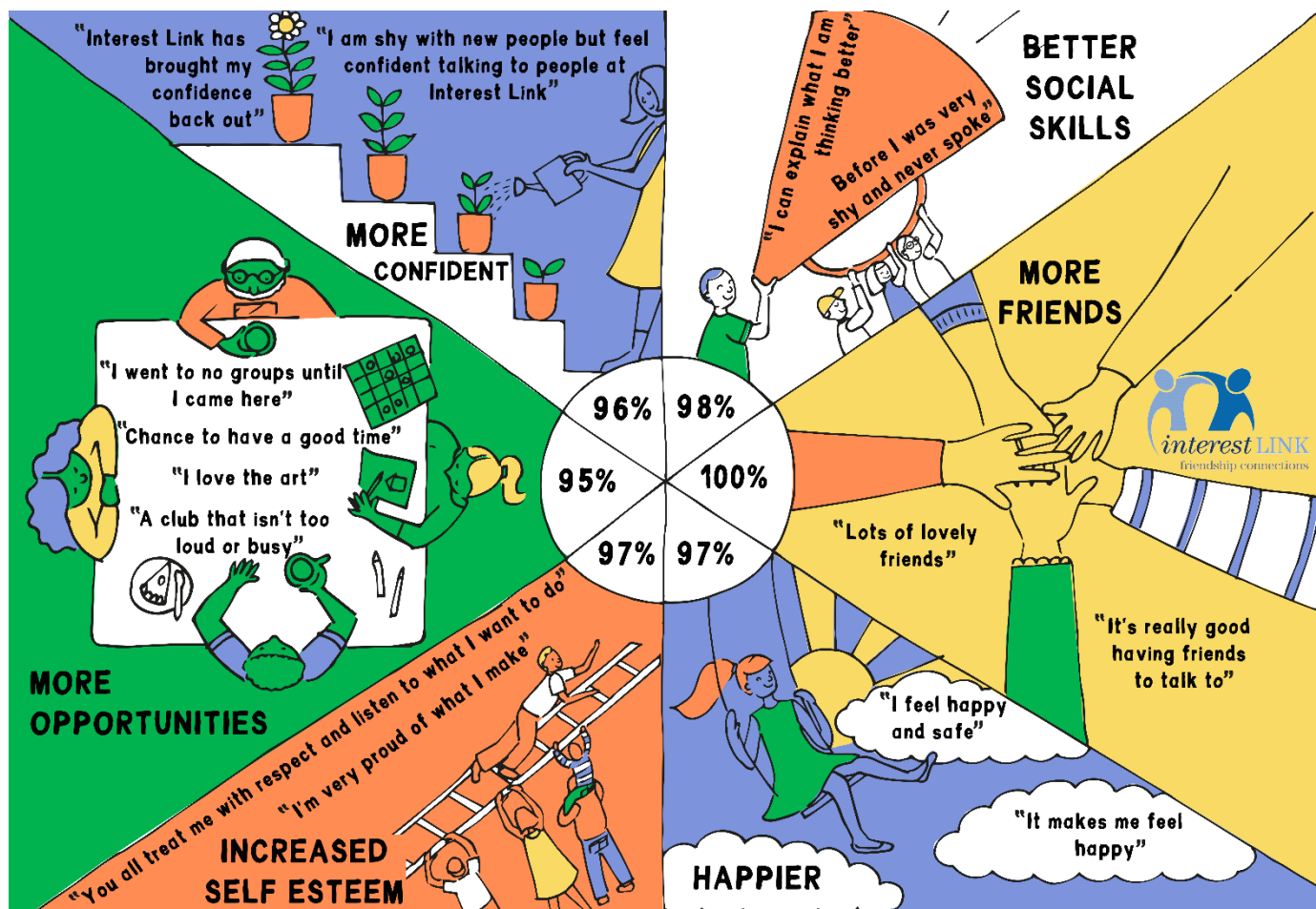




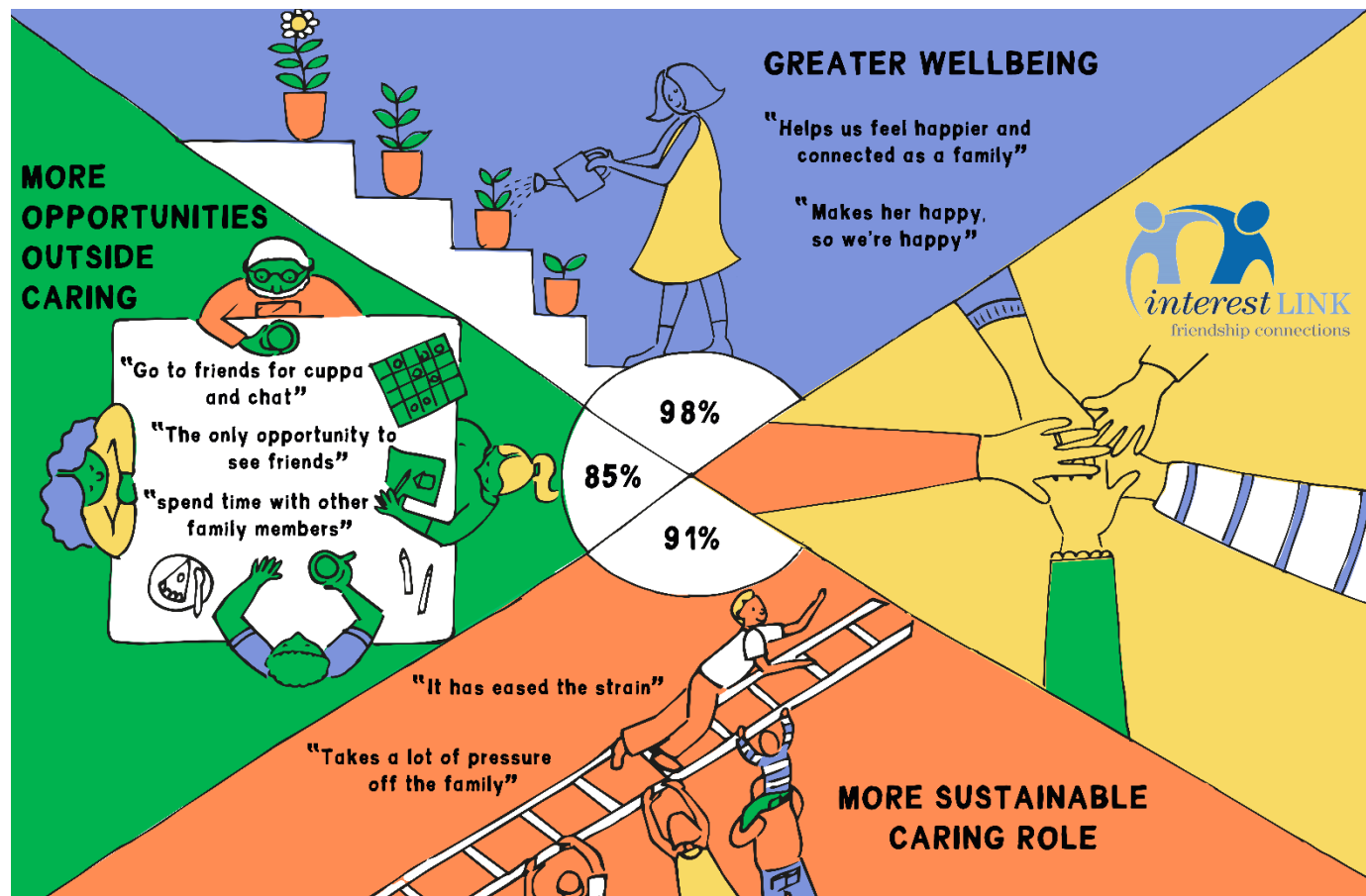
2023 Impact Report

*I talk more
it's fun*
lots of new friends
I feel like I belong
Made good friends
You treat me with respect *I love being out and about*
more confident speaking out
Proud of what I can do
I'm happy in the group

Members with learning disabilities said:



Family carers said:



Our Aims and Activities

Founded by carers in 1990, our befriending projects improve the quality of life of socially excluded children (aged 6+), young people and adults with learning disabilities, overcoming social barriers and lack of opportunity and giving respite to family carers.

