



*interest* LINK  
BORDERS

# 2025 Impact Report

always feel welcome

lot of laughs

accepted for who I am

makes me feel happy

one big happy family

I realise my abilities

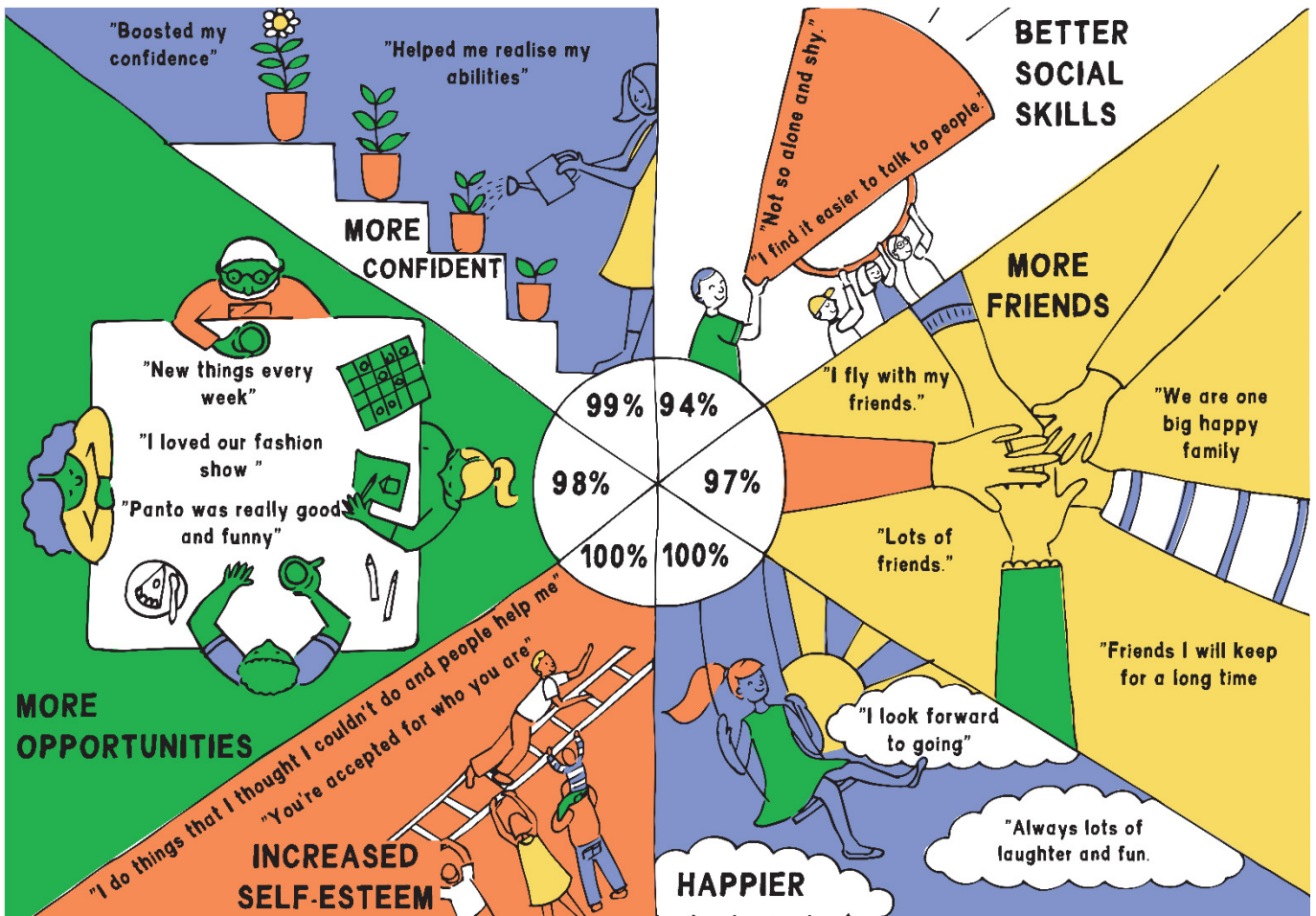
always look forward to it

exciting

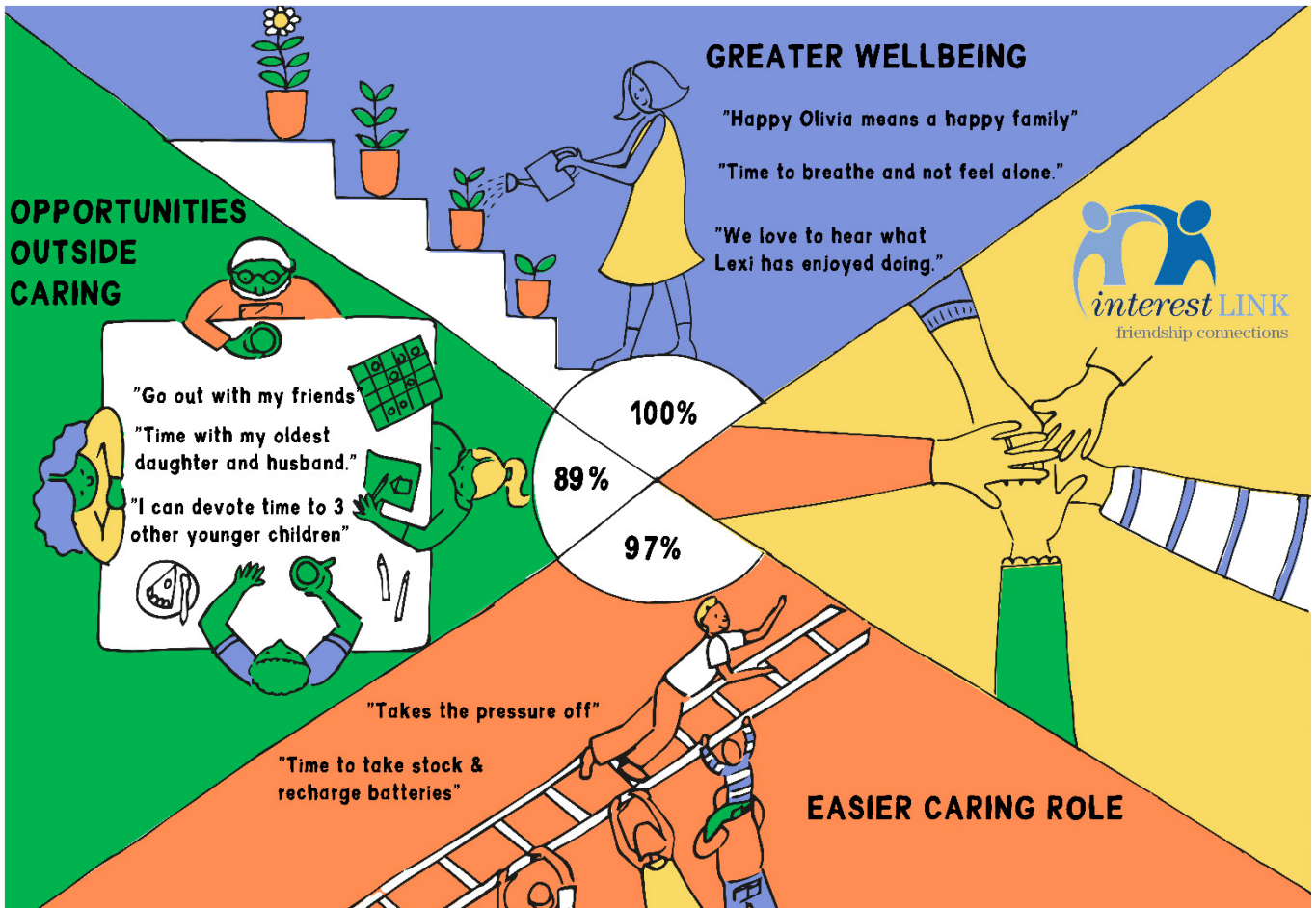
# Best friends

boosted my confidence love to chat now

**Members with learning disabilities said:**



**Family carers said:**



## **Our Aims and Activities**

We aim to improve the quality of life of socially excluded children (aged 8+), young people and adults with learning disabilities throughout the Scottish Borders. Our volunteer befriending projects overcome social barriers and provide fun and accessible opportunities, experiences and friendship networks on a longterm basis. They develop the qualities and skills needed for independent living, volunteering and employment and give regular high quality respite to family carers.

Our peer-age befriending for all ages is a very direct and effective route to improving social inclusion and our service is unique in the UK for its variety. We have 315 members of whom 265 are currently supported by 220 peer-age volunteers in 41 befriending groups and 45 traditional 1:1 links. Groups meet in community venues, in-school and on Zoom, and activities are similar to mainstream groups, including arts & crafts, drama, lifeskills, journalism, gardening, music, cookery, keep fit, games and overnight trips. 305 family carers benefit from regular respite.

We were originally founded by Berwickshire family carers in 1990 and now deliver through four branches (Berwickshire, Central Borders, Roxburgh and Tweeddale) each with its own experienced staff and local committee of stakeholders. They work with local schools, Borders College, Social Work and care providers to reach as many people as possible.

