

**Deep-Dive Report of the Whispers Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) Program Delivered in Neath Port Talbot, Wales**

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**Executive Summary**

This report presents the findings of a brief deep dive analysis conducted by Hwb Doeth on the Whispers Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) program currently being implemented in Neath Port Talbot, Wales. EAL is a form of experiential learning involving horses and a facilitator working together with an individual to create positive change. The Whispers EAL program has been designed for children who have experienced trauma and are in contact with statutory services as a result.

Thematic analysis was adopted to examine the limited qualitative data collected for this short report. The data included feedback from a small number of service users, external professionals, and the program's facilitators. The analysis revealed that the program has been exceptionally well-received by all service users and those referring children to it. Although limited, feedback from these groups indicates a high level of satisfaction with the program’s approach and outcomes. Moreover, the immediate impact of participation in the program appears to be profoundly positive. Children of various age groups and from diverse traumatic backgrounds seem to have shown significant improvements in their well-being. The program’s ability to cater to a wide range of individual needs and circumstances underscores its effectiveness and broad appeal. This positive reception and immediate impact highlight the program’s potential as a valuable tool and program for children who have experienced trauma.

Despite these positive findings, caution is necessary when interpreting this report due to the small amount of data collected and the lack of quantitative data to corroborate the findings. A more rigorous evaluation is required to provide robust and reliable findings.

**Background**

 The Whispers Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) program rolled out in Neath Port-Talbot was identified as a priority for a brief deep-dive examination by Hwb Doeth during a Youth Justice Area Performance meeting in late 2023. The Hwb Doeth coordinator was requested to visit the program's site, engage with their practices, observe the activities, and gather insights on outcomes for children. Following this visit, the coordinator was expected to produce a brief report to analyse the data gathered and provide recommendations for the type of research needed to evaluate the program's efficacy thoroughly.

Despite efforts, the site visit could not be conducted due to unforeseen circumstances. Nevertheless, qualitative data, including five support letters from professionals referring children to the program, one PowerPoint presentation containing feedback from six children service users, one informal meeting with the two professionals delivering the program, and two final reports produced by facilitators after program completion have been collected and analysed for this brief report. The findings from this analysis are presented below.

**Structure of Report**

This report will commence with a brief review of the existing literature on therapeutic work involving animals and trauma. Following this, it will briefly outline the program's implementation and structure. Subsequently, it will present the findings from the thematic analysis conducted and conclude with a concise section of recommendations.

**Brief Literature Review**

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**

In 2016, Public Health Wales published the first Welsh ACEs study, which stated that about half of all adults in Wales experienced at least one ACE throughout their childhood, while 14% suffered four or more (Bellis et al., 2018).

The study additionally revealed that children[[1]](#footnote-1) subjected to stressful and low-quality childhoods are more prone to poor mental health, often due to diminished self-image and self-worth. These children are also more likely to engage in harmful behaviours during adolescence, which can lead to serious health issues like cancer, heart disease, and diabetes in adulthood.

American scholars such as Buck et al. (2017) and Backer et al. (2013) similarly argue that the effects of traumatic experiences during childhood are significant and leave a permanent footprint on the brains of those affected by them. Advances in brain imaging technology, such as MRIs, have demonstrated that traumatic experiences influence brain development and functioning (Buck et al., 2017). These imaging studies reveal alterations in the amygdala, corpus callosum, cerebellum, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex (Baker et al., 2013). For individuals with a significant history of trauma, these changes can overwhelm cognitive processes, impairing the ability to verbalise feelings and psychomotor sensations as the prefrontal cortex becomes inactive (Sekiguchi et al., 2013; Van der Kolk and McFarlane, 2012). This is particularly relevant for children, as trauma can significantly impact their development, leading to difficulties in forming healthy relationships and poor impulse control, both of which increase the likelihood of criminal behaviour (Dodge & Pettit, 2003).

Trauma is also frequently linked with social and economic disadvantages, which heighten the risk of criminal involvement by creating environments where crime seems like a viable option (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019).

Additionally, the cycle of violence, where those who experience or witness violence are more likely to perpetrate it, further contributes to this issue (Home Office, 2018). The inadequate provision of support and intervention by social systems exacerbates the problem, as early intervention, although capable of mitigating the effects of trauma, is often insufficient, inconsistent, and unreliable (Davies et al., 2024).

