



Broadening Horizons

**An Evaluation of
Interest Link Borders**

by



March 2007

Broadening Horizons

Why Broadening Horizons?

I have gained a whole new attitude to people with learning disabilities, seeing them as people with abilities. At first I was nervous but got more confident. I've really learnt humility
(VOLUNTEER)

I've gained experience and I know now what I want to do with my life. I have changed my career because I enjoy being a volunteer so much. I've gone from office worker to care assistant
(VOLUNTEER)

I feel quite fulfilled and uplifted after meeting with my link - I've found it very rewarding and sort of the thing that was missing in my life after retirement
(VOLUNTEER)

People have said "I've got friends at last". There is a real sense of liberation and we must never underestimate this
(REFERRAL AGENCY)

Some service users are doing college courses. They wouldn't be doing this otherwise. The relationships are very genuine and really helpful
(REFERRAL AGENCY)

I meet different people. They're friendly at college
(SERVICE USER)

I was a wee bit scared at first but not now.... I used to hold on to the edge but I don't any more
(SERVICE USER (talking about swimming))

I was very excited the day I met my link and realised the things I could do and where I could go
(SERVICE USER)

He wouldn't be doing these evening classes because we wouldn't have the time, energy or money to help him do them. He's learning things which then adds something to conversations. It means a lot to him what he is doing
(PARENT)

It's brilliant that my daughter has an independent part of her life now.
(PARENT)

It gives my husband and I time to do things on our own – we probably appreciate it more than he does!
(PARENT)

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Mike Nicholson, Development Manager, Befriending Network (Scotland)

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY / KEY FINDINGS

3 years on from the last external evaluation of the organisation, Interest Link Borders continues to be an excellent example of a befriending project which provides a highly-valued region-wide service. The staff team report notably high levels of satisfaction, underpinned by the flexibility they feel they have in managing their time and in introducing ideas and boosted by the quality of the volunteers and the impact of their work. The Project Co-ordinator is singled out as being key to how the staff feel about their work and how the organisation is directed. This is endorsed by management committee members.

Volunteers, referral agencies, parents and carers and service users generally report high levels of satisfaction with the project and the way in which it is managed. Volunteers gain a sense of satisfaction from doing new and rewarding activities as well as from their impact on the lives of people with learning disabilities. The benefits they gain are frequently over and above what they expected when they got involved in the project.

Referral agencies and parents and carers are generally very satisfied with the way that the project operates, and gain benefit for themselves in their work (referral agencies) or their personal situations with some carers having the reassurance that their relative has support and genuine friendships outwith the family home.

Parents and carers, volunteers and referral agencies generally report that the links between volunteers and service users provide opportunities for people with learning disabilities to engage in activities, sometimes within community settings in a way that is quite unique in the area. The result is that people are able to be and feel more independent thereby gaining new skills and greater confidence about themselves and what they can do.

The last three years have seen significant developments within the project, notably the formalising of the Buddies project which links people with learning disabilities with a volunteer to enable them to access educational opportunities. This is regarded by all as an extremely successful piece of work, fostering new relationships, enabling people with learning disabilities to learn new skills and being an attraction to new and different volunteers. This piece of work appears to have increased the confidence of the organisation in embracing new opportunities and in negotiating working partnerships for the future with other agencies for the benefit of people with learning disabilities. This new found confidence is also leading the organisation to provide support to others interested in replicating the model.

Another smaller-scale but also potentially significant development with possibilities for the future is the supported employment of people with learning disabilities in part-time administrative or training roles within the organisation. This has also been highlighted as having had benefits for all concerned.

A further development has been the sourcing, placement and support of student placements in settings where they work with people with learning disabilities. Whilst this has increased the number of younger volunteers and been part of Interest Link Borders' aim of increasing awareness of people with learning disabilities, this has also been a time-consuming and at times frustrating piece of work.

Interest Link's structure of a limited number of part-time staff posts spread over a wide geographical area means that it is working at capacity and whilst there is demand for service expansion to support even greater numbers of people with learning disabilities (particularly from referral agencies, but also enthusiastic staff and committee members), the challenge is to maintain the work at its current level, given the competition for funding for small voluntary organisations and the difficulties of

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gaining funding over any significant period of time.

The practice of the project has just led to it being awarded the Approved Provider Standard for Mentoring and Befriending Projects (a national quality award) which provides a measure of safe and competent practice.

In summary, Interest Link Borders is meeting its aim of providing opportunities for adults with learning disabilities to pursue leisure and social activities of their choice in the community, and in doing so is highly valued by all stakeholders involved.

2. INTRODUCTION

a) Aims of Interest Link Borders

The aim of Interest Link Borders is to provide an opportunity for adults with learning disabilities to pursue leisure and social activities of their choice in the community.

The project intends the outcomes of these links to include improvements to service users' quality of life, assistance for them in acquiring social and practical skills, improvements in their self-confidence and a greater sense of independence.

Furthermore, the project aims to break down the barriers between people with learning disabilities and the community in general and to foster the ideals of care in the community.

The project aims to address the fact that although most adults with learning disabilities live in the community they are often excluded from it, with few social contacts, little experience at making friends or too many barriers such as difficulties in accessing transport.

b) Criteria of the Project

The project aims to provide a service for adults over 16 years of age, and there is no upper age limit. The service is available for all people with learning disabilities who are not able to live entirely independently. The project is unable to support people in situations where the level of personal care required is higher than volunteers are trained to provide, and this is assessed on a case by case basis as people are referred.

c) History of the Project

Interest Link Berwickshire started in 1990 and was initially run by a voluntary management committee. As the need to co-ordinate activities grew, the committee sought funding to employ a staff member to manage the service. This was achieved in 1996 with funding from the Voluntary Community Care Forum when a Coordinator was appointed on 10 hours a week. As the service developed in Berwickshire, a feasibility study in 1999 found that 275 of 375 adults with learning disabilities across the Borders said that they would use a service such as Interest Link. As a result in 2000 Interest Link Borders was created, and with funding from the Community Fund, Nationwide Foundation and Lloyds TSB Foundation, a Borders-wide Service was able to be launched in 2001 with the addition of part-time staff to cover three more areas within the Borders. The project quadrupled in income with the at this point and the 2004 evaluation noted the challenge is to sustain and develop this after the end of that funding period November 2004. The project succeeded in doing this by securing an element of core funding from Scottish Borders Council and three-year funding from the Big Lottery Fund, Lloyds TSB Foundation, The Henry Smith Charity, the Rank Foundation and the Robertson Trust and supplemented these with support from other trusts. In late 2003, the Buddies initiative began providing opportunities for people with learning disabilities to access educational opportunities and following pilot work a new staff post was created and this project was formalised and is now part of the structure of services provided.

d) Geography of the Area

The Scottish Borders comprises four traditional districts within a unified local area authority and health authority, coupled with the common sense of Borders identity.

The area provides a varied set of locations including towns such as Kelso, Galashiels, Hawick and Peebles, as well as outlying rural areas and coastal towns.

e) Comparison with other Befriending Projects

Interest Link Borders can be described as a befriending project although it tends not to use this definition in its publicity. It has always used the basis of 'going out to do activities' as the main appeal of the project to both service users and volunteers, partly because this implies less personal pressure than befriending.

Although the relationships are initially all activity or interest-based, the project's experience is that most become friendships where trust develops over time and the benefits of the relationship frequently go beyond the activity that brought people together. The interest or activity that people are linked to do is therefore a means to building relationships.

In terms of the scale of the project, Interest Link is one of the larger befriending projects in Scotland in terms of staff numbers and links supported, and it has the widest geographical spread of staff of any project in Befriending Network (Scotland)'s membership of 250.

f) Structure, Governance and Staffing

Interest Link Borders consists of four area offices or branches (Berwickshire, Central, Galashiels, Roxburghshire) each with part-time project staff (Branch Co-ordinators). In addition, the Buddies Branch operates the evening-class and student placement service Borders-wide.

The project has a total of 25 hours management staff (Project Co-ordinator) handling planning, monitoring & evaluation, fundraising, financial administration, policy and service development.

There are 112 hours of project staff time (Branch Co-ordinators and assistants) concentrating on delivering the service in their local areas: registering service users, liaising with their carers, recruiting, checking, training and supporting volunteers and making and supporting links.

There are 16 hours of administrative staff per week (Project Administrator (10 hours) and three x two hour supported placements). The Branch Co-ordinators are managed by the Project Co-ordinator, and each Branch has its own locally appointed Branch Committee.

The overall project is managed by the Board of Directors (referred to as the Project Committee) which has Branch Committee representation. All of the committees include representatives from referral agencies, voluntary sector, volunteers, carers and service users.

The staff team, the Branch Committees and the management committees all meet on a two monthly cycle which allows for reporting back and communication. In addition the Branch Co-ordinators have just reinstated a bimonthly meeting which will allow practice issues to be explored and a greater level of peer support.

g) Funding / Costs of the Project

The project is currently supported by core funding from Scottish Borders Council (£28,000 pa) and three-year funding from the Big Lottery Fund, Lloyds TSB Foundation, The Henry Smith Charity, the Rank Foundation and the Robertson Trust. To complete funding needs till March 2008, these term grants have been supplemented by one-year grants from Abbey Foundation, Baily Thomas Charitable Fund, Borders Voluntary Community Care Forum, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Childwick Trust, Clydesdale Bank PLC, Four Acre Trust, Gunter Charitable Trust, HBoS Foundation, Hugh Fraser Foundation, Lynn Foundation, MacRobert Trust,

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Miss Agnes M. Hunter's Trust, Monamy Trust, Mrs FB Laurence Trust, Rayne Foundation, Souter Foundation, Sport Relief, The Thomas Wall Trust, Trusthouse Charitable Foundation, Woodward Trust.

h) Plans for Future Funding

Scottish Borders Council funding has remained at £28,000pa in the years 2004-07 and the organisation hopes that this will be maintained in 2007-08. Interest Link enjoys a strong relationship at all levels with the Joint NHS-Social Work Learning Disability Service and receives its funding from the Short Breaks and Day Services budgets. A bid for growth will be made for 2008-09, stressing in particular the value of the service to those service users no longer accessing traditional day services.

