

# ADVANTAGED THINKING

## CHAPTER SIX LISTENING TO THE LANDSCAPE

Leading the way - voices from staff and young people

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“It [Advantaged Thinking] was a life-changing experience and from now on we will be using it in all our work and contact with professionals and young people. We will never forget how important the language is and how it opens or closes contact with young people. We want to share our experiences with other people who work with young people and we hope to inspire them and that they inspire us again.”

Erna Roelfsema and Charlotte Schippers, Groningen

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## LEADING THE WAY - VOICES FROM STAFF AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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

The Foyer Federation and its national network of Foyers champion an Advantaged Thinking approach in the youth-supported housing sector. Your Housing Group's Foyers are an outstanding example of how Advantaged Thinking can grow through an organisation from the work staff and young people do every day, to impacting strategic decisions within a housing association, influencing local commissioners to back the approach. In this chapter, we will hear from staff and young people from Your Housing Group services as they share the difference Advantaged Thinking has made to them during their time within the Foyers.

# 1. RESPONSES FROM FOYER MANAGERS AT YOUR HOUSING GROUP

The quotations below are taken from interviews with staff responsible for Your Housing Group's Foyer services in Chester, St Helens, Wigan and Warrington.

## a. What Advantaged Thinking looks like and brings to a service

Having worked with young people in an Advantaged Thinking way for many years, Your Housing Group's Foyer Managers have developed their own ways of **visualising** what it means to them and how it is woven into the fabric of their services:



**"If Advantaged Thinking was the sea, the rivers and streams would be the Advantaged Thinking journey feeding all the villages with its beauty and flow. As the villages become towns and cities, the clouds would be the reflections created by the mindsets of all the people living there which would pour back into the Advantaged Thinking sea ready to restart its journey."**

### Advantaged Thinking is...

"... a solution-based approach to challenges, issues, problems ... a reminder of what we want to achieve ... a 'can do' attitude that respects others."

"... an intrinsic culture rather than a prescribed set of rules."

"... looking through a positive lens."

"... about consistency in the way we deliver services, approach and speak to others, and even challenge each other. A way to overcome challenges and support others to do the same. A set of approaches that can easily be embedded into any working practices and processes that instantly makes them authentic, credible and positive. A badge of honour visible to others."

Through their consistent efforts and mindfulness of the approach, it has shaped the way they **think** about their work:

"It is a positive shift in mentality moving from a support model that focuses on need/issues/negatives and instead looks at talent/opportunities/ambition."

"Advantaged Thinking is the internal sort of 'due diligence' I do in my head when I am going through my daily work, making decisions or changes on scheme. It makes me question if what I am doing or agreeing to is for the right reasons – will it have a positive impact on our young people? Asking reflective questions that get you to the heart of the mission and purpose."

This consistent reflective practice and Advantaged Thinking decision-making is then reflected in how they **work** with young people:

### Advantaged Thinking is...

"It is about working with [people] and helping them on their journey in life, rather than passively having our service doing something 'to' them and then them moving on."



"... recognising qualities and aspects in a person and utilising these to progress."

"... tailoring programmes to capture individual passions – seeing people come to life through new opportunities."

The **impact** this daily practice and active awareness of Advantaged Thinking has is clear to those who work in this way:

"Many people will have experienced working with professionals in a disadvantaged way. This can cause anxiety resulting in a reduction in their self-confidence which may cloud their vision and prevent them from seeing their strengths. By focusing on [someone's] attributes and qualities, this improves their confidence and makes tackling their challenges seem more of a possibility than before."

**"Where there is Advantaged Thinking there is hope."**

## b. How practice develops through Advantaged Thinking

The **language** we choose has the power to impact the way we think – which has the power to affect the way we act, and the way we work with others:



“When I first started working in Foyers 25 years ago, we talked about young people as being ‘disadvantaged’, ‘ex-offenders’, ‘young homeless’, ‘care leavers’ – to name but a few. Despite our best intentions, we categorised, pigeon-holed and defined our young people every day with terms that tried to make the outside world make sense of the work we were trying to do. We never once stopped to reflect on the ways in which our language was buying into the scepticism held up by the media and society of the day. Advantaged Thinking has enabled us to break that cycle of viewing young people as a collection of faults, a flawed and broken mechanism that must be fixed. Instead, it has gifted us with a new mindset coupled with a revised glossary of terms such as ‘talent’, ‘worth’, ‘positivity’, ‘value’, ‘aspiration’ and ‘skill.’”

