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# A literature review of the social value of equestrianism

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Executive summary



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## Executive Summary

Those who regularly interact with horses know how that time improves their mental and physical health but how does wider society benefit? British Equestrian partnered with Sheffield Hallam University and Sport and Recreation Alliance on the first element on a groundbreaking study into the social value of equestrianism.

The headline findings from the initial literature review show equestrianism has been found to contribute social value in four outcomes and the evidence suggests there are unique positive consequences in equestrianism that are not found in other activities.

### **Social value**

The pursuit of social value has become an important step to help organisations and communities demonstrate their impact on society. This literature review was commissioned by British Equestrian (BEF) to lay the groundwork for quantifying the social value of equestrian activity in the UK. Its purpose is to identify, summarise and synthesise existing evidence on equestrian activity and social outcomes. In particular, it aims to uncover evidence in four established social value outcome areas:

- Physical and mental health;
- Subjective wellbeing;
- Individual development; and
- Social and community development.

The initial '*Quick Scoping Review*'<sup>1</sup> of academic published material and unpublished 'grey literature' identified 856 potential studies and reports for consideration. After eliminating 171 duplicate and inaccessible papers, the remaining sample of 685 was screened. Of these 395 were considered not relevant to the goals of the study, leaving 290 papers on which the analysis is based.

The overall findings of the review can be summarised as follows:

- The largest volume of literature was around the outcome area of physical and mental health.
- Subjective wellbeing, individual development and social and community development had significantly less suggesting a gap in existing empirical evidence.
- The majority of papers examined the social value of equestrianism in treating people with existing disabilities or long-term health conditions, opposed to preventing the development of such conditions.
- There are some negatives associated with equestrianism such as a risk of injury, severe injuries, and illness.
- The review found mixed evidence regarding the volume and quality concerning the extent to which equestrianism contributes to social outcomes.
- There has been a steady increase in the number of papers published since 2016 indicating a continued interest in this area of research.
- Further and higher quality research quantifying the social value of equestrianism is needed, particularly in the outcomes of subjective wellbeing, individual development,

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<sup>1</sup> Collins et al., 2015

social and community development, and those outcomes which seem specific to equestrianism.

Outlined below is a short summary of each of the four outcomes.

### **Physical and Mental Health**

Of the 290 papers included, 217 explored at least one sub-outcome of physical or mental health. Recreational horse riding, including 'off horse' activities such as grooming, is thought to reach the threshold for 'moderate' physical activity and therefore would contribute to the recommended '150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per week' for adults<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, horse riding has a positive effect on cardiovascular fitness and reduces the risk of ill health. Although there is a risk of injury and illness from horse riding, and associated activities, these can be reduced by utilising safety equipment.

Improving motor function (e.g. balance, gait, muscular strength, flexibility) because of Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT), was a popular research topic with 91 papers in total. They mostly focused on children and adults with existing health conditions such as Cerebral Palsy, Multiple Sclerosis, and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The papers reported significant improvements in motor function after completing EAT, with results surpassing those achieved through traditional physical therapy, indicating a unique benefit of equestrianism. The interventions ranged in frequency and length of sessions, but positive findings were reported from participating in EAT once per week and using mechanical simulators instead of traditional hippotherapy (Prieto et al., 2021; Salbaş and Karahan, 2023).

Hippotherapy was also thought to improve chronic back pain. However, in this context, it was suggested traditional hippotherapy would yield more positive results than a simulator due to the psychological effect that could be achieved by using horses (Collado-Mateo et al. 2020).

Papers also explored the impact equestrian activity has on mental health. Overall, it had a positive impact on symptoms of depression and anxiety. Specifically, EAT was reported to significantly reduce Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Six of the ten papers that focused on PTSD in veteran's found that therapeutic horse riding and equine-assisted psychotherapy improved symptoms, particularly negative thoughts (Johnson et al., 2018; Willmund et al., 2020). There were also findings that indicated a positive effect of EAT on patients with substance use disorder and eating disorders, including improved completion rate of treatment programmes (Gatti et al., 2020). The authors suggested that the horses created a calm environment that fostered positive growth and better communication for patients (Fennig et al., 2022). However, further research would be needed to provide robust evidence of these suggested findings.

