

Intensive Recovery Events: A new direction for UK SMART Recovery

A process Evaluation of UK SMART Recovery and Equine therapy weekends and feasibility assessment of feasibility of integrating SMART principles into intensive recovery events

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Background

UKSR provides free, science-based, weekly mutual-aid support for 5000 people recovering from addictive behaviours

Research suggests that brief, intensive support delivered over a few days benefits recovery (Dennis et al., 2005; McCarty et al., 2014)

UKSR has no track record of developing such intensive recovery events, or of evaluative research

Aims:

- 1) Service evaluation of a pilot intensive recovery events – equine therapy with UK SMART Recovery principles (spanning two weekends): process evaluation & participant and facilitator experiences
- 2) Canvassing SMART stakeholders to examine their views on implementing intensive recovery events
- 3) Share learning towards an operational model and toolkit for intensive events, allowing SMART to scale this intervention type and ensure consistency, quality, and impact measurement in the future.

Approach

16 Semi-structured interviews (separate schedules for):

- Participants N = 10 (*Experiential nature, overall experiences perceived impact*)
- Facilitators N= 2 (*Operational delivery: Fidelity to SMART principles, integration of equine-assisted activities, dose and reach, any adaptations. Broader reflections: group processes, participant engagement, group dynamics, perceived impact*)
- SMART stakeholders N = 4 (Organisational context, feasibility, and strategic fit within the current recovery landscape, initial perceptions of UKSP broadening its scope)

Participant feedback forms

Thematic Analyses – inductive coding and theme development from transcripts

**Programme itineraries, risk assessments, and related materials (e.g. pp worksheets)*

Process Evaluation (Moore et al., 2015)

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

implementation

Female 57%, 27 - 61 years, 47% of attendees over 2 weekends



All respondents:
Process Evaluation Findings



Fidelity

Participants recalled use of planned tools

CORE COMPONENT

DESCRIPTION

Mindsight

Window of Tolerance and guided mindfulness

Understanding Addictive Behaviours

Equine-integrated CBT tools and stages of change

Boundary Setting

Application of personal limits within recovery

Karpman Drama Triangle

Exploration of interpersonal conflict roles

ABC Model

CBT analysis of thoughts, beliefs, consequences

Pros and Cons Analysis

Structured review of behaviour change motivations

Equine activities aligned with plans; occasional enriching extensions beyond documentation

'We could lead one of the horses... and put that paper in the fire to let it go.'

Only minor timing adjustments due to heat; no programme drift reported by facilitators

- **Triangulated evidence confirmed strong fidelity and programme intinerary**

Dose

Structured Multi-day Intervention

The intervention spanned three full days, offering extensive engagement balanced between content and experiential activities.

Participant Engagement and Pacing

Engagement was high throughout the weekends (one exception, illness)

Participants appreciated a natural, unhurried pace with extra informal breaks enhancing flow and engagement throughout sessions.

“I think they managed the entire weekend in a kind of natural flow so nothing was hurried, there was time for everything “

Balanced Activity Types

The mix of equine work, paper-based tools, and discussions was well received, catering to varied learning preferences

Some desired increased hands-on horse time

Others noted the value of observing equine behaviour as part of group-based exercises.

A small subset found the volume of theoretical content intensive, expressing that fewer tools with more in-depth practice could enhance learning

Facilitator Flexibility and Content Density

Facilitators provided a broad toolkit focusing on choice, balancing theoretical content with practical application despite heat challenges

- Overall, the dose delivered reflected the designed balance of cognitive, behavioural, and experiential components, with flexible facilitation ensuring participants remained engaged despite environmental challenges such as extreme heat



Reach

Recruitment and Attendance

Recruitment relied on professional and community networks, resulting in 17 (of 20) participants attending from diverse behavioural backgrounds

Participant Diversity and Motives

Varied previous experiences with horses (some pre anxiety) and SMART awareness/engagement

Mix of behaviors including but not exclusive to “addiction”

Participants varied in recovery stages and experiences (some in active use or risk or relapse)

A heterogeneous mix of motivations: Specific behaviours or more general/wellbeing

“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”

