

OT in housing: pen portrait

About me

Name: Kate Sheehan

Current role: Occupational therapist

Organisation: KS Occupational Therapy Services

Years in housing: 35

Previous OT roles: I have worked in the independent sector for clients, case managers, solicitors and companies for 30 years.

My journey into housing

How I got here

When working as a locum in London, I married and moved to Waltham Forest social services. I had the most amazing manager who taught me the importance of home to us all, and how bricks and mortar can be a hinderance to occupational participation. Her passion started my passion in raising the profile of the benefits of accessible and well-designed housing for all.

Working in social services gave me the opportunity to be part of the Royal College of Occupational Therapists specialist section in housing, raising the issues around inaccessible properties and poor design standards, locally, nationally and internationally.

I was fortunate to sit on Habinteg Housing Association board for ten years, with some incredibly knowledgeable and engaged professionals, further developing my expertise and campaigning skills.

Moving into the independent sector has allowed me to work with clients to design their homes to really meet their needs, be it access to a chicken shed, a Manga therapy room or a Manchester United bathroom. It has also enabled me to work with companies on better design of products and adaptations, to move away from an institutional/medical model of design to a collaborative social model, where the client is truly at the centre of the design process.

What surprised me most about being a housing OT:

My housing colleagues are the most amazing bunch of people.

When I first started, the fact that in the East End of London there were still houses without inside toilets and that was in the mid 1990's.

When sat with a client in a bathroom, talking about the most intimate tasks, you really get to know what matters to them.

If we work together, we can champion change.

What I actually do

My typical week includes:

- Reviewing a new product CAD drawing
- Completing blogs for companies I work with
- Site visit on a big build to make sure the builders are building to the plans
- Supervision of other housing occupational therapists

The most rewarding aspect: Sharing knowledge – we all have a duty to share

The biggest challenge: Saying “no” to more work – I need to get better at this

Skills and knowledge I’ve developed

Technical knowledge I’ve gained:

1. Reading plans
2. Understanding planning law
3. Drawing my own plans using CAD

Skills that have been essential:

1. Understanding your clients’ needs and wants and learning to discuss compromises
2. Effective communication across multiple professions
3. If you get an opportunity to speak to influencers in government, just go for it

An unexpected competency I’ve developed:

Public speaking with confidence

My top tips for OTs considering housing

Three things I wish I’d known:

1. How broad the options are for a housing occupational therapist
2. Learn how to measure a room and convert it into a scale drawing
3. It opens so many opportunities as long as you don’t limit yourself

Essential learning / training:

Reading plans

Understand the law you are working within – it can be your friend

Inclusive Housing design Guide -<https://safespaces.co.uk>

One piece of advice

Being a housing occupational therapist has given me the privilege to work with clients for years (longest 15 years to date) and been on their housing journey with them through school, university and adult life. It can be such an empowering relationship that brings joy to you.

I have had the opportunity to work worldwide and meet some incredible occupational therapists who have and continue to inspire me. Speak at public facing events like Grand Designs to raise the profile of our role.

Working within the housing sector has allowed me to influence policy and regulations, which in turn makes it better for people who need accessible homes.

Never underestimate the power of occupational therapy.

Why housing OT matters

All occupational therapists work in housing to some degree because that is where our clients live and engage with their lives.