

# OT in housing: pen portrait

## About me

Name: Lorraine Abernethy

Current role: Advanced Practitioner Occupational Therapist – Level 1: Children’s Services

Organisation: Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT)

Previous OT roles: Senior OT adult community (approx. 1993- 2002), Locality Lead OT for 2 years as a secondment

## My journey into housing

### How I got here

I have always enjoyed and felt most comfortable in community services. The Children’s OT service in NHSCT was very different when I joined in 2002 – only a couple of OTs working mainly in special school and community. In our service, I have been supported and encouraged by our team management over the years to develop my skills and knowledge in wheelchairs and housing. I continue to work in both community and special school – getting to know the children in different settings really makes a difference to how we as OTs can help support them and their family.

In Northern Ireland we don’t have OTs working only in housing, however for a few years in NHSCT we had a specialist OT for Housing. I had the opportunity to carry out a brief secondment within this role which greatly helped to develop my interest in Housing and interagency working.

### What surprised me most about being a housing OT:

After over 30 years as an OT, there’s not much that surprises me! For new OTs working in housing, the role can be overwhelming as we have so much responsibility within the process and for ensuring public money is spent in a cost-effective way.

## What I actually do

### My typical week includes:

My week can be very varied. I work in special school around 2 mornings per week – typically carrying out seating and wheelchair assessments and reviews.

Community visits take up the rest of my time along with the major increase we have seen over the past number of years in the paperwork and admin required to do our job.

### **The biggest challenge:**

- the time scales involved in seeing a major adaptation through to completion
- anticipating the long-term needs of young children and trying to ensure that they have a forever home where they can be cared for and managed as well as be as independent as their condition allows
- managing service users expectations sometimes regarding the time scales and with DFGs, the amount of financial assistance that they might actually receive and what their contribution is

## **Skills and knowledge I've developed**

### **Technical knowledge I've gained:**

- Measuring internal circulation spaces and planning for larger and multiple items of equipment
- A basic awareness of what is required for the installation of home lifts and hoists
- Basic understanding of construction and structural constraints
- Reading plans

### **Skills that have been essential:**

- Ability to visualise layouts and the space requirements for equipment
- Managing risk
- Advocacy for the service user
- Communication and negotiation skills with all parties involved in the adaptation process
- Basic technical knowledge

## **My top tips for OTs considering housing**

### **Essential learning / training:**

Speak with families who have had an adaptation and been using the space for a while – what would they change if anything?

Take opportunities to learn from OTs who have been working in housing for a longer period – shadow and discuss cases.

Learn from your mistakes!

Attend housing courses and in service training.

Speak with the contractors who are carrying out the adaptations for practical advice and knowledge.

Take more before and after photos to learn from and assist with training others.

## **One piece of advice**

Always remember that we don't live an hour or a day in the lives of the parents and carers who do their best to care for their children and young people. Anything we can do to help assist in their day to day lives should be our goal at all times.

## **Why housing OT matters**

Not every day in work is a good day, however It is extremely satisfying to hear a parent or service user say that an adaptation has been life changing for them and their family.