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# Focus Ireland

Evaluation of the Spokes Programme  
Executive Summary

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Everyone has a right to a place they can call home.







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A copy of the full 'Evaluation of the Spokes Programme' report is available in electronic format by contacting Focus Ireland.

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# Acknowledgements

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The researchers would like to acknowledge the following:

\_ Firstly, and most importantly, we would like to thank the eleven customers in Spokes who participated in this evaluation. They freely gave of their time and shared their experiences with us. Their commitment to the evaluation and their openness during the interviews proved critical to its completion.

\_ We would also like to thank the staff at Spokes and Focus Ireland who worked with us on the research. We were facilitated and supported at all times by the staff in Spokes.

\_ All of those interviewed who work in homeless, education and training services, both statutory and voluntary organisations, who gave their time to be interviewed and who were so frank and constructive in their comments.

\_ Finally, we would like to acknowledge the support of Sinead McGinley, Research Officer, Focus Ireland, for her support and advice throughout the evaluation.

**Tanya Lalor and Gerard Doyle, TSA Consultancy**



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# About the Author

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TSA Consultancy is Ireland's leading third sector advisory, research and consultancy service. TSA Consultancy provides strategic advice and research to the agencies whose role is to develop and build the third sector in Ireland. TSA Consultancy is also committed to working with locally based community projects at every stage, from idea to start up and development. TSA's team members come from a background of first-hand knowledge of communities working to create social enterprise and tackle disadvantage.

Tanya Lalor, TSA Consultant, has over 12 years experience working with third sector organisations that respond to social exclusion and disadvantage. Her experience includes project development, social research, business planning, monitoring and evaluation, and social auditing. Prior to working in TSA, Tanya worked in the Social Economy Unit in Tallaght, the first support unit for social enterprise in Ireland. Most recently, she has completed homeless needs analyses and strategies for Limerick City, Ballyfermot, Finglas and Ballymun.

Gerard Doyle, TSA Consultant, has over 16 years experience working in community development in a wide range of settings. Gerard has an in-depth knowledge of issues pertaining to social inclusion, and has experience in social research, including community consultations, project development, monitoring and evaluation. His experience of housing includes working as a full time volunteer worker with the Dublin Simon Community and with a voluntary housing association. Gerard has a particular interest in the potential the social economy can play in providing disadvantaged communities and communities of interest with a mechanism to address unemployment, gain assets for community use and stimulate economic activity.

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The Spokes programme is an education, training and employment service provided by Focus Ireland since 2002 to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The aim of Spokes is to assist people to move on from homelessness by providing an alternative way of learning, through education and employment that is tailored to individuals needs. The number of people Spokes has worked with has consistently increased since the establishment of the programme – with 357 customers accessing the service in 2008 (this represents a 108% growth in the number of service users in just one year, i.e. 2007-2008).

Spokes provides support to people with low levels of educational attainment and typically negative experiences of formal education who, because of their chaotic lifestyle and housing issues, find it difficult to access mainstream labour market supports, even those directed at the long-term unemployed. The service recognises that training, education and employment can play a crucial role in tackling homelessness and ending social exclusion, and that for those most marginalised flexible responses which respond to complex needs are required.

TSA Consultancy was commissioned by Focus Ireland in 2009 to undertake an evaluation of Spokes, to consider how the programme is meeting its objectives and to assess the effectiveness of its model of service delivery. The evaluation of the Spokes programme found that the service provides a safe and secure environment for people who may be apprehensive about returning to education. The approach is informal and flexible, and succeeds in keeping the engagement of service users at different stages of personal education and training progression, and responding to their particular needs that may arise from homelessness. Spokes provides a range of supports from informal drop-in arrangements to FETAC Level 3 certification. A particular strength of Spokes is its capacity to underpin more formal FETAC course with life-skills and person development courses that break-down social isolation. While the evaluation recognises the strength of the informal development of Holistic Individual Education Plans in Spokes, it recommends greater reliance on written plans to set milestones and review progress.

Spokes' level of one-to-one support and the programme's flexibility to accommodate service users who have dropped out (due to changes in housing arrangements, health issues, court cases etc.) to re-enter courses are cited as unique elements in its success. Customers reported very positive experiences

and outcomes from the programme, but the evaluation found that there is a need for more effective capturing and tracking of progression beyond the programme to substantiate the positive impacts/outcomes of the service. In order for services like Spokes to provide the most effective progression route out of homelessness into training, education and employment, stronger collaborations with next stage agencies such as FAS or the VEC are required.

The success of Spokes has gone beyond its initial target group of young people. The evaluation report recommends a re-focusing on young people, a more effective recording of progression, and an exploration of the role that the social economy can play in providing employment to people who are experiencing homelessness.

There is clear evidence from customers and referring organisations consulted in the evaluation that Spokes has had a significant impact on service users' quality of life. One referral agency stated:

*"I've seen Spokes turn around the lives of customers"*

The homeless sector is experiencing a reconfiguration of services based on a 'housing first' model of service delivery, and this will have implications for training and education provision to those experiencing homelessness. There is an opportunity for Focus Ireland's new training, education and employment programme PETE (Preparing for Education, Training and Employment) to lead the process of greater collaboration between service providers in the community / voluntary and statutory sectors, as well as local development organisations and the Local Employment Services.



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## Introduction

The Spokes programme is an education, employment and training support programme for people over the age of 16 years, who are out of home, have had a history of homelessness, or are at risk of homelessness.

