Changing Intergenerational Relationships



IN THIS TOGETHER

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO INTERGENERATIONAL LANGUAGE

This resource was created in August 2026 by: Dr Catherine Pemble, Dr Elaine Douglas, Dr Heather Emond, Professor Alison Bowes, Michelle Briggs, Janice Mason-Duffy, Jane Morris, Ro Pengally, Ubaid Rehman, and Pat Scrutton as part of the Changing Intergenerational Relationships Project at the University of Stirling.

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Introduction

Whether it is swapping stories, sharing skills, or working together towards a shared goal, something important happens when people of different ages spend time together. Building connections between generations, or intergenerational relationships, can reduce loneliness, challenge assumptions, and strengthen communities.

Many groups already do this kind of work without calling it “intergenerational”. A community history group where people share and record local memories, an arts group where participants make and share work together, or a choir open to anyone who wants to sing are all spaces where people of different ages meet and connect. Yet many of us do not recognise these activities as intergenerational, or worry that the groups we work with may not be doing “enough” to apply for intergenerational funding.

This may be because many people assume that activities are only intergenerational if they include the very young and the very old: nurseries visiting care homes, or children interviewing centenarians about their experiences. Those activities can be valuable, but they are not the only, or even the most common, examples of intergenerational practice. Meaningful intergenerational work can involve teenagers and people in their forties, young adults and retirees, or any mix of age groups where genuine exchange takes place.

At its simplest, “intergenerational” means people from different generations coming together. We all belong to a generation and move through different life stages, which means many everyday activities already include people of different ages. The key question is not just who is in the room, but how they interact and how those interactions help build relationships, reduce loneliness, challenge assumptions, and strengthen communities.

This Guide

This guide is for groups in that position. It offers a plain-language introduction to intergenerational practice: what it is, why it matters, and how to describe it. Inside, you will find clear explanations of key terms, examples of how groups can talk about what they do in ways that highlight their intergenerational work, and practical starting points if you want to go further.

The guide was produced as part of the Changing Intergenerational Relationships project. Grounded in research, it brings together evidence and practical guidance to help you recognise the intergenerational work you already do, talk about it with confidence, and use that language when you plan activities, apply for funding, or report on what you have achieved.

Key Intergenerational Terms

It is easy to feel confused by some of the language around intergenerational practice. This section offers straightforward explanations of the terms you are most likely to see in funding calls, reports, and conversations around work and activities within the community.

Intergenerational vs Multigenerational

These are the terms you are most likely to encounter when talking about activities, groups, or spaces that bring people of different ages together. They sound similar, but there is an important difference.

Intergenerational describes activities where people from different generations are not just in the same room, but actively engaging with one another in ways that benefit everyone involved. This can include sharing skills, telling stories, working together on a task, or simply getting to know one another over time.

Multigenerational describes a setting where different age groups are present, but not necessarily interacting in any meaningful way. A supermarket is multigenerational. So is a public library, a GP waiting room, or a town centre. These are shared spaces, but they do not automatically create connections between people. They lack the “inter” in intergenerational.

Many funders now use “intergenerational” as shorthand for activities that bring people of different ages together for a shared purpose and for genuine interaction, not just co-presence.

KEY POINT

The connection and exchange between generations is the key difference between an intergenerational activity and a multigenerational one.

Intergenerational Contact

Intergenerational contact is what happens when a space or activity moves from being merely multigenerational to being truly intergenerational. It describes the moments when people of different ages stop simply sharing a space and start actually engaging with one another toward a shared goal.

This concept is especially helpful in community settings because it does not assume that contact has to be formal, lengthy, or deep. A brief conversation over a project, a skill passed on during a single session, or a joke shared passing can all count as intergenerational contact.

KEY POINT

Even fleeting interactions can make a difference; research shows that intergenerational contact does not have to involve long term or highly structured relationships to create real benefits.

Social Cohesion and Social Capital

Social cohesion is about how strongly people in a community feel connected to one another: the level of trust, the sense of "we're in this together", and how likely people are to pull together when something happens. You might think of it as the "glue" that helps a community stick.

Social capital is the web of relationships and informal help people can call on when they need it: the neighbour who helps with shopping, the person who offers a lift, the friend who passes on information about a local group or service.

Intergenerational work often strengthens both of these. As people from different age groups get to know one another and build up trust, it becomes easier to ask for and offer help, and easier to feel that you belong, creating communities that tend to become more resilient, more inclusive, and better able to support their members. These are outcomes that matter to both community groups and funders.

