

Healing that's powered by horses

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SIRONA Therapeutic Horsemanship, a charity based on the Dartington Estate, is making a remarkable impact on the lives of disadvantaged young people and adults through equine-assisted educational and therapeutic activities.

Their innovative programmes are designed to enhance social, emotional and physical well-being, fostering resilience among participants.

In 2023, Sirona supported 486 individuals aged five to 75, many of whom faced mental health challenges, other disadvantages or were not in education. The charity's tailored interventions create and nurture the unique bond between humans and horses, providing impactful therapeutic experiences that empower participants to return to education, gain employment, pursue further education, and achieve various positive outcomes.

Sirona's standout Therapeutic Horsemanship programme is offered on a one-on-one or small group basis. Participants learn about horse care and behaviour in a positive, non-judgmental, and safe environment. These activities are specifically designed to build self-confidence, self-esteem, and essential skills such as communication, teamwork, responsibility, empathy and resilience. The charity also offers Equine-Assisted Therapy, pro-



The charity Sirona Therapeutic Horsemanship is having a positive impact on the lives of disadvantaged young people and adults

viding one-on-one therapy and counselling sessions for those who find traditional talk-based therapy challenging. This approach is particularly beneficial for young people who have struggled to engage with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). By building positive relationships with horses, participants can open up about their emotions and life experiences, facilitating the therapeutic process.

In addition to therapeutic services, Sirona runs educational courses

through the British Horse Society's Changing Lives through Horses programme and offers an OCN London Level 1 Certificate in Animal Care. They also provide bespoke educational sessions to help young people develop key life skills and re-engage with education or employment.

For those who benefit from alternative interventions, Sirona offers nature-based activities led by a qualified Forest School leader. These activities are designed to improve mental health, concentration, calmness, and

physical health, particularly for young people with additional challenges such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, and emotional or behavioural struggles.

George Monbiot, author, journalist and Sirona patron, said: "If ever you need to restore your faith in humanity, take a look at what Sirona is doing. It provides love and healing in a world that too often seems cruel and uncaring."

Sirona collaborates with several local charities, organisations, and authorities, including Devon County Council and Torbay Council, South Devon Youth Offending Team, Action for Children, the NHS, and Y-Smart Drug & Alcohol Support. The charity relies on grants, fundraisers, and donations for funding, with 64.4 per cent of their funds coming from these sources last year. An open day in June 2023 raised an impressive £1,612.45.

Dr Hannah Burgon, chief executive of Sirona, said: "Recent figures show that the number of under 18s referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services has risen by 53 per cent since 2019. In Devon there were nearly 1,500 young people on the waiting list for CAMHS in 2022. Alongside this we are seeing more young people being referred to Sirona who are unable to attend school due to anxiety – again reflecting the national trend."

"We have especially noticed a large increase in teenage girls attending Sirona this year who are unable to attend school due to their anxiety, and

who are self-harming, isolated, and in some cases completely withdrawn from society apart from their attendance at Sirona.

"Time and time again we are truly astonished at how much young people have grown from when they started at Sirona, often withdrawn and with no confidence in themselves, to being able to skilfully lead a pony around an obstacle course, reading their body language and talking to complete strangers about their experience and knowledge.

"Despite the challenges of meeting the rising demand for our provision, alongside the more complex support needs of young people referred to Sirona, our staff and volunteer team remains passionately committed to our work, with the benefits we see daily confirming the vital importance of interactions with animals and nature for disadvantaged young people."

To support Sirona, individuals can make one-off donations, attend public courses, or sponsor a pony. The charity has a range of upcoming events, including a course on equine welfare in equine-assisted interactions in September and a free information session in October. Limited spaces may also be available for their new home-educated group starting in September and their horseworks group for 14 to 25 year olds.

For more information, follow Sirona on social media or visit their website at sironaequine.org.uk

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