220 members are supported by 200 peer-age volunteers across the Scottish Borders, nurturing friendships, providing opportunities and improving wellbeing, confidence & social skills. Our support is longterm and sustained throughout transitions. It is excellent preparation for employment and independent living and provides regular respite for 250 family carers.

Our service model has developed through co-production with families and members and is unique for its variety and the numbers it supports. It includes 60 traditional 1:1 links and 35 befriending groups in community venues, schools and on Zoom. Group activities are similar to mainstream youth and social groups, including arts & crafts, drama, film, gardening, music, cookery, keep fit, games, outdoor adventures and overnight trips.

Our service is delivered through four local projects (Berwickshire, Central Borders, Roxburgh and Tweeddale) each with its own staff and local committee of stakeholders. They work with schools, Borders College, Social Work and care providers to reach as many people as possible. Volunteers are PVG checked, trained (including adult and child protection) & supported by staff.

The need for the service

Our members have a lifelong condition that affects their development and means they need help to understand information, learn skills and live independently. Cerebral Palsy, Downs Syndrome & Autism are often involved, with high accompanying levels of epilepsy & sensory impairment.

They are socially excluded throughout their lives: Most are taught in additional needs units and lack opportunities for friendships and activities that are crucial to wellbeing and achieving their full potential: Only around 1% of people with learning disabilities have a partner in adult life and 4.5% a job (2019 LDSS). They are at risk if they go into the community on their own and there are almost no mainstream community activities they can access.

Family carers have a role which is difficult to sustain, isolating, reduces their opportunities, affects their wellbeing and makes them twice as likely to live in poverty.

The need for community involvement, friendships and activities that are fun and enable personal growth is constantly expressed by the members, families and care professionals we work with and is well-recognised in academic studies & government strategies.

Activities 2022-23

In the 12 months to the end of September 2023 we supported 220 members with learning disabilities. There were 65 1:1 links and 243 member places in 35 befriending groups. 88 members had both a 1:1 link and a group, or were in two groups. 255 family carers enjoyed short break respite and there was a parents craft & chat group in Tweeddale.

New groups included:

- An in-school lunchtime group at Burnfoot Primary (a 10%/20% SIMD area in Hawick).
- An adult lunch club in Galashiels (Brunch Bunch), responding to a reduction in statutory day services and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Three intergenerational Zoom groups (baking, home gardening and bingo). These had their origins in the pandemic and are now a regular part of our service.
- Two “Growing Interests” daytime groups in Hawick (Newsroom & Lifeskills)

[See a breakdown of all our groups.](#)

Highlights of the year included:

- Our [Friendship Day](#) in October
- Pantomimes in December and January by our [Central Borders](#) and [Roxburgh](#) branches.
- In February 2023 we won the overall Loving our Volunteers award, recognising outstanding volunteering in the Scottish Borders. Three of our volunteers were also recognised.
- In April 2023 we held the first [Charmian Challenge](#) fun run in memory of former director Charmian Ledsham, with 120 members, carers and volunteers taking part.
- In May 2023 we ran our most ambitious overnight trips yet: our first two-night trip on the overnight ferry to Amsterdam ([video](#) & [photoreport](#)) and our largest trip ever, by 12 members, 8 volunteers and 3 staff to Keilder([video](#) & [photoreport](#)). Both were joint trips between two branches, ensuring new friends were made.

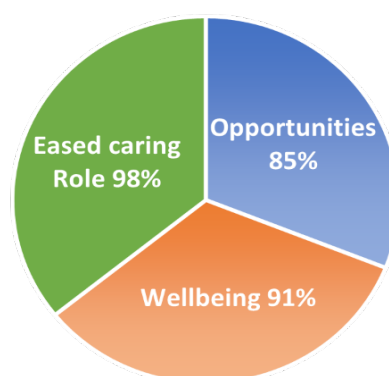
A massive vote of thanks goes to [our funders over the last year](#): our work would not be possible without their generous support.

Survey Outcomes at a Glance

Member Outcomes



Carer Outcomes



June 2023 Survey

We surveyed supported members, family carers, volunteers, tutors and care professionals in June 2023, using accessible questionnaires deployed face-to-face, online and by telephone and post.

	Members	Family carers	Volunteers	Tutors		
Response rates	48%	43%	55%	75%		
Main Outcomes:						
Impact on Members	More Friends	More opportunities	Greater Happiness	Improved Confidence	Increased Self-esteem	Better Social Skills
Reported by Themselves	100%	95%	97%	96%	97%	98%
Reported by Carers	98%	98%	96%	98%	98%	96%
Reported by Volunteers	97%		97%	96%	96%	96%
Impact on Family Carers	More Opportunities Outside Caring		More Sustainable Caring Role		Greater Wellbeing	
Reported by Themselves	85%		91%		98%	
Reported by Social Care Professionals	100%		100%		100%	
Impact on Volunteers	Increased Learning Disabilities Awareness		More confidence with people with learning disabilities			
Reported by Themselves	95%		95%			
Other responses:	Members	Family carers	Volunteers	Tutors	Social Care Professionals	
Service still needed	100%	100%			100%	
Feel valued & supported by Interest Link	97%		100%	100%		
Volunteering has met hopes and expectations			99%			
Safe & Professional Service					100%	

Links:

[Member Feedback](#)

[Carer Feedback](#)

[Volunteer Feedback](#)

[Care professional Feedback](#)

[Tutor Feedback](#)

[Case Studies 2022-23](#)

Outcome/Theme	Quotes
Confidence	Interest link has brought my confidence back out
Confidence	I have become more confident in myself.
Confidence	I was shy when I first started and feel more confident now.
Confidence	Doing new stuff makes me more confident.
Confidence	I'm much more confident to talk now
Confidence	Being part of Interest Link has shown me that I am able to meet new friends and to easily fit in to the groups I am a part of.
Confidence	I'm more confident with making decisions and speaking out in front of people
Confidence	A big yes. I meet new people. I sailed to Amsterdam. I did indoor flying and I have always been scared of air in my face! Everyone cheered for me!
Confidence	I had lost my confidence through the lockdowns and these groups have helped me build it back up.
Confidence	I am shy with new people but feel confident talking to people at interest link.
Confidence	Feel more confident
Confidence	I was shy and now I am always talking and causing mischief
Confidence	I feel more confident since coming to the group, I like going out for meals and having BBQs and going to the beach, the night away was a favourite memory
Friends	Lots of lovely friends I have great fun with and we help each other.
Friends	Not easy but this has helped.
Friends	I like meeting new people at the group and making friends with them.
Friends	I've made new friends
Friends	It's really good having friends to talk to
Friends	Made good friends
Friends	I have more friends
Friends	With the people running it and everyone who goes.
Friends	I have made a lot of friends and I'm happy,
Friends	I am friends we the leaders and people who attend and even parents
Friends	I have made many new friends by being a part of Interest Link.
Friends	I've made good friends and also helped them through hard times.
Friends	Lots and lots of new friends
Friends	One big family
Friends	Seeing people I used to go to school with and college too
Friends	I love being part of a group as I feel that I can be a part of something and not on my own. It makes me feel happy. I like the art group the best. I have memories of my friend there.
Friends	I enjoy our meeting as it gives me a chance to meet people as I live out in the countryside
Friends	Making friends and having something to do
Friends	I love champions I look forward to it every two weeks! Everyone is lovely and helpful.
Friends	The group makes me feel like I belong, have friends and make good art.
Happiness	Good to see my friends and I'm happy in the group.
Happiness	Happy in the group.
Happiness	I love Interest Link

