



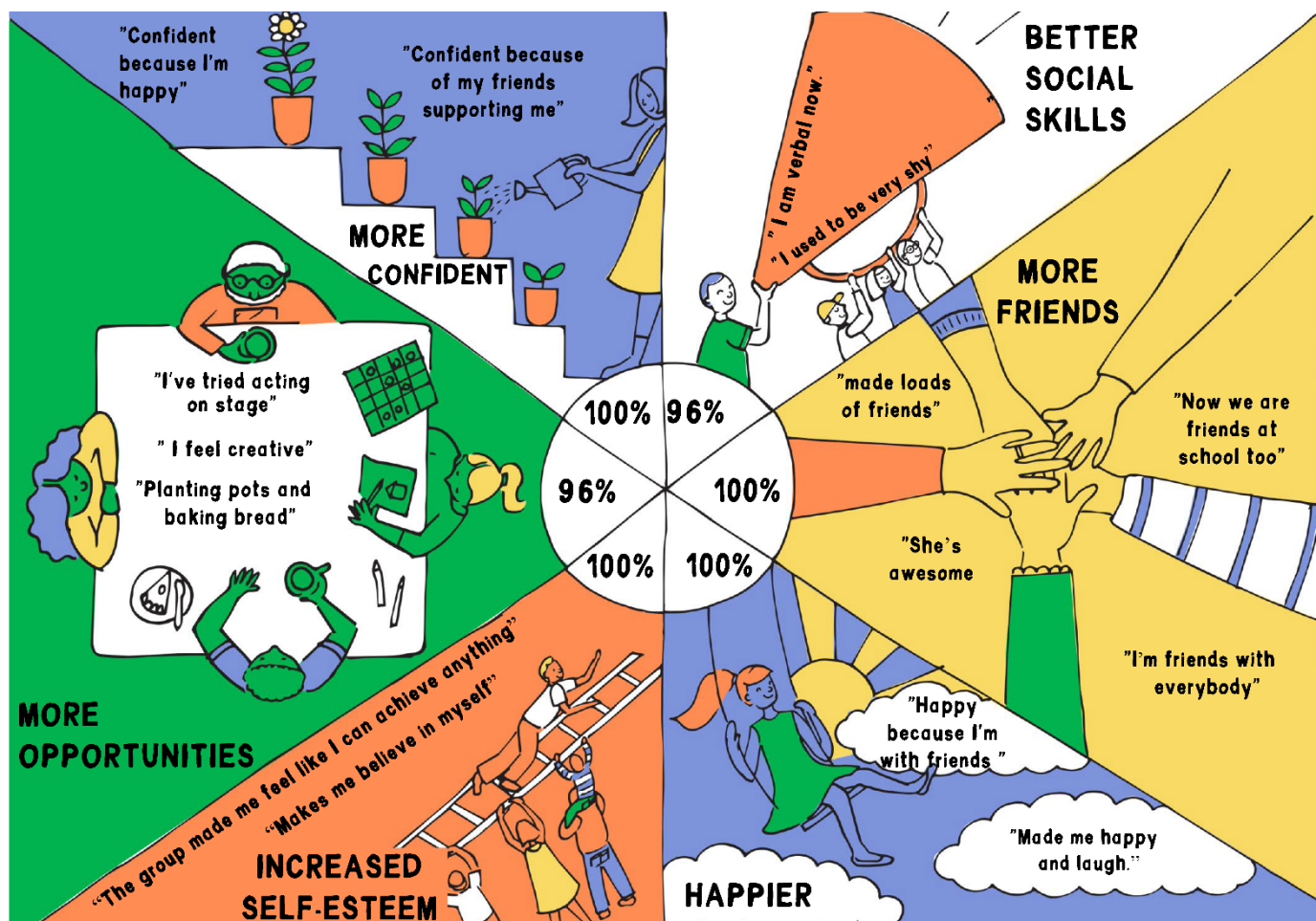
2026

Impact Report

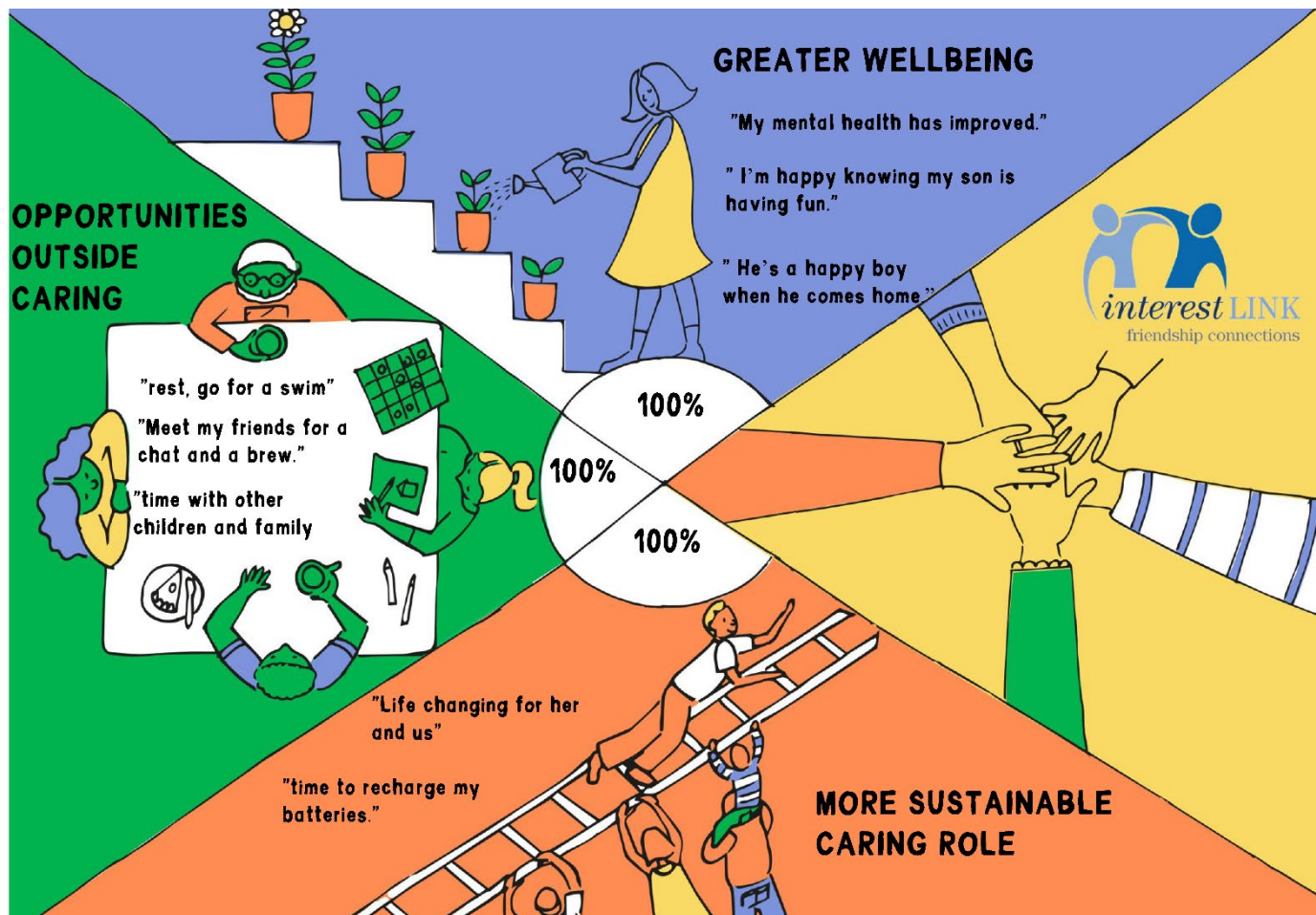
Berwickshire Branch

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 committee of stakeholders. 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.

