Royal College of Occupational Therapists

Neighbourhood mental health support in Tower Hamlets

Bringing mental health support into the community

The Barnsley Street Neighbourhood Mental Health Centre in Tower Hamlets is helping to transform how support is provided for people living with serious mental illness and complex mental health needs. Developed through a partnership between East London NHS Foundation Trust, Look Ahead Housing and the Tower Hamlets Mental Health Alliance, the service was one of NHS England's original neighbourhood mental health pilot sites.

The centre provides a wide range of support, including walk-in access, planned appointments, outreach, crisis support, guest beds and community-based groups and activities. People can access expertise from occupational therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, social care professionals, housing specialists, employment advisers and voluntary sector partners, all within one neighbourhood hub.

Looking beyond symptoms

The service is built on the understanding that recovery involves much more than managing mental health symptoms. Many people also experience challenges relating to housing, finances, employment, physical health, substance use and social isolation. By bringing services together, the team can address these wider determinants of health through coordinated, person-centred support.

For occupational therapists, the model creates opportunities to intervene earlier and more flexibly. Occupational therapy support is delivered through drop-in services, outreach work, home visits, group programmes and community activities.

The team also works closely with psychiatric liaison and inpatient services, enabling occupational therapists to begin supporting people earlier in their recovery journey. In some cases, this has helped people remain in community settings rather than being admitted to hospital, maintaining continuity with their daily routines, relationships and occupations.

Because occupational therapists work across the centre, in people's homes, and in community settings, they can understand individuals in the context of their daily lives and identify barriers that might otherwise go unnoticed. This helps ensure support is practical, personalised and focused on what matters most to each person.

Partnership working at the heart of recovery

The success of the service relies on strong partnerships across health, housing, social care, primary care and the voluntary sector. Occupational therapists work alongside peer support workers, community organisations and local networks, recognising that recovery is strengthened when people can access support within their own communities.

Occupational therapists have played a key role in shaping the service, including developing occupation-focused pathways, designing group programmes and embedding a focus on participation and belonging across the wider multidisciplinary team.

What can occupational therapists learn from this approach?

The Barnsley Street model demonstrates how occupational therapists can make a significant contribution to neighbourhood health by working across organisational boundaries and focusing on what matters in people's daily lives.

Working as part of a neighbourhood team enables occupational therapists to move beyond traditional service boundaries and intervene where they can have the greatest impact. This includes supporting people before crisis occurs, reducing social isolation, improving access to community resources and helping people remain connected to the roles, relationships and activities that matter to them.

The experience in Tower Hamlets highlights how occupational therapists can act as both specialists and system leaders, ensuring that recovery is understood not simply as symptom reduction, but as enabling people to live well in their communities.

> **‘Neighbourhood mental health has shown me that occupational therapy is at its strongest when we are both specialists and collaborators - bringing our unique occupational expertise while recognising and building on the strengths that already exist within people, communities and the wider multidisciplinary team.’**

Laura Coffin, Senior Occupational Therapist, East London NHS Foundation Trust