

# Initial Accreditation Report

Standards 1-8

Athena Herd Foundation CIC

25 January 2024

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## About accreditation

The Professional Standards Authority (the PSA) accredits registers of people working in a variety of health and social care occupations that are not regulated by law. To become an Accredited Register, organisations holding registers of unregulated health and social care roles must prove that they meet our *Standards for Accredited Registers*<sup>1</sup> (the Standards).

Initial accreditation decisions are made by an Accreditation Panel following an assessment of the organisation against the Standards by the Accreditation team. The Panel decides whether to accredit an organisation or not. The Panel can also decide to accredit with Conditions and provide Recommendations to the organisation.

- **Condition** – Issued when a Panel has determined that a Standard has not been met. A Condition sets out the requirements needed for the Accredited Register to meet the Standards, within a set timeframe. It may also reduce the period of accreditation subject to a review or the Condition being met.
- **Recommendation** – Actions that would improve practice and benefit the operation of the Register, but which is not a current requirement for accreditation to be maintained.

We used the following in our assessment of Athena:

- Documentary review of evidence of benefits and risk supplied by Athena and gathered through desk research
- Documentary review of evidence supplied by Athena and gathered from public sources such as its website
- Due diligence checks
- Share your experience responses
- Site visits including discussions with members of staff
- Interviews with the Chair, CEO and Registrar
- Observation of an Executive Committee meeting on 21 October 2022
- Assessment of Athena's complaints procedures.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/publications/standards/standards-for-accredited-registers.pdf?sfvrsn=e2577e20\\_8](https://professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/publications/standards/standards-for-accredited-registers.pdf?sfvrsn=e2577e20_8)

## The Outcome

The Accreditation Panel met on 20 December 2023 to consider Athena's application for accreditation. The Panel was satisfied that Athena could meet with Conditions all the Standards for Accredited Registers.

### **We therefore decided to accredit Athena with Conditions.**

This followed an initial Accreditation Panel meeting on 30 March 2023 where Standards One and Seven were found to be met, and Standard Three was met with Conditions. However, we found that the remaining Standards could not be met with Conditions alone. The Accreditation Panel decided to adjourn the meeting to allow Athena time to complete the following actions:

	<b>Action</b>	<b>Standard(s)</b>
One	Create a clearer firewall between management and oversight of key regulatory functions such as complaints and registration, and the other services that Athena provides, including its education and training provision. This should include making sure that the governance groups established to oversee these functions have the ability to make final decisions about outcomes of individual registration applications, and complaints.	Two, Four, Five, Six
Two	Review the format of the Register so there is a clearer distinction between registrants and members to allow the public and others to make an informed choice about which practitioners they choose. It should be easy to identify which practitioners are on the Register, and how this distinguishes them from members in terms of registration requirements.	Two, Eight
Three	Complete recruitment to and provide an update on the work of the Professional Conduct and Review Committee (PCRC) and Register Advisory Board (RAB). This should include an update on recruitment and confirmation of Chairs, examples of agenda, papers and minutes that demonstrate how they work in practice.	Two, Five, Six
Four	Review the Compliments and Complaints, Malpractice and Maladministration, and Sanctions Policies to ensure these provide a clear and robust process to handle complaints against registrants.	Five
Five	Provide clearer information to the public about equine therapy. This should include	Eight

	descriptions of the different roles Athena registers to help members of the public and others to make informed choices about how to choose a practitioner from its Register. Potential service users, and applicants should be able to know what to expect from an equine therapy session.	
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Athena provided evidence of how it had responded to the Actions above, as well as to some of the Conditions the Accreditation Panel had been minded to issue should accreditation be granted. The Accreditation Panel reconvened on 20 December 2023 to consider this evidence. The Accreditation Panel was satisfied that Actions One to Five had been addressed, but issued several Conditions aimed at strengthening Athena’s approach.

We noted the following **positive findings**:

- Athena has updated the format and layout of its Register, informed by user testing.
- The information provided on Athena’s website about equine facilitated learning should help service users to know what to expect from a session and understand its high-level benefits and limitations.
- Combined, this means that people will be able to better make an informed choice about their practitioner.

