



The Value of People

**An Evaluation of
Interest Link Borders**

by



November 2010

I'm looking at my son here.... if he's been out with pals it's his face...the difference that you can see....that's more important than any elaborate thing you could put money into (parent of service user)

Here if anyone made a mistake you laughed with them (service user)

I have realised that people with learning disabilities are capable of achieving a lot more than I first imagined and want to achieve to a high level in everything they participate in. (volunteer)

... it gives him something to look forward to - on Wednesday they (young people's group) went to see a DVD. X (service user) probably couldn't see it, but in that company and everyone laughing and giggling... he had got dressed up...he had the best jacket on. They went for pizza afterwards; he had a fantastic night. You can't do much better than that... when somebody is waiting at the door ready to go and when he comes back and relates everything that's going on - you can't knock that (parent of service user)

With one young man it's unbelievable how he is gaining in confidence all the time – he's doing things he had never done in his life before; he's absolutely thriving. He thoroughly looks forward to seeing his buddy and is full of smiles whenever he's talking about it. It's just phenomenal for him to achieve these things compared to years ago (referral agency)

At the night class he found some things taxing, like measuring wood. But at end of the day we had a table; he had never done that before in his life (volunteer)

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on behalf of Befriending Network Scotland www.befriending.co.uk

1. Interest Link Borders: Project Information

a) Background

Interest Link Borders was founded in Berwickshire in 1990 in order to provide 1:1 volunteer support for adults with learning disabilities, enabling them to undertake social and leisure activities of their choice.

In 2001 the project expanded to cover the whole of the Scottish Borders through branches in Duns, Galashiels, Hawick and Peebles. This followed the findings of a feasibility study which had shown the need for its services to be more widespread. In 2003 the project began its Buddies initiative, providing opportunities for people with learning disabilities to access educational opportunities through community education classes through the support of volunteers.

Since then the project has further expanded in 2007 to provide peer mentoring for young people with learning disabilities through a fortnightly young people's group, and in late 2009 through the pilot of 1:1 support for children with learning disabilities aged 11-15.

b) Need

Interest Link Borders aims to address the fact that although most people with moderate and severe learning disabilities now live in the community, they are often excluded from it, with few social contacts outside their family, day centre or school, little experience at making friends, or too many barriers such as difficulties in accessing transport. This is frustrating, isolating and limiting for these individuals and results in them being unable to pursue interests, participate in mainstream community activities, make choices, gain skills or develop independence.

The need which Interest Link Borders meets is therefore a fundamental one; the need for each individual to have friends; to have someone who takes an interest in them; to have fun with other people; and to gain all of the related benefits that these bring, for example greater self esteem and self worth and an opportunity to participate and contribute as fully as they can in their communities and families.

c) Aims

Interest Link Borders' aim is to improve the quality of life of people with learning disabilities in the Scottish Borders through its services. This is achieved by people having the opportunity to pursue leisure and social activities of their choice in the community and in so doing, forming friendships with the volunteers they meet.

Interest Link Borders intends the improved quality of life outcomes of these links to include people acquiring social and practical skills, improving in self-confidence and gaining a greater sense of independence. Furthermore, Interest Link Borders 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.

d) Outcomes

The outcomes which Interest Link Borders is working to achieve are that as a result of its work:

- service users will have improved confidence, self esteem and life skills
- service users will benefit from increased physical & mental wellbeing
- the shared activities and positive contact involved in befriending will help to break down the barrier between the disabled and the non-disabled, begin to change public attitudes and help to reduce social isolation and exclusion
- respite will be provided for families and carers of service users
- volunteers will develop personally from the experience

e) Services Provided by Interest Link Borders

e) i) The **Adult Service** links people with learning disabilities on a 1:1 basis with compatible volunteers so that they can meet up regularly for activities they both enjoy.

Typical activities include going to evening classes, playing golf, painting, bird watching, shopping, swimming, having coffee, horse riding, playing football or going to the cinema or a concert

The service has 285 registered users and 110 volunteers. At any one time around 110 links are in operation and a total of around 150 links operate over a year.

There are 3 types of link:

- long term community links. These have no time limits. Regularity of meeting up varies from once a week to once a month.
- evening class links. These are limited to a term at a Borders College or community class.
- student placement links: Care students from Borders College are placed as volunteers from September to March.

e) ii) The **Young People's Service** supports young people aged 16-25 who are in transition from childrens' to adults' learning disabilities services. Members typically stay in the service for 1-2 years before moving to the Adult Service.

There are 4 staff-supervised groups, each of 6 young service users and 6 young volunteer mentors, meeting fortnightly.

In addition to social and leisure activities, there are personal development workshops in drama, dance, art, music and citizenship.

e) ii) The **Children's Service Pilot** is running from September 2009 to March 2011 enabling children aged 11-16 who have complex learning needs to access mainstream out-of-school activities through 1:1 links with adult volunteers.

The project aims to make 12-16 links during the pilot period.

The three services benefit 180-190 people with learning disabilities each year.

f) The Use of Supportive Relationships

Interest Link Borders has opted for the model of supportive relationships (befriending and peer mentoring) between volunteers and service users because they believe that:

- service users' relationships with their volunteers have a very special quality, because the volunteers are there *out of choice* rather than because they are paid or feel an obligation. This is often the only such relationship a person with learning disabilities has and makes a huge impact on their quality of life and outlook.
- volunteers are drawn from service users' communities and are the ideal agents to enable their participation and integration in those communities.
- for young people, a peer mentoring group is the only way to bring them into contact with non-disabled peers who can act as role models, broaden their horizons and explore the choices open to them.

g) Management and delivery

Interest Link Borders' Board and Branch Committees are made up of service users, carers, volunteers and representatives of local statutory and voluntary agencies.

The organisation operates its 3 services as a single project, managed by the Project Co-ordinator and delivered locally in 4 different areas (Berwickshire, Roxburgh, Central and Tweeddale) by the four Branch Co-ordinators. The services dovetail, enabling service users to progress naturally through them as they get older e.g. from young peoples groups to adult 1:1, while retaining their relationship with their Branch Co-ordinator.

Funding is mainly raised from the Big Lottery Fund, Scottish Borders Council and a number of grant-making trusts. This is supplemented by local fundraising, for example through events.

h) Recognition

Interest Link Borders is well-recognised locally but also as a long-standing and innovative project within Befriending Network Scotland (the national network of befriending projects) and as one of the leading examples of practice for befriending projects supporting people with learning disabilities.

Interest Link Borders' practice has been recognised through the Approved Provider Standard (quality award for mentoring and befriending services) which it gained in 2010 and its work with volunteers was recognised by the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2006. Two previous evaluations by Befriending Network Scotland have found the project to be well organised and very popular with all stakeholders.

2. The Evaluation

a) Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation exercise lay in Interest Link Borders wanting to:

- assess whether the project is achieving its planned outcomes
- assess the need for services in the future
- assess the prospects for developing the Children's Service (e.g. enlarging it and extending it to work with younger children)

Additionally the project was keen to check whether the procedures which had achieved a quality standard were seen by stakeholders as being appropriately delivered.

b) Methodology

The evaluation consisted of surveys designed to meet the evaluation purpose. Where appropriate the same questions were asked across different stakeholder groups e.g. respondents' views on impacts on service, enabling opinion on the same issues to be cross checked.

The evaluation sought to gather information from people involved in all 3 Interest Link Borders projects and consisted of surveys or discussions with:

- 36 volunteers across all three projects (16 by email and 20 by phone)
- 13 parents / carers across all three projects (4 by email and 9 by phone)
- 13 referral agencies across all three projects (1 by email and 12 by phone)
- 18 service users (face to face meetings with 3 young people and 2 adult service users, informal discussions with 5 young people at a group social event with volunteers, meeting a group of 8 at a day centre)

- 5 staff (by phone)

The volunteers interviewed were 25 women and 9 men and included those who had been involved with Interest Link Borders from its earliest days (over 12 years), to those who had been involved in just a few months worth of volunteering. 21 of them had been involved for 1-3 years and 15 for more than 3 years. The volunteers represented all 3 projects and across all area offices.

The referral agency representatives interviewed included Scottish Borders Council staff (accessibility, transitions and learning disabilities staff), teaching and learning support staff from schools and college, a community nurse with learning disabilities speciality, housing association staff, a residential community manager, nursing home staff and a work placement co-ordinator for people with learning disabilities. Their experience of Interest Link Borders ranged from those who had had a connection with the organisation since its earliest days through to those who had become involved in the last 2 years as the developments for young people and children had begun. Some had seen just one match through to those who had seen 7 or 8 links with service users. 5 of the representatives have current involvement on a Branch Committees of Interest Link Borders.

The parents and carers interviewed and service users interviewed included those involved across all 3 projects and again included those with long term experience of seeing the person they care for using Interest Link services, through to those who care for service users who have just had their first few meetings with a volunteer.

The staff interviewed were the four Branch Co-ordinators and the Project Co-ordinator.

The service users interviewed included those from the young people's service and the adult 1:1 service, including some who were waiting to be linked.

Other work which took place included research into relevant regional and national policy and strategy documents.

3. Results: Volunteers Involvement with Interest Link

a) Activities

Volunteers described what they did with Interest Link. A small sample of responses is as follows:

Different activities every fortnight. We've done things like drama workshops, discos, dance workshop and crazy golf (young people's group)

I meet 1:1 as part of the children's project – we might go feeding the ducks, go to MacDonalDs, go to the cinema – I let her decide

befriending 1:1 with an adult; we go to the pictures, go swimming, go for a meal or a game of pool or snooker; it's dependent on what he would like

I'm linked 1:1; we go for coffee, we go on shopping trips to other towns... virtually everything really

I have befriended an older person who is wheelchair bound. We do some flower arranging, make jewellery, make collages, sew, make cards, read stories and magazines, have nail painting sessions, make Easter and Christmas decorations. Sometimes we go out in her car to a local craft centre with the help of one of the resident carers.

There's not been a typical week - hip hop, graffiti workshop, DVD nights, hot dogs and ice cream, cinema - sometimes the Interest Link staff decide or we'll chat as a group. We're up for anything.

Volunteers described their frequency of involvement in a range from weekly to monthly. This is dependent on a number of factors including the availability of the volunteer and the service user, the geographical distance between two linked people (which if great can prevent frequent meetings), or in the case of the young people's project because they are working to a fortnightly programme of activities.

b) Finding out about Interest Link

Volunteers were asked how they had first heard about Interest Link Borders. Local press and word of mouth were the most frequent source of the information which had led to volunteers getting involved (accounting for two thirds of those interviewed). The full list of starting points for volunteers finding out about Interest Link Borders and getting involved was:

- Volunteer Centre (1)
- Interest Link website (1)
- Knowledge of Interest Link from a work setting (3)
- Events (3)
- School / college presentation (5)
- Family or friends (8)
- Local newspapers (15)

c) The appeal of Interest Link

Volunteers were asked what had attracted them to Interest Link, as opposed to the other volunteering opportunities in the Scottish Borders. Attraction to some of the practicalities of the project, the opportunity to work with people with learning disabilities and the chance to do 1:1 work or to work with young people, accounted for more than two thirds of the volunteers. The full list of why Interest Link had appealed to volunteers was as follows:

- looked like fun (1)
- interest in being part of a group (1)
- interest in pursuing a specific interest (hobby) as part of volunteering (1)
- chance to gain care-related experience (2)
- it was by chance / it had no specific appeal (2)
- interest in working with young people (4)
- interest in doing 1:1 work (5)
- interest in working with people with learning disabilities (8)
- the concept of the project or practicalities of the project (11)

I wanted to work with children with learning disabilities or challenging behaviour. I do work in childcare but I've always wanted to go into the Social Work side of things. I feel like I want to be helping people but like to be challenged a bit more - get more experience for myself and it's good for CV

It just looked like fun – at the same time I was applying for uni so it looked worthwhile and looked like a good thing to do to widen my horizons, but it wasn't just something good for my CV

I knew a few people that volunteered for Interest Link before me and they recommended it and it deals specifically with learning disabilities which is the area I'm interested in

I was excited about the prospect of giving people with learning disabilities a better social life and providing them with fun activities. Through this I could help them make friends and encourage them to communicate with their peers. I feel this is incredibly important as every young person deserves a social life and the chance to have fun

I liked the idea of 1-1 and thought that this was a great idea. I also liked the idea of helping somebody locally

It appeared to me that with Interest Link you could really make a difference to one or more individuals on a one to one basis than you can volunteering for a lot of other organisations

It seemed like the volunteering I would be doing would be constructive and would be a good experience for me as well as the service user.

I work full time (9 – 5 Monday to Friday) so I am limited to volunteering at evenings or weekends and I am able to do this with Interest Link.

Interest Link attracted me because it involved helping other people who were around my age group to have a normal youth, and get out and do things they wouldn't necessarily get to do without being in a group like Interest Link. I think that it is a great service to offer anyone with disabilities because it is such a relaxed group.

4. Results: Experience of Procedures - Volunteers

Volunteers were asked to respond to statements about the process of getting involved at Interest Link, the training they had received and the support they receive on an ongoing basis.

Results are shown in Table 1 overleaf. These show that all volunteers feel very positive about:

- the way they were received into the project
- the way they have been prepared for their role and
- the way that they are supported in that role

The majority of volunteers strongly agreed with the statements given to them, showing a high level of satisfaction in Interest Link's processes.

In the case of the training question where there was a slightly lower proportion of respondents in the 'strongly agree' category, this can be explained by a proportion of volunteers who had a high level of *prior* experience of supporting people with learning disabilities. This group noted that the training was necessary for them to do (albeit still a positive experience), as opposed to something which smoothed their transition into working with people with learning disabilities.

I've worked in childcare settings for a few years. I think the training on the night if people were unsure was totally explained – there was a lot to take home as well as it being an informative time when people were talking and explaining

Volunteers were asked an additional question about training or support which they felt should be provided in addition to that which they have experienced. No volunteers highlighted any other training which they felt they needed before being linked, other than one long standing volunteer noting that a refresher in basic First Aid might be helpful now.

In terms of support, no volunteers felt that support other than what was on offer, was needed now that they were involved. Indeed many went on at this stage to compliment the project or a specific Branch Co-ordinator on the support they

Interest Link Procedure	Volunteers' Responses
The process of contacting Interest Link and registering my interest in becoming a volunteer was handled well	30 strongly agreed 6 agreed 0 disagreed or strongly disagreed
<i>It was very professional</i>	
<i>It was very easy to get in contact with them. They talked me through everything that could be expected and what I had to do to enable me to volunteer with Interest Link.</i>	
The training I received prepared me well for my volunteer role	27 strongly agreed 9 agreed 0 disagree or strongly disagreed

received. All of the staff were named by at least one volunteer from their area as being particularly supportive and/or well organised.

