



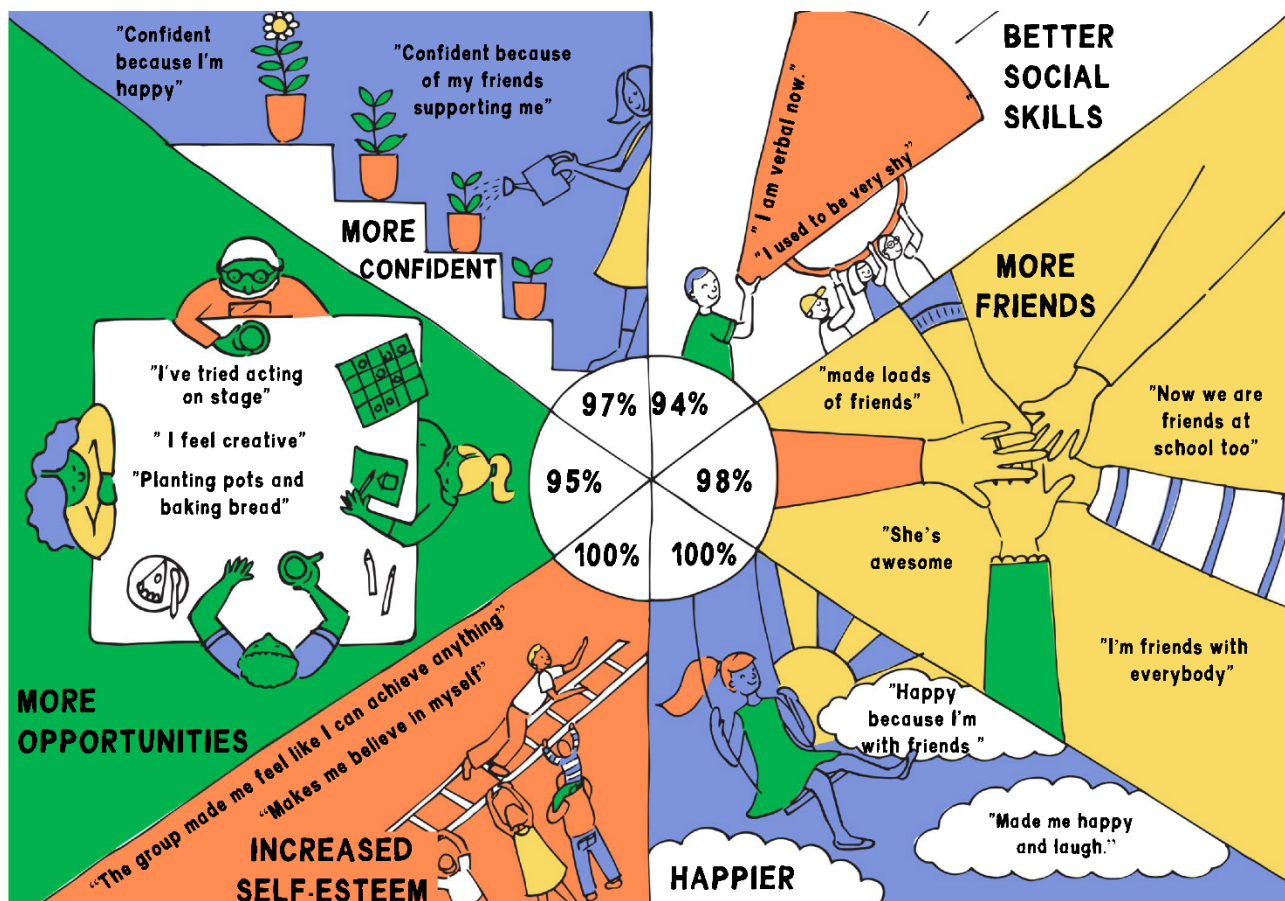
2026

Impact Report

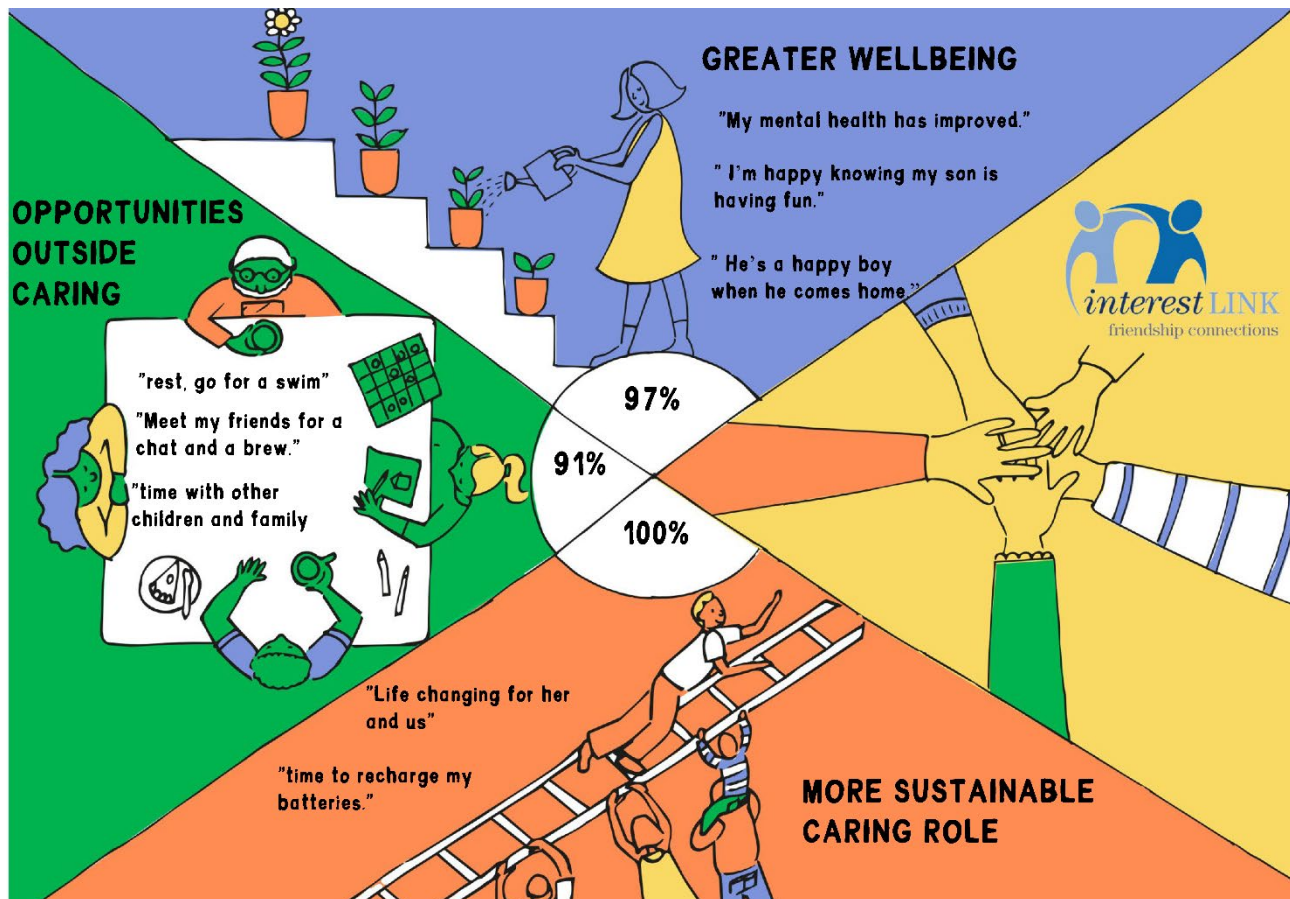
Adult Service: Ages 25+

ALWAYS LOOK FORWARD TO IT
BECOMING MORE INDEPENDENT
ALWAYS FEEL WELCOME
PROUD OF WHAT I ACHIEVE
A LOT MORE CONFIDENT
MAKES ME FEEL HAPPY
MADE LOTS OF NEW FRIENDS
FUN AND LAUGHTER
TRYING LOTS OF NEW THINGS
BETTER AT TALKING TO PEOPLE
I FEEL SAFE AND SUPPORTED

Members with learning disabilities said:



Family carers said:



Our Mission & Impact

We aim to improve the quality of life of socially isolated children (aged 8+), young people and adults with learning disabilities throughout the Scottish Borders. Cerebral Palsy, Downs Syndrome or autism are usually involved, with high accompanying levels of epilepsy, sensory impairments and mental health problems.

Members are often segregated at school and afterwards and lack opportunities for friendships and enriching activities crucial to wellbeing and personal development. Only 1% are likely to have a partner and 5% a job, day centre and college provision have shrunk by 80% and members are vulnerable in the community on their own. There are no other services addressing this locally.

Our volunteer befriending service has developed since 1990 through co-production with members & families, with new groups and ideas usually generated and initiated at branch-level.

We deliver through four branches (Berwickshire, Central Borders, Roxburgh and Tweeddale) each with its own experienced staff and local stakeholder committee. They work with local schools, Borders College, Social Work and care providers to reach as many people as possible. The service is open to anyone with learning disabilities through referral or self-referral. It is free of charge, save for occasional activity contributions (c£4) which are never a barrier to accessing the service. Transport is provided where needed.

We aim for longterm support, with many 1:1 links lasting 5 years or more and no limit to length of group membership save age boundaries for children and young people's groups. Volunteers are recruited from schools and the community and are PVG checked, trained (including safeguarding) and supported by staff. They provide support where needed, but the emphasis is on fun and friendship. We also draw on paid supporters, particularly to help those with higher needs.

Our service overcomes social barriers and provides fun and accessible opportunities, experiences and friendship networks on a longterm basis. Members form rich, trusting and often longterm friendships with volunteers and each other and have opportunities for new activities and experiences. This reduces social isolation and builds happiness, confidence, self-esteem and social skills. Volunteers are often the only people in members' lives out of choice and just for fun, and this has a massive impact. Involving young volunteers enables the peer-age friendship networks that children and young people value so highly.