Accessibility Challenges

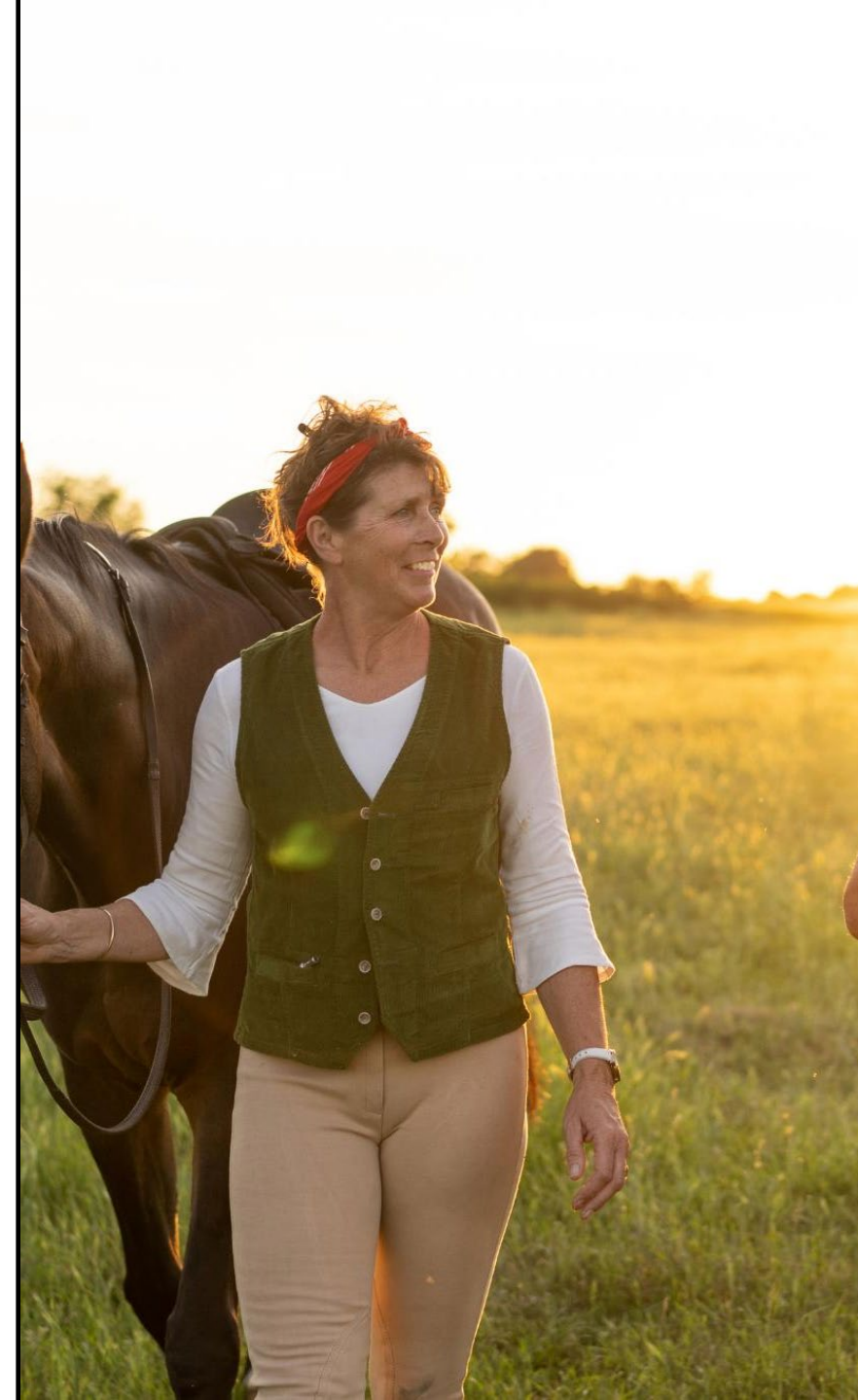
Rural location and uneven terrain posed some travel and mobility challenges, mitigated by support like car sharing and therapy animals

Some role ambiguity created by support some adjustment :

‘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]

Broader Suitability

Participants noted the program’s relevance beyond addiction, including mental health, life transitions, and neurodivergence



Contextual Factors

Calming Rural Setting

The rural outdoor environment fostered calmness and reflection, enhancing participant immersion during the three-day format

Facilitators: residential setting as a purposeful design element - creating continuity, shared focus, and reduced external distraction. Helps to consolidate learning

Environmental Limitations

Minimal shade and shelter, coupled with outdoor location caused some discomfort and may highlight the need for better contingency plans

