

ADVANTAGED THINKING

CHAPTER FOUR SUSTAINING DIRECTION

Insights from Accreditation



CHAPTER FOUR

SUSTAINING DIRECTION

“Taking this time to reflect ... as a team has been a real positive as it allowed us to recognise that we still have achieved a lot and have some real success stories when it comes to young people’s achievements. We have not merely ‘survived’ through COVID as a service.”

Coops Foyer FOR Youth review, 2021

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INSIGHTS FROM ACCREDITATION

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

1. USING ADVANTAGED THINKING IN SERVICE ACCREDITATION

The Foyer Federation redeveloped its existing Foyer Accreditation Scheme into the current FOR Youth framework over 2015-16, with the new scheme piloted in both Australia and the UK in 2016-17. It was essential for Advantaged Thinking to be cemented as the core ethos from which services reflect on and assess the quality of their provision. Thus, rather than Advantaged Thinking being a separate module in the scheme, it was integrated throughout FOR Youth in terms of the expectations for a service's vision, values, resources, support approach, holistic offer, impact and data collection processes.

To support services to understand these expectations, the scheme introduced an initial audit tool in the first three months of the process. This enables services to explore and reflect on the relevant Advantaged Thinking Test areas and show commitment to progress priorities in these over the Accreditation timescale.

The audit is based around encouraging services to:

- Select Advantaged Thinking test areas that have most relevance to the context of the service
- Identify positive examples in each test area, along with actions to be taken to promote these positives internally or externally
- Identify challenges that require further investment, along with any actions to be taken to progress these over the course of the Accreditation process

Based on these findings, services are asked to prioritise up to three key actions to achieve the greatest impact, explaining the rationale for their choice and what they hope to have achieved by their final validation visit at the end of the Accreditation process.

The pilot of the FOR Youth process showed that services benefited from the audit tool as a way to re-energise their Advantaged Thinking intent, improve consistency in knowledge and approach, and embed Advantaged Thinking more sustainably for the future. The audit brought staff together and, through its focus on Test Six, encouraged meaningful conversations with young people over their involvement in the service and understanding of the offer available to them. While some services found the online assessment and written materials adequate to complete the audit process, others required more detailed Advantaged Thinking training sessions to ensure a consistent level of understanding across staff teams involved.



The three top findings from the audit tool were as follows:

1. The audit was designed to be completed in a short period of 12 weeks. However, several services quickly began to act on themes emerging from their audit – which in some cases prevented them from submitting the actual documentation until much later than intended. This demonstrated how a focus on Advantaged Thinking produces increased energy and interest to progress service improvement.
2. There was often an inclination in services to begin their audit conversation with what was going wrong rather than what was going right. This shift to the positive was an important nudge in the audit tool to encourage services to approach their improvement from a more balanced perspective. It is particularly important given that some of the solutions to challenges can lie in promoting and scaling practice elements that are more Advantaged Thinking than others. The most Advantaged Thinking services typically prove to be those that are better able to identify a balanced range of positives to celebrate and challenges to address.
3. Services found the audit a useful tool to stimulate conversations between different staff roles and teams, and to begin to challenge any management assumptions by exploring deeper feedback from young people and staff on practice areas associated with the 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking. This often resulted in Advantaged Thinking becoming a regular conversation item in team and resident meetings.

It is important to note that the intention of the audit tool is to engage services in reflecting on themselves in an Advantaged Thinking way – not to promote use of the phrase as just another label without any meaning. Advantaged Thinking resides in the quality of service reflection and action taken to develop a service offer for and with young people. What matters in Advantaged Thinking is not whether people can identify its benefits as a phrase, but whether they believe staff are working with, not doing to, people; whether people feel their goals are invested in; whether people feel their strengths, identity and experiences are fully understood by staff; whether people are involved in how the service works and have the ability to shape it. While the Accreditation process expects people to understand Advantaged Thinking, it is rarely asked about directly in assessment interviews – rather, it is indirectly referenced and identified through evidence that expresses the 7 Tests in practice.

The Advantaged Thinking audit tool may be accessed through the Foyer Federation's FOR Youth framework product.

TAKING ACTION:

- Q1 How would you introduce an Advantaged Thinking audit of your service?
- Q2 Are there any positive areas of Advantaged Thinking practice in your service that could be promoted and scaled further to have a wider impact?

