



Beyond Befriending

Understanding the difference Interest Link makes - Research and evaluation of what changes in people's lives, how that happens, and what the evidence can tell us about how the service should develop.

Prepared by Understand Learning for Interest Link Borders October 2026.

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About this research

Interest Link already knows a great deal about what members and families think of its services. Its annual surveys consistently show very high levels of satisfaction. Members tell Interest Link that they make friends, try new things, feel happier and more confident, and get better at talking to people.

This research asked something slightly different. Rather than asking “Does Interest Link work?”, we wanted to understand more about what difference it makes, how that happens, and what the evidence can tell us about how the service should develop.

We looked at five questions:

1. Does it make a difference whether support comes mainly from Personal Assistants or volunteers?
2. What happens in members’ lives outside Interest Link?
3. What do groups and 1:1 befriending each offer?
4. What might members’ and families’ lives look like without Interest Link?
5. What role does Interest Link play as young people move into adulthood?

We are asking - “What difference does Interest Link make to people’s lives, how does that happen, and what can the evidence tell us about how the service should develop?”

What the evidence can - and can't - tell us

This report is a secondary analysis of information Interest Link had already collected. It draws on member and carer surveys, group and 1:1 feedback, service reports and service records from 2017 to 2026. The sources were created for different purposes, so not every question is available or directly comparable in every year.

Unless we explicitly say otherwise, figures describe survey responses rather than unique members. Some people responded in more than one year and some use more than one element of Interest Link’s support. The findings therefore describe the people who responded; they should not automatically be treated as estimates for every member. Historic response rates are used where they are available and reliable, but we have not reconstructed them where the original records do not support that.

We have used the evidence to identify reported experiences, recurring patterns and plausible ways in which Interest Link may contribute to change. It cannot isolate Interest Link from everything else happening in a person's life, and it cannot prove what would have happened without the service. Where survey wording or denominators differ, we say so and interpret comparisons cautiously.

We reviewed comments across the available surveys for recurring themes. Quotations illustrate those themes; they are not measures of how common an experience was. Names and unnecessary identifying details have been removed. Where we refer to a 'usable answer', we mean a response that answered the specific question clearly enough to classify for that analysis. The 2026 member-to-database linkage was rechecked against the corrected file supplied by Interest Link on 30 September 2026 before finalising this report.

We started with what Interest Link already knows. Rather than asking members and families to complete another survey, we looked again at the information Interest Link has collected over several years. This included annual member and carer surveys, group and 1:1 feedback, service reports, information about the groups members attend and other records provided by Interest Link.

For some questions, we could compare answers from different parts of the service. For others, we could follow what the same members had told Interest Link over several years and see how their lives and experiences changed.

We also looked beyond the percentages. When almost everybody answers “yes” to questions such as “Have you made friends?” or “Are you happy?”, that tells us something important: members value the service. But it doesn’t necessarily tell us why, or whether different parts of Interest Link make a difference in different ways.

Members’ and carers’ own words have therefore been just as important as the numbers. Throughout this report, we show the evidence behind what we found and, where the evidence doesn’t allow us to be certain, we say so.

1. Does it make a difference whether support comes mainly from Personal Assistants or volunteers?

What we wanted to know

Interest Link’s befriending model is based on friendship and support from volunteers of a similar age to its members.

Some newer adult daytime groups use a different approach. Most of the support comes from members’ paid Personal Assistants, funded through Self-Directed Support, with only one or two volunteers involved.

This approach helps members with higher personal care needs take part. It also addresses the shortage of daytime volunteers and creates opportunities for members and their Personal Assistants in rural areas where activities can be limited.

Personal Assistants are already members of the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) scheme. They receive an introduction to the group and are encouraged to take an active part in activities.

Interest Link reports that this approach works well in practice. But does it make a difference to members’ experiences? That’s what we wanted to explore. In particular, we looked at whether members were still making friends, enjoying themselves, building confidence, trying new things and feeling part of the group.

How we looked at it

Interest Link identified eight groups where most of the direct support comes from paid supporters. We linked the anonymous 2026 survey responses to information about the groups members attend.

