



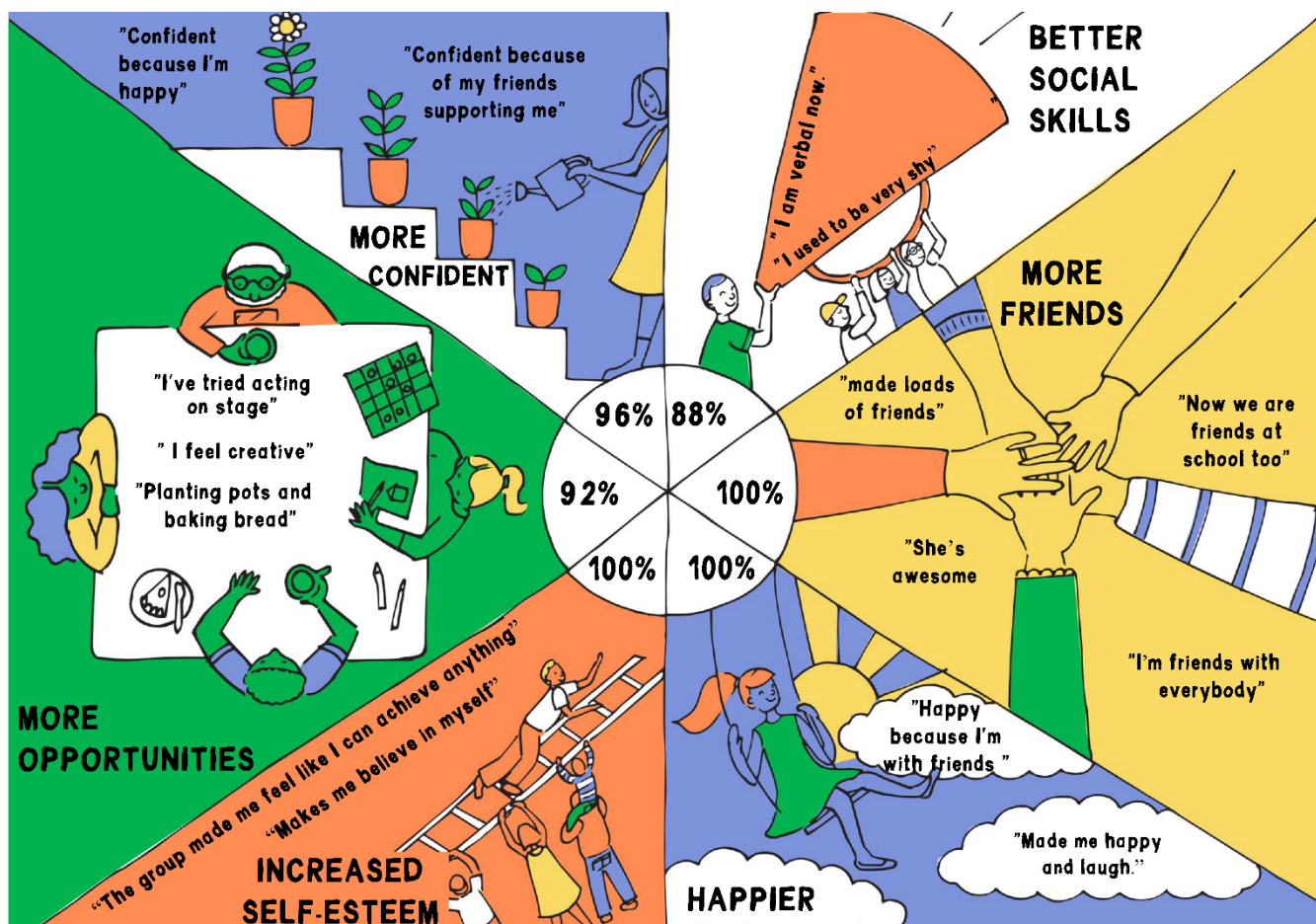
2026

Impact Report

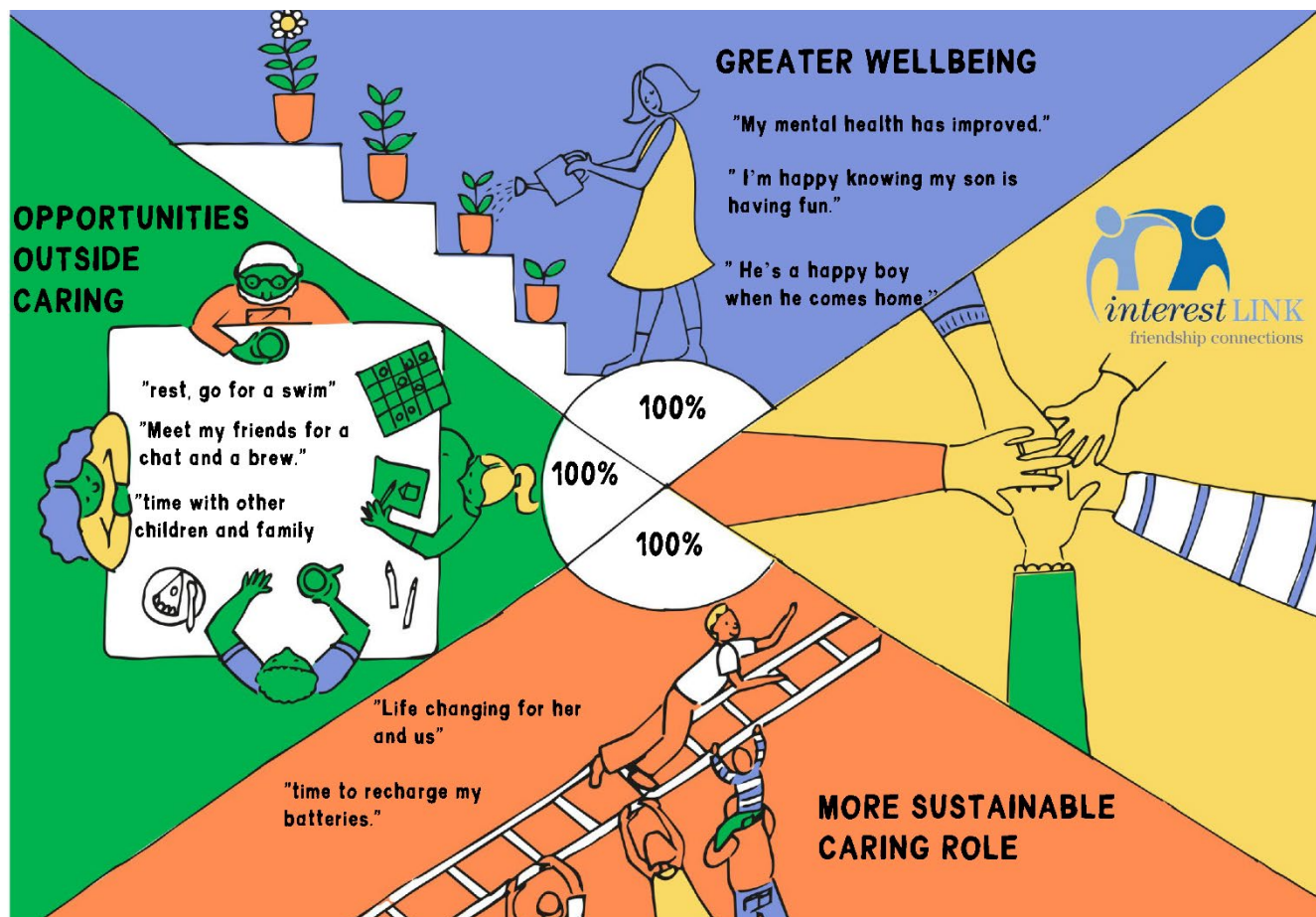
Central Borders Branch

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 & The Difference We Make

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.

