

Kate Sheehan
Occupational Therapy
EMPOWER, EDUCATE AND INSPIRE

Kate Sheehan is a well-respected Occupational Therapist, with 39 years of clinical experience, having graduated from the Derby School of Occupational Therapy in 1987. Her specialist area of practice is accessible housing design, championing the need to understand the meaning of home to an individual and how poorly designed modifications can have a significant impact the well-being of clients.

She has been a consultant occupational therapist for Stannah for the past 25 years, supporting them in product design and marketing.

In 2018 she co-authored the Wheelchair Housing Design Guide for the Centre for Accessible Environments, publication in March 2018, supported by the then Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, having previously authored Minor Adaptations without Delay and written chapters for The Essential Guide for occupational therapist 2022.

Kate continues to have a small clinical caseload to keep her up to date with the needs of her clients, she provides clinical mentoring for a number of local authorities and works closely with companies, forging better design for all.

Kate is internationally known and has presented her work in Australia, Italy, the USA and presented the first accessible housing courses in Bosnia and Croatia.

Kate was awarded a Fellowship from the RCOT in 2022 for her outstanding work in the field of occupational therapy and in 2023 was bestowed a fellowship from the University of Worcester.

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MAKING YOUR HOME, WORK FOR YOU

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Our homes are more than just buildings. They're where we live our lives, make our memories and feel most like ourselves. As we get older, the way we use our homes naturally evolves and a few simple, well-considered home improvements can make sure your home keeps pace with your individual needs.

This guide is about being ahead of the curve, making small, smart changes now that will make a big difference later. Think of it less as planning for old age and more as investing in your own comfort, freedom and independence for the long term.

The best home improvements are often the ones that work quietly in the background. Thoughtful design, practical innovation and future-ready thinking can help you continue enjoying your home, your routines and your community exactly as you do today, without compromising on style or character.

Throughout your home

Some of the smartest home improvements you can make are not specific to any one room. The following themes apply throughout your home and are worth keeping in mind, whether you are making small updates or planning something more significant.

Lighting

As we age, our eyes naturally change, and we generally benefit from better lighting around our home, both for comfort and for moving around safely. It is worth taking stock of the lighting in each room and asking whether it is really working hard enough for you.

Replacing older bulbs with brighter, higher lumen alternatives is an easy and affordable starting point and sensor-activated lights are worth considering in areas you might navigate at night, particular when accessing the toilet when you wake in the early hours.

Also, think about task lighting, focused lighting for specific activities like food preparation, reading, or close-up work, which can make everyday tasks much easier and more enjoyable.

Daylight bulbs are worth considering too, they mimic natural light, which can help with both concentration and mood, especially during the shorter days of autumn and winter.

Flooring

Making smart flooring choices now can make a real difference to how your home works for you in the long term. When replacing carpets or hard flooring, think beyond colour and style. A low-pile carpet is easier to keep clean and move around on, and heavily patterned carpets are best avoided, as they can be visually distracting.

It is also worth casting an eye around your home for the small things that make a big difference. Loose rugs, clutter, and uneven threshold strips between rooms are all simple things to address. Your stair carpet is also worth keeping in mind. Worn or frayed carpet on the stairs is a common hazard and replacing it before it reaches that point is a small investment that could make a real difference."

Storage

Good storage is one of the smartest investments you can make in your home. Thinking carefully about what you store and where, keeps your home feeling organised and easy to live in. As a general rule, keep the things you use most at a comfortable height, avoiding anything that requires repeated stretching up high or bending down too low.

When updating or replacing storage, pull-out drawers and shelves are worth considering over deep cupboards, where things can get lost at the back. Open shelving or clear labelling can also make a real difference to how easy your home is to navigate day-to-day.

Plugs, controls and technology

If you are doing any renovation work, it is worth thinking carefully about plug socket and light switch placement. Building regulations for new homes recommend positioning sockets no lower than 450mm from the floor and switches no higher than 1200mm, and these are sensible guidelines to follow in any home. Keeping controls within that range reduces unnecessary bending and stretching, which can make a real difference day to day. Making sure you have plenty of sockets throughout your home also reduces the need for trailing extension leads, which can create a trip hazard for any of us, old or young. Built-in USB ports are a useful addition for charging devices without the need for adaptors.

