

The Story of

Riding  
for  
Smiles

Dr Geoff Cutts with Stephanie Hind

Five years from dream  
to established charity

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1. Activities which make up an Equestrian Experience

## **1. Introduction**

Early 2022, five years since Riding for Smiles was established, time to reflect on the amazing journey for Riding for Smiles, from dream to established charity in less than five years. In many ways this journey is secondary to the impressive stories of the many children, young people and adults who have benefited from the activities and programmes, all supported by Riding for Smiles.

The story is about Riding for Smiles; Geoff (chair and treasurer) Helen (secretary) Sarah and Jen, trustees; Sharon, trustee, proprietor, and owner of Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre; Stephanie, Riding for Smiles' Special Educational Needs advisor and project liaison officer, and the staff, volunteers, horses, and ponies who make up the team.

## **2. From Dream to Charitable Status**

Stephanie Hind was aware of the benefits of animal therapy and had dreamed about making the benefits of horse riding available to children and young people. In early 2017 Stephanie approached Sharon Tolley, who shared the dream, and the journey began. Together they set about creating what we now know as Riding for Smiles.

Sharon had a lifelong dream to own a riding stable. This dream was realised in 2011 when she leased Bank House Farm and created the Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre. The growth of Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre has been phenomenal as demonstrated by the number of horses and ponies. There were sixteen horses in 2011, today there are fifty-eight and the Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre is an established business bringing thousands of customers to the stables each year.

The link between horse assisted therapy in raising educational and motivational effectiveness and in developing a cross section of skills is well proven. To ensure Riding for Smiles continually provides the highest quality of experience Riding for Smiles employs Stephanie. Stephanie attends and reports to monthly management / trustees' meetings.

Stephanie is a retired teacher who specialised in additional needs and physical education. She has years of experience working in schools planning, delivering, and monitoring/evaluating lessons for those with a variety of special needs.

Stephanie has used her skills in all these areas to provide innovative strategies to deliver learning opportunities to many children. She has always believed in the benefits of animal / horse assisted therapy in raising educational and motivational effectiveness and in developing a cross section of skills. She has

also had wide experience of working with multi professionals such as Psychologists, CAMHS and Speech Therapists. She is a keen sports person and has previously been a horse rider and owner.

Riding for Smiles strongly believes in the value of their Programmes and can demonstrate the benefits for the children, their classmates, their schools, their family life, and their life chances.

In those early days Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre funded Stephanie and provided the activities. The first sessions were delivered for a local pupil referral unit. However, local schools learned of the opportunity and wanted to come along to the stables. Finding a source of funding was becoming a necessity.

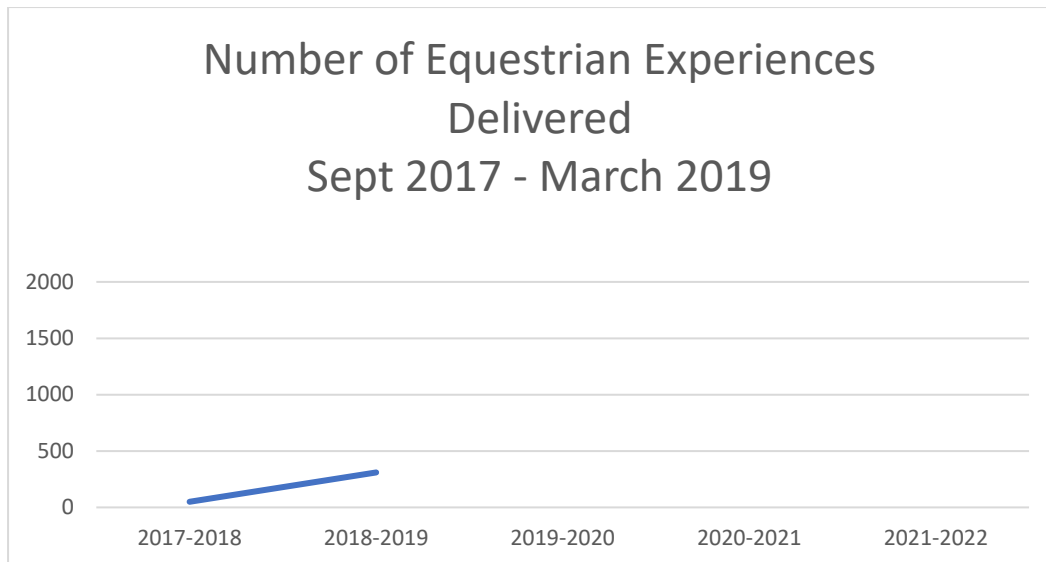
Numbers were small but the benefits were being realised and the numbers continued to grow. It was time to form the charity and create the lasting partnership between Riding for Smiles and the Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre. This partnership has been key to Riding for Smiles' success and is just one element which makes Riding for Smiles unique.

