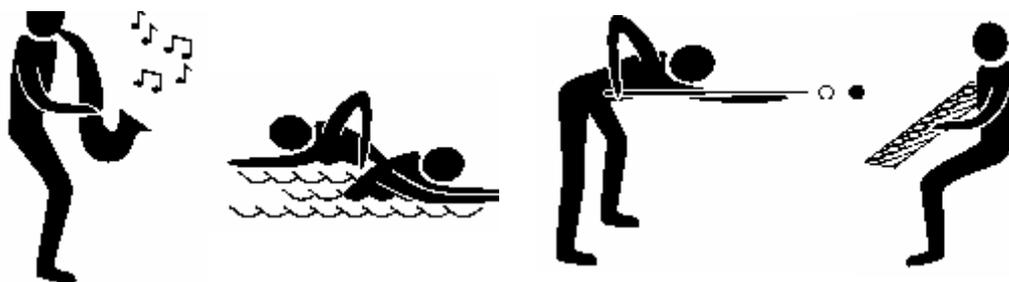




**INTEREST LINK: MAKING A
DIFFERENCE in
BERWICKSHIRE**

**An independent evaluation
by Liz Sutherland**

March 1998



N.B. Interest Link Berwickshire is now the Berwickshire branch of Interest Link Borders

Management committee and officers of Interest Link Berwickshire as at March 1998

Chairman:

Sheona Muir

Assistant Manager, Station Avenue supported
housing project

Vice-Chairman:

Les Lawson

Day Centre Officer, Lanark Lodge Day Centre,
Duns

Treasurer:

Leona Paton

Volunteer

Committee:

Alec Brack

Service user

Beverley Haines

Manager, Lanark Lodge Day Centre, Duns

Freda Hamilton

Organiser, Berwickshire Volunteer Bureau

Barry Jones

Director, Mount View residential home, Duns

Trevor McMinn

Service user

Helen Steel

Volunteer

Mark Wilson

Social Work Group, Scottish Borders Council

Independent Examiner:

David Laing

Co-ordinator:

Andrew Findlay

Assistant Co-ordinator

Susan Fleming

Office:

9 Currie Street, Duns, Berwickshire TD11 3DL

Tel/Fax

(01573) 410620

e-mail

coordinator@interestlink.org.uk

Web site

www.interestlink.org.uk

INTEREST LINK - MAKING A DIFFERENCE in BERWICKSHIRE

An independent evaluation of Interest Link Berwickshire, funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and commissioned from Liz Sutherland by the project's committee. Completed March 1998

Interest Link Berwickshire started in 1990 and was relaunched in 1996. It aims to help adults with learning disabilities enjoy leisure activities of their choice in the community with the help of volunteers. It matches volunteers with clients on a one to one basis to enable a range of shared activities such as swimming, cycling, bird watching, music making, playing golf and pool, going shopping and out for the evening. Interest Link is available to any adults living in Berwickshire or those who live elsewhere but attend Lanark Lodge in Duns (the Berwickshire County town) during the day.

Interest Link has one part time (10 hours per week) paid co-ordinator who has been in post now for over 18 months. It has an active committee who meet regularly and to whom the co-ordinator presents regular written and verbal reports. One client has served for a year on the committee and a second client has just been nominated to it.

Interest Link currently has 33 registered clients, 23 of whom are presently linked to volunteers. Eleven live with parents, twelve live in supported accommodation and ten live in residential care. About half of the links meet weekly and the rest a little less frequently. Links are made roughly at the rate of one per month. Activity is mainly in the eastern half of the county, where the majority of the population live.

Procedures

All volunteers on first expressing an interest have to complete a registration form and have to give their permission for a check to be made against police records. They also have to produce references. Progress checks are made three weeks after the initial link is established and then informally and via feedback forms which are sent out with the quarterly newsletter to all volunteers.

All clients have to complete a preliminary application form and a main application form, written in plain English. Clients and carers also regularly receive feedback forms for which there is a good rate of return. Interest Link produces information sheets for clients, carers and for volunteers.

Evaluation

This evaluation was conducted in response to a request from a donor, the Gulbenkian Foundation, for an independent report. In the course of this evaluation the evaluator spent a day on site in Berwickshire and met/ spoke directly with

- 13 clients
- 9 volunteers
- 9 parents and carers
- 8 committee members

She also spent about the better part of a day speaking to and meeting with the co-ordinator, preparing for her on site day and reading documentation.