## **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 5% a job. 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 enriching comes out loud and clear from the members and families we work with, and this is reflected in the feedback below.

## Activities 2024-25

We are currently supporting 265 members with learning disabilities, up from 250 a year ago. We have 335 places in 41 befriending groups (compared with 305 in 38 groups last year) and 3 new groups are planned for September 2025. 1:1 links have reduced from 55 to 45, continuing the gradual shift of focus towards groups. 102 members have both a 1:1 link and a group, or were in two groups. 305 family carers enjoyed short break respite. Around 200 volunteer befrienders have been involved during the year.

New groups started included:

- An Artful Numeracy group aiming to improve maths and money-handling.
- High and Primary school groups at Jedburgh Campus.
- A Drama group in partnership with Borders Youth Theatre
- A walking group (Woodland Warriors)

[See a breakdown of all our groups and 1:1 links.](#)

Highlights of the year included:

- Summer Trips in July 2024
- Friendship Day in October 2024
- Two pantomimes: [Countdown To Christmas](#) in December 2024 and Jungle Book in January 2025 (see [video](#) & [photoreport](#)).
- Our first mothers and daughters [overnight trip](#), to Whitekirk in March 2025
- Fashion Show in March 2025
- Our third Charmian Challenge fun run in April 2025.
- In May 2025 we ran a two night trip to York (see [video](#) & [photoreport](#)).
- In June 2025 we won Organisation of the Year at the YouthBorders Awards.
- In July Roxburgh Children's Group performed The Wizard of Oz (see [video](#) & [photoreport](#)).

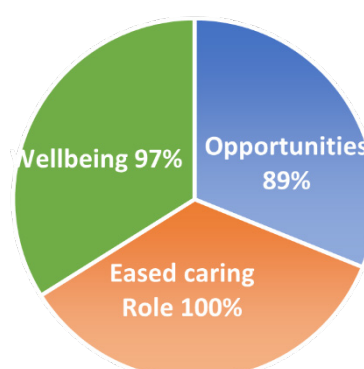
A massive vote of thanks goes to all our amazing volunteers and [our funders over the last year](#): our work would not be possible without their fantastic support.

## Survey Outcomes at a Glance

Member Outcomes



Carer Outcomes



# June 2025 Survey

We surveyed supported members, family carers, volunteers, tutors and care professionals in June 2025, using accessible questionnaires deployed face-to-face, online and by telephone and post.