Family carers have regular respite to spend on favourite activities, other family members and friends, happy the person they care for is having fun in a safe environment. Members return home fresh and with something to look forward to, improving family dynamics and sustainability.

Adult Service Activities 2025-26

At August 2026, we were supporting 150 members aged over 25, up from 133 a year ago. We have 245 places in 32 befriending groups (compared with 154 in 25 groups last year). 1:1 links have reduced from 35 to 32, continuing the gradual shift of focus towards groups. 78 members have both a 1:1 link and a group, or were in two or more groups. 96 family carers enjoyed short break respite. Around 100 volunteer befrienders have been involved during the year.

Six new groups including adult service members started or are being piloted:

- Interest Link Voices: a self-representation group that meets in Galashiels every two months, with an easy-read agenda and minutes, and decides key points it would like the Board to discuss at their next meeting. These are presented to the Board by one of the members who are Special Advisors to the Board. “Voices” meetings are followed by a Supper Club.
- Advanced Lifeskills in Hawick, for members progressing from our existing Lifeskills group. Two members were supported in the early stages of a longterm work placement at Burnfoot café.
- Cookery in Peebles (Adults) in partnership with Food Foundation, using a novel arrangement of four groups of three members rotating through 3-session courses on a continuing basis. This enabled each member to have their own cooking station and produce their own meal.
- Keep-fit with Carmen in Peebles adopted a model first used in Central Borders.
- Tweeddale monthly intergenerational social events regularised previous occasional events.

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

Highlights of the year included:

- Tweeddale Kiltwalk September 2025
- Friendship Day in October 2025
- Drama Productions:
 - Coldstream Cabaret Club with Borders Youth Theatre, Nov 2025 ([video](#) & [report](#)).
 - Central Borders Panto December 2025 ([photos](#))
- First work experience placements for two employability group members, from March 2026.
- Charmian Challenge fun run in April 2026.
- Winners at the YouthBorders LEAD Awards June 2026 for Best Performance
- Weaving Friendship exhibition in partnership with Great Tapestry of Scotland in July 2026

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.

