

Spinal injury specialist – Glasgow National Spinal Injuries Unit

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Context

The National Spinal Injuries Unit in Glasgow provides specialist treatment for everyone in Scotland who suffers a spinal injury. The occupational therapy team, led by Amanda Howat, works with patients who face housing challenges across all 32 Scottish local authorities, each with different processes for rehousing, adaptations, equipment and technology solutions.

The challenge

Patients with spinal injuries face significant housing challenges upon discharge. The patient profile has shifted from primarily young men with complete spinal cord injuries to an older demographic (average age 59) with more complex presentations including multi-morbidity and incomplete spinal cord injuries.

While adaptations were once commonly funded through local authority extensions, these are now extremely rare, making rehousing often the best option. The OTs must navigate different systems across Scotland depending on geography, tenure, and local policies, without the social worker support that was previously available.

The role

- Making contact with local authority OT colleagues within days of a patient's admission
- Initiating early conversations about discharge challenges and housing options
- Conducting home visits when possible, or coordinating with local OTs for environmental assessments
- Producing Housing Needs Reports when they can predict likely functioning outcomes
- Collaborating with Housing Options Scotland, a national organisation specialising in rehousing solutions
- Working holistically with every aspect of a person's rehabilitation, including physical, mental, and emotional well-being
- Advising on housing adaptations and technology solutions to maximise independence.

Benefits to the system

Housing benefits

- Early identification of housing needs prevents discharge delays
- Better coordination between specialist and local services
- More appropriate housing solutions that meet long-term needs
- National partnership with Housing Options Scotland provides expertise across all local authorities.

Health and social care benefits

- Reduced need for expensive care packages through appropriate housing solutions
- More efficient discharge planning and rehabilitation pathways
- Better integration of specialist expertise with local knowledge

- Potential for reduced whole-life costs when appropriate adaptations are implemented

Benefits to individuals and families

- Environment that enables optimal functioning and independence
- Ability to fulfil roles and occupations and live well
- Holistic approach addressing all aspects of functioning including employment, driving, and intimate relationships
- Greater autonomy and dignity through appropriate housing solutions.

Developing the role: a practical guide

Setting up the role

- Establish early referral processes to local authorities from point of admission
- Create partnerships with national housing organisations like Housing Options Scotland
- Develop standardised Housing Needs Report templates that can be used across different regions
- Build networks with OT contacts across all local authorities.

Building an effective service

- Implement joint visits between specialist OTs and local OTs where possible
- Create a database of contacts across all local authorities
- Develop knowledge-sharing mechanisms about local housing options and processes
- Establish clear communication protocols between specialist and local services.

Overcoming challenges

- **Challenge:** Local authorities rejecting early referrals as 'too soon'
- **Solution:** Education about the importance of early planning for complex discharges
- **Challenge:** Lack of consistency in processes across different authorities
- **Solution:** Development of standardised approaches and information sharing
- **Challenge:** Decision-makers in local authorities not understanding the role of OTs
- **Solution:** Better representation of OTs at strategic and policy levels

Demonstrating impact

- Document increased discharge efficiency due to early housing interventions
- Track care package costs avoided through appropriate housing solutions
- Monitor successful community transitions facilitated by proper housing arrangements
- Collect whole-life cost analyses comparing short-term adaptation costs with long-term care needs.

Top tips for managers

- Ensure early referral to local social care or housing OTs to initiate planning
- Arrange joint visits between specialist and local OTs whenever possible
- Complete Housing Needs Reports as soon as likely functioning outcomes can be predicted
- Involve Housing Options Scotland or similar organisations from the earliest possible stage
- Promote respect for specialist OT knowledge by local authorities
- Enable specialist OTs to access community OT networks for information sharing
- Consider whole-life costs rather than just short-term expenditure when making decisions