

**TRANSITIONS**  
EQUINE ASSISTED GROWTH & LEARNING

# PROGRAM EVALUATION REPORT 2013



**MAKS**  
SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE

MACS Supporting Young People have been exploring equine assisted learning and its application since 2002. we have completed several pilots to date demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach with young people who use our services. as a progressive organisation we recognise that working with young people requires ingenuity and a willingness to work both creatively and innovatively.

We became aware of a new approach using horses to help achieve personal growth which was growing in America, Canada and Europe but had not yet reached Northern Ireland. We researched the effectiveness of Equine Assisted Learning and realised this could be huge for young people that we work with. From this, Transitions (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning) project was born.

Transitions (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning) is an outcome focused programme of growth and development for young people aged 18-25 using horses as co-facilitators. By observing the horse's behaviour and using metaphors, specially trained facilitators help young people identify goals and overcome obstacles in a solution focused way. Transitions provides an opportunity for young people to gain insight into who they are and helps them identify positive coping strategies to cope with difficult situations. The cause and effect nature of their actions and the horses responses is a unique way of demonstrating to young people that their actions impact on others. For young people, this can be a revelation and when used positively, can be the first, most powerful step in reinforcing their belief that they are in control of their own lives.

As Transitions is a solution focused program of growth and development we use the assessment and initial sessions to identify goals for young people to work through. We then create scenarios that give young people the opportunity to make positive changes in their lives so they can overcome the difficulties they are facing.



#### OUR JOURNEY SO FAR

- We have previously completed 3 studies to date with a total of 16 young people aged 16-25
- We have trained a total of nine staff to deliver the EAGALA model with young people aged 16-25.
- We have been able to evidence a total 74% average improvement across ten key areas of support using our unique Transitions (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning) approach.

#### AIMS OF TRANSITIONS (EQUINE ASSISTED GROWTH AND LEARNING) PROGRAM 2013

- To deliver a structured, innovative programme of growth and development using Equine Assisted Learning techniques to young people aged 16 -25.
- We received 24 referrals for our Transitions program 2013
- Completed 18 assessments with young people using MACS services

#### OUR OBJECTIVES FOR THE PROGRAMME WERE AS FOLLOWS;

- Provide up to six Transitions sessions to 6 - 7 young people from across MACS services for a period of six weeks.
- Complete a minimum of one Outcome Star per young person involved in the Transitions programme
- Complete evaluation forms with both the young person and referrer at the end of the programme.



# EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

We used a variety of methodologies to demonstrate the impact of Transitions with young people involved in the Transitions programme. In order to ensure we had both qualitative and quantitative data we used the following tools;

- Evaluation forms for young people and referrers which were completed at the end of the programme. These questionnaires had nine questions focusing on their experiences prior to, during and following the Transitions programme. Young people rated themselves from strongly disagree to strongly agree on a range of statements.
- Our chosen outcome monitoring tool was a Mental Health Outcome Star which was completed at either the beginning, middle and end or the beginning and end depending on the number of weeks completed.
- Case studies to further demonstrate the impact and give a greater sense of the journey our young people experienced.
- In addition to these, we held a review day at the end of the project to evaluate the strengths of the programme and any areas for change and development which will be included as recommendations within the report.
- To evidence a longer term impact we will be conducting a six month impact evaluation with young people who have completed the Transitions program. The findings of this will be available to see in our Transitions development year report





“At times Transitions was hard but I felt safe. At the beginning it was scary and I was confused but the staff helped me understand what was happening and gave me time to think about what i was seeing. It took me to see what was happening with the horses to see how i behave with others that I'm having problems with. I don't think i would have seen that if I didn't do Transitions ”

# FINDINGS AND RESULTS

For ease of reading the findings and results will be broken down into three sections;

## RESULTS FROM THE YOUNG PERSON'S EVALUATION

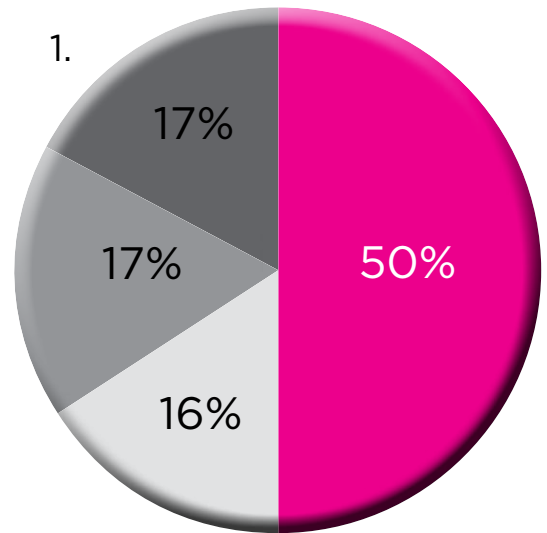
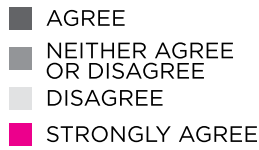
### RESULT OF THE REFERRER'S EVALUATION

### CASE STUDIES WHICH INCLUDE OUTCOME STARS TO SHOW CHANGE IN OUTCOMES FOR PARTICIPANTS

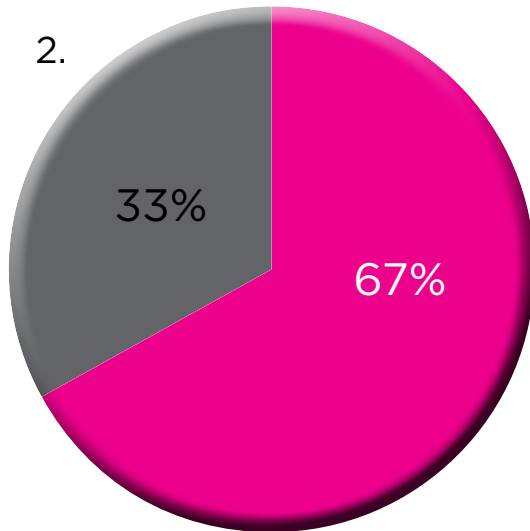
## RESULTS OF THE YOUNG PERSON'S EVALUATION

At the end of the six week Transitions programme young people anonymously completed evaluation forms and returned them in sealed envelopes. Some of the key areas we focused on in our evaluation were whether young people felt they benefited from the programme, was it different from the help they were or are receiving and whether the monitoring tools were useful. Opposite are the questions and responses from 6 out of 7 young people who took part in the Transitions programme.

