

Equality of Opportunity Committee

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Purpose

This paper is submitted by the College of Occupational Therapists (COT) to inform the committee's discussions in relation to the inquiry into home maintenance and adaptations services for older people in Wales. Appended to this paper is our written evidence submission which outlines a range of issues and potential solutions.

Background

Occupational therapists have been part of local authority social services since departments were first set up in the 1970s, and remain the only allied health profession to be employed in this setting (Riley 2002). Occupational therapy staff handle 40% of the referrals to adult social services adult services for people with physical impairments (Mountain 2000) yet they make up only 1% of the workforce (National Assembly for Wales Statistical Directorate 2006). The continual high demand for occupational therapy services is just one indication of the importance of their contribution to health and social care provision in Wales.

Promoting independence

Maximising an individual's potential to engage in daily activities as independently as possible is a key aim for occupational therapy. Occupational therapists' skills in adapting the environment and enabling people to carry out their chosen activities safely in their own homes can reduce dependency and the need for complex and costly care packages as well as admissions to hospital or residential care.

Reablement

Occupational therapists in social services are increasingly involved in reablement programmes that focus on improving people's function and independence in their own homes. Reablement programmes can be implemented following discharge from hospital or where a person needs to improve their functional ability in order to remain at home.

Inter-agency working

Occupational therapists already work across the boundaries of health and social care, with housing and voluntary sector agencies. Occupational therapists carry out joint assessments with their NHS colleagues to facilitate smooth and safe discharge from hospital. Through working in partnership with housing services to provide adaptations or re-housing, occupational therapists can help promote social inclusion, improve quality of life and reduce strain on carers (College of Occupational Therapists 2007)

Summary

There are a range of issues which the College believes are barriers to delivering a speedy and effective adaptations for service users. This paper will focus on four key areas of concern for your consideration.

Complexity of the Process

There is a lack of equity in funding streams across tenure and geographical patch

There is variable local interpretation of legislation, policy and eligibility criteria

Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) are a cumbersome process for the smaller adaptations. For example, under £5000, level access showers and stairlifts.

Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) have been faced with a growing number of adaptations via the Physical Adaptations Grant (PAG). Many had little experience or capacity to process them in a new system.

There is a need for more technical officers and trained support staff who can ensure applications flow through the system without bottlenecks.

Local Authority Housing Departments and RSLs need to share best practice and learn from each other to reduce variable interpretation of legislation.

The Added Value of Occupational Therapy.

OT services manage 40% of the workload, yet they comprise 1% of the workforce.

Occupational therapy skills are best used in complex situations where their ability to analyse the physical and social environment, demands of the task and the abilities of the individual can identify the most effective solution.

For many older people, more straightforward needs do not need an assessment by an occupational therapist. The College has worked

with Housing Associations to promote "Minor Adaptations without Delay" a guide to encourage Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to undertake small works/adaptations that do not need an assessment from an occupational therapist. However there has been slow uptake on this approach in Wales.

We have trained unqualified staff, trusted assessors, housing associations technical staff, handyman scheme and care and repair staff to undertake minor adaptations safely and competently deliver a speedy response.

More widespread employment of occupational therapists in local authority housing departments and Housing Associations. These Therapists will be able to advise on the best use of adapted void properties and set up housing registers. Where this is in place significant cost savings have been made. Research shows that occupational therapists are economical in their recommendations (occupational therapists only provide equipment or adaptations as a last resort) and do not over provide. However conversely evidence is that other professionals or unqualified staff (unsupervised) do over provide (Heywood 2001)

Performance management

Performance indicators must be put in place for RSLs and public sector housing in the same way it has been introduced for DFGs to ensure that adaptations are carried out in a timely manner and that social tenants do not have to wait for routine refurbishment schedules for adaptations to be completed.

All the data for the performance indicators must be consistently and accurately gathered and be comparable across Wales.

Where properties are subject to stock transfer business plans must be scrutinised to ensure that sufficient funding is available for future adaptations.