We issued the following Conditions to be implemented by the deadline given:

<b>Conditions</b>		<b>Deadline</b>
<b>Standard Two</b>	1. Develop and publish policies and procedures to make clearer how site visits are used to determine eligibility for the Register. This should include greater clarity on the circumstances in which they are required, what they involve, and how the site visit itself will be assessed.	Next assessment
<b>Standard Three</b>	2. Develop the detail of the <i>Framework for Professional Standards</i> and other codes of professional and ethical behaviours, so that they provide greater clarity about how they expect standards to be met in the context of equine therapy work. There should be a mechanism for making sure revised versions of the codes are communicated to registrants so that new requirements introduced post registration remain binding.	Next assessment

<b>Standard Five</b>	<p>3. The PCRC should be expanded to include members who are not involved in other aspects of Athena’s work, such as training. It should ensure that the investigation and adjudication of complaints are not carried out by the same individuals.</p> <p>4. Decisions made by the PCRC should not be subject to ratification by the RAB.</p> <p>5. Guidance on complaints should clarify how it will be decided which cases are appropriate for consensual disposal, how decisions would be made about these, and whether any findings (other than sanctions) would be published.</p>	<p>Three months</p> <p>Three months</p> <p>Three months</p>
<b>Standard Six</b>	<p>6. Establish clearer governance for oversight of education and training, such as through an Education Committee.</p> <p>7. Publish key information about the PCRC, RAB and any other new governance arrangements. This should include the Register of Conflicts of Interest, who fulfils key positions such as the Chair, and papers and minutes to demonstrate how the public interest is fulfilled. It should be clear how the governance arrangements work together as a whole. Athena could consider publishing diagrams of its governance structures to aid transparency.</p>	<p>Next assessment</p> <p>Next assessment</p>

We issued the following Recommendations to be considered by the next review:

<b>Recommendations</b>	
<b>Standard Six</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Publish clearer policies about how to raise organisational complaints, separate from complaints about registrants.</li> <li>2. Publish the process that will be followed for a disciplinary hearing, which is currently available on request.</li> <li>3. Equip members of the Executive Committee, RAB, PCRC and any further governance Committees established to make fair, consistent and transparent decisions. Athena</li> </ol>

	should consider induction training and ongoing training in areas such as equality and diversity, data handling and decision making in disciplinary procedures for key decision makers.
<b>Standard Seven</b>	4. Formalise the consideration of risks into its governance structure so there is regular discussion at meetings.

## About the Register

This section provides an overview of Athena and its register.

<b>Name of Organisation</b>	Athena Herd Foundation CIC, referred to in this report as “Athena”
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.athenaherd.org">www.athenaherd.org</a>
<b>Type of Organisation</b>	England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales
<b>Role(s) covered</b>	Equine facilitated practitioner Equine assisted practitioner Equine practitioner Equine interactions Equine facilitated learning Equine assisted learning
<b>Number of registrants</b>	15
<b>Overview of Governance</b>	The Register Advisory Board (RAB) has responsibility for oversight of the management and day to day running of the Register. There is a Professional Conduct Review Committee (PCRC), which has responsibility for complaints and which reports to the RAB. There is also an Executive Committee, which consists of five Directors.
<b>Overview of the aims of the register</b>	The objectives of the Athena Foundation Accredited Practitioner Register are to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• create and maintain professional ethics and standards that prioritise the health and wellbeing of clients and public and protects them from harm or injury;</li> <li>• promote and maintain client confidence and public credibility in the benefits of Equine Facilitated Interactions and the delivery thereof;</li> <li>• provide a clear definition of professional standards required to support the delivery of Equine Facilitated Interactions;</li> <li>• maintain ongoing compliance with these standards by all registered Practitioners.</li> </ul>

### Inherent risks of the practice

This section uses the criteria developed as part of the PSA’s *Right Touch Assurance tool*<sup>2</sup> to give an overview of the work of equine practitioners.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/publications/policy-advice/right-touch-assurance---a-methodology-for-assessing-and-assuring-occupational-risk-of-harm91c118f761926971a151ff000072e7a6.pdf?sfvrsn=f537120\\_14](https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/publications/policy-advice/right-touch-assurance---a-methodology-for-assessing-and-assuring-occupational-risk-of-harm91c118f761926971a151ff000072e7a6.pdf?sfvrsn=f537120_14).