EVERYONE NEEDS A PAL - THE CLIENTS' PERSPECTIVE

Magic

That is how one Interest Link client describes the service he receives.

It's not good - it's brilliant, it's superb...

is how another client sees it.

Interest Link clients without exception are very positive about Interest Link and about their volunteers.

My volunteer has helped me with a lot of things...he's a pal...everyone needs a pal.

Some clients particularly value the extended contacts their volunteer brings.

I've met my volunteer's family, too.

Others, perhaps less outgoing by nature, are quite happy just to have their volunteer as a new contact in their lives. For two clients their Interest Link volunteer is actually the **only** regular connection to any kind of social life outside that provided by their immediate family.

I don't go out any other night of the week, only with my volunteer.

Interest Link clients enjoy their time with their volunteers: that enjoyment is often due to the new experiences that having a volunteer opens up for them as well as to the enriching of their self esteem through the development of new relationships.

I wouldn't have gone to Berwick (a market town about twelve miles from this client's home) without my volunteer.

I like my volunteer a lot...he's very cheery.

I'm getting on very well with my volunteer. When we go out he buys me a drink and now I buy him one, too.

The real value of volunteers to clients is perhaps best captured in the words of a client whose volunteer (whom he had known for some time) had indirectly helped him a lot in coming to terms with the loss of his mother.

I feel as if my volunteer is part of my life as well.

FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD - THE VOLUNTEERS' PERSPECTIVE

Interest Link volunteers, both past and current, believe they get as much out of their volunteering as their Interest Link clients do.

It's given a structure to my week...I'd been looking for things to do and it's introduced me to new people.

Their self esteem has improved, too.

It makes me feel good. It gives me the chance to make a difference.

One ex volunteer has only given up because he has got a full time job, largely as a result of his Interest Link volunteering. He was particularly positive about the difference Interest Link made to his life.

It has been very beneficial for me.

One volunteer's sense of the social difference between his life and the life of his client was particularly telling.

We're from the outside world.

Another volunteer talked of his initial uncertainty and difficulty *finding a way in* to his client, a difficulty that with the co-ordinator's support, he was able to overcome. The practical and ever ready support of the Interest Link co-ordinator is much appreciated. Volunteers welcome his regular checks with them on the progress of the link and feel that the organisation is very well run.

I knew he (the co-ordinator) was always there when I wanted him...I think it is run perfectly...there are no loopholes.

They particularly appreciate the Interest Link system where the co-ordinator introduces them personally into the homes of their links.

It helps a lot to know the carer/parent as well...it shares the responsibility ...and it's nice to know you are trusted.

It is also true that volunteers are finding that their social networks have extended (in rather the same way as clients) as a result of their Interest Link work. They are very keen on the training events so far organised and interested in attending more of these. One male volunteer finds his link has now become linked with his social network. He is club secretary of a group which meets every two weeks and his Interest Link client comes with him.

..it's the common interest that's the thing...

Volunteers had heard about Interest Link in a variety of ways; through the local association of voluntary service, the local paper, through their membership and public role in clubs and organisations.

GIVING US ALL A BIT OF A SHAKE - THE FAMILY AND CARER PERSPECTIVE

Interest Link clients are either still living at home with parents/brothers and sisters or they are living in supported residential accommodation with varying degrees of independence. Interest Link makes a difference to the lives of clients' families and carers as well as to the lives of clients. One mother speaking about her daughter

She can go out with someone completely different now...before it was just me...now she has new ordinary folk to be with and she can get away from me for a bit...

Another parent feels

I am getting too old to do the things my son is interested in.

And another

It makes me feel happier that my son is doing something different now. I feel less guilty. I know he is really interested in this activity but I never was...now the volunteer does it with him and it has taken the guilt away..

The total dependence on the family for social life is lessened.

Before the Interest Link volunteer came along, my sons could not go out in the evening unless I took them. There's no public transport at that time and you have only yourself and your car to rely on.

Interest Link volunteers are good for the mental health of families and carers who see Interest Link activities and outings as

breaking the routine...that's good for us...it gives us all a bit of a shake.