Although I already knew a fair bit of what to expect, the training helped fill in some gaps.

The training was well handled, and there was plenty of information to gather before starting the link.

I felt I got everything I wanted to know

The support and supervision I receive is at the right level for my volunteer role

32 strongly agreed
4 agreed
0 disagree or strongly disagreed

It was good; she (staff member) was there just in case of emergency but she more stayed in the background, so it was just a bunch of friends hanging around which I think for everyone, made it feel more like that.

When I volunteered I was made to feel very welcome and there was a feeling of belonging to the group, people are always willing to listen which is so different from the normal world of today.

The support received is of a very high standard and very regular

I feel that my experience in becoming a volunteer was great assisted by all the support and guidance I was given. I was always able to ask anything when I was unsure and knew that there was always someone I could speak to either face to face or at the end of the phone. This was of great comfort especially in the early stages until my confidence grew. Even now, having volunteered for some time the support is still there when required. I think that this support has contributed to me staying with Interest Link along with the great experiences I have encountered.

Table 1. Volunteers' Experience of Interest Link Procedures

Volunteers were asked to speak about their experience of completing the feedback forms at Interest Link. This was the one area of the evaluation where there was the greatest disparity of answers. There were some volunteers who could not remember completing them through to those who understood them to be part of standard procedures and who saw them as 'essential' or 'valuable' in ensuring that volunteers received what they needed for a successful experience for all concerned. Most but not all of those who could *not* recollect the forms were adult 1:1 volunteers. Volunteers who had completed them saw them as an acceptable part of volunteering and no respondent found the forms intrusive in any way.

5. Results: Experience of Procedures - Referral Agencies, Parents & Carers

Referral agencies and parents and carers were asked to respond to statements about the process of finding out about Interest Link, through to referral, along with their impression of staff and volunteers¹.

Results are shown in Table 2. These show that all referral agencies and parents and carers feel very positive about:

- the way they were able to find out about the project
- the manner in which staff and volunteers work
- the selection procedures used for volunteers (to the level of their knowledge) and
- the referral procedures (where they had experience of these)

No referral agency staff or parents and carers disagreed with any of the statements, and there was a high proportion of respondents strongly agreeing about the quality and professionalism of the service. This was particularly true with regard to Interest Link Borders staff who were often named by respondents as being exceptionally helpful and willing to work positively.

¹referral agencies were not asked about volunteers as they often have not met them

	Referral Agencies	Parents and Carers
I have found Interest Link an easy service to find out about	6 strongly agree 4 agree ²	4 strongly agree 6 agree ² 3 don't know / can't remember
I have found Interest Link staff to work in a professional manner	9 strongly agree 1 agree	12 strongly agree 1 agree
I have found Interest Link volunteers to work in a professional manner	n/a	10 strongly agree 3 agree
I am confident that Interest Link's procedures in recruiting and selecting volunteers are of sufficient quality	4 strongly agree 6 agree ³	10 strongly agree 3 agree
I have found the process of referring people to Interest Link to be straightforward	7 strongly agree ⁴ 2 agree 1 can't comment	8 strongly agree 1 agree 4 didn't refer / it was handled by others

Table 2. Referral Agencies and Parent & Carers' Experience of Interest Link Procedures

note 2; some respondents commented that Interest Link had a strong profile within the learning disabilities field but not beyond

note 3; most of the 'agree' respondents noted that they did not know the detail or had a limited knowledge of Interest link's systems but were confident that the appropriate systems were in place

note 4; the importance of constructive relationships with Interest Link staff was a common theme to responses

Parents and carers were asked to comment on their experience of completing Interest Link feedback forms. Just under half noted that these were 'fine' or

'satisfactory' to complete and that procedures were as one respondent stated *'reassuring and friendly as well as professional'*.

Two respondents felt that some areas of the forms were either *'not quite as relevant as others'* or that *'options were difficult to answer'* (namely that the options given for responses didn't seem like a good match for the statements).

However half of the parent/carer respondents had no recollection of completing feedback forms or felt they had not had one recently. This was not seen by anyone as problematic. Some qualified this statement noting that they had a high level of contact with Branch Co-ordinators.

6. Results: Experience of Learning Disabilities and Related Attitudes - Volunteers

Volunteers were asked about

- i) their *level of experience in communicating* with people with learning disabilities and
- ii) their *frequency of contact* with people with learning disabilities

prior to being involved at Interest Link Borders.

They were then asked to what degree their volunteering at Interest Link had had *an impact on their attitudes* towards people with learning disabilities. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

	Low	Medium	High
Level of experience in communicating with people with learning disabilities	21	6	8
Frequency of contact with people with learning disabilities	17	8	12
Impact of volunteering experience on volunteers' attitudes about learning disabilities	13	5	18

Table 3 Volunteers' Experience and Attitude Changes Relating to Learning Disabilities

50% of volunteers had experienced a 'high' level of impact on their awareness and attitudes (and a further 14% described the impact as 'medium'). In many cases these respondents described their experience as a volunteers as providing 'a big impact' or being an 'eye opener'; something which had given them insight and made them view things differently.

A minority of volunteers felt that their experience at Interest Link Borders had had a low impact on their attitudes. These volunteers were mainly those who came to the organisation with a high level of experience of contact with people with learning disabilities. This came either from work settings, community settings (e.g. a neighbour) or from personal experience in their own family. These volunteers felt they had a full appreciation of issues before volunteering, because of frequent contact (in some cases daily), with people with learning disabilities.

A big impact. I now feel comfortable dealing with people with learning disabilities. This is because I understand that they are the same as everyone else and there is nothing to fear or feel uncomfortable about.

High. I have realised that people with learning disabilities are capable of achieving a lot more than I first imagined and want to achieve to a high level in everything they participate in.

Definitely a big impact – it's really been a big eye opener. They (the service users) explained the reasons why they came to Interest Link. It was a real insight as you get into your own comfort zone

A full listing of quotes relating to the impacts on volunteers' attitudes is given in Appendix 1.

7. Results: Personal Impact on Volunteers

Volunteers were asked what impact (if any) volunteering for Interest Link Borders had had on them personally. All volunteers interviewed described some effect, some learning, awareness or practical change which had taken place in their lives as a result of volunteering. Whilst very varied, the 42 responses from 36 people can be grouped under broad headings of

- improved confidence / maturing (8)
- valuing the link / the relationship with the service user (4)
- a new awareness of issues relating to learning disabilities and people in the community (15)
- new friendships (3)
- a chance to contribute / to be part of something (12)

I'm more confident around people of different abilities and different ages and social backgrounds.

I just really enjoy taking her out - it makes me feel good about myself - she gets excited when I go to her door - I can tell it makes her week - and I'm not giving up that much – just a small amount of time

It's opened my eyes to see that people with learning disabilities can interact into the community just as well as anybody else given the chance – there's a lot of fun to get on both sides from the service user and from the volunteer – I've enjoyed everything I've gone to. It's been great.

I feel like I've made really good new friends through my volunteering

It has made me realise that no matter if it is just for an hour or longer, the impact on someone's life in having a "buddy" can bring so much pleasure to them and to myself

The most common response related back to a new learning experience or raised awareness as volunteers reflected on the fact that they now had a level of contact and communication with people with learning disabilities which they had not experienced before.

The responses show a range going from those who are happy simply to be able to have an impact in a short time (thereby fitting something worthwhile into their busy lives), to those for whom the experience has become a fundamental part of what they do in life.

I feel rewarded and am happy that I can give something back to the local community, no matter how small.

It gives me more reason for being alive – it's true - when you get to my age you can get miserable - I can't do now what I could do 10 years ago - yet you come away from a meeting and you are told that she (service user) was so happy to see you - that makes up for everything- it's very worthwhile

A full listing of quotes relating to the impacts on volunteers is given in Appendix 2.

8. Results: Impact of Interest Link on the Service Users

Interest Link Borders aims for its services to achieve the following outcomes for its service users:

- improved confidence
- improved self esteem
- improved life skills
- increased physical wellbeing
- increased mental wellbeing

The evaluation asked the volunteers, referral agencies and parents and carers specifically about each of these 5 areas, asking if these stakeholders had seen changes to the service users, and *if* changes had been seen, then for examples to be given as evidence to illustrate these changes.

The results for each of the 5 areas begin below:

a) Confidence

Interest Link services result in improved:	Volunteers	Referral agencies	Parents / Carers
Confidence	17 strongly agree 15 agree 4 n/a	6 strongly agree 4 agree	6 strongly agree 6 agree 1n/a

Evidence for Improvements in Confidence:

The person used to be apprehensive about trying new things but towards the end of the year they couldn't wait to try out a new activity. (volunteer)

She had never been anywhere without her parents; she couldn't go on a bus without them. But gradually they let her do things for herself and see if things were ok. Quite quickly she began to get confidence. Other people didn't think she was able. (volunteer)

Compared to our first week at a dance class when the person I meet was very shy and didn't want to leave my side – they now speak to others in the class and don't depend on me so much (volunteer)

A couple of service users never went out in the evening and never had much social contact apart from day centre support. Now they've had lots of new experiences, especially outwith centre time. It's definitely benefited confidence-wise in getting out and meeting people. (referral agency)

A couple of our guys would get very anxious in new situations with new people; so you can

see that their confidence has gone up. It's a very positive experience trying new activities without familiar people supporting them. It's a nice thing to see when you have youngsters being able to go as they get so engrossed they forget about being anxious – now they actively look forward to the activities planned. (referral agency)

We had a young man who wanted to go out to a disco – he had never been before. The first time he sat there terrified in the corner although his feet were tapping and he enjoyed the music. The second time he sat nearer to the dancefloor . The third time he was asked by a girl to get up and he did, and he continued to have a nice time. This man had never been to a dance socially before; he didn't have any social contact outside of home. This was a huge step for him. (referral agency)

With one young man it's unbelievable how he is gaining in confidence all the time – he's doing things he had never done in his life before; he's absolutely thriving. He thoroughly looks forward to seeing his buddy and is full of smiles whenever he's talking about it. It's just phenomenal for him to achieve these things compared to years ago. He's gained in confidence, signs up for new things, he's out more and not withdrawn, he'll speak now and tell us what he's not happy with - now he's totally open and can express himself. Instead of meeting at the house he'll meet his support worker down the street – that's massive. (referral agency)

There are loads of examples – he's going out with other people and looking forward to it – when he first started he didn't want to go - now he's waiting 15 minutes before they come (parent)

Our daughter has found new situations very difficult and has avoided them. The Interest Link group that she has been part of has given her more confidence and she has gone into new situations with much more confidence and a greater willingness (parent)

She's shown a willingness to increase the distance and length of trips with her befriender and a realisation she can manage things without a parent (parent)

Table 4. Interest Link's Impact on Service Users' Confidence

Appendix 3 shows further quotes from volunteers relating to the impact of Interest Link on service users' confidence

Appendix 4 shows further quotes from parents relating to the impact of Interest Link on service users' confidence

b) Self Esteem

Interest Link services result in improved:	Volunteers	Referral agencies	Parents / Carers
Self esteem	16 strongly agree 14 agree 6 don't know n/a	6 strongly agree 3 agree 1 n/a	5 strongly agree 7 agree 1 n/a
<p>Evidence for Improvements in Self Esteem:</p> <p><i>The way he looked and dressed himself – we suggested to him he should have a makeover and just go for it - the next week he rocked up in these new jeans and leather jacket - the tracksuit bottoms have gone (volunteer)</i></p> <p><i>She has grown more as a person. She is more chatty and feeling better about herself (volunteer)</i></p> <p><i>She copies me a wee bit –if I have nail polish on, next week she'll have it. It's given her more interest - she tends to like being with other women - it encourages her a bit to do things she might not have thought about (volunteer)</i></p> <p><i>Although the lady (service user) couldn't say, it was the smile on her face that told the story (referral agency)</i></p> <p><i>A lot of people with learning disabilities have been told that they are ugly, so the fact that someone would want to dance with you and want to speak to you means a lot (referral agency)</i></p> <p><i>He's got a wee bit of confidence from doing something; he can take a stronger position on things. That's a good thing in certain instances (parent)</i></p> <p><i>When she's going out and choosing what she's going to wear; she's taking more interest in herself (parent)</i></p> <p><i>Being able to go out without her parents or family and feeling more independent. She nearly always came back full of fun and happy (parent)</i></p>			

Table 5. Interest Link's Impact on Service Users' Self Esteem

Appendix 5 shows further quotes from volunteers relating to the impact of Interest Link on service users' self esteem.

c) Life Skills

Interest Link services result in improved:	Volunteers	Referral agencies	Parents / Carers
Life Skills	11 strongly agree 21 agree 1 disagree 3 n/a	6 strongly agree 4 agree	10 agree 2 “difficult to say” 1 n/a
<p>Evidence for Improvements in Life Skills</p> <p><i>I let her use self-service checkouts – if we are buying anything I tend to encourage her to do more for herself. It’s guiding them in the right things - not telling them. (volunteer)</i></p> <p><i>She is now able to cook – the doctor couldn’t believe his eyes that she could cook and bake (volunteer)</i></p> <p><i>At the night class he found some things taxing, like measuring wood. But at end of the day we had a table; he had never done that before in his life (volunteer)</i></p> <p><i>Getting out and meeting other people is a social skill (referral agency)</i></p> <p><i>It’s (life skills) is not a big part of what she does as the activities they do are indoor and at her home....<u>but</u> this means she has a chance to be a hostess (referral agency)</i></p> <p><i>Now more willing to take on new situations (referral agency)</i></p> <p><i>One boy was very dependent on being looked after by a parent. He couldn’t do anything on his own - but he got into drama through Interest Link by going to a course with a buddy. This allowed him the confidence to follow up on the sort of things he was interested in. He got a volunteer theatre job helping with lighting and had a part with a local theatre group. He would phone and speak to people and write letters with assistance. He got that voluntary work all by himself; he just needed a start - they all need a beginning - where they feel ‘I’m ok I can do this’. ‘Ok-ness’ starts from yourself even just the belief that someone might want to talk to you. If you have self belief, it’s amazing what you can achieve in life (referral agency)</i></p> <p><i>Working within a group and having to put others first before himself; not being first on the list and waiting his turn. Looking out for others and when he’s with other young adults with special needs, realising that they might need help as well (parent)</i></p> <p><i>Drawing, dancing; a variety of things, but mostly I reckon it would be meeting up with other folk (parent)</i></p> <p><i>Money wise – she’s more aware of money - what she needs for where she’s going; She’s become more aware of that – it’s really brought her on and given her confidence (parent)</i></p> <p><i>It’s difficult to judge this, as I don’t know exactly what kind of opportunities to improve life skills our daughter has when she’s with her Interest Link volunteer. There certainly could be opportunities like paying for things (parent)</i></p>			

Table 6. Interest Link’s Impact on Service Users’ Life Skills

Appendix 6 shows further quotes from volunteers relating to the impact of Interest Link on service users’ life skills

d) **Physical Wellbeing**

Interest Link services result in improved:	Volunteers	Referral agencies	Parents / Carers
Physical Wellbeing	7 strongly agree 7 agree 22 n/a ¹	7 strongly agree 1 agree 1 disagree 1 n/a	6 agree 4 disagree ² 3 n/a

Evidence for Improvements in Physical Wellbeing

Our visits to the gym have had a big impact. He could not use the cycling machine himself at first but now he is able to pedal himself and we race over a distance of 3 miles (volunteer)

We definitely walk more than did at the start of the link. I wasn't sure how far she could go - initially everything was in the car then I caught on that she could walk a bit – so we are doing a fair bit of walking – in fact we are doing a sponsored walk for Interest Link soon (volunteer)

He's getting a good balanced diet and knows you can't go down the chippy every day. We've done a bit on budgeting; we've talk about how much he has got for his shopping and that this has to last for the week and he can't just buy cream cakes and biscuits (volunteer)

They (service users) are getting outdoors and getting exercise and are being supported to do that (referral agency)

For example, the opportunity to go mountain biking (referral agency)

X (service user) has enjoyed being physically active and getting a good opportunity to exercise with others of similar age (parent)

Our Interest Link volunteer takes our daughter swimming sometimes (parent)

Through dance - so yes – she's away tonight to watch a dancing showcase (parent)

¹ volunteers felt that the person they met with already had a good level of physical wellbeing, that their activities were not ones that contributed to this area.

