

Ryder



## Bringing generations together

Intergenerational learning as a tool to build empowered communities

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The composition of the UK population and family demographic is changing rapidly. The amount of people over the age of 65 in the UK is due to increase by eight percent over the next 25 years<sup>1</sup> and, as a result of scientific advances, a girl born today has a 50 percent chance of living to 100.<sup>2</sup> These changes are establishing a societal shift that we are not currently prepared for nor paying appropriate attention to. Furthermore, whilst we are living longer, we must ensure that everyone has fulfilling experiences throughout life.

This is particularly important as we grow older and our social connections may become more limited. A variety of events such as retirement, poor health or bereavement can trigger feelings of isolation, loneliness or psychological distress.<sup>3</sup> Over time, these feelings can result in people becoming disconnected from their communities and society, an issue which must be addressed to ensure everyone stays connected through all periods of life.

A review of 148 studies identified that the influences of poor social relationships are comparable with well established risk factors for mortality, such as smoking and alcohol consumption.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, another study found that 22 percent of adults in Scotland feel they do not have a strong sense of belonging to their local community.<sup>5</sup>

This demonstrates the significant role that our relationships and social engagements play in defining the state of our mental and physical health. It is therefore of the highest importance that we ensure our design solutions work towards enabling people to stay connected within their communities.

**To address these issues, we should embrace and enhance the abundance of dynamic resources already existing in communities – most notably the people.**

The implementation of intergenerational learning and integrated community design hosts a wealth of benefits for all generations. We can aspire to improve social skills, reduce ageist attitudes and create meaningful engagement between generations. This is a concept which has been investigated by Ryder in Barra, a small island in the Western Isles of Scotland where 21 percent of the population is over 65 years old.<sup>6</sup>

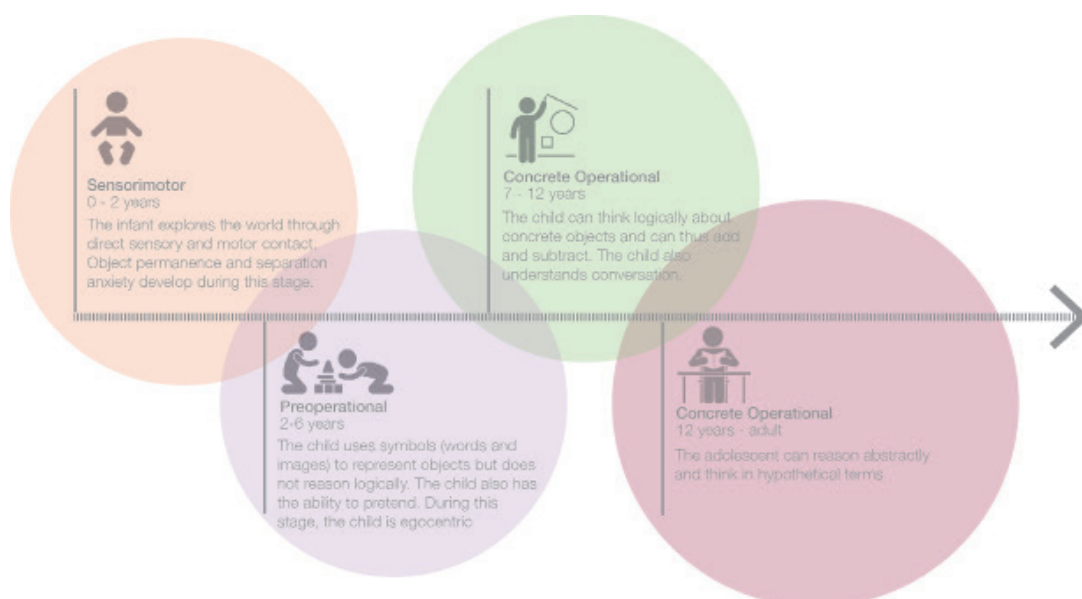
### Learning through relationships

Relationships are a crucial aspect of our lives and can ultimately improve our quality of living. At a young age, children learn a great deal from the people who interact with them: their parents, grandparents and wider family. They learn basic levels of how to interpret emotion and make social connections through play and curiosity, shaping their character later in life. But as people grow older, there are fewer opportunities for play to make these vital connections, particularly when people find themselves isolated. This situation presents an opportunity to link these increasingly isolated social groups in environments where the generations can work together to promote lifelong learning.

