

Skills Programme

Learning Briefing



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Overview

The Thames Reach Skills Programme helps formerly homeless and socially excluded people to improve their literacy and digital skills.

Established in October 2014, this ongoing programme seeks to address the fact that low skill levels in these key areas have been impeding a significant number of Thames Reach service users, holding them back from finding work and from moving forward towards more independent living.

In the two-and-a-half years since the Skills Programme began, improving basic literacy and IT skills has become central to the support Thames Reach offers. In that time, 651 people have been helped by the project, with many progressing to accredited courses, training, volunteering and employment.

Background

Thames Reach's vision is of a society where street homelessness is ended and nobody need sleep rough on the streets. In pursuit of this vision, Thames Reach's mission is to ensure that the people using its services find and sustain a decent home, develop supportive relationships and lead fulfilling lives.

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Increasingly, the organisation has found that many service users journeying away from homelessness and other forms of social exclusion lack basic skills. Many feel embarrassed at their low literacy levels. Others have faced trouble when required to use these skills in daily life, such as when filling out forms or using public transport, leaving them feeling excluded from commonplace activities that others may take for granted.

In response to this, Thames Reach developed a specialist programme, led by the newly created role of skills programme developer. This post was filled by a qualified teacher experienced in working with socially excluded people. The programme aimed to:

- help service users and people in the wider community to improve basic skills around literacy and using computers
- embed basic skills support in the various services offered across Thames Reach
- develop informal methods to help people improve their literacy
- offer accredited learning in these areas with key external partners
- maximise use of volunteers to deliver the programme and
- make full use of the Thames Reach Employment Academy as a base for skills development, including for those already in work, who can only access support outside normal working hours. The Employment Academy is a community resource in Camberwell, which helps local residents, including many current and former homeless people, to find work.

Literacy skills

With the support of the Monument Trust, one of the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts, a range of workshops and services have been set up to improve the reading and writing capabilities of Thames Reach service users, and to create a culture across the organisation where developing basic skills is regarded as an essential core expectation for all work in supporting service users.

Reading groups

One way to help people develop an interest and increase their confidence in reading is through reading groups, which take place at four Thames Reach projects, run by members of staff who have received group facilitator training. This is supported by The Reader, a charitable social enterprise working to connect people with literature through shared reading. The reading groups meet weekly to read and discuss a short story and a poem in a relaxed, informal environment, allowing people to build their confidence as readers. A total of 305 people have attended reading groups since the Skills Programme began.



Virginia Croft is the Thames Reach skills programme developer

Poem of the Day

Each weekday, a poem is circulated across Thames Reach by the skills programme developer. Many Thames Reach projects and services display these poems on noticeboards and use them as a basis for discussions with fellow staff and service users, helping to embed the importance of literacy within the organisation.

Literacy Support Service

Since the programme was established, an extremely effective relationship has been formed with the Literacy Support Service — another literacy initiative developed by Thames Reach and delivered by long-time volunteers with teaching backgrounds, led by Julia Olisa. This service works alongside the Skills Programme and is supported by the skills programme developer. People receiving help elsewhere within the organisation, and who could benefit from developing their literacy skills, are referred to the Literacy Support Service, where they receive one-to-one support for up to eight weeks. This takes place on a weekday at Thames Reach's Hudson House resource centre in Stockwell, with additional support at the Employment Academy on Thursday evenings, as the volunteers, who provide the service, are often at work during the daytime. Since the Skills Programme began, 42 people have attended this service providing intensive literacy assistance.



Trevor has been attending one-to-one literacy sessions to improve his reading and writing

Trevor first had contact with Thames Reach when he was referred to Thames Reach's Three Dimensions of Care for Diabetes, providing support for people with the condition. He identified that he had low levels of literacy and, as a single parent, felt he was letting his children down.

"When my daughter brings letters home from school, I have to get someone else to read them," he says. "I would like to be able to help her with her homework, but I can't."

Trevor started to receive support from the one-to-one Literacy Support Service and now sees his tutor, Julia, once a week. He really feels as if he is improving and can now read simple sentences.

"I notice words now," Trevor says. "When I go shopping, when I see notices, I try and spell them out. I can't read everything but I can have a good try. I can't thank Julia enough for all her help."

Trevor also gets support once a week from a reading buddy who, on advice from Julia, works to reinforce what he has done in his weekly one-to-one session.

Julia says: "Trevor came to his first literacy session with very few reading or writing skills. Dyslexia has made learning a struggle at times but, with courage and determination, he has begun to break through the wall of illiteracy."

