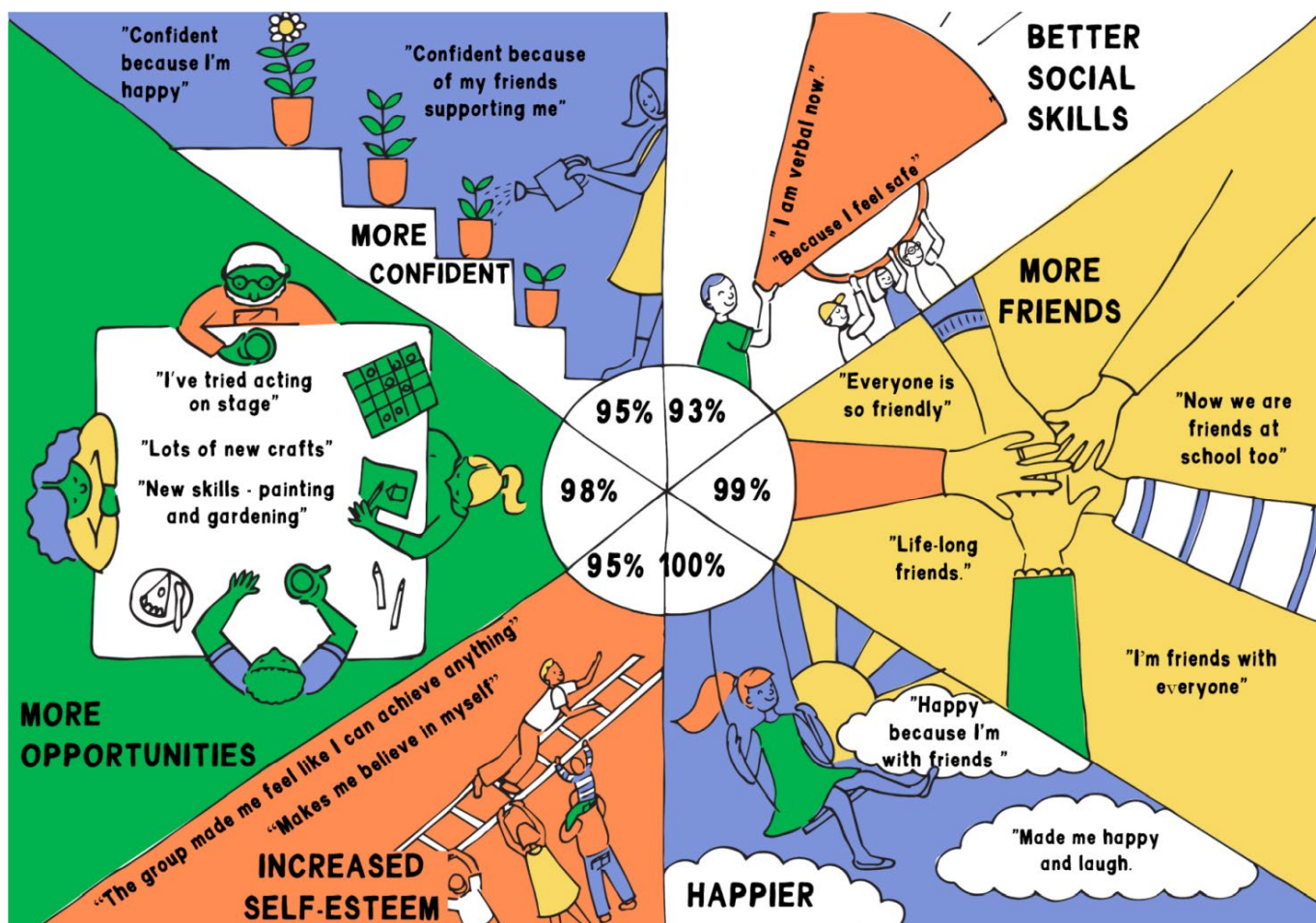




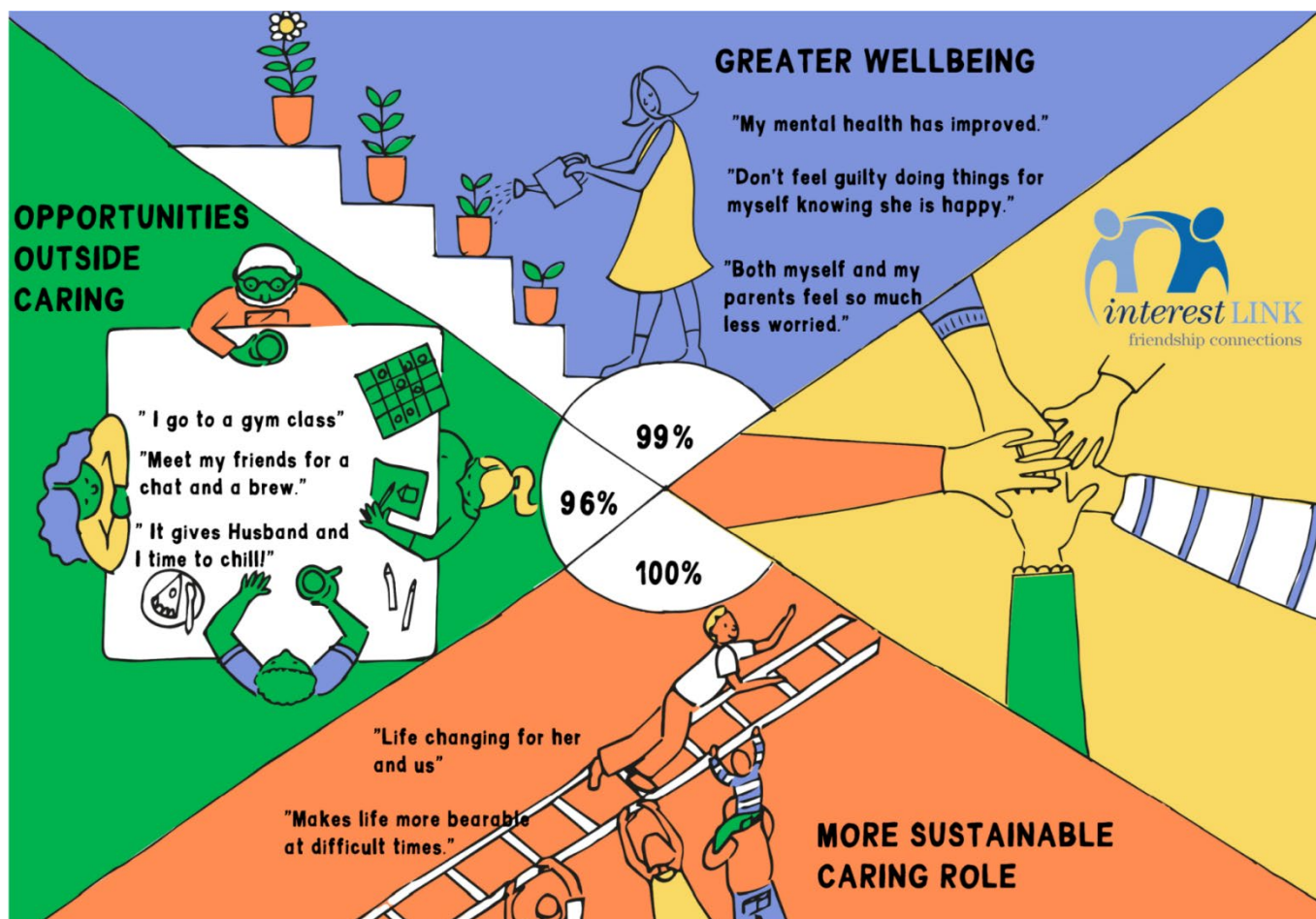
2026 Impact Report

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:



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.

Activities 2025-26

We are currently supporting 275 members with learning disabilities, up from 265 a year ago. We have 409 places in 49 befriending groups (compared with 335 in 41 groups last year). 1:1 links have reduced from 45 to 35, continuing the shift of focus towards groups. 150 members have both a 1:1 link and a group or are in two or more groups. 315 family carers enjoyed short break respite. 190 volunteer befrienders have been involved during the year.