Happiness	I love when my day comes to come to the group, it's so much fun.
Happiness	It is like a family
Happiness	I definitely feel happier and enjoy helping out too
Happiness	Makes me happy
Happiness	I feel happy and safe.
Happiness	I am So happy and feel good about myself
Happiness	I feel happier
Happiness	The group is really good and Rosa and Mandy make me feel happy. I can talk to them about anything. I feel happy.
Opportunities	I love doing all the different activities and spending time away from home.
Opportunities	Chance to meet friends
Opportunities	Get to meet new people
Opportunities	My mum does things with me at home and I teach her my new things.
Opportunities	I now have a club that isn't too loud or busy for me.
Opportunities	I've been able to go to new places, met new animals and try new things e.g. herbal tea.
Opportunities	Art and talking to more people and socialising
Opportunities	Learning how to cook new things and playing pool with Hugo
Opportunities	I have gone to places like GO Ape, rock climbing and various other places that would not normally get to do.
Opportunities	Trips away with friends
Opportunities	I made good friends with a volunteer and the others who go to the allotment
Opportunities	I went to no groups until I got the chance to come here.
Opportunities	I get to be a part of a group of young folk where I can just be me
Opportunities	Interest Link has given me the chance to meet new people and make new friends after moving to Kelso. The Lunch Club lets me get involved with cooking
Opportunities	Tried new foods, meet new friends.
Opportunities	Going to events and having an allotment
Opportunities	Given me the chance to have a good time. Declan (volunteer) is the best part of interest link
Opportunities	Indoor flying and Amsterdam. I love craft and I like the Selkirk group
Opportunities	Making new friends and going to Amsterdam
Opportunities	The chance to go out independently
Opportunities	It has taught me to be a more creative person and get more creative skills.
Opportunities	I find it great having opportunities to make art with other people.
Opportunities	I now buy arts and crafts to do at home for night time and weekends.
Opportunities	My art and cooking skills are far better!
Opportunities	I have just finished a landscape painting on canvas and my mum and dad are surprised how good it is.
Opportunities	I loved doing Pom poms and the clothing design project
Opportunities	Getting the chance to do 2 pantos and being the lead in the second was great! Really boosted my confidence.
Opportunities	I enjoy going out with Gerda. Enjoy libraries, we do bingo, its good.
Opportunities	I like doing every craft. I think I'm very good at art and crafts. I love everything about Motivators, truffles!! :-) bowling, games. I like going into the garden, getting my hands dirty! Green fingers.

Opportunities	My best memory was when we went to Melrose Abbey and got dressed up. The walk in Selkirk was great and I hope to do it again with my buddy.
Opportunities	I love the art
Opportunities	The best thing is meeting Hugo at the pub to play pool and also going to the cooking club learning how to cook and meeting everyone.
Opportunities	I love the cooking
Opportunities	I love being out and about and seeing things grow in the garden and meeting other people.
Self-esteem	I sang on stage at the pantomime
Self-esteem	Being in the panto. I feel like I'm an actress.
Self-esteem	Everyone is very kind to me and always pleased to see me, this makes me feel valued.
Self-esteem	You all treat me with respect and listen to what I have to say and what I would like to do.
Self-esteem	I feel better because it allows me to do more.
Self-esteem	Mary and Rosa listen to my ideas.
Self-esteem	I know that I have the confidence to join any group and to fit in easily
Self-esteem	People treat me better
Self-esteem	Everybody listens and helps me with everything.
Self-esteem	I know they will listen in the group and take me seriously.
Self-esteem	I love doing arts and crafts. I like to see what I have achieved. I use my imagination a lot more.
Self-esteem	I'm very proud of what I make. I give some of my things to people for presents.
Self-esteem	I love the art projects and have lots of things I've brought home to show my family. I am very proud of the work I have done.
Self-esteem	Everyone has a voice here
Self-esteem	It makes me feel part of something.
Self-esteem	Learning new baking skills with Liz made me more independent to cook for myself as Liz covers lots of things
Self-esteem	Helps with feeling independent
Social Skills	Before I was very shy and never spoke
Social Skills	I talk more
Social Skills	I can communicate easier with groups of people than I could before.
Social Skills	I speak more
Social Skills	It's helped me communicate with others.
Social skills	Speaking to my friends and we all encourage each other. We all smile and laugh.
Social skills	Roger has helped and supported me and I think I'm getting better at talking to people.
Social skills	I am more talkative with people.
Social skills	Although I don't use language I can communicate and laugh a lot.
Social skills	I think this group has greatly improved my social skills.
Social skills	I can talk to people more
Social skills	I can explain what I am thinking better.
Social skills	I can tell people what I mean now
Social skills	I enjoy coming to Monday groups. Speaking to others and people are good at understanding my signs and lip reading.

Outcome/Theme	Quotes
Carer Opportunities	Gives me time to myself and I am able to talk to people who understand my situation.
Carer Opportunities	I can go away walking, swimming meeting up with friends.
Carer Opportunities	We look forward to coming, it's sometimes the only chance to see friends all together
Carer Opportunities	If my child is out with a one to one it gives me time to spend with friends.
Carer Opportunities	Any respite is highly beneficial as we don't get much from elsewhere.
Carer Opportunities	I get time to relax when Christopher is at Interest Link.
Carer Opportunities	I use the time to catch up with friends by phone which I would not otherwise be able to do in the evenings
Carer Opportunities	My brother having access to Interest Link groups has given me time & space back: time to get things ticked off the 'to-do-list' as a family with young children this time back is invaluable. Also it means I can plan time with friends too, looking after my own mental health.
Carer Opportunities	I go to exercise classes while my daughter attends.
Carer Opportunities	I can do whatever I want or do nothing, just be at home or in the garden.
Carer Opportunities	We can go and see my daughter who lives in Edinburgh, also just time for ourselves.
Carer Opportunities	It gives me and my mum time together and a wee break to have some time for us.
Carer Opportunities	Tuesday evening is the only evening my daughter is out, so I can spend time with my husband and other daughter.
Carer Wellbeing	Knowing that Lauren is in the best of care, learning life skills and is content gives me a sense of peace thus allowing me to do things I otherwise could not manage.
Carer Wellbeing	Psychologically knowing that the boys have Interest Link to enjoy is very helpful as otherwise I worry about their mental health and what to do to keep them occupied every evening when we live in such a rural location. It is helpful that they can both attend the same group.
Carer Wellbeing	It acts as respite and we have never had any of this - so we know every two weeks we have two hours "free"
Carer Wellbeing	We are So happy
Carer Wellbeing	Our daughter is in a much happier place then she was before she started the group and her confidence continues to grow. This lifts the whole family.
Carer Wellbeing	Valuable time to myself & Christophers health & well being has been mainly improved by feeling like he has a place he belongs.
Carer Wellbeing	The boys always come back happy after an Interest Link evening and I appreciate the time off.
Carer Wellbeing	Out of the handful of organisations that we have had contact with since Joe came to live with us Interest Link is the only organisation who has delivered on what they initially offered and had made a meaningful and positive impact for Joe, my husband Simon and myself.
Carer Wellbeing	In previous groups my child has never enjoyed going to them but with this group she is so enthusiastic about it and its great to see her enjoying something like this with new friends