Risk criteria	
Risk criteria	Equine facilitated learning
<p><b>1. Scale of risk associated with equine facilitated learning</b></p> <p><i>a. What do equine practitioners do?</i></p> <p><i>b. How many equine practitioners are there?</i></p> <p><i>c. Where do equine practitioners work?</i></p> <p><i>d. Size of actual/potential service user group</i></p>	<p>a. Equine facilitation is the term for a range of roles that involve working with horses to develop self-awareness. It is often combined with other therapeutic approaches, such as counselling, to provide an ‘experiential learning’ process. This approach is premised on an understanding of the horse as an intelligent animal, with which the learner can develop a strong non-verbal relationship. The process of working with horses is intended to complete self-development and self-reflection. Within this report we use the broad term equine practitioner (EP) to describe the roles included in Athenas’ register.</p> <p>b. We could not find data on the total number of EPs within the UK. There do not appear to be any definitive data sources on overall numbers, but Athena’s best estimate is approximately 300-400 practitioners within the UK.</p> <p>c. EPs work in a range of contexts including therapeutic, and corporate development. Athena provides equine facilitated learning (EFL) for the following groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Corporate leadership and management</li> <li>● Private individuals and groups</li> <li>● Community and charitable groups</li> <li>● Learning organisations such as schools and colleges</li> <li>● Vulnerable and sensitive social groups</li> <li>● Those seeking alternative learning and therapeutic interactions.</li> </ul> <p>d. The broad application of EFL, and the range of contexts in which practitioners work, mean there is a potentially large and diverse service user group. However, since the number of practitioners is not known, it is not possible to provide an estimate of the actual service user group at this time. Athena has advised that the principal users of EFL tend to be therapists (including occupational therapists, counsellors, and psychotherapists); young people, particularly those who may have Special Education Needs; and vulnerable adults.</p>
<p><b>2. Means of assurance</b></p>	<p>The broad range of environments in which EFL is delivered means that the means of assurance will vary. Practitioners will be subject to existing safeguarding and health and safety policies in place when working within schools, and businesses. The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) has published specific guidance for health and safety in horse riding establishments<sup>3</sup>. Some equine facilitators who also practice</p>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cieh.org/media/1247/health-and-safety-in-horse-riding-establishments-and-livery-yards-what-you-should-know.pdf>

	as counsellors or psychotherapists may also registered with an Accredited Register.
<b>3. About the sector in which equine facilitators operate</b>	<p>Many EPs will also be trained in other disciplines, such as counselling and psychotherapy. These practitioners will blend a range of therapeutic approaches when working with service users. Counselling and psychotherapy are accessed by individuals privately, and through other services such as health and education. The industry standard for counsellors and psychotherapists is a minimum of a Level 5 qualification (or Level 4 with a further test of competence). Athena is an organisational member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), which is accredited by the PSA.</p> <p>There will also be equine facilitators who do not have prior learning or experience with counselling or psychotherapy. They may or may not have training in other practices such as life coaching, particularly if their work is orientated towards corporate environments. In these settings, equine facilitators offer a specialist form of personal development, with aims that include enhanced business performance.</p>

# Assessment against the Standards

## Standard One: Eligibility and 'public interest test'

### Summary

Standard One was completed as a preliminary assessment in February 2022. The Accreditation Panel found it is in the public interest to accredit Athena, and that Standard One is met. Further detail can be found in the published report<sup>4</sup>.

### Accreditation Panel findings

At its initial meeting, the Accreditation Panel noted the further work Athena had undertaken to strengthen mitigations for risks relating to adjunctive therapies, service user boundaries and safety around horses. The Accreditation Panel did not identify any changes that affected the preliminary decision that Standard One is met when it reconvened.

## Standard 2: Management of the register

### Summary

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Two was met. It issued the following Condition:

- **Condition One:** Develop and publish policies and procedures to make clearer how site visits are used to determine eligibility for the Register. This should include greater clarity on the circumstances in which they are required, what they involve, and how the site visit itself will be assessed.

### Accreditation Panel findings

#### *Initial Panel meeting 30 March 2023*

At its initial meeting, the Accreditation Panel found that Standard Two was not met.

Athena provides training and holds a register of practitioners. Our requirements include clear separation between these two functions to avoid conflicts of interests. The Accreditation Panel recognised that Athena had taken steps to strengthen the independence of decisions to admit practitioners to its register, through the creation of the RAB. This means that decisions were no longer made by people who are involved in the delivery of education and training. However, recruitment to the RAB was not yet complete. It also appeared that decisions by the RAB required ratification by the Executive Committee.

The Chief Executive, and Head of Design and Delivery both sit on both the RAB, as well as the Executive Committee. Although Athena had confirmed that these roles will be recused from decisions in which they may have a conflict, in practice this arrangement could still have resulted in perceived conflicts of interest since the

<sup>4</sup>Available at: [https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/accredited-registers/panel-decisions/athena-herd-preliminary-standard-1-panel-decision.pdf?sfvrsn=b4714820\\_4](https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/accredited-registers/panel-decisions/athena-herd-preliminary-standard-1-panel-decision.pdf?sfvrsn=b4714820_4)

Executive Committee was also responsible for overseeing training and other services provided by Athena in addition to its Register. The Accreditation Panel determined that there needed to be stronger firewalls between the management of the Register, and the rest of Athena's services including its education and training provision. The Accreditation Panel issued Actions One and Three to address this.

