

EQUINE CRISIS- RESEARCH REPORT

Redefining the equine crisis

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Equine Crisis – Research Report

Executive summary

This pioneering research applied systems thinking to build an understanding of the ‘Equine Crisis’ – from defining the crisis, and identifying its drivers and causes, to mapping and understanding the extent, scope and make-up of the crisis. We found that the original equine crisis, previously defined as over-breeding, over-population, neglect, and abandonment, has ameliorated, although it is not eliminated. Rather, now, diverse equine welfare issues are found across the different groups of equines.

Background

The term equine crisis was coined in 2012 to describe the pressure that animal welfare charities faced regarding the number of equines in the UK (United Kingdom) requiring intervention, at a time when most of the charities did not have space to take on more animals. The problem was perceived to be caused by abandonment, neglect, overbreeding and the overpopulation of equids and the term ‘equine crisis’ has been used for many years. This research was commissioned by the RSPCA, and undertaken by the University of Bristol, Human Behaviour Change for Life, and University College Dublin.

A systems approach

The systems approach used for this project broke down the complex equine world into relevant constituent parts, allowing exploration of the relationships between these parts and consideration of the impact of those interactions on other aspects of the system and the emergent properties of the system. This approach combined systematic use of data whilst maintaining a big-picture view of the problem, including what has led to the current situation and what this might mean for the future.



Methodology overview

Data were gathered using several methods and the results triangulated between them.

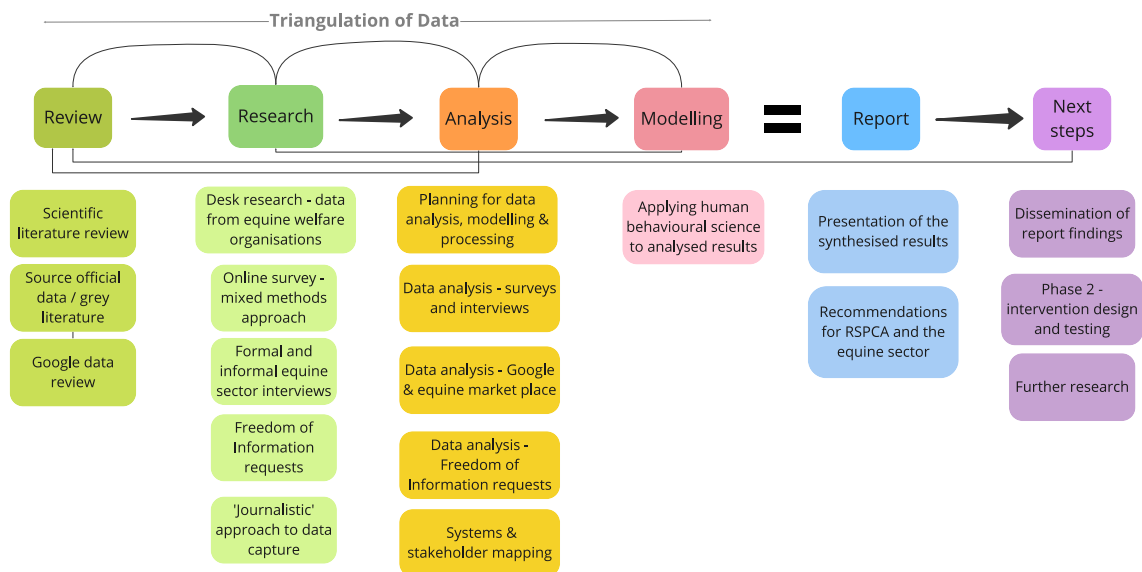


Figure 1. The figure provides an overview of the process and methodology utilised to undertake the systems based research examining the current state of equine welfare in England and Wales, the role of various stakeholders and the 'flow' of equines through the system.

Results

This project has brought together unprecedented diversity and volumes of data, to consider the equine crisis from several areas. It is apparent from the literature review that there is a paucity of published data and other research discussing or critiquing the equine crisis in England and Wales. There is a lack of information about the equine population, and improvement in this area will provide a baseline understanding of the equine population, together with an evidence base for ongoing monitoring which will enable the impact of any intervention to be evaluated.

Data from the report sections showed the following key points:

- The equine welfare system is multi-faceted and complex with many drivers, barriers and opportunities.
- Considering supply and demand is valuable and important but is only part of the system driving welfare compromise and is influenced by many factors.
- There are welfare issues facing most equines in England and Wales across all sectors of society in terms of welfare science (Five Domains not met).

The equine crisis has ameliorated, as originally outlined as over-breeding, over-population, neglect, and abandonment, although it is not eliminated. Rather, now, a diversity of equine welfare issues is found across the different groups of equines.

We suggest that there remains an ongoing "equine welfare crisis" consisting of:

- 1) The proliferation of carers 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) 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.
- 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.

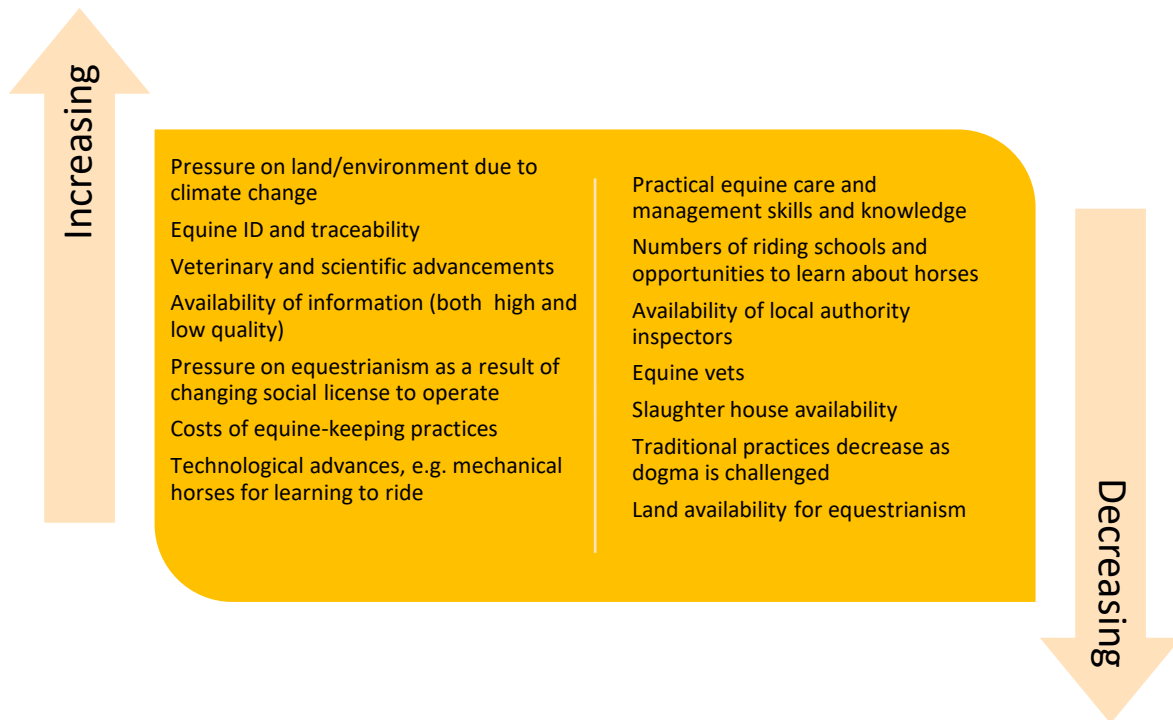


Figure 2. provides examples of factors that are increasing and those that are decreasing - with either positive or negative effects for the equine sector..

Local Authority data and interview information supports a reduction in abandonment and obvious neglect, but a strong theme of unintentional neglect through inexperience or lack of consideration for equine welfare was expressed.

“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. 10 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.”

The phrase ‘equine crisis’ does not appear to be used or well understood. The survey of equine owners showed that fewer than half (43.3%, n=1118) of respondents had heard of the term previously, 39.2% thought it was an accurate term to describe the situation today, but the largest proportion (48.5%) did not know the term (n=1046), and 34.5% had personal experience of it (n=1110) (see Figure 8).

Discussion

Data from all the above sources enabled a depth of understanding of the extensive and multifaceted nature of the equine world. This project mapped, cross referenced, and triangulated the data from the various sources and considered it through a systems-thinking lens.