² parents disagreed because they felt that their children were active or mobile already or because the activities they did had no particular bearing on physical wellbeing

Table 7. Interest Link's Impact on Service Users' Physical Wellbeing

Appendix 7 shows further quotes from volunteers relating to the impact of Interest Link on service users' physical wellbeing

e) **Mental Wellbeing**

Interest Link services result in improved:	Volunteers	Referral agencies	Parents / Carers
Mental Wellbeing	10 strongly agree 14 agree 12 n/a ¹	8 strongly agree 1 agree 1 n/a	2 strongly agree 11 agree

Evidence for Improvements in Mental Wellbeing

Seeing and feeling the difference herself, getting into smaller clothes and getting compliments from people about how well she is looking makes all the difference and gives her the motivation to continue. It also reinforces that she can do well and will think of other things she can do to keep up the good work (volunteer)

The service user felt more confident about going out in public with their learning disability and began to have a better understanding of other service users' learning disabilities as well. They also developed a very mature attitude towards the ignorance members of the public can sometimes display and realised that these members of the public were just uneducated about learning disabilities (volunteer)

He's improved - he doesn't get taken away (to hospital) so much now - he must be getting better because his tablets have been reduced right down to virtually nothing (volunteer)

They (service users) have an improved mood (referral agency)

I strongly agree; I absolutely strongly agree – there is a huge gain in how they feel (referral agency)

Definitely – this comes into confidence and everything like that (parent)

Strongly agree. It is good for her to have things to look forward to and plan for (parent)

Slightly. He enjoys what he's doing – he looks forward to it. He knows exactly when it is - what time it is (parent)

¹ the n/a responses represent mostly volunteers who felt 'unqualified or unable' to make an assessment for this answer

Table 8. Interest Link's Impact on Service Users' Mental Wellbeing

Appendix 8 shows further quotes from volunteers relating to the impact of Interest Link on service users' mental wellbeing

f) Summary of Outcomes

Table 9 below summarises the previous sub sections. The overall picture is that for Interest Link’s first outcome (that ‘service users improve in confidence, self esteem and life skills’) the results for *all* respondents are that:

- Confidence – 49% strongly agree and 42% agree (total 91%)
- Self Esteem – 46% strongly agree and 41% agree (total 87%)
- Life Skills – 46% strongly agree and 42% agree (total 88%)

The only notable variation is that less volunteers ‘strongly agreed’ about improvements in life skills but more parents agreed (perhaps as they could see service users’ developments in other aspects of their lives while volunteers saw them for much more limited activities).

The overall picture for Interest Link’s second outcome (that ‘service users improve in physical wellbeing and mental wellbeing’) the results for *all* respondents are that:

- Physical wellbeing - 24% strongly agreed and 22% agreed (total 46%)

Notably none of the parents and carers strongly agreed with this while referral agencies did mostly strongly agree. Indeed the majority of parents and carers did not agree or felt this was not appropriate for the service user concerned.

A high proportion (61%) of volunteers felt unable to comment or that this was not appropriate for the service user they saw or for the activities they did together. In conclusion, just under half of the responses agreed or strongly agreed that there was an improvement in physical wellbeing.

- Mental wellbeing – 34% strongly agreed and 42% agreed (76%)

This included all of the parents and carers, believing that Interest Link Borders did improve service users’ mental wellbeing, although again many volunteers felt unable to comment on this (33%).

Interest Link services result in improved:	Volunteers	Referral agencies	Parents / Carers
Confidence	17 strongly agree 15 agree 4 n/a	6 strongly agree 4 agree	6 strongly agree 6 agree 1 n/a
Self esteem	16 strongly agree 14 agree 6 don't know n/a	6 strongly agree 3 agree 1 n/a	5 strongly agree 7 agree 1 n/a
Life Skills	11 strongly agree 21 agree 1 disagree 3 n/a	6 strongly agree 4 agree	10 agree 2 “difficult to say” 1 n/a
Physical Wellbeing	7 strongly agree 7 agree 22 n/a	7 strongly agree 1 agree 1 disagree 1 n/a	6 agree 4 disagree 3 n/a
Mental Wellbeing	10 strongly agree 14 agree 12 n/a	8 strongly agree 1 agree 1 n/a	2 strongly agree 11 agree

Table 9. Summary of Interest Link’s Outcomes on Service Users

g) The Biggest Impact of Interest Link on Service Users – Volunteers' View

Volunteers were asked what they saw as the *biggest* impact of Interest Link Borders on service users' lives. Their answers fell into 4 main categories:

- a different type of relationship
- a peer (in age or gender)
- confidence (leading to independence)
- a chance to go to new places and do new activities

A friendly face - somebody that is put there as a pal - not someone she has to go into her pocket and pay for. She sees me as a mate, a pal and that's what it should be. If we meet someone else when we are out she'll say "This is my friend," and introduce me. You can tell that's different from her carers

She gets to go and do things that people our age usually do without their parents

It's the confidence thing. There are so many different activities. We try different things, but even just hanging out and talking, we've just watched them come out of their shells

He looks forward to the trips, he talks to all the carers about me, his parents are pleased with how it's going and he gets to visit different places when we go out.

Appendix 9 shows further quotes from volunteers relating to what they regard as the biggest impact of Interest Link on service users

h) The Biggest Impact of Interest Link on Service Users – Referral Agencies' View

Referral agencies were asked what they saw as the biggest impact of Interest Link Borders on service users' lives. Their answers were about:

- i) this type of support only being available through Interest Link (therefore service users would have no access to relationships and opportunities without the project)

but the majority of the answers focused on:

- ii) the uniqueness of the relationships which are formed with volunteers (which are seen to bring something different and special into the lives of service users)

They (Interest Link) provide a service that other organisations like the council don't provide. There is no support outwith day services – there is nothing without them (Interest Link). Nothing.

Inclusion into the community because if volunteers didn't come along it wouldn't happen

Somebody independent who isn't getting paid who shows an interest

It's 1:1 and individualised - people develop friendships other than through being carers. It's a new element to their social landscape

The personal nature of the link - in care in community it was thought that people with learning disabilities will make their own friends - it will be the same as us - that is not necessarily a fact - this is a little bit of a hand, a help along in that direction.

Priceless – it's different with staff – you can't create that relationship with staff

The ability to access activities and services with a peer group, with people of a similar age rather than relying on family members and parents – after all most teenagers wouldn't be seen dead with their mum or dad on a night out

We could support clients to go up to the Playhouse in Edinburgh – but that is seen as staff - this is seen as their buddies – the clients in themselves see this as different - they look upon staff as workers - they don't look on buddies as staff - they are mates or friends

i) The Biggest Impact of Interest Link on Service Users – Parents and Carers' Views

Parents and carers were asked what they saw as the biggest impact of Interest Link Borders on service users' lives. Their answers were about:

- i) something to look forward to
- ii) a chance for new friendships
- iii) a positive change in behaviour

It sounds so sad – it gives him something to look forward to - on Wednesday they (young people's group) went to see a DVD. X (service user) probably couldn't see it, but in that company and everyone laughing and giggling... he had got dressed up...he had the best jacket on. They went for pizza afterwards; he had a fantastic night. You can't do much better than that... when somebody is waiting at the door ready to go and when he comes back and relates everything that's going on - you can't knock that

The chance to do some of the things other young people do with another young person, not with her mum

Having a friend of his own. He's never had one in his 16 years. His brothers have friends; he's never had one, away from me; it's a huge thing for him

It's just a change in behaviour for her - the way she behaves now....she's got an outside interest to talk about; an interest in going out, in what she's wearing...

Just ma bairn happy; finding somebody that shares the same interest

Appendix 10 shows further quotes from parents and carers relating to what they regard as the biggest impact of Interest Link on service users.

9. Results: The Service Users' Views

Service users were asked to talk about their volunteers, the things they did together, why they had got involved in Interest Link and their best memory or picture from their time with Interest Link.

a) Reasons for getting involved

Service users had different specific reasons for getting involved, although broadly most said that they simply wanted to get out more and do something different or pursue an interest which they had no-one else to do it with.

I wanted to get confidence

To go walking, birdwatching

I wanted to do different things, get out more

To get out, go out places, so you are not stuck in the house

It was a new experience. I got to see new people and do things like films

Service users described their apprehension at the start of their time with Interest Link:

I was really really shy and scared at first

I had arguments with my mum about whether I would come or not

I found out a friend was going and that made it easier

Nervous – didn't know what it would be like

b) The Impact of Interest Link

However service users then went on to talk about how much they enjoyed meeting the Interest Link volunteers now that they were in established 1:1s or groups. The important things about volunteers which they spoke about, related to fun, friendliness and trust:

They are fun. Lots of fun. They are friends

They are easy to talk to

Nice and kind

She's good natured. She makes me laugh

He makes sure I'm all right

If they were a lot older it wouldn't be so good. Fun is the main thing and that they are in your age range and that you can easily talk to them. It's good that they are into stuff that you are into

They are a friendly bunch. It's great fun, I've met a lot of new people

Service users felt that they had learned things in the time they have been with Interest Link:

I've learned how to drum. At first I thought "Oh no I can't play that, but I could." It was back to basics. A new drum to learn every week

Meeting new people. I don't see anyone from school any more. I normally stay home in front of the TV or do things with my Mum

We've learned social skills and been reunited with friends

Each week I grew in confidence

They help you with your money and can give you advice clothes shopping

To play pool

Bake a cake

b) i) Impact of the Young People's Group

The results are similar to feedback gathered by Interest Link prior to the evaluation. In comments from service users specifically relating to the young people's group, it can be seen that they have gained something to look forward to, enjoyment, friendship, activities and a growth in confidence

It gave me something to look forward to. Something in the evening.

I enjoyed meeting up with other young people

Enjoyed going. Made new friends. Enjoyed going on trips

It makes me happy to go to the group

I like making new friends and going to functions

I have met some really good friends and it has given me more confidence in myself. I enjoy the group and everything we do in the group

Grow up. Be nice to other members. Enjoyed being with other teenagers.

Look forward to it because I do something different every fortnight

I have made friends. It is good fun

The group has made me more confident. I have made friends in the group

It allows me to go out with friends every week

Going out with friends and doing lots of things I would not normally do

b) ii) Impact of the Adult Service

Comments relating to the adult service gathered by the project relate to service users appreciating friendship, independence, shared activities and doing new things

It has made a good difference to my life as I have made a lot of friends and it was getting me out and I would like to come back for another year

My life has been good since I started seeing x (volunteer). I like it when she comes to visit me. She is a good friend.

I have become more independent and getting on with life

I enjoyed going out with X as we enjoy shopping and going to the garden centre

Yes. Enjoyed going out, shopping. Someone outside the family. It's made a big difference.

Being linked with a volunteer makes a big difference. I like meeting X and it gets me out. X takes me shopping and for a coffee

The best thing about the link is Tai Chi and good laughs

Being linked with a volunteer has made lots of difference and I do things I don't normally do. Like go to the cinema.

I have enjoyed the youth group very much. Everybody was happy and friendly. Going out with a volunteer made me feel good and I met new friends

c) Service Users' Best Memories

Service users' best memories of their time at Interest Link connected to having fun, a feeling of trust or safety and the chance to do new things:

(Drumming) It was a fun way to make mistakes – but not just you....you felt you could make mistakes and no-one would laugh. Different from being in class. Here if anyone made a mistake you laughed with them

The bowling was the best. Having fun meeting new people

We made shakers one time with dried rice and lentils. The top wasn't on properly and X shook it hard and the rice went everywhere and over everything. We were all laughing and saying, "She said shake it softly!"

When we go on trips. She's a right good laugh.

The time that he (volunteer) burned the burgers at the barbecue. We gave him a hard time! It was a good laugh

We went for a meal at China Town in Kelso – it was just a good night out

10. Results: Volunteers' Best Memory

Volunteers were asked about their 'best memory' of a time with service users at Interest Link Borders. Whilst a few felt that it was difficult to choose just one moment, (as they felt that all or most of their volunteering time was positive), the majority of volunteers were immediately able to pick out one moment. These moments can be broadly categorised into memories about seeing:

- a change in people's personality
- service users enjoying activities
- service users having a laugh or sharing a laugh with service users
- service users achieving something or overcoming a difficult situation
- service users and volunteers enjoying a group / communal experience

When we got back home she burst in through the gate and through the door and said, 'Mum, Mum I've had such a wonderful day!' She couldn't wait to say it; that always stands out in my memory

My best memory is while watching the service user do an exercise routine with a small group of girls, looking very happy and following the routine very well

We just started giggling at something and nothing really, just being silly, but it was just lovely as it is something that I would do with a friend just having a moment of madness

When the Youth Group did a drumming workshop with Nomad Beat and then a performance at the end. Just seeing everyone progressing the way they did; the doubt in everyone's minds at the start to then go on to put on a very good show with confidence and enjoying it

When we were on the minibus going up to the Playhouse to see Fame - I remember everybody being quite excited - the conversation on the bus was so simple - everybody was really happy. I don't know.... it has been such a good year - we were all really happy - we knew at the end of the first year it was going to be sink or swim for the group and we were clearly swimming

Appendix 11 shows further quotes from volunteers relating to what they regard as their best memory of a time with Interest Link service users.

