

**One  
Equine**

**Experiences of  
Equine Assisted Therapy &  
Learning in Northern Ireland**

November 2020  
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## Foreword

**I have been fortunate to meet many knowledgeable, experienced, and enthusiastic people involved in equine assisted activities over the past three years. There has been much dialogue and generous sharing of resources, research, stories, anecdotes, and opinions. There are countless online sources to inform about the wide depth and breadth of these activities around the world. However, this very depth and breadth can be overwhelming for the new reader.**



**Richard Moore**

Those of us involved in One Equine realised that enthusiasts are frequently in danger of talking to each other in the mistaken belief that they are spreading the word to a wider population. We decided to commission a report that would introduce equine assisted therapy and learning to audiences with no prior knowledge, that would highlight the most relevant peer reviewed research in the field, and that would share the powerful experiences of people in Northern Ireland.

We thought it particularly important that local voices were represented; an unintended consequence of this is that many who shared so willingly for the report remain willing to do so because of the impact in their lives. We are especially indebted to them for their testimonials and insights. Without their cooperation this report would not have been possible.

Dr Clare O’Kane has produced a highly readable, informative and engaging document. It will equally serve the newcomer and those seeking deeper understanding of how the incorporation of horses in therapy and personal development can create life-enhancing outcomes.

We are indebted to Clare for the energy and commitment she has devoted to this project.

Richard Moore.  
July 2020.

# Executive Summary

**This is the first paper of its kind to review the contribution which Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) is making to the wellbeing of individuals and their families in Northern Ireland.**

The personal experiences of EAT included here not only reflect the breadth and depth of EAT, but also demonstrate the potential positive outcomes for people who are experiencing a range of challenges – physical, emotional, and educational.

EAT services can differ greatly in approach and methods; from physiotherapy and occupational therapy led Hippotherapy for people with physical challenges, to Equine Psychotherapy facilitated by a qualified counsellor or psychotherapist, to Equine Assisted Learning where the focus is on learning through horses.

Despite the modality or purpose of the therapy, EAT is often about treating the whole person; physical, mental, social, and emotional. EAT, in all forms, has potential as a valuable complementary therapy to more traditional interventions or even as an effective alternative for those who are not responding to conventional therapies.

Research on the effectiveness of Hippotherapy based treatments in physical healthcare, particularly in the areas of Cerebral Palsy and Multiple Sclerosis, is well-established. Research on the efficacy of equine therapies in emotional, social, and behavioural treatments is still in its infancy, but early findings suggest that it may prove effective treatment in the areas of autistic spectrum disorder, Post-

Traumatic Stress Disorder, trauma, and emotional, social and behavioural issues in children, young people and adults.

In Northern Ireland there are currently many types of equine therapy services being provided to people with a diverse range of needs. In this paper, a number of people reflect on their personal experiences of equine therapy and their contributions provide valuable insight into the potential impact of this type of therapy.

**Their stories provide just a small snapshot of the wide range of equine therapy services currently available in Northern Ireland today.**

# What is Equine Assisted Therapy

**Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) is a specialised branch of animal assisted therapy which involves horses and donkeys in a range of treatments and activities in order to support human physical and mental health.**

EAT has been used in treating physical health since the 1960s. This form of EAT is often known as Hippotherapy, a term which literally means ‘treatment with the horse’. It is a tool used by specially qualified physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and speech and language therapists in which the movement of the walking horse is utilised to achieve treatment outcomes in physical health, such as improvements in motor skills, core strength, posture, cognitive impairment, and speech and language development.<sup>1,2</sup>

The use of EAT in mental health treatment is a more recent development but it is a rapidly expanding field.<sup>3,4</sup> There are a number of approaches to equine involvement in psychological therapy, including Equine Assisted Psychotherapy

(EAP) and Equine Assisted Learning (EAL)<sup>ii</sup>. It is important to note some of the key differences between these forms of equine therapy.

EAP is conducted by a mental health professional, such as a psychotherapist or counsellor, and aims to treat emotional, social, and behavioural issues. In EAP, the mental health professional facilitates the process between the client and the horse to create a safe, supportive space for the client to reflect, communicate, build positive relationships, and learn about themselves and others in this process.<sup>5</sup> EAP sessions usually involve unmounted, ground activities rather than riding activities.

**“As a contemporary practice, the field of EAT/L [Equine Assisted Therapy and Learning] is expanding rapidly and works from the premise that interaction with horses can be therapeutic and of benefit for people who find it difficult to engage with traditional therapeutic or educational interventions”**

**(Burgon, 2016)**

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i. Please note: there is a lack of standardised terminology within the field of equine therapy and many different approaches are taken in the practice and delivery of services. In this report the term Equine Assisted Therapy is used as a general term to describe a wide number of equine assisted interventions which aim to support people with a range of physical, mental, social, and educational needs.

ii. Also referred to as Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) and Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL)

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EAL is led by a certified facilitator with equine experience and a qualification in the use of equines in therapy, learning, or coaching. The facilitator can be supported by EAT assistants, who are often volunteers with experience of working with horses. EAL is essentially concerned with learning through horses; facilitators use a wide range of equine-assisted activities to help clients develop transferable life skills and achieve personal learning goals. EAL methods are also used to promote educational and social development. It is particularly well suited for group activities as participants can learn from each other. Activities in EAL range from practical work with the horses, such as mucking out, grooming, and animal care; to observation of horse behaviour and learning about animal welfare; to mounted activities.