Animal-assisted interventions have been shown to be effective in supporting children who have experienced trauma. These interventions can be incorporated into trauma-informed care models, which focus on understanding, recognising, and responding to the effects of various types of trauma. By providing a safe and supportive environment, animal-assisted interventions help children process their trauma at their own pace, fostering healing and resilience (VanFleet et al., 2015; Kern-Godal et al., 2015). Participation in these programs has been found to improve PTSD symptoms, reduce anxiety, and enhance emotional and behavioural functioning (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007; Beetz et al., 2012)

**Animals and Trauma**

Animals have long been used to address issues of human suffering. Morrison’s (2007) review of this history indicates that the practice has been around since the late 18th century when rabbits and chickens were included in the care of people with mental illness in England. Today animals are used to address an increasingly wide range of mental, behavioural and physical health conditions. Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is the deliberate inclusion of a non-human animal in an intervention setting to enhance service users' outcomes with common interventions include the presence of guinea pigs (O’Haire et al., 2015), but also dogs, and rabbits (Pitheckoff, McLaughlin, and de Medeiros, 2016) for outcomes such as the development of prosocial skills and stress reduction.

Service user populations are wide and varied, including school-aged populations, older adults, incarcerated populations, individuals testifying in court cases, and college students. In these cases, the presence of the animal is theorised to provide a social buffer that maximises the effect of the intervention (O’Haire et al., 2015). Children, for example, have been found to read more fluently when a dog is present (Jalongo, 2005). Horses are often included in animal-assisted activities and therapies, especially miniature breeds, for many of the same reasons (McCullough, Risley-Curtiss, and Rorke, 2015). Full-size horses are included in some psychotherapeutic settings because of their distinction as large prey animals, specifically creating an environment that is not socially buffered. In their hypervigilant state, horses provide immediate, yet non-judgmental, feedback to service users about their behaviour (Hayes, 2015).

However, the evidence on the therapeutic impact of horses is limited due to small sample sizes and lack of rigorous research designs (Buck et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2022). Despite this, the available results are promising, highlighting the need for alternative trauma treatments (Nelson et al., 2022; Burton et al., 2019). For instance, a meta-analysis of equine-assisted therapy for at-risk adolescents who experienced trauma found a medium effect size across seven studies with pre- and post-intervention data (g=0.714, p < 0.001). This effect size was reduced to small/medium (g=0.402, p=0.002) when only five studies with both treatment and comparison groups were included, indicating robustness across varied programs (Wilkie, Germain, and Theule, 2016).

Similarly, systematic reviews also suggest promising outcomes for diverse populations. Kendall et al. (2015) reviewed 15 studies, including two randomized controlled trials, and noted that while more rigorous studies are needed, equine-assisted interventions show potential, especially for child/adolescent social and behavioural issues. Selby and Smith-Osborne (2013) reviewed equine-assisted therapy for individuals with chronic illnesses or health conditions, concluding that these techniques can effectively complement traditional interventions but suggested that more robust studies are needed to provide sound findings.

**Horses and Therapy**

Current literature indicates that horses are now utilized in various therapeutic activities, including treatments for traumatic brain injury, autism spectrum disorders, sensory disorders, and stress-related conditions like PTSD (Hayes, 2015). In equine-assisted therapy, participants have the opportunity to gain insight into their own emotions and reactions through interactions with the horse (Masini, 2010). Activities often include grooming a horse, leading a horse, mindfulness/grounding exercises, facing obstacles with horses, round pen work with horses, observation of horses’ interaction with one another, and projection and processing of emotions.

Research suggests that horses' effectiveness in psychotherapy is linked to their prey animal nature, which keeps them in a heightened state of awareness, enabling them to detect subtle changes and ensure herd safety (Hayes, 2015; Thomas et al., 2016). Horses mirror human behaviour based on perceived congruency and respond to threats by fleeing together, reinforcing group cohesion. This behaviour conflicts with the individualistic responses of humans, particularly trauma survivors who may become isolated. Interacting with horses provides insights into the importance of connectedness during stress, anger, and fear, facilitating emotional processing through herd interaction (Thomas et al., 2016).

According to Hayes (2015), horses offer sincere and non-judgmental feedback to human behaviours, allowing users to observe the impact of their attitudes, emotions, body language, and boundaries simultaneously. This transparent communication seems to create a sense of safety for users, especially trauma survivors, promoting non-judgmental self-examination. With support from professionals, users can explore their post-traumatic stress responses, aiding them in developing the self-awareness needed for emotional healing. Furthermore, Hayes (2015) argues that individuals with emotional trauma often feel a positive connection by identifying with the horses' hypervigilance and social dynamics, fostering feelings of safety, acceptance, and compassion.