### Changing attitudes

A key goal for the younger populous is to reduce discrimination against older generations. It has been found that daily contact helps to control young people's overt and more subtle ageist stereotypes and attitudes.<sup>7</sup>

By encouraging young people to have and maintain positive contact with older generations, we can reduce the social stigma within our society whilst helping children develop a social awareness which will shape who they will become later in life. At a time when 78 percent of both primary and secondary school leaders think the curriculum should include more core life skills,<sup>8</sup> intergenerational learning could be a valuable addition to the early stages of education.



Piaget's Stages of Learning<sup>9</sup>

### The health benefits

Moreover, the adults involved should be learning and gaining an equal value from intergenerational contact. This mainly derives from increasing their social and community engagement which, in turn, reduces feelings of loneliness and isolation.

A study concluded that having a friend who is happy and closely connected can increase happiness by as much as 25 percent.<sup>10</sup> This highlights the importance of ensuring that people are enjoying life and engaging in continuous community involvement.

Not only does this impact mental health but it can also affect physical health. Research indicates that people who have had periods of depression in their life have increased rates of dementia.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, imagine the possible major health benefits within our grasp if we can maintain community and social involvement among older generations through design.

**“The strength of our social relationships and connections has a central role in determining our quality of life.”<sup>12</sup>**

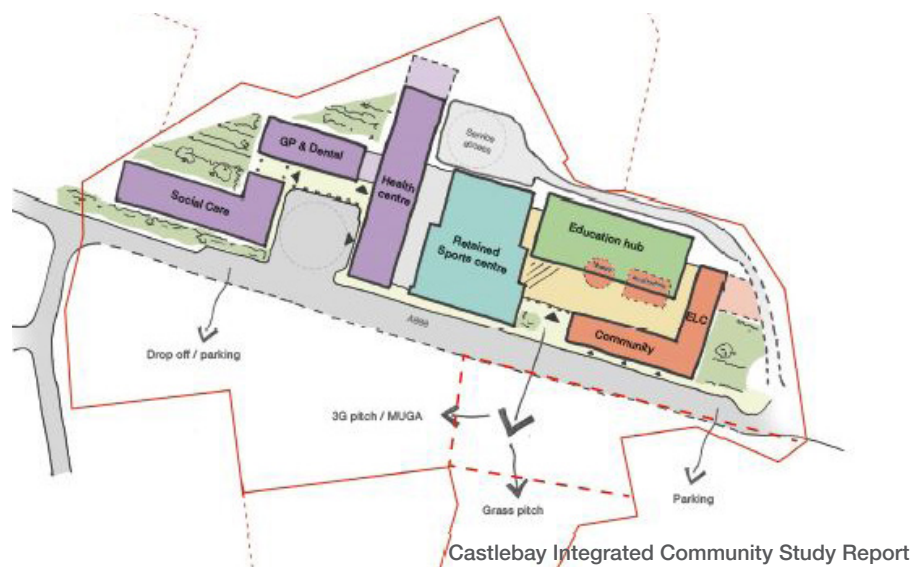
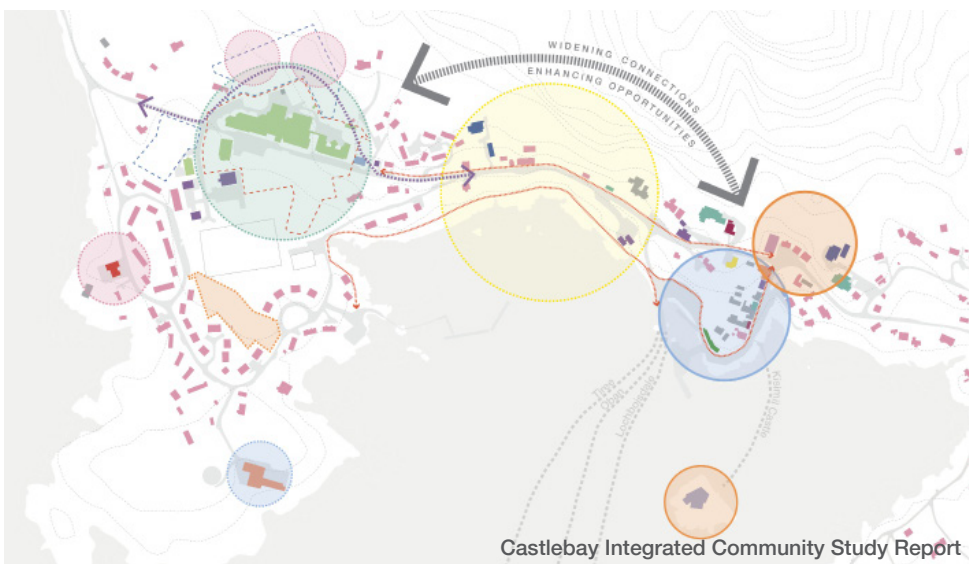


