



RDA IN LOCKDOWN



A report into the impact of prolonged RDA group closure during lockdown on the health and wellbeing of riders, carriage drivers and volunteers; the importance of the RDA community during this time and opportunities for support from RDA UK.

With thanks to all the members of RDA who took part in the survey.
Special thanks to India Collins-Davies.



Executive Summary

Prolonged closure of RDA groups has had a detrimental impact on the majority of RDA members, particularly among riders and carriage drivers, and specifically in the areas of physical and mental well-being and loss of confidence.

The inability to connect in a meaningful way with RDA's horses and other members during lockdown is exacerbating the issue for many members, for whom RDA is their sole access to activity, therapy and social life.

Many RDA groups are continuing to connect with their members during lockdown, and their efforts to do so are highly valued and appreciated. It is clear that being able to connect with other members and receive updates on the health and happiness of the horses makes a real difference.

Key themes

Emerging from the research are several key themes, questions and areas of concern, which may be useful to return to for further planning and support for groups and members in the coming weeks and months.

Financial

- Will my group be able to sustain itself financially?
- How can I help my group with fundraising?
- How will RDAUK be able to help my group?

Physical

- No riding for a prolonged period of time is causing physical decline for many participants
- How can participants maintain/begin to regain riding fitness at home?

Operational

- What are the plans for restarting at national and group level?
- How will social distancing work for my RDA group/personal circumstances?
- Is it too soon to start? (Or are we being too cautious?)
- Should RDA volunteers/staff wear PPE? Who will supply these?
- How long will it take?
- Are current regulations and plans fair?
- Can training be conducted online?

Emotional

- RDA is a lifeline for many and is missed deeply across the entire RDA community
- Will I be able to ride again?
- Will I be able to volunteer again?

Enrichment

- Interest in remote initiatives at national level: competitions, challenges etc
- Enthusiasm for contact from groups, especially when it involves photos/videos of RDA horses!

Communication

- Is information clear and easy to access?
- What resources will be available from RDAUK and will these be easy to use?
- How can communications be used to support and encourage the RDA community remotely?
- How can those who are less/not able to access digital communications be included?



Research background

RDA surveyed **3,382** members of the RDA community to better understand the impact of COVID-19 and the resulting closure of groups.

The survey considered the concerns of individuals - both as lockdown continues, and as they think about returning to RDA. It also covered the ways groups have been supporting their members, and the importance of this in coping during the crisis.

At the time of surveying, groups had been closed for over 3 months. A tiny number of groups have been able to restart activities for a fraction of their (independent) riders. There is still much planning to be done, and further easing of lockdown measures, before other groups can start up again.

Who took part



Questions

The survey asked

- The impact of groups closures on physical and mental well-being, confidence and communication levels
- The extent to which individuals are missing RDA
- Concerns about the negative impact of prolonged closure
- Which aspects of RDA individuals are missing
- How important groups have been in helping individuals during lockdown

Free text comment

- Ways in which groups have helped
- Concerns about returning to RDA after lockdown
- Other impacts of closure
- Ideas for ways groups and RDA UK could do more to support individuals



The impact of closure on individuals

The impact of RDA group closure on individual members of RDA cannot be underestimated. This prolonged period of inactivity and isolation is being felt across the organisation, among both participants and volunteers.

Among participants (including those answering on behalf of or about a participant), the biggest areas of concern are physical and mental well-being, with over 75% saying closure is having a negative impact on both. Social skills are also being affected – which may in turn be linked to confidence, with 63% saying their confidence levels have dropped.

In their comments, many respondents say that RDA is the only physical and/or social activity that they take part in each week. Although the population generally may have found new ways to exercise or socialise during lockdown, for RDA members that isn't always possible –

indeed, many people come to RDA precisely because it is the only physical activity they can do independently. This is leaving many members without access to any exercise or social life during this time.

Confidence levels is the most significant area of concern among volunteers. Again, 63% say that they feel less confident than before. Although the negative impact of closure among volunteers is less marked across the board than for participants, there are still significant concerns over physical and mental well-being for many.

As we will see later in this report, the negative effects of closure on people's health and well-being will have an impact on groups, particularly as they look to restart. Many of the concerns raised about returning to RDA sessions – particularly among participants – centre around issues of health, physical ability and anxiety.

What participants say....

80%

Being unable to access RDA has had a negative impact on my **Physical wellbeing**.

77%

Being unable to access RDA has had a negative impact on my **mental wellbeing**.

59%

Being unable to access RDA has had a negative impact on my **confidence**.

51%

Being unable to access RDA has had a negative impact on my **social skills**.

"I cannot express how much I miss riding and the horses. My physical health has declined significantly and I am now back on medication that riding means I don't normally take. I am also missing doing the only form of exercise I can do independently."

"Both my twins attend RDA sessions. J's anxiety has hugely increased since lockdown, his social skills and confidence has also suffered, along with his listening and attention (ADHD, Aspergers, anxiety). A has autism, learning disabilities, hypermobility & an auto inflammatory disease. Riding helps with his muscle strength, builds his core, all of which has suffered since lockdown. He also struggles with confidence, which RDA helps to build on and helps him with any worries"

"I feel more isolated. I miss interaction with other volunteers and the boost helping the riders has on my sense of wellbeing."