Despite the growth of EAL programs, limited research exists to assess their efficacy, and further research is needed to understand how they operate in practice and what the outcomes are for service users (Sylvia et al., 2020).

**The Whispers Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) Program**

**Creating the EAL program**

The Whispers Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) program was created in 2021 by sisters Debbie Stone and Laura Davies, two horse enthusiasts, qualified social workers, and trauma-informed mental health practitioners (Debbie operates in the Neath Port Talbot Youth Justice Service (NPT YJS), and Laura operates in the local Social Service within the Community Team). The EAL program was initiated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic's negative effects on children's mental health impact, with the aim of leveraging the therapeutic benefits of their horses to support the children they worked with within their respective statutory services.

The NPT YJS played a crucial role in the inception and support of the project. They approved and funded Debbie's EAL training, allowing her to take the necessary leave from her duties within the service. Furthermore, the YJS provided substantial support by commissioning the program's pilot phase in 2021, ensuring its operation for six months.

Additionally, the NPT Youth Service's continuous support and funding have significantly enhanced the program's accessibility for children and young people throughout NPT. This expansion has been facilitated through the Early Intervention Panel and the Think Family Partnership, which serve as primary sources of referrals. The project has also received considerable backing from the Community Children's teams in NPT.

The NPT County Borough Council has also made significant contributions to the program's success. The local authority facilitated access to trauma-informed training for both Debbie and Laura, including specialized training conducted by Dr Coral Harper, Director of Trauma Informed School Wales. This training has been instrumental in shaping their approach to equine-assisted work, enhancing the therapeutic impact of the program on children's mental health.

**Description of the program**

The EAL program consists of 8 sessions spread over 8 weeks, with each session lasting up to one hour per week for children. Additional sessions may be provided if deemed appropriate and needed by the professionals involved for up to a 2-year period. The sessions incorporate both individual and group work tailored to the child's needs and preferences. Each child begins with individual sessions led by the two facilitators. Once they have established rapport with the horses and professionals, they are gradually introduced to pair sessions. If appropriate, they may eventually join small groups, with a maximum of four children.

Children are referred to the program via various routes, including Youth Justice Services and Children's Social Services, but also occasionally from CHAMS and Better Futures.

According to information provided by the program facilitators during an informal meeting, since its implementation, the program has supported approximately 35 children referred from Welsh YJSs and about 80 children from other services (i.e., Schools, Better Future, Social Services).

Once children have been referred to the program, they are invited to attend the sessions in one of the two Whispers EAL program bases, one in Bridgend and one in NPT.

The program adopts person-centred and trauma-informed approaches, ensuring that each session is designed to address the specific needs of the children. These EAL sessions are crafted to complement the existing care and support plans of children, implementing strategies and practices that prioritize the individual needs, experiences, and well-being of each child, especially those who have experienced trauma. Additionally, the program occasionally appears to extend its support to work with the children's parents, recognizing the importance of involving the family unit in the healing and development process. This comprehensive approach ensures a holistic support system that fosters the best possible outcomes for the children.

The program seems to have a robust reporting system, as evidenced by two reports that the facilitator shared with the author of this document. This assertion is supported by feedback from a referring agency, which expressed satisfaction in a support letter regarding the depth of information provided in the reports concerning a child supported by the EAL.

The Whispers program is dedicated to improving children's mental health and emotional well-being. The program offers individuals the opportunity to form connected, attuned relationships with horses. For those who have experienced trauma, this can often represent their first experience of a healthy relationship. The objective is to enable the development and flourishing of other relationships founded not on power and control but on safety and connection.

As briefly mentioned in the literature review section, EAL is a form of experiential learning that involves horses and a facilitator working collaboratively with an individual to foster positive change. The Whispers EAL program encompasses various beneficial activities such as observing, handling, grooming, groundwork, and structured challenging exercises tailored to the children's needs and goals. By doing so, the Whispers program provides unique nonverbal opportunities for children to enhance self-awareness, recognize trauma-responsive behaviours, and identify negative feelings.

