Intensive Recovery Events: A new direction for UK SMART Recovery

Process Evaluation of UK SMART Recovery and Equine Therapy Weekends

Dr Carrie Wight
Prof Rebecca L. Monk
Prof Derek Heim
Edge Hill University

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

UK SMART Recovery (UKSR) provides free, science-based, weekly mutual-aid support for 5000 people recovering from addictive behaviours. This report details the findings of a project which enabled addiction researchers to work with UKSR as they consider expanding their support provision to include to interrogate the feasibility of intensive recovery events - a new space for their addiction support work - establishing what works. It aimed to:

1. Evaluate the feasibility of delivering SMART principles within an intensive, weekend equine-assisted recovery events
2. Explore systematically participants' and facilitators' experiences of the event
3. Obtain stakeholder perspectives (e.g., UKSR leadership, partner organisations) on the development of future intensive recovery events
4. Identify key components needed to produce a repeatable, high-quality operational model for future intensive recovery events. Develop these as part of a tooklit.

Method

16 semi-structured interviews were carried out with: participants (N=10), facilitators (N=2) directly involved in the intervention weekends, and stakeholders (N=4) affiliated with UK SMART Recovery. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings and Conclusions

The evaluation found that the intensive recovery weekends with equine therapy were feasible and well aligned with SMART Recovery principles, successfully combining structured SMART tools with experiential equine activities. Delivery was largely as intended, with high levels of engagement and strong participant satisfaction. Learning was not only absorbed during the programme but sustained for months, indicating meaningful and lasting impact. Participants described the weekends as immersive, experiential, and relational, with interactions with horses prompting valuable reflection on communication, boundaries, and emotional responses.

The blend of equine activities, facilitated reflection, and informal group interaction created psychological safety and supported shared learning. Group processes, including recognition of common struggles, further strengthened engagement and insight. The programme was accessible to participants from varied recovery backgrounds, though the rural location presents limitations for those with physical or transport challenges. The natural environment

was widely seen as enhancing focus and emotional engagement, although weather-related contingencies remain necessary.

Reflective exercises were central to impact, providing structure, pacing, and emotional containment; the closing ceremony reinforced learning. Acceptability was high, with suggestions focusing on clearer communication, smoother pacing, and continuity, rather than substantive redesign.

Impacts extended beyond the weekends, with many participants reporting shifts in perspective, increased confidence, and continued use of SMART tools. Some incorporated new practices into daily routines or reconnected with wider recovery networks, positioning the weekends as a targeted intervention with enduring influence.

Stakeholders viewed the programme as a valuable addition to UKSR's activities, consistent with SMART principles while offering a distinctive experiential format. Safeguarding - particularly during unstructured time - and maintaining clarity between the partnership and SMART's established meeting model were highlighted as priorities.

Stakeholders also noted that while UKSR occupies a credible position within the recovery landscape, its visibility and recognition remain lower than longer-established programmes. Strengthening understanding of SMART's evidence-informed foundations within services was identified as beneficial.

Looking ahead, stakeholders emphasised the importance of building organisational capacity, maintaining delivery standards, and protecting SMART's identity. They supported future growth, provided it is measured, well-governed, and anchored in SMART's four-point programme.

2 INTRODUCTION

UK SMART Recovery (UKSR) provides free, science-based, weekly mutual-aid support for 5000 people recovering from addictive behaviours. Guided by trained facilitators, participants work collaboratively to apply cognitive behavioural therapy and motivational approaches within a mutual-aid framework. Central to the model is the SMART 4-Point Programme, which focuses on building and maintaining motivation, coping with urges, managing thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and developing a balanced lifestyle. These tools are designed not only to support recovery from addictive behaviours, but also to strengthen longer-term self-regulation and wellbeing.

While SMART Recovery is widely delivered through regular weekly meetings, UKSR has not previously offered intensive short-format interventions. Evidence from equine-assisted interventions within substance use treatment contexts suggests that structured equine work may enhance engagement, emotional regulation, and treatment retention (e.g., Kern-Godal et al., 2016). However, there is limited understanding of how equine-assisted approaches operate when intentionally combined with a structured mutual-aid model such as SMART Recovery, particularly within a short, intensive weekend setting.

The Intensive Recovery Weekends with SMART were developed through collaboration between UK SMART Recovery and Equus Ferus (EF), which delivers equine-assisted therapeutic activities designed to support emotional regulation, interpersonal awareness, and psychological wellbeing. The aim was to explore whether SMART principles could be delivered within an immersive, equine-assisted environment. The project sought to examine whether combining structured recovery tools with experiential equine work could support skill consolidation, strengthen peer bonding, enhance motivation, and increase engagement with recovery processes, thereby possibly affording an additional, more intensive, means of supporting recovery from addictions.

2.1 EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

This Innovate UK funded project functions as a retrospective process evaluation of the collaboration between UK SMART Recovery and Equus Ferus. Two intensive recovery weekends preceded the commencement of the evaluation; as a result, prospective feasibility and acceptability measures were not embedded within the original programme design. The evaluation therefore focuses on understanding how the intervention was delivered, how it was experienced by those involved, and what can be learned to inform future delivery.

The evaluation is guided by the Medical Research Council (MRC) framework for process evaluations of complex interventions (Moore et al., 2015), with particular attention to three core domains:

- Implementation (including fidelity, dose, reach and adaptations)
- Mechanisms of impact
- Context

In addition to these domains, the evaluation incorporates a qualitative exploration of retrospective acceptability. Although acceptability is not a formal domain within the MRC framework, considering participants' responses to the intervention is important for understanding how it was received and how it might be improved. To support this, constructs from the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (Sekhon et al., 2017) were used to guide analysis of participants' accounts.

3 AIMS OF THE PROCESS EVALUATION

This process evaluation aimed to examine the two weekend sessions where UKSR principles were incorporated with equine-assisted activities. In addition, it also engaged UK SMART Recovery stakeholders to understand systematically their perspectives on implementing intensive recovery events of this type, and to identify opportunities for further development of the UK Smart Recovery's activity portfolio.

The specific aims were:

5. To evaluate the feasibility of delivering SMART principles within intensive, weekend equine-assisted recovery events
6. To explore systematically participants' and facilitators' experiences of the event
7. To obtain stakeholder perspectives (e.g., UKSR leadership, partner organisations, equine centre staff) on the development of future intensive recovery events
8. To identify key components needed to produce a repeatable, high-quality operational model for future intensive recovery events

4 METHODS

4.1 EVALUATION DESIGN

This study used a qualitative process evaluation design in line with Medical Research Council guidance for process evaluations of complex interventions (Moore et al., 2015), to explore systematically the delivery and experience of the Intensive Recovery Weekend with SMART.

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate given the relatively small number of individuals involved in the intervention and its retrospective nature. As the aim of the process evaluation was to understand how the intervention was experienced, implemented, and perceived across different stakeholder groups, qualitative methods were deemed appropriate to ensure an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences. UK SMART Recovery engages individuals from diverse backgrounds whose recovery journeys do not necessarily conform to stereotypical presentations of addictive behaviours. A qualitative design therefore allowed for the complexity and nuance of these experiences to be captured. Semi-structured interviews were used to balance flexibility with consistency, enabling participants to reflect on aspects of the intervention they considered meaningful while ensuring that data relevant to the predefined process evaluation domains were systematically explored.

The process evaluation was conducted retrospectively, focusing on the Intensive Recovery Weekends with SMART. This drew on participant and facilitator experiences, alongside therapeutic and delivery-related materials generated during the planning and delivery of the intervention. Wider UKSR stakeholder perspectives were also included to provide insight into broader organisational and contextual factors shaping potential delivery and reach of Intensive Recovery Events, if they were to be adopted by the charity to supplement their portfolio of support.

4.2 DATA SOURCES

Data were drawn from semi-structured interviews with participants and facilitators directly involved in the intervention weekends, six stakeholders affiliated with UK SMART Recovery but not directly involved in delivery of the weekends. In addition, documentary sources, including the Equus Ferus funding proposal and six anonymised post-event questionnaires, were reviewed to support assessment of fidelity and implementation. Where available, researcher field notes were incorporated to contextualise findings.

4.3 ETHICAL APPROVAL AND GOVERNANCE

Study approved by Edge Hill University's Science Research Ethics committee (Application number: ETH2526-0026).

4.4 PARTICIPANTS AND RECRUITMENT

A total of sixteen individuals participated in interviews as part of the process evaluation (*N* = 16). This comprised eight intervention participants (*n* = 8), two facilitators directly involved in delivery of the intervention weekends (*n* = 2), and six stakeholders affiliated with UK SMART Recovery but not involved in delivery (*n* = 6). One individual held a dual role as a horse handler during the weekends but also participated fully in the intervention and had lived experience of addiction. For analytic purposes, this individual was treated primarily as a participant, with selected operational questions drawn from the facilitator schedule to capture relevant implementation insights.

Demographic characteristics of intervention participants and stakeholders are summarised in Table 1. Across participants and stakeholders (*n* = 14), there were eight women and six men, with ages ranging from 27 to 61 years. Intervention participants (*n* = 8) and stakeholders (*n* = 6) are presented separately within the table. Given the small sample size, we are only reporting broad age ranges and are not from providing any additional information (e.g., ethnicity) about respondents.

Intervention participants described seeking support for a range of behaviours they wished to address or were in recovery from. These included substance-related issues (e.g., opioids, alcohol and other substances) as well as compulsive behaviours such as gaming, financial

difficulties, and disordered eating. Not all participants provided detailed descriptions; the above reflects the range of concerns reported and is not exhaustive.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of interview participants and stakeholders.

CHARACTERISTIC	INTERVENTION PARTICIPANTS (*n* = 8)	STAKEHOLDERS (*n* = 6)	TOTAL WITH DEMOGRAPHIC DATA (*n* = 14)
Women (n)	6	2	8
Men (n)	2	4	6
Age range	27 - 61 years	35 - 57 years	27 - 61 years

Prior to attending the weekend, participants completed a consent form permitting their email address to be shared with researchers evaluating the intervention. All participants who had provided a valid email address were contacted via this means with an invitation to participate, alongside a participant information sheet and consent form. Two reminder emails were subsequently issued during the interview period. Eleven individuals responded, ten returned signed consent forms, and one later withdrew due to poor mental health. A total of eight participants were ultimately interviewed. Of the 17 individuals who attended the weekends, this represents 47% of attendees.

Facilitators involved in delivery of the weekends, and support staff were contacted directly and invited for interview. Both main facilitators were interviewed, along with one member of the support staff who also participated in the weekend as someone with personal experience of addictive behaviours.

To recruit stakeholders, the researcher attended a UKSR staff meeting to introduce the evaluation, and a general email invitation was subsequently circulated within UKSR. Nine stakeholders expressed interest in participating, and six were ultimately recruited and interviewed. These included UKSR employees, meeting facilitators, and individuals working within the wider recovery sector.

