

# Confidence, strength and freedom

How RDA breaks down barriers and has a life-changing impact on disabled people's lives

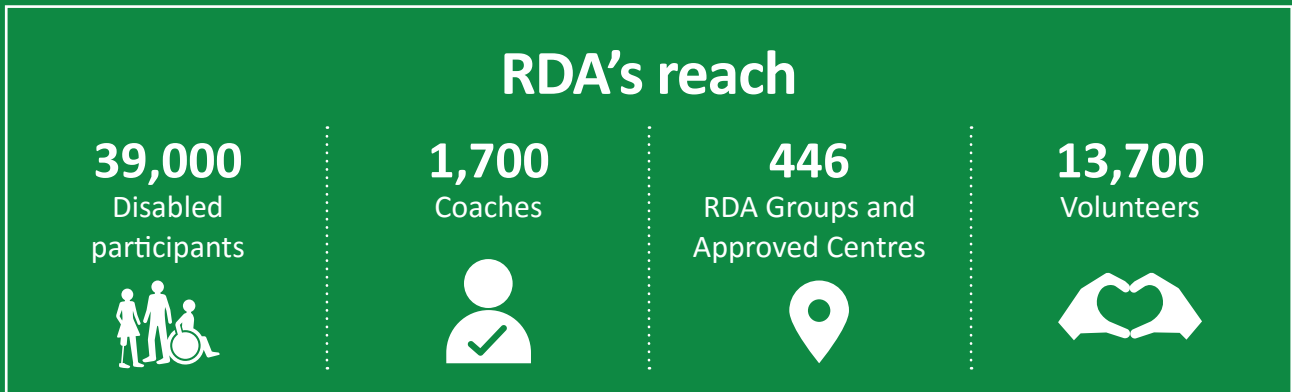


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October 2025



# The impact of RDA on the health and wellbeing of disabled people



Responses from 754 parents & carers and 410 participants indicate that:

## Improved participant mental wellbeing

**95%**  
Feel calm and focused during sessions



**72%**  
Are better able to regulate their emotions



**32%**  
of participants aged 16+ have very high life satisfaction, compared to 5% for disabled people aged 16+ in general (Activity Alliance 2024)

**63%**  
Report a long-term improvement to mood



## Social connection

**82%**  
Feel more connected to others

**68%**  
Have improved communication skills

**65%**  
Have made friends through RDA

**70%**  
Feel more connected to or interested in nature

**80%**

of parents/carers think the changes in participants wouldn't have happened without RDA



**“I have something wonderful to look forward to, I have a brilliant time at RDA and the session takes my mind off my worries ... Thank you to all!”**

**Participant at Thornton Rose RDA, survey respondent**

## Confidence, self-esteem and independence

**90%**

Feel more confident about themselves

**71%**

Are more independent

**95%**

Are proud of what they have achieved

**67%**

Have developed new interests or aspirations

## Physical wellbeing

**48%**

Are more physically active outside of RDA

**71%**

Have improved fine and/or gross motor skills

**88%**

Have better posture, balance and co-ordination

## Engagement with education

**64%**

Are more relaxed or settled in general, including at school, college or work

**11,502**

Awards & qualifications completed by RDA participants in 2024

**“RDA has given my son a lifelong interest that has transformed his life. It has helped him build confidence and self esteem, develop physically, lift his mood. It has given him achievements to feel proud of. There is no question that RDA has made my son the person he is today.”**

**Parent of adult participant at Scropton RDA, survey respondent**

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# Foreword by HRH, The Princess Royal. RDA President.

As President of Riding for the Disabled UK, I am pleased to introduce this year's Impact Report. Across these pages, you will find a powerful reflection of the life-changing work being delivered every day by our dedicated volunteers, coaches, staff, and supporters – each playing a vital role in ensuring that disabled people can experience the unique benefits of the human–horse connection.

For nearly sixty years, RDA has offered opportunities for freedom and achievement through horses. This year, we have once again witnessed the power of that work – not only in the joy and confidence it brings to our participants, but in the resilience and sense of unity it fosters across communities. It recognises the contribution of our network of federated groups and centres and I hope every RDA community sees itself represented within these pages and will see the report as a celebration of its own work and local influence.

Most importantly, the report gives voice to those at the very heart of our organisation – our participants, their families and carers – whose stories bring clarity and purpose to all we do. It provides valuable context, acknowledging the challenges faced by disabled people, and highlighting the significant role RDA plays in creating opportunities that might otherwise remain out of reach.

My sincere thanks go to everyone who contributes to RDA's success. Your commitment and hard work ensure we continue to underline our belief that it's what you can do that counts. I hope this report leaves you with a sense of pride in what has been achieved together – and the inspiration to continue supporting this remarkable organisation.



# The need

Disabled people and people living with long-term health conditions face persistent and intersecting barriers that limit their full participation in community life, sport, education and employment (Activity Alliance, 2023).

These barriers start with **societal prejudice, lack of access to spaces and services, and financial constraints**, which in turn negatively impact disabled people's individual overall health and wellbeing.



## The consequences

Research from Activity Alliance (2024) shows that disabled people are more likely to:

- **Have worse mental health and wellbeing** – Only 11% of disabled adults have a 'very high' happiness yesterday score, compared to 19% for non-disabled people. This has decreased in comparison to previous years due to several factors including the health impact of Covid-19 and the rising cost of living, with increasing levels of anxiety reported.
- **Feel more lonely, excluded and socially isolated** – One in five (20%) disabled adults feel lonely "often or always", which is almost twice the rate for non-disabled people (11%), and 48% feel socially isolated.
- **Have lower life satisfaction** – Only 5% of disabled adults rate their life satisfaction as very high, compared to 15% of non-disabled adults.
- **Be physically inactive** – Disabled people are twice as likely to be inactive (41%) compared to their non-disabled peers (21%). Reasons for this include experiencing challenges with physical mobility and chronic pain, struggling to access physiotherapy and not having inclusive and accessible options for physical activity. However, more than three-quarters (76%) of disabled people say they want to be more active.
- **Experience exclusion in educational settings** – Disabled children and young people are not consistently provided the educational support they are entitled to by law and are disproportionately excluded from school (National Children's Bureau, 2024), which means they have fewer opportunities to learn, experience personal growth and, later on, participate in volunteering or employment.

## The difference RDA wants to make

At RDA, we harness the power of the human and horse connection to enrich lives and support disabled people and those with long-term conditions to experience freedom and connection, feel valued, included and live fulfilling lives.

“When I’m riding, I feel like I’m flying and part of the horse. It’s beautiful.”

Young participant at Park Lane RDA, interviewee



# About RDA

## A national federation with local roots

**RDA harnesses the power of horses to enrich lives, supporting disabled people through innovative programmes that promote wellbeing, physical health and confidence.**

What began as a small group of pioneers recognising the therapeutic benefits of connecting people with horses, back in 1969, has blossomed into a nationwide movement.

Today, RDA is the only major UK charity focused specifically on the health and wellbeing benefits of bringing people and horses together, and a leader in disability sport.

**“RDA is the highlight of the week. It’s my daughter’s favourite thing. It’s life-changing. I mean that – what you enable is amazing.”**

Parent of child participant at Chipping Norton RDA, survey respondent

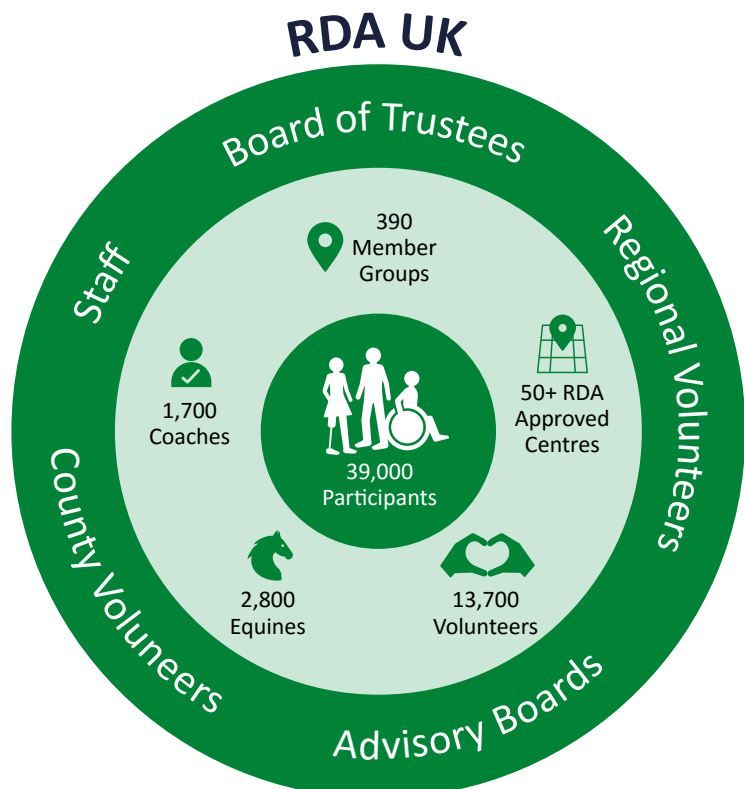
RDA’s transformative work is delivered in every corner of the UK by a **network of nearly 450 RDA Groups and Approved Centres**, who deliver RDA’s core therapeutic activities.