Changes in Big Lottery Fund programmes mean that Interest Link is able to apply for continuation funding of up to 5 years after their current grant expires in March 2008, with the potential to have a major impact in ensuring Interest Link's sustainability.

Trust grants have always been a very significant element of Interest Link's funding and the organisation hopes that the relationships made with existing and past donors will be continued into the future.

Local fundraising from individual donors, events and trading and companies has steadily increased from a low base, rising from £1,500 in 2005-06 to around £7,000 in 2006-07. Funding for assistance in developing this source has been applied for, and in 2007-08 the organisation hopes to generate around £12,000 from this source.

i) Awards / Recognition

Interest Link was awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service 2006. It also won the Borders New Ways Award 2003 for Promoting Wellbeing and Mental Health and was the overall winner of the 2004 Scottish Adult Learners Award for the South of Scotland. In early 2007 it was awarded the Approved Provider Standard for Mentoring and Befriending Projects (a national quality award).

j) Evaluation

A previous evaluation of Interest Link Borders was carried out by Befriending Network Scotland in 2004 ('Unique Opportunities'). It highlighted some procedural and developmental recommendations. The majority of these have been undertaken since then, in many cases to an advanced level. See Appendix A for the detail of this.

3. METHODOLOGY

The evaluation is based on the following components:

- Discussion with Project Co-ordinator on recent project developments;
- Telephone discussion with two Committee members;
- Individual telephone discussion with six staff;
- Telephone survey with 15 volunteers;
- Telephone survey with 10 parents/carers (nine were family carers and one was a professional carer);
- Telephone survey with eight referral agencies;
- Focus Group with eight matched pairs of service users and volunteers. This was an activity event based around a large floor-sized Snakes and Ladders game with questions relating to people's experience of Interest Link.

4. STAFF

a) Staff Role

The main role of Interest Link Branch Co-ordinators is the recruitment, training and support of volunteers and the assessment (post referral) and ongoing review of links. In addition some Co-ordinators are involved in other pieces of work such as:

i) the organising and support of care student placements

This work in conjunction with colleges was in response to Interest Link's desire to have younger volunteers and a way of meeting their wider aim of raising awareness about people with learning disabilities. Branch Co-ordinators are involved in identifying placements in care settings, in interviewing students and in placing and supporting them. Branch Co-ordinators described positive aspects of this piece of work such as the change in placement students/volunteers (*'I see them growing in confidence all of the time'*), service users being matched with people nearer their age and the possibility of placements going on to be longer term links. However it appears that this is a piece of work where there are also drawbacks (younger students not being allowed off care organisation premises if they are under 18) and the involvement of a significant investment of staff time (placement negotiation, college presentations, interview, initial training, supervision, review meeting with tutor etc.) to establish what can only be guaranteed as a 6 month link at the most. Branch Co-ordinators' experience has also been of a higher than average drop out rate, as students opt to change courses. This causes frustration and disappointment for the Branch Co-ordinators and the placement organisations they work to build up good relationships with.

When it works it's exciting and when it doesn't it's awful

ii) the support of service users providing administrative or training support (most of the time supported by a staff member from Ways2Work).

This was seen as an extremely positive development for everyone involved; genuine work opportunities helpful to Interest Link, individuals provided with achievable tasks which lead to a growth in confidence and inclusion within a work setting. Even staff members who had initial concerns that it might take time to organise and support now felt very positive about the development.

He has grown in confidence in leaps and bounds and has learned so much

He does a lot of tasks and very varied tasks

A huge success - I'm absolutely delighted

What a value it's brought - what a benefit it's been

He challenges people to really think

The bits of work they are producing - it's phenomenal

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iii) organising group activities e.g. discos, sporting groups or fundraising activities

One Branch Co-ordinator is involved in a relatively new initiative of organising discos every 3 months. These provide a way of involvement for service users who are on the waiting list as well as those who are already linked.

It's lovely for everyone – it benefits everyone, service users and volunteers

It lets people know that they are not forgotten about – we get 60 or 70 each time

It's a good opportunity for new volunteers who are not experienced - it's good for them

Another feature are football and swimming groups. These groups have to satisfy criteria (e.g. not replacing one-to-one links, small scale with high volunteer-service user ratio). They will not replace one-to-one as the focus of Interest Link but do address waiting lists, user groups for whom it is harder to find volunteers and activities that cannot be done one-to-one.

The football group has been going for two years, with specific funding from Sport Relief, and has just sent three 5-a-side teams to the Disability Scotland Championships in Glasgow. It involves 3 volunteers and a regular group of 6 service users, with the addition at certain times of up to 12 service users who attend Borders College. It is an activity that could not be done on a one-to-one basis and enables younger service users to be linked.

The swimming group was piloted last summer and started properly on 1st March. It involves up to 8 service users and 2 volunteers. Again this was an activity which volunteers found hard to do one-to-one in public sessions. Both groups are run by professional coaches.

Other group activities are the Caledonian Group in Hawick of four volunteers and six service users (which meets socially once a month and also organises events such as barbecues and outings to the theatre) and the Lennel House visiting group which as well as being linked on a one-to-one basis with users in a nursing home also organises music and storytelling sessions there.

b) Reward from the Job

Staff were found to be very enthusiastic about their jobs, with most enjoyment being gained from:

- i) dealing with volunteers;
- ii) seeing successful matches;
- iii) having good working relationships with agencies;
- iv) having good working relationships with manager and colleagues or
- v) practically the fact that the job was flexible enough.

Volunteers – I get so much from them. They are highly motivated. Never ceases to amaze they stay on

Probably the flexibility and it's quite varied

I love my job through and through

I like watching relationships develop

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Most enjoyable thing? When I link people – seeing the joy on the service user's face when they meet the volunteer for the first time

I absolutely love my job. I can't believe I found it and it found me

I love training and I love doing training

c) Areas of Difficulty

Most staff members could pick out something that they enjoyed. In general the most common theme was the frustration in letting service users or organisations down when there were insufficient volunteers or when people pulled out. Individual comments related to parts of the job where people felt they were naturally less skilled or less confident.

Student placements can be a struggle. Difficult to find placements. I've battled to get someone in to a placement and then they pull out

Feel sorry that I can't link everyone - I would love to have everybody linked. I don't like saying I haven't found anyone for you

Felt a bit guilty about all those not matched

Being let down, for example when volunteers go through training and getting matched and then drop out

All the paperwork – but I recognise admin is important

Training – it's not my forte

d) Staff Members' Satisfaction

Staff were extremely enthusiastic about the level of support they received at Interest Link and in a general question about support, invariably picked out the quality of management they receive. This was seen as allowing flexibility and creativity whilst still providing a clear structure. Staff have the opportunities to try new ideas in their branch which if successful can be rolled out throughout the other branches. In addition to this the manager was seen as being very supportive, approachable and responsive.

Staff also found support from colleagues, from Branch Committee members and from volunteers themselves.

5. VOLUNTEERS

This section looks at the volunteers at Interest Link Borders, providing some basic profile information, the reason for their involvement, the rewards they have gained, the difficulties they have experienced in the course of their involvement and their satisfaction with different aspects of the project.

a) Profile of the Volunteers

The profile of the 15 volunteers interviewed shows some broad themes:

- 12 female and three male volunteers (overall the project reports an average of 68% female and 32% male volunteers)
- one is in the 20-29 age range, two in the 30-39 age range, one in the 40-49 age range and five in the 50-59 and six in the 60+ age range (overall the project reports that 12% of volunteers are under 30, 28% are aged 31- 45, 36% are aged 46-60 and 24% are aged over 60)
- seven of the volunteers had volunteered in other settings before they became involved in Interest Link Borders while eight had not;
- three of the volunteers interviewed had been involved for less than six months, two each for 6-12 months and 13-24 months, and two for over two years;
- five of the volunteers had been recruited through newspaper adverts or articles, three through word of mouth (e.g. other volunteers), two from personal contact with staff, five from a range of sources including Volunteer Centre, direct mail letter and through knowledge of the project in a work (learning disabilities) environment.
- nine volunteers had taken part in the evaluation of 2004, four had not and two could not recall.

b) Motivation for Volunteering

Volunteers were asked to give their main reason for volunteering at Interest Link Borders:

- seven noted that they wanted to help other people in some way or be useful;
- four wanted opportunities to meet people (two of these were people who were new to the area);
- three had experience of working with people with learning disabilities;
- two talked of giving something back;
- other single comments included people having spare time or wanting to access evening classes

I know that some of the people I work with don't have much of a social life – I've seen how difficult it is for people to get out and what a difference the Interest Link volunteers have made to my clients, so I thought I could help myself

I am retired and like to put something back – my heart went out to people and it keeps me busy

I wanted to go to evening class and it seemed like a great opportunity to take someone with me

I'd just moved to the area and thought it would be a good way to meet people and get out and about

I wanted to give something back to the community I lived in

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Asking volunteers what they were hoping to get out of volunteering at Interest Link Borders when they started revealed some more about their motivations. Even those volunteers who began by saying they hadn't wanted to get anything out for themselves still mentioned personal gain i.e. no volunteers had entirely altruistic reasons for getting involved.

I was hoping the person I was linked with would get something out of it, but it has been really rewarding because I have got so much out of it and I've had a lot of fun. I didn't expect to get so much out of it. It's a two way thing

A night out once a week – something completely different from the normal routine

Friendship, feeling part of the community and being useful

I was hoping to meet people and do something different, new and exciting

When asked how their experience had matched their expectations, two thirds of the volunteers (10) said that volunteering at Interest Link Borders had been better than they expected, while five said it had been about what they expected. No volunteers described the experience as less good than expected.