The corrected linkage identified 30 group-survey responses from members attending at least one of these mainly paid-supported groups and 66 other group-survey responses. We compared what the two sets of responses told us and then looked more closely at the comments.

There is one important limitation. Twenty-seven of the 30 respondents also attend other Interest Link groups, so the survey cannot isolate the effect of paid support or tell us which group each person had in mind. Only three respondents attended mainly paid-supported provision without also attending another Interest Link group, which is too few for a separate comparison.

What we found

The experience remains very positive

Members attending mainly paid-supported groups continue to report very positive experiences. That is reassuring, but it is not a test of the effect of paid support itself.

Members said the group had helped them to...	Mainly paid-supported	Other groups
Make friends	29/30 (97%)	66/66 (100%)
Try new things	30/30 (100%)	62/65 (95%)
Feel happy	30/30 (100%)	66/66 (100%)

Feel more confident	29/30 (97%)	63/65 (97%)
Feel good about themselves	30/30 (100%)	65/65 (100%)
Get better at talking to people	27/30 (90%)	61/63 (97%)

The small differences go in both directions and are not meaningful evidence that one model produces a better experience than another. The groups differ in their activities, timing and member mix, and most respondents also attend other Interest Link provision. The comments help us understand what sits behind the numbers. Members attending mainly paid-supported groups still talk about friends, laughter, feeling welcome, feeling safe and enjoying being with other people. These accounts show that friendship and belonging remain prominent in their experience; they do not tell us whether the staffing model caused that experience.

Some groups may make different things possible

There is another strand running through some of the mainly paid-supported groups. Members talk about cooking new dishes, developing practical skills, gardening, art, exercise, trying unfamiliar activities and becoming more independent.

All 30 respondents attending a mainly paid-supported group said they had tried new things. The difference from other group responses is small and should not be treated as a paid supporter effect. More useful is the pattern in the comments: some of these groups combine the social side of Interest Link with structured opportunities to learn, practise and develop skills.

We need to be careful about why any difference exists. In the corrected linkage, respondents attending mainly paid-supported groups had an average database age of about 36. Seven of the eight groups run during the day, and the activities themselves are different. Age, life stage, activity, support needs and member choice may all matter, so we cannot attribute the pattern to paid supporters.

What it means

Members who attend mainly paid-supported groups report the same kinds of very positive experience seen across Interest Link. Because 27 of the 30 also attend other Interest Link groups, the evidence cannot tell us what effect paid support itself has.

What the comments do suggest is that some mainly paid-supported groups combine the social side of Interest Link with structured opportunities to learn, practise, try something new and become more independent. We cannot say that paid support causes this; programme design and the members using the groups may matter just as much.

That suggests the important question for Interest Link may not simply be whether support comes from a paid supporter or a volunteer. It may be:

“What are we trying to make possible for this member, and what kind of support will help them do it?”

2. What happens in members' lives outside Interest Link?

What we wanted to know

Interest Link's surveys consistently show that members make friends, try new things and become more confident. We wanted to know what happens beyond the service itself.

Do members use that confidence, those friendships or those skills at home, at school, in shops, on public transport, in other activities or elsewhere in their lives? In other words, does anything change when Interest Link isn't there?

How we looked at it

For this question, one year's survey wasn't enough. We looked across surveys from 2017 to 2026 and, where possible, followed what the same members told Interest Link at different points in time.

We were also careful about what counted as evidence of change. Someone telling us "I go to Zumba" tells us something about their wider life, but it doesn't tell us that Interest Link made a difference. Someone saying, "I can talk to people in the general public and my Zumba class which I had difficulty doing before," tells us much more.

What we found

Confidence becomes something people use

Members describe becoming more able to start conversations, speak to unfamiliar people, ask for things in shops, participate at school and join other activities. One young member said, "I speak more to people at my school now," while another member said, "Very much better! I now talk better in the bank, shops etc."

These examples matter because confidence isn't just being reported as a feeling. Members are describing things they can now do in everyday life that they previously found difficult.

Independence becomes practical

We found examples of members travelling independently, using buses and trains, shopping, cooking at home, doing things without parents and taking greater responsibility for everyday tasks.

