

Housing needs assessment & allocation: Wiltshire Council

Context

Wiltshire Council operates a choice-based lettings system across their large unitary authority covering three distinct hubs. The housing landscape varies significantly across areas, with one hub having substantial council housing stock whilst others are predominantly private rented and registered social landlord properties.

The housing OT service has evolved from a single practitioner to a seven-strong team including an Advanced Practitioner providing strategic leadership. The Advanced Practitioner works primarily in the South hub where direct council stock ownership enables closer collaboration with internal lettings teams. The service operates within a complex system where housing associations and council housing require different approaches to needs assessment and property allocation.

The challenge

Inadequate OT input in allocation processes

- OTs consulted too late in the allocation process after shortlisting has already occurred
- Limited ability to influence property matching decisions based on assessed housing needs
- Allocation decisions made without proper consideration of accessibility requirements
- Housing teams making matches based on limited understanding of individual needs

Inequitable access and prioritisation

- Property allocation dependent on whether an OT was available on viewing day
- No systematic risk-based prioritisation for housing allocation
- People in high-risk situations waiting too long for suitable housing
- Lack of fair access system, based on assessed need rather than timing

System fragmentation across tenures

- Different processes required for council housing versus housing associations
- Limited influence over housing association allocation decisions
- Inconsistent approaches to needs assessment across different providers
- Complex customer journey unclear to both residents and professionals

Assessment process inefficiencies

- Customers' expectations raised before proper suitability assessment
- Time wasted on inappropriate property viewings and matches
- Lack of systematic approach to recording and utilising assessment information
- Poor integration between housing needs assessment and allocation systems

The role

The Advanced Practitioner role encompasses strategic and operational aspects of housing needs assessment and allocation:

- Comprehensive needs assessment – Conducting detailed assessments of housing requirements considering current and future needs.

- Risk assessment and prioritisation – Developing and implementing risk matrices to ensure equitable access based on severity of need.
- Property suitability evaluation – Assessing whether specific properties meet assessed needs before customer viewings.
- Allocation process integration – Working to embed OT expertise earlier in shortlisting and allocation decisions.
- Cross-tenure Coordination – Building relationships with housing associations to improve allocation processes.
- Customer journey mapping – Developing clearer pathways through the choice-based lettings system.
- System Development – Creating protocols and frameworks to improve assessment and allocation integration.

Benefits to the system

Housing benefits

- More appropriate property allocations reducing re-housing requests
- Better utilisation of adapted and accessible housing stock
- Improved customer satisfaction with allocation outcomes
- Reduced administrative burden from inappropriate matches.

Health and social care benefits

- Earlier intervention preventing health deterioration in unsuitable housing
- Reduced emergency referrals due to housing-related health crises
- Better integration between housing and health needs assessment
- More strategic deployment of OT expertise in allocation decisions.

Financial impact

- Reduced costs from inappropriate allocations and re-housing
- Prevention of health and social care interventions due to unsuitable housing
- Better value from accessible housing stock through appropriate allocation
- Efficiency savings from streamlined assessment and allocation processes.

Benefits to individuals and families

- Residents receive housing that meets their assessed needs, resulting in better long-term outcomes.
- Appropriate housing allocation reduces the stress, disruption, and uncertainty associated with unsuitable accommodation.
- Individuals experience improved health and wellbeing when their home environment supports their needs and daily living requirements.
- Risk-based prioritisation ensures that those with the greatest level of need receive appropriate priority for housing.
- Effective housing matching can help prevent family stress and family breakdown associated with unsuitable living conditions.
- Residents are better able to remain connected to their communities, social networks, and support systems.

Developing the role: a practical guide

Setting up the role

- Establish clear pathways for OT input into housing allocation processes
- Develop standardised needs assessment frameworks incorporating housing requirements

- Create risk assessment matrices with clear prioritisation criteria
- Build formal relationships with housing allocation teams and housing associations

Building assessment systems

- Develop comprehensive assessment tools covering current and future housing needs
- Create clear criteria for different levels of housing need and urgency
- Establish protocols for evaluating the suitability of properties before customer viewing
- Design systems for recording and sharing assessment information across teams

Essential skills and knowledge

- Understanding of choice-based lettings systems and housing allocation policies
- Comprehensive knowledge of housing types, adaptability, and accessibility features
- Risk assessment and prioritisation skills for complex housing needs
- Relationship building and negotiation skills for working across housing tenures
- System design and improvement capabilities for process integration

Overcoming challenges

- **Challenge:** OT being consulted too late in allocation process
- **Solution:** Advocate for formal OT input at shortlisting stage; demonstrate value through case examples; build protocols requiring OT sign-off

- **Challenge:** Inconsistent approaches across housing providers
- **Solution:** Develop shared assessment frameworks; build individual relationships with housing association staff; create joint training programmes

- **Challenge:** Complex customer journey unclear to residents
- **Solution:** Create visual journey maps; develop customer-facing guidance; establish clear communication protocols at each stage

- **Challenge:** Balancing individual assessment with system efficiency
- **Solution:** Develop tiered assessment approaches; create clear criteria for different assessment levels; use technology to streamline processes

Demonstrating impact

- Track reduction in re-housing requests due to inappropriate initial allocations
- Monitor time from application to successful allocation for different need categories
- Measure customer satisfaction scores with allocation outcomes
- Document prevented health and social care interventions through appropriate housing
- Calculate system efficiencies from reduced inappropriate viewings and applications
- Evidence improved outcomes for high-risk cases through prioritisation system

Top tips for managers

- Advocate for formal OT involvement at shortlisting stage rather than post-allocation consultation
- Develop clear risk assessment matrices with transparent prioritisation criteria
- Invest in relationship building across all housing tenures, not just council stock
- Create standardised assessment tools that can be shared across housing providers
- Ensure assessment information systems integrate with housing allocation databases
- Support staff to understand choice-based lettings systems and housing allocation policies
- Establish regular review processes to refine assessment and allocation integration