2. ENCOURAGING YOUNG PEOPLE AND STAFF TO ENGAGE IN ADVANTAGED THINKING

As part of the FOR Youth Accreditation process, services are encouraged to engage young people and staff in exploring and expressing Advantaged Thinking through their shared talents and experiences. In 2017, Colin Falconer of InspireChilli designed an activity tool to help services stimulate initial ideas for engagement by identifying a project and/or discussion area that could involve young people and staff in the 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking.

To get started, it was recommended that a service undertaking FOR Youth Accreditation should produce a visual display for Advantaged Thinking featuring relevant experiences, words and images that illustrate the 7 Tests. Ideally this would be a shared activity with staff and young people. The aim of the display was to bring Advantaged Thinking to life, inspire shared understanding and spark future discussion and project ideas.



TEST ONE (TALK)

Services were encouraged to review their use of language through information, referral leaflets, posters and images to note how they express a positive message – both to and about young people. They were asked questions like ‘How much positive vs negative language is there?’, ‘What would young people change or add?’, ‘If young people had a section of a service wall or noticeboard, what would they put on it to talk about something important to them?’, ‘Is there anything positive young people wish they had known about the service in a referral leaflet before they moved in?’, and ‘Do staff make enough statements that promote young people’s positives?’.

TEST TWO (UNDERSTAND)

Services were encouraged to explore and promote the use of storytelling as a way to understand life experiences, achievement and identity. This could include poetry, music, public speaking, art, diaries, scrapbooks and mood boards, blogs and vlogs, photography, short films, conversations and interviews, or any other form of expression that helps young people articulate an aspect of their story in a positive way that can be shared (at least internally) through a publication, story wall or celebration event.

TEST THREE (WORK WITH)

Services were encouraged to explore the qualities that young people value most in staff by considering the following questions:

- What skills and approaches matter most to young people?
- What does the ideal staff member and team look like for young people?
- What should staff be like and be able to do on a regular basis?

Services were also prompted to work with young people to create a list of best-practice pointers to be used in staff recruitment, induction and training, and to consider how 1-1 support work approaches and plans could be improved from a young person’s perspective.

TEST FOUR (INVEST IN)

Services were encouraged to explore how young people would like to invest any available resources to improve the offer within the service, including considering what young people and staff could do together to develop the service offer using their collective skills and interests.

TEST FIVE (BELIEVE IN)

Services were encouraged to explore how young people’s dreams, hopes, goals and achievements can be captured and expressed through art, writing, music, photography, mood boards, an achievement board, tree or display in a way that helps to promote and share that young people have aspirations that the service believes in.

TEST SIX (INVOLVE)

Services were encouraged to explore the types of involvement young people actually want. They did this by considering how the service can involve young people in decisions and developments through different forms of representation in house meetings, staff meetings, management meetings, a youth advisory group, or more interactive digital forms of communication. If an effective form of representation did not already exist, services were prompted to think how it could be established. If it did exist, services were challenged to think how it could be developed to achieve greater impact.

TEST SEVEN (CHALLENGE)

Services were encouraged to explore what campaign issues inspire young people most, and to ask young people to choose a social issue that matters to them – either influenced by the Tests or other areas of interest. From this, they were prompted to develop a simple way to promote this as a positive campaign in the service, housing association and/or community, connecting with any existing local or national campaigns to help shape the project where appropriate.

Any of these exploration activities can be used to help capture insights for the FOR Youth Accreditation Advantaged Thinking audit, related areas in the deeper Accreditation assessment process, or simply to bring Advantaged Thinking to life in a way that adds value to a service's culture and relationships.

Young people's interests in the topics that define the Test areas often differ widely between services depending on what is current in their lives – whether that is a particular challenge young people are experiencing in the service or local community, or a broader social theme. The important thing is to invest in opening up channels of conversation and building relationships of trust, as well as ensuring that any promises to listen are acted on quickly.

TAKING ACTION:

- Q1 Which test area do you think is most likely to engage people in your service?
- Q2 How might you develop the suggested idea for that test area into a positive activity?