In addition to interview data, six anonymised post-event feedback forms were included in the analysis. These forms were anonymised prior to receipt and contained no demographic identifiers. It was therefore not possible to determine whether feedback respondents were also among the interview participants.

4.5 INTERVIEW FRAMEWORK

Semi-structured interviews were used across all interviewee types, with separate interview schedules developed for participants, facilitators and stakeholders, each aligned with the predefined process evaluation domains. This approach ensured that all domains were addressed across interviews, while still allowing flexibility for interviewees to discuss issues they considered most important.

Participant interview schedules focused on the experiential nature of the weekend, including participants' overall experiences, engagement with SMART tools and equine activities, and perceived impact. Interviews also explored emotional responses to the weekend and contextual factors that may have shaped individual experiences.

Given that interviews were conducted approximately six months after attendance at the weekend, the schedule was carefully structured to support recall. Interviews began by discussing expectations and circumstances prior to the weekend, allowing participants to situate themselves in time to summer 2025. This was followed by broader reflections on the weekend before moving into more detailed and nuanced discussion of the event. This staged approach was designed to maximise recall while maintaining alignment with the predefined process evaluation domains (see Table 2).

The facilitator interview schedule focused primarily on the operational delivery of the weekends. Questions explored fidelity to SMART principles, integration of equine-assisted activities, dose and reach of programme components, and any adaptations made during delivery. Facilitators were also invited to reflect more broadly on group processes and participant engagement, including observations of group dynamics and perceived impact.

The stakeholder interview schedule included individuals with more formal links to UKSR, such as employees and group facilitators, who were not directly involved in delivery of the intervention weekends. Interviews explored organisational context, feasibility, and strategic fit within the current recovery landscape, alongside initial perceptions of UKSR broadening its offer to include intensive events which integrate SMART principles with alternative therapeutic approaches.

All interviewees were provided with a simplified list of potential interview questions in advance, allowing additional processing time where required. During interviews not every question was asked verbatim, however all predefined domains were addressed either through direct questioning or through broader discussion initiated by the interviewee. In this way, the approach balanced structure with flexibility while ensuring comprehensive domain coverage.

At the beginning of each interview, contextual background information was collected to situate responses within participants' lived or professional experience. For intervention participants, this included discussion of current social circumstances and recovery history, if they felt comfortable sharing relevant details. Facilitators were asked about their professional background and experience of delivering SMART or equine-assisted interventions. Stakeholders were invited to describe their professional and / or personal links to addictions and their involvement with UK SMART Recovery. This information was used to contextualise subsequent discussion and to support interpretation during analysis.

4.6 MAPPING EVALUATION DOMAINS TO DATA

To ensure transparency in how process evaluation domains were operationalised, data sources were mapped against each evaluation domain.

4.7 DATA PREPARATION

All interviews were audio-recorded, with consent, and transcribed using Microsoft Teams' automated transcription function. Transcripts were reviewed against the original recordings to ensure accuracy and amended where necessary. Identifying details, including names and specific locations, were removed or replaced with neutral descriptors. Transcripts were then imported into NVivo to support systematic coding and data management.

In addition to interviews, anonymised participant feedback forms were incorporated into the analytic process. These included both open-ended questions and Likert-scale items assessing aspects of the weekend experience. Due to the small number of participants, the Likert-scale data were not analysed inferentially but were used descriptively to indicate overall patterns of participant satisfaction.

Table 2. Mapping of process evaluation domains against data sources.

Domain	Definition	Data Sources
Fidelity	Was it delivered as intended?	Facilitators, Participants
Dose	Quantity or intensity of intervention components delivered	All groups
Reach	Participation and depth of involvement	Participants, facilitators
Mechanisms of Impact	How the intervention created change	Participants
Context	External factors shaping delivery and experience	All groups
Acceptability (add-on)	Emotional and cognitive responses to the intervention	Participants, facilitators

4.8 ANALYTICAL APPROACH

As described in Section 3.1, the evaluation was guided by the process evaluation domains proposed by Moore et al. (2015) including implementation, mechanisms of impact, and contextual influences. As the evaluation was conducted after the intervention weekends had already taken place, a full prospective process evaluation could not be undertaken. In particular, assessment of fidelity was limited as direct observation of preparatory activities and real-time delivery was not possible. Where necessary, understanding of pre-intervention planning and delivery processes relied on facilitator accounts and contextual documentation (e.g., programme itineraries, risk assessments, and related materials) shared with the research team.

Data, including interview transcripts and anonymised participant feedback forms, were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Analysis was supported by NVivo to facilitate management and systematic coding of data.

Two complementary coding processes were undertaken. First, inductive line by line coding was conducted to capture participants' experiences, reflections, and perceptions relating to the weekends. Codes were developed directly from the data rather than applied from a predefined thematic structure. In parallel, data were also examined in relation to the predefined process evaluation domains. Relevant extracts were coded against these domains to ensure systematic coverage of the evaluation framework.

Stakeholder interviews were analysed separately but using the same overall analytic approach. Coding of these stakeholder data was primarily structured around the process evaluation domains in order to capture organisational, implementation, and contextual perspectives. Where stakeholder accounts extended beyond the domain framework, inductive coding was applied to identify additional insights.

Across all transcripts, a provisional coding framework was developed and refined iteratively. Codes were defined, merged, or separated where necessary to reduce conceptual overlap and clarify distinctions. Earlier transcripts were revisited throughout the process to ensure consistency in coding decisions across cases.

Themes were subsequently generated through the systematic grouping of related inductive codes into broader patterns of meaning. Draft themes were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure they reflected accurately participants' accounts and were supported by multiple data extracts. Domain-based coding was then used to structure and present findings in alignment with the evaluation framework while retaining the integrity of the thematic analysis.

4.9 USE OF DIFFERENT DATA SOURCES

Participant interviews formed the primary dataset for thematic development, providing detailed accounts of lived experience of the weekend and its perceived impact. Themes were

generated principally from participant data through the inductive coding process described above.

Stakeholder interview data were used to strengthen understanding of delivery processes, intended mechanisms, and system-level considerations. While stakeholder these data informed interpretation and added explanatory depth, they were not used to generate participant-level experiential themes.

In addition, facilitators provided supplementary background information regarding the structure and delivery of the weekends which did not form part of the formal thematic analysis but contributed contextual understanding. The researcher also visited Equus Ferus and took part in a practical demonstration of selected exercises used during the intervention. This visit supported understanding of the experiential nature of the weekends, which participants often described as difficult to articulate in detail. These activities were not treated as data for analysis, however, they supported contextual familiarisation and informed interpretation of participant and stakeholder accounts.

A small number of participant interviews were conducted in person during the site visit. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using the Microsoft Teams process described above and were incorporated into the thematic analysis alongside data obtained through online interviews.

4.10 METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

As the evaluation was conducted retrospectively, it was not possible to observe preparatory activities or real-time delivery of the intervention weekends. Assessment of fidelity therefore relied on facilitator accounts and contextual documentation rather than on direct observation. While this approach enabled reconstruction of delivery processes, it limited the extent to which fidelity could be verified independently.

The retrospective design, in this way, presented both strengths and constraints. Conducting interviews approximately six months after the weekends enabled consideration of any perceived longer-term impact. However, the passage of time meant that participant recall was occasionally incomplete or generalised.

In addition, exact completion timings for participant feedback forms were not available and responses relied on participant recall at the point of interview. As with most qualitative evaluations of this nature, participants were likely to be at different stages of their recovery journey, which may have shaped how the weekend was experienced and interpreted. These factors, alongside well-documented limitations of self-report data and the ‘snap-shot’ single-occasion interview design, should be considered when interpreting the findings.

5 RESULTS

This section presents findings from the process evaluation of the Intensive Recovery Weekends with UK SMART. Findings are structured in line with the predefined evaluation domains: implementation (fidelity, dose and reach), context, mechanisms of impact, and acceptability.

Within this structure, participant accounts form the primary basis of analysis, including a dedicated section exploring relational and psychosocial mechanisms of impact. Stakeholder perspectives are presented separately to provide organisational and system-level insights into the positioning and future development of intensive recovery weekends within UK SMART Recovery.

Post-event feedback forms indicated that, across all Likert-scale items, responses were uniformly positive. As such, agreement with statements gauging satisfaction across programme content, facilitation, setting, and overall experience all responses were either 4 (Agree) or 5 (Strongly Agree). .

5.1 PROCESS EVALUTAION FINDINGS

This section reports findings relating to the delivery and structure of the intervention, examining how the weekends were implemented in practice with foci on fidelity, dose and reach, alongside contextual influences.

5.1.1 IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation examines how the intervention was delivered in practice. This is considered in terms of how closely the weekends followed their intended structure (fidelity), the amount and intensity of content delivered across the three days (dose), and who the intervention reached (reach).

5.1.1.1 FIDELITY

The intended structure of the weekends were documented in a pre-prepared three-day programme schedule provided to both participants and facilitators. The programme outlined a sequence of psychologically informed sessions integrating UK SMART Recovery tools, equine facilitated human development (EFHD), and related cognitive behavioural approaches. Worksheets used during the weekends were clearly labelled according to originating framework, including UK SMART Recovery, EquiPath (Equus Ferus' equine therapy programme), and IFEEL materials (for mental health support).

Six core delivery components were identified within the programme documentation:

1. **Mindsight** Introduction to the theoretical model of the Window of Tolerance, alongside guided mindfulness practices.

2. **Understanding Addictive Behaviours** Exploration of addiction processes and introduction to the equine facilitated approach, integrated with cognitive behavioural tools and stages of change.
3. **Boundary Setting and Stages of Change** Focus on personal boundaries alongside application of the Stages of Change framework to consider individual progression.
4. **Karpman Drama Triangle** Exploration of common roles adopted in interpersonal conflict and consideration of strategies to shift unhelpful interaction patterns.
5. **ABC Model** Application of cognitive behavioural principles to examine activating events, beliefs and consequences.
6. **Pros and Cons Analysis** Guided consideration of advantages and disadvantages associated with behaviour change to encourage deliberate recovery decisions.

Accounts from facilitators and participants indicated that the planned structure was largely followed across the weekends. Participants referenced specific SMART tools, including the Lifestyle Balance Pie, ABC model, pros and cons analysis, and hierarchy of values exercises, suggesting that core components were delivered as intended.

