University of Cumbria

Evidence and Impact
Essay Collection

An asset-based
approach to
Theory of Change
– Kaz Stuart and
Steve Hillman

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🐦 @FoyerFederation

Kaz Stuart is a principal lecturer at the University of Cumbria.

Steve Hillman is Director of Policy and Impact for the Foyer Federation.

In 2014, the Foyer Federation launched its strategic vision for 2014-20. Entitled 'Telling a different story; Investing in young people', it announced our intention to create the conditions for a 'New Youth Offer' for young people struggling to make the transition to independent and thriving adulthood, especially those young people who cannot live at home.

We wanted this 'New Youth Offer' to be asset-based, in line with our avowed intention to reform services to our 'advantaged thinking' methodology: looking at who young people are rather than who they are not, viewing young people through a lens of talent and potential, rather than perceived 'deficits'.

We needed an evidence base for this approach that was also asset-based, to ensure that the methods were congruent with practice. This became a six-month mission for the Foyer Federation and the University of Cumbria.

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Through the process we discovered much about the complementary nature of external and internal evidence. An external evidence base gave the Foyer the confidence to re-launch their reclaimed offer, but only an internal evidence base would ultimately show the impact of that offer. The external and internal evidence bases were, therefore, both needed.

We also learned of the limitations of current theory of change models that focus on deficits or needs. We reconceptualised the theory of change from an asset-based approach. The theory of change was developed with young people and this taught us much about aspects of practice that had become implicit to staff but were of great importance to young people. Building an asset-based evaluation toolkit challenged many of our assumptions and reinforced the importance of fit for purpose evaluation approaches.

What follows is an account of the key activities that led to this learning.

The creation of the "New Youth Offer' quickly became about a reclaimed vision, drawing from the values and approach of the Foyers in the early 1990's. The holistic approach, the concept of a 'balanced community' of young people, the notion of the Foyer as a 'place of choice' for young people with a 'something for something' deal at its heart and the focus on learning and work as the best way to create the pathway to independent and thriving adulthood for young people all seemed as relevant and important as ever.

Rather than simply assuming that the reclaimed Foyer approach would work, it was important to underpin it with a robust external evidence base. A literature review was conducted of international papers, using search terms such as 'young people', 'asset-based' and other relevant aspects of the Foyer's offer (e.g. housing, exercise, nutrition, education, etc.). Both qualitative and quantitative papers from academic data-bases and grey sources from the last decade were drawn upon. Literature was only drawn from the last decade to ensure its relevance.

112 papers met these criteria.

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As some of these were literature reviews themselves, the total count of papers included rose to 324. The literature was collated and reported thematically under each strand of the Foyer offer, creating a clear evidence base that supported the potential of that aspect of their work. The literature review demonstrated how important it is to find supporting literature and that there is a wealth of material to draw upon.

Whilst this could not 'prove' that the Foyer's reclaimed offer would work, it provided confidence that it was theoretically robust and had the potential to lead to positive outcomes for young people. It also proved an invaluable resource for future funding bids and discussions with commissioners.

Because all of the papers reported the outcomes that asset-based work with young people achieved, it was possible to draw these out into an overall list of potential outcomes. Outcomes identified in asset-based outcome frameworks were also used to inform this analysis. The resulting list included 98 outcomes that could be achieved from the reclaimed Foyer offer, showing the potential and complexity of asset-based practices with young people. This theoretical list of outcomes needed to be built into a coherent framework that young people and staff could jointly use in developmental conversations. This prompted us to create a 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.

An asset-based approach to theory of change

We know that our positive work with young people leads to outcomes, but we (as a sector) are not always good at unpacking this process or being specific enough about the gains made. The two issues with theories of change are, firstly, that they may be planned by adults on behalf of young people and secondly are often based on what young people lack or need – a deficit approach.

We aimed to develop a theory of change that countered both of these issues. In order to make the theory of change participative, we considered how to best to engage young people, in order to ground the theory in their experiences.

