ABRS+
POSITIVE CHANGE FOR HORSES

EQUICENTRIC FUTURES

Defining the Conditions for Welfare-Centred Change in Riding Schools: A Realist Evaluation

What works, for whom, in what circumstances and why?

FOUNDATIONAL REPORT

SEPT – APRIL 2026

PROGRAMME RESOURCES

- UNE Five Domains Course
- Values Clarification (Brown, 2018)
- ISES First Principles (2018)
- FEI Ethical Horse Training Principles (2026)
- In-Hand Coaching
- Under-Saddle Coaching
- Reflective Journals, Webinars & Resources
- RREM Evaluation Process

ENABLING CONDITIONS

- Psychological Safety
- Shared Purpose
- Openness to Reflection
- Team Learning
- Willingness to Experiment
- Learning Culture

EQUICENTRIC CRITICAL CURIOSITY

"What is the horse experiencing?"

Directing attention to the horse's behavioural, emotional and learning experiences through observation, questioning, experimentation and reflection.

HORSE AS ACTIVE STAKEHOLDER & CO-EDUCATOR



Horses influence human learning through their behavioural, emotional and learning responses.

Their feedback provides information that shapes reflection, decisions and future actions.

The horse is not only the recipient of change, but an essential part of the learning system.

MINDSETS

- Critical curiosity
- Confidence
- Reflection
- Advocacy for horses

SKILLSETS

- Observation
- Learning theory
- Behavioural indicators
- Communication

SYSTEMSETS

- Shared language
- Psychological safety
- Team learning
- Learning culture

Changes occur across individuals, teams and organisations.
These changes reinforce one another and create the conditions for sustained change.

HORSE EXPERIENCE CONDITIONS

(Outcomes for the horse through improved horse-human interactions)

PREDICTABILITY

(Principles 6, 7, 8 & 9)

Horses experience clear, consistent and predictable interactions that they can understand.

- Lightness of Signals (6)
- Timing (6)
- Predictability (9)

CONTROLLABILITY

(Principle 6)

Horses learn how their behavioural responses influence outcomes, increasing their ability to control and navigate interactions successfully.

SELF-CARRIAGE

(Principle 10)

Horses maintain learned responses independently until signalled otherwise, supporting autonomy and self-carriage.

ENHANCED HORSE EXPERIENCES THROUGH EVIDENCE-BASED EQUITATION

Supporting predictability, controllability and self-carriage through improved horse-human interactions (Domain 4C).

More positive behavioural, emotional and learning experiences for horses.

A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT WITH RIDING SCHOOLS, ABRS+, BRITISH EQUESTRIAN AND SPORT ENGLAND

Kingsmead Equestrian Centre · Stepney Bank Stables · Ebony Horse Club – Changing Lives in the Heart of Brixton · Team Tutsham · British Equestrian · Sport England

Six-month programme (Sept 2025 – April 2026)

Realist Ripple Effects Mapping (RREM) Evaluation

WELFARE-CENTRED • EVIDENCE-INFORMED • LEARNING-FOCUSED • SYSTEMS-CHANGE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Special thanks are extended to ABRS+ and George Baber for his leadership, vision and commitment to positive change for horses, and for navigating the complexities and conditions required to bring the project to life.

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Finally, this report acknowledges the horses who remained at the centre of the project throughout. Their behaviour, responses and lived experiences continually shaped the questions asked, the observations made and the learning that emerged. This report seeks to keep horses visible within the systems, cultures and everyday practices that influence the quality of their lives.

This work is dedicated to them.



Project Lead: Lisa Ashton

Figures 3, 4 and cover co-created with Artificial Intelligence

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Glossary of Terms

Active Stakeholder

An individual or entity whose experiences, responses and interactions influence decision-making and outcomes within a system. Within Equicentric Futures, horses are regarded as active stakeholders within riding school environments because their behavioural, emotional and learning responses provide important information that can shape coaching practices, management decisions and welfare outcomes.

Behavioural Indicator

An observable behaviour that may provide information about a horse's affective state, welfare status, emotional experience or learning process. Behavioural indicators should be interpreted within the wider context of the horse, environment and situation.

Community of Practice (CoP)

A group of individuals who learn through regular interaction, shared experiences and collective problem-solving. Within Equicentric Futures, riding schools were viewed as communities of practice where knowledge, beliefs, behaviours and organisational cultures develop over time.

Context

Within realist evaluation, the conditions that influence whether a programme or intervention produces its intended outcomes. Context may include organisational culture, resources, leadership, existing beliefs, prior experiences, social norms and environmental factors.

Controllability

The extent to which a horse can influence or predict the consequences of its own behaviour. Controllability is considered an important component of positive welfare and is a central principle within equitation science.

Critical Curiosity

The willingness to question assumptions, explore alternative explanations and remain open to learning in situations characterised by uncertainty or complexity. Drawing on Brown's (2015) work in *Rising Strong*, critical curiosity involves resisting the temptation to default to certainty and instead engaging in reflective inquiry about one's beliefs, interpretations and actions. Within Equicentric Futures, critical curiosity was considered an important mechanism supporting reflexive practice, welfare literacy

and the exploration of what horses may be experiencing within training, coaching and management contexts

Equicentric
A horse-centred approach to decision-making that places the horse's lived experience at the centre of inquiry, reflection and action. Equicentric practice considers horse welfare, learning, behaviour, agency and emotional experience within the wider social and organisational systems in which horses live and work.

Equicentric Decision-Making
Decision-making processes that explicitly consider the question: "What is the horse experiencing?" alongside human goals, organisational priorities and practical constraints.

Equicentric Futures
An ABRS+ programme designed to explore how evidence-based equitation, welfare science and organisational learning can support positive change for horses within riding school environments.

Equitation Science
The scientific study of horse training and riding, drawing upon learning theory, ethology, neuroscience and animal welfare science to improve horse training, handling and management practices.

Five Domains Model
A contemporary framework for assessing animal welfare across five interacting domains: Nutrition, Physical Environment, Health, Behavioural Interactions and Mental State. The model emphasises both minimising negative experiences and promoting opportunities for positive experiences.

First Principles of Horse Training (ISES, 2018)
Evidence-based principles developed by the International Society for Equitation Science to promote clear communication, effective learning and positive welfare outcomes during horse training.

Horse-Human Interactions (Domain 4C)
The component of the Five Domains framework concerned with the quality of interactions between horses and humans and their influence on welfare outcomes.

Horses As Co-Educators
A concept in the Equicentric Futures programme theory recognises horses as active participants within riding school learning systems rather than passive recipients of human actions. Through their behavioural responses, emotional expressions, learning processes and interactions with people, horses continually provide information that can support human learning, reflection and decision-making. Within this framework, horses are viewed as stakeholders whose experiences contribute to understanding the effectiveness of training, coaching, handling and management practices. As participants engage with the question "What is the horse experiencing?", mechanisms including critical curiosity, confidence, shared language and professional reflection may be activated. These mechanisms support the application of learning theory, encourage experimentation with evidence-based practices and contribute to more equicentric decision-making within coaching, handling and welfare management contexts.

Impact
Within realist evaluation, an impact refers to a meaningful change experienced by individuals, groups, organisations or systems that occurs following interaction with programme resources. Impacts may be intended or unintended, positive or negative, immediate or longer-term. Unlike traditional outcome measures, impacts are not viewed as isolated results but as part of wider causal processes shaped by context and the mechanisms activated by participants. Within Realist Ripples Effect Mapping (RREM), each impact represents a change identified by participants, whilst the connections between impacts help explain the pathways through which change occurred.

Impact Pathway
Within Realist Ripples Effect Mapping, the connections identified between outcomes that help explain how and why change occurred. Impact pathways represent participant-generated causal explanations.

Learning Theory
The scientific principles explaining how behaviour is acquired, maintained and modified. Within equitation science, learning theory provides the foundation for understanding horse training and behaviour change.

Mechanism
Within realist evaluation, the reasoning, responses, emotions or processes triggered when programme resources interact with a particular context. Mechanisms explain why outcomes occur.

Mindsets
Changes in beliefs, attitudes, awareness, values, assumptions or ways of thinking. Within Equicentric Futures, mindsets represented one of three domains through which programme impacts were analysed.

Meeting People Where They Are
A core implementation principle of the Equicentric Futures project recognising that meaningful change begins with understanding existing contexts, beliefs, knowledge, experiences, identities and organisational realities. Rather than assuming a deficit model of education, the approach acknowledges that riding schools occupy different stages of their welfare, learning theory and organisational development journeys. Consistent with realist principles, the approach seeks to understand and work with existing contexts in order to create psychologically safe environments for reflection, inquiry, unlearning, learning and sustainable change. The principle recognises that the same programme resources may generate different outcomes in different settings depending upon the interaction between context, mechanisms and participant reasoning.

Outcome
A change that occurs as a result of the interaction between programme resources, context and mechanisms.

Positive Welfare
A state in which an animal experiences opportunities for positive affective experiences (curiosity, joy etc) in addition to the absence or mitigation of negative experiences.

Predictability
The extent to which a horse can anticipate events and outcomes within its environment. Predictability is associated with improved welfare and reduced stress.

Programme Theory
An explanation of how and why a programme is expected to achieve its intended outcomes.

Psychological Safety
A learning environment in which individuals feel able to ask questions, make mistakes, challenge assumptions and engage in reflective discussion without fear of embarrassment, judgement or punishment.

Realist Evaluation
A theory-driven approach to evaluation that seeks to understand what works, for whom, in what circumstances and why.

Realist Ripple Effects Mapping (RREM)
A participatory evaluation method used to identify programme impacts, impact pathways and unintended outcomes. RREM combines visual mapping with realist inquiry to explore how change occurs over time.

Reflexive Praxis
The ongoing process of critically examining one's assumptions, actions, decisions and their consequences in order to inform future practice.

Skillsets
Changes in practical capabilities, competencies, behaviours and applications of knowledge. Within Equicentric Futures, skillsets represented one of three domains through which programme impacts were analysed.

Social Licence to Operate
The degree of public trust, acceptance and legitimacy granted to an activity, organisation or sector by wider society.

Systemsets
Changes within organisational systems, cultures, structures, relationships and ways of working. Within Equicentric Futures, systemsets represented one of three domains (systems) through which programme impacts were analysed.

Theory of Change
A description of the pathways through which programme activities are expected to generate short-, medium- and long-term outcomes.

Welfare Literacy
The ability to recognise, interpret and respond appropriately to indicators of equine welfare, drawing upon animal welfare science, equitation science, applied behavioural analysis, and neuroscience.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ABRS+ Equicentric Futures Project was established to explore how welfare-centred change occurs within riding schools and, specifically, how evidence-based equitation, welfare science and organisational learning may influence the lived experiences of horses.

Grounded in realist evaluation, the project sought to move beyond the question of whether educational interventions work and instead explore the question: what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why? In doing so, the project aimed to better understand the conditions required to support welfare-centred change within riding school environments.

Four riding schools completed the programme, two withdrew following Stage 2 of implementation, providing valuable cases that helped refine understanding of the contextual conditions that may enable or constrain welfare-centred change.

The programme combined welfare science (Five Domains Model, 2020), evidence-based equitation through the ISES First Principles of Horse Training (2018), practical in-hand and under-saddle coaching, reflective learning activities and Realist Ripple Effects Mapping (RREM). Throughout the project, participants were repeatedly invited to engage with one central question:

“What is the horse experiencing?”

The evaluation did not directly measure horse welfare outcomes using independent behavioural, physiological or welfare assessment measures. Instead the findings reflect changes in mindsets, skillsets and systemsets that participants believed influenced horse welfare through improved horse-human interactions, learning processes and organisational practices. Consistent with realist evaluation, the focus was therefore on understanding the *conditions and mechanisms* through which welfare-centred change may occur, not causal effects on horse welfare outcomes.