It was established in February 2002 by Focus Ireland in recognition of the critical role that access to education, training and employment can play in tackling homelessness. Young people in these circumstances typically have low levels of educational attainment, negative experiences of formal education and chaotic lifestyles that make it difficult for them to engage with mainstream labour market supports, even those targeted at the long-term unemployed.

It is located adjacent to Focus Ireland's supported housing project in George's Hill, Dublin 7.

The services that Spokes offers to its customers<sup>1</sup> include individual learning plans, FETAC accredited modules, literacy/numeracy tuition, adult education, social outings, arts/crafts courses, advice and information on employment, and CV and interview preparation.

This evaluation was commissioned by Focus Ireland in order to assess the effectiveness of the Spokes programme in achieving its stated aims and objectives, and to prepare recommendations to inform this type of intervention.

The evaluation was undertaken by TSA Consultancy, specialists in third sector project development, evaluation and social research.

## Objectives of Spokes

The aim of Spokes is to assist people to move on from homelessness, by providing an alternative way of learning, through education and employment that is tailored to individuals' needs.

It achieves its aim by providing a wide and varied education programme and it provides intensive support for customers to enable them to achieve their goals.

The stated objectives of Spokes are:

\_To develop an individual plan, in co-operation with the customer, based on an assessment of their skills, expectations and level of their skills, expectations and level of stability with regular review of their plan.

\_To provide education and training options, which will broaden the customer's experiences in an enjoyable manner.

\_To allow each customer to work at their own pace and in a style that suits them.

\_To develop the customer's communication skills.

\_To assess literacy and numeracy skills and provide individual and group compensatory education programmes.

\_To provide an introduction to the world of work, including IT skills, work experience, work practice and expectations.

\_To provide information and resource materials on education and training and work opportunities.

\_To facilitate customers to gain experience of and entry to training and work by encouraging regular participation and commitment.

\_To develop relationships with training and education institutes and employers to develop systems of experience and placement.

\_To advocate on the customer's behalf and provide support through placements, to trainers, employers and the individual.

\_To assist in the initial funding of the transition to employment on an individual needs basis.

\_To liaise with key workers in ensuring the contact's welfare and accommodation needs are met as needs are identified.

<sup>1</sup> The term 'customers' is used by Focus Ireland to describe individual clients that use the organisation's services.

### Services offered by Spokes

Services offered to customers include:

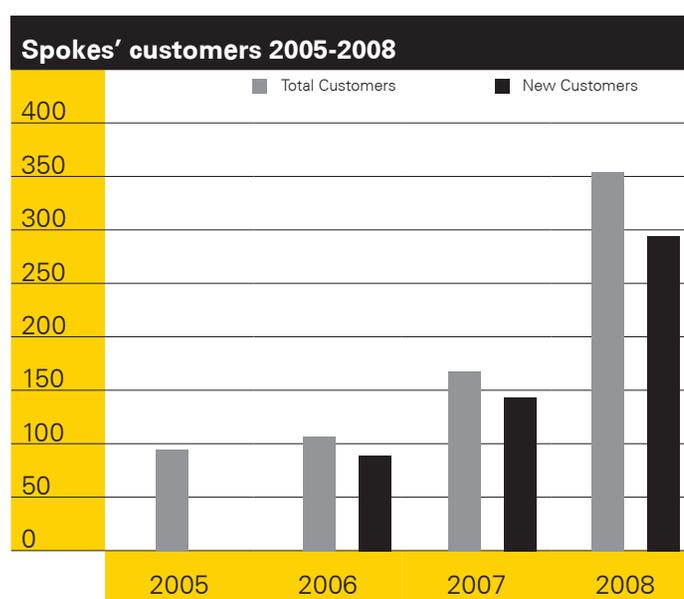
- \_ A drop-in service and computer use for sourcing information on employment, education and training opportunities.
- \_ Development of individual education and employment plans.
- \_ Regular users of Spokes are assigned a project worker who helps them to meet their educational, training or employment goals through the development of an individual plan.
- \_ One to one support with basic literacy and maths.
- \_ One to one support with FETAC modules.
- \_ FETAC (Level 3) accredited courses including Parenting, Health Related Fitness, Preparation for Work, Computers, Gardening, Self-advocacy, Arts & Design, Media studies, Graphic communication, Maths, Drama, and Photography.
- \_ Courses and activities that focus on the customers' life skills and social development, including health and other workshops, and summer projects.
- \_ Career advice and support, which includes referrals to external training courses, employment training, and support in developing CVs and completing college applications.

### Quantification of Spokes interventions and profile of customers

#### Number of Spokes customers

Spokes has recorded a steady increase in the number of individuals accessing it since 2005 (from which year data records are available), when 91 individuals accessed the project. In particular, after Spokes moved to its current premises in George's Hill in 2007, the service more than doubled its numbers of customers.

Data for 2008 reports that in that year, Spokes worked with 357 individuals, of which 108 were new customers. This is almost a four-fold increase on numbers since 2005. This information is presented in the graph below.



Each time the service interacts with a customer – whether it is a training session or providing advice – it is recorded as an intervention. A total of 4,475 interventions were recorded by Spokes for 2008. The majority of these (62%) were for 'drop-in', or unplanned, contacts (2,787 interventions), and 38% were for planned contacts<sup>2</sup> (1,688 interventions).