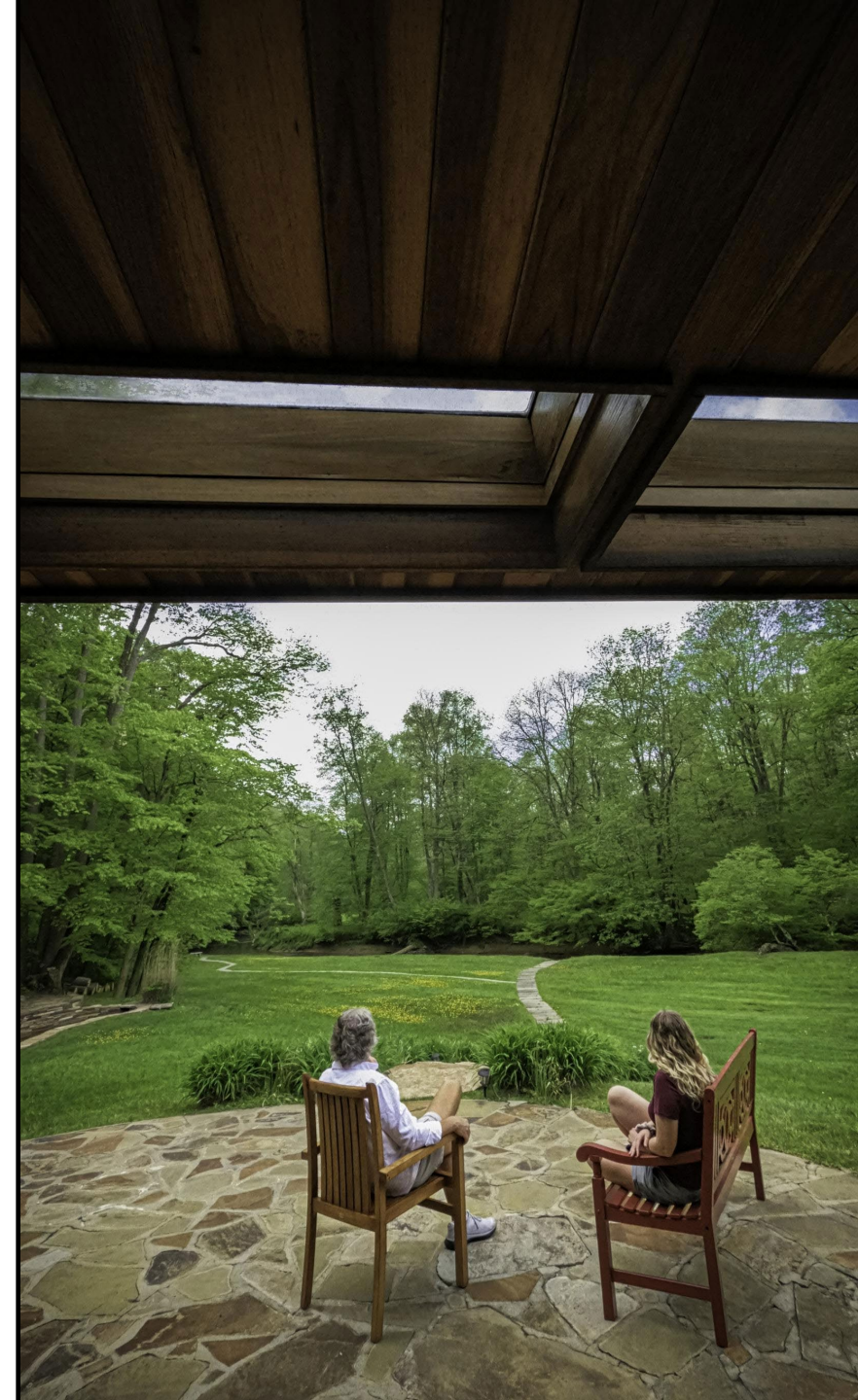
Communication Gaps

Unclear guidance on clothing, footwear, and protective items caused uncertainty among participants before the event. More re-attendance information on what to bring/wear would be appreciated

Privacy and Safety Concerns

Shared spaces reduced psychological safety for some due to unanticipated presence of unaffiliated individuals

- The value of the carefully cultivated therapeutic environment could be maximised with clearer pre-event notifications about the nature of the terrain, what to bring/wear for potential weather patterns, and how privacy concerns will be managed



Mechanisms of Impact (structural)

Integration of Cognitive Tools and Equine Experience

Combining structured cognitive tools with real-time equine activities fosters deep emotional processing and reflection

“But with the horses alongside ...having the ABCs and that exercise, it allowed me to separate, it allowed me to feel emotion because I was actually experiencing it as we were doing it”

Structured Reflection and Emotional Consolidation

Facilitators pair horse activities with guided reflection to help participants process emotions and solidify insights

Symbolic Transition Through Ritual

Closing ceremony involving writing and burning thoughts symbolises emotional release and learning integration

“we burnt them in the fire... they’re gone now”