He now uses the Employment Academy for support to search for work online and apply for jobs. He has also started to attend the iReach service, which offers a relaxed, informal introduction to computer skills for people with little or no experience.

At a reading group last Christmas, Trevor read aloud in front of other people for the first time. He was very nervous, but he succeeded, and says: "I never thought I'd be able to do this."

Reading Buddies

A Reading Buddies scheme was started in November 2014 at the Employment Academy, where trained volunteers with a teaching qualification offer one-to-one literacy support. The buddies meet with a single client over an extended period of time, with useful materials and advice provided by Thames Reach's skills programme developer and from volunteer literacy tutors. Reading buddies also travel to meet with service users at the particular Thames Reach service they most regularly use, such as a hostel or a day centre.

Incorporating the programme into the Festival of Learning

Informal literacy skills workshops, such as the reading groups, have also been held during the Festival of Learning, previously called Adult Learners' Week. This national event is held annually across colleges and community organisations, and took place at the Employment Academy in both 2015 and 2016. These workshops were scheduled alongside a wide range of subjects including stand-up comedy, bike maintenance and barista training.



Dorell has been able to transform her life through the Skills Programme

Dorell has been getting support through the Thames Reach Skills Programme and it's helping to transform her life.

When she first met with Thames Reach staff, she was homeless and sofa surfing, reliant on food banks, unable to claim benefits, and had an uncertain immigration status, having fled Jamaica after being the victim of a violent assault.

Her physical health was poor and staff helped Dorell to access Thames Reach's Three Dimensions of Care for Diabetes. Her mental health was also fragile and she needed the help of a counsellor to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Staff from the Skills Programme also identified that Dorell had a very low level of literacy, as her family back in the Caribbean didn't have enough money to send her to school during her childhood.

She was encouraged to improve her literacy by attending a weekly Thames Reach reading group at the Employment Academy, where she made new friends. She also now receives one-to-one literacy support from a tutor and gets regular help from a volunteer reading buddy.

She has also been able to improve her IT skills through the iReach computer workshop.

Dorell is currently living in a hostel, has resolved her immigration status, can claim benefits, and is keen to find work.

Virginia Croft, Thames Reach's skills programme developer, said: "The change in Dorell over the last year has been astounding. Her confidence and self-esteem have improved beyond recognition and she is working towards her biggest wish, which is to read aloud in front of people. She has also recently had phone contact with her estranged family in the Caribbean."

Digital skills

Learning how to use a computer is crucial for people trying to find a job, as well as for those already in work. It is also essential for everyday living, and Thames Reach is committed to helping people have as much choice and control as possible over how they live their lives.

iReach

To help achieve this, Thames Reach has developed a productive partnership with The Worshipful Company of Information Technologists (WCIT), which has funded iReach, a workshop offering informal support and mentoring to people with little or no computer skills.



Digital skills worker Chris Hamm advises service user Gennoria during an iReach session

In iReach sessions, a digital skills worker focuses on the practical uses of a computer to better engage service users. Sessions highlight the potential social benefits of using email, and show people how to use Universal Jobmatch to find work and understand Universal Credit, the new benefits system.

iReach has proven to be very popular, with a total of 220 people attending between January 2016 and May 2017. Workshops take place at Thames Reach hostels, as well as at the Employment Academy, which has enabled the Skills Programme to fulfill its ambition of encouraging the entire organisation to make literacy and IT development a core part of the work undertaken with service users.

Due to generous further funding from WCIT, the service is now expanding and will be delivered to additional day centres, and to people currently sleeping rough who are being assisted by Thames Reach's outreach services. The digital skills worker also visits people in their own homes, demonstrating how the organisation is working to meet the needs of hard-to-reach individuals and those at risk of isolation.

iReach has proven to be very popular, with a total of 220 people attending

The service has helped to reduce social isolation among participants, due to the communal, group-based nature of the sessions, and because the skills picked up in the workshop have enabled people to reconnect with family and friends via email or social media. It has also helped people develop the self-confidence to volunteer and access training.

A total of 30 people, who have regularly attended iReach, have gone on to enrol on and complete an accredited digital skills course, run by adult education college City Lit and delivered in partnership with Thames Reach.

