

Bristol horse charity on front line of supporting emotional health and wellbeing for local children and teens during Covid crisis.

Thursday 28 January, 2021

- **Discovery courses provide a “life-line” to students; especially during times of uncertainty**
- **HorseWorld continuing to deliver essential equine assisted learning sessions to Bristol’s young people**
- **Sessions with rescued horses are providing vital source of emotional and practical support for vulnerable students struggling to cope during lockdown**
- **Charity continuing to see a huge increase in demand for places on the Discovery courses, suggesting Covid-related stress is taking its toll on the emotional health and wellbeing of local youngsters.**

The emotional health and resilience of vulnerable children and young people in Bristol is being seriously affected by the current Covid crisis – that’s according to a local charity.

HorseWorld, the Bristol-based horse rescue charity, has seen an exponential increase in demand for places on its Discovery course – a programme which offers equine assisted learning to vulnerable young people, and is appealing for support from the public to enable them to help more at-risk children.

Demand for sessions was already in excess of the charity’s capacity prior to the start of the pandemic, but with the extra stress imposed on young people over the last ten months, in September alone enquiries and requests for places had doubled.

The charity also received desperate pleas from parents, guardians and teachers of some students for sessions to continue during the most recent lockdown as the sudden enforced stopping of sessions due to the previous full lockdown in March had caused great distress to the young people.

“We heard from parents and students about how hard it was for them during the first lockdown. It was heart-breaking to know that the children and young people had found it so hard to cope, but at the time there was nothing we could do,” said Sharon Howell, Discovery Course Leader.

“Many of our students find comfort in routine and need predictability in their lives to feel confident and secure, so the sudden stopping of courses during the first lockdown was very difficult for them.

“Connecting with our horses can be a huge source of comfort and a calming influence for our students, as well as a way for them to learn essential life-skills, so to have it taken away from them at a time when their anxiety and stress was probably at an all-time high was incredibly difficult for many of them. A huge source of support had been suddenly removed at the time they needed it the most.”

As an alternative learning provider registered with the local authority, the charity has been able to continue delivering the programme since the most recent lockdown began, albeit with strict safety measures in place and some changes made to how the sessions are delivered.

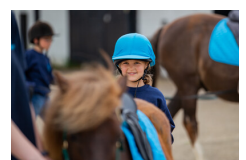
“Prior to lockdown some students were coming to us in small groups, but restrictions mean this is no longer possible. We recognised that we needed to take action to try and enable as many young people as possible to access the courses. All our facilitators are working extra hard as we’re now only able to work one-to-one, and are offering more sessions during the day,” said Sharon.

“We’re seeing first-hand that the Covid crisis is having a hugely negative effect on the emotional health of many of our students and missing their regular sessions with the horses has really taken its toll. But we only get to see a small percentage of children and young people; the likelihood is that there are many more young people out there who are struggling just as much as our students are.

“The demand for Discovery is already at an all-time high and I fear that it’s only once the peak of Covid has subsided that we’ll be hit with an even bigger wave of children and young people who are struggling to cope with the effects of living through these exceptionally stressful times. We will be doing all we can to offer what we know is this life-changing course to as many as possible.”

Sixteen-year-old Lauren has been attending Discovery sessions for the last 3 years to help her cope with

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her ADHD and strongly believes that the course has played a vital role in not only making her day-to-day life easier, but also helping her to stay in mainstream education. She said:



"I feel like horses are crucial to my survival because they slow my brain down, without me having to take even more tablets which just numb everything.

"I notice that when I'm at school sometimes I get a tight chest because I'm really anxious, but then I come here and it's like I can actually breathe. It's like someone has loosened a corset. This keeps me sane. Even with all the stress of having my GCSE's cancelled, but being here just took all that away. Without it I would have lost my mind; I would've been kicked out of school within a day.

"During the first lockdown I was really anxious because we didn't know how long it was going to last for, and I didn't know how I was going to be without being around the horses. I went back to school before the Discovery sessions started and I felt so stressed – even my friends noticed it in my eyes.

"I just can't focus without the horses. Quite often people like me with ADHD really struggle in school, but with the horses when they reward you it's such a huge feeling. It's worth so much more. It's like 20 million people saying 'well done', when it's the reaction of just one horse.

"Here you get to feel 'normal', whatever that is. But you get to feel like you're more of a person because everyone fits in. ADHD is like a battle between your body, your brain and society. I don't struggle because my brain is a problem. I struggle because the environment in which it's in says it's a problem. But here it's different. They start with the person and shape the environment around you. Here you have the freedom to be what you want and need to be."

In response to the huge surge in demand the charity is appealing for donations to assist HorseWorld in helping more vulnerable children and young people to access the courses - building their personal resilience and learning essential life skills. More information can be found at www.horseworld.org.uk/discovery-appeal.

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