



Equity Case Studies

ThinkForward: Asset-Based Language Guide

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Shifting how young people are described and see themselves

At a glance

Context: National charity working with young people (ages 13–25) across London, Kent and Nottingham

Equity focus: Challenging deficit language used to describe young people from underserved backgrounds

Key strategy: Co-produced, evidence-informed asset-based language guide

Who led it: Communications & Policy Manager, with young people and Youth Advisory Board

What changed: More confident volunteers, partners and staff; stronger sense of dignity and agency among young people

The challenge we were trying to solve

ThinkForward works with young people who face multiple, overlapping barriers and are at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET). Many of the young people on its programmes experience poverty, low school attendance, special educational needs, discrimination and limited access to opportunity. These challenges are often compounded by how young people are talked about by institutions and adults around them.

Young people themselves raised concerns about being described as “disadvantaged” or “disengaged”. They reported that such labels made them feel othered, stereotyped and diminished. Staff with lived experience of similar challenges echoed this, reflecting on the long-term impact that deficit language had on their confidence and aspirations.

The organisation recognised that language was not a neutral tool. It shaped how young people were perceived – and how they perceived themselves.

What we did

ThinkForward developed an asset-based language guide for staff, funders, volunteers and business partners. The guide sets out the strength-based language the organisation uses to describe the young people it works with, alongside terms it avoids and suggested alternatives.

The guide was co-produced with young people through consultations, including ThinkForward's Youth Advisory Board, and grounded in existing research on the impact of language on confidence, motivation and dignity. Rather than introducing a fixed script, the guide explains why certain terms matter and how language choices can reinforce or challenge inequality.

Central to the guide is a shift away from deficit labels towards describing young people as “underserved” – placing responsibility on systems and structures rather than on individuals or families.

Why this mattered for equity

Language shapes expectations. Deficit terms can subtly lower aspirations, reinforce stereotypes and normalise unequal outcomes. For young people already navigating structural barriers, this can compound feelings of shame or exclusion.

By adopting asset-based language, ThinkForward aimed to create environments in which young people felt recognised for their strengths, not defined by their challenges. The guide supports adults to communicate in ways that uphold dignity, agency and possibility, without denying the reality of structural disadvantage.

What made it work

The guide was rooted in youth voice. Young people were not consulted symbolically but meaningfully, shaping both the content and tone. Lived experience from staff added further depth and credibility.⁵⁰

The approach was also evidence-informed. Research on social mobility, education and psychology was used to support the case for change, helping funders and partners understand that this was not about “soft language” but about improving outcomes.

Finally, the guide was designed to be practical. It does not just critique existing terms but offers clear alternatives and explanations.

50 A new version of ThinkForward's asset based guide can be found here: [Asset-based Approach Guide v 2.0 Oct 2025](#)



Barriers and challenges

Language associated with disadvantage is deeply embedded in policy and funding systems, and some partners initially worried that moving away from familiar terms could create confusion. Care was also needed during consultation to avoid introducing new negative labels, relying instead on open-ended listening. Finally, embedding asset-based language consistently across staff, volunteers and partners required ongoing reinforcement rather than a one-off intervention.



What changed

The language guide has been well received by funders, volunteers and corporate partners. Volunteers report feeling more confident and excited about working with young people. Partners have begun to reflect on, and in some cases adopt, similar language principles in their own work.

Young people and parents have shared that being spoken about positively has helped build trust and engagement and allowed strengths to be recognised that had previously gone unnoticed.

The guide has also had wider influence, being shared at sector events and used as a prompt for other organisations to review their own language.



Project sustainability

The guide was produced within existing roles and resources, primarily through staff time. It is reviewed regularly to reflect evolving language and understanding, ensuring it remains relevant rather than static.

Because it is embedded in how ThinkForward communicates across programmes and partnerships, the approach is sustainable without additional funding.



Measuring outcomes

Impact is tracked through qualitative feedback from young people, volunteers, staff and partners. Volunteers report greater confidence in engaging with young people, and partners have shared examples of adopting similar language principles.

ThinkForward has also observed increased engagement from parents and stronger relationships built through more respectful, strength-based communication. While language is not measured through a single metric, consistent feedback indicates improved confidence, aspiration and trust among the young people served.



What we'd do differently/advice to others

Be careful not to introduce new negative labels while trying to challenge old ones. Open questions and listening are essential.

Start with those most affected. Young people's perspectives should shape the work from the outset, not be added later.

Expect some resistance. Terms like "disadvantaged" are widely used and convenient, but many stakeholders are open to change when the rationale is clearly explained.