Accredited learning

As well as seeking to generally improve and develop literacy and digital skills, some service users also want to earn qualifications in these areas to improve their employment prospects. Another key element of the Skills Programme has been to ensure that people have the opportunity of continuing their learning and increase their employability through moving on to accredited programmes. This is especially important, because many people using Thames Reach services have had bad experiences with more formal education in the past. The Skills Programme has set out to improve access to formal accredited courses, partnering with educational institutions to provide flexible, tailored learning opportunities.

City Lit

City Lit is an adult education college in central London, which offers thousands of part-time short courses every year. The college started delivering two accredited courses at the Employment Academy in January 2015, focusing on digital and numeracy skills. Since then, six further accredited courses have taken place, with 43 people achieving an accredited qualification.

The partnership with City Lit has been extremely effective and Thames Reach's understanding of the needs of homeless and vulnerable people has meant that these courses have been designed specifically to suit them. A good example is the recently run Customer Service Level 1 course, chosen because most of those enrolling had been volunteers in the reception team at the Employment Academy, allowing them to develop related skills in a familiar environment.



The Employment Academy in Camberwell is open some evenings for accredited learning courses

The Employment Academy also opens on Thursday evenings to host City Lit courses, due to space being in high demand in the building in the daytime. This has also helped create opportunities for people already in work, who are less able to attend services during the day. This group often want to continue developing their skills and to attain accredited qualifications, usually in the hope of moving into better-paid employment.

Many of those who completed these courses had initially come to the Skills Programme through some of the more informal groups and workshops, such as iReach or a reading group, showing how the informal aspects of the Skills Programme can act as a stepping stone to accredited learning. It also demonstrates the importance of an environment where people can build self-confidence and overcome any fears or anxieties around more formal learning.

LeSoCo

Lewisham Southwark College (LeSoCo), a local further education college, has been running accredited literacy skills courses, with some additional numeracy support, for adults at the Employment Academy since September 2015. The Skills Programme has been able to refer service users to LeSoCo's Entry Level 1 courses, with some people progressing to the Entry Level 2 course at the LeSoCo campus.



Peter has found work as a labourer after developing his basic skills

Peter worked as a tyre fitter for 38 years before he lost his home due to a relationship breakdown and ended up sleeping rough for three months on London's streets.

He started using Thames Reach's Camden Spectrum day centre, where his support worker, Diana Bejarano, introduced him to the Skills Programme taking place at the Employment Academy, in order to help him develop his basic skills.

Diana also helped him find temporary accommodation and then a room of his own in a shared house in the private rented sector.

At the Employment Academy, he was assigned a tutor, who gave him one-to-one literacy support, and he attended iReach workshops to improve his IT skills. He also took part in Thames Reach's painting and decorating training course, called Moving In Moving On.

Peter said: “It was hard for me, a pen and paper man, to pick up IT skills, but I learned to get onto websites advertising job vacancies.”

Peter got a six-week work experience placement at Tideway, the company building London’s new ‘super sewer’, the Thames Tideway Tunnel. On completion of the placement, he was offered a job as a labourer by the firm.

“I worked for 42 years and have always had a job,” Peter said. “But when I ended up on the streets I had nothing. I’m thrilled and over the moon to get this opportunity.”

Rob Townsend, an assistant support worker at the Employment Academy, who put Peter forward for the work experience, said: “It’s great Tideway have offered him a job and he’s deserved it through his own hard work.

“My aim is to help people develop their skills and have a better chance of finding employment – it’s very uplifting to see Peter seize this opportunity.”

Next steps

Initial engagement

Thames Reach is seeking to involve more service users as volunteer peer supporters within existing services in order to make use of their lived experience during the initial stage of engagement. People are often especially motivated and inspired by those with whom they have shared experiences.

Staff and volunteers are also being trained to deliver more reading groups across the organisation’s various projects, as this service has been a key informal introduction to the Skills Programme.

Reach and awareness

A course entitled ‘Awareness of Basic Skills’ has been written by the skills programme developer to train frontline staff about the importance of basic skills support for service users. Though optional at present, this course is set to become a part of the core training programme, and compulsory for all Thames Reach staff.

Thames Reach will also seek to develop new relationships with adult education colleges and other organisations to expand the range of skills services on offer, and will cultivate existing relationships with City Lit and LeSoCo.

The aim is to increase the amount of services available at the Employment Academy during the evening, which is another way of widening availability to those wishing to improve their basic skills, along with increasing the number of volunteers to help deliver the programme.

If you are interested in funding the Skills Programme, please contact Thames Reach area director Catherine Parsons at catherine.parsons@thamesreach.org.uk