The charity, 1174773, was formally registered on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2017. Charitable status allowed Riding for Smiles to bid for funding allowing the charity to grow. The three inaugural trustees were Sharon Tolley, Jen Lee, and Dr. Geoff Cutts.

### **3. Getting Started**

In that first part year up to March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, Riding for Smiles received several small donations and grants, all very gratefully received. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, Riding for Smiles had £770 in the bank.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2018 Riding for Smiles received a grant of £10,866. This marked the real start of Riding for Smiles' journey. In the year April 2018 to March 2019 over three hundred experiences were delivered. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, Riding for Smiles had £1,927 in the bank and a partnership was formally agreed with Coloured Cob. Riding for Smiles was, indeed, started.



#### 4. Searching for an Identity

Riding for Smiles was being recognised as ‘doing something different.’ Feedback was good from children, young people, and adults; from schools and their staff; from funders; and from the Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre. The reports written at the end of every term for each school highlighted what Riding for Smiles was achieving. Riding for Smiles was recognised as being child focussed, responsive to needs, and what is more fully embracing the Well-Being Pathway.

Promote (an environment supporting emotional growth),  
 Identify (individuals needing support),  
 Assess (specific needs for appropriate intervention),  
 Provide (interventions to match specific needs),  
 Review (how needs are being met and next steps, and  
 Celebrate (reflect on positives, efforts, and success).

School Heads reported.

“Anxieties have been alleviated, confidence raised, negative behaviours successfully addressed, and the thrill of horse riding felt.”

“Without exception, every child who has participated in the Riding for Smiles programme has loved their experience; they adore grooming the horses, cleaning out the stables and riding.”

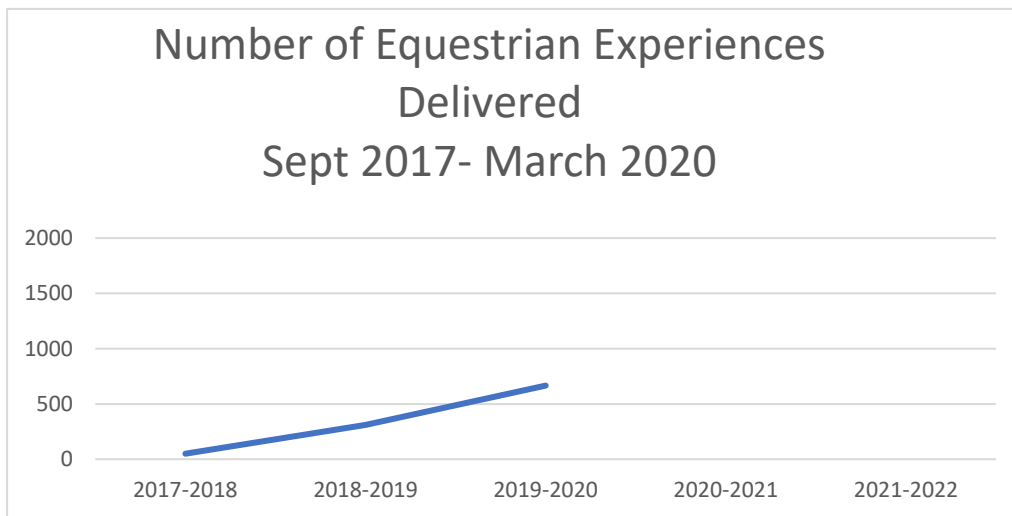
“Undoubtedly, each child has grown from their experience, whether they became calmer, more talkative, happier or more confident, their growth in confidence and esteem and mental well-being has been measurable and long-lasting.”

