

# Focus Ireland Submission to the Pathways to Work 2026-2030 Public Consultation

September 2025

## Introduction

**Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the new Pathways to Work 2026–2030 strategy consultation.**

Focus Ireland is committed to ending homelessness through housing, research, advocacy, and direct support for individuals experiencing or at risk of homelessness. As part of this mission, we offer education, training, and employment services through our Preparation for Education, Training and Employment (PETE) programme, which operates in Dublin, Waterford, and Limerick. PETE supports people who have experienced or are currently experiencing homelessness to overcome barriers to the labour market and realise their potential, combining practical skills development, personal growth, and tailored guidance.

This submission draws on our frontline experience and insights gained from working directly with people affected by homelessness. It reflects our understanding that homelessness and labour market exclusion are deeply interconnected. Strategies to improve access to education, training, and employment must therefore be integrated with efforts to prevent and address homelessness.

Focus Ireland is guided by the principle that homelessness is a systemic failure that denies people the opportunity to reach their full potential. As of July 2025, 16,058 people in Ireland were living in emergency accommodation. While many of these individuals are in employment or actively seeking work, the circumstances of homelessness create significant barriers to both securing and sustaining employment.

The 2022 Census [data](#) highlights the scale of this issue: 59% of people aged 15 and over experiencing homelessness were in the labour force, with over half of those unemployed experiencing long-term unemployment. At the same time, 25% were recorded as being in work. These figures highlight the urgent need to support individuals to remain employed while experiencing homelessness.

We work with people from diverse backgrounds, including young people, older people, women, people with disabilities, prison leavers, migrants, members of the Roma and Traveller communities, and lone parents. Many of these groups are disproportionately affected by homelessness and face compounding barriers to entering and staying in the workforce.

We believe it is essential that homelessness is addressed as a central issue in the upcoming Pathways to Work strategy. Ending homelessness requires strong interdepartmental collaboration, and we therefore call on the Department of Social Protection to work in partnership with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to ensure that the needs of people experiencing homelessness are fully recognised and addressed.

In this submission, we outline the key barriers faced by the people we work with and present recommendations under two headings: *Pathways to Work* and *Sustaining Employment*. While this consultation cannot capture every issue, we would welcome the opportunity to meet with officials from the Department of Social Protection to explore these challenges further and strengthen collaboration.

## Pathways to Work

Supporting individuals into employment requires more than job placements alone. For the people we work with, issues such as misinformation, prolonged isolation, limited awareness of supports, and language barriers all play a role in preventing engagement with employment. The following sections highlight the most significant issues we see in our services and outlines recommendations to ensure employment pathways are inclusive, accessible, and sustainable.

### 1. Clearer Guidance on Social Welfare and Employment

One of the most significant barriers we have identified is the ongoing confusion about how employment affects social welfare payments. This uncertainty impacts both service users and staff, often leading to hesitation, anxiety, and disengagement from employment supports.

While individuals may be informed of their rights at the time of application, our experience shows that prolonged periods on social welfare often result in this information being forgotten or replaced by misinformation shared informally.

A key example is Disability Allowance, which is means-tested and allows recipients to work while retaining their payment up to certain income limits. Despite this, there is widespread misunderstanding about the conditions. Many people believe, incorrectly, that they can only work a fixed number of hours (for example, 19.5 hours) and therefore limit their job search unnecessarily. Others are unaware that they can earn up to €165 per week without affecting their full payment, or that additional supports such as training grants are available.

Beyond Disability Allowance, individuals often underestimate the financial benefits of entering paid employment. They may focus only on the additional wages (for example, €80 - €100 per week) without considering the overall increase when combined with welfare payments. This highlights the need for regular and accessible information to clearly explain how employment affects entitlements, alongside straightforward communication about the broader benefits of work.

#### **We recommend:**

- Providing clear, consistent, and accessible guidance on how welfare entitlements interact with both employment and education.
- Expanding and promoting existing tools, such as the [Benefits to Work Estimator](#), supported by simple and user-friendly instructions.
- Offering personalised welfare guidance from the outset of engagement with Intreo and continuing this support through key transition periods.
- Delivering regular and centralised updates, potentially through a dedicated app, with reminders and clear information on entitlements and supports. This should include the promotion of job fairs.