## RDA Groups and Approved Centres

There are almost 450 RDA Groups and Approved Centres across the UK. RDA is a federated structure – each Group is a separate charity, typically run by a team of dedicated volunteers, that seeks to meet the needs of their local community.

Groups do not receive any government funding and must raise money to care for the horses and ponies, which are key to the RDA’s life-changing work.

RDA UK also accredits Approved Centres – commercial riding centres that adhere to RDA’s nationally recognised standards and are approved to deliver inclusive, high-quality equestrian and equine-assisted services for disabled participants.





## The wide range of RDA activities

Disabled children and adults can experience the benefits of equine therapy, both on and off a horse, through:

- Therapeutic horse riding
- Equine-assisted activities (that don't involve getting on a horse) like carriage-driving, horse care and groundwork, Tea with a Pony and Quiet Corners
- National, Regional and Virtual Championship competitions in Dressage, Showjumping, Vaulting and Carriage Driving
- Educational awards and activities including equestrian proficiency tests and accredited qualifications

**“The team are fantastic and so great at dealing with individual needs. I’m really grateful for the volunteers and the joy they bring each week.”**

**Parent of child participant at Clytha RDA, survey respondent**

## RDA UK

RDA UK exists to empower its network of RDA Groups and Approved Centres to make life-changing experiences possible. RDA UK do this by listening, adapting, and supporting the RDA community in an ever-evolving landscape.

RDA UK provides UK-wide leadership and advocacy, as well as central resource and support provision to Groups (such as insurance, Health & Safety and Safeguarding policies) to assure the safety and quality of activities. RDA UK is also responsible for coach training, assessment and Continuing Professional Development, ensuring that each activity is delivered effectively.

RDA UK's support and standards are enabled through a team of dedicated staff and regional and county volunteers.

# Why horses?

## Making movement possible for everyone

Equestrian activity is **one of the most accessible sporting opportunities for disabled people** (Leonard Cheshire, 2021). Unlike many other sports, **it can be adapted for people with a range of support needs**, making it truly inclusive.

Dedicated efforts to make adjustments – such as specialist equipment, volunteer support, or the option to take part in carriage driving or horse care instead of riding – break down barriers for those who might otherwise be excluded.

For many, joining an RDA Group is the **only way they can take part in physical activity** – and it offers far more than exercise alone.



## A powerful human-horse connection

The impact of bringing horses and disabled people together goes far beyond making physical activity accessible – **the connection between humans and horses can be profoundly powerful**. It can calm the mind, build confidence, and help people feel seen without needing to speak.

**Horses don't judge and don't need words. Their quiet presence and ability to attune to human emotion can be profoundly healing**, especially for people who have experienced trauma, social anxiety and discrimination.

Horses also encourage people to spend time outdoors and, for those who ride, offer a rare sense of freedom of movement and independence that many do not find elsewhere.

**91%**

of survey respondents think the emotional bond with equines is an important part of participants' experience

## Building strength, balance and freedom of movement

Therapeutic riding and hippotherapy are often recommended for disabled people because the horse's rhythmic, three-dimensional movement closely mirrors the motion of walking. This natural movement stimulates the rider's muscles.

An evidence review by the British Equestrian Federation (2024) found that hippotherapy has a positive impact on motor function and can significantly improve balance, gait, muscular strength, motor control, and co-ordination. It can help people with conditions such as cerebral palsy and multiple sclerosis to move more freely, with less pain and greater confidence.

**“Being on horseback and or having contact with horses and ponies gives me love for life.”**

Participant at Happy Hooves RDA, survey respondent

**Hippotherapy** – A physiotherapy treatment, led by a suitably qualified physiotherapist or occupational therapist, that uses the movements of a walking horse to bring about change in the client.

**Therapeutic riding** – Includes orienting riding sessions to teach riding skills as well as improve rider capacity for communication, confidence, enjoyment, relating to others, physical improvement and horsemanship.

## Lifting mood, calming minds – and supporting connection

Spending time with horses has a well-evidenced positive impact on mental health and emotional wellbeing. The British Equestrian Federation evidence review (2024) found that spending time with horses can **lift mood, reduce anxiety and ease symptoms of depression** – helping both children and adults **feel calmer and more emotionally settled**.

For those who struggle in social settings, **horses can offer a safe first connection**. This can open the door to stronger relationships with people. The research highlighted studies that show positive effects on social interaction, development of friendship, as well as communication and language skills in autistic children and young people.

Some studies also point to equine-assisted activities contributing to **increased engagement with education**, including better behaviour, study skills and reduced absenteeism.

**“I think it is the interaction between my son and the horse specifically that has calmed him. He really looks forward to his lesson and has excelled at listening and completing instructions.”**

Parent of adult participant at the Unicorn Centre, survey respondent



# What is the change we want to see?

## RDA's Theory of Change

RDA is committed to harnessing the power of horses to support disabled people and people living with long-term conditions to experience freedom and connection, feel valued, included and live fulfilling lives.

This report focuses on the outcomes experienced by participants, as shown in this section of the RDA Theory of Change below.



### Activities

Therapeutic horseriding and carriage driving

Competitive horseriding and carriage driving

Equine-assisted therapeutic activities

Equine-assisted educational activities

Co-production with RDA participants

### Outcomes

RDA participants will have improved mental wellbeing

RDA participants will feel more connected to others and the natural world

RDA participants will be more physically active and have increased physical ability

RDA participants will have increased self-esteem, feel more confident and able to take on challenges

Children and young participants will have increased engagement with education

RDA participants will have a more active voice in the RDA movement

### Long-term goal

Disabled people experience freedom and connection, feel valued, included and live fulfilling lives.

# How was RDA's impact measured?

## Independent evaluation

RDA UK commissioned this independent impact evaluation to demonstrate the difference that RDA activities make to participants supported through RDA Groups and Approved Centres across the UK.

The evaluation was conducted by Insley Consulting, who worked closely with the team at RDA UK and several RDA Groups to collect evaluation data.

Data was collected through:

- A national online survey of participants, parents/carers. To prioritise accessibility, Evaluators developed a standard and easy read version of the survey, which could be completed by participants and/or their parents and carers. We received

1,216 survey responses from 410 participants, 754 parents/carers and 52 volunteers.

- Visits to four RDA Groups: Fairlight Hall RDA, Horse Rangers Association, Park Lane Stables RDA and Peterborough & District RDA.
- Interviews with 16 participants, 16 parents/carers, 23 volunteers and five educators during group visits.
- Online interviews with eight representatives from partner and disability sector organisations.
- Two focus groups: One with a volunteer, parent/carer and leader of Isle of Mull RDA, and one with RDA physiotherapists.
- RDA UK's Annual Return, with 378 Groups and Approved Centres providing data.

**1,290 people consulted**

**1,216**  
survey  
responses

**68**  
interviews and  
conversations

**2**  
focus  
groups

**4**  
RDA Groups  
visited

**378 RDA Groups and Approved Centres**

provided data via the RDA Annual Return

# RDA's reach

## RDA participants

RDA supports people of all ages and abilities with physical and learning disabilities, sensory impairments, long-term health conditions and neurodivergent differences.

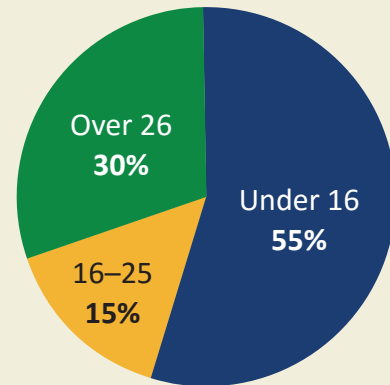
**27,000**

participants were supported by RDA Groups\* in 2024/25

**10,260**

new participants joined RDA Groups\* in 2024/25

\* does not include participants in Approved Centres



Age breakdown of participants who responded to our survey

## Of the participants involved in our 2025 survey ...

**63%**  
are female

**95%**  
identify as White

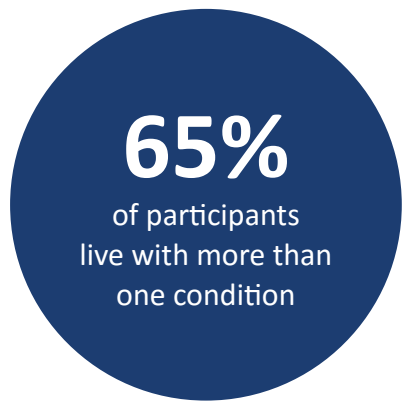
**5%**  
live in areas of high deprivation†

†Participants who live in deciles 1 and 2 (the top 20% most deprived areas) of the Indexes of Multiple Deprivation for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