Spokes Interventions 2008		
	Number	% of total
Planned contact	1,688	38%
Unplanned contact	2,787	62%
Total Interventions	4,475	

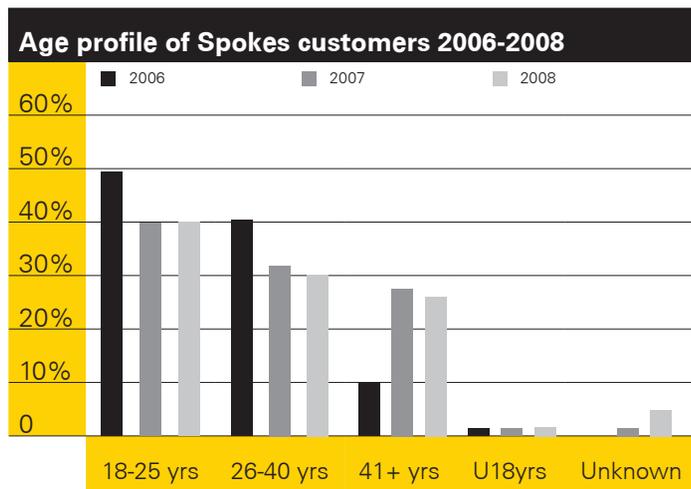
<sup>2</sup> Planned contacts correspond to structured interventions, such as FETAC course work, literacy tuition and individual mentoring sessions, while unplanned contacts correspond to drop-in interventions.

Most of the planned interventions comprised FETAC accredited modules (1,544 interventions), the remainder were interventions such as literacy tuition and individual mentoring sessions.

**Profile of users**

**Age profile**

Data drawn from Focus Ireland’s customer database reports that the most frequently arising age category that Spokes works with is the 18-25 year age group (39% of individual customers).



**Gender**

On average, male customers outnumber females by over two to one (and in 2008 71% of its customers were male). This reflects the gender profile of the homeless population in Dublin, as established in ‘Counted In 2008’.

The dominant household type amongst customers is ‘single’, accounting for 85% of all customers in 2008.

**Education attainment**

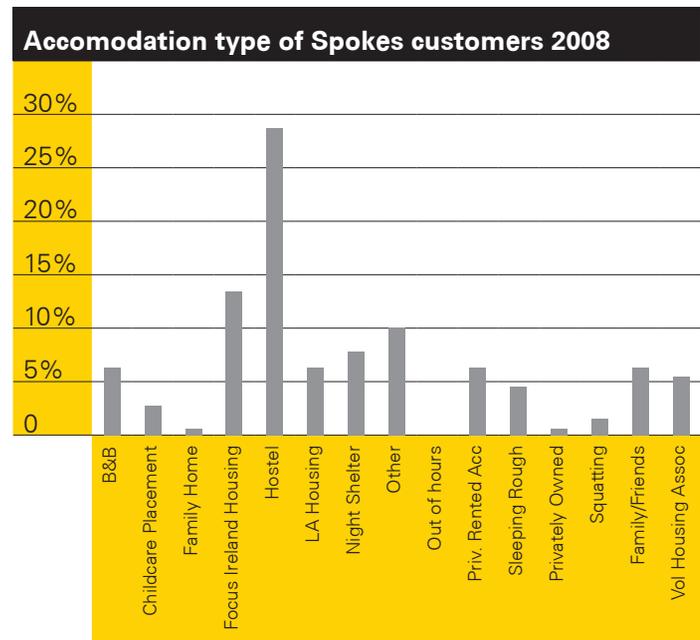
The education attainment of BTEI participants (105) in 2008 is presented in the table below (this represents only a sample of all Spokes customers). In 2008, 42% of this group attained primary level education only, with a further 34% having attained lower second level (or FETAC level 3) education only. This means that over three quarters of

the group (76%) had an educational attainment of lower second level or less.

	No.	% of total
Primary education only	44	42%
Lower second level/FETAC level 3	34	34%
Upper second level/FETAC level 4/5	22	19%
FETAC level 6 or above	5	5%

**Accommodation**

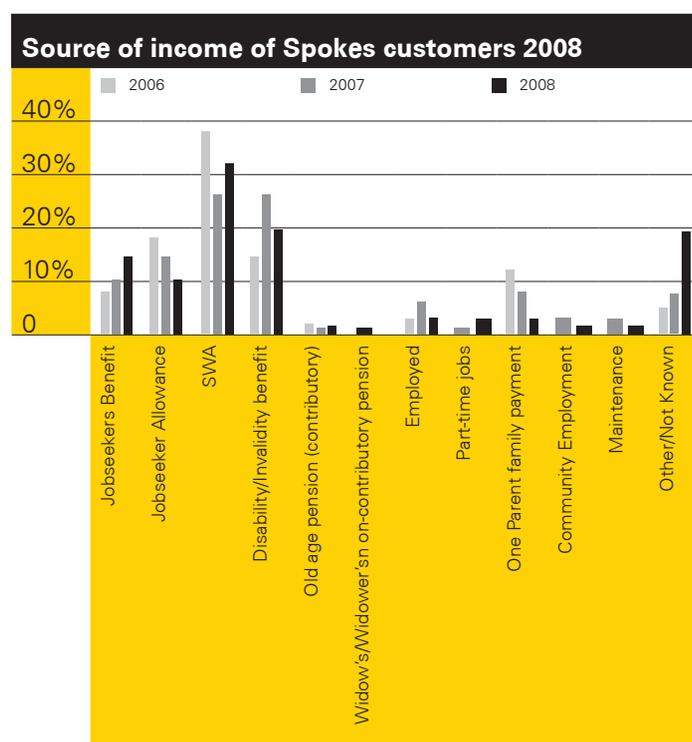
In 2008, hostel accommodation accounted for the most frequent type of accommodation accessed by Spokes customers, followed by Focus Ireland housing. The accommodation of customers is presented in the graph below.