“I now find it uncomfortable to ‘tag’ young people, e.g., NEET, homeless, etc., whereas years ago I would do quite easily. I try to contemplate my language when speaking about people, which is a challenge for me! But for all the right reasons, so it acts as a temperature gauge. The listening element is a big next step for me. Really listening.”

Developing a **relationship of trust** empowers young people to take positive risks and overcome challenges they might face:



“Empowering a young person to take part in the Foyer Federation’s ‘Power Up’ programme presented them with opportunities to excel and overcome their challenges. They were not thinking about their inability to read or write. This created an improvement in their wellbeing and confidence and made tackling their support needs easier as a level of trust and respect had been created. The young person felt less embarrassed to ask or receive support. This person has now moved on and understands much more basic English and maths than before, having felt able to ask for support from staff members they know they can trust.”

Positive approaches to challenging behaviour and restorative justice create an environment in which it feels safe for young people to make mistakes, learn, grow and feel valued:

“Our tenancy sustainment model is based on Improvement Notices rather than Warnings. There will always be incidents and risks that require some kind of consequence to show the seriousness and possible impact – but a lot of young people who come and live at the Foyer already have experienced a lot of punitive measures in their life and are numb to another authority figure in their life telling them that they have done something wrong. The real importance of an Improvement Notice isn’t the paperwork or mark on their file – it is the conversation that happens with a young person when they are issued it. Yes, potential consequences and negative impacts are discussed and made clear, but there is then an opportunity for a young person to change direction and divert to something with conversations around aspirations and goals included in the conversation.”



### c. How Advantaged Thinking makes a difference to people's lives

Young people often arrive at a Foyer after a difficult experience and with low levels of self-confidence, self-belief and self-esteem. Believing in young people has the power to help them **believe** in themselves and, from there, to thrive:

"It is sometimes a difficult paradigm to break when a person does not feel worthy to experience praise or success due to whatever has gone before in their life before coming to a Foyer. However, Advantaged Thinking provides us with the landscape to not only start a fresh chapter in the lives of our young people but also gives them 'permission' to be confident, to be proud, to be successful and – if they are daring enough – to dream."

"Tenacity – there is no substitute for it. Having your team 100% behind people and believing in them. **Advantaged Thinking starts like a seed and the belief can grow.** Those small things make a difference – giving the opportunity to try something new and still believing despite any falls. You can make your mistakes here and learn."

"Advantaged Thinking allows people the opportunity to feel proud of themselves again having engaged in conversations or opportunities that result in an improved self-esteem. Once their confidence is higher, tackling their challenges now seems more possible."

As young people grow with Advantaged Thinking and **transform** their own lives and futures, the harder impacts can be captured along the way:

"A Foyer service truly striving to deliver an Advantaged Thinking offer will be able to demonstrate and showcase the impacts through its vibrancy, ethos, community. Key Performance Indicators will be able to demonstrate impact such as positive planned progressions, action plan goals met etc. but the significant impact is that of the Foyer Offer."

"I think **Advantaged Thinking can be such a change in mindset and environment** to the young people who come to the Foyer, that they don't always see the benefits of it before they leave us. There might be some outcomes like fewer evictions, more entering education etc., but the work in a Foyer is just the foundation. It can quite often be the first time that they have been told that they have talent or value and be the first time that someone has told them they believe in them."

When you reflect on your own life, you might see the **impact** of Advantaged Thinking on you – whether you knew it at the time or not:

"For me personally, it's seeing what we do when utilising young people's (or anyone's, for that matter) strengths, passions, interests to get buy-in, engagement, motivation, happiness, structure, self-discipline – then seeing people thrive, achieve, move forward positively, or simply just understand something."

**"It's in my DNA, even though I never knew it was Advantaged Thinking.** I relate to being a 12-year-old kid, scrawny, shoulder-length hair, leaving for the track twice a week to pursue my new-found talent (I was 1st in the school P.E. run and the P.E. teacher became my coach and mentor). Passing my mates as I left the estate to get the bus after a quick stop to the corner shop to collect my can of coke and Mars bar my Mum had pre-paid for, with my spikes bag under my arm and national badges sewn on the back of my tracksuit, gave me moments of embarrassment, modesty, but also of pride, a confidence – I was a somebody. My mates, or kids on the estate I knew from growing up, sat on their BMX bikes or hand-made go-karts all looking at me like I had betrayed them. Even at secondary school, I wasn't just Wardy – I was Wardy the Runner, the school champion, the county champion. Teachers would say if I put as much effort into my maths as my running, I'd be better!"