More detailed questions revealed a broader range of motivations underlying why people had become volunteers at Interest Link Borders. Their strongest motivations were:

- to do something rewarding (all volunteers stated that this was 'very important' (10) or 'important' (5))
- to do something new (nine volunteers stated that this was 'very important' (5) or 'important' (4))
- to help the community (half (8) volunteers stated that this was 'important' (4) or 'very important' (4));
- to help people with learning disabilities (half (8) volunteers stated that this was 'important' (4) or 'very important' (4));

There was no link at all between gaining an award (e.g. Duke of Edinburgh) and volunteering at Interest Link Borders, and the link between volunteering helping with people's careers was only very important for two volunteers and not for others. The most varied response was around whether people were motivated by the chance to receive training or not.

An in-depth look at why people become volunteers at Interest Link does show that although volunteers describe their primary reason for involvement as being broadly altruistic, the picture is much more complex and there is also a strong focus on reasons relating to self-interest. Based on this split, there were 38 responses giving reasons of 'self interest' as being important or very important, and 25 responses giving 'altruistic reasons' as being important or very important.

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N=15 S= self-interest A = altruism	Scale of Importance					
	Not at all	-----				Very
	1	2	3	4	5	
To help the community (A)	1	2	4	4	4	
To help people with learning disabilities (A)	1	2	4	3	5	
To spend time with people with learning disabilities (A/S)	2	3	3	2	5	
To do something new (S)	1		5	4	5	
To do something rewarding (S)				5	10	
Because someone asked me (neutral)	12		1		1	1
To repay help I received in the past (A)	9		3		2	1
To receive training (S)	6	3	1	2	3	
To help my career (S)	11	1	1		2	
To gain an award e.g. Duke of Edinburgh (S)	15					

Table 1. Motivation: Reasons Behind Individuals' Decision to Volunteer

c) Rewards from Volunteering

i) Most Rewarding

Volunteers were asked an open question about what they had found to be 'most rewarding' about being a volunteer at Interest Link Borders:

- four spoke of seeing the service user enjoy themselves / being happy;
- four had found reward in meeting new people (other volunteers or users);
- three spoke of reward in helping their service user;
- two had found reward because of the change in attitudes and the new outlook it had given them.

I met a lot of new people and learned new skills. I've got new knowledge and I'm facing new challenges. I enjoy thinking about how to meet my service user's needs

It's very hard to put a finger on any particular thing but I have gained a whole new attitude to people with learning disabilities, seeing them as people with abilities. At first I was nervous but got more confident. I've really learnt humility.

The process of helping my service user in class. Helping and being there for him

The fact that my link is always so pleased to see me – I hate letting her down- even when I think I can't be bothered it's always worth seeing her face when she opens the door

The friendliness – it's been nice to meet people. I've enjoyed the friendship of the project staff

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The joy on my buddy's face because she gets so very much out of it – she's trying things she never tried before and getting the opportunity to do things

My link is at home with an elderly mother. I know that our link has really helped them out and our outings make my link happy. The fact they're happy pleases me because this is what it's all about

The number of people I've met e.g. other volunteers. Fantastic cross-section of people – a well-rounded experience

The relationship I built up was illuminating and challenging.

When I first met my service user she was really shy – I have seen her really change and blossom

I have really enjoyed myself – it's quite a humbling experience – the person I'm linked with gets so much pleasure out of such little things that I might take for granted

ii) Personal Gain

Volunteers were asked directly about what they had 'gained personally' from being a volunteer at the project. As previously noted, even volunteers who had primarily got involved for reasons of helping others, gained personal satisfaction as shown below:

- five could be said to have gained a new outlook or new personal attributes;
- four described it as enjoyable or fun;
- three talked of gaining confidence;
- the others talk of doing new things, gaining direction in life or meeting people.

It is clear therefore that volunteering at Interest Link Borders provides a valuable and personal experience which can give a range of benefits to more than match a range of motivations.

I've gained new knowledge and experiences and new networks of friends

I've gained patience as it can be frustrating

There is a sense of feeling that I can still do it - a renewed sense of confidence after a difficult fifteen years with a head injury

I've gained a huge amount e.g. my ability to react to people with learning disabilities.

The chance to be a person with another person not a professional – it's very thought provoking

I couldn't measure it – it's so rewarding and I feel like I've changed someone's life – I'm so grateful

You feel you're doing your wee bit – I enjoy it – it's really good fun – I look forward to seeing her

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I have learned more tolerance, patience and humility – I feel proud for being involved

I come back from discos as high as a kite – maybe a bit more confident

Experience and I know now what I want to do with my life. I have changed my career because I enjoy being a volunteer so much

I feel quite fulfilled and uplifted after meeting with my link - I've found it very rewarding and the sort of thing that was missing in my life after retirement

Going out and having fun – trying things I would never normally have tried myself – 2 hours a week when I concentrate only on what's going on for someone else and what's going on around me. It's given me confidence as well

I

It's a great variety of things – the satisfaction of helping someone – becoming friends and seeing a difference in someone who maybe doesn't find it easy to socialise

iii) Learning

In the session with service users, volunteers were asked what one thing they had learned as a result of their involvement in Interest Link. Three of them said 'patience' and the others talked of new opportunities or a greater awareness for the people they were linked with.

It's opened a new world – I didn't know some of these things existed or if I knew I'd never done them

Appreciating understanding your buddy's needs

You must not let people down and keep your promises

d) Career Development

Volunteers were asked whether any career development had resulted from their involvement at the project. Eight said that no development had happened, but five noted some link to their jobs (two said it was too early to comment):

My voluntary work definitely helped me get the job as a care assistant since I had relevant experience

I'm in retail management and I certainly would at some point in the future like to be in a more caring profession

No – although I put it down as 'other relevant experience' when applying for a recent job

Sort of – I'm now going back to managing people with learning disabilities

e) Difficulties in Volunteering

Volunteers were asked what they had found most difficult about being a volunteer:

- nine reported that there were no difficulties or problems;

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- two identified difficulties in communicating with the service users or their parents;
- one identified getting over-committed;
- one said that doing the same activity repeatedly can be boring;
- one said they felt guilty claiming expenses.

It can be difficult because my link wants to go to (place mentioned) all the time in the winter – a bit boring really

Trying to convince myself that the person I was linked with still needed me. Very frustrating. I tried to give my best and the person didn't seem to care

Communication with service users – it can be really hard sometimes to understand what's being said. It's frustrating for me and them

I got over committed – it became exhausting – my error

It took a while for family to accept me but we overcame this. Support workers were brilliant with this

f) Volunteers' Satisfaction with the Project

The majority of volunteer respondents are very satisfied with the project with particularly high ratings for training and support/supervision closely followed by matching and the application/selection process. This suggests good relationships between volunteers and staff as these are key areas of interaction. Individual volunteers (2) scored things lower where their match had broken down or they felt that support had tailed off. Others noted the application process or training had been a long time ago so scored 'don't know'.

i) Training

Volunteers were asked specifically to describe the training provided by Interest Link Borders that prepared them for their role and responses were extremely positive.

It was very good and filled in a lot of gaps in my knowledge about learning disabilities. I learnt quite a bit. It was thorough and prepared me for what's happening now

Training was very very thorough. She (Branch Co-ordinator) was very patient. It was probably a lot more intense than I imagined it would be but it needs to be that way

Really good – very informative and ongoing. We dealt with tricky situations and thought about risk assessments before actions

Makes you realise that it's a responsible thing you are doing. Helps you feel able to cope with potential problems. It was very well done – particularly good was the fact that someone on the team had learning disabilities so that helped give the service users' perspective and an insight into what sort of problems people might have to deal with. Lots of humour and very enjoyable

Volunteers also commented on other aspects of the project they had been asked to score their satisfaction on:

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On matching: *I was given every opportunity to be as open and honest as I needed to be – I felt very in control – there was no pressure*

On matching: *Very well done – within a week I was matched with someone local with similar interests*

On support and supervision: *she (Branch Co-ordinator) realises that it's important for volunteers as well as befriender to be interested and happy – I am definitely not abandoned*

	Satisfied					Don't know
	Not at all	-----			Very	
	1	2	3	4	5	
N =15 *= <i>just matched</i>						
Project as a whole				5	10	
Application and Selection Process			1	5	7	2
Training				6	8	1
Matching		1	1	3	9	1*
Support and Supervision			1	1	12	1*

Table 2. Volunteers' Satisfaction with Project

There were some comments that indicate areas where the project could improve:-

On training: *I haven't been to a lot but I have a natural ability to cope*

On training: *I don't think I had much training. It was over 5 years ago.*

On matching: *I was matched with someone who was supposed to be needing help but she was never in when I arranged to visit.*

On support and supervision – *It has kind of dwindled off now. I have moved though so although I still have email / phone contact I haven't had a house visit since I moved*

ii) Support and Supervision

Volunteers were asked which support they had accessed at Interest Link Borders. The results showed that most of the range of support offered was taken up by volunteers with Group Support being the only one where uptake was lower.

Have you chosen to access these forms of support?				
	Yes	No	Don't Know	Comments from Volunteers
1:1 Support	13	1		
Group Support	7	7		<i>Often just a few of us so sometimes a problem</i>
Social events	13	1		
Ongoing training	10	2	2	
Newsletters	14			<i>I get them once a month They are irregular</i>
Expenses	13	1		<i>Monthly and very prompt Good to have a SAE</i>

Table 3. Support Accessed by Volunteers

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Volunteers were asked to describe if there were other ways that Interest Link could support them. Four of the volunteers stated that there was nothing that they had found difficult. The ones who commented in this section all highlighted different issues relating to information, training and support:

I would like to know more about the other volunteers (other than the same ones that you see at social events). I would like more regular updates on number of links/fundraising activities. I would like more advance notice of social events and social events with volunteers and service users

Maybe group support meetings to just generally talk about things would be a good idea

I would have liked to have known a little more about the befriender's behavioural issues before meeting them. It helps you to know how to respond – for example, I would like to have known they were quite excitable

Maybe offer national training qualifications not just in-house

At the end of the survey volunteers were asked to note any other comments that they wanted to make. Most used this as a time to say further positive things about the project.