The Accreditation Panel also discussed the Register itself. It considered that as presented at the time, it would be difficult for a member of the public to distinguish between a registrant, and member. Although there was a filtering function which allows registered practitioners to be selected, there is not clear enough information about what this means in practice. Additionally, all members appeared on the register when clicking the link to the Accredited Practitioner Register. To be able to make an informed choice, there should be clearer information about the differing requirements for registration, and membership. Without this being in place, there was a risk that people may choose a member who is not bound to the same standards of practice and other requirements as registrants. Achieving this could be achieved through separating out the register from the membership list (or 'directory'), and/or providing clearer information on the existing Register. The Accreditation Panel issued Action Two, as below to address this.

Site visits can be undertaken as part of the registration process, if Athena determines that it is necessary to fully assess the competence of an applicant. There are not any guiding criteria for when a site visit is required, which could lead to inconsistency and actual, or perceived, unfairness. To address this, the Accreditation Panel was minded to issue the following Condition, if accredited:

- **Condition One:** Develop and publish policies and procedures to make clearer how site visits are used to determine eligibility for the Register. This should include greater clarity on the circumstances in which they are required, what they involve, and how the site visit itself will be assessed.

The following actions relating to Standard Two were issued:

- **Action One:** Create a clearer firewall between management and oversight of key regulatory functions such as complaints and registration, and the other services that Athena provides, including its education and training provision. This should include making sure that the governance groups established to oversee these functions have the ability to make final decisions about outcomes of individual registration applications, and complaints.
- **Action Two:** Review the format of the Register so there is a clearer distinction between registrants and members to allow the public and others to make an informed choice about which practitioners they choose. It should be easy to identify which practitioners are on the Register, and how this distinguishes them from members in terms of registration requirements.
- **Action Three:** Complete recruitment to and provide an update on the work of the Professional Conduct and Review Committee (PCRC) and Register Advisory Board (RAB). This should include an update on

recruitment and confirmation of Chairs, examples of agenda, papers and minutes that demonstrate how they work in practice.

### *Reconvened Panel meeting 20 December 2023*

The management reporting chain that existed between the RAB and the Athena Foundation Executive Committee has been removed.

Athena's intended Accredited Register remains part of its wider membership directory. It has updated the main webpage hosting this list<sup>5</sup> to include a brief description of each of its three membership levels (Athena Member, Accredited Practitioner, and Registered Practitioner (PSA)). Each of these categories has a corresponding button that can be clicked on to view the full list of individuals for each category. There are icons for each of these categories, which also appear on individual entries. The descriptors are also repeated within individual's full register entry. There is a new webpage, linked from the Register page, with further detail about each of the three membership levels<sup>6</sup>.

Athena has undertaken some user testing around the use and understanding of these pages and their content. Athena provided us with the script it used for the user testing. It told us that the general feedback received was that people understood how it worked and could navigate effectively, although it has taken forward some minor points in relation to wording.

Recruitment to the RAB is now complete. It has five members, including the CEO and the Head of Design and Delivery. There are three designated 'lay members'. Although these members are not on Athena's register, they do practice within the field of equine facilitated learning. The Chair also has experience in governance and regulation within the education sector. The Accreditation Panel recognised that there can be challenges in recruiting lay people and that once accredited, Athena may wish to seek additional lay members from other Accredited Registers (as discussed further under Standard Six).

The Accreditation Panel determined that the steps taken by Athena address Actions One to Three, in relation to Standard Two.

## **Standard 3: Standards for registrants**

### **Summary**

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Three was met. It issued the following Condition:

Condition:

- **Condition Two:** Develop the detail of the *Framework for Professional Standards* and other codes of professional and ethical behaviours, so that they make clear how they expect standards to be met in the context of equine therapy work. There should be mechanism for

<sup>5</sup> <https://athenaherd.org/explore/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://athenaherd.org/apr-defining-membership/>

making sure registrants are told when the Code is revised so that new requirements introduced post registration remain binding.

### Accreditation Panel findings

*Initial Panel meeting 30 March 2023*

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Three was met with Conditions.

The Accreditation Panel considered the range of standards and codes for business practice, ethical conduct and professional behaviour. It determined that broadly, our minimum requirements for this Standard were satisfied.

