

# ADVANTAGED THINKING

## CHAPTER TWO SEEING NEW DEPTHS

Insights from evidence and impact



## CHAPTER TWO SEEING NEW DEPTHS

“I see young people who are positive and engaged in their goals. I see them inspired and achieving in goals, education, employment and community connections. I hear young people talk about achieving, trying and succeeding. I see workers being challenged to work in different ways to support young people towards independence.”

Katie Hooper, Foyer Foundation Australia

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## INSIGHTS FROM EVIDENCE AND IMPACT

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Each section includes two 'Taking Action' questions to help you to reflect on insights.

# 1. BACKGROUND INSIGHTS

In January 2016, Dr Kaz Stuart and Ruth Browning produced a literature review for the Foyer Federation, published under the title 'The Evidence Base for an Asset-Based Approach to Youth Housing'. The University of Cumbria was commissioned to lead this research as part of the Foyer Federation's emerging work on developing a revitalised Youth Offer to fully express an Advantaged Thinking vision. The literature review also helped Foyer Federation create an evidence-based Theory of Change for Advantaged Thinking. These two sources form the main basis for this chapter, which will highlight key learning points for funders, commissioners and leaders to apply in developing future Advantaged Thinking services.

Before inspecting these sources, it is important to begin with two foundational insights:

1. To recognise that the evidence base for the current 'status quo' in how we help people deal with personal and social challenges is extremely poor. Consider the rising numbers of people struggling with mental wellbeing, the consistently high numbers distanced from secure employment, or the poor levels of attainment for those leaving the care system. This indicates that there is compelling evidence of costly failure from applying problem-focused approaches.

The poor outcomes our society achieves for people facing systemic injustice and disadvantage is comparable to a plane that is burning around us and beginning to plummet out of the sky. When reaching for a parachute in response, it would be natural to ask ourselves: does it make sense to apply the positive approaches that I would wish to experience and/or that I already use in my personal life to deal with this challenge?

**Reaching for a positive parachute through Advantaged Thinking feels like a common-sense action.** It is encouraging to know that there is also a scientific evidence base for Advantaged Thinking as a choice. This chapter supports both the common-sense and evidence-based arguments for Advantaged Thinking.



2. To recognise that traditional approaches for capturing evidence may not always be fit for purpose in an asset-based context, which weakens the range of available evidence to support our understanding of Advantaged Thinking.

Rather than seeing this as a weakness of Advantaged Thinking, it is more appropriate for us to accept that asset-based approaches directly challenge how we collect evidence and demand a different approach to measure outcomes. We cannot expect to capture the positive, holistic and personal growth impacts from Advantaged Thinking through a narrowly imposed, compliance-focused data set that simply responds to needs.

As Stuart and Browning note, "Target-driven services mean that the focus of the service is on the target rather than the person the service is designed to help. And 'targeting' people by their deficits – as unemployed; as an offender; as a teenage parent, etc, is itself part of the problem." What data we collect and how we do it, therefore, must reflect our own ethos to work alongside people and invest in their development. This means that we should try to capture evidence more from people's assets rather than their deficits, to see the whole person rather than a narrowly defined service area, and to track progression towards thriving aspirations rather than just short-term outputs.

## TAKING ACTION:

- Q1 Is there a compelling evidence base of negative outcomes for people you wish to support that already suggests an Advantaged Thinking approach is urgently needed?
- Q2 What might you need to do differently to ensure you can capture more person-focused evidence that reflects growth in people's strengths and abilities?

## 2. EVIDENCE SOURCES TO PROMOTE ADVANTAGED THINKING

The University of Cumbria literature review identifies 12 strong examples that form a secure qualitative and quantitative evidence base for taking an Advantaged Thinking approach, utilising the impact of associated asset-based practices. The review discovered 112 research papers evidencing asset-based work with young people from the last 10 years, demonstrating various positive impacts in the fields of youth work, housing support, education, employability, health support, asset-based community development, looked-after children and criminal justice.