Defined equine activities were referenced in the programme schedule, including boundary exercises and introductory herd interaction. While the documentation indicated specific structured equine components, participant descriptions suggested that horse-related activities may have extended beyond those explicitly listed in the written programme. For example, a participant described how horses were included in the closing ceremony, the last activity of the weekend:

'We were invited to write down something that we learnt, or something that we wanted to let go of, we were invited to write that down on a piece of paper and then we could lead one of the horses up near to where there was a fire pit, where we could then put that paper in the fire to let it go.' [Sophie]

Minor adaptations were also reported in response to contextual factors, including adjustments to scheduling due to heat. These changes related to timing rather than content and did not appear to alter the overall programme structure:

'We cut a lunch a bit shorter and finished a bit earlier, but that was just because of the environmental factors, and that was just on, like one day, on one weekend.' [Facilitator 2]

One facilitator explained a group decision was to have a shorter lunch break in order to finish earlier on one day, due to hot weather. This was the only noticeable change reported across either intervention weekend. No concerns regarding dilution of core components or programme drift were raised by facilitators or stakeholders. Overall, available evidence

suggests that the weekends were delivered broadly in line with its intended design, with flexibility applied to scheduling where required by environmental conditions.

5.1.1.2 DOSE

The intervention was delivered across three full days on both weekends, with sessions running approximately 10:00am to 4:30pm each day. Group size varied across the two weekends. The first weekend reached full capacity with ten participants, while the second weekend was also planned for ten participants but ran with seven, as three participants were unable to attend and informed facilitators in advance. Of those who started the weekend, attendance remained high with only one notable exception. One participant left early on one day and did not attend the following day, due to feeling unwell during the heatwave.

Programme documentation indicated a structure of morning and afternoon blocks, with a thirty-minute lunch break. However, participant accounts suggested that additional informal breaks occurred throughout the day, which were not specified in the formal programme. Participants suggested that breaks beyond the scheduled lunch were incorporated flexibly, contributing to a sense that the programme flowed well and was delivered at an appropriate pace:

'I think they managed the entire weekend in a kind of natural flow so nothing was hurried, there was time for everything and they were in you know the right amount of breaks, the right pace.' [Kate]

The balance between equine activities, group discussion, and written exercises was largely perceived as appropriate. Some participants expressed a preference for more time with the horses, although at least one of these participants explicitly stated a primary motivation for attending was horse interaction. Participants distinguished between time spent directly working with a horse and time spent in proximity with horses, while still engaging in group-based activities. Overall, participants reported a perception of a broadly equal division between horse-based and paper-based elements:

'if it was about the time spent like physically with the horse? Then maybe that was like 30% to 70% group work, but if it's about like time specifically about the horses versus time not with them then it would have been more 50-50, because sometimes like when you're in a group not everyone can touch a horse at the same time, so like people were observing and watching but I think it was roughly, roughly equal.' [Danielle]

A small number of participants felt there was too much paperwork, and that the volume of content over a short period could be overwhelming. One participant suggested that introducing fewer tools, with more time allocated to practising and consolidating each, would have supported deeper understanding. Facilitators acknowledged that a number of

frameworks were introduced within a compressed timeframe, explaining that this reflected an intention to provide a broad toolkit while allowing participants to engage more deeply with particular tools according to individual need.

5.1.1.3 REACH

Recruitment and referral pathways

Participants were primarily identified through existing professional relationships with facilitators. Referral pathways included community-based support settings, SMART Recovery meetings, and previous one-to-one therapeutic work with facilitators. Recruitment, in this way, appeared to be largely facilitator-led and invitational. .

Participant characteristics

As detailed, sarticipants reported experiencing, or being in recovery from, a range of problematic behaviours. Among those who described their experiences in terms of 'addiction', time in recovery varied considerably. Some participants described being in earlier stages of change, including periods of relapse and recovery, while others reported being in sustained recovery for several years. Some reported actively using substances at the time of the intervention, or considering themselves at risk of relapse.

'I was just almost ready to relapse completely to be honest. And when I went there I kind of, I was hoping just to do something for myself to be honest.' [Alison]

rather than attending with clearly defined goals, Alison described seeking a general sense of direction and personal grounding. Likewise, across participants, while some appeared motivated to support their recovery, or improving facets of challenging behaviours, other motivations for attending were not always specific or uniform and often reflected a broadly articulated desire to improve wellbeing or to address something in their lives at the time.

There was also variation in prior experience with equine environments. Some participants reported familiarity and a pre-existing connection with horses, while others described initial anxiety or uncertainty. At least two participants had previously engaged in equine-assisted work with facilitators, although not within a group or SMART-integrated context.

Experience with SMART Recovery[1] also varied. Two participants reported no prior awareness of SMART Recovery, one was aware but had not engaged, and the remaining participants had some level of prior involvement.

Eligibility and readiness for change

[1] SMART Recovery is a global organisation. Individuals may therefore have had prior contact with SMART Recovery outside of UKSR. For this reason, UKSR was not used as the sole identifier in this instance.

All participants completed a consent process, which, as detailed, included information about the research evaluation and follow-up contact Participants also completed a Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation - Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) assessment, a standardised measure of psychological distress assessing wellbeing, symptoms, functioning, and risk.

Screening procedures appeared to focus on both risk and readiness for engagement. While not all participants articulated specific goals for attending, their accounts suggested a general orientation towards change. Reflecting the diversity of motivations articulated in interviews, participants pre-assessments described being either motivated to address a particular issue, open to potential benefit, or seeking support in their recovery. All appeared enthusiastic or open-minded about participation.

Uptake and attendance

Twenty participants were initially planned across the two weekends, with seventeen attending. While reasons for non-attendance were not explicitly reported, attendance among those who began the intervention was high (see Dose).

Accessibility and barriers to participation

The intervention took place in a rural setting, which introduced both geographical and physical accessibility considerations.

Some participants reported travelling up to two hours each way to attend the weekend. Adaptations to support attendance included car sharing between participants and one participant staying locally with friends. The site itself also included uneven terrain and distances to be travelled between key areas (e.g., parking and paddocks). While minor physical limitations were managed through informal adjustments during delivery, facilitators noted that the site was not fully accessible. Individuals with more significant mobility impairments would likely have been unable to participate due to environmental constraints.

Additional support needs were accommodated on a case-by-case basis. One participant attended with a support worker (not interviewed), while another was able to attend due to being permitted to bring a therapy dog. The latter was facilitated through prior knowledge of the participant by the facilitator and was described as essential for enabling attendance. While these adaptations supported inclusion, some participants reflected on their impact within the group context. In particular, the presence of a support worker participating in activities, but not fully engaging as a participant, was perceived as affecting group dynamics.

'I felt a bit uncomfortable with the participant that wasn't there for any addiction issue himself, nor was he a facilitator, but he was more as an observer/accompanying someone else.' [Anon. feedback forms]

This concern related not to the presence of a support worker itself, but to the ambiguity of their role within the group. The support worker participated in activities alongside the group but was not positioned as a full participant, including at times commenting on the difference

between themselves and other participants. This, in turn, appeared to create some uncertainty in how their contributions were perceived, in this way suggesting a need for clearer role definition for individuals attending in a supportive/observational capacity.

Perceived suitability and reach beyond the sample

Participants' accounts reflected a belief that the intervention could be beneficial for a broad range of individuals and not only to those experiencing substance-related difficulties. While, in this way, some participants emphasised its relevance for individuals with addictive behaviours, others described the weekend as having broader applicability.

'Although it is designed for individuals dealing with addiction, the experience provides much more - it fosters acceptance and offers a judgement-free space where peers contribute unique perspectives to the group.' [Anon. feedback forms]

Participants suggested the intervention could be helpful for people experiencing mental health difficulties, those going through periods of transition, and individuals facing family or personal challenges. There was also some suggestion that the approach may be particularly beneficial for neurodivergent individuals, due to the experiential and non-judgemental nature of the activities. More generally, participants described the intervention as having a universal, or wide-reaching benefit, that could extend usefully beyond a single target group. This perceived flexibility of the combined equine and SMART-based approach was seen as offering value potential across a range of lived experiences.

5.1.2 CONTEXT

This section explores contextual factors that shaped both the delivery of the intervention and participants' experience of the weekend. Context refers to environmental, organisational and situational influences that may have supported or constrained implementation.

Provision and facilities

Participants were generally satisfied with the facilities available on site, with the understanding that this was a working stables in a rural location rather than a purpose-built venue. The natural outdoor setting was widely perceived as supporting the experience, contributing to a calm and peaceful environment. Facilitators highlighted the residential setting as a purposeful design element, describing it as creating continuity, shared focus, and reduced external distraction, which they viewed as important for consolidating learning across the three days.

The programme took place entirely outdoors. While this was manageable during temperate conditions, limitations became more apparent during the event as a result of a period of extreme weather. Participants noted that the available shelter, including a small marquee, would not have been sufficient to accommodate all attendees in the event of rain and that it was too warm to provide effective respite from the sun for extended periods.

Refreshments, including tea, coffee, cold drinks, and snacks, were well received. However, some participants reported uncertainty regarding what food and additional items they were expected to bring, such as suncream or insect repellent, and would have appreciated more information before attending.

'to just like to make sure to dress appropriately, to bring sunscreen, to bring fly spray like information about the ground like, you can wear whatever shoes that you should wear, you should wear boots, you should wear like really solid shoes for the horses or, um practical things like that' [Danielle]

Participants also noted the need for clearer communication regarding the outdoor nature of the event and any weather-specific preparations, such as bringing a hat or waterproof clothing.

One of the intervention weekends took place during exceptionally hot weather, which was noted as atypical for the location. Most participants were able to manage these conditions however, some reported experiencing sunburn and one participant left early due to feeling unwell as a result of the heat. Such developments suggest the value of contingency planning for adverse weather conditions, including heat, rain, and wind.

Confidentiality and visibility

The intervention took place within a shared stables environment, meaning that individuals not involved in the programme were present on site. Some participants reported feeling uncomfortable due to interruptions from others, the possibility of being recognised by people in their personal lives, while others highlighted concerns around privacy, particularly given the sensitive nature of the discussions.

'Though it being a shared space with non-workshop people dropping by made it feel a bit less safe given the vulnerable nature of the programme. Not enough to take away from the experience though, just minimally unsettling.' [Anon. feedback forms]

Participants who raised concerns about the non-exclusive use of the site were clear that this did not detract from the overall experience or perceived impact of the weekend. However, the sense of safety was identified as a key strength of the intervention, and the presence of others on site, particularly without prior awareness (though some noted being told this beforehand), was perceived as having some impact on this.

These findings highlight the importance of considering confidentiality within open or shared environments. While the risk of a direct breach may have been low, some participants' perceptions of privacy remain an important factor in creating a psychologically safe space and suggests a need for expectation management of prospective attendees.

MECHANISMS OF IMPACT (STRUCTURAL)

This section outlines key mechanisms of impact identified through the process evaluation domains, focusing on how elements of delivery supported reflection, emotional processing

and behavioural engagement. A more detailed exploration of relational and participant-level mechanisms follows in the subsequent section.