11. Results: Impact of Interest Link on Families and Carers

a) Impact on families – volunteers' views

Volunteers were asked if they had any direct contact with the families or carers of people who had caring responsibilities for the service users they were linked with. A third (12) did not and two thirds (24) did, mainly at the point of picking up or dropping off the service user, and occasionally in making arrangements for activities.

Of those who had even limited contact with parents or carers, positive feedback had been received in the following categories:

- i) parents / carers simply appreciating the fact that there was a service or a form of support or a relationship which the service user was benefiting from (i.e. with no mention of respite)

Her mum has said she really appreciates the volunteers because she can see a difference in her daughter confidence-wise and see her daughter doing things that somebody her age should be doing but not with her parents

- ii) parents / carers noting that there was a benefit from the improvement in mood or confidence in the service user which had a knock-on effect in the wider family or household

It brings new conversations into the routine of their family relationships

- iii) parents who specifically noted that they had appreciated the break provided by the service user going out independently of them, and in some cases had named specific things which they had done as a result

The first time I took her (service user) out, her parents went out for a meal by themselves for the first time

Appendix 12 shows further quotes from volunteers relating to what they regard as the impact of Interest Link on service users' families

b) Impact on families – referral agencies' views

Referral agencies were asked if they agreed with the statement that Interest Link's services also provide respite for those who have caring responsibilities for service users:

- 3 strongly agreed
- 4 agreed

- 2 disagreed

(those disagreeing were from residential establishments where there was no family caring responsibility)

Yes I would say so, especially for younger service users in terms of evenings and trips out

Strongly agree - families have been very positive about the opportunity; they see the increase in confidence and independence and it gives them an evening to themselves which can be so important

Agree - yes I'm sure there's an element of that – it takes the pressure off parents having to do things

Strongly agree - it certainly does and the feedback has been that even once a fortnight – even though it's a Tuesday night - they themselves feel it is of value

Disagree – it complements rather than substitutes – residents can be off the premises for 2 or 3 hrs but there could be 2-3 hrs discussion into organising them going

9 referral agencies were asked to comment 3 statements relating to Interest Link's potential impact on families. 2 did not comment because they represented residential establishments rather than family settings. All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Interest Link Borders relieved pressure and helped families to cope, making family life more sustainable.

Interest Link services can take the pressure off family relationships	2 strongly agreed 5 agreed
Interest Link services can help families to cope	2 strongly agreed 5 agreed
Interest Link services can make family life more sustainable	2 strongly agreed 5 agreed

Table 10. Referral Agencies' Views on the Impact of Interest Link Borders on Families

I've had comments from parents and carers saying they have had a difficult weekend but at least they have been able to have some time for themselves because the service user has been away out with a volunteer. This becomes part of their routine; they look for that service and if it wasn't there things would break down more quickly

The project can mean that the 1:1 intensity for a carer is changed (referral agency)

Carers say that they are so relieved to know that their family member is with someone and they know it is safe (referral agency)

c) Impact on families – parents and carers’ views

Parents and carers were asked if they agreed with the statement that Interest Link’s services also provide respite for those who have caring responsibilities for service users:

- 2 strongly agreed
- 7 agreed
- 2 disagreed

Most definitely without a doubt yes.

Yes I can do something not far away, and can get on and do something

We are able to do things we couldn’t have done with her (service user) there; we are all happy to be able to do something different

For me chance to sit down for an hour or two ...it’s that bit of time

Parents and carers were asked to comment on three statements relating to the impact of Interest Link Borders on families. Two thirds of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Interest Link Borders relieved pressure and helped families to cope, making family life more sustainable.

Interest Link services can take the pressure off family relationships	3 strongly agreed 5 agreed 2 disagree 2 n/a / unsure
Interest Link services can help families to cope	3 strongly agreed 5 agreed 2 disagree 2 n/a / unsure
Interest Link services can make family life more sustainable	3 strongly agreed 5 agreed 2 disagree 2 n/a / unsure

Table 11. Parents’ and Carers’ Views on the Impact of Interest Link Borders on Families

It makes it easier – she’s (service user) happy to go and happy to come back

*A wee bit – a couple of hours to myself - taking it easy putting your feet up
Everyone needs a break knowing she’s well looked after and it’s been well organised.*

Parents’ and carers’ views’ fit with those expressed to volunteers, as some view Interest Link as purely for the service user and without a respite role, while others appreciate the added bonus of time out, however limited that may be.

Our daughter only has very mild learning difficulties and so the role of Interest Link has not been to give respite but more as building confidence in new situations

We never looked upon Interest Link as a time of respite for carers but more as a time for service users to enjoying themselves.

I think Interest Link has the capability to help families in terms of respite, but at once a month the impact is limited.

It's hard to say because – it's not that you need the respite - but when he (service user) goes out it gives the option - gives you that little bit of freedom. That time is a bonus - a little bit of you time - you know that they are 100% ok and happy, so you are happy and do things you wouldn't normally do

Apart from work placements covering short periods this is the only time my daughter is not with me. Her outings give her something to talk to me about

12. Results: Interest Link's Role in the Area and in the Future

Referral agencies and parents and carers were asked about the ongoing need for Interest Link services and the project's fit with local and national policy. The results below show clearly that those currently involved expect to continue to need and use the service and that they feel it provides a valuable form of community-based support for people with learning disabilities in the Scottish Borders.

	Referral agencies	Parents and Carers
Do you expect to have an ongoing need for Interest Link services in the future?	10 strongly agree	12 strongly agree 1 agree
<i>I think there will be a bigger need in the future; it looks like massive changes on the way following a day centre review. Organisations like Interest Link are going to be more demanded on. The emphasis is heading that way (referral agency)</i>		
<i>Yes if only they could double, triple or quadruple it (referral agency)</i>		
<i>Yes – forever and ever and ever (referral agency)</i>		
<i>Any positive social opportunity for a person who has learning difficulties is beneficial, because it is always more difficult for people with learning difficulties to find a range of social opportunities, since they don't have as wide a social network available to them as the most people (parent)</i>		
<i>It is a good way for service users to socially interact with their peer group and also meet new people (parent)</i>		
	Referral agencies	Parents and Carers
Interest Link services are an important part of community-based support for people with learning disabilities	10 strongly agree	12 strongly agree 1 agree
<i>While the idea of community based support is a very good idea at the moment it is really very limited so Interest Link fills a huge hole (parent)</i>		
<i>They have the opportunity to meet others from their own area and feel safe (parent)</i>		
	Referral agencies	Parents and Carers
Interest Link services fit with local authority and national policy for people with learning disabilities	9 strongly agree 1 agree	7 strongly agree 4 agree 2 don't know
<i>For example 'Same as You' - sharing activities as friends fits with this policy; especially when people don't have any relationships other than with people who are</i>		

parent carers - the difference with Interest Link is that although people (i.e. volunteers) behave in a professional manner there is a different relationship (referral agency)

I've been at so many review meetings where this (Interest Link) is seen as the one thing that is needed for a client. It's often seen as a solution (referral agency)

Table 12. The Need for Interest Link in the Future and its Policy Relevance

13. Results: Uniqueness of Interest Link

Referral agencies and parents and carers were asked what Interest Link provided for service users which was *not* available through other support services.

Referral agencies' answers highlighted the opportunity for activities and for personal growth (e.g. confidence) but the majority described the new kinds of relationships available to service users of Interest Link (either through 1:1 or group activities).

Zipwiring, opera, canoeing, fishing – it's just fantastic. It's on a personal basis - they are taking into account the match when they are linking people up - shared interests. This might not be the case with another service. It's a break from support staff; it's seen as different. Buddies are seen as buddies – there's a totally clear distinction for our clients

Sometimes there's a gap in provision after college. Interest Link provides social contact in a safe environment for them. It's also about being part of a group which some can find difficult. This helps develop social relationships with others; the fact that the volunteers are young people as well is really beneficial

Basically what they are doing is great. A lot of our guys (service users) are not able to access things which people their age would. For example youth clubs are difficult for people to access particularly if they have care needs. The young person would need to bring a carer and then they'd be the only kid there with a parent or an older brother. That's not appropriate in terms of mixing in. I know of no-one else; its streets ahead with a view to adult services.

Appendix 13 shows further quotes from referral agencies relating to what they regard as Interest Link's unique role.

Parents and carers' answers to the same question, highlighted the opportunity for new kinds of relationships and for these to be independent of the family. Many highlighted the fact that Interest Link was the first form of support of its kind and thus the first access to friendships which the service users had had.

Well it's everything to (service user) - he doesn't do anything else – it's really hard for all young adults with special needs to get in a group. There isn't anything else which he would do with other friends with same similar or other disabilities. It's immensely important - he loves it - he has friends he chats to people...

For me personally this is the first time that (name) has gone out to an outside interest where I'm not involved. It's given her independence; it's quite a change

Taking it away from the family. It's been so family oriented before; we've always been ones who have done something

My son has complex needs and he doesn't have buddies. It's lovely for him to have people to do things with. I don't need to be there; it's his friend not mine, it's his. He's never had a friend before because I'm always there. It's important.

Appendix 14 shows further quotes from parents and carers relating to what they regard as Interest Link's unique role.

14. Results: Removal of Service

Referral agencies and parents and carers were asked what the impact would be of the removal of Interest Link, for the service users and the families.

The results again reflected the fact that Interest Link provides:

- unique relationships and friendships outside of family and paid carers
- something for service users to look forward to
- new opportunities and activities

Some comments also suggested that the removal of Interest Link would also lead to increased pressure on families and a sense of loss and loneliness for service users.

Referral agencies said:

Somebody doesn't have anybody to visit them, who isn't paid to be there

Some people would be devastated – they see it as important in their lives

It would be very sad for them; a personal loss

They would lose opportunities to do all the things we've talked about (earlier in the survey). They would be back to not being out and about. Back to reliance on families

It would mean people missing out on an awful lot - I don't know if council risk assessments would allow employees and service users to do some of activities currently happening

It would narrow their experience – they would be more dependent on parents to do anything that was a social activity and be more dependent on other local services

It would be a massive reduction in opportunities

Parents and carers said:

He wouldn't have anything would he? He wouldn't have anything that would be for him. If he wanted to go out it would be with me

I would have to think of some ideas to keep him happy – and that's something else for me to worry about – like during the holiday...for 6 weeks I was taking him out every day

It would take her independence – doing something outwith the family that's hers - her sister goes out with her friends - it would take that away from her – the fact that she has something else to talk about – she would just be with her mum the whole time

Our daughter would miss the experience of the group that she is part of as it is something that she looks forward to

A depleted social life! Missed opportunities to experience new activities.

It would be quite horrendous; she is at a stage where she is looking out for it - she would be really upset and I would be too – it's important she gets out and about as she can get quite lonely

She's got things to look forward to – she was worried when the group finished but now she is doing a class with the buddies. She's just loving this

She wouldn't be too happy – she is just getting to know people, building her confidence, going out – it's the first time out with someone not in the family - I was shocked she took to it

We would all miss looking forward to the outings. It is helpful in one's life to be able to look forward to social events. Our daughter always enjoys going out with her volunteer.

Interest link is a large part of her social life and one of the few social things she does without a parent

His only friend would go – there is not a lot in this area for him when he leaves school

15. Results: Potential Service Developments

Parents and carers and referral agencies were asked what further services or developments they thought that Interest Link could be involved in. The majority answer was simply a hope that the organisation would be able to continue providing the type of service it already offers. A few individuals (mainly referral agencies) offered different suggestions (i.e. there was no consensus on new developments for Interest Link). These were:

- the extension of the Young Peoples Group into an Adult Group as well as having the individual links
- the potential demand for a pre-11 age group (particularly during holiday periods)
- a wider demand for children with physical disabilities or additional needs given that Interest Link's focus is on learning disabilities (although a recognition that volunteers could not be expected to take on too responsible a role e.g. personal care)
- the timing of support for children to tie in with after school provision (being seen by Education Services as a better fit)
- scope for peer volunteers to support young people with learning disabilities to attend mainstream youth group provision

16. Results: Other Comments – Referral Agencies and Parents and Carers

Referral agencies and parents and carers were asked if they wanted to make any other comments. Most chose to, and these generally reflected:

- how valuable Interest Link as a resource in the community
- how well organised Interest Link is
- the impact Interest Link results in for service users
- how highly the Interest Link staff are thought of

A really worthwhile organisation - really well set up – the Branch Co-ordinator is excellent – I've never had a match that has hasn't worked

Interest Link has got to a point where it has become an important organisation. I can't believe how well it is managed and staff are very very professional.

You just have to go to one of these groups to see what happens; they are doing a fantastic job

Appendix 15 shows further quotes from referral agencies and parents and carers regarding Interest Link.

17. Results: Staff

The Branch Co-ordinators all provided comment on their workload, the tasks they undertake and the wider structure which they work within, while the Manager was interviewed about the project's most recent developments and its fit within a wider context in the Scottish Borders and nationally.

The key results to note are that the Interest Link Borders team of Branch Co-ordinators are a very committed and enthusiastic group of people who love their work and feel very well supported by each other and by their manager.

Since the last evaluation the Branch Co-ordinators' role has expanded to include the organisation of groups working with young people and more recently 1:1 matches for children, with corresponding increases in hours. Even where staff had felt cautious about these developments, notably about their ability to work with a younger age group, they now find themselves valuing every aspect of their role and finding that the developments have brought freshness to the job.

Staff have had to adapt to new ways of delivering services and corresponding ways of working, because they are now both supporting young people and children and at times organising and facilitating groups (in contrast to the previous more limited role of providing 1:1 adult support). The staff reflect that the main adjustment for them happened with the development of the young people's service, while the more recent children's service has been a combination of work which they had by then successfully managed already (i.e. co-ordinating 1:1 work and working with a younger age group).

This evaluation found that the staff team were all continuing to work through these service developments together, determining where the organisation's procedures needed to be adjusted e.g. careful consideration being given to the number of meetings it was necessary for Branch Co-ordinators to attend with new 1:1 children's matches.

