



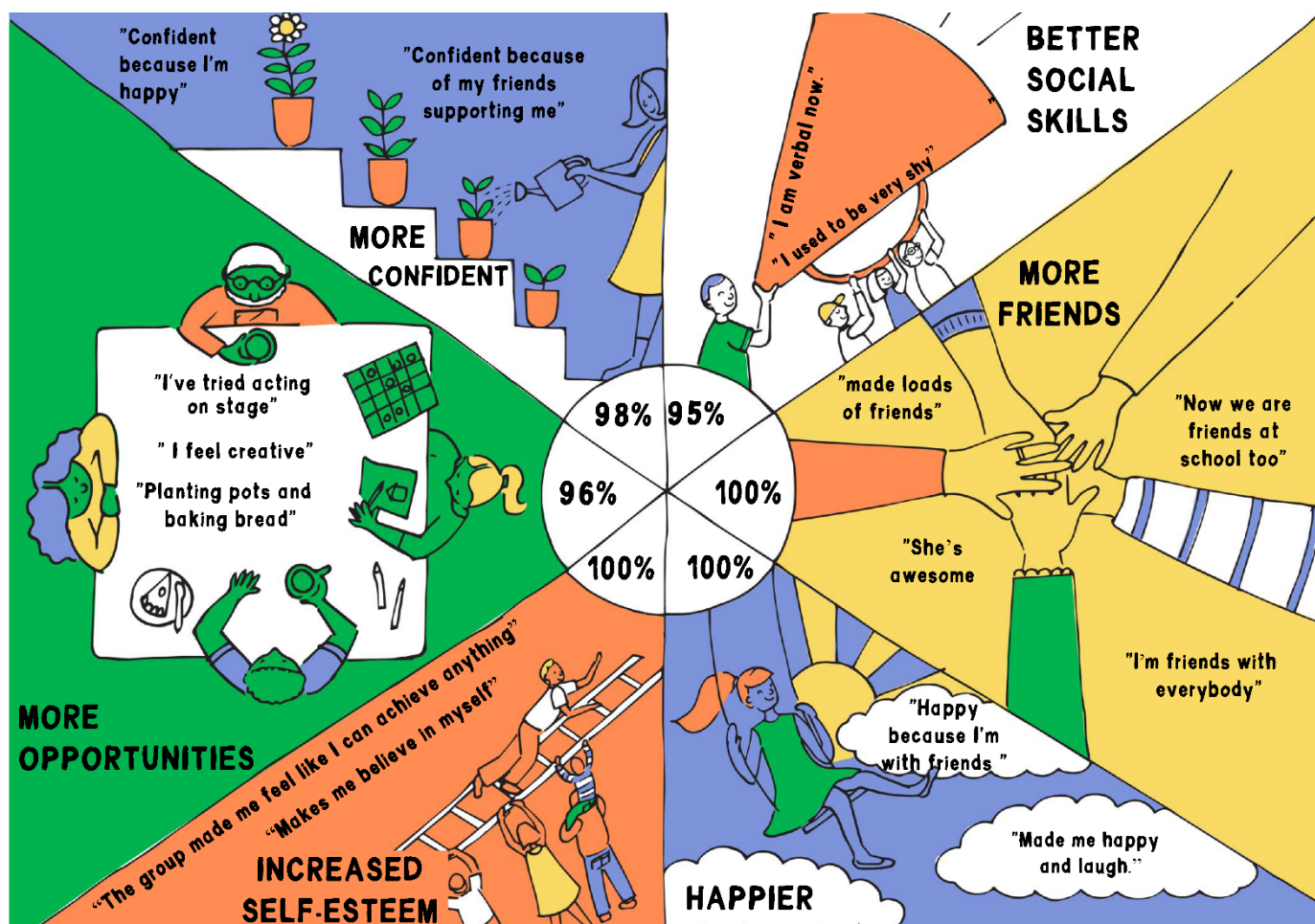
2026

Impact Report

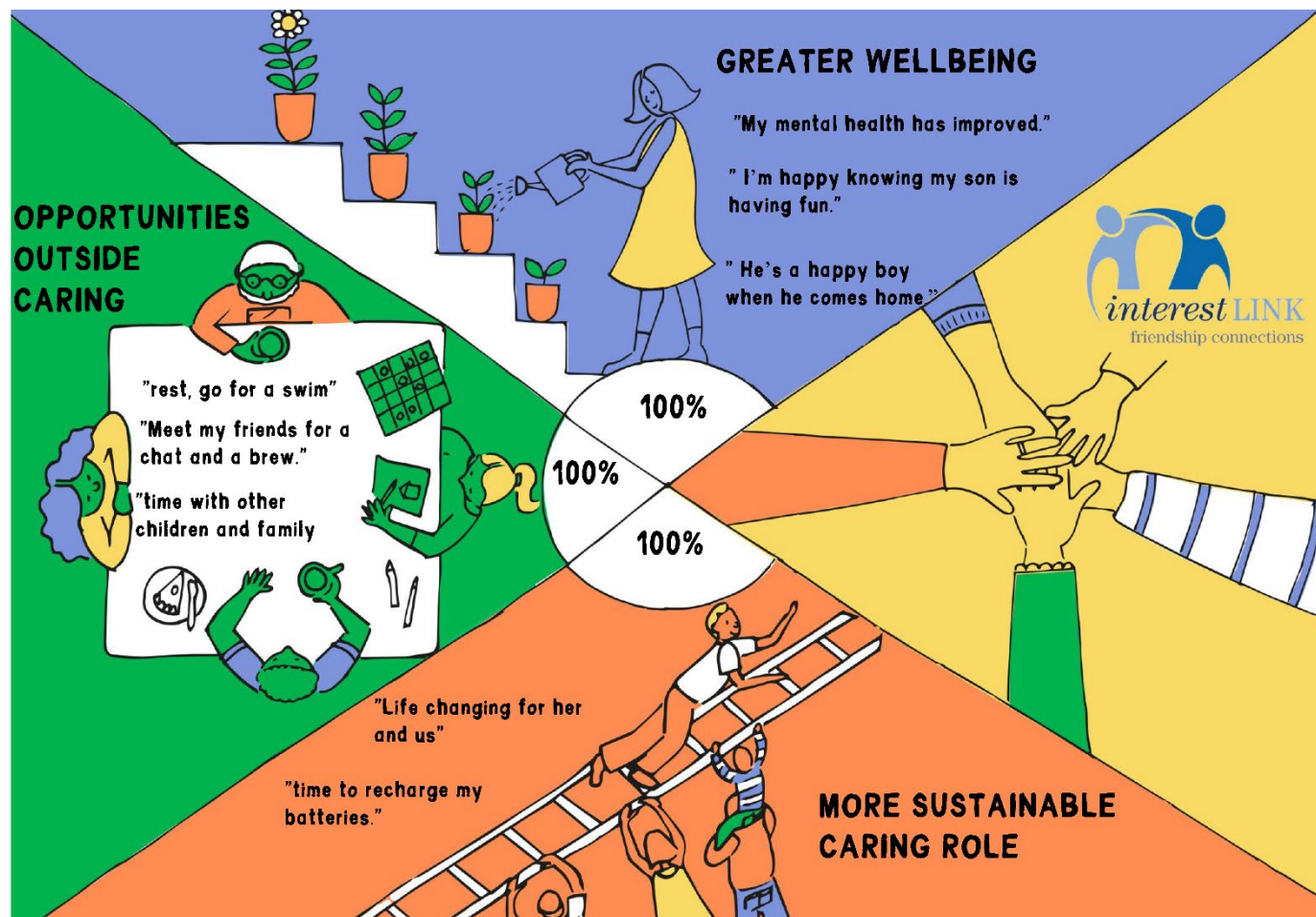
Children and Young People

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.

Children and Young People's Activities 2025-26

We are currently supporting 132 members with learning disabilities aged 8-25, through 189 places in 40 befriending groups (compared with 181 places in 35 groups last year). 1:1 links have reduced from 11 to 7, continuing the shift of focus towards groups. 39 members have both a 1:1 link and a group or are in two or more groups. 208 family carers enjoyed short break respite. Around 100 volunteer befrienders have been involved during the year.

Seven new groups including children and young people 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.
- Café Catch Up in Peebles and Pizza Club in Hawick: these are informal unstructured groups for older members of our youth groups, meeting fortnightly for general banter and chats about moving into adult life.
- 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.
- Tweeddale monthly intergenerational social events regularised previous occasional events.
- A youth cookery group is planned to start in Tweeddale in September 2026.