Eased caring role	When my sister attends the groups I know she is safe, having fun and meeting new friends along with learning new skills. This takes a lot of pressure off the family.
Eased caring role	It has eased the strain knowing that Christopher has something he looks forward too doing & he doesn't need my help to partake.
Eased caring role	My role as a carer is more settled/comfortable as my sister is having fun/learning new skills and meeting friends in a safe place which is planned excellent and she loves going to them.
Eased caring role	The service has certainly eased our role as carers as we get more time to relax.
Eased caring role	It is good to see my daughter being independent and knowing she is happy makes our role easier.
Eased caring role	Definitely. My mind is at ease allowing time for me to unwind.
Eased caring role	Made it more sustainable, and takes pressure off us and she has something positive to talk to us about what she has been doing or learning.
Eased caring role	Made it more sustainable
Member Confidence	My son loves the group and has grown in confidence
Member Confidence	His confidence has been helped a lot by Interest Link.
Member Confidence	His confidence & self esteem has improved hugely.
Member Confidence	As above, A's confidence has improved over the last year. Interest Link has contributed to this improvement.
Member Confidence	Yes, I think he is more confident, and doing something for himself that I'm not involved in gives him an interest.
Member Confidence	Our impression is that he feels more confident now that he can meet with friends and mentors who are ready and able to listen to him and his views.
Member Confidence	Yes the opportunity to make friends, working together and participating in group activities has helped her to definitely be more confident, assertive and self esteem.
Member Happiness	Most definitely as we can see the change in her and how happy she is around the group.
Member Happiness	Sarah really enjoys getting out and about.
Member Happiness	Very happy, he always looks forward to every session he attends
Member Happiness	They are happy to have an activity to do and friends to meet with.
Member Happiness	My sister is so happy coming to these groups and like I said plays a very important part in her life.
Member Happiness	My son is a lot happier getting out to the groups and seeing friends.
Member Happiness	Interest Link helps us feel happier and connected as a family.
Member Opportunities	My child has tried lots of different activities: I know my child is safe and not worried at all.
Member Opportunities	Interest Link is the only group in the area that could successfully meet my daughters needs and give her opportunities to meet new people and try new activities.
Member Opportunities	Sometimes he can be wary of new groups and gets quite anxious, but not at Interest Link's groups. He knows everyone and has settled.
Member Opportunities	This is the crucial thing about Interest Link, my daughter feels secure and happy and comfortable in the group and so willing to try new things. It is difficult if you have a learning disability to make and especially maintain friendships and that's what Interest Link does.

Member Opportunities	Most definitely from the children's group right through. The opportunities and experiences have been greatly beneficial and the young people might never have had the opportunity otherwise.
Member Opportunities	Alexander loves being busy and meeting people. Interest Link has given him opportunities to do both.
Member Opportunities	She enjoyed going away with the group to Amsterdam, had an amazing time and was well looked after
Member Self-esteem	Joe is enjoying all the groups he is attending and likes that his ideas & feedback are respected. As Joes confidence grows he is making more meaningful social connections: their are people who he calls friends now from the groups.
Member Self-Esteem	Definitely more confident and self esteem is much better and is always so proud of her work.
Member Self-Esteem	Yes, he is able to be himself around all his friends.
Member Self-Esteem	People gravitate to my daughter, this helps her self esteem.
Member Self-Esteem	Yes definitely showing Declan that he can do anything if just puts he's mind to it
Member Self-Esteem	A sense of achievement when completed activities Also a sense of belonging to a group
Member Social skills	She now talks to the other members and volunteers. So much confidence.
Member Social skills	He has shown much more excitement at being involved in social activities with Interest Link & his communication is constantly improving because of it.
Member Social skills	Communication skills and social skills, interaction is much better, she loves catching up with friends and it is a safe place for her.
Member Social skills	Definitely, has come right out his shell. More confident talking to people.
Member Social skills	She started having a telephone conversation with a link during Covid and it is so important to her that it has continued on. She enjoys having the link to herself but it also means that she really has to listen.
Member Social skills	Enjoying being sociable and part of a group.
Member Social skills	Alexander is very willing to share what he has being doing, who he meets and what things they talk about.
Need	He loves to socialise & this is the only place he can do it.
Need	It is very beneficial to our daughter as without she would have no friends due her mutism.
Need	Lack of other places for Jake to socialise & practice social skills. He has gained a lot of confidence from going .
Need	No local opportunities to us & hard to get spaces on anything that is available.
Need	Without this they would have nothing in the evenings.
Need	A doesn't have many opportunities to socialise now his college courses are over and this is good for his confidence and social skills
Need	It's the only thing he's got. If it wasn't for Interest Link he wouldn't have the social life he has.
Need	If he didn't do Interest Link I don't know what he would do.
Need	Interest Link promotes opportunities which she would not otherwise have. She would be lost without it.

Need	Most of my daughter's activities are with Interest Link. Being a rural community there are no other local opportunities. We would be lost without Interest Link.
Need	My child has found it difficult with other youth groups that he has tried. However, he found Interest Link much more suited to his needs.
Need	It is helpful to have time away from caring. My son has no statutory services.
Need	My child has tried all the other youth clubs in the area. None of them were suitable - too noisy, unstructured for him.
Need	Only group my daughter has: loves going to group
Need	There has been support and guidance not only for my daughter but for the family too and if this service wasn't there it would be devastating.
Need	Even more important now as only opportunity for friends to meet.
Need	It is the only thing Jordan does in his where he can socialise with peers
Praise for Staff & Service	Kate & her team are very welcoming & inclusive Christopher would be devastated if he could not continue it has become an extended family to him.
Praise for Staff & Service	You all do a great job, always friendly, understanding, and treat our young people with respect. keep up the great work.
Praise for Staff & Service	The past 2 years have been fantastic for my sister, through Covid it was very hard for her to meet friends etc, but the groups had excellent Zoom sessions and was always very well planned and so much fun, she was still able to see her friends, yes it was on screen but was still good for her. The things planned are so much fun for my sister with loads of variety and fun things to do. Rosa and Mary are fantastic people who plan excellent sessions for everyone, without the groups my sister would be lost and very withdrawn from social interaction with friends. Mary and Rosa run excellent groups which makes my sister a very happy lady. Also very happy sisters to see our sister happy and having fun.
Praise for Staff & Service	Interest Link has built a real community group. It was lovely to see everyone at social events, Shrek, Bingo and the Treasure Hunt, and we really appreciate all the hard work from Mary and Rosa and the volunteers. Many thanks.
Praise for Staff & Service	This service is an absolutely godsend for our family to sustain the placement. The array as said before is relevant and the young person gets so much confidence and practice to increase his level of concentration. Mary/Rosa just get him and work to his individual level. They really reinforce the fact he has to remain safe whilst doing activities and understand the risks involved with this young man.
Praise for Staff & Service	O has a great time at this group. As O's Mum I feel so comfortable knowing that this group supports O's abilities and there is no judgement at all. I really can't thank you enough for what you have achieved with O's confidence. We notice a big change at home.
Praise for Staff & Service	Staff work incredibly hard. I can't think of anything more they could do.
Praise for Staff & Service	Angela and her team have been fantastic in supporting Alexander in his move to Kelso.
Praise for Staff & Service	He's loved the group and the variety of choice. Staff are amazing and so thankful for this service