1. TAKING PART IN TRANSITIONS (EQUINE ASSISTED GROWTH AND LEARNING) HELPED ME OVERALL



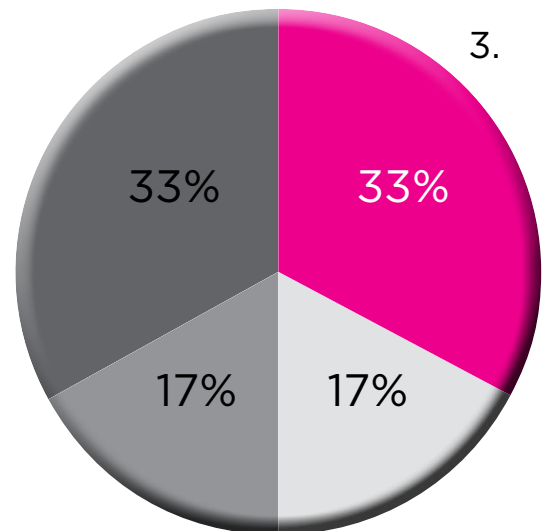
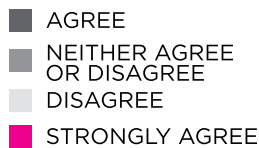
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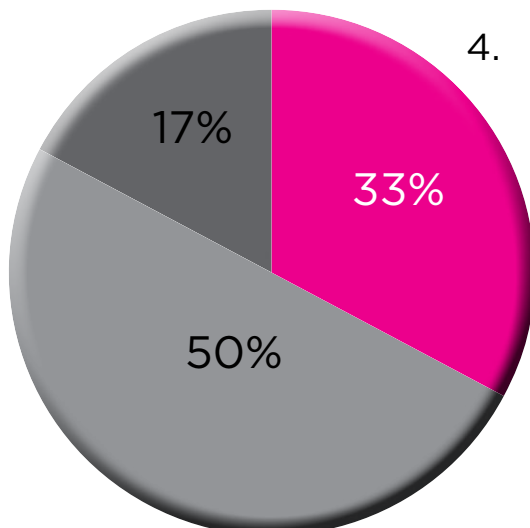
2. TRANSITIONS (EQUINE ASSISTED GROWTH AND LEARNING) WAS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TYPES OF SUPPORT/HELP I HAVE RECEIVED



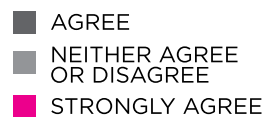
3. TRANSITIONS (EQUINE ASSISTED GROWTH AND LEARNING) SESSIONS HELPED ME ACHIEVE MY GOALS



4.



4. COMPLETING THE MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOME STARS HELPED ME SEE THE PROGRESS I MADE

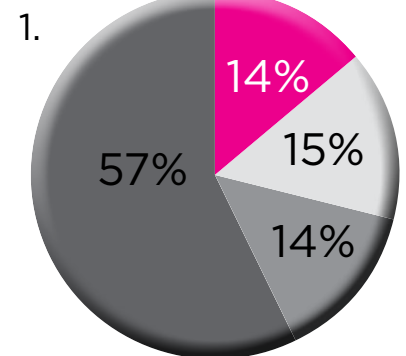




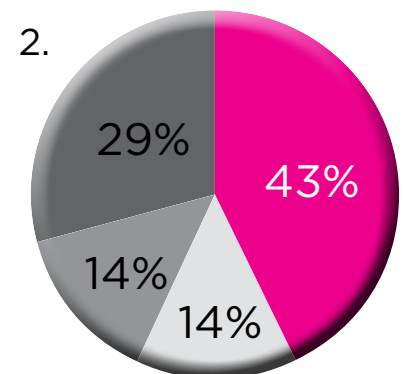
## RESULTS OF REFERRER'S EVALUATION

Seven referrer's in total completed the evaluation representing 100% response rate. Each referrer had a young person they are supporting complete at least one week of Transitions.

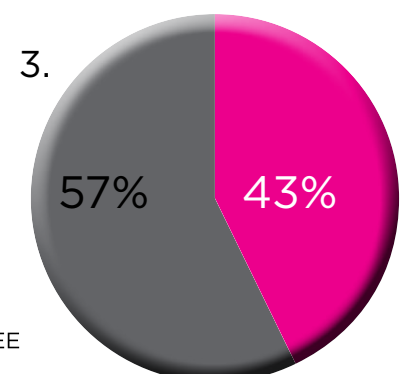
1. I CAN SEE THE CHANGES/IMPACT TAKING PART IN TRANSITIONS (EQUINE ASSISTED GROWTH AND LEARNING) HAS HAD ON THE YOUNG PERSON I AM SUPPORTING.



2. TRANSITIONS (EQUINE ASSISTED GROWTH AND LEARNING) HELPED IMPROVE MY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE YOUNG PERSON I AM SUPPORTING



3. FELT THE TIME SPENT WITH MY YOUNG PERSON BEFORE AND AFTER THE SESSIONS WAS USEFUL



■ AGREE  
■ NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE  
■ DISAGREE  
■ STRONGLY AGREE

“At first I didn't believe anything would come of transitions as I'd been around horses before. The 1st few visits I didn't really understand what way I was meant to grasp the things that were happening but after the third visit everything just hit me! It was an amazing experience! I just didn't think would have made me think differently about my life situation but it has and I would definitely recommend it to anyone!”

## MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOME STARS

Transitions uses a unique tool for measuring support and change when working with people. We use the Mental Health Outcome star to help monitor changes in ten key areas of Managing Mental Health, Living Skills, Physical Health and Self Care, Social Networks, Work, Addictive Behaviour, Identify and Self Esteem, Relationships, Trust and Hope and Responsibilities.

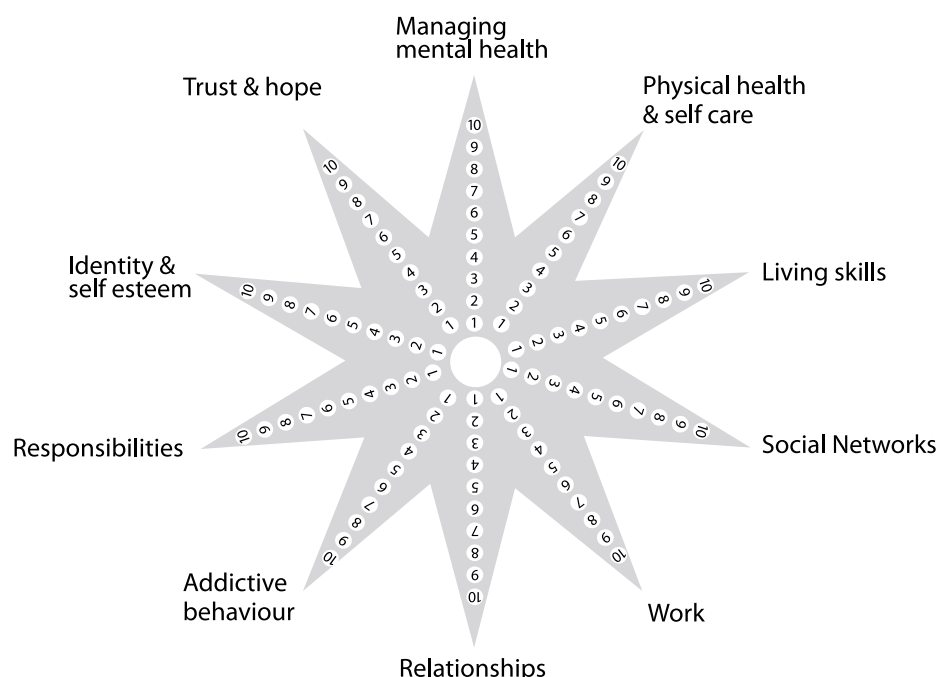
Each young person completed at least two Outcome Stars to help them see visually, the changes and improvements they had made.

Note: Young people identified areas that they wanted to work on (goals) whilst in Transitions. Therefore, not all 10 areas change over the course of the programme.

## IMPROVEMENT IN OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The tables included in addition to the Mental Health Outcome Stars represent the overall improvement for young people who took part in the Transitions programme. Data was collected from the self-scores given in each Outcome Star.

It should be noted that although young people identified goals they wanted to work on throughout the programme, other areas may have improved as a by-product of this. In addition to this, facilitators encourage young people to be reflective between sessions and therefore at different points some scores went down before improving. This is part of the process and where required, additional support was put in place for the young person. Therefore, we have included any areas of change in the young person's outcomes tables.





# CASE STUDIES

WE HAVE INCLUDED CASE STUDIES TO PROVIDE MORE DETAIL ON THE ACTUAL EXPERIENCES IN THE SESSIONS, THE INSIGHTS GAINED AND THE MOVEMENT FOR OUR YOUNG PEOPLE. THIS MATERIAL IS RICH AND AT TIMES PROFOUND AND WE HOPE THIS GIVES A FULLER PICTURE OF HOW TRANSITIONS WORKS IN PRACTICE.

Note: Two young people had one session and did not continue on. However, there was learning for us as practitioners which is shared later in the report. In light of this, our case studies are from five young people who completed 2 or more weeks of Transitions (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning).

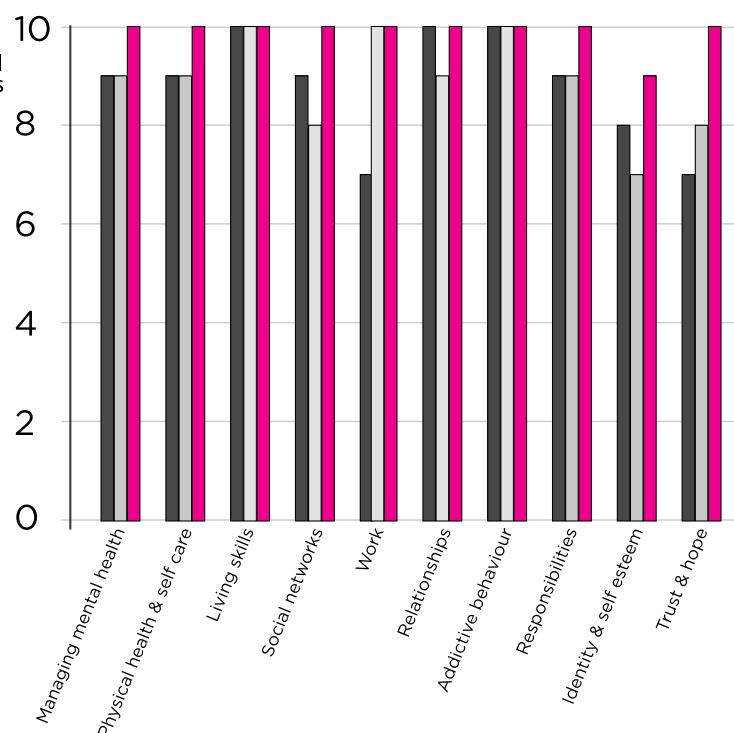
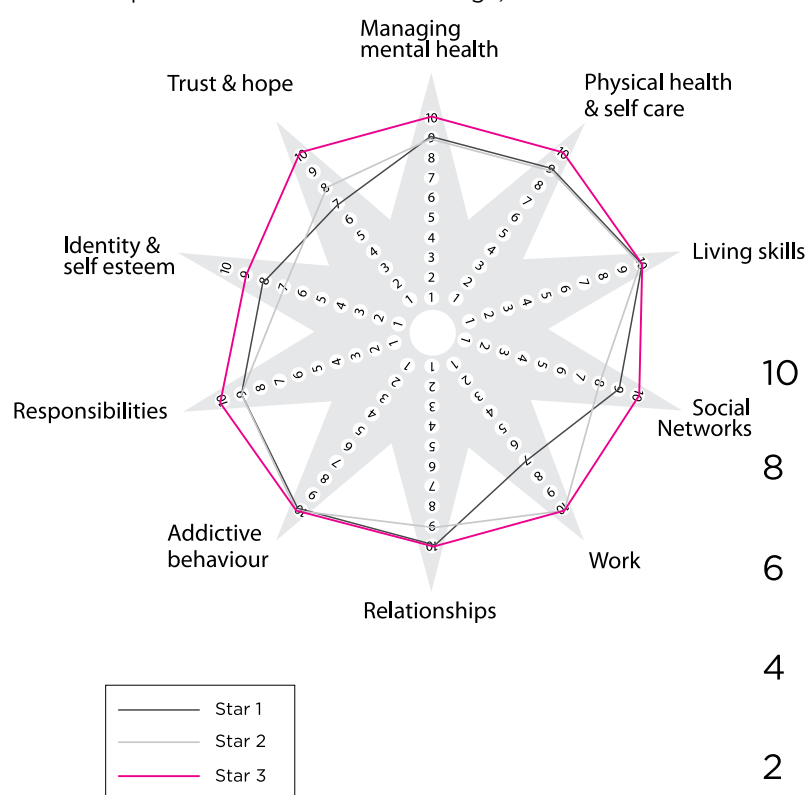
## OUR 1ST YOUNG PERSON'S STORY