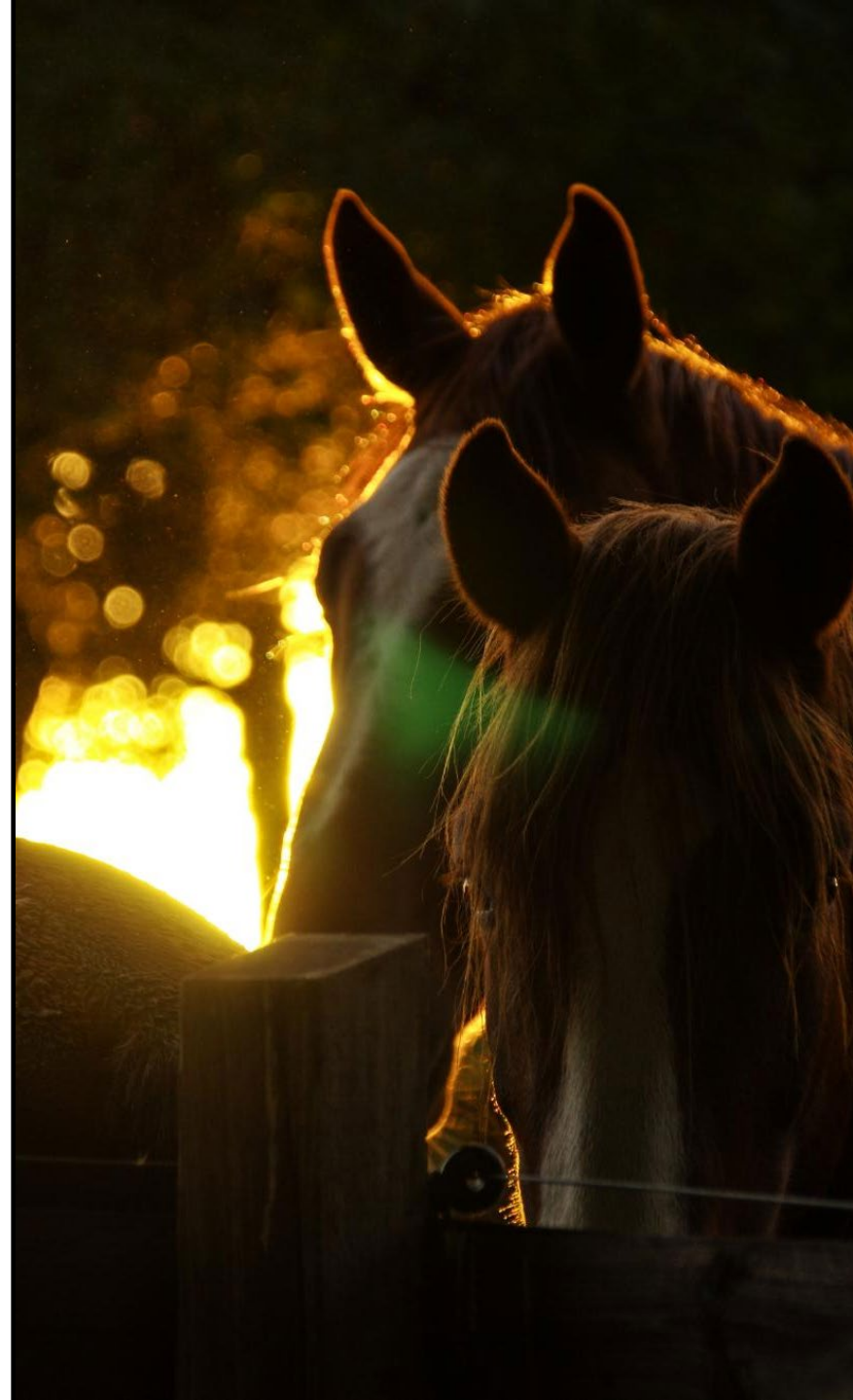
Individual Variability in Impact

Participants varied in how well mechanisms link to addiction recovery

‘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

Most find the process emotionally supportive and insightful

- Overall, efficacy understood as a result of the combination of structured SMART tools and equine therapy, with the horses acting as ‘emotional vehicle’ through which to enact tools



Acceptability

Role of Facilitators

Facilitators' expertise, authenticity, and warmth created a safe and trusting environment for participant engagement

“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”

Modelling communication, collaboration and reflective practice

Experiential Program Impact

Participants described the program's experiential nature as impactful and deeply felt but hard to fully explain in words

“I can't explain what happens there, I can't. It was a feeling like it was a feeling”

Perceived distinctiveness from traditional recovery support

Suggestions for Improvement

Participants recommended clearer pre-event communication

Simpler theoretical explanations to enhance accessibility

Continued Engagement Interest

There was keen interest in ongoing participation –

Recall of signposting to follow-up pathways of support varied among participants

- Intervention consistently viewed as impactful and worthwhile, with recommendations focusing on clarity, pacing and continuity rather than fundamental changes to the structure or ethos of the programme





Participant
Relational Mechanisms of Impact

Embodied Integration of Recovery Tools

1) Enduring Engagement with Structured Tools

Long-term Tool Recall

Participants retained knowledge of tools like the Drama Triangle and ABC model months after the event, showing lasting impact

Emotional Awareness Development

Tools helped participants slow automatic reactions and increase awareness of emotional responses and behavioural triggers

Supportive Environment Impact

A safe, supportive environment enabled participants to identify and express emotions, enhancing introspective capacity

Structured Exercises and Reflection

Interpersonal exercises encouraged breaking down feelings step by step, bridging emotions with behavioural roots



Embodied Integration of Recovery Tools

2) Central Role of Boundary Setting

Emotional Impact of Boundary Work

Boundary exercises triggered strong emotional reactions and remained memorable for participants beyond the intervention

“boundaries are massive ...when you're in recovery because if you don't have any then, pretty screwed”