I'm very happy with the whole experience and have found it very rewarding – I'm genuinely glad I'm involved

I think we're extremely lucky with our Branch Co-ordinator – she is such an easy person to deal with and a great person to meet when I was interested in volunteering. She's great and I'm very impressed with her

No – everything's brilliant and I love it!

The whole thing has been terribly friendly

It's a very well-loved scheme - run really well and people really friendly and it's a really worthwhile scheme - it's difficult to integrate into the Borders as an outsider but this a great way to get involved

So much of this is down to the support staff who make me feel so important and valued. I cannot thank them enough – Interest Link has changed my life and I know I have helped to change theirs. The person I'm linked with has gone from someone who never really went out to someone whose become involved with all sorts of activities.

Interest Link is tremendous – the people who work there are so,so passionate and committed – they make such a difference though they are working in such a difficult field

g) Volunteers' Reasons for Leaving

The project reports that over the past 5 years, 220 volunteers have been linked. 120 are still with the project, though 10 are currently unlinked and 100 have left. Of the

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120 current volunteers: 3 are placement students, 19 are evening class buddies and 98 long term community volunteers.

From the 100 who have left, 30 are placement students and 15 are evening class Buddies who signed on for a short-term commitment. This leaves 55 long term community volunteers who have left.

The figures stated only cover volunteers who have been linked. There were 55 more who were registered but dropped out at some point during training and were never linked.

i) Placement student retention: The project reports that placement volunteer retention has been very poor because a large percentage (varying between 35% and 75%) have dropped out of the college course during the link and so their link ended too. This is of great concern to Interest Link and increasingly tough measures are being taken to limit the impact of this e.g. in 2007-08, students will have 2-3 months preparation before being linked (to date, because they come police-checked and partially trained, the preparation time has been around one month).

ii) Evening class Buddies retention: almost all the volunteers who have left did so in the first two years of the service when it was being run on an ad hoc basis by the branches. Since the Buddies Branch has been in place only one has left. The Branch has meant there is much more of a team feeling among volunteers and this is reflected in retention.

iii) Community volunteer retention: the rate of losses has slowly increased from the birth of the service, from around 5% to the current 10-12%, and the reasons for linked volunteers leaving are almost all down to changes in lifestyle: taking on other commitments, moving away from the area, getting fulltime employment. The pattern has not changed over time. To the project's knowledge none have left because of their experience of the service.

6. PARENTS / CARERS

This section looks at the parents or carers of the people linked at Interest Link Borders, providing some basic profile information, the reason for their involvement, the rewards from being involved, the difficulties they have experienced in the course of their involvement and their satisfaction with the project.

a) Profile of Parents / Carers

The profile of the 10 parents/carers interviewed showed:

- all were women;
- one was a professional carer and nine were family carers;
- nine had one person registered/linked with Interest Link Borders and one had two registered/linked.

b) Reason for Referral

Parents were asked for the main reason why the person they cared for had been referred to Interest Link Borders:

- Six said that it provided opportunities for new social contacts and friendships outside of the family;
- Four noted the disabilities that the person they cared for had (3) or the fact that they lacked confidence (1).

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c) Reward from the Project

Parents and carers were asked what they had found most rewarding about being involved with Interest Link Borders. They spoke of the enjoyment for the cared-for person and of the knock-on effects of this.

Seeing his face light up when thinking about the course

To see their faces when they bring things home that they've made

Widening their circle of friends – the volunteer supports the whole family – it's really nice

It's been rewarding to see him enabled to do something without us. It gives him information he can share with us and gives him more to contribute

d) Difficulties in Involvement

All parents and carers were asked what they had found most difficult about being involved at Interest Link Borders. Seven of the parents/carers reported no difficulties.

- one noted the delay in getting a link or a lack of volunteers (and speculated that it was because of the nature of the disability (*I wish they could find him someone – we're in limbo*))
- one found difficulty in expressing concerns about an 'unsuitable' volunteer to Interest Link Borders (this link is now finished)
- one spoke of transport difficulties with the distance to get to classes

e) Parents' / Carers' Satisfaction with the Project

Results show generally very high levels of satisfaction across the project for parents and carers i.e. the project as a whole, project staff, volunteers and ongoing contact were rated highly. The registration process scored marginally lower but still gained positive comments. Five of the seven lowest scores were from the same respondent.

	Satisfaction					Don't know
	Not at all	1	2	3	4	
N =10						
Project as a whole			1		2	7
Registration process of initial contact				2	2	5
Project staff				1	2	7
Project volunteers	1					9
Ongoing contact from the project			1	1		8

Table 4. Parents' / Carers' Satisfaction with Project

Parents and carers were more satisfied with the level of contact they had with project staff *during the course of the link* than the contact they had *before the link started*. All respondents said they felt they could contact project staff if they had questions or concerns (although one qualified this and said '*not regarding issues with the volunteer*'). No respondents felt that there were aspects of the scheme where they wanted more information.

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	Satisfaction					Don't know N/A
	Not at all	-----			Very	
N =10	1	2	3	4	5	
Before the link started		1	2	1	5	1
During the course of the link	1			1	8	

Table 5. Parents' / Carers' Satisfaction with Project Staff Level of Contact

Whilst the main reasons for referral noted by parents and carers were to provide social support and friendships for service users, other benefits clearly occur as a result of the links. Four of the parent/carers noted that they received respite or support in some way.

It gives my husband and I time to do things on our own – we probably appreciate it more than he does!

I feel like it's a safety net – it's given me support that there's people there if I need them – I'm not on my own anymore

I can have better conversations with them. They are more 'up' for doing different things.

It gives us a break. We don't feel guilty about going out for an outing without them

Further reward for both parents/carers came from knowing there was a new opportunity for service users or directly seeing the enjoyment of service users.

It's brilliant that my daughter has an independent part to her life now

Not a great difference to us, but it's great that he can do something different to the rest of us. It makes life a bit more normal. He's doing something that we're not involved in and learning things which then adds something to conversations

Nice to see him go out with someone else

Parents and carers were given an open opportunity to comment at the end of the survey. Three added further positive comments.

They seem to have got it absolutely right. It's not an instant fix - you don't get a volunteer 'just like that' but it is thought about. I am extremely happy with the way it's worked out

I think that it's great that they get the community to see how other people live

I'd like to say they've been brilliant for me and my son. They do everything they can

7. SERVICE USERS

a) Profile

The service users registered at Interest Link are almost equal numbers of men and women, although 18% more women are linked. The biggest age range represented is 30-60 accounting for nearly two thirds of registrations.

A smaller proportion of service users aged under 30 (16%) are linked than are registered (23%). The reverse is true for service users aged 30 and above where higher percentages are linked than are registered.

Gender	Registered	Linked
Female	49%	59%
Male	51%	41%
Age	Registered	Linked
<30	23%	16%
30-60	64%	69%
60+	13%	16%

Table 6. Profile of Service Users

b) Reason for Referral

Service users were asked why they had got involved with Interest Link. They described their wish to get out more, to meet different people or have company, or to do specific activities.

To get out and about

I wanted someone to do things with

Someone to chum me to college

I wanted to go to the beach

To meet different people

I wanted to do keep fit

I thought it was interesting going out to different places

Get out and do courses (people went on to describe car and bike maintenance, internet, painting and drawing, tai chi amongst other activities)

Most service users reported that they had heard about it from a Branch Co-ordinator i.e. they remembered their first meeting with Interest Link Borders staff rather than any other means of advertising or referral. All were very complimentary about their meetings with Branch staff.

Service users were asked how they would describe Interest Link to other people. They mainly talked in terms of the help it offered in linking with other people and in getting people out.

Help me to get out and about

Very helpful

Help us to get carers

A place where someone can take us out

Finds able-bodied folk for people with learning disabilities

Ask for a buddy or something

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c) Difficulties in Involvement

Service users were asked if there was anything that they didn't like about Interest Link or being with their volunteer (note: the volunteers were there during this session). Most of the comments involved banter with the volunteers and no-one expressed genuine difficulties.

I don't like her driving

She's too cheeky

In another question service users were asked about the role of the Branch Co-ordinators. There seemed to be a good understanding that Interest Link staff members could help in the event of any difficulty.

You can speak to them

If there was a problem I'd tell them I'm not meeting up

I'd speak to her (Branch Co-ordinator) - she'd help me

d) Service Users' Satisfaction with the Project

Service users were asked about the length of time it had taken to be matched. Many did not have a clear memory of this stage of the process. None of the lengths of time mentioned appeared to have felt problematic to the service users on reflection.

On to a second buddy – not long for the first. Four months for the second

A year – it was worth the wait

I had a quick link, then a year then another link

Service users were also asked as to whether the Branch Co-ordinators had made good choices in the links they had been offered. Service users described their link volunteers positively and said that Branch Co-ordinators had made good choices (the volunteers were present at this event):

Yes just what I needed

Made in heaven

A very good choice

I could have said if it wasn't a good match

8. REFERRAL AGENCIES

This section looks at the referral agencies making use of Interest Link Borders. It provides some background on the agencies, their motivations for referring, looks at the difficulties they have experienced in the course of their involvement and looks at their satisfaction with the project.

a) Profile of Referral Agencies

Of the eight referral agencies interviewed:

- three were social work staff, two were linked to voluntary organisations, three worked for forms of supported accommodation;
- three had made 1-5 referrals, two had made 6-10 referrals and three had made more than 10 referrals;
- two had seen less than half of their referrals go on to be matched, two had seen half or more of their referrals go on to be matched, three had seen all of their referrals matched and one had not directly made referrals but had 'inherited' links on taking up a staff post.

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b) Reason for Referral

Referral agencies were asked for the main reason why they had referred people to Interest Link Borders. All of the answers referred in some way to the need to broaden the social networks of people with learning disabilities and/or the opportunity to do activities/hobbies on a different basis than would otherwise happen with paid staff.

