# Annual Review





**Registered charity number: 1169709** 

Iorsemanship



Registered Charity 1169709

• All images are of models and not real life participants.

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#### Mission

Sirona Therapeutic Horsemanship, provides animal-assisted educational and therapeutic activities to disadvantaged young people and adults with the aim of promoting increased resilience and social, emotional and physical well-being.



## **CEO Welcome**



### We are pleased to share our 2024 annual report on our activities at Sirona.

It has continued to be a challenging time to run our charity with the demand on our unique provision rising every year, set against an increasingly difficult financial and fundraising background. In addition we are continuing to see young people with higher support needs and levels of anxiety being referred to Sirona, so requiring us to be flexible in how we manage our provision. This resulted in us providing many more bespoke 1-1 sessions alongside our small group sessions (total sessions n=697 compared to 610 in 2023). In addition we worked with more parents and carers on sessions (n=24).

The 3-year lottery community funding we were granted in 2022 has supported Sirona to truly embed a traumainformed and relationship-based approach across our whole team and all of our work. We have invested in a wide range of both research based and practical training in order for this to be at our core, from when our administrator picks up the phone to an initial enquiry, to our equine apprentice and animal care staff relating to young people and parents attending Sirona. A long-term relational approach to practice, alongside an understanding of the importance of belonging is now being more widely recognised as imperative for young people with complex adverse childhood experiences. This approach has enabled us to build relationships with a growing number of young people who have been unable to engage in any other provision, and for whom Sirona is the only activity they are able to leave their homes to attend.

In October we ran a module on welfare in equine and animal-assisted interactions at Sirona for the Hartpury University first year student cohort on their new MSc Animal-Assisted Counselling and Psychotherapy masters degree course, the FIRST university based degree course in the UK. Our chair of trustees Sarah Urwin was on the initial curriculum advisory board and is one of a small selection of experienced Equine/Animal-Assisted therapy supervisors providing supervision support to students. This course has been a long time coming to the UK, with Sirona being involved in discussions for over 10 years until Dr Clare Thomas-Pino, PhD, SFHEA finally got it up and running. In addition to our annual summer open day we also held termly information coffee mornings and held our first Christmas open event in December where people could come and meet the animals and learn more about our Sponsor a Pony scheme. We were also very honoured to have been chosen as a charity of the year by The High Sherriff of Devon, Commodore Jake Moores, OBE DL RN in 2024 and attended a garden party he hosted in the summer to raise funds for his chosen charities.



Sirona was also invited to a community engagement meeting held by HM Lord Lieutenant of Devon and to present at the British Horse Society Changing Lives through Horses (CLtH) showcase at Saddlers Hall in London, attended by HRH Princess Anne and actor and BHS president Martin Clunes.

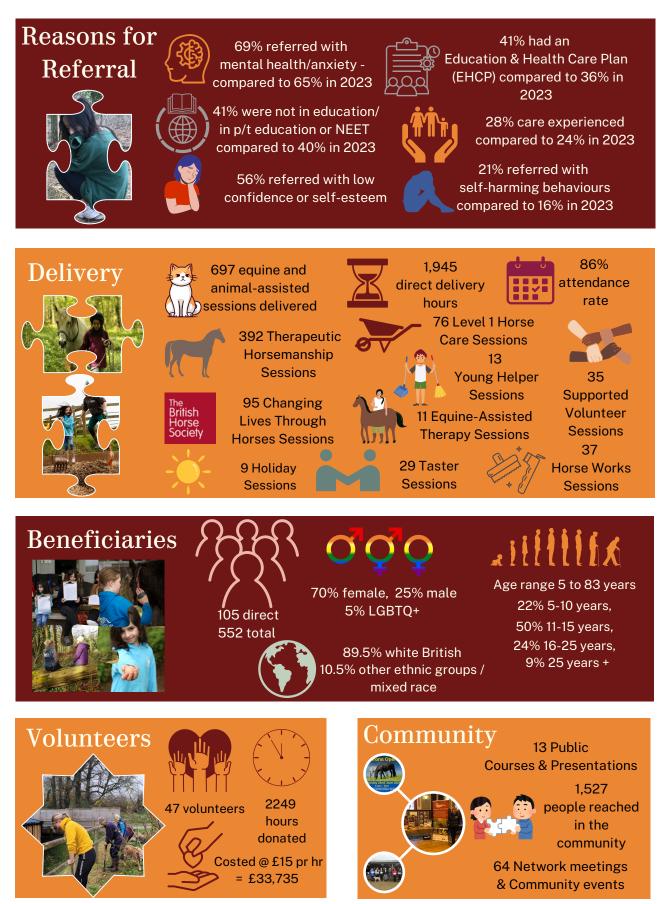
Evaluation of our provision is important to Sirona and in 2024 we completed a 2 year external evaluation of our provision in partnership with Hartpury University. The study showed a highly statistically significant increase across the range of indicators measured including a 60% increase in skills, 50% increase in confidence and 50% increase in communication. These outcomes are linked to increased resilience which is a key factor in improved life outcomes for disadvantaged young people. We are very proud of the work we achieve at Sirona and our incredibly dedicated team of staff and volunteers, who together with the horses and other animals really do change lives.