The findings suggest that meaningful welfare-centred change did not occur primarily through knowledge acquisition alone. Rather, change emerged through the interaction between programme resources, riding school contexts and a series of mechanisms

that supported participants to observe, interpret and respond differently to horse behaviour, learning processes and welfare.

Across all four riding schools, impacts were identified within three interconnected domains.

Mindsets: Participants reported increased awareness of horse behaviour, emotional states and welfare indicators. Critical curiosity emerged as a central mechanism, supporting participants to question assumptions, engage in reflection and consider horses' experiences more explicitly within everyday decision-making. Participants also described growing confidence in challenging established practices, increased openness to alternative perspectives and a stronger sense of advocacy for the horse.

Skillsets: Participants developed greater confidence in applying learning theory in both in-hand and ridden contexts. Reported improvements included observation skills, interpretation of behavioural indicators, timing of pressure and release, clarity of communication, and practical application of evidence-based equitation principles. Observational data collected during the project further highlighted opportunities to improve cue lightness, release timing and self-carriage, providing participants with practical reference points for continued development.

Systemsets: Impacts extended beyond individual learning. Riding schools described improvements in communication, shared language, consistency of coaching approaches, reflective discussion, team learning and organisational culture. In several schools, learning became increasingly embedded within everyday practice rather than remaining with individual participants. Informal systems, including conversations, WhatsApp groups, visual reminders and peer-to-peer learning, appeared to play an important role in supporting implementation and sustaining impacts from the project.

Analysis of the Realist Ripple Effects Maps identified several recurring impact pathways:

Awareness → Reflection → Confidence → Behaviour Change

Observation → Understanding → Adaptation → Improved Practice

Shared Language → Team Learning → Consistency → Organisational Change

Critical Curiosity → Experimentation → Learning → Confidence

Several cross-school themes were also evident:

- Development of equicentric awareness through critical curiosity
- Identity repositioning towards advocacy for the horse
- Shared language as a mechanism for collective learning
- Psychological safety as an enabling condition for change
- Horses functioning as active co-educators within learning systems
- Progression from individual learning to organisational learning

A notable finding was welfare-centred change appeared to emerge relationally rather than through compliance and/or regulation. There was little evidence that change resulted from enforcement or prescriptive implementation. Instead, participants described change occurring through conversations, reflection, experimentation, trust and collaborative learning.

Equally important was the continued visibility of the horse throughout the programme. Across all participating schools, horses remained central to discussion, reflection and decision-making rather than becoming secondary to organisational or educational objectives. The recurring question, What is the horse experiencing? functioned as a powerful mechanism for directing attention towards the horse's lived experience and supporting more equicentric approaches to training, coaching and management.

Increased confidence, curiosity, gratitude, psychological safety and willingness to experiment appeared to influence engagement with learning and implementation. These findings suggest that sustainable change may be supported not only by knowledge and skills, but also by relational mechanisms that enable individuals to engage with uncertainty, challenge assumptions and adapt practice.

The two withdrawal cases demonstrated that shared welfare aspirations alone were insufficient to generate programme impacts. Successful engagement appeared

dependent upon alignment between programme theory, participant expectations and a willingness to engage in inquiry, experimentation and collaborative reflection.

The refined programme theory proposes conditions associated with improved horse welfare are most likely to emerge when evidence-based equitation is applied within psychologically safe learning environments that support observation, experimentation, reflection and collective learning. Within these environments, horses become active contributors to organisational learning through the information provided by their behavioural, emotional and learning responses.

Overall, the findings suggest equicentric change occurs when participants become more skilled at observing horse behaviour, interpreting welfare behavioural indicators, critically reflecting on practice, and incorporating the horse's experience into everyday decision-making.

1.0 Introduction

The emerging literature of horse welfare in riding schools suggests equine welfare outcomes are shaped not simply by access to knowledge of equitation science but by the interactions between knowledge, beliefs, habits, social norms, organisational culture and wider systems (Nyberg et al., 2026). The ABRS+ Equicentric Futures project was developed as a realist-informed programme seeking to understand how equicentric change might be enabled within the complex contexts of riding schools. The programme theory proposed sustainable improvements in equine welfare would be more likely when coaches and riding schools were supported to develop welfare literacy (mindsets), practical application skills (skillsets), and organisational conditions that enable and reinforce change (systemsets). The intervention combined education, practical skill development, reflexive learning and organisational inquiry, recognising that different riding schools may activate different mechanisms of change according to their existing contexts. Consequently, the programme was designed on the assumption that no single intervention would generate identical outcomes across all riding schools; rather, change was expected to emerge through the interaction between programme resources, local context and participant reasoning.

Recent research conducted in Swedish riding schools (Nyberg et al, 2026) identified discrepancies between what instructors believed they were teaching, what students perceived they were learning, and evidence-based understanding of horse behaviour, welfare and learning theory. Comparable findings from lesson horse and equine-assisted service settings have highlighted that welfare outcomes cannot be assumed from good intentions, educational provision or organisational purpose alone, but are shaped by the interactions between people, practices, environments and institutional cultures. Collectively, these findings suggest that horse welfare is enhanced not only by knowledge acquisition, but by the wider social, cultural and organisational systems within which learning and decision-making occur.

Figure 1: Swedish Riding School Research Nyberg et al, 2026


PLOS One

Rider education at Swedish riding schools: Comparing teachers' and pupils' perspectives

Abstract

2.0 Initial Programme Theory

Ridings schools operate within the following contexts:

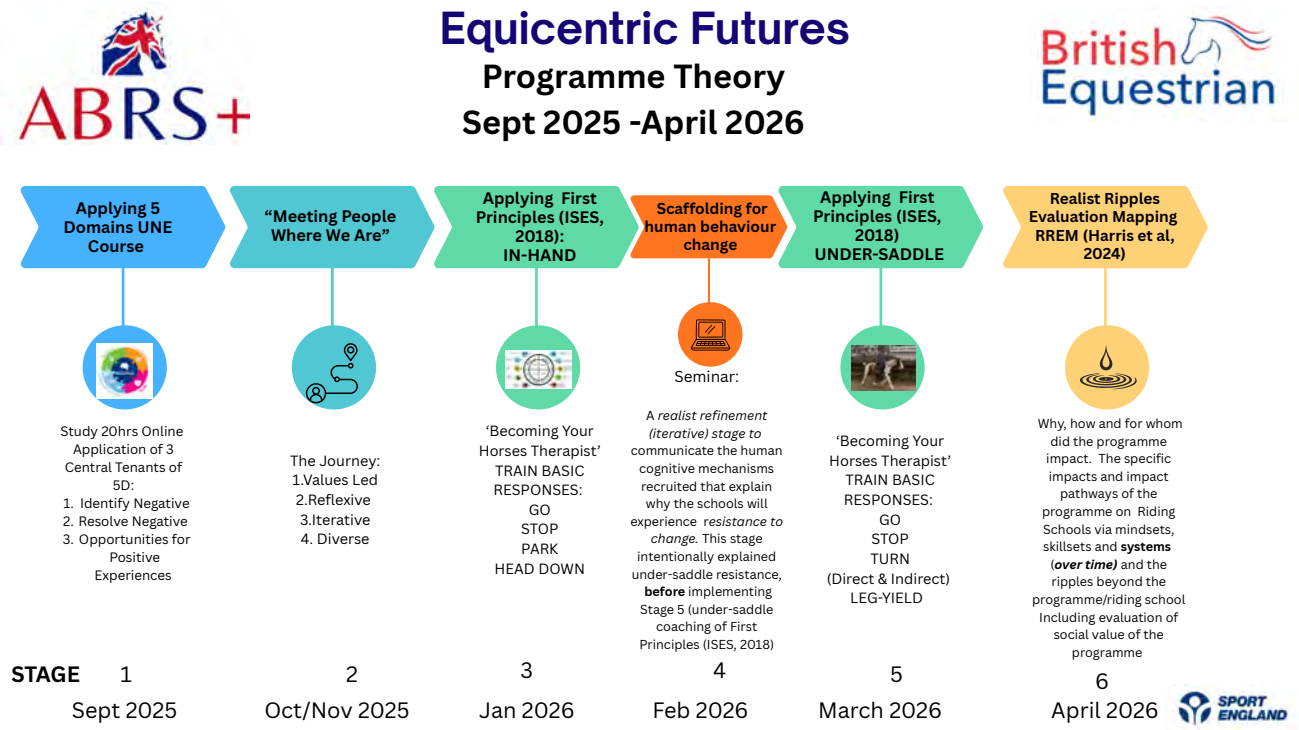
- Established coaching cultures
- Existing welfare beliefs
- Resource constraints
- Diverse horse populations
- Varying levels of learning theory knowledge
- Different organisational priorities

The programme theory proposed that when riding schools were introduced to evidence-based equine welfare frameworks (Five Domains, 2020; ISES First Principles, 2018) and provided with structured opportunities for reflection within psychologically safe learning environments, coaches and staff would be more likely to apply evidence-based equitation principles in practice. Participants were expected to become more able to recognise equicentric opportunities through the application of critical curiosity, asking: “What is the horse experiencing?” By critically evaluating existing practices and experimenting with the application of evidence-based equitation (ISES First Principles, 2018), participants were anticipated to direct greater attention towards horses’ behavioural, emotional and learning experiences.

Within the programme theory, critical curiosity functioned as a key reflective mechanism. The recurring equicentric question, “What is the horse experiencing?”, was intended to support participants in attending to behavioural, emotional and learning-related information that may previously have been overlooked. Through repeated cycles of observation, application, reflection and discussion, equicentric thinking was expected to become increasingly embedded within individual coaches, coaching practices and organisational decision-making.

Over time, these changes were expected to generate impacts across mindsets, skillsets and systemsets. The programme theory proposed that impacts would extend beyond individual participants to influence communication, shared language, reflective practice and organisational learning within riding schools. As these impacts rippled through riding school systems and cultures, the anticipated outcome was enhanced welfare for horses, alongside improved learning and development opportunities for riders, coaches and staff.

Figure 2: Initial Programme Theory (Ashton, 2026)



3.1 Riding School Application, Recruitment, Selection and Orientation

An open application process was undertaken to recruit riding schools into the ABRS+ Equicentric Futures project. Fourteen riding schools submitted applications. The application survey was designed to move beyond expressions of interest and explore the contextual conditions within which horse training, welfare and learning occurred. Questions examined how horses' behaviour was interpreted and discussed, how learning theory and welfare knowledge were shared, the influence of formal and informal organisational cultures, decision-making processes, leadership influences, staff participation in change processes, approaches to reflective learning, and the extent to which horse-centred practices were embedded within everyday routines. Additional questions explored perceptions of successful horse training, responses to conflict behaviours, communication practices, environmental influences on horse welfare, and organisational readiness for change.

Applications were independently reviewed by three assessors using a structured scoring rubric developed for the project. The rubric was initially drafted using artificial intelligence and subsequently refined by the project team to align with the programme theory, project objectives and selection criteria. Applications were assessed against domains including welfare literacy, openness to learning and reflection, organisational readiness for change, leadership support, reflective practice and potential programme impact. Scores were aggregated to produce an overall ranking, from which the six highest-scoring riding schools were selected. Selection also considered contextual and geographical diversity to support realist inquiry into welfare-centred change across different riding school environments.

Following selection, participating riding schools attended an orientation meeting hosted by World Horse Welfare at Glenda Spooner Farm. The meeting introduced the Equicentric Futures project, enabled relationship-building between participants and included a tour of the facility. Participants were introduced to World Horse Welfare's approach to embedding the Five Domains within daily operations and developing systems-level approaches to welfare implementation, providing valuable contextual insights prior to programme commencement.

