

OT in housing: pen portrait

About me

Name:	Tess Whitehead
Current role:	Clinical Lead for Housing Occupational Therapy and Property Search Services
Organisation:	Adaptation Design Ltd
Years in housing:	20
Previous OT roles:	Senior Occupational Therapist within Surrey County Council across adult and paediatric services, Associate Housing OT within the private sector, Moving and Handling Advisor and Trainer, Director of Inclusive OT Services Ltd

My journey into housing

How I got here

I qualified in 2006 and began my career within local authority services, working across adult and paediatric teams. Much of my work involved environmental assessment, reablement, and complex moving and handling. Over time I became increasingly interested in the bigger picture of how housing either enabled or restricted recovery and independence. I moved into private sector housing consultancy and later established my own practice before joining Adaptation Design, where I now lead the Property Search Service. A key shift for me was recognising that identifying the right property at the outset can prevent years of compromise and escalating care costs.

What surprised me most about being a housing OT:

The level of strategic influence the role carries. Housing OT work extends far beyond equipment and adaptations. It involves navigating legislation, assessing market realities, negotiating access and consent, and influencing property design in ways that determine how someone lives for many years.

What I actually do

My typical week includes:

- Reviewing housing needs for clients with complex neurological injuries.
- Researching local property markets for rental and purchase options.
- Attending and assessing viewings.
- Advising on adaptation feasibility and long-term suitability.
- Negotiating adaptation consent with landlords and agents.
- Liaising with architects and surveyors to influence layout decisions.
- Preparing detailed reports for solicitors, deputies, insurers, and case managers

The most rewarding aspect: Seeing the transformation when a client moves into a property that genuinely works for them. Independence increases, manual handling risk reduces, therapy becomes possible at home, and family life stabilises. The environment stops being a daily barrier.

The biggest challenge: Balancing clinical idealism with market reality and budget constraints. The perfect property rarely exists. The role requires pragmatism, foresight, and confidence to challenge assumptions while maintaining professional relationships.

Skills and knowledge I've developed

Technical knowledge I've gained:

1. Working within a surveying and architectural team has expanded my technical competence beyond traditional OT practice.
2. I have developed a strong working knowledge of structural alteration and design development, including what is realistically achievable within existing buildings
3. I understand regulatory compliance and buildability considerations, which allows me to ground my clinical recommendations in practical delivery.

Skills that have been essential:

1. Advanced clinical reasoning.
2. Risk analysis.
3. Negotiation and influencing skills.
4. Clear and persuasive report writing.

An unexpected competency I've developed:

Structured market reporting and financial appraisal. My work now involves evidencing what is realistically available within defined parameters and justifying housing recommendations through clear cost comparison and feasibility analysis.

My top tips for OTs considering housing

Three things I wish I'd known:

1. The right property is often more important than the adaptation. Starting with an unsuitable building creates long-term compromise, no matter how well designed the works are.
2. Housing decisions require you to think far ahead. You are planning not just for current presentation but for progression, ageing, equipment changes, and evolving care needs.
3. You will need confidence to challenge assumptions. Families, professionals, and budgets do not always align, and part of the role is holding onto clinical reasoning while navigating competing pressures.

Essential learning / training:

Learning to read floor plans confidently and think spatially is essential. Training in complex moving and handling within environmental constraints strengthens your design recommendations. Developing confidence in cost awareness and understanding how to evidence long term need, particularly within litigation contexts, is also important. Shadowing experienced housing OTs and spending time with surveyors or architects accelerates learning.

One piece of advice

Do not underestimate the influence you can have. Housing decisions shape independence, safety, care, sustainability, and long term quality of life. If you are prepared to think strategically and look beyond immediate presentation, this is one of the most impactful areas of occupational therapy practice.

Why housing OT matters

The environment defines what is possible. When it is designed well, therapy can succeed, care can be delivered safely, families can sustain their roles, and people can participate fully in life