“There has been a noticeable difference in the classroom. Children are contributing more and speaking more confidently to others.”

The paragraphs above define Riding for Smiles. Riding for Smiles enhances the children’s learning and provides an opportunity for development in many areas which enhances their life chances.

Riding for Smiles had its identity.

### 5. Year 3, April 2019 – March 2020



Numbers were increasing and Riding for Smiles began bidding for grants month by month and the number of successful bids slowly increased. Funders required Riding for Smiles to provide detailed records of expenditure against each grant. Riding for Smiles therefore developed a spreadsheet-based management accounting system which was implemented in August 2019.

Every visit to the stables is recorded. The data on record for each visit – date, school, programme, number of riders, number in the carriage, and the source of funding. This provides the total numbers and cost to each grant totalled for the month which then creates a month-by-month analysis. Riding for Smiles’ booking system then provides a detailed numbers and cash flow forecast.

Income was growing and funded around 650 experiences delivered over the year. The cash in the bank at the end of March 2020 was £4,319. Further Riding for Smiles had demonstrated good financial management making sure every penny raised or donated was used to provide equestrian experiences.

Riding for Smiles has minimal overhead costs which are directly funded through donations and specific grants. For example, the grant to fund Stephanie's salary through lock-downs.

## **5.1 Planning for a Future**

A Service Level Agreement had been agreed and signed off by the trustees and Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre and was further updated in March 2021. Riding for Smiles and Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre shared a vision making the future of the partnership secure.

Riding for Smiles was better understanding the immediate success of each visit, the benefits of a wider experiences and the development of learning opportunities. Each visit to the stables was an experience way beyond riding. A vast range of activities are on offer, each leading to specific experiences, benefits and learning outcomes. (Appendix 1)

## **5.2 From riding to Equestrian Experience**

The benefits from trekking and from riding lessons are well understood. Riding for Smiles started with the belief that wider learning needed more than riding. We at Riding for Smiles observed that many of the children and young people loved 'stable management.' The benefits, taking turns (to brush a pony or empty the wheelbarrow), sharing (brushes, shovels), listening and learning (using the right brush to groom and during 'formal' lessons), staying safe (in a busy yard with many large horses around) and poo picking, were very apparent.

A 'typical' equestrian experience includes 30 minutes horse riding or carriage riding and 30 minutes of stable management. Children on the deprivation programme attend for six one-hour sessions over a term; children on the mental health programme twelve one-hour sessions over two terms. Our adult group have a 40-minute trek or carriage ride followed by a self-help group session, often over an alfresco lunch.