Berwickshire Activities 2025-26

At 1st August 2026 the branch is supporting 68 members with learning disabilities aged 11-78 (up from 66 last year).

- There are 105 places in 11 befriending groups (up from 97 places in 11 groups last year).
- 1:1 links have reduced from 12 to 9, continuing the shift of focus towards groups.
- 41 members were supported in more than one activity.
- 74 family carers enjoyed short break respite.

[See a breakdown of Berwickshire groups.](#)

Branch Co-ordinators Kate Borthwick (Youth) and Angela Laidlaw (Adults) deliver the service, along with sessional workers, tutors and 40 volunteers.

Highlights of the year included:

- Youth overnight at [Whithaugh](#) Outdoor Centre in August 2025.
- Friendship Day in October 2025.
- Coldstream Cabaret Club with Borders Youth Theatre, Nov 2025 (see [video](#) & [report](#)).
- Charmian Challenge fun run in April 2026.
- Winners at the YouthBorders LEAD Awards June 2026 for Best Performance (Coldstream Cabaret Club).

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 Berwickshire Survey

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

Response rates	Members	Family carers	Volunteers	Tutors		
	54%	40%	40%	50%		
Main Outcomes:						
Impact on Members	More Friends	More opportunities	Greater Happiness	Improved Confidence	Increased Self-esteem	Better Social Skills
Reported by Themselves	100%	96%	100%	100%	100%	96%
Reported by Carers	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Reported by Volunteers	100%		100%	100%	100%	100%
Impact on Family Carers	More Opportunities Outside Caring		Eased or More Sustainable Caring Role		Greater Wellbeing	
Reported by Themselves	100%		100%		100%	
Impact on Volunteers	Increased Learning Disabilities Awareness		More confidence with people with learning disabilities			
Reported by Themselves	94%		94%			
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](#)

[Case Studies 2025-26](#)

[Fundors](#)

Did you make friends?

I have made lots of friends in the 3 and a half years since I joined Angela's groups when we moved to Kelso

Both through the groups and other activities

It's good to meet new people and spend time with each other

I enjoy spending time with everyone at the Cooking Club

I have made friends with other people in the group

New friends Poppy, Laura

I have many friends in the group

Yes, the group is friendly

Did you try new things?

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

The pizza escape room was new. I like it when we have barbecues and games like badminton, chess and card games

Lots of new foods and cooking skills

I've learned a lot about gardening

I've tried new things at the allotment group and at art

I did try new things, I love it

Yes, I like drama. I like Super Mario and other games

Tried drama

Did it make you feel happy?

I love attending all of my groups

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

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

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

I really enjoy coming to the allotment. We have a laugh

I'm always made very welcome

Sam makes me happy

It makes me happy

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

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 get to do stuff without my mum

I can go out with Sam

Yes: practising skills, getting better

Talking with friends is confidence

I am more confident because of the group

Did it make you feel good about yourself?

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

I like having friends out of school. I like going somewhere where I can be myself
Learning and socialising gives me a buzz
Always feel a part of it
The group make me feel good about myself
I can have fun
Yes, I feel good
Did you get better at talking to people?
I am confident talking and sharing ideas
Kate really tries to understand me, which is hard as I have a speech disorder. It's easier in a supportive setting
Yes - it's increased my social skills
We talk to each other about our week
Sam is fun and helps me, so it is easier to talk with other people
I got better at talking to people because of the group
I feel I can talk to people
Yes, I like to chat to people
Is there anything else you want to say?
Interest Link's youth group is the most fun thing in my week
I love going to all my groups and meeting my friends
I look forward to seeing my friend each time
It's good to learn new skills
Yes, I want to make a small film
I enjoy being in the group and seeing other people
Feel happy, like cooking and having the food. Feel good about cooking
Interest Link is good fun