Because some members have completed surveys over several years, we can sometimes see that change developing. One member's earlier responses describe trying things with support and becoming more confident away from their parents. Later responses describe independent bus travel and, by 2026:

"Got the bus to Edinburgh by myself to meet a friend..."

This is particularly useful evidence because we aren't simply asking someone whether they have become more independent. We can see the change appearing in what the same person tells Interest Link over time.

Friendships can leave the group too

Some friendships made through Interest Link continue elsewhere. Members describe meeting friends for coffee, going to the cinema and seeing friends made through Interest Link at school.

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

"I have made friends with another member and now we are friends at school too."

For some members, Interest Link provides the place where a friendship starts rather than the boundary within which it has to stay.

Sometimes it opens another door

We also found examples of members joining other activities, volunteering and taking on new roles. One particularly striking example comes from a member who now volunteers with Interest Link:

"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."

Other members describe joining another group, using skills elsewhere or becoming more comfortable dealing with people they don't know. These examples don't mean that Interest Link is responsible for everything that happens next, but they show that it can be part of a journey into a wider life.

Different people change in different ways

Not every member's story leads towards independent travel, employment or volunteering, and we shouldn't expect it to. For some people, the important difference is having a trusted friend, getting out of the house, spending time away from family, feeling safe with other people or having a social life they wouldn't otherwise have.

A member continuing to meet a befriender for coffee or lunch isn't a lesser outcome simply because it doesn't lead to something else. The evidence doesn't support a single idea of progress where greater independence is always the goal; members have different starting points, different needs and different things that matter to them.

What it means

Interest Link does not just give people somewhere to go. Some members describe changes in what they feel able and confident to do when Interest Link is not there, and some accounts link these changes to their experience with Interest Link.

We found examples of confidence being used at school, in shops, with unfamiliar people and in other activities. Some members become more independent in everyday life or travel, some friendships continue outside Interest Link, and for others the experience helps open the door to another activity, volunteering or a new role.

Looking at what the same members told Interest Link over several years suggests that these changes can build gradually. But greater independence isn't the only successful outcome: a lasting friendship, a safe social life or being able to spend time away from family can matter just as much.

"Confidence matters most when you can use it somewhere else."

3. What do groups and 1:1 befriending each offer?

What we wanted to know

Interest Link has changed over time. Service records show fewer 1:1 links alongside more groups and greater group capacity. Interest Link reports this as a long-term trend over the last decade. This reflects a deliberate move towards groups (where a broader range of outcomes can often be achieved) and fewer adult volunteers available in the daytime.

Year	1:1 links	Groups	Group places
2021/22	65	27	175
2023/24	55	38	305
2024/25	45	41	335
2025/26	35	49	409

Service context: these are annual service measures rather than directly interchangeable units. '1:1 links' refers to active befriending links reported for the year; 'groups' to distinct groups reported as operating; and 'group places' to member places across those groups. The table shows the direction of service change, not an exchange rate between 1:1 and group provision.

We wanted to know whether groups and 1:1 befriending appear to offer members different things. In particular, we looked at friendship, confidence, trying new things, independence and what members themselves say they value about each kind of support.

How we looked at it

For this question, we concentrated mainly on the separate group and 1:1 member surveys from 2024, 2025 and 2026. Across the three years there were 274 group survey responses and 48 1:1 responses. These are survey responses rather than 322 different people, because some members responded in more than one year.

The scores are useful, but they only take us so far. In both groups and 1:1 befriending, respondents report very positive experiences. The 2024 confidence question was worded differently, so we did not combine it with the later confidence results. The contrasts below are recurring patterns in members' comments, not exclusive features or measured effects of either model.

We therefore also looked closely at what members said in their own words. The people using the two services are not identical: 1:1 respondents were older on average — about 39 compared with 30 for group respondents — so we have been careful not to assume that any difference is caused by the model itself.

What we found

Members report very positive experiences of both approaches

There is no sign that one model produces a good member experience while the other does not. Across 2024–26, members using groups and members with 1:1 links consistently reported very positive experiences.

Happiness was effectively universal, friendship was extremely high, and members in both parts of the service described greater confidence, feeling good about themselves and becoming better at talking to people.