The 12 strongest areas of impact are listed below in order of reference in the review. They are grouped by thematic focus to show how Advantaged Thinking can prove particularly effective as a response to young people's needs and goals in personal development, housing, education, employment and health.

### THEMATIC FOCUS: Youth work and personal development.

“There is evidence from a range of countries that supports an asset-based approach to youth work, and further [...] strong evidence that proves it has an impact on outcomes for young people.” (p26)

Three evidence sources are shared below. Examples in the first are based on the Positive Youth Development model (PYD) which is strongly informed by asset-based principles, and thus is a good indicator of impact relevance for Advantaged Thinking.

**EVIDENCE SOURCE ONE:** a review of research papers on PYD in the USA. Travis and Leech (2014) found that this research indicated that there is ‘reliable and valid data for [...] competence, confidence, connection, caring and character [...] [the five Cs inherent in the PYD model]’ (p22). The reliable data that supports a PYD approach helps to validate the strong asset-based principles that underpin it.

A further review into the PYD model considered four other research papers from 2005, in which Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, Lerner (2005) proved “the usefulness of applying this strengths-based view of adolescent development within diverse youth and communities” (p24). Finally, a review

of the PYD model in 27 settings in the UK by Schuman and Davies (2007) concluded that the success of the PYD approach was enhanced when programmes were “long term, featured trusting adult relationships, and opportunities mentoring and bonding”, which are all common aspects in an Advantaged Thinking approach.



**EVIDENCE SOURCE TWO:** qualitative research in the UK on the impact of asset-based approaches for people deemed to have ‘complex needs’ by Boelman and Russell (2013) concludes “it is evident that asset-based approaches could significantly transform lives” (p.25). This can be connected with further research in the USA specific to young people from care (Graham, Schellinger and Vaughn (2015) and Watt, Norton and Jones (2013)), noting that both asset-building and strengths-based programmes of support increase personal outcomes for this group.

**EVIDENCE SOURCE THREE:** policy sources from Australia, including The Government of South Australia’s (2011) Office for Youth good practice guidelines and Australia’s Youth Affairs Coalition (2013) detail the fundamental aspects of youth work, which together “suggests that asset-based approaches are fundamental to youth work and that it can reduce risky behaviours” (p.25).

### THEMATIC FOCUS: Housing or homelessness

“Empirical evidence supports the use of asset-based approaches to housing... [and] found that it led to positive outcomes.” (p.31)

Three evidence sources are noted below from asset-based support examples in the USA and Netherlands along with research into strengths-based practice from Australia.

**EVIDENCE SOURCE FOUR:** a literature review of positive approaches for working with young people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness published by the Australian Government concludes, “Research suggests that homeless young people responded better to client-centred approaches that were strengths-based, flexible and forgiving and encouraged them to strive towards positive goals despite any setbacks (Cauce et al., 1994; Cauce et al., 2000)’ (date unknown: 22-23). The review identified “a notable shift towards working with young people using a strengths-based approach (Kurtz & Linnemann, 2006; McLaren, 2002)”. Strengths-based practice principles are fully reflected in the 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking, so their evidence in research is a reliable indicator for Advantaged Thinking impact.

and the alleviation of loneliness” and stressing the importance for young people to have access to resources. Both these findings support the focus on social connections within the Foyer Federation’s Advantaged Thinking Theory of Change.

**EVIDENCE SOURCE SIX:** the significant studies on a youth homelessness programme in the Netherlands, called Houvast, which was founded on strength-based principles. The study is described as significant due to its size and timescale, reaching more than 251 young people over nine months. The research identified 10 positive impacts on young people’s quality of life, satisfaction with family relations, finances, health, employment or education, depression, care needs, autonomy, competence and resilience. As a random controlled trial longitudinal study, this research is described by Stuart and Browning as “the best evidence of the impact of ... [an asset-based] approach” (p.32).