<b>Response rates</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Family carers</b>	<b>Volunteers</b>			
	43%	43%	44%			
<b>Main Outcomes:</b>						
<b>Impact on Members</b>	<b>More Friends</b>	<b>More opportunities</b>	<b>Greater Happiness</b>	<b>Improved Confidence</b>	<b>Increased Self-esteem</b>	<b>Better Social Skills</b>
<b>Reported by Themselves</b>	97%	98%	100%	99%	100%	94%
<b>Reported by Carers</b>	100%	100%	98%	98%	98%	98%
<b>Reported by Volunteers</b>	94%		99%	94%	94%	98%
<b>Impact on Family Carers</b>						
	<b>More Opportunities Outside Caring</b>		<b>Eased or More Sustainable Caring Role</b>		<b>Greater Wellbeing</b>	
<b>Reported by Themselves</b>	89%		97%		100%	
<b>Reported by Social Care Professionals</b>	100%		100%		100%	
<b>Impact on Volunteers</b>						
	<b>Increased Learning Disabilities Awareness</b>		<b>More confidence with people with learning disabilities</b>			
<b>Reported by Themselves</b>	93%		93%			
<b>Other responses:</b>						
	<b>Members</b>	<b>Family carers</b>	<b>Volunteers</b>	<b>Tutors</b>	<b>Social Care Professionals</b>	
<b>Service still needed</b>	100%	100%			100%	
<b>Feel valued &amp; supported by Interest Link</b>			100%	100%		
<b>Volunteering has met hopes and expectations</b>			98%			
<b>Safe &amp; Professional Service</b>					100%	

## Links:

### Survey Feedback:

[Member Feedback](#)

[Family Carer Feedback](#)

[Volunteer Feedback](#)

[Professional Carer Feedback](#)

[Tutor Feedback](#)

[Case Studies 2024-25](#)

[Fundors](#)

<b>Did you make friends?</b>
Lots of friends: Some of us meet when we aren't at the group.
Met friends I will keep for a long time.
My friends are really nice
Really like Val and the volunteers that help.
Sarah's my best friend
Everybody gets on well which is good and we go for a cuppa afterwards.
I enjoy being part of the group. Everyone works as a team.
I fly with my friends.
I have made friends and we've even gone to watch films together
I have made friends with Joss and she is someone who I can trust and feel open about when speaking.
<b>Did you try new things?</b>
Acting in Panto, I liked the fashion show, being creative with Leanne and Jane.
I like to try new things in the group that I thought I can never do.
I loved the fashion show and doing baking
The allotment is a good place to be outdoors, growing fresh veg and taking it home.
I have done Panto it was really good and funny
I really like archery, games nights, drumming and curling.
We went to Portobello and had a walk by the sea and lunch.
I have tried new things: its good and exciting.
Things that I normally wouldn't get the chance to do including acting and weekends away.
Sometimes I worry about doing new things but it's always ok in the groups.
<b>Did it make you feel happy?</b>
I feel happy attending the groups, they are so friendly.
I've met a lot of new people and I am very happy.
It's a fun group. Have a lot of laughs
Makes me feel very welcome when I go.
The group made me happy because I was loving being sociable
Yes it makes me very happy as I catch up with my friends and do fun things.
I always look forward to group nights.
I like the atmosphere in the group
I love the happy friendly atmosphere there and look forward to going.
Always lots of laughter and fun
<b>Are you more confident or can you do things more easily?</b>
I'm getting there with confidence and doing more things independently.
Being in the groups has boosted my confidence back up
The volunteers have made me feel more confident
I try to tackle more as I believe I can do it now.
I get more confidence and like speaking to people
Joss has given me more confidence and independence: I now get the bus or train to Edinburgh.
Now that I'm talking and sharing I feel confident.

Confident because I'm making friends
I feel more creative and helped me realise my abilities.
Thank you for giving me this opportunity to grow in confidence.
<b>Did it make you feel good about yourself?</b>
I did the Dame the main part in Panto and was proud of myself
Feel good because I have friends
I can be relaxed to have a chat with the group.
I feel I belong to the group
I find it interest link friendly and enjoyable. I always feel so welcome!
It's a nice feeling being with friends
Made me feel like I can do anything
Nice to be part of a group.
Yes because we all support each other and we one big happy family.
Yes, because I feel safe and the people and helpers are nice.
<b>Did you get better at talking to people?</b>
Confidence, opening up taking part in things.
Definitely more talkative and creative
I am good talking with friends now
I am happy to talk to other people about how I enjoy the group and what joy and fun you can see.
I can now start a conversation off with someone out with the group where I couldn't do this before.
I enjoy talking to people more now
I have no fears now that I used to have
I like being with other people now
I speak and feel comfortable in front of all the group and make jokes.
I used to be very shy.
love to chat more now
Yes that is a definite as I never talked in the group for 5 years and now I say sentences when I act on my own

<b>Do you and those you care for still need our service?</b>
<b>94% of respondents gave feedback, compared to 65% for other questions</b>
No other local opportunities and my son has built strong bonds and community within the group
Daniel doesn't have friends or know how to socialise so this is great for him.
Gives boys a valuable evening of activities with their peers in a safe space. There is nothing else for them out there.
Gives Lexi an opportunity to get herself with like-minded young people and nothing else for her age.
It is an amazing group & there are no other local opportunities
It's the only time apart from hospital that she leaves the house
My daughter is not in any other group, no local things in Jedburgh for her age group. She really needs this group.
The only outlet for our son to meet with other people, having experiences in an independent way.
It gives my son a different setting for learning and socialising that normal school doesn't afford him.
There is nowhere else my child can attend where she is welcomed. All other activities are too advanced for her and she cannot meet their expectations
This is the only service she can participate in and is an absolute life line.
We desperately need this service as there are so few opportunities that are suitable
<b>Have we given you more opportunities to spend time with the rest of your family, see friends or do other activities?</b>
Catch up with friends for an hour or so by going for a walk
Given my husband and I time to be together just the two of us (which never happens normally!) to go for a walk together whilst our son is engaged with the group, enabling us to have a conversation and concentrate on each other for a change.
Gives me more time to spend with my family, shopping trips and also to volunteer
I am a mum to 2 girls. One with Autism & one not. I don't get to spend much time one on one with them so it's lovely having an hour and a half with my oldest daughter
I can go out with my friends.
I can go shopping or a long walk
It gives a little respite time to take stock & recharge batteries for a few hours
This is the only evening activity so gives a chance to go out.
Time to breathe and not feel alone.
We have time in Berwick to relax when our son is at his Lunch Club
<b>Have we eased your role as a carer, or made it more sustainable?</b>
Any break is massive when you care for someone 24/7
Gives daughter a lot to look forward too. Not totally dependent on myself! Our relationship enhanced. Gives purpose and something to be proud of when she comes home and shares experiences.
Having the group where I know my child is well understood, well supported, relaxed and happy gives them a boost for the whole week which then positively impacts on me as a carer too.
A feel good factor after sessions and knowing my son (Shaun) has enjoyed it and us benefitting from it
It is invaluable to know that there are times for the boys to do their own thing. It gives then something to look forward to and takes the pressure off me.
Just that hour and a half to is gold worth, to be able to just relax and take our mind of our our son for a bit, knowing he is in safe hands, allowing us to be ourselves for a bit, is just the little injection you need to keep going when times are tricky.

