

"There needs to be an expectation that the therapist has supervision, which they regularly engage with, and an expectation that someone comes and views their sessions," she says. "Regulation after qualification is just as important."

Clare cautions that practitioners need to be mindful of confidentiality: "Often people are disclosing really sensitive information during sessions. You might have volunteers working on-site and they need to understand that information doesn't go beyond these walls."

Practitioners must consider the welfare of the volunteers: "What comes up in these settings can be traumatising," she says.

Clare would like a specific law governing animal-assisted services. In the absence of that, the EAP industry in the UK has started to move towards self-regulation.

The EASP is one of two bodies now offering registers of EAP practitioners. To be accepted onto the EASP's UK Human Equine Interaction Register (HEIR), practitioners must meet five standards, including having a regulated psychology, psychotherapy or counselling qualification.

"By encouraging practitioners to be transparent about their level of qualification and to use correct professional titles, the EASP is committed to raising standards and ensures that members of the public can identify through HEIR those practitioners who are best qualified to meet their needs," says Sarah Jane.

The other UK register was established by the Athena Herd Foundation, which offers training in EAP. In January 2024, their register was accredited by the Professional Standards Authority. Criteria for inclusion include a level four (equivalent to first year of a bachelor's degree) or above qualification, relevant to



Horses engage with humans without judgement, mirroring their behaviour

*"Horses don't provide therapy, they provide an equine environment that can be therapeutic. It's the practitioners who provide the therapy"*

DR CLARE THOMAS-PINO

the service being offered.

Foundation director Graeme Green says: "It's about creating an increased state of buyer beware, about trying to extend awareness to those commissioning or seeking the services that there are standards of practitioner."

**B**OTH registers also require a commitment to equine welfare. At a time when questions are being asked about the involvement of horses in sport and leisure, their role in therapy is likely to come under scrutiny, too.

Clare points out that most research into EAP looks at the impact on humans, not animals. "Currently about 1% of research

papers into EAP look at how it affects the horse," she explains. "We want to ensure that horses' wellbeing and welfare is considered at the same time as people's."

She also wants practitioners to be mindful of the language they use.

"Don't talk about 'using' the horses," she says. "Talk about working and partnering with them; it's important they have a sense of agency in what they're doing."

The other sensitive topic around EAP is accessibility. Equine-assisted therapy is not currently available on the NHS, meaning individuals and organisations must find ways to fund it themselves.

Philip points out that, by its very nature, EAP is an expensive form of therapy.

"It should be a team-based approach, with the different disciplines represented," he says. "It's expensive to do it properly – so there's a danger it becomes exclusive."

"It is complex but I wouldn't want only clinical psychologists to be able to deliver equine-assisted therapy. For someone who is vulnerable and locked into their trauma, if this therapy could be the mechanism of unlocking that with life-changing effects, affordable access is key. Accessibility and affordability are crucial."

Dawn, who has seen first-hand how EAP benefits the people in her care, agrees.

"If you make it clinical psychologists only you will price everyone out unless it becomes social prescribing [connecting people with community-based activities and resources that improve their health and wellbeing]," she says. "Equally we need someone to be in safe hands. Many kids we work with have been rejected so when a horse engages with them without that judgement, the power of it is incredible."

"I've seen, when it's done well, how powerful that connection can be." **H&H**

## How does equine-assisted psychotherapy work?



**THERE** are several ways in which horses may help the therapeutic process.

As prey animals, horses are skilled in reading non-verbal communication and are attuned to the environment around them. This makes them adept at picking up on the behaviours and emotions of those around them.

Horses mirror human behaviour. This allows the therapist to use the horse's reactions to discuss the reactions of other people, helping the person in therapy gain insight into their own relationships.

Horses are sensitive to touch, and this can be used to introduce "safe" touch to someone who struggles with intimacy or has experienced physical abuse.