That is particularly important given the way Interest Link has changed. The growth of group provision has not been accompanied by a visible drop in the positive member experience associated with traditional befriending.

Groups give people a social world

What stands out in the group comments is the number of relationships around the member. People talk about friends, everyone, being welcomed and accepted, enjoying being with other people and having somewhere they can be themselves.

A group can therefore offer more than a single friendship. It gives members repeated opportunities to meet different people, take part in something together and become part of a social circle. As Question 2 showed, some of those relationships continue outside Interest Link.

The activity matters too. Groups give people something to do together — cooking, exercise, art, going out or learning a skill — so friendship can develop alongside the activity rather than having to be its explicit purpose.

1:1 befriending gives people a particular relationship

The language around 1:1 befriending is more personal. Members are more likely to talk about a particular volunteer or friend and about a relationship that has developed over time.

That individual relationship can provide continuity and trust. It can also make ordinary things possible: going for coffee or lunch, shopping, travelling, using the bank, crossing roads or simply going somewhere without a parent.

Although 1:1 befriending involves fewer people, it does not necessarily create a narrower life. For some members, having one trusted person alongside them appears to make it easier to use the wider community.

Trying new things may happen differently

Members using both approaches describe trying new things, but the route can be different. In groups, new experiences are often built into the programme: a different activity, place, skill or shared experience.

In 1:1 befriending, trying something new can be more personal. The activity can be chosen around the member and their befriender and can take place in ordinary community settings.

Both can widen someone's life, but they can do it in different ways.

Different people are using the two approaches

We also need to be careful not to assume that any difference we see is caused by the service model itself. Across the 2024–26 surveys, people responding about 1:1 befriending were older on average than those responding about groups.

Their circumstances, support needs, where they live and what they want from Interest Link may also differ. The evidence therefore does not allow us to say that a particular outcome happens because somebody receives group or 1:1 support. What it does allow us to see is the different ways members describe and use those opportunities.

What it means

Members describe considerable overlap between groups and 1:1 befriending, and neither approach has exclusive outcomes. Within that overlap, recurring patterns in the comments suggest that groups may offer a wider social setting - different people, shared activities and repeated opportunities to take part - while a 1:1 link may offer a more individualised continuing relationship and tailored activity in the wider community.

There is considerable overlap between the two, and neither is inherently more valuable. Their strength may lie precisely in the fact that they can meet different needs — and sometimes work alongside each other.

The more useful question is: “What are we trying to make possible for this member, and what kind of support will help them do it?”

4. What might members' and families' lives look like without Interest Link?

What we wanted to know

High satisfaction tells us that people value Interest Link. But it does not tell us whether the same friendships, activities and opportunities would be available somewhere else.

So we looked for evidence about what members and families believe would be missing without Interest Link. Are there suitable alternatives? Would members still have opportunities to socialise independently? And what difference would that make to the people who support them?

How we looked at it

For this question, the comments from families are particularly important. Across the surveys, carers repeatedly describe what else is — or is not — available locally and what Interest Link allows their family member to do that would otherwise be difficult.

We also looked at members' wider social lives. In 2026, 37 of the 86 members who gave a usable answer — 43% — said they did not attend another group or social activity outside Interest Link.

Here, a usable answer means a response that answered the question about other group or social activity clearly enough to classify as yes or no; two non-answers were excluded. Reporting no other group or social activity is not the same as having no relationships or no activity at all, but it can indicate that Interest Link is an especially important source of organised social opportunity for some respondents.

We need to be careful with this evidence. We cannot know exactly what would happen to somebody if Interest Link disappeared. But when families repeatedly tell us that there is nowhere else suitable, or that Interest Link provides someone's only independent social opportunity, that gives us a strong indication of what may be at risk.

What we found

Many members have limited alternatives

Family carers repeatedly describe a lack of suitable social opportunities. Their comments are not simply about preferring Interest Link to another service. They point to a wider gap in what is available locally.

The 2026 survey reinforces this finding. More than four in ten respondents (43%) reported no other group or social activity outside Interest Link. For these members, Interest Link appears to be a particularly important source of organised social opportunities.

"There is nothing else for them out there."