Cognitive and Reflective Processes

A central mechanism of impact identified across accounts was the structured facilitation of reflection. Participants described the use of paper-based SMART tools as providing a clear framework through which to examine their behaviours, thought patterns and recovery processes. The worksheets were described as active prompts requiring written engagement and deliberate consideration, rather than passive informational materials.

Participants described the integration of SMART tools with equine activity as facilitating cognitive insight and emotional engagement. The use of structured tools, e.g., the ABC model, was experienced differently when applied alongside practical work with the horses.

'But with the horses alongside …having the ABCs and having that exercise, it allowed me to separate, it allowed me to feel emotion because I was actually experiencing it as we were doing it' [Alison]

For this participant, the embodied context appeared to deepen the impact of the tool. Rather than remaining an abstract cognitive exercise, the ABC framework became emotionally activated in real time. The opportunity to apply reflective tools within an experiential setting, from this perspective, may have supported greater internalisation than discussion-based reflection alone.

Facilitators described this integration as intentional with equine activities were designed to bringing emotions and relational patterns to the surface, and SMART tools providing the structure through which those experiences could be organised, examined and translated into behavioural insight. They spoke about the importance of consolidating emotionally activating material within structured reflection, ensuring that experiential learning became usable beyond the interaction itself. Both elements were viewed as essential to the model functioning as intended.

While many participants described clear integration between reflective tools and behavioural change, one participant highlighted a desire for stronger explicit linkage to their addiction-specific goals.

'More emphasis on/linking back to the addiction part - I loved the workshop, but found it a bit more general than I expected, and I came away from it a bit unsure how to tie the new concepts in with my actual addiction issue.' [*Anon. feedback forms*]

This feedback suggests that, although reflective processes were activated, the translation of broader psychological concepts into addiction-specific behavioural change was not uniformly experienced. For some participants, additional explicit framing may have supported clearer application to their primary recovery goals. Facilitators also reflected on the importance of maintaining clear linkage between experiential work and addiction-specific objectives. While the broader psychological focus was intentional, they acknowledged that explicit

reinforcement of addiction-related framing may support stronger transfer for some participants.

SYMBOLIC TRANSITION THROUGH RITUAL

The weekends were described as emotionally moving and intentionally paced. Participants referred to feeling able to process difficult material within a supportive group environment. They described the closing ceremony as an important psychological endpoint to the weekend. Following several days of reflection and experiential work, the structured ritual of writing down unwanted thoughts or behaviours and symbolically burning them was experienced as meaningful and intentional.

'At the end the last day, because we did this thing of writing all the things down that you want to, like I want to be able to say no or I want to stop, like I overthink a terrible overthinker so I want to overthink less, and we wrote more of a bit of paper made a big file, we burnt them in the fire, so they're gone, you're these are the things we've worked on, they're gone now.' [Richard]

For several participants, this ritual appeared to consolidate the work undertaken over the weekend, providing a clear psychological endpoint. The act of physically burning written reflections, in this way, appeared to function as a symbolic release, reinforcing the internal work undertaken over the weekend. Rather than ending abruptly, the intervention concluded with a deliberate moment of consolidation, which respondents' saw as appropriately paced and consistent with the tone of the intervention. As such, the structured closing ceremony was generally experienced as an effective endpoint designed to help participants transition from the intensity of the weekend back into everyday life.

5.1.3 ACCEPTABILITY

This section therefore explores participants' perceptions of the weekend in terms of perceived value, burden, appropriateness and suggestions for development. Findings are drawn primarily from interview data, with reference to feedback forms where relevant.

Perceived Credibility and Facilitation

Participants consistently described facilitators as central to the acceptability of the weekend. The combination of professional credibility, lived understanding, and relational warmth, was perceived as having fostered trust and openness within the group. Several participants indicated that facilitator style and authenticity contributed significantly to their willingness to engage fully with both the reflective tools and equine activities.

'They were knowledgeable, and humble at the same time. It was clear that they love this work. They worked well as a team, modelling clear communication.' [*Anon. feedback forms*]

The combination of expertise and approachability appeared to enhance participants' willingness to engage with both structured SMART tools and equine activities. Facilitators

were not only delivering content but modelling communication, collaboration and reflective practice, which, overall, reinforced the credibility of the intervention.

Experiential Distinctiveness

The experiential nature of the intervention was frequently highlighted as distinctive, but also difficult to articulate. Participants often described the impact of the weekend in affective rather than descriptive terms.

'I can't explain what happens there, I can't. It was a feeling like it was a feeling.' [Alison]

Several participants suggested that the value of the weekend was best understood through direct participation rather than explanation. Even facilitators, when reflecting on the intervention, occasionally struggled to describe how its different elements combined in practice.

This suggests that the intervention's strength lies in its embodied and relational qualities, which may resist simple summary. In the current context, where participants were personally invited and existing trust relationships were present, limited clarity prior to attendance did not appear to hinder engagement. However, should the intervention be offered more widely, clear and accessible communication about the process, activities and intended outcomes may be important to support informed decision-making and appropriate referral. Participants contrasted the weekend with traditional recovery meetings, emphasising its embodied and immersive qualities. The integration of structured tools with practical activity was experienced as distinct from discussion-based formats. This perceived distinctiveness may enhance its appeal to individuals seeking alternative approaches to recovery support.

Participant Suggestions and Future Appeal

While overall acceptability was high, participants offered several constructive suggestions aimed at refining delivery. Practical recommendations included clearer pre-event communication regarding site accessibility and location, terrain, appropriate clothing, weather-related preparation, and guidance on food and drink provision. These suggestions reflected logistical clarification rather than dissatisfaction with the intervention itself.

A more substantive theme concerned pacing and theoretical density. Some participants felt that a large number of tools and conceptual frameworks were introduced within a short timeframe, particularly within the paper-based components. One participant suggested:

'Skip trying to explain the different tools and how they all fit together, under which scheme and so on. As a participant, simple explanations of the tools themselves is sufficient.' [Anon. feedback forms]

This aligns with interview accounts indicating that while the tools were valued, reduced theoretical layering or greater simplicity may have enhanced clarity for some attendees.

Several participants also reflected on the importance of continued engagement following the weekend. Some expressed interest in further equine-assisted sessions, while others reported subsequently attending SMART meetings. Recollections regarding formal signposting back to SMART as an organisation were mixed. Although at least one participant recalled clear direction towards ongoing involvement, others were unsure whether this had occurred, suggesting that reinforcement of post-weekend support pathways may benefit from greater clarity.

Overall, suggestions were framed as refinements rather than criticisms. Participants consistently described the intervention as impactful and worthwhile, with recommendations focusing primarily on clarity, pacing and continuity rather than fundamental changes to the structure or ethos of the programme. While this section has focused on structural and experiential elements contributing to acceptability, the following one explores participants' accounts of relational and psychological mechanisms in greater depth, including perceived changes and longer-term impact.

5.2 PARTICIPANT RELATIONAL MECHANISMS OF IMPACT

5.2.1 EMBODIED INTEGRATION OF RECOVERY TOOLS

Enduring Engagement with Structured Tools

Participants demonstrated strong engagement with the weekend content, frequently referencing specific exercises and structured tools by name, including the Drama Triangle and other core activities. Many were able to describe exercises in detail several months after attending, suggesting that the activities had remained cognitively and emotionally salient. Participants also described the weekend as creating a psychologically safe environment in which they felt able to begin identifying and naming their emotions. Several reflected on how the structured exercises encouraged them to slow down and examine what was occurring internally, rather than reacting automatically. As one participant explained,

'We pair up and do things and going through these different techniques and stuff about you know like if you're angry, like why am I angry and like breaking it down and, all that sort of thing.' [Richard]

This process of breaking down emotional responses appeared to mark an early shift towards self-reflection, with participants beginning to articulate links between feelings, behaviours and underlying triggers before moving into more specific embodied exercises.

Central Role of Boundary Work in Recovery

While participants valued a range of exercises, boundary work consistently emerged as the most impactful component of the weekend. Unlike other activities, which were often described as useful or thought provoking, boundary work was recounted in emotive and highly specific terms. Every participant referenced this exercise directly, often returning to it unprompted when reflecting on what had stayed with them. The consistency with which it

was mentioned suggests that it was more than just another activity within the programme. Rather, boundary work appeared to operate as a key and integral component of the weekend, described by participants as a cornerstone exercise through which broader learning was internalised in a concrete and embodied way. Respondents frequently framed boundary-setting as fundamental to recovery itself, rather than as an isolated skill. As one participant commented,

'boundaries are massive … when you're in recovery because if you don't have any then, pretty screwed.' [Michelle]

Participants treated boundary work as integral to sustaining recovery beyond the weekend itself. Within this context, the boundary exercises appeared to offer a practical and emotionally resonant way of engaging with a concept that participants already recognised as critical, with the equine element providing one particularly salient component of this work.

Participants also described learning about boundaries through structured partner-based exercises prior to, and alongside, the equine work. One participant reflected on a paired activity.

'*One of us would stand and one of us would get closer and closer and closer until we felt a connection. And then as if we went a bit too far we'd both feel uncomfortable and step back and ah, and that's the place where we both feel comfortable.* [Kate]

Working with a partner in this way appeared to support participants in noticing both their own internal signals and those of others. Rather than assuming what a boundary should look like, participants described feeling the point at which discomfort emerged and recognising this as meaningful. This, to them, then clarified what they understood by the term 'boundary' in the first place, helping to shift it from a vague or abstract idea to something relational, negotiated and embodied.

Across interviews, boundary-setting tasks involving the horses were described as pivotal moments of insight. Participants did not speak about these exercises in abstract terms, rather, they recounted specific interactions and the meanings they drew from them. One participant described how setting a boundary with a large horse led to an unexpectedly powerful realisation.

'Having the horses there for me was massive because it kind of proved to me it doesn't matter how big, or strong, or you know powerful, something is, it still doesn't have the power to take your boundaries away from you,' [Alison]

In this account, the horse's immediate behavioural response appeared to confirm, in a tangible and embodied way, the participant's capacity to stand firm in the presence of something physically imposing. The act of maintaining a boundary with a noticeably larger and more powerful animal seemed to translate into a broader realisation, if a limit could be asserted and upheld in that moment, it could potentially be upheld in other areas of life, regardless of what or who was coming towards them. Participants frequently described similar moments in

which equine interactions transformed boundary-setting from an abstract psychological idea into something physically enacted and directly observed.

Equine Mirroring and Nonverbal Emotional Insight

Participants' varied reactions to the horses also prompted reflection on their interpersonal styles.