Relational Boundary Understanding

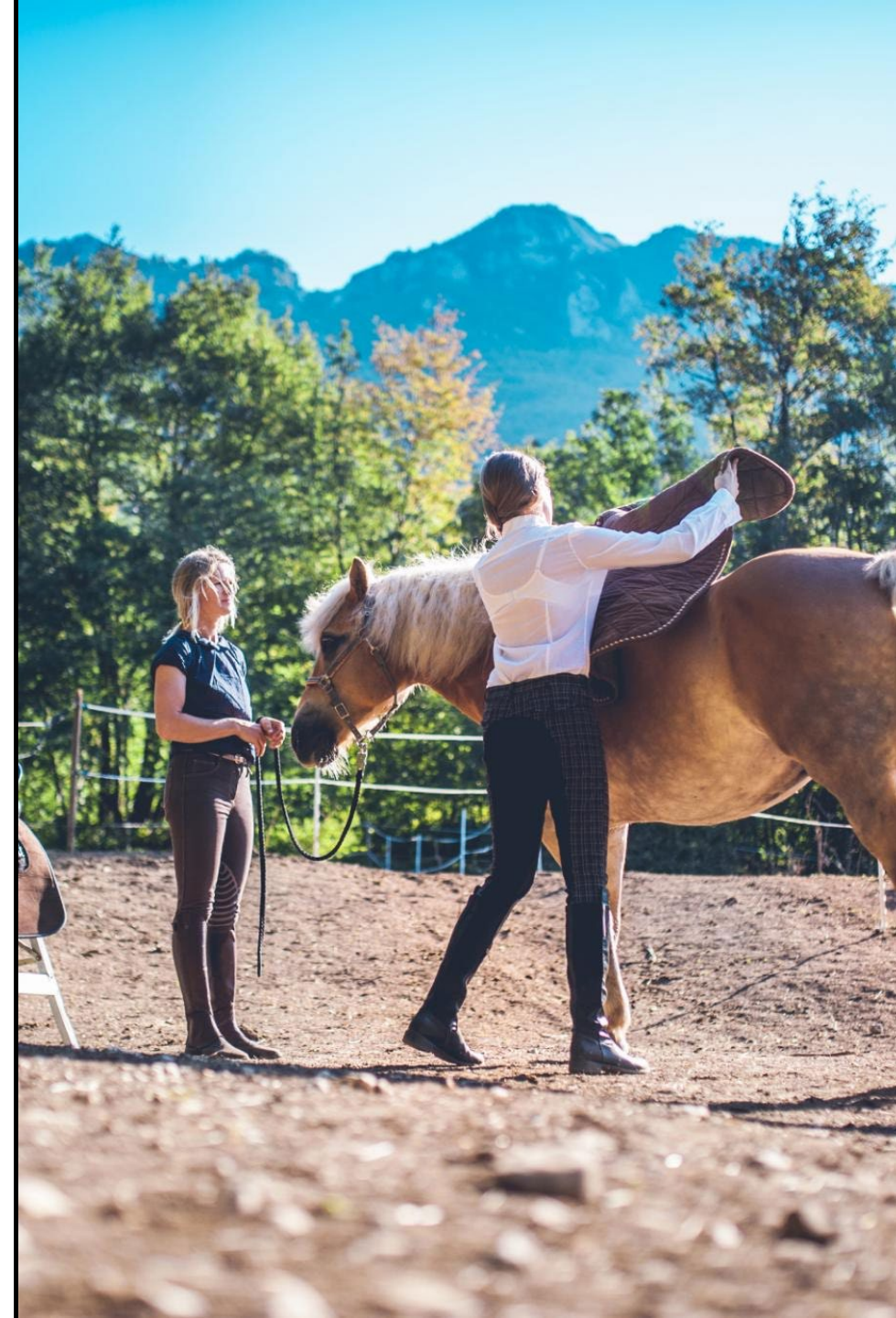
Participants learned boundaries as co-created in relationships through partner-based activities sensing mutual comfort and discomfort

“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 where we both feel comfortable”

Equine-Assisted Boundary Feedback

Horses provided immediate feedback reflecting human energy and proximity, deepening participants' boundary awareness and agency

“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”



Embodied Integration of Recovery Tools

3) Equine Mirroring and Nonverbal Emotional Insight

Horses as Emotional Mirrors

Horses reflect subtle emotional cues via posture and behaviour, helping identify inner emotional states nonverbally

“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.”

The interactions make visible processes that were already present but perhaps unrecognised

