

RSPCA 



Horse sense:

A good life for horses* through strengthening the horse–human relationship

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The full research report produced by Human Behaviour Change for Life and partners is available from: rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/horses/crisisreport

*This report uses the term 'horse' throughout as well as the term 'equine'. For the purposes of this report, both should be regarded as including horses, ponies, donkeys and mules.



Executive summary

The term ‘equine crisis’ or ‘horse crisis’ has been used by animal welfare charities for over a decade to describe abandonment and neglect of equines as a result of overbreeding and overpopulation, as well as the pressure they faced regarding the number of horses, ponies and donkeys requiring their help. Despite their best efforts, this ‘crisis’ appears somewhat persistent, and a multi-charity report entitled *Britain’s Horse Problem* noted that there was a similar number of horses identified at risk of poor welfare in 2020 as in 2012. In order to address this long-standing situation, we commissioned the University of Bristol, Human Behaviour Change for Life and University College Dublin to perform research to define the crisis as well as identify its drivers and understand its extent and scope, using a mixed methods model drawing on varied sources of data over the whole equine sector.

Our research has found that the original equine crisis has eased, but now most equines in England and Wales, across all sectors of society, are not having their welfare needs fully met. Welfare issues experienced by equines include: obesity, lack of turnout, poor predictability (e.g. frequently changing homes and herd mates), gastric ulcers, delayed euthanasia, limited social interaction, rough handling and poor owner recognition of stress, pain and quality of life.

Our research identified four key drivers of the equine welfare crisis:

1. a proliferation of horse keepers lacking in practical knowledge, skills and experience leading to an inability to provide for equines’ welfare needs and detect and treat any welfare problems.
2. a mismatch of the supply and demand of certain equine types leading to the over-population and low value of some equines, such as Thoroughbreds, a scarcity of others, such as leisure equine ‘all-rounders’, and welfare issues arising from a mismatch of owner skills with their equine’s needs.
3. a lack of equine-keeping facilities with adequate provision for turnout, grazing and socialisation leading to unfulfilled welfare needs and fewer opportunities for positive welfare.
4. a lack of provision for the lifetime welfare of all equines, including planning and careful decision-making from birth to death, leading to premature euthanasia, delayed euthanasia, abandonment, or poor end-of-life care.

Tackling the equine welfare crisis such that all equines have the opportunity to experience a good quality of life requires strategic, radical change and is reliant upon legislative, policy, attitude and behaviour change with commitment from key partners and stakeholders to work in collaboration.

Robust enforcement of welfare-compatible legislation and policy is critical.

We look to national governments to:

- strengthen legislation where required and support local government and other agencies in their enforcement role.
- introduce new legislation as is necessary, such as the regulation of livery yards and licensing of rescues and sanctuaries.

We look to local government to:

- address enforcement issues to ensure legislation and regulation is positively enforced.

We need to see significant change in attitudes and behaviours towards horses.

We look to animal welfare charity partners to:

- undertake coordinated strategic planning to change behaviours among horse keepers and collaboratively develop and implement action to improve the welfare of horses.

Equestrian organisations can help by:

- promoting positive language to their membership around equines as sentient, emotional beings with inherent value and by providing robust sanction when membership act in a manner incompatible with these values.

Colleges have a pivotal role and we will support review and development of their curriculum to:

- promote equines as sentient, emotional beings with inherent value, helping drive behaviour change to ensure they are treated as sentient.

Gaps in knowledge and practical skills among horse keepers and those working with horses must be addressed.

We look to national governments to:

- include animal welfare in the curriculum for all children.
- ensure curricula of regulated occupational and vocational training qualifications address knowledge and practical skills gaps.

Colleges have a pivotal role and we will support review and development of their curriculum to:

- address horse keepers' knowledge and practical skills gaps, including lack of understanding of the importance of the Three Fs¹ as key equine welfare needs.

Equestrian organisations can help by:

- ensuring their training curricula address knowledge and practical skills gaps in their members.

1 The Three Fs are Friends, Freedom and Forage – core horse welfare needs that are fundamental to their experiencing good physical and mental welfare. See: worldhorsecelfare.org/advice/the-3fs-friends-forage-and-freedom