**EVIDENCE SOURCE FIVE:** qualitative data from USA research into youth homelessness supports (Rew and Horner, 2003) include a five-year longitudinal study that concludes by noting “an attribution between positive youth development

## THEMATIC FOCUS: Educational opportunities.

“There is a strong evidence base supporting the benefits of asset-based approaches to education.” (p.35).

A focus on education forms part of the Foyer Federation’s Advantaged Thinking Theory of Change, so it is significant to emphasise that asset-based approaches to education do support young people’s achievement. The three evidence sources noted below come from studies in the USA and UK.

**EVIDENCE SOURCE SEVEN:** a study from Michigan State University (1999) into 250,000 young people in USA schools over one year, which found “young people with a high level of assets engaged in fewer risky behaviours and had more thriving indicators than those with a lower level of assets.” Stuart and Browning importantly conclude that “Assets were therefore said to mediate the impact of deficits” (p.34). This fully supports the rationale for an Advantaged Thinking investment.

**EVIDENCE SOURCE EIGHT:** a study for another PYD programme at a youth leadership institute in Minnesota (Bloomberg, Ganey, Alba, Quintero, Alvarez-Alcantara, 2003) found that young people benefited from various positive impacts including increased levels of community engagement, peer relationships, rates of enrolment in post-secondary education or job attainment, and reduced rates of

alcohol, tobacco or drug use/abuse. This connects with some of the evidence produced from health and employment-focused Advantaged Thinking programmes introduced by Foyer Federation in the UK Foyer network.

**EVIDENCE SOURCE NINE:** a quantitative study (Proctor, Tsukayama, Wood, Maltby, Fox Eades, and Linley, 2011) into a UK strengths-based model called the Strengths Gym. From a range of validated research measures, it identified that “adolescents who participated in Strengths Gym had significantly increased life satisfaction compared to adolescents who did not” (2011:377) (p.35). Increased life satisfaction through engagement with positive learning opportunities is often referenced by young people during Foyer Federation Accreditation assessment visits of Advantaged Thinking services.

## THEMATIC FOCUS: Employability.

“There was very limited evidence of asset-based approaches being used ... [but] strong support for an asset-based approach to employability training” (p.36).

Despite the general lack of research in this area, there is some significant evidence for an asset-based approach producing positive impacts for employability, which is noted in the single evidence source from Canada below.

**EVIDENCE SOURCE TEN:** research from Canada’s Homeless Hub (date unknown) looked at the impact of an asset-based Train the Trades employment programme for people experiencing homelessness. It found that 69% of participants either progressed their education or secured

employment as a result of the programme. This connects with some of the positive outcomes from Advantaged Thinking employment programmes introduced by the Foyer Federation.

## THEMATIC FOCUS: Health.

“...asset- based approaches are successfully used to address specific health issues ... there is a well-documented and well-evidenced asset-based approach to health.” (p.43)

Of all 10 thematic areas, health appears to provide the strongest UK indicators for positive uses of asset-based approaches, with both examples referenced below from the UK.

**EVIDENCE SOURCE ELEVEN:** an evidence-based briefing paper on asset-based approaches by the University of Glasgow (2011) reviews four examples in Scotland to conclude that “asset-based approaches may help tackle the underlying causes of health inequalities through capacity building, are in place in many health and mental health settings, and can be measured using the Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale.” (p.39)

delivery because “it helps people to address their problems more effectively and sustainably by working with them rather than doing to them.” A report in the same year also considered the evidence for adults in ‘Resilient and Resourceful Adults: An Asset Based Approach’, which similarly showed how the protective and promotional aspects of a focus on health assets “support people to be responsible for their own health.” (p.40)

**EVIDENCE SOURCE TWELVE:** a 2014 report from Executive Director Public Health Wales, ‘Children and Young People are Our Future: An Asset-based Approach’, explored five asset-based projects in Wales. It showed that asset-based approaches offer an effective model for health service

## TAKING ACTION:

- Q1** Which evidence examples and thematic areas connect most with your interests?
- Q2** Can you use the examples offered to illustrate that there is a secure evidence base to support you to apply an Advantaged Thinking approach in your work?