Knowing Maryann is enjoying herself among friends I can relax while she is there and she always comes home with a big beaming smile which is great
The break is good for all of us and my son really enjoys his groups.
Time to relax knowing he is in a safe environment
Yes, it allows me to relax knowing she is safe and nurtured
<b>Have we contributed to you or your family's happiness or general wellbeing?</b>
Definitely contributed to our sons well being and this has a positive effect on the rest of the family as well.
Definitely, it's worth a lot seeing Faye enjoying herself.
Gemma always comes home happy after the group meetings therefore we are all happier!
This is the only group where we have felt at ease and comfortable to leave our son, and the only group he is wanting to go back to, he feels valued and included.
Maryann is so much happier now she is among friends, after COVID there was nowhere for her to go and now is definitely much happier
My children would be lost without interest link
My sister is so much happier since starting the group. She was very lonely before and I worried about her.
Seeing our daughter going out socially in the evening makes her and us very happy
Seeing Shaun having some social life is something which we have been longing for.
<b>Have we successfully created a safe environment, enabling them to make friends and giving them new opportunities and experiences?</b>
Always feel safe with Shaun at group and he's made new friends and is talking about them which is a new thing for Shaun
He gets to go away with his friends and do lots of fun activities
He loves meeting his friends & enjoys the activities laid on
Its the only chance she gets to meet other younger people
Knowing that our son is happy with all the activities and has a great number of very good friends gives us peace of mind.
My son loves this group and can try activities that he probably wouldn't have experienced.
Yes he feels safe and is happy to be there without our support
Yes. The places that he's able to visit and gain new friends
<b>Are they happier because of our service?</b>
Always excited to go and has a really good time
Can't wait to attend.
He is a lot more relaxed and happy. This is a direct result of what the group and Rosa/Mary put into it.
He really enjoys his groups, also he loves to see his friends.
Immeasurably happier.
No hesitation about attending sessions. In diary always looks forward to attending all .
Totally enjoy every minute they are there
Visibly . Always talks about what has gone on when he comes home
<b>Do they have more confidence and self-esteem?</b>
Amazing to see her grow with such confidence
Definitely more confidence building friendships.
Definitely. He's able to go up town on his own and able to get what's needed
Has more confidence to speak in the group
He is much more comfortable in peer group situations

New challenges, independence. Very proud to show all achieved .
Panto has been brilliant for Olivia's confidence
There is no dangers while attending the groups he feels safe.
Yes, because some activities are challenging so she has a real sense of achievement.
Yes, it is the only group he wants to go to, as he feels relaxed, valued and included. Always so chuffed to show what he has made.
<b>Are their social &amp; communication skills better?</b>
Definitely. He has more social speech now.
Enjoys taking to people in the group, is more chatty
He now independently goes into the group, starts conversations and happily laughs/jokes with his peers.
Is now happy to speak with peers and staff
Lots of Conversation fun and laughter, no hesitation about going. Constantly interacting with different people.
He was reluctant to join in anything before but he is now growing in confidence.
Never as anxious as he can be and always speaks to others which again is a new thing for him
To see her grow from someone who never spoke to anyone outside of the house to now seeing her have conversations with other people confidently makes us happy
<b>Is there anything else you want to tell us? For example other differences we have made, highlights of the past year or what we could do to improve our service.</b>
Interest Link has been a life saver for Christopher this year, we are very grateful for what Kate does
Interest link has in invaluable to my family. One thing I would maybe like is overnight respite so can do an overnight with my youngest occasionally
Nothing. I can't recommend the service highly enough. Keep doing what you're doing.
The group has made such a huge difference to my sister's happiness and feeling of self-worth. She really enjoys writing and researching for the articles and comes home after sessions full of stories about what they have been doing and pride.
The service is good Val does a terrific job with them all and Blair is happy and always looks forward to showing off what they are doing especially the pantomime and he gets a real lot out of that
The Tweeddale Group goes above and beyond and has formed a real community. It is always lovely to see the groups coming together at wider events.
This group has made a massive difference to out family. It gives billy the space to grow while allowing me either a moment with another child or just a coffee alone. I'm beyond grateful for the service. And Kate has nothing but loving bones in her body
Very thankful for the group, only wish it had some sessions during the summer, or organised a small outing.
We are incredibly grateful for the help and support Stephanie and the other members have given our son: he was struggling and isolated before attending the group, Stephanie was wonderful in making him feel safe and confident to attend, very grateful that the service is available
Mary and Rosa run a fantastic service and think carefully about the activities so there is something for everyone.
It's a great service Val and Becca and all the helpers go above and beyond in everything they do.