June 2026 Adults 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.

Response rates	Members	Family carers	Volunteers			
	58%	63%	44%			
Main Outcomes:						
Impact on Members	More Friends	More opportunities	Greater Happiness	Improved Confidence	Increased Self-esteem	Better Social Skills
Reported by Themselves	98%	95%	100%	97%	100%	94%
Reported by Carers	100%	100%	97%	100%	100%	97%
Reported by Volunteers	98%		100%	100%	100%	100%
Impact on Family Carers	More Opportunities Outside Caring		Eased or More Sustainable Caring Role		Greater Wellbeing	
Reported by Themselves	91%		100%		97%	
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	96%		96%			
Other responses:	Members	Family carers	Volunteers	Tutors	Social Care Professionals	
Service still needed	100%	100%			100%	
Feel valued & supported by Interest Link			100%	100%		
Volunteering has met hopes and expectations			100%			
Safe & Professional Service					100%	

Links:

Survey Feedback:

[Member Feedback](#)

[Family Carer Feedback](#)

[Volunteer Feedback](#)

[Professional Carer Feedback](#)

[Tutor Feedback](#)

[Case Studies 2025-26](#)

[Funders](#)

43% of members said they attend no other groups or social activities

Did you make friends?

I have made lots of friends in the 3½ years since I joined Angela's groups when we moved to Kelso.

I love attending the GO Group - a nice small group. I love the banter. The sewing class is one of the highlights of my fortnight.

Ever since I joined this fantastic group I have made friends who I will cherish forever.

I have friends now that I go out with: we meet up and go out for coffee and cake.

We've been meeting for 7 years and become good friends.

I have good friends with all the Newshounds group.

Really built up a trust and friendship with Joss.

I am still happy to go out with Ewan.

Did you try new things?

We cook different things at the Duns Lunch Club, and grow lots of plants and vegetables at the allotment, learning how to take care of them.

Got the bus to Edinburgh by myself to meet Joss, and did many new walks around Innerleithen.

I have been able to improve my writing skills in a journalistic sense through helping to create the Burnfoot is Brilliant newsletter.

I can now say I have used a sewing machine - although I'm not the best at it!

I go places I would be worried about going, like Bowhill. I try things I would worry about, like the Kiltwalk.

I go to the pub to play pool, to the cinema and to restaurants.

I've learned a lot about gardening.

Lots of new foods and cooking skills.

Did it make you feel happy?

The art group is relaxing, and the allotment is great because it's outdoors in the fresh air and I feel revitalised. It's a good laugh.

I always feel a part of it and contribute both to the cooking and the banter.

I am very happy attending Rosa's groups. They are fun and I feel safe.

The group is my safe space, and without it I would just be in my house.

The staff are friendly, it feels homely and I like seeing my friends.

It's the only opportunity I get to meet people around my own age since my support was taken away from me.

Very happy, and it makes me feel included.

Pat is special company. She's nice, a special friend.

Are you more confident or can you do things more easily?

Since I first joined I am a lot more confident. I am now managing to be more independent, doing my own shopping and housework. I also give more eye contact (I have autism).

I am confident to mix with many different people at my groups.

I'm more confident using sharp knives, which I wasn't before.

I am very confident. I now talk so much more to people.

I can now do things that I could never do when I first joined.

I feel confident going on the bus with Pat.

I can now confidently walk into my group on my own and stay by myself, with my carers bringing me and collecting me.

Happy walking around the shops with Anne.

Did it make you feel good about yourself?

I now perform on stage and I'd never done this before Interest Link. People come to see me on stage!

Trying out new things and learning new things makes me feel good about myself. Our walks give us the opportunity to get out in the fresh air and visit lots of different places.

It's good to know my input is important and to feel good about the work I have helped with.

Learning and socialising gives me a buzz.

My self-esteem has grown.

I'm proud when I made the plant pots.

Everything to do with Pat makes me feel good about myself. She's a nice person.

Enjoy activities with friends. Supports my independence.

Did you get better at talking to people?

I am better at speaking to people I don't know well or at all. I'm better at approaching people and asking on-the-spot questions.

Very much better! I now talk better in the bank, shops etc.

I can talk to people in the general public and my Zumba class, which I had difficulty doing before. I find it easier now I've got to know them well.

I feel I can talk to anyone and I feel listened to, and before I didn't feel that way.

I feel more confident asking at shops and at home for things I need or want.

I absolutely love talking to people, especially new people who have joined, and giving them advice.

I just confide in Pat. I can make friends easily with anybody.

I still feel shy - but not when I am with Anne.

Is there anything else you want to say?

Rosa goes over and above to ensure I have the best time. This year I particularly enjoyed our visit to Bowhill House. The Disco night was brilliant fun. At Interest Link I live my best life!

Stefanie and her team are brilliant, kind and fun.

What's to say about this fantastic group - very lovely people. Val is a very hardworking person who always keeps us right.

I just feel this group is such a lifeline for me. It makes me happy when it's the Wednesday of the group, because I know I'm going to see my friends.

I really enjoy interviewing people for the newsletter. In 3 years I am so much more confident and happy - the news group has been a great thing for me!

Thank you Joss and Mary for giving me this opportunity.

This is the longest I have attended a group, and it is one of my favourite groups to go to.

Do you and those you care for still need our service?

Interest Link is the only consistent adult service in our area and has been massively successful in its positive impact on our household.

This is absolutely vital for Calum, as where he lives there isn't really anything else for autistic adults to do. The group is hugely beneficial for his emotional health as he gets to spend time with his peer group.

Alexander gets a lot out of meeting his friends through Interest Link. It's a great way of socialising as well as learning new skills, like cooking and gardening at the allotment.

The service allows my sister to make friends and take part in independent social activities. I don't know of any other charity in the area which offers her this.

