

OT in Housing: Pen Portrait

About me

Name: Jenny Haslock

Current role: Principal Health Manager (Housing OT Manager)

Organisation: Leeds City Council

Years in housing: 23

Previous OT roles: Graduate OT Rotation 2 years; Senior OT Social Care 4 years

My journey into housing

How I got here

When employed as a Senior OT in Social Care I was approached by my then manager about a secondment position in Housing to sit with the Adaptations Team. This was to offer support with larger adaptation schemes.

I thought this was an interesting opportunity as at the time I loved being a community-based OT, but I also really liked the design aspect around adaptations and homes.

Whilst working in the Adaptations Team I also worked with Leeds City Council Lettings Teams to help match people on the rehousing register to already adapted homes in Leeds. This latter co-working is what gave the Housing OT role its unique identity allowing the role to grow into a team and service.

Pivotal Moments:

- 1) Further MSc training and qualifications in Accessibility and Inclusive Design gave me insight in how environments can be made more accessible and inclusive along with technical information of building regulations and building standards.
- 2) The realization about being more environmentally friendly – not taking adaptations out but keeping them in homes and matching people. Recycling has led to amazing cost savings as well as being environmentally friendly. (Approx £5 Million a year)
- 3) Ensuring that people with medical needs on the rehousing register needing an adapted property were getting a fair service and not being discriminated against.
- 4) The role no longer being a secondment position and working permanently within a housing setting and being able to appoint additional OT staff to help develop the service into what it is today.

What surprised me most about being a housing OT:

The biggest surprise is the reward of getting it right! Finding the right home for an individual or family is amazing.

The abundance of learning opportunities allowing me to shape and develop my career as a housing OT which I may not have had in other areas of practice.

What I actually do

My typical week includes: (For a Housing OT in Leeds)

Monday morning teams check in to plan the week ahead with the team.

Monitor daily new Housing OT Referrals – checking for any Ready to Let properties that have been matched and need to be viewed with customers urgently.

Plan visits for the following:

- Property assessments for any new adapted or un-adapted homes
- Feasibility assessments with surveyors,
- Site visits for those properties under adaptation or new build
- OT assessments for planned kitchen and bathroom upgrade works
- OT assessments for stair-lift through floor lift suitability and renewals
- OT Viewing Assessments with customers who have been matched to a potential new home – either adapted or needing to be adapted.

Weekly allocation meetings to review and allocate any new cases along with team support to discuss any ongoing or complicated cases/bigger build schemes. We also regularly have training events to follow on from these meetings.

The most rewarding aspect: Being able to match people to the right home where they can feel safe, maintain or gain independence and feel part of a community.

The biggest challenge: The biggest challenge has been trying to gain the recognition of the Housing OT Team being a standalone Housing OT service with the appropriate professional guidance and support in place.

Skills and knowledge I've developed

Technical knowledge I've gained:

1. Building Regulations and Building Guidance
2. Designing and adapting homes for better life function.
3. Business and Management

Skills that have been essential:

1. The increased technical knowledge of basic building regulations has helped me to develop better spatial visualization skills to allow me to assess an environment and make more comprehensive recommendations for adapting or designing environments.
2. Reading off building plans and how they translate when carrying out site visits when you may need to alter a plan due to unforeseen building challenges.
3. Clear communication may seem simple but how you translate information from your client to the design and build application can be tricky both with managing expectations of the client and the reality of any building barriers that may arise.

An unexpected competency I've developed:

Better working knowledge of how houses are built and the obstacles from certain building methods that may prevent a scheme from being viable.

Business Management, growing the Housing OT team or any team has meant having to understand good business, management and leadership styles.

My top tips for OTs considering housing

Three things I wish I'd known:

When I moved into housing, I opted to further my knowledge in building practice and design. This helped me to understand building processes better, what good design practices looked like and how I could challenge these to meet the needs of individuals.

The importance of networking (communication) with other professionals outside of your profession such as surveyors, builders and architects.

How important your identity is as an Occupational Therapist and the support you get from other OTs even if they do not work in the same area of practice.

Essential learning / training:

- Background reading on Building Regulations and Building Standards
- Attending any courses that offers insight into adaptations and good design practice
- Understanding and being able to visualize measurements and dimensions

One piece of advice

Have confidence in your knowledge, commitment and interest. If I was wanting to explore housing OT options, I would look to shadow a range of professions not just OTs but Surveyors, Builders and Architects who also work in the field of housing adaptations.

Why housing OT matters

Housing OT looks beyond activity analysis to the environment, which facilitates not only safety and independence but identity and belonging.