People need a friend to share common interests

It enables people to get out, do activities and sustain activities. In a very rural area where local support infrastructure for this is very poor, it empowers vulnerable people whilst staying in their comfort zone

Because people were isolated and wanted something more than a support worker. They want to do a hobby with someone else who is enjoying it – on more of an equal footing

People are very socially isolated and have low self esteem. Interest Link offers 1:1 which helps develop social networks

It makes a difference to users that volunteers aren't paid to spend time with them

c) Difficulties in Involvement

Five of the responding agencies noted that there were no problems.

Nothing. Always accessible and available. Can always discuss concerns

Joint working helps iron out any problems

Two referral agencies noted issues with volunteers:

There are never enough volunteers, so we have to be careful about who we refer

You cannot concoct the perfect volunteer for each client which can be a frustration but this is not a criticism

One noted how difficulties with endings can occur:

It can be difficult for service users when the relationship breaks down or the volunteer leaves – especially people with learning difficulties who might get very attached. It did happen once that a volunteer had to leave suddenly for personal reasons and the service user got very upset

d) Referral Agencies' Satisfaction with the Project

Referral agencies are generally satisfied with the project as a whole, communication, the project staff and volunteers all scoring highly. The referral process was the only area to pick up lower scores as it was perceived by two as 'slow' although in one case this was qualified:

It can be a bit slow. I don't blame them. They're just very thorough and I can see that matching takes time and some clients have very complex learning disabilities and mental health needs.

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Overall the comments were very positive

On the project as a whole:

Such a professional outfit with such a small budget. Very reactive and proactive – a real challenge for small organisations. Really flexible too. We are really fortunate.

On communication between Interest Link and agencies:

Really flexible – mobiles, landlines – they always phone when they say they are going to. Meetings are always inclusive with genuine participation from all concerned.

On project volunteers (some qualified responses although very high satisfaction scores overall)

All very enthusiastic and open and friendly

Some are very good and some are mediocre. The mediocre ones tend not to volunteer for very long

Not always the right age – would be ideal to have better ‘age matches’. It’s also difficult to match geographically

When asked what had been most rewarding about their involvement in the befriending project, the referral agencies talked positively of:

- i) partnership working
- ii) Interest Link’s working practice and
- iii) the experiences and opportunities that their clients had received which would otherwise not have happened.

Some service users are doing college courses. They wouldn’t be doing this otherwise. The relationships are very genuine and really helpful

It’s a very caring organisation and very focused on what it’s trying to achieve. They spend a great deal of time trying to get the match as good as possible

Our agency is about capacity building. Interest Link is a key to helping us do this. They do excellent work and groundwork and are key allies

The ability for us to work together to benefit the people we work with. Interest Link is very flexible and offers opportunities that Social Work could not offer. 1:1 is invaluable for people and better to use volunteers than paid staff sometimes for folks’ self esteem

Seeing the clients take part in successful activities that they enjoyed

The social side of life is opened up for clients. We can watch friendships blossom and see them getting a presence in the community. They meet new people and share life’s highs and lows

It is rewarding all round – tremendous on an individual level but also a massive impact on a whole household. Residents (residential community) get so excited before they go out and are so proud when they come back in – so befrienders are part of all our lives.

	Satisfaction					
	Not at all ----- Very					n/a
N =8	1	2	3	4	5	
Project as a whole				2	6	
Communication between Interest Link and your agency				1	7	
Referral process			3		4	1
Project staff				1	7	
Project volunteers				1	7	

Table 7. Referral Agencies' Satisfaction with Project

9. IMPACT OF THE RELATIONSHIPS

a) Volunteers' Experience of the Relationship

The majority of volunteers have had a good or very good experience and three quarters of volunteers believe that the service users have had a very good experience within their link.

	Quality of Experience					
	Very Bad -----Very Good					Don't know
N =14 (1 too early to comment)	1	2	3	4	5	
For you (the volunteer)		2*	1	2	9	
For the service user	1*	1*	1	4	7	

** these lower scores represent two comments (scored 2) relating to a newly matched volunteer who felt it was early days, and two comments (scored 1 and 2) relating to someone involved in a link that broke down*

Table 8. The Links – A Good or a Bad Experience? – The Volunteers' View

b) Changes Observed in the Service Users by Volunteers

10 of the 15 volunteers interviewed had observed at least some positive change in the person they met with in the course of their link, with a high proportion of links resulting in changes in service users' self confidence, feelings of self-worth/self-esteem and increased involvement in the community.

Three of the volunteers felt it was too early to comment as they were not linked or were about to be linked.

Two volunteers scored all answers as 'don't know's' or 'no'. These 'no' responses were qualified by respondents describing situations where links had broken down or where care circumstances had changed and affected the situation.

Half of the 'don't know's' were expressed by those who felt that they had no baseline to measure against and comment on e.g. observation of family relationships, or by those in new (< 6 month old) links.

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N =12 (3 of 15 were too new to answer this question)	Yes	No	Don't Know	n/a
In general	8	2	2	
To their self confidence	9	2	1	
To their feelings of self worth / self esteem	7	2	3	
To their family relationships	3	2	5	2
To their involvement in the community	7	3	2	

Table 9. Positive Changes in the Service User Observed by the Volunteer

They are much more assertive and talk to other people now

Her communication skills have improved. Her sense of humour is more obvious

They are more confident with money and their social skills are improving

He has been a bit more outgoing – more adept at processing information. Could be that he found the previous course too boring, but he seems to be engaging better with this one because it's more challenging

She's made friends with a lot of people in the two pubs we go to – she enjoys a joke with them...

Before me, she always looked to her mother if you asked her a question. Now she can choose for herself. She's so chatty now – everyone who knows her says it. We make photo albums of everything we do – looking back at the beginning you'd never believe the changes and what we've done

Gradual changes – nothing happened overnight

She can hold a longer conversation with people so they could engage with her more easily – trust has become easier for her too

Through me she joined a film club which we now go to even though our link has finished

It wasn't a positive experience – she didn't enjoy the classes and rather than tell me she wasn't enjoying it she told her doctor which was difficult

c) Changes Observed in Service Users by Parents / Carers

Just over half (6) of parents/carers have observed positive changes in self-confidence and feelings of self-worth/self esteem and family relationships during the time that the service users have been linked with volunteers. Half (5) observed positive changes in every category.

The four respondents observing 'no change' qualified their answers. For two it had been that the relationship had not gone on long enough or had broken down. The other two noted that the service user was very involved already or was confident so was not dependent on the buddy, but also noted that the project 'added another dimension'. Despite this, all four of these respondents had something positive to say when asked what the service user had gained from Interest Link Borders. They

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talked of opportunities, activities and friendships that would otherwise not have taken place.

Enabled him to go to college evening classes, which he would not have been able to do

Enjoyed it tremendously – linked with a younger person. It made a big difference.

Compared with the volunteers, parents/carers are much clearer about whether change has occurred with only one 'don't know' answers.

N =10	Yes	No	Don't Know
In general	6	3	1
To their self confidence	6	4	
To their feelings of self worth / self esteem	6	4	
To their family relationships	6	4	
To their involvement in the community	5	5	

Table 10. Positive Changes in the Service User Observed by Parents/Carers

Parents/carers were asked if there were other positive changes they had seen in the person they cared for as a result of involvement with Interest Link Borders. Three chose to comment positively and the rest did not comment:

His interest in clothes has come back

He feels that there is somebody else who wants to spend time with him – his friend – he has ownership of that relationship. When the rest of his family meet his friend he feels special

More outgoing and sociable than before

d) Changes Observed in Service Users by Referral Agencies

Referral agencies all reported positive changes for the people they have referred to Interest Link Borders with changes being observed in service users' involvement in the community and their self-confidence and self-worth.

N =8	Yes	No	Don't Know
In general	8	0	0
To their self confidence	8	0	0
To their feelings of worth / self esteem	8	0	0
To their family relationships*	5	1	2
To their involvement in the community	8	0	0

Table 11. Positive Changes in Service Users Observed by Referral Agencies

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At a review yesterday the service user called and chaired it themselves. It went really well. A good way of dealing with issues that had arisen, but they wouldn't have thought to do that 2 years ago

One person feels valued for the knowledge that he has gained through classes. They have gained friends....true friends...which a lot of people with learning disabilities don't have

One individual has been able to get past his fear of going out in the evenings and has been supported through that. Interest Link meet people where they're starting from

Social events are really important. One service user said, "It's the first time someone has danced with me". It is great to see people accepted rather than rejected as soon as they walk into a room. People have said "I've got friends at last". There is a real sense of liberation and we must never underestimate this

e) Changes Observed in Service Users by Staff

Staff members had very strong feelings that the service provided was of benefit to service users in providing new opportunities and changing people's social skills and outlook.

Especially males - I see them growing in confidence and learning a healthy approach to boundaries - friendships are forming

They are doing things they wouldn't be able to do otherwise

They are building up confidence tremendously, particularly people who live with their families, who don't attend day centres and have more of an isolated life

At any social events that I go to, I can't help but think it must improve service users' lives especially if they have parent carers

One man who recently got a volunteer – he is on cloud 9 about it – he's so animated if you ask him about it - he's just having a ball

People have definitely got new skills and do things that they didn't have the confidence to do before

People are making choices

People are being creative and have actually made something

Come the evening, people don't have much to do and this can be the night out for the week. You can find their coats are on and they are by the door ½ an hour before the volunteer arrives

Links have given people such a quality of life, having lots of fun, someone they know is going to visit and take them out, someone they can talk to as a friend and they can offload a bit

f) Changes Experienced by the Service Users

i) Being Helped by Interest Link

All service users described ways that the project had helped them. These were with practical tasks or learning new skills, better communication / social skills and getting to new places.

Socialising – especially at night time

Speaking to folk

Meeting people

I went to cooking classes. I like baking cakes. (volunteer went on to explain the service user had a certificate of merit for this). I cook for my mum and dad.