## **The unique role of the horse**

### **‘The living apparatus and the divine mirror’**

It has been argued that horses can bring unique qualities to the therapeutic setting. As both prey and herd animals, horses have evolved as social animals with highly developed communication skills who are extremely sensitive to their environment. Professionals working in the field of equine therapy believe that as a result horses have an innate ability to read the emotions and body language of humans and can offer valuable feedback and insight. This has been described as the horse as an ‘emotional’ or ‘divine’ mirror. The other principal role of the horse in therapeutic activities is that of a ‘living apparatus’, which refers to the use of the horse’s natural walking gait to provide motor and sensory input to the rider with physical challenges. In equine therapy horses are viewed as a therapeutic assistant or partner and the welfare of the horse is of utmost importance to the therapist or facilitator at all times.

Figure 1: Types of Equine Assisted Therapy

## Types of Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT)

### Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

- Emotional, social, behavioural
- Accredited psychotherapist/counsellor
- Treatment goals and outcomes
- Therapeutic approach to create safe, supported, confidential space; interacting with horses, grooming and ground activities
- Treating addictions, anxiety, depression, PTSD, stress, trauma, neglect, abuse

### Hippotherapy

- Physical, speech and language
- Qualified physiotherapist, OT, speech and language therapist
- Treatment goals and outcomes
- Mounted activities to improve motor skills and core strength

### Equine Assisted Learning (EAL)

- Educational, social, and physical
- Certified facilitator
- Learning and coaching goals and outcomes
- Practical work such as mucking out, grooming, feeding, cleaning; observation and learning about horse; horse-riding activities; particularly suited to group activities

# Recent Research on Equine Assisted Therapy

**EAT practitioners and service users argue strongly that horses and donkeys are distinctly effective therapeutic animals. Over the past decade there has been a marked increase in the number of research projects aimed at providing an evidence base for this argument.**

Much of the research on EAT to date has focused on Hippotherapy. The use of Hippotherapy in the treatment of Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is one area well reflected in the research. In 2010, a systematic review of the evidence concluded that Hippotherapy has a positive effect on balance in persons with MS, with an added benefit of enhancing quality of life, but acknowledged that data was limited and more research was needed.<sup>8</sup> A recent randomised controlled trial to investigate the effect of Hippotherapy and standard care versus standard care alone in MS patients has added to the existing literature; it found that Hippotherapy plus standard care significantly improved balance and also fatigue, spasticity, and quality of life in MS patients.<sup>9</sup> Last year, the findings of a small pilot study on the effects of Hippotherapy on quality of life, spasticity, gait, pelvic floor, depression and fatigue in MS patients also indicated some promising results.

Research on the impact of Hippotherapy in Cerebral Palsy (CP) treatment is also well-established. As far back as 2007, one review found that both Hippotherapy and therapeutic horseback riding were effective in improving gross motor skills in children with CP.<sup>11</sup> Further literature reviews

in 2011 and 2012 also concluded that Hippotherapy and therapeutic horseback riding have positive effects on gross motor function, postural control, and balance in children with CP – but in both cases the authors cautioned that more methodical, larger scale research was necessary.<sup>12,13</sup>

More recently, a narrative review of the benefits of Hippotherapy for children with CP identified positive psychological benefits and improvements in quality of life, in addition to clinical changes in gross motor function, sitting independently, speed of walking, length of stride and postural alignment.<sup>14</sup> Other recent research projects have found that Hippotherapy in addition to conventional therapy produces statistically significant changes in hip adductors spasticity in children with CP<sup>15</sup> and that Hippotherapy supports gross motor functioning and simulates the pelvic movement of normal walking in adolescents with cerebral palsy diplegia.<sup>16</sup>

Recent research has looked at the utility of Hippotherapy in other clinical areas such as musculoskeletal disorder, acquired brain injury, and the treatment of pain conditions and mobility in older people. For example, a 2015 review of the efficacy of EAT in the

treatment of musculoskeletal disorders concludes that Hippotherapy can improve muscle strength, balance, and coordination of movement, while also contributing to relaxation and control of posture.<sup>17</sup> Findings from research projects on the use of Hippotherapy in older populations suggest that EAT decreases pain, and improves range of motion, and quality of life in older adults with arthritis<sup>18</sup> and that Hippotherapy can improve lower limb strength and balance in older people.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth noting however that across the research literature on the effectiveness of Hippotherapy as a clinical treatment are calls for more, well-designed, disciplined studies in order to increase understanding and to provide a more robust evidence base for the benefits of EAT.

While research on the utility of Hippotherapy based treatments in physical healthcare is relatively well-established, research on the efficacy of equine therapies in emotional, social, and behavioural treatments is very much in its infancy. Early research findings seem to suggest that EAT, both therapeutic horseback riding and unmounted ground level interaction with horses, may prove effective treatment

in the areas of autistic spectrum disorder, learning disability, trauma, and emotional, social and behavioural issues in children, young people, and adults.

