

Impact Report

2024-25



SEPTEMBER 2025

The Avon Centre
Kings Weston Road
Henbury
Bristol
BS10 7QT
Registered Charity Number 281648

The
AVON
— CENTRE —

Who we are

The Avon Centre is a horse and nature-based activities centre supporting Disabled and disadvantaged people in Bristol and the surrounding areas. As well as being home to a well-established RDA (Riding for the Disabled Association) group, the Centre also offers Shetland Therapy, a non-ridden provision working with a small herd of Shetland ponies, as well as tailored alternative education supporting individuals who benefit from different approaches to learning.



A Busy 2024/25

The past year was a one for The Avon Centre. The team continued to work towards reaching pre-Covid rider levels, whilst supporting existing and new programmes, working with partner organisations and holding two open days, our first since Covid. With the support of a resilience grant from Bristol City Council, we have been working towards making the Centre more accessible, and hope that soon we will be able to welcome even more people through our doors!

Shetland Therapy

The Avon Centre supports a new activity called Shetland Therapy, a client-led activity allowing participants to spend time with our adorable herd of tiny Shetland ponies, learn how to care for them, take them for walks in our woods, and enjoy the benefits of feeling calm, present and mindful.

“It helps regulate my children for the rest of the week. It’s the one place I see my children flourish.”



Physio and rehabilitation

For many years, horse riding has been used as a form of physiotherapy. RDA was first founded to support children recovering from polio. Riding a horse exercises the same muscles and requires the same core strength as walking. It is therefore a useful tool in supporting the physical wellbeing of people recovering from injury, those who may not be able to weight bear, or those people who use a wheelchair to support their mobility.

2024 saw the Centre partnering with The Grand Appeal and Physiotherapists from Bristol Children’s Hospital to support rehabilitation work using the Mechanical Horse. The programme has been very successful and continues in 2025/26.



“When horses are moving it’s good for his body, he can feel his body. He can’t keep his back straight but when horse riding he sits with his back straight and he’s not hunched. He feels like a king, he’s proud of himself, he sees all people from above.”

Celebrating our champions

Avon RDA Group was proud to support participants in attending the RDA National Championships (virtual & face-to-face). We presented 23 riders at the Regional Dressage and Show Jumping Qualifiers. An amazing 18 qualified to compete at National Level, with 12 placed 1-6th in their categories.

“She really likes the competitions – her brother did lots of competitions and because of her cerebral palsy she’s always struggled – but she’s done the RDA ones, for her it was such a big thing, such an opportunity. Then she’ll take her rosettes in for Show and Tell. It makes her feel special.”

In addition to this, 7 participants entered the Virtual Dressage, Show Jumping and Countryside Challenge Competition, 3 of whom were placed 1-6.

“I love the Virtuals as I like to compete in a more relaxed home environment which means less stress, no crowds, allowing me to focus on the activity and perform at my best.”



The Centre was lucky enough to be invited to send 10 participants to the British Dressage Competition at Hartpury, where they rode, and rubbed shoulders with high level dressage riders.

In addition to Regional and National competitions, the group offers regular riding, fun, in-house Dressage and Show Jumping events as well as giving participants the opportunity to join the Endurance league and receive a rosette for distances covered over the course of the year. There is also the opportunity to work on groundwork and spend time looking after the ponies and learning horse care.

Supporting Students

At the Avon Centre, veterinary students are able to gain a vast amount of equine experience during their work placement with us. This includes general horse handling and care, to observing veterinary and equine professionals during their visits. Veterinary students learn to lead effectively and safely, bring in and turnout to the field, groom horses to a high standard whilst also carrying out general health checks; stable management tasks such as mucking out, make feeds which are tailored to each horse, and learn the day to day running of a yard.



Veterinary students also get the opportunity to observe and ask questions of various veterinary and equine professionals such as our veterinary surgeon who visits on average every two weeks to administer vaccinations and assess/treat any horses who may require medical attention; our onsite veterinary physiotherapist whenever horses require specific or maintenance treatment; the dentist, and farrier who visits weekly carrying out both barefoot trimming and shoeing.

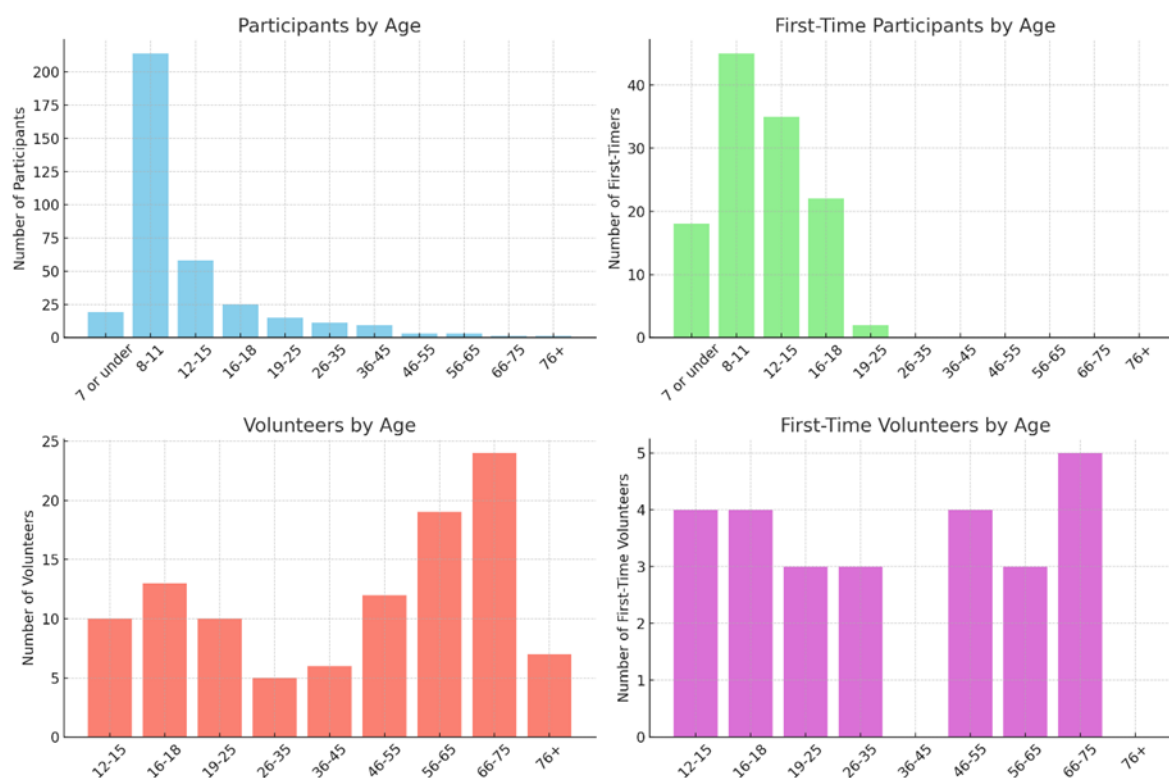
Veterinary students tend to spend one to two weeks with us for their work placement and can return for further work experience if they wish to do so.