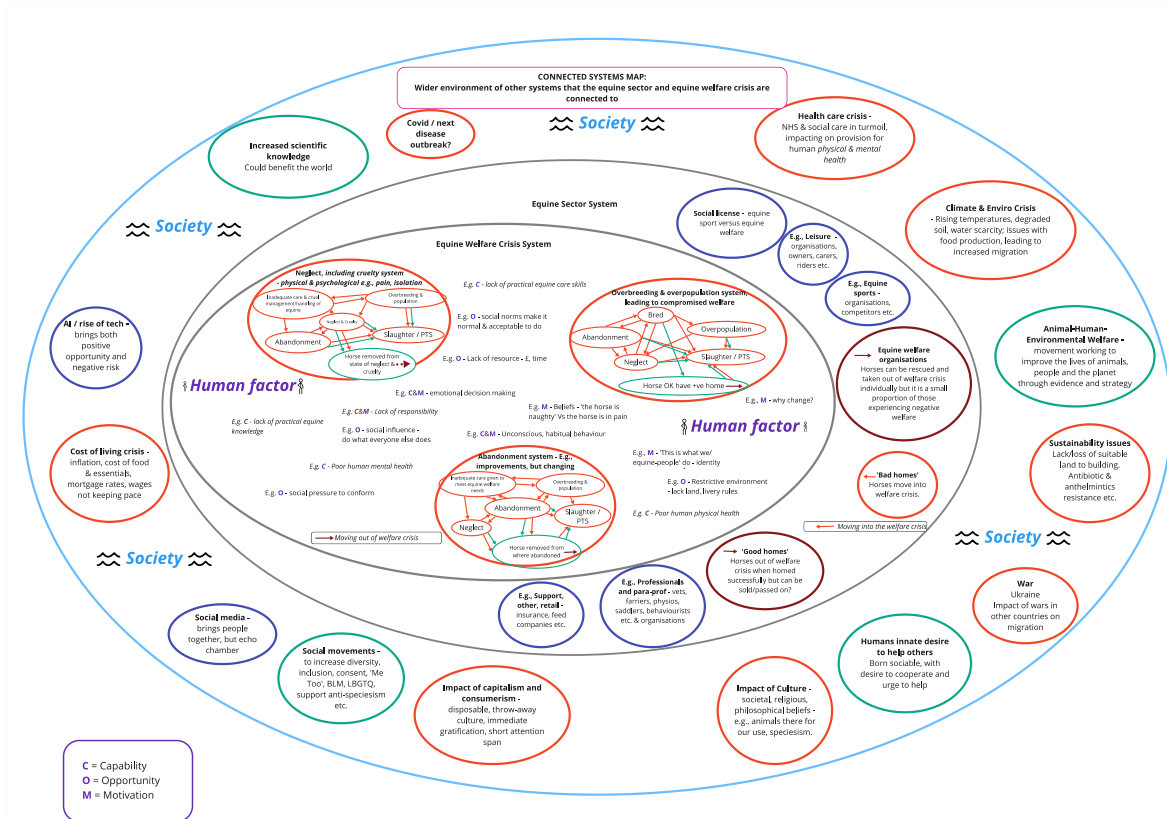


Figure 3. This systems map shows the equine welfare crisis system in the context of the equine sector system, that sits in the wider environment of society where other systems are present that interact with each other at different points.

The equine crisis is itself a complex system. It is situated within the unique system of the UK equine sector and impacted by the wider system of societal change and global events in which the equine sector sits. Our findings reveal how intrinsically interconnected these systems are and how siloed thinking is unlikely to yield any positive change. It is evident that the equine crisis, as defined in 2012, has evolved as the wider system has evolved around it, rather than resolved to any extent.

All data sources provided suggestions for solutions to the welfare problems equines face in England and Wales. These were collated and clustered into five key themes:

- policy and process
- education and training
- working with others/collaborations
- societal approaches
- further research.

The collated suggestions were critiqued, and recommendations drawn out as appropriate.

It is worth restating here that equine welfare is ultimately determined by human attitudes, beliefs, values, culture, knowledge, and skills. The equine industry has seen a period of intense change particularly in the last three to four years, both within and outside of the equine sector, and the

impression received through the formal interviewees is that this period of change has yet to stabilise. The Social License to operate is a significant threat to the equine industry and the need for genuine change could affect welfare in some sectors.

The survey results add weight to the findings covering the differences in knowledge across the equine industry, with suggestion of increasing knowledge in some areas, but limited practical experience opportunities resulting in a lack of practical skill. The interview findings suggest that a blanket approach to welfare challenges is unlikely to be successful for some issues if applied uniformly across regions.

There still exist gaps in our findings; one notable example is data on donkeys and mules. These species are often overlooked and fall between the gaps in data collected by organisations; sometimes they are included in categories of “horse,” and sometimes omitted altogether.

Conclusions

This pioneering research project concludes that there are welfare issues across all sectors of equine society and all areas of equestrianism. This research shows that supply and demand is only one part of the wider system driving equines in the UK to have compromised welfare and provides suggestions on how this issue could best be framed. In the past, the crisis has been defined in terms of supply exceeding demand and as a result, there being a shortage of homes for equines, however the issues now centre around the Five Domains, with few equines having their needs met in England and Wales, and this preventable situation, can be described as a ‘welfare crisis’.

This innovative research has enabled a deeper understanding of the equine sector regarding the systems within it and how they connect to impact upon equine welfare, which will enable strategic and practical action to be taken at all levels of the equestrian sector.

Introduction

This body of research was commissioned by the RSPCA to investigate the drivers of the equine crisis, defined as equine overpopulation, overbreeding, neglect, and abandonment, in England and Wales.

The project takes a systems approach to break the complex equine sector down into relevant parts, allowing exploration of the relationships between these parts and consideration of the impact of those interactions on other aspects of the system. By using this approach, we can be systematic with the data and research gathered but maintain a big picture view of the problem with a logical and understandable end goal.

The project draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from a range of sources including existing literature and data sources, and original bespoke research. These are brought together and viewed systematically to inform our conclusions and recommendations.

This report takes the reader through the research journey. The report is structured into standalone sections, that fit together to build a cohesive whole. As such, while the report can be dipped into at will, we strongly suggest that it is read systematically following the structure outlined below.

The **background** piece sets the backdrop against which this research took place. The **timeline** provides a wider framework of events, and together with the background piece sets the context for what follows.

To fully understand the problem, the equine industry had to be understood first. A body of **desk-based research** drew on publicly available and purposely requested information from a variety of sources to build an understanding of the equine sector and how it may have changed since the term ‘equine crisis’ was first coined in 2012.

The findings of the desk-based research were used to inform the development of two strands of original research. Firstly, an **online survey** of equine stakeholders in England and Wales was conducted to capture the perspectives, understandings, and experiences of multiple stakeholders across the equine sector. Secondly, the desk-based research and survey findings together informed the sampling framework and topic guide for a series of **interviews**. Informal journalist style interviews combined with more formal interviews of key stakeholders to provide greater depth of understanding of different elements of the equine sector.

Finally, triangulating our data as viewed through a **systems thinking and mapping** lens enabled us to elucidate key themes across the distinct parts of the system, uniting the discrete parcels of information into a unified whole.

Our findings are pulled together in a comprehensive, overarching **discussion**, and used to suggest solutions to the issues identified and **recommendations** for the sector.

002. Thought piece – the evolving relationship between horses and humans

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The aim of this document is to underline the point that the equine sector (including the equine welfare sector, and therefore linking to the equine crisis) came about as a result of equine culture being developed over many years, but which has been sped up in recent time. If we don't understand that what has gone before is the foundation for what is happening now (e.g., culture, beliefs, values, habituation, social norms) we will miss key signs and patterns that can reveal opportunities for change. It is by understanding the past, joining the dots to the current situation and using this to forecast the future that we can develop effective interventions. We need to learn and not repeat the mistakes of the past but also, we need to learn where things in the past may have been better than they are now. An enormous amount of change has occurred in the equine sector over this time but has accelerated in the last 3 years. An informal approach has been used to build this picture of horse history, it is a vast area of interest and the factors that have contributed to the development of the horse human relationship we have today are multifaceted. Change in industry, mechanisation, economic change and land use alterations have all impacted on the accessibility of equines to people in England and Wales over time. Various sources have been utilised to build this picture including academic papers, professional interpretation of data, professional knowledge of the horse industry and historic texts.

In the beginning....

The relationship between horses and their caregivers has developed and changed since horses have been domesticated. To become a domestic species there are specific traits needed, the species must be able to breed easily and flexibly in a domestic setting plus their response to humans and their flight response needs to be suitable for domestication. Horses were a pivotal species for domestication changing the course of human history, but history often comes back to the relationship between people and horses. The management of horses, often adapted to suit our needs rather than based on their ethological needs, can also be affected by relationship and perceived needs or wants of the horse. How horses are managed affects their behaviour, which in turn affects how people perceive their need to be controlled. The passing down of knowledge and experience, with stories and personal experience, is a strong influence on people's behaviour. Horses are large and can be intimidating, potentially leading people to be risk averse, to stick to what they know, or have heard, works.

Horses have been evolving into the species we have today over 55 to 60 million years, from the small forest dwelling Eohippus to the more recognisably horse Merychippus which existed around 15 million years ago. The donkeys, asses and zebra species diverged from the horse around 2 million years ago, with donkeys being more closely related to zebra than horses. Just 6000 years ago man's relationship with horses began, with horses and donkeys being used for meat and milk. Evidence suggests multiple domestication events across Western Eurasian and Central Asia, before horse use spread rapidly across Eurasia. The domestication of horses fundamentally changed human history, including the ability to move long distances and critically changing how warfare occurred.

The relationship between humans and horses has been mentioned repeatedly through history, from the stories of muleteers in the war, individuals who were able to understand and build working relationships with mules, with mules returning to their troops after being captured by the enemy, to the relationships that people perceive they have with their pet horse today. Understanding how this relationship has developed, alongside often contradicting methods of training or devices for control can give us an insight into what underlies behaviour seen from owners and riders today.

The writings of Xenophon are considered one of the most influential pieces of horse work written, it emerged in around 440BC and begins to talk of horsemanship. The need to build a relationship with the horse and talks of first training a horse in a gentle manner, he also talks of the importance of a gentle trainer and building riding skills before trying to train a young horse. These writings appear to be the basis of modern classical riding and gives us an insight in Persian expert training of their cavalry. Within the text he describes movements from the Greek army which resembles modern day dressage moves, this indicates the high level of training achieved. The Greek use of horses for carriages is documented in art and depicts reins and long shanked bits. The evolution of the bit correlates with the change in warfare across cultures, the ability to have greater control over the horse allowed evolution of more efficient weapons that could be used on horseback.

The development of knights and competitions in high society is likely to have pushed the development of bits which are decorative and give greater control so that in battle horses can be directed even in highly stressful situations where their natural behaviour would have been to flee. Long shanks and high curbs would have focused pressure on specific and sensitive areas in a horse's mouth. The horses of the time are considered to have been bred to be larger so they could carry the weight of the armour, however the smaller and finer horses were still present.

There is then little evidence of horsemanship development until the Middle Ages, with the development of firearms the use of horses slowed but around 1400 AD with the fall of Istanbul trick riders from circuses fled to Naples where The School of Naples was then formed. The riders were highly skilled, and horses used were generally of lighter Iberian breeds. The horses were taught airs above the ground and the horsemanship was considered of high importance. The moves were thought to have been developed from warfare, but the horses were so sensitive and highly trained they were highly expensive and unlikely to have been used in actual battle. The training methods used were considered cruel and some of the bits used included long shanks, variable levels of harsh mouthpieces and curbs. Even the noseband was a method of control, a capezona was a noseband that had reins and tightened when the reins were taken up. It could be considered that the horses were so sensitive and explosive due to pain.