One area that has been relatively well-researched is EAT as a treatment for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Research indicates that equine interventions on children and young people with ASD can lead to improvements in mood, concentration, communication, social behaviours, as well as reduce the severity of ASD behaviours.<sup>20, 21, 22</sup> In one study, respondents describe how horses “open up” autistic children and “make possible interactions that seemed impossible before”.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most robust studies on EAT and ASD is a 2015 randomised controlled trial of therapeutic horseback riding in young people with ASD in which two groups of 6-16 year olds were monitored over a ten week period. One group received equine therapy while the other control group took part in barn activity without horses. The results show significant improvements in the equine therapy group compared to the barn activity group on measures of irritability and hyperactivity, along with

**“The outcomes of this study lend support to findings from previous EAAT studies with the ASD population, suggesting that there is an important active ingredient in the human-equine interaction that can effect positive changes in irritability, hyperactivity, social, and communication behaviours in this population”**

**(Gabriels, 2015)**

notable improvements in social cognition, social communication, and the total number of words and new words spoken.<sup>24</sup>

Several recent studies have evaluated the outcomes of EAT in treating Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), particularly in military veterans.<sup>25, 26, 27</sup> Findings suggest that EAT may be an effective treatment for PTSD, with participants showing significantly lower levels of PTSD symptoms and higher levels of happiness, quality of life, and self-esteem after receiving equine therapy. One study reports that participants in the EAT group had 87.5% likelihood of having lower PTSD score after six weeks of equine therapy than participants in the control group.<sup>28</sup>

There is further evidence that equine therapy, EAP in particular, can prove effective in improving emotional, social and behavioural functioning in children and young people.<sup>29</sup> A number of recent small-scale studies have found that adolescents can benefit from both EAP and EAL specifically in relation to building

confidence, self-esteem, and positive relationships.<sup>30, 31</sup> Other research focused specifically on 'at-risk' adolescents have reported positive outcomes from EAT/L interventions such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, empathy, increased levels of hope and decreased levels of depression.<sup>32, 33</sup>

Recent research on EAT has looked at treatment areas as diverse as older people with dementia in residential care to children exposed to problematic parental substance abuse, which gives some indication of the wide range of possible applications for equine therapies and activities.<sup>34, 35, 36</sup>

What is apparent across the literature on the use of EAT in emotional, social, or behavioural treatment is that relationships – human and equine – are a vital part of the therapeutic process. Furthermore, as a therapy that does not rely exclusively on verbal communication, EAT has the potential to be an effective alternative for those people not suited to traditional 'talking therapies'.

**“This review suggests that EAT is a form of experimental therapy that enhances positive behaviours, reduces negative behaviours and has helped people with mental health problems. The studies have also indicated that EAT can be as effective as other therapies currently used. Thus, the potential of EAT, as an alternative to talking and existing experimental and creative therapies, is recognised. While the reviewed literature is fascinating and has revealed positive results in EAT on mental health and behavioural problems, research studies that are more comprehensive are required, especially in the UK before claims could be made for its evidence-based value”**

**Cantin and Marshall-Lucette; 2011)**

However, as research is at such an early stage caution must be taken when looking at the current evidence base. There is a very strong case for more rigorous research into the effectiveness of equine assisted interventions in improving physical, psychological and social wellbeing in people.<sup>37</sup> The conclusion to one review of

the literature on the effectiveness of EAT in treating people with mental health and behavioural disorders captures both the potential for EAT as a viable alternative to traditional therapies but also the need for a more robust evidence-base<sup>38</sup>:

**Figure 2: Benefits of EAT in emotional, social, and behavioural treatment as indicated in recent research**



# Experiences of Equine Assisted Therapy in Northern Ireland

**In Northern Ireland there are currently many types of equine therapy services being provided to people with a diverse range of needs.**

It is important to keep in mind that the EAT services that are available can differ greatly in approach and methods; from physiotherapy and occupational therapy led treatment, to EFP facilitated by a qualified counsellor or psychotherapist, to EAT&L which is often supported by dedicated volunteers. Despite the modality or purpose of the therapy, EAT is often about treating the whole person; physical, mental, social, and emotional.

Equine Therapy has historically been delivered in Northern Ireland by organisations such as Riding for the Disabled (RDA) and the Donkey Sanctuary's Therapy Centre<sup>iii</sup>. More recently therapists have been offering different types of EAT to wider audiences. Some cases are based on referrals from local health professionals, schools, social services, support networks, and rehabilitation programmes, while others are private clients opting to use these services through personal choice.

In the case studies that follow, people reflect on their personal experiences of equine therapy<sup>iv</sup>. There are also a number of perspectives on equine therapy from professionals in the areas of education and adoption services. Their stories provide just a small snapshot of the wide range of equine therapy services currently available in Northern Ireland.

**Note to Reader – Some of the names used in the case studies that follow are not the actual names of the people whose experiences are described. Please also note that in all cases a qualified professional or experienced volunteer was present at all times to cope with all outcomes.**

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iii See Appendix 1 for more details on these organisations

iv See Appendix 2 for more details on the background, context, providers, and evaluation processes behind some of these case studies

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## William

**William is aged six and has Downs Syndrome. He was born with two holes in his heart and spent the first three months of life in hospital which has significantly impacted his development. His mother, Doris, talks about William's experiences of equine therapy at Gortilea Social Farm CIC (Hippotherapy services)**

**"The 10 sessions [of Hippotherapy] have made an absolute difference to William ... now he's sitting up straight and he's just so much more confident. We would be lost without having these sessions"**

William is non-verbal and uses Makaton sign language to communicate. Before attending Hippotherapy sessions he could not walk or sit up unaided. He had had a lot of physiotherapy and occupational therapy but was not progressing.