It is essential that individuals receiving social welfare, especially long-term recipients, are fully informed of their rights and entitlements regarding employment. By improving awareness, we can build confidence, dispel misinformation, and encourage stronger engagement with training and employment opportunities.

## **2. Sustained Communication and Support**

Homelessness can lead to social isolation and a loss of self-confidence. It is often accompanied by a range of challenges, including financial instability and mental health difficulties. Without regular communication and support, prolonged reliance on social welfare can deepen this isolation and reduce engagement with employment and education opportunities.

As outlined above, we want to place further emphasis on the importance of consistent communication with individuals, particularly those facing heightened vulnerability and stress, and for long-term recipients of social welfare support.

To support these individuals in building confidence and developing an understanding of the world of work, it is essential to adopt a collaborative and tailored approach. We strongly recommend ensuring regular communication and active collaboration with services such as PETE, so that individuals receive timely, appropriate, and person-centred support throughout their journey.

### **We recommend:**

- Maintaining regular and proactive contact, especially with individuals who have disabilities or have been out of the workforce for an extended period.
- Strengthening collaboration with services like PETE, and actively considering referrals where additional, tailored support may be beneficial.
- Ensuring that support builds confidence and engagement without creating additional burden for service users.

## **3. Access to Training and Personalised Career Guidance**

Training and career guidance play a vital role in helping people feel confident and supported when entering the paid employment. This is especially important for those who have experienced homelessness or have been receiving social welfare supports for an extended period.

Through our work delivering employment and education services in Dublin, Limerick, and Wexford, we have observed significant challenges in navigating Further Education and Training (FET) provision across Education and Training Boards (ETBs). These challenges echo findings from a recent [report by SOLAS](#), which highlights the need for ETBs to simplify structures and learning pathways, improve access, and provide a more consistent learner experience. The people we work with often encounter wide variation between regions in course availability, reporting requirements, opportunities for blended or online learning, and eligibility criteria. Because each of our services liaises with a different ETB, individuals seeking the same training can face vastly different processes and requirements, creating unnecessary barriers.

Addressing these inconsistencies is vital to ensuring equitable access and meaningful engagement with training opportunities.

Supports such as the *Intreo Training Support Grant* are valuable, yet awareness remains limited. Information is often fragmented, inconsistently promoted, and difficult to navigate. Both staff and

service users are frequently uncertain about eligibility, application processes, and deadlines. This leaves people missing opportunities that could make a real difference.

Another issue we have noticed is that many individuals apply for any job they can find, regardless of whether it matches their skills or interests. This often leads to job rejections, early dropouts, and reduced confidence. Others become caught in a cycle of training programmes, continuously upskilling without transitioning into employment due to low self-belief and a perceived need for further preparation.

To be effective, training must go beyond generic skill development. It should be tailored to each individual's interests, career goals, and long-term aspirations. When training is aligned in this way, individuals are more likely to remain engaged, complete their programmes, and apply their learning to secure meaningful, sustained employment.

Training must equip individuals not only to access employment but also to sustain it. Courses that enhance workplace knowledge - such as professional communication, digital literacy, AI awareness, and workplace etiquette - are essential to ensuring individuals are equipped to adapt, progress, and thrive in their roles over time.

**We recommend:**

- Creating a single, regularly updated hub with clear information on all training and upskilling supports, including eligibility, application steps, and deadlines.
- Standardise access and processes across ETBs to reduce regional disparities, making it easier for the people we work with to participate in training and progress towards sustainable employment.
- Providing personalised career guidance that links individual strengths, transferable skills, long term goals, and labour market opportunities.
- Offering practical employment readiness programmes covering workplace expectations, communication, digital skills, and confidence building.
- Teach how to introduce oneself at job fairs, how to handle social interactions at work, and what employers look for beyond a CV.
- Designing training that is accessible to people with different literacy levels, neurodiverse profiles, and mental health needs.
- Focusing on sustainable outcomes by matching training and job opportunities with real labour market demand, rather than prioritising speed of placement.
- Developing targeted programmes for young people to encourage engagement with the workforce.

#### **4. English Language Proficiency**

Limited English language proficiency is a significant and growing barrier among our service users. As Ireland approaches full employment, roles that do not require English language skills have become increasingly scarce. Without strong English language skills, individuals face challenges not only in securing jobs but also in accessing training opportunities, engaging with support services, and sustaining long-term employment.