Challenging Interpersonal Patterns

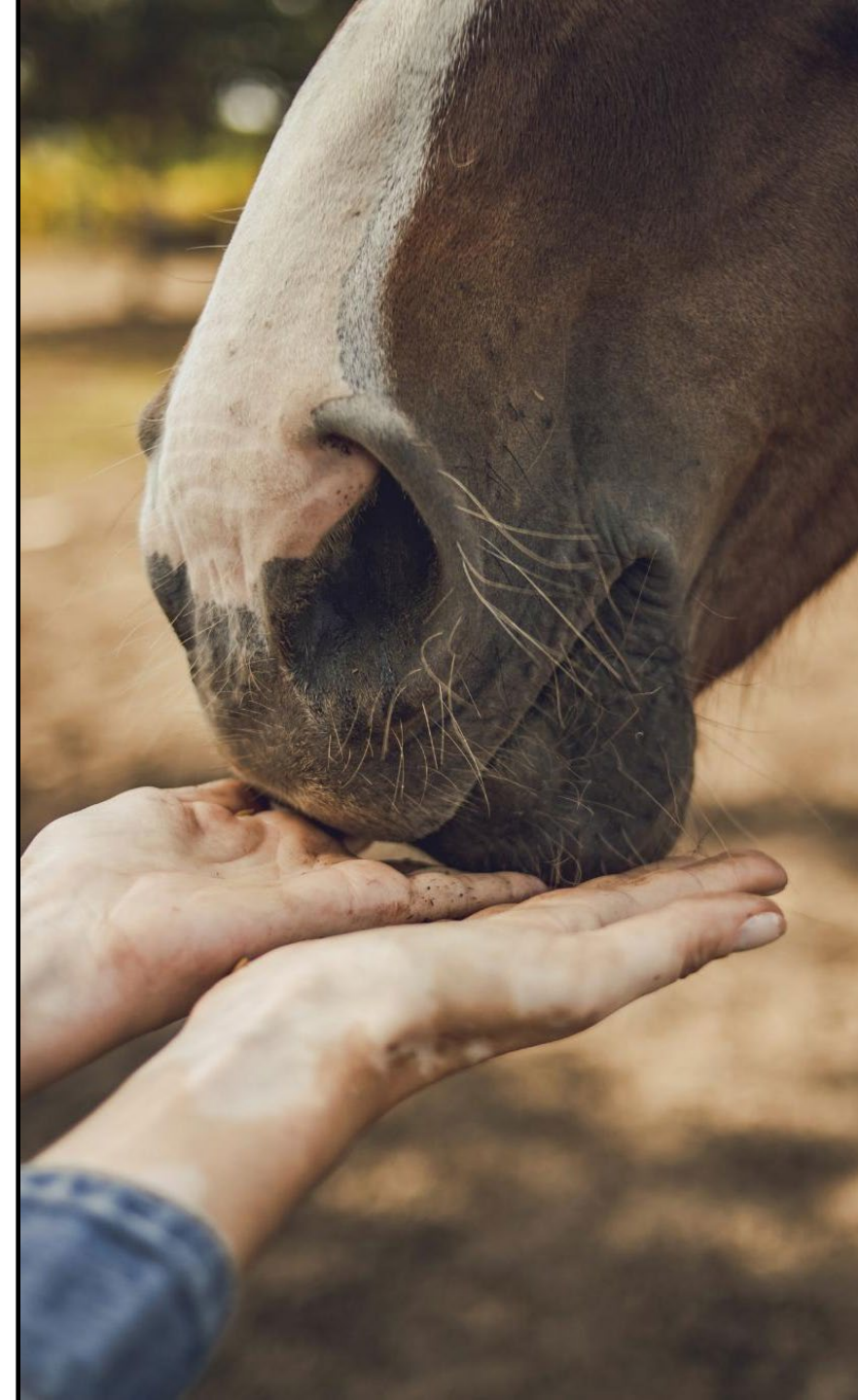
Real-time equine feedback enables participants to recognise avoidance and fear, challenging assumptions in relationships

Alternative to Verbal Expression

Horses provide authentic, wordless responses, supporting those overwhelmed by traditional group discussions

Deepening Emotional Processing

Silent equine interactions make concepts like authenticity tangible by revealing emotional mismatches instantly



Collective Reflexivity and Shared Recognition

Reduction of Isolation Through Shared Patterns

Group members identified common emotional and behavioral patterns, reducing initial concerns about communication and building connection

Feeling understood fostered belonging, honesty, and vulnerability among participants

Development of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety emerged early through mindfulness and structured group tasks

Horses helped reduce social tension by providing a shared external focus, easing anxiety
Ongoing activities like pair work and check-ins enhanced trust and mutual support

Horses as Social Anchors and Group Catalysts

Horses act as grounding influences that ease social interaction and reduce interpersonal pressure

The horse serves as a common focal point, encouraging group conversation and reducing performance anxiety

Participants felt increased comfort, support, and togetherness through interactions involving horses

Horse's provision of non verbal feedback seen as key

"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"





Sustained and Transformative Impact

Clarity, Insight, and Early Post-Weekend Changes

Participants gained clearer understanding of their emotions and behaviours

Structured activities (e.g., awareness, boundary-setting) deepened insight into personal struggles

Many moved from self-doubt to a strengthened sense of direction and empowerment

Early insights formed a base for continued behavioural and emotional growth in

Long-Term Wellbeing and Behaviour Change

Lasting improvements in anxiety reduction, calmness, and confidence months after

Applying boundary-setting skills helped participants decline unhealthy relationships and risky activities, fostering empowerment

Participants incorporated body scans and grounding exercises into daily routines to maintain self-awareness and wellbeing