This is about the only way my son can mix with others socially in his age range.

There aren't many opportunities for my son where we live. Having his friend meet him and going to the Cooking Club gives him an opportunity to see other people.

Lewis really enjoys the group and the Zoom groups. There aren't many groups like Interest Link with such regular, consistent commitment to young adults.

Our son values the group and the friends he sees there. He would be unlikely to have contact with them otherwise.

Have we given you more opportunities to spend time with the rest of your family, see friends or do other activities?

When Alexander is at his Duns Lunch Club we get the opportunity to do the shopping or visit the garden centre for a cup of coffee.

My wife and I can go for coffee or lunch when our son is with people from Interest Link.

Because my younger brother has the groups of Interest Link, it means I can have more independent time with my young children.

Shopping, reading, having a moment to myself. It's wonderful because we know Rosa and Mary take such good care of Calum in a safe and secure place.

We can use this time to be a couple and go for a walk in the evening.

I go to a gym class while she attends the Tuesday evening groups.

Definitely - it gives me peace of mind knowing she is somewhere safe, and takes the worry away.

This year we have become grandparents and have been able to help with childcare.

Have we eased your role as a carer, or made it more sustainable?

Angela and her team, from day one, said what they could deliver and have delivered on every service promise. The service Angela has curated for Joe has eased my carer's burden and given back, in part, more of a sibling relationship between me and my brother. Angela has created safe, supported spaces where Joe feels listened to, respected and valued.

My sister was very lonely and sad before she started at Interest Link. She is so much happier and feels her life is more fulfilling, so I feel much less worried and am so pleased to see her grow in confidence.

Definitely - to see our young adult become independent, having friends and a social life of their own, is wonderful.

It's particularly great with the additional support of collecting him from the house and dropping him back. That really helps me relax.

Can relax knowing he is safe within the group.

It is good for Lewis to mix with other young adults with different disabilities and gain a different perspective. It enhances his life.

Yes - before, I was always forward planning for things for her to do, and the groups have taken that need away from me.

My son is a lot happier not being stuck with his parents.

Have we contributed to you or your family's happiness or general wellbeing?

Having Interest Link - and Angela - in our lives means Joe has structure to his week. Joe needs certainty and consistency for positive mental health. Angela's service means we are a household with the support to give each other the space and time we need. A happy household!

We feel so much better being part of the Interest Link community. Before, we were isolated as a family.

He just loves going and working with Val. She keeps them occupied.

Lewis particularly gets on well with Rosa. He can struggle to form good relationships with women, and this is very important to us.

Just having time to relax ourselves, knowing Alexander is enjoying himself in a safe environment, is a great benefit to us.

Maryann has her smile back.

If Nicola is happy then we are happy. We've faced several challenging situations this year, and Nicola has talked them over with Joss as a friend, which has helped her wellbeing.

She is more confident, higher self-esteem and more willing to try new experiences.

Have we successfully created a safe environment, enabling them to make friends and giving them new opportunities and experiences?

Joe has positive, healthy friendships from attending Interest Link groups. He has friends he messages and meets for coffees - a huge positive in Joe's life, one that was missing for numerous years.

Alexander has made a lot of friends through Interest Link over the years, with Angela and her team continually coming up with new ideas.

Absolutely - they are acknowledged on arrival and nothing escapes Stefanie's attention.

Absolutely! This cannot be stressed enough. Without this group Calum would have nowhere to meet people his own age and socialise.

We cannot thank you enough for the opportunities you provide. Always risk-assessed, safe, welcoming and inclusive.

Mix of all abilities and great atmosphere - everyone can be themselves!

Very safe environment, even on trips - very well organised, every detail thought of.

It has been great to see my sister grow in confidence and make new friends.

Do they have more confidence and self-esteem?

Joe's mental health was in a very wobbly place when Angela met him. The change in him has been a collective effort, and Angela's positive consistency has been a profoundly positive part of his journey to the confident, self-assured person Joe is now.

She feels a sense of purpose and self-worth she did not have before.

Always goes into groups without hesitation, and no hesitation meeting outside the group environment.

One sister was very shy when she first came. Now she helps, talks to others, shares what she's been up to and helps others. She feels very safe and happy.

This has grown over the years, partly Nicola maturing but also the different situations she's done with Joss, which have given her confidence in new situations.

Calum is more willing to try new things now, and when plans change he can cope better.

He has learnt so much from the groups, really come out of his shell and has great confidence.

Maryann is going out to meet others again.

Are their social and communication skills better?

Because Joe feels safe and respected, he feels empowered to contribute, negotiate and lead!

Alexander has a better understanding of how to behave in a group. He'll always put across his point of view, but is now better at listening to what others say.

Katherine, although still softly spoken and shy in unfamiliar surroundings, will actively seek out her friends for a chat.

More able to initiate and maintain conversations.

She is more confident talking in groups and sharing her experiences.

Helpers at club understand her and have learned to sign!

It helps him having to talk to new people.

Always comes away from groups laughing and joking, confident and really pleased she attended.

Is there anything else you want to tell us?

Just our heartfelt thanks to Angela for providing the services she delivers with such positive care. The skill of coming into people's lives, saying what you can deliver and then delivering on it all, is a skill not all possess. Thank you Angela.

The consistent routine and the commitment, especially of Rosa and Mary, is commendable. This is a great group, offering different activities but also respecting that these adults are adults and treating them accordingly.

Rosa has planned amazing activities for everyone. One example was the Kiltwalk - what an experience to see everyone finish across the line with such pride and achievement. Rosa is amazing.

This year has been very hard for our family. Knowing Val & Becca's group were there to look out for her emotionally has been an absolute godsend, letting me concentrate on my sister. I can't thank them enough for going above and beyond.

We all love Interest Link - the staff, volunteers, other users and parents. We've met other families with similar lives and can chat and support each other.

She loves coming to sessions, particularly drama with Oli. She loves the opportunity to perform and sing in a show.

Thank you as always to Joss and Mary for their support, and to Interest Link. It is greatly appreciated.