"It's that sentiment I consider when I see the young people we work with. What they can do – not what they can't. Show people they can be proud, that they need to work hard, show aspiration (that some may not even know what it looks like). It's this that really gives me belief in what we do, and Advantaged Thinking compliments that by giving us a channel to feed it."



## d. Story Highlights from Advantaged Thinking

### Providing opportunities to help a young person overcome grief to achieve his goals and ambitions:

"It was having the opportunity to send a young man to Hawaii for a three-month sports coaching summer camp which was a dream that he had written off as never going to happen.

"The young man had lived for all things sports related – in particular Rugby League. However, his dream and whole outlook on life started to evaporate shortly before coming to live at Ravenhead due to the very sudden and untimely death of his father. By his own admission, he had given up on his goals, his life and himself. His role model in life was now gone and his mother started to suffer from bouts of deep depression. He had fallen into a quite destructive mindset and had settled into a lifestyle that was becoming very harmful to his health. He was not interested in anyone or anything and his stock response to most suggestions was either "So what?" or "What's the point?"

"To cut a very long story short, we managed to re-engage him by arranging a work placement with Saints Community Foundation, which is part of our local Rugby League club that delivers health promotion and coaching programmes to the young people of our local schools and youth groups. During this time, I spoke to him about the work we were doing as part of our Healthy Conversations programme and discussed the possibility of sending him to a sports summer camp. I can honestly say that was a pivotal moment in his development and I saw him start to shine from that day forward.

"He eventually realised his dream of going abroad to undertake his Sports Coaching course and vowed he would not let that be an end to his dreams. During his final months at Ravenhead, he worked tirelessly to gain as much experience and as many qualifications as possible. This, in turn, led to him being accepted onto a Sports Science degree course at University of Central Lancashire which he successfully completed. He is now not only the coach of a local rugby youth team where he lives but also works as a personal trainer and is in the process of going back to university to train as a teacher."

### Enabling a young person to grow in confidence and self-esteem through showcasing their talents:

"Supporting a resident to showcase their skills and perform at a Foyer Federation awards evening despite the multiple attempts she had taken to end her life in the months running up to the event.

"Presenting her with an opportunity to showcase her talent and prove to others how good she was ended up being a beacon of light for her to look forward to. It gave her something positive to focus on rather than reflecting on negative experiences from the past. This person was desperate to showcase her musical talents and by presenting her with an opportunity to do this it really enhanced the working relationship between

the Foyer staff and the residents.

"She could see how much the team supported her, having attended the event in person to be there cheering her on. The positive feedback she received from attendees really boosted this girl's self-esteem. It was brilliant to see someone who had every chance to say no or to miss this opportunity actually grasp it with both hands.

"She often refers to it as one of the best days of her life and the gratitude she shows to staff for giving her this opportunity was amazing. It shows how much we trusted her and believed in her as a person. This means so much more than working with someone in a classroom on a 1-2-1 basis. It helped her to believe in herself at a time when she needed this more than anything else."

### Influencing and investing in Advantaged Thinking practices to create an environment that encourages young people to thrive:

"Influencing our own organisation to embrace an Advantaged Thinking methodology using its assets to benefit a young person within the Foyer on their journey. Examples of this include:

- Internal nominations: young people can be nominated for properties, investing in them as a 'customer' longer-term than just their Foyer experience. This also provides young people with additional options when moving on from the Foyer.

- 25% rent reduction: is invested in enabling young people to financially manage entering employment. Any employed young person is granted 25% reduction to their rent to counterbalance the support cost element of licence fees and encourage employment opportunities.

- Galactic Awards: an event recognising and celebrating the talents and achievements of young people.

- Financial commitment: for standalone events/ opportunities benefiting young people i.e., residentials, Wi-Fi, Fellowship for Leaders programmes etc.

**Taking a person-centred approach to help a young person manage their mental health and grow into a thriving future:**

“RC was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, depression and anxiety, and was a care leaver who had been in lots of different placements. They had previously stayed in mental health facilities as a child.

