

Local Authority home adaptations: The impact of timely provision on people's care outcomes

The issue

In Adult Social Care, Occupational Therapists (OTs) increase people's independence and optimise care packages by advising on equipment provision, adaptations and manual handling. The provision of their services is, however, limited by funding constraints and waiting lists.

What we wanted to find out

What impact does timely access to home adaptations provided by OT services have on people's care outcomes in adult social care?

What we did

We searched the British Journal of Occupational Therapy (BJOT), the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), Google Scholar and the Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy databases for relevant reviews and studies published in English since 2015. We defined timely access as the "provision of minor or major home adaptations following referral by an OT or OT Assistant". We also looked for relevant professional guidance.

What we found

We identified a feasibility Randomised Controlled Trial (f-RCT)¹ and a related report based on interviews with the trial participants,² a systematic review,³ a mixed methods study focused on people with Motor Neurone Disease (MND),⁴ and four qualitative studies,^{5, 6, 7, 9} one of which was published after the search.⁹

The RCT focused on people aged 65+ who had been referred to a single local authority for an accessible level shower. They were randomised to immediate adaptations (no wait) or usual adaptations (with a 3-4 month wait). Outcomes were assessed at 3, 6 and 9 months.

Two of the qualitative studies were undertaken in Australia^{5, 9}, and two were conducted in local authorities in England⁶ and Wales⁷ respectively.

We also found a 2019 guide on planning and delivering home adaptations, published by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists.⁸

What the evidence suggests

We identified four broad areas of impact related to the timely provision of home adaptations: wellbeing, quality of life, health and safety, and ongoing care needs.

Wellbeing

Five studies highlighted the impact that delays in providing home adaptations can have on wellbeing. For this briefing, wellbeing was defined as the overall state of a person's physical, mental, emotional and social satisfaction with life.

Studies highlighted the emotional toll of delays. They found that waiting times are experienced differently by different people, for example, older adults' perception of time is likely to be different to that of working-aged people,³ and people with a rapidly progressing terminal illness such as MND may have a different perception again.⁴ One study found that people's individual expectations and differences in patience were mediating variables in the ways they experienced outcomes.⁵

When people lose confidence in washing, they lose confidence in other areas of their life such as leaving the house, for fear of smelling.² Participants in the feasibility trial by Whitehead *et al.* talked about dreading having to use their former bathing facilities. This had impacted their sense of safety and spilled into anxiety in other areas of their life.² The feasibility trial itself suggests that there is an important preventative aspect to the timely installation of bathing adaptations for older adults.¹

All participant outcome measures improved from baseline at 3 months in the *immediate adaptations* group, compared to minimal changes or slight worsening in the control group. Participant outcomes included health and social care related quality of life, overall wellbeing, physical and mental health, perceived health, independent bathing and falls. Carers in the intervention group reported improvements in perceived health status (mental and physical), quality of life and reductions in carer strain, although the sample size was smaller.

Bailey *et al.* (2018) found that the installation of adaptations can increase people's psychological and social wellbeing, as it means they can go outside and use community services.⁶ However, they also found that when delays occurred when people needed to gain permission from landlords to make adaptations, this placed extra stress on the relationship and caused tenants worry about the security of their home.⁶ Participants also reported feeling embarrassed and felt that they were being seen as demanding when needing assistance from family whilst waiting for adaptation.

Quality of life

Six studies highlighted ways in which people's quality of life was impacted by delays in providing home adaptations.^{2,4,5,6,7,9} For this briefing, quality of life is defined as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns.

Dignity: Participants in the feasibility trial described how having an adaptation positively impacted both dignity and a sense of control.² The qualitative studies illustrate the impact of delays on dignity:

"My husband lived in the living room with no shower facilities at all. We were washing him out on the decking with buckets of water. No dignity in that whatsoever".⁴

"It took too long... The toilet had been lifted off every day and going on for me...I was stinking, man..."⁶

Control:

The inability to participate in daily tasks due to delays leave people feeling a loss of control.⁷ The impact of these delays were found to be further compounded as people take time to adjust to them.⁶ Prompt referrals for adaptations where people are involved in considering their options, are suggested to contribute to a sense of control and to facilitate supportive outcomes.^{5,9}

Two papers highlighted how having adaptations in place *before the need arose* gave people and their carers peace of mind: “what helped most was having things there for when we needed them”.^{4,9} However, some councils only consider providing adaptations when needs present themselves, which is particularly problematic for people with progressive conditions like MND. A bereaved family member explained “My husband passed away nine and a half months from diagnosis and the ramp wasn’t even begun”.⁴ None of the local authorities participating in the MND Scotland study had formal fast-track procedures in place for people living with terminal illnesses.

Some people choose to take control by funding the adaptation privately because of frustration with the delays.^{6,9} They spend savings, withdraw pensions or get into debt to enable timely access.⁴ However, professionals have concerns that privately funded adaptations are sometimes inappropriate, unsuitable for needs and insufficiently safe.⁶

Health and Safety

Much of the evidence suggests that people experience more falls when there are delays to adaptations and this often leads to broken bones, hospital admissions and increased paid care.^{1,3,4,9} Participants in the feasibility trial reported that people who were continuing to use their own bathing facilities while waiting for an adaptation, sometimes used them in an unsatisfactory, adaptive style, such as washing on their hands and knees in the bath, which exacerbated physical health problems such as arthritis.²

Ongoing care needs

The scoping review found that people reported increased difficulties in performing everyday tasks for each consecutive month whilst waiting for adaptations.³ In contrast, people required less care and support when adaptation was completed, which suggests that delayed access to adaptation will increase the length of time and potentially the level of support required.^{1,6}

Quality of evidence and conclusions

We are moderately confident about the trustworthiness of the studies analysed in this briefing. However, inferring transferability to all adults with disabilities should be made with caution as most of the papers referenced focused on specific groups (such as older adults or people with MND) who may have had different outcomes to the wider population being considered in this paper.

What this means for practice

When developing adaptations provision, local authorities should consider:

- Fast tracking procedures for people with rapidly progressing conditions
- Investing in working preventatively than reactively to need
- Increasing public awareness of adaptations
- Ways of communicating throughout process to manage expectations
- Ensuring that services have workers with knowledge of adaptations at the front door

Further resources

“Adaptations without delay” (2019) is a report commissioned by RCOT.⁸ It sets out a decision-making framework in which adaptations are defined based on the complexity of the situation and the type of structural alteration required, rather than the type or cost of the solution. It provides guidance on workforce and operational considerations relevant to the different levels of intervention. The report underscores the value of occupational therapists in

complex cases and recommends redesigning services so simpler adaptations can be handled without their input, helping to speed up access to timely adaptations.

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