'Some people are like, he's going to come up to me though, I don't want to push him away, I feel really bad. And other people are like, oh my God, he hasn't come up to me, he hates me.' [Lianne]

Here, the horse was frequently described as acting as a mirror. Participants suggested that the horses reflected back what they were bringing to the interaction, often through subtle shifts in proximity, posture or engagement. Several explicitly referred to horses as 'reflectors', or noted that they would 'mirror back' what was happening internally during an exercise. Rather than attributing insight to the horse itself, participants described the interaction as making visible processes that were already present but perhaps unrecognised.

Participants interpreted their reactions to equine proximity, whether avoidance, over-accommodation, or assumptions of rejection, as indicative of broader relational patterns. The shortened extract above illustrates how quickly meaning was assigned, feelings of guilt, fear of rejection, or personalisation of the horse's behaviour appeared to echo familiar interpersonal dynamics. Observing these interpretations in real time and recognising that the horse was responding to behaviour rather than intention or imagined judgement, appeared to create space for re-evaluation. When a boundary was communicated and the horse adjusted without drama, this challenged expectations that asserting limits would inevitably result in relational harm.

Some participants extended this interpretation further, describing the horse as reading energy or responding to authenticity. Any mismatch between internal state and outward presentation was exposed through the interaction. The horse's behaviour was therefore experienced as nonverbal feedback on emotional alignment, reinforcing the connection between internal processing and external action. Through this process, participants described gaining insight not only into boundaries, but into wider emotional and behavioural tendencies.

The nonverbal nature of equine feedback was also highlighted as particularly important. For participants who found verbal expression challenging, the horses provided an alternative route into engagement.

'I'm generally quite quiet, I don't tend to talk much in crowds […] the fact that the horses don't even need words […] it kind of gave you that feedback, on what you were thinking rather than you having to vocalise it.' [Sophie]

The nonverbal nature of equine feedback was highlighted as particularly significant for this participant who found group discussion challenging. She described herself as generally quiet and uncomfortable speaking in crowds, noting also that this difficulty extended even to

smaller groups. In this context, the horse offered a form of relational feedback that did not require verbal disclosure. She described gaining insight into her thoughts and internal state through interaction with the horse, without the pressure to articulate those experiences aloud.

For participants who found verbal processing difficult, the equine element therefore appeared to provide an alternative and more accessible route into reflection and therapeutic engagement. These experiences were described as deepening participants' understanding of SMART principles and making them tangible within real-world interaction. Across accounts, horses were positioned as embedded within the recovery model itself, facilitating the translation of SMART tools into lived, relational experience.

Participants also described the equine element as facilitating connection and authenticity.

'The connection thing is massive in recovery […] we're disconnected when we're drinking or using, […] from people, from society, from the world, from ourselves […] and those horses don't respond to you if you're not sort of being authentic.' [Michelle]

Here, the participant linked the weekend experience to recovery more broadly, highlighting connection as a central task within recovery itself. The use of substances and other destructive behaviours can create a barrier between individuals and others, and often between individuals and their own thoughts and emotions. In this context, recovery was framed as the gradual re-establishment of connection, to self, to feeling, and to other people. The equine interaction was experienced as part of this process, with horses perceived as responsive to whether participants were still operating from a place of emotional disconnection or beginning to engage more openly and authentically. Participants described feeling reconnected not only to the horse, but to themselves and, by extension, to others. The horse's responsiveness to what participants described as authenticity appeared to reinforce the importance of emotional alignment and presence.

In several accounts, this sense of connection did not remain confined to the individual - horse interaction but carried into group discussions, where participants were able to articulate insights that had first been encountered nonverbally. In this way, embodied connection appeared to lay the groundwork for deeper collective reflection.

5.2.2 COLLECTIVE REFLEXIVITY AND SHARED RECOGNITION

Reduction of Isolation Through Shared Patterns

Participants described the group as a central mechanism through which insight developed during the weekend. Several entered with uncertainty about whether the experience would be relevant to them, particularly where their behaviours did not align with more traditional understandings of addiction. Through interaction, shared behavioural patterns became visible across differing backgrounds. This recognition appeared to reduce apprehension and increase

a sense of safety, allowing participants to engage more openly. Within this context, vulnerability and self-reflection deepened for participants as the weekend progressed.

Initial hesitation was common. Some participants questioned whether the weekend would apply to them, particularly where they did not identify with more stereotypical narratives of addiction.

'I knew most people that were going to be there were going to be having problems with substance abuse and they were going to be identifying as like proper addicts and I wasn't sure if I fully fit in.' [Danielle]

Participants whose destructive behaviours did not involve alcohol or substance misuse reported feeling anxious that they would be unable to relate to others, or that the programme might not feel relevant to them. As discussion unfolded however, similarities in underlying behavioural processes became apparent. Surface differences in background, substance, or behaviour became less significant as participants recognised common patterns in decision-making, emotional responses, and coping strategies. This recognition was seen to reduce feelings of isolation and strengthened a sense of shared understanding.

Development of Psychological Safety

As this sense of shared understanding developed, participants described feeling increasingly safe within the group.

'soon as we sat down and we first mindful exercise, we all done it, at that point I was like, Yeah, you know, this group where we are is a safe space, and I was able to just carry on being able to open up and be honest. I think it's down to knowing it's a safe space?' [Paul]

For this participant, the early shared exercise marked a point at which the group was understood to be safe. This perception of safety appeared to reduce self-censorship, enabling him to speak more openly and allow for vulnerability in the presence of others. Perceived safety appeared to build across the weekend. As confidence in the group increased, participants became more willing to discuss their behaviours and to reflect on these in front of others. Individuals who would typically avoid group settings reported being able to engage meaningfully, while quieter members were observed to participate more actively over time. The group therefore functioned as an enabling context for surfacing vulnerabilities, deepening both collective and individual insight.

Horses as Social Anchors and Group Catalysts

Participants described the horses as shaping the social and relational atmosphere of the weekend. Their presence appeared to provide comfort and to reduce the potential for social tension within the group.

'I think having the horses there […] made people feel more relaxed actually, just even being able to see them […] It opened up different conversations for people. Seeing the horses there, people were engaging and talking about the horses with each other.' [Michelle]

Here, the suggestion is the horses functioned as a shared point of reference within the group. Attention could be directed toward the animals and the activity, rather than resting solely on the individual speaking. This appeared to reduce performance pressure and support more natural interaction between participants. Other participants described the horse as operating almost as an additional group member within certain activities. In this way, the horse supported interaction and communication between group members, contributing to increased engagement across the weekend. Participants described a visible shift in group dynamics across the weekend. Early interactions were seen as characterised by hesitation and discomfort, which gradually gave way to mutual support and openness.

'to begin with everyone was sort of like very reserved and it was sort of like a very almost uncomfortable? […] then after you've done these exercises, by the end of the first day but definitely by the second day, the way everyone was supporting each other, and how people were open up' [Lianne]

This illustrates a transition from guarded participation to active engagement. As structured exercises unfolded, participants became increasingly willing to contribute, respond, and reflect in front of one another. Several participants linked this growing cohesion directly to the format of the weekend, including check-ins, pair work, and shared activities.

'we got closer and closer as the weekend went on, with the check-ins and the, the different exercises that we did and pairing that we did some pair work, so I think we did we just all got closer and more comfortable with each other.' [Kate]

Engagement was associated with repeated opportunities for interaction. The structure of the weekend combined individual reflection, pair work, and whole-group discussion. Pair work provided a semi-private space in which participants could practise tools and reflect with one other person, often reducing the intensity of speaking in front of the full group. Feeding reflections back to the group created opportunities for shared discussion, where participants recognised similarities in experience and reported moments of realisation while listening to others. Break times were also described as important. Informal interaction away from structured exercises appeared to also strengthen personal connection, contributing to familiarity and comfort within the group. Together, these elements supported progressive increases in engagement rather than relying on spontaneous cohesion.

For some, the collective aspect of the weekend strengthened the overall impact of the experience.

'I found having the group, kind of strengthened the experience as well, making it more powerful. It was a togetherness, and I think we, well, I think we all commented how, how recovering addicts and things need that. And it's not we don't often get that in just everyday life. And that was something that I think the whole group felt that that we had.' [Alison]

For this participant, the group was positioned as integral to the recovery work taking place. The sense of togetherness was described as powerful and meaningful within the context of recovery, reinforcing the importance of collective engagement. Observable increases in

participation, comfort, and mutual support suggest that the group dynamic amplified the overall impact of the weekend. For some participants, this relational shift extended beyond the weekend, contributing to sustained changes.

5.2.3 SUSTAINED AND TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT

Clarity, Insight, and Early Post-Weekend Changes

Participants arrived at the weekend with differing aims and expectations. Some attended with a specific behaviour or difficulty in mind and were seeking support in addressing it. Others described a more open position, uncertain about what the programme would involve or how it might apply to them. Despite these differences, participants consistently expressed hope for positive change, even where they were unsure how that change might occur.

'I was expecting a lot of talk about drugs and alcohol specifically, and that's not how it was. It was very, much more about the feelings that lead to those behaviours.' [Sophie]

The emphasis on emotional and behavioural processes, rather than specific substances, was described as meaningful by some participants. By centring discussion on common behavioural patterns rather than particular addictions, the weekend created a framework that participants from differing backgrounds and with different personal experiences could recognise as relevant to their own experiences. As described in the previous section, this shared recognition was reported as contributing to increased engagement across the weekend. For many participants, insights gained during the weekend continued to shape how they understood and approached their behaviours afterwards.

Early indications of sustained impact were, for example, evident in feedback forms completed after the weekend. When asked about their next steps, respondents described greater clarity in different ways. Some reported knowing what specific actions they intended to take, others felt clearer about the behaviours that required attention, and some described a deeper understanding of themselves even where concrete plans had not yet been formed.

'The whole process built towards success. The first two days were challenging; I learned, and by Day 3 I was feeling strong and assertive, having understood what behaviour I need to change. […] I can see the places where my life needs attention.' [Anon. Feedback Forms]

This description reflects a movement from challenge to clarity, with the structured progression of the weekend contributing to increased confidence and behavioural insight.

Long-Term Wellbeing and Behaviour Change

The interviews conducted as part of this project and conducted approximately six months after the intervention weekend provided insight into whether these shifts had been maintained. In these follow-up interviews, participants described broader improvements in wellbeing since the weekend.

'A lot more calm, a lot. I don't know how you how you explain connected. So like, not so anxious, not so fearful, I felt more confident with the horses and myself.' [Michelle]

This participant expressed she had experienced improvements in anxiety and a greater sense of calm since the intervention, alongside increased confidence. Similar accounts were offered by others, who reported improvements in overall mental health as well as more person-centred changes, including increased self-awareness and shifts in self-perception.

Strengthened Recovery Identity and Group Confidence

Alongside broader improvements in wellbeing, participants described concrete behavioural changes. As detailed, boundary work introduced during the weekend was frequently referenced in follow-up interviews., and one participant described applying the principle of saying 'no' in situations they had previously felt difficult to navigate.