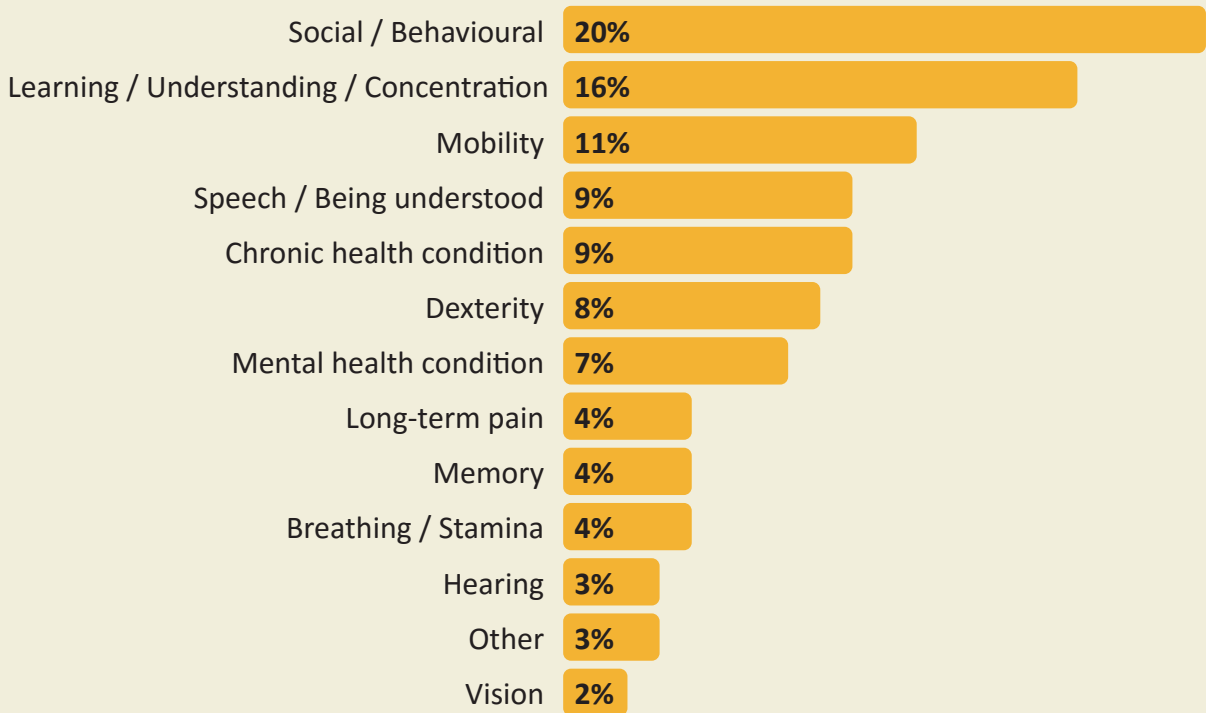




RDA participants have a variety of physical and non-physical disabilities, and almost two-thirds (65%) are living with more than one condition. Staff and volunteers have observed a notable shift in recent years, with more participants joining who are autistic or have ADHD. This reflects a broader societal trend: diagnoses of autism have risen exponentially – by 787% in the past 20 years, according to a major population-based study (Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 2021).



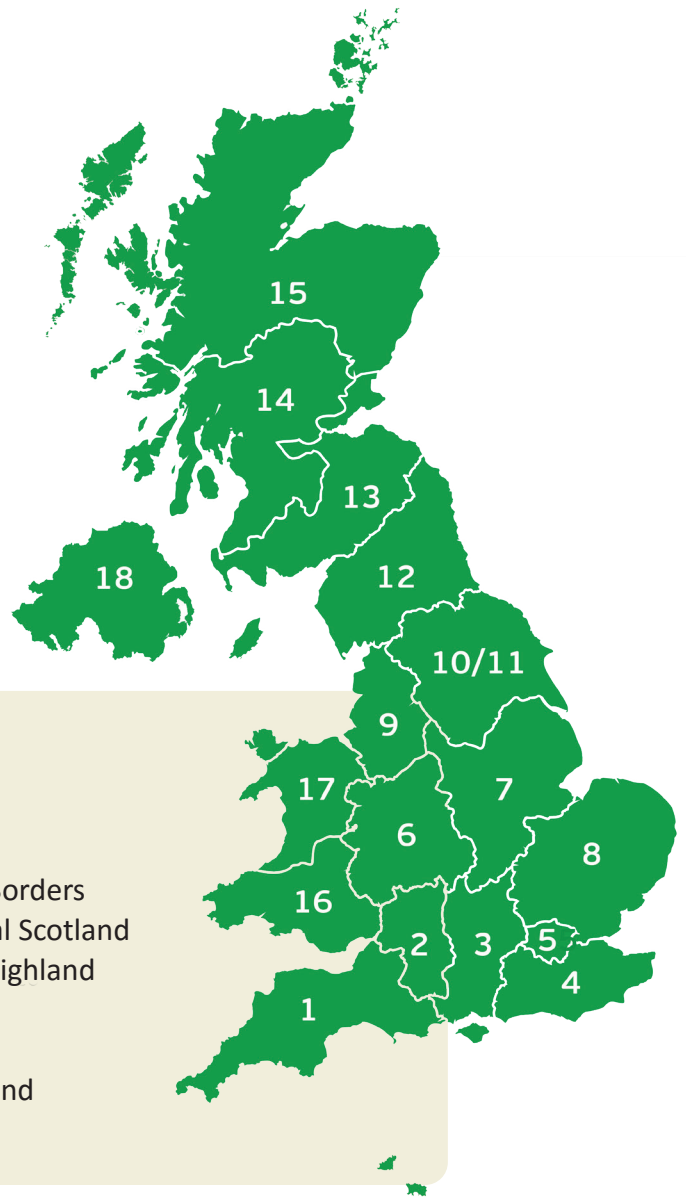
### Conditions that RDA participants live with



# A national movement with local impact

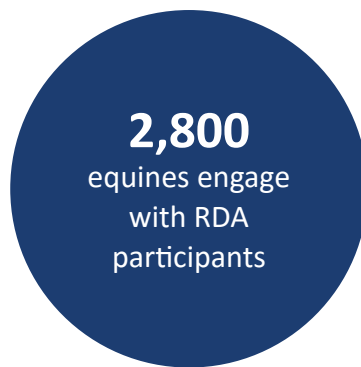
The impact of RDA's work is visible across the UK, meaning that RDA's presence and activities are never too far away.

Thanks to a network of RDA Groups and Approved Centres, RDA supports 39,000 disabled people all over the UK – from cities to remote rural areas – in finding **achievement, therapy and joy** through horses.



## RDA Regions

- |                   |                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. South West     | 10/11. Yorkshire            |
| 2. Mid West       | 12. North                   |
| 3. South          | 13. Edinburgh & Borders     |
| 4. South East     | 14. West & Central Scotland |
| 5. Greater London | 15. Grampian & Highland     |
| 6. West Mercia    | 16. South Wales             |
| 7. North Midlands | 17. North Wales             |
| 8. East           | 18. Northern Ireland        |
| 9. North West     |                             |

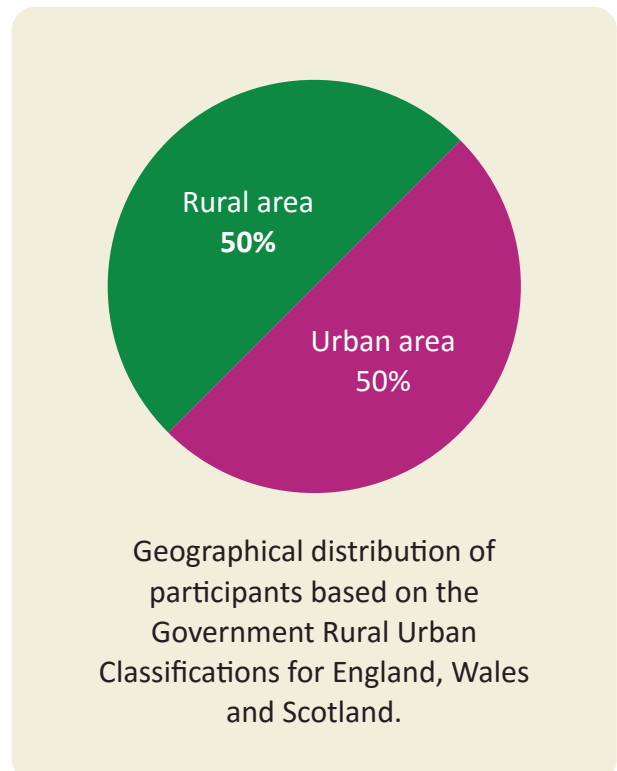
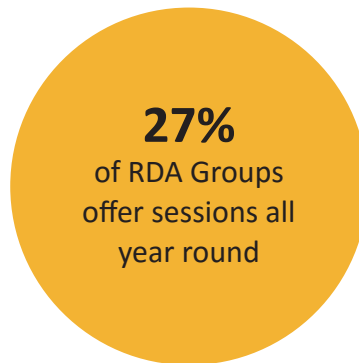


354 Groups and 24 Approved Centres provided data used in this report on activities and participants

**“We feel so blessed that my daughter can attend RDA. It is the highlight of her week. The Group is run so well and all the volunteers are professional, patient and very kind, we really can’t thank them enough.”**  
Parent of adult participant at Bryanston RDA, survey respondent

## Increasing demand for RDA

RDA Groups are evenly distributed between rural and urban areas, with the majority offering sessions during term-time only. Despite covering the majority of the UK, existing demand outstrips capacity, with many disabled people on an RDA Group waiting list.