Transparent decision-making is critical. Assessments should be challenged appropriately and justification for a recommendation must be clear. The use of occupational therapists in local authority housing departments and in the Assembly Government's Housing Directorate would provide leadership on these matters.

Information

As identified in the recent Shelter/ Contact a family report (Mackie et al 2009), clear accurate information is essential. It needs to be explicit about the range of routes and funding streams related to different tenures, the application of local criteria and potential ongoing costs, such as maintenance and insurance.

RSLs must provide information to their tenants about their rights in relation to alternative routes (PAG or DFG), maintenance and repair responsibility and potential rent increases.

Progress chasers should be used to release occupational therapists time and to support and empower families through the DFG process

Information needs to be shared across LAs and RSLs about processes and best practice.

Information should be shared across housing authorities about accessible properties and families in need to ensure best use of available adapted property.

Recommendations

The College makes the following recommendations

Expand the fast tracking of adaptations most frequently needed by older people, such as simple grab rails and fast tracking of DFGs for works under £5,000 or for specific categories of adaptation.

The recommendation in the 2005 Jones 'Review of Disabled Facilities Grants' that all work under £1000 should be carried out without recourse to PAG or DFG should be adopted widely.

Continue to fund handyman and care and repair schemes to facilitate discharge and prevent admission.

Provision of simple (straight) stairlifts needs to be rapid and there are a number of models across Wales which offer the opportunity to speed up the provision via the DFG. These need to be rolled out across the whole country to ensure better provision.

For RSLs the "quick wins" implemented by the Welsh Assembly Government appear to be very effective. The College supports the recommendations of the Essex Review on Affordable Housing.

Where Stock Transfer is to occur there needs to be clear scrutiny of business plans to ensure that sufficient funding is allocated to adaptations; There needs to be a performance indicator to ensure adaptations are undertaken in a timely manner and consideration could be given to wider use of RSLs capital budgets in adapting properties,

The College's guidance 'Minor Adaptations without Delay' should be implemented more widely to reduce waiting times and deliver speedy effective services.

Occupational therapy personnel are needed in strategic positions to inform developments and drive change in adaptation systems.

More occupational therapy staff should be employed in the housing departments and Assembly Housing directorates. In Northern Ireland, the employment of an occupational therapist in the Housing Executive has delivered widespread benefits including design guidelines for adapting wheelchair properties and an audit resulting in clear data on where every wheelchair user lives and the need for accessible housing.

References

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Annex 1: Written Evidence submitted to the Committee

Equality of Opportunity Committee Inquiry into Home Maintenance and Adaptations Services for Older People: Evidence from the College of Occupational Therapists

Introduction

The College of Occupational Therapists is the professional body for occupational therapists and represents over 28,000 occupational therapists, support workers and students from across the United Kingdom and around 1,500 in Wales. Occupational therapists work in the NHS, Local Authority social care services, housing, schools, prisons, voluntary and independent sectors, and vocational and employment rehabilitation services.

The College of Occupational Therapists (COT) is pleased to provide evidence to the Committee Inquiry into Home Maintenance and Adaptations Services for Older People. Adaptations are key to enabling people to live full and independent lives in their own homes and in doing so, improve their quality of life.

Occupational therapists provide the expert assessment leading to recommendations for Disabled Facilities Grants.

Waiting times for adaptations provided through local authorities, including those funded by Disabled Facilities Grants

Unacceptable waiting times exist throughout the whole process for the provision of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). The process covers two statutory bodies: social services who recommend what is necessary and appropriate and the grants department, usually situated in the local housing authority, who are responsible for determining whether this is reasonable and practicable. In consequence there needs to be differentiation between waiting times for an occupational therapy assessment within social services and time taken from the local housing authority receiving the recommendation and the application complete to the adaptation in place. There are also separate performance management routes for these statutory bodies.

This means that collecting data is difficult unless there are good local partnership arrangements. There are also discrepancies in what is deemed the start and end points of the process. Collecting the data more effectively will help set standards for delivery and help identify where there may be bottlenecks in the process.