After 10 weekly sessions of Hippotherapy, William could sit up independently and was displaying much improved muscle tone. This enabled him to ride a bike for the first time in his life.

**"Before William came to Hippotherapy he couldn't really sit up, he needed support all the time. And then as the weeks got on, then William was getting that wee bit stronger and getting more into a routine"**

Despite having no previous contact with horses, he formed an instant and very close bond with Smokey. William particularly enjoys grooming Smokey, an activity which has significantly improved his fine motor skills.

**"Smokey and him have an absolutely amazing bond! Whenever we first came here I was literally crying because he just lights up the arena when he comes in, his smile beaming!"**

Doris sees Hippotherapy as different to other interventions, which in her view, is one of the reasons it has proven to be so effective for William.

**Following a second block of 10 weekly sessions William was able to take a number of independent steps for the first time.**

## Jennifer

### **A mother of two daughters with ASD talks about their experiences of Equine Therapy at their local RDA centre**

**"If you have to put on a pair of boots, you have to put on hat to ride, you have to put on jodhpurs, and you have to wash so there's no smell of horses. Our kids have huge problems with those things but they deal with it because they really want to get involved with the horses. So they learn that they will survive and that these uncomfortable sensations are not fatal and they do them, and do them, and do them, and they desensitise to them, and they get through it"**

"We went from a child who thought that life simply wasn't worth living, and said as much, who was withdrawing from life, who had stopped going out, who was agoraphobic, who stopped talking, and then ultimately the final decision, subconscious decision, she stopped eating. I came in here [RDA centre] and I sat down and I watched what they were doing and I thought "wow", I was so impressed. She smiled and she started to talk. It was phenomenal"

**"If you put a child with Autism on a half- ton or a ton animal, communication has got to be instant, it's got to be effective, it's specific, it's clear"**

"It's all of those things our kids with ASD need, they get that. But they also learn 'how to', they learn the cause and effect, they learn the relationship, 'well, if I want this to happen, then I have to do that'"

**"They learn how to deal with sensory challenges as well"**

"If you can learn to deal with a very busy environment and the smells and the dirt and the noise and the lights and the instructions and the communication requirements and the temperature drops and changes – then you can deal with the classroom, you can deal with the lecture theatre, you can deal with the workplace, and you can deal with people. So that's the little buzz phrase, 'transferable skills', that's how that works"

## David and Jonathan

### **A father of 14 year old boy with ASD, shares his son's experience of EFP**

**"He just seemed to be someone who existed before and now he is somebody who is living life. And I think Equine Therapy has given him the strength of character to take ownership of his diagnosis and to be able to go on and on"**

"Equine therapy has had such a massive positive impact. His first session he went in and said 'look, I'm not talking about emotions and how I feel'. So that was the first session. The second session he came out, got into the car and talked for a solid hour and a half, which is probably the longest conversation I've had with him in about five years"

**"It's the relationship with the animal, he feels totally at ease with the horse"**

"He has learned how to vocalise his frustrations, how he feels, and his desires... He has now shown interest in a career path for himself, and he has built friendships. He was able to deal with public transport, flying - all the things that he could never cope with"

"The outside stimulus, being in groups - he still struggles with that but he now has a coping strategy and that has been the biggest impact that the equine therapy has had on [him]. He now has faith in himself that he can deal with this and he is aware

that if he has a bit of a 'meltdown', that he can process that and move on. It doesn't have to define him.

**"It's the first time I would say that I have actually had trust in a treatment that works, that's not going to sedate my child, and is not going to leave him in an institution as an adult"**

"For us, my son at the moment is fourteen, this time three years ago I didn't think he'd be alive at fourteen as I really believe that he would have taken his own life. One of the most amazing things is, he came out of one of the sessions, jumped in the car and said to me 'Dad, I love life' ... I never thought I would hear him say that"

**"I now fully believe that he will be able to succeed in life because of this non-invasive treatment that was offered to him. Equine Therapy has made such a massive difference, in ways that medication was not able to do"**

## Perspectives: EAT and Education

**Sean McMorro, former principal of St Anthony's Primary School, Craigavon. A number of years ago, a group of children from the Learning Support Class (LSC) at the school attended weekly EAT sessions at a nearby RDA centre**

"[Initially] I was very sceptical ... When I drove out to [the RDA centre] that first day I was thinking 'I'm going to see this for a few minutes then I'm going to have to see [the LSC teacher] and say maybe we should knock this on the head, this is a wee bit dangerous, you know these children are getting up on a horse and it's quite a height, it's just an accident waiting to happen' – that was my thinking"

"Within seconds I could see how the children were benefitting from this. That rapport between the horse and the child, the calm. It was almost as if the horse was tuned into the child's needs. And the children were just loving this. I've never seen them happier. I've never seen them as calm."

"It has actually had a maturing influence on the children as well ... When they come back from that session they are calm, they are better predisposed to learning, they interact better amongst themselves ... It has impacted positively on their personalities."

"Having seen the impact on this small group of children, it would be great to try this out with children from mainstream classes or even children the school had

identified through school counsellors as having emotional or mental health needs ... Really, it's the best therapy that I have ever witnessed and I would love if we could extend this to all the children in the school."