Based on the program’s advert it aims to:

* Build relationships and trust
* Build emotional resilience
* Raise self-awareness
* Improve emotional wellbeing
* Opportunity for self-growth with nature
* Boost confidence and self-esteem
* Improve impulse regulation
* Understand boundaries
* Improve social and communication skills

Based on the program’s advert its benefits for children are:

* Develop Trust: The initial step in EAL involves establishing trust with the horse, the facilitator, and oneself. This foundational step significantly enhances growth in interpersonal relationships. Developing trust in an animal like a horse is particularly powerful for individuals whose ability to trust has been compromised by challenging life experiences.
* Anxiety Reduction: Research on human-animal interactions indicates that contact with animals, including horses, significantly reduces physiological anxiety levels. Initially, some children and adolescents may fear horses; however, with the support of a facilitator and a therapeutic horse, whose genuine affection helps alleviate these fears, anxiety is diminished.
* Depression and Reducing Isolation: Depression often arises from feelings of rejection, difference, and exclusion. Horses, through their unconditional acceptance, non-verbally encourage young individuals to re-engage in friendships and positive social interactions, thereby reducing feelings of depression and isolation.
* Mindfulness: EAL integrates mindfulness at every step, teaching young people to be present, calm, centred, focused, and fully engaged. Horses, being highly sensitive, reflect the emotions of others, providing a form of bio-feedback. This dynamic interaction fosters new, positive ways of being, significantly impacting cognition, feelings, and behaviours associated with various mental health issues.
* Self-esteem: As children challenge themselves to learn and master new skills, their confidence increases. The natural, non-competitive, and non-judgmental environment of EAL enhances their ability to tackle new projects and challenges, leading to improved self-assurance and self-esteem.
* Impulse Regulation: EAL benefits children and adolescents who struggle with impulse control and emotional regulation. Communicating calmly and non-reactively with a horse promotes emotional awareness, self-control, and impulse modulation, reducing irritability, agitation, and impulsivity, while increasing cooperation and behavioural control.
* Self-Efficacy: Successful engagement in challenging exercises and goal-oriented activities fosters initiative, problem-solving, and renewed feelings of self-efficacy. Achievements in EAL empower children and adolescents, replacing feelings of helplessness with a sense of capability and motivation.
* Positive Identity: Through close interaction with horses and facilitators, children develop a sense of acceptance and positive self-concept. The bond with the horse fosters a healthy relationship, enhancing the child's identity and self-definition.
* Communication: Learning to communicate with a large animal enhances intuition, patience, and awareness of non-verbal cues. Horses' sensitivity to non-verbal communication helps individuals develop greater emotional awareness and improve their relational skills.
* Growth with Nature: EAL provides a unique opportunity for young people to experience the outdoors from a new perspective. Engaging in learning within a natural, peaceful environment enhances the overall benefits, fostering joy and connection with nature.
* Self-Acceptance: Initially, children may fear embarrassment while interacting with horses. However, they quickly learn to focus on their comfort levels, reducing public fears and increasing self-acceptance. They also understand that progress is a journey, and self-acceptance is crucial for resilience.
* Social Skills: EAL supports the development of appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication, positive feedback reception, reciprocity, assertiveness, and engagement. It is particularly effective in helping socially isolated or withdrawn children to develop positive social skills and trust.
* Assertiveness: Working with a large animal like a horse can be intimidating. EAL provides a foundation for children to learn assertiveness, clear communication, and direction, enabling them to express their needs and feelings more effectively in relationships.
* Boundaries: Many children have experienced controlling, traumatic, or conflictual relationships. EAL helps them discover healthy, safe, and mutually respectful relationships with horses, teaching them about boundaries within a caring context.
* Creativity and Spontaneity: Children with socio-emotional difficulties may be emotionally inhibited or despondent, losing spontaneity. The creative and playful aspects of EAL help restore spontaneity, creativity, and the ability for healthy recreation and play.
* Perspective and Giving: By nurturing a relationship with a horse, children develop positive attachments outside their home and school environments. Through grooming and caring for the horse, they learn to give, connect, and redirect their focus from their struggles to positive interactions.

**Analysis**

Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was employed to analyse the qualitative data (including five letters from professionals referring children to the program, one PowerPoint presentation with feedback from six children involved in the program and one informal virtual meeting with the two professionals delivering the program). This resulted in the identification of several key themes, which are discussed below in the findings section.

**Findings**

The thematic analysis revealed several key themes related to the program's strengths and outcomes for children and professionals (both internal and external to the program). Some areas for development also emerged. More detailed findings are presented below.