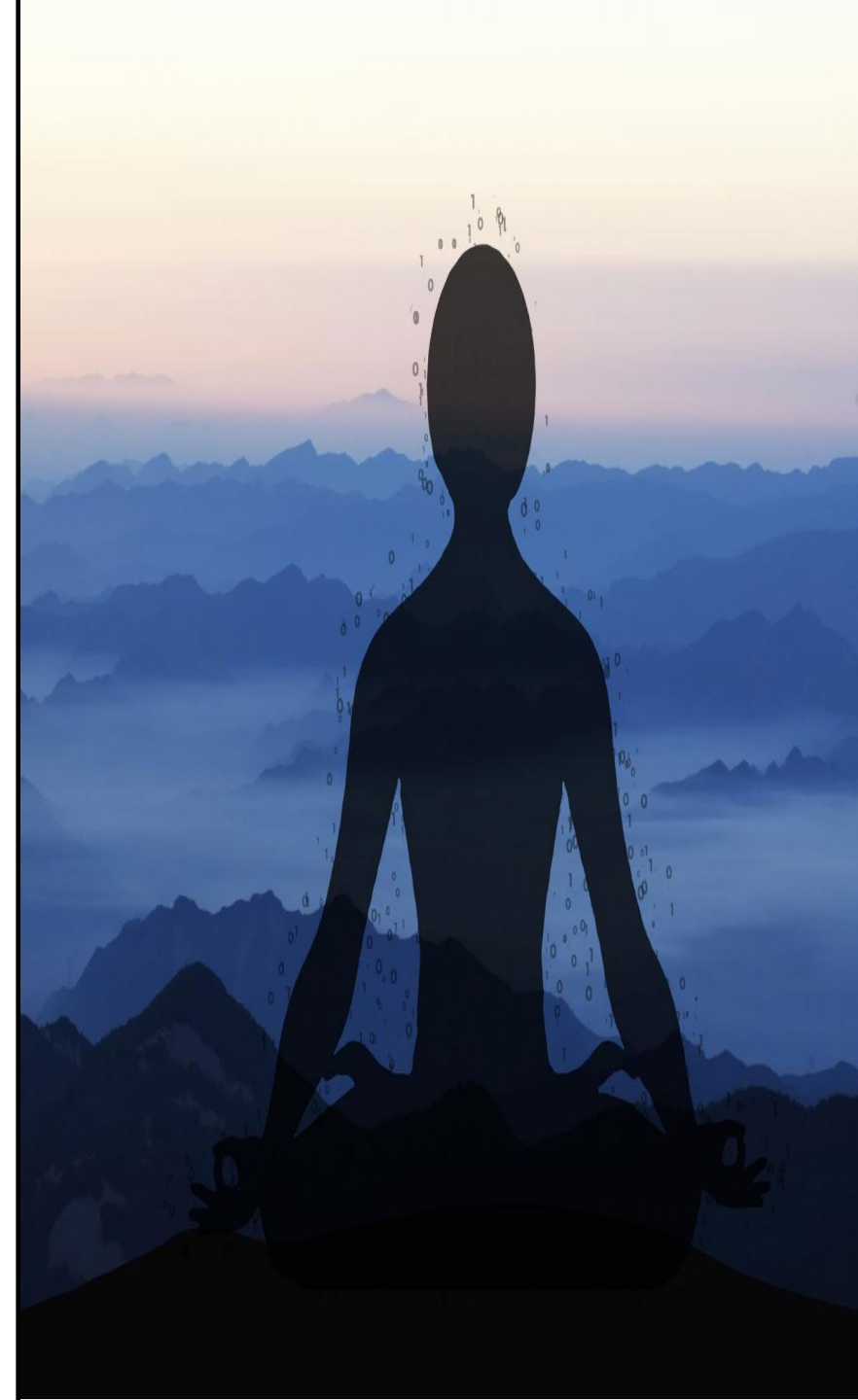
Strengthened Recovery Identity and Group Confidence

Deepened participants' recovery identity, making them feel grounded and aligned with their values

Overcame hesitation and fear, feeling more capable of sharing and engaging in group recovery settings

Newfound confidence extended beyond recovery settings, positively affecting workplace and social relationships

Enduring emotional, behavioral, and relational transformation over time





Stakeholder Perspectives on Value, Identity and Future
development

Perceived Value and Operational Considerations

Innovative Experiential Recovery

Praised for combining animals, outdoor settings, and experiential learning to support behaviour change and reflection

“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”

Terminology and Accessibility

Mixed perceptions of the term 'intensive' highlight the need for careful language – Accurate/Misleading (versus other types of addiction support)? Potentially off-putting?

Accessibility and cost concerns may affect participation (perhaps set aside funds for those who can't afford), problems of scaling up

Safeguarding and Facilitation

Care need for animal welfare and ethical standards in view of brand linking

Mental health stability and stage of recovery considerations for participant suitability

Group dynamics – potential trauma bonding and unhealthy attachment

Concerns about unstructured time (trading “war stories”)

Maintaining Program Integrity

SMART tools should enhance experiential programs without being confused with SMART meetings – blurring of SMART's core approach/deliver. Need to preserve the mutual aid model's identity



Organisational Positioning of SMART Recovery

Distinct Recovery Approach

SMART Recovery offers a CBT-informed four-point program as an alternative to spiritual or abstinence-based models (presented as philosophically different from 12 –step approached)

It is evidence based

Offers framework for management

“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”