“When she moved into Coops Foyer her mental health was poor and she was engaging in a lot of self-harm, often presenting at A&E with numerous injuries. This quickly culminated in RC attempting suicide, and over a four-day period, similar incidents led to both the police and ambulance services being called to her as an emergency. After a short stay in hospital, RC returned to Coops Foyer where referrals were made to the appropriate agencies to help support her in the community.

“While working with RC it became apparent that she was very unhappy at the apparent lack of control in her life. She felt that since being a child and having social care involvement, she had always been told what to do and could not make choices for herself. I encouraged her to take the lead on her own support plans using the online Outcome Star system, empowering her to set her own goals and allowing her to see improvements on reflection.

“We established that RC felt isolated and vulnerable and that she was very self-conscious

about the labels and preconceptions that people had about her, particularly in relation to her diagnosis. We supported her in finding voluntary placements at a local amateur sports team which was identified as an interest of hers and provided her with a meaningful use of spare time. She was linked with a local young women’s group to socialise with others and developed coping strategies for when she was struggling with her mental health.

“RC expressed a great interest in being creative and supplies were purchased as part of her ‘toolbox’ that meant she could explore these activities and her artwork was displayed around the building. She had ambitions to attend university and was encouraged to complete her studies with support to ensure she achieved the necessary results. As she was very self-conscious of her self-harm scars, funding was sourced to purchase make-up to cover these which boosted her self-esteem and meant she became a lot more confident.

“RC was able to manage her mental health independently and sought staff support when needed rather than relying on the emergency services as she had done previously. This negated the need for continued crisis intervention and involvement with other statutory agencies and services.

“RC was successful in obtaining a place at University and left us to study a BA in Early Childhood Studies at the University of Chichester.”

**e. Top tips for leading Advantaged Thinking**

Advantaged Thinking is flourishing in the four Your Housing Group Foyers and continues to be a central part of the positive outcomes young people achieve. Here, Foyer Managers share their tips on how this is done.



**Ways to work**

“Getting young people to begin to trust an Advantaged Thinking approach can be a challenge. One way to overcome this is to present them with opportunities to do something fun and engaging. Almost like a ‘throw them in the deep end’ approach. Or by creating a positive feeling amongst other residents on site which makes them feel like they want to engage in the next opportunity presented.”

“You are there to help, support and guide. It seems like a simple point but one that is sometimes forgotten, especially when you have challenges in your own life.”

“Present as many opportunities as possible for positive engagement and to evidence you are a different service than all the others they will have experienced. You have that cutting edge and that something different that shows you are willing to invest in them. The young person needs to understand that you can’t do it all and that they need to keep up their side of the deal. They need to trust you and you need to help them to feel like an excited child without a care in the world. Help them to remember to be happy and positive first – everything else will fall into place.”

“Everything begins with positive communication, both in terms of how we talk to our young people as well as how we talk about them.”





“Listen – especially to your young people. You will be amazed at what you can learn.”

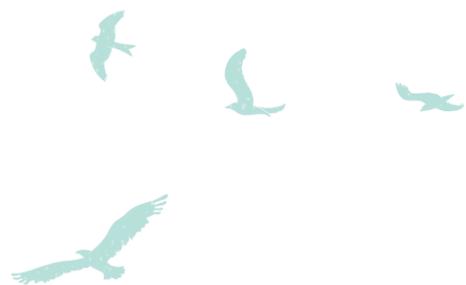
“One of the most important aspects of managing a Foyer to me is creating an environment where young people are given the opportunities and space to try, experiment and discover who they are and what they want to do in life. It is providing a safe space for them to try something outside of what is safe and supposedly ‘realistically achievable’ – and for them to know they will still be safe if they fail. But this environment and mindset can’t be created just by offering info on college courses or traineeships – this needs to be at the core of the support offer.”

“There is no better way to build trust and show you believe in [people] than by investing time, or money, into supporting them. They can see you are willing to go above and beyond for them. This helps to build a relationship and shows residents you are more than just words or talk. You are evidencing to them that you are with them.”

“Advantaged Thinking needs to be the mindset of the service, not just the manager.”

“Invest in others. Embed it into culture both in practice and policy.”

“Keep asking ‘Why?’ Why do we do this? Why do we have this policy? Why do we make this decision? Why does this look like this?”



### Ways to be



“Always be open to new ideas and possibilities. As managers we do not know everything, and you are only as strong as the team you work with.”

“Be a role model. Always look for the opportunities, seek out the positive aspects of every situation and don’t be afraid to fail... that’s how we learn.”

