



Case study

West Auckland Riding for the Disabled



Building balance and confidence

Community-Led, Long-Term Impact: West Auckland Riding for the Disabled

West Auckland Riding for the Disabled (WARDA) has been supporting children and young people with a wide range of disabilities and challenges through horse-riding programmes at Henderson Valley Park for half a century.

The volunteer-run organisation provides weekly therapeutic horse riding for people with physical, cognitive and social-emotional disabilities. But with Auckland’s sometimes unpredictable weather, the need for a covered facility was clear.

After 20 years of hard work, which involved raising \$4 million in funding, WARDA’s indoor arena opened in March 2025, showing what’s possible with the right mix of vision, passion, advocacy and targeted investment.

Navigating a complex landscape

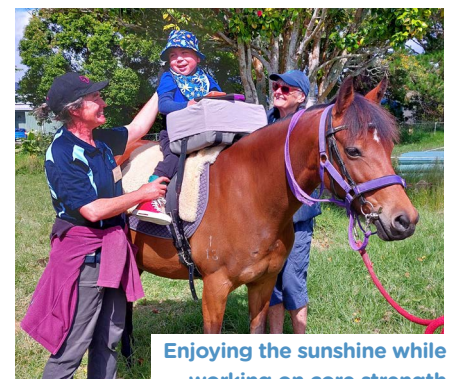
The concept for an indoor arena in West Auckland has been on the cards since the early 2000s. But turning that vision into reality meant working through a complex funding system, says Shirley Furneaux, WARDA’s Treasurer.

“The biggest challenge was navigating a fragmented, uncertain funding landscape over a very long period of time,” says Shirley. “We had to approach many different funders without knowing whether we would ever have enough funding to even start.”

Norma Hayward, WARDA’s President, says the funding applications also took considerable time.

“We had to explain that riding for the disabled isn’t just pony rides: we’re a professional organisation delivering goal-based programmes with trained coaches and real outcomes.”

Norma adds: “Funding from some sources must be spent within a set period of time, even though construction couldn’t begin until all major funding was secured... we ended up staging [the project] – then we were able to move it forward.”



Enjoying the sunshine while working on core strength

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Advocacy helps unlock progress

Many projects to develop sport and recreation facilities in Auckland are led by volunteers. This was the case for WARDA's covered arena, which Norma and Shirley say was delivered by "an incredible team of volunteers who have stuck with it and got it over the line."

In response to barriers that many community-led projects face, Aktive advocated through Auckland Council's Long-term Plan process in 2024 for changes to the Council's Sport and Recreation Facility Investment Fund (SRFIF), which supports the development of sport and active recreation facilities.

Along with increased funding, this advocacy included pushing for a targeted funding component to support projects that had already demonstrated strong community investment but needed help to reach completion.

This proved pivotal for WARDA, as did the project's inclusion as one of a number of key projects included in the Tāmaki Makaurau Sport and Recreation Facility Priority Plan in 2024.

"In addition to funding provided earlier in the project, Auckland Council's most recent funding was a huge boost to us, and that allowed us to progress to the final stage of the project," Shirley says.

"We were at a point where we didn't know how to get the project through to final completion. [Aktive's advocacy], and Auckland Council's support brought the confidence and momentum that was necessary to push the project forward."



Back to the stables



West Auckland Riding for the Disabled

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Shirley Furneaux, WARDA's Treasurer

Norma says Aktive also helped funders work more collaboratively through re-introducing the Regional Funders' Forum, which brings together funders to better align and maximise sector investment, reducing uncertainty around staged delivery.

A permanent home and year-round certainty

In February 2025, Auckland Council allocated \$512,589 through the SRFIF to completing the project, giving it the final push needed towards completion after earlier

support from a range of other funders. Norma and Shirley say the facility is "transformational."

"It gives us security," Shirley says. "For the first time, we have a true permanent home that allows us to plan ahead and grow services."

Norma adds: "The lack of a covered riding space was a massive barrier for years. This arena removes that uncertainty: having a roof allows us to deliver uninterrupted services, year-round."

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Impact for riders and the wider community

The indoor riding arena is projected to welcome approximately 18,000 people each year which will have a significant impact to the west Auckland disability community. According to Shirley, these benefits are already being felt. “We’ve almost doubled the number of sessions we deliver because we can operate year-round.”

The arena is welcoming people from across the New Zealand Riding for the Disabled network, including hosting national training events.

The facility is also a shared community asset, with growing numbers of equestrian and other community users enquiring about using the arena. With final work on parking and a driveway soon to be completed, community use is expected to grow even further.

Learnings for other community organisations

After two decades of effort, Shirley and Norma have learned a lot of lessons about developing a community facility.



Shirley Furneaux and Norma Hayward



Working on balance

Shirley says organisations need a realistic strategic plan, budget and forecast, along with a good understanding of both grant application requirements and the conditions attached to funding. “Keeping regular dialogue with funders and updating them on progress is essential.”

Knowing the funding landscape in detail and understanding which funders support which parts of a project, and what conditions come with that funding is also important. Norma believes strong governance is critical, too. “Grow a committed committee or board who are there for the long haul and understand the project from planning to completion,” she says, adding that having people with the right skills such as finance, project management, fundraising or property knowledge can make a real difference.

The WARDA team also found it valuable to learn from others who’d delivered similar projects, carry out feasibility work, and plan for the long-term upkeep and compliance requirements that come with a new facility.

“Now we’ve got this amazing facility that gives our riders and their families the certainty of year-round service and better outcomes,” Norma concludes. “It’s a real win-win for the whole community.”

Here to help

For more information on community sport and recreation facility development projects, contact:

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