

Adaptations senior occupational therapist - Accessible Homes Service: Bristol City Council

Context

Bristol City Council's Accessible Homes Service is a dedicated housing OT team sitting entirely within the housing directorate, not adult social care. This structural position is central to how the service operates and what it can achieve. Twelve OTs and OT assistants work alongside surveyors and caseworkers, with three senior OTs managing the OT team.

The service handles all adaptations work for the local authority. Bringing all of this work in-house has created a consistent, specialist service where the team knows every process and pitfall. The only adaptation work carried out by other OTs is minor requests, such as grab rails and small steps.

The service operates across several distinct pathways and referrals come via a triage process. If any element of an enquiry points to adaptations and no other needs are present, it comes directly to the team without a social care assessment. Where someone has more complex needs, the adult social care team handles the initial contact but the date recorded on the Accessible Homes waiting list reflects when the person first came into the system, so people are not disadvantaged by the handover.

The challenge

High demand and the risk of long waits

- Bristol faces extreme housing pressure and correspondingly high demand for adaptation services.
- OT and OT assistant waiting lists fluctuate and can be lengthy, depending on staffing levels.
- The traditional model of social care triage followed by a separate adaptation application can result in people effectively waiting twice: for an assessment and then again to be picked up by an adaptation service.

Inconsistency across the system

- Where adaptation requests are made by OTs without specialist housing knowledge, reports may lack key information, leading to delays and additional work further down the pathway.
- OTs in other settings don't always have the capacity or confidence to follow an adaptation case through to completion, which creates handover problems when works aren't successful or need adjustment.

Under-utilised adapted housing stock

- Properties that have been adapted can become available to households that don't require those adaptations, wasting investment and reducing the availability of accessible stock.
- Without active management of adapted void properties, there is no mechanism to make sure suitable properties are made available to people who need them.

Poor understanding of the OT role

- Housing colleagues operate primarily with property-focused metrics, such as void turnaround and rent income, rather than person-centred priorities.

- Without deliberate effort to bridge this gap, the OT team risks being poorly understood and underused by housing partners, limiting its influence.

The role

The role covers the full spectrum of housing adaptation work, structured around several distinct service offers:

- Assessment centre – Running twice weekly at a city-centre location, the assessment centre handles simple cases where a reliable recommendation can be made without a home visit. This allows the core team to focus on complex casework.
- OT and OT assistant caseloads – Individual caseloads managed through high and standard priority pathways. Agency staff are contracted alongside the core team to handle mid-level cases, those not suited to the assessment centre but not requiring the most specialist input, freeing the core team for complex work.
- Full case ownership – The team owns every adaptation case from assessment through to completion of works. Where problems arise, the OT follows the journey to its conclusion. This continuity is the primary reason adaptation work is not delegated to other parts of the system.
- Rehousing reports – Where someone in any tenure is seeking to move on disability grounds, the team produces either a brief statement of requirements for simple cases or a full housing report for complex needs, informing the Home Choice Bristol bidding system and enabling appropriate prioritisation.
- Property viewings – When housing officers identify a void property to offer to a disabled applicant, the OT is contacted to assess suitability in person before the offer is made.
- Urgent adaptations process - Where a person cannot sustain a new tenancy without immediate works, a fast-track process enables essential adaptations to be carried out promptly to allow the tenancy to proceed.
- Making best use of stock – A council policy pathway for properties in the council-owned stock where adaptations would exceed £20,000, where a resident is under-occupying, or where adaptation is not feasible. Cases go to panel review and the process can facilitate a move to more suitable existing stock, bypassing the main choice-based lettings system. This mechanism recycles adapted stock efficiently and avoids costly works where rehousing is a better solution.
- Induction and workforce development – Senior OTs have developed a detailed in-house induction programme that has since been adopted and adapted for adult social care. New staff are trained through a combination of in-house mentoring, contractor-led sessions (including stairlift companies and kitchen suppliers with accessible showrooms), and close working alongside the surveyor team.

Benefits to the system

Housing benefits

- Consistent, specialist OT input ensures that all adaptation recommendations are well-reasoned, reducing the risk of costly errors or repeat visits.
- Property viewings prevent unsuitable matches from proceeding, protecting housing's investment and avoiding early tenancy failure.
- Processes provide a mechanism to recycle adapted stock effectively, matching existing accessible properties to people who need them and returning general-needs properties to the wider pool.

Health and social care benefits

- Single-point-of-access for most adaptation referrals removes the double-wait problem that affects services where social care assessment precedes a separate application process.
- Full case continuity means that when works go wrong or needs change, the same team can respond; there is no handover gap.

