

# SPORT4 EMPOWERMENT



**EMPOWERING WOMEN  
THROUGH  
SPORT & PHYSICAL ACTIVITY  
IN COUNTY DONEGAL**



Donegal Domestic Violence Services



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland



Arna chomhchistiú ag  
an Aontas Eorpach  
Co-Funded by the  
European Union



SPÓRT ÉIREANN  
SPORT IRELAND



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“ No words can explain how much these groups and connections help me. ”



# INTRODUCTION

The Sport 4 Empowerment (S4E) project, launched in County Donegal in February 2024, is a collaborative initiative between Donegal Sports Partnership (DSP) and Donegal Domestic Violence Services (DDVS), with support from Donegal Local Development Company (DLDC). The project is designed to assist women and children who have experienced domestic violence (DV) and are currently receiving support through DDVS.

Utilising sport and physical activity, the holistic programme aims to enhance participants' physical and psychological well-being while improving their educational and economic opportunities. By addressing the various challenges faced by this vulnerable group, S4E seeks to promote positive behavioural change and empower participants in all aspects of their lives.

This project is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union. The S4E is Sport Ireland's ESF+ Programme and aims empower people at risk of social exclusion and poverty through sport and physical activity.

Quote

**"A PURPOSE TO MY LIFE.  
SOMETHING TO GET OUT OF BED FOR  
THANK YOU MUCH APPRECIATED.**

**I WAS LOST AND NOW I'M DOING OK"**

*"We are so proud of this project and have been blown away by the feedback and comments from each of the activities offered. We have learnt so much from our clients, especially in terms of what a huge impact this type of approach can have and why it's so important to be able to offer activities focused on holistic development - physical, emotional and social. This programme is so unique in that it brings together different organisations to work together to offer a flexible and bespoke series of activities. But the key strength of the programme is the partnership between DDVS and DSP, that links clients and activities from across the county. It is through this partnership that we can provide the motivating force to keep clients interested and engaged, even when their own personal situations can become quite challenging at times".*

**Dr. Marie Hainsworth  
Manager, DDVS**



# CONTEXT - NATIONAL STATISTICS

## DV Stats for Ireland:

- **1 in 4** women in Ireland have experienced DV (Violence Against Women, 2014)
- **14%** of women in Ireland have reported physical violence by partner (Women's Annual Report, 2023)
- **41%** of Irish women know someone in their circle of family and/or friends who have experienced DV (Women's Annual Report, 2023)
- **6%** of women in Ireland have experienced sexual violence (Women's Annual Report, 2023)

## Homelessness

- **92%** of homeless women in Ireland have experienced some form of DV (National Women Council, 2018)
- **158%** increase in women's homelessness from 2015-2019 (Focus Ireland, 2019)
- An average of **180 women** and **275 children** seek emergency accommodation every month (Safe Ireland, 2023)

## Addiction

- **11,000 women** in Ireland have experienced DV while struggling with addiction
- **48,000 women** in Ireland who use illicit substances have experienced some form of DV within their lifetime (DAVINA Project, 2022)

## Mental Health Stats for DV pop

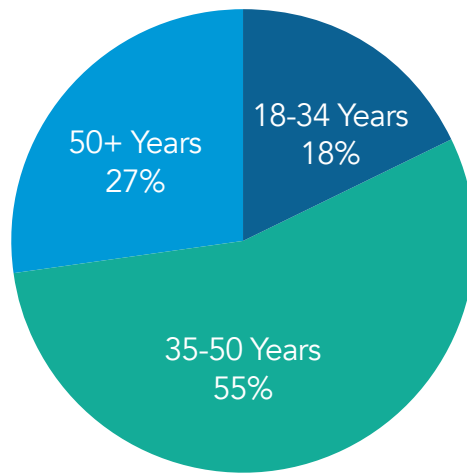
- DV estimated overall cost to mental healthcare of **€176 million** (Mental Health Network, 2012)
- DV associated with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance abuse (Focus Ireland, 2019)

# GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

At the recruitment stage in February 2024, **12 women** had enrolled in the programme. Four months later, that number had more than quadrupled, with **53 women** and **16 children** currently participating in various components of the S4E programme. As of now, the programme boasts a 100% retention rate and has grown significantly, primarily through word of mouth. Due to its success, partner organisations feel confident in referring participants to the programme.

The women and children participating in the programme come from disadvantaged backgrounds and represent a variety of ethnic minorities, religions, and disabilities, showcasing effective intersectional work. Additionally, many of the women are currently experiencing or have a history of addiction and/or mental health challenges, adding further complexity to the group.