"It is an amazing group & there are no other local opportunities."

"There is nowhere else my child can attend where she is welcomed."

For many members, it may be their main social connection

Some of the comments go further. Families describe Interest Link as the only place where their family member regularly meets other people or gets out of the house.

For these members, the likely alternative is not necessarily another club or activity. It may be considerably less contact with other people.

“It’s the only time apart from hospital that she leaves the house.”

“The only outlet for our son to meet with other people.”

“Interest Link is the only meaningful social contact my daughter has with her peers.”

It creates independence from family too

Interest Link also provides something that satisfaction scores do not always capture: opportunities for members to spend time away from their parents or carers and develop their own relationships and experiences.

That matters for the member because it creates a life beyond their immediate family. They can have their own relationships, experiences and routines rather than everything being organised through a parent or carer.

It matters to families too. Carers describe being able to let go a little and having their own role eased as their family member becomes more confident and socially connected.

“The only activity our son can attend independently without us”

“Interest Link gives my daughter her only time away from family!”

The difference can be ordinary — and enormous

What might disappear without Interest Link is not always something dramatic. It can be having someone to meet for coffee, somewhere to go every week, friends who know you, an activity you can attend without your parents, a reason to leave the house, or a few hours in which a family member does not need to organise or provide the support.

These may seem like small things individually. But the survey evidence and family feedback show how important they are. For many members and families, they provide opportunities for friendship, independence and everyday social experiences that can be difficult to find elsewhere.

What it means

For many members, Interest Link is not replacing another social opportunity. It is providing one that otherwise may not exist.

The evidence does not allow us to say that every member would become isolated without Interest Link. Many have other activities, relationships and sources of support. But a substantial minority report no other group or social activity, and some families explicitly describe Interest Link as their relative's only suitable or independent social opportunity.

That means the difference Interest Link makes is not confined to what happens during a group or a 1:1 meeting. It can also be understood through what would be missing without it: friendships, activity, independence from family, regular contact with other people — and, for carers, some space from a role that can otherwise be constant.

For many of the members and families represented in the surveys, Interest Link provides social opportunities that are difficult to find elsewhere.

5. What role does Interest Link play as young people move into adulthood?

What we wanted to know

Moving from school into adult life can mean significant change: routines alter, services change and young people are expected to become more independent.

Interest Link supports people across this transition. We wanted to understand what the existing evidence tells us about the part it can play — particularly in building confidence, friendships, communication, independence and the practical skills people may need as their lives change.

How we looked at it

There isn't a single set of survey questions that highlights changes in outcomes as young people systematically from youth provision into adult services. So we cannot treat this as a formal study of transition.

Instead, we looked across the evidence for the things that matter during that period: becoming more confident away from parents, developing friendships, communicating with other people, travelling, making choices, learning practical skills and beginning to take on adult roles.

We also looked at newer provision specifically designed around this stage of life, including Café Catch Up in Peebles, Pizza Club in Hawick and Advanced Lifeskills in Hawick.

What we found

Confidence starts before independence

The youth feedback contains many of the building blocks that later matter in adult life. Young members talk about meeting people, making friends, joining in, trying unfamiliar things and becoming more confident talking to others.

That may seem a relatively small change, but being able to communicate with people beyond a familiar group is one of the things that can make greater independence possible later.

"I speak more to people at my school now."

Having something of your own matters

The evidence in Questions 2 and 4 shows the importance of doing things without parents. For a young person approaching adulthood, Interest Link can provide a safe place to begin doing that.

This is not simply about learning to travel alone or going somewhere independently. It is also about having your own friends, your own activities and your own relationships with people outside your family. That can be part of becoming an adult even where somebody will continue to need significant support.

Interest Link can provide continuity while everything else changes

One of Interest Link's strengths is that support does not necessarily stop at the point somebody leaves school or reaches a particular age.

That matters because the need for friendship and belonging does not disappear when someone becomes an adult. Interest Link can therefore provide a thread of continuity: the setting or activity may change, but the

person does not suddenly lose access to the relationships, social opportunities and support that have helped them build confidence.