“Be happy in what you do. Try to keep a good sense of humour, don’t take yourself too seriously, be open to scrutiny and feedback and remember to smile occasionally. If you are not approachable and happy in your job, what chance do you think you will have?”

“Be positive, have energy and encourage people to do something outside their comfort zone that can be daunting or feel uncomfortable.”

“Be confident to challenge others and systems. Be bold in talking about Advantaged Thinking. Reframe the picture – give situations and people the opportunity to flourish.”

“Never give up. There will always be challenges and obstacles. Your job is to find the best and most effective way around them.”

“Be authentic. Don’t just pay lip service to what you do. Young people may not have the life experience that you have but they can spot a phoney from a mile away. Always be honest and truthful in all that you do.”

### Ways to influence others



“Working in a broader environment where other agencies are still working in a deficit way or just paying lip service to an asset-based approach – they might claim to be using similar models like ‘PIE’ or asset-based working but have a real hard time understanding how and why we work how we do. This can be apparent in multi-agency meetings or even when new staff who have experience working for other services expect that young people will be given their notice for being arrested or admitting to substance misuse. For some, an explanation of our service and Advantaged Thinking can work. For others, using practice examples where we have used Advantaged Thinking then pinpointing what we have done and why can work. For others, the use of language in emails and templates. At times being honest and saying, “We don’t tend to use language about people like that, but I know what you mean.”

“Don’t be afraid to challenge the status quo, even if it feels uncomfortable. It’s likely that if you think it, others will too.”

## f. Future Hopes

In the future, Foyer Managers would like to see the wider culture embrace an Advantaged Thinking mindset and way of living in all aspects of life:

“Society has progressed in wellness regarding mental health and addressing stigma. The same movement could happen in the way that we invest in one another and the viewpoint we take regarding situations, bringing an Advantaged Thinking methodology into everyday lives.”

They would like to see more good news stories about young people and how they thrive through Advantaged Thinking:

“More successful stories about how a positive approach has helped people to overcome their challenges.”

They want young people to take the lead in owning Advantaged Thinking and the ways it works for them:

“Equip and enable young people to become Advantaged Thinking advocates rather than staff ‘owning the rights’ to the ethos on our schemes. I want a young person to say, ‘they had this thing called Advantaged Thinking there and we learnt to turn negatives into positives.’”



They want the Advantaged Thinking approach to gain greater recognition and become a mark of excellence for the staff, the service and – most of all – the young people they work with:

“Advantaged Thinking becomes a beacon of excellence that others want and approach us for.”

“I want our services to have such a reputation that everyone else believes in our young people so that I can easily source high quality apprenticeship or employment opportunities, or high-quality housing, without the mindset being that there is no point giving them a chance as they will fail.”

### TAKING ACTION:

**Q1** Which insights resonated most with you?

**Q2** How might you challenge your staff team and/or self to take action from any of the insights shared, or add to them with your own?

## 2. RESPONSES FROM YOUNG PEOPLE ON WHAT ADVANTAGED THINKING MEANS

We asked young people from Foyers in Your Housing Group along with young people from other youth housing services to reflect on and respond to the 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking. While most responses were directed to Test Three, all of the Tests provoked powerful insights which are shared below:

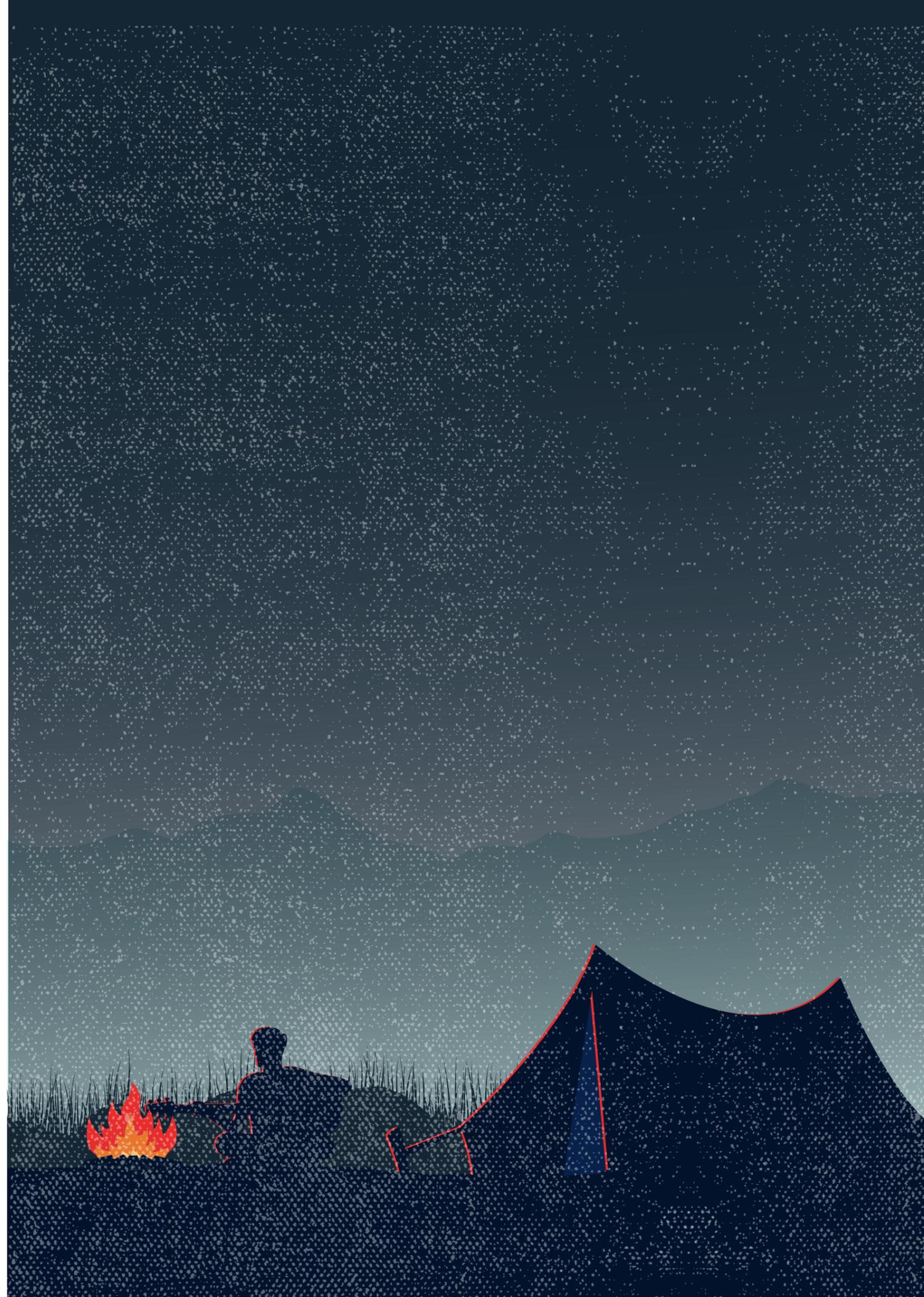
<b>Test One – Talk:</b>	<p>“Labels I’ve been put under... I find it very negative in general. Words I would like people to use about me... Open-minded. Optimistic. Friendly.”</p> <p>“When people use positive words to describe you rather than negative, it gives you a more positive outlook.”</p>
<b>Test Two – Understand:</b>	<p>“Someone who understands me, and other people would approach you for a conversation, would engage with you, would be social.”</p> <p>“Understand me for the real me – not what the paperwork says.”</p>
<b>Test Three – Work With:</b>	<p>“I prefer to be coached. Staff here do a mix of both – focus on rules and paperwork, and also mentor and coach us. The staff work with me the same across all services. I like it. It’s positive. They focus on positives rather than negatives.”</p> <p>“Someone who can listen and talk equally. Someone who is very open to my ideas – who you can work with easily and there’s not a lot of friction. Someone who is okay with you as a person.”</p> <p>“The title of a job – ‘Project Officer’ – makes me feel like maybe I’m not a person, I’m a project.”</p> <p>“Ask a young person ‘how was your day?’ even if it’s just a five-minute chat. This is for all staff.”</p> <p>“Be accessible, even if you are busy or have stuff to do. That’s okay with young people – just have structure and say, ‘I can chat in half an hour or an hour’.”</p> <p>“Don’t tell someone off for spilling milk – ask them how you can help clean it up.”</p>