Eight new groups 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.
- Cookery in Peebles in partnership with the Food Foundation: this used 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 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 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			
	53%	49%	59%			
Main Outcomes:						
Impact on Members	More Friends	More opportunities	Greater Happiness	Improved Confidence	Increased Self-esteem	Better Social Skills
Reported by Themselves	99%	95%	100%	96%	99%	93%
Reported by Carers	100%	100%	99%	100%	100%	99%
Reported by Volunteers	99%		97%	95%	95%	97%
Impact on Family Carers	More Opportunities Outside Caring		Eased or More Sustainable Caring Role		Greater Wellbeing	
Reported by Themselves	96%		100%		99%	
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	95%		95%			
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			97%			
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?
We all have lots of friends at the groups.
Also catch up with old friends
Life-long 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 Robbie and now we are friends at school too.
Everyone was so friendly
She is the most kindest and understanding person I could ever ask for
I have made loads of friends, see them in school.
Ever since I have joined this fantastic group I have made friends for who I will cherish for ever.
I've made lots of friends and it feels nice
Did you try new things?
I try things I would worry about like the Kiltwalk.
Eating marshmallows and playing badminton. Seeing the otter was good.
enjoy the singing sessions the most
I feel creative in the craft group and I like growing in the garden groups at the allotment
I have tried new things and I am going to try a big thing when staying away from home at Netherurd.
I've tried acting on the stage as I previously helped with props
I've tried new things at the allotment group and at art.
Lots of new foods and cooking skills
The pizza escape room was new. I like it when we have barbecues and games: badminton, chess and card games.
Things like playing in the tent at Wild Woods, and roasting the marshmallows.
Did it make you feel happy?
Always enjoy attending the group
Because of the group I am happy.
When it's time to meet the group I am always smiling and love to talk to other members.
I am very happy attending Rosa's groups. They are fun and I feel safe.
It makes me happy because I'm with friends and it fits my ability.
It's good and fun and I love everyone.
Made me happy and laugh and giggle
The group made me feel happy from the very first time when I joined .
They all made me feel welcome when I was new
Very happy and it makes me feel included
Are you more confident or can you do things more easily?
Confident because I have my Interest Link friends
I am confident as I get people supporting me even when I feel nervous.
I am more confident although I have struggled with my mental health. But the group helps me with this also.
I am not scared of asking if I forgot something
I can do now do things that I could never do when I first joined.

I feel I can share my views and news
I speak out now and say what I think and would like when doing drama
When i first came I was shy and not chatty but now I am fine and look forward to the groups
Volunteer makes me feel a lot more confident
Yes: practicing skills, getting better
Did it make you feel good about yourself?
Enjoy activities with friends. Supports my independence.
Everything to do with Pat make me feel good about myself.
Helped my anxiety and mental health
I now perform on stage. People come to see me on stage!
I'm proud when I made the plant pots
It makes me feel like I can make friends and they make me happy.
Makes me believe in myself a little better
Makes me feel great that people come to see me in the panto
Proud of the food I make
The group made me feel like I can achieve anything.
Did you get better at talking to people?
I am better at speaking to people I don't know.
I can still be shy but am building confidence
I am verbal now.
I feel I can talk to anyone and I feel listened to and before I didn't feel that way
I feel more confident in asking at shops and at home for things I need or want.
I speak more to people at my school now.
Very much better! I now talk better in the bank, shops etc
I talk to people from the high school.
We talk to each other about our week.
Yes, because I feel safe in these settings.
I am better at speaking to people I don't know that well or at all.
I can still be shy but am building confidence