<b>Since you started volunteering, have you become more confident socialising with people with learning disabilities</b>
At first I was somewhat apprehensive as i hadn't really interacted with many people that had learning disabilities and was scared that i would do or say somethings wrong however now i feel more confident and understand how i can make conversations along with understanding things they may struggle with
I was shy to talk to a boy in a wheelchair when we saw him shopping and now I speak to him happily in the group.
I am more confident talking to people with learning disabilities
I do but I was a bit scared at the start.
I do, it was very nice I'm more confident
I feel confident among people with learning disabilities and can carry that into the community in my everyday life.
I feel more confident because I did not know them but now I do
I feel more confident interacting and understanding individual needs of the youngsters
I talk to people with disabilities in the school way more than I did
Me and my friends play with Baillie in school outside the group
<b>Are you more aware of the barriers they face?</b>
Absolutely; I had no real experience of socialising with people with learning difficulties before joining the group. I think many people have preconceptions which affect the way they would behave when socialising with people with learning difficulties. Though there can be many barriers our service users face, they are still very human, with emotions and personalities that shine through.
Definitely, I think it has really reinforced that every person with learning disabilities is completely different and communicates in a different way.
Got to know what they are capable of
I am able to understand, more clearly, what challenges people with learning disabilities face
I have a much better understanding of their disabilities and how to help.
I have become more aware of how to support people with disabilities, especially those who are blind/Visually impaired
Learning new skill to helping everyone in all areas
very, there are still many barriers due to lack of understanding.
Meeting different people with complex needs has made me feel aware also they have taught me do much to be more patient and laugh more.
Without a doubt a huge learning curve for me as I went in blind. I am now very comfortable working with people with learning disabilities.
<b>Have you made friends with the people with learning disabilities you have volunteered with?</b>
Cathy and I are really special friends: we know all about each others families and enjoy each others company.
Everyone is so friendly, there is always a great atmosphere and the activities get everyone involved
Feel I have a good long term friendship with Fiona.
Yes, because when I see them in school we chat.
I feel Nicola and I have a great friendship.
I have made amazing connections.
I have made lots of lovely friends.
I play with them and say hi now.
I've met a lot of amazing people over the years and made friends for life.

Undoubtably. The groups have been vey welcoming, full of chat and great humour, interested in me and easy to get on with.
<b>Can you give examples of differences in their happiness, confidence, self-esteem and social skills?</b>
Always happy to talk to me, not as shy, and very patient.
Confidence in taking part such as singing, dancing to music
Every time they smile and talk to me more
All of them seem a lot more relaxed and happy and I think that's been with confidence.
One member I am regularly paired with was very quiet but now often starts conversations, which is lovely.
I have seen Nicola's confidence grow over the time I have been linked with her.
I notice people talked to me more and weren't scared to ask for help
I see them becoming more independent.
Individuals are more confident with building and maintaining relationships
It's amazing seeing them come on and become so much more confident from year to year, it's amazing to see how much they've come on and support each other.
Over the course of every session I've noticed that the members become a lot more comfortable and talkative. It's also really nice seeing all the friendships they've built up with each other.
Seeing the youngsters taking part in pantomime, fashion show and singing, pushing themselves outwith their comfort zone, their self confidence growing as they grow.
They are coming out of their shells it is satisfying to see
They often come and speak to me now whether for help or to tell me something funny. When I first started volunteering they wouldn't say much. Means that they feel safe with me now and know I enjoy a laugh.
<b>Do you feel valued and supported by Interest Link and its staff?</b>
Absolutely. Wish I had joined years ago. Activities are so well organised. My opinion is asked for and I feel fully part of a great team.
Always made welcome by Kate and feel needed.
Angela really looks after us! I know she'd take time and care to support me with any concerns
I have been able to bring some of my own skills to Interest Link, which has been valued by the group leaders.
Friendly staff and volunteers Warm environment A valuable place for all involved
I felt immediately included and welcomed by Stef and Kenny. A very funny and safe environment.
I know that if I have any issues I can contact Mary or Rosa. I meet with Mary on a regular basis for a catch up.
Of course, Val and Becca always do their best: Always checking up, making sure we were all on time and enjoying ourselves while also taking time to speak to us individually to make sure we were doing okay.
The staff and fellow volunteers are very supportive and are there to help with any personal difficulties.
At one point I was struggling with the befriending, but a good talk helped very much to put things in perspective and improved the experience
<b>Has volunteering with us met your hopes and expectations?</b>
All expectations exceeded!
Far exceeded my expectations
I am really enjoying the volunteering and don't feel it is too much. Have met some lovely people.
It has exceeded my expectations and is so rewarding personally
It is really satisfying
It's different to what I thought it would be but I like it. I like seeing new faces.
It's funnier than I thought it would be. 🤪
More than, as I didn't know what to expect! I'm appreciated. It has opened a new and fun element in my life.

So many users have their faces lighting up as they come in - and are recognised and greeted by friends. Very rewarding to be part of offering this social space to some who have very limited socialising opportunities
Yes, it gives me a chance to give something back to help and support the youngsters.
<b>Do you have any suggestions for improving our service as a whole or your volunteering experience?</b>
I am amazed at the variety of events and activities offered by Interest Link and enjoyed by our members. I think you really have a wonderful organisation which brings a lot of joy to a lot of people! Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share the joy!!
I can't think of everyone, I feel that everyone has a chance to suggest activities etc for the group
I have suggested bringing music in different ways more into the groups as I believe in particular for disabled people it has huge benefits. We are now doing this with sing along nights, music workshops and karaoke which everyone seems to be enjoying. We even done an impromptu sing along with the guitar at the end of last year singing Christmas Songs .!
I wouldn't change anything intrestlink is a safe environment to voulanteer in I highly recommend them
it was perfect but it could go on for longer
More funding to help the members have a wide range of experiences
More publicity o think it's such an amazing project and more people need to be informed about it
no it was perfect
Recruit more volunteers. Let me know if I can help.
I feel like it's perfect already

## Selected Feedback: Care & Social Work Professionals

[Top](#)