"Those horses are special, absolutely. These [RDA] volunteers are special, they are great people. They know the children so well, just as the horses do. I just wish that this kind of therapy could catch the attention of educationalists at a department level. This should be funded, this kind of therapy should be funded for all schools."

"For me what I witnessed constitutes one of the highlights of my career. I feel that EAT&L should be made available to all children regardless of ability or need."

## Teacher, Cedar Lodge School

**A small class of boys aged 12-13 years with Social, Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who cannot cope behaviourally in a larger class setting attended the British Horse Society Ireland 'Learning through Horses' course**

**"It was incredible to see the level of connection each pupil had with the horses"**

"Socially the boys would struggle with building positive relationships with peers and adults. They often display aggressive, angry and violent behaviour. Their levels of perseverance within educational and social environment can be very limited"

**"Every boy who took part thoroughly engaged with the course. Spending time with the horses was, without doubt, the highlight of the week for each child and going to the course caused much excitement and joy"**

"On a practical level, the boys learned how to prepare a horse for riding, how to look after the horses through mucking out stables and feeding. Learning these tasks induced a level of self-discipline and respect in each boy"

"The boys also benefited hugely from the riding skills they learned which included how to guide a horse, how to walk and trot independently. As these riding skills were learned, I witnessed a huge confidence boost in the boys"

**"This level of confidence, humility and respect has greatly helped our learning**

**at school as there has been a marked difference in behaviour in certain boys as they've grown through the course"**

"Speaking to one boy's parents about the course ... they have witnessed a huge change in their son's confidence. He relayed to them that, at all times, his head feels 'fuzzy' but that everything 'becomes clear' when he gets on a horse. I witnessed this particular boy's confidence levels rise massively. By the final session he was like a new child as he rode, regularly celebrating his achievements to me verbally and beaming with joy as we finished the final session"

Another boy in the class struggles hugely with confidence socially. He finds it very difficult to express his emotions and needs verbally. This boy made a very strong bond with his horse. His love as he rode and cared for the horse was evident and the boy had no qualms about displaying this affection in front of others ...It was great reward to see his growth"

**"Spending time with these magnificent animals brought about a level of humility, gentleness and self-discipline in the boys that would be rare to find in other school settings"**

## Principal, Mitchell House School

**Miriam Donnan is principal of a school for pupils aged 3 to 19 years old who have a range of physical disabilities, such as Cerebral Palsy, Spina Bifida, Brain Injury, muscular conditions, limb amputations, and developmental delay.**

**"The benefits to the whole child are so important for us as a school to recognise ... so important to our staff to see massive benefits to their wellbeing, their whole, I suppose, outlook on life. It is so important to us to recognise that the impact of this doesn't just go to an hour on a Tuesday afternoon, it actually goes through the whole child, through the week..."**

For Miriam Donnan, principal of a school for children and young people with physical disabilities, physiotherapy-led equine therapy sessions with RDA are about treating the whole child. She identifies some key areas where the weekly sessions are of particular benefit.

Developing core strength and co-ordination are of utmost importance, especially for pupils with Cerebral Palsy or Brain Injury.

**"Having that opportunity to co-ordinate themselves and also to respond to the horse is so important and when they do that it gives them that sensation that they can then use - they can then use those co-ordination skills they have developed through riding the horse in everyday activities in school"**

Confidence in communication is another benefit. A lot of the pupils have speech and language difficulties and find it challenging to communicate with strangers. Having the opportunity to build relationships and communicate with staff and volunteers is important.

**"But most importantly they know how to communicate with the horse ... they have to listen to what the horse is communicating to them and respond. And that communication development is lovely to see"**

There is also an aspect of learning in the sessions, such as repetition of letters and numbers, interlinking their learning at school with their riding experience.

There are positive Mental Health benefits too, particularly for teenage pupils. Mental health can be a big challenge for young people with physical disability and that experience of being able to relate to animals is important for mental wellbeing.

**“The impact for the parents as well, that’s massive, to have you child coming home talking about the horse they’ve been on, talking about that relationship with them, actually wrapping up and heading outside for the afternoon summer and winter, is so, so important”**

Some of the youngest pupils at the school attend Equine Therapy sessions at the Donkey Sanctuary. Miriam talks about the huge benefits these sessions have for those children who have not had the early sensory experiences that a normally developing child would have due to their physical disability.

**“That’s a massive big step for them at a very young age and I suppose that then is a stepping stone for us and we can use that then in school for their sensory experiences – they can talk about what they’ve experienced with the donkeys and use that as a learning experience as well”**

**“It is so lovely to see the children ready to go on a Tuesday afternoon and really excited about it and wanting to get the best from it”**

# Perspectives: EAT and Adverse Childhood Experience

## **Sheila Lavery, former co-ordinator TESSA (Therapeutic Education and Support Services in Adoption)**

"What I was looking for was therapies that would feel less threatening for children and where children wouldn't have to talk about their experiences. One of the things we know about trauma is that when you start talking about things that have been traumatic in your past it creates a physiological response in the body and actually puts children in fight, or flight, or freeze, or submit behaviours. Also a lot of children would have experienced trauma when they were very young ... and so they would have what we call developmental trauma, and they would have it from before they had language, they would have no verbal skills to articulate or even understand it. So what I was looking for was ways they could express trauma physically, creatively, relationally and not have to sit in an intense therapeutic experience and try to think about or talk about something they had no cognitive ability to do"