We thank all our supporters and funders in 2024 and hope you enjoy reading our report.

Dr Hannah Burgon

### **Impact & Performance**

#### A summary of 2024

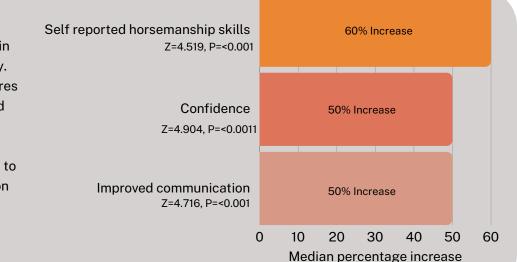


### Our Outcomes An evaluation in partnership with Hartpury University

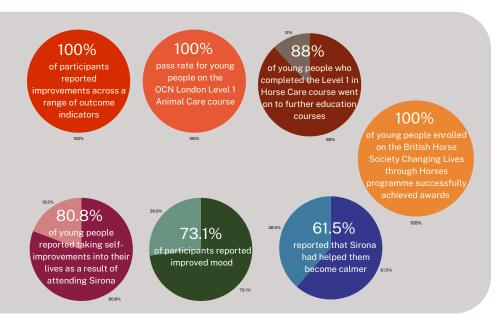




In 2024 we completed a 2 year external evaluation of our provision in partnership with Hartpury University. Pre and post evaluation questionnaires from 72 young people were analysed and the study confirmed previous research showing that our equineassisted programmes at Sirona lead to positive outcomes. Notably, Wilcoxon signed rank tests revealed the following;



The areas assessed are based on wellbeing measures linked to resilience factors, with resilience being a key factor in improved life outcomes for disadvantaged young people. We follow a co-production approach at Sirona where young people choose their own goals and are supported to celebrate their successes, however small, to build confidence and selfesteem. Key findings from the report include;



### A participant's journey

### Carrie's Story



\* Names have been changed

Carrie\* was referred to Sirona when she was 14 yrs old by a charity worker who was supporting the family due to domestic violence. As a result of this Carrie suffered with anxiety, trauma and mental health issues, a loss of confidence and had been unable to attend school for over two years. Carrie had a love of horses and the charity worker hoped Sirona would help Carrie engage in an positive activity.

Carrie initially attended 6 sessions of 1-1 Therapeutic Horsemanship sessions in order to build up a relationship with her practitioner and the animals at Sirona, and begin to feel safe in the new environment. Carrie engaged really well, building a special relationship with our rescue Dartmoor pony Rupert Jones, who can also be anxious in new situations. Carrie learnt how to regulate her own behaviour and body language in order to have a positive relationship with Rupert Jones. Using our unique Equine-Based Mindfulness breathing exercises Carrie was able to help Rupert Jones using techniques when he was anxious, and then in turn was able to learn how to calm herself.