The data would suggest that those in Bed and Breakfast accommodation comprise a relatively low proportion of the Spokes customer base (6%) while accounting for a relatively high proportion of the homeless population in Dublin, as outlined in *'Counted In 2008'* (at 33%).

### Source of income

Some of the most frequent sources of income for Spokes customers are illustrated in the figure below.



The single most frequent source of income of customers was Supplementary Welfare Allowance (31% in 2008), followed by disability allowance/ benefit and invalidity benefit (19% in 2008). It should be noted that there was a high frequency of 'other/not known' sources of income identified.

In 2008, 30.5% of Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) participants<sup>3</sup> were in receipt of disability/ illness payments and an additional 29% were unemployed for more than three years.

<sup>3</sup> 105 customers of Spokes participated in the BTEI.

## Evaluation methodology

### Planning and developing an evaluation framework

An initial briefing and planning meeting took place between Focus Ireland, Spokes staff, and the evaluators. Following this meeting, an evaluation framework was devised. This set out indicators for each of the evaluation objectives, described the means of gathering evidence (including documentary research and consultations), and drafted interview schedules to be used throughout the evaluation.

During the planning phase for the evaluation, a list of relevant individuals and organisations to be consulted was drawn up. These included staff and management within Focus Ireland and external organisations.

The research phase of the evaluation commenced following sign-off of the evaluation framework.

### Documentary research

Quantitative data used in this report was generated through an analysis of Focus Ireland and Spokes data: the primary source of quantitative data was customer database records and project reports.

Documentary research also included project reviews, annual reports, strategic plans, and policies relating to employment, education and homelessness.<sup>4</sup> Data and case studies from the UK on good practice education, training and employment service provision targeting those homeless were also reviewed. These were drawn from the consultants' prior experience of the sector and from research undertaken by FEANTSA.<sup>5</sup>

### Consultations

The primary research method was qualitative, and consultations comprising semi-structured interviews were undertaken with customers of Spokes, staff and management of Spokes and Focus Ireland, and with external organisations that have a relationship with the service, or have a remit in the area. In total, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Most were face to face interviews, but a small number of telephone interviews were undertaken. All interviews followed

<sup>4</sup> Including the Spokes induction pack; Spokes model of service delivery, 'The Way Home' National Homeless Strategy, 'The Key to the Door', Homeless Agency strategy, Focus Ireland's Strategic Plan, Homeless Agency's 'Evaluation of homeless services'.

<sup>5</sup> The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless.

the format of the interview schedules agreed during the evaluation planning stage.

#### Spokes' customers

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a sample of Spokes' customers. A total of 11 interviews took place with customers of Spokes, and all were held in George's Hill in the first quarter of 2009. The evaluators also gathered profile data of those interviewed, and a profile of those consulted was generated to compare with that of all Spokes' customers. It was found that both populations were similar (this profile and comparison is included in the appendices of the main report).

#### Focus Ireland staff

10 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with staff and management of Spokes and Focus Ireland, and these followed the format of interview schedules developed in the evaluation framework.

In addition, one service manager in Focus Ireland circulated evaluation questions internally within the service's staff team. These were discussed at a staff meeting, the feedback collated, and passed on to the evaluation team.

#### External consultations

Nine semi-structured interviews were undertaken with training and education organisations and with those organisations that have referral relationships with Spokes. These included FÁS, CDVEC (including the 'Foundations' Programme), Business in the Community's 'Ready for Work' Programme, and Cedar House.

The Homeless Agency and the Department of Social and Family Affairs were also consulted.

### **Summary of evaluation findings – Spokes model of delivery**

Spokes' model of service delivery prioritises a client-centred approach, and adopts a pathways approach, as follows:

\_ Referrals

\_ Assessment

\_ Drop-in

\_ Education

\_ Training and employment

\_ Referrals and onward progression

The evaluation considered how Spokes is achieving its objectives as well as the effectiveness of this model of delivery. The findings of the evaluation are summarised under each of these headings.

#### **Referrals**

Data in respect of referrals into Spokes for 2008 is available for 44% of new customers. These referrals came from Focus Ireland services (63% of all referrals), other voluntary homeless services (13.5%), self-referrals (6%), and emergency accommodation providers (5%).

The evaluation consulted referral organisations about their views of Spokes, how it meets the needs of their customers, and whether they would recommend any changes to the service. They reported very positive views of the impact that Spokes has had, with one commenting that:

*"I've seen Spokes turn around the lives of customers."*

Amongst the strengths of Spokes identified by services that refer to Spokes were:

\_ The secure and safe environment that it provides for people who may be apprehensive about returning to education. This was complemented by the encouragement and support offered by staff members, which was a consistent theme arising in all consultations.

\_ The informal and flexible, client-centred approach adopted by Spokes. The point was made that it could pitch courses at an appropriate level, based on the current requirements and learning needs of the



customer, and this was a factor in keeping customers engaged.

\_ Spokes' understanding of homelessness makes it well placed to respond to the needs of customers.

\_ Spokes is a good starting point for those returning to education, particularly because of its emphasis on confidence-building actions.