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

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

There are no other opportunities for him at his age. It is the only place he can see his friends and make new ones. Interest Link has been an absolute lifeline to his mental health, and Kate has been instrumental in getting him to try new things

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

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

It's local and a vital service for young adults with disabilities to get out and socialise

There are no other local groups that can support young people in this way, helping young people to meet people and form friendships

There are very limited choices when disabled. Having the service allows us to have things to do and get to meet and make friends

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

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

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

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

Even a few hours to do shopping in peace or take the other kids for tea has been so important to us

I have four sons, and having Billy away in the evening allows me to spend time with the others

My husband and I now have a couple of hours to go for a meal

It gives me time to spend with my daughter

Allows us as parents a little respite, which is very limited

When my child attends group, it means I can focus my attention solely on my other child

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

Angela and her team from day one have 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 myself and my brother

Alexander takes part in 4 activities through Interest Link and these give us respite to do things ourselves

Without Interest Link, Jake would probably need more mental health care than he currently does

It helps my son get used to other people looking after him and his needs

Definitely eased it - my daughter, who attends group with Kate, has made friends with Kate's support along the way

Can relax knowing he is safe within the group

More sustainable, as it frees up some time

Gives me time to myself

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

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

Less meltdowns, as he can regulate better, meaning everyone else is more at ease. It has also taught him to socialise, which has helped regulation

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

My son always looks forward to the lunches and sometimes going for a walk afterwards

I'm happy knowing my son is having fun and socialising with others

Tabitha has friends at group

Makes life more bearable at difficult times

It's nice to break up the week

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. This is a huge positive in Joe's life, one that was missing for numerous years

100%! Kate supervises the groups brilliantly and gives advice and supports the attendees when anything should arise

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

It has been so important to Jake and taught him confidence and independence

Very safe and well run

The group are very friendly

Enjoys taking part in the group

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

Much more confident in general, but also specifically when it comes to meeting others

He wouldn't be where he is now without Interest Link

Angela always encourages everyone to join in and take part

Enjoys helping others within the group

Being able to get time away from parents is a big help

Yes, very happy

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 environment. He will always put across his point of view but is now better at listening to what others say

It helps him, having to talk to new people

Talks more

Is happy when attending

Is there anything else you want to tell us?

Kate is absolutely brilliant! She is there every meeting to support the young people, goes out of her way to make sure they are included, respected, listened to and feel valued

Our heartfelt thanks to Angela for providing 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, is one not all possess

Alexander really enjoyed the Charmian Challenge and meeting friends from the Peebles group he attended before moving to Kelso. He loves the allotment and watching the plants and vegetables grow

The group encourages my son to mix and, where possible, help others. We live in the countryside and this group gives him the opportunity to meet others

Billy has grown up a lot since joining. He has definitely evolved as a person and become more mature

The service has been excellent. Kate is amazing, always has great activities and is very supportive

Want the service to carry on, as it's very valued - especially living in an area with very few amenities for disabled people

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

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

My member is a true friend

Yes - we sometimes meet when not in group

I feel very comfortable with all the members now and we have a lot of fun

Yes, the members are lovely and very interesting, and I learn lots along the way

A very friendly and welcoming group

We are always pleased to see each other and chat

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 about being himself and knows he is accepted; Helen is now much more relaxed and warm

Some members did not say anything to me at first, and now they share things - and if we meet outwith the group, e.g. in a shop, they'll chat

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

Members share and take turns more easily when playing games and taking part in activities such as carpet bowls

They invite each other to their birthday parties, and they've learned new skills through practical activities

At Coldstream Friday Club I've seen more confidence in members actively joining in and enjoying themselves

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

They speak out more

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

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

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

I love seeing them happy and interacting with others, and that they can talk to the volunteers

Volunteering at the group definitely improves your skills at dealing with ASN

I understand the social struggles that people with disabilities face

It helps me understand the problems they have with everyday life

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

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

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

Angela is very good at checking in with her volunteers to make sure we're OK and know what's planned, and always says thank you to her team