'So that's where the 'no' comes in. So started using that and going 'no I don't want to be around that person' or 'no I'm not going to do that', they went oh, ok right. And that was my big thing for me trying it quite hard but it really helped me in moving forwards.' [Richard]

In this illustrative example, the practical application of tools introduced during the weekend, coupled with increased confidence, enabled the participant to recognise and respond differently to previously damaging situations. This experience of asserting a boundary and observing that it was respected appeared to be reinforcing, supporting movement away from previous patterns.

Participants also referenced continued use of specific practices introduced during the weekend. One participant, for instance, described retaining and revisiting the body scan exercises.

'I remembered a lot of the work, and I have taken it with me especially the body scans and coming back to yourself and building more self-awareness, and just having a play about with who I am kind of thing. I've kind of taken that from the weekend.' [Alison]

Here, the participant describes the integration of a structured exercise into ongoing self-reflection. The emphasis on returning to the body and building self-awareness suggests that elements of the weekend were incorporated into everyday coping and identity exploration rather than remaining confined to the event itself.

Others articulated this strengthening more indirectly, describing clearer boundaries, reduced reactivity, and greater self-awareness in daily life. Some characterised the experience as life changing, while others used terms such as transformative or described it as having a lasting positive impact. Across interview participants, the weekend was consistently described as having effects that extended beyond the event itself. For some participants, such shifts were described explicitly in recovery terms.

'it has strengthened my recovery, if I can pull these skills from that weekend to help me now in the present, then yeah, yeah it has.' [Michelle]

While the overall experience was described positively by all interview participants, such sustained integration was not uniform. One participant reflected on the difficulty of fully embedding the tools into everyday life.

'the SMART language was all very new to me, and it felt very heady and I hadn't quite embodied it. [...] and although the guys did a brilliant job for me I think it hadn't quite seeped through the bedrock if you know what I mean.' [Kate]

Her account suggested that the introduction of multiple new tools within a short timeframe had made it difficult to fully consolidate and embody the material. For this participant, spending more time exploring fewer tools may have supported deeper integration beyond the weekend.

Several participants also described changes in how they viewed group-based work more broadly. Individuals who had previously felt uncertain about group settings reported increased confidence in their ability to engage. As one participant reflected.

'it gave me a different view on group work and the kind of, actually this might be something that I could do. And be able or not just could do but could do, and be able to potentially speak up or share.' [Sophie]

This shift suggests that the experience altered not only how participants engaged during the weekend, but how they perceived their capacity to participate in similar environments in the future. Increased willingness to contribute and speak within a group context was described as a meaningful outcome in itself.

Taken together, participants' accounts suggest that the weekend did not function solely as a contained intervention, but as a catalyst for ongoing change. Improvements in wellbeing, strengthened boundaries, continued use of tools, and increased willingness to engage in group settings were described as persisting beyond the event. While the depth of integration varied, interview participants consistently characterised the experience as having lasting personal significance.

5.3 STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON VALUE, IDENTITY AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

This section presents stakeholder perspectives on the SMART Recovery and Equine Facilitated Intensive Recovery Weekend within UK SMART Recovery (UKSR), focusing on organisational value, identity and future development. While the previous section centred on participant experiences and mechanisms of impact, this section reflects the views of individuals positioned within UKSR's organisational context. Stakeholders were asked to consider the intervention's perceived value, its alignment with UKSR principles, and considerations for responsible implementation and future growth. Findings are organised around three areas: perceived value and operational considerations, organisational buy-in and protection of identity, and future development and responsiveness.

5.3.1 PERCEIVED VALUE AND OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Innovative Experiential Recovery

Stakeholders responded with clear enthusiasm for the Intensive Recovery Weekend and expressed strong endorsement of its potential value. The intervention was described as 'fantastic', 'an excellent idea', and 'a really valuable tool'. Several stakeholders spoke in personal terms about their interest in attending or supporting wider implementation, indicating genuine excitement about the model.

The integration of animals, nature and experiential learning was widely viewed as potentially powerful. The combination of environment, embodied reflection and structured SMART tools was seen as offering a distinctive experience.

"It sounds like a really good mix of all sorts, just the environment, the being with animals, the building confidence and also yeah, the direct kind of comparisons, and then you know how the tools work with that sounds really good." [James]

This stakeholder emphasised the therapeutic potential of working with animals and the value of being in a natural environment. He also viewed the structure of the intervention as thoughtfully designed, describing the experiential activities as complementary to established SMART tools. This perspective was broadly representative of stakeholder responses, which were consistently supportive of the partnership as a whole. Stakeholders frequently referred to the therapeutic potential of working with animals and the value of being outdoors, suggesting that the setting itself may contribute meaningfully to engagement and reflection.

Terminology and Accessibility

Based on the materials reviewed, the term *intensive* did not appear to be formally used within Equus Ferus documentation. However, the term has been used within the research context and informal discussion to describe the weekend format. While the general concept was received warmly, stakeholder responses suggest that careful consideration of language was warranted. Interpretations of the term *intensive* varied considerably, with some understanding it as a concentrated weekend experience such as the one delivered, and others associating it with much longer-term residential rehabilitation models, including programmes extending to 90 days. These differing interpretations appeared to be shaped by stakeholders' personal and professional experience, particularly where they were working within recovery services.

'Actually thinking about it the word intensive, is intense in itself isn't it? So for some people the idea of going on an intensive weekend is like you've lost them at the word intensive because that is actually going to feel way too much for them.' [Lily]

One stakeholder suggested that the term *intensive* could be off-putting for prospective service users, noting that it may feel intimidating for individuals in a fragile stage of recovery. This

highlights the importance of careful language in describing partnerships and interventions, particularly where terminology may carry unintended associations.

Safeguarding and Facilitation

Practical considerations were also raised in relation to cost and accessibility. Several stakeholders reflected on whether such an intervention could be cost-prohibitive for the average service user if delivered as a privately funded activity. One stakeholder suggested that, if privately funded, recovery providers could be expected to offer similar interventions as paid options, and that a proportion of the income could potentially be allocated to support placements for individuals unable to finance the experience themselves.

'You know like the equine provider or something like that that all of a sudden is making money from running them for the Priory customers, then they may be persuaded to put a little fund aside to continue to offer a small number of placements, almost like scholarships, for people who can't afford it.' [Noah]

This proposal reflected a broader concern about equity of access, alongside recognition that funding structures would need careful consideration. Expertise and appropriate facilities were also discussed as potential challenges should the intervention be repeated or scaled at a larger level.

Safeguarding considerations were also highlighted. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of participant suitability, particularly in relation to stage of recovery, current substance use and mental health stability. While screening processes such as the CORE forms were viewed as helpful in mitigating some of these risks, stakeholders noted that the immersive format may require additional vigilance.

Concerns were also raised regarding unstructured downtime.

'I think that any time that people have got, downtime together, so you know in between groups and breakout rooms and that's going to get a coffee and that sort of thing, you know in my experience they tend to lend themselves to, if not managed, the war stories.' [Noah]

One stakeholder observed that unstructured downtime can create space for detailed recounting of past substance use, which, if not carefully facilitated, may become romanticised, or triggering, for others. Similar concerns were raised by other stakeholders, including the potential for trauma bonding and the formation of unhealthy attachments between vulnerable participants. These reflections underscore the importance of trauma-informed facilitation, clear ground rules and active management of group dynamics, particularly where individuals at different stages of recovery are spending extended time together.

A small number of stakeholders also raised consideration of horse welfare. While not framed as a criticism of the intervention, this reflected awareness that UKSR's name would be associated with any equine-facilitated activity delivered under partnership. Ensuring high standards of animal care, ethical practice and appropriate facilities was therefore viewed as

essential, both in safeguarding the welfare of the animals involved and in protecting organisational credibility and reputation.

Maintaining Program Integrity

Some stakeholders reflected on how the weekend would be positioned in relation to established SMART delivery. Given the highly structured nature of SMART meetings, there was sensitivity around how the integration of SMART tools into a different format might be perceived.

'It's the difference between the SMART tools and a SMART meeting, and the SMART tools on their own are one thing, as long as people using the SMART tools on their own within this concept, aren't claiming to run a SMART meeting.' [Lily]

One stakeholder described an initial hesitation about SMART branching beyond peer-led mutual aid meetings into intervention partnerships. While supportive of the concept, she articulated concern that the distinction between SMART meetings and the use of SMART tools in alternative formats could become blurred. There was apprehension that participants might assume all SMART activity follows the same structure, and that this could detract from the clarity and consistency of the existing meeting model.

Other stakeholders similarly noted that partnerships of this nature could complement SMART meetings, provided that UKSR retains clear messaging about its core offer of ongoing mutual aid. This refers to the established model of free, peer-led meetings that individuals can attend for as long as needed, without time limitation or financial barrier. In contrast, partnership events such as the Intensive Recovery Weekends, or whatever, not concerned about the word 'intensive', they could be called, may be time-limited and potentially cost-associated. Stakeholders therefore emphasised the importance of preserving the distinction between SMART's ongoing mutual aid provision and additional, distinct intervention activities.

5.3.2 ORGANISATIONAL POSITIONING OF SMART RECOVERY

This section moves beyond reflections on the Intensive Recovery Weekends and considers stakeholders' views of SMART Recovery as an organisation at the present time. Discussion centred on where SMART sits within the wider recovery landscape, how its model is perceived, and how UKSR is viewed in terms of identity, credibility and current position.

Distinct Recovery Approach

Stakeholder commentary frequently referenced 12-step recovery models as a point of comparison, reflecting their prominence within recovery provision. This comparison is presented descriptively rather than evaluatively. Stakeholders were not positioning one approach as superior to another, but identifying differences in philosophy, structure and suitability for different individuals.

Stakeholders consistently described SMART as occupying a distinct and valued space within the recovery landscape. It was viewed as an important alternative for individuals who do not feel comfortable within spiritually framed or abstinence-based models. The structured, CBT-

informed foundation of the programme was repeatedly highlighted as a key strength, contributing to both its credibility and its practical utility.

One stakeholder reflected positively on the structure of the programme,

'I like the four-point programme as a whole. You know there's a good amount of CBT in there for people to take home and reflect.' [Owen]

The four-point programme was, in this way, valued for its practical focus on equipping participants with behaviour change strategies. Stakeholders described it as providing structured tools that could be used both within meetings and independently between sessions. The opportunity to engage with CBT-based activities that members could apply in everyday life was considered a particular strength.

Other stakeholders similarly highlighted the evidence-based foundation of SMART as a distinguishing feature within the recovery landscape. While recognising the value of peer-led recovery models more broadly, stakeholders viewed SMART's structured, CBT-based approach as offering a clear and credible framework for self-management. One stakeholder described SMART's role within the recovery landscape in the following terms.