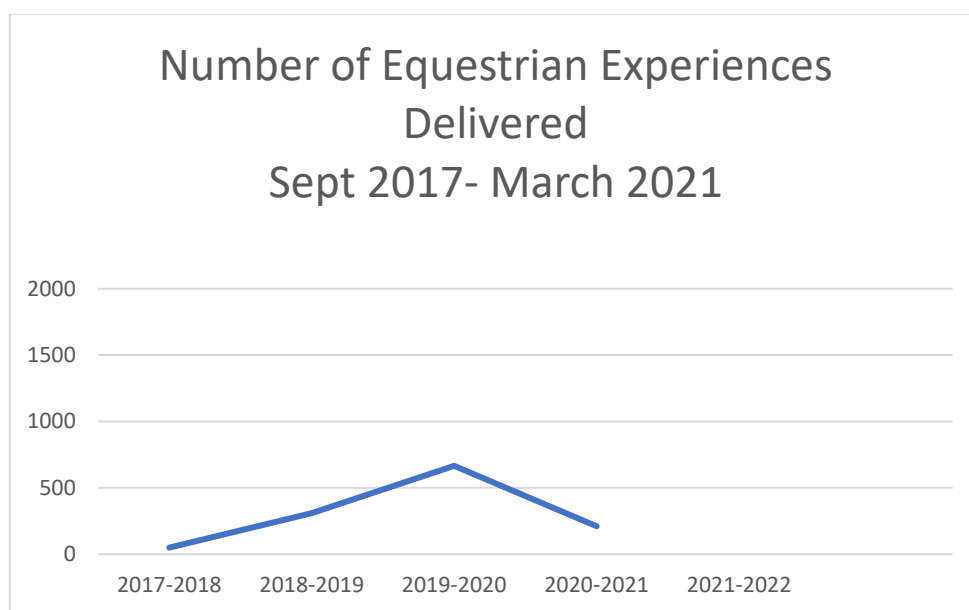
Riding for Smiles together with Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre, their staff, and their safe and secure horses, deliver a complete experience which does deliver the breadth and depth of experience required to realise the amazing benefits. This is why we think Riding for Smiles with Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre is truly unique.

Appendix 1 comprises the list of activities which are available to bespoke an experience. Riding for Smiles is delivering unique experiences tailored for the children, groups, and programmes.

## 6. Year 4, April 2020 – March 2021

March 2020, the Chair caught one of the final flights from the USA home straight into the first lock down, schools were closed and all visits to the stables ceased. Just 210 experiences were delivered in September and October 2020 before the second lock down. These periods proved to be extremely difficult for children, young people, and adults with mental health problems and those living in deprivation.

With hindsight Riding for Smiles had foresight and started to prepare for the uncertain future. Numbers plummeted.



### 6.1 New Trustees join the Board.

At the Riding for Smiles Trustees' Meeting on Nov 5th, 2020, Sharon, the current chair, welcomed Sarah and Helen to their first meeting as trustees. Geoff was elected as Chair taking over from Sharon and Jen having completed her three-year term, stood down. The new board of trustees being, Geoff, Helen, Sarah, and Sharon. Stephanie attends the monthly meetings as part of the management team.

Sarah is a Solicitor specialising in civil litigation. She is Head of Operations and Technical Performance at one of the UK's top one hundred law firms. Helen was an Inclusion manager and Special Educational Needs Coordinator in a Primary school setting. She is a Volunteer with Girl Guiding UK and a horse loaner. Geoff was a Director and Academic from Sheffield Hallam University. He was Chair of Governors at The Bolsover School; a volunteer for the Royal



National Lifeboat Institution delivering talks in schools and to adult groups, an instructor with the Royal Yachting Association, a founder and life member of Bolsover District u3a, member of Elmton and Creswell Big Local, Elmton Community Association, Church treasurer and his wife owns a horse which is stabled at the Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre.

Riding for Smiles successfully bid for funding to enable continued development during this period. These funds enabled Riding for Smiles to retain the services of Stephanie throughout and Stephanie and the Chair, supported by the trustees and staff at Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre worked to make sure Riding for Smiles could react to any situation which might emerge.

## **6.2 Looking for Inclusivity**

RfS had always prided itself in the inclusive approach, working with a wide variety of additional needs. RfS became increasingly aware of the need for access to the provision for less mobile children and those in wheelchairs. Special schools had attended but were unable to bring those with complex physical needs.

Inclusivity was achieved with funding from Sport England. A horse drawn carriage, adapted for users of wheelchairs, was ordered at an agreed price. Riding for Smiles subsequently learnt that the carriage was being imported from Poland and empty returning UK trucks were being used to import the carriages. The import date, delayed by the uncertainty, pushed the delivery date beyond Brexit and the supplier told us that they could not guarantee the agreed price. After discussion, the supplier cancelled the order saving Riding for Smiles a job.