Outcome/Theme	Quotes
Confidence making friends with people with learning disabilities	This gave me a newfound confidence to work and help bring out the most for these YP and their experience. I am now going to work with YP with disabilities in America.
ditto	Before I thought it would be hard, but it wasn't really.
ditto	I can understand them more
ditto	I definitely think my confidence has grown and volunteering has been a great help in my new job position as additional needs assistant in a local borders school
ditto	Awareness of disability and how you can help gives confidence
ditto	The more people I meet the more able I am to understand people and form relationships.
ditto	Far more empathetic and confident in public.
ditto	I am able to talk to group members more and understand their barriers.
ditto	Yes more confident and understand every ones needs
ditto	Learning disability work was new to me but I was able to learn so much in treating people totally as individuals rather than in some social category.
ditto	I am more confident chatting to and socializing with people with a learning disability now than when I started volunteering with interest link. And when out in the community am more aware of barriers, for example being aware if in a shop that someone may need more time at the till. I often stop and chat to one of the men that used to attend the interest link youth group.
ditto	100% as previously I had never been in a situation to socialise with people with learning disabilities. However now I love spending time with them and fully understand the barriers they face daily.
ditto	It gets me more excited for Monday and it helped me to play with kids with disabilities.
Friendships	The lady I have befriended and I have built up a friendship over the years we have been linked. And likewise with others that I have met through the youth group, if they see me out locally they'll always say hello to me.
Friendships	I've had great fun getting to know/ building relationships every week with the members
Friendships	Great people that I can communicate with and have fun with
Friendships	Have built a lovely friendship
Friendships	Found it easy to interact with new members and everyone has been really friendly.
Friendships	Two way relationship. I have enjoyed their warmth.
Friendships	they are all lovely people and i feel like they are easy to get along with
Friendships	Lifetime friendship
Friendships	Our friendship has developed well. I look forward to our lunch dates as much as she does.
Friendships	I really enjoy getting to chat to and spend time with all the members.
Friendships	So many amazing things to do that build strong friendships
Friendships	Yes I have best friends and always there for me

Friendships	Special friends for life
Friendships	I've made new friends.
Learning disabilities Awareness	Totally I understand more that difficulties are not a barrier in some cases they prove to be a strength, I have learned so much the group has given me more than I could ever give back
LD Awareness	Before starting I wasn't really aware of the potential isolation people face and also physical impacts
LD Awareness	I feel much more knowledgeable and understanding of learning disabilities.
LD Awareness	People need to be aware that they are individuals with strengths and insights just like people without learning disabilities
LD Awareness	It has made me think how vulnerable they can be. Plus the role of parents is challenging perhaps.
LD Awareness	I have learned so much from everyone and they are so happy to share there experiences and helping me also to communicate with them.
LD Awareness	I understand so much more
LD Awareness	it has made me more aware of the struggles others can have and how i can help people
Member Outcomes	When I first met N she was nervous around new situations, and relied on a lot of support from her parents. After a few years of our link, I can see her confidence has grown, and is still growing. She's more confident when we're out in the community being able to ask questions to members of staff when in a coffee shop for example. She's now living independently which is a big step for her and shows great confidence.
Member Outcomes	They feel like they can be included with people that don't have disabilities.
Member Outcomes	They have been smiling a lot more and have been giving a lot more hugs
Member Outcomes	Being shy when they first started but as the weeks go by they are getting more confident to speak.
Member Outcomes	They always have smiles on their faces and want to share with the group what they have been doing.
Member Outcomes	B seemed very introverted when I first joined, but she's since become extremely chatty about her personal life.
Member Outcomes	Some have come out of their shells and can happily express themselves
Member Outcomes	They are happier making friends and join in more are less shy and talk more
Member Outcomes	One of the members who used to be incredibly quiet and participate occasionally will now happily chat to me and interact with a smile on his face.
Member Outcomes	The vast differences between the Robbie I met in the children's group and the one I sit next to right now will always be my go to example for a drastic improvement in Happiness, Confidence & Self-esteem, and Social Skills.
Member Outcomes	From first meeting them where initially they are reserved it is so clear that the events bring them out of their shell and the smile on their face is great to see.
Member Outcomes	i saw when we were on the Amsterdam trip that everyone did so well by talking to new people and understanding how different things works for different people.
Member Outcomes	We recently have had 2 new members join and at the last meeting they joined in completely and seemed to have lost their initial shyness.
Praise for staff	Becca and Val are always a great laugh, so helpful and just amazing to have had the opportunity to learn from them both.

Praise for staff	Stef and Donna are truly amazing!!!! And I appreciate everything they have done for me and everyone else
Praise for Staff & Service	Mary and Rosa have always been extremely accommodating and friendly, and I hope to stay in touch.
Praise for Staff & Service	It is good the way it is, Kate is great at running the group
Praise for Staff & Service	Angela has offered excellent one to one support with a recent query I had, and I know she is always available and would listen if any volunteers had questions or suggestions
Other Vol Outcomes	Befriending has been really fun and I'm glad I volunteered to be a part of it all. The activities have been amazing.
Other Vol Outcomes	Volunteering always feels like a reward even after a long day at another job, it's helped me a lot in being more confident working with people who have disabilities and it has just been amazing every time!
Other Vol Outcomes	I really do enjoy interest link and have done for the past years. It's been a great way to boost my skills and experience and has also been great fun. I receive a lot of support from Stef and Donna which is always greatly appreciated.
Other Vol Outcomes	I felt I was doing something genuinely worthwhile with my time, which has guided me in applying my values to future university and career choices.
Other Vol Outcomes	I started to do this because of my Duke of Edinburgh Award but I have decided to continue after because it's so fun to do activities and become friends with people who might struggle with that.
Other Vol Outcomes	I love seeing the joy my buddy gets when we meet up. I also love that it gives families a break
Other Vol Outcomes	I love to work with the kids in Interest Link, helping them have fun. Helping others gives a real sense of achievement
Other Vol Outcomes	Chance to do something new, takes me out of my comfort zone, helps with my social skills.
Other Vol Outcomes	I love every minute of it. It's ridiculous how much I love it!
Other Vol Outcomes	I have had some of the best times with the ladies I have buddied over the years. Feel honoured to be an interest link volunteer
Other Vol Outcomes	The satisfaction of making a difference in someone's life seeing them happy .
Other Vol Outcomes	I enjoy meeting up with the Friday guys - there is always a warm, kind atmosphere and people light up as they chat.
Other Vol Outcomes	I enjoy being part of something that is outward looking, that supports diversity in communities
Other Vol Outcomes	It has saved me at times when my own mental health has been difficult. I view the group as a whole as friends.
Other Vol Outcomes	When I first signed up I just had a vague idea of what was involved, but it has surpassed anything that I had in mind and any preconceptions I had at the time.
Other Vol Outcomes	Definitely, I wanted to help out / support local groups and feel like I could give something back
Other Vol Outcomes	Being able to support people in the community and see how happy they are
Other Vol Outcomes	The whole experience is fantastic
Other Vol Outcomes	At first I was a bit nervous but now I feel really good to come down and talk to other people
Other Vol Outcomes	I like to see people happy. I like it when new people join & I can help them. I felt proud when a new member said he trusted me