Do you and those you care for still need our service? 96% of respondents gave feedback, compared to an average of 65% for other questions
As it's the only opportunity that my son can attend and he gets a lot from it.
He is normally anti-social but has made friends here.
Interest Link gives Jade her only time away from family!
Only consistent adult service/resource and massively positive impact on our household.
Interest Link is the only meaningful social contact my daughter has with her peers.
It offers wonderful opportunity for social interaction with a fabulous group.
It is the one thing she will go to without mum!
It's local and a vital service for young adults with disabilities to get out and socialise.
The only activity our son can attend independently without us and he really enjoys it.
It's a lovely little group with children just like her. It's not overwhelming like other clubs.
No groups like Interest Link with regular and consistent commitment to young adults
Have we given you more opportunities to spend time with the rest of your family, see friends or do other activities?
Allows us as parents a little respite which is very limited
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.
Spend time meeting my friends for a chat and a brew
My husband and I enjoy a walk and a meal.
I go to a gym class while she attends Tuesday evening groups.
I have four sons and having Billy away allows me to spend time with the others
I'm able to meet friends for a chat and a chance to catch up.
Shopping, reading, having a moment to myself. Its wonderful because we know Calum in a safe and secure place.
Have we eased your role as a carer, or made it more sustainable?
Can relax knowing he is safe within the group
Gives me time to recharge my batteries
I know my son is safe whilst attending the group so that helps me to relax
It is lovely knowing Milo has somewhere he looks forward to going, is understood and just feels he fits!
It's helped me let go a bit of where my girls can go and who with.
My son is a lot happier not being stuck with his parents
My son can wander off but he does not whilst at the group so I am able to relax a little
The group has greatly improved Ks confidence and social skills and eased our role.
Without Interest Link Jake would need more mental health care than he currently does.
Have we contributed to you or your family's happiness or general wellbeing?
I feel so much less worried as Sian is so much happier and more confident.
Don't feel guilty doing things for myself knowing she is happy.
Makes life more bearable at difficult times.
Gemma is always happy when she comes home from the group. Makes us happy too!
He's a happy boy when he comes home.
Less meltdowns as he can regulate better meaning everyone else is more at ease.

My mental health has improved.
She is in a much better frame of mind and that makes us happy.
We feel so much better being part of the Interest Link community. Before we were isolated as a family.
Yes in so many ways. The girls were raving about their last session and they got to see all these animals and the baby otter.
Have we successfully created a safe environment, enabling them to make friends and giving them new opportunities and experiences?
Kate supervises the groups brilliantly and supports when anything should arise
They are also acknowledged on arrival and nothing escapes Stefanie's attention.
Alexander has made a lot of friends: Angela always coming up with new ideas.
ABSOLUTELY! Something for Lacey that's not school or family to try different things.
It has been great to see my sister grow in confidence and make new friends.
Joe has friends he meets for coffees... this is a huge positive, missing for numerous years.
It is usually difficult to get her to try new things but though she worries she will do them with the group.
Always risk assessed and safe and welcoming and inclusive.
Such kind people - Mary, Rosa and the volunteers. Great patience and understanding of SEN needs.
Very safe environment, when out on trips, very well organised, every detail thought of.
Do they have more confidence and self-esteem?
Alistair was bullied and had no confidence, Interest Link has given him self-esteem
Being able to get time away from parents is a big help.
Much more confident in general but specifically when it comes to meeting others
Everyone attending is equal and they really enjoy the social interaction.
He has learnt so much and really come out his shell and has great confidence.
He wouldn't be where he is now without interest link
Joes mental health was very wobbly and it has been a journey to the confident & self-assured person he is now.
Always willing to try new things knowing that she is supported by her peers.
Lots more confidence through starring in pantos, cook- alongs, outings.
Able to be themselves and not be judged. To have fun.
Are their social & communication skills better?
Joe feels safe & respected: he feels empowered to contribute, negotiate and lead!
Better at listening and waiting their turn to speak
Communication much better. They look and feel more confident.
He is not as shy anymore.
Helpers at club understand her and have learned to sign!!!
It's helping mental health problems and realising the whole world isn't a scary place.
Alexander has a better understanding of how to behave in a group environment.
She is more confident talking in groups and sharing her experiences.
She has selective mutism, but in her time with you she has become more vocal.
Much better over the last year: Even when out in the town she speaks to many more people.
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.
Faye has a special diet too and we don't have to worry as all catered for! So we have confidence to let her attend!!