"I think the benefits [of EAT] are diverse and different for different people, different children, different families. I think they are often subtle. One of the things we know about trauma is recovery is slow. But one of the things that happens with Equine Therapy is that there are moments of breakthrough, moments of opportunity that kind of let you in. These children are very defended, you know, and there

are opportunities where you can 'get in' and begin to build a relationship. It is relationship that changes people – it is relationship that changes traumatised children"

"Just doing that exercise where you approach the horse and the horse is very clearly giving you signals if they're not comfortable, traumatised children give you signals if they're not comfortable ... but we don't always see them because we're too busy listening to the words that are coming out of their mouths and we're not reading the body language. What a mother does with a new baby is have what we call a dance of attachment where they get to know each other and that was exactly what was happening with the horse...And it was a very clear indication of how softly and quietly you have to move to build a relationship that will regulate the child...that will help rewire their neurobiology that will help them overcome the trauma or certainly manage it and build resilience in the child so that they can have qualities to get through life without being constantly dogged by their early life experiences. It's an incredibly useful service for our children"

## Rebecca

**Rebecca was adopted at a young age, she is now 12 years old; she attended EFP sessions alongside her parent at Rangeview. A qualified counsellor was present at all times and therapy took place in a private and confidential setting.**

**"We explored our own personal boundaries and learned about keeping ourselves safe around the horses ... Over the next couple of sessions we explored my daughter's feelings more and [the therapist] helped me see that my daughter was feeling a bit stifled because I was being over protective ... I needed to let her blossom while still being there when she needs me"**

"Rebecca and her family had been going through a difficult time, but traditional therapies failed to have any positive impact. Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) was suggested as a possible alternative because Rebecca had always loved horses.

Rebecca could be quite impulsive and unaware of danger, both to herself and to others. The hope before beginning EFP was that the therapy would help to improve Rebecca's communication and concentration skills, build confidence, and reduce feelings of anxiety.

Rebecca's experience of equine psychotherapy led to some positive outcomes for her and her family.

Working together alongside the horses and the therapist helped Rebecca and her parent to build and strengthen their relationship. Rebecca's parent felt they gained a much better understanding of their child's needs, strengthened feelings of trust, and consequently felt more confident about giving Rebecca greater responsibility and independence.

"After seeing her confidently lead a horse around an obstacle course on her own, I reluctantly let her walk our dog at home. I was amazed at how this made the walk less stressful for us all (including the dog!) and she is now walking him regularly. I can see that my daughter needs more independence and I need to let her have it"

## Damien

**A 17 year old living in foster care talks about his experiences of EFP Rangeview. A qualified counsellor was present at all times and therapy took place in a private and confidential setting.**

**"I found the first time it was very emotionally draining because I just popped and everything went everywhere, I had no control of being able to keep that together and through going again and again I was then able to then progress and shape that into my own opinion, my own thoughts and be able to think of it logically and not just a big mess of emotion everywhere"**

"You walk the horse in a field and it was down to me, while any other time I had been with a horse it had been very much someone else was controlling that horse – I was just there. So there was a sense of responsibility..."

**"The first time I did it I was very hesitant and I was really not calm"**

"To be fair I really wasn't up for the idea, so I just went out and chatted, let's get this over and done with. The horse planted his feet and refused ... So I had to be calm, then go with the horse as like a friend, not just trying to force him around a field so I could go back inside"

"It helped me to relate to other things, not just myself. Before going out for the equine therapy, [the therapist] had done bits of therapy just in a room. I did see a benefit

of it, but after I went out for the equine therapy I then saw ten times that benefit in half the time. And so it turned from maybe once a week for an hour we would sit inside and talk, to once a week talking outside with a horse. And it was so much quicker, I got so much more help so much quicker"

**"Thinking back to it I would say it was like a balloon – going inside, sitting inside, is like releasing a bit of pressure, a bit of air, but outside is like stabbing the balloon, popping the balloon, everything is out."**

"While I was doing therapy just inside I noticed I'd held back a lot of the things I wanted to say cause maybe I was afraid to say them or whatever, but outside whether I wanted to or not I couldn't – which is kind of a good thing in that sense it needs to be said.

**"My mind-set right now is I would not be the person I am without that type of therapy, that has built me up so much and it was an amazing experience, it helped so much"**

# Jack

## **Jack, aged 55-64 years, has been living with PTSD as a result of a conflict related incident which left him with lasting psychological injuries**

**“The experience was very beneficial for my wellbeing, especially my mental health”**

The PTSD symptoms Jack experiences are wide-ranging and debilitating; vivid flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, difficulty sleeping, anger issues, hypervigilance, on and off bouts of depression, and feelings of social isolation.

In the past, Jack has tried a number of different psychological therapies but he felt they had little or no impact. He agreed to take part in a three day course of Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT), throughout which he would engage with a psychotherapist.

EAT had a positive impact on Jack. He felt that he gained confidence and a sense of independence. He learned how to regulate his breathing and become more self-aware.

Post-therapy evaluation supports Jack's own appraisal, showing an overall clinical improvement in his symptoms with his severity level of distress moving from 'moderate' to 'low'.

For Jack, an additional benefit of this type of EAT course was the opportunity to meet and engage with other people in a similar situation, which helped with his feelings of social isolation.