### **Subjective Wellbeing**

Subjective wellbeing was the second most researched outcome with 105 papers, 42 of which looked at quality of life. Equestrianism has been shown to significantly improve a person's long term health condition, resulting in a notable enhancement in the patient's quality of life. These

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240015128>

benefits have been reported in people with Multiple Sclerosis, Alzheimer's Disease, breast cancer, ankylosing spondylitis and in older adults. One study even found that EAT enhanced the quality of life for both the stroke patient, and their carer (Bunketorp-Käll et al., 2017).

Engaging with horses through equine-assisted activities is thought to reduce stress, increase a feeling of calmness, and improve life satisfaction. One study focused on quarantine control workers found that after just 16 weeks of equine-assisted learning, participants reported a significant reduction in perceived stress and an improvement in all three stress coping factors: social support seeking, problem solving, and avoidance (Jung et al., 2022). Additionally, two studies captured the profound impact of owning horses, suggesting that caring for horses, more so than other animals, contributes to a greater sense of purpose and increased psychological wellbeing. In part, this is due to the satisfaction gained from their horses' response to their care decisions (Luhmann and Kalitzki, 2018; Bornemann, 2024).

### **Individual Development**

Ninety-six papers captured the effect of equestrian activity on individual development. There were nine sub-outcomes included in the report, self-esteem and confidence were the most commonly researched (34 papers). A particular focus in this area of research was the impact of equestrianism on young people 'at risk', notably those disengaged from traditional school, in the care system, or who had experienced violence. Research suggests that equine-assisted activities can have a positive effect on attendance at school and subsequently attainment (Pendry et al., 2014), reduce poor behaviour and increase prosocial behaviour (Pelyva et al., 2020), reduce gaming addiction and improve emotional behaviour (Park and Jung, 2024). It has also been found to significantly reduce domestic violence incidents in families (Hemingway and Sullivan, 2022).

Papers also looked at the development of skills that would be beneficial for employment. A positive relationship was seen between the use of horsemanship skills and life skills (Smith et al., 2006). In addition, young adults aged 16-24 who regularly ride rated their proficiency of 21 out of 23 soft skills significantly higher than non-riders (Oliveira et al., 2016). 54% of Riding for the Disabled (RDA) volunteers, believed volunteering had improved their career prospects. Furthermore, one case study reported that participating in an EAT programme had a positive relationship with occupational engagement in adults with mental health issues (Højgaard-Bøytler and Argentzell, 2023). Together these indicate that participating in both 'on horse' and 'off horse' activity has a positive relationship with employability.

Overall, equestrianism was found to have been associated with reducing poor behaviour, improving good behaviour, improving a person's ability to cope, their self-efficacy and self-confidence, and the development of skills which would be beneficial for employment.

### **Social and Community Development**

Social and community development was the least researched outcome with 60 papers. There were trends that equestrianism has a positive effect on increased social interaction, development of friendship, and social trust. One study reported that males and those aged over 25 years valued social contact more than females and people under 25 years old (Sáez et al., 2022). Therefore, indicating that certain sub-populations may experience greater social and community benefits from equestrian activities than others. However, surprisingly, equestrian

activity was not found to significantly reduce feelings of loneliness overall. Although, a more focused study revealed that RDA volunteers reported having a positive connection with others. These volunteers highlighted benefits such as increased social connection, empathy, and a stronger sense of belonging within a community.

Twenty-one papers looked at communication and language, with nine of those focussed specifically on people with ASD. One study found that after a ten-week therapeutic horse-riding intervention, children with ASD showed significant improvements in the social communication, number of words, and the use of new words (Gabriels et al., 2015). Similar positive findings were also reported in people with dementia (Sebalj et al., 2024). Although there is a need for further studies with robust methodologies, these findings indicate that equine-assisted therapy has a positive effect on communication, vocabulary, and overall language skills. This is a unique aspect of equestrianism not seen commonly in other activities.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this quick scoping review indicates there is sufficient evidence in the literature to complete a Social Value or Social Return On Investment (SROI) study to estimate the value of British equestrian activity. The literature review provides evidence of outcomes linked to both general sport and physical activity, as well as in outcomes specific to equestrianism. Whilst there is evidence that equestrian-specific outcomes could be valued with suitable financial proxies, if these proxies are not available, the outcomes can also be reported qualitatively, alongside the quantified measures.