As time went on there seems to have been a move back towards Xenophon's teachings. During the Age of Reason (18th Century) two great masters published books, Antoine de Pluvinet and Francois Robichon de la Guerinierre both opposing the training methods from the School of Naples. These books promoted a building of relationship with a horse and the requirement of riders to be skilled.

This school of riding also considered the preservation of the horse's mouth, historic bits have relied on the harsh bits to control horses' strength, speed and natural fear responses by inescapable pain or discomfort. Twists on the metal shafts intensify the pressure on the mouth, long shanks act with a strong curb action on the poll, spikes on cheekpieces act as direct pressure points. During this time, they advocated the use of a snaffle during training and a caveçon, both to preserve the sensitivity of the mouth. Only when the horse was more trained was a normal bridle used, in a similar manner as spade bits are considered suitable for only the highest training horse in Western riding. A normal bridle still had long shanks and a curb rein, but they had less severe mouth pieces and often had a ring at the same level of the bit. At this time only the most noble men could afford to have horses trained to this standard, there were specific skilled trainers for the horses.

As military developments continued there was an increasing need to have a higher number of horses trained for war. This led to the development of Campagne school, which worked to train riders and horses to a level, to have the skill required to do basic dressage, cross country and jumping so they are prepared for battle. All this work was carried out in a snaffle bridle, again with the consideration of preserving the horse's mouth. Only when horse and rider were considered skilled enough were they allowed to use a double bridle, it is unclear when the double bridle developed but there are advantages in that the snaffle can be used most of the time and the curb engaged when more specific manoeuvres required. These masters were the foundation of modern-day dressage and riding.

As more and more horses were used there was further refinement, with less need for horses in actual battle the need for ease of use became a driving factor. The Watering bit was developed, a simple jointed snaffle bit with a slight curve to the mouthpiece and loose rings. The bit was attached to the headpiece by T bars and leather straps so it could easily be removed for grazing and only 1 piece of headwear was needed per animal.

The knowledge and experience of people preparing horses for war and battle then appears to dissipate into society, when soldiers returned home and through the development of military sport teams. These methods were developed at times of stress and due to a specific need, but they have been the basis of modern-day sports and have remained key components and influences as to how horses are trained and managed.

The development of sport and leisure pursuits involving horses seem to have gone hand in hand with horse domestication and use across the globe, with the first recorded horse race being in China and Persia in 1500 – 1000 BC and horse chariot races being recorded in Greece by Xenophon in 600BC. These sports were often to display or refine the skills of warriors and many are still seen today, with similar principles including dressage and horse racing. The first recorded horse race in UK (United Kingdom) was in 1174, with the winning horse being owned by King Henry II. Racing was a sport for the wealthy with horses being gifted by royalty as they were prized possessions. The type of horse being raced was different than a general-purpose work horse, this developed further and the thoroughbred as a breed developed in the UK during the 17th and 18th century, where native mares were bred with imported stallions of Arabian, Barb, or Turkoman breeding. The different breeds of horse suited their history and uses, with the shire breed being developed from the English great horse, which was used to take men into battle in full armour. As war changed the breed was improved to be draft and farm working animals, by breeding mares from Holland with British stallions, the shire breed society was formed in 1878.

The UK perspective

The use of horses in the UK has changed and developed over the centuries, helping to shape the country and industry in UK today. Horses were used for farming, as transport for individuals in the form of horse drawn buses in London which utilised up to 25,000 horses and to deliver food and milk. As the industrial revolution advanced technology in UK the need for workers in industry changed, often utilising women and children and making them work in poor conditions. The history of pit ponies used in UK reflected how society changed, ponies, horses and mules were first used in mines in 1750 but their use escalated when legislation came into force in 1848 that barred women and children under 13 from working underground. At its peak in 1913 up to 70,000 ponies were being used underground in mines. The National Equine Defence League was formed in 1908, originally the Pit Ponies Protection Society, and along with the Scottish Society to Promote Kindness to Pit Ponies they campaigned and achieved protective legislation for these working equids. As technology advanced mine work was gradually mechanised and the need for ponies reduced, the final four pit ponies left Ellington Pit in 1994 with probably the last pit pony, Robbie, being retired in 1999 from a mine near Pontypool.

The perception of horse and animal welfare appears to have developed and become more important to society in the 19th century. Black Beauty was written in 1877 highlighting the poor welfare of working equids in the UK, a time when horse buses and horse drawn food deliveries were common. The Horse Trust, the world's oldest equine charity was formed in 1886 with the vision to provide a place of rest and retirement for working horses. Further charities were founded during this time, with a focus on different areas of the industry which were considered as a concern for welfare. World Horse Welfare (formerly ILPH) formed in 1927, with charity founder Ada Cole working towards protecting the welfare of British horses who were being exported for slaughter in Europe, often experiencing long and harsh transportation. These charities achieved protective legislation that changed the outlook for horses' welfare, however the perceived need for charity support for the equid sector persisted. The Donkey Sanctuary formed in 1969 and Redwings and Mare and Foal Trust began in the 1980s, these organisations have offered sanctuary and care for horses, donkeys and mules that have found themselves experiencing poor welfare. Interestingly each of these charities have been formed by women.

The last 100 years has seen a huge change in the use of horses in the UK. World War 1 changed the shape of the horse population in the UK, with 25,000 horses in the army at the start of the war in 1914 the army recruited thousands of horses from UK to reach a million horses, donkeys, and mules in its service by 1917. This decimated the horse population in the UK, affecting the availability and type of horse available for industry.

As the UK recovered economically and agriculturally from the war, the mechanisation of industry was reducing the need for horses' and people's physical labour in many areas. The shape and suitability of the UK countryside was also changing, the Enclosure Consolidation Act of 1801 had developed more parcels of small, enclosed areas for farming, along with the industrial revolution increasing the canals and roads the UK countryside was becoming fragmented. The use of the horses left in the country changed, horse sports continued for the wealthy and horses were still utilised across the UK on a smaller scale as work horses. The sport of fox hunting continued after the war, the new network of roads facilitating the travel of city gentry to pursue countryside pursuits such as fox hunting. The future of horses in the UK appeared secure using them in sporting pursuits with the wealthy.

In 1927, there was an invention which may have contributed to the spread of popularity of the horse in sports, the television. Increasing mechanisation of industry and a strengthening economy changed

the financial and time budgets of the UK population. In 1950 just 1% of the population owned an TV but by 1965 this had risen to 25%. The real livings standards have increased 4.5 times since 1950s and this growth in economy potentially allowed the space in peoples budgets for more hobbies. Over a similar period, riding schools began to appear, making horse riding more accessible to those who lived in the city or who wanted to try riding without the facilities to own a horse. One of the first riding schools was started in 1941, Bowlers in Merseyside, with another large popular riding school, Talland forming in 1964. The Association of British Riding schools, Livery yards and Equestrian centres formed in 1954, and legislation of riding schools began in 1964 with the Riding establishments act. During the 1960s and 70s there was a surge in interest in horse sports, with events such as The Grand National, Badminton, Olympia and Hickstead being televised. Princess Anne rose to fame to win the 1971 European Eventing championships and the BBC's sports personality of the year. Around the same time Harvey Smith became famous for his controversial behaviour during showjumping, becoming famous enough to embark on a music career. During the 1960's Patricia Leitch published her book series of Jinny and Shantih, a very relatable story of a teenager and her horse. The famous story of Black Beauty was made into 6 films or series in the UK and was also produced across the globe, other films such as The Black Stallion were immensely popular. As horses were growing in popularity in entertainment, they were also becoming more accessible to own.

With this rise in popularity came an increase in horse societies, one of the more well known being The British Horse Society which formed in 1947. The British Horse Society has an extensive system of world standard qualifications, from horse owner knowledge certificates to their Stages exams, which lead to various riding instructor and groom qualifications. The British Riding Club is an organisation with individual Riding Clubs across the country, about 50 years ago they became affiliated with the BHS (British Horse Society). Since this affiliation, the numbers of riding clubs have grown, with over 440 affiliated clubs, 50 affiliated riding centres and 34,000 members.

With ever increasing food imports the British farmer was looking to diversify to make best use of their land, forming livery yards, selling small parcels of land to small holders, or renting out areas for horse use. This shift facilitated an increasing population of privately owned and kept horses.

The emergence of equine colleges

As the equine industry really began to grow and the skill required to train and care for an equid apparent, colleges started to offer equine courses. During the 1980's colleges started to offer vocational courses, which maintained a high level of practical application along with theory. This course type allowed the equine industry to move away from on-the-job training, which removed college students from yards such as riding schools and competition yards. The reduction of cheap and skilled labour impacted on the ability for these providers to offer services, which then increased costs. Popularity continued to increase, and colleges and universities started to offer courses which were more academic, desk based. Distance learning and internet-based learning started to grow from 1980's with an ever-increasing amount of knowledge available to those willing to study online, this came with limited supervised practical experience. The first equine degree was offered by Warwickshire Agriculture College in 1990, which was a leader of equine education at the time. These courses enhanced the understanding of horses and their physical and behavioural needs, but it reduced the amount of practical experience that was available. Hartpury, an agricultural college offered the first equine science degree course in 1992 and more colleges followed suit. Even with the rise of degree courses the strength of the BHS accreditations held and in 2023 colleges still promote their affiliation with the BHS.