There is an urgent need to expand access to English language education and to embed these supports from the earliest stages of engagement with Intreo. Integrating language learning as a

core component of the employment pathway would promote inclusion, improve employment outcomes, and reduce the risk of long-term disengagement.

**We recommend:**

- Ensuring that English language support is available as an integral part of employment services rather than a separate or secondary option.
- Expanding access to free or subsidised English language classes, with flexible scheduling to accommodate those balancing work, training, or care responsibilities.
- Linking English language provision directly to training and employment pathways, so individuals can build the confidence and communication skills needed for work.

## Sustaining Employment

As highlighted in the previous section, securing employment is only the first step for many of the individuals we support who are currently experiencing homelessness. Sustaining employment presents a significant challenge, often shaped by barriers beyond an individual's control.

To effectively support people in maintaining employment, it is essential to recognise and respond to the realities of homelessness. Daily life in emergency accommodation makes routine tasks - such as cooking, and laundry - extremely difficult. Many individuals are placed far from their workplaces, resulting in long commutes and unaffordable transport costs. For families, these pressures are compounded by the stress of shared living spaces and limited access to childcare. In some cases, individuals may not know whether they will be allocated a bed until late in the evening, adding further uncertainty and emotional strain.

The experience of homelessness is profoundly stressful and traumatic. It demands constant engagement with support providers, local authorities, landlords, and other agencies in the effort to secure stable housing. These demands compete with the responsibilities of employment, making it difficult to maintain consistent performance and focus at work. Entering a workplace where employers and colleagues lack an understanding of the realities of emergency accommodation can also be isolating and place people at a disadvantage in their work performance. Yet employment is a central pathway out of poverty, and it must be made accessible and sustainable for those experiencing homelessness.

Supporting individuals to remain in employment requires coordinated, interagency approaches that are responsive to their lived experiences. No single government department can address these challenges in isolation. Collaboration across departments is essential, and partnerships with organisations like ours play a vital role in providing holistic, person-centred support.

While we acknowledge that many of these issues may fall outside the immediate scope of this strategy, it is crucial that the experiences of our service users are recognised and considered. The following section outlines these lived realities in more detail and presents our recommendations for sustaining employment.

### 1. Transition from Social Welfare to Employment

A significant barrier to sustaining employment is the lack of clear information about the transition from social welfare to employment. Many people are unaware that they must inform Intreo immediately when they begin working and provide a letter from their employer to confirm their start date. As a result, individuals frequently find themselves in arrears and required to repay one or more weeks of welfare payments.

This creates financial strain at precisely the point when they are trying to find stability and security through work. The stress of repayments often leaves individuals feeling that they are worse off in employment than receiving social welfare supports, which can discourage continued engagement with work.

**We recommend:**

- Proactive and timely communication, supported by clear step-by-step guidance.
- Accessible digital tools, such as an app with reminders and prompts for individuals starting work, to reduce the risk of arrears and confusion.

## **2. Transport Barriers**

Transport costs are another major challenge to sustaining employment while living in emergency homeless accommodation. Many of the people we support are employed in areas far from the emergency accommodation they are staying in, or are relocated frequently to different accommodations, making reliable and affordable travel to work difficult.

A person's employment status should be a key consideration when assessing their emergency accommodation requirements, and every effort should be made to ensure they are supported to remain in work. Without being able to access transport, individuals are at risk of losing employment, even after securing a role.

**We recommend:**

- Ensuring that when the Department of Social Protections provides supports such as topped-up Leap Cards, assessments consider the exact distance an individual must travel between their emergency accommodation and place of employment, as standard allocations may not meet the needs of those with long commutes.
- Making a person's employment status a key factor when determining the location of their emergency accommodation, so that placements minimise travel distances and costs and reduce the risk of job loss.
- Ensuring that employment supports take account of the location of an individual's emergency accommodation, so that roles are realistically accessible and commuting requirements can be sustained over time.

### **3. Childcare Barriers**

Childcare is an equally pressing barrier. In Ireland, the high cost and limited availability of childcare prevent many of the people we work with from entering employment or engaging in training and education. This challenge particularly affects lone parents, most of whom are women, and has a direct impact on gender representation in the workforce. Many of these parents are forced to juggle care responsibilities with paid employment while also navigating homelessness. According to homelessness figures published by the Department of Housing in July 2025, 58% of families in emergency accommodation were lone parent households. These figures highlight the urgent need for adequate childcare supports to enable lone parents to access employment, training, and education.