However, the Accreditation Panel noted that some of Athena's key codes of practice, such as the *Framework for Professional Standards*, were set out at a high level. This could limit their utility for registrants and make it difficult to consider allegations of breaches of the code through its complaints procedures. To address this, Athena should provide further detail about its expectations of its registrants in the context of their practice as EPs. The Accreditation Panel was minded to issue the following Condition, if accredited:

- **Condition Two:** Develop the detail of the *Framework for Professional Standards* and other codes of professional and ethical behaviours, so that they provide greater clarity about how they expect standards to be met in the context of equine therapy work. There should be mechanism for making sure revised versions of the codes are communicated to registrants so that new requirements introduced post registration remain binding.

The Accreditation Panel considered that the current webpage format of the *Framework for Professional Standards* and other key policies could make it difficult to have clear version control, which in turn could undermine Athena's ability to hold registrants to its conditions of registration. Although Athena is managing this for some policies through version control logs on the webpage itself, it should consider whether this will be workable for the revised documents.

## Standard 4: Education and training

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Four was met.

### Accreditation Panel findings

*Initial Panel meeting 30 March 2023*

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Four was not met.

The Accreditation Panel noted that the main route to registration currently is through completion of Athena's Diploma, which is taught through a blend of in-person, and remote learning. The external verification of training courses provided by the Accredited Counsellors, Coaches, Psychotherapists and Hypnotherapists (ACCPH); and the organisational membership of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (an Accredited Register) helps to provide independent assurance.



The Accreditation Panel noted that gaining Ofqual regulated status would provide further assurance but recognised that the current arrangements were consistent with the Standards in the meantime. However, Athena needed to be clear about its requirements for applicants who had not completed its own Diploma.

The Accreditation Panel noted that Athena's Standards of Education and Training page on its website outlined that qualifications need to be externally regulated by an Ofqual or equivalent body. Since the Athena Diploma is not itself at this time regulated by Ofqual, it is important that Athena reviews its requirements and provides clear information for prospective applicants and other stakeholders.

Since Athena both provides training and manages the Register, there was a need for clear firewall between these functions. This was particularly the case since management of the Register itself is currently subsidised by income from delivery of the Diploma. The Accreditation Panel considered that the current arrangements do not provide clear enough separation. The need for clearer separation between the governance and management of education and training, and management of the Register relates to Action One. The Accreditation Panel was minded to issue a Condition aimed at achieving this, under Standard Six.

The Accreditation Panel issued the following action relating to this Standard:

- **Action One:** Create a clearer firewall between management and oversight of key regulatory functions such as complaints and registration, and the other services that Athena provides, including its education and training provision. This should include making sure that the governance groups established to oversee these functions have the ability to make final decisions about outcomes of individual registration applications, and complaints.
- **Action Three:** Complete recruitment to and provide an update on the work of the Professional Conduct and Review Committee (PCRC) and Register Advisory Board (RAB). This should include an update on recruitment and confirmation of Chairs, examples of agenda, papers and minutes that demonstrate how they work in practice.

#### *Reconvened Panel meeting 20 December 2023*

The CEO and Head of Design and Delivery, who sit on the Executive Committee, are no longer directly involved in the delivery of training. Their roles now focus on quality assurance of training, and management of the Register. The training team has been expanded through additional recruitment.

Regarding potential conflicts of interest between the training and registration functions, Athena advised that 'if an individual considers themselves (or is deemed) conflicted they will absent themselves from the discussion. The Chair will provide oversight and the ultimate decision if required on what is deemed to be a conflict.' Athena is also in the process of establishing a Conflicts of Interest Register.

Whilst the Accreditation Panel considered that there was sufficient separation of functions to accredit, it is important the governance of education and training is

further separated. This is addressed through the Condition issued under Standard Six.

### Standard 5: Complaints and concerns about registrations

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Five was met. It issued the following Conditions:

- **Condition Three:** The PCRC should be expanded to include members who are not involved in other aspects of Athena's work, such as training. It should ensure that the investigation, and adjudication of complaints are not carried out by the same individuals.
- **Condition Four:** Decisions made by the PCRC should not be subject to ratification by the RAB.
- **Condition Five:** Guidance on complaints should clarify how it will be decided which cases are appropriate for consensual disposal, how decisions would be made about these, and whether any findings (other than sanctions) would be published.

### Accreditation Panel findings

#### *Initial Panel meeting 30 March 2023*

At its initial meeting, the Accreditation Panel found that Standard Five was not met.

The Accreditation Panel noted that the PCRC had been established to manage and oversee the handling of complaints about registrants. Although recruitment was still underway, this would provide a mechanism for considering complaints from the initial receipt to final decision. See Actions One and Three.