When replacing appliances or controls, simple is always best. Clear, easy-to-use controls with good colour contrast make everyday tasks more straightforward and are a smart long-term choice. It is also worth thinking beyond the controls themselves. A self-cleaning oven takes one physically demanding task off your list entirely, and ovens with a slide-and-hide door, such as those in the Neff range, are a good example of a design that makes access safer and easier without compromising on style.

Smart technology is also worth exploring. From video doorbells that let you see who is at the door from your phone to voice-activated assistants that can control lighting and heating, technology can make your home work harder for you with very little effort. Smart plugs are also worth considering, allowing you to control lamps and appliances remotely from your phone or smart device without any rewiring.

Entrance and hallway

A few smart choices at your entrance can make coming and going much easier. If space allows a small bench or seat near the front door makes putting shoes on and off more comfortable and a shelf or table nearby is always useful for keys and bags.

A letter cage fitted to the inside of your front door is a small but worthwhile addition, catching post as it arrives and removing the need to bend down to the floor each time.

If you are replacing your front door, it is worth specifying a low threshold option. Standard door thresholds are a surprisingly common trip hazard and a low or flush threshold makes entering and leaving your home much easier and safer. It also allows you to wheel in suitcases or a shopping trolley with ease.

Good lighting both inside and outside your entrance is well worth investing in and sensor-activated lights are particularly useful here.

If you are planning any work on your stairs, having an electrical socket fitted at the bottom is a small and inexpensive addition that makes retrofitting a stairlift in the future straightforward. Another simple improvement worth considering is making sure you have two bannister rails that run the full length of the staircase.

It is also worth thinking about the space immediately outside your front door. Having a level area to stand while you open or close the door, put down bags, or find your keys is something many homes lack but which makes a genuine difference to everyday comfort and safety.

Room by Room

Every room in your home has its own rhythm and its own demands. The following guides look at each space in turn, exploring the simple and smart improvements that can make each room work better for you both now and in the future.

Living room

Your living room is where you relax, socialise and unwind, and with a few smart choices, it can continue to work beautifully for you. When replacing sofas or chairs, think beyond style. A chair with good back support, arms and a comfortable seat height is not only a pleasure to sit in but a smart long-term

choice, allowing you to get into it and off it with ease.

A well-considered layout makes a real difference, both for everyday comfort and for the future. Think about positioning seating at a good distance and angle for watching TV, making the most of natural light and leaving enough circulation space to move around easily, whatever life brings.

Finally, think about the practicalities. Conveniently placed plug sockets, easy-to-operate window dressings, and good task lighting for reading all make everyday living that little bit more enjoyable.

Kitchen

The kitchen is the heart of the home, and a few smart choices can make it a more enjoyable and efficient space to work in for years to come.

When planning any kitchen updates or renovations, think carefully about layout. Positioning your oven, hob and sink along the same continuous run creates a natural flow that makes cooking easier and more intuitive, reducing unnecessary movement around the kitchen. If you are replacing your oven, an eye-level or tower oven with a pull-out landing shelf is well worth considering, as it makes it much easier and safer to handle hot dishes.

Storage is worth thinking about too. Drawer units tend to be more practical than deep cupboards with hinged doors, making everything easier to access without rummaging. Internal storage organisers and MIDI-height fridge-freezers are also worth considering when replacing appliances.

When replacing taps, lever taps are a smart choice over twist taps, as they are much easier and more comfortable to use on a daily basis. An instant hot water tap is also worth considering, as well as being a practical and increasingly affordable addition to any kitchen, it removes the need to lift and pour a heavy kettle, which can be a real benefit as we get older.

Good ventilation is essential in any kitchen. If you are replacing or upgrading your extractor fan, it is worth investing in one that is effective and easy to operate. Remote controls are a practical feature worth looking for, removing the need to stretch up to reach the controls. If space allows, having a small table or breakfast bar in or close to the kitchen is a good decision, as being able to eat in or near where you prepare food removes the need to carry hot dishes and drinks through to another room, which is both practical and safer.

Finally, remember that a well-designed kitchen does not have to look purely functional. The best kitchen upgrades combine practicality with style, creating a space that works hard for you whilst looking exactly as you want it to.

