

INTERGENERATIONAL WORK WITH CARE HOMES

HOW COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND CARE HOMES CAN PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELLBEING.

A summary of the evaluation of England's largest coordinated national initiative to set up intergenerational links between schools, youth groups and care homes.

THE PROJECT

Between 2019 and 2022, **Care Home Friends and Neighbours (Care Home FaNs): Intergenerational Linking** brought together 116 schools (plus two youth groups) with 114 care homes. The project was targeted in 11 less socio-economically advantaged areas of England and connected over 4,000 young people (aged 5-14) with an estimated 2,000 older people living in care homes.



WHO WAS INVOLVED?

The project was led by a partnership between two organisations:

- **My Home Life England** (MHLE) works to promote positive practice and improve the quality of life for those living, visiting and working in care homes and other care settings.
- **The Linking Network** (TLN) works with children and young people to build relationships with people they might otherwise not meet – people of different ages, ethnicities, religions and backgrounds – through Schools Linking and Intergenerational Linking.

The project was funded through the #iwill Fund. The #iwill Fund is made possible thanks to £66 million joint investment from The National Lottery Community Fund and the Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) to support young people to access high quality social action opportunities.

The Dunhill Medical Trust (DMT) acted as a match funder for the project. DMT supports the science and social change needed for healthier older age.



The Linking Network

THE EVALUATION

This report summarises and provides commentary on an evaluation of the project carried out by Dr Briony Jain, Research Fellow at MHLE, with Lois Peach and Dr Ali Somers in January 2023.

Download the full research report at: myhomelife.org.uk/intergenerational-linking

The full citation for the report is: My Home Life England and The Linking Network (2023). Care Home Friends and Neighbours (Care Home FaNs) Intergenerational Linking Project Final Report: Discovering the untapped potential and social value of connecting younger people with older people living in care homes. City, University of London.



KEY FINDINGS

- **Intergenerational linking brings positive outcomes** to both young people and older people living in care homes, including children with additional needs.

- The best activities were goal-directed and **based on ideas developed by the younger and older people themselves.**

- **In-person activities generally yielded more positive and meaningful interactions** but there is also **real value in virtual/remote connections** and they can play an important role in building relationships and helping younger and older people prepare for meeting in person.

- **The right organisational structure** was essential for success: 'brokers' to bring together schools and care homes and act as motivators, communicators and relationship builders; along with national-level support from experienced organisations.



THE PROJECT

Background

A growing body of evidence suggests that taking part in intergenerational activities, which bring together older and younger people in purposeful activities, can lead to positive outcomes.

The project team synthesised the findings of several systematic reviews and meta-analyses, which identified the most commonly reported benefits as: improvement in age-related attitudes; positive effects on wellbeing and social connectedness; and skills development and learning.

The project was therefore based on the premise that investment in this kind of programme can make a significant contribution to social cohesion, improve younger people's knowledge and skills, and improve older people's wellbeing and health.

Approach adopted

The programme used a **broker-led** model where 11 local brokers or 'community connectors' were tasked with facilitating 10 intergenerational links between schools/youth groups and care homes in their local area. These individuals acted as motivators, communicators and relationship builders. Support was provided by the National Team and a Sharing Network, and local and national advisory boards.

A total of 230 schools, youth groups, and care homes participated across England. This equated to at least 4,000 young people (aged 5-14) and an estimated 2,000 older people living in care homes - an average of 32 students per school and 15 residents per care home.

Flexibility was embedded in the design of the project. Brokers were able to take their own approach to delivering the programme, allowing local-level approaches to be tested and relationships to form organically.

The first planning stage of the project was in motion when **the first Covid-19 lockdown** was introduced in March 2020. The delivery and evaluation of the project had to therefore take place under pandemic restrictions.

As the aim of the project was to connect people across the social care and education sectors - two of the sectors hardest hit by Covid-19 - creative adjustments had to be made to enable younger and older people to connect.

Free school meals data and relative deprivation indices showed that the locations of participating schools and care homes were skewed towards being **among the least socio-economically advantaged areas of England**.

PROJECT EVALUATION

The project's researchers carried out an evaluation using multiple different methods, including both 'appreciative inquiry' (which focuses on what worked well, rather than what didn't) and 'action research' approaches (reflecting on the learning throughout the journey of the project in order to support its ongoing improvement). They collected qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources using several different methods over the course of the programme.

OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

Given the challenges that schools and care homes faced, the outcomes achieved were impressive.

Both school and care home leads were surprised by just how much the children and older people enjoyed spending time together and sharing experiences, and how much they looked forward to the interactions.