Following these sessions Carrie was able to progress onto our small group Horse Works session with two other young people. Whilst initially nervous about this change, Carrie soon settled in and within a couple of weeks her confidence had grown, and she started to make new friends. She was even able to attend our open day with the HorseWorks group, giving a leading demonstration with Rupert Jones in front of a large crowd. This was a huge achievement and something Carrie thought she would never have been able to do previously. Carrie shared with us how Sirona had helped her during a really difficult time in her life.

"I like a challenge now – if something worries me I still try anyway. I have improved in confidence. I was really nervous at the open day but I still did it – I feel like Rupert trusted me because of his body language."

Carrie is now starting at a new school to work towards her GCSE's with the dream of working with horses in the future. She is hoping to return to Sirona for work experience to support her to move onto a local college course. We look forward to welcoming Carrie back to Sirona to help her achieve her dreams.

## Feedback Collected from parents and carers over 2024

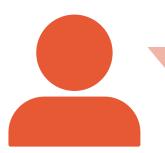
"Please pass on my thanks for all the staff that have worked with T. Sirona has made a huge difference to him and massively improved his confidence. He is in a completely different head space then he was 2 years ago when he started. He is now going to Bicton College in September and is about to start driving lessons. Its amazing the change in him. Thank you so much."





"Thank you! I'm so grateful M is able to come to Sirona, it's been life changing to her in so many ways. I didn't see her smile in years until she came to Sirona – we were pretty stuck as a family. M had no aspiration in her life, she's now determined to maintain her attendance at Sirona and work with horses. She now has something to look forward to, she's a lot more social and spends more time out of her room now."





"K has benefited greatly from her sessions at Sirona, prior to attending K didn't leave home or engage with anyone other than myself. K still feels a lot of anxiety and Sirona sessions are the only thing K engages with and gets a sense of purpose each week . It really has changed her life."



"If it wasn't for Sirona K wouldn't be where she is....she is like a completely different young person. She thinks so positively of you all and the relationships she has made" "Just thank you."



#### **Our Equine and Animal-Assisted Provision**

Demand for our provision remained consistent during 2024 with a full timetable providing places for between 25-30 vulnerable young people each week and a waiting list.

We have continued to receive referrals for an increasing number of young people with a higher complexity of support needs who require the quiet, calm environment at Sirona. This would appear to reflect the increasing national mental health crisis in young people and the reputation of Sirona in being able to meet these young peoples' needs. Alongside this referrals for young people with high levels of anxiety who are unable to attend school have remained high, with the Child of the North "An evidence-based plan for improving school attendance" 2024 report stating that; "Between 2015-2016 and 2023-24, the overall school absence rate rose in England by 57%.".

The report also shows how vulnerable children are at increased risk of school absence: "the persistent absence rate for pupils with an Education Health Care Plan was 37.6% – substantially higher than for those without special needs (18.6%). The overall persistent absence rate is highest in the South West (22.2%). Persistently absent children have a nearly four times increased risk of becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)".

"Being with animals really helps me feel better and calmer. They heal me; if I have a headache it's gone. I think animals are magic. It's hard when you feel really nervous, and your belly feels wobbly and you want to run and hide. Sirona has helped me face my fears and feel less nervous".

Demand for donation based bursary places from parents on benefits or low incomes remained high, with Sirona providing £16,814 in bursary in 2024, almost double the original projection for 2024 of £8,487.

The level of need from desperate families has been challenging and we made increased safeguarding reports to social services; one example being a single parent with an autistic child telling us that "we are cold and hungry".

That this is happening in the affluent South West is shocking, and demonstrates the increased level of strain that small charities such as Sirona are being put under.

"Life is stressful but when I've been here its easier to go back to. It clears my mind so I don't have to overthink everything".





#### **Longer Term Sessions**

To best meet the individual needs of young people referred to Sirona, we provided more 1-1 and longer term equine and animal-based sessions in 2024 to build strong, trusting relationships so young people start to feel safe, and are then able to progress onto other opportunities such as small group sessions, our educational courses or return to education.

