

OT in housing: pen portrait

About me

Name: Rachel Wooden

Current role: Specialist Housing Occupational Therapist

Organisation: London Boroughs of Richmond and Wandsworth

Years in housing: 12+

Previous OT roles: Senior Occupational Therapist in a Children's Community Team for 5 years and in then in Adult Social Care for over 15 years

My journey into housing

How I got here

I've always been interested in making homes 'work' for people. I was always pushing the boundaries within my previous roles (to the frustration of managers!) – I think I was always frustrated by having to compromise so much on adapting unsuitable homes. I was offered the chance to work closely with our Housing Department whilst still in Adult Social Care, assisting with the adaptation of properties to create accessible homes for wheelchair users. Then the council and housing associations started to build new homes in the borough, but they had sought no advice about inclusive and accessible design and the properties were not fit for purpose and needed considerable adaptation post-completion. One of our housing directors took an innovative approach and created the first Specialist Housing OT post in our borough to provide expert advice for new affordable housing developments from the outset, which I was offered... and the rest is history!

What surprised me most about being a housing OT:

...How much I would love it! I have really found my niche and feel like I have flourished in this role. It is a constant place of learning – there is always something new. I rarely get bored as 2 days are never the same. In one day I can be checking multiple accessible kitchen plans and trying to resolve complex shower floor issues, discussing accessible waste management and accessible car parking strategies, then I'm completing interviews with residents who have moved into our new homes and trying to resolve issues which have arisen unexpectedly for them. The role is so varied. I love the independence of being the only OT in the teams I work in and I enjoy working with so many different people (planners, development managers, architects, contractors etc), but I also value working closely with our other Specialist Housing OTs in the council.

What I actually do

My typical week includes:

- Reviewing early-stage plans at pre-app stage in the planning process, to help determine whether an appropriate number and size of wheelchair accessible homes are being provided in the scheme, and then reviewing detailed plans at full planning stage.
- Checking detailed drawings of flat layouts, accessible bathrooms, accessible kitchens and product specs to ensure they are inclusive and fit for purpose – which usually involves numerous discussions and meetings with architects, developers and kitchen designers.
- On-site meetings at various stages of the build to make sure nothing is missed. This is especially important as the project draws near completion, such as ensuring products in the bathroom are installed correctly and the fitting of the kitchens is perfectly executed.
- Completing viewings with potential residents... and interviewing residents who have moved into our new accessible homes – these are usually very positive conversations which is always a joy – and helping to resolve unexpected issues which have arisen.

The most rewarding aspect:

Seeing the 'lightbulb moment' when someone suddenly understands why I've pushed so hard for a particular design element – i.e. after fitting an electric rise-fall kitchen worktop for the first time, a contractor said to me that he'd never fit a manual rise-fall worktop again in his life!

The biggest challenge:

Getting people to understand why a particular design element is so important for accessibility – sometimes I feel like I'm constantly repeating myself... but it's usually worth it in the end!

Skills and knowledge I've developed

Technical knowledge I've gained:

1. Understanding Part M building regulations in great depth!
2. Having a good base of understanding of a wide range of regulations and good practice guides, such as ADM1 and 2, BS8300, PAS 6463, WHDG, IHG, London Housing Design Guide, RIBA stages... the list goes on
3. On site understanding of some basic construction (i.e. bathroom wall strengthening, windposts, fitting rise-fall worktops)

Skills that have been essential:

1. Tenacity... with gentleness - never giving up and trusting that both my expertise and my intuition as an OT are right, but bringing people alongside, gaining trust and imparting knowledge.
2. Decades years of working with disabled children and adults with a very wide range of conditions – this has given me a really good wide base of knowledge to help understand inclusive housing design.
3. An inquisitive mind – always being prepared to learn new things, asking for regular training on a wide variety of subjects related to inclusive and accessible design and construction.

An unexpected competency I've developed:

I enjoy surprising contractors with my level of knowledge about level access shower installation, the slip resistance of flooring, the complex fitting of a kitchen rise-fall section, the automation of door entry systems and the intricacies of correct socket locations, etc etc!

My top tips for OTs considering housing

Three things I wish I'd known:

1. Asking for formal training on inclusive and accessible design early on in my Housing OT career
2. Finding a specific mentor early on in my Housing OT career
3. Working in housing and construction is really challenging and you need a thick skin!

Essential learning / training:

Attending basic training on inclusive and accessible design and adaptations is essential... but most of my learning has been on the job and with other Housing OTs who were so generous with their time. My top piece of advice is to find an expert Housing OT, shadow them and ask them to mentor you.

One piece of advice

Working in housing, especially in inclusive and accessible design, is one of the most rewarding areas to work in as an OT because a good home enables people to live life to the best of their abilities. Moving into housing was the best decision I made and I would have no hesitation in encouraging other OTs to do the same!

Why housing OT matters

Being a Housing Occupational Therapist allows me to be truly client-centred and focused on enabling people to flourish in their homes and in their communities.