

Pioneering partnership between NHS Lothian and Muirfield Riding Therapy celebrates 10 years together

NHS Lothian and Muirfield Riding Therapy (MRT) are celebrating 10 years of partnership working together in delivering the Children's Therapeutic Riding Service; providing life-changing therapeutic riding, free of charge, to children and young people with various disabilities in East and Mid Lothian.



Orio

The Children's Therapeutic Riding Service was the first, and is still the largest service of its kind in Scotland. They provide Hippotherapy, a specialist and highly effective form of physiotherapy, on horseback.

NHS Lothian children's physiotherapist Heather Falconer, who pioneered the service with MRT's Service Coordinator Susan Law, has described what Hippotherapy is. She said, "Children are referred when their NHS Lothian physiotherapist believes hippotherapy to be the most effective form of physiotherapy for them. The children present with a huge array of challenges, including difficulties with mobility, balance, muscle tone, strength, coordination, body awareness and symmetry. Hippotherapy provides a means to address all of these issues and more!

"Hippotherapy uses the movement, warmth and rhythm of the horse as a therapy tool. As a horse walks, every step

challenges its rider's balance. This activates and strengthens the muscles of the trunk and pelvis. A 3-dimensional movement is transferred to the rider's pelvis which mirrors the movement of a normal rhythmic human walking pattern, and gives experience of a normal walking pattern. The warmth of the horse and a gentle rolling gait can relax tight muscles, while a more choppy movement can increase low muscle tone."

Alongside Muirfield's friendly horses, riders now also have the opportunity to ride on Oreo, a specialist mechanical horse. This horse-shaped, high tech piece of physiotherapy equipment responds to leg and hand movements just like a real horse. Oreo is linked to a screen in front of him which allows his riders to choose from an array of scenic rides such as the beach or fields which they can virtually follow.

Heather added, "It is great fun, both for me and for the children I work with, for them it doesn't feel like therapy, but delivers consistently amazing results. It is also much easier to connect with a child and for them to trust me using the ponies or Oreo as an intermediary. It is a 3-way therapeutic relationship, 4-way if you count the volunteer key workers too."

Charlie Kay, 13 has been using the service for 10 years. Charlie's mum Melanie explains how much it has helped her son. She said, "The best part about the riding service is that Charlie sees it as more of a hobby than a therapy session. He has seen a real knock-on effect in mobility and his walking is so much better. As the riding engages his core he is sitting up better and straighter. Not only is it great for his physical health, but Charlie also enjoys the social aspect of speaking to all the volunteers and staff."



Craig on Oreo with Mum Mel and Physio Heather

Due to COVID-19, access to the horses has been restricted, but Charlie has sessions booked with the mechanical horse Oreo

which he also really enjoys. Melanie added, "As Charlie is quite competitive he enjoys beating his score on Oreo. You get more points the more you are centred on the horse, so this has really helped to focus Charlie and improve his position and posture. "

During 'more normal' times when group sessions are running Melanie enjoys meeting other parents, She said, "Not only are the sessions helpful to Charlie, I find I get great advice joining with other parents in the viewing gallery. I am very grateful to have the opportunity for us both to use this incredible service."

For more information on Muirfield Riding Therapy check:
www.muirfieldridingtherapy.org.uk