3.2 Withdrawal of Participating Riding Schools

Of the six riding schools initially selected for the Equicentric Futures programme, two organisations elected to withdraw during the early stages of implementation. Both withdrawals occurred following participation in Stage 2 ("Meeting People Where We Are") and prior to commencement of Stage 3. This is noteworthy given participating riding schools had been selected through a competitive application process and had committed to engaging with all stages of the programme.

Correspondence explaining the first withdrawal indicated strong alignment with the overarching aims of the project, including improving ridden experiences for horses, meeting horses' individual needs and avoiding situations where horses were merely coping with their work. However, concerns were raised regarding the interpretation of a practical training demonstration involving a horse presented by the riding school as displaying conflict behaviours. A perceived disconnect between evidence-based equitation and the riding school's preferred interpretation of ethical behaviour change practice was discussed during the Stage 2 visit. Differences in interpretation, ethical framing and perceptions of acceptable intervention appeared to influence engagement with the programme.

This case provides valuable insight into the contextual conditions that may constrain engagement with equicentric change initiatives. Specifically, it highlights how existing belief systems, organisational identities and interpretations of ethical horse training practices influenced whether programme resources were perceived as congruent with participants' values.

The second riding school also withdrew following participation in Stage 2 ("Meeting People Where We Are") and prior to commencement of Stage 3. During the site visit, practical coaching sessions were undertaken with staff members and their own horses. Learning theory was applied to support a horse displaying separation-related behaviours, providing an opportunity to explore the practical application of evidence-based equitation within the riding school's existing context.

During a follow-up online discussion, the riding school expressed concerns regarding the purpose and function of the Equicentric Futures project. Specifically, expectations appeared to centre upon receiving a welfare audit based on the University of New England (UNE) Five Domains framework completed during Stage 1. In contrast, the Equicentric Futures programme was designed to explore Domain 4C (Horse-Human Interactions), with particular emphasis on the application of the ISES First Principles of Horse Training (2018). The project therefore focused on understanding horse welfare through the quality of horse-human interactions, learning processes, training practices and organisational culture within riding school environments.

During this discussion, it became apparent that the riding school viewed behavioural problems as relatively uncommon within its context. The organisation reported few instances of negative behavioural indicators or unwanted behaviours and described established procedures for managing horses where concerns arose. Consequently, participants expressed limited need for further inquiry into horse training, learning processes or coaching interactions, which formed a central component of the project's programme theory.

From a realist perspective, this case highlights the importance of alignment between participant expectations and programme theory. Whilst there appeared to be broad agreement regarding the importance of horse welfare, differing assumptions existed regarding where welfare challenges are located and how welfare should be evaluated. The project was designed on the premise that welfare is shaped not only by health, management and environmental factors (Domains 1-3), but also by the quality of horse-human interactions (Domain 4C), training practices, learning processes and organisational culture.

Together, these withdrawal cases provide important realist insights into the contextual conditions that may enable or constrain engagement with welfare-centred change initiatives. Whilst the riding schools appeared to share similar welfare aspirations, they held differing assumptions regarding the nature of welfare assessment, the relevance of learning theory and the role of horse behaviour as a source of information about a horse's lived experience (Mellor et al., 2020). These differing assumptions appeared to influence engagement with the programme and the mechanisms activated within each context.

3.3 Summary of Selection

- 14 applied
- 6 selected
- 2 withdrew
- 4 completed

3.4.1. Stage 1: Applying the Five Domains Framework (Orientation Stage)

The first stage of the Equicentric Futures programme involved completion of the University of New England (UNE) Five Domains ONLINE Course. Participating riding schools were invited to undertake approximately 20 hours of online learning introducing contemporary animal welfare science and the practical application of the Five Domains Model (Mellor et al, 2020) to equine welfare assessment and decision-making.

The course introduced participants to the three central tenets underpinning the application of the Five Domains framework:

1. *Identify* negative experiences.

2. Help *horses resolve* negative experiences.

3. Provide *opportunities for positive experiences*.

These tenets provide the animal welfare foundation upon which the remainder of the Equicentric Futures project was built. Rather than viewing welfare as the absence of poor welfare, participants were encouraged and guided by the UNE course to consider how everyday decisions, interactions and management practices influence both negative and positive experiences for horses. Whilst the Five Domains framework provided participants with a comprehensive introduction to contemporary animal and equine welfare science, the practical application of Domain 4C (Horse-Human Interactions) received comparatively less attention on the UNE course than other welfare domains. Consequently, participants were introduced to the importance of behavioural interactions within welfare assessment, via the Equicentric Future Project.

The UNE identified gap became a central rationale for the Equicentric Futures programme. The programme theory was designed to build upon the welfare literacy established through the Five Domains framework by providing riding schools with practical, evidence-based equitation (First Principles, ISES 2018) for understanding and improving horse-human interactions. The subsequent application of the ISES First Principles of Horse Training (2018) and later the FEI Ethical Horse Training Principles

(2026) provided participants with a practical framework through which Domain 4C is operationalised within everyday riding school environments.

Participants were encouraged to move beyond observing what horses were doing and begin exploring what horses may be experiencing. Throughout the programme, the recurring question, "What is the horse experiencing?" acted as a mechanism for directing critical curiosity towards the horse's behavioural, emotional and learning experiences within horse training, equestrian coaching and routine and non-routine (veterinary interventions) handling interactions.

Viewed through the lens of Aiko Bethea's Anchored, Aligned, Accountable framework (2026), Stage 1 provided an initial welfare anchor by introducing a shared language around equine experiences, welfare outcomes and opportunities for positive change. The course established the foundation upon which subsequent stages would build, preparing participants to explore how welfare aspirations might be translated into everyday coaching, handling and management practices through the application of evidence-based equitation.

3.4.2 Stage 2 Meeting Riding Schools Where They Are (Anchoring)

The first stage of the Equicentric Futures programme focused on understanding the unique contexts, cultures, values and aspirations of participating riding schools. Drawing upon Brené Brown's values clarification exercise (Brown, 2018), participants were invited to identify and prioritise personal and organisational values most important to them. Through a facilitated process, participants narrowed an extensive list of values to a small number of core values that they believed guided their decision-making and interactions with horses, riders, staff and wider communities.

This process was not an audit, welfare assessment or knowledge test. It sought to establish a shared understanding of what mattered most to participants and to create psychologically safe conditions for subsequent inquiry, reflection and learning. Consistent with Aiko Bethea's Anchored, Aligned, Accountable framework (2026), this stage sought to anchor participants in their values before exploring how those values were enacted within everyday riding school practices.

Consistent with realist thinking, differences between participants and riding schools were anticipated. Individuals entered the programme with different experiences, identities, responsibilities, organisational cultures and aspirations for themselves, their communities and their horses. Whilst the specific values selected varied between participants, common themes emerged across riding schools including kindness, curiosity, safety, inclusion and a desire to improve outcomes for horses and people.

The rationale underpinning Stage 2 was that meaningful and sustainable change for horses would be more likely when new knowledge, skills and practices were connected to participants' existing values rather than imposed externally. Consequently, the role of the project lead was not to instruct participants what to think, but to create conditions in which participants could explore, question and reflect upon the alignment between their values, their everyday practices and the experiences of the horses at their riding schools.

Participants were invited to exercise agency throughout the programme. This values-based approach provided the foundation for one of the central mechanisms underpinning Equicentric Futures: critical curiosity. Drawing on Brown's observation that "the opposite of curiosity is certainty" (Brown, 2015), participants were encouraged to remain open to inquiry and exploration through the recurring question: ‘What is the horse experiencing?' This question became a central organising principle throughout the programme, supporting reflection, discussion and the application of evidence-based knowledge within the context of each riding school's unique circumstances.

3.4.3 Stage 3: Applying Learning Theory In-Hand (Alignment)

The third stage of the Equicentric Futures programme focused on the practical application of learning theory through in-hand (IH) training. Building upon the values-based foundation established during Stage 2, this stage sought to align participants' equine welfare aspirations with observable, evidence-based equitation (EBE) *practices*.

Stage 3 commenced with an introduction to Equitation Science International (ESI) Ten Basic Responses, providing participants with a framework for understanding how horses learn and how training can be structured to support clarity of communication,

predictability, controllability and self-carriage. Particular emphasis was placed on the application of combined reinforcement (the removal of pressure and the addition of something the horse values ie scratch or nut) and Principle 2 of the FEI Ethical Horse Training Principles (2026): Regard for Equine Biomechanics and Physiology.

Participants were introduced to four In-Hand foundational responses:

• Go (acceleration)

• Stop (deceleration)

• Park (immobility)

• Head Down (and therefore head up)

These responses were selected because they provide practical opportunities to apply first principles of horse training from the International Society for Equitation Science and improve the horse's experience of training. Particular attention was given to the development of light, clear signals, timely release and self-carriage, enabling participants to explore how training practices influence not only behavioural outcomes but also the horse's experience of learning. The practical coaching component, referred to as "Becoming Your Horse's Therapist", encouraged participants to consider how everyday interactions influence horses' behavioural, physiological and emotional experiences. The ten basic responses were therefore explored not simply as technical training objectives, but as opportunities to provide horses with experiences of greater predictability, controllability and self-carriage.

Within the programme theory, the intended horse welfare outcomes were:

• Lightness of signals (Principle 6, ISES 2018) → increased predictability for the horse

• Timely release of pressure (Principle 6, ISES 2018) → increased controllability for the horse

• Self-carriage (Principle 10, ISES 2018) → increased agency for the horse

Consequently, participants were encouraged to move beyond asking whether a horse performed a behaviour and instead consider how the behaviour was acquired and what the horse may be experiencing during the learning process.

From a realist perspective, Stage 3 sought to activate mechanisms including critical curiosity, experimentation, confidence, and reflective observation. By observing, feeling (experiencing) horses responding to increasingly lighter and clearer signals/ aids, participants were provided with practical opportunities to connect welfare science, equitation science (learning theory) and behavioural indicators in real time. The recurring question, "What is the horse experiencing?", remained central throughout stage 3, encouraging participants to evaluate training success not solely through task completion, but through the quality of the horse-human interaction itself as reflected through the three central tenets of Equicentric Futures project: l*ightness, release of pressure and self-carriage*.

3.4.4 Stage 4: Human Behaviour Change: Preparing for Resistance (Preparation)

The fourth stage of the programme was introduced following the in-hand training phase (Stage 3) and prior to the under-saddle coaching phase (Stage 5). Retrospective analysis of the programme theory suggests this stage served an important preparatory function.

Whilst participants generally approached the in-hand training with openness and critical curiosity, ridden coaching represented an area in which coaches on the project and instructors had established expertise, professional identities and long-standing reinforcement histories of their social and professional identities. Consequently, the project lead anticipated introducing new evidence-based equitation (EBE) under saddle would generate uncertainty, resistance, defensiveness and/or cognitive dissonance.

A webinar was therefore delivered exploring human neuroscience (heuristics) cognitive biases, social identity, assumptions and beliefs and the human condition of resistance to learn. Participants were introduced to confirmation bias, identity-protective cognition, reinforcement histories and the challenges associated with changing established professional practices.

Drawing upon realist principles, the purpose of this stage was to prepare the riding schools for the possibility that new knowledge may challenge existing beliefs and practices. The webinar sought to create psychological safety around uncertainty and normalise discomfort as part of the learning process.

Viewed through the lens of Aiko Bethea's Anchored, Aligned, Accountable framework (2026), stage 4 acted as a bridge between alignment and accountability. Participants were encouraged to explore whether their existing practices aligned with their stated values and to remain open to evidence that may challenge their assumptions.

Stage 4 sought to activate mechanisms including intellectual humility, openness, critical curiosity, reflexive awareness and willingness to experiment. These mechanisms were considered important contextual conditions for the successful implementation of Stage 5.

3.4.5 Stage 5: Applying Learning Theory Under Saddle (Accountability)

The fifth stage of the Equicentric Futures programme focused on the practical application of learning theory under saddle. Building upon the foundational responses established during the in-hand training stage, participants were supported to translate evidence-based principles into ridden work whilst maintaining a focus on the horse's experience of training.