Bathroom

The bathroom is one of the most important rooms to get right, and thoughtful planning here can make a real difference both now and in the future. Think carefully about space when planning any changes, as leaving adequate room around key fixtures means the bathroom can accommodate any equipment or assistance you might need in the future without feeling cramped.

Bath or shower?

If you are renovating, a wet room or step-free shower is the smartest long-term choice, removing the need to step over a bath or shower tray. If you currently have a bath, it is worth considering whether a shower might be a more practical long-term option.

The shower

Whatever you choose, make sure your walls are fitted with reinforced wall backing so that grab rails and a shower seat can be added easily in the future without any major works.

Thermostatic shower controls are well worth fitting, making it simple to set and maintain a comfortable and safe temperature, reducing the risk of scalds or burns.

A sliding rail shower head, sometimes called a riser rail, is a smart choice over a fixed head as it can be adjusted to work at any height, whether standing or seated. It is worth choosing one that also functions as a grab rail as well, giving you something secure to hold whilst in the shower without the need for any additional fittings.

It is also worth thinking about where you store your shower products. Shelving or a caddy positioned at a comfortable height, without the need to bend or stretch, makes showering easier and safer and is a simple thing to get right from the outset.

The toilet

The toilet is one of the most frequently used fixtures in the home, and a few simple considerations can make a significant difference to comfort and independence. Leaving adequate space around the toilet is important, making it easier to use and ensuring the room can accommodate any additional equipment or assistance in the future.

If you are replacing your toilet, a comfort height model, which sits slightly higher than a standard toilet, makes sitting down and standing up much easier on the knees and hips. A wall-hung toilet is also worth considering, as the height can be set to suit you precisely during installation and the clear floor space underneath makes cleaning easier.

When it comes to flushing, a large, easy-to-press flush button or a lever handle is a much more practical choice than a small or stiff mechanism, particularly for anyone with reduced grip or dexterity.

Reinforced wall backing around the toilet is well worth including from the outset, making it straightforward to add grab rails in the future without major works. An outward-opening door is also a practical and sensible choice for any bathroom renovation, ensuring the door can always be opened easily from the outside in an emergency.

The wash hand basin

The position and design of your wash hand basin is worth thinking about carefully, and leaving adequate space in front of it makes the bathroom much more comfortable and practical to use.

A wall-mounted basin offers more flexibility around height than one set into a vanity unit, and the knee clearance underneath means it can be used comfortably from a seated position should you need it in the future.

A mirror positioned to work whether standing or seated is a simple but often overlooked detail that makes the bathroom work better for everyone.

Lever taps are a much more practical and comfortable choice than twist taps. It is also worth thinking about storage around the basin, keeping everyday essentials within easy reach at a comfortable height to avoid unnecessary bending or stretching.

Fixtures and fittings

Slip-resistant flooring, good task lighting, and good contrast between surfaces and fittings, avoiding white on white for example, all make the bathroom safer and easier to navigate.

Finally, make sure you have adequate heating and ventilation, both of which make the bathroom a more comfortable and practical space.

Bedroom

A good night's sleep and a calm, well-organised bedroom make a real difference to how you feel, and a few smart choices here are well worth considering.

Getting the height of your bed right is important. A bed that is too low or too high makes getting in and out much harder than it needs to be, so if you are replacing your bed think carefully about height as well as comfort. A supportive mattress is equally worth investing in.

Think about what you can reach from your bed. A bedside lamp, your phone

and any other essentials should all be within easy reach and a conveniently placed plug sockets means everything can be charged overnight without trailing leads across the floor.

Adequate circulation space around the bed makes the room more comfortable to move around in and is a smart long-term choice. When choosing bedroom furniture and storage, look for wardrobes with easy-to-open doors and pull-out internal fittings that bring everything within reach without rummaging.

Stairs

The stairs are one of the most important areas of your home to get right, and a few simple improvements can make a real difference.

If you are doing any work on your stairs, make sure each step is consistent in height and depth, as uneven steps are one of the most common causes of trips and falls. A plain, good-quality carpet in good condition is the smartest choice for stair flooring, and keeping the stairs clear of clutter is an easy but important habit to maintain.

Good lighting on the stairs is essential and making sure you have a light switch at both the top and bottom of the stairs is a simple but really practical improvement.

Handrails are worth reviewing too. Where the width of your staircase allows, a handrail on both sides is ideal and a round or oval profile rail is much easier to grip than a flat one.