Successes in reducing waiting times

Occupational therapists have identified and improved waiting times for assessments in Wales and examples of some of the methods employed are listed below:

Through the use of Trusted Assessors and other competent staff to undertake straightforward assessments for minor works/adaptations and equipment has freed up occupational therapy time to concentrate on complex assessments.

The use of 'Progress Chasers' to monitor recommendations once they have been passed to the local housing authority thus freeing up caseload time for occupational therapists.

Having good equipment delivery services to release occupational therapy time, as they may be unnecessarily involved in delivering equipment.

In order for these improvements to be achieved and successful, occupational therapy managers must be involved in strategic planning locally. There will also need to be investment in support staff (occupational therapy assistants), trusted assessors and equipment delivery services if best use of occupational therapy time is to be achieved. There is a range of evidence available to demonstrate that the above initiatives have been successful in the areas mentioned above.

Standards should be set to which services can be measured that are realistic and take into account the housing needs of the locality. This should include all the various funding streams for adaptations.

The process for applying for grants and minor adaptations

There are a number of funding streams for adaptations, including social services budgets which usually directly fund low cost adaptations. This varies around Wales but may be normally around £1000. The 2005 Disabled Facilities Grant Review recommended £1000 and if this recommendation were formally accepted this would introduce some level of equity around Wales.

Disabled Facilities Grants fund adaptations up to £36,000, and the funding stream known as Physical Adaptations Grant (PAG) funds adaptations in housing associations. Alongside this is a range of tenures which each provide anomalies in the route to funding e.g. owner occupiers, private rented property, local authority owned property, local authority property that has transferred ownership to another agency i.e. a housing association and housing associations. There are particular difficulties for those people in properties which have been transferred from a local authority to a housing association (commonly known as stock transfer). In these cases funding is not clear as they are not eligible for funding from the local authority or housing associations via the PAG grant. There is a need for strategic planning for funding adaptations when business plans for stock transfer are drawn up.

The problems with some of the funding streams and tenures will be highlighted if deemed helpful during our oral evidence, which will demonstrate the complexity of some of the situations encountered by occupational therapists and the people they aim to help.

Suggestions for improving the delivery of adaptations to older people

Older people need to have minor alterations to their homes for a number of reasons. Adaptations may be required for safety to prevent falls; sensory loss such as sight in order to assist in locating items around the home and to also improve their safety; and where a disability has reduced their access to a key part of the home. The adaptations provided will enable older people to live safely and independently within the home. Suggestions to improve speedy delivery of services include:

Handy person services provided by home improvement agencies which in turn can lead to other services being provided such as income maximisation.

Hazard safety checks to help prevent falls, these can be provided by home improvement agencies and also other voluntary agencies and can include a range of assistance such as energy saving light bulbs to ensure good lighting on stairs.

Social services occupational therapy teams operating fast tracking services that provide simple adaptations such as grab rails and stair rails without an assessment visit.

Housing associations using information contained within 'Minor Adaptations without Delay', which was published by the College in partnership with the Housing Corporation. This publication promotes housing associations taking responsibility for the provision of simple adaptations and identifies the types of minor adaptations that can be completed without an occupational therapy assessment. It is supported by a technical guide to help staff complete the installation. This can be downloaded at:

http://www.cot.org.uk/public/publications/intro/pdf/minor_works_entire.pdf.

Several authorities have adopted this, but it needs to be used more widely to maximise the benefits in terms of reducing unnecessary referrals to occupational therapists. There is also a partner publication that provides confidence and security to employers and individuals through identifying the

competences required to be able to implement. This can be downloaded at:

http://www.cot.org.uk/public/publications/free/pdf/Competence_framework.pdf

A fast-track mechanism could be in place to provide those adaptations costing up to £10,000. This could include stairlifts, level access showers, showers over baths and ground floor toilets. These are the most common requests received for older people. A system that does not require the bureaucracy involved in a DFG (i.e. proof of title of ownership which can cause inordinate delays) would be welcomed.