Our first young person is currently in support of MACS services. Areas of need which the young person identified included identity and self esteem, managing mental health, trust/hope and relationships. In her first session, we asked her to spend time with the horses, becoming familiar with them. One of the horses kept walking away, not allowing her to get close. This had meaning for the young person who related it to her own experiences of trust and self image,

stating "the horse doesn't like me" and "this is what happens when I let people in close, they go away". Other important themes came out for the young person in relation to balancing her past and current self and allowing them to co-exist without ignoring emotional needs.

The following week we asked the young person to create a structure in the arena, using any equipment that represented her experiences that had brought her to this point. The young person built her life in different stages, some good and some bad. One section in particular dealt with a sensitive emotional issue, sitting as a huge X in the middle of the structure. and When asked to lead the horses through her journey, the horse she labelled as herself, refused to walk through this section and repeatedly sidestepped it. Exploring this with her, she could relate this metaphor to how she deals with problems – avoidance.

The remaining sessions focused on this structure and although the meaning of the X sometimes changed, the young person felt the sessions would help her move past this. At one point, the young person changed the X and we discussed her approach to problem solving and "black and white" thinking which this young person is prone to. She recognised that doing the same things over and over meant getting the same results and by changing the shape of the X, she could lead the horses (her past and present self) into her future space. This moment was extremely emotional and powerful for this young person and she shone with a sense of achievement and recognition in her own ability to cope. "Bad things have happened to me but good has come out of it because I learnt stuff. So this can be the same for other bad times".





## OUR 2ND YOUNG PERSON'S STORY

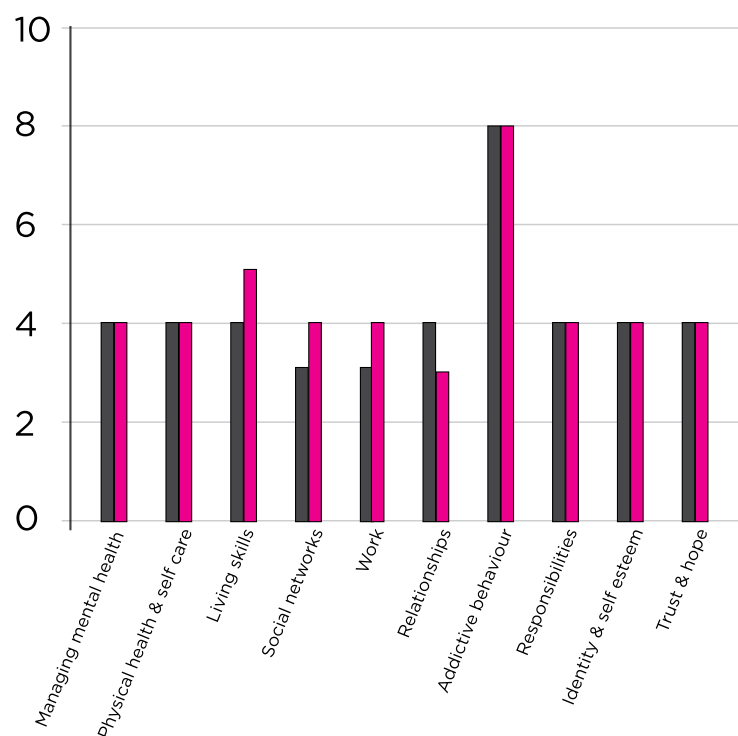
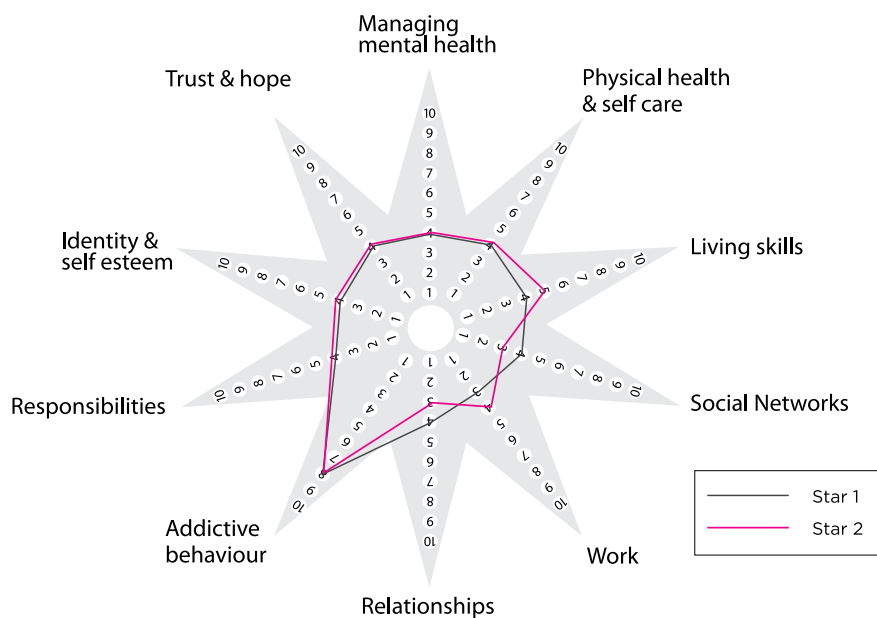
Our second young person is currently in support of MACS services. Areas of need which the young person identified included managing mental health, trust and hope, relationships, lack of confidence and feeling isolated. This young person enjoyed spending time with the horses so initial activities focused on grooming. Uniquely with these horses, they spent a lot of time standing very still, with very little movement. At times, when the young person tried to groom the horse he identified as "me", the other horse blocked this which resulted in anger and frustration.

