



Post-lockdown activity levels



A report into the current activity levels of RDA groups post-lockdown (October 2020), the barriers to restarting and opportunities for support from RDA UK.

With thanks to all the RDA groups who took part in the survey.



Executive Summary

The easing of lockdown enabled RDA groups around the UK to start planning for reopening. Two months into this process, almost a third of groups have restarted activity to some degree.

However, participation levels remain low. Although 152 RDA groups around the UK are operational in some form, across the whole organisation RDA is currently only working with approximately 7.5% of its usual participant numbers.

Almost a quarter of the closed groups surveyed have no plans to restart (not that they will close for good, just that they aren't yet making plans).

Social distancing (not being able to support riders) and school groups not returning are clearly significant barriers for groups that remain closed.

The threat of local restrictions and lockdown measures is also eroding confidence. These factors have prompted the majority of closed groups to decide to remain closed until the Spring of 2021.

Research background

There are 467 RDA groups in the UK and at the time of surveying (end September 2020) 152 groups are signed off and registered with RDA UK to restart activities post-lockdown.

While the number of restarted groups is encouraging, anecdotal evidence suggests that participant numbers remain low, as groups struggle with ongoing restrictions around social distancing and other guidance.

The research has been carried out to reveal the actual statistics behind the anecdotal evidence, and to find out the scale of the challenge that RDA continues to face.

More optimistically, there is much to learn from groups that have been able to restart.

Among open groups, the top three vital factors that enabled them to restart are supportive trustees, a supportive venue and an overall commitment to restarting. These attitudinal factors are often seen as more significant than purely practical considerations, such as access to horses and having enough volunteers.

Where participants have returned to their groups, the RDA experience is clearly changing. To overcome the barriers of social distancing, (which prevent many participants from taking part in their usual riding or driving activities) new activities are now being offered.

This changing landscape has opportunities for RDA beyond the current situation, opening up new ways to deliver beneficial experiences with horses.

In addition, RDA surveyed groups to understand the different factors that enable some groups to restart and deliver activities for some of their participants, while the majority of groups remain closed.

Ultimately, RDA UK's imperative is for the whole organisation to get back to normal levels of activity in the fullness of time. This research will help to build a realistic timeframe for such a goal to be realised, as well as reveal what support groups need to help them get there when the time is right.

263 out of 467 RDA groups took part in the survey.



Questions

The survey asked:

- Whether groups have returned to activity or remain closed.
- If open, which activities they are currently able to offer.
- How many participants they are currently working with.
- How this compares to participant numbers in normal times.
- Which factors were important in being able to restart.
- Which factors were important when deciding to remain closed.
- When closed groups plan to restart.
- What support from RDA UK would enable groups to restart or further increase levels of activity.

Activity levels - an overview

- **263** groups took part in the survey. Of those, **69%** remain closed and **31%** have reopened (which matches the picture across the organisation).
- Open groups (those signed off to carry out some on-site activity with participants), are on average working with **23%** of their usual participant levels.
- The range of participation levels is very broad across the organisation, with some open groups working with **4%** of their participants, and others back to **100%**.
- Looked at in the context of all groups, this means RDA is working with approximately **7.5%** of its total participants.
- By Christmas, restarted groups hope to have grown participant numbers to an average of **36%** of their usual levels (with caveats around schools opening or more participants being able to come back).



Re-started groups

The number of restarted groups is something to be celebrated. In the context of the challenges they face (meeting tough restrictions, training volunteers and family members, bringing horses back to fitness and creating a safe and supportive environment for participants to return), returning to activity is no mean feat.

Groups have shown that it is their will to succeed (some even point to a kind of moral imperative) and the support of key members of their community that has enabled them to restart - an attitude that seems to trump other, more practical, considerations.

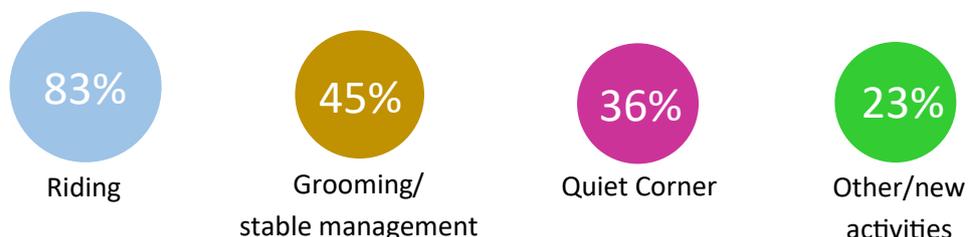
Restarted groups are adapting their activities to accommodate new guidelines, showing an ability to innovate, and an acceptance that things may be very different for quite some time.

With some groups (especially carriage driving groups) unable to carry out any of their normal activities, restarting means reimagining what RDA means, and finding new ways for participants to benefit from their time with horses.

What makes restarting possible....



What's on offer....



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“Volunteers, session leaders and trustees are all very committed to our riders so we were keen to solve problems, and find safe ways of working. Continued engagement with riders during lockdown helped us understand demand and recognise how much people missed their interaction with ponies.”