We believe that the success of our provision is because we have retained a genuinely child-led individual and relational approach, set within the peaceful rural environment of our centre and the grounding effect of being with animals. More and more research supports the vital importance of being in nature for young people (Richard Louv, 2005) and of having a sense of belonging (Dr Lisa Cherry, 2025).

With the current generation the most alienated from our natural environment and the growing concerns of the negative effects of mobile phones and social media for young people's mental health, the need for opportunities for provision such as Sirona Therapeutic Horsemanship has never been greater.

#### **Horse Works**

The new Horse Works sessions, which we started in Autumn 2023 aimed at young people who are NEET or risk of NEET, continued to be a really successful addition to our provision during 2024, with 10 young people aged 14-18 years on the programme this year. Five of these young people progressed onto this small group from 1-1 Therapeutic Horsemanship sessions at Sirona, and whilst initially the young people were anxious about moving to a different session with other young people, they were soon working really well as a team and building strong friendships.

Some feedback from HorseWorks participants includes;

"I've learnt life skills – like being kinder to people and taking care of animals. It's helped me learn about myself."

"It is good to be outside and in a small, safe group. I am more confident with talking and I feel able to talk more and with more people now."

"I'm calmer now. (Sirona) Helps me be more confident with relationships and friendships and making new friends."

KEY ACHIEVEMENT 5 young people enrolled on the new accredited OCN London Level 1 in Animal Care course we started in January 2024



#### **Changing Lives Through Horses**

The Changing Lives through Horses programme we run at Sirona through The British Horse Society also grew in 2024 with 95 sessions in 2024 compared to 88 in 2023.

Providing progression opportunities for young people to move into educational and small group sessions based on preparing for the future and gaining skills for employment aimed at those young people who may be at risk of becoming NEET, are aligned to our mission purpose of supporting young people to gain skills and resilience in order to overcome their adverse child experiences and go on to have positive life outcomes.





#### **Environmental Activities**

An area of equine welfare we have been working hard on is creating a more richly biodiverse environment on our land. Following advice from Jenny at Ash Rescue Centre we mulched with old organic hay and reseeded sections of our field with horse and wildflower friendly seed from Meadowmania and then rested it last winter. The result is a healthy field of mixed native grass and wildflowers, which we strip grazed the horses on over the summer and then mulched, seeded and rested another section of the field over winter, so slowly creating a healthier grazing environment for our herd.

The result of this more biodiverse environment has been quite astonishing in terms of wildlife. In addition to a very healthy bat population we now have both green and greater woodpeckers, nuthatches', thrush, barn and tawny owls, grass snakes, visiting deer, frogs, toads and newts, and many varieties of dragonflies and butterflies attracted to our pond and flourishing buddleia.

One of our weekly volunteers, Paige Beattie has been developing our horticulture further with our supported volunteering group, planting more native shrubs in our orchard garden and growing herbs etc for young people to plant in their sessions at Sirona.





### Local and National Connections

Community events, training and working with other organisations



### Local & National Connections

Community events, training and working with other organisations

#### **Community involvement**





Alongside our equine and animal-assisted provision Sirona was busy in 2024 with community involvement sharing and disseminating our work to wider audiences. At our annual community open day in June we had over 200 people from our local communities through our gates, and raised £1612.45 through donations and sales of cakes, plants, games, bric-a-brac stall and a raffle.

We also held termly information coffee mornings and held our first ever Christmas open event in December where people could come and meet the animals and learn more about our Sponsor a Pony scheme.

Our participants are involved in all these events, from helping on the day, taking part in demonstrations in the arena showcasing the horse skills they have learnt at Sirona, making and donating items to sell, and providing lots of great ideas such as the new merchandise we introduced to trial this year.

"Working with the horses has helped me manage my life better. It took me out of a dark place and brought some light into my life."

#### **Presentations alongside royalty**





On 4th October we were invited to present at the British Horse Society Changing Lives through Horses (CLTH) showcase at Saddlers Hall in London, attended by HRH Princess Anne and actor and BHS president Martin Clunes, together with a number of young CLTH participants.