I went to college

I got out more

I wanted to see more of the Borders. It's very hard to get around otherwise.

I made a patchwork cushion for a Christmas present

I meet different people. They're friendly at college.

I like it (went on to describe drawing and painting and trip to Carlisle)

You have a good laugh

Life is busier

It gets you out of your shell – mixing with different people

I enjoyed the friendship day – get along with people

Go to the beach sometimes – have nice days and enjoy myself

ii) Learning

Service users were asked to state what one thing they had learned through their involvement at Interest Link. The range of answers showed that;

i) new practical skills had been learned and

ii) people had greater social awareness and social skills.

How to make a patchwork cushion

I managed to cope in Festival crowds

How to hold a dinner party

Smiling at people – making nice friends

Have respect for those people you are with

Having a good time is very rewarding

Have a good sense of humour

iii) Best Memory

When asked for their best memory, service users gave diverse answers that indicated:

i) the value of particular friendships;

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- ii) the impact of visiting new places or attending special events;
- iii) the feeling of accomplishment from learning new skills; or
- iv) a growth in confidence from trying things they would not have done otherwise.

My birthday was mentioned at the Tattoo

I thoroughly enjoyed her company

The Friendship Day (event for service users and volunteers to celebrate their links)

I was very excited the day I met (link's name) and realised the things I could do and where I could go

Art classes. Some pictures were made into cards and calendars and sold. People said 'what an achievement.'

My first time swimming – I was a wee bit scared at first but not now.... just to get the feeling of water... I used to hold on to the edge but I don't any more.

I went in her car to new Gretna Shopping Centre and to Teviot Water Garden. Seeing different fish and went for a walk

Speaking to people...I've stopped blethering

Princess Anne spoke to me (volunteer explained she presented an award to the project). I've got a photo in my room

iv) General Feelings

Service users were asked to tick against 'smiley face' scales for two questions at different times during the evaluation activity about how they felt before and after being linked. The results show that they regarded themselves as happier having been linked.

How did you feel?	Very Sad	Sad	Neutral	Happy	Very Happy
Before linked	XX	XX	XX	XX	
After linked				XXX	XXXXX

Table 12. Service Users' Feelings Before and After Being Linked

g) Changes Observed in Families by Staff

Staff members felt that by providing a link for a service user, families often gained benefit too. They were asked about the difference that Interest Link makes to families.

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Huge – dealing with younger parents has been a slightly easier ride – they are wanting the service, although we have seen successes with older parents too, we have had to convince people about the service. But great to see those links grow and see them change their lifestyles

One person I know looks after their brother – it lets them go out with friends. They don't feel guilty about going out and leaving him on his own. They know he's out enjoying himself too

Families do say it makes a difference, and in residential accommodation, a senior house manager at Garvald is always raving about volunteers and the impact on the house (staff and other residents). Everyone gets excited about it

Parents or carers will say it's fantastic – it's made such a difference to their son or daughter

h) Changes Observed in Volunteers by Staff

Staff members have seen a clear difference for volunteers as a result of their involvement at Interest Link, gaining skills, confidence and having a way of contributing within the community.

It can be a real boost to their confidence

One volunteer has had a complete career change because of it

They feel they are doing good in community and seeing people grow and develop

Getting skills in training and going on to jobs in care or social work

Doing things that they might like to do but never have time to do it

Volunteers also like the fact they don't meet too often – once a month is common – fits lifestyles without burden or over-committing

Project staff also described volunteers' commitment to the organisation being clear from their participation not just in their link but in other areas of work too

They are willing to come if we tell them its important, for example the Friendship Day - people are dying for another one – it's of value in itself and a way of feeding back to us

10. PROJECT DEVELOPMENTS

This section considers if other services in the Borders could provide what Interest Link does, and looks at potential areas of development for the organisation.

a) Unique Nature of the Project

Volunteers, parents and carers and referral agencies were unanimous in their response when asked what service would be used if Interest Link Borders did not exist. They all concluded that there was no equivalent.

No-one else would go to a rock concert with him (parent)

I don't know (parent)

Nothing – he goes to a centre but it's very insular. Trips out are very institutionalised (parent)

Nothing – she's 48 and there's nothing else out there – she's not 'young' or 'old' (parent)

If funding dried up (for Interest Link) I don't know what we'd do. Our lives would be difficult to say the least. I cannot stress this enough (referral agency)

It would be a real loss if they weren't there (referral agency)

If they weren't there we would have to go back to square one and then it would take ages to set up. It would be awful if they weren't there. I don't want to think about it! (referral agency)

None – it's REALLY important (referral agency)

Nothing – no-one else provides volunteers and a social calendar and friendship (referral agency)

Nothing like Interest Link would offer this service e.g. social outings, things at weekends and evenings. Most other services are just 9-5 Monday –Friday (volunteer)

Because the Borders is so large and communities are so dispersed, without Interest Link Borders these people would have nothing (volunteer)

Staff at residential home might take them in 2s and 3s but not 1:1 (volunteer)

b) Potential Developments

i) Volunteers' Views on Project Developments

The most common comment from volunteers when asked about potential project developments related to the project growing in size, better promotion/profile raising and more social opportunities for volunteers and/or service users.

More volunteers to help more people

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They are fantastic but not well enough known. Need to promote themselves better. Then maybe more people would get involved. Maybe it needs to be emphasised that your expenses are paid and you can do classes. When I tell people they think it sounds a great idea

Recognised qualifications from the training

They are short-staffed like all such schemes but if anything it would be nice to have more social get togethers – good for morale and very social – should be definitely one a term minimum

I would like to see more links and more social things with the links and their volunteers. I would like to see the service expand – I have seen some of my clients at work who would like links but it hasn't happened and they have got disappointed so therefore some of my clients haven't applied again

More social events with other volunteers

Obviously they just need to get more men to volunteer

ii) Parents' / Carers' Views on Project Developments

Seven parents and carers had no comment to make on potential developments.

The three that did, made comments linked to issues raised previously in their surveys relating to transport, a long delay in matching or problems with an individual volunteer.

iii) Referral Agencies' Views on Project Developments

Five referral agencies' responses when asked what developments they would like to see, revolved around increasing the number of volunteers and links available, shortening the waiting time, formalising volunteer training and broadening the range of people worked with.

More volunteers with a wider spectrum of interests

I would love them to grow if at all possible and have even more volunteers. Maybe advertise themselves as advocates as well

I would like to see more links and links being made more quickly. I know someone who has waited nearly a year and is now not interested. Some service users can forget they asked for a link. It's not Interest Link's fault – they do stress that there could be a long wait but sometimes people with learning difficulties don't understand.

The time taken is because Interest Link are thorough

It would be fantastic if they could work with other client groups e.g. younger children or people with mental health problems. It's a good model and it would be great to learn from this

Linking with College and offering accredited training to volunteers – especially those doing volunteering for career purposes. A better volunteering package might lead to a better quality of volunteer and the possibility of different ages of volunteers

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It would be great to get younger volunteers too e.g. people on gap years or 16/17 year olds using it for a career development path. Could they explore and expand links with high schools? Most volunteers are middle aged women or retired men – not all service users fit these age groups. It can be a deterrent to referring people

I can't think of how it could be better – it's such a good organisation. Everyone is so dedicated and it really does meet all our needs. Interest Link are so good at coming up with new initiatives themselves and whatever they say they're going to do really does happen and it happens in a way where the people in my community are really empowered. Interest Link are amazing – I really admire the quiet and effective way that they just get on with things.

It's like a nice warm front room with a comfy chair and a fire on! Really friendly, welcoming and relaxed. They are just great and really helpful. More of the same please!

iv) Service Users' Views on Project Developments

Service users were asked for their ideas on what developments Interest Link Borders should look at for the future. Their responses all focused on more group activities that brought service users and volunteers together socially or for training.

Another Friendship Day

A trip to Alnwick Gardens

A bus run in the summer to St.Mary's Loch

First Aid course (update it)

Waiting list people could join in group activities

Burns Supper or a Christmas dinner – have a piper piping in the haggis

v) Staff Members' Views on Project Developments

Staff did not have particularly strong views about developments or changes that the organisation needed. The most common areas discussed were:

- i) the capacity of the project to support more people
- ii) the need to improve the existing service
- iii) training for volunteers and service users

We should improve on the service all the time and give people what they need

We need more volunteers

There would be perfect justification for working longer hours but there's not the funding, so a slight frustration that it could be developed further

To do it properly and increase the numbers of links I would need more backup but that would be great

More training from outside for volunteers e.g. moving and handling, 1st aid, or things for service users

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Get volunteers to give us ideas – move experienced volunteers to another level

The Buddies service was seen as the area that still had particular potential to move in new directions, but only given appropriate resourcing.

Buddies is at a point at where it can't grow within a 20 hrs staff post

Development of daytime classes or community classes is a natural next step although sometimes there are no concessions

Many of the Branch Co-ordinators mentioned the fact that they were about to start meeting every two months as a means of peer support, adding to the existing more formal staff meeting involving the manager. Staff appeared to be eagerly looking forward to these meetings as a way of further cementing the support and exchange of experience between already valued staff team.