Outcome/Theme	Quotes
Carer Outcomes	Interest Link helps with carer stress and it gives people fun things to do and carers/family time to concentrate on other things aside from their caring role. The groups help people to stay connected to their friends and make new friendships. General happiness and well-being is improved upon as a result
Carer Outcomes	The respite has a positive impact of helping families be more balanced and thus more sustainable as carers. The biggest impact that I hear commented on is the knock on effect of young people being happy, being involved and being valued. All of this has a very positive impact on carers happiness and well being.
Gap in provision	The groups fill a much needed gap. They give people the chance to learn life skills, build confidence and make connections with others
Gap in provision	I think you provide excellent opportunities and a service where people feel safe and able to gain new skills in a calming/fun environment. There are not many groups in the area so Interest Link plays a vital part in adults lives where they can meet friends and socialise while having fun.
Gap in provision	Super link from school to evening groups, attending the group in school has allowed young people to move onto the evening group. These provide a social setting for the young people that they do not have elsewhere and support for the families in term of seeing their child included with in a group, casual parental interaction through the group.
Gap in provision	Groups that provide opportunities for people who are often socially isolated to meet others and form friendships have huge value. There are still too few such groups in Berwickshire.
Gap in provision	There are not a lot of groups in Cheviot for my clients apart from the ones you offer
Gap in provision	A fantastic link between school/home/IL- no other provision like it
General	Also helping support transition to high school!
General	The Befriending scheme in Langlee Primary School was fantastic for all the children involved.
General	I think this service & provision is a wonderful flexible & forward thinking service that aids community inclusion & friendship forming but in a really interesting & fun way. Well done to team Interest Link you are smashing it as always :)
General	Keep up the good work, :-), very appreciated.
General	Please keep the group going as it gives so many opportunities.
General	Students in HHS thoroughly have enjoyed sessions. They visibly feel relaxed, motivated, confident, enjoying the relationships and various interesting activities.
General	A really valuable service. Keep up the good work!
General	Keep going- you both do a fantastic job and we very much appreciate your work with the school
General	Keep doing what you are all doing as it is just fabulous.
General	I think it has been a great success - all the children involved loved it and have grown as a result.
Member outcomes	Everyone I know who is involved in Interest Link speaks of their excitement to attend groups, as do their family and carers. For many people after lockdown it's

	been daunting to go back to activities, but Interest Link have helped to ease people back in with reassurance and care
Member outcomes	Through volunteering partnerships it is evident that members and volunteers alike have gained fundamental skills with an intrinsic value. This transactional process has provided a range of learning opportunities; many of which have tangible outcomes. Volunteers have gained vital skills in communication, confidence and task management while members have in-turn gained confidence, self-worth, life and social skills having access to equitable opportunities. These have reflected on families/carers having time to restore balance in their lives.
Member outcomes	The adult I support absolutely loves coming to the groups, she smiles and is so happy to see her friends, she is also very proud of things she makes and all her friends look out for her and each other for support and help.
Member outcomes	My client looks forward to sessions and talks about them a lot.
Member outcomes	My client's confidence of coming to groups on her own has grown massively.
Member outcomes	Independence is being promoted and new skills learnt which has build the persons confidence and self esteem.
Member outcomes	An increased willingness to engage; people telling us that they like/enjoy going to e.g. the lunch group in Duns, and explaining why; an uplift in self-confidence and being more comfortable around others. Membership of groups can also be a gateway into other developmental activities, e.g. joining other groups, becoming volunteers, moving into further education or training.
Member outcomes	The peer mentors have developed their understanding and empathy for children with Additional Needs. The members have developed their communication skills.
Member outcomes	More positive around school and in their decision making skills
Praise for Staff	Well done and thanks Rosa, Mary and helpers.
Praise for Staff & Service	Val and Becca have been so welcoming, they bring a calm and caring atmosphere to the group. The children's group has been a great chance for the Service user I support to meet adults and other young people they will be attending school with next year. This has been great for the transition to high school and made many faces more familiar.
Praise for Staff & Service	Both Angela and Kate have been a joy to work with. They are both very accommodating of the needs of the people we work with and do their best to support our service
Safe & professional	Yes - everyone speaks highly of the service and how they feel safe and included
Safe & professional	During my involvement with your organisation I have observed members/volunteers supported in a safe and professional way at all times.
Safe & professional	I feel you offer a very safe, kind and warming environment for everyone.
Safe & professional	All the service users needs are thought of and met.
Safe & professional	Professional communication, notice of any changes given in good time, well prepared for activities.
Safe & professional	Extensive risk assessments are carried out prior to activities taking place.
Safe & professional	This is my first job like this and bringing my client has absolutely warmed my heart. The love, fun, togetherness etc. is unbelievable.
Safe & professional	Safe and professional yet relaxed
Safe & professional	Very professional and approachable

Outcome/Theme	Quotes
Member Outcomes	It is clear that members of Green Wanderers and Motivators have built up strong friendships and community and they are great to work with. I am always made to feel welcome and their enthusiasm is infectious.
Member Outcomes	<p>Working with Interest Link is joyous; endless laughs with wonderful people in a safe and supportive atmosphere that fosters friendship and collaboration.</p> <p>The impact on members is enormous in terms of learning new skills and developing creative ideas in an environment of trust and support. Similarly, the skills and empathy of the volunteers, together with the expertise of the staff, combine to create an environment that makes people feel valued and part of the team.</p> <p>When one see the faces of surprise and pride worn by parents and friends of members witnessing members performing one feels a huge sense of satisfaction.</p>
Member Outcomes	I am a tutor who has worked creatively with Interest Link members for many years. I have noticed that, by attending the groups, participants have improved their creative skills including coordination, dexterity, sequencing & creative decision making, and also their social skills including meeting new people, sharing, talking to a large group, helping others, and I would say members are overall more confident in social situations, and in trying new activities.
Member Outcomes	Opening them up to new learning experiences through food is great - see each person enjoy and have fun whilst developing knowledge and skills through food activities
Praise for Staff & Service	Without exaggerating, Interest Link is the best and most supportive organisation I've ever worked for. Sometimes additional Time would be useful
Praise for Staff & Service	Interest Link are doing an exceptional job of bringing people together to learn new skills, be out in community spaces, express themselves and to make strong friendships and bonds in the process. The fact there is always a lot of laughter says it all!
Praise for Staff & Service	I think Interest Link is pioneering in its services to service users. I think the positive effect of the groups has a far reaching effect on wider family and friends, who love the groups. The Interest link activities have become a vital part of service users lives, their development as individuals and as members of a wider, stronger, healthy community.
Praise for Staff & Service	Nothing is too much trouble for the incredible, enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff. They find the perfect balance of empowering members, raising expectations and empathy.
Praise for Staff & Service	Volunteers, young people , Becca and Val make the sessions run smoothly- Thank you

Jokokubos (16) and Simonas

Jokokubos (16) and Simonas (13) are brothers from Lithuania

Simonas is on the autistic spectrum and has been with Interest Link since March 2022, joining The Duns group first & now he is attending the Kelso Group. English is his second language. He was quiet & shy when he first attended the group, but now he has gained confidence & talks to other group members. He is kind & friendly & has a great sense of humour & gets on well with everybody.