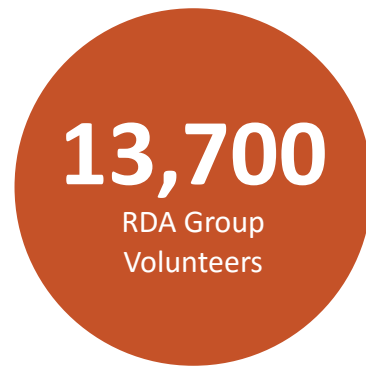
# RDA's coaches and volunteers

RDA coaches and volunteers are the bridge that enables each participant to connect with a horse in a safe, inclusive and rewarding way. **They establish a trusting, person-centred relationship with each participant** – whether they are ready to mount a pony for the first time or are enjoying the company of horses out of the saddle.



**Every RDA session is led by a trained coach who brings specialist knowledge and deep commitment.**

Coaches not only plan and deliver sessions, they lead the volunteer team and build meaningful relationships with each participant. Together, they help individuals work towards their goals – whether that's learning to ride independently, gaining confidence, or developing everyday skills like following instructions or counting.



**RDA simply couldn't exist without its incredible volunteers.**

They are the reason so many disabled children and adults can benefit from the unique bond between people and horses. Volunteers make RDA sessions inclusive, accessible and safe – whether supporting someone to ride with side walkers and leaders, assisting with carriage driving, or offering calm companionship through activities like grooming or Tea with a Pony. Their dedication is at the heart of everything RDA does.

The success of groups is underpinned by wider volunteer support through the administration, fundraising and governance support from a team of trustees.

**“It's inspiring to be part of something that makes a genuine difference on weekly basis.”**

**Volunteer, survey respondent**



# What is the quality of delivery?

## An inclusive and supportive experience

Feedback from participants, parents, carers and educators consulted was overwhelmingly **positive** – a reflection of the care, skill and dedication shown by RDA coaches, volunteers and staff at every level.

It also highlights the vital role of **RDA UK's training, resources and support**, which help ensure that activities are not only **safe** and high quality, but also **engaging, inclusive and truly life-enhancing**.

“RDA have been really supportive of both my child and myself. [They are] encouraging and interested in us ... my daughter loves coming to RDA.”

Parent of child participant at Nottingham RDA, survey respondent

99%

of participants and parents/carers think RDA sessions are good or excellent



Participants, parents, carers and educators consulted described RDA sessions as an experience that creates “**excitement**” and “**big smiles**” all round. Many spoke with warmth and gratitude about what makes RDA so special – and why it works so well for their family or school.

Key ingredients that people highlighted included:

- **Truly inclusive experiences** – Coaches and volunteers “do what is right for people”, adapting sessions so that everyone can take part. This was especially praised by families whose child had tried horse riding elsewhere unsuccessfully before RDA.
- **The relationships built with RDA coaches and volunteers** – Coaches and volunteers were described as **passionate, knowledgeable, emotionally invested**. Several participants appreciated that some volunteers are disabled themselves and bring **lived experience and empathy** to their role.
- **Bonds with horses** – With the right support, participants are able to form meaningful connections with equines.
- **Safety and structure** – Many participants, parents/carers and educators pointed out that sessions were well planned, creating a sense of security, routine and trust, and the conditions for a **safe experience**.

**97%**

of participants feel safe and supported at RDA

## Training and quality assurance

**RDA’s training programme ensures that coaches and volunteers are confident, knowledgeable and ready to support a diverse range of participants.**

RDA UK has developed structured training pathways combining theory and practical learning – from disability awareness and equine care to session planning and communication skills.

Coaches can choose to qualify as a Group Coach or Coach, with the option to progress to Advanced Coach after two years’ experience.

This commitment to high-quality training means every session is underpinned by skill, care and understanding – helping participants achieve their goals and experience the life-changing benefits of working with horses.



# Outcome: Improved mental wellbeing

## Feeling happier, calmer and more confident

Disabled people are more likely to experience poorer mental wellbeing than non-disabled people (Activity Alliance, 2024). RDA Groups create a space where participants can connect with horses – and in doing so feel freedom and exhilaration.

**One of the most profound positive differences that RDA makes is in mental wellbeing.** One participant credited RDA with saving his life, saying that he was feeling “very suicidal” before joining. Many participants link attending RDA with a more positive outlook. Participants, parents, carers and educators consistently described attending RDA as “joyful” and “the highlight of the week”, giving children, young people and adults a sense of **calm, confidence and happiness that often extends beyond the stables.**

**“The only time my wife is really happy is when she is with the horses and people at RDA. It re-connects her with animals she has always loved and opens her to more interpersonal activity. It is wonderful to see.”**

**Partner and carer of adult participant with Alzheimer’s at Mid Suffolk Carriage Driving Group, survey respondent**

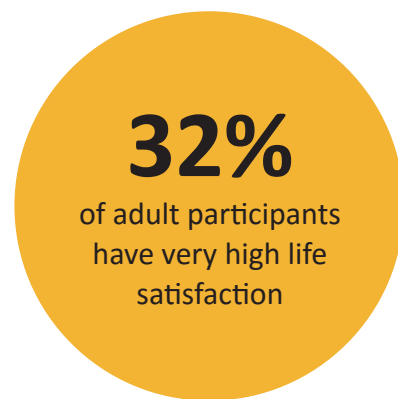




## Significantly better wellbeing

RDA participants aged 16+ are happier and more satisfied with life than disabled people aged 16+ in England overall – and, although the RDA sample size is small (88 self-reporting participants) this difference is **statistically significant\***.

Almost one-third (32%) of RDA participants aged 16+ reported ‘very high’ life satisfaction, compared with just 5% for disabled people in general (Activity Alliance survey, 2025).



Wellbeing measure (0-10 scale)	RDA participants – UK (disabled people aged 16+)	England benchmark (disabled people aged 16+)
Happiness yesterday	7.02	<b>5.84*</b>
Life satisfaction	6.76	<b>5.68*</b>
Feeling anxious yesterday	4.25	4.70

Mean wellbeing scores: RDA wellbeing data (88 self-reporting participants), benchmarked against Sport England’s Active Lives Survey (2025) – for disabled people in England.

\*Significant difference (using a Welch t-test).

## How RDA improves wellbeing

People consistently highlighted three elements that improve participants' mental wellbeing:

- **The calming presence of horses** – Many participants describe a gentle, two-way exchange: as they learn to relax, the horse relaxes too – and in return, the horse's calm presence helps them feel more settled.
- **Supportive relationships with volunteers and coaches** – The RDA community offers encouragement, acceptance and emotional safety, which participants and families deeply value.
- **Time outdoors and in nature** – For many participants, RDA is their only opportunity to enjoy green spaces and experience freedom of movement in a safe and supportive way.

“I have lupus and other physical difficulties, but all the encouragement, support and love from the coaches and wonderful volunteers and, of course, our horses and ponies are keeping my body going and adding joy and pleasure to my life.”

80-Year old participant at Fairlight Hall RDA, written feedback



# Impact story: From grief to joy

## Natalie, 33 years old

**Riding and grooming horses helped Natalie deal with the grief over her boyfriend's passing. The "joyful" experience of going to RDA has made her more independent and active.**

Natalie, who has learning disabilities, started going to Fairlight Hall RDA in Hastings after her long-term boyfriend passed away. She was heartbroken and became withdrawn, not leaving the house without her mum, who said: "I wanted her to come to RDA to have new adventures and think of different futures".

Riding and grooming the horses has been transformational in helping Natalie to process her grief. She describes the experience of coming to Fairlight Hall RDA as "joyful"; her mum added that she is always smiling now.



A significant change has been noticed in Natalie's communication: She chats to the "amazing" volunteers, and talks to Buddy, the new horse at Fairlight RDA, encouraging him with "Come on, darling!"

Natalie's mum says she has become more independent and physically active – she now goes into a nearby town by herself to meet with her friends, go swimming and to dance fitness classes. Going to Fairlight Hall RDA is the "highlight of Natalie's week".

## RDA Group spotlight: Fairlight Hall

Established in 2015, Fairlight Hall RDA supports people of all ages in Hastings and Rother – including through riding proficiency and Tea with a Pony sessions for people living with dementia.

Coaches and volunteers are known for making everyone feel welcome and included, helping participants enjoy peaceful rides around the group's woodland and pond paths.

A highlight is their much-loved sensory trail, which features windchimes, drums, lights, textures, scents and artwork created by riders and a local 'Art on Prescription' group. It offers a full sensory experience that encourages participants to count, explore, and connect with nature while riding – and is about to be upgraded thanks to community support.

The group recently crowdfunded for a new horse and were able to welcome two gentle additions – Buddy and Teddy. Demand continues to grow, with a waiting list of participants from both rural and urban areas of deprivation.

# Better mood and emotional regulation

**Taking part in an RDA session has a restorative effect on participants and improves their mood.** Participants and their parents/carers said that the connection with horses is crucial to this, either through their calming presence, or because participants know they need to relax so that the horse can relax too and the session can be successful.