If you are planning any work on your stairs, having an electrical socket fitted at the bottom is a small, inexpensive addition that makes retrofitting a stairlift in the future straightforward and hassle-free.

Homelifts

For many people, remaining in the home and community they love is an important part of planning for the future. If you are considering significant home improvements or renovations, it is worth taking the time to think about where a home lift could be positioned, even if you do not need one today.

Modern homelifts provide access to every floor of your home without the need to navigate stairs, helping to reduce the risk of trips and falls whilst making everyday life easier. They are also useful for transporting shopping, laundry, luggage and other household items between floors, benefiting everyone in the household, not just those with mobility concerns.

Today's homelifts are designed to be an attractive addition to the home rather than a purely functional feature. With a wide range of sizes, layouts and finishes available, they can be integrated into almost any property and tailored to suit individual tastes and interior styles.

For those who do not feel a stairlift is the right solution, a home lift offers an alternative that allows every room in the home to remain fully accessible. Rather than adapting how you live, a lift helps ensure your home continues to work around you, allowing you to enjoy every part of it with confidence and ease.

By thinking ahead and considering a lift as part of your long-term plans, you can future-proof your home, retain greater independence and continue living life at home as normally as possible for years to come.

Garden

Outdoor space matters more than many of us realise. Time spent in the garden, whether pottering, sitting, or simply enjoying the fresh air, has real benefits for both physical and mental wellbeing. With a few smart choices, your garden can remain a space you enjoy and connect with for years to come, whatever your level of mobility.

Access to and from the home is a good place to start. A smooth, level threshold between your home and garden removes a common trip hazard and makes moving in and out much easier. Where there are steps down to the garden, a handrail and a contrasting edge on each step make them significantly safer and easier to navigate. For further guidance on paths and surfaces leading to your home, the Access: Paths and Driveways section is also worth reading.

Paths and surfaces within the garden are equally worth prioritising. Making sure paths are in good condition, even and non-slip, is one of the most important things you can do. Loose gravel and uneven surfaces are best avoided.

Raised beds are a brilliant investment for any garden, bringing planting up to a comfortable working height and avoiding the need to bend. Easy-to-maintain planting with good use of mulching reduces the amount of work the garden demands, and artificial grass is worth considering as a low-maintenance alternative to a traditional lawn.

Think about the practical elements too. A conveniently placed outside tap saves the need to carry heavy watering cans, and a rotary or wall-mounted washing line at a comfortable height makes hanging out clothes much easier. Good lighting along pathways and at entry points is also well worth investing in.

Finally, make sure you have a comfortable place to sit and enjoy your garden, ideally within easy reach of the door. Being able to step outside and sit down without having to travel far into the garden means you can continue to enjoy your outdoor space even if your mobility changes over time. Stable, well-proportioned garden furniture at a good height makes all the difference.

Access: Paths and driveways

Getting to and from your front door safely and comfortably is something many of us take for granted, but the approach to your home is just as important as the home itself. A few simple improvements can make a real difference, whatever the weather or time of day.

If your driveway or path surface has seen better days, it is worth addressing sooner rather than later. Uneven paving, loose gravel, and cracked surfaces are all trip hazards that are straightforward to fix and well worth the investment. Where possible, a smooth, firm, and slip-resistant surface is the ideal.

Good lighting along your path and driveway is essential, particularly during the darker months. Sensor-activated lights are a practical and energy-efficient choice, ensuring the route to your door is always well lit without you needing to think about it.

If your driveway has a slope, handrails or a gentle ramp with a non-slip surface can make it much easier and safer to navigate. It is also worth thinking about step-free access where possible, both for your own comfort now and for ease of access in the future.

Looking ahead

You can make your home work for you, now and into the future, by investing in thoughtful design, practical improvements and future-ready solutions that support your long-term needs without compromising on comfort or style.

Many of the ideas in this guide are simple, affordable and easy to introduce, whilst others may form part of a larger renovation or future plan. Whatever changes you choose to make, the goal is the same: to create a home that continues to support your independence, your wellbeing and the life you want to live.

Because ultimately, the best home is one that allows you to focus less on the challenges of everyday living and more on enjoying the people, places and routines that matter most. A home that adapts with you, supports you and helps you continue living life, at home, as normally as possible.