

Stock improvement specialist – Aberdeenshire Council

Context

Aberdeenshire Council first trialled employing an occupational therapist within housing in 2007. Due to the success of the trial and the continued benefit the role brings, they now have five part time (2.5 full time equivalent), housing occupational therapists (housing OTs) based in Housing and Building Standards within Environment and Infrastructure Services. As part of the housing OTs' role, they work within a structured Housing Improvement Programme (HIP) to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of the council's housing stock across the region.

The challenge

The council's HIP is a significant investment initiative aimed at upgrading homes to meet and maintain those standards required by the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS), the Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing (EESH) and the developing requirements of the new Social Housing Net Zero Standard (SHNZS). Housing occupational therapists are required to assess and make formal recommendations on the needs of tenants in relation to bathroom, kitchen, access (doors, steps and ramps) and heating upgrades. The housing occupational therapists liaise with other members of the Stock Improvement Team and colleagues in the Property Services section on any adaptations that are required through the contracts that Property Services manage on behalf of the Housing Service. Adaptations are made to meet the needs of those council tenants with health conditions or disabilities.

Without housing OT input, standard bathroom, kitchen, access, and heating upgrades may not adequately address the specific requirements of current and future tenants, leading to costly retrofitting and potential housing mismatches.

The role

The housing OTs in the council focus on stock improvement through:

- Assessing and making formal recommendations on tenant needs relating to bathroom, kitchen, access, and heating upgrades
- Liaising with the Stock Improvement Team and Property Services colleagues on required adaptations
- Contributing to the adaptation and sheltered housing sections of the Housing Specification to ensure the adequacy and suitability of components used, thereby improving the standard for inclusivity
- Implementing systematic improvements such as converting ground floor bathrooms to wet rooms in one and two-bedroom properties and all sheltered housing
- Advising on decant processes to help to ensure that HIP works can proceed for tenants in need
- Evaluating the suitability of decant properties and ordering equipment as required
- Conducting Housing Needs and Pre-Allocation assessments for Housing Options and Homelessness Teams
- Providing input to the design of new-build properties to improve inclusive design
- Contributing professional and clinical input to household occupiers assessments for damp, condensation, and mould issues.

Benefits to the system

Benefits for housing:

- More inclusive and adaptable housing stock through proactive design improvements
- Reduced need for costly individual adaptations through universal design principles
- Better allocation of properties to meet tenant needs
- Specifications the 'future proof' council housing that benefit all future council tenants with needs
- More efficient use of decant properties during improvement works.

Benefits for health and social care:

- Decreased demand for reactive health and social care interventions
- Reduced numbers of adaptations required to council homes that would otherwise require assessment by social work OTs between capital upgrade programmes
- Working towards making housing barrier-free and inclusive
- Better housing conditions supporting overall tenant wellbeing
- More efficient use of adaptation budgets through proactive design/adaptation via upgrades when components are being renewed at the end of their life cycle.

Benefits to individuals and families

- More accessible homes that meet current and future needs
- Reduced need to relocate due to changing health conditions
- Increased independence and dignity through inclusive design
- Better housing conditions supporting improved health outcomes
- More appropriate housing allocations for those with specific needs.

Developing the housing OT model: a practical guide

Setting up the role

- Position OTs within housing departments to focus on housing issues to reduce waiting times
- Establish formal input into housing improvement and upgrade programmes and specifications
- Create clear systems for OT assessment within standard housing processes
- Develop relationships across housing, property, and maintenance teams.

Building an effective service

- Implement inclusive design approaches to common property elements, such as level access showers in ground floor properties
- Create standardised assessment processes for tenant needs within improvement programmes
- Establish clear referral pathways from homelessness and housing options teams
- Develop influence on design specifications for both improvements and new builds.

Overcoming challenges

- **Challenge:** Balancing universal design with individual needs
- **Solution:** Develop tiered approach with basic inclusive design for all properties and additional adaptations where needed
- **Challenge:** Coordinating with multiple departments and contractors
- **Solution:** Establish clear communication channels through software systems

- **Challenge:** Limited technical knowledge among OTs
- **Solution:** Provide specialist training on building regulations, design standards, construction principles and understanding design drawings

Demonstrating impact

- Track reduction in retrospective adaptations in properties with improved specifications
- Monitor tenant satisfaction with adapted properties
- Document cost savings from proactive versus reactive approaches
- Collect case studies showing improved tenant outcomes.

Top tips for managers

- Integrate OTs fully within housing upgrade and improvement processes
- Ensure OTs have input to the adaptation sections of housing specifications and standards
- Use OT expertise to develop inclusive generic design approaches that benefit all tenants
- Involve OTs in pre-allocation assessments to ensure appropriate matching
- Create clear processes for OT input to new build designs
- Support OTs to develop technical knowledge through specialist training
- Use OT clinical reasoning to develop vulnerability assessment tools.