At times he has challenges with making choices & understanding game rules. Winning & losing games can be a big challenge for him but with our empathy & guidance he manages his time in the sessions. He enjoys attending the groups & tries out the arts and crafts cookery and drama projects. He has settled into the group and has become a popular member. He is always friendly to other group members & now initiates conversations.

Simonas has gained confidence since joining the group & has asked to join group WhatsApp he has made friends in the group with people from different schools and different towns. He has also joined the local Borders Youth Theatre as he has a keen interest in drama. Interest Link worked with Simonas & his Mum to ensure that he settled into the BYT drama group.

Jokokubos like his brother is on the autistic spectrum and has been with Interest Link since March 2022 joining The Duns group first & now he attends the Kelso Group. The brothers get on well with each other Jokokubos will talk with Simonas he will tell Simonas how to behave

Jokokubos likes to be on the periphery he enjoys walking around, he does not spend much time on the activities but takes part as best as he can. He will sit down for a snack & enjoys the food.

Jokokubos has favourite subjects, it used to be talking about going to the casino, now he likes to talk about cars & gaming. Jokokubos wrote a letter to the coordinator about PlayStations & Xboxes: his Mum said he had never done this before.

Jokokubos said "I enjoy walks to the park, I enjoyed the café. I meet new people. Art and crafts are fun". Simonas said "I meet new friends, We have fun playing games and doing crafts and I can speak out in the group"

The boys parents are thankful for the group that enables the boys to socialise.

Jurgita the boys' Mum told me how much the boys miss the group during the holidays and said "They have met new friends/people and they come home chatting, laughing and smiling. I can go out with friends or I can go shopping and have some me time".

Linda

Linda is a 46 year old mother of two (one of whom is also a member of Interest Link Borders). She has moderate learning disabilities and lives relatively independently with the support of social work and her elderly mother who lives 10 miles away. She has been an active member of ILB since 2018. Linda wears hearing aids, has asthma and suffered severe trauma in her earlier years. Despite these barriers she is

resilient and a good mother to her children. In the year and a half since I joined the Interest Link staff I have watched her blossom from a quiet woman who wouldn't make eye contact to someone who has a new-found confidence and meaning in her life.

Linda enjoys going to our allotment every week and is part of a tight-knit group of friends there. She is a supportive friend to another of our members who suffers from depression at times, encouraging him to come along when he is feeling low. Recently we had a lot of work done upgrading the allotment and she helped plan the improvements. She has grown in confidence enormously and has really found her voice through the allotment, not to mention that her horticultural skills have come on in leaps and bounds! She has passed these on to her daughter and now grows a wide range of veg and flowers in her own garden. She enjoys a lovely bond with our main volunteer and they share a great respect for one another. A new volunteer who started recently owes a lot to Linda for helping him to find his feet as a newbie to gardening.

Linda also joined a newly formed Interest Link Health and Wellbeing group in January along with eight other members who meet monthly to enjoy artistic activities. She has formed close friendships with a couple of the other women who attend and they now meet socially out-with this group which is super to see. This is a group where people can relax, be mindful and talk about any issues they have in their lives as well as have the pleasure of enjoying being creative together.

Linda has recently been supported along with some other members to start a New Age Kurling group. She also volunteers for the ILB youth group her daughter used to attend, and is a great asset to the group.

Faye

Faye is 22 and lives locally with her mum and dad in a small town –she is a very popular and much loved member of our crew! She has a loving and warm family. Faye has the best sense of humour and is great fun. She has been with us since she was 11 years old and has been in our children's and youth groups. She is also now in the adult service where she does either crafts or baking. She has been with us to Belfast, Manchester and Dundee on our residential trips too.

Faye has Down's Syndrome, is non-verbal and has coeliac disease. Faye requires 24 hour support and supervision, so when she is at the group her dad says that they can have time together as a couple in the knowledge that Faye is not only safe but also having fun with an established group of her friends. They have recently become grandparents so for Auntie Faye to have time away also affords the family extra baby times! When Faye is away for the weekends with us, mum and dad are able to attend rugby games or just relax together with regular pics on WhatsApp from us of what Faye is up to, whether it's The Titanic Exhibition, indoor skydiving or (gluten free) afternoon tea! The family say they love knowing that Faye is having different experiences with her peers and always fully support all our project plans and ideas.

The group also allows Faye to maintain independent social connections with other members Faye has known since her school days. Mum says that this consistency has made the transition to adult services a little easier as there was no break or change in her access to Interest Link at a time when everything else changed – even during lockdown, Faye accessed our Zoom sessions so that the connections were maintained.

Faye travels in one of our group taxis and this not only boosts her independence, but means that no one needs to be out and about driving Faye to the group to then to have to come back later on – this increases the respite time for the family as their evening is not fractured.

O

O is 9 years old and lives with her parents and sister in Galashiels. She was referred to us during lockdown and then we met her at our lunchtime school sessions before she then joined the children's group - O was shy when she first attended but always has a big smile. She has settled in very well and has formed a particular bond with a volunteer, Martyna. They do the activities together within the group and so far, O has been involved with our calendar project and has also decorated a Christmas cake with handmade fondant snowmen.

O comes happily into all the sessions and is so excited when she sees her new friends – she is a lovely girl and we are so pleased to have her with us. O has learning disabilities as well as communication and physical health issues so she requires a high level of care, and has previously tried to attend mainstream social/activity groups but these have not worked out for her. Mum heard about Interest Link and sent us a message – our first meeting was a Zoom hello so we could tell mum more about what we do and answer her questions.

Her mum sent me this message "O has very much enjoyed coming to the group from the start. She doesn't tend to like doing things. Once she's in the house that's normally it but since starting this group O really likes going out. Her confidence has grown a lot. I'm so glad she enjoys going because it gives her time to socialise out with school hours but it also allows myself to have a bit of breathing space knowing that she is in a safe place and is happy to be there. This makes family life as a whole much easier and I am less stressed. The opportunities of the different activities that she does is great. I am thoroughly happy that I was able to find this group and allow O to expand her skills."

Aileen Marie

Aileen Marie is 26 and lives with her mum, dad and brother in a small town in the Borders. They are a close knit family and Aileen Marie is also a devoted Auntie.

Aileen Marie has been with Interest Link for 12 years and has a learning disability. She was previously in our children and youth groups and went on our most recent residential trip to iFly in Manchester before she transferred over to the adult service where she attends our fortnightly crafting group. Aileen Marie has already developed strong bonds with the crafting crew: There is a range of different ages and characters within the group and this means there is never a shortage of chatter and laughter or reassurance when required too.

She currently has an employment placement at a local catering and gardening project run by a support agency.