Training, education and employment placement providers do not make significant referrals to Spokes. This is consistent with the view that Spokes acts as an initial step in training and education. It could also reflect a view that there is some overlap between Spokes and other training and education services.

**Assessment**

The evaluation found that formal and written 'holistic individual education plans'<sup>6</sup> are not widely undertaken, primarily owing to staff shortages, lack of space<sup>7</sup> and to a lesser extent, factors such as customers' reluctance to engage in a formal assessment and planning process, and customers not keeping appointments. In spite of this, staff report the informal assessment and planning process to be successful, given the relaxed manner in which they are undertaken which is believed to facilitate open and honest discussion with customers.

From the customers' perspective, the assessment process provides clarity and constitutes an effective planning process.

*"To see it written down and reflect on it is good – you may not realise what you have been doing until you see it back."*

For the project as a whole, not having written plans could undermine its ability to set milestones with customers and to review their progress. It also undermines Spokes' ability to quantify and document its impact on customers with funders and external bodies.

**Drop-in**

'Drop-in' services include use of computers and the

internet, preparation for driving tests and one-to-one supports from staff. Spokes is the only service that provides drop-in of this kind in Dublin, and it is heavily subscribed by customers: in 2008, it accounted for 2,787 of all contacts with customers (62% of all interventions for that year). Drop-in services are offered on a five-day per week basis.

Drop-in is used as a way of engaging with customers, many of whom do not have the confidence to take part in structured learning activities when they first come in contact with the service. Customers spoke about the impact of this approach.

*"I had no confidence when I first came here...that is down to Spokes. I would not be even thinking about going to college if I didn't come here."*

In the view of staff and referring organisations, the drop-in aspect of the service facilitates return to training and education amongst those who have had negative experiences of formal education, and low educational attainment, all of which are important in building confidence.

*"Customers in Spokes are treated with acceptance, support, respect. These three things are important in building...confidence."*

According to customers consulted, the drop-in aspect of the service is very important. It facilitates social interaction, and peer support in addition to staff support and is very important in building confidence.

*"We all work at our own pace and we are all at different levels but we all help each other out."*

The one-to-one support is also an important factor in building confidence.

*"It was hard for me as I was always withdrawn...the one-to-one was very helpful!"*

6 According to project reports, a Holistic Education Plan process involves identifying a number of self-defined goals by the customer, as well as the steps necessary to achieve these goals.

7 Space is required in order to ensure that an assessment can be undertaken on a confidential basis.





Drop-in services continue to be accessed by customers who have accessed mainstream training and education services. In these instances, they usually comprise personal support from staff and assistance with completing assignments as well as the use of computers.

**Education**

Education comprises accredited and non-accredited education.

Non-accredited education includes life and personal skills development courses such as arts, music, relaxation, outdoor pursuits, health workshops, summer projects, and drop-in computer classes. These activities are not funded from mainstream sources, and have been supported by corporate sponsorship and Focus Ireland’s fundraising activities.

These are regarded as very important interventions given the low educational attainment of Spokes’ customers and negative experiences of school. They complement Spokes’ emphasis on a gradual introduction to learning, and they enable customers to consider education from a new perspective. In this way, the non-accredited education acts as a route to formal and accredited education. According to one customer;

*“I have done stuff that I would never have thought of...I never thought that I would learn.”*

Customers also spoke of how courses had been developed arising from their feedback and comments.

This introduction to a return to learning is accompanied by an ethos within the project that places a premium on a welcoming and unthreatening environment. A consistent theme arising in the evaluation – among customers and service providers alike – was the staff approach which prioritises support and encouragement of the customer.

*“Spokes...provides supports around where the customer is “at”.*

Customers reported being nervous and apprehensive when first planning to engage with Spokes and believe

that the emotional and one-to-one support that they received was a very important aspect of the service.

Non-accredited education also facilitated peer-support and social interaction, which was also highly valued by customers, both in terms of building confidence and enabling education progression (particularly around computer use).

Service providers and referral organisations also saw the value of non-accredited education. Recommendations for continued development included:

\_An outreach service that could provide mentor support particularly for young men.

\_Anger management, parenting skills, conflict resolution are very relevant to the lives of those homeless (Spokes has developed courses in these areas).

Accredited education incorporates FETAC accredited modules, and funding for tutors to deliver these modules is provided by the Department of Education and Science (administered by the City of Dublin VEC), under the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI). In 2008, 105 people participated in BTEI (FETAC accredited) courses. Most of these were male (66%), and 76% of participants had an educational attainment of lower second level (with 42% having an educational attainment of primary level or less). Other characteristics of this group include being distanced from the labour market through disability or illness (30.5%) or long term unemployment (29% of participants have been unemployed for over three years).

In 2008, 101 modules were accredited and certificates were presented to 30 people.

The recognition of participants’ success at accreditation ceremonies was considered to be very important by staff in Focus and referring organisations.

*“For some...the awards may be the only recognition of achievement...they are extremely important”.*

An important aspect of the FETAC accredited courses is that customers’ folders are submitted twice a year, which





enables those customers who have dropped out of the programme to re-submit. Unique to Spokes is the level of one-to-one support that customers receive when they return to re-submit after having dropped out. Spokes is designed around the likelihood of drop-out for many of its customers. Reasons for drop-out can include loss of accommodation, prison, and health issues. Customers who anticipated leaving the service for reasons outside of their control were conscious that they would return at a later stage and pick up where they left off.

