

Bespoke adaptations for adults with learning disabilities: Northern Ireland

Context

Occupational therapists led a collaborative approach to provide bespoke adaptations for adults with learning disabilities. The intention was to enable increased participation in occupations and support community care, while reducing costs and demands relating to residential placements.

Policy context:

- Northern Ireland Programme for Government
- Disabled Facilities Grants review
- Interdepartmental Housing Adaptations Design Toolkit
- Inclusive design focusing on cognitive and sensory impairment
- Health and Social Care Reset Plan 2025
- Providing the right care, at the right time, in the right place.

The challenge

Inequitable access to adaptations for people with complex sensory, emotional and behavioural presentations was creating a barrier to participation in essential occupations.

The OT response:

The occupational therapist's practice evolved into regional influence. Their activity and influence included:

- Recommendation of housing adaptations that included emotional/sensory regulation space, to facilitate access to occupations, whilst also enhancing safety, support and well-being.
- Co-produced project with clients and their families, pushing traditional boundaries and shifting towards a more neuro-affirming and rights-based approach to access and design of housing adaptations.
- Dissemination of results and outcomes through presentations at the Northern Ireland Allied Health Professions (AHP) Research and Innovation Conference 2024, and the Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT) AHP Conference 2024, alongside an expert by experience. This focused on the life-changing occupational impact that adaptations had enabled.
- Sharing of impact by the expert by experience at a workshop for all OTs working within Adult Learning Disability Services across Northern Ireland.
- Establishment of a bespoke adaptations and restrictive practice group, set up with oversight by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland.

Outcomes:

- Runner-up in the WHSCT Davin Corrigan Award which recognises outstanding projects co-produced in partnership with service users/carers, where their involvement has been integral to enhancing the safety and quality of care provided.
- Life-changing impact for individuals with a learning disability and their families, as evidenced by ongoing data collection.
- Data collection has now been scaled across the region to consolidate outcomes.

- Increased number of clients who can remain within the family home, reducing demands for long-term, high-cost supported living placements.
- Greater ability to deliver neighbourhood care in line with the policy direction in Northern Ireland.
- Review of Housing Needs Report from Interdepartmental Housing Adaptations Design Toolkit to ensure more inclusivity.
- Plans to share results and outcomes nationally within occupational therapy networks.
- Policy language increasingly reflects greater inclusivity beyond physical disability.

This approach demonstrates how OTs can act as advocates for inclusion and integration, using their expertise to scale from individual practice to regional influence. This creates the foundations for systemic change, ensuring that 'accessibility' is more inclusive and not solely focused on access for physical needs.