



Risk Assessments and EAL / Wellbeing Programmes

When a riding centre adds Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) or Equine-Assisted Wellbeing (EAW) programmes, the underlying site and equine risk assessments remain essential but they generally need to expand in scope, become more person-focused, and account for non-riding, therapeutic, or experiential activities that differ significantly from a traditional riding environment.

Below is a clear breakdown of how risk assessments typically vary, and why.

How Risk Assessments Change When Introducing EAL / Wellbeing Programmes

1. Participant Profile Risks

Traditional riding schools assume participants are:

- walking independently
- able to follow instructions
- familiar with outdoor environments
- reasonably coordinated and self-aware

In EAL/EAW, participants may include:

- children with SEN
- adults with learning disabilities
- individuals with anxiety, PTSD, or trauma
- people with mobility challenges
- people unfamiliar or nervous around horses

New assessment considerations:

- Communication abilities (can they process multi-step instructions?)
- Emotional regulation (risk of panic, shutdown, or dissociation)
- Mobility and strength (risk of falls during non-ridden interactions)
- Triggers or sensitivities (noise, touch, sudden movement)
- Safeguarding and supervision ratios

2. Activity-Specific Risks (Non-Ridden, Experiential Tasks)

EAL activities differ from riding lessons. Examples:

- grooming
- leading a horse in a pen
- obstacle or reflective tasks in an arena
- herd observation in a field

New assessment considerations:

- Risks during close-contact groundwork
- Standing or moving near loose horses during observation sessions
- Handling equipment participants may be unfamiliar with
- Outdoor reflective tasks where participants may be distracted
- Participants sitting on the ground or in vulnerable positions

3. Horse Selection and Behaviour & Welfare Risks

EAL requires horses with:

- high tolerance for unusual movements or vocalisations
- stable temperament
- minimal reactivity to unpredictable client behaviour

New assessment considerations:

- Suitability screening for each horse
- Extra monitoring of horses used for EAL—behavioural fatigue, stress signals
- Shorter session limits (welfare domain: mental load)
- Adjusted workloads to avoid “emotional burnout”

4. Environmental Risks

Because EAL sessions often take place:

- in quiet corners of paddocks
- on sensory trails
- in enclosed but informal environments
- outside the typical controlled arena space

New assessment considerations:

- Ground conditions where participants may sit or walk slowly
- Access routes for people with mobility challenges
- Weather-related mental wellbeing impact (heat, wind sensitivity)
- Additional equipment (benches, props, sensory items)

5. Facilitator & Staffing Risks

Traditional instructors ≠ therapeutic facilitators.

New assessment considerations:

- Competency requirements for facilitators
- Clear role boundaries (not delivering therapy unless qualified)
- Emotional load on staff
- Safe working practices for sessions with vulnerable adults or children
- Additional DBS and safeguarding procedures

6. Session Structure & Emergency Procedures

EAL sessions are less structured and more client-led.

New assessment considerations:

- Reviewing emergency stop/withdraw procedures for groundwork
- Quiet disengagement protocols if a participant becomes distressed
- Horse removal procedures during emotional escalation
- Communication plans (e.g., co-facilitator roles, safe words)

7. Psychological Safety Risk Assessment

Unique to wellbeing-focused programmes.

New assessment considerations

- Potential emotional triggers (activities, horse responses)
- Participant boundaries (touch, proximity)
- Safe reflective spaces
- Aftercare or debrief protocols
- Handling disclosures of distress or trauma

Summary: Key Differences in Assessments

Area	Riding School Risk Assessment	EAL / Wellbeing Risk Assessment
Participant factors	Physical ability; riding skill	Cognitive, emotional, behavioural needs
Activity types	Mounted & standard groundwork	Reflective, unmounted, experiential, unpredictable
Horse suitability	Ridden temperament	Emotional tolerance, low reactivity, welfare monitoring
Environment	Arena, stable yard	Quiet spaces, sensory trails, herd fields
Staff training	Riding instruction	Facilitator skills, safeguarding, trauma-awareness
Emergency planning	Falls & horse incidents	Emotional overload, dissociation, horse stress
Psychological risk	Minimal	High importance

Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) Risk Assessment

The Table below provides some suggested content for risk assessments; these are by no means comprehensive. They should be integrated with your Riding Establishment Risk Assessments and tailored to your specific needs, location and clients and reflect the associated hazards. You should amend policies, procedures and plans to ensure the control measures form part of your EAL activity, and are understood by staff.

What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed?	How might they be harmed?	What are you already doing to control the risks?
Difficulty following instructions; sensory overwhelm	Participants, facilitators, volunteers	Panic, shutdown, sudden movements, slips/falls	- Pre-session screening - Adapt instructions to participant processing ability (visual aids, step-by-step prompts) - Maintain supervision ratios appropriate to client profile - Allow support person where required - Quiet introduction to horses
Horse startle response / close contact behaviour	Participants, facilitators	Stepping on feet, nipping, defensive reactions	- Facilitators reinforce established safe positioning protocols - Use temperament-screened horses - Monitor equine welfare and limit emotional load
Loose horses during herd observation	Participants	Knockdown, kick, uninvited approach	- Keep participants behind fencing - Use settled herd - Monitor horse body language

What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed?	How might they be harmed?	What are you already doing to control the risks?
			- Facilitators brief participants on safe observation behaviour; ensure escape routes are clear
Uneven or slippery ground	Participants, staff	Trips, falls, sprains	- Inspect ground conditions - Suitable footwear - Adapt access routes for mobility challenges - Provide alternative indoor or surfaced areas if conditions unsuitable
Grooming activities	Participants	Being in vulnerable zones; tool misuse	- Reinforce safe zones for participants unfamiliar with horses - Provide adapted grooming tools if needed - Facilitators supervise positioning
Leading horses	Participants	Rope burn, being pulled, tripping	- Offer assisted leading (two-person) for participants with reduced coordination - Use ropes with safety clips - Teach halt and disengagement signals
Reflective / emotional tasks	Participants	Emotional overload, dissociation	- Facilitators monitor psychological safety - Provide disengagement protocols; ensure horses can be removed

What are the hazards?	Who might be harmed?	How might they be harmed?	What are you already doing to control the risks?
			quickly if participant becomes distressed
Emotional disclosure or distress	Participants, staff	Emotional crisis, vicarious trauma	- Provide clear aftercare or debrief space - Facilitators trained in trauma-aware responses - Referral pathways established
Loss of balance, panic, or distraction while mounted	Participants, horses, facilitators	Falls, horse stress, unsafe dismount	- Suitability screening - Assisted mounting/dismounting - Safety stirrups/neck straps - Facilitator close supervision - Emergency dismount protocol
Emotional fatigue from switching between ridden and therapeutic tasks	Horses	Stress, confusion, behavioural burnout	- Limit number of sessions per horse - Rotate horses - Monitor for stress signals - Adjust workloads - Ensure adequate rest and time with other horses