With colleges and the BHS providing opportunities to increase knowledge and the internet providing an easy way to learn the role of the riding school began to diminish. Increasing litigation with the heightened awareness of the risk that horse riding carries put increasing pressures onto riding schools, with rising pressure for land and increasing insurance premiums riding schools struggled with 250 closing from 2018 to 2023, leaving just 1,497 in the UK. This is a loss of 1.5 million riding lessons and opportunities for people to experience and learn about horses and their care. The increase in academic degrees and research into horse physiology, ethology, and behaviour, often based on increasing sport performance, and the reducing ability to get hands on practical experience of horse management and care is potentially creating a population where common horse sense is lacking. As a prey species horses and donkeys' behaviour is often subtle, experience improves the ability of people to identify and appropriately identify pain and stress-based behaviour which improves donkey welfare and handler safety. This lack of practical experience, often more in terms of horse management rather than riding experience is meaning that we have generations of people without practical experience with horses.

The rise of the leisure horse

The influence of the international horse community has increased, and it has influenced the UK knowledge base, horse activities and the perception of horses. Queen Elizabeth supported Monty Roberts and his quiet way with horses in the early 1980s, he promoted a new way to communicate with horses by knowing and understanding how horses behave and act. Note that the seemingly quiet way was later understood to be more controlling and manipulative than it first appeared. Roberts has travelled across the world and his book, released in 1997, sold 6 million copies. The selling of the elusive bond between horse and person was popular and the different way of thinking began to impact on how people viewed horses and the BHS traditional teachings. These are different views and ways of working to the military history that is so influential with English riding and sports.

The financial crisis of the 1980s and 1990s tied in with the start of several horse charities, started not for a specific movement such as protecting horses from export or pit ponies but due to evidence of equids suffering in their everyday life. In 2008, the financial crisis hit, house prices fell, unemployment rose, and the UK went into a recession. People's budgets were squeezed and the financial implications of keeping a long lived, large animal were apparent. At this time, the largest welfare case of its time occurred at Amersham, Spindles farm, where 111 horses were seized and a further 32 found dead on site. This was a time where there was a horse welfare crisis and more large welfare seizures occurred.

The majority of the current horse population in the UK is used for leisure riding, however the UK countryside is becoming less accessible for horses, either for people accessing it for leisure use or as a living environment. This lack of available land is a potential contributing factor for horse behaviour problems, when confined horses can develop repetitive behaviours or abnormal behaviours. These behaviours can be problematic for their handlers as they includes increased aggression, high reactivity and explosive rebound behaviour under saddle. The land that has become available for small holdings or livery yards is often old farms that have been sold off, there has been a huge reduction in the number of dairy farms during this time. These farms were purposely planted with rye grass, which gives high quality grass yields for energy-seeking cows and silage. This high sugar grass contributes to obesity and laminitis in the equine population. The livery yards that are available are often functioning at a high population density, they cope with horses' increased aggression and poor social experience by housing them in stables and offering single paddock turnout to reduce injuries. Horses are expensive and veterinary care is expensive which are both motivators for protecting horses from perceived risk. Historically, when horses were working animals they worked hard each day, they had turnout to ensure

their diet was cheap and the movement reduced health risks such as tying up and swollen legs. The horses in the war or in barracks were commonly stabled more, with increased grain rations and dried forage but each year they had holidays. Sport horses and hunting horses were often stabled for long hours during their working season, with grain rations given alongside their forage rations, they worked hard, had turnout to reduce stiffness and were shod. The best grazing was saved for the cows and sheep and horses had rougher grazing. However, when the working season was over for the year, they would be given a holiday, shoes off and turned away in groups; they had months off to live as a horse and physically and mentally recuperate. The leisure horse of today does not have holidays in this manner, in some high-density livery yards they are stabled all winter to protect the land. This is a long way away from the life horses used to lead in UK.

In combination with decreasing riding schools and fewer opportunities for practical experience, the ability of new horse owners to cope with horses is in doubt. There is an increasing level of concern regarding horse owner competency, with vets and professionals indicating they see a general lack of confidence with handling, training, and riding horses. This shift in horse owner ability appears to be influencing the areas where horse prices are rising or remaining high, the good solid middle-aged cob is now expensive to buy. Where a well-trained cob is now hard to find the horse market has an increasing number of thoroughbreds that are surplus from the racing industry. As the access to the slaughter industry has been limited, charities are forming to retrain these racehorses for a riding career. Where many will go on to be successful, the majority will have behavioural or physical problems that influence how amenable they are to a hacking home, which may be exacerbated by the modern owners' lack of experience.

Also of note is the rise of equine assisted therapy and the number of horses being used in this area. Equine assisted therapy typically involves ground-based activities between the client and the horse, overseen and facilitated by the therapist. Clients include people who are in therapy for a variety of reasons and some practitioners also run programmes such as corporate team building. This is an unregulated area, and the quality of experience is considered variable by some for horses and humans alike.

The COVID pandemic and current problems

COVID hit the horse industry in a surprising way, where there was potential for financial instability it was reported that the appetite to own a horse increased dramatically with the price of horses raising further and charities highlighting that there was high demand to rehome animals. Due to lockdowns people utilised online sales, buying horses unseen. This provided dealers with an opportunity to offload horses who were not appropriate to be sold, especially to the people who were trying to buy them. Alternatively, it may have been the case that only less experienced horse people bought an animal unseen, leaving them more vulnerable to buying horses that were not suitable for their level of experience. This covid bubble may quickly burst in a similar way the covid puppy boom has burst. Climate change, with the recent dry summers and dry winters has affected crops, with various forage sources becoming impossible to source and prices of feed increasing. The war in Ukraine has further amplified this issue with imports reducing and energy costs rising. The Blue Cross study indicates that a common form of disease in UK horse population is laminitis, with farmed fields often being rich in rye grass, suited best for dairy cows; this increases horses' needs for a forage alternative to grass. Along with the cost-of-living crisis it is no longer viable to have a horse at home and for it to tick along with little financial input. With veterinary care increasing in cost and the slaughterhouse option becoming difficult to achieve due to horses being signed out of the food chain some people are in a situation whereby disposing of their horse is becoming financially difficult.

The future

What does the future hold? It is hard to predict the way the horse industry may develop, with the social license to operate debate ongoing and a deepening evidence base in the scientific literature that highlights the challenges horses face in the domestic life and when ridden there is seemingly less appetite for horse riding and horse sports. The financial squeeze and pressure to improve farmland may further reduce the areas horses can inhabit in the UK. These factors coming together with the cost-of-living ongoing crisis may develop a horse welfare crisis, with thoroughbreds and signed-off horses unable to enter the food chain and vets' bills rising, disposing of the excess, unrideable, retired, or sick horse may become financially challenging. There is already an increase in horse welfare cases, with large numbers of horses being seized. In 2022 a case of 200 horses being seized occurred, another occurred in Wales after the death of an owner and 40 ponies were signed over. These are just two examples of large welfare cases that are occurring post COVID, but welfare charities are seeing an increase in returned rehomed animals and an upsurge in people signing animals over or identifying and reporting welfare concerns. The climate challenges that the preceding years have given, with resulting shortages of forage have the potential to continue, with many areas experiencing a drought in 2023 which will further add to the problem.

003. Systems mapping and other diagrams

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Equine stakeholder map

This diagram maps the potential locations where equines might live and be kept, together with who is responsible and involved with their care and management. The map illustrates the complex nature of the sector, together with the different environments, care providers and ways equine animals may be utilised. It includes examples of both stakeholders who have direct (e.g., stable managers, grooms, farriers, vets) and indirect (e.g., Defra, BETA [British Equestrian Trade Association], insurance) connection to the welfare of these animals. This map can be developed further for use in phase two of the project to explore which potential stakeholders and influencers should be engaged to deliver a positive improvement to equine welfare.