my young person has grown through the years with life skills, safe environments in which to grow and flourish into confident individuals.
I am so happy with the way things have gone. It's been great.
I can only say thank you for all the hard work that Val and her team put in to enable my son to attend he is happy. Fantastic cannot fault anything great support and care and the shows and pantomimes that are put on are brilliant and a lot of work goes into all this
You are always planning new challenges and the constant refresh really helps feelings of achievement and enjoyment for my sister.
I would like to see Interest Link address some of the challenges young people with LD face, eg social media and technology, dealing with challenging people and other problem solving.
Interest link has given us so much more to look forward to and she would not otherwise have any of the things she has done.
It's a great service with incredible staff, providing a happy and safe environment
We as parents also attend a Parents Craft Group where we meet other parents and carers.
The Kiltwalk was amazing to see all those people finish across the line with proudness and achievement.
The staff and volunteers positively encourage relationships, skills and young people to believe in themselves and what they can achieve. Keep being awesome!
Incredible opportunities and brilliant and creative projects have given her a voice to share her ideas and also her experience of being visually impaired in a way that nothing else has. There is simply nothing else like this group in the area, or the wider country that I am aware of.
Faye has a special diet too and we don't have to worry as all catered for! So we have confidence to let her attend!!
my young person has grown through the years with life skills, safe environments in which to grow and flourish into confident individuals.
I am so happy with the way things have gone. It's been great.

Since you started volunteering, have you become more confident socialising with people with learning disabilities
I feel quite at ease with people with learning disabilities now, not just those within the group but those in everyday life.
Definitely feel more confident at helping, talking, socialising and getting involved.
A huge impact on my confidence socialising with people with learning disabilities
I've definitely become more confident
It's so much fun that you barely realise you are gaining confidence, but it develops just the same
I feel more comfortable making friends with people with learning disabilities
I love mixing and helping out with the group, they made me more confident whilst helping them becoming more confident.
It has greatly helped me with socialising with people with learning disabilities
I feel I have become more confident in socialising.
It's been beneficial to me learning new people and being more confident and understanding them and it's just been amazing
Are you more aware of the barriers they face?
I am aware of the barriers members face especially as they grow up and leave compulsory education.
Volunteering at Interest Link has helped me to understand the ASN kids at my work better.
I understand them and the challenges they face better
I've found this experience so helpful in understanding the individuality of disability.
I'm aware of the challenges our members face
I now understand the social struggles that people with Disabilities face
It helps me understand the problems that have with everyday life.
I'm definitely more aware of challenges people with learning disabilities face.
Barriers continue to be a challenge: a lot of other services no longer available so Interest link is a vital service and organisation.
Learning curve although I focus on the individuals rather than the disability
Have you made friends with the people with learning disabilities you have volunteered with?
I have built up a lovely special friendship with my young lady who I volunteer with.
Yes: we meet sometimes when not in group
I've made friends with everyone at the group. Emily H and Lacey especially. It's fun to play with them.
It has been great to make so many friends through Interest Link.
A very friendly and welcoming Group.
Everyone is very nice and when i see them outside of school they say Hi
I have made lots of friends, both volunteers and members
Friendship is amazing and everyone is valued. Everyone respects one another and feels like a family.
I have made quite a few friends since doing my volunteering work and I hope they are for life.
My member is a true friend and only leaves the house with me - no one else!
Can you give examples of differences in their happiness, confidence, self-esteem and social skills?
The atmosphere is so relaxed and the laughter shows how much enjoyment there is.
Many of the service users who used to be a lot quieter are now a lot more sociable.
Members share and take turns more easily when playing games.
Emily H and Ivy are definitely more talkative than when I first met them.