The benefits aren't limited to the session itself. Participants often feel happier before attending, simply through anticipation, and

leave feeling proud and energised. This uplift can last for days, weeks or even longer.

- **95%** of participants feel calm and focused during sessions
- **98%** feel happy during sessions
- **72%** of parents/carers say the participant is better able to regulate their emotions because of RDA

The uplift in mood starts ahead of sessions, as participants look forward to attending, and the calming effect lasts well beyond the session – into the coming days, weeks and months, as participants experience exhilaration and pride in their achievements.

## How long the uplift in mood lasts



These emotional benefits make a difference well beyond the stables. Parents, carers and educators described improvements in focus, self-regulation and confidence at home and at school.

One educator described how a child with behavioural challenges “showed marked improvement in self-regulation” after attending RDA sessions with his school – so much so that he was able to go on his first family holiday, something that had never been possible before.

**“Before a session people tend to be quite tense, and always afterwards you notice how people seem happier, more relaxed. The morale has improved quite a lot.”**

**Volunteer at Isle of Mull RDA, focus group participant**

# Outcome: More connected to others and the natural world

## Overcoming isolation through connection

Disabled people are significantly more likely to experience social exclusion and loneliness, often facing barriers that limit their participation in community life.

One of the most powerful ways RDA makes a difference is by offering a **genuine sense of belonging**. Participants from all types of RDA Groups – from small, once-a-week sessions to busy centres open all week – consistently described feeling understood and accepted. For many, **RDA is one of the only places where they feel truly included** – part of a safe, welcoming community.



“It’s the only time I go out during the week. It gets me out of the house, gives me something to look forward to, and makes me feel like I’m doing something normal.”  
Adult participant, Horse Rangers RDA



## Improved communication

RDA's supportive, low-pressure environment helps many participants – particularly those with learning disabilities – **to express themselves more confidently**. Parents, carers and educators shared powerful stories of children and adults who had previously struggled to communicate, beginning to **open up, engage and connect** during sessions.

Some participants who were previously non-speaking or reluctant to interact began:

- Talking to horses, volunteers or peers.
- Listening to and following instructions.
- Expressing themselves more at home and school.
- To form new friendships.

**“Attending RDA has changed everything, including her communication at home. She talks more now.”**

Parent of child participant at Fairlight Hall, interviewee



**68%**

of participants have improved their communication skills

**65%**

of participants have made new friends because of RDA

# Impact story: Proud to be a member of the RDA community

## Dexter, 43 years old

**“Working hard” looking after the horses at RDA makes Dexter feel fitter and being part of the Park Lane Stables community has given him a sense of pride and belonging.**

Dexter is a key member of Park Lane Stables RDA – he visits the stables in south west London most days, and on Saturdays, he volunteers to do horse care. Dexter experiences difficulties with his knees and feet, and doing groundwork makes him feel fit and strong – “I like working hard”, he says.

Dexter, who also has Down syndrome and a hearing impairment, lives opposite Park Lane

stables. He saw the horses from his window and wanted to visit from the first day he moved in.

Coming to RDA makes Dexter feel “happy” and “excited” and gives him a sense of belonging, especially as he lives on his own. When he had to move out of his flat briefly for renovations, he felt quite isolated – “he missed RDA so much”, says his brother.

Being part of the Park Lane community has increased Dexter’s self esteem by giving him purpose, a sense of pride and belonging. He is happier living independently since, says his brother.

## RDA Group spotlight: Park Lane Stables

Park Lane Stables in Teddington is located in the heart of the community, with a stable that opens onto the street, where passers-by can stroke the ‘Cuddle Horse of the Day’.

Participants can engage with horses through riding and carriage driving in nearby Bushy Park, and horse care. The “kind and joyful” environment helps people feel “wanted” and valued – they can drop in to make a cup of tea, spend time with the horses and have a chat with the volunteers, most of whom have a disability. This has been key to supporting the diverse west London community, including survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire, to the LGBTQ+ community – “our aim is to take down barriers”.

Park Lane Stables recently crowdfunded over £1m to buy the stables and ensure the continuity of their work.



## Spending more time in nature

Participants and families often described RDA as their **main – and sometimes only – opportunity to enjoy the outdoors**. Whether due to physical access barriers, social isolation, or the challenges of family outings with children who have SEN, many have limited access to green spaces in their daily lives.

Attending RDA offers the chance to be outside, breathe fresh air, and feel more connected to nature – something participants and carers deeply value.

People described this connection happening in different ways:

- Spending time with horses and other animals.
- Exploring woodland paths, fields or nearby beaches on horseback
- Experiencing the seasons and their surroundings through sound, scent and movement

Several participants said their favourite thing was “hacking out” – going for a leisurely horse ride outside of the arena, in parks, fields, stable grounds or nearby beaches.

**Hack** – To ride a horse or pony at a leisurely pace on country roads, woodlands or fields.

70%

of participants  
feel more connected  
to nature



# Impact story: Tackling rural isolation

## RDA Group spotlight: Isle of Mull

Founded in 2015, Isle of Mull RDA, located off the west coast of Scotland, supports participants of all ages living across the Inner Hebrides. Families travel up to **two and a half hours each way by ferry and road** to attend weekly sessions – a reflection of just how valuable these experiences are.

Living in a remote rural area can be quite isolating, more so for disabled people. Isle of Mull RDA plays a vital part in helping participants feel **welcome, understood and part of something bigger**.

The Group offers **riding along stunning beaches and hill paths, connecting with nature and local wildlife**. When the weather turns, riding in the arena or grooming the horses provides a welcome alternative.

The Isle of Mull RDA community is like a “family” to participants and their parents. For many who haven’t met other people facing similar challenges in the isolated islands, or who are unable to access the terrain without a horse, the Group **connects participants with the land, sea, and people**.



# Outcome: Increased self-esteem and confidence

## More confident at RDA and beyond

Disabled people often face barriers and discrimination that can deeply affect their confidence and sense of self-worth. RDA sessions offer the chance to build **self-belief, experience success, and grow in confidence.**

One of the most commonly reported outcomes – by participants, parents and carers alike – is a genuine boost in confidence. RDA doesn't just build practical skills. It helps participants to feel differently about themselves, thanks to:

- Feeling **valued and accepted** in a truly non-judgemental space.
- Being encouraged and supported by **coaches and volunteers who adapt to their needs.**
- **Experiencing progress and achievement,** often for the first time.

This newfound confidence was visible both **during sessions and in everyday life:**

- At RDA – being able to **get on a horse after initially being hesitant,** or attending sessions independently.
- Beyond RDA – **trying new sports, engaging more at school,** or trying new social situations.



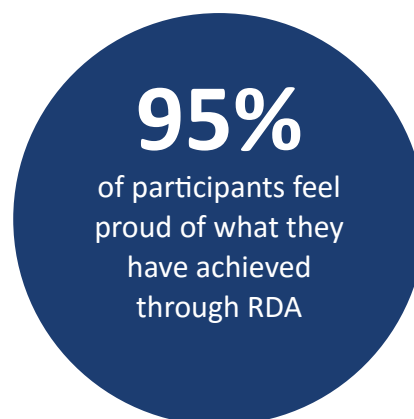
“Joining RDA has changed my life. The increase in confidence, muscles, strength, balance and mental health has been noticed by family, friends, carers and healthcare professionals. This has given me the ability to do more for myself.”

Participant at Patchwork RDA, survey respondent

## Feeling pride in achievement

Participants told us that **coming to RDA gives them a sense of purpose and accomplishment** – whether through riding, grooming, or simply spending time with horses.

Many spoke with pride about learning a skill they never thought possible. Some highlighted the joy of riding when their non-disabled peers didn't, while others found equal satisfaction in caring for and connecting with horses.



# Impact story: Horses helped my daughter to heal

## Eva, 15 years old

**Through RDA, Eva discovered a passion for horses, which has helped her to move through grief and discover what she's capable of – now she feels “she can have a go at things”.**

When Eva first joined Horse Rangers Association RDA at age 8, her mum was surprised she “took straight to it”. “She has a fear of heights and spatial awareness challenges, but she happily climbed up on a huge horse on the very first visit.” Seven years later, Eva is cantering confidently and has won the Rider of the Year 2025 award at Horse Rangers.

Eva, who is autistic and has a learning disability, joined RDA after her dad passed away. “The horses had such a good understanding of Eva’s grief”, her mum says. “I’ve watched their bond grow over the years. She is so relaxed here.”

Riding has also helped Eva become more confident beyond the arena – she’s now engaging in other sports, such as autistic football and cricket. According to her mum, “RDA has helped Eva feel that she can have a go at these things”. She used to be quiet, but at RDA she enjoys talking to volunteers and interacting more with people, including at the Royal Windsor Horse Show, where she was proud to meet The Princess Royal.

Coming to RDA has helped Eva to understand what she’s capable of, which has opened the doors to new experiences. It’s also given her a new interest to pursue – she has chosen to do horse care at her specialist school, showing how Eva’s experience of RDA is shaping her aspirations.

“Sadly, Eva’s father didn’t get to see her ride, but he hoped she may one day ride a horse, having ridden horses himself”, says her mum. “It really was just written in the stars.”



