

The Herd's Ahead Veteran's Well-Being Project Impact Report

About the Project

Working in collaboration with The Veterans' Farm-Able Foundation (now Veterans Outdoors), the project delivered 6, monthly day-programmes of Equine Assisted Interventions and outdoor activities with 5 veterans experiencing mental ill health, PTSD, social isolation and problems transitioning to civilian life, all of which, were exacerbated due to the pandemic.

Equine Assisted Interventions (EAI) is an alternative therapeutic intervention to traditional talk therapy, which has been shown to improve symptoms of depression/anxiety/PTSD, reintegration issues and overall quality of life in veterans, whilst helping tackle stigma attached to traditional therapies. It is widely known that veterans avoid mainstream therapies and services and view seeking help as being weak. Horses offer an extraordinary amount of emotional support and can help veterans to navigate challenging emotional experiences. There are currently very few EAI services in the UK specifically supporting the veteran community. However, scientific evidence shows that EAI could be a very beneficial approach to those in need of social, emotional and trauma support, following military service.

Sessions took place in small groups, led by a Hugs project manager, equine specialist and civilian mentor and supported by Farm-Able's welfare staff. The programme was designed with tasks/obstacles for the veterans to overcome so they could share their experiences with each other and the professional team. Wrapped around these sessions, veterans also took part in other outdoor activities including developing a sensory garden, helping to paint or maintain areas of the yard and stables and assisting in the preparation of the site ahead of open days and events, which also helped disadvantaged children in the community who attend Hugs well-being interventions. This created a sense of purpose and community for the veterans and helped promote positive teamwork. Project aims were; increased well-being, decreased social isolation, decreased stigma, decreased symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD and building friendships between veterans and with the wider community. Outcomes were measured using the WEMWBS scale and open questions to produce accurate and comprehensive data.



The Hugs Foundation. Registered Charity Number: 1175633

Tel: 07539 916048 www.hugsfoundation.org.uk

Company Registered Address: Higher Whitley Farm, Helland Road, Bodmin, Cornwall, PL31 2NT

The Veterans Farm-Able Foundation (now Veterans Outdoors). Registered Charity Number: 1175204

Tel: 07760 729080 www.veteransoutdoors.org.uk

Company Registered Address: c/o 4 Stonesclose, Galpin Street, Modbury, Ivybridge, PL21 0RZ

The Need

A recent study (MOD, 2018) showed mental ill health in serving military personnel and veterans increased by 78% over a 10 year period. There are 54,000 veterans in the South West experiencing mental ill health and a range of life challenges including depression, alcohol misuse, anxiety disorders and PTSD. The pandemic has exacerbated these problems, with The Veterans Farm-Able Foundation charity (now Veteran's Outdoors) seeing an increase in referrals, suicide ideation, feelings of hopelessness, and social isolation. One service user that attended the project had a goal "to stay alive." A recent study by Combat Stress showed a 50% increase in veterans with declining mental ill health due to the pandemic. The project helped veterans by:

- Interactions between veterans and horses promoted emotional growth, built confidence, communication skills, trust, social skills, impulse control, and helped define boundaries. This helped veterans, who were struggling to cope, to break down barriers and promote healing and skills to build civilian and family relationships and peer friendships. For example, one of our service users had sadly experienced domestic (mentally and emotionally) abuse and was extremely quiet and withdrawn. Through tasks with the rescue ponies, such as teaching them to lead, stop and walk on, the service user built confidence and learnt to be assertive and set boundaries to enable success in the task. When the rescue pony started to get impatient and show behaviours such as pawing the ground, the service user was supported to lower the energy levels, deescalate the situation and establish leadership skills to calmly say no, leading to a sense of achievement in the completion of the task.
- Improving the community spaces/areas at Hugs such as the sensory garden, helped the wider community i.e. disadvantaged children that use these spaces, giving veterans a sense of meaning and purpose and improving well-being. We also found that service users could step back and see what they had achieved and liked the community payback element, making a difference to those less fortunate.



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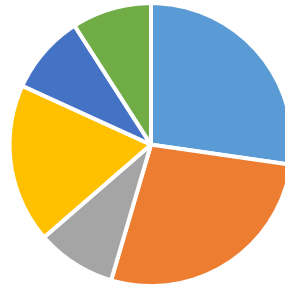
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The Service Users

Service User Details					
Male	Female	Non Binary	Aged 30 - 40	Aged 41 - 50	Aged 51 - 65
2 (40%)	3 (60%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	3 (60%)
Total 5 Service Users					

Service Users Referrals



■ PTSD ■ Anxiety ■ Agrophobia ■ Domestic Abuse ■ Depression ■ Physical Disability



Outcomes

Positive Changes in Service Users from Mentor Observations and Service User Feedback:

- Improved confidence and self-esteem
- Reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD
- Built friendships/relationships
- Built leadership skills and learnt to set boundaries
- Reduced social isolation
- Provided a safe space to think and then gave confidence to tackle other issues. Hugs provided a regular space, date and time to do this.

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Feedback From Service Users

"Staff were 100%. Tremendous, social, very lively and a big encouragement. An excellent day and very well organised." Service user also commented that the most helpful part of the day was that it increased their confidence.

"The ponies helped me feel relaxed."

"If this continues in 2022, I will be putting my name down without fail."

"It reminded me to be myself."

