

OT in housing: pen portrait

About me

Name: Shane Elliott

Current role: Head of Housing and Health

Organisation: Department of Health/Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Years in housing: 30

Previous OT roles: Head of Occupational Therapy Services; Clinical Specialist OT in Housing

My journey into housing

How I got here

I started in Community Adult Physical Disability OT Practice 30 years ago and immediately I could see the difference accessible housing can make to people's lives. I also have a family member who is a wheelchair user, so I had some personal experience of the difficulties people with disabilities experience in navigating their environment. That certainly triggered an interest in the area and a desire to improve things where I could.

What surprised me most about being a housing OT:

I think what surprised me about being an OT involved in housing was the breadth of knowledge required to do the job. I am continually surprised that, even after over 30 years working in the area, I still encounter cases that challenge my thinking. As we say in Northern Ireland, "every day is a school day" when working in housing.

What I actually do

My typical week includes:

- Responding to Assembly Questions related to housing on behalf of the Minister of Health
- Providing expert advice to the Department of Health and Housing Executive
- Chairing Interagency Complex Case Advisory panels involving housing and health staff to identify appropriate housing solutions for challenging cases. Those challenges can be clinical, technical or both.
- Evaluating design proposals for major adaptations

The most rewarding aspect: Bringing people together from housing and health and finding housing solutions for people with complex needs.

The biggest challenge: Dealing with significant financial challenges in delivering services in both housing and health sectors, resulting in lack of OT capacity and lengthy waiting times for adaptation provision or agreed solutions.

Skills and knowledge I've developed

Technical knowledge I've gained:

1. Understanding the technical requirements for external access e.g. ramps
2. Understanding the technical challenges of reconfiguring internal spaces
3. An understanding of schedules of rates and costs of adaptation works

Skills that have been essential:

1. The ability to collaborate and build relationships through networking
2. The ability to be confident in your professional decision making and understanding how people function in their environment
3. The ability to interpret plans and design proposals

An unexpected competency I've developed:

The ability to challenge technical staff such as architects and designers on proposed solutions, and question when works are described as not being technically feasible.

My top tips for OTs considering housing

Three things I wish I'd known:

1. That there is no one size that fits all in terms of design solutions.
2. That building relationships is critical to everything we do!!
3. That it is OK to take balanced risks in our professional decision making, so long as we are not reckless.

Essential learning/training:

- Understanding of legislation and statutory duties in relation to housing.
- Understanding how people function in their environment and identifying the barriers that restrict their ability to move freely and independently, or impede their family/carers from safely supporting/assisting them.

One piece of advice

Don't overthink, trust your professional "gut instinct" in your decision making and don't sweat the small stuff!!

Communicate, Collaborate and learn the art of Compromise!!

Why housing OT matters

Our interventions have a significant impact on an individual's ability to lead a meaningful life. We should never undervalue what we do as a profession in housing, and should take every opportunity to educate our housing partners and decision-makers in health about the expertise we have and how we can improve health outcomes through the provision of accessible homes.