Our education coordinator, Kirsty Bowles, and trustee, Sarah Urwin, shared the story of a young person Terry\* (not his real name), who joined Sirona's therapeutic sessions after three years out of school. Through Sirona, Terry gained the confidence to progress onto the British Horse Society Changing Lives Through Horses (CLTH) programme we run at Sirona, and later completed our Level 1 Horse Care course. He is now enrolled on a Level 2 in Horse Care course at Bicton college working towards achieving his dream of working with horses and has chosen to return to Sirona to undertake work experience next year.



### **Events and Outreach** 2024: A busy year for Sirona in terms of our wider outreach

#### **Conferences and forums**

Various members of the Sirona team presented at the Horses in Education and Therapy International (HETI) spring and autumn forums held at The Donkey Sanctuary and The Horse Course, and were also invited to present on a panel discussion at the Equine Assisted Practitioners Network conference with Dr Clare Thomas-Pino, Hartpury University and Dr Debbie Busby, Animal Behaviourist. Our patron, the internationally renowned equine ethologist and author Lucy Rees was keynote speaker at the International Society of Anthrozoos conference held at Hartpury University in 2024, attended by delegates from all over the world.

#### **High society events**

We were very honoured to have been chosen as a charity of the year by The High Sherriff of Devon, Jake Moore in 2024 and attended a garden party he hosted in the summer to raise funds for his chosen charities. Sirona was also invited to a community engagement meeting held by HM Lord Lieutenant of Devon.

#### Collaborations

Sirona collaborated with many local and national organisations in 2024 including; Hartpury University, Sparsholt University, Plymouth University, University of Padova and Ca'Foscari University of Venice, Torbay Council, Devon County Council, Somerset Council, Plymouth Council, Cornwall Council, Devon Community Foundation, HM Lord Lieutenant of Devon, CAMHS, NHS, Horses in Education and Therapy International, Equine Assisted Services Partnership, Guide Dogs UK (Young People), The British Horse Society, Equine-Assisted Practitioners Network, Duchy College, Devon Mental Health Alliance, OCN London, Torbay Safeguarding Partnership, and many local schools and parents.

We were invited to a round table event by Devon Community Foundation to discuss a new mental health youth fund. This was attended by senior commissioners from Devon County Council and Torbay children's services, philanthropists, and a select number of other prominent young people's organisations such as Young Devon and Space youth services.



### The Sirona Team - 2024

The human team.....



Our dedicated, professional and skilled staff, trustee and volunteer team are passionate about the work at Sirona, regularly going above and beyond in their work supporting some of the most vulnerable young people in our communities.

Many of our team have volunteered at Sirona and been with us for many years, including a number who have been involved since we started in 2012.

We hold regular team meetings, monthly clinical team supervision with our child psychotherapist Di Gammage, and an annual team development day to discuss Sirona's progress and future plans as a group. In addition, we have regular team social events and a varied staff training and development programme.

#### Volunteer and team feedback

#### Amber Hughes – equine apprentice at Sirona 2024-25

"I had the pleasure of doing my level 2 equine groom apprenticeship at Sirona and it was probably the best 15 months of my life. The environment is very warm and welcoming, the team immediately made it feel like home. They delivered high quality training and teaching daily, there was never a point during the apprenticeship where I thought that I wasn't able to ask questions or learn more. Sirona is a none judgemental environment which is hard to find in the equestrian industry, they never pressured me which is why I was able to learn soo much not just about horses but about myself. Sirona enabled me to learn a horse centred approach and get a refreshing new perspective of horse handling, care, psychology and much more which I will carry with me in all aspects of my life. I was extremely lucky to experience the world "through the horses eyes" and synchronise with Sirona's stunning, kind-natured horses."



Volunteer

"Volunteering at Sirona is always a pleasure. The staff are super friendly and helpful and the environment is always calm and easy to work in. The animals are all chosen carefully for their calm temperment and are real characters.

