



# Enabling Greater Independence

Rachel Hirst is an occupational therapist that works at the William Merritt Centre, she shares the amazing work that she is involved in as part of the team there

I work as part of a team at the William Merritt Centre in Leeds. We are a Disabled Living Centre and our ethos is to provide impartial and professional advice around all aspects of daily living equipment for adults and children. We don't supply or sell any equipment so our emphasis on "Try before you buy" enables people to avoid making costly mistakes on equipment which is not suitable for their needs.

We are also an accredited member of Driving Mobility and undertake driving and passenger access assessments at our offices in Leeds, York and Sheffield. Here we undertake fitness to drive assessments and adaptation assessments with clients of all ages. We want to keep people on the road but they obviously need

to be safe, our on-road assessment indicates how a person's medical condition affects their ability to drive. Referrals usually come via DVLA, the Motability Scheme or health professionals. A recent client who attended the centre for a driving assessment commented:

"I had several sleepless nights as I wondered whether I would lose my driving licence; I have driven 58 years so it was a very scary prospect.

"As soon as I met Lauren and Kate I began to feel at ease, Lauren gave me the opportunity to discuss all of my issues and tell her how I was feeling and how much driving meant to me. I have always loved driving.

"I would highly recommend the centre to anyone who is anxious about their ability to drive and stay mobile. These people are here to help."

The great thing about working at the centre is being able to do assessments with equipment which is a bit more unusual and because we aren't restricted by local statutory eligibility criteria, the sky's the limit! We were able to assess and apply to charities for funding for an

all-terrain wheelchair for one client who was a keen rugby fan and wanted to watch her daughter play rugby for her local team. Her current wheelchair was always getting stuck in the mud so the Mountain Trike from Experience Community was identified as offering a really good solution.

For children, we regularly do Wizzybug assessments in conjunction with national charity Designability. These fun, powered wheelchairs are available for free to children under five, giving them independent movement and allowing them to explore their environment through the use of switches or joystick controls.

We also offer Try B4 U Fly assessments and are one of only three other centres that offer this service across the country. Clients pay for these assessments and we go through the whole process of flying; from booking a seat, to check in, to transfers onto the aircraft seat. We also discuss issues around travelling with their mobility scooter or powered wheelchair and issues around continence. For many clients, the opportunity to fly again opens up a world which many had not thought possible.

We use the person, environment, occupation (PEO) model when carrying out assessments and follow the occupational therapy process. Typically, clients can refer themselves for an assessment to try a particular piece of equipment and we try and glean as much information as possible before the assessment by emailing out pre-assessment forms. This was particularly useful during the pandemic by cutting down on contact time when clients attended the centre. We then carry out an initial interview to establish a full picture of their functional ability, medical condition and home situation. Most of

our assessments take place here at the centre so we encourage clients to bring along photos to give us more information about the home setting which really guides our clinical reasoning and decision-making process. The assessment then consists of the client trying the various equipment that we have here in the centre. For example, if someone is struggling to mobilise around their home and in their local area they may attend the centre to try a powered wheelchair. We would demonstrate the controls and ask them to carry out a series of tasks, for example, driving in a straight line, reversing around a corner, negotiating a dropped kerb. The many visuo-spatial and cognitive skills required to drive a powered wheelchair or scooter are numerous so a thorough assessment is imperative, particularly as we sometimes have to advise against such a device at the end of the assessment. Similarly, a stairlift may be contra-indicated for someone who has a degenerative, neurological condition, so being able to clearly explain why this is the case is essential.

As part of our occupational therapy process we would always signpost on to the local NHS or adult social care where appropriate, but some people wish to fund their own equipment privately or simply don't meet the eligibility criteria for certain equipment. Our centre offers a place where clients can try a range of equipment in a non-pressurised setting and with support to choose the equipment which will best meet their long-term needs. Knowing that a client will be more mobile, more independent and have a better quality of life as a result of our intervention at the centre is a really satisfying feeling.

You can find out more about the William Merritt Centre at [wmdlc.org](http://wmdlc.org) or email Rachel Hirst on [rhirst@wmdlc.org](mailto:rhirst@wmdlc.org).

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