### 3. IMPACT AREAS TO FOCUS ON ADVANTAGED THINKING

It is helpful for organisations introducing Advantaged Thinking to be mindful of how and where they seek to capture their own evidence base by looking for specific impact areas. The research conducted by Stuart and Browning aids this process by identifying impact areas most aligned with an asset-based approach.

One strong source of inspiration for this is the Youth Thrive Framework: “established in 2011 by The Center for the Study of Social Policy [CSSP] in the USA [this] is a strengths-based initiative used to identify how all youth (i.e. 9- 26 year olds) can be supported in ways that advance healthy development and wellbeing and reduce the likelihood or impact of negative life experiences (CSSP, 2015)” (p.64). The framework has particular relevance for Advantaged Thinking impact given its focus on thriving and its underpinning application of both strengths-based and PYD perspectives. Stuart and Browning note (p.69) that the core principles of thriving, defined by Bundick, Yeager, King and Damon (2010, pp. 891-892), are utilised in the framework – of which, the following three have most relevance to Advantaged Thinking outcomes:

**THRIVING focuses** on aspects of development beyond merely the absence of the negative.

Thus, the importance Advantaged Thinking gives to evidencing what people can do.



**THRIVING refers** to the functioning of the integrated, whole person across all life domains.

Thus, the importance Advantaged Thinking gives to evidencing holistic performance.

**THRIVING entails** the engagement of one's unique talents, interests, and/or aspirations.

Thus, the importance Advantaged Thinking gives to evidencing talents and personal goals.

Learning from this is reflected in the Foyer Federation's Advantaged Thinking Theory of Change, evident in its strong focus on thriving aspirations and consideration for holistic development areas.

A second source of inspiration is offered by Stuart and Browning's collation of different asset-based outcome frameworks into a 'master list' of potential outcome areas to draw from. As Stuart and Browning note: "These are sorted into three types of outcomes:

- The intrapersonal outcomes that young people need (within themselves)
- The interpersonal assets or outcomes that are needed when young people interact with others in the world
- The external family, community and societal assets that would enable development to occur." (p.82)

The table is printed in full below:

INDIVIDUAL PROXIMAL OUTCOMES				EXTERNAL SOCIETAL ASSETS	
Cluster	Outcome	Cluster	Outcome	Cluster	Assets
Internal positive values	Caring Equality and social justice Integrity Honesty Responsibility Restraint Gratitude Learned optimism Learned hopefulness Quality of life	Internal communication	Explaining Expressing Presenting Listening Questioning Using different ways of communicating	External support	Family support Positive family communication Other adult relationships Caring neighbourhood Caring school climate Parent involvement in schooling
Internal management of feelings	Reviewing Self-awareness Reflecting Self-accepting Emotional intelligence	Internal social competence and relationships	Negotiating Interpersonal competence Cultural competence Resistance skills Peaceful conflict resolution Working with others Establishing positive relationships Interpreting others Managing conflict Empathising Leading others Attachment Connection	External empowerment	Community values youth as  Resources Service to others Safety
Internal resilience and determination	Self-disciplined Self-management Self-motivated Concentrating Having a sense of purpose Persistent Self-controlled Hardiness Coping Thriving	Internal creativity	Imagining alternative ways of doing things Applying learning in new contexts Enterprising Innovating Remaining open to new ideas Learned resourcefulness	External boundaries and expectations	Family boundaries School boundaries Neighbourhood boundaries Adult role models Learned peer influence High expectations
Internal planning and problem solving	Navigating resources Organising Setting and achieving goals Decision making Researching Analysing Critical thinking Questioning and challenging Evaluating risks Reliability	Internal empowerment / confidence / agency	Self-reliance Self-esteem Self-efficacy Self-belief Locus of control Sense of coherence Action competence Positive view of future	External opportunities for constructive use of time	Creative Activities Youth programmes Religious community Time at home
Internal commitment to learning / development / work	Achievement Motivation School / work Engagement Homework / work Bonding to school / workplace Reading / studying for pleasure				

This table may provide a starting place for organisations to identify potential outcome areas of interest. However, even more usefully, Stuart and Browning also considered the frequency of outcomes referenced in different research in order to zone in on the outcomes asset-based approaches are most likely to produce.