Some newer provision makes the transition more deliberate

These newer forms of provision are designed to create opportunities relevant to transition, including social connection, practical skills, greater choice and progression.

There are early signs of what that can lead to. In March 2026, two members involved in employability provision began longer-term work placements.

It is too early to treat two placements as evidence that the programme routinely leads to employment. But they do show that Interest Link can potentially support a journey that starts with social confidence and participation and, for some people, develops into practical skills, greater independence, volunteering or work.

Adulthood doesn't have one destination

The evidence throughout this research warns against defining a successful transition too narrowly.

For one young person, progress might eventually mean travelling independently or working. For another, it might mean being comfortable away from their parents, making their own choices, maintaining friendships or having somewhere they belong as an adult.

Those are different outcomes, but they can all represent greater control over someone's own life.

What it means

The existing evidence suggests that Interest Link may have a role before, during and after the point at which somebody formally becomes an adult.

For younger members, it can provide the building blocks: friendships, communication, confidence, new experiences and time away from family. As young people get older, those foundations can support greater independence, practical skills and wider participation.

Newer transition and lifeskills provision gives Interest Link an opportunity to make that role more deliberate. But progression should not be understood as a ladder where everybody is expected eventually to reach independent living or employment.

A better question is: "What does becoming more adult mean for this particular person, and what can Interest Link help make possible?"

What the research tells us overall

Friendship and belonging are the foundation

Friendship runs through almost all the evidence. Members talk about having people to talk to, being welcomed, seeing friends regularly and having somewhere they feel comfortable and accepted.

That matters in its own right. For some members, particularly those with few other social opportunities, having friends and somewhere to belong may be the most important outcome Interest Link creates. But the evidence also suggests that friendship and belonging can provide a foundation for other changes.

What starts at Interest Link doesn't always stay there

We found repeated examples of members using confidence, skills and relationships elsewhere in their lives.

Members describe speaking to people at school, communicating with unfamiliar people, shopping, using banks, travelling independently, meeting friends outside Interest Link, joining other activities and, in some cases, volunteering or moving towards work.

Not everybody follows that path, nor should they be expected to. Taken together, these accounts suggest that Interest Link may contribute to changes in what some members feel able to do when Interest Link is not there.

Different forms of support can make different things possible

Members attending mainly paid-supported groups report the same kinds of very positive experience seen elsewhere in Interest Link, but 27 of the 30 also attend other Interest Link groups, so we cannot isolate the effect of paid support. The available 2024-26 surveys also show very positive reported experiences among respondents to both group and 1:1 provision.

Groups can create a wider social world: several relationships, shared experiences, activities and a sense of belonging. A 1:1 link can provide a particular trusted relationship, shaped around one member and sometimes used as a bridge into everyday community life. Some mainly paid-supported groups appear particularly able to combine friendship with structured opportunities to practise skills, try unfamiliar activities and become more independent.

These are not rigid distinctions. The important finding is that Interest Link has several ways of creating the conditions in which people can participate, develop relationships and do more.

For many members, suitable alternatives are limited

In 2026, 37 of the 86 members who gave a usable answer (43%) reported no other group or social activity outside Interest Link. Families describe a lack of suitable local opportunities and, in some cases, Interest Link as their family member's only meaningful social contact, only independent activity or only regular opportunity to spend time away from family.

We cannot know exactly what would happen without Interest Link. But the evidence shows that many respondents have limited other organised social opportunities. For these members, Interest Link provides an important route to friendship, participation and a social life beyond their immediate family.

There isn't one definition of progress

Some of the most striking evidence concerns increasing independence: travelling alone, shopping, communicating with unfamiliar people, volunteering or beginning a work placement. Those outcomes matter, but they are not the only measure of success.

For another member, progress might mean attending without a parent, making a friend, choosing what they want to do, feeling safe around other people or simply having somewhere they want to go each week.

A good outcome is not everybody reaching the same destination. It is somebody being able to do more of what matters to them.

What this means for Interest Link

Keep different routes available

The evidence does not support replacing volunteers with paid supporters, paid supporters with volunteers, or 1:1 befriending with groups.

They can create different opportunities for different people. The more useful starting point is: “What are we trying to make possible for this person, and what kind of support will help them do it?”