- The assessment centre model provides rapid resolution for the high volume of straightforward cases, maintaining access for people with urgent but simple needs.

Financial impact

- Bringing all adaptation work in-house creates a consistent evidence base for spend, enabling the team to track what is being invested and where.
- Costly adaptations are avoided where a move to existing suitable stock is a better and cheaper solution.

Benefits to individuals and families

- Residents can contact the service directly without navigating a social care front door, and their position on the waiting list is backdated to when they first made contact with the system rather than when they reached the specialist team.
- For those with straightforward needs, the assessment centre offers a fast, accessible route to resolution.
- For those with complex needs, a single named team follows the case from assessment through to completed works, with the capability to respond when things do not go to plan.
- Where rehousing is the better solution, the same team produces the housing report and can attend a property viewing, providing continuity across what might otherwise be a fragmented process.

Developing the role: a practical guide

Setting up the service

- The decision to bring all adaptation work in-house, removing it from social care OTs, was the foundation of the Bristol model; this requires sustained leadership support and a clear agreement about scope boundaries between teams.
- Clear triage criteria agreed with the adult social care team mean that adaptation referrals route directly to the specialist team without unnecessary delay; investing time in this agreement early is essential.
- Scope boundaries with adult social care OTs should be clearly defined and agreed: the Accessible Homes team doesn't address complex moving and handling, complex seating, or hoisting, and seeks advice from social care colleagues for these needs; this clarity protects both teams.

Building the assessment centre model

- An accessible, centrally located venue running twice weekly enables high throughput for straightforward cases and keeps waiting times low for the majority of referrals.
- The model works only if criteria are applied reliably: the assessment centre handles simple bathing and stairs cases only; cases with any additional complexity go to the waiting list.
- Interim provision by the triage team (such as a raised toilet seat while someone waits) can reduce risk and distress for people pending a fuller assessment.

Managing the housing relationship

- Sitting within the housing directorate is a structural advantage, but it doesn't automatically create understanding of the OT role among housing colleagues. The team has set up dedicated communication channels and actively promotes its offer to housing staff.
- Cross-profession tensions around prioritising the person or prioritising the property can be managed through relationship-building over time, and by demonstrating that OT involvement reliably improves outcomes for both the person and the housing stock.
- Stock management mechanisms are more effective when the OT team is closely connected to the voids and rehousing processes.

Overcoming challenges

- **Challenge:** People with straightforward needs wait alongside those with complex needs, creating inequity and unnecessary delay.
- **Solution:** The assessment centre model provides a fast-track for simple cases, with the waiting list reserved for those whose needs require in-depth assessment and follow-through.
- **Challenge:** Adapted properties being allocated to households who do not require them.
- **Solution:** Develop a panel-based mechanism to match adapted and adaptable stock to people who need it; the OT team's close involvement in the process ensures clinical knowledge informs stock decisions.
- **Challenge:** Other OTs across the authority producing adaptation reports without the specialist knowledge to follow them through.
- **Solution:** Bringing all non-minor adaptation work into the specialist team creates consistency and ensures cases are owned from start to finish; regular relationship-building with the adult social care team maintains the referral pathway.
- **Challenge:** No formal qualification pathway for housing OTs who want to progress beyond the basics.
- **Solution:** A detailed in-house induction programme provides a strong foundation; the team draws on contractors and industry partners for product-specific training; sector-level qualifications for experienced practitioners remain a significant gap that the profession needs to address.

Demonstrating impact

- Track the number of cases resolved through the assessment centre and the waiting times achieved, demonstrating the throughput benefit of the tiered model.
- Record the adaptation costs avoided through stock matching, comparing planned works costs against actual rehousing costs.
- Monitor waiting times from first contact with the system to demonstrate the single-wait benefit of the direct access model.
- Capture rehousing report activity alongside adaptation casework to demonstrate the breadth of OT contribution beyond DFG works.

Top tips for managers

- Develop and protect an in-house model – the consistency and case continuity it creates is the foundation of the service's quality and efficiency. Having multiple teams doing adaptation work can create more problems than it solves.
- Invest in an assessment centre model if volume allows – the ability to offer most people a rapid resolution is a significant benefit that protects capacity for complex work.
- Establish a referral triage agreement with adult social care early and revisit it regularly – a well-functioning front door is the single greatest lever for reducing double-waiting.
- Acknowledge the cultural challenge of working within housing collaboratively – shifting from a 'property-first, person-second' model is structural, not personal, and requires sustained relationship-building rather than a one-off communication effort.
- Support senior OTs to develop and share their expertise via induction and training materials that can be shared with new team members, to ensure a continuity of knowledge and approach.