



REACH FOR THE SKY

THAMES REACH'S ACE PROJECT TAKES A TRULY UNIQUE APPROACH TO HOMELESSNESS. AS ONE BENEFICIARY EXPLAINS, IT'S AN AMBITIOUS ENTERPRISE BUT ONE THAT PAYS DIVIDENDS

was sleeping rough in places like Embankment and Holborn," recalls 40-year-old Essex-born Graham Shelby. "In Holborn I would sleep in a car park, under a ramp to keep the rain off. I was always looking for shelter, pillar to post for 10 months or so."

From this bleak outlook of just a few months ago, Shelby is now happily settled in a new bedsit, accessing mainstream services such as a GP and completing courses to improve his employability. And, as he himself says, "it is all down to Thames Reach".

Thames Reach is a homeless charity based in south London. In the courtyard of its impressive new Employment Academy in Camberwell stands a statue called *Aspire* (pictured). A work created by world renowned artist Randy Klein (assisted by formerly homeless people), it incorporates a Victorian spiral staircase the charity was obliged to

retain by planners during the refurbishment of the site but feared was unsafe. The idea of turning it into an artwork was a neat, if unusual, solution to the problem.

Neat and unusual seems to be in the water in Camberwell as evidenced by Thames Reach's latest project. The charity has undertaken a 'payments by results' contract from the Greater London Authority (GLA) to navigate 415 entrenched roughsleepers in the capital into accommodation and ultimately independent living. It is this project that put Shelby's life back on track. He had been in the grip of a depression and suffering the effects of a breakdown triggered by the death of his father a year ago. "The trauma set me off drinking and I pushed friends and family away. I ended up in Southampton. I was just looking to be free," he says, "but I was in a mess and was taken to a police station."

Hospital treatment helped but Graham was soon back on the streets in London, where he met Thames Reach outreach staff working on the payments by results contract, Ace. With the extra resources they have on the project, they were able to take quick, effective action to get Shelby into accommodation.

A truly unique model, the Ace project has been backed by investments from a number of social funders, including a £250,000 loan from Big Issue Invest. Payments from the GLA will be made to Thames Reach under the contract terms when rough sleeping has been reduced, individuals have been sustained in accommodation or reconnected with families abroad, and progress has been made in the areas of employment and health in line with set targets.

"It's great to be able to help finance Thames Reach's Ace project," says Big Issue Invest chief executive Nigel Kershaw, who is also chairman of The Big Issue. "We have worked with Thames Reach over many years, sharing a common philosophy of dismantling homelessness through prevention and self-help."

Thames Reach's range of projects has broadened considerably since it was founded in 1984. From outreach work it has moved into housing, health, hostel, employment and reconnection services, employing its person-centred approach to individuals experiencing homelessness. In the Ace project, personal navigators are assigned to work with homeless people, and on their behalf with other agencies, using the charity's 30 years of experience to achieve moves away from the streets. This experience has paid dividends for Shelby.

"Now I'm in a bedsit in Streatham," he says proudly, "and I've done an employability course (through Jobcentre Plus) to get my CV sorted. I'm looking for work in hospital portering as I have some experience in that area. It's daunting looking after the bedsit, paying the electricity and food from my jobseeker's allowance, so I have to keep a straight edge. But I've got friends that visit who make sure I'm okay and I'm volunteering two days a week at the homeless charity Emmaus."

Daunting maybe, but a far cry from the lonely existence under a car ramp in Holborn, which was reality a mere three months ago. Now that's a result. ●

thamesreach.org.uk; bigissueinvest.com

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