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Review of key mechanisms in intergenerational practices, and their effectiveness at reducing loneliness/social isolation

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Welsh Government's programme for government, *Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021*, sets out a commitment to 'develop a nationwide and cross-government strategy to address loneliness and isolation'¹ as part of its strategy to improve the health and wellbeing of the population. In support of this commitment the Assembly's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee undertook an inquiry into loneliness and isolation, the results of which were published in December 2017. As part of its inquiry, the Committee received evidence on the benefits of intergenerational contact between children and older people and concluded that 'the evidence we heard on intergenerational contact ... can sometimes be more beneficial than contact with one's own age group'².
- 1.2 The report recommended 'that the Welsh Government undertakes an evaluation to assess the impact of intergenerational contact on people experiencing loneliness and isolation. If the evaluation highlights benefits of such contact, the Welsh Government should ensure best practice in this area is rolled out across Wales'^{3,4}.

¹ Welsh Government *Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021*, p.8

² National Assembly for Wales Health, Social Care and Sport Committee (December 2017) *Inquiry into loneliness and isolation*, p.39

³ Ibid, p.39

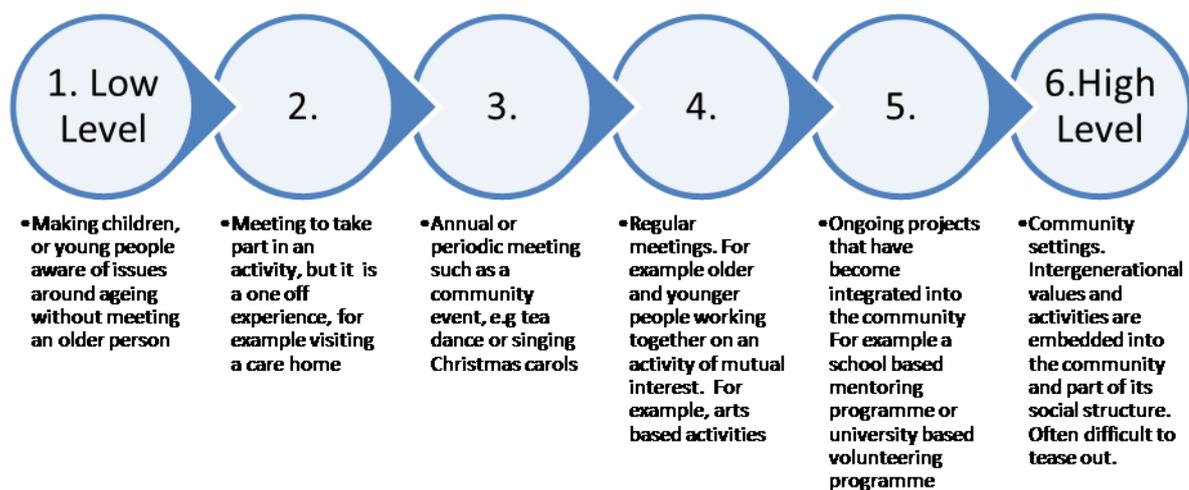
⁴ Welsh Government officials took the view that a review, rather than an evaluation, would be a more appropriate approach as this would allow for good practice across a larger range and number of initiatives to be identified which would draw upon existing evaluation findings where available.

1.3 Intergenerational practice is often commonly defined using the Beth Johnson Foundation’s definition:

‘Intergenerational practice aims to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities which promote greater understanding and respect between generations and contribute to building more cohesive communities. Intergenerational practice is inclusive, building on the positive resources that the younger and the older have to offer each other and those around them’⁵.

1.4 Whilst intergenerational practice can take many forms it is possible to place activities on a continuum from a low to a high level of intergenerational contact as set out at Figure 1.1:

Figure 1.1: The intergenerational contact continuum



Source: Adapted from Kaplan (2004:7)⁶

2. Aims and objectives of review

2.1 OB3 Research, in conjunction with the Centre for Loneliness Studies, University of Sheffield, was appointed by the Welsh Government to undertake a review of key mechanisms in intergenerational practices, and their effectiveness at reducing loneliness and social isolation.