For families in emergency accommodation, restrictions on visitation make it impossible for parents who rely on informal childcare arrangements to participate in work or training. Parents of older teenagers also face unique challenges, as emergency accommodation rules prohibit leaving anyone under the age of 18 unsupervised, an option available to families with secure housing. This leaves parents with very few alternatives, as after school activities are often unaffordable and may require transport that families cannot access.

Inflexible work and training schedules further force parents to make impossible choices between employment and caregiving, trapping them in cycles of poverty and exclusion. To ensure that parents experiencing homelessness can participate fully in employment and education additional childcare supports are essential. Importantly, these supports must reflect and respond to the realities of life in emergency accommodation.

#### **We recommend:**

- Ensuring that childcare supports are affordable and accessible for families experiencing homelessness, including consideration of the National Childcare Scheme income thresholds, and extending eligibility where appropriate.
- Adapting training programmes so that participation requirements are flexible enough to accommodate the caregiving responsibilities of parents in emergency accommodation.
- Providing flexible solutions for parents of older children in emergency accommodation, including exploring options for supervised independence where safe and extending transitional payments to support engagement in education, training, or employment.
- Providing clear and accessible information on childcare entitlements through Intreo offices, including tailored guidance for families in emergency accommodation, so that parents are fully informed of the supports available to them.

### **3. Structural Barriers for Social Groups**



As previously outlined, we support individuals at risk of, or currently experiencing, homelessness who come from a wide range of backgrounds, including members of the Roma and Traveller communities and people with disabilities. Each of these groups faces distinct challenges that often impact their ability to sustain employment

One of the most persistent barriers is discrimination and exclusion, particularly for members of ethnic minority communities, who are often underserved by mainstream employment programmes. These systemic inequalities make it harder for individuals to remain in work and can contribute to early dropouts or long-term disengagement.

For employment pathways to be truly effective, they must be culturally competent, inclusive, and adaptable. Programmes should be intentionally designed to remove systemic barriers, ensuring that supports are not one-size-fits-all but tailored to the real circumstances of individuals navigating homelessness and other forms of disadvantage.

**We recommend:**

- Ensuring employment supports are culturally competent and inclusive, taking into account the specific needs of ethnic minority communities, including Roma and Traveller communities.
- Providing targeted outreach and engagement strategies to reach groups who are often underserved by mainstream employment programmes, reducing the risk of exclusion or early disengagement.
- Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of employment pathways for minority and disadvantaged groups, using feedback from participants to continuously adapt and improve programmes.

## Conclusion

People experiencing homelessness are among the most marginalised groups in our society, yet they have been consistently overlooked in employment activation policy. The people we work with come from diverse backgrounds and often face additional forms of isolation and discrimination, which make accessing and sustaining employment particularly challenging. The Pathways to Work 2021–2025 strategy did not acknowledge homelessness as a barrier to employment, leaving the needs of this group unrecognised and without a plan to support them out of poverty through meaningful employment. We are submitting this written response to ensure that people experiencing homelessness are explicitly acknowledged in the development of the 2026–2030 strategy.

Through our Preparation for Education, Training and Employment (PETE) service, we work directly with people experiencing homelessness to support them into education, training, and employment. PETE demonstrates that with tailored, person-centred supports, people can overcome significant challenges and sustain employment. However, PETE alone cannot address systemic barriers, including the realities of life in emergency accommodation, inconsistent information sharing across agencies, limited outreach to marginalised groups, lack of affordable childcare and challenges such as low English language proficiency. We therefore urge the Department of Social Protection to engage directly with Focus Ireland and other frontline services



to inform the strategy, ensuring that interventions are coordinated, inclusive, and responsive to the lived realities of people experiencing homelessness.

The upcoming strategy is an opportunity to address this longstanding oversight. By explicitly recognising homelessness as a barrier to work and fostering interdepartmental collaboration, Pathways to Work 2026–2030 can create meaningful opportunities for people experiencing homelessness to enter and remain in employment, helping to break cycles of poverty, exclusion, and housing insecurity.