Parents and carers see differences in the self esteem of their sons and daughters and those they care for, too.

They come out with a lot more now...they hear what's happening in the town and bring the news back to us...which makes a change.

Several parents and carers can see the difference meeting not just a volunteer but also the volunteer's family makes..

especially when there's contact with children because they don't really have that contact any other way.

Parents and carers recognise the extent of a volunteer's commitment, too.

It's a big commitment for them after all.....

It was this and not any concerns about volunteers that worried them. (See later section) The only anxiety that parents/carers have is that the volunteer might for very understandable reasons stop coming.

I hope it will go on and that folk won't let them down...a lot of things have started for them in the past and then fizzled out...

With that anxiety aside, parents have no other worries about Interest Link. They have every confidence in the organisation, its system for registering volunteers, its procedures for matching volunteers to clients, always introducing them to the family first. For many of them their son/daughter first heard of Interest Link via a professional worker already known to and trusted by the family so that, no doubt, minimises any possible concerns. They were especially confident in the co-ordinator.

The views of professional carers

Staff working in residential accommodation who have by law a duty to care for all their residents are particularly impressed by the Interest Link co-ordinator's procedures for volunteer screening and matching and support. The co-ordinator introduces Interest Link volunteers being matched with clients living in supported accommodation to the clients' key workers, in the same way that he introduces by home visits volunteers to parents of clients living at home. After that initial introduction Interest Link works to the principle that the Interest Link volunteer is for that particular client not that particular residential unit.

*It's their own volunteer...especially for them...that's really important
for people living in residential accommodation like this.*

This key worker also feels very positive about the benefit to male residents of male volunteers.

So many of us working in this field are female..

She feels too that there is a distinct gender difference in the way volunteers approach their volunteering - men being happier to do something active and specific, a shared and well defined activity like going to the gym or going to the accordion club while women prefer

to go with the flow, be more flexible and varied in what they do

For those working with Interest Link clients with more profound difficulties there were some concerns that are dealt with in the final section of this report.

DEVELOPING A HEALTHY BASIS - THE COMMITTEE PERSPECTIVE

The Interest Link committee believe the **strengths** of Interest Link are

a paid co-ordinator with time to support volunteers and clients

a good co-ordinator - someone who is easy to talk to, very well organised and a good communicator

the organisation's professional and responsible practices and procedures

the success of links so far

an active committee with relevant experience

development of formal training opportunities for volunteers

They see the **weaknesses** as

lack of secure funding for co-ordinator

organisational vulnerability to loss of present high quality co-ordinator

operational pressures of sustaining a steady stream of new volunteers, while supporting old ones. (They recognise in this the need to resist the temptation to expand the work beyond what one employee can manage by way of numbers of monitoring/supporting links).

lack of community based facilities for leisure pursuits in the locality limiting possibilities for new interests to be developed

distances that have to be covered by volunteers and clients in a large rural area with a poor public transport infrastructure

a necessary reliance on volunteers to ensure volunteer to client communication never goes wrong

They see **opportunities** for Interest Link

in its capacity to provide new experiences for people whose lives are by necessity limited

in its capacity to provide new experiences for volunteers

and they believe that it has the potential

to reach out to people with learning disabilities who do not receive any existing service

to be replicated in other parts of the Scottish Borders.

WHAT MAKES INTEREST LINK WORK

For **volunteers** what makes Interest Link work is

- sharing a common interest to start with
- compatibility with their link
- getting something back from their volunteering
- clear lines of communication with co-ordinator, client and family/carer
- practical guidance and ready support from the co-ordinator
- confidence in the professionalism of the organisation and especially in the work of the co-ordinator.

For **carers and parents** what makes Interest Link work is

- ability to trust the organisation and everyone associated with it
- the clear personal benefits new activities provide for their son/daughter
- some sense of sharing of the responsibility for making life interesting
- the sense that their son/daughter has their own individual interests

For **the committee** what makes Interest Link work is

- the quality of the co-ordinator

For **the co-ordinator** what makes Interest Link work is

- the quality of the volunteers and their commitment
- the active support of the committee
- the positive feedback from clients

One area for attention

The only immediate agreed area for attention is that the Interest Link co-ordinator, care staff and volunteers all feel that it is more difficult to establish sound links for clients with more profound disabilities. There is more likelihood of 'false starts' - volunteers turning up once or twice but not coming back again - upsetting clients and their carers.