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

Highlights of the year included:

- Berwickshire overnight at [Whithaugh](#) Outdoor Centre in August 2025.
- Friendship Day in October 2025
- Youth Enterprise Art Auction November 2025,
- Drama Productions:
 - Roxburgh Children's Group Neon Cowboys, October 2025 (see [video](#) & [photoreport](#)).
 - Coldstream Cabaret Club with Borders Youth Theatre, Nov 2025 ([video](#) & [report](#)).
 - Central Borders Panto December 2025 ([photos](#))
 - Roxburgh Youth Summer Show, Diesel, in June 2026 ([video](#) and [report](#))
- 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 Children and Young People's 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			
	48%	40%	42%			
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%	98%	100%	95%
Reported by Carers	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Reported by Volunteers	100%		93%	90%	90%	93%
Impact on Family Carers	More Opportunities Outside Caring		Eased or More Sustainable Caring Role		Greater Wellbeing	
Reported by Themselves	100%		100%		100%	
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	92%		92%			
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			94%			
Safe & Professional Service					100%	

Links:

Survey Feedback:

[Member Feedback](#)

[Family Carer Feedback](#)

[Volunteer Feedback](#)

[Case Studies 2025-26](#)

[Fundors](#)

42% of members said they attend no other groups or social activities

Did you make friends?
New friends Poppy Laura.
I've made lots of friends and it feels nice
Amy and Emily H. I am friends with Shaun and Haiden too.
I have made loads of friends, see them in school.
I'm friend with Emily.
Abby Declan Sarah Craig Ryan Amazing group friendly staff and friends
I have made friends with Robbie and now we are friends at school too.
Making new friends, catch up and chat.
I have made friends with other people in the group
I've made friends with everybody.
Did you try new things?
Trying new things makes me want to keep at it and never give up.
Played new games. I do drama and crafts, making truffles.
I did try new things I love it.
We made Christmas cards. We had toasted marshmallows. We did line dancing, it was fun.
Planting pots and baking bread
I am a volunteer with school groups now. I used to be a member but being a volunteer has been new and I like it.
Eating marshmallows and playing badminton. Seeing the otter was good.
Meeting the giant frog last time. He peed everywhere!
Panto rehearsal
Panto and trips away and cinema lifeskills.
Did it make you feel happy?
Because of the group I am happy.
Sam makes me happy
The group made me feel happy from the very first time when I joined .
Made me happy and laugh and giggle
Very happy and want to come every time to the group
They are very welcoming and we laugh a lot.
Happy because I'm with friends.
It makes me happy at the group speaking to people and being friendly.
It's good and fun and I love everyone.
It makes me happy because I'm with friends and it fits my ability.
Are you more confident?
Yes I am more confident.
Talking with friends is confidence
Confident because I have my Interest Link friends
Yes because she make feel a lot more confident
Confident cos you're happy, I talk, friends, drama.

I am more confident because of the group.
I am confident because of my friends supporting me.
I am confident as I get people supporting me even when I feel nervous.
A lot more confidence with script lines
I am confident because of my friends supporting me.
Did it make you feel good about yourself?
The group made me feel like I can achieve anything.
Sharing news of me doing new thing
Yeah it makes me feel happy.
the group make me feel good about myself.
Makes me believe in myself a little better
makes me feel proud of myself for joining in and meeting people
I think I am a good friend.
It makes me feel like I can make friends and they make me happy.
I like having friends out of school. I like going somewhere where I can be myself.
The group made me feel like I can achieve anything.
Did you get better at talking to people?
Sam is fun & helps me so it is easier to talk with other people
Because I am happy talking to people.
I got better at talking to people because of the group.
I speak more to people at my school now.
I feel I can talk to people
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
I talk to people from the high school.
Being with the group who I know makes it easier for me to speak up for myself .
I can still be shy but am building confidence
There's a lot of people at the Group with shared interests, so it makes me more social. I enjoy talking to the people in the Group.