Of those completing the follow-up survey:

- **95%** of care home leads reported that residents appeared to enjoy the intergenerational interactions 'very much' (20 of 21 respondents).
- **91%** of school leads reported that their children appeared to enjoy the intergenerational interactions 'very much' (31 of 34).
- **90%** of school (31 of 34) and care home leads (19 of 21) reported that they would recommend intergenerational linking to others.

IMPACT FOR CHILDREN

Themes that emerged about the impact for children:



More than 79% of school leads reported that some of their children formed relationships with individual residents either in person or virtually. Others frequently observed the enthusiasm and excitement generated among the children: many looked forward to the in-person visits to the care homes (76.5%), and spoke about the older people outside of the interactions (73.5%).

"It's been a very positive experience. Children have looked forward to every session... We have come back to school each time with positive things to talk about."
- SCHOOL LEAD, NEWCASTLE

"I am enjoying using my language skills to make a video for the old people, it makes me feel special for having a skill that not everyone else has."
- PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENT, ENFIELD

"Meeting older people has definitely boosted my confidence, talking to all of the care home residents has been a pleasure."
- PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENT, SEFTON

Some school leads were surprised by changes they noted in the children, including how much more interested they were in activities like reading, writing, and making art when this was done with or for the residents.

"A young lad with challenging behaviour befriended one of the residents and he planned his 100th birthday and they really just bonded."
- LOCAL BROKER

A theme that emerged from the data was that certain groups of children responded particularly well to intergenerational linking, including **children with additional learning needs**, those with English as an additional language, and children dealing with bereavement or who do not have grandparents of their own.

"A teacher talked about some of her pupils with autism when they met residents living with dementia. Almost a mutual understanding and the comfort of sitting in silence. She said it was really beautiful to see."
- LOCAL BROKER

"A little boy who had recently lost his dad really clicked with one of the men in the care home - spending an hour walking around the garden together. At the end of the session, the little boy said, 'I only live down the road, maybe my mum could come and I could spend time with you again.'"
- LOCAL BROKER

IMPACT FOR OLDER ADULTS LIVING IN CARE HOMES

Themes that emerged about the impact for older people living in care homes:

RENEWED ENERGY **SOCIAL INTERACTION** **SHARING SKILLS, LIFE LESSONS AND KNOWLEDGE** **AN ENHANCED QUALITY OF LIFE** **NEW RELATIONSHIPS** **HAPPINESS** **SENSE OF JOY** **SENSE OF PURPOSE**

One of the most frequently observed impacts was that the older people described themselves as happier during and after intergenerational sessions. Over 50% of care home leads reported that the older people were more talkative than usual and seemed to “come to life” around the children.

“I was surprised by the fact that the residents’ attention, mood, energy, and enjoyment all increased when the students came to visit - they’d come alive. It is nothing short of a miracle!”

- CARE HOME LEAD

“The residents [are] communicating more with each other. There’s banter going on between them that wasn’t there [before].”

- CARE HOME LEAD

“I haven’t felt this re-energised for years.”

- CARE HOME RESIDENT, LEEDS

Over half of care home leads (57.1%) reported that older people were able to share skills, knowledge, stories and/or experiences with the children, adding to the enjoyment and value of the experience for them.

“I enjoyed listening to older people’s knowledge. For example [a resident told me] Jupiter is the largest planet and it’s like a big brother to Earth”

- PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENT, LEICESTER

“I think the residents just love seeing how enthusiastic the children are about it. They were talking about it hours later and that’s how you know that is has really resonated with them.”

- CARE HOME LEAD, PLYMOUTH

Some strong themes also emerged around the pronounced impacts of intergenerational linking for particular groups of older people, including those with dementia, depression, sensory impairment, and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

“There was one particular gentleman who was very depressed, hadn’t smiled, hadn’t spoken much, didn’t want to interact with anyone, who didn’t stop smiling after that first meeting and was just a completely different person”

- LOCAL BROKER

IMPACT ON THE BROADER COMMUNITY

The intergenerational project appeared to contribute to greater awareness and mutual understanding across care homes, schools and the local community. Churches and other local organisations got involved in the project, and experiences were shared with the families of the children, creating a wider ripple of positivity in the community about care homes.

CHALLENGES

The main challenges experienced by school and care home leads were:

- **Covid-19** - The pandemic created challenges in terms of both communication and engagement from some schools and care homes.
- **Time constraints** - Time and resources are constrained in both schools and care homes at the best of times, and this was exacerbated by the pandemic.
- **Practical/logistical challenges** - These included travel; having enough adult supervisors for the children; getting photography consent from parents; managing the number of children visiting at one time; and difficulty with technology during virtual interactions.