Have you made friends with the people with learning disabilities you have volunteered with?

My member is a true friend and only leaves the house with me - I'm her only trusted person to take her out.

I have known the members for years and consider them my friends, and hope they think of me as a friend too.

I get on really well with my one-to-one; we go out for a meal every few months.

Very much a special friend with Sarah - developed over many years now.

My one-to-one link knows all about our family and vice versa. We enjoy each other's company so much and always have fun.

I recently bumped into a member in Lidl who helped me with my shopping.

Have worked with a member for 10 years and have developed a very positive relationship - also with the family.

It has been great to make so many friends through Interest Link with the members with learning disabilities.

Can you give examples of differences in their happiness, confidence, self-esteem and social skills?

I see a real difference with Nick - we now chat in a relaxed way and I feel he trusts me. William is more confident now about being himself; he knows he is accepted. Helen is now much more relaxed and warm.

Some members didn't say anything to me at first, and now they share things - and if we meet outside, e.g. in a shop, they'll chat.

My partially sighted friend is confident to walk on his own with me.

Sarah can advocate better for herself now - more confidence and a more consolidated sense of herself. Very lovely to see.

I have been recognised and warmly greeted by members in shops or on the street, even when I hadn't seen them first.

One service user was very shy and never volunteered information when I started; now he'll tell me about himself when I see him at Interest Link or around Peebles. Really lovely to see.

They invite each other to their birthday parties and have learned new skills through practical activities.

They call me by my name now when talking to me, and chat much more.

Since you started volunteering, have you become more confident socialising with people with learning disabilities and more aware of the barriers they face?

Being a volunteer helps me maintain the skills I developed over 20 years supporting people with additional needs, especially in different social situations.

Having volunteered for almost 9 years, I feel confident and aware of the barriers members face, especially as they grow up and leave compulsory education.

I had very limited engagement with people with learning disabilities before; now I see they just want to enjoy life like anyone else, and with support they can achieve their goals. Great to witness - and to call them friends.

I feel quite at ease with people with learning disabilities now, not just those within the group but those in everyday life.

I love it - seeing them happy and interacting with others, and being able to talk to the volunteers.

I understand the social struggles that people with disabilities face.

I've become more confident and have learned that people with learning difficulties have happy, vibrant lives. I see fewer barriers now than when I started.

Barriers continue to be a challenge: a lot of other services are no longer available, so Interest Link is a vital service.

Do you feel valued and supported by Interest Link and its staff?

Angela is very good at checking in with her volunteers to make sure they're OK and know what's planned. She's very good at always saying thank you to her team.

Angela is fab - she appreciates us helpers so much and tells us often.

Rosa does a fantastic job. She is amazing and makes everyone feel valued and supported. Thank you Rosa.

Mary keeps in regular contact - we have catch-ups over coffee every few months. I know I can ask if I need support or advice.

Val is always there with encouragement and time for a chat if and when I need it.

Kate is very good at communicating with me via WhatsApp, the volunteer group and one-to-one meetings.

I have been through a period of ill health this year and our coordinator was extremely supportive - she met up with my link regularly when I couldn't, and sent photos of their meetings.

We are always made to feel valued - we join in like there's no tomorrow!

Has volunteering with us met your hopes and expectations?

My volunteering has exceeded my hopes and expectations, and I'd say it's something I'm most proud of in my own achievements.

I've loved every minute of my ten years with Interest Link and I am honoured to be part of a wonderful team.

I love the art groups and the wonderful ideas Angela has. The walks too are amazing - I've seen lots of new places.

I have been a volunteer now for approximately 15 years and love it!

It has enabled me to continue in an area I have always had an interest in.

I've learned more about myself through the process and am now pretty confident helping people, any people, with difficulties.

I thoroughly enjoy volunteering, and it has been lovely to meet everyone and become involved with the group. Thank you.

Do you have any other reflections about your volunteering experience or suggestions for us?

More social activities such as the annual friendship day or afternoon teas, enabling both service users and volunteers to meet others involved in Interest Link.

We could work together further to offer more groups if possible - this is a wonderful group where everyone is extremely supportive. We could share this with others.

New volunteers with different ideas and personalities bring a new buzz, which I believe bolsters the experience and confidence of the people with learning disabilities.

Interest Link has grown a lot since I became involved. You must be doing something right, so carry on!

I would like to get first aid training.

Thanks Angela for all you do - it's a terrific group!

I honestly don't think I have one suggestion.

Do you feel we offer a safe and professional service?

100% a safe and professional space - the people love these groups.

I feel my client is safe at all times and the group is run exceptionally well.

Service users always feel safe and included. The activities always vary, which provides great stimulation and interest.

The Art and Gardening groups I have been to are great and run very professionally.

Lots of activities, days out and fun nights, all thought through thoroughly for my service user.

It is reassuring that the Interest Link staff have been long-standing, which creates such continuity for residents.

Very safe environment in venues and out in the community.

Do you think we provide needed opportunities that fill a gap in existing provision?

There are so few social groups for people with learning disabilities. Interest Link is a lifeline for lots of people.

There is a huge shortage of provision in the region, and the services Interest Link provide are vital for meeting the core needs of individuals living with learning disabilities. With cuts continuing across many services, it is vital that Interest Link continues to provide social and learning opportunities for individuals who would otherwise risk isolation, boredom and low self-esteem.

There are not a lot of groups out there for vulnerable adults, so Interest Link plays a vital part in providing amazing groups.

Yes, 100%. This is a safe place where our service user can enjoy activities with friends. The organised days out are exceptional and always a fond memory afterwards.

I support a gentleman in his 60s and it's great for him.

With all the cutbacks in Council funding, it is a vital role that you offer residents.

People we support are able to meet up socially with friends, along with the online baking group that has remained successful.

Have you seen a difference in the happiness, confidence and social skills of members you are closely involved with?

My client's confidence has increased massively since joining the group. This has impacted her life at home, and this year she is becoming more independent - cooking, housework, shopping.