Challenges in Visibility

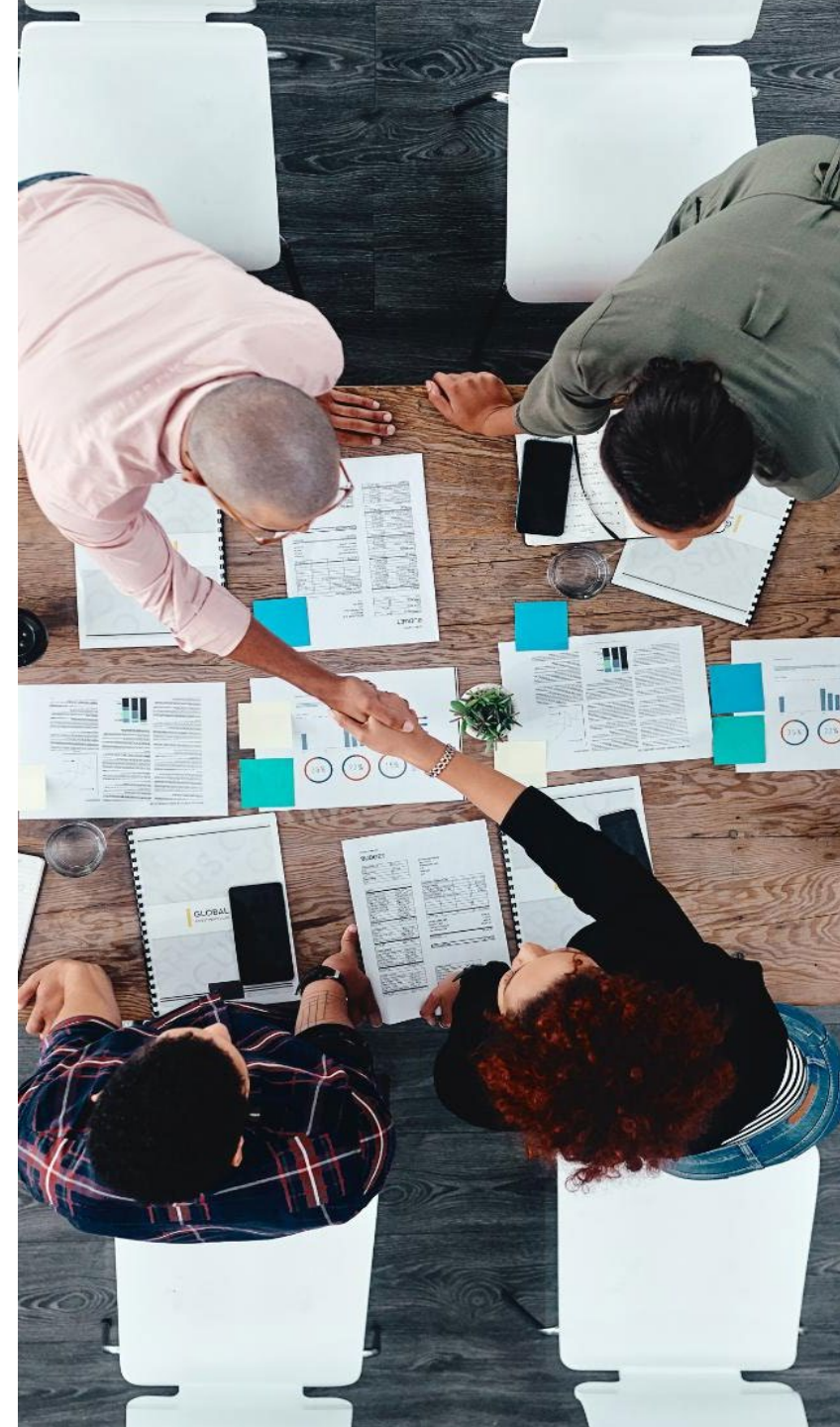
SMART Recovery has limited visibility compared to widely known 12-step groups and faces misconceptions about its evidence base

Organisational Capacity

UK SMART Recovery is building resources within a global framework, facing challenges in innovation and infrastructure development (as a global organisation with many voices needing to be heard to bring about change). Described as *“quite a fledgling sort of spin-off”*

Future Potential and Growth

Stakeholders are confident in SMART's potential to improve presence, address misconceptions, and balance innovation with core values



Future Development and Responsiveness

Growth Opportunities in Recovery Services

Recovery services face high demand, creating opportunities for SMART to provide accessible and scalable 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”

Engaging Younger Generations

SMART aims to address addictive behaviors among youth, adapting to digital communication and emerging risks

Strategic Partnerships for Growth and Continuous Support

Collaboration with NHS, local authorities, voluntary organisations, frontline services, criminal justice settings, workplace environments and youth-focused provision

Expansion of Intensive Recovery Events?

Not replacing the structured meeting model

Embedding SMART tools within practical, embodied contexts rather than just discussion

Equine therapy seen as one example. Others = walking or fishing, group art-related retreats and other structured experiential programmes

“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”



Conclusions

Intensive recovery event model was feasible; strong engagement, sustained learning, reflective tools effective; rural setting beneficial but needs accessibility & weather planning

Participants reported immersive, relational learning; equine tasks supported insight, confidence & continued tool use post-event

Stakeholders viewed weekends as aligned with SMART; highlighted safeguarding, clarity of identity, and need for increased visibility & capacity

Future models need strong preparation, safeguarding, facilitator skills mapping, clear SMART integration & suitable partnership settings