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Rather than giving the groups of young people a blank piece of paper, we created a resource pack for them to work with. This comprised a deck of index cards on which were written a range of possible activities and outcomes. Twenty Foyer residents worked with the cards: adding new ones, removing ones that they did not agree with and linking activities to short, medium and long term outcomes to represent their experiences.

There were a number of surprises for us from this exercise. There were areas of practice that were implicit, such as the qualities of the staff, and yet these were central to the young people's experiences of success. The participatory approach therefore overcame the blind spots and assumptions inherent in adults' views of practice.

The resulting theory of change was 'owned' by the young people and, therefore, fully represented their experiences. It started with

a list of the assets that a young person might arrive with – open-ended, flexible and asset-based rather than stemming from a deficit-based list of disempowering needs. The theory of change posited the qualities of staff as pre-requisites for effective engagement with young people. A broad list of activities that were on 'offer' for the young people to choose from ensured a flexible, person-centred, asset-based practice rather than a predetermined 'programme'. The outcomes that young people derived from these activities were listed and linked from short to medium and long term gains. These were drawn as flexible, potential trajectories that young people could own, rather than deterministic pathways.

We then returned to the literature and drew evidence from 120 papers to support each link in the theory of change that had been created from young people's experiences. This increased the robustness of the theory of change as an experience and evidence based model for practice that was open-ended rather than deterministic.

Finally, we needed to enable the Foyer to develop its own internal evidence base for its reclaimed offer. Many evaluation tools are based on the premise that young people will be poor at something on arrival; this will be improved by the intervention, leading to a higher score at the end. This is a deficit-based, disempowering approach that required fundamental rethinking.

Static screening for deficits was replaced with rich, asset-based conversation in which the young person identifies their skills, their interests and their ambitions. The theory of change is

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a useful tool to support this conversation. The young person then identifies what they want to work on (rather than using a predefined list) and identifies what '1' and '10' would look like (rather than being limited to a predetermined level of capability). Use of this individual baseline leads to conversation about how the young person has achieved change (rather than using predefined levels of progression or an organisation taking claim for the developments made).

This was a subtle but powerful reframing of the evaluation process, to a young-person-centric and asset-based model.

One weakness in this approach was that it would not enable the Foyer to say that all young people had achieved to a certain level. As such, we also chose to include one standardised metric. The choice of tool took much consideration, as it needed to be asset-based, free and with a light touch. The General Self-Efficacy Scale met these criteria in that the questions are generally positive rather than negative. The tool has proved to be valid, reliable and robust enabling the Foyer to communicate to people who value standardized quantitative data alone. In addition, the tool is easy to administer, with only ten questions to answer, and is, importantly, free.

The project has resulted in the following outputs:

- An external evidence base for asset-based practice

- An asset-based internal evidence base

- A list of evidenced outcomes from asset-based practice

- An asset-based and evidence and experienced based theory of change

- An asset-based evaluation toolkit.

These outputs left the Foyer Federation in a strong position and with the confidence to implement their reclaimed offer and influence commissioners and policy makers to also adopt an asset-based approach.

It is important to state that we do not claim this research 'proves' that our work is effective. As

discussed above, we have created an evaluation mechanism that will enable us to gather real-world evidence that Foyer services are effective and deliver the immediate outcomes (sense of belonging, financial capability, healthy eating, etc.) that allow us reasonably to predict that longer-term outcomes (tenancy sustainment, employment, health, etc.) will follow.

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.

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By measuring the right outcomes – the ones that we know make a difference and that we know that young people value - there is a greater likelihood that Foyers will deliver the right things to enable a successful transition to 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 in the wrong ways and 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.

About the Centre for Youth Impact

The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations committed to working together to progress thinking and practice around evidence and impact measurement in work with young people.

We offer:

- A 'route in' to information, support and discussion in relation to evidence and impact

- Local and national events where you can collaborate with others, learn and build momentum

- Resources to support meaningful impact measurement

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The Centre for Youth Impact
9 Newarke Street
Leicester
LE1 5SN

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