

Housing allocation and accessibility specialist: City of Edinburgh Council

Context

In the City of Edinburgh Council, housing occupational therapists are employed within Housing Services and based in the Home Accessibility Referral Team (HART). These OTs are joint managed between the Access to Housing Manager and a Professional Lead Occupational Therapist within the Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership, creating a bridge between housing and health services.

The challenge

Edinburgh operates a choice-based lettings system for applicants with health conditions or disabilities who need expert assessment to determine their priority level and property requirements.

Without specialist OT input, there's a risk that people with complex needs may not be appropriately prioritised or matched with suitable properties, leading to inappropriate allocations, costly adaptations, or continued health deterioration.

The role

The housing OTs in Edinburgh Council focus on rehousing assessments and allocations through:

- Assessing housing applicants with complex health conditions or disabilities
- Determining eligibility for 'Gold Priority' for rehousing on ill-health/disability grounds
- Making detailed recommendations on property requirements for specific applicants
- Matching applicants with appropriate available properties
- Assessing for and commissioning adaptations when required
- Developing and implementing property accessibility assessment tools
- Using technology (iPads, laser measuring devices) to document property features
- Acting as 'brokers' between locality OTs in the Health and Social Care Partnership and Housing colleagues
- Contributing individual and aggregate needs data to new build development planning
- Supporting the 'Empty Homes' initiative by identifying adaptation potential in vacant properties

Benefits to the system

Housing benefits

- More appropriate allocation of accessible properties
- Better understanding of property accessibility features across the housing stock
- Improved assessment tools for property accessibility and adaptability
- More informed decision-making on housing allocations and adaptations
- Better utilisation of empty properties through OT input on adaptation potential

Health and social care benefits

- Reduced health deterioration through timely housing solutions
- Decreased need for crisis interventions due to unsuitable housing
- Better integration between housing and health services through joint management
- More pragmatic solutions to complex housing needs

- Improved data on housing needs to inform future service planning

Benefits to individuals and families

- Faster access to appropriate housing through expert assessment and prioritisation
- More suitable property matching based on comprehensive needs assessment
- Greater independence and wellbeing through appropriate housing solutions
- Reduced waiting times for essential housing adaptations
- Better-informed choices about housing options and potential property suitability

Developing the role: a practical guide

Setting up the role

- Establish joint management between housing and health/social care
- Position OTs within teams responsible for housing allocations
- Create clear assessment frameworks for determining housing priority based on health needs
- Develop technical capabilities through appropriate equipment and training

Building an effective service

- Implement standardised property assessment tools to document accessibility features
- Create pragmatic approaches to adaptations that balance ideal solutions with practical realities
- Establish strong communication channels with locality-based OTs
- Develop influence on new build planning through data collection on housing needs

Overcoming challenges

- **Challenge:** Limited integration between housing and social care IT systems
- **Solution:** Work towards at least partial system integration to improve information sharing

- **Challenge:** Limited technical staff to support OTs
- **Solution:** Provide specialised training for OTs on technical aspects of building design

- **Challenge:** Balancing ideal solutions with pragmatic approaches
- **Solution:** Develop clear frameworks for decision-making that consider short, medium and long-term needs

Demonstrating impact

- Track successful housing allocations for applicants with accessibility needs
- Monitor adaptation costs and compare with potential costs of alternative solutions
- Document case studies showing improved outcomes through appropriate housing allocation
- Collect feedback from service users on the suitability of allocated properties

Top tips for managers

- Develop integrated working between housing and health/social care through joint management
- Invest in technical equipment to support accurate property assessment
- Work towards IT system integration between housing and social care
- Provide specialised training on building design and technical aspects
- Involve OTs in empty property initiatives to identify adaptation potential
- Create clear feedback loops between OT assessments and new build planning
- Support OTs to develop 'broker' skills between different professional perspectives