Age Segregation

Age segregation is the structural issue that intergenerational practice usually aims to address. It describes the way modern life often organises people by age or life stage: children in schools, young adults in universities and workplaces, older adults in retirement and care settings, and so on.

This structure shapes most people's daily routines, but it also reduces the amount of contact between generations. When different age groups rarely share spaces or activities, it becomes harder to build connection, understanding, or social capital across generations. Intergenerational work creates opportunities to cross these boundaries and to rebuild everyday contact between age groups in ways that feel natural and mutually beneficial.

Accessibility

Accessibility is about how easily people can find out about, get to, and take part in a space or activity. In intergenerational work, this means thinking about what helps people of different ages, backgrounds, and circumstances come together, and what might get in the way.

Some barriers affect whether people can get to and from an activity in the first place. They might not hear about it, find the information difficult to understand, or feel unsure whether they would be welcome. Steps into a building can make access difficult, as can session times that do not fit around work, school, childcare, or bus timetables. Once someone arrives, the question becomes whether they can comfortably stay and take part. Suitable seating, the language used, the support available, and flexibility in how people join in can all make a difference. Thinking about accessibility means looking at both what helps people attend and what enables them to keep taking part, whether regularly or from time to time.

Making a space or activity more accessible for some people often makes it easier for others to take part too. In intergenerational work, this can help bring together people who might otherwise miss out, creating more opportunities to get to know one another, build trust, and feel part of the group.

KEY POINT

Remember, there is no such thing as a perfectly accessible space, and you do not need to think of every potential barrier before you start. Accessibility is an ongoing process, so keep talking to people about what helps them take part and what gets in the way as your group grows. What works well for some people may be less helpful for others, and people's needs can change over time.

Being ‘Intergenerational Enough’

It is possible for groups doing genuinely valuable intergenerational work to miss out on funding, not because their activities are lacking, but because they do not yet have the language to describe them, do not realise they qualify as “intergenerational”, or have not known what kind of evidence funders look for.

An Intergenerational Lens

Learning how and when to use an ‘*intergenerational lens’* is not about exaggerating what a group does; it is about using the best tools available to describe that work accurately and explain why it matters.

Taking time to reflect on what a group does, how it runs, and what it achieves can inspire you to find new ways to improve things in the future. Looking through an intergenerational lens can help members notice what is already happening around them: informal mentoring, knowledge sharing, and friendships across age groups that emerge as people work together. It can shape what they pay attention to, what they value, and what they choose to encourage. More practically, it can also affect which opportunities they feel able to apply for and what kinds of evidence they think to collect.

The examples in this section are fictional, but they draw on research data from the Changing Intergenerational Relationships project. They are not based on any single group, but the patterns, activities, and experiences they portray, reflect real community life. The application questions are similar to those used by funders such as the National Lottery Community Fund, Creative Scotland, and the Scottish Government’s Investing in Communities Fund. Each example shows how a group might typically describe itself, and how that description can change when an intergenerational lens is applied.

Example 1: Riverside Community Connect

Application question: Please describe your organisation and the activities you deliver. (250 words)

Without an intergenerational lens...

We are a community-based organisation delivering a range of weekly creative, social, and wellbeing activities for local residents. Our programme currently includes arts and crafts sessions, light physical activity classes, and informal social gatherings such as coffee mornings and shared meals, all designed to provide regular opportunities for engagement. In addition to our weekly offer, we also run seasonal events throughout the year, including summer fairs and winter celebrations, which are open to all members of the community and encourage broad participation.

Our activities aim to reduce social isolation, support mental wellbeing, and create meaningful opportunities for people to connect with others in a welcoming and supportive environment. All sessions are carefully designed to be accessible and inclusive, with a clear emphasis on participation and enjoyment rather than prior experience or skill level. We work in partnership with local organisations, including libraries and community centres, to host our activities in locations that are both familiar and convenient for attendees.

Participants are encouraged to attend regularly, build lasting relationships, and contribute to the ongoing planning and development of future sessions. Feedback is gathered both informally, through conversation, and more formally through periodic surveys, ensuring that activities remain responsive to the evolving interests and needs of the community. Our organisation is volunteer-supported and is committed to creating a friendly, supportive atmosphere where individuals feel welcomed, valued, and included.

With an intergenerational lens...

We are a community-based organisation delivering a range of weekly creative, social, and wellbeing activities that bring together local residents across different age groups. Our programme includes arts and crafts sessions, light physical activity classes, and informal social gatherings such as coffee mornings and shared meals. We also run seasonal events, including summer fairs and winter celebrations, which are open to all members of the community and support shared participation.