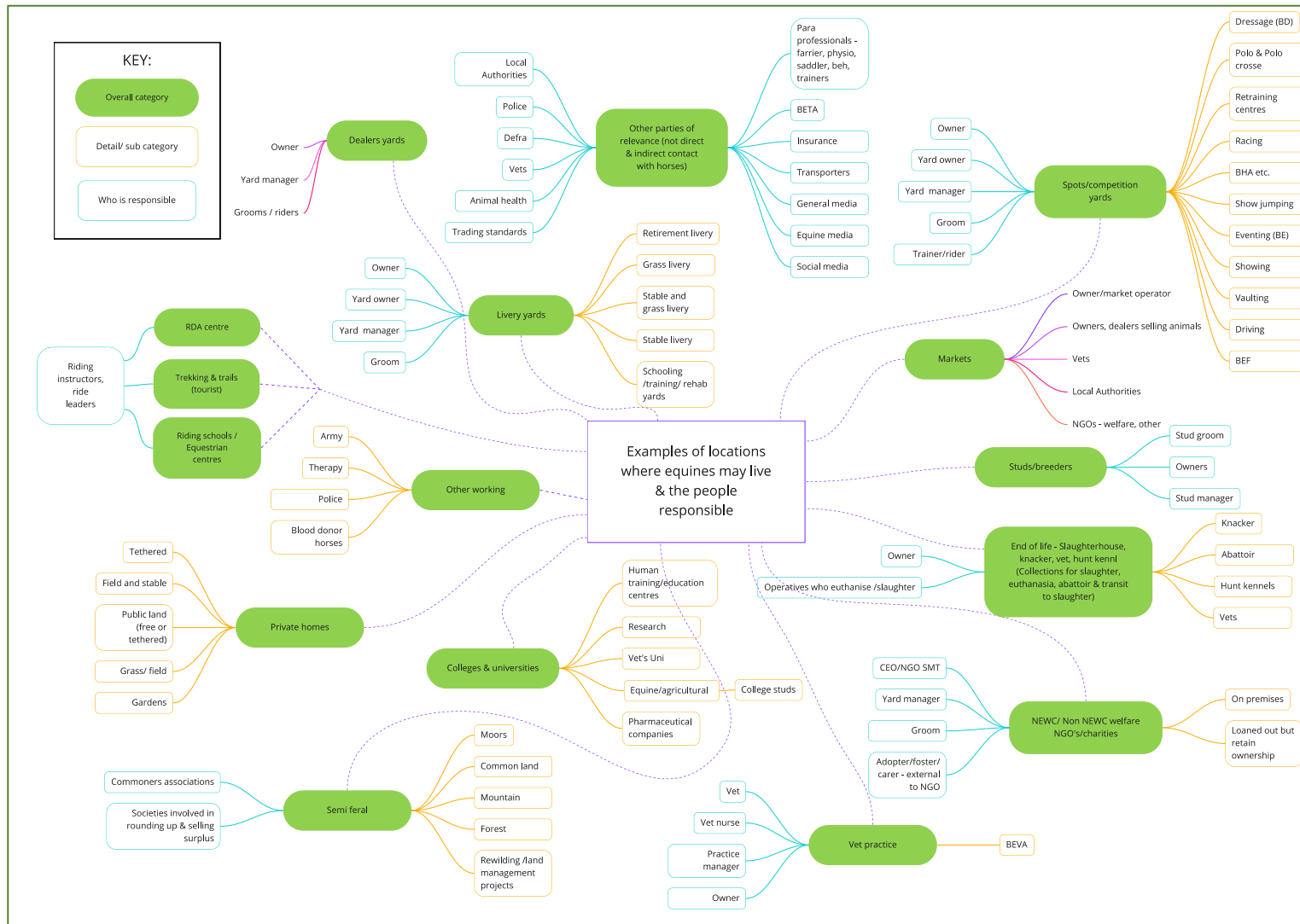


Figure 1: Stakeholder and influence map

Life of a horse from birth to death

This diagram maps out the different stages of life that horses either will or might go through from being in utero, to birth, early, mid, and late life, to eventual death. It highlights potential decisions that will be made at each stage, together with good and bad welfare outcomes for the animals involved. Its purpose is to bring focus to the different opportunities and challenges that are available at different points in the animal's life to maintain good welfare. This diagram will be utilised in phase two to focus on specific opportunities for delivering positive change.

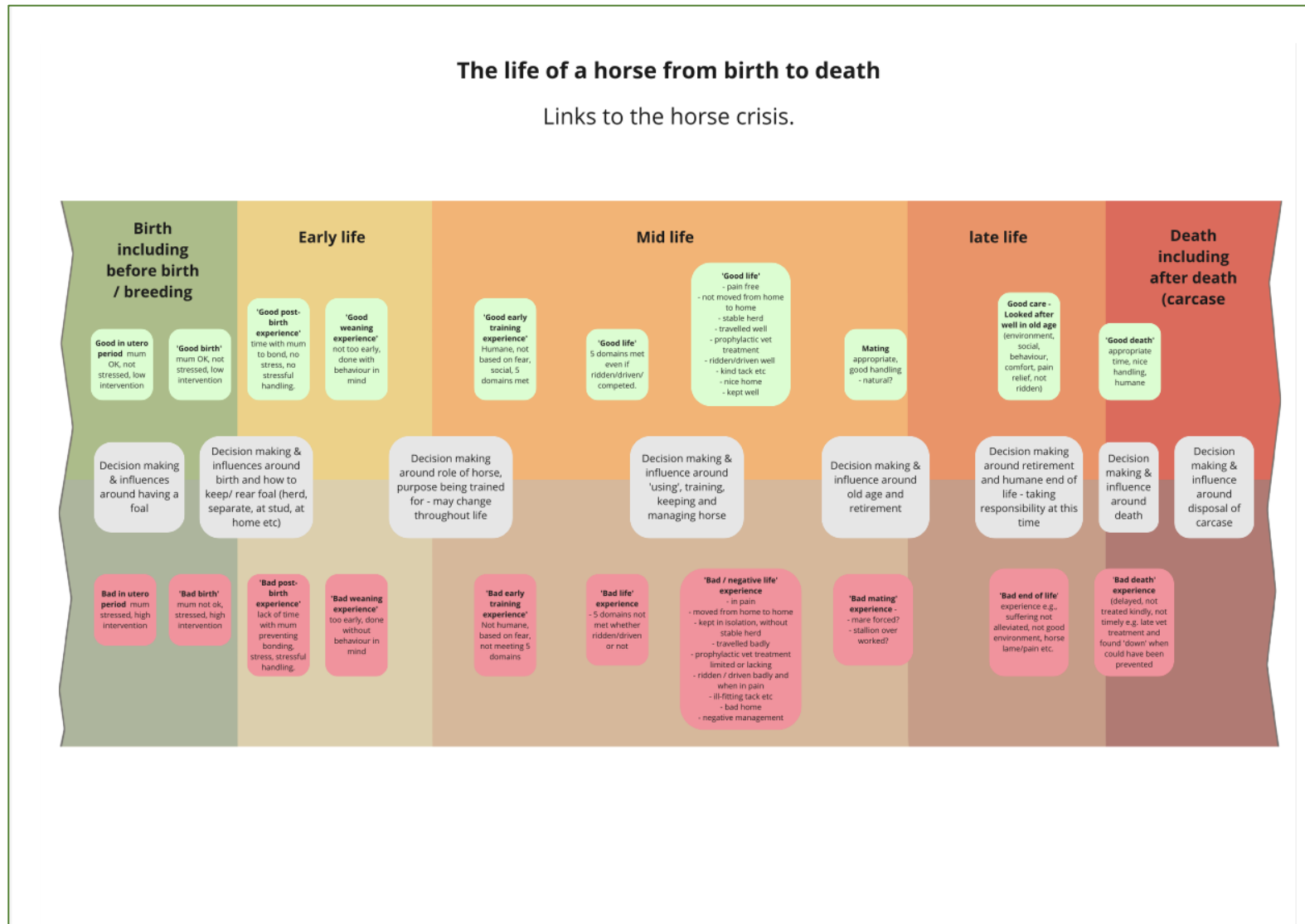


Figure 2: The life of a horse

Human drivers of the equine welfare crisis system

The human animal is central to whether positive or negative animal welfare outcomes occur, by the action or inactions that they take. Drawing upon the Theory of Interpersonal Behaviour, the COM-B (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation, Behaviour) Model and the Five Domains model of animal welfare, to provide a framework for mapping and explaining the different factors that have emerged through the research. (See Appendix for explanation of some of key behaviour change models).

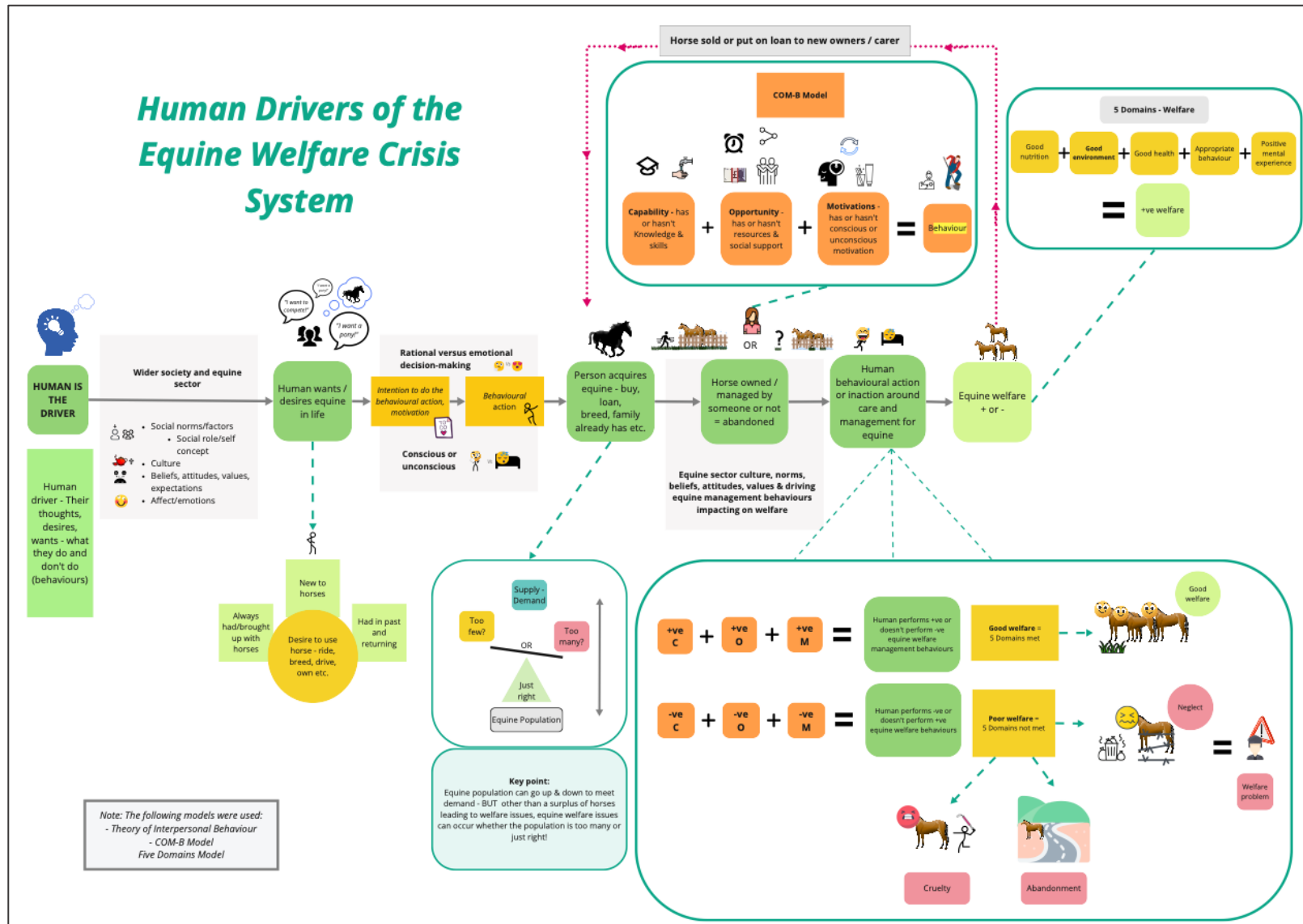


Figure 3: Human drivers of the equine welfare crisis system

Systems diagram explanation - moving from left to right:

Human is the driver – what we think, desires, want, what we do and do not do, our behaviours

In the main, humans are both the solution to equine welfare issues but also the problem. It is our behavioural actions or inactions that directly or indirectly impact on the equine animals we interconnect with and may be responsible for. How a person thinks, their desires and wants and ultimately what they do or do not do, that has the potential to have positive or negative impact on equine welfare (e.g., providing fresh clean water, or not providing fresh clean water).