**The top softer outcome areas were noted as follows in order of frequency:**

1. Communication skills: "improved interpersonal skills / communication skills / social skills"
2. Social competence and relationships: "increased community networks"
3. Empowerment and confidence: "more secure identity/character" and "improved confidence"
4. Resilience and determination: "increased coping skills / resilience"

Services applying an Advantaged Thinking methodology should therefore expect to see positive distance travelled in people's social skills, networks, identity, confidence, and resilience, based on the frequency with which these outcomes have been identified in research on asset-based provision.

**The top harder outcome areas were noted as follows:**

1. Improved physical and mental health
2. Improved educational attainment
3. Increased citizenship
4. Increased housing stability
5. Increased employment

Importantly, it was noted that achievements in the softer outcomes helped to drive the harder outcome areas. This illustrates the importance of producing a broad, holistic set of outcomes that reflect the interconnected relationships between different asset impact areas. Asset-based investments in communication skills, social networks, identity, confidence and resilience will all be important determinants for programmes seeking better health, education, citizenship, housing and employment outcomes. These are best described as positive promotive factors to achieve thriving outcomes.

For funders and commissioners, the above provides a strong rationale to invest in Advantaged Thinking as an effective evidence-based approach to support positive outcomes for people's health, education, citizenship, housing and employment.

**TAKING ACTION:**

**Q1** How do the three principles of thriving quoted above connect with aspirations in your work?

**Q2** Can you collect data in any of the listed outcome areas to evidence your asset-based impact?

## 4. THE FOYER FEDERATION'S ADVANTAGED THINKING THEORY OF CHANGE

Dr Kaz Stuart of the University of Cumbria worked with Steve Hillman of the Foyer Federation to produce an Advantaged Thinking Theory of Change. The text below is taken from a case study they produced from this work, published under Stuart, K. and Hillman, S., The Centre for Youth Impact (2017):

### “An asset-based approach to theory of change”

“A theory of change is a logical map of all the things that need to happen in order for people to change. It shows what may otherwise be a mysterious black box of practice with young people. We know that positive work with young people leads to outcomes, but we (as a sector) are not always good at unpacking this mysterious process or being specific enough about the gains made. Two issues with theories of change are that they are often based in deficit approaches and may be planned by adults on behalf of young people. At the Foyer Federation, we sought to do this in a participative and asset-based way.

“In order to make the theory of change participative, the Foyer Federation considered how to best engage young people. Rather than developing a theory of change to impose on young people, the Foyer Federation wanted to create this through young people's direct experiences. A list of all the possible activities a young person might want from a Foyer was created from a range of documents. A list of potential outcomes from the research previously quoted was also created. Armed with a pack of index cards, the Federation then spoke with 20 young people who were residents at Foyers to find out how these activities and outcomes reflected their lived experiences.

“The young people refined and shaped the emerging theory of change. They added and took away activity cards, building a sense of what helped them develop and grow. They added and took away outcome cards, building a list of appropriate possible outcomes.

They also linked them into causal chains – activities leading to short, medium and long-term outcomes. Young people built the final theory of change.

“Addressing the deficit approach took careful consideration. Theory of change maps usually start with an identification of the needs of a group of service users. This is a deficit approach as it identifies what they cannot do and what gaps are to be filled by the theory of change. The Foyer Federation adopted the opposite approach. We considered what strengths or assets a young person might arrive with. We concluded that this would include young people aged 16-25 with a wide variety of assets. The key starting point for any interaction with young people was therefore a discussion and identification of what they can do and what they are good at – rather than a discussion of what they cannot do. The list of outcomes (assets) developed is a good way to consider a full range of assets that the young person might have. The young people said that this was a really important aspect of Foyers' work, something that made them different to other services they accessed.