The manager of the care home thinks it might help if he was also to be present when volunteers and clients are first being introduced and that system is now being adopted. Another way of dealing with this identified difficulty, suggested by carers and the co-ordinator, would be to make sure that potential volunteers spend plenty of time just getting to know clients living in the care home before any specific outings were arranged. Through experience, the co-ordinator now feels he now has a better idea of the type of volunteer who will be able to support clients with more profound disabilities.

Other observations/ suggestions for consideration in the future

Press ahead with intention to involve users more actively in governance. This is a really important priority. The committee will need to consider what such

involvement means in practical terms for them. Papers will need to be shorter and agenda items more clearly presented.

Develop a version of the newsletter for clients.

Maintain mixed approaches (local paper/radio/ads etc.) to advertising - volunteers often put themselves forward the second time they hear of you, not the first.

Maintain present procedures for recruiting clients and volunteers - they seem to be very strong but not cumbersome.

Consider the benefits of developing a modest calendar of training /social events for volunteers to give them a chance to meet each other more.

Another way of getting together easily with people (committee/ volunteers) without spending too much time travelling is to use telephone conference calls (using the charity focused Community Network service).

Think of inviting in key officers in social work department to social events and perhaps use the evaluation report as a focus for such an event..?

Especially consider how to educate those social workers who may be supporting clients with no access to services about the work of Interest Link.

When/if developing similar service elsewhere remember the key role of staff in the supported accommodation facilities where many present clients live.

Consider whether it might be possible to secure some funding from the Social Work Dept (or other local sources) to spend time with interested “movers and shakers” in other parts of the Borders who might want to replicate the Interest Link service in their area.

With their permission, use your clients’ words and stories in any promotional literature e.g. Annual Report, newsletters, information leaflets, letters of application for funding. Consider using photographs too where appropriate.

Try to think of all the different ways you can communicate the value of what you are doing to the Borders community generally e.g. via the radio, newspapers etc. Some of them might be funders at some point!

Think about parcelling up aspects of your work and fund-raising just for that parcel e.g. having a petrol fund, having a fund for training events etc.

Keep a steady focus on your aims and resist temptations of funding through initiatives with other agendas than your own.

Plan for expansion through lots of local multiplication of yourselves rather than through growing one very big organisation.

Use other people’s training events and materials as far as possible for your volunteers

And finally

It is clear the main strength of the organisation lies in the co-ordinator - not just in the procedures he has established which are sound in themselves - but also in the kind of personal skills and commitment he brings.

While that is a great asset for Interest Link, it is also a point of vulnerability as so much depends on the co-ordinator. It might be worth the committee considering whether there is any way they can through voluntary effort find additional clerical and administrative support for the co-ordinator. This will be especially necessary if he is to spend any time at any point helping other parts of the Borders establish their own Interest Links. But it would also ease his clerical work load and maybe allow him to do more work developing training events for example for volunteers or even supporting a few more matches.

It would also be helpful if the committee were to think about enabling the co-ordinator to meet up from time to time with staff in other organisations doing similar work. He has already begun that process and there are several organisations and individuals he may especially want to consider making contact with e.g. Alex Dillon who facilitates the Advocacy group within ENABLE; ELCAP, an organisation with similar aims but on a much larger scale and with a more developed and extensive programme; the present co-ordinator of Borders Parent to Parent (for parents of children and young people with special needs) and the Borders organiser of LEAD (Scotland) who also match volunteers with adults with disabilities.

The committee, who between them bring much experience to the work, might like to spend some time discussing what makes for a successful Interest Link outcome in the longer term. While it is clearly the case that initially successful links are about compatibility and mutual enjoyment of each other's company, is there a case for considering at least for some clients whether or not the volunteer's longer term role is to assist in their client's capacity to be more independent within the local community. Not entirely unrelated to this possibility is the notion that for some matches having an informal contract - for example to meet every week for the winter - may be helpful to those volunteers who would like to do something but do not want what may feel like a very permanent commitment. This idea might be worth discussing more fully with clients and with parents too.