He made connections to his own relationship with his mother and how similar patterns can emerge in their relationship.

Making observations on patterns in the horse's behaviour (such as stillness) allowed us to probe further and create exercises around where he is now and his hopes for the future. A massive shift happened for this young person when a horse moved from his space (resignation) to where he wants to be, eating an apple he labelled as "inaction" on the way. This metaphor for inaction helped him realise that in order to change his current circumstances, he needs to take action and make changes. He had been unable to put a head collar on both horses to lead them together but this time approached

the horses head on, put the head collars on and led them from a place of "inaction/where I am now" to where I want to be. Although he stated the future is scary, he led both horses into this space and stood with his shoulders back and a smile, an immense aura of pride shining through at his accomplishments.

This young person particularly struggled with feelings of isolation as his anxiety in social situations had increased to the point where he found it really difficult to leave his home. However, he attended every week and he expressed that in addition to time spent with the horses in the sessions, he found the time talking to MACS staff after his sessions as something he particularly enjoyed.



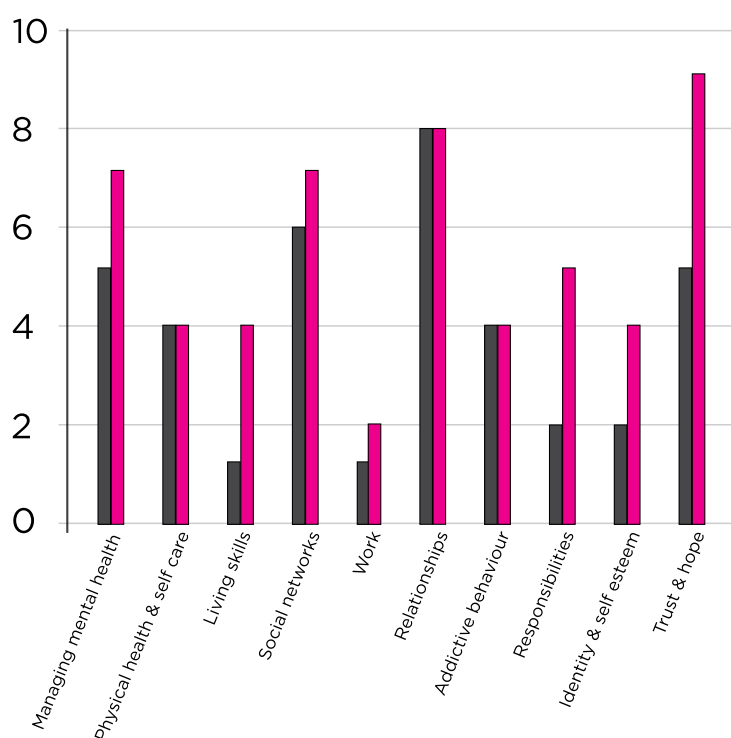
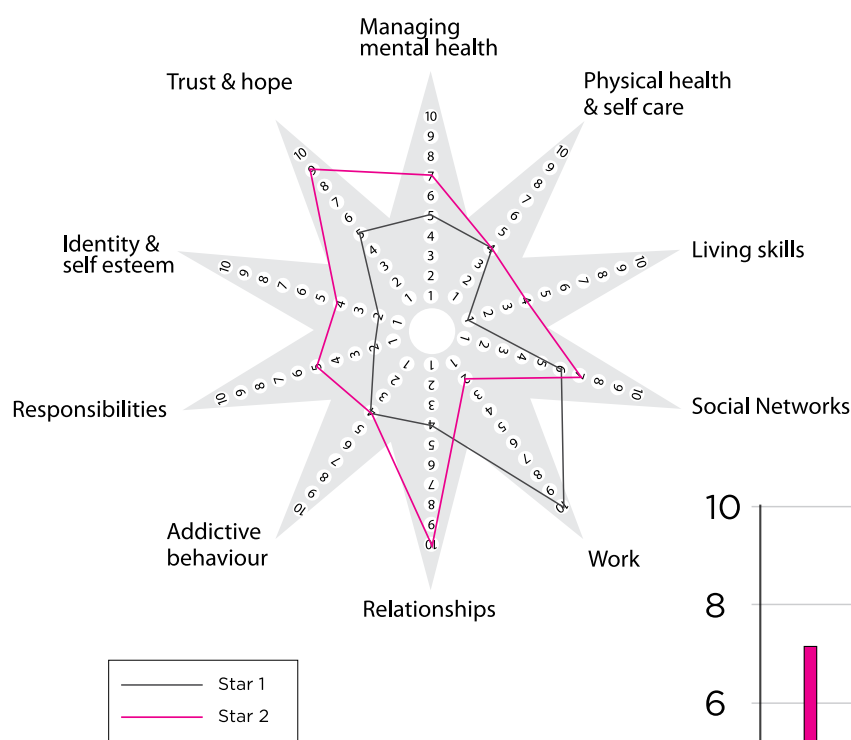
“I found transitions really helpful because it showed me so much about my life. It was a real eye opener. I find it hard to talk to people about things that are going on for me but transitions has helped me learn to do that. It also has helped me begin to work through these issues. Transitions is really enjoyable because it's all hands on, not sitting around bored. I really looked forward to Wednesdays knowing I was going to transitions because I would find out something new about myself every week and it was never the same thing over and over”