Another area of change has been around ensuring appropriate referrals within the children's service, given the different and more encompassing terminology of 'additional needs' used in education services as opposed to the project's familiar territory of 'learning disabilities'. Staff are aware of the potential for a very broad spectrum of referrals (in both children's and adults work), but equally appear comfortable about the fact that Interest Link Borders has criteria, policies and boundaries in place, and has to consider the appropriate involvement of its volunteers. They believe the project to be fair and inclusive and that they do their 'absolute best' to work with people within the project's structures.

Ultimately it appears that the project has developed positive links with new referrers resulting in referrals to the children's service and the pilot on course in terms of numbers and feedback on outcomes from those involved.

Reflection on the developments of the newest services also shows that Interest Link's structure has allowed a small pilot to develop right across the Borders in an efficient and effective way. Already established Interest Link staff have taken on some additional hours and responsibility for a small caseload of children's 1:1 matches, rather than any new appointment(s) needing to be made. This has also meant that each of Interest Links branches has been able to offer all 3 services to the area it serves.

Staff did note in the course of evaluation that they are at capacity in terms of the hours they are willing to take on, and therefore any further expansion of Interest Link's service would require some staffing additions.

18. Results: Interest Link's Alignment with Local and National Policies

i) Getting it Right for Every Child

'Getting it Right for Every Child' (GIRFEC) is a Scottish Government programme which aims to improve outcomes for all children and young people. It is seen as the foundation for work with all children and young people, including adult services where parents are involved. It builds on universal health and education services, and is embedded in the developing early years and youth frameworks. It builds on the previous identification of a lack of joint working across children's services and aims to improve their integration.

The programme is founded on the recognition that:

Every child and young person in Scotland is on a journey through life: experiencing rapid development and change as they make the transition from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

As they progress, some may have temporary difficulties, some may live with challenges that distract them on their journey and some may experience more complex issues.

No matter where they live or whatever their needs, children and families need to know where they can find help, what support might be available and whether that help is right for them.

We all want our children and young people to be fully supported as they grow and develop to be:

- **Healthy** ... experiencing the highest standards of physical and mental health, and supported to make healthy safe choices
- **Achieving** ... receiving support and guidance in their learning - boosting their skills, confidence and self-esteem
- **Nurtured** ... having a nurturing and stimulating place to live and grow
- **Active** ... offered opportunities to take part in a wide range of activities - helping them to build a fulfilling and happy future
- **Respected** ... to be given a voice and involved in the decisions that affect their wellbeing
- **Responsible** ... taking an active role within their schools and communities
- **Included** ... receiving help and guidance to overcome social, educational, physical and economic inequalities;
- **Accepted** as full members of the communities in which they live and learn
- And above all, to be **safe** ... protected from abuse, neglect or harm

*We want our children and young people to be **successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.***

The emphasis within GIRFEC is on ensuring the best interests of the child and on agencies connected with children communicating with each other and working together towards this. A further emphasis is on the identification and reduction of risks perceived for particular children and young people.

GIRFEC is therefore described as being about *transformational change*; about how agencies, on their own or working with others, identify needs and risks, and plan and review actions to confirm that they are improving outcomes for children and young people.

In summary, GIRFEC is described as promoting a shared approach (between the individuals and agencies which might have contact with children and young people) that:

- builds solutions with and around children and families
- enables children to get the help they need when they need it
- supports a positive shift in culture, systems and practice
- involves working together to make things better

Conclusion: Interest Link Borders appears closely aligned with the underlying principles and aspirations of GIRFEC, notably the fact that the organisation aims for respect, acceptance and inclusion for the people it works with.

In addition, relating to cross-agency communication, Interest Link Borders offers a strong track record of partnership working, having initiated a structure of local area committees at the point the organisation expanded across the Borders. Interest Link Borders' wide structure and support for staff in each area includes representatives of other stakeholder agencies (e.g. social work, education (school and college)), ensuring good communication and the possibility of the information sharing across boundaries which is advocated by GIRFEC.

In terms of GIRFEC's emphasis of addressing risk for children and young people, whilst this is not the primary motivator for Interest Link Borders in its work, the organisation appears to have an important role to play in this area. The evaluation results show that Interest Link Borders' reduction of the isolation of children and young people, by providing them with access to positive 1:1 relationships or peer friendship groups, leads to inclusion and behavioural change for the service users and attitude changes for volunteers. This reduces the risks of young people with learning disabilities being alienated, failing to develop some of the skills they need to live more independently and remaining reliant on their families.

ii) The Scottish Government's view of the voluntary sector and children's services

The Scottish Government¹ notes that *the voluntary sector has a long tradition of contributing towards the provision of children's services in Scotland. Voluntary organisations also have a key role in contributing towards local planning of children's services and in representing the views and interests of children and families.*

Scottish Ministers have acknowledged *the vital contribution that voluntary organisations make at national and local level to the delivery and development of children's services, including:*

- *the ability to attract additional resources and the added value this provides;*
- *the commitment made by volunteers;*
- *establishing a positive relationship with children and young people;*
- *direct experience and specialist knowledge of service delivery; and*
- *developing innovative and flexible approaches.*

Conclusion: Interest Link Borders has brought additional resources to the Scottish Borders, encouraged a significant level of volunteer commitment, established positive relationships with children and young people, developed specialist knowledge of service delivery, and over the years has developed innovative and flexible approaches to broaden the age range it works with. In conclusion Interest Link Borders can be seen to provide the ‘vital contribution’ described above and ‘acknowledged by Scottish Ministers’.

¹ www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/childrenservices/10335

iii) The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UK is bound, in international law, by the terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention has not been incorporated into Scots law so it does not have direct effect. However, the Scottish Government seeks to reflect the aims of the Convention in its policies and legislation wherever possible.

The Convention, developed in 1989, spells out the basic human rights of children everywhere. These include: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest extent; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life.

Although most of these recommendations are aimed primarily at the UK Government they are relevant to Scotland and the Scottish Government is “taking them very seriously and is committed to a positive response”.

A draft Scottish Government action plan¹ in response to the concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, was consulted on in early 2009.

This document includes the statements that:

- The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that all children with disability have their needs identified and met at the earliest opportunity (with corresponding action being to ensure that issues relating to children and young people with disabilities are integrated in GIRFEC and Early Years Framework).
- Transition will play a prominent role in the Scottish Government’s development of children’s disability policy in the future with action including work on transition in contexts such as school and colleges

Conclusion: Interest Link’s work in broadening its age range to include young people and now children is in keeping with the Scottish Government’s interest in addressing issues for people with disabilities at the earliest opportunity. Interest Link’s focus on supporting young people who have lost friendship groups after school

or college is in keeping with the Scottish Government's interest in transition times as a key issue for children and young people with disabilities.

¹Improving the Lives of Children in Scotland - are we there yet?: Consultation on the Scottish Government's response to the 2008 Concluding Observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

iv) Policy for Children and Young People / Early intervention

Ultimately any Scottish Government or local authority policy for children and young people sits within the context of wider national outcomes, including three that relate specifically to children and young people:

- our children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed.
- our young people are successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens.
- we have improved life chances for children, young people and families at risk.

One of the themes of GIRFEC and of other policies focusing on children and young people is early intervention. This advocates moving from intervening when a crisis happens towards prevention, building resilience and providing the right level of support before problems materialise.

This principle is described in Scottish Government documentation more widely in relation to early years policy. A joint policy statement from the Scottish Government and COSLA on Early Years and Early Intervention notes that:

'Children and young people will be a natural focus of early intervention. Many risks start to become apparent during childhood and there is good evidence to suggest that the earlier the action to prevent or mitigate risk and harm, the better.'

'A key part of any early intervention policy is building the capacity of individuals, families and communities to secure the best outcomes for themselves.'

It goes on to note that early intervention principles include:

- shifting the focus from service provision for the delivery of outcomes, to building the capacity of individuals, families and communities to secure outcomes, and
- addressing the external barriers which they may face in seeking to maximise their life chances, making use of high quality, accessible public services as required.

It also notes the importance of reducing inequalities with the same outcomes and opportunities for all, and the need to take action to identify those at risk of not achieving outcomes or opportunities.

Conclusion: In terms of overall national outcomes for children and young people Interest Link's activities appear to fit well, being geared towards creating confident individuals and increasing independence to enable people to contribute.

With regard to early intervention principles there is a suggestion that there will be a move away from service provision, yet this evaluation finds that families and social care and education staff see that service provision *is required* to begin a process which can 'address external barriers' and 'maximise life chances' as highlighted in

the principles e.g. the parents of teenagers saying that the Interest Link group is the *first time* that their children have had friendships.

If an early intervention approach was applied to the situation which Interest Link works within in the Scottish Borders then it could be argued that it is at the forefront of the solutions needed to address the risk that *today's* children with learning disabilities do not become isolated teenagers in a few years time.

19. Conclusions

Interest Link Borders' purpose in undertaking the evaluation was that it wanted to:

a) assess whether the project is achieving its planned outcomes

namely;

a) i) service users having improved confidence, self esteem, life skills

The evaluation found that many service users do improve confidence, self esteem and life skills as a result of the service. The majority of volunteers, referral agencies and parents and carers agree that improvements in these areas happen for the service users they have seen and were able to provide examples of these improvements. Only a small minority of people were unsure about these answers or felt that they couldn't comment.

Confidence for service users improves at a seemingly simple level as service users become more confident just in meeting the one volunteer they are matched with (although in some cases this can be a major development in itself), through to the diverse activities which service users undertake with volunteers. The confidence gained through activities ranges from people feeling able to order at a café or shop for themselves, through to the experience of attending and learning at a night class, to the powerful group and public experiences exemplified by the young people's group and the Nomad Beat drumming workshops which led to a public performance.

Self esteem is seen to improve for service users, closely allied to the uniqueness of the relationship they have with volunteers, as service users gain a relationship with an individual or group of peers who take a genuine and personal interest in them and who encourage them to have a pride in themselves and what they do and achieve.

The life skills which stakeholders believe service users have gained, and which they have provided examples of, often relate to self confidence and self esteem. On the whole the main life skills gained are seen by respondents as being the willingness and ability to socialise and to communicate with the public, although other skills were mentioned including many which relate to independent living e.g dealing with money or a raised awareness and ability to eat healthily.

Service users' feedback endorses what all of these observers have said, highlighting the importance of these supportive volunteer relationships in their lives and the new experiences and skills which they have gained as a result.

a) ii) service users benefiting from increased physical & mental wellbeing

Interest Link can have an impact on service users' physical wellbeing although this is seen as being very activity-specific e.g. if service users are doing fitness or healthy eating related activities as part of their time with Interest Link. This differs from the previous outcome which is not activity dependent i.e. confidence or life skills might improve across a very wide range of activities.

Therefore the physical wellbeing element of this outcome will therefore be more difficult to deliver on across all service users.

Interest Link does have an impact on mental wellbeing, a fact particularly noted by referral agencies and parents and carers. Volunteers were less sure about this but this may well relate to uncertainty over the terminology. For many respondents an

improvement seen in mental wellbeing of service users ties in strongly with the improvements in people's confidence and self esteem but also more widely to the fact that Interest Link ensure that service users have something to look forward to, along with the knowledge that they have friends, and the fact that they have something to talk about.

a) iii) shared activities and positive contact involved in befriending helping to break down the barrier between the disabled and the non-disabled, begin to change public attitudes and help to reduce social isolation and exclusion.

Interest Link is achieving this outcome. Not only do many of the volunteers report a substantial change in their awareness and attitudes through the positive contact and shared activities which they have with service users, but the very fact that these relationships are often very public i.e. in night classes, in public places (swimming pools, snooker halls, restaurants and cafes) etc., means that the profile of people with learning disabilities is raised as they undertake the social activities which many take for granted.

The development of group activities for young people adds another dimension as do Interest Link's own group activities e.g. coffee mornings and fundraising events

a) iv) respite being provided for families and carers of service users.

Interest Link can provide a very helpful respite role for families. However, even where this is the case it is a side benefit of befriending. Whilst the provision might be a factor considered in an overall picture of a family at the point of referral, it is clear that it is not a stated reason for referral. The referral agencies and the families using Interest Link Borders remain very in touch with the organisation's core aim of providing social and activity opportunities for people with learning disabilities and appreciate the difference which the project makes to these individuals. The fact that this can give families a break is a bonus but the priority is on a positive experience for the service user.

It is also important to note that the positive effect on families is by no means just about the service user being absent from the family setting for the time that they are meeting with their Interest Link volunteer, and therefore giving them a break. Rather, it is about the positive effect on their independence and wellbeing which then influences how they are in the family setting, in terms of feeling more positive about themselves and about what is ahead, and in terms of being more willing to try other activities and having things to talk about. There is therefore a sense that Interest Link enables people with learning disabilities to go back into their families feeling better about themselves and having more to contribute. The knock-on effects of this are in more positive family dynamics.

a) v) personal development of volunteers.

Interest Link has a large and very committed group of volunteers who are able to talk extremely positively about what they do. There is not a sense at all of people doing this out of some sense of duty, rather volunteers are greatly enjoying their varied experiences and are learning from them at the same time as enjoying making a positive contribution in the community. At one end of the spectrum volunteers gain very simply from the appreciation they get for the time they put in, leading to a sense of fulfilment through to those volunteers who have changed career into care work as a result of the experience and interest they gained at Interest Link. All volunteers can

describe some personal impact resulting in them thinking or acting differently as a result of their time at Interest Link Borders.

This evaluation was also to assist Interest Link in:

b) assessing the need for services in the future

There is nothing to suggest that there will be anything other than an increased need for Interest Link Borders services in the future. Referral agencies and parents and carers all see an ongoing need for this form of support for people with learning disabilities in the future. For many parents of children and young people who have accessed Interest Link Borders in recent years, the service is described as the *first* appropriate and effective support of its kind which has been available for their child. Given that there is now a route for young people to move into being matched in the adult service, then it would also seem that if the children and young people's service grow and are successful then these will be a natural 'feeder' into the adult 1:1 service.

In discussion with referral agencies about future needs, they identified not just that Interest Link was well managed, but that it was providing something unique which they or paid carer services could not replicate. They highlighted changes to care provision in the Scottish Borders e.g. cutbacks which would lead to less people being able to access day services, as evidence that there would be an even higher need for the activities and social opportunities which Interest Link Borders offers in the future. Interest Link's fit with the tone of national policy also suggests that it is as well positioned as it can be even in more difficult financial times.