The session revisited the Equitation Science International 10 Basic Responses and explored how these responses are developed under saddle (through the application of Principles 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 of the ISES First Principles of Horse Training (2018))

Participants were introduced to ridden responses including:

• Go (included up gait, faster within the gate “gears within gears” and longer strides

• Stop (included down gait, slower within the gait and shorter strides)

• Turn (Direct and Indirect) - Opening and closing forelegs eg abduction and adduction of forelegs (FEI Ethical Horse Training Principle 2)

• Poll Flexion/s (change of rider hand position, changing how the bit is experienced, resulting in ‘poll flexion’, and not an equine leg response to the riders rein cue.

• Leg-Yield - Opening and closing hindlegs - abduction and adduction (FEI Ethical Horse Training Principle 2)

These responses were selected because they provide opportunities to establish clear communication pathways between rider and horse whilst supporting the horse's ability to predict (experience lightness), control (experience release) and experience agency (keep going until rider signals again) .

Similar to stage 3 (in-hand) the practical coaching component was framed as "Becoming Your Horse's Therapist", encouraging participants to consider how ridden interactions influence not only performance outcomes, but also horses' physical, behavioural and emotional experiences.

Within the programme theory, the intended welfare outcomes remained:

• Lightness of signals → increased predictability for the horse

• Release of pressure → increased controllability for the horse

• Self-carriage → increased agency for the horse

Participants were therefore encouraged to evaluate ridden performance not through task completion alone or the persistence of pressure until the desired behavioural outcome was achieved, but through the quality of the horse-human interaction and the horse's ability to experience clarity, responsiveness, relaxation and self-carriage.

Particular emphasis was placed on recognising behavioural indicators associated with effective communication, learning and emotional wellbeing. Participants were encouraged to attend to signs of predictability, controllability and independent maintenance of responses, viewing these not simply as performance outcomes but as indicators of the horse's experience within the learning interaction.

The programme introduced the proposition that positive emotional experiences may be more likely when horses experience clear communication, predictable outcomes, opportunities for controllability and the timely release of pressure. Participants were encouraged to consider how these conditions may contribute to positive affective states and support learning through reward-related processes associated with better-than-expected outcomes.

From a realist perspective, Stage 5 represented the accountability phase of the programme. Participants were invited to examine whether their ridden practices aligned with the values identified during Stage 1 and the First Principles (ISES, 2018 & FEI Ethical Horse Training Principles, 2026) explored in-hand and under-saddle during Stages 2, 3 and 5. The recurring question, "What is the horse experiencing?", acted as a mechanism of critical curiosity, reflection and accountability, encouraging participants to explore the relationship between values (mindsets), practice (skillsets) and impact (systemsets).

Viewed through the Equicentric Futures programme theory, accountability was not framed as compliance with external standards, but as ongoing reflection on whether horses' lived experiences were consistent with participants' stated values and personal aspirations.

3.4.6 Stage 6: Realist Ripple Effects Mapping (RREM): Understanding Why, How and For Whom

The sixth and final stage of the Equicentric Futures project involved the application of Realist Ripple Effects Mapping (RREM) (Harris et al., 2024) to evaluate programme impacts and refine the programme theory. Consistent with realist methodology, the purpose of this stage was not simply to determine whether the programme worked, but to understand what changed, for whom, in what circumstances and why (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

RREM was selected because it provides a participatory and theory-informed approach to exploring both intended and unintended outcomes, whilst simultaneously identifying the pathways through which change occurs. Rather than viewing impacts

as isolated outcomes, RREM recognises that change often occurs through interconnected causal processes that unfold over time within complex systems.

Participants from each riding school were invited to identify impacts resulting from their involvement in the programme and to map the relationships between those impacts along the timeline of the project (November 2025 - April 2026). Particular attention was given to understanding how the programme resources (see Appendix I) interacted with existing riding school contexts to generate changes in thinking, behaviour and organisational practices.

Drawing upon the Equicentric Futures programme theory, impacts were categorised into three interconnected domains:

- Mindsets – changes in beliefs, assumptions, awareness, confidence, values, critical curiosity and ways of thinking.

- Skillsets – changes in knowledge and practical application of evidence-based equitation (EBE): application of learning theory and welfare science in-hand and under-saddle.

- Systemsets – changes in riding school culture, communication, relationships, decision-making processes, coaching practices and wider riding school systems.

Participants were encouraged to identify not only direct programme impacts but also secondary and tertiary impacts, enabling the exploration of wider ripple effects extending beyond individual participants and immediate programme activities. These included impacts on horses, staff, volunteers, clients, coaching practices, riding school and non riding school organisational cultures and broader equestrian communities.

From a realist perspective, the purpose of Stage 6 was to identify the mechanisms that appeared to explain observed changes and to examine how these mechanisms operated within different riding school contexts. Particular attention was paid to understanding how mechanisms including critical curiosity, psychological safety, confidence, shared language, experimentation and professional reflection contributed

to the development of equicentric practices (mindsets, skillsets and systems) and decision-making.

The RREM process also provided an opportunity to explore the social value generated through the programme. Social value was considered not only in terms of direct benefits to participating riding schools, but also through the wider impacts on horses, staff wellbeing, volunteer engagement, coaching practices, organisational learning and the potential for longer-term cultural change within the equestrian sector.

The findings from Stage 6 informed the refinement of both the programme theory and theory of change. Through the identification of impact pathways across mindsets, skillsets and systemsets, the evaluation sought to explain how equicentric change occurred, the contextual conditions that supported or constrained change, and the mechanisms through which participants translated welfare aspirations into everyday practices that may positively influence and enhance horses' lived experiences in riding schools.

3.5 From Programme Theory to Programme Impacts

The Equicentric Futures programme was intentionally designed as a sequential and cumulative intervention. Beginning with the development of welfare literacy through the Five Domains framework, participants were subsequently invited to explore their personal and organisational values, apply evidence-based equitation through in-hand and under-saddle coaching, and engage in critical reflection regarding the relationship between horse welfare aspirations and everyday riding school practices. Throughout the programme, the recurring question, "What is the horse experiencing?", acted as a unifying mechanism intended to direct critical curiosity towards the horse's behavioural, emotional and cognitive (learning) experiences.

Viewed through the lens of Aiko Bethea's Anchored, Aligned, Accountable framework (2026), the programme sought to create conditions in which participants could first become anchored in their equine welfare values, then align those values with evidence-based equitation practices, before ultimately holding themselves accountable to the lived experiences of the horses within their care. Drawing upon realist principles, the programme theory assumed that meaningful and sustainable

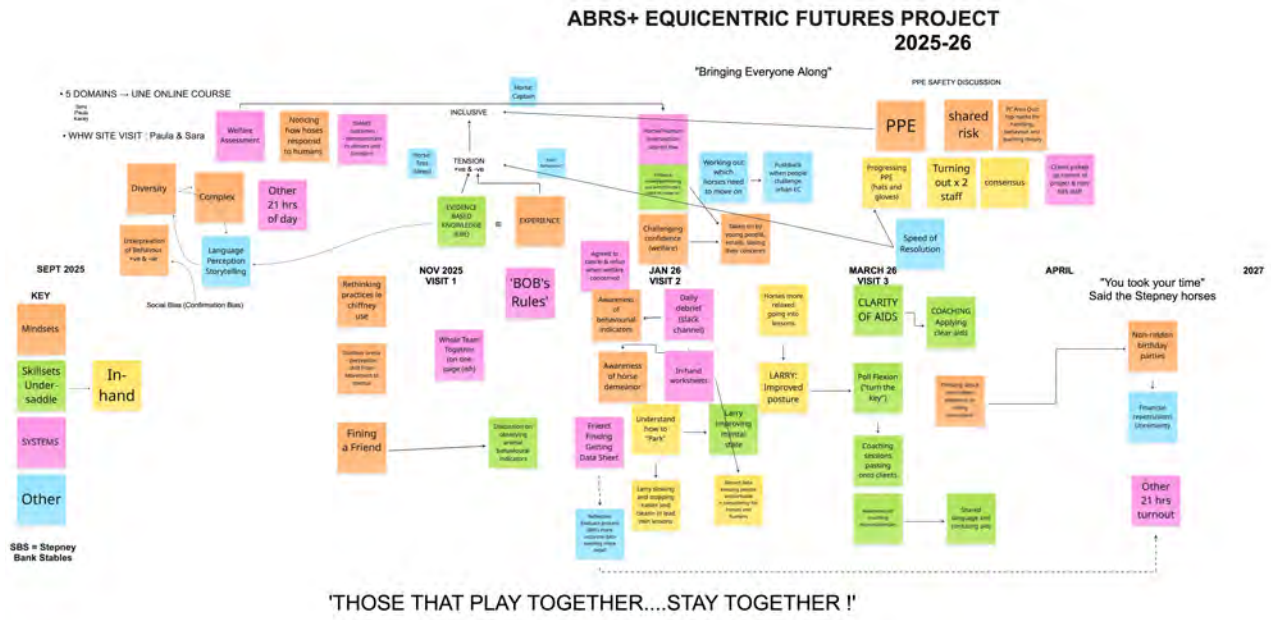
change would be more likely when welfare science, learning theory and organisational learning were connected to participants' existing values, identities and contexts rather than imposed externally.

However, realist evaluation is concerned not only with programme design, but with understanding how programme resources interact with different contexts to generate different outcomes. Consequently, the final stage of the project sought to examine whether the intended mechanisms were activated, how participants experienced the programme, and the extent to which impacts occurred within participating riding schools.

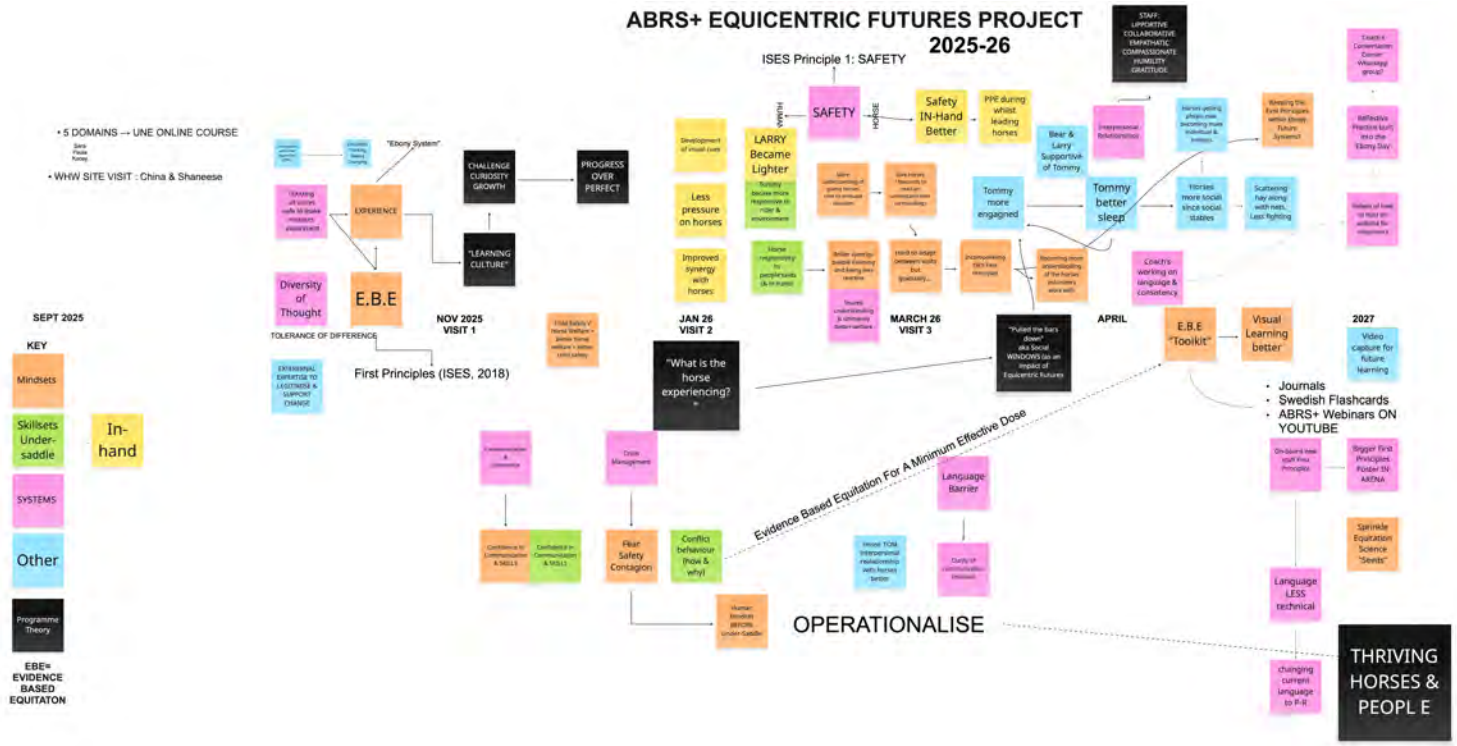
The following Realist Ripples Effects Maps (RREMs) provide a visual representation of the impacts identified by participants and the pathways through which those impacts emerged over time. Each impact represents a change identified by participants, whilst the connections (arrows) between impacts represent participant-generated explanations of how change occurred. Together, the maps illustrate the ripple effects of the programme across mindsets, skillsets and systemsets, enabling exploration of not only what changed, but also how, for whom and under what conditions equicentric change appeared to occur.