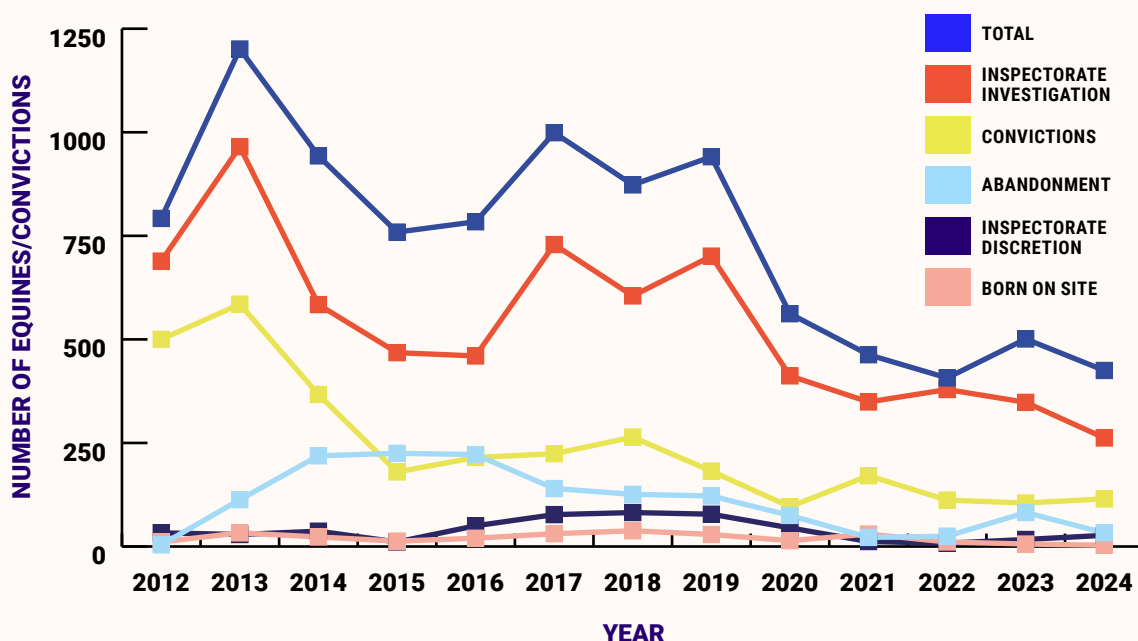
1. Introduction and aims

The term ‘equine crisis’ (or ‘horse crisis’, commonly used as a synonym) started to be publicised by equine welfare charities in 2012. It was used to describe the pressure faced regarding the number of horses, ponies and donkeys in the UK believed to require their help, at a time when most didn’t have space or resources to take on any more. In 2012, of an estimated GB horse population of 840,000^[1], equine welfare charities estimated that 6,000 horses in England and Wales were at risk of poor welfare, and noted that the number of horses taken into equine charity care had risen sharply over the previous five years. World Horse Welfare saw a 50 percent rise in equines being taken into their care and Redwings Horse Sanctuary saw a rise/increase of 28 percent. The overall number of horses in charity care was 2,800^[2]. The problem was widely believed to be due to increasing abandonment and neglect of equines, the result of overbreeding and overpopulation combined with a financial crisis – too many animals with too few good homes to go to and financial pressures increasing on owners.

Several charities, including the RSPCA, produced three reports over eight years to raise the profile of the crisis with governments, local authorities, horse keepers and the general public. These included: *Left on the Verge: The approaching equine crisis in England and Wales* (2012)^[3], *Left on the Verge: In the grip of a horse crisis in England and Wales* (2013)^[4] and *Britain’s Horse Problem: From horse crisis to systemic failure – the need for owner accountability, wider regulation and better enforcement in England and Wales* (2020)^[5].

Despite some notable successes, e.g. the introduction of the Control of Horses Acts of 2014 and 2015 (Wales and England respectively), which made it easier for land owners, including local authorities, to seize equines if they had been abandoned on their land, these reports and the best efforts of the charities working in partnership did not result in the equine crisis ending. *Britain’s Horse Problem* noted that in 2020 there was a similar number of horses identified at risk of poor welfare – 7,000 – as in 2012^[6]. Figure 1 details the numbers of horses taken into RSPCA care from 2012–2024 along with convictions for equine welfare offences, showing that while the numbers have declined from a high in 2013 to under half of the peak, many horses continue to suffer at the hands of their owners.

Figure 1. Annual number of equine intakes by the RSPCA 2012–2024, by four primary intake reasons, total intake and convictions. Adapted from^[7] to include updated data and convictions.



“Equine emotions are influenced by where they live, their diet, behavioural interactions with people, other animals and their environment as well as their health.”

Welfare organisations developed interventions to tackle overbreeding and abandonment (e.g. subsidised castration and identification clinics) based upon well-informed hypotheses on the causes of the crisis but their effectiveness had never been properly tested through rigorous research. Furthermore, there has been a lack of full identification and understanding of the drivers of the equine crisis, which has prevented informed, effective, targeted action. This is critical to safeguarding equine welfare and reducing pressure on welfare charities.

To help identify and fully understand the equine crisis, as well as to develop effective, targeted solutions, in 2022, we commissioned the University of Bristol, Human Behaviour Change for Life and University College Dublin to research the equine crisis further, looking to define the crisis as well as identify its drivers and understand its extent and scope.

