

Current equine management in Equine Assisted Services (EAS)

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INTRODUCTION: Animal Assisted Interactions (AAIs) are programmes that intentionally incorporate animals into health, educational and human services for the therapeutic benefits of humans (IAHAIO, 2018), and have increased in popularity in recent years (García-Gómez *et al.*, 2020). Equine Assisted Services (EAS) are a branch of AAI that specifically utilises equids within the intervention. Currently horses are the second most popular animal to be used in AAI after dogs. With a greater focus on animal welfare within the general population recently (Ferlazzo *et al.*, 2023), The Animal Welfare Act (2006) was developed to fill a gap in legislation and safeguard the welfare of animals in the United Kingdom and has since been upgraded by the Five Domains Model (Mellor *et al.*, 2020). More recent welfare approaches aim to encourage a positive overall state for the animals including the mental state.

Currently there is no independent governing body to oversee EAS and provision of EAS does not have required standards; therefore, there can be large variety in practitioners experience, ethical framework, and best practice for both equine and human welfare (Seery and Wells, 2024). As a result, several organisations have produced guidelines such as The International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organisation (IAHAIO) white paper and The Federation of Horses in Education and Therapy International (HETI) ethical guidelines. Due in part to the lack of governance and training required for EAS's, little information has been gathered regarding common practice in the sector. There is very little clarity in terms of what best practice entails. However, in 2021 IAHAIO published guidelines in an effort to standardise the EAS sector. This study hopes to determine both common practice and levels of adherence to the published guidelines.

METHOD: An online questionnaire was selected due to its possible reach, statistical accuracy and its reduced bias compared to interviews and focus groups (Marshall, 2005). After ethical approval, the questionnaire was refined based on feedback from a pilot study. The questionnaire consisted of 29 questions across six different sections gathering data on EAS practice and the aspects of the Five Domains Model (Environment, Physical Wellbeing, Mental Wellbeing, Behaviour and Nutrition) (Mellor *et al.*, 2020), utilising both open and closed ended questions (Krosnick, 2018). Professionals currently working in the EAS sector were targeted and both convenience and snowball sampling were used. Emails were sent directly to known professionals and members of the Federation of Horses in Education and Therapy International (HETI) alongside invitations to pass on the questionnaire to other EAS professionals. In total 54 responses were collected. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and statistical tests on Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was conducted alongside Chi-Square Goodness of Fit and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test. Qualitative data from open ended question were analysed using Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify key themes and patterns.

RESULTS:

- In total 90.74% (n=49) of respondents had either an equine or counselling-based qualification and 35.19% (n=19) had both. Within this, EAS specific qualifications were reported by 11.11% (n=6), equine only by n=16 and counselling only by n=4.
- Of the 54 respondents, 51.85% (n=28) reported that equids spend 0-1 hour involved in EAS activities daily, 37.04% (n=20) reported 2-3 hours, 5.56% (n=3) reports of 3-4 hours, 3.70% (n=2) of 4-5 hours and only 1.85% (n=1) 5+ hours.
- All respondents also stated that the equids have veterinary checks, dental checks and farrier or podiatrist assessment.
- 98.15% (n=53) reported that an ability of equids to be able to perform natural behaviours was of great importance to their organisations.

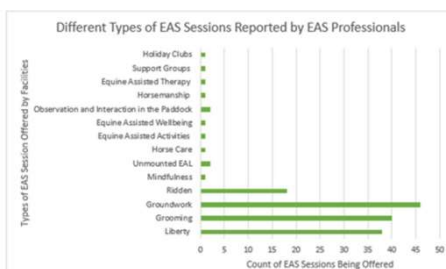


Figure 1 - Different types of EAS sessions reported by EAS professionals.

Type of Turnout	Winter Count	Summer Count
Small Herd Turnout (Less than 5)	31	33
Large Herd Turnout (More than 5)	18	18
Traditional Field	20	20
Track System	15	16
All Weather Turnout Pen	9	9
Pairs Turnout	10	11
Single Turnout	2	3

Table 1 - Different forms of turnout being utilised within the EAS sector

- There was significantly more ($Z=-2.977$, $p=0.003$) turnout time reported during summer (7.17 ± 1.240) than winter (6.35 ± 2.085).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: The study highlighted the range backgrounds of EAS facilitators, emphasizing the necessity for a unique skill set encompassing equine behaviour, anatomy, and risk management. However, it notes a lack of specific EAS qualifications among practitioners (Education and training requirements for equine services | IAHAIO, 2021). As a result of this, concerns regarding the transition and management of rescue or retired horses within EAS were reported, emphasizing the need for knowledgeable staff and the potential risks to equine welfare (Paschall, 2023; Seery and Wells, 2024). The number of non-ridden sessions offered could be related to the number of horses coming into the sector as a form of retirement or as rescues. However, it was promising that 85.19% of facilities acknowledged recommended guidelines within practice. When participating in sessions, there was an emphasis upon allowing equids to choose to participate and engage, rather than being forced.

There was also a fair degree of flexibility within sessions to match equid needs. These later findings embrace a relatively new concept within the equine industry that has previously kept equids in a manner more convenient to humans (Hemsworth, Jongman and Coleman, 2015). Promoting an attitude that focused upon the equid participants, could be used to improve the public perception of EAS as a whole and allow for a greater number of people to benefit from the service.

There was an important focus on keeping the equids in as natural state as possible, while ensuring that individuals receive specific necessary care to ensure wellbeing. This was further highlighted by the most common types of stabling being no stabling or in an open barn allowing for equids to interact with each other. All EAS facilities in this investigation adhere to IAHAIO guidelines concerning regular veterinary, dental, and farrier care. Complementary therapies are also utilized, with a trend towards openness to alternative therapies (Repac, Mangan and Xie, 2022). Alongside the physical environment aiming to recreate the natural environment, nutrition also reflected this. Several different natural ingredient were used in feeds for a variety of different reasons including herbs that could be found during natural foraging behaviours.

In summary, current practice within the EAS industry do follow the five domains welfare model with emphasis on positive environment rather than simply just absence of negative environment. Broadly, IAHAIO guidelines are followed with a significant number of participants intent on keeping equines in as natural state as possible.

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