Our behaviours, and before them our behavioural intentions, are influenced by factors and antecedents that influence the approach we take. These include our attitudes, beliefs and values, our emotions, our habits, the culture we live, the social norms and influences and our sense of who we are as a person. In the context of equine welfare, this could be the equine cultural social norms, beliefs and emotions connected to horse ownership and care. For example, is there local norm around attending a local riding school or is there the drive to own your own horse and keep them at the local DIY livery yard.

Human wants / desires an equine in their life

These factors may influence, and drive desires, wants, and needs, our desire to achieve certain goals, to achieve certain outcomes, for example to ride or drive, to hack or compete, to rescue or work with, and so on. In this case this is driving the desire to have a horse, whether this is the goal of having a horse for personal leisure based purposes, or to compete, or for work say in a riding school, the individual goals will be driven by their own beliefs and emotional cues, along with being influenced by those in their social group who they identify with, which can also link back into our sense of self. Each person will have their own background and influences, whether they are new to horses, had horses in the past and are returning to being around horses some years later, or whether they were brought up with horses and they have remained a constant in their life.

From these want and desires to acquire an equine animal, the intention to act on this desire will help drive the behaviour to occur, which will also be impacted upon by facilitating factors (e.g., are suitable horses available, does the person have access to money and the means to search for a horse to buy or loan). Linking into this move from intention to behaviour is the degree to which the process is linked to habitual responses. For example, does the goal of obtaining a horse link into behaviours around the emotions of contact and connection with horses, has the person bought horses in the past and routinely engages in horse seeking behaviours regarding looking at adverts online of horses for sale.

This is where the process of decision-making is so important to consider and thinking around whether decisions are being made with conscious rational thought or driven by unconscious emotion, as the desires to acquire a horse may be strongly linked to how it makes someone feel to be connected to a horse and impacts on their sense of self as a horse owner, or person who competes etc.

Person acquires equine – buys, loans, breeds, given

The behavioural actions around acquiring an equine are dependent on what is and isn't available to the person who is seeking the animal, the balance between supply and demand – are there the equines that fit the desire animal that the person is seeking, in some cases this will be the case in others, as the research

has shown there is a potential short fall of the type of equine that many buyers are looking for (safe, sound, allrounder that carries weight and is between 14hh and 16hh).

Supply and demand

It is the movement up and down between supply and demand, that is recognised by economists in other marketplaces, between the desire by consumers demanding a product and the supply by manufacturers of that product. There are also the cases, through marketing and other practices, where supply comes first and then demand is created through making the product or service attractive, therefore creating demand. This push-pull relationship between supply and demand fluctuates and is influenced by other factors, such as the economy, for example, how much disposable income does the person have for the purchase. In the case of equine breeding and population, the desire to acquire a horse coupled by disposable income to do so, together with other factors (e.g., more time, working from home, refocus of what is important in life related to Covid) may create increased demand, which starts to drive concerns around scarcity of certain types of animal, or develop a trend around a certain type (e.g. the rise of the coloured cob) which in turn drives the prices of certain types horses up, and may encourage people to breed animals in order to capitalise on this demand. However, there are flaws in chasing demand regarding breeding horses, one is the breeder is unlikely to be the only person with that idea and therefore the numbers of certain types of horses will go up, which in turn will tip the seesaw from too few to too many of this type of horse. Secondly, horses by their nature are slow breeders, and thirdly a market where horses are selling fast, and prices are high can change quickly if the economic situation changes and disposable income is eroded (e.g., 2008 'Great' recession and the cost-of-living crisis that started in late 2021). This change can then further tip the seesaw of too many horses, as those acquired when times are good are then sold on or loaned, when a person can no longer afford them.

Market forces only explain part of the situation regarding supply and demand, as in the equine world there are also the animals that people breed that do not appear to have a market demand (e.g. indiscriminately bred, such as in cases of hoarding, or uncontrolled moors and common) or only link to demand for part of their life (e.g. Thoroughbreds coming out of racing).

Finally, a key point regarding the equine crisis is the equine population can go up and down to meet demand, but other than a surplus of horses leading to welfare issues linked to other factors (e.g., owner/carer no longer has the resources or capacity to meet the animals welfare needs), equine welfare issues can occur whether the population is too high, too low or just right in supply and demand terms. Equine animals suffer from neglect and cruelty for many reasons, not just whether there are many or few of them.

Horse owned / managed by someone or not = abandoned & Human behavioural action or inaction around the care and management of equine

This element of the diagram refers to the ownership, care and management of the equine, as to factors that may influence how it is taking place; such as the equine sector culture, norms, beliefs, attitudes, values and driving equine management behaviours impacting on welfare (e.g., keeping horses separately in

small paddocks versus keeping animals in social groups with enriched, varied paddock environments that allow increased movement). The COM-B model was utilised to consider the themes that emerged from the research that could impact on the persons behavioural action or inaction regarding care and management of the animal, and therefore their welfare outcomes. The Five Domains model was utilised to provide focus to the thinking in relation to findings and data obtained through the research.

It should be noted that abandonment, we take to relate to animals that are abandoned in the wider community (carpark, golf course, side of the road), where the owner cannot be traced; or, animals that are abandoned at a livery yard or in a field, and the owner is no longer caring for the equine or paying their bills. In both these cases care and management behaviours are no longer happening and the animal's welfare is compromised the levels of neglect escalate.

Examples of elements impact upon behaviour action were:

- *Capability* – whether the person had the relevant knowledge and skills and whether they were psychologically or physically strong enough to do the behaviour. A lack of practical skills and knowledge came out strongly, particularly in relation to new leisure owners. In addition, human mental health was raised as being a real challenge regarding equine welfare, and an aging population of some equine owners.
- *Opportunity* – whether the person has the relevant physical opportunity such as resources or social opportunity such as social support. Concerns around the cost-of-living crisis were evident in the research and reports from welfare organisations of increases in the number of calls asking for help with costs. Social influence and norms are something felt strongly within the equine sector, whether it be friend groups at livery yards, the power of social media, or trends in certain practices (e.g., the rise in natural horsemanship, or dressage) or types of horses (e.g., rise in the popularity of coloured cobs).
- *Motivation* – whether this person is acting consciously drawing upon reflective motivation, or unconsciously, habitually, and emotionally drawing on automatic motivation. The research indicated a shift in the types of people involved with horses and the types of motivators. For example, from those who kept horses to work or undertake certain activities such as hunting, to those who keep for leisure pursuits and more like a pet. The former is often referred to as being more rational and the latter more emotional, but this may be a simplistic viewpoint, as both could be said to be driven by emotional drivers of the feedback, they get from being involved and connected with equines. Comments that relate to this area from the research were decisions around putting an animal to sleep and how this may be undertaken, as to whether reflective of automatic motivation was steering the behaviours, but the data collected would suggest the perception is more emotional and automatic.
- *Behaviour* - Regarding behavioural action or inaction a number of areas of concern were identified, for example, those who are lacking practical skills who are not assessing or not able to effectively assess an equines behaviour to tell when they are in pain, whether an animal is unsound or showing signs of colic, so issues may go unnoticed, become worse, or the vet may be called later than is prudent for the equine wellbeing and the alleviate suffering.

The diagram shows how the components of Capability, Opportunity and Motivation are needed to drive either positive behaviours that result in good equine welfare as outlined by the Five Domains model; or, negative behaviour resulting in neglect, abandonment, and cruelty, and ultimately a welfare problem that needs addressing. It is worth noting, that it could be just one thing that is causing poor welfare, such as a person not having the skills to assess pain behaviour, or it could be a combination of element, a person is also being pressured by others at the yard to jump their horse. The challenge is once the negative outcomes occur and suffering is happening, does someone step in like a welfare organisation, does the person just carry on so things don't get better, or, as in the feedback loop, does the equine get moved on, either sold or loaned out to a new person or situation, where the process starts again? We would suggest all three happen, with the latter two being all too common, due to resources, peoples understanding and recognition that there is a problem, and social norms around what is acceptable.

Connected Systems Map: Wider environment of other systems that the equine sector and equine welfare crisis are connected to

This systems map was developed to show the equine welfare crisis system in the context of the equine sector system, that sits in the wider environment of society where other systems are present that interact with each other at different points. This research is unique in taking that bigger picture view in considering the impact and interrelationship of different systems including events linked to those systems whose emergent properties have far-reaching consequences for positive and negative (e.g., Covid, cost of living, climate and so on.)