Central Borders Activities 2025-26

At 1st August 2026 the branch is supporting 70 members with learning disabilities aged 11-78 (up from 62 last year).

- There are 113 places in 13 befriending groups (up from 105 places in 11 groups last year).
- 1:1 links have reduced from 9 to 4, continuing the shift of focus towards groups.
- 35 members were supported in more than one activity.
- 78 family carers enjoyed short break respite.

Two new groups piloted in Spring 2026:

- 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. This will shortly become a multi-branch group to represent Voices across the Borders.
- An informal Supper Club at Café Recharge in Galashiels open to all members.

[See a breakdown of all the Central Borders groups.](#)

Branch Co-ordinator Stefanie Poletyllo and Assistant Donna Riddell deliver the service, along with sessional workers, tutors and 55 volunteers.

Highlights of the year included:

- Friendship Day in October 2025
- Central Borders Youth group Enterprise Project recycled artworks auction in November 2025
- Central Borders Panto December 2025 (see [photos](#))
- Charmian Challenge fun run in April 2026.
- Weaving Friendship exhibition in partnership with Great Tapestry of Scotland, July 2026. This celebrated the learning disability community in the Scottish Borders, with all the befriending groups contributing work such as a Welcome banner made from stitched calico panels, embroidered fabric panels and a short film on friendship.

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 Central Borders 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			
	54%	40%	55%			
Main Outcomes:						
Impact on Members	More Friends	More opportunities	Greater Happiness	Improved Confidence	Increased Self-esteem	Better Social Skills
Reported by Themselves	100%	92%	100%	96%	100%	88%
Reported by Carers	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Reported by Volunteers	100%		95%	85%	85%	95%
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	85%		85%			
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			95%			
Safe & Professional Service					100%	

Links:

Survey Feedback:

[Member Feedback](#)

[Family Carer Feedback](#)

[Volunteer Feedback](#)

[Case Studies 2025-26](#)

[Fundors](#)

Did you make friends?

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

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

I have made friends with Kenny - he makes me laugh all the time. Iona is a student and I met her too. I get to see Aileen Marie at the craft group.

I am in the youth group and get to see Tash and Faye.

Old and new friends.

I sit with Claire.

Met all my friends.

Did you try new things?

New skills - painting and our art auction, socialising more and showing people around at the auction.

I feel creative in the craft group and I like growing in the garden groups at the allotment and MuddyBuddies@Home online.

Planting - and we made soup, bread and butter. I took this for my packed lunch the next day.

Cooking and new recipes.

Lots of new crafts.

My counting is getting better.

Singing and dancing.

Also enjoyed pizza week.

Did it make you feel happy?

Very happy, and it makes me feel included.

Enjoy meeting Anne and the chat - she shows me her crafts and I tell her all my news too.

The group is exciting.

Enjoy group - gets me out and less bored.

Meeting everyone.

I like coming here.

Very - I look forward to it.

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

More confident to meet people - when I first came I was shy and not chatty, but now I am fine and look forward to the groups.

Confident because I have my Interest Link friends.

Friends with Ruth - she encourages me and I need that sometimes.

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!

Makes me feel great that people come to see me in the panto.

Makes me feel proud of myself for joining in and meeting people.

Because I know I have a good friend.

I feel welcome.

It makes me feel good about myself.

Did you get better at talking to people?

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

I met new people and also see old friends there too.
--

I am better at talking to people.

I used to be very shy, but not here.

Meeting more people, lots of conversations.

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

Is there anything else you want to say?
--

Stefanie and her team are brilliant, kind and fun.
--

I feel grateful that I get to be here and try new activities.

Every creative and dramatic - I like coming to Interest Link.

I would like to do music with the group too.
--

Very happy.

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

There are no other local opportunities that provide exactly what Interest Link do. This is a space where young people can just be themselves, learn, experience and try all sorts of new things in a safe, fun, no-judgment space!