I have learned alot about animal welfare and specifically how to behave around them, considering their needs and making our interactions with them always a positive experience for them.

I like that as a volunteer you are made to feel a valuable member of the team and that your ideas and opinions are welcome but also that the animal's welfare is paramount in everything they do."



9 payroll staff 2 full time, 7 part-time

4 freelance staff 6 trustees, 47 volunteers

#### 2 Patrons

The staff and volunteer team includes counsellors, social workers, teachers, a child psychotherapist, occupational therapist, riding instructor, Level 2 equine apprentice, and a part time office co-ordinator.

### The Sirona Team - 2024

..... and the animal team









We could not carry out our work without our very special animal colleagues and their welfare is at the forefront of our work. In the Autumn of 2024 we revealed our new look Sponsor a Pony Scheme and support increased by 20%, Please contact us if you would like to know more.



In April we hosted a pioneering course with the international author and play therapist Tracie Faa Thompson; 'Incorporating Calming Signals and Scent work into Equine-Invited Interventions'.

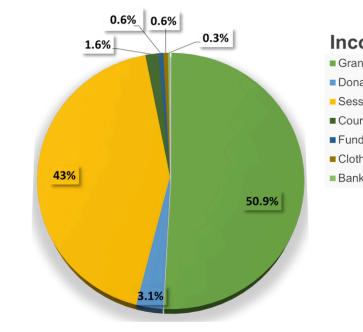
People travelled from over the UK to attend this course and the horses (and team - see left)

enthusiastically engaged in this stimulating enrichment activity.



#### **Financial Review** 2024 Income and expenditure breakdown

### Income



#### Income

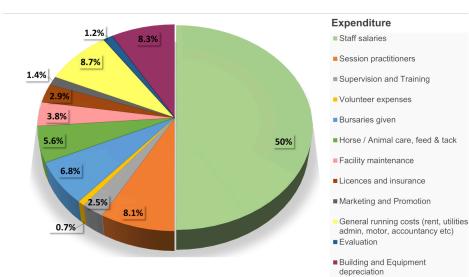
- Grant Funding
- Donations (inc Gift Aid)
- Session Income
- Courses
- Fundraising Events
- Clothing / Other Income
- Bank Interest

Sirona is funded primarily by grants and session income. The total income during the year was £233,775 (2023 - £255,223) of which

- £118,925 (2023 £155,629) from grant funding.
- £7,229 (2023 £6,504) from donations (including gift aid).
- £100,420 (2023 £86,085) received from session income.
- £3,795 (2023 £3,954) from courses.
- £1,428 (2023 £2,349) from fundraising events.
- £1,369 (2023 £702) from sales of clothing, merchandise and other items.

Session income rose by nearly 17% in 2024 partly reflecting a change in timetable introduced in September as our staff team continues to grow in skill and flexibility. Grant income also remained strong as we completed our final year of the Lottery 3 year grant which has supported us so well.

### Expenditure



Total expenditure for the year on our charitable activities amounted to £246,718 (2023-£222,324) as the charity sought to pursue its objectives.

- Direct staffing costs rose by a further £16,337 to £104,074 (2023 - £87,737).
- · Horse and animal costs rose during 2024 at £13,584 (2023 - £10,352).
- The cost of insurances and licences rose to £7,166 (2023 - £5,804).
- Provision of bursaries in an increasingly difficult environment, double the projected figure, £16,814.
- Although inflation has had an impact other costs stayed relatively stable compared with the previous year.

### THANK YOU

#### Our gratitude to our donors and supporters

Sirona could not operate without the support of many trusts, donors and individual supporters – our equine and animal-assisted sessions are subsidised by over 50% and we are constantly fundraising in order to provide increased donation based places to those in need.

We are so grateful to the trusts who have awarded grants to Sirona in 2024 together with individual donors and those who have supported Sirona through our 'Friends of Sirona' and 'Sponsor a Pony' schemes. Your support is so important to the continued success of our charity.



### Ways you can help

#### There are many ways in which you can help such as;





## Contact us for further enquiries

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