This will be creative and supportive and will bond people into a cohesive group

11. LEARNING AND ACTION FROM PREVIOUS EVALUATION

The 2004 evaluation listed 37 recommendations across 9 headings. Interest Link Borders has addressed all of the recommendations, acting in some way upon each of them (see Appendix A for full detail). Examples of areas of strategic development and working practice that have been explored and addressed are as follows.

a) Scale of the project:

- review of staff / match ratios
- discussion with peers in other projects regarding funding packages

b) Project developments / funding packages

- developing contacts / campaigns to improve numbers of male and younger volunteers
- securing funding relating to sporting activities and respite care
- review approach to fundraising
- introduce information to funding applications
- quantifying demand for people with severe learning disabilities in nursing homes and giving consideration to service development in this area

c) Staff support / communication

- staff training needs analysed
- external supervision arranged for Project Co-ordinator
- staff / Branch Co-ordinator meeting structure reviewed and improved

d) Volunteer recruitment

- action taken to increase number of male volunteers
- action taken to increase number of younger volunteers

e) Waiting list management

- new group activities developed to help to address this

f) Evaluation

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- Buddies scheme evaluated

g) Introducing new procedures:

- link reviews where professional carers are involved
- core competency training enabling 1:1 training
- new feedback form produced for service users
- service user registration forms re-written

h) Strategic placement:

- links / presentation to Scottish Executive
- representation on Learning Disabilities Service Providers Group

i) Nature of relationships:

- group / day activity opportunities introduced
- discussions with holiday-providing projects to assess applicability for Interest Link Borders

12. CONCLUSIONS

Although most adults with learning disabilities now live in the community, many are still socially excluded as they have no social contacts outside their family or day centre, no experience of making friends and no transport. This is frustrating, isolating and limiting; they cannot pursue interests, participate in mainstream community activities, make choices, gain skills or develop independence. Interest Link Borders aims to provide 1:1 relationships which support adults with learning disabilities to pursue activities and interests. This evaluation has found that in achieving these aims, Interest Link Borders is running a unique, highly professional and popular service that is valued by all stakeholders.

Since it was last evaluated in 2004, the project has maintained its Borders-wide presence and continued to develop namely through the expansion of its Buddies service to support more people into college placements, through the support of care student placements and the creation of supported employment placements for adults with learning disabilities.

Key conclusions are as follows:

Interest Link Borders has grown in confidence as an organisation, looking beyond the traditional model of 1:1 long term befriending and successfully piloting and formalising new services including Buddies (evening class volunteers), sourcing and supporting care placements for young students and providing work opportunities for people with learning disabilities.

Interest Link Borders has a highly motivated and enthusiastic staff team who are respected by all stakeholders at the project

Interest Link Borders successfully serves the people it aims to support
People with learning disabilities are referred for reasons which match the project's aim, namely in order to broaden the social networks of people with learning disabilities and/or to have access to activities and interests which would otherwise not be available. It appears that there is a good understanding of what the project is there to do (lessening the incidence of inappropriate referrals), and that there are good working relationships with a range of referral agencies who think highly of the project.

Interest Link Borders attracts people into volunteering and into working with people with learning disabilities

Half of the volunteers interviewed had not volunteered before in their local community, and the project is therefore succeeding locally in bringing people into volunteering who had not previously been involved.

Interest Link satisfies its volunteers' motivations for getting involved and frequently provides unexpected additional personal reward

Volunteers gain reward from seeing service users enjoying their activities. This matches their motivation for volunteering in the first place, which is often about wanted to be useful or to help others. In addition volunteers have themselves gained additional social benefits (particularly for people new to the area) and for a small minority their volunteering has had an impact on their career choice or development.

Interest Link Borders' volunteers have a good experience throughout their involvement at Interest Link

Volunteers report high levels of satisfaction with the project, across all aspects of procedures (e.g. application and selection, training and matching) with training viewed as thorough (and necessarily so) and well-presented.

The support and supervision provided for volunteers scored particularly highly. There is a range of uptake of some of the support on offer (as would be found at most schemes where some support is optional). Overall there were occasional anomalies where one or two individual volunteers seemed unaware of support available or reported markedly different experience from the norm. Few difficulties are experienced by volunteers in the course of their links.

Parents and carers feel well served and supported by Interest Link Borders

Parents and carers were very satisfied with the project with staff and processes being ranked highly. The registration process scored lower (although still scored well) Some individual situations rank satisfaction very low because of their experience of a long wait or a failed link.

Just under half of the parents/carers reported the respite or support was a definite by product of Interest Link's support for their family member. This was not a reason for referral but was much appreciated.

People with learning disabilities experience positive change as a result of meeting with Interest Link volunteers

Positive changes for service users had occurred according to two thirds of volunteers, particularly in their self-confidence, their feelings of self-worth and their involvement in the community.

Referring agencies unanimously see positive changes for the people supported, primarily in the areas of self-confidence and feelings of worth/self esteem and their involvement in the community.

Half of parents and carers report positive changes but all see value in service users' involvement with Interest Link. Even for those service users who were already seen as confident or engaged in activities, Interest Link added another dimension to their lives according to their parents/carers.

The service users themselves speak very positively of their links with volunteers and the fact that these relationships enable them to undertake activities which they might not otherwise do.

Volunteers generally report good or very good experiences from their links and believe that the adults with whom they are matched are also experiencing this. Interest Link Borders is therefore achieving the aims it sets itself in positively influencing the lives of people with learning disabilities and the people closest to

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them in terms of improving personal independence, social wellbeing, reduced isolation and improved family and community relationships.

Interest Link Borders is seen by referral agencies as an irreplaceable key ally, with respected staff, working practices and volunteer relationships that lead to genuine improvements in the lives of people with learning disabilities

Interest Link Borders presents few difficulties or problems to its stakeholders in general. A very small minority of individuals (volunteers, parents/carers or referral agencies) who have experienced problems with long waiting times or difficult matches are the only ones who express any dissatisfaction

Interest Link Borders provides a unique, personal, informal and highly valued service for people with learning disabilities that is not on offer from any other agency

The project is seen by all parties as unique in the Borders. Alternative forms of support were understood simply not to be available and Interest Link Borders is therefore viewed by volunteers, referral agencies and parents and carers alike as being irreplaceable by any other current service. Most groups interviewed would like to see more adults with learning disabilities supported by the project.

Interest Link Borders is organisationally very well-connected and makes every effort to link with key players locally through its committee structure, in the wider learning disabilities field in the Borders and at a national level

Interest Link Borders has developed its practice, procedures and outlook based on its previous external evaluation and it can rightly claim to have safe, competent practice of quality from its recent award of Approved Provider Standard for Mentoring and Befriending Projects

Interest Link Borders faces the same challenge as other voluntary organisations of maintaining existing services while faced with demands to expand

There will be a continued need for the services provided by Interest Link Borders in years to come from many of those already supported, and further need yet to be addressed from people with learning disabilities who have not yet accessed the service

In summary this evaluation concludes that Interest Link Borders is a well-managed and well-respected organisation which offers unique services of value to people with learning disabilities that enhance their lives and broaden their horizons

13. RECOMMENDATIONS

a) Sustaining Current Work / Developing in the Future

- i) Concentrate efforts initially on sustaining the current highly valued services before further developments are considered
- ii) Consider any future developments by utilising 'Investing in Ideas' (Big Lottery Fund small grant) allowing work to be commissioned to explore potential and practicality e.g. exploring alternative ways of involving young volunteers *see below

b) Supported Employment Placements:

Consider the potential for further development of these successful placements in terms of the capacity within Interest Link to provide tasks and support for those in placement

c) Student Placements

Continue to monitor closely this area of work and in particular review the success of planned steps to address difficulties already identified by the organisations. Particularly consider the impact on staff time (for already busy part time posts) of this piece of work and do a form of cost/benefit analysis to decide on its future

d) Involving Young People*

Explore other methods of involving young people:

i) Project Scotland (full time volunteers 16-25) – consider Interest Link's capacity to create and support a Project Scotland placement that could support a number of younger service users (*there is currently only one volunteering option of any kind registered in the whole of the Borders on the Project Scotland website*)

ii) Advertising pursue possible advertising opportunities through Scottish and Borders-specific young peoples' resources and groups e.g. www.youngscot.org.uk, www.dialogueyouth.org, Borders Youth Theatre, Borders Youth Orchestra and through any work/initiatives being done to encourage and develop citizenship in schools

iii) Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme – explore opportunities to access younger volunteers through the community service aspect of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme (*Gold Award is for 16-25 age range and service is weekly for one year*)

iv) Contact with Befriending Projects with higher proportions of younger volunteers – explore successful strategies used by other befriending projects who have higher levels of younger volunteers

e) Recruitment Possibilities

i) New to the Area

Consider ways of advertising volunteering with Interest Link Borders specifically to people who are new to the area (the social/integration opportunity has been highly valued by current volunteers who were in this position)

ii) Former Contacts

Review the follow-up done with the volunteers who pulled out before being linked to ensure that they are aware of developments at the project e.g.

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Buddies. A proportion of those previously expressing an interest in Interest Link may be attracted back by new opportunities.

f) Consistency of Support

Explore the consistency of support currently being offered to the volunteers across the organisation, perhaps through the reinstated staff meeting structure (e.g. to look at Interest Link branches consistency in providing groups, ongoing training, newsletters, expenses, 1:1 support) (*as there are indications of a minority of volunteers missing out / being unsure of support options*)

g) Refresher Training

Consider the need for / value of increased refresher training for long term volunteers who have not accessed training for some time (or who experienced very different training when they joined, to that which is now provided to volunteers)

h) Staff Meeting

Set down basic principles for what the re-instated extra bimonthly staff meeting for Branch Co-ordinators is there to achieve and plan agenda items, experience-sharing and branch comparisons for discussion to ensure maximum benefit from this means of support.

Include a review / comment on this evaluation as part of staff team discussion / project review and development.

i) Events

Review the organisation's overall approach to social, training and joint service user / volunteer events in terms of frequency, time resources and value to participants and plan a project-wide calendar of events as a result.

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Appendix A

Recommendations in 2004 independent evaluation and actions taken

RECOMMENDATIONS

The project is doing an excellent job at providing a valuable service for people with learning disabilities. It has also positioned itself well and worked hard at developing its profile and securing support and should strive to maintain this strong position.

As Interest Link Borders considers how to structure itself for the next period of time (2004-2007) it should consider the value of bringing local committees together for a 'visioning day', ensuring that all are informed and 'on board' for the next stage of the project. This day should be informed by statistical analysis including profiles of service users and volunteers, levels of demand, and demand from those outwith current project criteria.