This report provides an overview of the research. It describes the current equine crisis, its drivers and recommendations for key stakeholders in order to achieve a good quality of life for all equines. This report provides much-needed evidence to help understand the current welfare state of equines in England and Wales and the actions necessary to improve the relationship between horses and people such that equine welfare and quality of life will be improved.

A good life for equines

Throughout this report we refer to a good life for equines. This means a life where equines feel good and are thriving, where positive feelings or emotions predominantly outweigh negative feelings or emotions. Equine emotions are influenced by where they live, their diet, behavioural interactions with people, other animals and their environment as well as their health. Understanding how an equine is likely to be feeling can be assessed using the five domains model of welfare assessment. You can read more about that at: worldhorsewelfare.org/advice/the-5-domains-of-animal-welfare

2. How was the research conducted?

The research was conducted using a mixed methods model drawing on varied sources of data over the whole equine sector, including reviews of scientific and lay literature, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to local authorities, analysis of data from equine welfare charities and equine organisations, an online survey with over a thousand respondents, informal and formal focus groups and a detailed examination of online equine sales adverts.

3. What is the current equine crisis?

Previous research on the equine crisis suggested that the increase in numbers of horses needing help was due to continuing overbreeding in poor economic circumstances, resulting in excess of supply over demand, resulting in abandonment, neglect and suffering^[8]. However, our research has shown that the equine crisis, as defined in 2012, has evolved. Regarding the nature of the current equine crisis, our research has found that:

- The equine crisis, as originally rather loosely defined as over-breeding, over-population, neglect and abandonment, has eased, although it is not eliminated. Rather, now, **a diversity of equine welfare issues exists across the different groups of equines**. Issues identified include obesity (see Figure 2), lack of turnout, poor predictability (e.g. frequently changing homes and herd mates), gastric ulcers, delayed euthanasia, limited social interaction, rough handling and poor owner recognition of stress, pain and quality of life (see Figure 3).
- Equine welfare is impacted by a complex, multi-faceted system with many drivers, barriers and opportunities.
- Considering simple supply of, and demand for, horses is valuable and important but is only part of the system driving welfare compromise. **Supply and demand is influenced by many factors**.
- Unlike 2012, it is not only horses used for particular disciplines, or particular breeds, or those owned by particular communities that face welfare issues. Most equines in England and Wales, across all sectors of society, do not have the opportunity to experience a good quality of life.

Our research has identified evolution of the original equine overpopulation crisis to a widespread failure to meet the welfare needs of equines. For this reason, our research proposes renaming the 'horse crisis' the 'equine welfare crisis'^[9]. Finally, there is a strong argument, put forward in *Britain's Horse Problem* (2020)^[10], that as a persistent cycle of equine welfare need, the former crisis can no longer be deemed as such but must be recognised as a systemic failure of ownership and enforcement. The findings of our research support this conclusion.

Figure 2. An obese pony. Obesity is just one of the diverse welfare issues identified in the report.





Figure 3. Horse showing facial signs of stress and pain – note the head held high, ears back, tension in the mouth and jaw and the inverted v-shape above the eye. Poor recognition of these signs by horse owners means that stress and pain go undetected and untreated.

4. What is causing the equine welfare crisis?

Our research identifies four key drivers of the equine welfare crisis.

a. Key drivers

1) The proliferation of horse keepers lacking in practical knowledge, skills and experience leading to an inability to provide for equines' welfare needs and detect and treat any welfare problems.

“ It is so easy to buy a horse now without having any knowledge of how they should be kept, ridden, the costs with the result that many horses live under appalling conditions. ” (Survey respondent)

“ I would say 90 percent plus anything that's come in that's been from a caring home has got something wrong with it that's been missed or ignored. ” (Formal interviewee)

A lack of basic knowledge and experience of those caring for horses was a strong theme in both the formal and informal interviews as well as the survey. Research participants attributed this to an increase in novice owners who lack the knowledge and practical skills associated with horse ownership. Multiple reasons were suggested to be responsible, including the reduction in the number of riding schools, the loss of opportunities for young people to work on yards to gain practical experience, and the cost of riding lessons coupled with low horse prices meaning that novice owners made the decision to buy a horse and 'learn together' rather than pay for lessons. Associated with this is the tendency for many owners to have only had experience with their own horse rather than multiple horses through exposure in a riding school environment. Numbers of riding schools have declined by 250 in recent years to under 1,500 in 2023 due to owners retiring or staffing problems¹¹. The lack of practical skills and experience has also been exacerbated by the growing number of livery yards² only offering full livery services, meaning that many owners

² A livery yard is a facility where horse keepers can pay to board their horses. They may provide full livery, where all horse care is provided by livery yard staff, 'DIY' livery where all care is provided by the horse keeper, or a combination of these.

never undertake the basic care of their horse themselves. Equine colleges were also mentioned in relation to the deficiency in practical skills, particularly regarding recent graduates attempting to enter the equine industry. Research participants suggested that basic practical skills were not taught and that students were only exposed to safe, schoolmaster horses due to concerns for health and safety. This has resulted in graduates who are only experienced in handling straightforward horses and who lack the necessary skills and ‘day one’ competencies to work in practical equine settings.