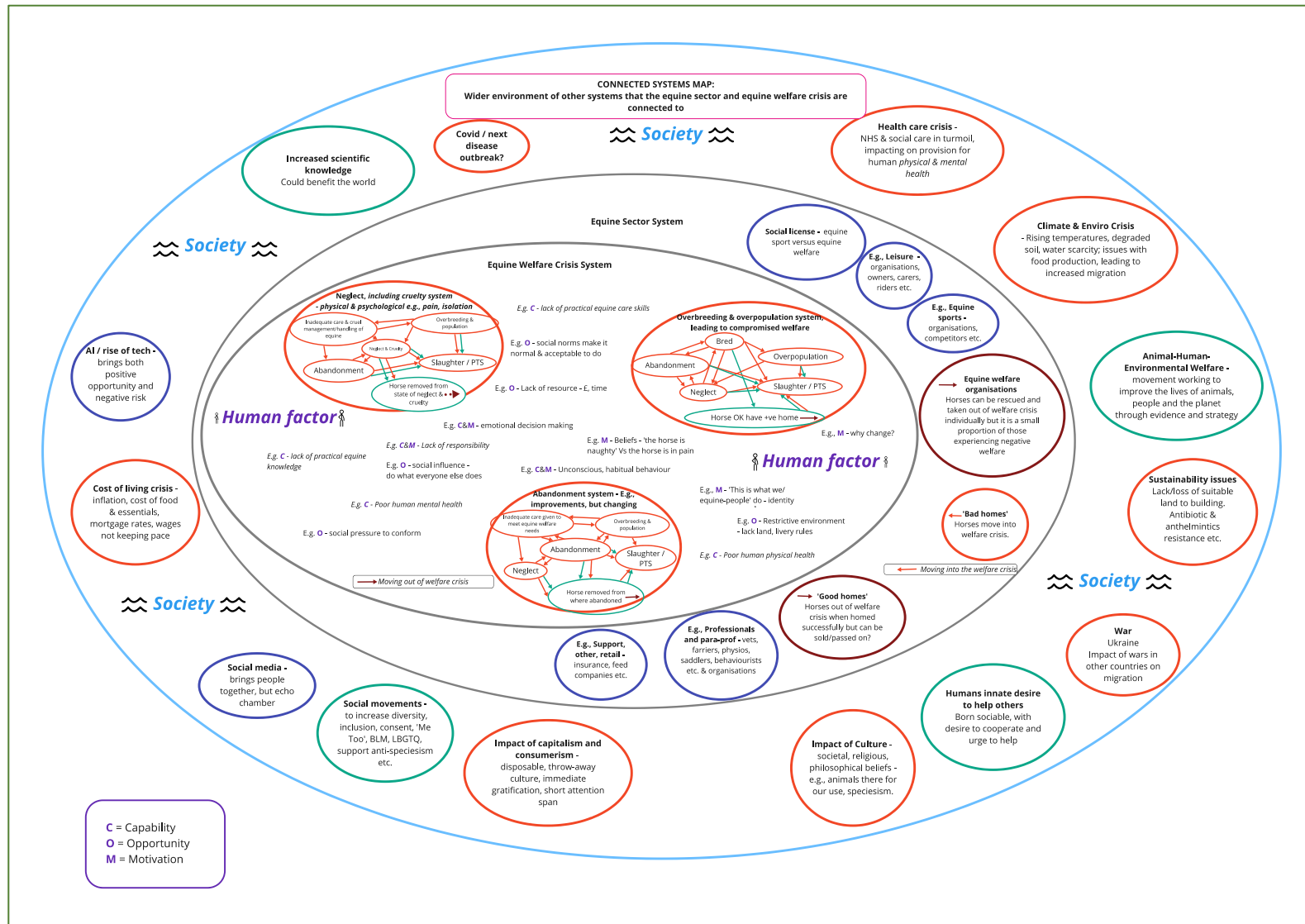


Figure 4: Connected systems map

004. A review of the published literature about, or relevant to, the equine crisis

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Introduction – exploring horse welfare in the UK

Some horses are frequently kept and owned for leisure purposes, some are kept and used for sport, and a lower percentage are used as work animals across a range of situations including, transport,

forestry, or therapy. Most horse owners do not consider horses to be companion animals (Rioja-Lang et al., 2020) but they are also not considered to be livestock and as such they have received less research into their welfare than livestock species. However, with a population estimated at one million across the UK, living in a range of management systems from high level sport horses to unhandled populations, it is understandable that concern is rising about horse welfare.

The equine welfare situation in the UK is complex, with many factors contributing to the cause of compromised welfare. There have been studies to explore different aspects of the welfare situation, but these studies do not look at the whole picture, instead they add detail and depth of understanding to aspects of the whole. In 2016, equine stakeholders were interviewed to explore their perceptions and understanding of welfare issues in the equine sector (Horseman et al., 2016). The stakeholders raised several areas of concern for equine welfare including health, management and riding, and training. The root causes identified, in descending order of importance were lack of knowledge, finances, advice seeking behaviour, indiscriminate breeding, horses being viewed as commodities, welfare legislation, passport legislation and euthanasia costs.

In another study, researchers used the Delphi method to identify what equine experts viewed as horse welfare concerns and to rank them in order of their perceived importance (Lang et al. 2020). Compared with the Horseman study, a similar, but subtly different, range of factors were identified and ranked in order including, poor disease prevention, delayed euthanasia, lack of owner knowledge, fear and stress involved in horse use, poor recognition by owners of pain, obesity, and inadequate feeding strategies.

To gain a broader view of the welfare situation, reports, and evidence from the welfare charities themselves can be considered. Rosanowski and Verheyen (2019) used an equine rehoming charity's data to review why horses were being relinquished into the charity and the factors that affect if a horse may be rehomed. Out of 791 horses in the study 52% of them were rehomed in the study period of 1 year. The most cited reasons for giving up the horse was owner related reasons, with lack of time, change in circumstances and lack of money also ranking highly. The rehoming of horses was affected by several factors including if they were able to be ridden, their age (under 5 years were the least likely to be rehomed), sports horses were rehomed more quickly than native breeds and they were more likely to be rehomed if ownership was transferred.

Williams (2019) highlights that the growth in the UK equestrian sector follows economic growth but identifies the lack of published data and research into the factors affecting the perceived equine welfare crisis in the UK.

Other studies that look into specific areas of concern in more depth including the racing industry, the health of traveller horses, horse slaughter and papers that seek to greater understand the relationship between people and their horses.

The horse welfare situation is complex, and the diversity of research and articles have already produced evidence regarding the variety of factors that could affect the welfare of individuals and populations. A systems thinking approach allows this project to map 'the big picture' and start to identify and potentially understand how some of these factors are connected and

how one system may affect other systems. This allows a wide understanding of causality, which shapes how future interventions may affect systems. The existing research and reports can add further depth and understanding to the picture, and research gaps can be identified.

This project looks at the whole horse welfare situation, including how the phrase ‘the horse crisis’ is used. Language is important affects people’s perception of and behaviour regarding welfare issues. A crisis is defined as a time of intense difficulty or danger, is that the most appropriate word for the current welfare situation and will it make an impact in the areas where impact is required for meaningful change? The climate change movement is struggling to reach a consensus of whether the phenomenon of greenhouse gases being trapped should be “Climate change”, “global warming” or “The climate crisis”. Feldman and Hart (2021) considered the impact of language on Twitter-based news items and found that the use of climate emergency could have a negative effect as items were considered less newsworthy compared with items using the words climate change and little effect was had on change engagement. McHugh et al (2021) critically reviews how the emergency framing will impact on action taken regarding climate change and more specifically how it will impact on governance and policy, which highlighted the need to understand the impact of the language on the target audience dependant on their own interests and personal understanding.

Introduction - the equine crisis

The term ‘equine crisis’ was first coined in 2012 in the report *‘Left on the Verge: the approaching equine crisis in England and Wales’* published by charities working in equine welfare in England and Wales, namely the RSPCA, Redwings, Blue Cross, WHW, Horse World, BHS (British Horse Society). The publication of this report raised awareness of the approaching equine crisis outside of the equine welfare charity sector was subsequently followed by the publication of two further reports documenting the situation as it progressed, *‘Left on the Verge: in the grip of a horse crisis in England and Wales’* (2013) and *‘Britain’s Horse Problem’* (2020).

In this review of the published literature about, or relevant to, the equine crisis, we summarise the pertinent literature that has been published since 2012 when the initial reference to the equine crisis was made. This literature takes a variety of forms, including industry reports, industry surveys, popular media articles and scientific papers. These will be reviewed in turn and avenues that warrant further exploration in relation to the research question will be identified.

Methodology

This review primarily focused on information published during and after 2012, although sources predating this were included where it was relevant to do so.

Information sources were identified using online searches and following up references cited in other publications where available.

Industry reports

These will be reviewed in date order to enable trends over time to be explored and to provide background context to the current state of the equine industry.

Left on the Verge: the approaching equine crisis in England and Wales (2012). RSPCA, Redwings, Blue Cross, WHW, HorseWorld, BHS.

<https://www.redwings.org.uk/sites/default/files/On%20the%20verge%20-%20the%20approaching%20equine%20crisis%20in%20England%20and%20Wales%202012.pdf>

This collaborative report was a cry for help from the equine welfare charities working in England and Wales. The report highlighted the increasing pressure on their services and the imminent threat of crisis point being reached if the situation continues. The report states that the number of horses charities are caring for has increased dramatically over the five years preceding the publication of the report, and while rescue centres already have over 2,800 horses in their care, a further estimated 6,000 horses were considered at risk at the point of publication. The economic crisis of 2008 is not explicitly referred to, although the ‘continued poor economic climate’ is. The problem is described as resulting from overbreeding and the poor economic climate. Fly-grazing was identified as an increasing problem. The issue of breeding horses with poor conformation or of little use or value was also raised. Data are presented illustrating the pressures equine rescue centres were under with many having little if any capacity to take in more equines at that point, yet there has been a marked increase in welfare complaints. While prosecutions have also increased, these are costly in time and resources. Solutions to the approaching crisis are proposed including better equine identification and traceability to owners, education regarding breeding practices, support for landowners and local authorities to deal with fly-grazing and making sure that the horse owning public recognise this crisis. Restriction of the Tripartite Agreement is also recommended. The charities emphasise that they cannot prevent the approaching crisis alone.

Left on the Verge: in the grip of a horse crisis in England and Wales (2013) RSPCA, Redwings, Blue Cross, WHW, HorseWorld, BHS.