3. INSIGHTS ON EMBEDDING ADVANTAGED THINKING

The Foyer experience suggests that asset-based working is best achieved through a whole-system approach, whereby organisations offer the culture and support that equips staff to work in an asset-based way. The following 10 examples have been identified from Foyers progressing through FOR Youth Accreditation as the top practical ways to help embed and sustain a consistent Advantaged Thinking system and culture for staff to operate within.

1. RECRUITMENT

Are your recruitment processes set up to find talented staff with the commitment and passion to work in an Advantaged Thinking way?

Ensuring a service has the right staff, fully committed to working in an Advantaged Thinking way, is essential to building a consistent foundation for practice to grow. However, services must often introduce Advantaged Thinking into teams containing some staff who are comfortable working in traditional, deficit-based ways. This means there may be a period of adjustment for any staff less committed to move on from the service.

It is essential to ensure that any future recruitment practices use an Advantaged Thinking approach, from the advertisement and role description through to the interview process. This helps to attract the best talent into the service – and those most equipped to work in an Advantaged Thinking way. HR practices should be a focus for early investment to make sure that Advantaged Thinking is built into future recruitment processes.

2. TRAINING AND INDUCTION

Do your training and induction processes invest in equipping staff with the skills they need to work in an Advantaged Thinking way?

In line with recruitment, the next critical phase for any new staff will be their experience of induction, which is the logical place for people to begin to deepen their appreciation for Advantaged Thinking if the induction process foregrounds this and makes it as key an expectation for knowledge as safeguarding will naturally be.

Advantaged Thinking should be a core component in the organisation's training offer for staff, enabling staff to refresh and challenge their practice. This might mean a combination of trainings to introduce the concept and 7 Tests, alongside training in specialist areas of coaching and co-production.



3. STAFF TITLES

Do your staff roles have titles that promote an Advantaged Thinking approach?

When recruiting for new staff and developing an Advantaged Thinking team, some purposeful thought should be given to the use of role titles. This can be an opportunity to signal a break in convention from transactional roles such as Case Managers to more relational titles such as Coaches. Wherever possible, job titles should consider how the people accessing support from those roles will experience the choice of language, keeping in mind any barriers from negative association or the impact of the title on a positive, trusting relationship. This should be just as important a factor as considering how the role title will be understood and valued by external stakeholders.

4. TEAM MEETINGS AND STAFF SUPERVISION PROCESSES

Do team meetings and supervision processes encourage Advantaged Thinking conversations?

Team meetings and staff supervision offer a regular space for Advantaged Thinking conversations to be stimulated and kept alive. This can be achieved by ensuring that every agenda and supervision session includes an item to reflect on, identify and celebrate Advantaged Thinking. Some teams encourage meetings to begin with a formal Advantaged Thinking sharing item, and others end with this as an opportunity to celebrate positive achievements and wins. Supervisions might include a question that explicitly challenges staff to reflect on Advantaged Thinking learning using the 7 Tests as a frame of reference.

5. STAFF AND LEADERSHIP CHAMPIONS

Do you have a team that champions Advantaged Thinking across all areas of the organisation, breaking through silos and power hierarchies?

Developing a team of champions for Advantaged Thinking is an excellent way to embed and sustain its presence across an organisation – particularly if champions are selected from different role levels and areas of responsibility. Champions offer an important driver to encourage and celebrate Advantaged Thinking, bringing together collective resources and expertise to lead progress. They help to ensure Advantaged Thinking resides in the fabric of the organisation, from the boardroom to the front desk. Champions come together to share learning experiences over the year, recognise impact and challenge each other using the framework of the 7 Tests as a guide for reflection.

6. BUILDING REFURBISHMENTS

Does the physical environment of your service express its Advantaged Thinking ambition?

It is a lot easier to deliver an Advantaged Thinking offer in a service where a positive environment expresses its vision. Staff working in ill-equipped cramped offices, young people in run-down communal lounges with broken equipment, or maintenance jobs left uncompleted for months on end does not provide a setting that shows authentic belief and investment in people. Investing in the look and feel of the building is likely to have a significant impact on the experience of the people who use it each day. The physical environment is where people see Advantaged Thinking come to life. The building has an important role to play in establishing a culture of Advantaged Thinking that people can see growing around them, whether this means the introduction of a psychologically informed environment plan, the redesign of functional space to increase positive engagement and social interaction, or simply increased attention to standards of presentation.