**“I found this course so beneficial and it was a wonderful opportunity to meet and chat with other victims who have also experienced severe trauma similar to that which I have experienced”**

He has since joined a gym to keep up both his physical activity and social interaction, when he would previously have stayed at home. The impact of this initial course was so positive that Jack sought further Equine Therapy after it ended.

## Conclusion

### **This is the first paper of its kind to review the contribution which EAT is making to the wellbeing of individuals and their families in Northern Ireland.**

The personal stories included here not only pay testimony to the potential impact of this kind of therapeutic intervention, but also reflect the breadth and depth of EAT. These first-hand accounts demonstrate the potential positive outcomes for people who are experiencing a range of challenges – physical, emotional, and educational.

One strong message that comes through clearly in both literature review and case studies is that EAT, in all forms, has great potential as an alternative therapy for those who are not responding to more conventional therapies. Consideration might be given to introducing EAT early in the treatment journey in areas where the existing research on the benefits of equine therapy are particularly strong such as trauma and ASD.

The literature suggests that there is a clear need for further measurement of the benefits and outcomes of EAT and a proper evaluation of costs involved and overall value of equine therapies. More robust research is needed in order to provide a more solid evidence base for EAT. However, the positive indications in the existing research and the voices of those who have experienced EAT should not be ignored.

This paper shines a light on the practice and delivery of EAT in Northern Ireland and gives a voice to just a few of the many people who currently benefit from equine therapy services locally.

A co-ordinated plan for EAT in Northern Ireland is needed to ensure that equine therapy services are accessible to any individual who could potentially benefit from them and to ensure that service provision is adequately funded. There is a need for decision makers at all levels to consider how best to incorporate EAT as an alternative mode of therapy and education. The diverse applications of EAT mean that potential benefits span many governmental departments including health, education, justice, and the economy.

It is hoped that this paper will help raise awareness of the multi-faceted therapeutic benefits of EAT and indicate the potential it has to improve the lives of a diverse range of individuals and families across Northern Ireland.

# Appendix 1

## Organisations who helped with this report

**We are truly indebted to the following organisations who helped in the production of this report. Without their help and experience this report would not have been possible.**

### **Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA)**

At RDA, horses have brought benefit to the lives of disabled children and adults for more than 50 years. RDA is an inclusive and diverse organisation which welcomes clients with physical and learning disabilities, and autism, and there are no age restrictions. RDA offers fun activities like riding and carriage driving, and provides therapy, fitness, skills development and opportunities for achievement, all supported by volunteers and qualified coaches. There are currently 30 groups and 4 RDA centres in Northern Ireland.

Research carried out by the RDA shows that horse riding with RDA delivers physical benefits, boosts confidence, improves communication skills and helps to build relationships.

“We know our activities support our clients’ education and learning, and that having the opportunity to compete improves confidence in daily life”

A 2018 survey of RDA volunteers found that volunteering with RDA gives people a sense of belonging – and a place of trust. Volunteers feel better about themselves, more confident, cheerful and relaxed. Volunteering with RDA is an active experience, helping to maintain an active lifestyle for people who value their fitness and continued physical health, even in later life. The results of the study demonstrate the ‘dual benefit’ at the heart of RDA volunteering: making a difference to the lives of others and benefitting the volunteer at the same time.

**Source:** [www.rda.org.uk](http://www.rda.org.uk)

### **The Donkey Sanctuary**

The donkey-assisted therapy programme at the Donkey Sanctuary is specifically for vulnerable children and adults. Initially the programme focused on children with additional needs, but over the last four decades the demand for a programme that could help adults and children with a wide range of emotional, psychological and cognitive needs became apparent.

“Donkeys have an innate emotional intelligence that can help to develop the psycho-social and emotional skill set of humans. We allow our donkeys to work with our clients on the same level to develop an empathetic relationship, which is mutually beneficial for the client and the donkey”

**Source:** [www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk](http://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk)

### **Rangeview Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning Centre**

Rangeview Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy & Learning is an integrative approach to the treatment of children, young people, and adults who have been exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and trauma. This approach reflects an integration of, developmental trauma, trauma-informed care, sensory attachment, attachment focused treatment, cognitive behavioural therapy, bringing principles and practices drawn from Somatic Experiencing & Polyvagal Theory.

Our vision - To improve lives and to relieve suffering caused by mental health problems.

Our approach - We believe it is important to take a 3 pronged approach to delivering support:

1. Support the child, young person & adults
2. Support the parent/carer
3. Support the social worker/care system

We are currently piloting a programme for young people and adults with mental health issues and complex needs using EFP.

Partners & Clients - TESSA; CAMHS; Community Mental Health; Autism Services; Simon Community; Private Clients; Belfast Trust; Northern Trust; South Eastern Trust; Southern Trust

For more information see [www.rangeview.co.uk](http://www.rangeview.co.uk)

### **Gortilea Social Farm**

Gortilea Social Farm is Northern Ireland's first Occupational Therapy centre to deliver a holistic approach to therapeutic interventions through meaningful activity with horses, their environment and nature. We dedicate ourselves to being a centre of excellence in this field, aiming to provide a place for everyone regardless of limitations (both physical and mental). We support children to reach their full potential, where the sky is the limit, we do this through meaningful, functional and therapeutic activities transferable to all areas of daily living.