The respite element of the groups and events such as our Friendship Day are a two way street for Aileen Marie and her mum. Her mum has recently suffered from ill health and Aileen Marie has subsequently become one of her mum's carers helping with practical daily elements as well as emotional support. The times with us at Interest Link mean a lot to the family as mum knows that Aileen Marie is having fun and

also having a break - mum finds it very reassuring to know that Aileen Marie is maintaining her social connections. She feels that she can relax knowing Aileen Marie is safe and enjoying herself with us – the taxi to and from the group means her mum doesn't have to worry about travelling either.

Aileen Marie's mum says "without you Aileen Marie would not have the confidence to do the things she does in the group, I know she is safe and happy. She has made a solid bunch of friends and it gets her out and about – she gets so much from her time with the groups".

Jack at Brunch Bunch

The Brunch Bunch runs fortnightly in a local food surplus café called Café Recharge in Galashiels. Sessions are 2 hours long and consist of crafting or an activity and then our brunch/lunch. So far, our activities have included mug painting. Easter cards and jewellery making.

Jack has previously been a member of our evening baking sessions but a change in his health meant that these were no longer suitable for him. We were very sad to hear this as Jack was frequently our star baker – he has a great eye for detail.

Jack's family were one of the reasons we started to realise that a daytime session was needed after his mum called after lockdown to say that his day service was being shut and there was a huge gap in activities for her son. As Jack was already with us, we knew that the model could work in a daytime setting so we are delighted that Jack attends The Brunch Bunch!

Jack has autism and is mostly non verbal so his mum has shared this with us –

"Thanks to the Brunch Bunch, Jack is able to still maintain his connections with his friends at Interest Link and he gets the chance to be with other people as well as learn more about the etiquette of eating out. I know that Jack enjoys choosing his own choice of meal from the menu and enjoys attending with his support staff – this is a valuable chance for Jack to just relax and enjoy a shared experience"

Jack's mum also told us that "Although Jack is predominantly non-verbal, he is able to tell me who he has seen at the Brunch Bunch as they are people he has met before and I can see that he is enjoying the sessions, I can see that he is happy to attend. It's an extra opportunity for him to mix with friends outwith the family too.

Harry

Harry has a learning disability and is 14 years old and lives with his grannie and single mum Sally. Harry attended our Wilton School Group for many years before he moved to Hawick High School. Harry was supported by staff in the Additional Needs Unit at Wilton where Interest Link ran an online and face to face group session with 4 members and 4 young peer mentors. Harry enjoyed many happy years engaging with Becca from Interest Link with a variety of group activities with his friends.

Harry moved to Hawick High School when he turned 12, where he continued to access our senior school service with an older group of members who are supported in the Hawick High School Unit for Additional Needs children.

Harry is now in our evening Children's group. He settled in well although he was anxious at first and needed mum to stay for the first few sessions. He especially enjoys board games and loves to interact with staff and members of the group. His laugh is infectious and is always commented on.

Sarah our sessional worker also works in the Additional Needs Unit at Hawick High School, so is another familiar face for him and makes him feel less anxious about being away from mum.

Sally really depends on our service and feels happy and confident that Harry is with people he knows and now feels safe. Sally is able to have a little bit of time to herself to catch up with what she chooses to do. Sally also enjoys looking at our Facebook Page. She is delighted that Harry enjoys our activities especially Drama. Harry is always eager to come to his group and sad when the session finishes. The taxi ride is very important to both Sally and Harry. It gives Sally extra time to herself and Harry thoroughly enjoys the taxi ride with Sarah as escort and his friends. It is fun to have a spin around Hawick as the taxi driver drops off members.

Sally is grateful for everything we do and the transport that we offer helps alleviate any extra stress. "Harry loves the group and has so much fun. Without these little groups our kids wouldn't have the chance to meet and make friends in similar situation and experience these activities thank you to all of you for making this happen".

Lawrence and David

Lawrence and David are twins, they are 9 years old and live with their parents and younger sister Daisy. Lawrence has ADHD and a learning disability. David has a learning disability and is autistic. David has more difficulty understanding and navigating the world around him.

Lawrence attends our evening Children's group while David attends a school lunch group. David enjoys one to one time with other school children and young peer mentors from mainstream school classes.

Lawrence is very happy in the evening group and it offers him an opportunity to meet other children from different schools. He especially likes working with Leanne our Baking Tutor, learning to prepare food from different countries around the world. He also enjoys Drama sessions, where he is learning to express himself and think creatively. These sessions offer a great opportunity for him to problem solve and work in a team with other children and peer mentors, supporting him to feel more confident.

Mum Kendra is very happy that both boys are having an opportunity where they spend quality time meeting other children as they have very limited opportunities to socialize. These opportunities also give mum and dad time to spend with other siblings.

Interest Link have regular open parents' evenings where the boys parents are invited along to see what Lawrence has been up to. Kendra also enjoys interacting with our Facebook Page looking at photos and videos from David's group. The boys like it that they have their own special Interest Link groups and enjoy sharing stories with each other when at home.

Chris

Chris is 33, has a learning disability and suffers from epilepsy. Following an accident two years ago he needs support in walking. He lives with his mother Agnes, is isolated from friends and has very little access to any social life in the evenings and at weekends.

Agnes is anxious about Chris but very happy with a new fortnightly group of ours, Best Friends Forever, as Chris has settled into the group perfectly. The group was created for members over the age of 26 and meets 1pm-4pm in local cafes, where they can be socially active and feel safe. Members are encouraged to be as independent as possible, traveling to venues, ordering and paying for their own lunch and drinks. The group share their news and talk about things that are important to them.

During the pandemic Interest Link found different ways to connect Chris with friends through Zoom. Chris's mum Agnes is a sole carer and was very grateful for the support that the organization gave her and Chris during this very difficult and challenging time. Chris was very excited about getting back to normal and meeting up with his friends face to face, but continues his interaction through our WhatsApp groups and posts his many drawings on Facebook. Agnes says "connecting with other members is a great idea. I know how much it has been a benefit to Christopher, thank you Val and Becca".

Chris says "I feel I am really good at saying things online now and it's great to see my pictures on Facebook. We have great banter at the café group and I am very excited when it is the next meeting and I can see my friends".

Agnes always reiterates how grateful she is for the support that they both receive.

James

James lives with his parents on an isolated farm. James is in his 50's and has Downs' Syndrome. He has been a member of Interest Link Roxburgh for many years and attends the Caledonian Group.

The group is the only opportunity that offers a social outlet for him and a chance to meet up with his friends in the evening now he does not have a day centre place. During the pandemic Interest bought an iPad for James so he could pop into a scheduled weekly "Banter Group", Bingo and Karaoke sessions. This undoubtedly enhanced his mental health and well-being. James facial expressions sum up how happy it makes him feel to be reunited with his friends face to face and he loves Drama and Music. "I like to speak to people and tell them about me and where I go this makes me happy. I enjoy the Banter Group and meeting new friends from everywhere. I like singing with the group on Music Group. I like drama and shows."

James's parents have felt isolated as they get older, and the respite time is vital as it enables them to have a break in the knowledge that he is in safe hands. James' mother Elizabeth especially enjoys coming along to open parent's nights at the Caledonian Group where she is able to catch up with other parents who they have known for years, and to see James perform in Drama Performances. "If it wasn't for Interest Link Roxburgh James would have had no connections with friends especially in the evenings and during the pandemic." When James returned from a recent Silent Disco she said "It was party time, now it's talking time, he is on a high! Thank you to all at Interest Link"

With thanks to all our Funders in 2022-23



www.interestlink.org.uk