Poor practical knowledge, skills and experience of horse keepers was suggested to compromise equine welfare in a number of ways. Interviewees described the inability of many of those caring for horses to recognise poor quality of life and when their horse was in pain leading to delays in seeking veterinary treatment. Failure to read equine behaviour, particularly stress and fear, was believed to lead to inappropriate equipment or training practices as owners attempted to address their horse’s behaviour without understanding the underlying cause. Research participants also suggested that poor decision-making around routine care and management could lead to unintentional neglect and the horse’s welfare needs not being met, particularly regarding access to forage and turn out.

2) A mismatch of the supply and demand of certain equine types leading to the over-population and low value of some equines, such as Thoroughbreds, a scarcity of others, such as leisure equine ‘all-rounders’, and welfare issues arising from a mismatch of owner skills with their equine’s needs.

“ You don’t want to encourage breeding because there’s loads of horses out there. But are the horses of the right useful type? ” (Formal interviewee)

“ There is an unmet demand for medium- and large-sized horses that will do no more than pleasure riding. And an oversupply of small cobs and Thoroughbreds. ” (Survey respondent)

Survey respondents and interviewees identified significant problems within the equine marketplace in England and Wales. Some breeds, such as Thoroughbreds (see Figure 4) and small cobs (see Figure 5), are overrepresented, while there appears to be a deficit of larger, weight-carrying ‘all-rounder’ leisure horses. This was supported by a seasonal evaluation of online equine sales advertisements. The overrepresentation of Thoroughbreds in particular has led to low prices for this breed, making them an attractive option for those wanting to enter horse ownership on a low budget. The trend for purchasing Thoroughbreds due to their affordability has considerable welfare implications for the horses themselves who usually require more intensive feeding and upkeep than other breeds, and may be more likely to have gastric ulcers, stereotypies (repetitive behaviours linked to poor welfare such as crib-biting, weaving and box-walking) and physical issues, which may go unnoticed by inexperienced owners or untreated by those on a budget. Furthermore, Thoroughbreds are unlikely to be a suitable choice for all potential horse owners, particularly novice ones. Difficulties handling and riding their horse can lead owners to take strong action to overcome this issue, for example by using equipment that can inflict pain, fear or punishment-based training techniques. It may also lead to these horses being repeatedly sold on to new homes and a repeat of this behaviour occurring. The challenges of a mismatched pairing are often compounded by the owner’s lack of skill, experience and a knowledgeable support network. As well as compromising equine welfare, such pairings can be dangerous for both horse and owner.

The deficit in large ‘all-rounder’ leisure horses with a bit of experience (typically aged 6–10) has driven prices up, and the sales adverts examined as part of the research included a number of ‘horse wanted’ adverts specifying these qualities, demonstrating this demand. These are also the types of horses desperately sought after by riding schools to offer lessons for adult clients. Many riding schools are now priced out of the market for these horses and consequently have had to limit intake of adult clients, further exacerbating the problem of upskilling those new to equestrianism.



Figure 4. A Thoroughbred horse at RSPCA Felledge Equine Centre.

3) The lack of equine-keeping facilities with adequate provision for turnout, grazing and socialisation leading to unfulfilled welfare needs and fewer opportunities for positive welfare.

“ Too many yards offer restricted or no turnout. Horse management stuck in Victorian era of working horses, despite modern knowledge. Horses kept for human convenience and insufficient places suitable for equine needs – not enough space, socialisation, grazing, browsing. Factory farming approach is preferred – rows of stables/social isolation. ” (Survey respondent)

“ Good yards are hard to find, or then to afford. Livery yards in this country seem to overstock themselves with horses so there is no way the three F’s (Friends, Freedom and Forage) can be met, with fancy stables taking precedence and few yards offering group turnout, or winter turnout. We need a change in perception on how to keep our horses. ” (Survey respondent)

The online survey and interviews reported a perceived decline in the number of livery yards available to private horse owners. Those that are available are now considered more likely to offer full or part livery services rather than do-it-yourself (DIY) livery, as a way to make them more financially viable for the yard owners. It is harder to find equine facilities offering year-round turnout and the option for a horse to live out at grass in a herd, with many yards offering only limited access to small individual areas of grazing. Even accessing a field to rent was reported to be difficult by owners. The decline in livery yard numbers was attributed to increased pressure on land for housing development, with a number of survey respondents reporting that they had been forced to move their horse due to their yard being sold for development. The high costs associated with running a livery yard were also identified as a factor behind the decline.

