

# New build design: Caerphilly County Borough Council

## Context

Caerphilly County Borough Council integrated an occupational therapist into their Private and Accessible Housing Service. This has enabled direct OT input into the council's housing strategy and development teams, to influence new housing developments and ensure that properties are designed to be accessible and adaptable from the outset, reducing costly retrofitting later.

## The challenge

Housing developers would often build with minimal consideration for accessibility, typically treating accessible housing as a separate specialist category rather than incorporating inclusive design principles. New properties frequently had basic design flaws that made them unsuitable for people with accessibility needs, such as inappropriately positioned shower controls or boxed-in plumbing that prevented equipment installation.

## The role

The OT team works collaboratively with housing strategy officers, planners and developers to influence new build designs, focusing on:

- Analysing housing register data to identify specific accessibility needs in local areas
- Advising on the type and quantity of accessible housing needed in new developments
- Reviewing development plans and suggesting practical improvements
- Attending site visits during construction phases to identify potential issues
- Educating developers about the practical implications of design decisions
- Advocating for future-proofed designs that can adapt to changing needs
- Knowledge of the local area
- Analysing need under the Local Housing Market Assessment
- Links into Programme Development Plan

## Benefits to the system

### Housing benefits:

- Reduced need for expensive retrofitting of new properties
- More efficient use of housing development budgets
- Increased supply of appropriate accessible housing
- Strategic alignment between housing stock and community needs
- Housing associations and developers gain better understanding of accessibility requirements

### Health/social care benefits:

- Decreased pressure on adaptation budgets
- Reduced hospital admission and hospital discharge delays due to housing issues
- Prevention of health issues related to inappropriate housing
- Less demand for expensive care packages to compensate for unsuitable environments

## Benefits to individuals and families

- Homes that balance accessibility with aesthetic appeal

- Reduced need to relocate when needs change
- Greater independence in daily activities
- Inclusive communities where people can age in place
- Better integration with the wider community

## Developing the role: a practical guide

### Setting up the role

- Establish quarterly meetings with housing strategy and development teams
- Create formal channels for OT input into planning applications and development proposals
- Develop relationships with project managers on new build sites
- Position the OT to have early input into design decisions, not just compliance checking
- Establish an accessible housing register to enable OTs to fulfil their role most effectively

### Establishing effective consultation on new builds

- Create a structured approach to reviewing plans and specifications
- Develop a checklist of common issues based on past experience with adaptations
- Establish processes for site visits during different construction phases
- Implement a feedback loop where experiences from completed developments and customer satisfaction are used to inform future projects

### Overcoming challenges

- **Challenge:** Developers viewing accessibility as a compliance issue rather than a design opportunity.
- **Solution:** Demonstrate how inclusive design can enhance marketability and reduce future costs.
  
- **Challenge:** Perception that accessibility only applies to 'specialist' properties, not general-needs properties.
- **Solution:** Promote flexible, universal design principles that work for everyone.
  
- **Challenge:** Engaging developers meaningfully rather than superficially.
- **Solution:** Build relationships, demonstrate value through practical examples, and provide evidence-based recommendations.

### Demonstrating impact

- Document cost savings from designing correctly first time versus retrofitting
- Showcase positive feedback from residents in well-designed properties
- Monitor adaptation requests in new versus older properties
- Track the uptake of recommendations by developers

### Top tips for managers

- Include OT in planning and development meetings from the earliest stages
- Ensure OTs have appropriate knowledge of planning and building regulations
- Provide opportunities for OTs to build relationships with developers and architects
- Support OTs to develop educational materials for developers about practical accessibility
- Encourage photographic documentation of good and poor design examples
- Position OT as a resource rather than an inspector to encourage cooperation
- Involve OTs in post-occupancy evaluations to strengthen future recommendations
- Set up a common housing or accessible housing register
- Co-locate and embed OTs in the housing service