Denn likes coming here, he feels welcomed and staff are approachable. He is normally anti-social, but he has made friends here. He can't get help from local services - it's taking ages.

It's a great service for our son, he gets so much out of it; he would be very isolated if the service was not available.

Oliver needs interaction with peers his own age and he benefits massively.

It offers a wonderful opportunity for social interaction with a fabulous group.

This service is well needed for my older child, as it is one of the only social groups she goes to.

It gets my son out and meeting people, and he likes to do the activities.

There aren't many groups available that are so welcoming.

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

It creates a little space in the week when youth group is on where I can do something - or do nothing - knowing Milo is somewhere I won't get a call to collect him, as he is very confident and content in the group.

Without Interest Link my daughter would not meet up with her friends and workers.

Gives me time to spend with other children and family.

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

Time to do the shopping and catch up with others.

Can spend time with my daughter, go on trips.

More time for myself.

I have felt confident that my daughter will be happy in a safe environment.

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

It is lovely knowing Milo has somewhere he looks forward to going, is understood and just feels he fits!

Our son loved the group and it makes him happier and allows him to be creative and sociable.

I genuinely enjoy the community. They are kind and caring towards each other.

Social events and communicating with friends in a safe environment.

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

Milo has really flourished since starting Interest Link. It's lovely for us all to see him enjoy something so much! He comes back so happy and relaxed, excited to tell us what he's been making, cooking, baking and chatting about!

It is helping him cook, and I hope he'll become more independent. While he's here he's learning, enjoying himself and making friends. He loves it.

Our son loved the group and it gives him a sense of belonging.

Faye loved club nights and gets very excited - it's her thing, she loves it!

My son is always happy when he comes back after the group.

Again, the friendships and kindness are wonderful.

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

100%! The group is very well facilitated to create a positive, respectful space entirely focused on young people building each other up, recognising strengths and talents, and encouraging everyone to give things a go!

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

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

Both meeting new people and trying new activities. Socially very important.

My son gets on with everyone at the group.

A very relaxed, friendly atmosphere.

Do they have more confidence and self-esteem?

Milo's confidence and self-esteem has definitely improved since being part of Interest Link. There are things he thought he wasn't good at, but he's realised that in a safe, supportive space he can achieve things he didn't think he could. This has helped frame a different mindset across lots of areas of his life.

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

Able to be themselves and not be judged. To have fun.

Everyone attending is equal and they really enjoy the social interaction.

Chooses her outfit to go to club and gets very animated.

Are their social and communication skills better?

Milo has positively grown here. He found it difficult to make friends and relax in social settings, but Interest Link has been a constant - he looks forward to going, enjoys the activities and social network, has made connections and feels comfortable and confident engaging!

More communication skills, not fearing to approach people.

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

Helpers at club understand her and have learned to sign!

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

Is there anything else you want to tell us?

The range of activities is fantastic - baking, making, planning, always something different. The atmosphere and the way the group is facilitated makes such a positive difference. The staff and volunteers encourage relationships, skills, and young people to believe in themselves. Keep being awesome!

It's a great service with incredible staff, providing a happy and safe environment.

I just think this is a great group. The staff are great and love to engage with the kids. Watching them laugh and smile every week - nothing beats it.

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

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.

It gives her the social interaction that is desperately needed. For some members it is their only social interaction outside home.

The fact that you continue to provide your services is wonderful and much appreciated by all who attend.

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

I have had the pleasure of getting to know all the members in this wonderful group. Lots of laughs are had and stories shared!

Caroline shares many things with me, just like a long-term friend would.

I have made lots of friends, both volunteers and members.

I feel I have fostered strong friendship connections.

It's a fantastic atmosphere, everyone is so friendly. It has been great to chat with so many different people.

I have made lots of friends in the classes and outside classes.

A great bunch of adults full of fun and laughs.

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?

One member joined in my second year and I've loved seeing his confidence grow when communicating with us all, and forming friendships with other members.