**1.0 Strengths of the Whispers EAL program**

1.1 Flexibility

Based on the data collected for this report, both internal and external professionals involved in the Whispers program concur that its flexibility in addressing the needs of children who have experienced various types of trauma, as well as its adaptability across different age groups, significantly enhances its effectiveness. Based on the data gathered, it is suggested that the program supports children as young as 8 and up to 18 years old. Additionally, the program is flexible and can adjust the number of sessions delivered to each child based on their individual needs, with durations ranging from a minimum of 8 weeks (the standard length of the program) to up to 2 years, depending on the level of support required for stabilisation.

*‘We were working with a child in the secure estate for a serious offence. Within the first couple of sessions, it was really clear that she was not safe at home. We managed to continue to provide support to the child r throughout pre- and post-sentencing and after the child turned 18 and was released into the community. So, we worked throughout the transitioning period. We even moved one of our horses to a new field the week before the child was due to be released to help the child work through what the whole transitioning process would mean for her through the horse experience as well. This experience was really powerful for her. We supported her for over 2 years.’*

(Debbie and Laura)

‘*J is a 15-year-old male whom the Team has been involved with since July 2020. J is a Looked After Child. J becoming Looked After followed several incidents where J perpetrated significant assaults on his mother who concluded she could not safely care for him. J was referred to the EAL program for support in relation to his emotional well-being and emotional regulation.’*

(Support Letter nr 4)

*‘We supported a sibling group (age-related data has been omitted for animality purposes). Concern was held by LA because the boys had developed negative, disproportionate, and extreme views of their mother and were reluctant to spend time with her. An added issue was that the boys believed that all professionals were not to be trusted, and they feared talking to them. By professionals, I mean Police Officers, Social Workers, and Teachers… At the time of the referral, the hope was that this intervention would assist in rebuilding the boy's relationship with their mother, build their trust in professionals and ultimately return to a shared care arrangement.*

(Support letter nr 5)

1.2 Person-Centred Approach

Based on the data collected, it appears that the program's person-centred approach allows for the customisation of sessions to meet the unique needs of each child, thereby fostering an environment where they feel safe and supported. This tailored approach provides the necessary time for participants to gradually open up with professionals. By allowing children to progress at their own pace, the Whispers program creates a therapeutic setting where emotional resilience can be developed. Professionals have observed that this individualised attention and the non-judgmental support offered in the sessions help alleviate anxiety and promote self-esteem among the participants.

*‘We had a referral of an 18-year-old who attempted suicide twice in the two weeks before coming to us (Whispers program). During his first session, he was really down and did not speak. There were lots of concerns about criminal exploitation and county lines and his home environment was not safe and stable. He was introduced to Sky, a very feisty sting and independent horse. He was actually drawn to Sky. For that first session, he touched the front of her forehead for about 45 minutes. Nothing was said at all. I looked at the horse, and we could see a tear in Sky’s eye, which I had never seen a horse with a tear. Then the boy disconnected, and I asked him: ‘What did that mean for you?’ and he said: ‘She knows I just needed a friend right now’. That was it, that was what the first session was about. From there, he began to connect more with Sky and other horses and slowly opened up with us.’*

(Debbie and Laura)

*‘Thank you to you (Debbie) and Laura for everything you have done, you’ve changed my whole life and I don’t suffer with panic attacks anymore. I’m enjoying my life now with the horses.’*

(Child Service User D)

*‘One child, who had struggled with anger management issues, found a remarkable transformation through his interactions with the horses. In this therapeutic setting, the child learned to control his anger by connecting with and respecting the horses, all while experiencing a sense of acceptance and understanding.’*

(Support Letter nr 3)

*‘The bond formed between the child and the horses provided a unique and judgment-free space for him to navigate his emotions. The horses, allowed the child to express himself without fear of criticism. Through these interactions, he discovered alternative ways to cope with and manage his anger, gaining valuable skills that extended beyond the equine sessions into his daily life.’*

(Support Letter nr 4)

*‘As a locality Team Manager, we commissioned Debbie and Laura to work with one of our most vulnerable teenagers, who had previously suffered appalling sexual abuse. The young person was quite ‘shut down’ and ‘lost’ in many ways and as a service, we were finding it hard to connect with them to support them to have that safe base to progress on to therapy. Their home life was incredibly difficult due to the emotional and relational consequences of the abuse and relationships at home were breaking down…*