Set up following a successful pilot using hippotherapy, we recognised the huge holistic benefits of equines as a therapeutic medium for a range of children, noting the significant and timely improvements in children's overall functioning and development, many going beyond initial goals set.

Over the past year, our onsite occupational therapist, the support team and volunteers have delivered a number of very successful hippotherapy sessions for children with complex needs. We have also piloted two small group programmes including Hippo Club and G.A.I.T.S for children using a kinethetics style of learning (learning by physically doing) to meet their individual needs.

For more information see  
[www.gortileasocialfarm.org](http://www.gortileasocialfarm.org)

### **The British Horse Society Ireland (BHS Ireland) - Learning with Horses Course**

Northern Ireland has many young people who for a variety of reasons have become negative in their approach to education and life in general. The BHS Ireland wants to provide those young people with a unique opportunity to learn through working with horses. We have sourced funding for and delivered approximately 90 courses since 2007, touching the lives of approximately 700 young people in Northern Ireland.

Learning with Horses gives young people between the ages of 9 and 17 a snapshot introduction into the basic care and management of horses, as well as fundamental riding skills. They also discover how to communicate and work with horses, encouraging positive engagement and motivational learning experiences that will be remembered long after the event. We work with Northern Ireland's Educational Guidance Centres, schools, and EOTAS (Education other than at school) to identify students who will most benefit from attending the course.

This project has benefitted vulnerable children who are unable to attend mainstream education due to long term medical, social, emotional, or behavioural problems. Student selection criteria includes: children with disabilities such as autism, deafness, speech problems and moderate learning difficulties; challenging behaviours, social deprivation, emotional/anger management issues, communication deficit, difficulty in engaging with aspects of the curriculum. Many are economically deprived. Some may be excluded or in danger of exclusion and who are marginalised as a result.

All courses take place at a British Horse Society Approved Riding School. BHS Approved Schools have horse and pony welfare along with client safety and satisfaction as priorities. Each course will be taught by a riding instructor/coach from the BHS Accredited Professional Coach Register. The 'Learning with Horses' course is a six week, two hour session for eight students or one hour session for 4 students and is aimed at young people with little or no experience of horses.

### **The Victim and Survivors Service (VSS)**

The VSS vision is to improve the health and wellbeing of victims and survivors. VSS have identified that while counselling and talking therapies result in improvement in 60% of individuals, 40% do not report improvement. In considering alternative psychological therapies for this cohort, analysis demonstrated some demand of equine therapy.

One of the case studies included in this report was provided by the VSS. The VSS used the COREnet evaluation tool to measure the impact of the equine assisted therapy programme on the individual involved. The individual was also asked to provide feedback on their experience.

## Appendix 2

### Note on the Coronavirus Pandemic

**During the course of this project the world was thrown into unprecedented and challenging times with the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic.**

The impact of this period of social and economic turmoil on the mental health and wellbeing of the population is sure to be extensive and complex. Several leading charities and academics have stressed that now is the time to strengthen mental health services in order to effectively support people in the months and years to come.

The mental wellbeing of children and young people is emerging as an area of particular concern.” Evidence from early research indicates that disruption to education, changing family dynamics, financial pressures, and social isolation during the pandemic have all contributed to increased feelings of anxiety, depression, stress and fatigue among many young people. Older children and young adults, those with pre-existing mental health and special education needs, and children and young people with ongoing social care needs were found to be particularly adversely affected.” Barnardo’s NI are amongst those calling for mental health and wellbeing to be prioritised in schools.”

The mental health repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic are being felt across society. Many people have experienced trauma directly through bereavement, coping with a positive diagnosis and the potential long-term health implications that can follow, and working with critically

ill coronavirus patients in health and social care settings. The mental health of many more has been affected by the extraordinary social and economic restrictions that have been placed on our lives.

**“We need to prepare now for the months and years to come, when some people will have returned to a type of normality; a normality that contrasts sharply with others whose lives have been changes immeasurably. This is when the mental health fallout will be most acute and this is the time we need to make plans”**

At the time of publication of this report many of the centres have had to close or significantly reduce their services. Anecdotally we very aware of the impact on both the physical and mental well being of the people who normally use these service. This is supported by both service users and their carers.

\* Young Minds, [www.youngminds.org.uk/resources/policy-reports/how-is-the-covid-19-pandemic-impacting-young-peoples-mental-health](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/resources/policy-reports/how-is-the-covid-19-pandemic-impacting-young-peoples-mental-health) accessed 24/09/2020

\*\* Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU), UCL and Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, “Emerging evidence. Coronavirus and children and young people’s mental health” Issue 3, 26 August 2020

\*\*\* Barnardo’s NI, ‘New Term, New Challenges, New Opportunities – a report based on the thoughts and experiences of local educators ahead of school’s return’ August, 2020

\*\*\*\* Professor Siobhán O’Neill, Belfast Telegraph, April 15 2020

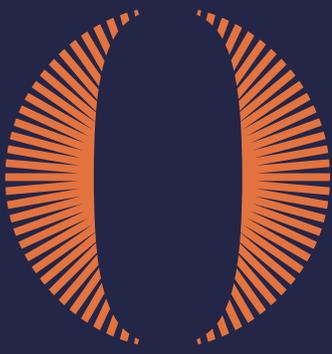
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