This evaluation was also to assist Interest Link in:

c) assessing the prospects for developing the Children's Service (enlarging it and extending it to work with younger children)

N.B. For more detail about the results of the pilot, please see the separate independent evaluation of it.

Interest Link has reached the start of its target range (12 in a 12-16 range) in terms of the number of matches for children it is seeking to develop as part of its current pilot children's project . The comments from those who have been part of or have observed the relationships established to date are very positive. An extract of the results solely for the Children's Service shows that:

- volunteers all agreed or strongly agreed that the children they were linked with had improved in confidence during the link. The parents and carers had the same opinion as did referral agencies.
- volunteers all agreed or strongly agreed that the children they were linked with had improved in self esteem during the link. The majority of parents and carers and referral agencies had the same opinion.
- the majority of volunteers and referral agencies agreed that children had improved in life skills. Some parents agreed but others felt this impact was not relevant to their child
- volunteers who were undertaking physical exercise with their link believed the activities to impact on physical wellbeing. Parents of children in the same situation agreed.
- Volunteers and parents and carers and referral agencies all agreed that the links had a positive impact on the childrens' mental wellbeing

- Half of the volunteers believed their link to have an impact on parents and carers in terms of a break. The majority of parents and carers reported that this was the case for them and referral agencies also identified this impact.

Interest Link have suggested two proposals to develop the pilot in the future

i) increasing the age range of the service.

Some referrers have noted the need from families they work with for support for children who are younger than the 11-16 age range of the pilot.

Other befriending projects in Scotland often work with a younger age range of children than Interest Link's current lower limit of 11 (typically starting at 7 or 8), therefore there are well established models in other parts of the country using befriending with a younger age group (these are generic children's befriending projects rather than those working with children with learning disabilities).

On the basis of the above, Interest Link propose to increase the age range from 11-16 to 8-16.

ii) increasing the size of the service.

The pilot target was 12-16 befriending links and this was achieved by general publicity to local schools and statutory services to initiate referrals. Once sufficient had been received to meet the target, no further marketing was carried out. Clearly there is a larger pool of children with learning disabilities who could have access to and benefit from the service.

The Scottish Government's Statistical Bulletin of Pupils in Scotland 2009 records 62 primary pupils and 115 secondary pupils with learning disabilities in the Scottish Borders. Assuming these are distributed evenly between academic years, there should be around 112 children with learning disabilities in the 8-16 age range.

To lay the groundwork for a larger service Interest Link has also directly approached 5 primary schools that have a concentration of children with complex needs and all 9 secondary schools. Each school was asked how many children aged 8-16 would come within the criteria for the service. Interest Link report that 103 potential service users (including those involved in the pilot) have been identified in this way.

From Interest Link's experience in the Adult Service and Young Peoples Service, it is likely that up to 20% of children might have a very low chance of being linked because of the complexity of their learning disabilities or the presence of challenging behaviour or severe health problems.

Interest Link's experience would also suggest that up to a further 20% might not take up the service when offered it.

Taking the more conservative figure of the 103 children directly identified through the schools, it is reasonable to assume that around 62 children with a high chance of being linked would register with the service.

This figure tallies with the numbers of service users that would be expected from Interest Link's experience with its Young Peoples Service, which works with 16-25 year olds: There are around 7 registered service users aged 16 and a similar

number aged 17 and 18. This would suggest 63 children registering for a Children's Service spanning each of the 9 academic years.

On the basis of this demand, Interest Link proposes to increase the capacity of the service to 30 links, with a target of linking 50 children over three years, and this seems entirely reasonable if funding can be secured.

d) Testing project quality

Interest Link also wanted to cross check people's experience of them as an organisation with the fact that they have been externally assessed in terms of their practice (Approved Provider Standard for Befriending and Mentoring Projects)

The evaluation concludes that those who experience their procedures most closely:

- volunteers (through recruitment, selection, training and support)
- referral Agencies (through the referral process)
- parents and carers (through the referral process)

view the organisation, its staff and their ways of working very positively indeed.

To a large extent the concluding message from all of the stakeholders is for Interest Link at the very least to 'keep on doing what it's doing'. The organisation's Branch Co-ordinators are to be commended in the feedback which was received, as each of them were singled out by people they had contact with for praise in terms of their organisation, sensitivity, enthusiasm and support. It's important to note that the Branch Co-ordinators in turn single out their manager for his role in giving them a structure and flexibility to feel both supported and creative, and their committed and enthusiastic volunteers without whom nothing could happen. The overall result of all of these positive contributions is that service users, parents and carers and referral agencies all value the service and the impact that it has and note that it has an important role to play in the future and would be sorely missed if it were not there.

Appendix 1 Impact on Volunteers' Attitudes to People with Learning Disabilities

Quotes from volunteers who were asked to what degree has volunteering at Interest Link had an impact on their attitudes towards people with learning disabilities

A big impact because before I was involved it was easy to judge - and now everybody's individual and has abilities

Oh it's been absolutely amazing - the way they (people with learning disabilities) see things - the difficulties that they face - unless you are involved there is a lot of stigma.

Being in the youth group I've got a right good insight into the way issues affect people like at work, socially, out on the street; it's given me a better understanding

A big impact. I now feel comfortable dealing with people with learning disabilities. This is because I understand that they are the same as everyone else and there is nothing to fear or feel uncomfortable about.

It's changed my attitude completely – I've now met people I've never been I touch with before - our family was never affected by anything like this – it's completely new – now I probably get on with them better than anyone else!

It has really brought to my attention that service users have a lot to give as well as being willing to accept and take on board any help or assistance you can give. Unlike a lot of people on this planet they do not look for the earth but can be very grateful for the smallest of things, even a smile.

Definitely a big impact – it's really been a big eye opener. They (the service users) explained the reasons why they came to Interest Link. It was a real insight as you get into your own comfort zone

High. I have realised that people with learning disabilities are capable of achieving a lot more than I first imagined and want to achieve to a high level in everything they participate in.

Now and again I get a reminder; I suppose I can get to know him too well but sometime it stops you in your tracks when something happens and you are reminded that he has learning disabilities.

I've not changed my views but this has given me more experience and understanding of them

Certainly - actually working as a volunteer 1:1 and meeting other people...it's very practical. You can learn a lot just from reading about but when you do it, and you are responsible for safety, mobility; it's totally different. You don't realise the level of vigilance you've got to have. It's not frightening or anything though.

I met a lot of other people and their carers too and learned how to communicate with people who had problems with communication

Have you got a spare week? This has opened my eyes to how little I knew about it in the first place. To how much this can influence the person you work with. It's given me a new pair of sunglasses. A great impact...and great fun

The only thing I think I realise may be different, is that I realise people with learning disabilities can be more independent than I understood.

High - I now work in the Care Sector as a result. Interest Link helped me not to make assumptions about service users and also to appreciate the individual needs of a person with a learning disability.

Quite a lot - it was quite an eye opener- I had never been involved with people with learning disabilities. I was on the outside looking in. Now it was from the inside looking out - how they interact social events. It's been a good learning curve.

High - It showed that everyone that has a learning disability is different, for example, one person in the youth group was partially blind, and another had speech problems that denied him the ability to talk so he had a book and machine to help. Gradually I learned to understand without him needing to use either of these which I think made it easier and less frustrating for him.

Appendix 2 Impact on Volunteers

Quotes from volunteers who were asked “What impact(s) if any has Interest Link had on you personally?”

The question was an open one. The answers have been grouped under broad headings

Confidence

I'm more confident around people of different abilities and different ages and social backgrounds.

It's enabled me to meet new friends and I wasn't confident about driving far but the fact is that I'm not phased by that now

It's really really helped with my confidence. I had quite low self esteem and confidence myself. It's really helped with other aspects of my life, like getting out more myself and getting involved in other things. The positive feedback from people I know who see a change in me has totally boosted my confidence

It has made me much more confident and I share my opinion much more than I used to

I felt it's (meeting with people with learning disabilities) has been quite natural - quite easy for me - that's a good thing to know I can do that – I'm a lot more confident to cope with any situation

It has made me a more confident person and more accepting to the differences in people

The Link Itself

I feel valued and accepted by the individual and enjoy our friendship.

I really look forward to taking her out – I just enjoy her company – we have good laughs and good fun - we have a lot in common

I look forward to my visits, I enjoy that (service user's name) enjoys his time and can see he likes the trips out immensely. You should see the smile on his face as I arrive

I just really enjoy taking her out - it makes me feel good about myself - she gets excited when I go to her door - I can tell it makes her week - and I'm not giving up that much – just a small amount of time

A New Awareness

A profound impact – I've learned and I get as much from the relationship as they do - I enjoy it - I get out and about. I've learned about the voluntary sector and people with disabilities; it's been a whole new world out there and I am involved in it now

It has certainly opened me up to people with learning disabilities – and although my family have never met him (service user) they know about things like that now

It's given me a new perspective on people with learning disabilities and improved my social and communication skills

It's opened my eyes to see that people with learning disabilities can interact into the community just as well as anybody else given the chance – there's a lot of fun to get on both sides from the service user and from the volunteer – I've enjoyed everything I've gone to. It's been great

I possibly now appreciate that you should not judge people until you get to know them and not on the first visual experience

My understanding and knowledge of people with learning disabilities has increased a lot and I am more confident when meeting people for the first time, something I have always been nervous of

I don't think it's had major impact but it has helped me grow up. I was 17 at the time and the major social life was parties – now I have a different social outlook

It's made me a bit more understanding and tolerant and friendly towards people with learning disabilities and I've come to know a lot of carers and people with learning disabilities. It has encouraged me to go to Garvald for Interest Link activities and Open Day. It has made me more confident if I meet someone with learning disabilities who I don't know

It's matured me a wee bit – I've always considered myself open-minded but getting in there and getting involved with different people, it's broadened my mind even more. You use it in other parts of your life - before when you were in the street or heard someone shouting - you might write it off as bad behaviour - now that person might be having a tough time – you look at everything in a different way

I have a busy office based job. Interest Link has given me the opportunity to do something completely new, which forces me to switch off completely from all the usual day to day stuff and focus completely on the person I am with. I feel it really helps to put life's issues in perspective!

It's quite humbling actually – you appreciate more what you've got and how easy things are for you. We've got it kind of lucky actually when you see how hard it is for some to get access and how they are treated because we don't live in a great society

It has opened my eyes to the joy, the fun that can be had with people with learning disabilities - the level of learning disabilities is more than I thought - it covers so much - a bigger scale

It has made me very grateful that I am in a position to be able to give back something to someone who before Interest Link entered their lives, they may have seen very few if any people outside that of their immediate family. It has made me view day to day life with an improved knowledge.

Friends

The chance to find really good friends (from staff and buddies).

I feel like I've made really good new friends through my volunteering

The Chance to Contribute / to be part of something

It's given me pleasure and a sense of helping individuals

I have been involved with Interest Link one way or another for a few years now and there is always something new to discover. They (staff) are very imaginative when it comes down to new ideas for events and parties and put a lot of effort into ensuring that both volunteers and service users enjoy themselves. They (staff) have worked hard and have built up wonderful relationships with the service users and their volunteers and go all the way to ensure it is enriching for everyone. It is lovely to be part of something that so many people, both volunteers and service users enjoy

I feel rewarded and am happy that I can give something back to the local community, no matter how small

It has made me realise that no matter if it is just for an hour or longer, the impact on someone's life in having a "buddy" can bring so much pleasure to them and to myself

Volunteering with Interest Link has enriched my life

I find Interest Link extremely rewarding and I also found it quite challenging which was good for me. It has given another layer to my retirement which is very worthwhile

I enjoy it - I feel I'm helping somebody else; it's a good feeling

It gives me more reason for being alive – it's true - when you get to my age you can get miserable - I can't do now what I could do 10 years ago - yet you come away from a meeting and you are told that she was so happy to see you - that makes up for everything- it's very worthwhile

Appendix 3 Volunteers' Evidence of Improvements in Service Users' Confidence

Quotes from volunteers who when they had agreed that they had seen improvements in service users' confidence were asked for examples as evidence of this.

When we first met he would speak to me – yes, no answers. Now we have a full-on conversation for a long time and he also joins in conversations with people I know if we meet somebody

My link was quite shy at first but now seems genuinely pleased to be with me.

The 2 people came and were very quiet; very very into their shells. By the end of the year it was like two different people. We were having a good banter. It was nice to see that after the end of two years

Many of the service users, whether on a one to one basis going to Evening Classes or in the Youth Group, have been quite introverted, not wanting to interact with others or take part in activities. However, as the time has progressed it has been a pleasure seeing them becoming more involved and their faces lighting up with new experiences and dealing with new people they have met

He's a lot more confident now. Originally if someone came up they would speak to me; now he would get involved. He's doing a lot more himself outside of Interest Link. If you had met him originally you would never have thought that was possible – he was a timid frightened laddie

A couple of service users who are really confident in themselves and communicated with all of the volunteers and service users but at the beginning the rest were quite shy and didn't want to participate and communicate with anyone. By the end they were all talking to everyone and joining in with everything – definitely a change in confidence

My service user is now happy to come out of their home to attend various different events with me

Agreeing to attend events outside their comfort zone

Giving me more eye contact

Initiating conversations with unfamiliar people

With me she's more confident and not afraid to ask for things and say what she'd like to do. She feels safe in my company when we are out and about - initially she was reluctant with somebody strange. But I've seen her out and about - she warms to people quickly

The person used to be apprehensive about trying new things but towards the end of the year they couldn't wait to try out a new activity

She had never been anywhere without her parents; she couldn't go on a bus without them. But gradually they let her do things for herself and see if things were ok. Quite quickly she began to get confidence. Other people didn't think she was able

When we first had contact, the person didn't know me and we had to get to know each other. We are doing things now we wouldn't have done before

I don't think that the link has impacted on her general confidence levels particularly although I think she has confidence in me and there is definitely a trust that has developed

At the group we went to she didn't take part much at first and wasn't willing to sing and play. By the end she was willing to take part and played a part at a Christmas event - she was dressed as Mary - she wouldn't have done that before. Also she wanted to go places that she didn't want to before our friendship – she wanted to go further afield

I think he's into planning now – he has a think about what he wants to do - as I'm leaving one activity, he's planning the next. He's got more confidence to go out on his own in the community, and potter about where he lives. He feels comfortable, safe, doing that sort of thing

Why do I think he's more confident? He slaps me now! When we play pool and I play a duff shot he very quickly lets me know. I feel there has been an improvement – he's more open, more confident

They are more talkative and less afraid to say what was on their mind – they are more comfortable with speaking to you

Drama (at college night class) really brought him out. You've just got to go and do it. You can't learn that out of a book. The inhibitions have gone. He was really good at it, taking part more as the course progressed

Compared to our first week at a dance class when the person I meet was very shy and didn't want to leave my side – they now speak to others in the class and don't depend on me so much

The first couple of times she was very shy and wouldn't sit near me; now she is running to the door to meet me and we'll sit together and chat away

Her confidence seems to have grown over time where she would be more likely to answer any questions from the teacher (at night class) towards the end than at the beginning. We will be going to a different night class next session and so hopefully her confidence will continue to grow

He was a very quiet lad; very reserved. He has started to come out of himself now. You can tell by the things he wants to do

What certainly has changed in him, and I suppose it is confidence, is his attitude to strangers. He was very wary. Recently he spontaneously wiped my hand when he got paint all over it. Certainly he is quite lively with me and comfortable and seems to enjoy himself – he has no-one else

One of the service users had a problem with going into new situations and her confidence was terribly low. Since she joined the youth group she has come on so much she even volunteered to stand up and talk to a large group of people on her own. She surprised us all

I was with a group of young people, but I saw a difference in all of their confidence as they all seemed much more comfortable with each other and us (the peer mentors) as the year went on

He now manages his own money and shares in buying coffees etc

I can see the difference from when we first started going together to the slimming club that due to losing weight and feeling better about herself she has gained so much confidence. I also think her confidence has also grown from learning about foods; what are good foods and which are the bad ones, so she can make better choices in healthy eating and also do some exercise. She can see it working so knows she is doing things right which is definitely a 'feel good' factor and confidence booster

She doesn't talk so its cuddles and smiles as her way of showing affection – like the other day in the car - I got her going with something funny and she gave me a nudge back; it's her way of talking

Appendix 4 Parents / Carers Evidence of Improvements in Service Users' Confidence

Quotes from parents and carers who when they had agreed that they had seen improvements in service users' confidence were asked for examples as evidence of this.