Research participants felt that many yards are now overstocked with too little grazing or other turnout available for the number of horses present on site, leading to increased time stabled and compromising equine welfare. Others voiced concerns that there are so few opportunities to keep horses together given the lack of available land and apparent reluctance to turn horses out together. Worryingly, a number of participants reported the difficulties they had experienced when trying to find somewhere to keep their horse that would meet their welfare needs, particularly the Three Fs³

3 The Three Fs are Friends, Freedom and Forage – core horse welfare needs that are fundamental to their experiencing good physical and mental welfare. See: worldhorsecare.org/advice/the-3fs-friends-forage-and-freedom



Figure 5. Small cobs, part of an RSPCA rescue following a report of neglect in 2020.

(see Figure 6). Participants reported an absence of experienced and knowledgeable yard managers, further compromising equine welfare when inexperienced or uncertain owners had no one to ask for appropriate advice. This was compounded by the absence of licensing meaning that, unlike riding schools, anyone can open a livery yard and offer livery services for horses.

It is worth noting here that increased traffic on roads and lanes, reduction in bridleways and loss of land to development has also changed what people do with their horses, with many owners reporting that they no longer feel safe to go out hacking and are spending more time in the arena instead.

4) The lack of provision for the lifetime welfare of all equines, including planning and careful decision-making from birth to death, leading to premature euthanasia, delayed euthanasia, abandonment, or poor end-of-life care.

“ I feel like more people these days are likely to sell due to their equine not being fit for purpose anymore rather than keeping for life. **”** (Survey respondent)

“ I know several local riders, they go through horses every six months. So, they'll buy a horse, they'll post on Facebook about how wonderful it is and they've done this dressage test and they've done this and the other, then they'll fall off the horse, and then the horse will be for sale three months later, and then they'll buy another horse and then the next thing. So there are people that are sort of serial horse buyers, but not horse keepers. **”** (Formal interviewee)

Research participants suggested that horses are now changing owners more frequently as their suitability as ridden horses and their owners' needs change, rather than horses being kept for life. This has significant welfare implications. Changing homes is incredibly disruptive, and many horses are not given the time they need to settle into new environments, social groups and routine, and are sold on to yet another home. There appears to be little, if any, lifetime planning, from poor breeding compromising physical health and longevity to horses being signed out of the food chain when young, leading to loss of value and challenges around disposal when the horse has reached the end of their life. It is now not uncommon to see older horses advertised cheaply for sale or given away free as a companion when they can no longer be ridden. This was observed in the sales adverts



Figure 6. Horses enjoying the Three Fs – Friends, Freedom and Forage.

“ Many people do not understand that the way they are keeping their horses does not meet their welfare needs and they are denying their horses a good life as a result. ”

examined where horses in their 20s, including a 27-year-old horse, were advertised. Participants attributed this trend to the high costs of euthanasia, the fear of judgement from others if an otherwise healthy horse was euthanised rather than retired, novice owners' reluctance to euthanise their elderly horses, and vets for prolonging the life of equines to avoid upsetting their owners.

Horses are living longer than ever before yet their owners are often more financially constrained. The majority of equine sales adverts cite human-related reasons for the sale, including changes in personal and financial circumstances. It can be expensive to provide appropriate end-of-life care, particularly if the owner also wants a horse they can ride. Equine welfare may be compromised by poor recognition of declining quality of life, delayed treatment and delayed euthanasia. The fear of judgement associated with the euthanasia of a healthy horse that can no longer be ridden should not be underestimated as a barrier.

The evidence presented above reinforces the earlier points around the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the equine welfare crisis. If we want to achieve a good quality of life for all equines then we need a multi-faceted approach and to tackle each of the four drivers.

b. Unintentional neglect

A strong theme of unintentional neglect due to inexperience of horse owners or simple lack of consideration of equine welfare in decision-making is present throughout the evidence on the key drivers of the equine welfare crisis presented above. This theme is represented particularly clearly in the online public survey of horse keepers, where one anonymous respondent summed this up extremely well:

“Far fewer horses owned by the proverbial ‘happy hacker’, far more people who only ride in an arena, far greater aspirations with far less knowledge, skill and experience to back them up. Ten years ago the majority of horses were kept in large groups in fields, and used as pleasure horses; more and more nowadays, they are kept in stables with limited turnout in individual small patches of grazing, as status symbols.”⁽¹²⁾

