I need help – Project Forge

Fit to Theme

Sustainability – business use/need

When faced with the task of developing a product that would support Shelter Scotland in their aim of ending homelessness and bad housing in Scotland, we were particularly interested in how people find somewhere to stay and how they access help that first day or night when they find themselves homeless; either without somewhere to stay that night or sleeping on someone’s sofa.

To understand the process they go through we tried to find out what we would have to do if we had to present as homeless in Edinburgh. Immediately, we realised that it isn’t terribly intuitive to find the information you need and find out where you need to go to present as homeless.

We did figure it out after a bit of time, but if you are facing the immediate pressure of not having somewhere to sleep that night, or you are running out of data, you want the process to be as quick and easy as possible. You also want advice on what to expect when contacting emergency homelessness advice lines so you are prepared for any ‘gate keeping’ you may encounter.

We have developed a ‘help me now’ button for the Shelter website which then takes you through to a service that takes your location, and the time of day and points you to the most appropriate available services to you based on that information. If you are under the age of 16, it points you to Social Services. It collects some basic information about gender and age initially, though this can be expanded going forward to fit the demographic information demands of Shelter. This can help Shelter build up demographics on who is using this service to declare as homeless or find emergency accommodation for the night.

Hopefully this provides a way to better quantify the problem of homelessness which could help when applying for government funding and expand service as needed.

In terms of a market for this product we know that 35,000 people last year were declared homeless in Scotland. So immediately there is a group of people looking for access to information on emergency accommodation. Over 60% of the social class groups D and E have smart phones and because our product is web based as opposed to app based it doesn’t require to be downloaded and can be easily accessed from a library computer as well as a phone.

This is a service that can quickly and easily be rolled out across Scotland’s 32 local authorities, using Shelter’s existing database of services. We tried to develop the prototype with an eye to maximising accessibility for disabled, for example those who are visually impaired.

To broaden product reach we would also suggest that Shelter Scotland may want to broaden out to include advice on other services that people in crisis need, this could include advice on the nearest food banks or to GP services that accept homeless patients.

Shelter could also consider a charity drive to ask the public to donate old smart phones, which could be passed onto the homeless allowing them better access to services and information. There are currently 125 million unused old phones in the UK so there is great potential to redistribute these to those in need.