

WITHOUT LIMITS.

On Horseback.



Equine Bronze DofE Award

A unique pathway to the Duke of Edinburgh's Award



Why this matters.

Caroline Tomlinson Founder and CEO My Life

When we first began thinking about setting up a Duke of Edinburgh's award programme at My Life, we were struck by just how much the aims of the award match our own mission.

"We're here to celebrate and champion every young person. To provide a safe environment of support and challenge that grows as they do," they say. Which is something that runs through everything we do at My Life Opportunities, at Thompson House Equestrian Centre and the pathways we provide for young people.

As we always say, My Life was set up in the first place to provide meaningful opportunities for the people we love, a sense of purpose for them, and the chance for them to feel included rather than excluded. That belief still drives everything we do today.

That's why we have always been so supportive of the core understanding that "whatever their ability, interest or background, DofE offers young people the chance to strive for achievement, overcome obstacles, and set their minds to a personal challenge."

In 2025, with funding and support from the British Horse Society, we began to investigate whether we could offer an equine-specific Duke of Edinburgh Award Bronze programme. Through all our work at Thompson House Equestrian Centre, we know the power that horses can have to effect real change in people.

Elsewhere in the country, there is the chance for people to do some of their DofE expedition on horseback, but because of the incredible resources, knowledge and professional experience we have at My Life and Thompson House Equestrian Centre, we also wanted to tailor the skills, physical and even volunteering elements to an equine environment.



**“I became kinder, more caring,
more tolerant. My confidence
has grown.” - Reece**

This approach is genuinely groundbreaking and pioneering; we know of no other equine DofE programme in the country. And we were also determined that it didn't just appeal to or cater for the kinds of people who already rode horses regularly - this was about giving everyone the opportunity to work together as a team to achieve something really special.

And that opportunity was obvious as soon as we publicised the programme. From an initial plan to offer a one-night-a-week programme for a limited number of people we ended up with an incredible 21 young people attending across two nights!

That's made for the most incredible nine months for us all to share. But it was the words of Reece as we were looking back which really stuck with me. Reece said:

“My school wouldn't let me do the DofE there because, well, they didn't like my behaviour.

But as I came here, I realised that the environment at Thompson House Equestrian Centre meant I actually enjoyed being around horses and people.

I became kinder, more caring, more tolerant. My confidence has grown.”



A journey to remember

Ultimately, that's the story of the equine DofE at My Life. It's been a wonderful journey of self-discovery for these young people which I hope you will enjoy reading in the forthcoming pages. They have had experiences and developed skills that they will use and reflect on for the rest of their lives.

So the hard work and dedication of this DofE group has been incredible to witness. But we'd also like to thank the support of parents, volunteers and My Life and THEC staff who have contributed so much to make this programme such a success.

Let's do it all again next year!



Nine months that reshaped lives

The My Life DofE programme adhered to the core DofE Bronze requirements: young people must be at least 13 (Year 9), commit around an hour a week to each section, and complete the award over a minimum of six months.

Volunteering

Choose to give time to benefit others and the community.

3 months

We helped participants where necessary to volunteer at the THEC pony club and My Life's school holiday activities. Others volunteered on farms, at other riding centres, a bird sanctuary, dancing and drama groups.

Physical

Participate in an energy-consuming activity to improve health and fitness.

3 months

We were able to use horse riding and walking/working with horses as a main physical activity, with football, netball and martial arts sessions added in.

Skills

Develop a non-physical personal interest, talent or vocational skill.

6 months
(extended)

Horse care and knowledge formed the foundation of the Skills section, alongside first aid, map reading, cooking and drama. Participants also helped produce and perform in My Life's community pantomime, Snow White and the Seven Steeds.

Extended to six months, the section enabled them to achieve British Horse Society qualifications while building confidence through practical experience.

Expedition

Plan and complete a journey taking 2 days and 1 night; minimum of 6 hours planned activity; team must be fully trained and complete a practice expedition; must be unaccompanied, self-reliant, and include camping overnight while cooking a substantial hot meal.

Our expedition was on horseback, with camping on My Life's 84-acre grounds in the Lancashire countryside. Our riding alone took us past the six hours, with participants having responsibility for full care of their horses for 48 hours. We prepared for the ride weekly including ensuring everyone worked towards and completed BHS Ride Safe bronze and silver qualifications.