## AGE PROFILE

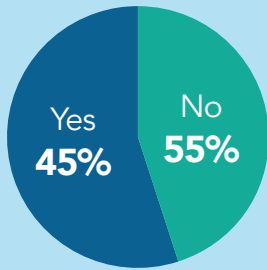


## NATIONALITIES

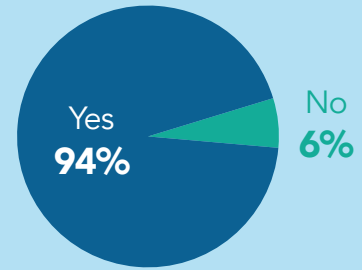


# HEALTH CONDITIONS

Have you ever struggled with alcohol or other substance misuse and/or addictions?



Have you ever struggled with mental health?









# INNOVATION

The overall aim of the social innovation priority is to develop new approaches to the challenges faced by disadvantaged groups and to develop the social innovation ecosystem in Ireland. S4E employs innovative methods of consultation including co-creating and codesigning the programmes that have the target groups needs at the centre of the programme and ensures innovation is embedded throughout.

Several consultation sessions were facilitated with women accessing DDVS, focusing on the primary goals outlined below:

## 1. Exploring Barriers and Challenges:

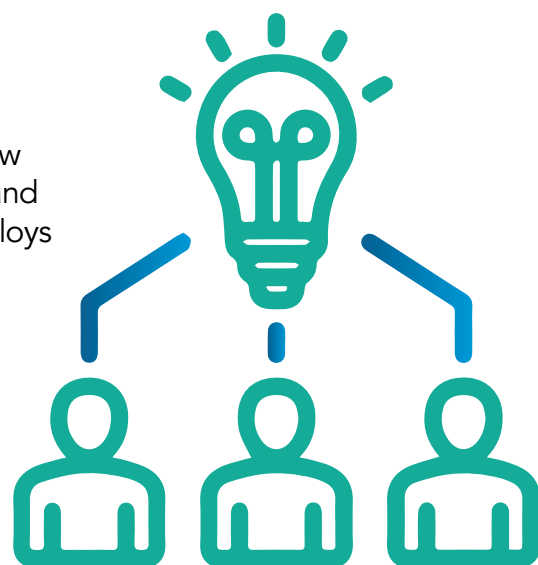
Understanding the obstacles and difficulties these women face, whether in accessing services, navigating their situations, or any other aspect of their experience.

## 2. Determining Needs:

Identifying specific needs that are not currently being met, allowing for a better alignment of services with the actual requirements of the women who use them.

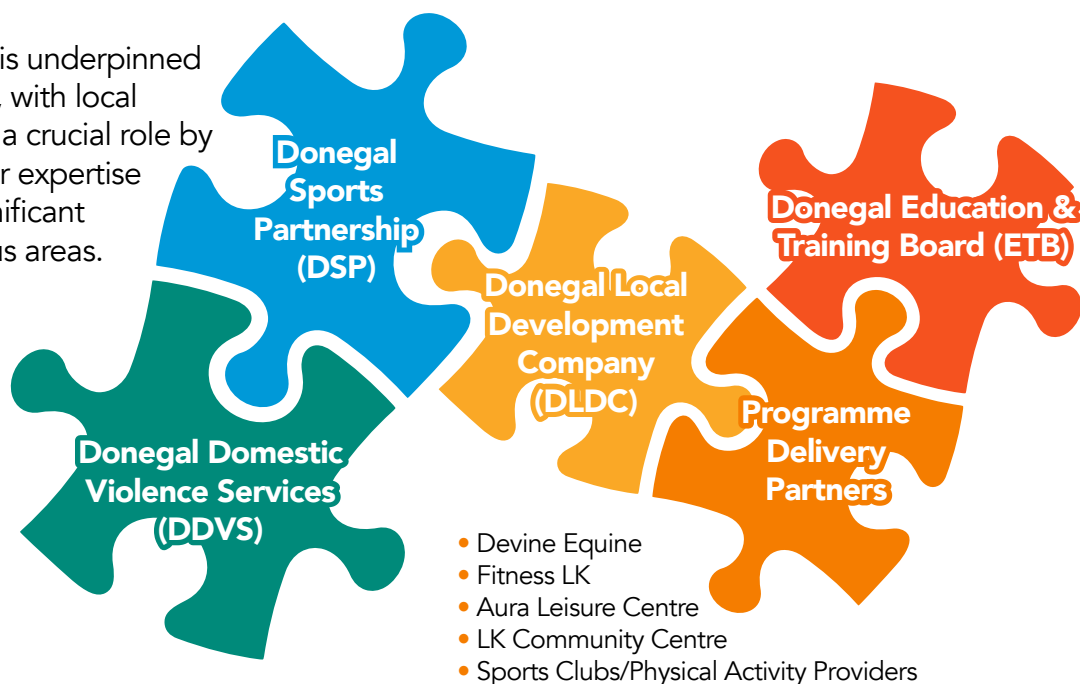
## 3. Co-Designing Participation Programmes:

Collaborating with the women to design programmes that address their needs effectively. This approach ensures that the programmes are not just top-down solutions but are shaped by the insights and lived experiences of the women themselves, increasing the likelihood of successful outcomes.



# INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

The S4E project is underpinned by collaboration, with local partners playing a crucial role by contributing their expertise and offering significant support in various areas.





# ***BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION***



The consultation identified several key barriers that hinder their participation in both sports and broader societal activities. These barriers include:

## **1. Issues with Transport:**

Access to transportation emerged as a significant challenge. Many women may not have access to a personal vehicle or public transport, limiting their ability to attend sports events, social activities, or even essential services. This isolation can lead to decreased opportunities for engagement and participation.

## **2. Childcare:**

The availability and affordability of childcare are crucial factors. Many women struggle to find suitable childcare, which prevents them from participating in activities outside the home. Without reliable childcare options, their ability to engage in sports or other societal activities is severely restricted.

## **3. Cost:**

Financial constraints are a major barrier, particularly for women who may already be dealing with economic hardships due to their circumstances. The cost of sports participation, including fees for membership, equipment, and travel, can be prohibitive, limiting their ability to take part in these activities.

## **4. Fear:**

Fear plays a significant role, whether it's fear of judgement, failure, or even physical harm. For many women, the thought of entering unfamiliar spaces or trying new activities can be intimidating, especially if they've faced trauma or abuse. This fear can prevent them from exploring new opportunities and integrating into the community.

## **5. Confidence:**

Many women reported a lack of confidence as a barrier. Years of trauma or abuse can erode self-confidence, making it difficult for them to believe in their ability to succeed or even try something new. This lack of confidence can be a significant obstacle in participating in sports or other community activities.

## **6. Self Esteem and Self-Worth:**

Low self esteem and self-worth are closely related to confidence issues. Women who have experienced domestic violence may struggle with feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness, which can make it difficult to take the first steps towards participation in activities that could benefit their physical and mental well-being.

## **7. Attitudes and Judgment:**

The fear of being judged by others or encountering negative attitudes is a common concern. This can stem from societal stigma around domestic violence or preconceived notions about the capabilities of survivors. Such judgement can discourage women from participating in sports or other community activities, as they may feel unwelcome or scrutinised.

These challenges collectively create significant barriers to participation in sports and broader societal activities. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that includes providing accessible transportation, affordable childcare, financial support, and creating a supportive and non-judgmental environment that fosters confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth.

# S4E - PROGRAMME COMPONENTS

## Adults

- Equine Therapy
- Dance Fitness
- Fitness & Circuits
- Yoga
- Aqua Aerobics
- Line Dancing
- Park Walks
- Day Trips - Wild Alpaca Way - Ards Friary - Cinema -Picnic
- Reflexology
- Confidence Building Workshops
- Individual Development Plans
- Numeracy & Literacy through Cooking
- Intensive English Classes
- Nail Technician Certification
- Soap Making Workshop
- CV Workshop
- Decoupage



## Children

- Gymnastics
- Dance fitness
- Equine Therapy
- Confidence Building Workshops
- Sensory Play & Equipment Provision
- Development of Play Area at DDVS Refuge





# PROGRAMME IMPACT

Trauma leaves a lasting imprint on the body. The effects of trauma, particularly for children and families affected by domestic violence, extend far beyond mental and emotional burdens; they also significantly impact physical health, leading to a range of long-term health issues.

Incorporating movement for those who have endured such trauma can help restore balance to their nervous systems, releasing endorphins that mitigate the negative effects of trauma on both mental and physical health.

To achieve lasting and meaningful change, therapeutic work must address individuals' behavioural patterns, empowering them to make necessary changes to create the lives they deserve. This process aims to restore their confidence, strength, and autonomy to enact critical changes. By integrating these behavioural principles while participants engage in various activities, the benefits become evident, allowing women to reclaim their power.