## OUR 3RD YOUNG PERSON'S STORY

Our third young person is currently being supported by MACS services. Areas of need which the young person identified included managing mental health, trust and hope, identity and self esteem. In the first session this young person spent time with the horses, becoming familiar to them. She expressed a real comfort with the horses but at the same time a level

of fear of them. This was explored further in the sessions but the young person was unable to put a name to them, seeing them as just horses. The young person had two further sessions, due to being on holidays and used the time to focus her remaining sessions on her life journey. Her life journey had different elements, reflecting her goals, past difficult experiences and where she is now. Using the horses, she was able to move through the difficult parts of her journey and clear a

new path/journey for herself which she labelled “new beginnings”. For this young person, she felt it was important to accept her past and move on. A powerful moment for this young person happened at the end of her final session when the “past” horse stood in her past, she stood in her present and her “future” horse stood in the future. This represented a balance of where she was, where she is now and where she wants to go.



## OUR 4TH YOUNG PERSON'S STORY

Our fourth young person is a 21 year old female who has been supported by MACS since 2012. Areas of need which the young person identified included Managing Mental Health, Trust and Hope, Identity/Self Esteem and Social Networks.

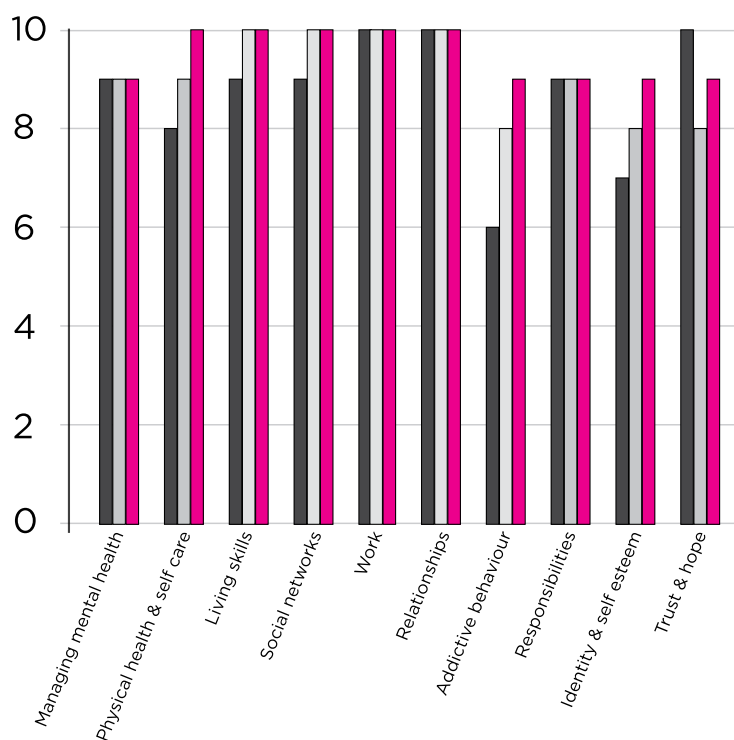
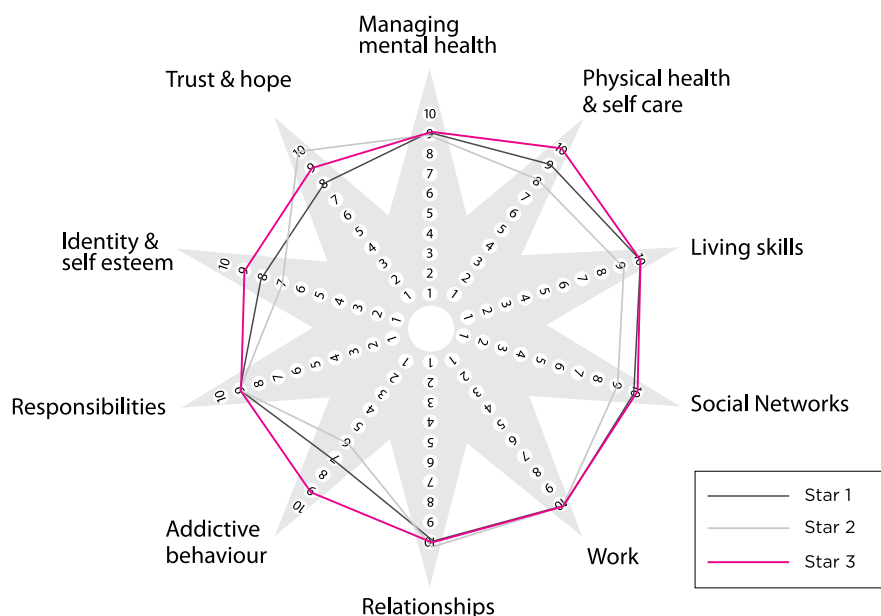
This young person spent her first couple of sessions being around the horses. She found the experience nerve wracking and was unsure of the horses and how they might respond to her so the first activities were based on helping her feel safer in the arena, for example, grooming.

The young person enjoyed the

space and time to herself and activities were focused on her. This was met with resistance at times and different activities which encouraged her to look at allowing time for herself while meeting all her other demands. An example of an activity used was labelling the apples as things that were important to her and spacing them out. The horses were loose and naturally went to eat the apples. The young person had to prioritise what was most important to her and keep the apples from being eaten. This brought out a lot of feeling for the young person in relation to her personal life and family matters.