I strongly agree – there are loads of examples – he's going out with other people and looking forward to it – when he first started he didn't want to go - now he's waiting 15 minutes before they come – confidence-wise he quite likes chatting anyway but to be chatting in a group gives him more confidence more assertiveness

He can turn himself to almost anything if he's got company; it gives him a wee bit of confidence

Strongly agree – she is much more willing to try different things - what helped was different groups.

Her big thing (fear) was meeting people and speaking to people - now she's meeting people her age – she's gained confidence through that. It's doing her the world of good; she's getting more independent

Our daughter has found new situations very difficult and has avoided them. The Interest Link group that she has been part of has given her more confidence and she has gone into new situations with much more confidence and a greater willingness

She particularly enjoyed the dance and drama classes and took part in the end-of-class show for parents

Strongly agree – she has been very very wary about going out; she has had a terrible, awful fear of going to unknown leading to tantrums before going out anywhere different. Now we use a diary with her; she was going to the coffee morning (Interest Link event). She couldn't wait to get out, bounced down the steps to the car. After it, she bounced back into the hall; what a wonderful time - she couldn't wait to tell me what she'd been doing and who she had seen

Agree – she seems a bit more outgoing and looking forward to the time for her volunteer to come - next time they are going out for a meal

Our daughter is a confident person already. I can't really say that her confidence has necessarily improved. It certainly hasn't been diminished. The main benefit that she gains from Interest Link is enjoyment - a social opportunity. And this is a good thing, undoubtedly, which probably helps to maintain her confidence

She's shown a willingness to increase the distance and length of trips with her befriender and a realisation she can manage things without a parent

It's only 1 hour every 2 weeks – but she has gained some confidence - over time I hope this will gain more

She has improved in confidence; she is very reserved and kind of quiet so it's great that she can go and meet her buddy

Appendix 5 Volunteers' Evidence of Improvements in Service Users' Self Esteem

Quotes from volunteers who when they had agreed that they had seen improvements in service users' self esteem were asked for examples as evidence of this.

My service user has done so well at losing weight but as usual with us all we have our weeks when things haven't worked out so well for various reasons. My service user said last week (because she had put on weight) that if I was not going with her she would not have gone back as she felt she had failed. But as she had my support felt she could put it behind her and move forward. We talked over what may have caused the blip so she would know for the next time to avoid making the same mistake. Talking things through with her helped her to understand that it may not always be good news on the scales but it is important to realise how well she has done in the past and will soon be back on track again; everyone goes up and down at times

The way he looked and dressed himself – we suggested to him he should have a makeover and just go for it - the next week he rocked up in these new jeans and leather jacket - the tracksuit bottoms have gone

With many of the events I have been volunteering with, initially the service user has been unsure about taking part, however, as they experience the event and start enjoying it you can clearly see their confidence and self esteem greatly increases

It's the wee things she does - she now stays in a house with carers and because they are younger people she likes to show off - before that her parents were doing everything for her. She's enjoying being trendier

She copies me a wee bit –if I have nail polish on, next week she'll have it. It's given her more interest - she tends to like being with other women - it encourages her a bit to do things she might not have thought about

When I first met the person I was linked with they were incredibly nervous due to their speech impediment through their condition. However through the year, they would speak to me first more and more and eventually were asking me to help them with their speech exercises and pronunciation of words

I think having 1-1 contact with someone who is a friend and not a carer or social worker has been really positive for her – and perhaps makes her feel more like one of the other residents who have much more familial contact than she does. I have noticed this particularly when I visit on birthday, when it seems to give her a lot of pleasure having someone there especially for her

The first time I went to MacDonaldis with her, she hung back. This time she was more forward - going up to the counter

He was a bit tense and anxious when walking past people whatever venue we were going to; he's happier in himself now

The person I support joined in with dancing to an audience and would often dance at home for her family

I feel she loves the fact she is out with someone on her own that is not a member of her family and that I am her special friend

She has grown more as a person. She is more chatty and feeling better about herself

All the service users have definitely started feeling more confident in themselves and what they could do even though they thought at the start that they wouldn't be able to. With a lot of encouragement you could see they are brimming with self esteem

Appendix 6 Volunteers' Evidence of Improvements in Service Users' Life Skills

Quotes from volunteers who when they had agreed that they had seen improvements in service users' life skills were asked for examples as evidence of this.

The question was an open one. The answers have been grouped under broad headings

Shopping, Ordering and Money

She's got skills in counting money

She comes up to order now - she points and puts her thumb up

I let her use self-service checkouts – if we are buying anything I tend to encourage her to do more for herself. It's guiding them in the right things - not telling them

She's talking about the prices of things. I'm trying to get her to count her money and understand more about the amounts she has and how much she'll have left

When I'm her out for tea I've been taking her purse - helping her count her money. She is recognising and remembering what money is what – I get her to pass it over and to count the change

Health, Eating and Exercise

My service user has learned how to eat more healthily and will think about what she is buying now and also thinks more about types of exercise she can do. She has started to go swimming and has built up her walking from getting the bus at bus stops further away to walking down the town from her house which is about a mile, so really good

She likes cooking a lot more and she drinks water now

She knows how to bake a cake and has some confidence to cook

She is now able to cook – the doctor couldn't believe his eyes that she could cook and bake

We did a healthy eating workshop which helped everyone learn how to cook a decent healthy meal. I think everyone thanked the Branch Co-ordinator for organising that one!

Social Skills

By attending evening classes available to the general public, I feel that due to the mix of people attending they are experiencing life skills from the interaction. Also the various options of classes available allows the opportunity of different experiences

His social skills have improved a lot since I became my service user's friend

They seem to be more comfortable with a social situation. Maybe I take it for granted. Just communicating with other people and telling people what they were struggling

with. At beginning they were quite cagey about things having problems with – but they were asking for help by the end

They have been exposed to going further afield and meeting other people and doing other things

As we get out 1-1, perhaps this gives her the opportunity to experience situations that would be more difficult in a bigger group. She likes to interact with the people that we encounter and I make sure that she is as independent as possible when we are out – without compromising on safety of course

Communicating with other people and integrating well

Practical Skills

One of our workshops involved learning to sew which the person I was linked with had never attempted before. By the end of the workshop they had mastered the basics and was incredibly proud

I don't see him at school but what he is doing with me is practising some of his skills like improving his accuracy in painting

The person I support gained a great deal of life skills from attending the dance class like handling money and following the rules of the class

At the night class he found some things taxing, like measuring wood. But at end of the day we had a table; he had never done that before in his life. At the cooking class we turned out things that were edible!

He lives on his own and he's had a difficult medical diagnosis; but he's getting through it – he's never taken it as a bad thing

Much more confident in putting ideas forward

Appendix 7 Volunteers' Evidence of Improvements in Service Users' Physical Wellbeing

Quotes from volunteers who were asked to give examples of improvements they had seen in service users' physical wellbeing

Strongly agree – being overweight is a big issue for many people with learning disabilities and when they live on their own with minimal support this can be quite daunting but she has managed with support from her carers and myself and the lady at Slimming World to overcome many of the bad habits living on your own can bring. Learning about the importance exercise makes to your health and thinking of ways you can exercise even if you are quite big and cannot do much to start with and understanding that small changes lead to bigger ones in time. Also feeling the difference as you lose the weight and find you can do much more than you could before as you have more energy

By being part of a group of volunteers and other service users, I believe that interaction in games, role playing / dancing allows development in their wellbeing

Our dance and drama workshops were very physical and kept the group active for the two hours

The person I support got a great deal of physical wellbeing as they learned to do about four dances; it was good exercise as well as co-ordination skills

I suppose I get him out and about more – into the fresh air

Appendix 8 Volunteers' Evidence of Improvements in Service Users' Mental Wellbeing

Quotes from volunteers who were asked to give examples of improvements they had seen in service users' mental wellbeing

Seeing and feeling the difference herself, getting into smaller clothes and getting compliments from people about how well she is looking makes all the difference and gives her the motivation to continue. It also reinforces that she can do well and will think of other things she can do to keep up the good work

The service user felt more confident about going out in public with their learning disability and began to have a better understanding of other service users' learning disabilities as well. They also developed a very mature attitude towards the ignorance members of the public can sometimes display and realised that these members of the public were just uneducated about learning disabilities

He's improved - he doesn't get taken away (to hospital) so much now - he must be getting better because his tablets have been reduced right down to virtually nothing

He talks to me about things he wouldn't talk about with family members

He seems more self assured

I think she's a wee bit happier

My service user has become more outgoing and aware more of what is going on around them but is willing to listen should they perhaps have got the incorrect version of events.

Yes, in terms of confidence and being able to speak up. Everyone always left really happy

She has 1-1 time doing something she enjoys and it makes her happy – this must have had an impact on her mental wellbeing

This is shown by the general depth of conversations

I think that the person got a sense of release from everyday routines and I believe this will have helped mentally

This has probably improved because of her confidence; she is happier with herself – she's bubbly and outgoing now - seems happy to see me

The interaction in the car; he will start up a conversation now. I see a slight difference and it's a positive

Appendix 9 Volunteers' Impact on Service Users

Quotes from volunteers who were asked what had been the biggest impact of their involvement on the service user's life

A different type of relationship

Meeting someone else who is unconnected with normally daily life and who wants to do different things with her.

A friendly face - somebody that is put as a pal - not someone she has to go into her pocket and pay for. She sees me as a mate, a pal and that's what it should be. If we meet someone else when we are out she'll say "This is my friend," and introduce me. You can tell that's different from her carers.

I think by what his parents have told me, he sees me as a pal - if he was going to anything else it would be with his Dad; now he's got his own pal.

Having a friend outside of her usual circle who keeps in touch, visits and hopefully makes her feel special

I think it gives her a great sense of independence and she just loves having a new friend that is all for her

An opportunity to get to know people away from their parents having to hold their hand all the time; a new more independent place to be

I think they have said it so often that they enjoy coming with me because there is no pressure - I let them choose and we just meander - we might halfway through decide to go somewhere else. It's their choice all the time - I've always been at their service to go where they want to

He would just be sitting watching TV; this provides stimulation, enjoyment, socialisation and I think it's that I'm there just for him and he has ownership of the relationship. It's unique

Just the friendship - when I went to see her and I wasn't expected there was a great smile and she opened her arms

In my mind it's helping her – it's something that she hasn't got during the week - nobody coming in for her, stroking her hand, doing her hair, personal things - staff haven't time to be personal. I'm sure that's the most beneficial thing for her

A Peer (in age or gender)

A friend that's the same age, likes the same things and doesn't judge and builds on the skills she already had

A bit of confidence - more chance to meet with a woman of her age - opportunities to socialise more

I think she's just getting time out – there are just men at home. Meeting me gives her more female company; we try and do more girly things like looking at jewellery. She's enjoying that side of things

She gets to go and do things that people our age usually do without her parents

Confidence (Leading to Independence)

The groups improved their outlook on things – they have confidence now to call up their friends - before it might have been a daunting task

They have become much more confident than at the start

They have gained a form of independence as they are not with their parents and family members or cooped up indoors in front of the TV or computer

Seeing how far all of the service users have come on; the growth in all of their confidence was so nice to see. And just everyone getting on so well and having a great time with each other. It didn't feel like an organised group which made it even better. The biggest result was the change in their confidence and belief in themselves

I would like to think that the support I have provided has allowed them to encounter new experiences and build up their confidence. It has been a pleasure for me seeing them enjoying their time with me and how much they have progressed from when I first met them and having enjoyed all we have done

Just getting out and meeting people and the confidence that's given him; if I wasn't going out with him he would sit in the house

He is not afraid to go out and about and try new things. He now has different and additional interests which he did not have before

Just showing them that they have confidence to do things that they want to do. It has also shown that it is easier to communicate with other people than they might think and people will try to understand them

It's the confidence thing. There are so many different activities. We try different things, but even just hanging out and talking, we've just watched them come out of their shells

New places and activities

He looks forward to the trips, he talks to all the carers about me, his parents are pleased with how it's going and he gets to visit different places when we go out

The fact that I'm able to take her out - giving her the chance to get more confidence in herself and experience what other children her age are experiencing

I hope I have enabled my link the opportunity to get involved in activities which she has enjoyed

.

...and fun!

The fun side – it's helped bring out the fun side in him – but it's a two way thing

Appendix 10 Biggest Impact of Interest Link – Parents and Carers

Parents and carers were asked to describe what the biggest impact of Interest Link services were on the service user

Something to Look Forward To

It sounds so sad - gives him something to look forward to - on Wednesday they went to see a dvd – X (service user) probably couldn't see it but in that company and everyone laughing and giggling.... he had got dressed up...he had the best jacket on. They went for pizza afterwards; he had a fantastic night. You can't do much better than that... when somebody is waiting at the door ready to go and when he comes back and relates everything that's going on - you can't knock that (parent)

She loved having something to look forward to; dance, café, birthday parties , practical things like arts and crafts

Our daughter looks forward to going out with her Interest Link volunteer, and we - the parents enjoy a little respite.