The team set up camp, cooked an evening meal (lasagne and salad) as well as preparing breakfast and lunches. The ride itself was led by participants.



Skills

The Skills section of the DofE Bronze awards - which we extended to six months - is where the programme became unmistakably “My Life”.

In all our initiatives outside DofE, we ensure that we celebrate and enhance people’s individual skills and gifts, building on their interests and passions to create outcomes that make sense for them.

In practice in our DofE programme that often meant there were 21 young people with different abilities and even expectations of what they might want to get out of an equine DofE.

What we found most refreshing was the skills areas weren’t just about individual improvement. Participants were often put in a position where they themselves had to teach, coach and lead.



“I’ve only really realised now that the skills I developed weren’t really about riding, or tacking, or horse care. They were about taking responsibility, being a good leader, giving my peers confidence. I’ll definitely take all that into whatever I do next. ”

- Jess



“I got so much from helping someone else with their riding skills,” says Jess. “I really wanted to get them to a stage where they were enjoying riding as much as I do. And that’s not about pushing someone into areas they don’t want to go, it’s about helping them progress at a pace that feels comfortable for them. About understanding them as people.”

That meant people who weren’t confident with riding in groups - and even people who were - learned how to do it together, understanding how different horses operate and interact with each other.

“If they had a horse refusing on the expedition, they then knew what to do about it,” says Caroline.

Learning collaboratively

Over six months, participants worked towards **British Horse Society Challenge** and **Ride Safe Awards** while developing horse care, stable management and riding skills.

"I think one of the skills I learned over time is riding different horses," says Dylan. "I had to then adapt how I ride to get the best out of that horse."

"What I really enjoyed is that some would turn up expecting to ride huge horses and they got a little pony instead," says Volunteer Heather. "There was never anyone pulling a face or complaining, they just got on with it - and probably learned more."

"What you learn when you're going on an expedition with six other people is that you don't do anything on your own, you do it as a team."

- Sophie

A lot of the skills were developed in this collaborative, group way. When they were doing practice session for the cooking element of the expedition, many didn't believe it would be possible to prep a shepherd's pie and apple crumble, make it, cook it, and clear up within two hours.

"But we worked out who would be best at each task, and actually ended up really enjoying the process - so much so we did it more than once with different recipes," says Sienna. "And it all tasted really good. I know this was an equine Duke of Edinburgh but the cooking might have been my proudest moment."

Other sessions included equine and human first aid; the key here was not to feel stressed that they didn't individually know all the procedures in the event of an incident, but to first feel confident that someone did - and if not where to find help.

"What you learn when you're going on an expedition with six other people is that you don't do anything on your own, you do it as a team," says Sophie. "And we all had a leader of the group taking ownership and responsibility so that even if it was a situation which was beyond the skills we learned, we could have the confidence to ring 999 and talk it through calmly."



Snow White & the Seven Steeds

The skills developed throughout the programme came together in My Life's community pantomime, Snow White and the Seven Steeds, where our DofE participants played a vital role. It was the culmination of months of learning, teamwork and growing confidence.

The production gave participants the opportunity to develop leadership, horse desensitisation, teamwork and problem-solving in a live performance environment.

Mainly, we wanted to foster a sense of teamwork, patience, and problem-solving in a live, unpredictable environment; that's quite a skill to develop but it comes with practice in a wide range of situations, not just creative or dramatic environments.

"We learned a lot about the horses - what things scared them and what they needed you to do to reassure them - which then helped out on the expedition."

- Sienna



Snow White & the Seven Steeds, performed by participants from the Equine Bronze DofE Award.



But, obviously, creative skills in drama, music, dance, art, production and design could be worked on. Equine coaches Des Hulley developed the audio and Claire Prentice created the visuals, and their leadership skills trickled down to our DofE participants; to anyone co-ordinating props, scenes, and even managing peer support.

This sense of learning how to navigate performance, find emotional regulation, develop resilience, and manage anxiety all became key skills - and aligned naturally with Duke of Edinburgh frameworks while remaining accessible and enjoyable.

And all of this was done without a formal dress rehearsal.