*"I have a court case coming up and I think that I will get sent to prison but I will be able to come back and finish what I am doing".*

Organisations such as the CDVEC believe that a key strength of Spokes is its ability to undertake developmental work with customers, which complements the structured, class-based work. Moreover, Spokes' integration with other Focus Ireland services makes it well placed to bring the needs of customers to key workers and to address these needs.

**Training and employment information and advice**

Training and employment supports are provided by project staff in Spokes, and supports include job mentoring (accounting for 253 interventions in 2008) for customers.

It also includes other supports such as advice and information (515 interventions in 2008), personal programme supports such as writing letters and applications (100), assistance with job seeking (15), advocacy (46), accompaniment to appointments (21), planned customer contact (108) and phone contact with customers (180). Unplanned and drop-in support where advice is offered is also included under this heading and comprised 2,283 interventions in 2008.

Requests for support usually relate to training rather than employment. Customers that were interviewed prioritised training and education over employment, and had little expectations for accessing employment, particularly in light of the current economic climate. Other barriers to employment identified by customers were: not having stable accommodation, health related issues (including mental health issues), and age (perceptions of being too

old).

Staff feel that the data collection systems do not fully capture the nature of training and employment advice interventions. They also feel that this area of work is vulnerable to staff shortages, as it is primarily undertaken on a one-to-one basis, and loss of staff means that there is limited time for this type of support.

This is one area where greater collaboration between training and employment providers/ support organisations (for example, the Local Employment Services) could maximise scarce resources.

**Referrals and onward progression**

Data available for 2008 reports that over two-thirds of referrals were made to education, training and employment providers (67%), with the remainder being made to other supports (health, addiction, mental health supports, legal supports, etc.). Most of the onward referrals were made to education and training organisations, reflecting the view that customers prioritised education and training activities over employment, or that they experienced barriers around accessing employment.

Staff note that onward progression of customers can be hard to capture, as once a customer moves on from Spokes their progression and outcomes may not be possible to capture. Moreover, the absence of a formal and written holistic education planning process makes it difficult to demonstrate and capture progression within the service. The evaluation process also indicated limited collaboration between training, education and employment support programmes.

Nearly half of those consulted were attending Spokes at the same time as other training, education and employment guidance services (to which they had been referred by Spokes). These included community-based training and education programmes (e.g. CDVEC's Foundations and Dublin 8 services); pre-university access courses (one customer had already been accepted to Trinity College) and the 'Ready for Work' programme.

These customers were accessing formal (e.g. specific courses) or informal supports (drop-in, particularly around





using computers and completing assignments) in Spokes while attending other courses. In one case, staff liaised with the third level institution that a customer was attending when she had difficulties there. One customer made the point that support around attending mainstream, third level institutions is important for people who have experienced homelessness, as they could be older and isolated from their classmates.

*“Some of the lads are in their twenties and not really mature...they can be easily bullied. They would just be seen as a target if they are heading back to College... amongst young people who have just left school and they would sit in the corner.”*

### Additional evaluation findings

#### Summary of strengths

The strengths and unique features of Spokes identified by customers and service providers alike include:

- \_ Its flexibility of service delivery and capacity to support customers that may be at different stages of their personal progression as regards education and training. This enables the project to work with all presenting customers at their own pace, and at earlier stages of ‘readiness’ than other training and education providers.
- \_ Its expertise in capacity building, life-skills and confidence building measures amongst customers, through non-accredited and informal training. The commitment and expertise of staff members was regarded as a major contributory factor to these outcomes.
- \_ Its continued mentor support for customers, who despite having progressed onwards to other education programmes may require additional supports, is an important aspect of Spokes.
- \_ The social interaction between customers through social programmes and outings, and the drop-in service which facilitates peer support and which tackles isolation amongst those with limited social networks.
- \_ The approach of staff members and their understanding

of the issues around homelessness affecting customers was particularly emphasised by referring organisations as a key factor in the success of Spokes.

- \_ The location of Spokes within Focus Ireland and its support structure enables it to access and deliver holistic and broader supports (for example, housing, key working, etc.).
- \_ The opportunity to provide training and education outside of the day-to-day living environment was regarded as important for customers.
- \_ There are good opportunities for customer participation in all aspects of the programme, including content of programmes and activities. Customers reported very good opportunities for engagement, feedback and consultation, and reported a strong sense of ownership over the programme.
- \_ There is clear evidence from customers consulted, and from the experience of referring organisations, that Spokes has had significant impact on their quality of life.

#### Summary of issues

- \_ It is acknowledged by Focus Ireland staff and other education and training providers that while flexible supports are favourable, there is a risk that they could potentially undermine a focus on progression, and that a balance has to be struck between soft, individualised supports and outcomes.
- \_ While supports are provided in a flexible manner, some service providers felt that this could potentially undermine a focus on progression.
- \_ The inability of staff to undertake written assessments of customers principally arising as a result of lack of space in the George’s Hill premises and staff time can undermine the capturing of data on outcomes and progression of customers. The reliance on informal and verbal assessments can undermine the ability to establish clear milestones that can be reviewed.
- \_ There was some perceived overlap between services offered by Spokes and other providers, such as CDVEC Foundations and Local Employment Services. This was





articulated by staff of Focus Ireland, the VEC and other service providers consulted.

\_Spokes has evolved into a service which engages with people who might not ordinarily engage with training and education programmes, and focuses on progression towards education, training and ultimately employment opportunities. In terms of the programme's responsiveness to the needs of customers, the point was also made however that the role of Spokes in meeting the needs for structured activities to an individual's day was not the primary role of the service.