As it plans its development, the main areas that Interest Link Borders must explore are:

- **The potential demand from its constituency:** there is a gender and age mismatch between the service users referred and the project's volunteers, and the demand for support is much larger than current resources can cope with and could continue to grow;
- **The maximum number of links that a staff member can manage;** staff are already managing numbers that are close to good practice recommendations, therefore the project should determine what its limits should be in order not to overstretch resources and affect the quality of service;
- **The funding options that are available;** there are a finite number of times that the same larger trusts will support the project and even with local authority support the project should proceed with further development with caution in order to remain at a sustainable level;

Recommendations relating to these areas of work are detailed overleaf. In addition there are other recommendations for exploring current practice based on conclusions from the surveys undertaken or from some of the weaknesses in the project identified by staff and committee members.

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a) Increasing the Scale of the Project	
i) Consider carefully the maximum caseloads of links relating to current staff hours and to potentially increased staff hours (with reference to the Code of Practice ¹ and the experience of other befriending projects), relating these to the level of good practice the project wishes to aim for (training, supervision etc.)	Maximum capacity has been judged at 25 links for a branch with a Co-ordinator working 20 hours (Central Borders, Roxburgh & Tweeddale) and 30 links where there is an assistant co-ordinator working 6 links (Berwickshire and Buddies). This is in slightly of the Code of Practice but reflects many links operating on a monthly or weekly basis rather than weekly.
ii) Base the scale of the project for the next 3 years and the targets mentioned in any funding proposals on i)	Done
iii) Contact other similarly sized befriending projects e.g. COVEY, bfriends, re their recent experience and the difficulties and potential methods in sustaining larger befriending projects	<p>Done. COVEY raise funds from similar sources to Interest Link: Trusts, Big Lottery Fund and the local Council.</p> <p>bfriends has Children 1st as a parent body, which provides it with community fundraising capacity. In particular, people have raised money for bfriends through sponsored walks and other events.</p> <p>Interest Link has developed its community fundraising beyond small branch events over the last year, to include telephone recycling, an annual raffle, a 'Friends' scheme, providing catering at Kelso Races and donations from employers whose staff volunteer. We have a staff member running the Blackpool half-marathon in June 2007, and would hope to encourage other supporters to undertake similar events.</p> <p>The experience of community fundraising is that it is usually successful, raises morale, is good publicity for the service and has a lot of potential to be developed further. At present the sums raised are small in comparison to trust and other grants and there is a long way to go before this gap is closed.</p>
b) Project Developments / Funding Packages	
i) Consider the potential for packaging the increased recruitment of younger volunteers and of more men as areas of development which may attract funding, and which might be viewed as innovative across the befriending field	Younger volunteers have been recruited though the Borders College student placement scheme. This has not yet needed to be separately fundraised for.
ii) Consider the opportunity to package support options for service users who are on	Done: Sports Relief funding has been secured in 2006 and 2007

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waiting lists as a funding development addressing unmet need	for group sports activities including Central Borders football and swimming groups. These use a small number of existing volunteers in group befriending with 6-8 service users.
iii) Explore options for respite care funding recognising that the project has an impact on the quality of life of carers (refer to experience of befriending projects which have been successful in this)	Done: Scottish Borders Council funding includes an element drawn from the Short Breaks budget. Funding has been secured from Trusts such as Four Acre Trust which focus on respite.
iv) Consider geographical areas not currently reached by the project and the opportunity to package these as a project development for funders	Done: This would only apply to growth outside the Borders: there are no funders who would prioritise particular parts of the Borders for funding. At the same time, the only geographical area not previously reached in the Borders, around Eyemouth in Berwickshire, has been fully engaged over the last year.
v) Consider opportunities to develop specific work with male service users to address the imbalance between registered users and male volunteers and package these as a project development for funders	Done Adverts specifically aimed at men have been placed, with some success at remedying the imbalance. Funding opportunities in this area are not apparent.
vi) Consider fundamental changes to how fundraising is undertaken at the project to avoid over-reliance on trust funds e.g. consider the feasibility of employing fundraisers (refer to befriending projects that have used these resources), of developing 'friends of' schemes, of seeking out individual donors, and of undertaking large scale fundraising events	Done: Project Committee considered the feasibility of sub-contracting to fundraisers but decided to develop the capacity in-house: see a) iii) above. Approaching high net worth individual donors and organising large scale fundraising events is the next logical step for local fundraising to take.
vii) Consider training for the Project Co-ordinator to assist in broadening his fundraising experience beyond trusts	This has been achieved through the purchase of books and subscriptions to fundraising magazines.
viii) Package anonymised evidence gathered in reviews on the difference that befriending has made in people's lives for use in funding applications	Done: Case studies have been produced by each branch for use in publicity and fundraising.
ix) Ensure that any request for funding to Borders Council shows how much charitable funding has been brought into the area for this work to date	Done
x) Funding proposals should stress the management structure as being innovative and responding to geographical challenges as well as involving carers and users	Done
xi) Discuss with the Scottish Executive about their interest in supporting local work of national significance and explore the potential for Interest Link to be supported as an example of a replicable project	Submissions and presentations have been made to the Scottish Executive's The Same as You? Implementation Group in 2006.

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<p>xii) Quantify the potential demand from those outwith the current service criteria who have tried to access the project: people with physical disabilities, people with mental health problems, people with severe learning disabilities, and use this information in Committee 'visioning' day</p>	<p>Done: Provision for those with severe learning disabilities who live in nursing homes has been developed through group volunteering.</p> <p>The Project Committee has agreed that given the extremely challenging environment in which the existing service operates, and its marked and unique success in doing so, it is preferable to concentrate skills and resources upon it.</p> <p>It has been made clear to Scottish Borders Council and other organisations who have enquired that services for other user groups would be explored if there was a realistic possibility of funding for them. However, the expertise of Interest Link is in learning disabilities: services for other user groups would require new committees and new staff.</p>
<p>c) Staff Support and Communication</p>	
<p>i) Undertake basic training needs analysis for staff and build into programme for next three years and fundraise for this as a specific item</p>	<p>Done.</p>
<p>ii) Explore potential value of additional support / personal development for staff e.g. through external supervision</p>	<p>Done: External supervision arranged for Project Co-ordinator, reflecting the difficulty of line-management by the Project Committee alone. Internal supervision and support systems for other staff have been strengthened and fully embedded.</p>
<p>iii) Review frequency of staff meetings and consider the addition of occasional case study / procedure review meetings by Teleconference using Community Network</p>	<p>Done: bi-monthly staff meetings now supplemented by Branch Co-ordinator's bi-monthly meetings.</p>
<p>d) Volunteer Recruitment</p>	
<p>i) Consider introduction of specific campaigns/approaches to increase numbers of male volunteers (and explore fundraising potential of this development)</p>	<p>Done: see b)v) above</p>
<p>ii) Consider introduction of specific campaigns/approaches to increase numbers of younger (<age 30) volunteers (and explore fundraising potential of this)</p>	<p>Done: see b)i) above</p>
<p>e) Waiting List Management</p>	
<p>i) Review current approach to informing and including service users on the waiting list to ensure that this area of work is being handled as sensitively as possible</p>	<p>Done: events for unlinked service users have been increased: Group befriending such as the Central Borders football,</p>

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	swimming and storytelling groups and the Roxburgh Caledonian Group. Training events such as First Aid and Personal Safety Social events such as the Berwickshire quarterly discos
ii) Explore approaches adopted by other befriending projects to waiting lists	Done: approaches implemented as above.
f) Evaluation	
i) Evaluate Buddies Scheme prior to discussing developments for the future. Review the responses of volunteers, service users and colleges to the first year of work	Done: evaluation available on project website.
ii) Explore options from Borders Council for financial support to assist in above evaluation	Evaluation carried out internally.
g) Project Procedures	
i) Consider review of the current same-gender matching policy in order to make the provision of service more even for males and females	Done: Policy reviewed and decision made that mixed-gender links can be made in specific circumstances when appropriate.
ii) Review current practice in maintaining contact with professional carers once links are established to ensure good communication is maximised.	Done: annual face-to-face link review introduced involving service user, carer, volunteer and Branch Co-ordinator.
iii) Review how best to balance the need to provide training for all volunteers with the mixed experience and abilities that a volunteer group will present with	Done: Core competencies for volunteers have been produced to enable 1:1 training by Co-ordinators where group training not available or appropriate.
iv) Review procedures of gaining feedback from service users on links	Done: New feedback form produced, and included with newsletter mailings.
v) Review procedures for risk assessments	Done: Risk assessment training refreshed and procedures re-examined.
vi) Explore opportunity of reviewing a different project procedure in two-monthly teleconferences involving staff team	Done: through bi-monthly Co-ordinator meetings per c) iii) above.
vii) Review method of providing training volunteers with different levels of experience e.g. fast track training for more experienced volunteers	Done: See g) iii) above.
viii) Review service user registration forms to ensure they are at an appropriate level	Done: forms re-written extensively over past two years.
h) Strategic Placement	
i) Maintain current contacts with Borders Council and other key players in the learning disabilities field in order to be best placed for gaining support for future developments	Done: Project Co-ordinator now sits on Learning Disabilities Service Providers Group.
ii) Improve contacts with Scottish Executive highlighting that Interest Link is providing an	Done: see b) xi) above

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innovative service which could provide an example for other local authorities	
iii) Ensure that Borders Council is aware of the role it could play in supporting a nationally innovative project	Done.
i) Nature of Relationships	
i) Explore opportunities/practicalities for day activities as suggested by service users	Done: Group befriending initiatives and social & training events developed to address this: see e) i) above.
ii) Explore opportunities for weekend breaks / holidays as suggested by service users gathering information from Alternative Scheme for Holiday Aspirations (ASHA) (Edinburgh)	Done: Discussions with ASHA indicate that their volunteers are paid and that the service inevitably involves the provision of personal care. Currently Interest Link volunteers do not deliver any personal care and staff are not qualified to train or supervise provision of personal care. Extending the service in this direction would require a separate project that could deliver these aspects.

**This report was compiled by Mike Nicholson, Development Manager,
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