2024-25 Participants Overview

- **Total Participants: 359**
- **Participants on Waiting List: 90**
- **Type of Participants: mostly self-referred children and adults for therapeutic and RDA competition riding**

Participant demand is currently far greater than can be met at existing horse and staffing levels. It is our hope that with support from funders and an increased herd size we will be able to support more participants in 2025-26.

Avon RDA Report - Demographics Overview



Volunteer and Staffing Overview

The Centre is proud to work with a wide range of volunteers, including supporting participants in The Duke of Edinburgh Awards. The Centre currently has:

- **106 Volunteers**
- **14 RDA Volunteer Coaches**

Events and fundraising

Over the past 12 months, the Centre scheduled a variety of events, including riding camps, fun rides, holiday hacks, monthly show jumping and winter dressage competitions, combined training events, and various one-off activities such as talks and film screenings.

Open Days have effectively connected us with the local community and raised awareness about our work, while enhancing our reputation within the equestrian community.

We were delighted to welcome the Duchess of Beaufort and show her around our facilities, woods and introduce her to the horses and ponies.

Overall, events and the café generated over £20,000.

We also generated income through facility hire, including

indoor and outdoor arena rentals, simulator room, meeting room, forest school, and hacking track. Our new cross-country jumps improved the appeal of the hacking track, thanks to corporate volunteer efforts and fun ride promotions.



All funds raised go directly towards supporting our charitable aims.

Partnerships

In 2024/25, the Avon Centre worked in partnership with a number of charities and community organisations to support participation in horse and nature-based activities:

Bristol Autism Project

Every Family

Active Recovery

The Bristol Children's Hospital

WECIL

Imayla

Impact

Looking ahead to 2025-26, we aim to leverage our experiences from last year's events to enhance financial outcomes and community impact. This will enable us to make a difference to people like Joe:

“Since coming to the Avon Centre and becoming an RDA rider there, I feel like I have developed a lot both socially and mentally.



Before I found the Avon Centre I felt a bit lost, now when I am there, I feel all my worries wash away. I have learnt a lot about learning to control my emotions just by being around horses and being guided and supported by staff.

I feel like I am part of a team and community which I have not felt before having previously felt isolated due to my disability. I now have the opportunity to make good friends and just be myself.

Since riding and volunteering here, my future seems much clearer, I have life goals, my passion for horses has accelerated and I know that working with horses will be part of my future and I am looking forward to many more challenges and opportunities.”



“Our experience at RDA has been a long journey. Both my children started at the stables 4 years ago when they had a taster session with the Bristol Autism Project for Horse Care. It was a **one-hour experience that changed their lives**.

My son R fell instantly in love with a Shetland Pony called Beau. The pony seemed to also have an instant connection with R and was very loving with him. The children didn’t want to leave, and gave them heart hugs in floods of tears.

The volunteers noticed the bonds, and they were both offered weekly Horse Care with the Shetlands. These lessons created a **calm and undemanding space** for the children. They lovingly brushed them, walked them, picked up their poo and gave them heart hugs. It became a **place of belonging** they hadn’t had before. Both children would leave less stressed and calm. J would walk on her tippy toes whilst leading the ponies, a sure sign in her of pure joy.



They moved on to riding lessons after two years. These lessons gave them such confidence and a deep connection to the horses. They breath in time together. You could see the benefits after every lesson as they came away more relaxed for their week. If a lesson is ever missed, you can see huge anger outbursts because they haven’t had the **space to regulate with the horses**.

J progressed through the grading and this year competed for the first time in the Regional Championships. She was filled with such pride and confidence.

I personally don’t know where we would be as a family if it wasn’t for all the team at RDA. They have been there through a really tough time for the children at school and every week has been a **place of refuge** for two children on the spectrum.

Kim and the team have been there every step of the way, supporting and encouraging the children in a really understanding way. I am ever grateful for this place."

What does Avon mean to you?

93% of users surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that their time at Avon has had a positive impact on their mental health or wellbeing.

77% of survey respondents strongly agreed that their time at Avon makes them healthier.

We asked our participants what The Avon Centre means to them. The last word is from them.