4.0 RREM Findings (Full-size versions of each map are provided in Appendix B)

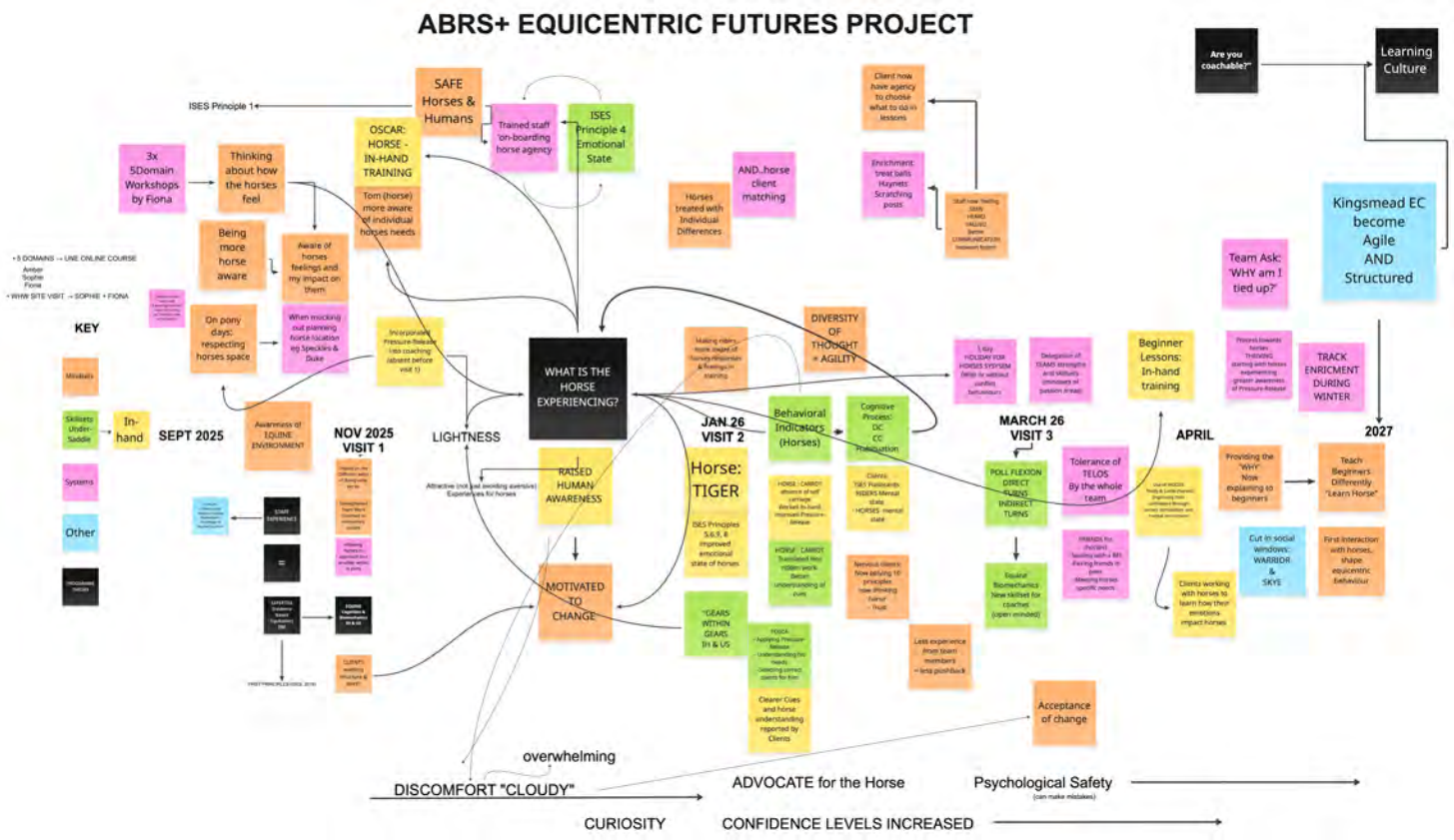
Stepney Bank Stables (13th April 2026)



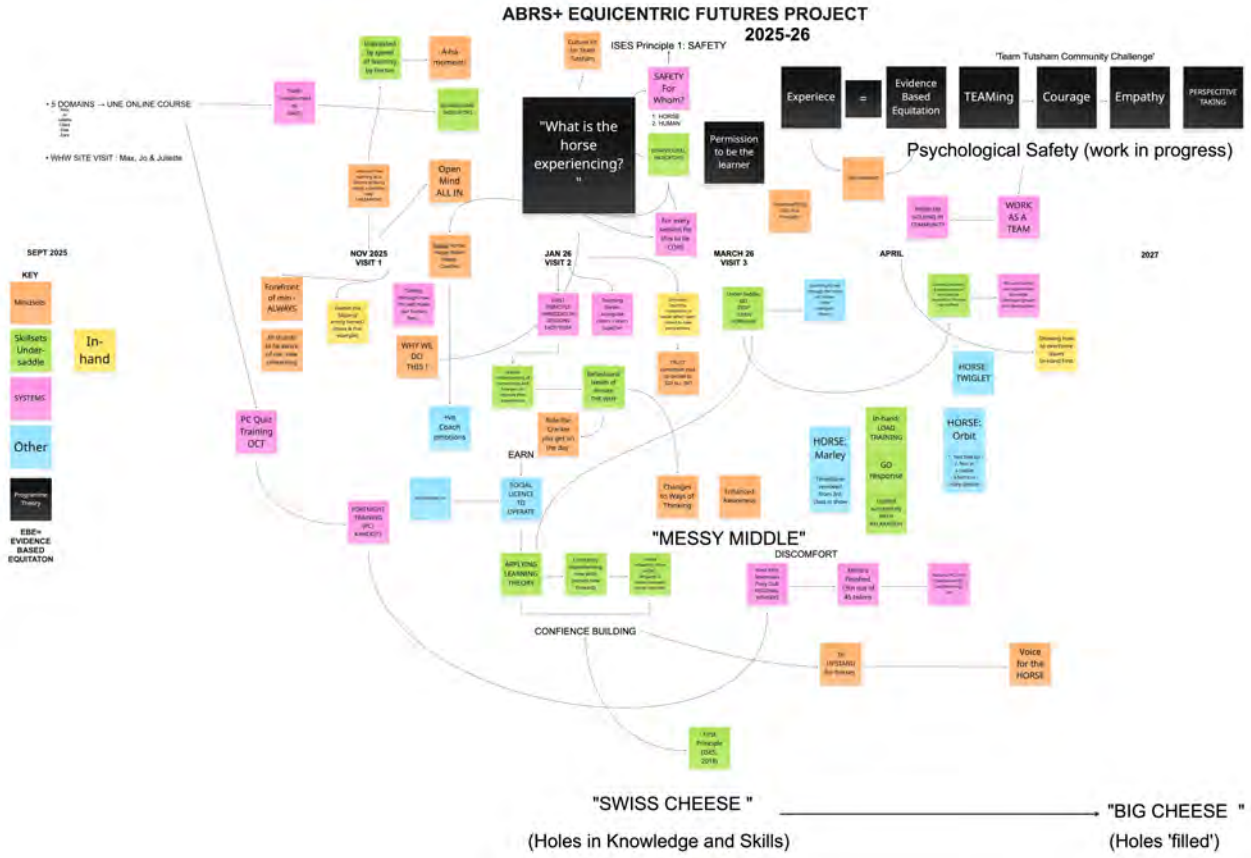
Ebony Horse Club (20th April 2026)



Kingsmead Equestrian Centre (21st April 2026)



Team Tutsham (27th April 2026)



4.1 RREM Findings: Cross-Schools Analysis

Analysis of the four Realist Ripples Effects Mapping identified a wide range of impacts across mindsets, skillsets and systemsets. Whilst individual riding schools generated unique impact pathways, several consistent patterns emerged across all riding schools.

4.1.2 Mindsets

The strongest impacts identified across the maps related to changes in awareness, critical curiosity, and reflection. Participants described becoming more aware of horse behaviour, emotional states and welfare indicators. Increased critical curiosity, confidence and willingness to question assumptions were recurring impacts. Participants described shifts from focusing primarily on task completion/activities (loading, applying sunscreen) or performance (trot to canter) towards greater consideration of what horses may be experiencing during in-hand and under-saddle training.

Several impact pathways suggested participants became more comfortable engaging in reflective discussions about horse welfare, coaching practices and learning theory. Rather than presenting welfare as a fixed body of knowledge, the programme appeared to encourage ongoing inquiry via critical curiosity causing a pathway for reflection.

Across schools, impacts relating to awareness, confidence, curiosity and equicentric thinking were repeatedly identified.

4.1.3 Emerging Mindset Finding

The programme appeared to create opportunities for participants to direct greater attention towards horse behaviour, emotional states and welfare indicators. Increased awareness often acted as an early impact that subsequently influenced practical skills and organisational decision-making.

4.1.4 Skillsets

Participants identified a range of practical impacts associated with critical inference through observation, interpretation and application of learning theory.

Skill-based (application of learning theory in-hand and under saddle) impacts:

• Improved observation of horse behaviour

• Increased recognition of equine behavioural indicators (positive and negative)

• Greater understanding of learning processes

• Increased confidence applying learning theory

• Improved communication with horses

• Enhanced coaching and handling practices

• Increased awareness of timing of pressure and timing of release of pressure

Across multiple schools, impact pathways linked improved observation to improved decision-making. Participants frequently connected learning theory concepts to practical situations involving training, handling and horse welfare management.

4.1.5 Emerging Skillset Finding

The programme appeared to support a shift from reacting to behaviour towards observing behaviour and interpreting welfare behavioural indicators. Participants increasingly described horse behaviour as information rather than simply a problem requiring correction.

4.2 Systemsets

System-level impacts were evident across all four riding schools.

Participants described:

• Improved communication between staff and volunteers

• Development of shared language around welfare and behaviour

• Greater collaboration and team learning

• Increased psychological safety

• Opportunities for reflective discussion

• Development of learning cultures

• Increased consistency in coaching and handling approaches

The impact pathways extended beyond individual learning and described changes within wider organisational systems. Several schools identified impacts associated with communication structures, coaching cultures, volunteer development and collective decision-making.