\_Spokes' location within the overall management structure of Focus Ireland has changed since it was established. As a result, its development has not taken place within a single department, and there is a view that it has no 'home' within the organisation, and that it would benefit from consistency of place within the organisation. This observation was made by several staff members within Focus Ireland as well as Spokes. It was also noted that its target group has shifted from primarily young people, to a much broader group. It was felt by some in Focus Ireland that there was a need to clarify its target group, rather than become a 'catch all' service.

**The external environment**

The main report presents a number of external issues that are likely to have a bearing on the future development of Spokes. These are summarised below.

There will be a reconfiguration of homeless services in the medium - to long-term based on a 'housing first' model of service delivery, which will have implications for training and education provision to those experiencing homelessness.

The Homeless Agency is undertaking a mapping exercise of training, education and employment services for those experiencing homelessness. This is likely to have an impact on how some services are delivered, as well as lead to new linkages between services.

The development of the Preparation for Education, Training and Employment (PETE) programme within Focus Ireland and its successful application to the Dormant Accounts Fund is timely in the context of these changes.

The opportunities for Focus Ireland, Spokes and the PETE programme are outlined in the report.

The report presents a number of case studies of interventions which focus on collaboration across services for integrated service delivery and employability. The findings of the evaluation point to the lack of labour market opportunities viewed by those consulted and the limited opportunities for the mainstream labour market to meet the needs of those who have been homeless.

A model of how the organisation could develop (incorporating Spokes and the PETE programme) is provided in the main report, based on the UK model of training, education and employment for homeless people 'Off the Streets and Into Work'.

**Recommendations**

Recommendations are made in light of the evaluation findings, changes anticipated in the sector, new developments in training, education and employment, and opportunities for Spokes and the PETE programme.

**Spokes and its future within Focus Ireland**

**Recommendation No. 1**

This would be an optimum time to establish a clear 'vision' for how Focus Ireland will approach this dimension of its work in the future, including target groups and priorities. This should take into consideration the longer-term organisational objectives of Focus Ireland in delivering an education programme, as well as particular target groups it may seek to support in terms of education and training, and its intended role with regard to the new PETE programme.

A review should also consider the current objectives, which describe services rather than state aspirations for the project. A shorter set of objectives that are more goal-oriented should be devised.





## Quantifying outcomes and data collection

### Recommendation No. 2

It is recommended that data collection systems in the new PETE programme and Spokes should be developed in order to capture outputs, individual progression, and demonstrate the outcomes of the project.

Much of the work of the service involves confidence and capacity building measures, and data systems should capture this information through case studies, testimonials and other methods.

This will be particularly important for the PETE programme as it should be used by the project to communicate successes and challenges, and contribute to the development of the model for wider application in Ireland.

### Recommendation No. 3

A useful exercise for the new programme would be to use data collected to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of the project. This could include estimating savings to the State as a result of individuals' participation in pre-education, education, training and employment supports. This would be useful in demonstrating impacts from a funding perspective and could assist in attracting support.

## Customer participation

### Recommendation No. 4

Customer participation should continue to be emphasised and supported, and in the context of the new PETE programme, could be formalised as progression routes for individuals (for example, around peer support, mentoring, etc).

### Recommendation No. 5

Consideration should be given to forming an advisory group of current and/ or former participants of Spokes (this could meet on an ad hoc or regular basis) to consider proposals and provide feedback on new actions, in order to access the expertise and insights of current and former service users. Participation on an advisory structure could in itself be progression for individuals participating in education and training interventions.

## Collaboration with other services and agencies

### Recommendation No. 6

The following collaborative actions are recommended:

- \_ Continued collaboration around the development of the new (PETE) programme.
- \_ There should be more formal communication and collaboration between education and employment service providers in the community/voluntary and statutory sectors (e.g. FAS, VEC etc.) as well as local development organisations<sup>8</sup> and the Local Employment Services. Systematic collaboration could take place around developing and delivering services, and sharing of resources (for example, access to space).
- \_ Collaboration with mainstream and statutory services (and decision makers within these organisations) around development of practice, models and policy should be promoted.
- \_ A collaborative 'skills audit' (undertaken to determine education and training needs of homeless customers) could be undertaken between service providers (as discussed in sections 5.3.4 and 5.5 in the main report).
- \_ Focus Ireland does not have the sole remit for enhancing collaboration. However, the new PETE programme may provide an opportunity for the service to lead the process of greater collaboration between service providers. For example, this might take the form of an advisory or steering group which would look at promoting referrals, ensuring progression of clients across services, amongst other activities.

## Progression

### Recommendation No. 7

An overarching strategy for progression (including labour market progression) should be initiated. This should acknowledge the role of 'demand-side' labour market interventions, including the role of the social economy<sup>9</sup> in providing employment opportunities.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Local Area Based Partnerships.

<sup>9</sup> The social economy is that part of the economy, between the public sector and the private sector, that engages in economic activities to achieve social objectives, and usually functions through independent, democratic organisations.



**Recommendation No. 8**

Focus Ireland should explore the potential of the social economy sector as a means of providing long-term progression and employment opportunities for all of its customers (as is common practice in the UK and EU).

The social economy sector can be an important generator for employment for people with low skills or who are experiencing discrimination in the labour market (as presented by the case studies in section 6.2.1 in the main report).