Our activities aim to reduce social isolation, support mental wellbeing, and create meaningful *opportunities for connection* in a welcoming environment. Our sessions are open to people from all ages and backgrounds, allowing intergenerational contact to occur within activities, as people of different ages interact through conversation, shared tasks, and informal exchange. This includes the sharing of skills, knowledge, and experiences, as well as the development of relationships over time and increased confidence in social participation. Sessions remain accessible and inclusive, with a focus on participation rather than prior experience or skill level.

We work with local partners, including libraries and community centres, to host activities in familiar and convenient locations. Participants are encouraged to attend regularly, supporting the development of ongoing connections. Through feedback gathered informally and through periodic surveys, we are increasingly able to recognise and evidence the contribution these interactions make to social cohesion and social capital, including patterns of mutual support and shared learning across age groups. Our organisation is volunteer-supported and committed to creating a friendly, supportive atmosphere where individuals feel welcomed, valued, and included.

What Changed, and Why

In this example, the main shift is in how the existing work is described. Broad terms like “connection” and “relationships” are unpacked so it becomes clearer who is connecting and what this looks like in practice: people of different ages interacting through shared activities, conversation, and informal exchange. That added detail brings the social dynamics of the sessions into view, rather than leaving them implied.

There is also a clearer link between what happens in the room and why it matters. By naming intergenerational contact and connecting it to ideas such as social cohesion and social capital, the revised version shows how everyday interactions contribute to wider community outcomes. This makes it easier to see how the activity creates value, and how that value aligns with priorities commonly used in funding decisions.

Example 2: Roseview Grow-n-Gab

Application question: Describe the need your project addresses and the difference it makes to participants. (300 words)

Without an intergenerational lens...

We are a community garden project responding to a lack of accessible green space and opportunities for local residents to engage in outdoor activity. Many people in the area live in flats or housing without gardens, limiting their ability to spend time outdoors, grow food, or take part in nature-based activities. This is compounded by experiences of social isolation, particularly among individuals who may not have regular opportunities to connect with others in their local community, including those experiencing low confidence or limited mobility.

Our project provides a shared, welcoming space where people can take part in gardening, learn new skills, and spend time outdoors in a supportive environment. Participants are able to contribute to planting, maintaining, and harvesting, regardless of prior experience, with activities designed to be inclusive and adaptable to different needs and abilities. The garden offers a regular point of contact for those who may otherwise have limited social interaction, helping to establish routine, structure, and a sense of purpose.

The difference the project makes is both practical and social. Participants gain access to fresh air, physical activity, and, in some cases, locally grown produce. Many report improvements in wellbeing, including reduced stress, increased confidence, and a greater sense of personal achievement. The shared nature of the space encourages conversation and connection, supporting the development of relationships over time.

With an intergenerational lens...

We are an intergenerational community garden project responding to a lack of accessible green space and opportunities for local residents to engage in outdoor activity. Many people in the area live in flats or housing without gardens, limiting their ability to spend time outdoors, grow food, or take part in nature-based activities. This is compounded by social isolation, particularly among those without regular opportunities to connect with others locally.

Our project provides a shared, welcoming intergenerational space where people take part in gardening, learn new skills, and spend time outdoors in a supportive environment. Through the shared nature of gardening, participants of different ages work alongside one another, interacting through conversation, collaboration, and informal exchange as activities unfold. Tasks such as planting, maintaining, and harvesting create natural opportunities for people to engage, share knowledge and experience, and contribute in different ways.

The difference the project makes is both practical and social. Participants gain access to fresh air, physical activity, and, in some cases, locally grown produce. Many report improved wellbeing, including reduced stress and increased confidence. The garden creates regular opportunities for intergenerational contact: small, everyday interactions through which knowledge, skills, and experiences are shared, contributing to relationships, mutual understanding, and a sense of shared purpose over time.

By providing a consistent space for participation, the project helps reduce isolation and strengthen social cohesion. As connections develop across age groups, it also contributes to social capital, supporting networks of trust and informal mutual support. Participants are encouraged to take ownership of the space and its development. Reflecting on how the garden is used has enabled us

What Changed, and Why

In this example, the changes focus on how the activity is structured and who is involved. The revised version does not just state that different age groups attend; it shows how gardening tasks bring them into contact, making interaction part of participation rather than something that happens by chance. This is what distinguishes it from a multigenerational space.

