



Asset-based Work with Young People

Findings from the Youth Fund evaluation

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October 2019

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Overview

Renaishi were appointed to evaluate Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Youth Fund in June 2016. This is the third of three published papers to share learning on key themes:

1. [Core funding](#)
2. [How organisations have sustained and grown their impact](#)
3. **Asset-based work with young people** (this paper)

We will also publish an [Executive summary](#) of key findings across all themes explored in the evaluation.

About the Youth Fund

The [Youth Fund](#) launched in 2015 to provide core funding for organisations whose main purpose is to help young people (aged 14-25) in the most precarious positions, where making the transition to adult independence is most challenging. Organisations must work with young people experiencing disadvantage in a way that recognises and builds on their strengths and potential, which Paul Hamlyn Foundation refers to as an 'asset-based approach'. Eligible organisations can apply for up to £60k of funding over two years.

Between 1st June 2015 and 1st June 2019, the Youth Fund had provided 129 grants worth a total of £7.5m. The Fund is still open to new applicants.

What is meant by 'asset-based work'?

The term 'asset-based' covers a range of approaches to working with young people in a way that values their strengths, as well as addressing the problems they face. This can mean identifying what young people are good at or interested in, and building on this. At an individual level, the person is at the heart of asset-based working and support is tailored to help them achieve their own goals. In other words, asset-based approaches seek to empower people to have agency over their own lives, and to develop their assets in a positive way.¹

Asset-based approaches are often contrasted with 'deficit-based' work, i.e. approaches that focus on needs, problems, or issues, to the exclusion of positive opportunities. Deficit-based working is usually seen as a dominant paradigm in the social sector, because the majority of interventions in the UK have historically been funded, managed, designed and delivered on the basis of tackling problems.

Youth practitioners are attracted to asset-based approaches for many reasons. Some may feel that young people are too often demonised by sections of society, and labelled as 'risky', 'problematic', 'vulnerable' or 'needy'. Asset-based approaches can be seen as a way of counteracting this trend, helping young people to feel valued and putting them in the lead. At

¹¹ A more detailed definition and discussion of asset-based working can be found in *Asset-based approaches to working with young people: A Review* (Renaishi, 2017)

their best, asset-based approaches can extend beyond the individual level, to influence wider structures and systems that impact young people's lives.

Crucially, there is no single 'model' or 'technique' for asset-based work. The term encompasses a wide range of practices, approaches, methods and ways of working that are united by a core set of values and beliefs, rather than grounded in a particular model. The term also covers the work and approach of a whole organisation, not just direct work with young people.

Aims of our work and this paper

This paper introduces a simple framework to help organisations identify different ways in which they can apply asset-based working in practice. This model was developed through a process of in-depth research with a diverse group of organisations funded through the Youth Fund, who all share a commitment to asset-based work, but apply these principles in a range of different ways. The framework is not intended to be used as a 'checklist' or incentive to box-ticking, but rather a starting point for organisations thinking about how to further embed their asset-based practices.

The framework was developed alongside work by independent advisor, Colin Falconer of InspireChilli who was commissioned by Paul Hamlyn Foundation to support the Youth Fund. His work has concentrated on describing the ten 'asset spots' which bring together extensive research and theoretical work on where organisations can grow their asset-based practice. Our framework complements this approach, but takes a different starting point: the ways a particular group of youth organisations currently *do* work in an asset-based way, rather than ways in which they *could* work. As a result, there is substantial overlap in the content of the two frameworks, but with different emphases on certain elements.

The Youth Fund is designed to support organisations that can demonstrate that they already work in an asset-based way. As such, the aim of the framework is not to support organisations to 'transition' to this way of working, but rather to strengthen, develop and support the work of those that already do.



About the framework

The framework (above) shows the broad arenas in which an organisation can embed asset-based approaches to its work. It is not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to prompt organisations to think about the different ways in which they might embed asset-based approaches throughout the organisation to strengthen their practice.

The following sections describe each part of the framework in turn, and provide some ideas and inspiration for how to embed asset-based approaches in each area of work. We have deliberately not included case studies, because there is no single 'template' or 'best practice model' for organisations to follow – you have to find an approach that is right for your organisation's culture, values and context.