*The Equine Assisted Talking intervention with Whispers Equine was instrumental in preparing our young person for therapy. The work that Laura and Debbie did not only gave them a safe person to freely talk about their current life with, it taught them that it can be safe to build trusting relationships with adults who aren’t their mum, and that they wouldn’t be abused by any adult who tried to get close.’*

(Support Letter nr 1)

*‘Our young people often have very complex needs and may have experienced significant trauma in their lives. Whispers has been instrumental in supporting the young people’s emotional wellbeing and mental health, in providing them with the skills to take back some control. They ensure that the program is bespoke, to the needs of the individual child and that all effort is made to make them feel safe and comfortable to open-up. The use of horses provides an excellent tool to allow young people a safe space to speak and has brought forward some important safeguarding issues that may not have come to light through conversations alone.’*

(Support Letter nr 2)

 1.3 Building Relationships and Trust

Moreover, the data indicates that the Whispers program's adaptable and flexible framework, which allows children sufficient time to open up, is instrumental in fostering relationships among the child, the horse, and the facilitator. This triadic relationship is crucial for the child in building trust not only with the facilitator but also with external professionals. Additionally, not pressing the child to engage but meeting them where they are emotionally and working with them at their own pace helps the child feel understood and heard, which are essential components for emotional healing and development. The facilitators' unwavering commitment to creating a safe and trusting environment appears to have enabled children to engage more profoundly in the therapeutic process, resulting in significant short-term outcomes.

*‘Being around the horses makes me feel happier and calmer.’*

(Child Service User B)

*‘I am back to my old self, and I love it!’*

(Child Service User C)

*‘The boys were able to open up and develop a relationship with the horses, demonstrating to them what a healthy relationship looks like and enabling them to experience the feeling associated with this.’*

(Support Letter nr 5)

*‘J thoroughly enjoyed the program. He reported that he felt it had helped him gain a better understanding of his emotions and how to handle them when they escalate. He also reported that the course had given him the confidence to speak with professionals about the things that worry him. ‘*

(Support Letter nr 4)

1.4 Professional's Views of the Program

The data indicates that the two program facilitators possess extensive experience in working with children with diverse needs and adverse childhood experiences, alongside their considerable expertise in equine care. The Whispers EAT program offers a distinct therapeutic approach by combining the therapeutic benefits of interaction with horses with conventional counselling techniques and social work interventions, all within a trauma-informed framework.

According to the facilitators' accounts, children in the program often are not yet ready for traditional ‘talk’ therapy. However, the bond they develop with the horses fosters emotional openness and vulnerability, allowing professionals to use the program as a means to gain a comprehensive understanding of the child's actual situation. This process also facilitates the identification of future tailored professional support needed to address each child's specific requirements to help them thrive.

*‘Many of the children referred into our program are not ready for talk therapy. They are usually ‘shut down’ and are reluctant to engage with professionals, but once they meet the horses, they ‘melt’ and start to open up. We did not expect the level of disclosure we are experiencing when we first started the program. Probably, we had taken more disclosures during our time in the Whispers program than in our roles as practitioners working with children.’*

(Debbi and Laura)

*‘In my view, the experience we had as a case holding team for this young person with Whispers Equine has been nothing short of transformative, and I wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone seeking a therapeutic intervention where the young person perhaps ‘isn’t quite ready’ for therapy (or maybe they are deep down). The relationships that Debbie and Laura built with them, and the impact that the horses had on this young person, I know will stay with them for a long time. Therapy couldn’t have been considered for this young person without this intervention and I am firm of the view that this intervention, in many ways, saved this young person from a sadly rapidly worsening situation. They were able to engage in education, their relationship with their mum vastly improved and they began to adhere to safety planning in placement which was a significant improvement and made life safer for them.’*

(Support Letter nr 1)

*‘There is no doubt in my mind that the course can have life changing positive impacts for young people – that is not, to my mind, an overstatement. It inevitably follows that I would recommend the programme to anybody who feels that a young person or young people that they are working with would benefit from it.’*

(Support Letter nr 2)

*‘The young people I have referred into the program have made significant progress in their ability to regulate their emotions which has then enabled them to function more positively within their families and educational settings. This may not seem like much to a layperson but is hugely significant to these young people, particularly where their relationships are at breaking point or they have not accessed school for long periods. I am yet to find a young person who does not want to continue attending following the completion of their sessions and they often ask me if they can go back! Which speaks volumes!’*

(Support Letter nr 3)

1.5 Partnership Working and Information Sharing

Based on the available data, the processes of partnership working and information sharing, particularly in handling disclosures from children and providing progress feedback to referral agencies, have shown marked improvements over time, demonstrating a progressive enhancement in these areas.