Her final sessions focused on her personal obstacles/barriers she sees in her life. She constructed

her journey and led the horses through. At times, they refused to move past obstacles and we discussed what that might mean with the young person, identifying personal blocks that prevent her moving forward. This opportunity to reflect and see things from a new perspective shifted her focus onto the positive aspects of her character, her seeing the horses approach to "moving through a bit at a time" as indicative of how she works through problems. Although resistant at first she explained because of the activities with the horses, she has become aware of the areas of herself she needs to work on and now sees how important it is for her to have space for herself.





“I really loved taking part in transitions. I think it’s a fab service to have. Before transitions I didn’t really have an interest in horses and was a bit wary about working with them as they are so big....I guess it’s just because I didn’t know what to expect. I’m glad I did it now as the horses were all amazing and it was a great experience. I have changed my opinion on horses now and think they are wonderful and very smart animals. They pick up on things very quickly.”

## OUR 5TH YOUNG PERSON’S STORY

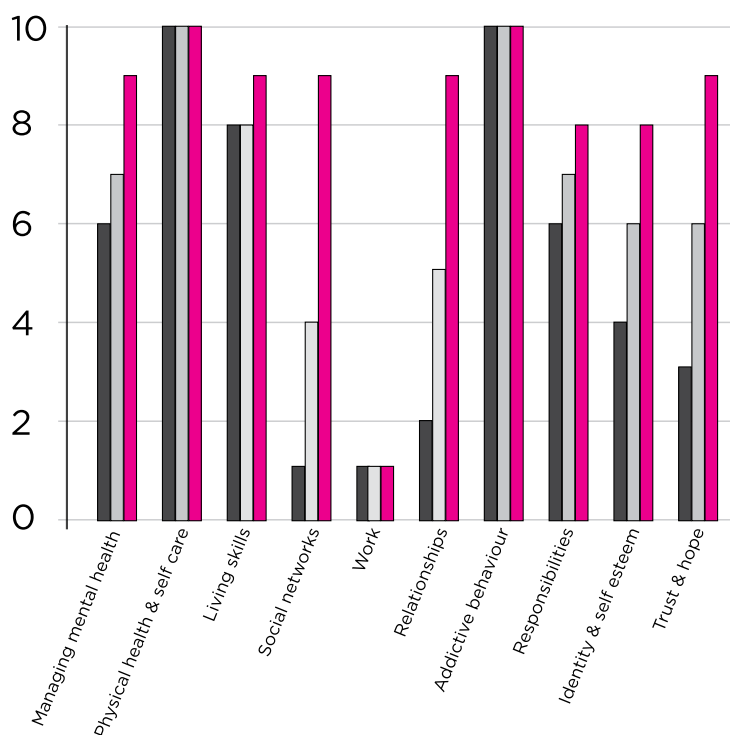
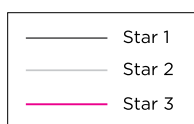
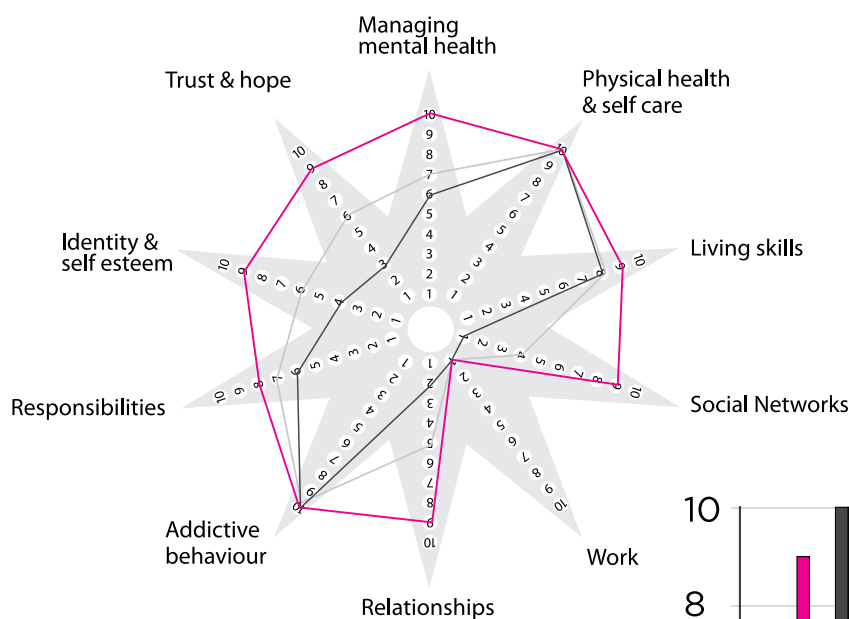
Our fifth young person is currently being supported by MACS services. Areas of need which the young person identified included Social Networks, Identity and Self Esteem and Trust and Hope.

From the beginning this young person expressed feeling stuck, particularly in her relationships with others and had a goal of being able to express herself fully. As sessions progressed, the young person identified clear patterns

of behaviour between the horses (which she labelled as herself and her mum). She could relate clearly to this behaviour and we progressed the sessions by doing activities around boundaries with her and the horses. These activities evoked a lot of thought and emotion for the young person by challenging her role in the relationship and providing insight into how she communicates and how external influences can impact on the relationships she wants. We created activities with the horses that allowed the young person to challenge her perceptions of her

situation and how she responds.

The activities with the horses allowed the young person to realise she can increase her boundaries and increase her sense of control she has over her own life and what is important to hold onto/let go of. She recognised that she can’t force relationships but she has the resources and skills to improve her relationships. The young person summed up her experiences well by saying “sometimes it takes being on the outside looking in, to see what you need to change”.





## UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

In this section we would like to show how the data collected has had a wider impact, demonstrating the differences that taking part in Transitions has made for young people.

As a result of taking part in the Transitions programme;

- 3 young people engaged in formal counselling services
- 2 young person accessed employment
- 3 young people engaged in training and education
- 5 young people engaged better with support services e.g. social services, mental health support services.