### The principles in practice

The benefits of intergenerational learning and community integration are clear, but how do we introduce and design our communities to facilitate for this type of interaction? Ryder's integrated community study for Barra looks at the integration of its existing primary school, community school, early years, sports centre, hospital, social care and community centre to form a combined community hub. This hub would co locate the facilities on a single site in a coordinated manner, creating opportunities for the community to engage and participate. Through shared facilities, physical connections can be made which may otherwise not have come to fruition.

An example may include the higher likelihood of interaction between the school and early years departments when their facilities are physically close. This increases the chance of casual encounters occurring, working to improve our social relationships and connections. A shared facility also allows for community collaboration, encouraging people from all generations to work together and form meaningful intergenerational engagement and, consequently, quality intergenerational learning.

It is important that we consider the challenges which are likely to be encountered with this type of approach to community design. Initial perceived challenges include the safeguarding of participants and ensuring the engagement and learning is meaningful, as well as designing integrated facilities in a manner which respects the need for privacy in the hospital and social care settings. To approach these challenges, it is important that the community is involved throughout the design process to ensure the facilities maximise user experience.



## Tackling loneliness and social isolation is an issue which has recently been highlighted by the Scottish Government in its publication *A Connected Scotland*.<sup>13</sup>

The strategy, published in December of 2018, aims to tackle issues similar to those discussed in this article to build stronger social connections and communities. Through collaboration with the government, there is the potential for communities to develop local efficiencies and reap the benefits gained by the creation of integrated community facilities. As a result, this could benefit the healthcare and education sectors in Scotland by providing new learning and care opportunities.

Similarly, **Generations Working Together** is an organisation which is working to support the integration of intergenerational work and opportunities across Scotland. Its work aims to ensure that younger and older people are more respected in their communities, achieving enhanced health and wellbeing for individuals.<sup>14</sup>

Going forward, it is important to consider that intergenerational learning is not a new concept, rather one which we must re embrace to create empowered communities where lifelong learning is embedded in the foundations. In a setting such as Barra, it is easy to imagine a community facility thriving as there is a small population, when compared to the larger scale and population of towns and cities in the UK. However, if we strive to create places where community is at the heart, we can work towards empowering communities within larger settings and create a greater sense of belonging in our local communities. This strategy will increase the likelihood of lifelong and intergenerational learning occurring naturally, thereby realising health and wellbeing benefits among a wide range of demographics.

We would love to hear from you if you are interested in collaborating.



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