## RDA Group spotlight: Horse Rangers Association

The Horse Rangers, based in Bushy Park in Hampton, west London, have been part of the RDA network since the 1960s.

Their “highly skilled, patient and accommodating” coaches and volunteers lead horse riding sessions in a “non-judgemental environment”, which people can access through becoming members to secure a weekly slot.

They always have a waiting list so, when possible, they support RDA riders to progress to their mainstream (non-RDA) sessions at weekends, freeing up an RDA place for someone who is in need.

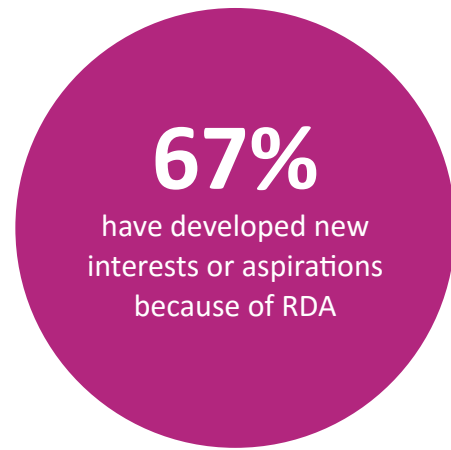
**Canter** – A three-beat gait of a horse – smoother than a trot and slower than a gallop.

## Broader horizons

Being part of an RDA Group contributes to the personal growth of many participants – a **chance to learn about and try something completely new – and in doing so, discover a new passion.**

Learning new skills both on and off the horse – from tacking-up to riding confidently – becomes a lifelong passion for many RDA participants, **something that is part of their identity, gives them motivation in their day-to-day life and is a “talking point”** with others.

In some cases, it can contribute to people imagining a brighter future for themselves – **some participants go on to volunteer at their RDA Group, compete at regional and national championships, or consider a new career in equine or animal care.**



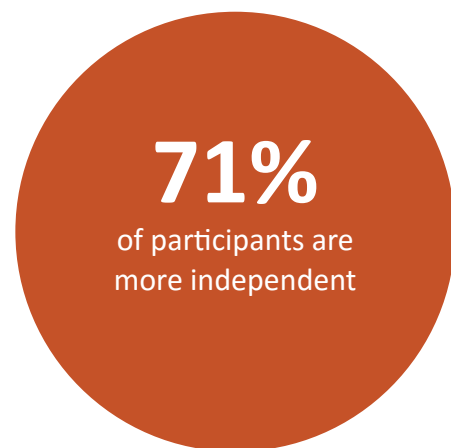
**Tacking-up** – This is preparing a horse with the necessary equipment (“tack”), in a safe and correct way. Tack will usually include at least saddle, bridle and reins, and should not cause pain or discomfort to the horse. More advanced riders or volunteers must untack the horse after riding.

## Experiencing freedom and independence

One of the most powerful feelings participants of all ages described was **the sense of “freedom” they experience through horse riding and carriage driving.** For many people with physical disabilities, RDA offers **autonomy in movement that they don’t find anywhere else** – one that feels **freeing, empowering and joyful.**

Parents, carers and educators also noticed a wider shift in independence. After attending RDA, many participants required **less one-to-one support**, began **talking more with friends at school, or felt more confident going out and joining in** without needing family support.

**“It feels amazing when I’m on a horse – it feels like the sensation of walking.”**  
Adult participant who is a wheelchair user



# Impact story: A richer and fuller life after RDA

## Josh, 16 years old

**Through “always talking to Henna”, the horse, and the volunteers at RDA, Josh has become a more confident communicator and independent – before he was inactive, and now walks dogs, does karate and trains at the gym independently.**

For Josh, going to Fairlight Hall RDA near Hastings is synonymous with pride – he started horse riding here and now rides Henna independently. He loves hacking out in the “very pretty” woods and around the pond.

Coming to Fairlight Hall RDA has made Josh, who is autistic and home educated, more talkative. He has learned to communicate with the horse – “I am always talking to Henna as I am going around” – and he likes talking to the

“lovely” volunteers, who make him feel safe. His mum has noticed that he is now more confident when talking to adults.

Josh started coming to RDA on the recommendation of a physiotherapist, to develop his core strength, balance and co-ordination – and it has helped. Josh is more physically active and independent – he was relatively inactive before RDA, and now he does dog walking, karate and goes to the gym independently.

When it rains and Josh can’t ride, he enjoys grooming the horses. By doing this, as well as participating in woodland management activities at a nearby horticultural day centre, Josh is considering attending the local farming college.

Since coming to RDA, Josh has become stronger, more independent and confident to try other activities outside of home and think of a more positive future.



# Outcome: More physically active and increased physical ability

## Reducing inactivity among disabled people

For many disabled people, **opportunities for safe, enjoyable exercise are limited. Nationally, more than four in 10 disabled adults (41%) are inactive**, doing less than 30 minutes of moderate activity per week (Sport England, 2025). The barriers to participating in mainstream sports or fitness can feel overwhelming.

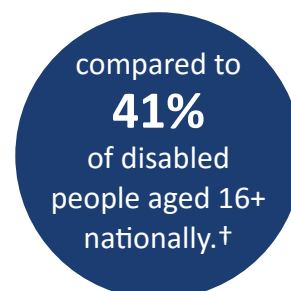
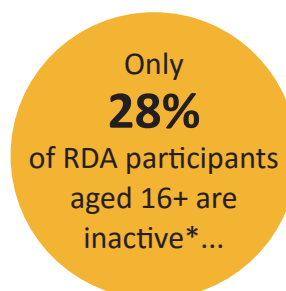
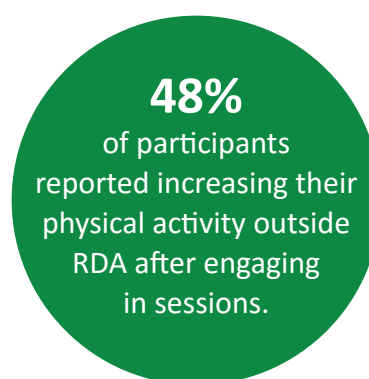
Sport England emphasises the importance of the **COM-B model** (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation – Behaviour), in tackling inactivity. It indicates that people are more likely to be active when they:

- Feel physically and emotionally able to take part (**Capability**)
- Have access to safe, supportive, inclusive spaces (**Opportunity**)
- Want to take part because the experience is meaningful and enjoyable (**Motivation**)

**RDA provides all three – helping to increase participants’ physical activity (Behaviour).**

RDA offers a unique gateway into movement, where participants can stretch, strengthen and move their bodies in a way that feels purposeful, empowering – and fun.

Our evaluation found that **RDA sessions measurably improve participants’ activity levels:**



**For participants who were previously inactive, RDA often becomes a first step to moving more.** Families told us that once a participant builds strength and confidence with horses, they are more likely to try other activities – from dog walking and karate to swimming or gym sessions – creating ripple effects for health and wellbeing.

\*doing fewer than 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per week

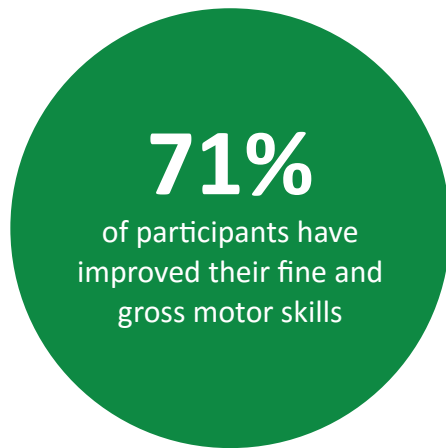
†Source: Sport England (2025). This is likely to be an underestimation due to how activity levels were measured in the survey (n=236 survey responses) – RDA will strengthen data gathering in this area in the future.

## Improving fine and gross motor skills

One of the most consistent differences reported by participants, parents, carers and educators was **improvements in everyday physical skills** – the kinds of movements that support independence and participation in school, work and daily life.

Parents described how RDA had helped children to **hold a pencil**, improve their **balance and posture**, or find it **easier to walk** – changes that make a huge difference to quality of life.

While horse riding is a key contributor to these outcomes, so too are activities like carriage driving and horse care – **from holding the reins or a grooming brush, to maintaining body control and coordination** while working with horses on the ground.



**“My son is always so excited to go to lessons ... He has very tight muscles and I have noticed the riding seems to help keep them looser. It’s helping keep his core stronger for longer and helping with his fine motor skills.”**

Parent of child participant at Aim RDA, survey respondent



## Building strength, balance and reducing pain

For many participants with physical disabilities or coordination challenges – such as hypermobility, dyspraxia or cerebral palsy – attending RDA plays a vital role in **supporting physical development, stamina and pain management**.

Horse riding naturally engages the core muscles, improves balance and posture, and offers movement that mimics walking – making it especially beneficial for those who face barriers to other forms of exercise. Families and participants described everyday improvements as a result of attending RDA:

- One child with cerebral palsy, who first arrived “slumped over and hugging the horse’s neck,” now sits upright on the horse – and at school – with greater strength and confidence.
- An adult participant with progressive multiple sclerosis has retained muscular control that would likely have been lost without the regular exercise and movement RDA provides.
- A young girl now experiences two pain-free days after every riding session, thanks to her improved core strength and balance.