Although Athena had developed a range of policies and procedures to support this, these were not yet all consistent. For example, it was not clear how the *Complaints and compliments policy* links with the *Malpractice and Maladministration policy*. The definition of 'whistleblowing' within the *Malpractice and Maladministration policy* could also be confusing since it defined whistleblowing as anyone who wishes to remain anonymous, rather than the legal definition<sup>7</sup>. Athena should also consider how to separate out the investigation, and adjudication stages of the process more clearly and ensure that the same people are not involved in each, for individual complaints. The Accreditation Panel considered that having separate appeals functions for different processes would be beneficial, as part of this.

Another key issue was that the policies themselves did not clearly distinguish between registrants, and others involved in Athena's work. For example, the Sanctions policy refers to students, and members of staff. If accredited, this could cause confusion since it may be assumed that the PSA had endorsed the overarching policies and procedures.

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<sup>7</sup> [Whistleblowing for employees: What is a whistleblower - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/whistleblowing-for-employees)



The Panel agreed with the Recommendation and Conditions as set out in the report. It additionally set a Condition aimed at clearer separation of policies and procedures as applying to registrants. It issued the following Actions relating to Standard Five:

- **Action One:** Create a clearer firewall between management and oversight of key regulatory functions such as complaints and registration, and the other services that Athena provides, including its education and training provision. This should include making sure that the governance groups established to oversee these functions have the ability to make final decisions about outcomes of individual registration applications, and complaints.
- **Action Three:** Complete recruitment to and provide an update on the work of the Professional Conduct and Review Committee (PCRC) and Register Advisory Board (RAB). This should include an update on recruitment and confirmation of Chairs, examples of agenda, papers and minutes that demonstrate how they work in practice.
- **Action Four:** Review the Compliments and Complaints, Malpractice and Maladministration, and Sanctions Policies to ensure these provide a clear and robust process to handle complaints against registrants.

### *Reconvened Panel meeting 20 December 2023*

Recruitment to the PCRC, which is responsible for handling complaints about registrants, is now complete. The Chair, and one other PCRC member are members of Athena. The two non-Chair members are both additionally part of Athena's training team, creating the potential for a conflict of interest if they are reviewing a complaint about someone they have trained.

The *Complaints and Compliments Policy*, and *Malpractice and maladministration Policy*, have been revised and are now consistent with the ToR for the PCRC. The *Malpractice and maladministration policy* sets out definitions and criteria for the types of practice that fall under this process, rather than the less formal *Complaints and Compliments* route. However, the *Malpractice and Maladministration Policy* does not set out how it will be decided which cases are appropriate for consensual disposal, how decisions would be made about these, and whether any findings (other than sanctions, as below) would be published.

The *Sanctions Policy* aligns with the *Malpractice and maladministration policy* and sets out the types of sanction that can be issued, which include suspension and withdrawal of registration. The *Sanctions Policy* also makes clear that sanctions will be published online, on the Professional Conduct Notices page. During assessment, Athena confirmed that any sanctions would also be visible on the practitioner's register entry. Registrants can appeal the issuing of all sanctions. The policy does not differentiate between sanctions issued through the consensual disposal route; and so, it is assumed that these would be published.

There is a process for those who have been removed from the Register to reapply. The information about [Reapplying for, and Restoring, Membership](#) states that these

applications 'will be considered on a case-by-case basis the Professional Conduct Review Committee. In such cases the decision of the committee will be final.' There is no information provided about how to submit a request for reapplication or any further details about how the PCRC will make this decision.

The PCRC is responsible for decision making at all stages of the complaints process, including initial triage, investigation, and adjudication. Since there are only three people on the PCRC currently, there is the risk that the same people may be involved at different stages in the process. Further, since two members of the PCRC are also on the training team, it is unclear whether they would be required to consider a complaint about someone who they had personally trained; and if not, how the PCRC would remain quorate and able to fulfil its role.

The inclusion of the PCRC of two members of the training team increases the likelihood of having direct prior relationships with registrants who are later subject to a complaint. Athena's definition of 'lay' allows for members of the profession if they are not part of the Athena team. These points make it particularly important that there is an independent appeals process – however the Chair of the RAB, which is responsible for ratifying complaints decisions, acts as both the initial decision maker on whether to accept an appeal, and a final arbitrator in the event of an inconclusive Independent Review (albeit noting this is expected to be a rare occurrence).