7. SUPPORT APPROACH

Do the tools you use to manage 1-1 support promote Advantaged Thinking conversations and relationships?

The best support documentation offers a framework that stimulates powerful conversations, facilitates ongoing learning, signposts practical actions, captures reflections, and features a process that fits the needs and goals of the person receiving support in a way they can influence. The worst models get in the way of the conversation, promote a transactional process over a personal relationship, and leave the person receiving it with limited say over their own words.

Checking that your support approach is right is just as important as investing in the building. It is, after all, the main tool by which people will be engaged in progressing their lives. Paperwork that is mostly negative and overformal can be used in an Advantaged Thinking way, but it is like walking in shoes that don't really fit your feet. It will slow everyone down. It is much better to ensure the support approach reflects an Advantaged Thinking focus on the key fundamentals of understanding, working with, investing, believing in and involving people. Services that take time to innovate in this area will secure a strong foundation to accelerate Advantaged Thinking growth.

8. SERVICE REVIEW

Do you have an annual process to learn from your experiences with Advantaged Thinking?

Introducing an annual review process has proven to be the most consistent recommendation made to new services going through Foyer Accreditation. By putting this in place, services can ensure there is dedicated space to reflect on and learn from Advantaged Thinking – picking up challenges before they become longer-term problems, celebrating achievements to promote good practice, and recognising pressures without letting them dictate service purpose. Too often, reviews are processes conducted by external forces that do not engage the whole service. But an Advantaged Thinking review seeks to involve everyone – both young people and staff – and provide another opportunity to engage and value every voice that has a stake in the service. Most importantly, it evidences a leadership that embraces learning. Self-learning is the most reliable way to sustain Advantaged Thinking.

9. SERVICE AUDIT

Are you able to review how far you meet the 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking?

Services beginning Foyer Accreditation are supported to undertake an Advantaged Thinking audit to gauge themselves against the 7 Tests and begin to explore how these are, or can be, expressed through their practice. There is every reason to continue this audit conversation in ongoing years, particularly as staff teams change and operating environments adapt to external policy. The audit process provides an easy way to refresh perspectives and generate renewed energy for leading Advantaged Thinking.

10. REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND CELEBRATION

Do you have a space for staff to reflect on and celebrate their experiences?

Time to reflect and celebrate can be seen as a luxury stretched services can't afford. But reflective practice sessions and opportunities to recognise and promote Advantaged Thinking stories help services withstand the pressures of operating within systems that demand deficit-based compliance. Those services that plan in sessions for reflection and celebration end up saving time through the positive energy and insight they generate. Tips for reflective practice include asking what good looks like for any topic or issue, identifying current energy levels to discuss what might increase them, treasuring insights from performance data and feedback stories, and using the 7 Tests to share inspiration examples. Foyers accredited through the Foyer Federation undertake an annual Accreditation review which encourages them to reflect on and celebrate achievements.

TAKING ACTION:

Q1. What areas might you need to prioritise to ensure Advantaged Thinking can be sustained in your service?

Q2. How might you begin to implement any of the 10 examples above to support your priority areas?

4. IMPACT TRENDS FROM ADVANTAGED THINKING DATA

The following insights were generated from average scores taken from two years of benchmarking Accredited Foyers between 2019-2021, which includes one year working within the restrictions of the pandemic.

Positive progress impacts on 1,000 young people leaving Foyers after an average stay of 62 weeks across 2019-2021 were as follows:

Positive Progress	92%	86.5%	81.5%
	Personal Development	Financial Capability	Housing
	88%	82%	
	Social Skills	Health and Wellbeing	

Education

- 70%** of young people were not in education on entry
- 61.5%** progressed their education in Foyers
- 41%** started a new qualification, traineeship or apprenticeship
- 23.5%** were in education on exit (though many young people are likely to 'age out' of formal education during their time at the Foyer)
- 4%** progressed onto university or college

Employment

- 88%** of young people were not in employment on entry
- 48.5%** progressed their employability skills in Foyers
- 41%** took up work during their stay
- 15%** took up volunteering
- 26%** were in work on exit

Advantaged Thinking Foyers appear to have the most impact on young people's personal development – their ability to set and achieve goals, and to grow in confidence and agency – along with the social skills to connect with others and participate in a community.