Which aspects of RDA individuals are missing

Understanding which elements of RDA members are missing can help RDA to develop activities and initiatives to support individuals if closure continues. The results show that members are mostly missing the horses (91%) and their interactions with volunteers and coaches (92%). Among participants horses are at the top of the list, with 94% missing them.

The fact that almost everyone is missing the horses might be obvious – and might even seem flippant - but it is actually really significant for many individuals. RDA horses provide so much more than a weekly riding lesson, so their lack is being felt very strongly. For some people this extends to worrying about the horses' wellbeing (and fitness), about whether they will see their favourite

horse again and if the horse will remember them. Not spending time with the horses is, for some members, a contributing factor in their reduced sense of mental well-being. As we see in the next section, being able to have some connection with the horses at this time can make a real difference.

“I miss going and meeting people. But most of all I miss the horses. Stroking them, being close and to have them look back.”

“We miss the routine at the start of their week, the positive interactions with volunteers, greeting and being with the ponies. They have both said how much they miss RDA. They have less energy and motivation and my eldest's communication and confidence has been affected.”

“He is really missing his friends and the time being good at something. Schoolwork is hard work and a constant reminder of disability. RDA was a place in the week where he could be good at something and feel comfortable with his friends.”

Q Is there anything else you would like to say about the effects RDA group closures are having on you or the person you take care of?

things hope routine without friends attend good hard horse riding clients
 missing riding used affected safe well riding sessions benefits parents
 gives lessons many miss weekly miss horses impact also
 miss interaction see school going miss routine activities start son
 mental health worry enjoy sessions support feel years
 riders RDA sessions horses work riding important
 children ride volunteers miss confidence
 RDA know group may help family much us time
 missing social will lost N RDA group ponies one concerned
 now people return really missing physical mental love lot think
 everyone daughter miss sessions social interaction coach contact due
 life m really riders missing participants difficult exercise especially
 look forward miss seeing back effect makes highlight week need lockdown



The importance of RDA groups during lockdown

Despite the total closure of all RDA groups around the UK, many groups have remained in touch with their members throughout (research to groups suggests that around half have done so). Where this contact is happening, it is highly valued by participants and volunteers alike. Over 60% say that their RDA group has been quite important, important or vital in helping them during lockdown.

There are various ways that groups have kept in touch, ranging from social media and email updates, to Zoom calls with the horses. Respondents talk about feeling 'connected', a 'sense of belonging', 'keeping their spirits up' and 'not being forgotten'. Some groups are using the opportunity that lockdown affords to reach out to their members in new ways, and this is appreciated.

One of RDA's key strengths has always been tackling social isolation, and this

research demonstrates the vital part played by groups even when no RDA activity is taking place. Naturally, it's the horses that everyone wants to get back to, but the RDA community is so much more besides.

We will look later on at the concerns that individuals have about returning to RDA, and communication to members plays a big role in helping here. While many groups are good at communicating on a social level with their members, there may be room for more information and reassurance about the continuation of the group and plans for the future.

The survey shows that some members have real concerns about never being able to ride again – either through their own deteriorating health or through their group closing permanently. Opening up a discussion with individuals about these issues would be reassuring.

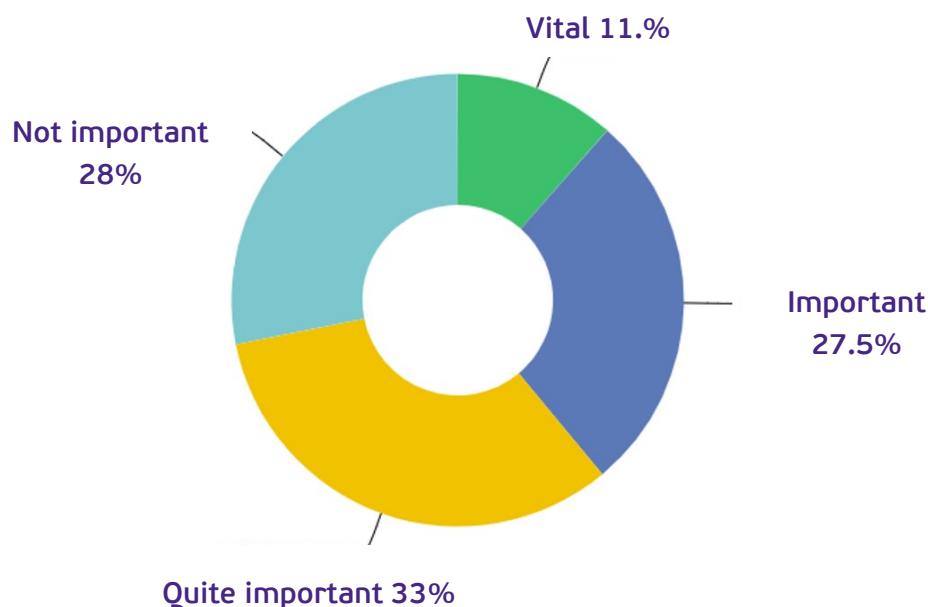
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“We have had updates, regular emails and we follow them on Facebook and Instagram where they have posted pics of the ponies which my daughter loves.”