That could become a useful principle when thinking about new members, existing members whose needs are changing and future service development.

Protect friendship and belonging as outcomes in their own right

It would be easy to focus increasingly on independence, skills, volunteering and employment because they are visible signs of progression.

The evidence does not support making those the destination for everybody. For some members, friendship, regular social contact, belonging and time away from family are the outcome. Interest Link should continue to recognise and describe their value alongside more obvious progression.

Build on the transition role

Interest Link already appears to help young people develop some of the foundations of adult life: confidence, relationships, communication, choices and experience away from parents.

Newer provision such as Café Catch Up, Pizza Club and Advanced Lifeskills creates an opportunity to make that role more deliberate, while still allowing different young people to have different ambitions.

This does not require turning Interest Link into an employment or independent-living service. It means recognising that social confidence and belonging can be part of the route towards greater independence for those who want and are able to pursue it.

Don't lose sight of what isn't available elsewhere

The evidence about limited alternatives is strategically important.

When thinking about where provision is most valuable, Interest Link should consider not only demand but also what members could realistically do instead. A service may have particular value where the alternative is not another provider but isolation, dependence on family or having nowhere suitable to go.

What could Interest Link measure next

The existing surveys do something very well: they demonstrate that members and families are overwhelmingly positive about Interest Link. However, when 95–100% of people repeatedly answer yes, those questions have very little room left to tell Interest Link what is changing, how it is changing or why. The answer is not a much longer survey, but a few more useful questions.

1. Find out what changes outside Interest Link

Add one accessible question such as: “Is there anything you now do outside Interest Link that Interest Link has helped you feel able or confident to do?”

Examples could include meeting friends, travelling somewhere, shopping, talking to people, joining another activity, helping at home, volunteering or working, with space for something else.

2. Know which part of Interest Link somebody is talking about

Where members attend several groups or use more than one form of support, the current surveys can make it difficult to know which experience their answer relates to.

A simple anonymous group or activity identifier would make future comparisons much stronger without identifying the member in published reporting.

3. Ask what would happen otherwise

Add a simple question such as: “If you didn't have Interest Link, what would you probably do instead?”

The answer might be another group, spend more time at home, rely more on family, see friends another way, or something else. This would give Interest Link better evidence about whether it is adding another opportunity or providing something that otherwise would not exist.

4. Measure what matters to the individual

Rather than assuming that everybody is working towards the same outcomes, ask members what they would like their involvement to help them do.

That might be making friends, feeling more confident, learning something, doing more independently, getting out more or simply having fun. A later question could then ask whether they feel they are getting closer to it.

5. Follow a small number of journeys over time

Some of the strongest evidence in this research came from being able to see what the same member said over several years.

With appropriate consent and anonymous identifiers, Interest Link could follow a small number of outcomes over time and see whether confidence, friendship, independence and wider participation develop.

Before adding any new question routinely, test it with members for accessibility, comprehension and burden. Questions about personal goals or what somebody would do without Interest Link may need different formats or supported completion; where somebody else helps to answer, Interest Link should distinguish the member's own view from a carer or proxy view where possible.

Interest Link could also record broad reasons for waiting, declining, leaving or being unable to participate where these are known. This would help identify unmet need and barriers, not just outcomes for people already using the service.

Conclusion

Interest Link's annual surveys already showed that people enjoy the service. Looking across the evidence tells us something more important. Members and families describe relationships and opportunities through Interest Link that some say they struggle to find elsewhere.

For some people, that means friendship and somewhere they belong. For others, it becomes confidence to speak to people, travel, shop, make choices, join another activity or spend time away from their family. For some, it can contribute to a longer journey towards volunteering, work or greater independence.

Those reported changes sit alongside different forms of provision. The evidence does not establish that one staffing or service model causes better outcomes than another; instead, members describe different relational and participation opportunities across groups, 1:1 befriending, volunteer support and paid-supported provision.

For some members, this contribution may be particularly important. They report few other organised social opportunities, while families describe difficulty finding suitable alternatives. Interest Link provides friendship, belonging and an ordinary social opportunity that some members and families say is difficult to find elsewhere.