**Recommendation No. 9**

Progression routes are planned in the PETE programme (for example opportunities for volunteering and collaboration with Volunteering Ireland). Opportunities for volunteering within Focus Ireland (and other homeless services) should also be explored. Volunteering could include mentor support or befriending, where appropriate. Peer support was evidenced in the Spokes programme. This was undertaken on an informal basis and was highly valued by those accessing and providing peer support, and it was found to enhance the learning environment.

**Funding and sustainability****Recommendation No. 10**

Focus Ireland should consider devising a proposal for accessing funding from the Department of Social and Family Affairs' Activation and Family Support Programme, which provides flexible supports for individuals distanced from the labour market. This type of funding could support the informal and non-accredited elements of Spokes, which would be consistent with the approach of the programme. Contact should be made with the Regional Manager in the Department of Social and Family Affairs, and the local facilitator who has a role in determining funding.

**Recommendation No. 11**

Spokes and Focus Ireland, particularly through its new PETE service, are well placed to become a demonstration project for equality mainstreaming. The PETE project could support statutory agencies, such as FÁS and the VEC, to learn from the model and apply this learning to mainstream services, and should liaise with the Equality Authority in this regard.





# Appendix 1: The Preparation for Education, Training and Employment (PETE) Programme

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Focus Ireland's PETE (Preparation for Education, Training and Employment) programme was established in October 2009. The PETE programme was developed out of an identified need to address the gap in the training, education and employment pathway through homelessness into independent living.

In consultation with FAS, CDVEC and a number of emergency accommodation providers, Focus Ireland identified a need to develop its existing education programme, the Spokes programme, to provide assessments and support people experiencing homelessness by providing life skills training with the dual purpose to prepare people for independent living and to support readiness to access a training, education and employment pathway.

The premise of this development is that people currently experiencing prolonged, new or repeat homelessness face multiple barriers and disadvantage to accessing education, training and employment. Many people who experience homelessness are early school leavers or have had negative experiences of early learning, and while the motivation to progress may be strong, learning or work environments may present as threatening experiences.

Focus Ireland's PETE programme addresses the individual's barriers to accessing education, training and employment and supports the participant in achieving the first step on the training, education and employment pathway.

The PETE programme presents educational achievement as one option in blocking pathways to homelessness. Through the provision of a flexible education course, customers are facilitated to reach their potential and develop a positive self-concept and self-esteem. With improved self-esteem and educational qualifications, it is hoped that customers will have gained the skill, knowledge and abilities necessary for successful social integration and more effectively block re-entry to homelessness.

The PETE programme works on achieving these objectives by providing a wide and varied individualised education programme, which includes intensive support to participants as they aim to achieve their self-defined

goals. Education is both formal and non-formal, with the formal components accredited by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC).

## Aim

To enable people who are resident in emergency homeless accommodation to gain the skills and confidence to access a pathway to mainstream training, education and employment and to evidence the need for a life-skills approach as a first step towards independent living.

## Target Group

- \_ Newly homeless.
- \_ Those experiencing long-term homelessness (i.e. for longer than six months).
- \_ People who are homeless who require support to gain life-skills and access to a Training, Education and Employment (TEE) pathway to mainstream services and independent living.

## Objectives

- \_ Provide a TEE assessment and access programme to emergency accommodation providers, to support case management activity where special TEE intervention is required.
- \_ Deliver individual and group personal development training and educational readiness programmes, on site in hostels or in the training and education facility in George's Hill.
- \_ To support individual participants to gain confidence and skills, and to progress on a TEE pathway to mainstream services and employment.
- \_ To work in cooperation with CDVEC, FAS, the Homeless Agency TEE network and emergency accommodation providers to ensure a seamless pathway to mainstream services and employment for participants.
- \_ To pilot the PETE programme in Dublin City and the

20.



Greater Dublin Area and evidence a model of best practice.

\_ To work with the mainstream TEE providers to include a readiness for training, education and employment approach nationally as a first step to TEE for people experiencing homelessness.

### Participants

The programme is designed to offer the opportunity for participants to gain practical skills; interpersonal and social skills; increased personal confidence; and awareness of opportunities. Specifically the programme aims to impact positively on participants in the following areas:

- \_ Self-esteem
- \_ Ability to learn
- \_ Ability to participate in structured activity
- \_ Daily living skills
- \_ Time-keeping and routine
- \_ Communicating and relating
- \_ Ability to speak for oneself
- \_ Reflection on life aspirations and lifestyle choices
- \_ Identifying work ambitions and aptitudes
- \_ Motivating and planning for the future

The programme will support participants in achieving these skills by offering access to minor awards in areas such as: communications, numeracy, literacy and Information Technology.

### Referrals and onward progression

When a service user has reached their goals and is progressing on from PETE, project workers try to link them with appropriate onward referrals to community education centres or groups, further education and training, employment or supported employment where appropriate. This onward progression is co-ordinated with the onward progression support services within Focus Ireland, for example the Tenancy Support Services, case management services, and the HNA (Holistic Needs Assessment). PETE project workers support the customer in their progression and are available to accompany them to colleges for their registration or into their initial classes where appropriate.

### Training and employment

Along with the focus on educational achievement and progression, PETE provides information and advice on education, training and employment options, which may suit a service user's own skills and level of stability. Through PETE, service users are also linked in with the Business in the Community 'Ready for Work' programme where they are provided with opportunities for work placements and further job coaching.



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# Notes

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