“The key purpose for our existence. Knowing there were participants who suddenly lost the ability to connect with their equine friends but did not know or understand why they could no longer come, why they could not go out and so on.

We were keen to do everything we could to be able to provide opportunities to help, support and encourage those with disabilities get back to something we know helps and provides therapy as well as exercise.”

“A huge enthusiasm to get back to supporting those with a challenge in life.”



Barriers to re-opening

The situation for closed RDA groups is as wide ranging as it is for the ones that have managed to restart.

Groups that rely on schools bringing pupils back have been hit particularly hard, and any change to this situation feels largely out of their control. Similarly, as social distancing measures persist, groups with less independent riders are struggling to find ways to bring back their participants safely.

The majority of these groups do have plans to restart in the coming weeks and months, and are taking steps to overcome the hurdles that have prevented them from reopening to date.

This might be by training up family members to provide support in riding sessions, working with schools on a phased return to RDA over time, training volunteers and bringing horses back to fitness.

It should be acknowledged that the decision to remain closed is not being taken lightly. Carriage driving groups, for example, are committed to restarting as soon as social distancing rules allow (at the time of this report carriage driving is not permitted within social distancing rules).

73%
of closed groups said not having participants who can take part independently is a very important or vital factor

48%
said schools being unable to return is a very important or vital factor

“Social distancing makes it impossible to mount and dismount our riders. They are wheelchair users and the 2metre rule makes riding with side walkers and leaders unsafe.”

“We are planning to restart, we are working through a gradual plan of bringing ponies back into work and contacting riders and volunteers.”

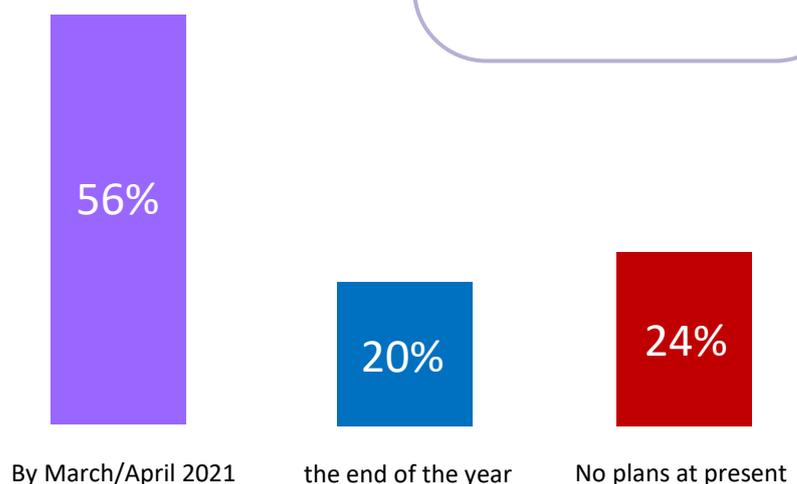
“We take participants only from a local school and they are not ready to return to riding.”

“51% of our volunteers are in the vulnerable age groups.”

“We are a driving only group. Our only coach is not related to any of our participants and as it is impossible to keep a 'social distance' between coach and participant, driving is not possible.”

Plans to restart....

The majority of groups plan to restart in the Spring of 2021. Some would close naturally in the winter anyway, and many feel optimistic that the overall situation will have improved by then.





Support from RDA UK

The survey asked groups what further support from RDA UK would enable them to restart or further increase their activity levels. Of the options offered there were no stand out answers – and this was true of both restarted and closed groups who answered the question.