4.2.1 Emerging Systemset Finding

The programme appeared to influence not only what individuals knew and did, but also how riding schools learned, communicated and reflected together.

4.3 Impact Pathways

The most significant finding was not the individual impacts themselves, but the pathways linking them. Across schools, participants consistently described sequences of change linking:

1. **Awareness → Reflection → Confidence → Behaviour Change**
2. **Observation → Understanding → Adaptation → Improved Practice**
3. **Shared Language → Team Learning → Consistency → Organisational Change**
4. **Critical curiosity → Experimentation → Learning → Confidence**

These pathways suggest impacts were experienced as interconnected processes rather than isolated outcomes.

4.4 Cross-Schools Interpretation

The findings indicate that the programme did not operate primarily through information/knowledge of First Principles alone. Instead, participants described impacts emerging through cycles of observation, reflection, discussion, experimentation and social learning.

Across all four schools, changes were identified within mindsets, skillsets and systemsets, suggesting that the programme influenced not only individual knowledge and behaviour, but also wider riding schools' culture and ways of equine education inside riding schools context.

Importantly, impact pathways converged around horse-human interactions, supporting the programme's focus on understanding how horses experience training, handling and coaching within riding school environments.

4.5 Realist Analysis of Equicentric Change

4.5.1 Theme 1: Developing Equicentric Awareness Through Critical Curiosity

Across all four riding schools, participants described increased attention to horse behaviour, learning processes and welfare indicators. However, the RREM maps suggest that knowledge acquisition alone did not explain programme impacts. Rather, participants appeared to engage in a process of critical inquiry, characterised by increased observation, questioning and interpretation of horses' behavioural responses. The recurring question, "What is the horse experiencing?", functioned as a mechanism of critical curiosity that directed attention towards previously overlooked behavioural and emotional information. Through repeated cycles of observation, application and reflection, participants developed greater confidence in interpreting horses' responses and using these observations to inform decision-making. Critical curiosity therefore emerged as a key mechanism linking welfare literacy to practical behaviour change.

4.5.2 Theme 2: Identity Repositioning and Advocacy for the Horse

The RREM maps suggest impacts extended beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills to include changes in professional identity. Participants increasingly described their roles not solely in terms of instruction, coaching or horse management, but in relation to understanding and advocating for horses' lived experiences. Concepts including "Advocate for the Horse", "Humans Educated", "Learning from the Horse" and "Permission to be Different" suggest participants began repositioning themselves in relation to the horse and their professional practice. From a realist perspective, this appears to represent a shift in participant reasoning, whereby the horse's experience became a more salient reference point for decision-making. Identity repositioning therefore emerged as a mechanism supporting the integration of welfare considerations into everyday coaching, handling and management practices.

4.5.3 Theme 3: Shared Language as a Mechanism for Collective Learning

A consistent finding across all riding schools was the development of a shared vocabulary through which horse behaviour, learning and welfare could be discussed. Concepts including lightness, release, self-carriage, behavioural indicators, clarity of aids and critical curiosity appeared repeatedly across the maps. The findings suggest that learning was not experienced solely at an individual level but became embedded

within collective discussions and interactions between staff, volunteers and coaches. Shared language appeared to function as a mechanism through which observations could be communicated, assumptions challenged and learning normalised within riding school communities. The emergence of a common conceptual framework therefore appears to have facilitated collective sense-making and supported the wider diffusion of programme impacts.

4.5.4 Theme 4: Psychological Safety as an Enabling Mechanism

Psychological safety emerged as one of the strongest cross-case themes. Explicit references were evident within the Kingsmead and Team Tutsham maps, whilst similar processes appeared implicitly within Ebony Horse Club and Stepney Bank Stables. Participants described increased willingness to ask questions, acknowledge uncertainty, challenge existing assumptions and experiment with new approaches. From a realist perspective, psychological safety did not represent an outcome of the programme but a contextual mechanism that enabled learning to occur. The findings suggest that when participants perceived reflection, uncertainty and experimentation as acceptable, they were more willing to engage with evidence-based equitation and critically evaluate existing practices. Psychological safety therefore appears to have functioned as a key enabling condition supporting the activation of other mechanisms including curiosity, confidence, experimentation and reflection.

4.5.5 Theme 5: Horses as Co-Educators Within Learning Systems

One of the most distinctive findings emerging from the RREM maps was the role of horses in shaping participant learning. Across all four riding schools, participants described learning occurring through observation of horses' behavioural responses to changes in training, handling and coaching practices. References to lighter responses, increased relaxation, improved communication and behavioural change suggest horses acted as ongoing sources of feedback regarding the effectiveness of human actions. Within the refined programme theory, horses are conceptualised not as passive recipients of training interventions but as active contributors to learning processes. Through their behavioural, emotional and learning responses, horses provided information that influenced participant reflection, confidence and decision-making. The findings support the proposition that horses functioned as co-educators within riding school learning systems.

4.5.6 Theme 6: From Individual Learning to Organisational Learning

Whilst many impacts were initially experienced at an individual level, the RREM maps suggest that change increasingly became embedded within wider organisational systems. Participants described enhanced communication, increased consistency of coaching approaches, reflective discussions, team learning and the development of learning cultures. These findings suggest the programme influenced not only what individuals knew and did, but also how riding schools collectively generated, shared and applied knowledge. From a realist perspective, organisational learning emerged through the interaction of shared language, psychological safety, reflection and collaborative inquiry. Consequently, the programme's impacts appear to have extended beyond individual capability development to influence the social and cultural conditions within which future welfare-related decisions would be made.

Whilst the findings suggest learning became increasingly embedded within organisational systems, communication practices and riding school cultures, the sustainability of these changes remains unknown. The evaluation was conducted over a six-month period and was therefore able to identify evidence of embedding, but not long-term maintenance. A central question emerging from the project is how welfare-centred change is sustained once external facilitation and programme resources are removed. The findings suggest sustainability may depend less upon the retention of knowledge and more upon the continued presence of the conditions that enabled change, including psychological safety, shared language, critical curiosity, leadership support and collective learning. This question provides a strong rationale for the future development and testing of the Equicentric Conditions Framework.

4.5.7 Theme 7: Boundary Conditions

The withdrawal of two participating riding schools provides important insight into the contextual conditions under which the programme theory was, and was not, activated. Both organisations expressed strong commitments to horse welfare, yet interpreted programme resources through different professional assumptions, welfare philosophies and organisational expectations. In realist terms, these cases demonstrate that exposure to the same programme resources does not necessarily activate the same mechanisms across contexts.

Rather than representing programme failure, these cases help define the boundary conditions of the programme theory by identifying circumstances in which intended mechanisms, including critical curiosity, experimentation and collaborative inquiry, were not activated as anticipated. These findings reinforce the realist proposition that programme outcomes are contingent upon the interaction between context, programme resources and participant reasoning.

4.6 Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) Configurations: Explaining How Equicentric Change Occurred

Whilst the thematic analysis identified recurring patterns across participating riding schools, realist evaluation seeks to move beyond description and explain the causal processes through which programme impacts occurred. The purpose of this section is therefore to examine how programme resources interacted with different riding school contexts to activate mechanisms that generated observed outcomes.

The following Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) configurations were developed through retroductive analysis of the Realist Ripples Evaluation Maps, impact pathways and negative cases. CMO's offer explanatory propositions regarding the conditions under which evidence-based equitation appeared to influence horse welfare through changes in mindsets, skillsets and systemsets.

CMO 1: Psychological Safety Supporting Experimentation

Context

Participants were invited into a non-judgemental learning environment that emphasised curiosity, reflection and exploration rather than assessment or compliance. Riding schools were intentionally met where they were, and participation was framed as an invitation rather than an audit.

Mechanism

Participants experienced psychological safety, reducing fear of judgement and increasing willingness to question assumptions, acknowledge uncertainty and experiment with unfamiliar approaches.

Outcome

Participants demonstrated increased engagement with evidence-based equitation, greater confidence in applying learning theory and increased willingness to reflect on existing practices.

This configuration was evident across all four participating riding schools and appears to have functioned as a foundational enabling condition for subsequent programme impacts.

CMO 2: Horse Feedback Activating Critical Curiosity

Context

Participants applied evidence-based equitation through practical in-hand and under-saddle activities focused on lightness of signals, timely release of pressure and self-carriage.

Mechanism

Observing changes in horses' behavioural responses activated critical curiosity. Participants became increasingly attentive to behavioural indicators and began questioning what horses may be experiencing during training and handling interactions.

Outcome

Participants reported increased observation skills, enhanced interpretation of horse behaviour and greater consideration of horses' emotional, behavioural and learning experiences when making decisions.

The recurring programme question, "What is the horse experiencing?", appeared to act as a resource that repeatedly activated this mechanism.

CMO 3: Shared Language Supporting Collective Sense-Making

Context

Participants were introduced to common concepts and terminology drawn from welfare science, equitation science (learning theory) and the Five Domains framework.

Mechanism

The development of shared language enabled participants to communicate observations, discuss welfare concerns and reflect collectively on horse-human interactions.

Outcome

Increased team learning, greater consistency of coaching approaches, enhanced communication and the emergence of more reflective organisational cultures.

This configuration suggests programme impacts were not confined to individuals but became distributed through social learning processes.

CMO 4: Alignment Between Values and Practice

Context

Participants engaged in values clarification activities and subsequently explored the practical application of evidence-based equitation through coaching, handling and management contexts.

Mechanism

Participants reflected upon the relationship between their welfare aspirations and their everyday practices. This process appeared to activate identity-based mechanisms including professional reflection, moral reasoning and advocacy for the horse.

Outcome

Increased integration of welfare considerations into decision-making, greater willingness to challenge existing assumptions and stronger identification with equicentric approaches to horse care and training.

The findings suggest participants did not simply learn new techniques; many reconsidered how their professional roles related to horses' lived experiences.

CMO 5: Horses as Co-Educators

Context

The programme positioned horse behaviour as meaningful information rather than evidence of compliance or non-compliance.

Mechanism

Horses' behavioural, emotional and learning responses provided continuous feedback regarding the effectiveness of human actions. Participants increasingly interpreted these responses as information that could guide future decision-making.

Outcome

Increased responsiveness to horse feedback, enhanced reflection and greater adaptation of coaching, training and handling practices.

This configuration supports the proposition that horses functioned as active contributors to learning processes within riding school systems rather than passive recipients of human intervention.

CMO 6: Boundary Conditions

The withdrawal of two participating riding schools provides important insight into the contextual conditions under which programme mechanisms were not activated as anticipated. Although both organisations demonstrated strong commitments to horse welfare, differing expectations regarding programme purpose, professional assumptions and interpretations of evidence-based practice appeared to influence engagement with programme resources.

These cases suggest that welfare aspirations alone were insufficient to generate programme impacts. Instead, outcomes appeared contingent upon participants' willingness to engage in experimentation, inquiry and collaborative reflection regarding horse-human interactions. From a realist perspective, these cases provide valuable explanatory insight by identifying circumstances in which programme resources were perceived differently across contexts. Consequently, they refine the programme theory by identifying important boundary conditions for future implementation and highlighting the importance of alignment between programme theory, participant expectations and existing organisational beliefs and practices.

5.0 Social Value Generated Through Equicentric Futures

Whilst the primary purpose of Equicentric Futures was to explore the conditions that enable welfare-centred change within riding schools, the findings suggest that the programme generated wider social value extending beyond horse welfare outcomes. Participants reported increased confidence in observing and interpreting horse behaviour, applying learning theory, engaging in reflective discussion and advocating for horses within their organisations. These developments represented more than the acquisition of technical knowledge. They contributed to staff development, volunteer capability and increased confidence in making welfare-informed decisions within everyday practice.