The Accreditation Panel considered the steps Athena has taken to date, and the outstanding issues. It determined that whilst Standard Five was broadly met, greater independence and separation of roles is needed within the complaints process. The small number of registrants (expected to be approximately 15 once the Register is accredited) reduces the risk of this being an immediate issue, and so this could be addressed through Conditions:

- **Condition Three:** The PCRC should be expanded to include members who are not involved in other aspects of Athena's work, such as training. It should ensure that the investigation, and adjudication of complaints are not carried out by the same individuals.
- **Condition Four:** Decisions made by the PCRC should not be subject to ratification by the RAB.
- **Condition Five:** Guidance on complaints should clarify how it will be decided which cases are appropriate for consensual disposal, how decisions would be made about these, and whether any findings (other than sanctions) would be published.

## Standard 6: Governance

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Six was met. It issued the following Conditions and Recommendations:

Conditions:

- **Condition Six:** Establish clearer governance for oversight of education and training, such as through an Education Committee.

- **Condition Seven:** Publish key information about the PCRC, RAB and any other new governance arrangements. This should include the Register of Conflicts of Interest, who fulfils key positions such as the Chair, and papers and minutes to demonstrate how the public interest is fulfilled. It should be clear how the governance arrangements work together as a whole. Athena could consider publishing diagrams of its governance structures to aid transparency.

#### Recommendations:

1. Publish clearer policies about how to raise organisational complaints, separate from complaints about registrants.
2. Publish the process that will be followed for a disciplinary hearing, which is currently available on request.
3. Equip members of the Executive Committee, RAB, PCRC and any further governance Committees established to make fair, consistent and transparent decisions. Athena should consider induction training and ongoing training in areas such as equality and diversity, data handling and decision making in disciplinary procedures for key decision makers.

## Accreditation Panel findings

### *Initial Panel meeting 30 March 2023*

At its initial meeting, the Accreditation Panel found that Standard Six was not met.

The Accreditation Panel considered the points raised under Standards Two, Four and Five relating to governance and determined that these also meant that Standard Six was not met. Although Athena is taking steps to create clearer separation of its functions in its governance arrangements, its new governance Committees are still in development. It was important that they were fully recruited to and working in practice, before Athena could be accredited. The Panel issued Actions One and Three to address this:

- **Action One:** Create a clearer firewall between management and oversight of key regulatory functions such as complaints and registration, and the other services that Athena provides, including its education and training provision. This should include making sure that the governance groups established to oversee these functions have the ability to make final decisions about outcomes of individual registration applications, and complaints.
- **Action Three:** Complete recruitment to and provide an update on the work of the Professional Conduct and Review Committee (PCRC) and Register Advisory Board (RAB). This should include an update on recruitment and confirmation of Chairs, examples of agenda, papers and minutes that demonstrate how they work in practice.

### *Reconvened Panel meeting 20 December 2023*

As set out under earlier Standards, although recruitment to the RAB and PCRC is now complete, membership appears to have been drawn from people who have had an association with Athena, in some cases through its training and/or membership. Membership includes 'lay' people, but the definition drawn by Athena for 'lay' is that they are not members of the existing Register Team. The current Chair of the PCRC is also Chair of the Athena Foundation Executive Committee.

This approach means that all members of the PCRC and RAB have close association with Athena or are otherwise practising within the field of the roles registered. This creates the risk that professional interests could become a prominent factor in decisions concerning the Register. While the requirements of Action Three are met, the Accreditation Panel determined that it is important to seek to diversify the experience and selection of its governance Committee members to act as a counterbalance to the focus on professional experience. Condition x under Standard Five addresses this for the PCRC.

- **Condition Six:** Establish clearer governance for oversight of education and training, such as through an Education Committee.
- **Condition Seven:** Publish key information about the PCRC, RAB and any other new governance arrangements. This should include the Register of Conflicts of Interest, who fulfils key positions such as the Chair, and papers and minutes to demonstrate how the public interest is fulfilled. It should be clear how the governance arrangements work together as a whole. Athena could consider publishing diagrams of its governance structures to aid transparency.

### **Standard 7: Management of the risks arising from the activities of registrants**

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Seven was met. It issued the following Recommendations:

Recommendation:

- Formalise the consideration of risks into its governance structure so there is regular discussion at meetings.

### **Accreditation Panel findings**

#### *Initial Panel meeting 30 March 2023*

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Seven was met at its initial meeting.

The Accreditation Panel noted the further actions that Athena had taken to strengthen mitigations as recommended in the provisional Standard One outcome of February 2022. This included developing clearer guidance on adjunctive therapies, safety when working with horses, and strengthening its safeguarding guidance. Noting that the risk matrix itself had not been updated since this assessment, the Accreditation Panel agreed that the formation of the new governance arrangements presented an opportunity to embed management of risks on a more regular basis. It issued the following Recommendation:

- **Recommendation Seven:** Formalise the consideration of risks into its governance structure so there is regular discussion at meetings.