The description of interaction is also more specific. Where the original refers more generally to “conversation and connection”, the revised version points to ongoing exchanges of knowledge, skills, and experience as a regular part of activity. Naming these small, everyday interactions as intergenerational contact makes the social dynamics of the space more visible and easier to evidence. Finally, by linking these interactions to social cohesion and social capital, the revised version draws a clearer line between what happens in the garden and the wider patterns of trust, mutual support, and shared purpose that funders are interested in.

Seeing Your Work Through an Intergenerational Lens

The examples in the previous section shows how an intergenerational lens can change the way a group describes familiar activities, bringing different aspects of their work into focus.

The questions below are designed to help you look at the groups, organisations, or activities you are involved in with that same lens and to notice things that might otherwise be taken for granted.

1. Who is in the room?

You might describe your group as “for the community” or “open to all”, but who is actually turning up? This question invites you to look at the age range of participants, including who is missing, who attends regularly, and who only appears at bigger events. Think about how people find out about your group, whether they feel it is for them, and what might make getting there difficult, such as session times, transport, or physical access. Noticing these patterns can help you understand who your activity currently reaches and where there might be opportunities for more intentional intergenerational work.

2. Where, when, and how do different ages interact?

Instead of asking “are different ages present?”, ask “at what points do people actually talk, work together, or share something?”. Think about moments in a typical session – setting up, the main activity, tidying up, and break times – and notice where natural intergenerational contact already happens and where people tend to stay within their own age group. re these opportunities easy for everyone to take part in, or do things like the layout of the space, the pace of an activity, or the language used make joining in harder for some people? This can show how the design of your activity supports, or gets in the way of, meaningful interaction.

3. What do people of different ages give and get here?

Intergenerational practice depends on mutual benefit, not one age group simply “helping” another. Try to notice what different age groups bring (skills, experience, energy, perspectives) and what they take away (confidence, understanding, new relationships, practical knowledge). Is there room for people to contribute in different ways, with support or flexibility where they need it? This can also highlight where assumptions are shaping roles in unhelpful ways, for example younger people always being treated as learners or older people always being seen as helpers.

4. How are everyday interactions building social cohesion and social capital?

Here you are looking beyond the activity itself to the relationships and informal support that form around it. Are people starting to recognise each other outside the group, checking in on one another, sharing lifts, swapping advice, or inviting each other to other activities? Noticing these “small” developments can show how intergenerational contact is contributing to trust, mutual support, and a stronger sense of belonging.

5. What evidence are we already collecting... and what simple things could we add?

Many groups already gather information that can help show intergenerational impact, such as attendance records, basic age bands, and annual or twice-yearly check-ins with participants. These existing tools can do more “intergenerational work” if you adjust questions slightly to draw out people’s experiences of difference and connection. For example, alongside your usual feedback you might include a short prompt such as:

“[Group name] is open to people from different age groups, backgrounds, and life experiences. How do you feel about being part of a group like this, and what, if anything, do you feel you gain from spending time with people who are different from you?”

You could follow this with:

“Is there anything that helps you take part, or anything that would make it easier?”

Questions like these encourage people to comment directly on intergenerational and other forms of contact, and on their experience of taking part, without needing a long survey. When you put these responses alongside what you already know about who attends and how often, they can give you a clearer picture of how your activity is shaping relationships, confidence, and understanding across age groups, where changes might help, and what evidence you can draw on for funding applications and reports.

So We're Doing Intergenerational Work… Now What?

Recognising the intergenerational dimension of what you already do is a significant step, and it often comes with an immediate follow-up question: right, but what do we do with that? The answer will vary between groups, but there are some common areas it can be helpful to think about as you start to use this lens more constructively.

Be clear what you're doing together

Intergenerational work is more than people of different ages sharing a room. It helps if the people who run or host the group know that "people mixing across ages" is part of what they are trying to make happen. A simple way to test this is to ask: if someone new joined, could you explain what people of different ages get from being here together?

If that feels hard to answer, it does not mean you are doing anything wrong. It just means there is more to find out. You might start by asking people from different age groups what they enjoy about the group, what they feel they get from it, and why it matters to them. These conversations can gently change how you plan sessions, how you talk about the group to others, and what you notice as "success" when you look around the room.

Look at how people mix

Not all contact is the same. Intergenerational groups tend to work best when people are doing something together, when everyone feels they have something to offer, and when there is enough time for people to get to know each other. It can help to look at a typical session and ask: when different ages are together here, are they really joining in on the same footing, or are some mostly watching while others lead?