The development of shared language around horse behaviour, learning and welfare supported improved communication between staff, volunteers and coaches. Across participating riding schools, participants described greater consistency in decision-making, increased collaboration and more frequent opportunities for collective reflection. These findings suggest that the programme contributed to organisational learning by strengthening the conditions through which knowledge could be shared, challenged and embedded within practice.

Importantly, impacts were not confined to individual participants. The Realist Ripple Effects Mapping (RREM) findings demonstrated pathways through which learning spread across teams, influenced coaching approaches, informed organisational decision-making and contributed to wider cultural change. The emergence of psychological safety, shared language and team learning created conditions in which welfare-related conversations became increasingly normalised.

Participants also reported sharing concepts, language and practices with colleagues, volunteers, clients and wider equestrian networks. As a result, programme impacts extended beyond the immediate boundaries of participating riding schools, creating opportunities for wider dissemination of evidence-informed and welfare-centred approaches to horse training, coaching and management.

From a horse welfare perspective, participants reported increased awareness of behavioural indicators, greater consideration of horses' lived experiences and more deliberate application of evidence-based equitation principles. Whilst this evaluation

was not designed to directly measure horse welfare outcomes, participants consistently described changes intended to improve clarity of communication, predictability, controllability and opportunities for positive experiences for horses.

These findings are particularly significant given the recognised contribution of riding schools to the wider social value generated by the equestrian sector. British Equestrian's landmark social value report estimated that riding schools generate approximately 25% of the sector's total social value, contributing an average of £292,000 in social value per riding school annually. Riding schools were identified as vital community hubs that support physical and mental health, wellbeing, lifelong learning, volunteering and social inclusion.

Viewed through this lens, the findings from Equicentric Futures suggest that welfare-centred change may generate benefits that extend beyond horse welfare alone. By strengthening staff capability, volunteer development, organisational learning, communication and reflective practice, riding schools may be better positioned to sustain the broader social value they generate for both horses and people.

The findings therefore suggest that welfare-centred change should not be viewed solely as an equine welfare outcome. Rather, it may represent a mechanism through which riding schools strengthen learning cultures, develop people, improve organisational effectiveness and enhance the social value they create within their communities.

6.0 Refined Programme Theory

The initial programme theory proposed that introducing riding schools to evidence-based welfare frameworks, evidence-based equitation and structured opportunities for reflection would support the development of welfare literacy (mindsets), practical application skills (skillsets) and organisational conditions that enable and reinforce change (systemsets). Through repeated cycles of observation, application, reflection and discussion, participants were expected to direct greater attention towards horses' behavioural, emotional and learning experiences, resulting in more equicentric decision-making.

The findings broadly supported the initial programme theory. However, the evaluation also identified several important refinements:

1. Knowledge alone was insufficient to generate meaningful change. Programme impacts appeared to depend upon the presence of psychologically safe learning environments that supported questioning, experimentation and collaborative reflection.

2. Horses played a more active role within the change process than originally anticipated. Participants frequently described learning through observing horses' behavioural, emotional and learning responses. As a result, horses are reconceptualised within the refined programme theory as active stakeholders and co-educators whose responses continuously informed human learning and decision-making.

3. The initial programme theory emphasised individual learning, the findings suggest organisational learning was equally important. Shared language, team learning, reflective discussion and psychological safety enabled programme impacts to become embedded within wider riding school systems and cultures.

The refined programme theory therefore proposes that conditions associated with improved horse welfare are most likely to emerge when evidence-based equitation is applied within psychologically safe learning environments that support observation, experimentation, reflection and collective learning

The refined programme theory is presented in Figure 3 (page 48)

7.0 Methodological Boundaries and Reflexive Considerations

As a realist evaluation of a pilot intervention, the purpose of this study was programme theory development and refinement rather than statistical generalisation. The four participating riding schools represented the complete cohort of riding schools completing the Equicentric Futures *pilot* programme and provided sufficient contextual variation to explore how programme mechanisms appeared to operate across different riding schools. The intention of this evaluation was not to determine whether findings were representative of all riding schools, but to develop explanatory understanding of what appeared to *work, for whom, in what contexts, and why*.

The purpose of the evaluation was therefore to generate explanatory insights capable of informing understanding of similar riding school contexts, rather than to produce findings that could be statistically extrapolated to the wider riding school population.

Participating centres were self-selecting and likely to possess a greater interest in horse welfare, evidence-based practice and professional development than the wider riding school population. While findings may not transfer directly to all riding school contexts, particularly those with lower levels of readiness for change, this was consistent with the purpose of the pilot, which sought to explore how welfare-centred change mechanisms operate under conditions where participation and engagement are present.

The evaluation drew substantially on participant-generated data, including reflective discussions, focus groups, observations and Realist Ripple Effects Mapping (RREM). RREM was intentionally selected because it captures stakeholder interpretations of change, impact pathways and unintended consequences within complex social systems. Importantly, the method also provides opportunities for participants to identify where anticipated changes *did not occur*, where implementation challenges were encountered, and where programme mechanisms, such as the application of First Principles, appeared less effective than expected. In this sense, the absence of anticipated outcomes, resistance to particular aspects of the programme, and barriers to the uptake of First Principles were considered as theoretically informative as successful examples of change, contributing to refinement of the emerging programme theory. Findings were therefore interpreted through a process of triangulation across multiple data sources to strengthen explanatory understanding.

Figure 3: Refined Programme Theory



The evaluation did not include direct measurement of horse welfare outcomes using independent behavioural, physiological or welfare assessment tools. This reflected the realist orientation of the project, which prioritised understanding how welfare-centred practices were interpreted, enacted and embedded within riding school contexts. The primary focus was therefore on understanding how participants translated welfare aspirations and evidence-based knowledge into everyday practice and how these practices were believed to influence horse welfare through the programme theory. Future phases may benefit from integrating additional horse-centred outcome measures alongside realist approaches to further explore relationships between programme mechanisms, practice change and horse welfare indicators.

As an adaptive and iterative intervention, the Equicentric Futures programme evolved in response to emerging learning throughout implementation. This responsiveness was considered a strength of the programme and was consistent with both realist and systems-informed approaches to change. However, it also means that the intervention (programme theory) was not fixed from the outset. Rather than viewing the ability to iterate and refine the intervention as a methodological weakness, it reflects the reality of working within complex social systems where ongoing refinement is necessary to understand how change processes unfold in practice.

As project lead, facilitator and evaluator, my own interpretations inevitably influenced programme refinement throughout implementation. Reflexive journalling, stakeholder dialogue and iterative theory testing were therefore used to support transparency, critical reflection and ongoing refinement of the emerging programme theory throughout the evaluation process.

8.0 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Shift from Information Transfer to Applied Learning

The findings suggest that knowledge alone is unlikely to generate sustained welfare-centred change. Future initiatives should prioritise opportunities for participants to apply evidence-based knowledge in practice, observe outcomes, reflect on their experiences and adapt their approaches within their own organisational contexts. Resources, webinars and educational materials remain valuable, but should be viewed as *components of broader learning processes* rather than as standalone solutions.

Recommendation 2: Invest in Facilitation as a Mechanism for Change

Facilitation emerged as an important mechanism supporting participants to translate knowledge into practice. Future programmes should incorporate structured opportunities for observation, discussion, guided reflection and practical problem-solving. Particular attention should be given to supporting participants in interpreting horse behaviour, the processes of how horses learn (learning theory) and connecting knowledge to practice using horse feedback to inform decision-making.

Recommendation 3: Support Leadership for Welfare-Centred Learning Cultures

The schools reporting the greatest impacts were characterised by leadership that created conditions for learning. Future work should support riding school leaders to develop psychologically safe environments that encourage curiosity, experimentation, reflective discussion and collective learning. Leadership development should therefore be considered a welfare intervention as well as an organisational one.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen Shared Language on Behaviour, Welfare and Learning Processes

Shared language emerged as an important mechanism supporting communication, consistency and organisational learning. Future initiatives should support the development of terminology and frameworks that enable coaches, staff, volunteers and riders to discuss horse behaviour, learning processes and welfare in consistent and meaningful ways.

Recommendation 5: Develop Communities of Practice

Many of the reported impacts emerged through collective learning rather than individual knowledge acquisition. Future phases should establish and support Communities of Practice that enable riding schools to share experiences, discuss challenges, exchange ideas and learn from one another. Such communities may provide an important mechanism for sustaining learning beyond the lifespan of individual projects.

Recommendation 6: Keep the Horse Visible Within Decision-Making

Across participating schools, horse behaviour increasingly became a source of information informing reflection, discussion and decision-making.
Future work should continue to encourage approaches that help participants attend to behavioural responses, emotional states and learning indicators, ensuring that the horse's experience remains visible within everyday coaching, training and management decisions.

Recommendation 7: Refine and Test the Emerging Equicentric Conditions Framework

The findings suggest that welfare-centred change is most likely when a number of enabling conditions interact, including practical skill development, facilitation, psychological safety, critical curiosity, shared language, leadership support and collective learning.

Future work should focus on refining, testing and validating the emerging Equicentric Conditions Framework (ECF) across a wider range of riding schools and organisational contexts.

9.0 Future Developments

Phase 2 should focus on understanding how the enabling conditions identified through Equicentric Futures can be replicated and scaled across the wider riding school sector. A central question emerging from the Equicentric Futures evaluation is not how welfare-centred change is initiated, but how it is *sustained*. Whilst the findings suggest meaningful changes occurred across mindsets, skillsets and systemsets, the long-term maintenance of these changes remains unknown. Realist evaluation recognises that outcomes are contingent upon the continued presence of the contextual conditions and mechanisms that generated them. Consequently, the next phase of development will focus on understanding how the conditions associated with equicentric change can be supported, maintained and embedded over time.

Phase 2 priorities:

1. Establish a Community of Practice involving participating and new riding schools
2. Test the Equicentric Conditions Framework across diverse organisational contexts
3. Explore how practical coaching, facilitation and reflective learning can be delivered at scale
4. Evaluate the sustainability of observed changes over time
5. Identify barriers and enablers to wider sector adoption
6. Continue exploring how welfare science and evidence-based equitation can be translated into everyday practice through mindsets, skillsets and systemsets.

The overall aim of Phase 2 is not to disseminate information, but to better understand how riding schools can consistently create the ***conditions*** that support welfare-centred cultures, learning and decision-making.