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

How inspiring people with learning disabilities are. I've gained confidence to try new things I never did before for fear, e.g. new age kurling and art

Kate is very good at communicating with me via WhatsApp, the volunteer group and 1:1 meetings
Volunteering here at Abbey Row is lots of fun and I've found out lots of great skills
I always feel welcomed and valued
Has volunteering with us met your hopes and expectations?
I have been a volunteer now for approx 15 years and love it!
It has enabled me to continue in an area I have always had an interest in
I love the art groups and the wonderful ideas Angela has. The walks too are amazing - I've seen lots of new places
I enjoy volunteering and find it very rewarding; it's been lovely to meet everyone and become involved with the group
I think it's a lovely group. When I organised the stone-painting activity, it was great seeing everybody enjoy it
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 members and volunteers to meet others involved in Interest Link
We could work together further to offer more groups if possible - this is a wonderful, supportive group and we could share it with others
More celebratory activities where members can meet more people, such as afternoon teas with games
A walk would be a nice activity
More planning
Thanks Angela for all you do - it's a terrific group!
Interest Link is a fantastic service

Walter, 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. Walter has speech challenges and uses sign language. Walter'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.

Walter 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!!

Walter 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." Walter'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."

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

English is the family's second language and Jack 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 Jack 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.

Jack 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.

Jack'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. Jack speaks more."

Gordon is 35 and has a learning disability and is blind and lives outside Coldstream with his mother and stepfather He has been a member of Interest Link since 2017 and has a wonderful relationship with his one to one befriender, Sarah whom he sees every fortnight. We are extremely fortunate to have Sarah as

a volunteer and she remains fully committed to the friendship even though she recently moved away and now has considerable distance to travel to see him.

Gordon has also been coming along to our Coldstream Friday Club for the past four years and he gets great pleasure from the many varied activities offered at the Club. Thanks to the support of the volunteers, Gordon is able to attend without bringing along a carer which gives him a sense of being independent in the group. There are a couple of other members who have become particular friends and he likes to spend time with and chat to when he comes to the group.

Gordon's mother works and says she really values the time Gordon spends with his befriender as it gives her much needed opportunities to spend time with her husband on their own. Gordon's stepfather is a bit older and does a lot of the caring needed by Gordon. Gordon is extremely chatty, can repeat himself and often asks the same questions over and over which can be very wearing for his family: his involvement in the group provides his close family some respite and helps give him other things to talk about. "He enjoys his day out with his befriender and his monthly club I get time to do other things: I can go shopping or a long walk, any me time is good."

Ross is 53 and joined Interest Link in 2017. He lives with his elderly mother and father in Chirnside and has a learning disability and some mental health issues which can lead him to be paranoid at times. Ross was very specific when the prospect of having a befriender was brought up: he would only accept a friendship with a woman. Fortunately, we were able to match him with a suitable female befriender and they got on extremely well together and continue to do so.

They have their routines, for example walking around the Hirsell in Coldstream, or visiting favourite coffee shops and cafes. This suits them both very well and gives Dad, the main carer, some much needed respite. Ross's mother is partially disabled and suffers with various medical issues which means that Ross's Dad, in his late '70s, is a full time carer for both his wife and son.

Four years ago, Ross joined the new fortnightly Cooking Club we started up in Duns. He enjoys taking a full part in cooking and when we all have lunch together he chats away with the other eight other members of this group. His Dad speaks very highly of Interest Link Borders and says the Cooking Club and his befriender are lifelines for himself and wife for respite, and especially for his son who has no other social outlets.

Ross told me "I like meeting new people, and what we cook is nearly all new so that's good."

His parents said "Mixing with others has given my son confidence and he looks forward to going out with people he can trust. He gets a chance to learn how to cook, eat healthy food and enjoy walking in the countryside. My wife and I very much appreciate the help and experience Angela has given our son, my wife and I can go out together. It gives us a break."

With thanks to all our Berwickshire Funders in 2025-26



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