One member I've worked with for about 3 years has grown hugely in confidence - so much so that she shared her skills in a certain craft with others in the group. When I first met her, there is no way she would have done that.

Our service user knows when we are coming to groups, and despite not being able to communicate verbally she lets us know how happy she is by laughing and smiling. She makes lots of happy noises and laughs with her friends.

The person I support is so happy at the group. His confidence has really grown, he's made friends and looks forward to going.

More confident in interactions with people they don't know so much, and an opportunity for social relationships as part of a wider community.

Our resident always looks forward to meeting up with Interest Link. We all recently thoroughly enjoyed the Peebles Disco - it was lovely for everyone to come together in a different setting.

They are confident in their group; staff can sometimes sit back and allow them the freedom to mix, then support when it is needed.

Kiltwalk - all felt proud. Day trips - amazing experiences for them. Garden - love, and it builds confidence.

If you are closely involved with family carers, do you think we have supported them?
Mum and dad have been able to spend time with a new grandchild and go out on date nights.
When we attend groups it frees up time for her parents to do their own thing.
Allows mum to spend more time with her grandchild and spend time with friends.
Do you have any other feedback or suggestions?
I don't know how this could be improved! Rosa goes over and above to provide a safe, professional and, most importantly, fun environment.
I have worked in partnership with Interest Link for a number of years, and year after year our students give positive feedback, specifically naming the opportunity to learn more about the needs of people with learning disabilities and their carers. Particular credit to Stef, who goes above and beyond to welcome students and let them know their contributions are valued. She is a very inspiring worker.
The groups work perfectly as they are. I honestly don't think they could be any better. A big shout out to Rosa and team!
Just keep up the good work - the news group has given the man I support a new lease of life.
Interest Link is a great group. They provide so much for people who have a disability. I highly recommend them to people who ask what may be available.
More of the same! You are all invaluable and provide wonderful opportunities for our residents.

Tell us about your experience as a tutor

It truly is joyous to walk into an Interest Link session - warm welcomes from everyone, seeing old friends and sharing a sense of belonging. The group are so close emotionally, and the room is a safe space where people are free to take creative risks, push themselves and work as an ensemble. It has been so cool to see the group develop into the cohesive band of creatives it has become!

A stand-out memory was our picnic soup at the last session before Christmas. Everyone wrapped up for winter, and our soup was made from onion and beetroot from the allotment. We made doorstep decorations from evergreens and had a Christmas singsong. All outdoors, all in great spirits.

One stand-out memory this year was with the quietest group member, during a tea break in the garden. She instigated the conversation with me for the first time and shared lots about herself. It made me think how the open space of a garden allows quieter people, or those who experience overwhelm, to be heard in a way that is often very challenging in big indoor groups.

Make That is a truly spectacular group! I teach crafting fortnightly to around 16 service users and their carers, so the tables almost fill the room. Service users often show me things they have made, which we show to the whole group.

I am a musician and ran music sessions with two of the groups. Both were really enjoyable - the participants were fantastic and engaged well, and the staff and volunteers were all really friendly and helpful.

I really enjoy seeing the participants grow in confidence and enjoy being active. The class provides a supportive environment where everyone can take part, make friends and achieve at their own level.

Do our members with learning disabilities benefit from and develop their creativity in your sessions?

The Make That crafting activity has changed over the years, as the group has become so much more confident in their dexterity, coordination and creative decision-making, so I now prepare more challenging activities. I always provide extra materials, as many want to try the craft at home - which shows they are confident they can remember what we've done.

The 'plotters' have a real sense of ownership at the allotment, and creativity shows up in different ways - getting curious about unusual vegetables to grow, trying recipes at home, and putting cut-flower arrangements together.

Members are more likely to attempt more challenging activities - trying a complicated song instead of an easier one. They have become more proficient with technology and take a greater role in choosing how they want to be creative.

Gardening and the natural world are inherently creative. Members grow their plants from seed, nurture them and experience joy from the sight and scent of flowers, or cook and eat the produce - creating from the soil up!

In both music sessions I saw members develop their creativity through singing, percussion and sensory activities. They came up with great ideas and were very enthusiastic.

Yes, definitely - they go home wanting to practise cooking different meals.

Do you feel valued and supported by Interest Link and its staff and volunteers?

Communication is clear, ahead of time and relevant; supplies are provided in advance; staff are friendly, professional, experienced and kind; and volunteer recruitment and retention is hugely impressive, allowing continuity of work and progression.

I feel there is real heart behind the allotment from Angela and our two volunteers. They understand the value of gardening, muck in to get the jobs done, and support members. I feel able to talk through challenges and ask for help.

Very much so. Angela is amazing and very supportive of us all.
Rosa regularly expresses that she values the service the Greener Peebles team and I provide to Interest Link.
I always feel supported by both staff and volunteers at Interest Link.
All part of the team that makes each session supported and keeps it flowing together. Thank you.
Is there anything we can do to improve your tutor experience?
The room we use is not ideal - quite dark and hard to move around in. It would help to have more rehearsals in the performance venue, and the sessions can feel rushed, with people arriving late and heading for taxis before the finish. Even an extra 15 minutes at the start would allow a more relaxed session.
I'll keep an eye on the CPD offered. Things that would be relevant for me: outdoor first aid, and approaches to teaching and learning with adults with additional needs.
I've found it tricky recently to encourage volunteers and some support workers to pause their chats when I'm introducing activities. Support with this would make it easier to explain and help everyone understand.
Do you have any other feedback for us?
It really is a privilege and an honour to work for what I consider to be the best organisation of its type I've ever encountered in England or Scotland.
It is clear to see the broad variety of benefits Interest Link brings to their members, support workers, families and volunteers. The opportunities - social, creative, educational - are varied, inclusive and, above all, always lots of fun. I take my hat off to Rosa and the team.
I also teach the Parents' Group monthly, made up of parents, siblings and carers. The craft activity gives people respite from their worries, builds their confidence, and helps them feel a sense of belonging in an often isolating, lonely position as a carer.
Val and the group make great themes up, and I love to take on the group's ideas. Seeing people nurtured together shows how much they enjoy learning and finding fun in the session.
Working with Interest Link members and adults with learning disabilities has helped me improve my skills - skills I hope to use during the rest of my career.