Riding for Smiles turned to Hartland Carriages who designed and manufactured a carriage for the charity. This carriage was designed, built, and delivered within the grant amount. Riding for Smiles now has a magnificent carriage designed for wheelchairs. However, for obvious reasons, the opportunity was not made available until April 2021. Between April 2021 and March 2022, over two hundred carriage rides were provided for children, young people and adults in their wheelchairs accompanied by over one hundred carers.

People in wheelchairs can now access the equestrian experiences and friends and siblings, irrespective of their disability, can ride together.

## **6.3 The Development Project**

Riding for Smiles were anticipating growth. The Strategy and Business Plan needed a detailed review, a detailed plan was needed for the future. The mental health programme required a detailed plan, and a presence was needed on social media. A Development Project was instigated with a grant of £13,000, split three ways, mental health, social media, and the strategy / business plan.

### **6.3.1 Revisiting the Strategy and Business Plan**

Working with external consultants, Riding for Smiles commenced the revision of the strategy and business plan in April 2020. The project did not go to plan largely down to the difficulties of working through the pandemic, the pace of change and the uncertainty experienced by everyone. Businesses and charities were experiencing unprecedented challenges. Not the time to be reviewing the charity?

Riding for Smiles needed to emerge from the periods of lockdowns in great shape to be able to meet the anticipated significant growth.

Working with the consultants day by day together with the many discussions over zoom, research by the consultants, opportunities afforded to talk to similar charities and continued dialogue made a very considerable impact on our thinking. These discussions helped us focus on what would really be effective in very uncertain times. The speed of change and uncertainty required Riding for Smiles to respond to the situation quickly and decisively.

Along with review and update of all the major documentation such as the Constitution, the Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct, the Privacy Policy, the Whistleblowing Policy, Information of Schools and Groups, the Rules for visits to the stables and the Risk Assessment, Riding for Smiles revised its strategy and business plan.

### **The Revised Strategy and Business Plan**

- To concentrate on partnerships with schools reducing the radius of influence to Northeast Derbyshire, North Nottinghamshire and areas of south, South Yorkshire.
- To seek funding for three / four years to enable longer term planning and commitment to our suppliers, staff, and users.
- To focus on four areas of activity.
  1. The Mental Health / Deprivation Programme in Mainstream Schools
  2. The special Programme developed for SEND schools.

3. Working with other charities for the benefit of their beneficiaries.
  4. Working with a group of adults with mental health problems.
- To move to Blocks as the unit for delivery, costing and planning. A Block will comprise six sessions, for eight children / young people delivered over a half term. The Block will be used for planning and costing and as the 'standard' unit of delivery. Riding for Smiles will continue to bespoke every block to meet the needs of the child / young person.
  - To actively promote the wheelchair accessible carriage to enhance the commitment to inclusivity.
  - To renew our commitment to the children and young people to treat them with respect and kindness and to strive to understand and meet their needs.

With the new strategy in place Riding for Smiles was able to build a business plan for the next years and a financial plan for the years up to 2025.

### **6.3.2 Social Media**

The social media project has been completed. The aim of the project was to create a web site ([www.ridingforsmiles.org](http://www.ridingforsmiles.org)) and a Facebook page. IT and business professionals, including the external consultants, wanted to build Riding for Smiles a web site for marketing, online sales, getting more customers. This helped set two objectives for the social media presence and helped us understand that a marketing / sales site was not what was needed.

The first objective was to provide a platform to inform everyone about the mission, vision, and values of Riding for Smiles, to report achievements, news, plans and dreams and to share plans, achievements, and success.