We don't expect every organisation to work in an asset-based way across all of the parts of the framework, though some are more essential than others:

- **Purpose:** this is a necessary starting point for all asset-based organisations. It influences the organisation's approach in every other area of work.
- **Decision-making, Delivery and Operations:** these are three areas in which organisations might embed asset-based principles. Not all organisations will focus on all of them, but to be fully asset-based, you do have to do something in at least one of them – otherwise your purpose will ring hollow.
- **Influence:** this is about how your asset-based purpose and ways of working creates influence, through the ways that you communicate with others, and the ways that you help young people to get their voices heard. It is not 'essential' to being asset-based in the same way that your purpose is, however in our research we found that it is an almost inevitable outcome of trying to work in an asset-based way within a wider context that is typically not asset-based.

Purpose

For an organisation to be fully asset-based, this must be inherent in how it articulates its purpose. Our research identified two ways in which organisations do this:

1. By articulating a **core belief in young people** – their ability, their validity and/or their humanity
2. By reflecting **strong organisational values** – relating to how young people should be treated, supported and nurtured

Organisations with an asset-based purpose give a strong sense that they stand for something. They don't just define themselves as anti-problems, but see themselves as having a positive purpose. They are often critical of the way young people are treated in society, by other organisations that are not asset-based in their approach. This purpose shapes and drives organisational behaviours, and provides a direction for the asset-based approaches used in other areas of the organisation.

Unsurprisingly, having asset-based principles embedded in their purpose is a very common theme across the cohort of organisations funded by the Youth Fund. This is because Paul Hamlyn Foundation specifically chose to fund organisations that are fully committed to this way of working, and worked hard to filter out applicants that could use the right words, but did not demonstrate that they have a strong connection with those principles.

Decision making

This part of the framework is about how organisations share power with young people. In our research, we found very varied ways that organisations do this, depending on their particular culture and context. Broadly, there are three ways that organisations have embedded asset-based approaches to young people's decision making:

1. Through **formal governance structures** such as a Youth Board or young Trustees. These types of approach work at an *organisational level*.
2. Through **co-design and participatory decision-making**, for example asking young people to design new programmes or choose what activities the organisation delivers. Typically, these types of approach work at a *programme level*.
3. Through **giving young people control** over their own 'journey' with the organisation, for example allowing young people to set their own goals, choose their own support package or engage at their own pace. These types of approach work at an *individual level*.

Organisations can embed young people's involvement in decision making in both formal or informal ways. It takes ongoing work and effort, and a commitment to meaningfully share power. For example, many organisations have a formal Youth Board or similar structure, but this does not mean that it is effective or truly embedded – it is easy to be tokenistic, and it takes time to embed appropriate practices and work out the right approach for your organisation. Organisations that take an asset-based approach have typically thought deeply about how to share decision-making power, have a desire to share power more equally, and have a compelling reason or belief to do it.

To embed asset-based approaches to decision making, our research suggests that organisations need to have:

- **Confidence** – that your organisation is ready and able to work in this way
- **Stability** – so that your approach has time to become embedded, and won't be disrupted by instability or change
- Strong **relationships** with young people – it won't work if you have the right structures in place, but lack the relationships to make these meaningful

Some organisations also support young people to contribute to decision making outside of the organisation, for example through advisory or policy work (see 'influence' below).

Delivery

This part of the framework is about how organisations work with young people, both through formal programmes and other informal approaches. Again, specific approaches vary enormously, depending on organisations' sector, methods of delivery and which group(s) of young people they engage with. Broadly, organisations can embed asset-based approaches to their delivery in three ways:

- 1) By creating models that **involve young people themselves as partners in delivery**, for example by training them as peer mentors, coaches, trainers or other roles
- 2) By drawing on **family and community as assets in delivery**, for example by engaging parents, guardians, trusted adults or other local organisations in ways of working with young people
- 3) By developing an approach that is built on **relationships** and **giving young people time and space** – this is about the ethos of the delivery

All of these approaches can be hard to achieve in practice. They are built on the quality of relationships, which take time and investment to develop, and which is hard to articulate. It is about *how* an organisation works, rather than what 'activities' they deliver. It is about foregrounding young people and the things that they value – time, safety, adult relationships, feeling listened to and invested in, and being given opportunities to have an active role.