<b>Do you feel we offer a safe and professional service?</b>
All issues are acted on appropriately and timely
Excellent group, lots of variety, fun, safe, different ideas every week.
In any dealings I have had with Interest Link they have always had our members best interests at heart.
It was clear to see the members valued this group with Val and the volunteers.
Rosa ensures safety for everyone at all times.
This is a great service with a lot of commitment from Volunteers.
Val is so thorough, asking for all the relevant information
<b>Can you give examples of differences in members' happiness, confidence, self-esteem and social skills?</b>
A member was able to take part in the group and perform on stage, they were not able to do that before joining.
As part of a project some of the attendees were working on for their newspaper group i was asked to give an informal interview with some of the attendees. They were able to step outwith their comfort zone and did an amazing job, they were full of confidence and able to provide clear informative questions.
Definitely one of the ladies who come to our service was very anxious and not much confidence this group has really brought her out herself has enjoyed meeting new friends .
I can see the transference of skills
I have noticed a grow in self esteem from many members and the joy experienced when members attend group activities
Jeremy always looks forward to his visits from Jean and loves to be involved with planned activities.
My client is now so much more confident in herself. She initiates conversations with people which she wouldn't do before. Tries new tasks at home without the hesitation she had before.
The change & confidence in the person I support is amazing .. they have made lots of good friends ..
Throughout the singing and songwriting workshops facilitated by Alchemy's artist in residence, all the group members showed a significant increase in confidence, happiness and social skills, which demonstrated as growing engagement in the activities, contributing to the songwriting process, and in some cases directing the singing, taking a lead on documentation, and making art for the group's performance!

## Selected Feedback: Tutors

[Top](#)

<b>Do you feel valued and supported by Interest Link and its staff and volunteers?</b>
Absolutely: Kate has made me feel part of the group. She is an incredible support with ideas and in working alongside me to support members of the group. The committee also pay promptly which is much appreciated.
Hugely! I so appreciate Val's belief in me that I can deliver the sessions.
I feel part of the family, valued and listened to.
I feel rewarded by interest link in every sense
Mary & Rosa are always supportive in helping me to run the creative classes. They are friendly, welcoming and happy to talk if I have any concerns. I also feel that they value my work as a creative practitioner. They are both completely dedicated to their work and it really shows in the amount of care and attention they put into the sessions, which are always so sociable and fun.
Steff and Donna are amazing always there to help ❤️
Oh yes they are all one big family
Rosa is always forthcoming in her appreciation for our sessions and work.

### Lucas

Lucas is nearly 13 and lives with his mum and dad – he is a new member of our children’s group. Lucas has a diagnosis of learning disability and his mum messaged us to ask if she could refer Lucas to us as she was concerned that he was feeling socially isolated.

We popped along to meet Lucas and his mum and we all had a great chat. Lucas told us about things he likes to do and we told him about the children’s group we run. We all decided it seemed like a good idea for Lucas to pop along and see how he felt. Lucas has now been with us for a few months and things are going very well. Lucas joins in with all our activities and has even tried chocolate ice cream for the first ever time at a tasting night we had!

Lucas’ mum told us “We are so pleased to finally have found a social group which Lucas can attend; he looks forward to the gatherings, and it’s great to see that he is so included, encouraged, and supported by all the lovely staff and volunteers, we really get the feeling that Lucas does matter as a person, that he is important and worthy. It is a huge relief for us that he feels so confident and happy to be a part of the group. Lucas is learning new skills, developing friendships and independence.”



Lucas says he is having so much fun, he enjoys meeting new people, feels safe and supported to achieve the tasks. People are being patient with him. Fun to try different things every time, doesn’t get boring.

We are glad to have Lucas with us!

**Emily** is a 10-year-old who has Williams Syndrome and lives at home with her mum and dad, and three younger siblings. In addition to her learning disability, Emily also has a PEG feeding tube to help her gain weight as she is very small for her age. She is generally happy and outgoing, but can become anxious and subdued, especially in new situations.

Emily started attending Interest Link via Zoom in early 2021, and then attended a school group and Children’s Group since. She recently left the school group to allow other pupils to access the service, but continues to attend the evening group every second week. Williams Syndrome can cause “uninhibited behaviour, over-friendliness with strangers and a compulsion to talk to adults” (Williams-syndrome.org.uk), so it is important to Emily’s family that she attends a club where they know she can interact with others and build friendships safely.

Emily loves spending time with the peer mentors at the group, and is always excited to meet someone new. She is close friends with one of the other group members, and is getting more confident about interacting with the members she doesn’t know so well. Emily enjoys doing crafty activities and using

playdough. She is sometimes nervous about physical activities, but likes to try new things if she has a peer mentor there to support and encourage her. Her self-esteem has definitely grown since starting the group, and she is now confident about trying new things. Lucy has told me that Emily “absolutely loves the group” and is always excited when Monday night comes around.

Emily’s mum Lucy said that she likes the time to herself and often indulges in reading a book or magazine and eating a snack which she enjoys after a busy day as mum to four kids!

**Ellen** is 16 years old, has a learning disability and is Autistic and lives with her mum Sally. Ellen attends the Additional Needs Unit in Hawick High School and is supported by the educational team. Having Autism poses many issues for Ellen as she requires support wherever she goes in her local community. Ellen has no friends and usually socializes with her mum.

Mum, Sally approached me recently at a Transitional meeting at Hawick High School as she had heard about Interest Link. Sally was very keen that Ellen became involved in our YPS Group as Ellen had no social opportunities out with school hours. Sally was concerned that Ellen would not settle in as Ellen tends to become agitated in noisy environments, so she accompanied Ellen for the first few sessions.

Ellen took a while to adjust to the noise levels but eventually settled. The group members are helpful and kind to Ellen and make sure they support her in all the group sessions. She was given the part of a laughing Hyena in the Christmas Pantomime, Jungle Book and was supported on stage by our Creative Director Graham: she played her part magnificently. She was very proud of herself, and mum Sally had tears in her eyes as she witnessed her performance. Ellen`s confidence has increased and is now a very popular member of the group: she tolerates the noise and no longer requires her headphones to fall back on. Ellen is looking forward to the next Show we put on.