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Figure 4: Equicentric Futures: Findings & Recommendations



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APPENDIX A

Equicentric Futures Project Resources

FOR THE HORSE RESOURCES

6 CENTRES +

ABRS+ 2024 WEBINAR SERIES



1. Social licence & future of riding schools: The Why, What and How
2. Applying the 5 Domains Model
3. An Integrated Approach to Future Proofing Riding Schools
4. Ethical Horse Trianing On Purpose
5. Collective Soloutions

YOUTUBE

6 CENTRES

Applying 5 Domains ONLINE LEARNING RESOURCE

ABRS+

50% DISCOUNT FOR ABRS+ MEMBERS

University of New England

SKILLSETS

ONLINE COURSE

6 CENTRES

VALUES DRIVEN

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE INTROSPECTION

CULTURAL (normalised behaviours) CHANGE

MINDSETS

REFLEXIVE PRAXIS

5 CENTRES

DOMAIN 4C: HOSRE-HUMAN INTERACTIONS

ESI EQUITATION SCIENCE INTERNATIONAL

HOW HORSES LEARN: (DVD 1)
INHAND (DVD 2)
UNDER-SADDLE (DVD 3)



SKILLSETS

3 ESI DVDS

4 CENTRES

Applying First Principles (ISES)



Application of FIRST PRINCIPLES InHand & Undersaddle

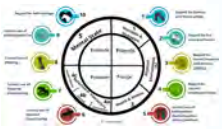
SKILLSETS

FLASH CARDS (ES SWEDEN)

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MINDSETS SKILLSETS SYSTEMSETS



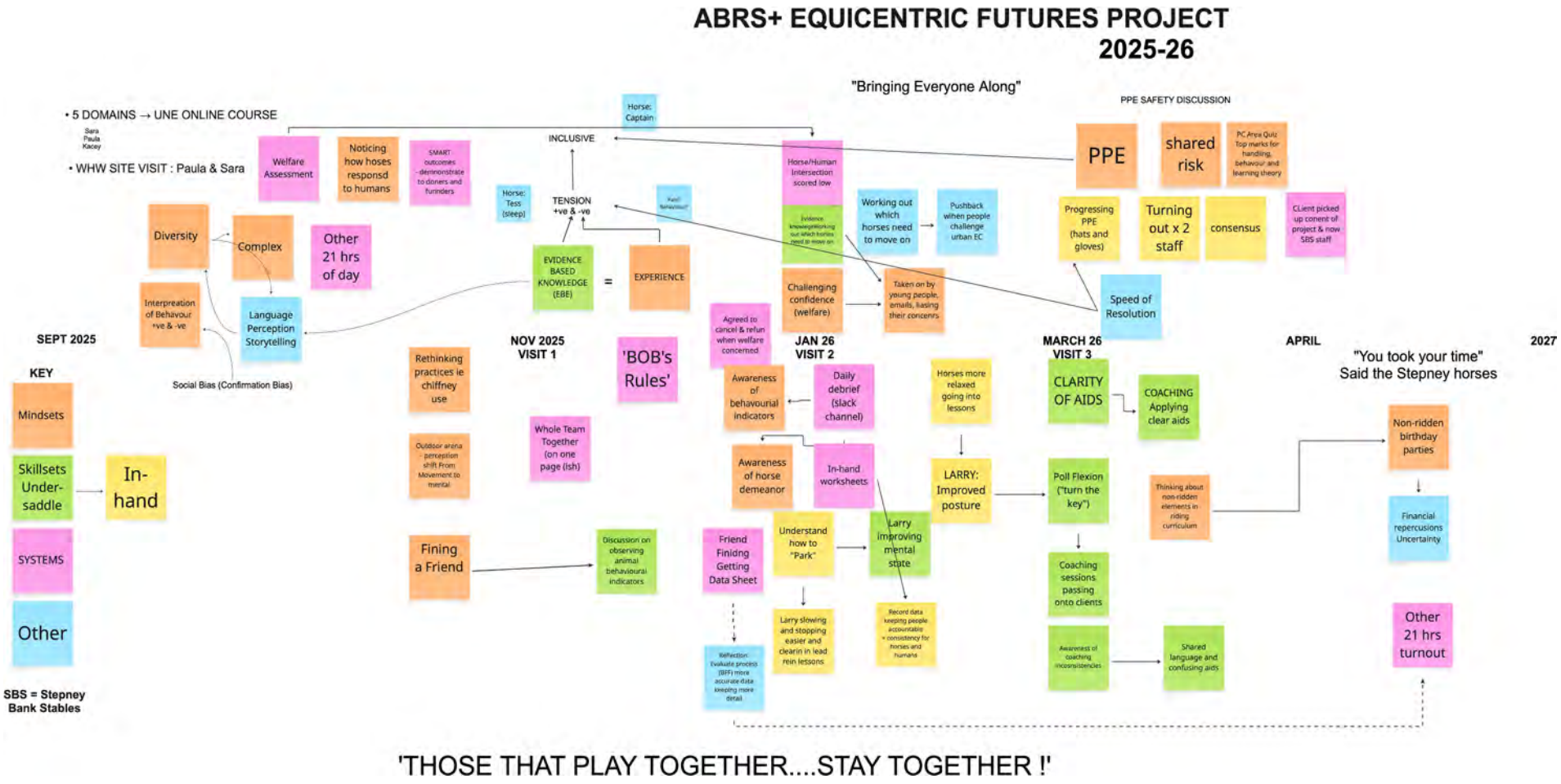


MINDSETS SKILLSETS SYSTEMS

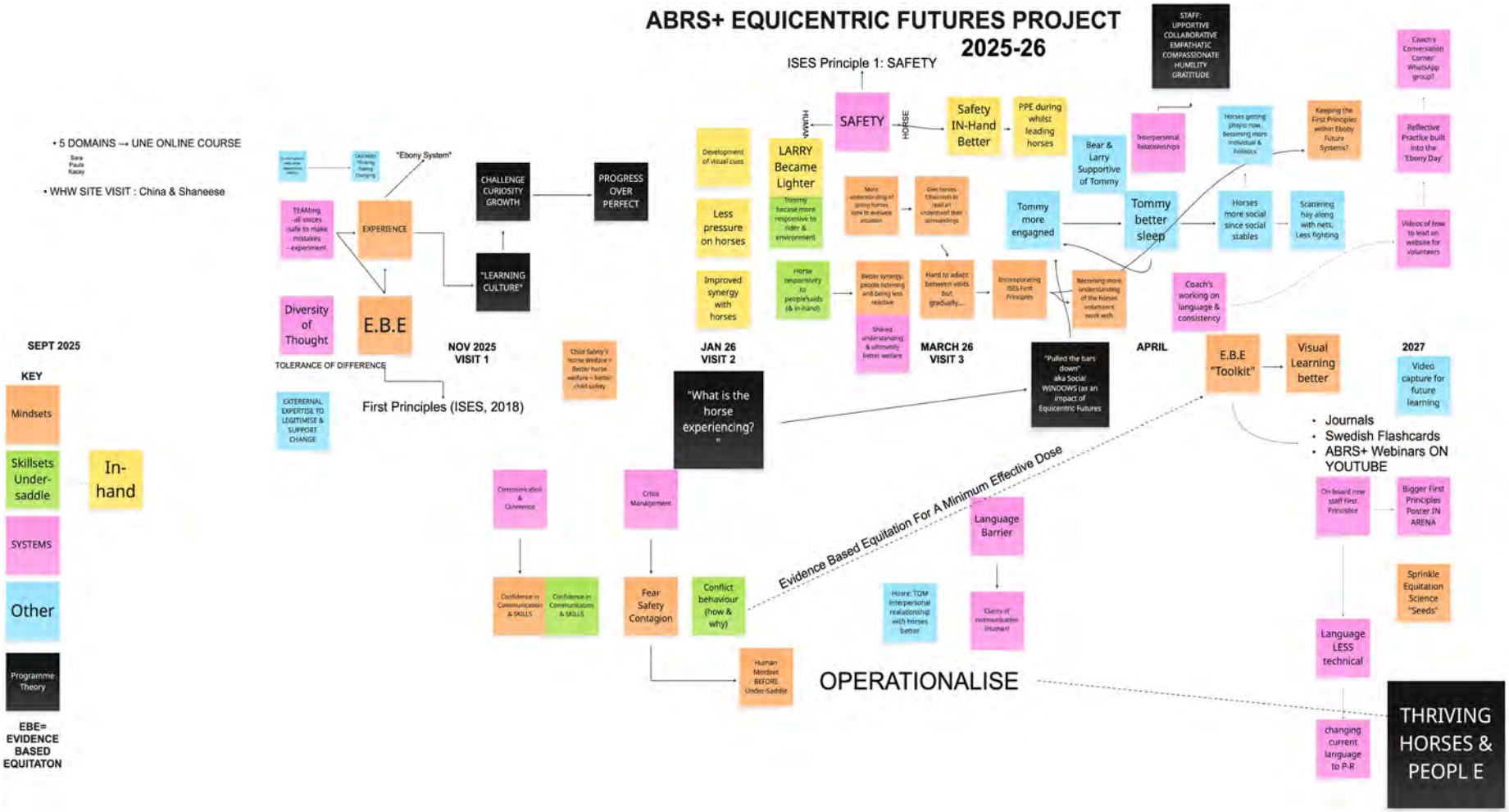
BOOK

APPENDIX B

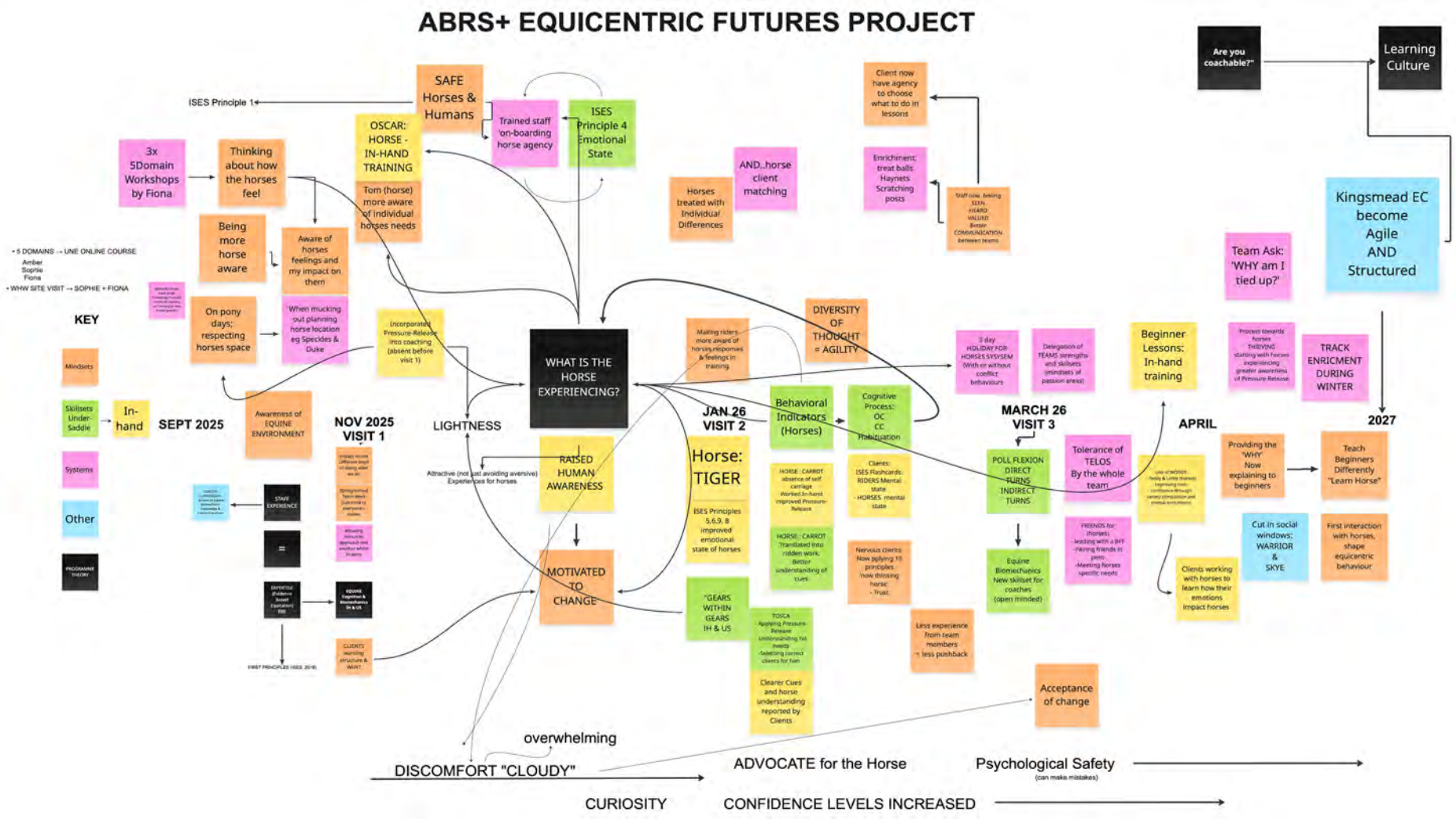
B1: Stepney Bank Stables RREM



B2: Ebony Horse Club RREM



B3: Kingsmead Equestrian Centre RREM



B4: Team Tutsham RREM