RDA’s tracker data (2019) shows that **after just 12 weeks, 67% of participants demonstrated a physical improvement**.



“RDA has improved his core strength, balance and general stamina more than any other activity. He has hypermobility and is reluctant to participate in any physical activity. Riding a horse has been crucial to his physical development.”

Parent of young person at Newbury RDA, survey respondent

### The impact and contribution of RDA physiotherapists

RDA recognises that each individual has unique needs and goals. Therefore, a network of volunteer Chartered Physiotherapists provide professional clinical expertise to RDA Groups. They work with riders to develop personalised programmes that may involve other therapists (like occupational or speech therapists) to maximise the benefits of riding.

Physiotherapy at RDA can include the use of a mechanical horse or hippotherapy (from the Greek word ‘hippos’, meaning horse), which utilises the warmth and movement of the horse to help relax muscles, improve posture, balance and co-ordination.

# Impact story: Becoming stronger, calmer and more engaged at school

## T, 10 years old

**Improving strength and co-ordination and feeling calmer through engaging with horses and riding has helped T engage with school differently – she can now listen and sit down to do her work, which previously wasn't possible.**

Being “outside on a hack” with the Peterborough & District RDA makes T, who is autistic and has ADHD, feel “happy”. It has also helped with her hypermobility (which means she has less muscle control) by strengthening her core and improving her co-ordination – “she is now able to hold her head up and control her movements on the horse”, says her carer. This means T can now sit on a chair at school, whereas before she had to use a sitting ball.

Connecting with horses also helps T to feel “calm” at RDA, which has changed how she is at school: “After her first lesson, she sat down and got on with her work at school, and the school said that they had never seen her do that before”, her carer explains. “Coming to RDA benefits the rest of her school day. She has learnt how to listen here.”

T used to be withdrawn, but thanks to the encouragement and support of the coaches and volunteers, now she is more talkative. She is also making her carer proud with her riding achievements, like recently making the perfect rising trot!

**Rising trot** – When the rider takes their weight off the horse's back every other stride, allowing the horse to use their back freely.

## RDA Group spotlight: Peterborough & District

Peterborough & District RDA, founded in 1966, is one of the oldest Groups in the UK. Every Wednesday morning during term time, the Group welcomes children with their parents and groups of children from three local special schools for horse-riding sessions. Participants benefit from an indoor and outdoor arena, as well as fields and a lakeside route for hacks, giving them the chance to enjoy nature and freedom of movement.

One of the Group's coaches, a qualified SEND teacher, makes sessions inclusive through the use of Makaton – a system of signs, symbols and speech – to support children with communication difficulties.

# Outcome: Increased engagement with education

## Gaining new skills and qualifications

Disabled children and young people and those with SEN are disproportionately vulnerable to school exclusions and disengagement from learning (National Children’s Bureau, 2024). Many are not given the support they are legally entitled to and therefore cannot make the most of their school experience. This not only hinders their educational achievement, but also means they have fewer opportunities to learn new skills, experience growth and, later on, participate in volunteering and employment.

Through RDA, participants of all ages have the opportunity to **learn and grow in a non-academic setting**. Parents, carers and educators told us how children and adults developed skills in riding, carriage driving, and horse care, often gaining confidence through practical learning that felt enjoyable and achievable.

For many, attending RDA is their **only opportunity to experience structured learning** in an environment where they feel safe and supported. Importantly, **RDA offers the opportunity to work towards and achieve awards and qualifications**, such as the RDA Proficiency Tests – opening the door to accomplishment that may feel out of reach in traditional educational settings.

“My daughter’s highlight was passing her Grade 1 Riding and Horse care Proficiency Test. It gave her a real sense of purpose and she was so proud.”

Parent of child participant at Wyfold RDA, survey respondent

RDA offers a range of awards and qualifications:

- **Proficiency Tests** – in Riding, Carriage driving, Showjumping, Vaulting and Horse Care. These structured awards allow participants to be recognised for the practical skills they develop through RDA.
- **ASDAN Programmes** – externally accredited and focused on broader life and employability skills.
- **Endeavour Awards** enable all participants to achieve a qualification, as they are flexible, focused on individual goals set by the participant and do not require a formal test.

**11,502**  
Awards and qualifications awarded to RDA participants in 2024

Type of award / qualification	Number of awards / qualifications awarded
Proficiency Tests	8,112
Endeavour Awards	3,352
ASDAN Programmes	38

Number of awards and qualifications awarded by RDA Groups to participants in 2024

## A better experience at school

Parents, carers and educators consistently told us that RDA makes a difference far beyond the stables – helping children and young people feel **calmer, more confident, and more engaged in other areas of life.**

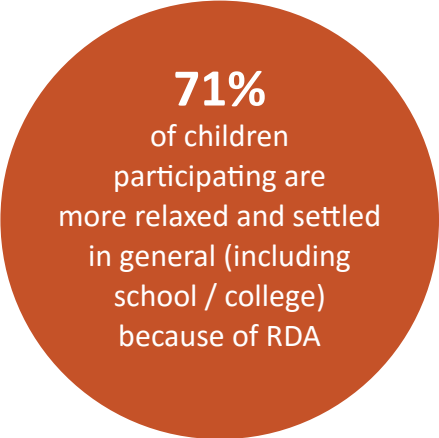
For school-aged participants, this translates into a better experience in education. Feeling relaxed and empowered through riding and building a bond with horses helped **71% of children feel more settled.**

Teachers and school staff shared how attending RDA helped children to:

- Develop **patience and resilience**, as sessions help participants attune to the horse's mindset, and in turn adapt and regulate their own emotions.
- Build **confidence and independence** – through gaining a sense achievement and being in control of their experience on the horse.

Educators also observed improvements in **mood, communication, social interaction and physical ability** – all of which helped children show **“a different side”**, participate more fully in lessons and interact more positively with their peers.

RDA plans to invest in further research with educators to build a stronger evidence base around its impact on educational engagement in the years ahead.



**71%**  
of children  
participating are  
more relaxed and settled  
in general (including  
school / college)  
because of RDA

“The confidence the children build at RDA translates to school, because suddenly they know ‘actually I can mount, I can trot’, and they start to think, ‘perhaps I can have a go at that writing’ – they are different children.”

Katie Aldred, Headteacher at Bagshot Infant School, who attend Sandhurst RDA, interviewee

## The importance of RDA school placements

Most children attend RDA sessions during school hours, either with their parents or as part of a school group. Across the UK, RDA Groups have developed **strong relationships with specialist schools**, whose staff recognise the unique benefits RDA offers for children with additional needs.

Schools take different approaches to participation:

- Some select a few children to attend weekly for the entire school year.
- Others rotate students term by term so that more children can experience RDA.

RDA staff and volunteers often felt that **longer placements deliver greater impact** – even if that means fewer children attend. Children with sensory sensitivities may need time to adjust to the environment, wear a helmet, or gradually build up to riding. Others may be hesitant at first and benefit from a **gradual process of confidence-building** through repeated, supported sessions.

Parents and carers also noted that **stopping RDA during key academic stages**, such as GCSE preparation, **led to noticeable regressions in wellbeing** – reinforcing the value of consistent, long-term engagement as part of a child's support network.

# Impact story: Confidence in SEN children that lasts

## Bagshot Infant School

**Bagshot Infant School has been taking children with SEND to RDA for ten years, leading to “amazing” physical and mental improvements. Parents are “blown away” by confidence and independence the children build through horse riding.**

Bagshot Infant School in Surrey welcomes children aged 4-7, many with high communication and interaction needs. The school has been taking children to Sandhurst RDA for thirty years and the impact on them starts with how inclusive the experience is: “Our group has autistic children, children with physical disabilities, children with social mental health issues, and RDA are the epitome of inclusion because they welcome everybody. The children don’t feel different, they are just riders”, says Ms Aldred, Headteacher.

Attending RDA has “amazing” physical and mental impact: “It’s that confidence that it gives them”. Even their parents are surprised when they go to see them ride, which happens twice a year: “They are just blown away by their independence”. There are non-speaking or shy children who now talk and engage with peers, and children with physical disabilities whose posture has improved “hugely”.

This positive effect remains even after the children leave the school, and has a crucial effect on their development: “The confidence builds through the year, whether they carry on riding or not ... Three of the children who go to RDA at the moment do not have an Education, Health and Care Plan, although it was thought they would soon need one, and now they don’t. That’s the impact of RDA’s therapy.”



# RDA's wider impact

## More connected families

When a disabled person engages with RDA, the benefits often extend to the whole family. Parents and carers shared **how RDA has changed family life for the better** – not just by supporting their child, but by creating space, connection and calm in their wider lives.

Families described a range of positive effects:

- **Reduction in isolation** – Several said their RDA community had “enriched their lives”, offering a rare chance to connect with other parents facing similar challenges.
- **Improved family relationships and routines** – Attending RDA was often one of the only shared experiences that felt truly enjoyable and relaxing. Families described how their child’s improved mood or communication had a knock-on effect on relationships with siblings and home life.
- **Respite and breathing space** – Some valued the opportunity to have a short break while their child attended, using that time to rest, recharge or take care of other family needs.