## Standard 8: Communications and engagement

The Accreditation Panel found that Standard Eight was met.

### Accreditation Panel findings

*Initial Panel meeting 30 March 2023*

At its initial meeting, the Accreditation Panel found that Standard Eight was not met.

Whilst Athena had a dedicated area of the website for information about its Register, this was not prominent from its main landing page, which focuses on the other services that Athena provides. It is important that Athena provided clear information about its public protection role, which allows the public to check practitioners are appropriately registered and trained. The register should consider how it communicates its role to the public. The Accreditation Panel noted the points raised under other Standards, particularly about clarity of the register and the equine facilitated workers, as captured under Action Four:

- **Action Five:** Provide clearer information to the public about equine therapy. This should include descriptions of the different roles Athena registers to help members of the public and others to make informed choices about how to choose a practitioner from its Register. Potential service users, and applicants should be able to know what to expect from an equine therapy session.

*Reconvened Panel meeting 20 December 2023*

Athena has published new resources to support service users and members of the public in their understanding of the Register as well as what to expect from Equine Facilitated Interactions. This includes a clearer outline of different types of membership, and clarifying which individuals are and are not covered under the extended regulation of the PSA (Registered Practitioner (PSA)) as part of the Accredited Practitioner Register. <https://athenaherd.org/apr-defining-membership/>

As a result of the user testing described earlier in this report, Athena has developed a new “Working with Horses” paragraph on the Protecting the Public webpage, <https://athenaherd.org/apr-protecting-the-public/>. This provides links to an outline of what service users should expect as part of an Equine Facilitated session <https://athenaherd.org/apr-efi-sessions/> (which also provides links to independent research and sources about Equine Facilitated Interactions) in addition to providing clearer definitions of the different activities and practices undertaken under the umbrella term of Equine Facilitated Interactions: <https://athenaherd.org/apr-definitions-of-practice/>.

The further information added to Athena’s website provides greater clarity on what to expect from a session. Links to independent sources of information about the basis

for the benefits of equine facilitated interactions have been provided. The information appears to represent benefits in a fair and reasonable way, without exaggerated claims. We consider this is sufficient to equip members of the public using the Register to understand what to expect from their practitioner, and the sessions they offer and addresses Action Five.

## Share your experience

We received eight responses to the invitation to share experience of Athena.

Five of these were positive, highlighting the value that members had drawn from the organisation to their professional development. Concerns were raised in the remaining three. The main themes raised were:

- Independence of the quality assurance of Athena's training
- Engagement with other bodies in the sector.

We considered the submissions through our assessment. Action One issued at the initial Panel meeting helped to establish greater separation and independence between Athena's education and training activities, and management of the Register. Condition Six, which requires the establishment of a separate education governance body, will further strengthen this.

Athena provided evidence of its engagement with other bodies as part of Standard Eight. It has also committed to working with other Accredited Registers and regulators as relevant to its work.

## Impact assessment (including Equalities impact)

We carried out an [impact assessment](#) as part of our decision to accredit Athena. This impact assessment included an equalities impact assessment as part of the consideration of our duty under the Equality Act 2010.

This is the first Register involving animal-assisted therapies that the PSA has accredited, and issues relating to this were explored through the preliminary Standard One assessment<sup>8</sup>.

There are no current known sources of complete data about the number of EPs. This means little is known about the diversity of AH registrants, or wider EFL workers. Athena has developed an Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policy and begun to collect anonymised data about protected characteristics to develop a better understanding of the demographic and social profile of Equine Assisted or Facilitated Practitioners. We have identified some potential improvements to the form and will monitor progress when we assess Athena against the new Equality, Diversity and

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/accredited-registers/panel-decisions/athena-herd-preliminary-standard-1-panel-decision.pdf?sfvrsn=b4714820\\_4](https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/accredited-registers/panel-decisions/athena-herd-preliminary-standard-1-panel-decision.pdf?sfvrsn=b4714820_4)

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Inclusion Standard (Standard Nine) that was introduced in July 2023, at its next renewal assessment.

A key consideration throughout the assessment has been the potential conflict arising from Athena offering both training that can lead to registration and managing the register itself. The further actions issued at the initial Accreditation Panel meeting were aimed at creating greater separation and oversight of these functions. We considered that Athena has addressed these and have issued additional Conditions of accreditation to further strengthen this area. The Accreditation Panel considered these were sufficient to address the risk of potential conflict of interest, and that overall, it is in the public interest to accredit Athena.