Through sport and physical activity, the S4E collaboration between DDVS and DSP has provided participants with the opportunity to explore their identities and interests in a safe, accepting, fun and supportive environment. This initiative encourages the women to build friendships, rebuild their confidence, and establish social connection with their communities.



Further Education  
& Training  
Opportunities  
**13 women**



Employment  
**9 women**

*"I think this programme has encouraged and enabled so many to participate in therapeutic horse riding and equine assisted activities who have never had the opportunity to do so before and to realise the amazing benefits of it too. It has enabled individuals who have never been in the presence of a horse to do so and has challenged their fear and emotions in this regard too. It has also given those who in their childhood were able to horse ride and who for several reasons both physically and emotionally have been unable to do so for such a long time do so again.*

*This programme has been the catalyst for so many participants to challenge both their physical and emotional wellbeing and has enabled so many to find a sense of calmness and confidence within themselves too. The participants have grown together and have formed links and relationships with their peers and now have developed a strong group of ever growing confidence having achieved so much in such a short time".*

**Mary Devine**  
Manager, Devine Equine







# PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

- ✔ I feel welcome and like I belong in the group
- ✔ Going to the group gives me something to look forward to
- ✔ I feel safe in the group
- ✔ I feel my voice is heard by the group leaders
- ✔ I feel the group helps my mental health
- ✔ I feel respected and valued in the group



100% YES

Would you have been able to access community activities without the programme? Why or why not?

**No 85%**

Barriers:



Money



Transportation



Childcare



Feelings of guilt

## Do you feel more comfortable attending community activities since joining the programme?

Why or why not?

→ YES %100

"It has helped my confidence so much. I am meeting and making new friends and learning to have the confidence to talk to people and get to know them. I was dependent on medication before just to be able to go out on my own"

## What impact do these programmes have on your sobriety, if applicable?

"I have been sober for 2 years but recently wanted to drink again. I felt so alone and depressed. But then I got referred to the programme and I was able to tell her I wanted to drink and she helped me realise I didn't want the drink I wanted to be numb again. But now I feel stronger and I am looking forward to things that she sets up and I even signed up for a course in September. I need to be sober now and I want to be for the first time in so long."

## Do you feel the programmes have helped with your feelings of isolation and/or loneliness?

→ YES %100

## Have these programmes had any effect of your mental health?

→ YES %100

"Very much. I am not alone and I know that I have something to look forward to now. I had so much support when I first came into the service but then it was just me alone and I didn't know how to cope so I just drank and stayed alone. Now I have things to do and I don't feel so isolated and overwhelmed with my life"

"Yes! It can be lonely when you move to a new place. I moved because of an abusive relationship. And the support I have received from all the wonderful staff and the new friends I've made has helped me feel better about myself."

"Absolutely, I have done horse therapy and zumba and exercise classes. Being able to meet with others who have gone through the same as me and get strong together is a huge benefit to my mental health."

"Yes, the programmes improve my confidence and feelings of empowerment."

"I feel less alone and I feel like I'm finally seeing some hope. I want to get out of bed even if it's a hard day when I have a group I can go to."

"I feel more positive. I haven't had a drink in almost a month since I started going to these things. I can see my thoughts being more positive and not so hopeless."



## Any additional impact and/or benefit that you have experienced since becoming involved in the programmes?

This programme helped me to gain self confidence, improve my language, get out of my isolation, make new friends, learn communication skills and get rid of stress.

A true life line and feel I'm on the right path now in terms of my confidence and being open to new things. I am very lucky to be part of the group. And I really like that the children are also included and its part of their healing

I don't feel like my abuse is who I am anymore. I can be me and they will see me. I don't have to fake my feelings and hide myself. I don't remember the last time I felt like that.

It has benefited me as I know I am not alone in my trauma. The activities are great fun and a great boost to my confidence and I feel more empowered and have better coping skills from attending these programmes.

## How have these programmes benefited your overall health?

I feel empowered on a Tuesday, just knowing I am going to my group. I am not worried about having enough money to get there because transport is provided, which would be impossible otherwise as public transport is very limited in my area and it's too far to walk.

I am being more active and going to exercise and now go for walks and learning to cook has helped me make better meals at home and realise it is not as expensive and difficult as I thought.

It helps me gain physical fitness, which boosts my self confidence, it gets me out socialising with people more which is very beneficial for my mental health.