Alternative suggestions could be reclassifying straight stair lifts as equipment which would then open up opportunities for direct payments, leasing and recycling arrangements and more satisfactory maintenance arrangements (currently maintenance is not always included in a DFG). Work is currently progressing on this in England.

The usefulness of information and advice on home maintenance and adaptations services

The most useful information is that which identifies a person-centred approach rather than a service availability approach. Information should be written in partnership with service users and be easy to understand and in a range of language and formats. As already identified the systems and funding streams in place are complex so to explain this will require some expertise.

The way information is currently provided is variable and perhaps an audit of what is currently provided should be undertaken with an award from a service user group as to the most informative and readable.

The maintenance of installations and equipment

Maintenance depends on the tenure and funding route for the adaptation and is a concern for older people as the costs of insurance and repair are high. In local authority properties, an adaptation will be maintained and repaired by the council. This is not the case in all tenures and information needs to be clearly available on the ownership of, and responsibility for, repair and maintenance.

Some housing association tenants under the PAG scheme may incur an extra financial burden where their housing association passes on costs in relation to insurance, maintenance or repair of the adaptation in the form of increased rents. Occupational therapists are aware of situations where tenants have refused to have an adaptation because of the high costs quoted as rent increases from their housing association. Others have not been made aware of the cost before completing and are then faced with an unexpected financial burden after completion.

Resources for home maintenance and adaptations services

The College welcomed increased limits for DFGs and the fast tracking of PAGs for specific adaptations under the Minister for Housing's "quick wins". There has been significant investment in adaptations in Wales with noticeable system improvements since the 2005 Review of Disabled Facilities Grants. The increased level of Grant (£36,000) and the removal of the parental means test for DFGs for children has made an impact.

However, there must be recognition that in Wales, much of the housing stock is old and not easily adaptable e.g. external access problems as a result of natural topography. Housing resources need to be used far more intelligently to get best value out of public money and deliver maximum quality of life for people.

Suggestions for improving resources

There are a number of examples of best practice across Wales and some are included below:

Occupational therapists that are employed in housing departments assist in improved allocation of adapted housing stock or assessment of void properties for suitability for adaptation to enable re-housing of disabled tenants living in properties unsuitable for adaptation, the introduction of housing registers, and property management.

When refurbishment schemes or block maintenance are being planned account needs to be taken of lifetime homes standards for older age and disability. Current practice appears to ignore this and as a result increased costs are being incurred to make properties accessible following refurbishment.

The application of housing registers for adapted owner occupied properties for sale.

In Northern Ireland the employment of an occupational therapist in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has delivered a valuable role including research and design guidelines for wheelchair standard housing in high density environments and plotting the population of wheelchair users on a GPS map, which is updated when people are issued with new wheelchairs. A similar post in the Welsh Assembly Government Housing Directorate would be valuable.

Good quality inclusive design principles should be used in all new builds.

Performance management of home maintenance and adaptations services provided by local authorities and Care and Repair agencies

The College welcomes the call for improved performance management as recommended in the 'Essex report'. Performance management needs to extend to all types of adaptation processes and tenures. Robust data and national performance indicators should raise the quality of service provided to service users.

Equity of provision of home maintenance and adaptations services in different parts of Wales and for homeowners and tenants

There needs to be an equity and transparency in the way in which adaptations are provided. The difficulty in not doing so impacts on staff who have to manage the complaints about inequities. A national approach offers the opportunity for monitoring and evaluation and judgment against clear benchmarks.

The 2005 Review of Disabled Facilities Grants had a range of recommendations which have not been fully implemented. Full implementation of these would help to improve the adaptations processes for older people

Conclusion

Occupational therapists from across Wales, with an experience of adaptations, have contributed to this response. Occupational therapists are committed to supporting timely and high quality adaptations that enable older people to live safely in an accessible environment.

There needs to be a more coherent approach to the delivery of adaptations, with greater recognition by authorities that appropriate and accessible housing has a vital impact on the quality of people's lives and their ability to remain in their own home and community.

The College hopes that the examples and suggested solutions presented in this document are helpful and we look forward to expanding on these areas during our oral presentation.