"One of the biggest things was learning to adapt, to take charge when there were so many things going on," says Sienna. "I know there were quite a lot of us who were quite anxious about it, and I was making sure the stage production worked, the signs and horses and props were all in the right place," she adds. "I felt we all really helped each other out to make it a success."

And this was noticed by parents and the audience.

"The way it all came together, everyone just absolutely loved it and could see how much effort had gone into it," says Gina, Tallulah's mum.

"Call it learning skills, call it volunteering, call it the physical element as it was hard work moving everything, everyone and every animal around ... I'd say it was the perfect - and unique - DofE activity."

- Gina



Volunteering

One of the reasons My Life was so keen to offer and run a Duke of Edinburgh's Award programme is because of the volunteering element.

What the DofE say about volunteering - "it's about making a meaningful contribution in your community" - is mirrored in the exact aims and outcomes we have as a charity for anyone who uses our services. It's through this meaningful contribution that our members can feel valued, increase their networks and ultimately feel that they have worth and are making a difference.

As a charity ourselves, we were able to offer volunteering opportunities at Thompson House Equestrian Centre and on our farm.

This meant we could support some DofE participants who may have found securing an external volunteering placement too overwhelming or anxiety-inducing.

In this way, we could be as inclusive as possible. Nobody was left out or unable to complete the volunteering element of their Bronze award.

Outside of My Life, participants volunteered at community farms and stables, animal rescue centres and owl sanctuaries. But not everyone worked with animals. Some helped out at dance and drama groups.

As Heather says, "Some have gone from being the ones who need support to being the ones who are supporting others. And there was a real noticeable change when they stopped asking 'what do I do now' and started telling other people what to do."

Giving time, gaining confidence

At My Life, volunteering is about far more than completing an award requirement. It's about belonging, making a meaningful contribution and discovering the value you can bring to others.

As these participants' reflections show, giving their time helped them grow in confidence, purpose and self-belief.

Paige

I was pretty frightened of the birds at the sanctuary to start with. I kind of had to like scream inside! But it was a matter of perseverance and I soon learned to love them and work with them.



Scarlett

Mainly, I think volunteering anywhere teaches you resilience. Not everything will go the way you want it to, and there may be things you don't understand or don't like. But, all you need to do is put the skills you do have into practice and you get a lot out of it.

Dylan

My real takeaway from my volunteering at the Pony Clubs was the importance of communication and teamwork. We had to tailor what we were saying to our audience of kids, and you have to try and handle their individual needs. I actually got really confident by the end working with a different age range of people.

Nancy

I helped out with a drama club - and actually I ended up planning and delivering some of the sessions. I was dreading it to start with but by the end of my time with them I felt really confident and we'd put on some really good sessions for the children. It really taught me leadership and time management too; I'd never done anything like that before.



Chloe

I volunteered at this pretty big farm open to the public, mucking out the horses, feeding the sheep and pigs, grooming the rabbits and the guinea pigs. Actually it also taught me a lot about social skills as I had to deal with the public too.



Physical

The DofE Physical section is about improving health, fitness and personal performance through regular activity.

At My Life, horses became the catalyst for that journey, helping participants build strength, stamina and confidence both in and out of the saddle.

Most participants logged their contributions through horse riding, then layered in other activities such as football, netball and martial arts.

This wasn't gentle hacking though: they rode multiple horses, adapted to different temperaments and worked in varied settings, from enclosed arenas to roadwork practice as part of the British Horse Society's "Ride Safe" pathway.

Adapting to different horses—whether nervous, strong or unpredictable—was a physical challenge in itself. Participants built confidence by staying calm through spooks, sudden leaps and unexpected behaviour, while spending long days in the saddle during the expedition.

Combined with the demands of stable chores, these experiences gave them a genuine sense of physical achievement.

For many, riding became a bridge: something highly motivating in itself that drew them into other, physical tasks – mucking out, lifting equipment, walking long distances and monitoring their own stamina.

Preparing hay nets became part of everyday stable duties, building strength and responsibility.

The Expedition

Two Days.
One Night.
48 Hours with Horses.

The DofE Bronze expedition became something unique on horseback. Participants didn't just ride the route—they planned it, cared for their horses, camped together and took responsibility for every stage of the journey.