SUSTAINABILITY

School and care home leads expressed a strong desire for the relationships established throughout the project to be sustained, and for the intergenerational linking project to continue. Of those completing the follow-up survey, **80% of care home leads and 71% of school leads said they definitely intended to continue their intergenerational link.**

WHAT WORKED

- The Covid-19 pandemic, though challenging, provided a unique context where the opportunity for social interaction took on new meaning and value, particularly for those living and working in care homes. **Meaningful remote connections** were made in many creative ways, for example: sharing letters, gifts, artwork, becoming pen pals, virtual lunch clubs and online reading groups.
- **In-person activities** generally yielded more positive and meaningful interactions between younger and older people, but **real value was seen in virtual meetings**, particularly to prepare younger and older people for meeting in person and to build and/or maintain connections when physical interactions were not possible.
- Interactions and activities linked to **seasonal events** such as Christmas, Valentine's Day, or the Queen's Jubilee celebrations were some of the easiest to organise and provided a good foundation for conversation, creativity, and learning.
- Another powerful element was when the activities were **student or resident led** - ideas were designed as shared experiences where the younger and older people chose what they wanted to do together.
- Having a **shared sense of purpose** contributed to effective interactions, and activities that involved some sort of social action (e.g. beach cleaning) were commonly reported as among the most successful.
- Finally, many of the brokers reported that some of **the most effective activities were often the simplest**. These "enabled the children and older generation to become comfortable in each other's company" and "build a positive relationship". Examples included "a small number of residents coming to a school and chatting or reading with small groups of children" and "taking the children to see where the care home is, even if they could only wave through the windows".

Processes that supported success

Connecting younger and older people to facilitate intergenerational interactions doesn't just happen – a huge amount of effort and support structures go into making this kind of project work on such a large scale. Local brokers identified several key aspects of the programme design that contributed to its success and should be a staple for future programmes:

- **Broker-led model** – Without a broker facilitating connections, and acting as motivators, communicators, and relationship builders, the onus for all the work would fall on individuals in schools or care homes, who are already working with limited time and resources.
- **Support structures** – These included support from the National Team (My Home Life England and The Linking Network) who provided a direct point of contact for any queries or concerns raised by the brokers. Brokers felt that the peer-to-peer Sharing Network that supported them should be a staple for any future intergenerational linking programme.
- **Resources and training** – Brokers really valued both the resources, training and coaching provided by the National Team, and being able to contribute to the development of additional resources to support the work (see back page for these resources). Brokers identified a need for further training and support, for example regarding project management and sharing specific expertise about care homes and schools, if they were not already familiar with these environments.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Care Home FaNs: Intergenerational Linking is the largest coordinated national initiative to set up intergenerational links between schools, youth groups and care homes in England to date. It marks a significant step forward for intergenerational practice.

- **Clear outcomes for young and old:** The evaluation confirms previous research indicating benefits to young and old, and demonstrates the positive effects of intergenerational work for the wider community. The project helped to promote wellbeing for older adults living in care homes and stimulated engagement among young people – potentially planting the seed for future involvement in social action and encouraging young people to think positively about careers in social care.
- **Relationship-centred:** Intergenerational linking is about building positive relationships that are meaningful, reciprocal, and have the potential to be long-lasting. Relationships take time to develop, and so intergenerational linking needs to be thought of as a journey rather than a sprint to the finish or a one-off event. Setting appropriate expectations about the pace and requirements for schools, care homes and funders is therefore vital. Time is required to realise the individuality, creativity and compassion of school children, older adults, teachers, care home staff and local brokers.
- **The broker model is crucial:** The value of having a local 'connector' who brings together care homes and schools, and helps them maintain their relationship during challenging times with staff turnover and huge workloads, cannot be overstated and should be used as a blueprint for the future.
- **Creating and sustaining a movement of intergenerational connection:** Overall, the programme has enabled a strong foundation of links across schools and care homes across England.

The opportunity to create positive inclusive relationships for some citizens who are potentially excluded must be a top priority for public health. With additional support, we have seen that a sense of connection, respect, dignity and autonomy can flourish for older and younger people.

Local brokers can help create a 'contagion of enthusiasm' in further schools, care homes and local areas – leading to even more positive outcomes for individuals and across generations. The priority for the future should be **embedding and investing in intergenerational practice**, supported by alignment with the school curriculum and with Ofsted and Care Quality Commission criteria.

Without further support, there is a risk that the pressures facing these institutions could mean that these links wither on the vine.

A big thank you to everyone who has contributed to this project!

My Home Life England and The Linking Network are committed to working with the wider intergenerational sector to spread learning and resources, and continue this important work.



The Linking Network

For the full report and for a range of tools and materials to support, go to:

myhomelife.org.uk/intergenerational-linking

For consultancy support to help you roll out programmes in your area, contact: **mhl@city.ac.uk**

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