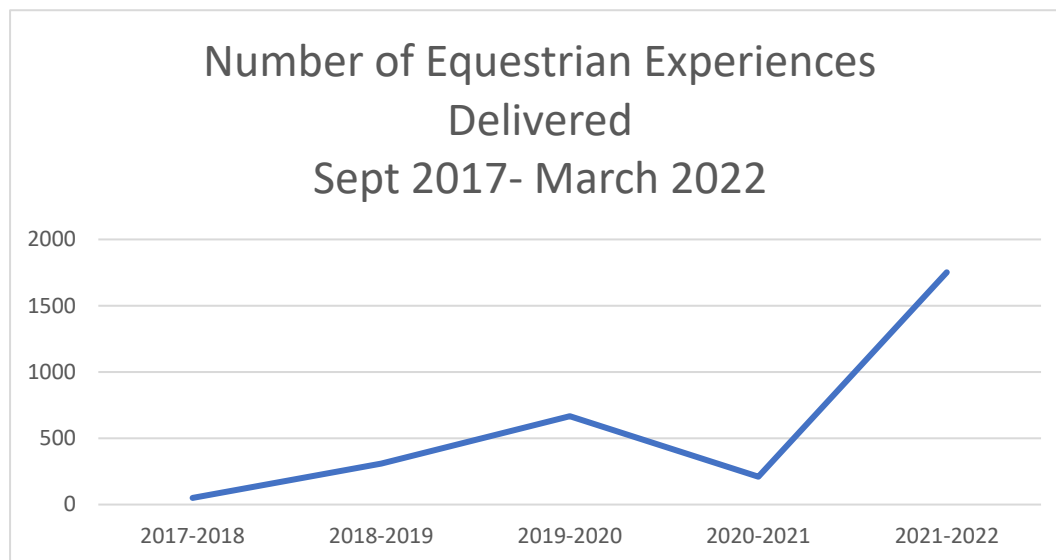
The second objective was to provide potential funders with the evidence to give them confidence to fund Riding for Smiles.

### **6.3.3 The Mental Health Project**

This Project was planned in accordance with the Well-Being Pathway. This project forms one of Riding for Smiles' ongoing programmes. The work completed has also informed the development of the Deprivation Programme. This research and development work will be published in a series of papers. The first paper will be published on RfS' website ([www.ridingforsmiles.org](http://www.ridingforsmiles.org)) in late Spring, 2022.

## 7. Year 5, April 2021 – March 2022

### 7.1 The Steepest Line



Thank goodness Riding for Smiles and Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre were in good order to be able to meet the new demand. An 830% increase in numbers from 2020-2021, not unsurprising, however a 250% increase from 2019-2020, now that's significant growth and challenge.

Riding for Smiles rose to the challenge and together with Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre, a host of volunteers, and amazing staff from schools, all working together, we delivered around 1,700 experiences over the year.

### 7.2 The Big Funding Break.

Before the wow, it is very fitting that Riding for Smiles should say thank you to those who have funded Riding for Smiles over the past 5 years, including; Amy's Fund, Arnold Clarke, Barchester's Charitable Foundation,, Bassetlaw District Council, Bolsover Lottery, Bolsover District Voluntary Association, Charities Trust, Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre Charity Rides, Cloth Workers' Foundation, Country and Land Association Charitable Trust, Derbyshire County Council, Duke of Devonshire's Charitable Trust, Elmton, Creswell and Hodthorpe Big Local, Elmton Village Open Gardens, Healthy Bolsover, Jones Charitable Trust, JN Derbyshire Trust, Lady Hind, Lhoist (Whitwell Quarry), Local Giving PLC, National Lottery Community Fund, National Lottery Awards for All, Nottinghamshire Group Rides, Nottinghamshire Community Fund, Sport England, Talbot Trust, Torne Valley Ltd, Toy Trust, and UK Youth.

Riding for Smiles will continue to work with all these organisations.