William, 16 joined Interest Link in 2023 and is in the Duns and Kelso youth groups with his brother. He has learning disabilities and his condition affects his breathing. William has speech challenges and uses sign language. William's family is very supportive and caring to him, but he can be challenging and disruptive at home, with his brother and in social situations.

William settled well in the group, being kind and caring to others and has become an active lively member. His speech has improved and he has gained confidence and independence, making friends with members from different schools. He is always willing to try new things and take up new opportunities offered to him and took part in a local sports day. He attended our residential weekend and tried all the activities on offer Swimming, Raft Building, Archery, Walking, Campfires, Kitchen Duties and Washing up!!

William said: "They are my friends and I can have fun there: I enjoyed trying the exercise bike. I don't go to any other activities." William's mum said: "It gives the boys a valuable evening of activities with their peers in a safe space. They enjoy the opportunity to be independent from me, and there is nothing else for them out there. The boys love the planned activities especially during the holidays. It gives them something to look forward to and takes the pressure off me. I can get on with jobs that I can't do when the boys are at home and sometimes I arrange to go out for a drink with friends."

Jokokubos, 19 joined Interest Link in March 2022, joining The Duns group first and now he is attending the Kelso Group.

Jokokubos's parents are Lithuanian, English is his second language. He is autistic, which gives him special challenges with his understanding in communication and the environment that he is in. When he joined us he did not speak and (made autistic noises) there was limited interaction, with Jokokubos preferring to walk around.

He was very quiet and shy when he first attended the group, making noises only, but now he has gained confidence and talks to other group members, he is kind and friendly and has a great sense of humour, he gets on well with everybody. At times he has challenges with choices and understanding different social situations. Taking part can be a big challenge for him but with our empathy and guidance and support he manages his time in the sessions.

Jokokubos has gained more confidence since we went away for an Adventure Weekend in the Summer, he has made friends in the group with people from different schools and different towns. Last year he was happy to watch people in our annual show, but this year as his confidence has grown, he was happy to take part.

Jokokubos's mother said: "No other organisation offers so many opportunities, and I have more free time to spend with my husband. It gives the boys happy times, fun in a safe space, smiles & laughter and they are keen to try new things with their friends. Jokokubos speaks more."

Lexi is 12 years old and lives with her parents, siblings, and the family pets in the countryside here in the Borders – she is a bright and engaging girl. She joins with the chats at the group and is creative and thoughtful.

Lexi has a diagnosis of autism and has sadly experienced bullying at school. She was initially shy when coming to the group but soon settled in and came out of her shell – joining in with crafts, games nights, baking, singing, and even starring in our film “Jock McBond” as an evil scientist.

Lexi’s mum Amanda says “Lexi loves attending Interest Link and it’s so nice to hear her giggling and having fun. Lexi is autistic and she has experienced bullying at school and in clubs and the community. At Interest Link she can be herself and have fun with likeminded people, in a safe environment where she is not judged by anyone. This is crucial for us as parents to know that Lexi has a safe space to go and be happy. It’s does wonders for her self-care, confidence and self-esteem. Lexi also takes part in activities she may not have the confidence to do in front of other people, as she struggles with self-confidence, at Interest Link she can do crafts and activities, giving her experiences she misses elsewhere. Lexi is making friends for life at Interest Link, and this is great for her going forward into her teenage years, she and other children need this opportunity. We cannot thank the staff enough for giving Lexi this chance.”

Denn is 19 years old and lives with his mum Nikki in Galashiels – they are new to the area and Denn’s mum was keen to encourage Denn to meet folk locally. They both attend a local church together and enjoy the community there. Denn has a diagnosis of autism and Klinefelter syndrome as well as lung issues.

Despite Denn’s initial anxiety, within 20 minutes of starting the cooking group it was like he had always been a member! Lots of laugh and banter and gentle mischief ensued. Denn has made all sorts of goodies with the crew and sometimes brings in things he has made at home too – his handmade chocolates were a triumph! Denn is now considering joining our youth group and we are hoping to welcome him along very soon!

Denn says of Interest Link “It’s a nice place, lovely people - I enjoy baking and having a laugh with the others who are really friendly, they are helpful - and I feel comfortable approaching them. They accept me for who I am.”

Mum Nikki says “I think it’s brilliant that your group is available as Denn now loves coming to your group. If it wasn’t available Denn wouldn’t be socialising which would be a real shame if you weren’t there for him. He loves coming and he wishes there could be more days like it.”

Annie is a 21-year-old member supported by Interest Link Roxburgh. Annie has a learning disability and lives with her parents. She was very shy when first introduced to other Life Skills Group members last October, but has settled in nicely and is now much more confident at speaking in front of others and offering her own opinions.

Annie travels independently to the group and has made good friends, and with the help of out tutor Liz she is now proficient in numeracy and problem-solving skills. Annie also attends our Youth Group and

putting herself forward for a couple of parts in the Summer Show was a huge step forward for her, and will enable her to gain much more confidence in herself. Annie is feeling good about the acting roles in the show and is very happy with this as she has been offered the right support to fulfil these roles and gain maximum potential.

Annie's Dad is very happy and glad she has been offered more social opportunities to make friends. Mum Gill sat in on a Life Skills session last year and enjoyed seeing what Annie could do when presented with more complex numeracy tasks. Gill is also pleased that she can meet new people of similar ages and can't wait to see Annie perform in the Summer Show. Both parents agreed that Annie is happy and a much more confident person. Annie now has a work placement at Burnfoot Café through our group. This placement is supported by Liz our Tutor, and we look forward to seeing how Annie copes with practical tasks that she will be given over the next 6 months. It is hoped that Annie will be offered more voluntary hours in the near future and learn to carry out Café duties with minimal support.