The requirement is clear: a journey of at least two days and one night, with a minimum of six hours of planned activity each day, training and practice in advance, and an unaccompanied, self-reliant overnight camp with a substantial hot meal.

In three groups of seven, everyone had defined roles – trail-layers, followers, leaders and designated first aiders. And the six hours of planned daily horse rides sat within a broader 48-hour period in which young people were responsible for full horse care, as well as their own camp management.

Caring for horses before and after riding – feeding, grooming, tacking, checking welfare was integral to the expedition, not an optional extra.

“The Bronze award says two days and one night,” says Heather. “In practice, they lived and worked, explored, rode and ate together for 48 hours straight. And that is quite an achievement for some who had never slept away from home before.”



Where everything came together

As we have seen, the preparation for the expedition began almost as soon as the participants began their DofE programme.

They took part in regular riding, BHS Ride Safe training, first aid sessions, map-reading workshops and pre-expedition cooking practice.

They rehearsed not just the practical tasks but the group roles they would hold when leaders stepped back during their adventure.

Once at camp, participants set up tents, organised equipment, and cooked substantial meals – including lasagne with salad, cookies, breakfast and lunches – with My Life leaders maintaining appropriate oversight but expecting the group to self-manage.

“They rode, they cared for the horses, they set up camp and they cooked. By the end, it was their expedition, not ours.”

- Heather





Challenges on the trail

The DofE Expedition challenges young people to step beyond their comfort zones, building resilience, teamwork and confidence. On horseback, those lessons became even more powerful.

Of course there were challenges on the expedition - that is in many ways the whole point of the exercise - to develop resilience, good decision making and adaptability.

So when a horse was spooked by a shopping trolley or a car wash, the group were able to use collective problem solving to keep the expedition moving, quickly assessing risks and regaining composure.

When they needed to cross a road with multiple horses, they were able to apply the Ride Safe signalling and teamwork under pressure.

“Many of these young people are used to adults stepping in at the first sign of difficulty ... The expedition reversed that pattern.”

- Caroline

“The teenagers themselves decided who would lead, who would navigate, who would cook, and how to respond when things go wrong. I think in a way that’s when you see who they really are - and they’re all great people in their own way,” says Caroline.

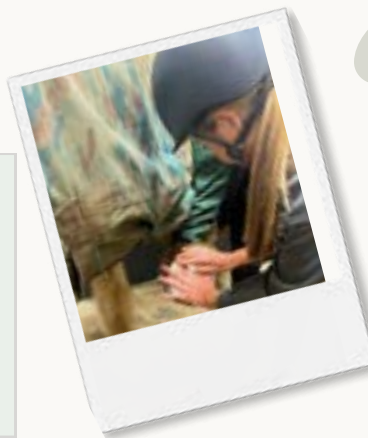
“And the mixed ability was undoubtedly an asset; people with various diagnoses as well as those from different backgrounds all shared the same field and tents and made the same contributions; young people who might normally be segregated by label or attainment instead learned to adapt to each other.

They all worked really well independently, but also as a team they communicated really well as a group. All the horses were safe, all the riders were safe and they were all pushed out of their comfort zones.”

Read on to discover the challenges they overcame and hear, in their own words, what the expedition meant to them.

Jasmine

I got to learn so many new things about riding, cooking, myself and others, too. It was so much fun.



Dylan

I enjoyed it very much. It was a unique experience, challenging, taught me perseverance, particularly when I had to put a tent up by myself.

Scarlett

My horse can be a bit giddy so I was scared to take him on the expedition but he was really good. And I think feeling in tune with him for a long time meant we both gained confidence.

Nancy

After all the weeks and months of hard work, actually finishing the expedition was very rewarding. It was a lesson in perseverance leading to good things. I was proud of myself.



Tallulah

This was only the second time I've slept away from home, and for me to be in a tent like that – it was a big thing for me to do. I am so proud of myself.

Meet our participants

Every participant's Duke of Edinburgh journey is unique. These participant profiles celebrate the individual strengths, qualities and achievements that each young person has shown throughout the programme. From growing confidence and resilience to kindness, determination and teamwork, each story reflects the progress they've made and the difference horses have helped them achieve.



Maisy has grown in confidence and leadership, demonstrating resilience, compassion and excellent teamwork.