“The next step is for theories of change to list the activities that an organisation or service might provide. We turned this approach on its head and considered what a young person might want – this is asset-based, focusing on what they want, not what they need. This is the cornerstone of the Foyer's 'offer'; it is not a pre-defined list of structured activities, but a range of things on offer that a young person can choose to engage with.

“The young people pointed out that fundamental to effective asset-based working was the quality of the staff. This was therefore the first aspect of the offer:

**Staff who are: respectful, professional, trusting, open, positive, role models.**

**Staff who offer: a 'something for something' deal.**

**Staff who can skilfully: teach, give information, advice, guidance, mentoring, coaching, and moral support.**

“Second to this was a broad range of different activities that a young person might want to access, each asset-based. Fundamental to the asset-based theory of change was the assumption that the young person will choose what they want to do, what is important to them, rather than the staff telling them what to engage in.

Having developed a theory of change that represented the reality of young people in Foyers, the literature review from Stuart and Browning was then used to check that there was evidence to support each link in the theory of change. A total of 120 papers were used to underpin the links between the different sections of the theory of change. This dual process of participatory design with underpinning literature produced a robust theory of change for an Advantaged Thinking approach. The final theory of change is printed over page.

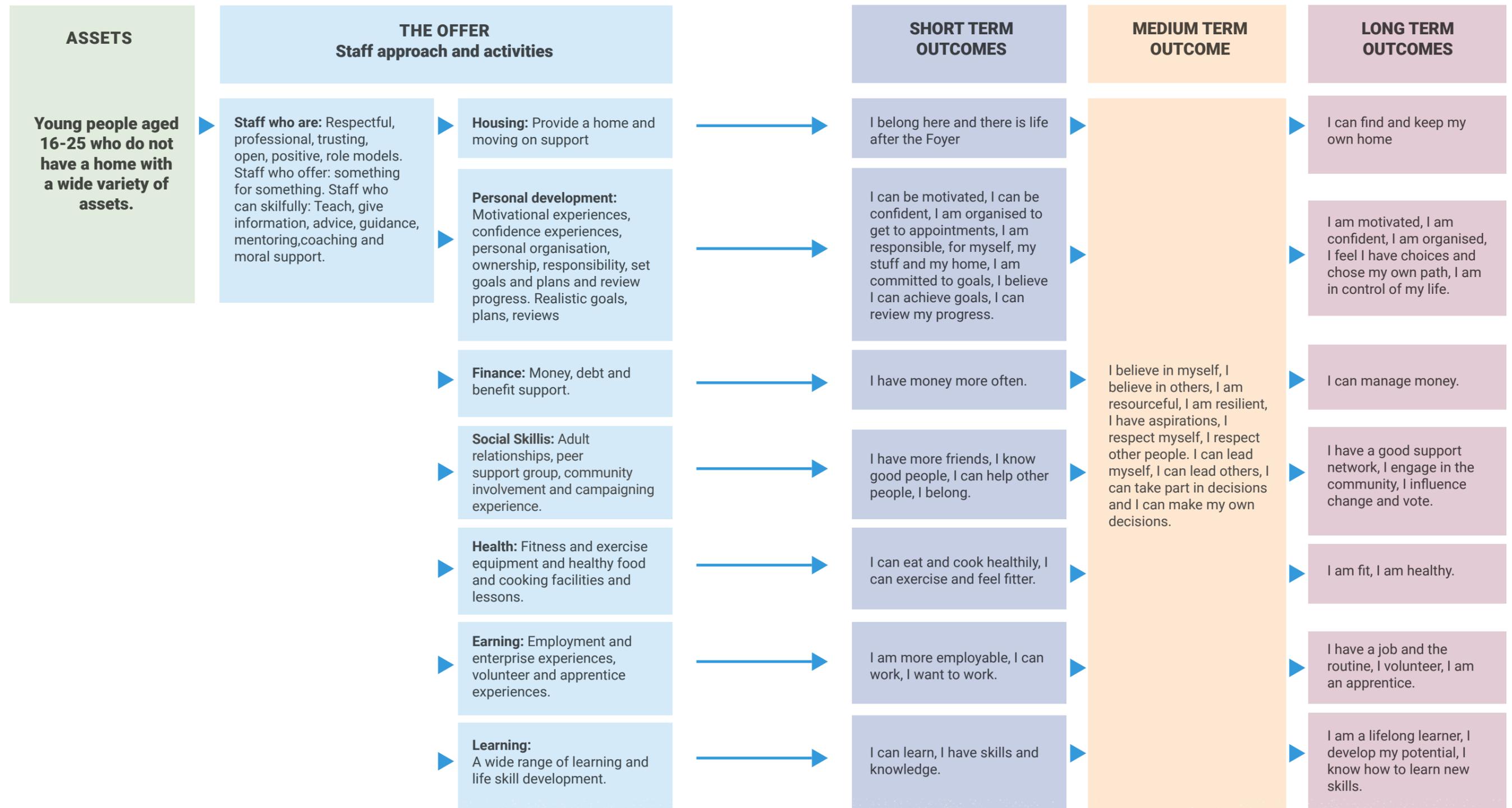
“Next was the range of outcomes that the young people might achieve. An asset-based assumption here was that young people would achieve the outcomes rather than the staff or organisation. The outcomes are the assets that young people develop through their engagement with the Foyer's activities. They are owned by young people, not the staff.