"Annie has grown in confidence and thriving and looking forward to the future. We both feel she still needs support at the work placement, but hopefully in the weeks to come this will be addressed". Gill, Annie's mum.

Shaun is a 15-year-old member who attends the evening Roxburgh Children's Group and one of the in-school groups at Hawick High School. Shaun is Autistic and attends the Enhanced Provision unit at the high school.

Shaun has a good relationship with his parents and grandparents, and idolizes his big brother. They all attend open evenings and events, such as our performance of the Wizard of Oz last year.

Shaun has gained social skills through attending the two Interest Link groups and now engages with the other group members, rather than just the adults in the room. As he interacts with the peer mentors and fellow members, he is growing in confidence and now likes to share his opinions about the activities, alongside stories and jokes he likes. At a recent Children's Group session, he entertained the peer mentors with his spot-on American accent!

Staff at the high school have told me that Shaun gets very excited anticipating an Interest Link session and will ask repeatedly what activity we are doing. Often the anticipation is more exciting for Shaun than the actual activity, and he loses interest once we have started, and I am working with the school to help Shaun stay on task and get the most out of our sessions that he can. Along the same lines, we did a line dancing project at Children's Group which Shaun seemed disinterested in; however, for weeks after the project finished Shaun continued to ask me, "Are we seeing Jenny [line dancing tutor] again on Monday night?" He definitely enjoys his Interest Link groups, even if the way he interacts with the activities is unexpected sometimes!

Shaun's mum Nicola said "Interest link are amazing in what they do, we are really appreciative of the group welcoming Shaun to join in with them. Seeing Shaun joining in group activity and having some social life is great and something which we have been longing for for quite a number of years now". Shaun's dad Gordon said "Always feel safe with Shaun at group and he's made new friends quite often

talking about them which is a new thing for Shaun. Never as anxious as he can be and always speaks to others which again is a new thing for Shaun”.

Matty is 14 years old and lives with his Mum, Emma. He has learning disabilities and has been in Tweeddale Champions Group for nearly 18 months. Matty took a long time to settle, and for the first months, he would only stay at the Group for a short time before wanting to go home. Emma would try leaving for a short time, but he got anxious and distressed so she came back to the Venue to sit with him. Matty didn't at first join in Group activities but accepted one peer mentor at a time playing a board game with him. He watched what was going on in the wider Group and started to seem happy to be there.

After some months, Matty decided his Mum should go home once they'd arrived at the Venue saying “Matty alone, Mum pick me up”. He stayed on the periphery of the Group, but started to gradually join in activities, encouraged to do so by one of the peer mentors. In the past few months, Matty has been looking much more relaxed within the Group. He gets involved in all the activities eg taking part in Archery and Indoor Curling when it was his turn, and joining in Karaoke with other Group members, singing out the ‘title’ words. He also loves to dance on his own whenever he listens to music.

Matty says very little but understands much more. He picks one significant word or two out of a sentence spoken to him and repeats it. This was usually “home soon” at the beginning of his time in Champions; which later progressed to “group now, home later”.

Matty's Mum Emma said: “He really enjoys his time at Champions Group. When he knows he has his Club on a Monday as we do his routine – big smiles; and when he comes home from school he can't wait to get ready and ‘head’. When walking home from Champions Group he is happy and cheeky. He's had a good time.”

Tony is a young man of 22 who has been in the Tweeddale Youth Group for a number of years. He has Downs Syndrome and until recently lived at home with his parents. He now lives independently in a flat opposite his parents' house where he receives one to one support from a local care agency.

Tony is fit and insists on walking to the Venue for Group sessions but accepts a lift home from one of the Group Leaders which his parents really appreciate. Tony is one of the first people to arrive at our Venue never misses the sessions unless he is ill or away on holiday. He is passionate about rugby and the local team and goes to all their games when he can, and loves being asked about the most recent Saturday game.

Tony interacts with others in the Group whilst doing activities and is happy to be helped when needed. He's got a good sense of humour and loves listening to jokes. Tony does not say a great deal. He speaks using short sentences, or one-word answers and rarely initiates conversation.

Tony's confidence has grown though over the years I've worked with him. There are particular people he likes to sit beside at the Group and I can see him relax. He smiles a lot when they speak to him. He takes part in all the activities at Front Runners no matter what we're doing. Tony now shows a maturity that he didn't have when he first joined us. He comes along to our new Catch Up Group in a local café where he

meets with other Front Runners Group members to chat, have a coffee or juice and play dominoes or similar games. He also meets up with friends he made in the Group previously and who have moved on. They attend our quiz nights together.

Tony's Mum Eileen says: "Tony has attended Interest Link for many years. He values the opportunity it provides to maintain contact with old friends, as well as widening his connections. He is a busy and very active young man – he enjoys the range of activities and balances attendance with involvement with another group focusing on his interest in sports!"

Alex is a 25 year old member who attends the BFFs group and lives with his mum Gillie. He is autistic and communicates using British Sign Language.

Alex likes routine and structure, he dislikes large groups and has found previous groups at Interest Link, such as the YPS panto group to be a challenge. Alex enjoys the smaller size of the BFFs group and the fact that we don't do formal projects. He sees the group as an opportunity to do 'show and tell' with his friends. Alex loves to share his own news, and is slowly becoming more engaged with the other group members sharing their news too.

Gillie has recently shown an interest in Alex leading a more independent life and will be attending our upcoming information evening for parents about moving out of the family home. She has set up some routines within in the home so that Alex can start to practise independent living, such as a food cupboard in the kitchen of things which Alex is able to prepare on his own. As Alex practises new skills and learns to prepare new foods, they are added into the cupboard.

One of the other members from BFFs told Helen that he would like to learn some BSL so he can become better friends with Alex. Alex gives a big thumbs up to any of us who have shown him what we know in BSL. Alex is always excited for BFFs and chooses which friends he would like to sit with when we go out for lunch. He is building closer friendships with everyone in the group, especially Katie (sessional worker) and Robbie (member).

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