While the Animal Welfare Act 2006 remains an effective piece of legislation with provisions for those causing unnecessary suffering or failing to fulfil their duty of care, many of the welfare issues affecting equines, highlighted above, do not meet the threshold for action – especially in the context of limited local authority and charity resources for enforcement. These issues, the result of prevalent forms of unintentional neglect, lead to poor welfare just like other more obvious forms of neglect. So, despite intake and conviction data (see Figure 1) showing a decrease in activity actionable under the Act in its current form, our research suggests that many equines, from semi-feral moorland ponies to elite competition horses, kept by all sectors of society, are not living good lives. Many people do not understand that the way they are keeping their horses does not meet their welfare needs and they are denying their horses a good life as a result.

c. Donkeys and mules

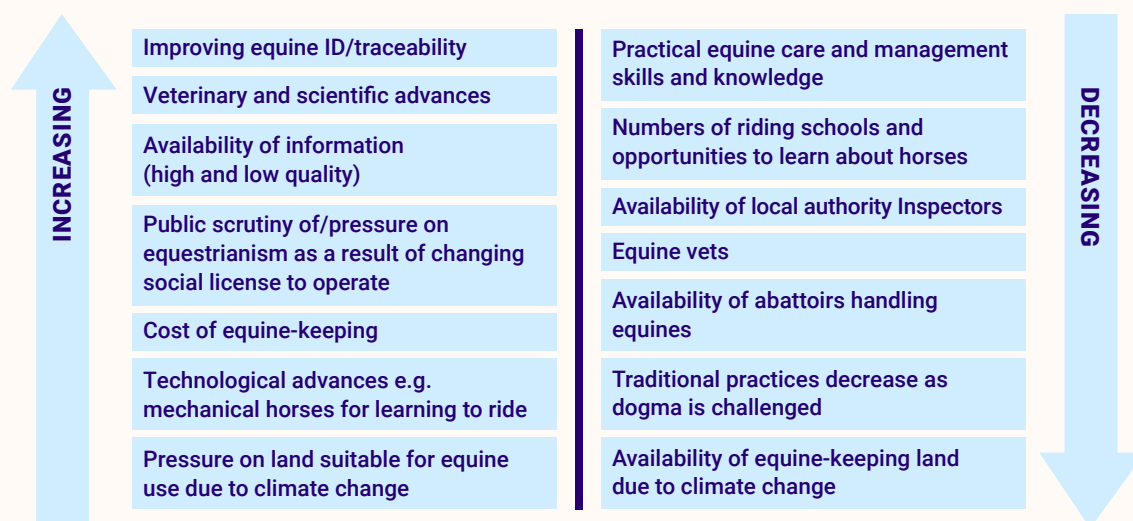
Unfortunately, data on donkeys and mules is lacking. They are often overlooked and fall between the gaps in data collected by organisations; sometimes they are included in categories of ‘horse’ and sometimes they are omitted altogether⁽¹³⁾. Many of the factors found in this project, such as the move towards owning equines as pets, the lack of good-quality livery options, and the increase in inexperienced keepers, are likely also to impact donkeys and mules. However, given that donkeys have unique behavioural and physical needs, and that donkey keepers are an under-studied population, such extrapolations must be made with caution. Further research specific to the impact of the equine welfare crisis on these animals is merited.

5. How can we tackle the equine welfare crisis?

Our research has found that equines are suffering neglect at all levels of horse-keeping society. Many equines are not having their welfare needs met and do not have the opportunity to experience a good quality of life. The equine sector is not currently sustainable environmentally, economically or socially, particularly in light of climate change and loss of grazing to development.

It is important to recognise that the equine welfare crisis is a complex system (see Figure 7). It sits within the unique system of the wider equine sector and is impacted by societal change and global events. It is clear that ‘siloe thinking’ and a focus on narrow issues in isolation, such as particular communities or sports, is unlikely to yield much positive change. In fact, ending suffering of equines requires strategic, radical change and is reliant upon legislative, policy, attitude and behaviour change with commitment from key partners and stakeholders to work in collaboration. This includes national and local governments, animal welfare charity partners and equine colleges and organisations.

Figure 7. Increasing and decreasing factors having either positive or negative effects for the equine sector^[14].



Using this research, we identified three key areas that we believe to be critical to help equines experience a good quality of life: **the introduction and enforcement of welfare-compatible legislation; driving attitudinal and behaviour change; and improving and enhancing knowledge of equine welfare needs and practical skills.** Nonetheless, achieving sustainable and effective change is only possible through **collaborative and partnership working** and so in highlighting the three key areas of change, we have identified the key stakeholder groups upon which change is dependent.

a. Introducing welfare-compatible legislation and robust enforcement

Our research found that there was a lack of equine-keeping facilities with adequate provision for turnout, grazing and socialisation leading to unfulfilled welfare needs and fewer opportunities for positive welfare. Furthermore, well-drained, unimproved land (i.e. not intensively managed and fertilised agricultural land) suitable for horse pasture is under pressure from climate change^[15] and development for housing^[16]. New (e.g. regulation of livery yards) and stronger, more effective legislation (e.g. review of the Animal Welfare Act 2006) alongside policy and process is necessary to ensure welfare-compatible standards, but these must be coupled with robust enforcement to be meaningful and to allow action to be taken to drive change, especially in more resistant individuals/practices. Furthermore, legislation, policy and process need to be widely known about, and outlined in a way that minimises scope for misinterpretation.