Many organisations told us that their approach is “just good youth work”, but nonetheless they were distinctive in the amount of time, effort and resource they invested in making sure that the way they work with young people fully embodies asset-based values. The time and money needed to meaningfully work in an asset-based way is a real challenge for organisations that frequently came up in our research.

Operations

This part of the framework is about ways of working internally, and how organisations can embed asset-based principles throughout its functions. This involves having processes and structures in place which align with, and are true to, your values and purpose as an asset-based organisation. Our research identified a wide range of different ways that organisations embed asset-based ways of working:

- **Human Resource** related processes, e.g. job descriptions, job adverts, job titles, appraisal processes
- **Team** related structures e.g. management structures, how team days are run, how meetings are conducted
- Approaches to **training** and **developing** people, including staff and volunteers
- **Communications** and **fundraising**, e.g. by using asset-based language

- **Evaluation** processes and methods, e.g. avoiding using deficit-based tools to evaluate impact
- **Information gathering**, e.g. how information about young people is collected and the types of questions asked, including assessment processes

Organisations' approaches are often relational – i.e. based on how people relate to each other within the organisation – but embedded and sustained through tweaking or creating formal structures, such as the way that roles are described in job descriptions. Overall, these ways of working are about making sure that the way you operate is in line with who you are as an organisation. The size of your organisation makes a difference, as our research suggests that large and small organisations go about doing this in quite different ways – small organisations being strongly relational, whereas large organisations need to make sure that embedded structures are in place.

Influence

Not all organisations specifically focus on 'influence' as a core part of their organisational strategy or delivery, and many don't formally invest in influencing capacity (for example, by creating a campaigning role). However, we found that organisations committed to working in an asset-based way almost inevitably end up speaking out, helping young people to speak out, and projecting their principles to the outside world in a way that influences others.

A common theme amongst organisations funded by the Youth Fund was a feeling that they are doing things a bit differently, and have to explain and justify that to others, especially when they are asked to behave in a way that is not in line with their asset-based approach.

There are two broad ways that organisations do this:

1. By making a **conscious effort to use asset-based language** in their external communications, and/or to call out organisations which use deficit-based language to talk about young people
2. By **supporting young people to speak out and get their voices heard**

Influence 'falls out' of the other ways that an organisation embodies asset-based work – its purpose, decision-making, delivery and operations – rather than being a distinct function of the organisation, although some organisations do consciously invest in it. This is why it sits along the bottom of our framework. There may be little funding or resource to formally influence, but it is an almost inevitable outcome of trying to work in an asset-based way in an outside context that it is at odds with that approach. It is also the type of work that core funding makes more possible, by providing sufficient internal capacity to allow core members of staff to develop the organisation's influence.

Summary

Why does it matter whether, and how, organisations work in an asset-based way? Many organisations that we spoke to in our research believe that this type of approach makes their work more effective, as well as being the ‘right thing to do’. Many felt very strongly that asset-based approaches are vitally important in work with young people, but struggled to articulate what this should look like. We hope that the framework described in this paper will give organisations a shared language to talk about this work, and some inspiration for ways in which they can further develop and embed asset-based approaches in their organisational practice.

Asset-based working is about working in a way that aligns with your values, rather than just trying to achieve specific outcomes. This is always a work in progress, and there are lots of inherent challenges in truly embodying these principles in your work. On their own, organisations cannot overcome all of the power imbalances or deficit-based contexts that affect young people. However, organisations that are truly asset-based will always choose to invest the resources that they do have to work in ways that align with their purpose and what they stand for as an organisation, making their contribution to a wider shift in attitudes and culture in our society.

Contact

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We would like to thank all of the organisations who contributed to a workshop in April 2019 to help inform and develop our thinking on this work.