

# **Riding for Smiles – November 2022**

## **Returning to 'Normal'**

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### **Introduction**

'Normal' or the 'new normal' with additional pressures on schools whilst many of the constraints imposed by the pandemic still remain? This paper reports the new normal as observed, understood, and managed by Riding for Smiles.

### **New constraints, new timetables, staffing problems and more**

Following the pandemic with schools returning to relative normality, RfS found that there were new constraints which were not a consideration pre-pandemic. Schools had to include catch up sessions for many pupils and alter their timetables accordingly. This meant that they were not all were able to access our provision at the same times as before due to curriculum timetable and staffing issues. The original time slots which we had planned to use for groups had to be changed in order to accommodate all groups taking part. This was managed successfully by collaborating with schools and our partner the Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre and being as flexible as possible. This proved to be a difficult and frustrating experience for RfS as we desperately wanted to help.

Smaller groups and accommodating the challenging needs are indeed a challenge for delivery which we are pleased we managed. However, this did come at a cost. It is good to be able to report that our funders fully understood the difficult and changing circumstances.

### **Restrictions begin to be eased**

Once the restrictions had eased it became easier for the school to organise the groups according to needs (bubbles no longer necessary). This meant that the groups could be mixed ages, which at first appeared to be more challenging. However, since we always work to meet the individual needs of children, it worked well and had some positive implications. The older children assumed a caring role for the the younger ones and the younger ones were often motivated by the involvement and skills of their older peers.

## **Higher levels of anxiety observed**

Some children initially had high anxiety levels, being in an unfamiliar environment and faced with a new challenging activity. We observed higher anxiety levels over pre-pandemic levels. It has not been an enjoyable time for children with complex needs. The need to support these children has consequently become even more necessary.

This meant that on the first week back many were not confident enough to ride a pony or, in some cases, go near one on the yard. Facing their fears and overcoming negative attitudes to challenges is one of the desired outcomes.

## **Individual plans, very small steps, setting targets with the child, linking targets to school awards**

RfS built individual plans for children who needed them in order to help them achieve. This involved taking very small steps each week by setting targets with the child for the following week and making a deal with them that school awards would be given if they were to complete them.

We were starting from a lower base level. The key to success; very small steps, setting targets WITH the child, making deals with the children linked to school awards, and adhering to the deal. Together, we are riding for smiles.

Because the children were part of the target setting, they did not feel like they were being forced into something they did not feel comfortable with and therefore felt in control.

We were always careful to limit the activity to the plan agreed to by the child and not try to push them any further any quicker. This allowed the children to build up trust in us and benefit from the positive feelings of achievement rather than failure.

## **Reaching targets**

All children involved managed to reach their targets and planned outcomes by the end of their programme and left feeling very proud of themselves and the progress they had made.

RfS has demonstrated again their flexibility and ability to meet the needs of the children. RfS is delivering real benefit albeit in many cases from a lower starting point. We look to continuing to help children overcome many of their problems and the effects of the pandemic helping them to aspire to fuller and more fruitful lives.