To achieve legislative and policy change we believe the following actions are necessary.

National governments to:

- strengthen legislation where required and support local government and other agencies in their enforcement role through the provision of appropriate resources and the establishment of dedicated animal welfare officers^[17].
- introduce new legislation as is necessary, such as the regulation of livery yards and licensing of rescues and sanctuaries through an update of the The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018.

Local government to:

- address enforcement issues to ensure legislation and regulation they are responsible for is positively enforced to improve equine welfare.

The recent UK Government white paper announcing its intention for local authorities to shift to a unitary model provides scope for ending the current 'postcode lottery' in enforcement, where provisions vary widely across different councils, by consolidating animal welfare responsibilities into single-tier authorities. This should also encourage joined-up, efficient and effective enforcement of animal welfare laws and promote collaboration and sharing of best practice across local government. The RSPCA will support these efforts through training and knowledge transfer.

Equestrian organisations can help by:

- promoting the Three Fs and good pasture management practices with their membership, including incorporating them in member standards.
- acting as leaders in lobbying governments and local authorities to protect land suitable for equine pasture.

b. Driving attitude and behaviour change towards equines

Equine welfare is ultimately determined by human factors, including attitudes, beliefs, values, culture and behaviour. Recognition of the commodification of equines and failure to be treated as sentient was striking in the survey responses^[18]. Horses are often seen as commodities; a resource to make money from by breeding, selling or slaughter, or as a tool to use to achieve personal sporting goals. A lack of consideration of their sentience denies that they have feelings and interests of their own, and results in inappropriate treatment.

Persistent outdated attitudes to horses include failure to understand their welfare needs and emotional complexity, belief that horses are unintelligent, paradoxically that they somehow inherently know what people want them to do in handling/training and that 'naughty' horses intentionally don't do this, and that they feel happy and secure in looseboxes. Therefore, attitudes of horse keepers towards horses need to change. We must encourage acceptance of horses as intelligent and sentient beings. This means that we must recognise that they have their own emotions and feelings and are not mere commodities to buy, sell, give away, slaughter, abandon and neglect without care or concern.

However, horses do not just need to be accepted as sentient, they must be treated as sentient. This is problematic, as there is also a disconnect between our attitudes towards animals and how we actually behave towards them; a theme that appears in the RSPCA's *Kindness Index Report (2024)*^[19]. This disconnect needs to be addressed to create lasting change, which means the behaviour of horse keepers needs to change. As an example, horse keepers' decision-making is largely based on tradition, economics and emotions, and this is reinforced by equestrian social norms and the lack of any understanding that horses are experiencing compromised welfare at all levels of equestrian society^[20]. We need to see a shift in behaviour so that more sympathetic management, handling and training techniques are adopted, which will improve the lifetime welfare of equines. Human action or inaction regarding their care and management directly influences their welfare and quality of life^[21]; behaviour change is crucial for us to see the end of the equine welfare crisis and equines experiencing good lives.

Behaviour change is necessary across all parts of the sector to help ensure equines have the opportunities to live a good quality of life.

We look to animal welfare charity partners, particularly those that are members of the National Equine Welfare Council (NEWC), to:

- frame equines as sentient, emotional beings with inherent value rather than disposable commodities, unifying positive language around equines, which will help ensure charities are talking with one voice on the topic of equine sentience and value. This means horse keepers, equestrian organisations and national and local governments will be exposed to ‘one powerful version of the truth’ on matters of equine sentience and value, helping drive behaviour change to ensure horses are treated as sentient.
- undertake coordinated strategic planning to change behaviours among horse keepers and develop and implement action to improve the welfare of horses, sharing vision, data and budgets to achieve this.

Equestrian organisations can help by:

- promoting positive language to their membership around equines as sentient, emotional beings with inherent value rather than disposable commodities, in this way changing attitudes and driving behaviour change to ensure horses are treated as sentient.
- having confidence to intervene and provide robust sanction when membership act in a manner incompatible with these values.
- promoting the Three Fs and good pasture management practices with their membership, including incorporating them in member standards.

Colleges have a pivotal role and we will support review and development of their curriculum to:

- promote equines as sentient, emotional beings with inherent value rather than disposable commodities, helping drive behaviour change to ensure they are treated as sentient.