“This development of asset-based assessments, identification of supportive staff capabilities, supportive activities, and a range of short, medium and long-term outcomes led to an asset-based rather than deficit-based theory of change. The young people who developed the process were crucial in its design. They pointed out areas of implicit practice that needed to be made explicit and removed aspects of the offer that we thought were important but they did not value. The participatory nature of the theory of change and its asset-based design has given its strength and we advocate for this approach when planning a theory of change.”

### TAKING ACTION:

- Q1** How might you apply the Foyer Federation's participatory design process to develop your own approach to impact data?
- Q2** How does the final Theory of Change fit the experience of people in your services?

# THEORY OF CHANGE



## 5. APPLYING THE THEORY OF CHANGE IN PRACTICE

The Foyer Federation has used the Advantaged Thinking Theory of Change as part of its Foyer FOR Youth Accreditation process. It utilises it to gather evidence that Foyer services are effective and deliver the immediate outcomes (sense of belonging, financial capability, healthy eating, etc) that can reasonably predict that longer-term outcomes (tenancy sustainment, employment, health, etc) will follow.

As part of this Accreditation scheme, Foyers are required to collect performance data to show how young people leaving the Foyer progress distance travelled measures under each seven thematic areas from the theory of change. Insights from this are considered in more detail in Chapter Four and contribute to the evidence base for Advantaged Thinking outlined here. Experience of operating the scheme's data requirements clearly identifies that services can take steps to collect this data, and that the process of reflecting on this gives services a better understanding of their performance and development opportunities.

**In 'An Asset-based Approach to Theory of Change' (2017) (p.5), Stuart and Hillman note:**

"Foyers are frequently part of Housing Associations, and as such are measured on housing management key performance indicators such as voids and arrears. Even those Foyers who are independent of Housing Associations still have a housing management task. But Foyers are also youth development organisations and need a set of measures that reflect this. By measuring the right outcomes – the ones that we know make a difference and that we know young people value – there is more likelihood that Foyers will deliver the right things to enable young people to make a successful transition into adulthood.

"It is a truism within our sector that 'what gets measured gets done'. This is frequently used as a criticism: that due to pressures from funders, government and elsewhere we spend too much time measuring the wrong things and that therefore we end up doing the wrong things. Our approach to the theory of change is our way of ensuring that we are measuring the things that we, and young people, truly value about our work."