I'm not drinking. I am getting out of the house and doing physical things that I never would have thought I would do



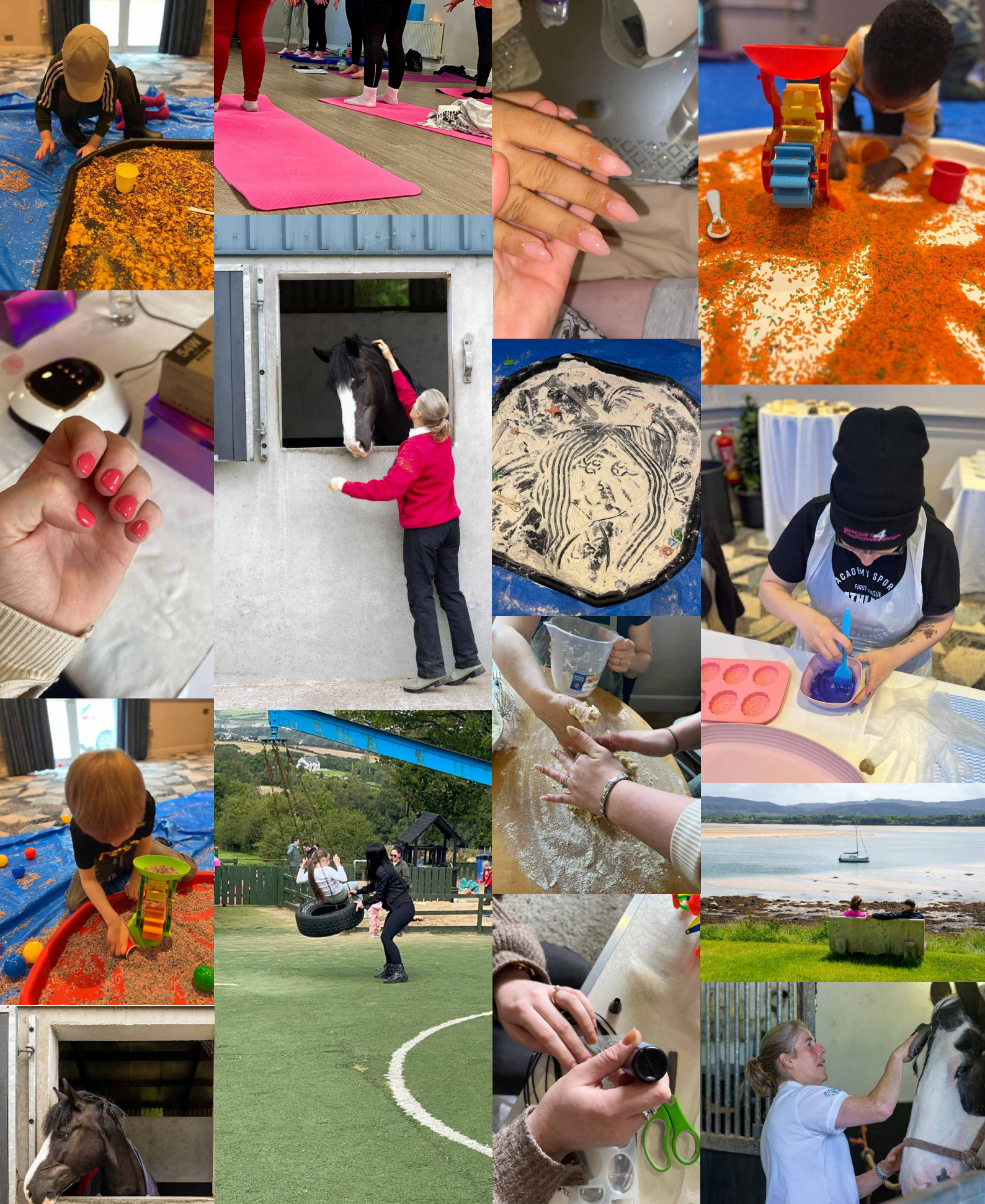




**“ The group helps everyone on their different journeys to support, listen and share insights and understanding of what each individual has been through, and how they worked or are working through it and can meet and have fun and laughter with all of these amazing strong women. The leaders are so lovely, welcoming and understanding of the fact that everyone needs a lifeline at the beginning of their journey. ”**

**“ The courses are bringing back the feeling of having the control of my life back in my hands. I am doing what I was dreaming of and trying to do for a long time and the abuser always got it from me. On the courses I can feel for real that he has no more power to do so. I had even struggled with the finances, now I am enrolled on these amazing and dreamed courses. Thank you so much for this opportunity. ”**





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