Do you and those you care for still need our service?
97% of respondents gave feedback, compared to an average of 68% for other questions
Because Interest Link gives Niamh a chance to meet friends
There is no other groups like this one in our area where my son is safe and he has made some good friends
There are no other local opportunities and it gives Billy the chance for independence
There are no other local groups that can support young people in this way, helping young people to meet people and form friendships.
My son loves it and gives us a bit time in our own. And gives him a little independence
To build new friendships and confidence whilst being safe
Need more events in local area .
Kacey loves it: its helped her after her kidney transplant
Because it helps Jade and she loves it
Few other local opportunities
There arent any other suitable options
Have we given you more opportunities to spend time with the rest of your family, see friends or do other activities?
Just have a little time to myself gardening or suchlike
I can spend time meeting my friends for a chat and a brew
Yes while my son at the group I meet a friend and we go a walk.
Yes it does. That time is a god send respite. It gives the rest of the family time to spend time together or catch up with friends.
Time to do the shopping and catch up with others
Gives me time to spend with other children and family.
I have got younger children too
Gives us time with our eldest daughter.
Have we eased your role as a carer, or made it more sustainable?
Gives me time to myself.
The group has greatly improved Ks confidence and social skills and has therefore eased our role as it helps us help him.
More sustainable as it frees up some time
Life changing for her and us.
I get an evening to myself It's nice to have a couple of hours free time of a night
Yes, it's lovely to have that little bit of time outwith school hours.
Gives me time to recharge my batteries
I know my son is safe whilst attending the group so that helps me to relax
Have we contributed to you or your family's happiness or general wellbeing?
My mental health has improved.
She is in a much better frame of mind and that makes us happy.
I'm happy knowing my son is having fun and socialising with others.
My son is always happy when he comes back after the group
I can plan a walk or visit friends
Having a happy and self confident young adult in the family affect the general wellbeing of everyone involved.

He's a happy boy when he comes home.
Yes my sons happy when he knows he has his group it's added to his routine board which he gets excited about.
Milo has really flourished since starting Interest Link, it's lovely for us all to see him enjoy something so much!
Our son loved the group and it gives him a sense of belonging
Have we successfully created a safe environment, enabling them to make friends and giving them new opportunities and experiences?
Danny enjoys each activity and spending time with the friends he made
It has been so important to Jake and taught him confidence and independence
I believe so my son happy always says he's had fun.
The space does feel like a safe environment and gives a chance to talk to others.
Group is good
Yes. Ivy has a great bond with the other people who attend.
Robbie has enjoyed a range of activities
He looks forward to the group and enjoys every activity
100%! Kate supervises the groups brilliantly and gives advice and supports the attendees when anything should arise
My son gets on with everyone at the group
Do they have more confidence and self-esteem?
Yes very happy
Able to be themselves and not be judged. To have fun.
Yes he has confidence as he asks to go
Jade has lost any shyness she had
Much more confident in general but also specifically when it comes to meeting others
Much more willing to join things Things she would be scared to she now just gets on with it So much more confident in trying new things
Emilee is getting a lot more confident around other people and Haylee is getting more confident in talking around other people
Seen a difference in my son he's happy and big smiles when he's had group.
Definitely. I see it when he comes home
Jade loves to have a blether with everyone
Are their social & communication skills better?
Yes I think so he's not as shy.
He is not as shy anymore
More communication skills, not fearing to approach people.
Always good to meet different people and do different things
Definitely thanks to Becca and Kate
Helped with socialising.
Hes definately better in social situations
She has selective mutism, but in her time with you she has become more vocal.
she's always been a social person, now there's no sopping her
Confident going along to the group by himself which hasn't been the case for any other activity
Is there anything else you want to tell us? For example other differences we have made, highlights of the past year or what we could do to improve our service.

Enjoys group of friends at Interest Link
The service has helped Jade so much gave her so much confidence it's amazing thank you all
Just keep going! It's as simple as that. Things like this are important for children who don't communicate or have many friends.
It's a great service with incredible staff , providing a happy and safe environment
It has made my son feel more comfortable and confident about himself and pretty learnt more stuff he didn't know about
Just wish was more for the kids
The service has been excellent. Kate is amazing and always has great activities for them and is very supportive.
Billy grown up a lot since joining . He is definitely evolved as a person and become more mature.
Only a big thank you to Becca! She is truly amazing & the kids are all lucky to know her!
Niamh loves the fish and chips night, she also enjoyed the cooking class, the evening at netherard and the archery
No improvements needed. Excellent service provided to our young people and Mary is such a wonderful gentle-hearted lady.
Mary made Robbie feel comfortable from our very first meeting. Everyone has been very encouraging and supportive of Robbie