## EXPECTED LEARNING

As Transitions is experiential in nature, our focus is on creating scenarios in which young people can gain insight. Based on the information from the horses behaviour and what we see and hear from the young people, we plan and create situations in which a young person has the opportunity to learn something new or see something in a different way. Examples of this are strewn throughout the case studies but we can clearly see from the quantitative and qualitative data shown in this report, that Transitions (Equine Assisted Learning) is an effective tool

for helping young people move through a process of change. The relationships between the horses, young people and facilitators create a melting pot of opportunities for reflective learning, insight and personal growth that is unique to our approach to working with young people. Providing additional wraparound support in terms of other services is a key element in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of young people, creating distinctive openings for further dialogue and progressive work.

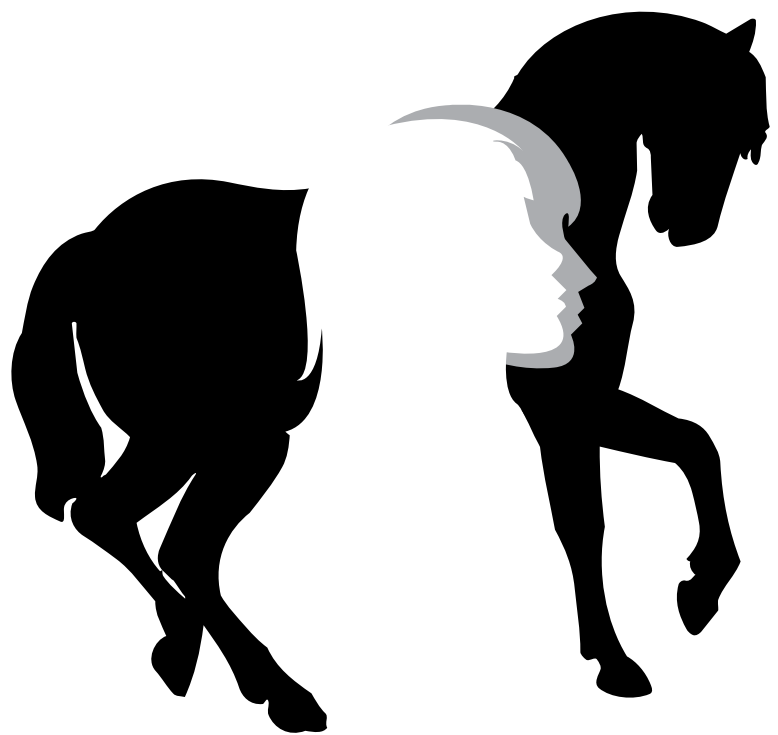
## UNEXPECTED LEARNING

We have expanded our knowledge in relation to some of the key elements of the program. This expected learning was reinforced through our practice and included;

- It is important to have a lead on coordinating the training and planning of the programs.
- Clearer information is needed for those who are interested in referring into Transitions. Also, the referral criteria needs to be reviewed to ensure appropriate referral to the project
- Debrief is a vital process for the facilitators. Planning dates and adequate time for debrief is a critical part of the program design and delivery.
- Practice sessions for facilitators

are helpful. In planning Transitions programs, time should be allowed prior to the beginning of sessions to allow staff to practice.

- Space and time needs to be allowed for discussion of 'S' (facilitators own processes).
- It is helpful for young people to explain why you are asking young people to do tasks at certain points, especially at the initial stages. This helps them feel more secure and limits confusion.
- Group sessions were helpful for staff in understanding the process for young people.
- Planning dates in good time is important. Need to have them in as early as possible and any changes should be communicated in good time.
- It is useful for facilitators to work with different members of the team and observe each other's sessions. This allows facilitators to see different ways of working and become familiar with each other's styles.



# TRANSITIONS

EQUINE ASSISTED GROWTH & LEARNING





# RECOMMENDATIONS

We have a wealth of information from the evaluation forms, discussions with young people, referrers and from staff facilitating and leading the Transitions project.

From this information we have compiled a number of key recommendations. These are;

1. It is strongly recommended that there is a Transitions (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning) team dedicated to the delivery of the service. Due to the pressures on the different services it is extremely difficult to manage the program for staff who are already have other work commitments.
2. Group sessions are useful for young people. Staff need to do more training in relation to facilitating group sessions.
3. Staff should deliver more Transitions group sessions as part of their ongoing professional development in Equine Assisted Learning.
4. Regular supervision (which can include peer supervision) is a critical part of the process and time must be allowed in the planning process for this.
5. De-briefs for referrer's and basic training of the EAGALA approach is important. Where possible, an information session should be given to referrer's to help them understand the process and support the young person.
6. It is recommended that staff do further training on delivering the EAGALA model with young people who have learning disabilities. If not suitable, staff should refer to other appropriate agencies.
7. We need to continue to build an evidence base in relation to the effectiveness of our model with young people. A key recommendation is that we continue to evidence both qualitative and quantitative in the form of Outcome tools, evaluation forms and impact reviews.
8. It is recommended that an impact evaluation be completed with young people six months after they have completed a program to demonstrate the longer term impact of this approach.

# CONCLUSION

TRANSITIONS IS A POWERFUL TOOL FOR SELF DISCOVERY AND PERSONAL GROWTH. WE HAVE SEEN HOW THE EXPERIENTIAL NATURE OF TRANSITIONS ALLOWS YOUNG PEOPLE TO CHALLENGE THEIR OWN ASSUMPTIONS AND BEHAVIOURS IN A UNIQUE WAY THAT COMPLIMENTS EXISTING SUPPORT BEING OFFERED BY MACS SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE.

For the majority of young people, the unique combination of the environment, solution focused activities and the triad of the mental health specialist, equine specialist and horse has opened a window of opportunity for them to explore issues in a way they never expected.

MACS has a passion for Transitions (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning) and a proven track record of success. We aim to continue to deliver this service with young people, providing unique opportunities for personal growth, insight, reflection and development.















**TRANSITIONS**  
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