Anya's confidence, kindness and leadership have shone throughout her journey.



Freya's determination and resilience helped her achieve her goals.



Isabelle is quietly confident, shows kindness and resilience.



Tallulah embraced new challenges and never gave up.



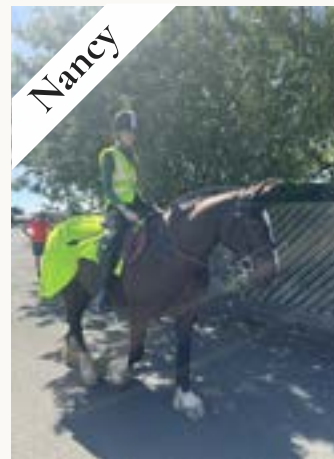
Dylan's kindness and willingness to support others are real strengths.



Scarlett stepped beyond her comfort zone and grew in confidence throughout her journey.



Chloe brings enthusiasm, positivity and determination to every challenge.



Nancy is a thoughtful and positive young lady with a bright future ahead.



Austin combined teamwork and sound judgement throughout his journey.



With the horses' help, Sienna learned to focus, persevere and believe in herself.



Kacie's self-determination and stepping beyond her comfort zone helped her grow in confidence.



Thea has shown self-determination, turning challenges into opportunities.



Reece showed resilience and personal growth through his passion for horses.



Lauren leads with maturity, resilience and a passion for horses.



Jess is a natural leader who inspires confidence in those around her.



Jasmine combines compassion, patience and a passion for horses.



Paige's quiet determination and horsemanship shone throughout the expedition.



Evelyn is a supportive team player who always encourages others to succeed.



Sophie combines a passion for horses with a genuine care for people.



From beginner to expedition rider – Lily's progress has been remarkable.



Outcomes

What changed?

When we spoke to the young people who gained so much from the DofE, several themes recurred.

Leadership and decision making

Many of the richest stories came from situations where participants had to lead, whether that be novices at THEC or peers just starting their riding journey. It equipped them with the skills to balance safety with encouragement and empathy.

Sometimes, they planned and run their own sessions, discovering that they can hold a group's attention and manage behaviour.

Expedition leaders also made on-the-spot decisions about routes, camp tasks and risk.

Confidence

Everyone said they were now more confident speaking to people they don't know, whether that's audiences at the pantomime, parents at open events or younger children they are teaching during volunteering.

Teamwork

Teamwork improved, particularly in high-stakes scenarios like managing a nervous horse, coordinating CPR practice, or getting six riders and their mounts across a road safely.



Resilience

Resilience increased – turning up week after week, coping with long expedition days and recovering physically and mentally afterwards.

“Residentials change them – you can almost see the confidence click into place.” - Caroline Tomlinson

Independence

Independent and inter-dependency skills: Using time management and working together to cope with unpredictability.

Future aspirations

These experiences feed directly into career ambitions: veterinary medicine, equine work, dog-unit roles, physiotherapy and the armed forces all emerged as serious aspirations supported by the practical skills and certificates accumulated through the programme.

“They were all enjoying themselves and you could see from the start to the finish how much they've improved in confidence, belief and trust in each other.”

- Caroline



More than an Award

For My Life, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award has become far more than a badge scheme. It is a framework that enables a highly diverse group of young people to be challenged, supported and celebrated – on horseback, on stage and under canvas.

For the young people, this has become an incredible story they are now able to tell about themselves.

“Thank you and all the wonderful volunteers that helped Evelyn through her DofE. The energy, time and effort that was put in to giving the young people this amazing opportunity was truly amazing and genuinely altruistic - which is extremely rare and we really do appreciate it.”

- Gemma, Evelyn's mum





Tel: 01257 472900

Web: www.my-life.org.uk

Email: info@my-life.org.uk

**My Life Opportunities &
My Life Support Standish**

Thompson House
Equestrian Centre,
Off Pepper Lane,
Standish, Wigan,
Lancashire
WN6 OPP

**My Life Opportunities
Leigh**

My Life @ Future Steps,
Leigh Sports Village,
Sale Way, Leigh,
Lancashire
WN7 4JY

**Thompson House
Equestrian Centre**

Off Pepper Lane,
Standish, Wigan,
Lancashire
WN6 OPP