Since you started volunteering, have you become more confident socialising with people with learning disabilities
I find it much easier to talk to most of them.
I used to be really quiet and scared to talk to people. Being here makes me feel more like myself.
Yes, but I make a note to myself not to generalise, and treat each person as their own unique selves.
Definitely and I feel more confident at helping, talking, socialising and getting involved.
Every year there's new people joining the Group. Each year brings new experiences/barriers.
I have noticed we have lots in common(pets) & we can have lot's of laughs
I love it seeing them happy & interactive with others & they can talk to the volunteers
Helps me understand them.
I understand the social struggles that people with Disabilities face
I feel more comfortable making friends with people with learning disabilities and understand them and the challenges they face better
Are you more aware of the barriers they face?
A huge impact on my confidence socialising with people with learning disabilities
The set up of the group allows everybody attending to grow
I love mixing and helping out with the group, they made me more confident whilst helping them becoming more confident
It's so much fun that you barely realise you are gaining confidence, but it develops just the same
I feel I have become more confident in socialising, and I understand the barriers that they face .
it's been beneficial to me learning new people and being more confident and understanding them and it's just been amazing
I have become more aware of the barriers they face daily and have become more confident socialising with them.
It has made me more confident in myself when interacting with people and knowing how to approach different situations and people.
It helps me understand the problems that have with everyday life.
Barriers continue to be a challenge: a lot of other services no longer available so Interest link is a vital service and organisation.
Have you made friends with the people with learning disabilities you have volunteered with?
A very nice Group great fun
I have made lots of friends, both volunteers and members
Everyone is very nice and when i see them outside of school they say Hi
I have had the pleasure of getting to know all of the members in this wonderful group. Lots of laughs are had and stories shared!
I've made friends with everyone at the group. Emily H and Lacey especially. It's fun to play with them.
I'm friends with Emily, Emilee and Haylee. I'm friends with everyone really.
it was very fun especially the crafts and going outside with the others - I'm glad I participated!
I liked meeting a lot of the people there because they were kind and funny
It is a fantastic atmosphere, everyone is so friendly. It has been great to get to chat with so many different people.
Yes, all the group members are really nice and easy to get along with.
Can you give examples of differences in their happiness, confidence, self-esteem and social skills?

Helping Anne talking to others is good for everyone.
everyone was happy everytime
the first week they were a bit shy and at the end they were kind
near the end they talked more to us
Emily H and Ivy are definitely more talkative than when I first met them.
they're more talkative to you since they now know you
one girl first seemed very shy and really didnt speak much but now she seems very talkative
It's great seeing the group members being able to order food confidently on their own.
Lacey and I were playing with a ball earlier and she never used to do that. It's easy to get along with all the members.
Many of the service users who used to be a lot quieter are now a lot more sociable.
Do you feel valued and supported by Interest Link and its staff?
Volunteering here at Abbey Row is lots of fun and I found out lots of great skills to have
because it was fun
It was all fun
Both staff and supported people are always so nice, friendly and excited when anyone shows up and says hello. Always such a joy!
I loved the staff, Interest Link and the others!
They are all fantastic!
I love Becca!
interest link staff are always very kind and supportive towards me
I feel fully supported by this amazing team. Both within my time volunteering and through their kindness outside of the service.
yes they always checked on us
Has volunteering with us met your hopes and expectations?
it was all amazing and fun
I always like meeting new people
I came here to work on my confidence and it's way better than before.
I think it is a lovely Group and when I organise the stone painting activity, it was great seeing everybody enjoy it.
I think it was great, thank you for letting me come.
I liked doing it and it has met hopes and expectations
It has far exceeded my expectations.
It's exceeded my expectations!
its been amazing to volunteer
Yes, I have had a good time volunteering with interest link and getting to know all the members.
Do you have any suggestions for improving our service as a whole or your volunteering experience?
Interest Link is lovely, I really enjoy volunteering here!
It is perfect as it is!
It was perfect
Interest Link is lovely, I really enjoy volunteering here!
It is perfect as it is!
It was perfect
Interest Link is lovely, I really enjoy volunteering here!
It is perfect as it is!

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 Abby 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 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).

With thanks to all our Funders in 2025-26

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