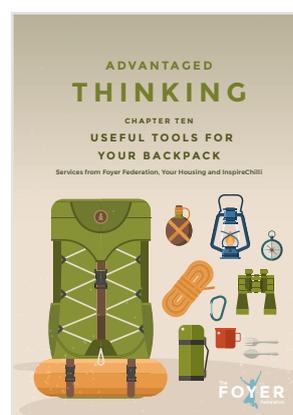
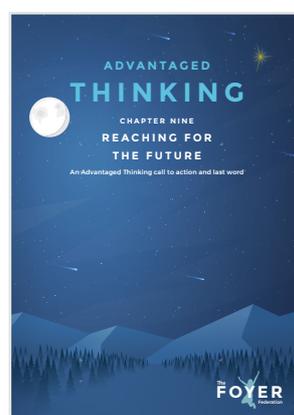
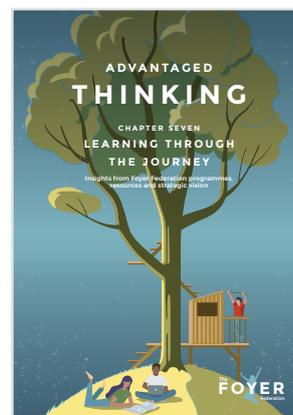
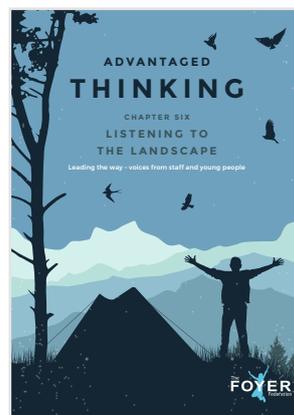
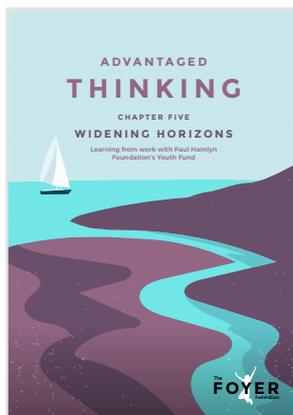
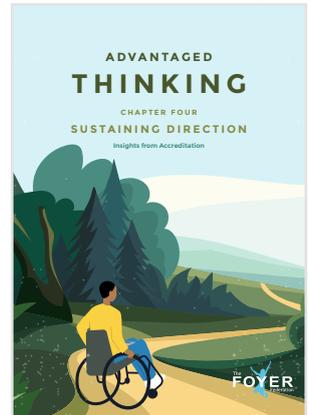
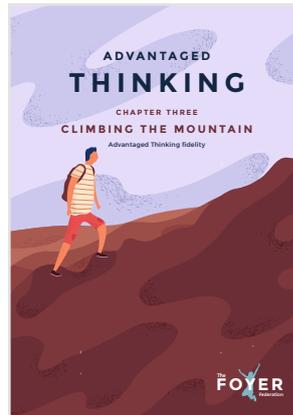
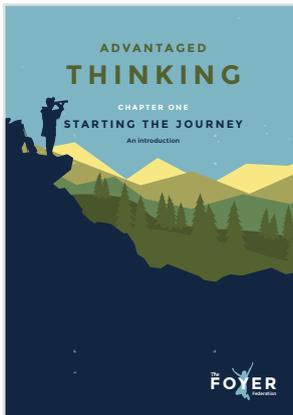
The approach to the theory of change described is an Advantaged Thinking one.

### TAKING ACTION:

- Q1** Do you agree that, in measuring the right outcomes, there is more likelihood your services will deliver the right things to enable people to achieve?
- Q2** How might you use the Advantaged Thinking Theory of Change to ensure you are measuring the things of most value for people from your work?



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The Foyer Federation  
 Work.Life, Core Building  
 30 Brown Street  
 Manchester  
 M2 1DH



inbox@foyer.net  
 www.foyer.net



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