The two program facilitators, with social service backgrounds, have established a robust safeguarding policy that they developed independently over time. The promptness with which information is shared with the relevant organisations appears suitable given the sensitivity required in their field of operation, which is critical considering the potential trauma and risks children may face if professionals do not take timely and appropriate actions.

*‘Coming from a Social Service background, we have a very robust safeguarding policy that we have developed. Safeguarding of children is at the heart of our job. We have made numerous immediate safeguarding referrals once the session ended when concerns were identified and if we felt the child was an immediate risk. To provide just one example of many, last week, a child came to our session a bit down. We learned by the end of the session that he was suicidal, so we had an immediate conversation with the child and the social worker and suggested a crisis assessment was needed. So, we actioned immediately.’*

(Debbie and Laura)

1.6 Reporting

As mentioned afore, based on the information provided by the two facilitators, the reporting process of the program appears to be robust and has improved over time. The two facilitators have significantly enhanced the robustness of the report since the program's inception regarding the amount of information included about children and their progress throughout the program. An analysis of two recent specific reports provided by the program facilitators reveals that they contain detailed insights regarding the safeguarding concerns identified through the program, as well as comprehensive updates on the children's progress from start to end. Additionally, these reports systematically present outcomes and feedback concerning the children's status before and after participation in the program, ensuring that referral agencies are well-informed of the child's progress.

‘*Our reporting process has evolved over time. Tiny details about the child were captured when we started the program. However, now, the process of writing the report is robust and quite time-consuming for us (facilitators). Still, for the referring agency, it is rich in details about the child's progress and strengths identified, as well as safeguarding issues recognised.’*

(Debbie and Laura)

***‘X’s Outcomes and Feedback***

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Outcome Star Domain’s***  | ***Before Programme*** | ***After Programme*** |
| ***How do you feel?*** | *4* | *8* |
| ***Boundaries*** |  | *5* |
| ***Confidence*** | *4* | *9* |
| ***Your Safety*** | *3* | *6* |
| ***Relating to others / Empathy*** | *4* | *6* |
| ***Communication and Language*** | *3* | *6* |
| ***Relaxation*** | *2* | *10* |
| ***Relationships*** | *6* | *8* |

*The outcome chart above is used to capture young people’s views utilising a scaling question to score themselves in certain areas of their lives before commencing the programme. We then relook at the outcomes form together at the end of the programme and ask young people to re-score themselves in those areas.*

*This tool is used to capture the young people’s views around the distance that they feel they have travelled through the journey of the programme.*

*To clarify for readers of this report the scoring tool used here comprises of a 1-10 scale, where 1 would reflect a very low score and the worst a young can feel in that domain and 10 reflecting a very high score and the best a young person can feel in that domain.’*

(X’s EAL Final Report)

This comprehensive approach to reporting is also supported by one of the five support letters received, which attests to the depth and usefulness of the information provided. While this is the only letter among the five to highlight these aspects, its contents affirm the perceived effectiveness and thoroughness of the program’s reporting procedures. However, additional feedback from those referring children to the EAL is essential to draw a more robust and definitive conclusion about the efficacy of the reporting process.

*‘From a professional standpoint, the service has provided excellent reports and communication throughout their input. This aids me in my ongoing support of families and highlights any issues that may need to be addressed swiftly. I believe that the work that Whispers does is hugely important to us as a Local Authority and more specifically to our young people, and I fully support the potential progress of Whispers as a service.’*

(Support Letter nr 3)

**2.0 Areas for Development**

Due to the limited data collected as part of this deep dive, it is challenging to pinpoint specific areas for development. However, the findings appear to highlight the need for better advertising and clarity regarding the program's practical operations with children. According to the analysis of details provided by the two facilitators during an informal meeting, each child referred to the program has a referral form produced by the referral service outlining the expected work to be carried out during the program. The facilitators then develop a personalised plan for each child based on the referral form, which can be modified and updated from week to week based on the child's level of engagement and disclosure of risks and/or trauma experiences. The program facilitators will also proceed at the child's pace, ensuring that the work aligns with the child's readiness and willingness to participate.

Nevertheless, during the informal meeting with the EAL facilitators, the two noted that, at times, those referring children to the program might have unrealistic expectations regarding the intensity and type of work delivered. Therefore, it would be beneficial to provide greater clarity to those referring children, emphasising that the program employs a person-centred approach and that the support provided can differ for each child based on their circumstances and the child's readiness to meaningfully engage with the service.