2.2 The review aimed to:

- identify the key mechanisms (barriers and enablers) by reviewing available literature on intergenerational practice that focuses on tackling loneliness and social isolation and interview key respondents who are involved with intergenerational programmes

⁵ For instance as used by [Generations Working Together](#)

⁶ Kaplan, M, (2004). Toward an intergenerational way of life. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*. Vol. 96 (2): 5-9.

- inform policy development by illustrating key enablers and barriers, using case studies of intergenerational programmes in Wales and/or elsewhere in the UK
- identify whether there are subgroups within society for whom intergenerational programmes are particularly effective and ineffective in reducing their loneliness and social isolation.

2.3 The review was also tasked to offer recommendations:

- on practical lessons that could feed into future guidance on setting up intergenerational projects aimed at reducing loneliness and social isolation
- for policy that focus on enablers of intergenerational programmes that are successful at reducing loneliness and social isolation as well as key barriers that prevent the reduction of social isolation and loneliness in such programmes.

3. Method

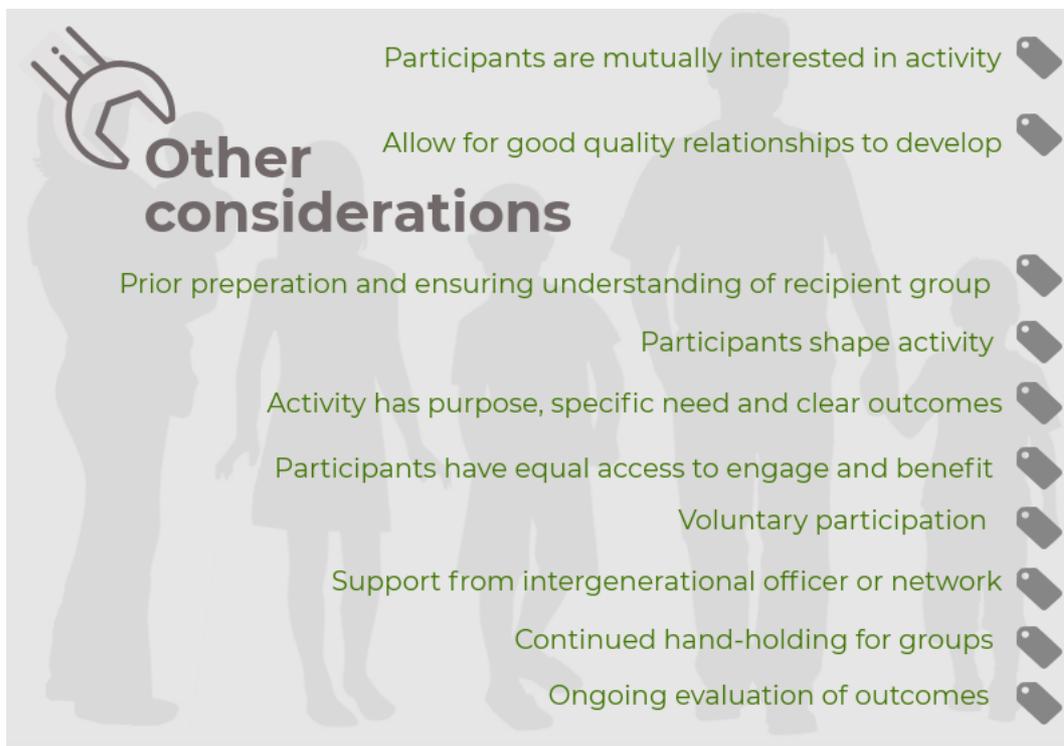
3.1 The review involved:

- an inception stage, which included an inception meeting with Welsh Government officials and preparing a refined methodological approach and project plan
- desk based research, which involved undertaking a state-of-the-art review of the latest published and 'grey' literature, and grouping and tabulating the key findings
- preparing research instruments to inform the fieldwork with key informants and representatives involved with intergenerational activities and case studies
- identifying intergenerational interventions and selecting a sample for inclusion as case studies within the review
- undertaking phone interviews with representatives from across 13 intergenerational initiatives and reviewing, where available, relevant evaluation material on these
- undertaking phone interviews with two organisations with a specific national intergenerational remit
- undertaking interviews with 14 key informants, including 11 organisations who were approached to provide evidence on the experience of particular sub-groups
- synthesising the findings of the fieldwork and desk-based research and preparing a peer-reviewed final evaluation report.