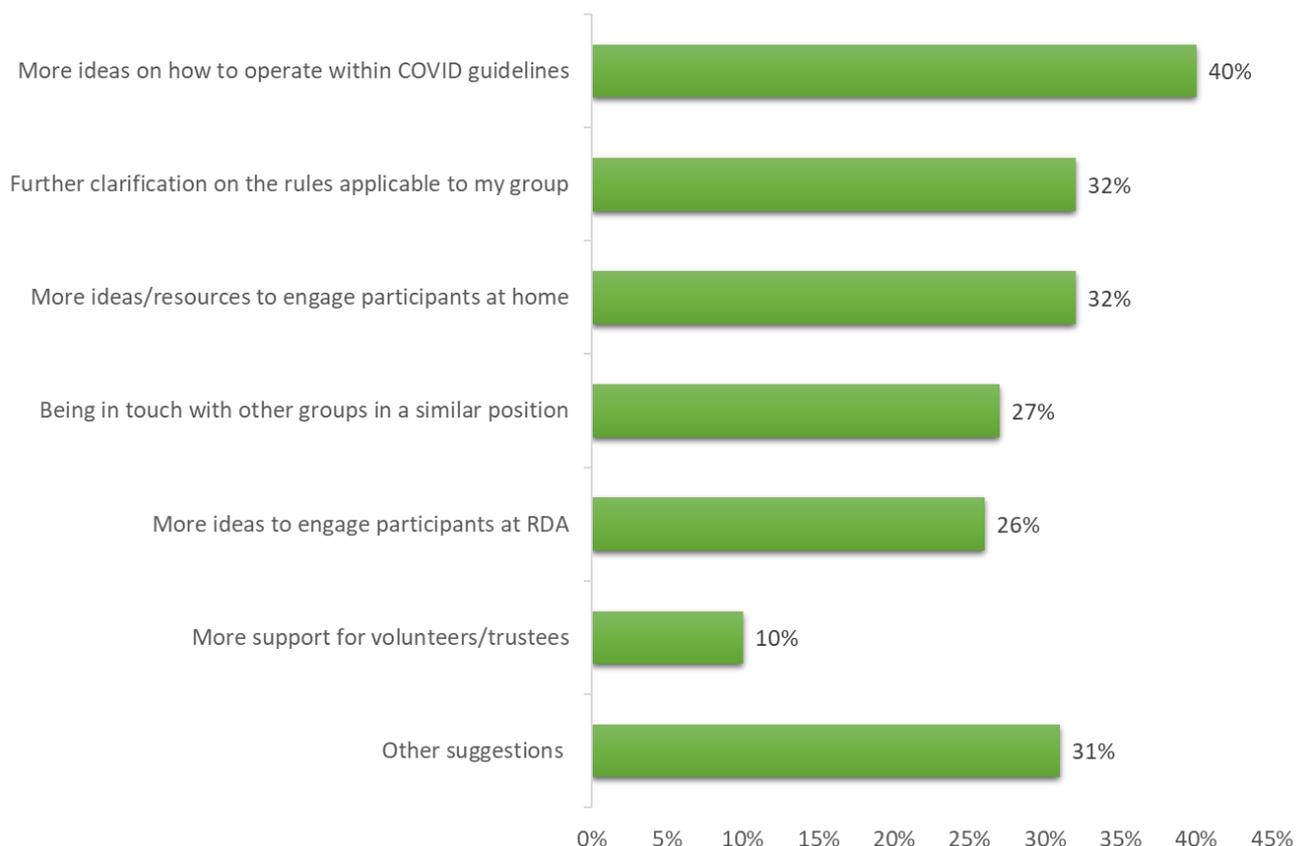
This suggests that, as is often the case in RDA, there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach, and the organisation may have to be ready to respond to the individual needs of each group.

The most popular request, made by 40% of respondents, was for more ideas on how to operate with COVID restrictions. Interestingly, Only 10% of groups want more support for volunteers and trustees (despite trustees clearly playing such a vital role in groups being able to reopen)

Support for participants

When asked about support for participants, groups were more likely to ask for ideas and resources to support participants at home than in RDA sessions. This was true of both restarted and closed groups. Many groups have been creating and distributing their own materials for participants at home on a weekly or monthly basis since the start of lockdown and would appreciate more support from RDA UK as the situation continues.

With 93% of participants still unable to take part in RDA activities, there is an immediate need (and opportunity) for RDA UK to respond. This would also have benefits beyond the current situation, extending the RDA experience and creating opportunities for engagement and education outside of the traditional weekly RDA session.





Recommendations

While there is no ‘one size fits all’ when it comes to RDA groups, the research highlights some specific areas for consideration.

1. COVID guidance

With so many groups remaining closed because of social distancing guidelines, it is important that everyone understands how the rules can be applied safely in an RDA context. RDA UK’s clear and up to date guidance has been acknowledged by many during this time, and this should continue.

2. School groups

Closed groups that rely on schools bringing participants should be a key area for support. They may benefit from contact with groups in a similar situation who have managed to get their school back on board. Even where a return to activities isn’t possible, schools could also be kept engaged with educational resources and activities for pupils to do at home.

There are examples of groups doing this and their input would be valuable here.

3. RDA at home

Lockdown has demonstrated the value and importance of being able to access RDA resources at home. For many groups this is now the only activity on offer, and RDA UK should be supporting this with regular new materials. There are plenty of examples from groups to facilitate this.

4. Trustees

Our research shows that trustees play a vital role in helping their groups to restart and increase activity levels, but only a few groups feel that more support for trustees would be welcome. This contradiction should be explored further, to ensure that trustees have the confidence and encouragement to steer their groups through this crisis - without feeling overwhelmed by ‘support’ that might feel like unwelcome pressure.

5. Groups with no plans

For the groups with no plans to restart at the moment, RDA UK has a responsibility to ensure they are not left ‘out in the cold’. These groups have made the tough decision to remain closed (or have been forced to do so). It is vital they remain connected to the wider RDA community, and feel supported by RDA UK both throughout their closure and when they are able to restart.

6. Support for innovation

Across the organisation there is an appetite for doing things differently. New activities are being introduced. Groups want ideas on how to operate within COVID guidelines, how to engage participants at home and new things to try within sessions.

This could be the single biggest moment of innovation in RDA’s history and groups should feel encouraged and enabled to embrace change if they want to. RDA UK needs to find ways to encourage and facilitate innovation – and inspire others to follow suit.