Sally now enjoys time to herself and has an opportunity to catch up with things at home. Sally is also very happy that Ellen is socializing with young people of similar age, and in a safe and stimulating environment.

### **Billy**

Billy joined the Duns group in 2023. He is 9, has a learning disability and his hearing is impaired. He has been hospitalized on many occasions and is disruptive at home with his brothers. Billy’s family is very supportive & caring to him.

He has settled well in the group, being kind & caring to others and has become an active lively member. Although he has many health challenges, Billy is always friendly and supportive to other group members. He has gained confidence and independence since joining the group, and made friends with members from different schools and the peer mentors. Billy is always willing to try new things and take up new opportunities offered to him.

Billy is a very mature 10-year-old & looks forward to attending the High School soon. Billy’s mum says he always returns from the group meetings with a huge grin on his face.

**Charlie** is 20, has learning disabilities and lives with his mum, dad and siblings in Selkirk. We originally met Charlie when he was 10 and he was in our children's group for 3 years. Charlie finished school and then went to college to do a Lifeskills course which he enjoyed but afterwards he found himself with much less to do and he therefore started to stay in the house more. His mum called us to ask if there was anything Charlie would be able to join again at Interest Link and we were pleased to be able to welcome him to our youth group.

Charlie has settled in very quickly and has reconnected with some old pals from school too.

Charlie likes to be helpful in the group and always participates in our sessions. This photo is of him helping to sort toys for a recycled art project we are doing – Charlie helped decide on categories and to separate the toys accordingly.

Charlie says that Interest Link is the only evening opportunity that he has and it's his night out. He enjoys doing art when we are doing creative sessions.

Charlie's mum says "Charlie enjoys coming to the group as it gets him out to socialise with other people and he enjoys doing new things at the group too."

### **Keisha**

The Tavern Group meets fortnightly in the Tavern at Eyemouth which is a friendly community restaurant. Members chat play pool & board game & cards. Chats often become interesting lively discussions in the group with a wide range of topics, and group members get on well & support each other .

Keisha is 20 and is Polish. English is her second language and she is autistic which affects her day to day living. She has a great knowledge of crafts, and brings her latest projects to show us. She also shares her wealth of cards & dice games and takes part in the WhatsApp message group.

Since joining the group her confidence has grown and her English has improved greatly. As a result, she has gone onto attend a local course in needle work outside the group, which she has enjoyed very much. "I can talk to more people and have many friends at the group. It helps me be more independent and it makes me feel good."

Keisha mother is delighted that Keisha is a group member & attends the group independently. "Eased my role as my daughter has made friendships within the group, which has greatly improved her mood. Peace of mind knowing she gets to go out and have a social and some fun"

**Mel** is 53 and lives in Coldstream with her mother. She has a learning disability, limited mobility, deafness and heart condition. The immediate family moved here from South Africa many years ago and her two sisters now also live in the Scottish Borders.

Mel has been a member of Interest Link Borders since 2005 and in that time has had three one-to-one befrienders as well as taking part in our Friday Club in Coldstream which meets monthly. Because of her mobility issues, Mel is completely reliant on her family to take her places which puts a lot of pressure on

her mother who is aging and has her own health problems to contend with. Mum finds her caring duties exhausting and relentless and says the only rest and respite she gets is when Mel comes to Interest Link.

During Covid, Mel had to shield for an extended period due to her heart condition and became very isolated, so we organised for her to have a telephone buddy who called her weekly. They developed a lovely friendship and continued to speak to each other fortnightly after Covid. Both Mel and Mum say her buddy has been a huge benefit to Mel and has helped her cope with isolation and given her support when her heart condition flared up and she was very unwell. It's a relief to Mum to know Mel has support outside the family. It also gives them something different to talk about together. Mum is also delighted Mel can come to the Friday Club and give her a break as well as see her friends.

Mel said "They are always laughing and I like to see everyone happy. It's a good social, nice to chat to other people. I enjoyed trying new things"

Mel's Mum said "There are no other local opportunities. Gives me time to do my hobbies like painting. Peace of mind knowing she gets to go out and have a social along with some fun. I'm happy when Mel's happy"

**Bella** is 36 and lives in Coldstream with her parents who both work full-time. Bella has a learning disability, is autistic and can be very anxious (we adapt events to support Bella with her issues with anxiety and panic attacks).

Bella has been a member since she was 18 and takes part in quite a few activities with us. She comes to the Friday Club in Coldstream which runs monthly on a Friday evening and she loves bringing suggestions for things to do at the Club and helping to make plans. She also can be supportive towards others in the group who are less able.

Bella came with us on a residential to Haggerston Castle Holiday Park where she took a full part in all the activities and had a fantastic time.

Bella also attends our Health and Wellbeing Club in Kelso which meets once a month and goes to our New Age Kurling twice a month. She also enjoys coming to our larger events which are Borders-wide e.g. Friendship Day and our annual Charmian Challenge Walk/Run.

After Covid Bella lost confidence travelling independently and has been reliant on her parents to get her from A-B. We're working towards her using the bus with a buddy (another member who is confident using public transport). She intends to join our Woodland Warriors group when it starts soon in collaboration with Borders Forest Trust. Apart from Interest Link Bella's only activity is a Boccia class. Bella said: "I enjoy all three groups that I go to. I would like to do the residential again, it was fun and gave my mum a break."

Bella's mother and father have often mentioned they value her involvement in Interest Link as she meets friends and has interesting things to do during the week while they work rather than sitting around the house. They feel she has become more independent as a result, and it's helped with her anxiety. Her parents were delighted that she was able to come to our residential again in the summer as they said it

gave them much needed space from each other and they appreciated the respite. They often meet with friends when Bella is at her groups. They worry about the future when they won't be around and feel her involvement with Interest Link gives them some peace of mind for the future.

### **Angela**

Angela is 50 and lives independently in Galashiels. Her family live locally and Angela enjoys spending time with them – her mum brings her to and from Fruity Fitness.