Just looking forward to their meeting – it's a really strong link they've got

Opportunities for Friendship

Having the opportunity to go out socially and meet new friends

The chance to do some of the things other young people do with another young person not her mum

Having a friend of his own. He's never had one in his 16 years. His brothers have friends; he's never had one, away from me; it's a huge thing for him

A Positive Change in Behaviour

It's just a change in behaviour for her - the way she behaves now....she's got an outside interest to talk about; an interest in going out, in what she's wearing. She's more grown up and has an interest in what's going on around her.

Increased confidence

Self esteem – it's something for herself - meeting up with friends

Just ma bairn happy; finding somebody that shares the same interest

Appendix 11 Volunteers' Best Memory

Quotes from volunteers who were asked about the best memory they had of a time with their service user or in their group

The question was an open one. The answers have been grouped under broad headings

The change in service users' personalities

I feel happy to go each time and would say that every visit is special. It's good to see a smile or get a few words of conversation from a person who is incredibly shy but who genuinely enjoys our time together

One of the service users didn't join in some of the activities, but once I went to sit beside her within five minutes she was up and joining in and had a huge smile on her face which made me feel good because I got her to do it

When my service user actually came to the bottom of the stairs to meet me. This was a big step to my service user who before did not even want to answer the door

When she puts her arm round my neck and pulls me towards her for a cuddle. She's coming to me a bit and she smiles - that's my thank you

I am doing a reflective diary to record the journey and I think that the last time I saw him was the best time and I think that each time. I think him reminding me... he pointed to my watch and knew it was time for me to go but we didn't rush to finish. He followed me as I was driving up the driveway so he could wave bye bye

Most outstanding day with her was the day I took her up to Edinburgh - sandwiches in Princes Street Gardens - there was church organisation singing songs. She's a very good singer so she sang along. When we got back home she burst in through the gate through the door 'Mum, Mum I've had such a wonderful day!' She couldn't wait to say it; that always stands out in my memory

When we did the karaoke night....some folks who were normally really shy getting up and singing and dancing and stuff- near the end it showed how people had come on – they definitely wouldn't have done that early days

Service users enjoying activities

She loves her food to see her eating constantly in a social setting when there are lots of people and lots of noise – she's so happy eating a big massive pudding and doesn't care what's going on and polishes it off properly – I love seeing her enjoy it

Seeing him enjoy himself at the theatre and at adventure activities

Going to Harry Potter because he loves that - he really enjoyed that - seeing him coming on and enjoying himself

Probably one of the best personal things would be when I took him to his mother's grave - he asked for a while to do it. I took him from the hospital.

The best memory? He potted 3 balls at pool and he said he meant it! I was standing in disbelief for ten minutes

My best memory is while watching the service user do an exercise routine with a small group of girls, looking very happy and following the routine very well

My best memories are when she expresses quite spontaneously that she is enjoying herself or is happy – that's what it's all about! I also enjoy our singing along to music in the car on trips out as we both love music!

Supporting the service user to fulfil a wish to find their grandparents' headstone

They are all good memories - every time we've gone out we've find something exciting

Service users having a laugh / sharing a laugh with volunteers

My favourite memory was the funniest one...I had a wolf whistle on my phone; every time it went off she giggled. But eventually she got a wee bit embarrassed by it so we picked another one together. We just had such a good laugh about it, both of us together

I have lots of happy memories but this one just sticks out because it is so simple. We had met up before slimming class to go to a table top sale. We had a good look around and talked about all the lovely things and who had made them. We then had a coffee together both encouraging the other in good banter to stay away from the tempting scones and tray bakes. We just started giggling at something and nothing really, just being silly, but it was just lovely as it is something that I would do with a friend just having a moment of madness. We then had to get serious and head off to get ourselves weighed. We both lost that week must have been the giggling burning off extra calories

I think I've got to say Edinburgh - a couple of trips up there – it's been a whole day thing – we've had a meal – in fact we just ate all day it was great! She laughed a lot; that's important – she's unassuming and quiet and you need to get things going - she had a ball that day - I did too I must admit

My best memory is being in the swimming pool with her and her laughing and saying she was having a great time. She also says that she loves being with me and that she likes me very much and that makes me feel very good about myself knowing that the time I am spending with her is very worthwhile and making a difference to her life

One of the hip hop session nights- everyone got involved and we split up into little groups. The ideas that everyone was coming out with....it was really really good fun - everybody had a laugh. A couple of weeks later - everybody had to come up with a move - a lot us were embarrassed to do it but just did it. People had gone home and thought up a move

We went to see Toy Story and had the big 3D glasses on. Hers kept falling off her face – she was having a right good laugh - she couldn't stop laughing. It was good to see her having a good time

I enjoy it all - we get on really well and chat and giggle the whole time we're out together. It's just like being out with any of my other friends

Service users achieving something or overcoming a difficult situation

Winning a dance competition; the group were so proud when all their hard work paid off

I left from work worried about whether we had enough time to get to the game (football match). We got there just in time as teams coming out, but then they went 2-0 down after 30 minutes. He (service user) was boiling and wanted to go – but they came back 4-2. He was as high as a kite. We could have made a decision to leave but we stuck it out

One day we went to the donkey sanctuary- at first she decided that she didn't want to be there because there was a big group being shown around - but when got to feed the donkeys she forgot about everyone else- the smile on her face when she was feeding them was great. She had been so withdrawn in the first few months....

When the Youth Group did a drumming workshop with Nomad Beat and then a performance at the end. Just seeing everyone progressing the way they did; the doubt in everyone's minds at the start to then go on to put on a very good show with confidence and enjoying it

Service users and volunteers enjoying being part of a group

When we were on the minibus going up to the Playhouse to see Fame - I remember everybody being quite excited - the conversation on the bus was so simple - everybody was really happy. I don't know.... it has been such a good year - we were all really happy - we knew at the end of the first year it was going to be sink or swim for the group and we were clearly swimming

As a volunteer with the Youth Group all the Borders groups went away on an outward-bound adventure day. On this day we had many different experiences for both volunteers and service users. It was great to see everyone supporting and encouraging one another and to see the adulation when someone had overcome a challenge

Probably the dance group because absolutely everyone wanted to be involved. Everyone was having so much fun. It was really great being outgoing and creative

Best memory with the Youth Group was the Big Beat workshop because it gave everyone the chance to try something new and exciting. Everyone had such a great time learning all the rhythms, and the performance for mums, dads and friends was so good to let them all see what we had been doing and how much fun we had together. Our group was a tight close group so it made it even better

Appendix 12 Volunteers' Evidence of Impact on Parents and Carers' Lives

Quotes from volunteers who were asked about the impact which their volunteering had on the people who have caring responsibilities for the service users they are linked with

Comments about practical assistance for parents and carers

One man (service user) was always at home with his dad- the group enabled the dad to have a night off - it benefited them both. The dad had never had the opportunity to put trust in somebody to look after his son

They (carers) have more time for themselves and see an improvement in the service user

They (carers) are given the chance to unwind and relax for night knowing that their children are in safe, capable hands having fun and learning/trying new things

The first time I took her (service user) out, her parents went out for a meal by themselves for the first time

It gives them (carers) a break, while knowing that their child is having fun

Don't really know but I would imagine it does help if even to a small extent that she is able to get out and about and they (parents) know she is safely undertaking an activity she enjoy.

She (mother of service user) told me 'I'm glad I've got the ironing done'

I think it gives her parents a well deserved break. They are very comfortable letting their daughter go with someone they know they can trust and who has the right skills to handle any problems that may arise

The parents have thanked me for the help I have given. They are very pleased to finally be getting some assistance and that the service user is getting assistance too

Comments about an impact on a wider household

It brings new conversations into the routine of their family relationships

The parents did mention that she looked forward to going out - her mood improved when she came back; she's always better when she comes back

All the feedback that I receive is really positive as they (carers) feel that the friendship has had a positive effect on the rest of the house

Comments about parents being happy with the service for the person they care for

I'm not sure but they (parents) always seemed really grateful for us coming along and spending time with them

His mum says he's a lot happier – he's come out of his skin a bit

I think they (parents) are quite amazed at how my young friend now behaves towards me- they feel that his life is enriched. I think his mum is glad someone takes an interest in him outside school. The grandparents are quite taken with someone wanting to do something with their grandson

The parents have said that the service users are always talking about the things we do for weeks afterwards

The parents think the service users have become much more confident as well

Her mum has said she really appreciates the volunteers because she can see a difference in her daughter confidence-wise and see her daughter doing things that somebody her age should be doing but not with her parents

She (mother of service user) said to me 'You do so much for her - she loves when you are coming over'

Basically they (parents) tell me he looks forward to my visits, and enjoys himself on our trips

I was told by the person's parents that they appreciate the time I spend with their child and that their child enjoys it too

Her mum said. 'She was excited to see you tonight – she enjoyed herself last week'

Appendix 13 Uniqueness of Interest Link's Services – Referral Agencies

Referral agencies were asked to describe what Interest Link provides which is not available through other support services

A New Kind of Relationship

It's just somebody who can develop a relationship who isn't paid to be involved in the service, especially with people who have no relatives – it's someone else for that person

It's a chance to build relationship outside the organisation

Companionship; my clients are socially isolated. For me to have this service (to refer to) is wonderful – it is 'like minded links'

Zipwiring, opera, canoeing, fishing – it's just fantastic. It's on a personal basis - they are taking into account the match when they are linking people up - shared interests. This might not be the case with another service. It's a break from support staff; it's seen as different. Buddies are seen as buddies – there's a totally clear distinction for our clients

Sometimes there's a gap in provision after college. Interest Link provides social contact in a safe environment for them. It's also about being part of a group which some can find difficult. This helps develop social relationships with others; the fact that the volunteers are young people as well is really beneficial

Basically what they are doing is great. A lot of our guys (service users) are not able to access things which people their age would. For example youth clubs are difficult for people to access particularly if they have care needs. The young person would need to bring a carer and then they'd be the only kid there with a parent or an older brother. That's not appropriate in terms of mixing in. I know of no-one else; it's streets ahead with a view to adult services

An opportunity to experience what's more like a friendship - not somebody who is paid to be with you. It's much more informal. Two people deciding if they like each other

A lot of things are time limited or place limited...this is very person centred

Young people have flourished in that group – they've had no friendships before, only workers and adults. This offers an opportunity to have a real friendship - to develop friendships and connections with people similar interest, people who like the same bands - the things that draw us to people. The other thing that is helpful is that it can extend out of that - their friendships can extend out of that group with the support of parents. Like two people ended up going golfing on another night – that's what you want because the group is not forever

Activities

Well I suppose the ability to do leisure activities - we're not able to provide that as an organisation. Interest Link do it in the evenings when there is no other option. We would have to go to other voluntary organisations, but that is not an easy task at all and very few work with people with learning disabilities in our area – it is invaluable

It provides opportunities people wouldn't otherwise have

Personal Growth

It builds confidence with regards travelling more independently

It's social development in a safe environment - there are organisations which do 1:1 for a family using direct payments; it's not as appropriate. You bump into people (service users) out with an older person shopping maybe. It doesn't always look like it's working. This is a much more natural and more appropriate support for that age group (young people)

Appendix 14 Uniqueness of Interest Link's Services – Parents and Carers

Parents and carers were asked to describe what Interest Link provides which is not available through other support services

The One and Only Time

Well it's everything to (name) - he doesn't do anything else – it's really hard for all young adults with special needs to get in a group. There isn't anything else which he would do with other friends with same similar or other disabilities. It's immensely important - he loves it - he has friends he chats to people...

This is the only group he goes to

When my daughter was doing the group activity it was the first real group that we found for her

For me personally this is the first time that (name) has gone out to an outside interest where I'm not involved. It's given her independence; it's quite a change

It's a great service. Even the bus is now stopping for the day centre so Interest Link is the only definite thing for her

New Relationships

Support and interaction with other young people in a variety of situations

An opportunity to meet new friends

She's getting direct payments but nothing else - direct payment gives one person . With Interest Link there are little groups, like helping at coffee mornings. That's socialising and getting her confidence up and going shopping where she can pick things

It's an enjoyable social time for my daughter.

It gives someone who is more like a friend than a carer

It's someone who is nearer my daughter's own age, doing normal activities for her age group

Independence from the Family

A chance of independence and time away from family arranged activities

Taking it away from the family. It's been so family oriented before; we've always been ones who have done something

My son has complex needs and he doesn't have buddies. It's lovely for him to have people to do things with. I don't need to be there; it's his friend not mine, it's his. He's never had a friend before because I'm always there. It's important

Appendix 15 Other Comments from Referral Agencies and Parents and Carers

Referral Agencies

A really worthwhile organisation - really well set up – the Branch Co-ordinator is excellent – I've never had a match that has hasn't worked

It's well run – it's neat and tidy and not many loose ends

Just to say it's a very valuable resource in the community - well respected

Interest Link has got to a point where it has become an important organisation. I can't believe how well it is managed and staff are very very professional.

It's been a really positive experience working with them – I hope it continues and ideally expands

It's got a fantastic set up – I would certainly hate to see the service breaking down – it does a lot of good positive work

A valuable service which is age appropriate - allows them (service users) to keep in touch with friends. Because the Borders is a rural area it's difficult to sustain those friendships without some help to do that – that's what this project does

A superb service - easy to find - easy to access – referral is straightforwardd - feedback is really quick about referrals

Parents and Carers

You just have to go to one of these groups to see what happens; they are doing a fantastic job

Really good... really really good- if I was giving marks out of 100 - full marks

I just think the whole lot of them, the people, the organisation and volunteers do a super job – it's just fantastic they can offer that service – I've been really pleased with it all - they are great hearted people

Interest Link is the best thing that has happened to x (daughter) - it has given her confidence in life; long may it continue

We very much appreciate the caring approach and support given by the Branch Co-ordinator and the volunteers

Only concerning the Branch Co-ordinator... to sing her praises! She is a very hard working and valuable member of the staff and we have always found her to be extremely helpful – always willing to go that extra mile and with the service user to the fore at all times.

It is very well organised - not having issues with transport - everything seems to go like clockwork – staff are great – you need to clone them - right enthusiastic – right on the ball - so well organised- you trust them not worrying that things are going to go wrong – they put a lot of effort into the job

A lovely friendly adaptable service

Long may it continue



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