"I think that SMART has a very important role to play in the landscape, because AA relies on a fundamental belief in spirituality […] whereas SMART takes a more practical approach to recovery in that it places the onus on the individual to be responsible for their recovery.' [Liam]

This reflection captures how SMART was understood as offering a philosophically different approach to recovery. The emphasis on practical tools and personal responsibility was viewed as central to its identity. Stakeholders described this distinction, also touched upon above, as particularly valuable for individuals who do not identify with spiritually framed models and who prefer a structured, skills-based framework. This positioning was echoed by most stakeholders, who consistently described SMART as occupying a distinct philosophical space within the recovery landscape.

Challenges in Visibility

In addition to reflecting on SMART's philosophical position, stakeholders commented on UKSR as an organisation within the current recovery landscape. While there was strong belief in the value of the model, several stakeholders observed that SMART does not yet have the same level of visibility or recognition as more established 12-step programmes.

'I know at my work I've been trying to get SMART Recovery facilitated but no one talks about it. No one promotes it. You know the general sort of everyone knows about NA and AA and Gamblers Anonymous so people always go there.' [Ava]

This comment illustrates a perceived lack of public awareness of the charity, and stakeholders described a gap in promotion, familiarity and cultural recognition. In this sense, UKSR was sometimes characterised as still building its presence, with scope to strengthen outreach and embed itself more firmly within mainstream service pathways.

One stakeholder described attempting to introduce SMART within a charitable or private recovery setting, but encountered reluctance based on the perception that SMART lacked an established evidence base. According to the stakeholder, this perception contributed to a decision not to incorporate SMART into existing provision. This account suggests that awareness of the programme's evidence-informed foundation may not be consistently understood across all service settings and that this may pose challenges for expanding modes of delivery.

Organisational Capacity

Alongside reflections on visibility and positioning, stakeholders also commented on UKSR's organisational capacity. While there was clear belief in the strength of the model itself, some described UKSR as still consolidating its infrastructure and resources. One stakeholder referred to the UK branch as '*quite a fledgling sort of spin-off*', suggesting that there remains scope for growth in areas such as material development and independent content creation. This was framed less as criticism and more as recognition that UKSR is continuing to establish itself within the UK context.

Stakeholders also reflected on the structural complexity of operating within a global organisation.

'Because it's a global organisation, SMART Recovery, […] when you're talking about kind of introducing anything new into the programme, there's a lot of kind of OK's that need to be checked and voices that need to be heard and they often go through slow moving committees to make any changes.'

This comment reflects an awareness that governance structures within an international model can influence the pace at which adaptation or innovation occurs. While this was not framed as opposition to such (weekend) events, or to development more broadly, it highlights the practical constraints associated with introducing change across multiple affiliates. This was echoed by another stakeholder, who reflected on cultural differences within existing training resources, alongside an awareness of the financial constraints involved in developing UK-specific alternatives.

Taken together, these reflections illustrate stakeholders' commitment to the integrity and effectiveness of the current model, alongside a recognition of areas where continued development may strengthen UKSR's position. Having considered where stakeholders feel SMART currently sits within the recovery landscape, the next section turns to how they envisage its future direction and ongoing relevance.

5.3.3 FUTURE DEVELOPMENT AND RESPONSIVENESS

Growth Opportunities in Recovery Services

Beyond reflections on the Intensive Recovery Weekend and SMART's current positioning, stakeholders were invited to consider the organisation's future direction. Discussion focused

on areas of unmet need within the wider recovery landscape, opportunities for growth, organisational capacity, and the importance of remaining responsive to social, cultural and technological change. With strong endorsement of SMART's core model, stakeholders were also clear that continued development would require careful expansion, adequate resourcing, and thoughtful partnership working.

Stakeholders described significant pressures within the wider recovery landscape. Statutory services, including mental health, detox and rehabilitation programmes, were characterised as oversubscribed and stretched, with limited capacity to provide sustained or preventative support.

'SMART I think has got a huge potential to act as both the primary recovery pathway like from services like residential rehab, detox and NHS treatment.' [Ava]

This comment reflected a belief that SMART could operate not only as a complementary support, but as a visible and accessible frontline pathway. While SMART is already present within many services, stakeholders suggested that its role is not always clearly embedded or widely recognised. The desire expressed was not to replace existing provision, but to see SMART more consistently integrated and promoted within it.

Engaging Younger Generations

Stakeholders reflected on how patterns of addiction and recovery are evolving, particularly in relation to age and the range of behaviours presenting. One stakeholder questioned:

"Are we going to appeal to people who are now becoming adults and perhaps need that help, and also different addictive behaviours, you know the way it isn't just drugs and alcohol anymore you know it's lots of different things that people struggle with. And I think to remain relevant we need to, we need to consider that really." [Lily]

This comment reflected concerns about how the needs of younger people may differ from those more commonly encountered within addiction services, and within SMART, in previous years. Stakeholders noted that younger generations communicate differently and spend significantly more time online, shaping both patterns of engagement and exposure to risk. While core substances such as alcohol and other addictive drugs remain prevalent, additional pressures associated with a digital age were recognised, including new behavioural dependencies and social dynamics that may drive substance use.

Echoing this perspective, another stakeholder spoke passionately about ensuring that young people are aware of SMART as a supportive organisation and advocated for a stronger presence within preventative and educational contexts. This included integrating SMART principles within schools, youth-focused services and family settings, positioning the programme not only as a recovery pathway but as an early intervention and awareness framework.

Strategic Partnerships for Growth and Continuous Support

In addition to upstream integration, stakeholders described the importance of continuity across recovery pathways. Rather than viewing SMART as a discrete intervention, some envisaged it operating as an end-to-end support framework.

'So we're trying to see SMART as potential to have a kind of end-to-end pathway, you know where people can access in the community, they can access it if they end up in prison or any sort of point that they're affected by the criminal justice system transferring into hostels and approved premises in the community as they transition back and yeah, hopefully potentially landing with those as volunteer facilitators.' [James]

This perspective positioned SMART not simply as a meeting format, but as a consistent thread running through different stages of an individual's recovery journey. The emphasis was on accessibility, transition and sustained engagement, particularly across points of disruption such as entry into, and release from, the criminal justice system.

Stakeholders frequently framed expansion in terms of collaboration rather than duplication. As SMART seeks to increase its visibility within frontline services, criminal justice settings, workplace environments and youth-focused provision, partnership working was viewed as central to sustainable growth.

Suggestions included deeper integration within NHS and local authority pathways, stronger embedding within prisons and probation services, and increased engagement within school and family contexts. Stakeholders also highlighted the importance of maintaining continuity across transitions, including movement between custody, hostels and community settings.

Expansion of Intensive Recovery Events?

In addition to statutory and voluntary sector organisations, some stakeholders discussed collaboration with private recovery providers and experiential programmes. This suggestion emerged during discussion of models similar in structure to the Intensive Recovery Weekend, and consideration of where this type of partnership might be expanded.

'I could see working would be if it was kind of an outward bounce course, so you know you go and you know you do these activities where you go and […] you've got to build something and, […] if you can integrate these tools into a fun activity that people learn from' [Liam]

Here, the emphasis was on integrating SMART tools within activity-based or experiential formats, where learning occurs through participation rather than discussion alone. The emphasis was not on replacing the structured meeting model, but on embedding cognitive and behavioural techniques within practical, embodied contexts. In this way, the equine-facilitated weekend was viewed not as a standalone innovation, but as one example of a broader category of partnership models that could extend SMART's reach while retaining its core principles.

Stakeholders also discussed other activities that could adopt a similar format to the Intensive Recovery Weekend. Suggestions included outdoor-based initiatives such as walking or fishing

groups, as well as art-related retreats and other structured experiential programmes. These were viewed as strong candidates for partnership because the activity itself can act as a catalyst for communication, reflection and challenge within a supported environment.

Such formats were considered compatible with SMART tools, allowing cognitive and behavioural techniques to be integrated within embodied or creative experiences, while retaining clear structure and facilitation. As one stakeholder reflected,

'Having the ideas and coopting tools from another company, and both companies in a way coming together to work on their approach, it can only be beneficial.' [Owen]

Partnership was not framed as dilution or departure, but rather as mutual enhancement. The emphasis was on shared learning, complementary strengths and collaborative evolution, reinforcing the view that SMART's growth need not come at the expense of its core principles. This sentiment was repeated across interviews.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 AIM 1: TO EVALUATE THE FEASIBILITY OF DELIVERING SMART PRINCIPLES WITHIN INTENSIVE, EQUINE-ASSISTED RECOVERY EVENTS

Overall, findings indicate that the intensive equine-assisted model was feasible and suitable for its intended purpose. The integration of SMART principles with Equus Ferus' experiential approach worked well within the intensive format and was positively received by those who attended. Accounts collected several months after the weekends indicate that engagement with reflective and behavioural processes had been sustained, with participants describing ongoing application of learning.

Available documentation and accounts indicate that the intensive equine-assisted format was delivered largely in line with the planned structure, with core SMART components implemented as outlined. Attendance and engagement were strong, and the balance between SMART-based reflection and equine activity was experienced both as purposeful and as manageable within the intensive format.

Participants represented varied personal and recovery backgrounds, with differing familiarity with both SMART Recovery and equine activity. Pre-screening procedures were appropriate within the existing referral context, and reasonable adjustments were successfully implemented. The physical environment of the current setting did present accessibility constraints and may not be suitable for individuals with significant physical restrictions.

The rural outdoor setting was generally appropriate and widely perceived as enhancing focus and atmosphere. Exposure to environmental variability highlights the importance of contingency planning for adverse weather conditions, and clear advance communication regarding practical requirements and site arrangements remains important, particularly where delivery occurs within a shared environment.

Reflective exercises formed a central mechanism of impact. The integration of structured SMART tools with experiential equine activity supported cognitive insight and emotional engagement, allowing emotionally activating material to be organised and translated into behavioural understanding. The overall pacing of the weekends contributed to a sense of containment, with the structured closing ceremony functioning as a clear psychological endpoint.

Overall acceptability was high. Facilitation quality was central to engagement, and the experiential format was perceived as distinctive and meaningful. Suggestions for development focused primarily on clarity, pacing and continuity rather than structural change, indicating that the core model was viewed as appropriate and worthwhile.

6.2 AIM 2: TO SYSTEMATICALLY EXPLORE PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE EVENT

Across participant accounts, the weekends were described as an immersive and relational intervention in which recovery tools were engaged with practically and experientially within a supportive group setting. The equine-facilitated activities formed a core component of this process, providing experiential contexts through which participants encountered and reflected on recovery concepts in real time. Participants described moving beyond intellectual understanding towards personal application, supported by interaction with the horses, structured exercises and facilitated reflection. The structure of the programme created space for participants to examine their own patterns, responses and assumptions as they emerged during activities.