We look to national governments to:

- support the development and delivery of cross-sector campaigns and initiatives aimed at changing attitudes and behaviour towards horses, helping ensure horse keepers can provide them with the opportunity to experience a good quality of life. Such support should include providing resources where possible.

c. Improving and enhancing knowledge of equine welfare needs and practical skills

As evidenced in Section 4 above, the proliferation of horse keepers lacking in practical knowledge, skills and experience is one of the key drivers of the equine welfare crisis. Horse ownership is substantially unregulated in England and Wales (beyond the general regulations of the Animal Welfare Act 2006); meaning that anyone can buy and own a horse without any test of skill, knowledge or commitment to their welfare. Although there is scope for action to be taken under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 for causing unnecessary suffering or failing to fulfil duty of care, many of the equine welfare issues discussed in this report do not meet the threshold for action despite their leading to poor welfare, just like other more obvious forms of neglect.

We need to make sure evidence-based and up-to-date education and training are readily available and provided to *all* riders and horse keepers, at every stage, ensuring they are empathetic, caring, respectful and considerate, with knowledge and practical skills enabling equines to experience a good life. This includes the development of an equine education curriculum, which would help target those working with equines but also needs to help address the knowledge and practical skills gaps of horse owners. Education and training must address the lack of understanding of equine welfare needs that results in poor decision-making affecting welfare from birth to death, and help drive change in attitudes and human behaviour. It is, however, critical to ensure that there are measures in place to check those who deliver training/education and that the quality and content of the training is appropriate.



We look to national governments to:

- include animal welfare in the curriculum for all children.
- ensure curricula of regulated occupational and vocational training qualifications address knowledge and practical skills gaps.

Colleges have a pivotal role and we will support review and development of their curriculum to:

- address horse keepers' knowledge and practical skills gaps, including lack of understanding of the importance of the Three Fs as key equine welfare needs and of good pasture management practices.

We look to animal welfare charities, when liaising with potential and existing horse keepers, to:

- ensure horse keepers have better awareness of the Three Fs as core equine welfare needs and of the importance of protecting pasture through good management to facilitate provision of these.

Equestrian organisations can help by:

- ensuring their training curricula address knowledge and practical skills gaps in their members.

6. Moving towards a good life for equines in England and Wales

The scale of change necessary to achieve a good life for equines should not be underestimated, although the push to drive forward and achieve change could be argued as very timely given the increased and recent focus on equine welfare within society. For example, the general public are increasingly challenging the use of horses in various sports, as evidenced by greater public concern over horse welfare in the Grand National Steeplechase^[22] and equestrian sports in the Olympics^[23]. Some people are asking whether it is legitimate to ride horses at all^[24]. Many equestrian organisations are aware of this challenge and have started to question what a good life for equines looks like (for example, see the programme for the World Horse Welfare Conference 2024)^[25] while others have changed their language, policies and practices; for example, the launch of the British Equestrian Charter for the Horse^[26]. Change within younger horse keepers is also apparent, with those who have attended animal husbandry college courses improving their knowledge of equine sentience, behaviour and welfare needs as well as their attitudes to equines due to the inclusion of animal behaviour and welfare science in the curriculum^[27]. The latter changes are also reflected in the curricula of some equestrian organisations; the Pony Club and British Horse Society being notable examples. There is also a clear growth of interest in alternative and non-traditional horse handling and training techniques^[28]. These focus on understanding of horse behaviour and needs and this growing interest is evidence of changes in attitudes and a desire to change in grassroots equestrianism. This openness to change and apparent shift in some areas is heartening, but good equine welfare and quality of life will only be realised if beliefs and behaviour change too.

The RSPCA is committed to driving forward change and securing a good life for all equines. The launch of this report provides the basis for this work. As an example, we have already started exploring how we can help change attitudes and behaviours towards equines and have commissioned further work to help identify the tools and approaches needed to achieve this. This work also includes mapping knowledge and practical skills gaps across horse keepers in order to address these in collaboration with our partners.

We cannot do this work alone though; a good life for all equines requires collaborative and strategic working across all parts of the sector, including animal welfare charities, membership bodies, commercial bodies, education and training providers as well as governments. This report, importantly, identifies some of the ways in which our stakeholders and partners as well as key decision and policy makers can contribute and provides the basis for these discussions.

If you can help us build a world where all equines are respected and treated with kindness and compassion then we would really like to hear from you. You can request more information or express interest in working with us by contacting the RSPCA Companion Animals Department: cad@rspca.org.uk

“ We cannot do this work alone though; a good life for all equines requires collaborative and strategic working across all parts of the sector, including animal welfare charities, membership bodies, commercial bodies, education and training providers as well as governments. ”

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