4. Key findings

4.1 The evaluation found that the key mechanisms in terms of enablers and barriers to delivering successful intergenerational practice are:





4.2 The review found that the most common outcomes that intergenerational initiatives claim to achieve were:





Reduced isolation and loneliness

Improved wellbeing, positive mood and raised spirit, pride, quality of life

Improved health (mental and physical)

Opportunity to engage in follow on activities

Live independently at home for longer

Improved access to services

Confidence

Self-esteem

Behavioural change

Skills (social, communication, gardening, creative arts)

Knowledge (e.g. local history)



Reduced isolation and loneliness

Improved wellbeing

Improved health (mental and physical)

Affordable housing

Community outcomes



Improved
community
cohesion &
connections



Reduced
community
tensions



Increased
sense of
belonging to
community

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 The review concluded that intergenerational practice can be considered as a continuum of contact between different generations which varies from low level interventions such as raising awareness of ageing issues through to high level intervention where intergenerational activities are embedded into community settings as a natural part of its social structure. The majority of the case study interventions considered as part of the review fell into the medium level category of interventions and predominantly included distinct activities which involved regular sessions between older and young people as well as ongoing projects that had become integrated into the community. Very few of the highest level interventions were included in light of the difficulties in identifying them as a result of being fully embedded into the community.
- 5.2 It was found that many intergenerational practice interventions claim to reduce loneliness and social isolation. In some cases, the original main outcome was not to reduce loneliness and/or social isolation but it became a by-product of the intergenerational work. In other cases, reducing loneliness and social isolation was the initial focus and intergenerational work became a by-product of the initial approach. Broadly speaking, case study interventions were found to make a greater contribution to reducing social isolation than loneliness. Embedded and longer-term interventions were also considered to have the potential to make the greatest impact upon levels of social isolation and loneliness.
- 5.3 Short-term intergenerational projects, particularly those which are reliant upon project funding, are at greater risk of being unsustainable. It is possible that these types of

interactions could be more damaging for older people and leave them feeling more isolated at the end because they have no access to replacement activities. For some projects that survive past the initial intervention and become owned and embedded into communities there is frequently a lack of evaluation to draw and identify which aspects are most successful and which areas need adjusting.

- 5.4 The review found that some groups are more inclined to participate in intergenerational initiatives than others, with women more inclined to do so than men. The review also found that at a broad level, regular group based intergenerational activities are more likely to be focused on bringing together older people and children whilst community based initiatives (such as choirs and social groups) are more likely to recruit a broader range of participants by age and offer multigenerational opportunities. The review found some examples of successful initiatives which were targeting specific audiences and these included young professionals, refugee and migrants and dementia patients.

6. Recommendations

6.1 The review offers eight recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider in terms of future policy relating to intergenerational practice. It is recommended that:

- Intergenerational activity be included as an implementation mechanism within the Welsh Government's proposed strategy on loneliness and isolation
- Intergenerational practice be considered in its widest sense and be considered within the context of policy areas such as housing, planning, education, social justice and community development. The Welsh Government's strategy on loneliness and isolation should consider how intergenerational practice could be fully embraced and embedded in existing or new policies i.e. how new developments or spaces can be used by different generations
- The Welsh Government considers the case for establishing a national body to drive and support intergenerational developments as well as to advocate the case for intergenerational planning across key policy areas
- Such a national body (or otherwise) puts in place an appropriate support framework for intergenerational practice enablers, practitioners and volunteers, building on existing good practice and resources and which includes guidance, training and peer support
- Consideration be given to proactively identify, enable and support the roll-out of successful UK initiatives (such as Homesharing UK, Cares Family and the Good Gym) to specific settings or areas within Wales
- The Welsh Government considers the feasibility of establishing an intergenerational seed fund or micro-financing to support activities which have the potential to be mainstreamed and sustained post funding
- All intergenerational practices adopt ongoing evaluation of their provision so as to provide meaningful evidence on their impact upon reducing loneliness and isolation
- Practitioners in Wales keep abreast of international developments and good practice relating to intergenerational practice by engaging with national and international communities of interest and conferences.

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Available at: <https://gov.wales/key-mechanisms-intergenerational-practices-effectiveness-reducing-lonelinesssocial-isolation>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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