<p><b>Test Four – Invest:</b></p>	<p>“I want people to invest time and effort into me more so than money. Effort the most. When someone spends effort on me, when they’re present, it’s more important.”</p> <p>“When I think about investment, it’s time and energy, but money is great too. Time and energy are important.”</p>
<p><b>Test Five – Believe:</b></p>	<p>“Have a thought for who I can become, not just where I came from.”</p> <p>“I want people around me who trust me now – and for my future.”</p> <p>“It can be a struggle for us to believe in ourselves. That’s where things need to start.”</p>
<p><b>Test Six – Involve:</b></p>	<p>“Give us a voice on things that really matter – how we live in our homes, how we can live in our lives.”</p> <p>“Prove that you’re listening to people by what you do.”</p> <p>“We all want to be part of something. But that something has got to mean something.”</p>
<p><b>Test Seven – Challenge:</b></p>	<p>“Do you stand up for all young people?”</p> <p>“Keep pushing for the positive on all the little things that might be opportunities to us.”</p> <p>“Show up for us, don’t give up on us.”</p>

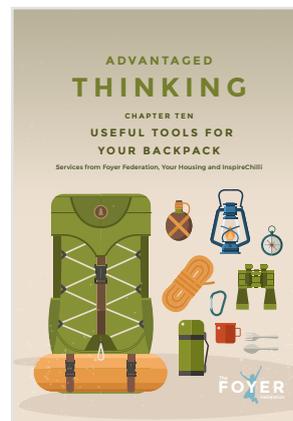
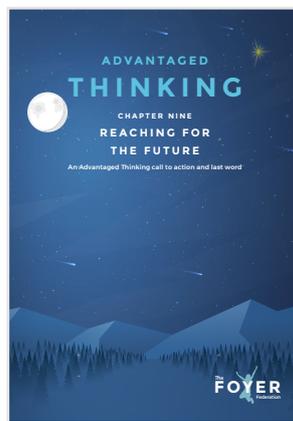
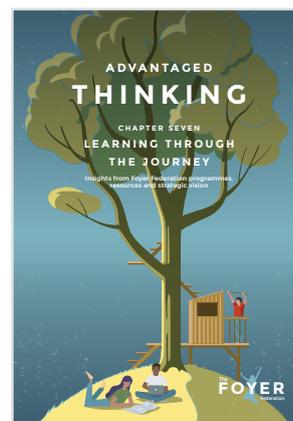
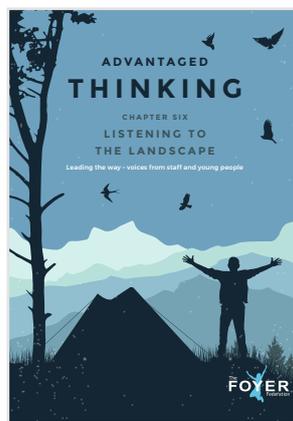
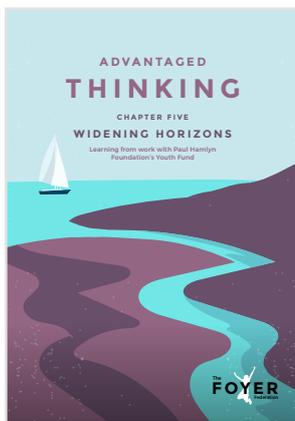
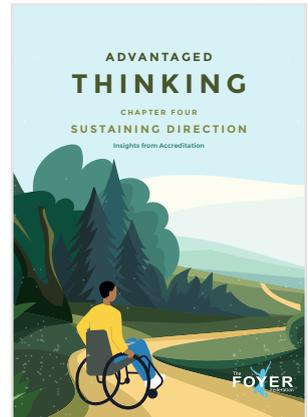
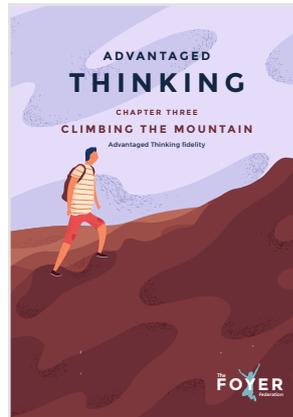
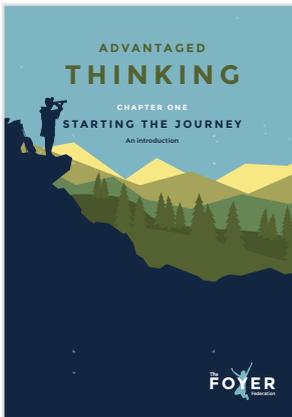
**TAKING ACTION:**

**Q1** Which Advantaged Thinking responses from young people resonated most for you?

**Q2** How might you take action in your service to learn from these responses or add to them?



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