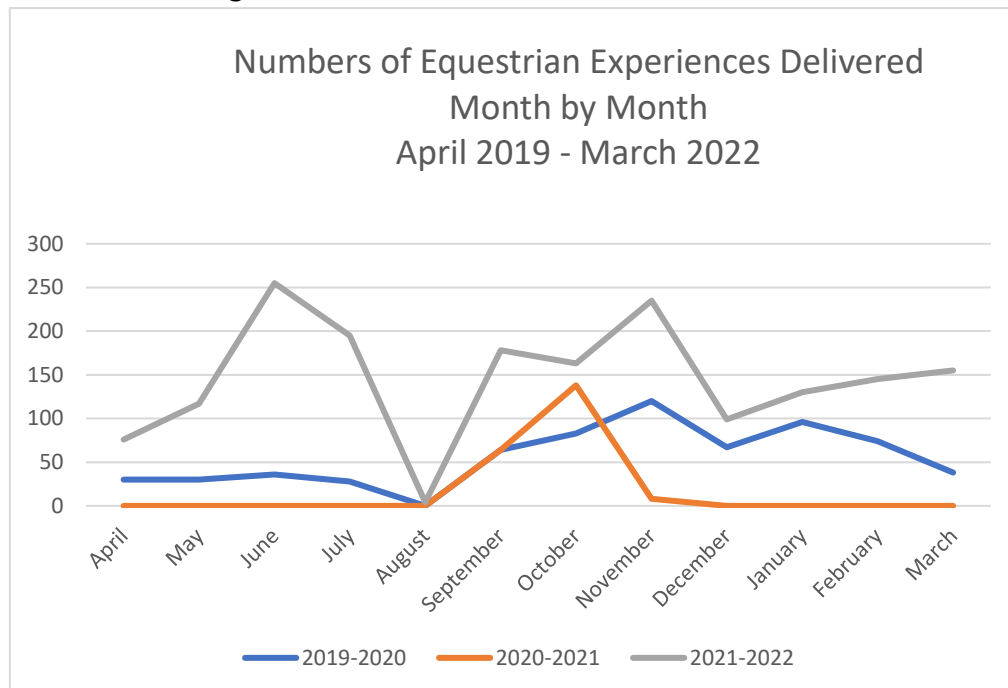
**Wow, wow, wow**, the National Lottery Community Fund grants Riding for Smiles £116,875 to significantly fund the mental health / deprivation programme to September 2025. A massive thank you to the players of the National Lottery.

Real joy as Children in Need adds a further £30,000 to the funds. Thank you to everyone who donated to their appeal.

This was an amazing achievement for Riding for Smiles. Riding for Smiles has multi-year funding as we had set out in our new strategy.

## 8. What Next? April 2022 – September 2025

### 8.1 The Starting Point



### Dream or Ambition – the Next Years

*“Dreams, indeed, are ambition; for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream. And I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow.”* William Shakespeare

## **8.2 The Numbers and the Financials**

The Mental Health Programme in Mainstream Schools is expected to be stable at around eight hundred experiences per year. This programme is fully funded until September 2025 with a grant from the National Lottery Community Fund.

The Deprivation Programme in Mainstream Schools will target around eight hundred experiences each year. This programme has funding from the National Lottery Community Fund. This is around one third of the funding needed each year. This leaves a gap of between £15,000 and £20,000 per year which remains as a challenge for the Summer of 2022.

The SEND Schools' Programme is fully funded until 2024/2025 by a grant from Children in Need. The number of experiences delivered should be around five hundred each year.

Programmes with other charities are funded by the visiting charity themselves. Riding for Smiles is happy to make the assets, such as the wheelchair friendly carriage, available to the visiting charities. Small amounts of funding are available to help other charities who need assistance. Riding for Smiles is working with other charities to enable them to access the services of Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre.

The Riding for Smiles' adult group was funded by MIND. This funding has now finished however the group are still attending with Riding for Smiles funding. There is scope to develop the programme.