**80%**

of parents/carers say RDA has had a positive impact on family life

“We both know more people now ... My daughter is relaxed, which means the family can relax too. We love the family at RDA ... It makes us all happy.”

Parent of child participant at Fairlight Hall RDA, interviewee





## Positive and fulfilled volunteers

Volunteering with RDA doesn't just benefit participants – it also has a profound impact on volunteers themselves. RDA UK's 2020 report, 'Volunteering with RDA: Horses, Health and Happiness', highlighted how volunteering for RDA helps tackle loneliness and supports both mental and physical wellbeing.

Volunteers who took part in this evaluation described the benefits in their own words:

- **Better wellbeing** – Many spoke of RDA as a **therapeutic space**, with some joining to cope with grief, stress or anxiety.
- **Social connection and sense of purpose** – Volunteers valued being part of a welcoming community, where they could meet people, give back, and see the difference they were making through participant progress.
- **New skills and self-confidence** – Supporting participants and learning about horses and disability helped many volunteers **feel upskilled, empowered and proud**.

Several RDA participants go on to **become volunteers themselves**, gaining confidence, a sense of purpose, and a new perspective on their own potential. For some, it becomes a **stepping stone into work or further involvement in the equine world** – including one participant who started riding as a child, became a volunteer, and is now employed by their local RDA Group.

**“My job as a nurse is hard physically and psychologically, but I have found my place at RDA. My volunteering day is ‘my spa time’, it re-charges my battery.”**

**Volunteer at RDA Peterborough & District, interviewee**

# RDA's contribution to the changes

## RDA's unique impact

The independent evaluation provides strong evidence that **RDA makes a distinct and irreplaceable contribution to the changes experienced by participants**. Through surveys, interviews and focus groups with participants, parents, carers, volunteers and educators, the evaluation found that **RDA is the critical factor enabling these life-changing outcomes**.

RDA helps many disabled people **overcome or lessen the impact of the barriers they face** (see page 6) – supporting improvements in **mental and physical wellbeing, reducing isolation, enabling access to physical activity, and increasing engagement with education**.

**“RDA has completely changed my life for the better. I’m not as dependent on my wheelchair. It improves my mental health.”**

Young participant at Wyfold Group, survey respondent

**80%**

of parents/carers think the changes in participants wouldn't have happened without RDA

Over three quarters (80%) of parent/carers surveyed confirmed that the changes they witnessed in their family members **would not have happened without RDA**.

The evaluation also revealed that **when RDA is unavailable, participants can lose progress**, underlining its unique impact:

- A man with Down syndrome became “very sad” and isolated when he had to temporarily move away due to flat renovations and could no longer attend RDA.
- An autistic adult with learning disabilities experienced increased anxiety and a sense of disconnection when his RDA Group temporarily relocated during building works.
- A young person with mental health difficulties showed a **marked decline in wellbeing and academic engagement when her school stopped allowing RDA attendance** during GCSE preparations.

These stories, told to our evaluator during site visits, reveal that RDA is far more than a leisure activity – it is often a lifeline for participants' mental and physical health, confidence, and daily wellbeing. **The presence of RDA in their routine enables progress; its absence can stall or reverse it.**



# Evaluators' conclusions

## The delivery

Through its network of federated Groups across the UK, RDA is building a movement of disabled people whose lives are being changed through inclusive and engaging therapeutic activities with horses.

RDA Group coaches and volunteers ensure that delivery is well organised and of a high standard. Their encouragement, flexibility, and person-centred approach are key factors in the quality delivery.

## The difference

This evaluation provides strong evidence that RDA activities create meaningful positive change for disabled people in four key areas – mental wellbeing, connection to others and nature, confidence and self-esteem, and physical ability and activity.

As a result of taking part in RDA activities, whether that is riding or carriage driving – at competition or beginner level – as well as caring for and enjoying the company of equines, participants feel happier, brighter, calmer and less anxious.

The inclusive atmosphere within RDA Groups creates a space where disabled people can overcome isolation, experience acceptance, and feel a sense of belonging.

Skills development and qualifications provide participants of all abilities a sense of achievement, which improves confidence and self-esteem, with many disabled participants reporting new aspirations.

Horse riding has a meaningful impact on participants' physical strength, balance and posture – leading to reduced pain, increased

mobility, improvements in day-to-day life and gains in independence.

RDA participants are more physically active than disabled people in general, often taking part in new sports, which contributes to their overall health and wellbeing.

There is also emerging evidence that RDA positively impacts engagement with education, by increasing skills and access to learning and qualifications in a non-academic setting, and improving focus and emotional regulation.

## The opportunity

Demand for RDA is high, with over 3,800 people on waiting lists. Participant needs are also shifting, with more neurodivergent people now taking part. RDA Groups are already adapting, and the federation now has a strategic opportunity to build on this – strengthening sensory-aware practice, broadening non-riding options, and embedding neurodiversity-informed training and peer-learning across the network.

RDA's impact could also be extended through national-level advocacy for the inclusion of disabled people in sport, leisure, and society – especially at a time of disability benefit and SEN education reforms.

These developments would require resources that could be leveraged by building relationships with new partners, policymakers and funders.

This evaluation offers RDA the opportunity to celebrate its achievements and grow further – to break down barriers and support more disabled people to live fulfilling lives through freedom, connection and inclusion.

## Summary of evaluators' recommendations for RDA UK

1. Reach more participants by helping groups to increase capacity and develop new partnerships with commercial riding centres
2. Continue strengthening inclusive practice across the federation – particularly to support the growing number of neurodivergent participants
3. Engage new partners and funders
4. Influence national policy and public attitudes on disabled people's inclusion in sport, leisure and society
5. Invest in monitoring & evaluation to evidence long-term impact



# RDA UK response to the evaluators' conclusions and recommendations

This report highlights the profound impact of RDA activity on the lives of disabled people across the UK. This is true both in the acute connection with RDA during sessions but also the life-changing impact that extends beyond RDA in supporting people to feel more confident, connected and to see improvements in physical and mental wellbeing.

Those of us who feel and see the impacts of RDA activity everyday know the value of RDA and this report gives us all a powerful empirical tool to overtly express the value of RDA to funders, partners and everyone in the street.

We hope everyone connected to RDA feels proud of the overwhelmingly positive feedback from parents, carers and our truly inspirational RDA participants.

Thank you to the evaluation team at Insley Consulting – Emma Insley, Joana Caldeira Martinho and Megan Stephenson.

We welcome the evaluators' recommendations and are encouraged that they align with our strategic priorities for the years ahead.

- **Inclusive practice:** We recognise the importance of continuing to strengthen inclusive practice across the federation. In particular, we are committed to ensuring that our activities and resources support the growing number of neurodivergent participants, so that every individual can access and benefit fully from RDA. Developing further the link between RDA activity and education is a priority for our future programme and activity development.
- **Reaching more participants:** We will continue to seek opportunities to help build capacity, share good practice,

and explore new opportunities for collaboration.

Across the Federation, demand for RDA activities outstrips capacity. RDA UK will continue to support RDA Groups in adapting and developing sustainably. We will support growth in our activities wherever possible, but recognise that not every RDA Group will have the opportunity to grow. The re-launch of the Approved Centre Scheme develops our partnership with commercial riding centres. While delivering our charitable objectives through Groups will always be at the centre of our mission, this is a vital step in increasing access and ensuring high-quality, sustainable growth.

- **Monitoring & evaluation:** We agree that investing in monitoring and evaluation is essential to evidence the long-term impact of RDA. We will continue to strengthen our approach to data collection and impact measurement, ensuring that we can clearly demonstrate the difference RDA makes for our participants, volunteers, and communities.

We are grateful for the engagement from RDA Groups to help RDA UK continue to access evidence and stories so that our leadership role in raising the profile of RDA can continue to build. The importance of monitoring and evaluation cannot be underestimated for Groups and RDA UK to engage new partners and Funders.

We are grateful for these recommendations and see them as an opportunity to build on our achievements and ensure that RDA, through national-level advocacy, cements itself as a leader in activities for disabled people across the UK.



**CAUTION  
BLIND  
RIDER**

# Thank you from RDA

## Thank you

RDA UK would like to express their heartfelt thanks to:

- All the participants, parents and carers, educators and volunteers who supported this evaluation by generously providing their insight through the national survey, interviews and participation in focus groups.
- All RDA Groups and Approved Centres, and the staff, coaches and volunteers that run them, who deliver RDA's life-changing experiences. A special thanks to the RDA Groups who hosted the evaluators' visits and provided data via the RDA Annual Return.
- RDA UK staff, who supports the network of Groups and Approved Centres and supported evaluation design and data collection.
- Our incredible donors, who enable RDA UK and RDA Groups to continue to support as many disabled people across the UK as possible.
- The evaluation team at Insley Consulting – Emma Insley, Joana Caldeira Martinho and Megan Stephenson.

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We are grateful for the support received from players of People's Postcode Lottery, which has allowed us to evidence the life changing impact within this report.





**“I can’t imagine life  
without RDA for my  
son and me.”**

**Parent of adult participant  
at Park Lane, interviewee**



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