I've seen the people we support really come out of their shell and interact with people.
I am recognised and warmly greeted by members in shops or on the street.
Kenzie has certainly come out of his shell since he first started.
Some members weren't confident to even say lines and now they are acting them!
One person was very shy but now chats to everyone and has lots more confidence.
A couple never joined in and now they really are enthusiastic.
Do you feel valued and supported by Interest Link and its staff?
All the staff are so supportive and show such an interest in my life and well being.
The staff are incredibly supportive and make the sessions welcoming and engaging.
They look out for my mental and like to check up on me and make sure that I am okay.
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 outside of the service.
I have received lots of valuable feedback from Mary and Rosa which gives my self-esteem a huge boost.
The staff are all amazing: I always feel valued we are all like a big family
Angela is fab, she appreciates us helpers so much and tells us often.
It's amazing: Becca makes this place feel like home and is so welcoming to everyone.
I've had valuable support from Mary when I found the volunteering challenging.
Has volunteering with us met your hopes and expectations?
It has exceeded them. I look forward to the sessions every week.
It's gone above and beyond my expectations, it has helped me to understand people better, and to make friends: I really enjoy volunteering
Yes 100% Interest Link is amazing my expectations and hopes have all been met.
I love the art groups and the wonderful ideas Angela has. The walks too are amazing. Seen lots of new places.
I came here to work on my confidence and it's way better than before.
And exceeded them, it's great to have seen the development over the past couple years and seeing how much more confident and how much fun they're still having.
I have learned loads from the experience and can't wait to learn more
In ways I didn't imagine. I thought I was the one helping but it turns out that works both ways and I missed the group when I was absent.
It has honestly been so much better than I thought it would and I find it has become a highlight of my week
I've loved every minute of my ten years with Interest Link and I am honoured to be a part of a wonderful team .
Do you have any suggestions for improving our service as a whole or your volunteering experience?
I have given Rosa ideas over the last year most of which have been implemented.
It is as perfect as it is!
More celebratory activities where members can meet more people such as afternoon teas with games.
More social activities similar to the annual friendship day.
Volunteering here is lots of fun and I find out lots of good skills to have. everyone is very lovely and talkative.
More walks would be nice.
What about some Tai Chi lessons!? I think it's great to get people from outside organisations to come and lead the group as they can bring skills we volunteers don't have.
Interest Link has grown a lot since I became involved. You must be doing something right so carry on doing what you're doing!
I would like to have the first aid training more locally to me.

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.
Lots of activities and days out and fun nights that have been thought through thoroughly for my service user.
Service users always feel safe and included. The activities always vary which provide great stimulation and interest.
The Art and Gardening Groups that I have been to are great and run very professionally.
The group is always well supervised and allowed to work in a safe manner
Very safe environment in venues and out in community.
Do you think we provide needed opportunities that fill a gap in existing provision for our members with learning disabilities and their families?
A very much needed activities group.
Yes, and new project in the school will extend and develop further opportunities.
Heart of Hawick is used for the annual play, an opportunity members would not find elsewhere locally.
There are not a lot of groups out there for vulnerable adults, so Interest Link plays a vital part by providing amazing groups.
There are so few social groups for people with learning disabilities. Interest Link is a life line for lots of people.
There is a huge shortage of provision in the region and I think 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.
Yes, not very many groups like this in the area.
With all the cut backs in Council funding it is a vital role that you offer residents.
Can you give examples of differences in members' happiness, confidence, self-esteem and social skills?
Always happy to see friends at groups, interacts in all activities where possible.
Member laughs all through her time at group. Engages with other members of group.
Mixing with the mainstream children enhances all of the above.
Individual I support really enjoys all the activities and loves being part of a social group.
Our service user knows when we are coming to groups and despite her not being able to verbally communicate she lets us know how happy she is by laughing and smiling.
Person I support is so happy when he is at the group. His confidence has really grown.
My client's confidence has increased massively since joining the group. This has impacted on her life at home and this year she is becoming more independent, cooking, housework, shopping etc.
More confident in interactions with people they don't know so much.
Do you have any other feedback or suggestions for improvements?
I can only comment on what I see when the group are in the hall , hopefully this is ok .
I don't know how this could be improved! Rosa goes over and above to provide a safe, professional and most importantly a fun environment.

Our students give positive feedback about their experiences, specifically 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.
Interest Link is a great group. They provide so much for people who have a disability. Highly recommend them to people who ask what may be available.
Just keep up the good work ... the newsgroup has given the man supported a new lease of life
Keep up the fabulous work
More of the same!! you all are invaluable and provide wonderful opportunities for our residents
Thank you for the work you guys do!
The activities planned are amazing for these young people. Rosa is fantastic :-)
The group is run so well with lots of extra outings/activities. I can't see how it could be improved.
The groups work perfectly as they are. I honestly don't think they could be any better.

Selected Feedback: Tutors

[Top](#)

Do you feel valued and supported by Interest Link and its staff and volunteers?
Very much so. Angela is amazing and very supporting for us all
The Staff are so positive and full of ideas
Very much so, staff and volunteers were very warm, welcoming and keen to support the activities
I always feel supported by both staff and volunteers at Interest Link.
All help is provided to make the class successful. Myself and Rosa are in regular communication to guarantee all members have an enjoyable experience.
I feel that 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 to communicate and complete tasks. I feel able to talk through challenges that come up and ask for help.
Always. The staff and volunteers are so helpful, enthusiastic, and always willing to get involved therefore creating a really inclusive atmosphere.