## **8.3 Is it a Dream?**

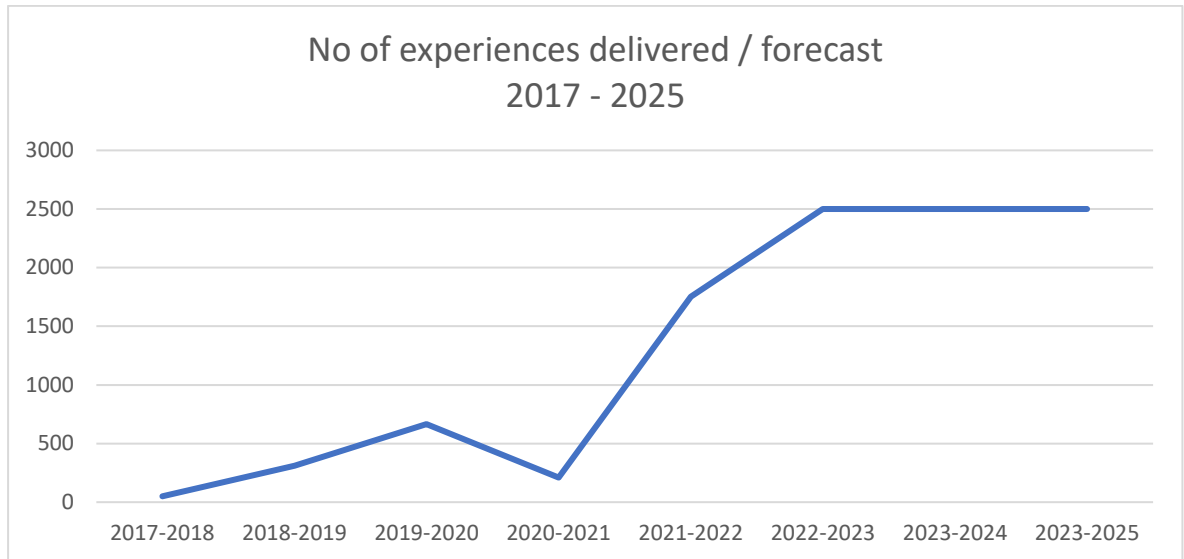
Back in 2017 if anyone said, Riding for Smiles with Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre would be delivering 2,500 experiences over three terms, 36 weeks, which is seventy experiences each week; we might have replied, "Dream on".

In the Spring of 2021 if anyone said, Riding for Smiles with Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre would be delivering 2,500 experiences over three terms, 36 weeks, which is seventy experiences each week; we might have replied, "Never in your wildest dreams".

In the year 2021-2022 Riding for Smiles delivered 1,700 experiences. Funding is still a challenge, but it does seem we can dream.'From dream to

established charity helping hundreds of children, young people and adults,' is not a dream too far.

The rapid growth of 2021-2022 should be followed by more measured growth into 2023. From then on, our efforts will be aimed at maintaining the amazing level of delivery and service and benefits for our community.



*Is this a vision? Is this a dream? Do I sleep?*  
*William Shakespeare*

## **Appendix 1 Activities which make up an Equestrian Experience**

- Pony trekking through Creswell Crags, an enclosed limestone gorge occupied during the last ice age.
- Carriage riding also through the Crags.
- 'Formal' riding lessons where the children develop muscle strength and flexibility by practicing their balance, riding with arms outstretched, controlling the pony by riding in circles, changing rein etc, and many learn to ride at trot. The lesson to trek ratio varies from child to child.

The above activities provide a one-to-one opportunity to talk to the children and listen to the children as they ride through the Crags with its wide selection of flora and wildlife. E.g., The swans nest and cygnets, ducklings, hyena.

Stable yard activities designed to develop social interpersonal skills and language skills include:-

- Pony grooming, the use of brushes etc and safely approaching and being in proximity with a large animal.
- Cleaning and learning about tack and the need to look after valuable belongings.
- Looking after ponies – feeding, filling hay nets and water buckets.
- Poo picking – looking after the environment, sharing wheelbarrows, using tools safely etc.
- Practicing listening, understanding, and following instructions leading to the appreciation and understanding of a challenging, dangerous environment.

All the activities are aimed at allowing the children an opportunity to challenge themselves and to build their confidence and self-esteem.