Angela has a learning disability and also epilepsy. She is very active and keeps us up to date with her impressive daily step count!

Angela has been a member of Interest Link for over 20 years and has had a 1:1 link to attend college classes during that time as well as now being a member of our new Fruity Fitness sessions. She also attends our Monday night craft sessions. Angela has lots of pals in both groups and enjoys making the crafting projects as gifts for family and friends. Angela shares a taxi to the craft sessions with two of her friends so it really makes for a night out. The sessions are always laughter filled and Angela enjoys lots of 'banter' with everyone – she also really enjoys the social evenings we have at the sessions. The last one was out summer bingo with big prizes and supper. Angela didn't win last time so she is hopeful of a change of luck for Christmas bingo!

Angela was one of the first members to join our new Fruity Fitness group and she always participates fully in the sessions whether it's tennis, football or dancing! She loves to feel the burn.

Angela's mum Irene says "Angela likes to be busy and Interest Link groups give her a chance to see her friends outwith the family – she enjoys coming to fitness and craft and making things for us all"

Angela says "I enjoy being out and I like the fitness group – I like the music too. Next week we are having Spooky Fitness for Halloween and I am wearing my pumpkin earrings and pumpkin ears!"

**Dan The Man** is 26 years old and has been with us since he was 10. Dan lives in a local town with his mum and grown up sister – they are a close family. Dan has a learning disability and is very shy – this makes it tricky for him to get out and about on his own. His mum works hard and has a full time job so she is keen for Dan to be doing activities and enjoying himself rather than being in the house for long periods of time. Dan originally joined our children's group and then transitioned into our youth group. He came with us on our first ever night away with the youth group and told me today that he has very fond memories of laughing until he cried after a menu disaster in the youth hostel we stayed at! Dan also joined in with a 4 link – 2 volunteers and 2 members – within our Roxburgh branch and he particularly enjoyed their outing to an archery school and also their night away staying at an outdoor centre. The link ended after 3 years but many good times were had!

When Dan became "too old" for the youth service he then moved very smoothly into our adult sessions and now attends our fortnightly Brunch Bunch where he loves doing crafts and choosing his lunch in the rescued food café we use as our venue – today's choice was fish and chips. Dan likes a hearty lunch and a mocha to keep him going through his day!

Dan also attends our fortnightly sessions of drama. He was not keen to be on the stage but was very keen to learn more about the stage so over time he has become our tech assistant for our productions. Dan really enjoys this element and is now confident enough to make suggestions for lighting and stage management!!

As a further example of his increasing confidence, Dan has now joined our branch committee as a member representative. We are very proud of him.

Dan's mum says "Interest Link has been amazing for Dan over the last 16 years!! I honestly don't know how I would've coped all these years without Interest Link. It gives Dan some time out and about and also gives me a wee break from my caring role"

Dan says "I feel happy in the groups, I am with my friends and there's always lots of laughs. I really like doing the crafts in the Brunch Bunch too. Interest Link groups are the only ones I go to and they give me more confidence. I feel welcome. I wish I could be in all the groups that they run!"

**Billy** is 34 and is autistic. He lives with his mum in Hawick and joined the Roxburgh Branch last September. Billy attends the local Day Centre but struggles to connect with friends that are of the same age and similar ability. Billy finds it difficult in larger groups because it is noisy and overwhelming for him.

I approached Billy's mum Paula asking if Billy would like to become a member of our Life Skills Group. Paula thought that this would be a great opportunity for him, as it has been a long time since Billy has been at school and has no current outlet to practice money handling, improve numeracy skills and enhance his social skills. Paula especially liked the fact that the Life Skills group is small.

Billy started the Life Skills Group in January of this year and has grown in confidence. Initially he found it hard to concentrate and required time to get to know everybody, settle into the group and concentrate on the challenges that Liz our Tutor prepares for the group members. Because the group is small Billy has become less anxious and the quiet atmosphere has helped him concentrate on tasks. Paula, Billy's mum has been really pleased with his progress so far and says Billy talks about the group and really looks forward to seeing new friends. Billy is friendly with all the group members, and one of his roles is to ask group members what they would like to drink at breaktime.

Billy really enjoyed the Trolley Dash at Morrisons in Hawick, where all the group members were given a shopping challenge and work as a team. Billy has improved his skills in numeracy, counting and problem solving. Billy's confidence has increased, and he has new friends that he enjoys spending time with. Paula is very happy that he can attend a group that provides opportunities for him to improve skills in many areas, and that they are meaningful to everyday life.

"He loves coming and is always happy when he knows it's on, which makes me happy. I have time with my mum and it lifts a weight on me knowing that Billy is doing things he enjoys with friends."

**Sally** is 40, has a learning disability and is cared for by her elderly parents and her sister Ruth. She has felt isolated and has very few opportunities to socialize and meet up with people of the same age. She is now a member of our Adult Caledonian Group and our Newshounds Group in Hawick fortnightly.

Sally looks forward to the Newshounds Group and has already made new friends. Sally always had a desire to attend a Media Course as she loves writing stories and being creative. The Newshound Group has offered a unique opportunity for her to express herself creatively and learn to report, interview and write news articles with support.

Sally is more confident and very pleased about what she has achieved so far. Sally also has an opportunity to spend time with new friends who have the same passion. Ruth is very happy with her sister's progress and is so glad she has had this opportunity to enhance her social skills and be part of a group she enjoys. The Caledonian Group also provides another opportunity to be part of a group that involves friendship and activities that she hasn't been able to access.

Sally's confidence has soared and was recently very pleased with herself when she interviewed a famous local jockey and wrote an article on his recent successes, all the more so because she loves horses.

"Sally really enjoys the group and the work the Hounds put together is so professional" said Ruth, Sally's sister. Sally's elderly parents are very happy that she has found new friends.

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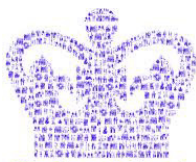
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