Foyers have a bigger impact on educational progression than employability, though the total numbers in work are more than double on exit from a Foyer than on entry. This reflects both the stronger attention paid to learning opportunities and life skills in the Foyer offer, and the challenges posed by the impact of employment income on the affordability of rent without housing benefit. Some Foyers offer rental subsidy programmes to offset this challenge, which enables them to achieve 30% more young people taking up work during their stay.

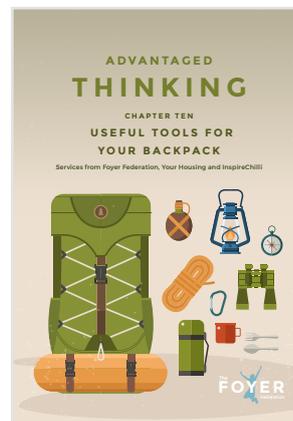
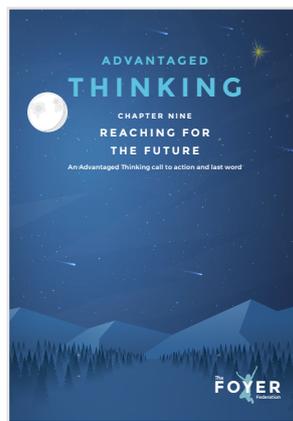
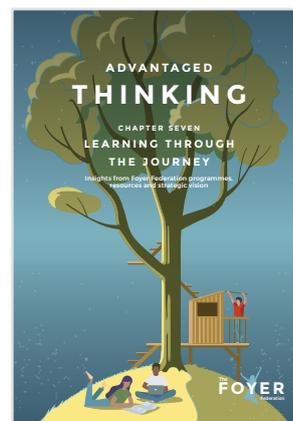
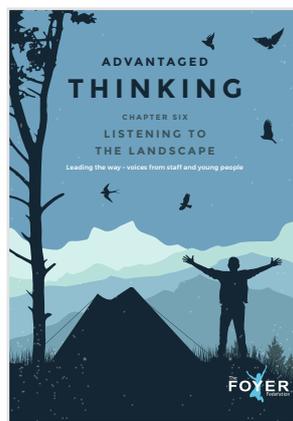
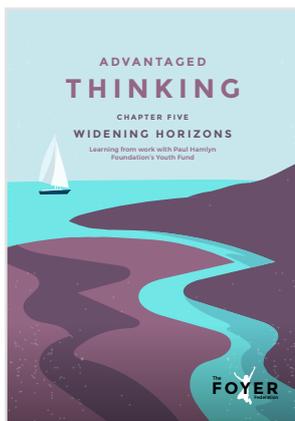
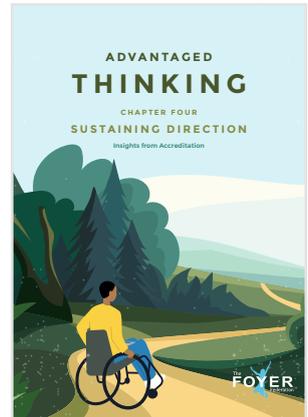
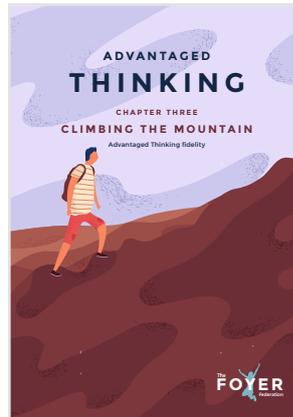
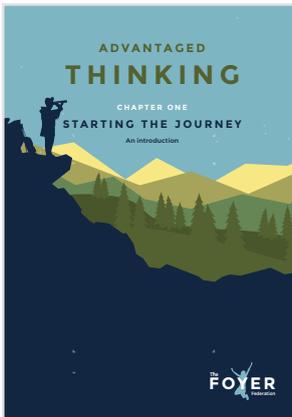
Taken together, these impacts support the view that Advantaged Thinking Foyers offer thriving places for young people to live, learn and work.

TAKING ACTION:

- Q1** Which areas would you like to achieve higher rates of impact in?
- Q2** Are there any investments you could introduce to help support young people's potential achievements?



Advantaged Thinking series of reports:



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