



EQUAL GROUND MEASURE

A new way to evaluate
homelessness services:
introducing the Equal
Ground measure

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Shelter
Cymru

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1. Introduction

This is a guide to Shelter Cymru's Equal Ground Measure, a new way for councils to understand the views of the people who use homelessness services. This Measure has been developed with the involvement of more than 100 people with lived experience of homelessness. While many services already have ways of measuring customer satisfaction, the Equal Ground Measure is different. It asks the questions that people using services feel are important to them – not the questions that service providers might assume are important. In this way, the Equal Ground Measure provides a unique perspective on how well services are really meeting people's needs.

The Measure can easily be appended to existing processes and is simple to use, giving councils an efficient way to embed person-centred principles in their service evaluation. Our aim is to support councils in their goal to drive up standards of customer service and user involvement.

At the time of going to print, a number of local authorities have pledged to take on the Measure and we look forward to working with more. We hope that all organisations in Wales providing statutory homelessness services will find this a useful tool to help them further the aims of Part 2 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014.

"We've worked with Shelter Cymru on to the Equal Ground Measure and with our own service users, and it's been incredibly useful. It's a survey that puts the focus firmly on people's real priorities, and that's invaluable for those of us working to meet their needs."

- Local authority stakeholder

2. Getting the full picture

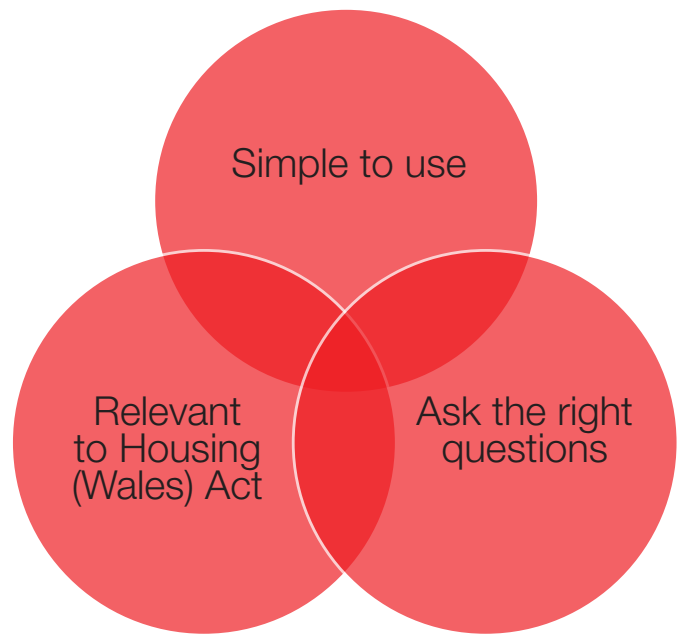
Person-centred principles are leading an evolution in the culture of service provision in Wales. The key understanding here is that people who use services are 'experts by experience'. Any evaluation of services that fails to tap into that expertise is missing a vital part of the picture. While the Welsh Government collates homelessness statistics and many – but not all – local authority homelessness teams have their own evaluation procedures, we felt there was a need for a mechanism to directly access and measure people's experiences. Shelter Cymru has been advocating an alternative measure for some years, with the aim of providing a counterpoint to the official statistics. We wanted to help homelessness teams get a fuller, more detailed picture of how frontline services are delivered.

While services aim to help prevent and relieve homelessness, the success of interventions can sometimes be constrained by external factors such as a lack of local affordable housing. The Equal Ground Measure takes account of this by splitting questions into two parts – experiences and outcomes. How people are treated when they use the service, and how effectively their homelessness situation was dealt with, are both given equal weight in the final Measure.

3. Developing the Measure

The Measure has grown out of our Equal Ground Standard which was published in 2015 and has been adopted by many Welsh local authorities.

The Equal Ground Standard identified 73 aspects of frontline service provision that mattered to people. To create the Measure we needed to refine these down to a brief and simple set of questions. By making it short and simple, we aim to remove a barrier to participation, making it a brief exercise rather than a time-consuming one.



The methodology for the Measure was developed in partnership with Cardiff University. We undertook three strands of research:

- 1. Stakeholder interviews:** these were in-depth, semi-structured meetings with representatives of five Welsh local authorities, identifying the key issues from the service provider's perspective, identifying current evaluation strategies, developing methods for incorporating a Measure into existing practice, identifying barriers and devising solutions.
- 2. Literature review:** a desktop study exploring current best practice in customer satisfaction measurement across a wide variety of sectors in the UK.
- 3. Service user focus groups and survey:** we accessed the expertise-by-experience of over 100 people with lived experience of homelessness (or the threat of homelessness) in refining the questions for the Measure down from the 73 elements of the Equal Ground Standard. From a series of focus groups emerged a list of 37 statements, to be judged on a scale of importance from essential down to not important. These formed the basis of a survey: respondents worked through the statements and scored them by how important they were felt to be in assessing the service provision they had received.

4. The final Measure

The vast amount of information that was processed during the research was ultimately refined down to just six questions: three under experiences and three under outcomes. While the final Measure appears to be very simple, it is based on a rigorous methodology. It means we can be confident that these six questions accurately represent the key factors that matter most to people using homelessness services.

EXPERIENCES

Thinking about the last time you used the homelessness service, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

(strongly agree / agree / neither agree nor disagree / disagree / strongly disagree)

- | | |
|----|--|
| 1. | I was spoken to with courtesy, respect and understanding |
| 2. | The council contacted me when they said they would |
| 3. | I was supported by the staff while using the service |

OUTCOMES

After your assistance from the council's homelessness service had ended, how much do you agree or disagree that the following statements describe your situation?

(strongly agree / agree / neither agree nor disagree / disagree / strongly disagree)

- | | |
|----|---|
| 4. | I felt safe and secure in my accommodation |
| 5. | I felt that I was unlikely to be at risk of homelessness for at least the next six months |
| 6. | I felt the advice and help I had from the council was appropriate to my situation |

After finalising the questionnaire in this way, it was individually tested by a small group of service users. This process allowed for examination of the scales used in measuring each question, the clarity of the statements, and other fine tuning. The end result is, we believe, relevant and robust.

"It's certainly a very useful tool to have as a provider of services and I'd be very keen to adopt (the Measure) and embed it within the department. I think it would be of enormous value to us, and indeed to any homelessness service."

- Local authority stakeholder

5. Trialling the Measure

In 2018 we collaborated with two Welsh local authorities to conduct real world trials of the Measure. In one authority the questions were added into the already-existing customer satisfaction survey, and sent to service users via email. In the other authority a sample of service users were contacted by telephone. Although both methods worked well, we found that email resulted in a higher return rate. However, the Measure is designed to be flexible enough to work with whichever communication method fits best with the local authority's existing practice.

"The information gathered by the Measure is presented in a concise and very clear way, and this helps give us a sense of how people feel about their experience in the round. It's interesting that even in cases where people feel that their housing problems haven't yet been resolved and give a negative verdict, they often give much more positive responses to the questions about their overall experience of using the service. It's important to people that they feel supported, listened to, and treated with respect, and that stays with them regardless of whether we were able to resolve their housing problem on this occasion and within the timeframe covered by the questionnaire."

- Local authority stakeholder

6. Next steps

Developing the Measure has been a collaborative effort, bringing together the expertise of homelessness practitioners and the expertise-by-experience of the people who use services. A number of providers across Wales have already pledged to take on the Measure and we would like to see more doing so. Please get in touch with us if you are interested in putting the Measure into action – we'd be happy to assist in any way we can.

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