*‘We worked with two girls, and the professionals were really worried about criminal and sexual exploitation, but the girls were not disclosing anything to the professionals. Based on the professional's accounts, the girls regularly visited a specific town in South Wales. Through the exercises we designed for the girls, involving role-play activities with the girls and the horses, we were able to eventually understand that the toilets around the fair of that city are not safe for girls and that children are at risk of rape. An actual disclosure never took place, but we were able to identify the risks and areas of concern through these role-play activities and through listening to the girls. This took time, and the girls did not open up immediately. Information like this would never come up in an office setting. But eventually, we were able to put safeguarding measures in place for the girls to keep them safe.’*

(Debbie and Laura)

Additionally, a significant area for improvement that seems currently deficient is the feedback mechanism from the children's parents or guardians. Given that each child's needs are distinct, parental feedback can enable program staff to customise interventions to align more closely with individual requirements. This customisation not only enhances the efficacy of interventions but also ensures that they are appropriately targeted to address each child's unique challenges and strengths. Furthermore, parents and guardians typically possess a thorough understanding of their child’s behaviours and attitudes, which may not be entirely visible to program facilitators. Consequently, ensuring feedback from parents/guardians is captured would reinforce the program's commitment to providing person-centred services.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the limited data collected for this report suggests that the Whispers program is a unique and powerful tool for supporting children across various age groups who have experienced diverse types of trauma. The program's flexibility and person-centred approach allow it to address the individual needs of each child and work at their own pace, making it a potentially valuable resource in trauma-informed interventions.

However, it is important to exercise caution when interpreting these findings. The current deep dive report is based on a small sample size and lacks the rigour necessary to draw robust and reliable conclusions.

Despite the positive findings, many aspects of the program remain unclear. For instance, it is unclear how some elements of the program operate in practice, particularly regarding how a child’s progress is assessed, recorded and reported to the referring service and how it handles disclosures made by children. Furthermore, although there seem to be positive immediate outcomes for children following completion of the program, the long-term outcomes remain unknown, necessitating further research. It is also important to note that feedback from children presented in this paper was obtained from a presentation created by the two facilitators. Thus, the findings cannot be generalised to all children supported through the years by the program.

Additionally, it is unclear how the program has evolved since its inception and what areas, if any, require development.

Finally, more effort appears to be needed to capture the feedback of parents/guardians of the children involved in the EAL program, as their voices are not included in the final report.

The author recommends implementing a comprehensive Process and Outcome evaluation of the Whispers EAL program to substantiate its efficacy and ensure its sustainability. This evaluation should aim to thoroughly understand the program's long-term outcomes for children, practical functioning, and session unfolding, aspects that were not adequately captured in the brief deep-dive report.

The evaluation should focus on several key areas:

* Process Evaluation: A detailed examination of how the Whispers EAL program operates in practice is essential. This includes observing and documenting the progression of sessions (from start to end of the program) to gain insights into the processes, system and interactions that occur during the program.
* Outcome Evaluation: To assess the program's effectiveness, it is crucial to evaluate the outcomes for children participating in the program. This should involve conducting interviews with the children to gather qualitative data on their experiences and the program's impact on their mental and emotional well-being. Capturing the children’s perspectives will permit a more comprehensive measurement of the program’s outcomes. As their insights can reveal impacts that might not be immediately visible to external observers.
* External Professionals Views: Interviews should be conducted with external professionals who refer children to the program. Understanding their perspectives on the program will provide valuable insights into its effectiveness and potential areas for improvement. This feedback will help in identifying strengths but also areas where the program can be enhanced to better serve the needs of the children.
* Follow-Up Study: A follow-up study should be included in the evaluation to assess the program's post-completion effects on its participants. Ideally, this follow-up should occur at least 12 to 24 months after program completion. For a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impacts, it is recommended to incorporate a longitudinal element to the evaluation, with follow-ups extending to at least five years after program completion.

By undertaking this robust evaluation, the Whispers EAL program can ensure continuous improvement and provide robust evidence of its efficacy in supporting children who have experienced trauma. This will not only help sustain future funding but also enhance and maximise the therapeutic outcomes for the children involved in the program.

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1. N.B. In this report, the terms "child" and "young person" are used interchangeably, both referring to individuals up to the age of 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)