Some new service users were very reserved initially, but being part of the group they've engaged really well and now start conversations and love participating in the events we do.

One person was very shy and took a while to get to know you, but now chats to everyone and has lots more confidence.

One girl first seemed very shy and didn't speak much, but now she's very talkative.

Esme's confidence seems to be growing hugely.

We have conversations about life - there are no barriers.

Growing confidence to join in.

More social skills.

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

I've found this experience so helpful in understanding the individuality of disability. Everyone is different and definitely not defined by their learning disability.

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.

A huge impact on my confidence socialising with people with learning disabilities.

I feel more comfortable making friends with people with learning disabilities and understand the challenges they face better.

It has greatly helped me with socialising with people with learning disabilities.

I find it much easier to talk to most of them.

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

I feel fully supported by this amazing team - both in my time volunteering and through their kindness outside the service.

Interest Link staff are always very kind and supportive towards me.

Definitely - always a positive experience where my volunteering is acknowledged and encouraged.

Been offered more opportunities. Interest Link is flexible and accommodating around my other commitments.

Good atmosphere, friendly staff, a lot of laughing.
They are all fantastic!
Always there for you.
Has volunteering with us met your hopes and expectations?
It's gone above and beyond my expectations. It has helped me understand people better and to make friends. I really enjoy volunteering.
My volunteering has exceeded my hopes and expectations, and I'd say it's something I'm most proud of in my own achievements.
It has honestly been so much better than I thought, and has become a highlight of my week.
It has far exceeded my expectations.
Exceeded!
Love helping in all classes and meeting more people.
Do you have any other reflections about your volunteering experience or suggestions for us?
New volunteers with different ideas and personalities bring a new buzz, which bolsters the experience and confidence of the people with learning disabilities.
It is perfect as it is!
It was perfect.

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.”

Sandra is 38 and lives in Galashiels in a supported tenancy with her friend and housemate – they both attend some of our groups together. Sandra is a cheerful girl - she has a great sense of humour and a fantastic giggle! Sandra has learning disabilities and requires support with everyday life. She is close to her smashing family and has a lovely team of support staff.

Sandra joined Interest Link in 2010 as a member of our youth group - she quickly settled in and since then has joined our adult service where she now attends our Brunch Bunch, Selkirk Craft sessions in the evenings and has now joined our daytime Fruity Fitness sessions too! For the craft sessions, she travels on her own with other members and volunteers in our Border Wheels mini bus and she enjoys this. There's always singing and laughter as they arrive and then leave! Sandra has long-term friends within the groups and it's a great chance for them to see each other and relax!

Sandra enjoys the creativity at the craft sessions and the brunch bunch – and here she is enjoying her baked potato on a chilly autumn day! Juliet

Juliet is 30 and lives with her mum and dad in Selkirk– she is also very close to her sister. Juliet joined us in 2015 and became a member of our youth group. Juliet joined in with all our activities and made some good friends, particularly Chelsie one of our then volunteers. They shared a room when we flew over to Belfast for the night away on our youth group weekend away. We visited the Titanic and had a blast! Juliet has joined in with lots of our Zoom sessions during and since lockdown – she's been a lucky bingo winner more than once!

Juliet was in the youth group for 3 years and then moved over into our adult service where she joined in with cooking and crafting sessions before becoming a now very established member of the panto group and this is the perfect fit. Juliet has an infectious enthusiasm for theatre and she loves to sing and dance. This year's panto will be an homage to Frozen and we have no doubt Juliet will shine once more on the stage!

Juliet's parents told me 'Juliet loves coming to Interest Link! She is always very happy there and enjoys the opportunity to catch up with friends. Drama with Ollie is great - he is so encouraging and she gets to be on stage, which she loves, in a supported environment. As parents, we know that she is having fun in a safe place. Her language and social skills have definitely been accelerated by the interactions there.'

With thanks to all our Central Borders Funders in 2025-26