“They have given me something to look forward too. They have put tests on the internet which I found interesting. They have kept me informed, so I don't feel forgotten. Thank YOU.”

“It would be nice to talk to someone to know horses are well, especially my usual horse.”

What participants say....





Concerns about returning to RDA

The majority of members say they do not have concerns about returning to RDA, but even so, over a quarter (27%) of participants and their support networks do. This rises to 31% if we just look at the results from participants.

Among participants, there are personal concerns about getting back into a routine, wondering if things will be the same as before (in terms of familiar faces and horses), worries about having forgotten skills or losing confidence and a loss of physical ability. They also have some concerns about the practicalities of running sessions within social distancing and hygiene guidelines.

It is important to note that this in no way points to a reluctance to return to sessions. Instead, it demonstrates the need for groups to talk to members about their worries, so that appropriate support can be given. As discussed already in this report, keeping members updated and involved in the preparations for restarting sessions would be reassuring.

Understandably, volunteers' concerns focus more on the practical needs of the group: maintaining social distancing; horse fitness; volunteer numbers; the vulnerability of some participants and how to support participants back into riding after a break.



"I haven't been anywhere since the beginning of lockdown, other than a short walk each day and a couple of medical appointments. I'm actually quite scared about leaving the house now, and will need encouragement that it's safe to come and participate."

"I am concerned that RDA may never allow us to resume our lessons."

How RDA groups and RDA UK can help more

Where members feel that their group or RDA UK could be doing more to support them, the majority of comments from participants refer to receiving updates about the horses or 'social' events with other members. We have already seen the importance of this type of regular contact in helping to support participants through prolonged group closure and these comments reinforce the point.

In addition, participants and their support networks want to know what is actually happening at their group and their plans for re-opening. Specifically,

what measures are being taken to ensure the safety of members and whether there is a proposed timetable for re-opening.

Volunteers also stress the importance of 'keeping in touch' - in reference to their own group and the wider organisation. They want to be kept informed about the emerging plans for reopening and government guidelines, and it is clear that in some instances they feel they are not getting the information they want.

In contrast, many members took the opportunity to highlight positive aspects in relation to the information and

support they have received from their group and RDA UK. Unsurprisingly for an organisation of the size and complexity of RDA, the issue seems to be one of inconsistency and difficulties around disseminating information effectively through the whole network.

Training was mentioned by some volunteers, eager to brush up their skills or to use the 'downtime' to learn new ones. This chimes with the loss of confidence being experienced by many volunteers as a result of group closure.



"RDA head office have been an incredible support throughout the situation, it definitely shows the benefit of being part of a National Organisation - thank you all."

"It would be nice to hear from people, just to chat and say hello. But I'd love any kind of horsey competition or quiz, or art project. I don't know really - anything we could kind of do together, or share to stay connected."

"Even if we cannot maybe ride until we have a vaccine, I would love to be involved in any form of training that would improve my coaching skills. I have done most of the ones online."



Recommendations

Q Is there anything else you think RDA UK or your group could do to help you through this time?

little friends participants really appreciate ride keep us informed competitions brilliant lovely
 look everyone pictures horses send links Continue things sessions Paco
 social media help group ponies social distancing work returning thank difficult
 email might Perhaps visit horses well learning going missing see people
 time regular contact children know lessons really groom
 updates allow group see horses RDA support
 horses keep contact keep love help share riding
 Nothing best us safe one Maybe N start Yes soon s Please
 course think videos photos Make sure great already also arrange online
 zoom meetings keep touch horse care volunteers kids possible soon possible
 riders difficult time will ok posting enjoy nice back go back person etc regular contact
 much need

The survey revealed several practical ways that groups and RDA UK can support individuals through lockdown, and to help them prepare for returning to activity when the time is right.

In addition, important consideration should be given to the barriers (both cultural and practical) that prevent members from receiving information, being involved in planning and being able to share ideas and concerns.

RDA UK

1. Create contacts database of individual members so information can be shared more effectively and consistently.
2. Promote training opportunities (and/or create new ones) for volunteers to address confidence levels.
3. Support groups to address the concerns of members about returning to sessions.
4. Produce 'restart roadmaps' for members to explain how (and how not) RDA may be able to restart.
5. Create more resources for participants at home, including creative projects, competitions, online tests/quizzes. Also consider how these can be used to boost confidence levels to remind participants about some of the things they might have forgotten (or think they have).

RDA Groups

1. Contact members regularly with updates about all aspects of the group: horses, news from other members, plans for restarting – especially reassuring members that this planning is happening (being realistic about timescales where possible).
2. Circulate updates from RDA UK, so that members are kept up to date and understand the planning that is going on across the organisation.
3. Consider how you might discuss the individual concerns of participants as part of the plan to restart.
4. Include the views of members in your planning – and ask for ideas.
5. Discuss training needs with your volunteers and coaches.