Recognition of similar traits, behaviours and challenges among the group environment appeared to support engagement with the material presented, while the equine tasks shaped how participants understood and applied the content. Collective observation of interactions with the horses, alongside facilitated discussion, supported reflection on boundaries, which were seen as particularly worthwhile, communication and behavioural patterns. The combination of structured sessions, equine exercises and informal interaction contributed to psychological safety and collective learning.

Participants also described effects that extended beyond the weekends themselves. These included shifts in perspective, increased confidence in applying tools, and continued use of strategies introduced during the programme. For some, the experience prompted integration of specific practices into daily life and renewed engagement with recovery-oriented support. Taken together, participant accounts indicate that the event functioned as a concentrated intervention space that supported ongoing recovery engagement.

6.3 AIM 3: TO GATHER STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES (E.G., UKSR LEADERSHIP, PARTNER ORGANISATIONS, EQUINE CENTRE STAFF) ON UKSR

Stakeholders viewed the weekends as a meaningful addition to existing UKSR activity. They were viewed as consistent with SMART principles, while offering a different format through the inclusion of equine-facilitated work. Practical considerations centred on delivery

safeguards and governance. Safeguarding procedures were noted as due additional considerations, particularly with regard to unstructured time during events. There was also emphasis on ensuring that any expansion into partnership-based models did not dilute SMART's established meeting structure or values. Partnership working itself was generally viewed positively, particularly where it enabled UKSR to reach different groups or operate in new settings while retaining its core framework.

Stakeholders also reflected on the positioning of UKSR within the wider recovery landscape and described the charity as occupying a distinct space within recovery provision. While there was strong belief in the value and credibility of the model, several stakeholders noted that UKSR does not yet have the same level of public visibility or recognition as more established recovery programmes. Observations were made regarding promotion, familiarity across services, and awareness of UKSR's evidence-informed foundation.

Looking ahead, stakeholders described development as dependent on strengthening organisational capacity while preserving the core SMART framework. Growth was viewed as achievable where infrastructure, facilitator preparation and quality oversight are in place to support consistency. There was a clear emphasis among stakeholders on ensuring that expansion does not dilute the four-point programme or the established meeting structure. Consideration of future directions were therefore framed as requiring a process of consolidation and measured development, rooted in maintaining clarity of identity and ensuring delivery standards.

6.4 AIM 4: TO IDENTIFY KEY COMPONENTS NEEDED TO PRODUCE A REPEATABLE, HIGH-QUALITY OPERATIONAL MODEL FOR FUTURE INTENSIVE RECOVERY EVENTS

Findings from the process evaluation identify several areas of consideration for developing future UKSR partnership-based intensive recovery events. These elements draw from reflections on delivery as well as stakeholder suggestions for future partnership-based models. Together, they inform the development of a toolkit intended to support replication while preserving clarity of purpose for UKSR (see Section 7. Toolkit).

Advance preparation helps participants engage more comfortably in the intervention setting, including clarity about the nature of the activity, logistical arrangements, and behavioural expectations. Partnership delivery also needs to insure operational readiness of partners, and appropriate safeguarding considerations should form part of future partnership delivery. This includes assessing participant suitability for specific activities, with attention to factors such as mental health, stage of recovery and accessibility needs. It also involves recognising that periods of unstructured time during intensive interventions may pose risks for some participants and planning accordingly through proportionate risk assessment and support arrangements.

Facilitator capacity also emerged as an important factor. The current model developed from a facilitator bringing a specific skillset into the partnership context. This points to the value of recognising and mapping facilitator skills across the organisation. Identifying facilitators with niche expertise, or with relevant professional backgrounds, may create opportunities for future partnership-based delivery. Consideration of facilitator strengths and how these might support adapted formats of UKSR-integrated activity appears a key consideration.

Clear integration of UKSR within partner activities supports consistency of delivery. UKSR tools should be clearly identified, and participants signposted to local meetings and wider support pathways. Maintaining distinction between partnership interventions and formal UKSR meetings, in this way, helps preserve clarity around purpose, structure and expectations, while reinforcing continuity of engagement.

Stakeholder suggestions also identified possible future partnership contexts. These included private or charitable rehabilitation settings, established activity centres, therapeutic group environments, custodial settings, and educational institutions. Exploration of such settings would benefit from alignment with UKSR principles, appropriate safeguarding capacity, and consideration of how structured tools can be incorporated into the host activity.

Taken together, these elements outline an operational approach centred on partnership quality, facilitator expertise, structural clarity and preservation of the UKSR framework. The accompanying toolkit translates these considerations into practical guidance to support consistent future delivery.

6.5 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This evaluation was conducted retrospectively. The research team was not involved in the design or inception of the intervention. As such, prospective assessment of fidelity against pre-specified aims or theoretical frameworks was not possible. The limited fidelity assessment undertaken was necessarily based on available documentation and participant and facilitator accounts.

The intervention itself consisted of two intensive recovery weekends rather than an extended programme. Findings therefore reflect a time-limited intervention delivered within a specific partnership context. Seventeen participants attended the events, of whom eight took part in follow-up interviews. The views presented are therefore based on approximately half of those who attended, alongside feedback forms. No information is available regarding the recovery status or subsequent engagement of participants who were not interviewed, and reasons for non-participation are largely unknown. Findings should be interpreted with this in mind.

Inclusion of feedback collected shortly after the event captured some immediate reflections on delivery and experience. Follow-up interviews conducted several months later provided additional insight into perceived longer-term impact. However, the interval between the event and follow-up interviews may have influenced recall of the participant experience.

Six stakeholders were interviewed. While this represents a small number and may not capture the full range of stakeholder perspectives across UKSR and partner organisations, participants were drawn from managerial, community and facilitator roles, providing a spread of positions within the partnership context. Findings should therefore be understood as indicative rather than comprehensive.

6.6 CONCLUSION

Findings indicate that the SMART integrated equine therapy model was **feasible, appropriate, and well-aligned with SMART principles**. The combination of SMART tools with Equus Ferus' experiential activities was delivered largely as planned and was positively received. Participants continued applying learning months later, demonstrating sustained impact.

Engagement was strong, and the balance between equine activities and SMART-based reflection worked effectively. Participants came from varied recovery backgrounds, with pre-screening and reasonable adjustments generally appropriate. However, the rural setting poses **accessibility limitations**, particularly for people with physical restrictions.

The natural environment was viewed as enhancing focus, though weather-related contingencies are important. Reflective exercises were central to impact, supporting emotional engagement and cognitive insight. The structured pacing and closing ceremony provided containment. Acceptability was high, with suggested improvements focusing on **clarity, pacing, and continuity**, rather than major structural change.

Participants described the weekends as **immersive, relational, and experiential**, enabling recovery tools to be understood and applied in real time. Interactions with horses prompted personal reflection on behaviour, boundaries, communication, and emotional responses.

Group processes supported learning: recognising shared struggles enhanced engagement, while collective observation and discussion deepened understanding. The structured blend of equine tasks, facilitated reflection and informal interaction created **psychological safety** and promoted shared growth.

Impacts extended beyond the events themselves. Many participants reported **shifts in perspective, increased confidence**, and ongoing use of tools introduced during the programme. Some incorporated specific practices into daily routines or re-engaged with wider recovery support, indicating the weekends acted as a **focused intervention with lasting influence**.

Stakeholders viewed the weekends as a **valuable and meaningful addition** to UKSR's activities, consistent with SMART principles while offering a distinctive experiential format. They emphasised safeguarding -especially around unstructured time -and the need to maintain clarity between partnership activities and SMART's established meeting model.

Stakeholders described UKSR as occupying a **distinct and credible space** within the recovery landscape, though with **lower visibility and recognition** compared to more established

programmes. Some noted limited awareness in services of SMART's evidence-informed foundation.

Looking forward, stakeholders emphasised the importance of **building organisational capacity**, maintaining delivery standards and safeguarding SMART's identity. They supported growth, but framed it as **measured, well-governed and consistent with the four-point programme**.

The evaluation identified key components required for future partnership-based intensive recovery events:

- **Clear advance preparation** (logistics, expectations, nature of activities) helps participants engage effectively and strengthens partnerships.
- **Robust safeguarding processes** are essential, including assessing participant suitability for experiential tasks and managing risks posed by unstructured time.
- **Facilitator capacity and skill-mapping** matter; identifying facilitators with specialist expertise can support replication in new settings.
- **Clear integration of UKSR tools** within partner activities ensures consistency and preserves the distinction from formal SMART meetings, while directing participants toward wider support.
- **Suitable partnership contexts** may include rehabilitation centres, activity centres, therapeutic groups, custodial settings, and educational institutions—provided alignment with SMART principles and safeguarding requirements is maintained.

Together, these elements support a replicable operational model centred on **partnership quality, facilitator expertise, structural clarity and protection of UKSR's core framework**. The accompanying toolkit translates these requirements into practical guidance for consistent future delivery.

7 TOOLKIT

The following components are drawn from the process evaluation findings and are intended to support consistent, high-quality delivery of future UKSR partnership-based, intensive recovery events.

7.1 UK SMART RECOVERY BRANDING AND INTEGRITY

To preserve clarity of purpose and protect the UKSR model:

- UKSR tools and materials should be clearly identified as originating from UKSR.
- Participants should be explicitly signposted to local UKSR meetings, online meetings, and the UKSR website.
- Clear distinction should be maintained between partnership-based intensive events and formal UKSR meetings.
- The four-point programme and established meeting structure should remain central to any adapted format.
- Any partnership activity should integrate UKSR content in a way that supports continuity of engagement with ongoing UKSR provision.

7.2 COMMUNICATION WITH PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

To support informed participation and accessibility:

- Clear articulation of the aims and purpose of the event.
- Detailed information about the activity format, structure and timings.
- Practical information regarding environment and setting, including:
    - Location and transport
    - Clothing requirements
    - Food and refreshments
    - Physical environment and terrain (where relevant)
- Explicit accessibility information, including how to request reasonable adjustments.
- Clear contact details for facilitators or organisers for pre-event queries.
- Behavioural expectations and boundaries within the intervention setting.

7.3 SAFEGUARDING AND PARTICIPANT SUITABILITY

To support safe and proportionate delivery:

- Pre-event risk assessments covering the activity setting and participant needs.
- Consideration of participant suitability, including mental health, stage of recovery and accessibility needs.

- Awareness of potential risks during periods of unstructured time.
- Contingency planning for weather, incidents or accidents.
- Clear safeguarding procedures during the event, including defined roles and escalation pathways.
- Alignment of safeguarding practices between UKSR and partner organisations.

7.4 ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Where relevant to the partnership activity:

- Verification of facilitator qualifications and role clarity.
- Appropriate insurance and compliance with health and safety requirements.
- Animal welfare standards and oversight where animal-based activities are involved.

8 REFERENCES

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