Case Study Anna (55 years old) – name changed to protect service user

One of the participants on The Herds Ahead Project was a 55-year-old Royal Air Force veteran, who we will call Anna. When Anna referred to The Veterans Farm-Able Foundation and signed up to the project, she was suffering from high levels of anxiety, depression and was also recovering from cancer. With little or no family support and having escaped a toxic marriage, she had become socially isolated, had exceedingly low confidence and self-esteem and found it very difficult to trust others. Farm-Able offer a variety of activities to support veterans. The Hugs Foundation's Herds Ahead Project was one of the first activities that Anna attended, supported by welfare staff from Farm-Able. Quiet and unsure of herself, proximity to the horses seemed to provide a connection and talking point. Memories of a happy childhood and interaction with horses came forth.

Joining The Herds Ahead Project provided a series of structured and timetabled visits, with each session building on the last. Anna was able to discuss what she found most helpful with the team and she became involved in helping shape the structure of the sessions to enable the most positive outcomes for her and others on the course. The project offered a balance of outdoor activities to provide a sense of purpose and with emphasis on teamwork and the therapeutic benefits of Equine Assisted Interventions.

As the sessions went on, Anna's confidence grew and she was able to join a nature recovery pathway with other outdoor activities with Farm-Able. Having a knowledge of plants and gardening she became involved with larger mixed gender groups, working on land-based projects that partnered with local Town and Parish Councils and other community groups. She formed relationships and developed leadership skills, which were built on from the tasks she had successfully accomplished at Hugs. Having worked on The Hugs Foundation's sensory garden, she played an active part in planning, developing and implementing two projects that provided community sensory gardens in a local Town. One garden was a haven for nature and wildlife, aimed at the education of children, the second was a "Garden of Hope" for the community to enjoy. The end of the project was marked by a public opening event, which Anna attended, standing proudly with the rest of the team for photographs.

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Anna has a great work ethic and can always be relied upon to turn up and see things through, she returned for every session of The Herds Ahead Project. The project was a catalyst to change for Anna and it has had quite a transformational impact on Anna, with mentors, peers and other participants noting a big change in her confidence, happiness and social inclusion. Anna still has some days when confidence can be an issue and as a woman of few words it was good to hear her say “I had a bad day pretty much every day, but now they are far less frequent and I am able to deal with them.”

She has always been fearful of exams and failure but has recently completed both a Foundation Maths course and has just received Level 5 (strong pass) results for her GCSE Maths exam. Not content with Maths, she also passed a Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) exam with 98% and is the only female enrolled with the Stirling Project, Plymouth’s latest veterans self-build scheme. The project will see 8 previously homeless veterans involved in the construction of 25 self-contained affordable homes to rent. During the build, the veterans will earn construction qualifications and skills which will help them gain employment once the project is complete.

The Herds Ahead Project has helped Anna rebuild her confidence, self-esteem, social skills and leadership skills. It has supported better mental health and well-being, enabling and encouraging participants to live successful, independent, civilian lives. Anna continues to participate in Mindfulness and any community based projects. When asked about Equine Assisted Interventions and The Hugs Foundation in the future she commented “If this continues in 2022, I will be putting my name down without fail.”



Expenditure

Although we had less participants than we’d planned for, costs remained the same. For the first two sessions, we had a qualified therapist on site. However, it soon became apparent that the cohort did not need a specific therapist as they were either already receiving counselling/therapy outside of the project or fed back that it made them feel more disengaged and self-conscious with a therapist there. Hugs staff were Mental Health First Aid trained and qualified in animal and human behaviour. Farm-Able staff were all veterans and

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one staff member that attended all sessions was Trauma Trained and MHFA trained too, therefore, it was decided that the project outcomes would be more successful by having civilian and veteran mentors, rather than 'therapists.' The hours worked by the Farm-Able staff were slightly more than predicted, as were the administration costs, evening out the difference in expenditure from not having a therapist for several sessions.

The Positives – What Went Well

Every service user reported that the project had helped them in some way. There was no negative feedback left by anyone. All that worked on the project were flexible to each service user's individual needs and goals and were able to adapt sessions last minute. The Hugs rescue animals also benefitted from working with the service users and several have now been rehomed due to the work they did on the project. The community, as a whole, has benefited from the work the project has accomplished e.g. sensory garden.

The Not So Positives – What Can we Improve On?

Veterans with more severe mental ill health are a challenging community to engage and keep engaged. This is a sector wide issue. These issues made recruitment difficult, but some of this may be down to distance from Farm-Able in Devon to Hugs in Cornwall. It was incredibly difficult to get all 5 service users to attend all sessions and sadly, on more than one occasion, less attended. It was also difficult to get feedback from the participants, most chose to not complete their WEMWBS scores and so feedback has gone on their verbal and written reports and observations. However, every service user reported the project had helped them and they had enjoyed it. From this, we need to learn and adapt for the future. Farm-Able were responsible for recruitment, therefore there was a heavy emphasis on the Devon area. It would be more beneficial to aim recruitment in the Cornwall area so that distance does not become a barrier. We could do this by reaching out to more local veterans' charities and organisations to spread the word about the project. Moving forwards, from the service users' feedback, a combination of volunteering type 'doing' tasks, such as, improving Hugs facilities to help disadvantaged young people alongside some Equine Assisted Interventions would work well for different groups of veterans. We hope to continue this much needed support and will be looking to apply for further funding for 2022.



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