If you see that people are sticking with their own age group, or that one age group always seems to be in charge, that is useful information. Small changes can help. You might pair people of different ages for a task instead of grouping by age, invite a younger member to lead part of an activity alongside an older member, or build in a few minutes at the end for people to share what they made, noticed, or learned with each other. These small tweaks can shift the feel of a session from "we happen to be in the same place" to "we are doing this together".

Share decisions, not just activities

One sign of strong intergenerational practice is that people of different ages help shape what happens in the group, not just turn up to something planned for them. Sharing decisions is about sharing power: asking people from different age groups

what matters to them, listening seriously, and letting that shape what you do next. It does not mean everyone always gets their own way, but it does mean that people's experiences and ideas are taken seriously.

In everyday terms, this might be as simple as asking now and again, "What's working well for you at the moment? What would you change?" and then showing what you have changed in response. Or it might mean occasional planning chats where younger and older members sit together to plan events or suggest new activities. When people can see that their input makes a difference, they are more likely to feel the group is "ours" rather than something being done to them, and this can make the intergenerational side of the group feel more genuine and worthwhile.

A FINAL EXAMPLE

Joan runs a weekly poetry group, and the group includes people across a wide range of ages, from her youngest attendee, who is 19, to her oldest, who is 86. After reading this guide, she realises that she is running an intergenerational poetry group, even though she had not started it with that in mind. While she is not sure yet whether she would want to apply for intergenerational funding in future, she decides to make a few small changes to support the intergenerational side of the group more deliberately anyway.

She starts by tweaking her usual introduction to include a brief explanation that the group is a space where people of different ages can work alongside one another, learn something new, and get to know each other. While running sessions, she begins to ask people from different age groups when she needs multiple volunteers for a task, such as helping at the tea break or tidying away at the end. Finally, she builds in a few extra minutes at the end of the session for a reflective activity, asking people to say what they enjoyed and what they would like to do in the future, which she notes in her notebook.

None of these changes are difficult, time-consuming, or costly, but together they help create the kind of shared activity, exchange, and connection that sits at the heart of intergenerational work.

A Final Word

Intergenerational work has been happening in our communities for far longer than we have had the language to describe it. The connections that form when people of different ages come together, and the benefits they create, do not suddenly become "real" because someone uses a new term or designs a formal programme. But having a shared language can help us recognise what we already do, explain it to others, and learn from one another.

For every example in this guide, there are many other community groups quietly doing work that matters just as much: creating spaces where people come together, looking out for one another, and doing things they could not do alone. Many of these groups would not immediately call themselves "*intergenerational*", but the relationships they build across ages are already strengthening their communities in real and important ways.

We hope this guide is a useful companion if you feel unsure or a bit confused about intergenerational language, or if you have ever wondered whether your work, organisation, or group is "intergenerational enough" to count. You are invited to use it to reflect on the groups and activities you are part of, and to share it with others who might find it helpful.

Help Us Create More Resources Like This

This resource was created as part of the Changing Intergenerational Relationships project, based at the University of Stirling. It is part of our ongoing commitment to creating evidence-based resources and insights that are meaningful and useful to the communities at the heart of our research.

If you value resources like this and want to see more of them, please tell us. Your feedback helps us make the case for academic research to put time, funding, and support into creating things that communities can use, so that the people who contribute to research can benefit from what it produces.

Let us know how you found out about the guide, what you found helpful, and what could be better. We would especially like to hear if you have used it, plan to use it, or have shared it with others. A few lines about your experience can help us improve what we create and show why more research projects should do this too.

Please email us at: **CIR@stir.ac.uk**.

This guide draws on data collected as part of the UKRI-funded Changing Intergenerational Relationships Project at the University of Stirling (see www.cpc.ac.uk/projects/143/Changing_intergenerational_relationships_a_regional_case_study), alongside research and practice evidence from the National Foundation for Educational Research, the Beth Johnson Foundation, Generations Working Together Scotland, the National Lottery Community Fund's Ageing Better programme, UKRI's Healthy Ageing Challenge, Creative Scotland's Culture Collective, the WHO Ageism Report (2023), and Age Scotland's On Every Street report (2025). Statistics on loneliness draw on the ONS Community Life Survey (2024/25), the Campaign to End Loneliness, and a 2025 systematic review of the economic costs of loneliness and social isolation, while the wider economic context is informed by IFS Living Standards research (2024).

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Changing Intergenerational Relationships

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