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!"

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."

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."

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.'

Marion is 30 years old and has a learning disability and cerebral palsy. Marion currently lives with her Gran and Grandad and has been supported by them for many years. Marion's grandparents are in their 80's and Marion has become more isolated, with no opportunities to meet up with people of similar age.

Marion is a keen baker in our Online Baking Group and has also joined the News Group: Marion has enjoyed the company of other members who are of similar age, and she now travels with them to the group. Marion has been inspired to learn to write articles, carry out interviews and discuss subjects that she is familiar with such as local bus services in her area. Marion is also passionate about local festivals and is looking forward to creating her own stories with support.

Gran is extremely happy with the outcome and now looks forward to hearing how she gets on when she returns from Newshounds. Gran is currently supporting Marion to apply to the Housing Association to find her own place and to live independently. They know they will not be around for ever and want so desperately to know Marion is safe, independent, confident and happy and has access to new friends.

Marion's Gran Margaret: "Thank you for your time and effort to support Marion to find new friends. It gives Marion time with her peers and opportunities to try new experiences instead of being stuck in the house with no one her own age or friends this is really making a difference already: after COVID there just didn't seem as though there was anywhere for her to go and now she does, she is definitely much happier. Knowing Marion is enjoying herself among friends I can relax while she is there and she always comes home with a big beaming smile which is great."

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).

Jean is 31 years old and has DiGeorge Syndrome. She lives independently but her parents are very supportive. Jean first registered with us in 2014, when she was linked one-to-one for a time. In 2022 Jean joined Make That, our craft and chat group. She was quite shy when she first joined but has become more confident and chats more now. This year Jean also joined Green Wanderers our gardening and outdoors group, and has enjoyed gardening, fruit picking and making herb sachets. Jean also attends the Tweeddale social events including our Autumn Ball, summer trips and games evenings. She did the The Edinburgh Kiltwalk with other members to raise funds for Interest Link, and has used this as an opportunity to get fitter and now walks regularly.

Jean says, 'I love the happy friendly atmosphere at the groups and I look forward to going. I like to meet up with people that I am familiar with so I can be relaxed to have a chat with them. I manage to have conversations with people whereas before I would just go quiet and be embarrassed. I can now start a conversation off with someone outside the group where I couldn't do that before.'

Jean's support worker said, 'Jean is so much more confident in herself. She initiates conversations with people which she wouldn't do before and tries new tasks at home now without the hesitation she had before.' Her dad says 'Jean's involvement in the activities is a great help to her life and confidence.'

Cameron is 34 years old and has learning disabilities and lives at home with his mum. Cameron joined Motivators, our Wednesday evening social group in 2017, where he enjoys a variety of activities including games nights, food and music sessions, meals and evenings out.

In 2022 Cameron also joined Green Wanderers our gardening and outdoors group, which gives him the chance to enjoy a variety of activities outside in the Community Garden and to go on group trips. This year this has included a trip to Kailzie Gardens, Birkhill House to meet the alpacas and Border Berries.

Cameron gets on well with everyone in the groups and has become good friends with the other groups members. He is chatty, cheerful, fun, sociable and always arrives at group sessions with a big smile. Cameron is always up for a new challenge and has now completed the 'Wee Wander Challenge' at the Edinburgh Kiltwalk two years on the run, to help raise funds for Interest Link.

Cameron always attends our social events with his family if he can, and these provide another opportunity for him to meet up with his friends and to have fun. These events have included our beetle drives, bingo nights, quizzes and potluck suppers, sing-alongs, treasure hunts, our annual St Andrew's Day meal and ceilidh, and last year Cameron and his family played a big part in helping us to arrange our first ever Autumn Ball.

Cameron says the groups make him feel happy and he is more confident because of the groups. His mum says, 'Cameron enjoys his groups and is so excited to attend. He feels safe at the groups. The groups give us some time apart from each other to do our own things and then we are able to tell each other about our day. I can go and do things for myself when Cameron is at the groups and I don't need to worry.'

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