<https://politicalanimal.rspca.org.uk/documents/15717622/16045250/Horse+Crisis+Report%2C+June+2013.pdf/2bd5fd43-4f62-c836-3d99-3170644dd4d0?version=1.1&t=1620223874835&download=true>

An update to the original *Left on the Verge* report. The number of horses at risk in England and Wales is now estimated at almost 7,000. The author charities reiterate that this is not a problem they can solve alone, and they need the support of the horse-owning public, government, and local authorities. The report covers the same areas as the previous report, with some updates. One of these concerns the slaughter of horses for meat in the UK, a trade which has doubled since 2008. The closure of two abattoirs that previously slaughtered equines was linked to an increase in horses being fly-grazed and abandoned. Welfare complaints received by all charities have continued to rise since the previous report, however there are signs that rehoming is coming under pressure which adds to the problems of lack of space and no further capacity at rescue centres, with many charities having horses waiting to come in and being housed in foster homes. The fly-grazing problem in Wales was highlighted, as was the pressure local authorities are under to deal with it, particularly as equines are being moved between counties depending on enforcement. The solutions presented reflect those of the previous report, although many of the points have been expanded. Education of fringe groups such as travelling communities to encourage responsible ownership was also specified.

Stop The Scourge: time to address unlawful fly-grazing in England (2014) Blue Cross, CLA, NFU, Redwings, Countryside Alliance, BHS, RSPCA, HorseWorld, WHW.

<https://www.redwings.org.uk/sites/default/files/Stop%20the%20scourge%20-%20time%20to%20address%20unlawful%20fly-grazing%20in%20England%202014.pdf>

Report on why legislation is needed in England to control fly-grazing. The report outlines what fly-grazing is and why the current legislation is not sufficient to tackle the problem. As one of the issues relates to the inability to link a horse to an owner, the report also highlights the problems with equine identification within England. The report describes the impact that fly-grazing can have for the equines involved, the landowners and the local authorities. Some local authorities are seeing an increase in fly-grazing since the Welsh legislation was passed suggesting that owners are relocating their horses to England as a consequence. Potential costs for local authorities of enforcing fly-grazing legislation are also covered.

The impact on equine welfare charities is also highlighted, stating that fly-grazed horses represent a notable proportion of their intake, one that has grown significantly in the last three years and this level cannot be sustained as the charities reach capacity. They also draw attention to the public blame they receive when they cannot take action on fly-grazed horses due to the current legislation.

The report expresses support for the Private Members Bill tabled by Julian Sturdy MP to address the issue of fly-grazing. It also offers other potential solutions including the need for an equine identification system to be introduced and enforced, challenging the need to breed, and sharing best practice.

Removing the Blinkers: the health and welfare of European Equidae in 2015 (nd) WHW, Eurogroup for Animals

<https://eu.worldhorsewelfare.org/documents/eu-reports/removing-the-blinkers-report.pdf>

This 122-page report by World Horse Welfare and Eurogroup for Animals provides a comprehensive insight into the EU (European Union) equine sector in 2015. The report covers the number of Equidae within the EU, their use of land and their financial contribution to the economy. It also reviews the current legislation including the challenges within it, for example depending on where and how they are used they may either fall under legislation covering livestock or legislation covering companion animals, or they may fall between the two. A case study on page 47 describes the confusion surrounding the status of equines and who is responsible for enforcing it in the UK. Six overarching themes concerning equine welfare ran through the report: welfare at slaughter, rural development, responsible ownership, identification and legislation, welfare in transport, and disease control. More specific challenges to equine welfare within the EU were also identified. These included unlimited breeding, end-of-life decisions, management (confinement, lack of space and turnout, social needs not being met), lack of knowledge of appropriate equine care among owners, training, and handling methods (including within sport), use of Equidae for meat, treatment of working Equidae, poor access to professionals (vets, farrier, saddlers).

The report makes several recommendations based on their findings targeted at different regulatory bodies either together or separately – the European Commission, the Food and Veterinary Office, Competent Authorities, and Equine sector bodies. The recommendations call for consistency regarding how Equidae are defined and treated within the EU, and the need for effective legislation to protect equine health and welfare and the enforcement of such legislation.

AWC Opinion on the Animal Welfare Issues related to Covid-19 (2020)

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/889858/AWC Opinion on the Animal Welfare Issues related to Covid-19.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/889858/AWC_Opinion_on_the_Animal_Welfare_Issues_related_to_Covid-19.pdf)

This report considered the immediate impact of the restrictions put in place to control the spread of COVID-19. COVID-19 restrictions impact all businesses and activities such as racing and show animal events (Point 16). The report also highlights the impact of social distancing on the behaviour and welfare of equines and companion animals (Point 32), including the health and behaviour risks of reduced exercise regimes for equines which may lead to weight gain and potentially laminitis as well as excitable, potentially dangerous behaviour when ridden again (Point 33). Routine vaccinations for equines and companion animals did not meet the requirements for essential travel under lockdown so were suspended which may have longer term consequences for disease outbreak (Point 60).

The report also drew attention to the seasonal nature of some equine related businesses, e.g. trekking centres and horse display teams, whose income would be greatly reduced due to COVID-19 restrictions preventing usual business activities making the point that this may cause future issues when there are insufficient funds to feed and provide veterinary care for the number of equines they have (Point 61).

Multiple concerns relating to the operation of welfare charities were raised including reduced income (Point 65), likely need to take in and subsequently rehome animals due to the closure of businesses such as riding schools, the rise in abandoned animals and over-capacity amongst breeders (Point 66). Furthermore, COVID-19 restrictions may hinder adoptions and rehoming if potential rehomers are unable to visit rescue centres (Point 67). There was mention that some centres are having to apply higher levels of euthanasia than they usually would to maintain the welfare of animals in their care in the face of high numbers of animals and limited rehoming or fostering options (Point 70), although the species these centres worked with was not provided.

Finally, point 89 describes the likely impact on local government, and nationally, should animal welfare charities be forced to close through lack of income.

AWC Second Opinion on the Animal Welfare Issues related to Covid-19 – medium to longer term (2020)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/940349/awc-second-opinion-on-animal-welfare-issues-related-to-covid-19.pdf

This report explores that medium to longer term consequences of COVID-19 for animal welfare. Key statements relating specifically to equines have been extracted here.

Impact of the lockdown and reduction in movement - the RSPCA reported a 50% reduction in the reporting of 'cruelty cases' but at the same time, there are reported increased concerns about animal abuse in households (Point 16).

Equids have been affected by cancellation of events, shows, racing etc. Reported concerns about lack of exercise potentially storing up health issues, alongside concerns about a drop in vaccination levels for equine influenza (Point 18).

Looking towards the future, concern has been strongly expressed by welfare charities about the loss of fundraising and the heavy call on their reserves both monetarily and in terms of volunteers and personnel and this then giving rise to concerns about their future ability to deal with potentially increased autumn and winter demands (Point 22).

Concerns about abandonment, relinquishment and social isolation of animals bought or obtained during the lockdown and confinement period (Point 23).

Seasonal effects normally seen may be exaggerated due to loss of jobs and income, e.g., more horses and dogs and cats needing new homes or abandoned and due to the risk of the closure of refuges and charity homes. Additional concerns for horses because of the increasing price and availability of bedding, i.e., straw, because of a reduced harvest (Point 24).

Additional concerns include fear of disease outbreaks due to compromised vaccination levels (Point 25) and failure to detect cases of mistreatment due to the reduced movements of regulatory bodies and charity inspectors (Point 26).

Points 53-56 covered other businesses likely to be affected by the pandemic, all of which related to equines. Farriers were designated key workers, however the drop in the number of horses being used because of the cancellation of equine events, e.g., racing, pony clubs, eventing, showing, etc. meant marked reduction in the requirement for being shod. In addition, many horses are being turned out rather than kept ready for work (Point 53). Many riding schools and trekking centres are closed with approx. 10% suggesting they would not open again (Point 54). Many racing yards have seen a reduction in the number of horses kept for racing as syndicates and individuals have sold them off. This is likely to continue if there is a financial downturn. Livery owners expressed concerns about horse owners being unable to afford to keep their horses/ponies and equine rescue organisations are equally expressing the same concern about the welfare of horses and ponies this autumn/winter (Point 55). Many equine rescue centres are already full or nearly so and with reduced staffing and volunteers, are concerned about their ability to take in more animals in the coming months (Point 56).

Ongoing concerns related to equine breeding. Equine castrations were also curtailed during the pandemic. In addition, the BEVA/BHS castration clinics have not taken place, which would imply at least approximately 50 colts or stallions remain entire based on that scheme's previous year's statistics (Point 95). It is suggested that in the non-thoroughbred horses, where artificial insemination is allowed, many owners, having found that competitions were cancelled, opted to put mares in foal. It is suggested, therefore, that there may be an increase in foals being born next year (Point 97).

Britain's Horse Problem Report (2020) Blue Cross, Bransby, BHS, Horse World, Redwings, RSPCA, WHW.

<https://newc.co.uk/joint-equine-welfare-charities-report-britains-horse-problem/>

Focus on progress in England and Wales since Left on the Verge report. Details strategies adopted by charities to help them cope with the continuing crisis, including housing rescued horses in private boarding establishments, more engagement with government and LAs (Local Authorities). Some smaller charities have not coped with the pressure (some folded, two merged with Redwings). States a trend that cases are involving larger numbers of horses. Contains NEWC (National Equine Welfare Council) data on number of equines admitted.

Identifies factors they think are behind this ‘systematic failure in equine welfare’ and makes recommendations in light of these. Areas covered include inadequate enforcement of equine identification and the Animal Welfare Act, failure of ownership (prioritising profit, indifference, ‘rescuing equines that they are then unable to care for appropriately, delayed euthanasia – not helped by cost), lack of regulation. Highlights impact of COVID-19 and outlines predicted challenges that will be faced by the charities over the coming year (fall in donations/income, sanctuaries at capacity, over-breeding/supply).

The report concludes by stating that all parties need to work together on these solutions to prevent a potential equine welfare catastrophe in the next 24 months and create a better system where equine welfare is better protected. The recommendations within the report provide a pathway to help achieve this.

Welsh Government (2021) Our Animal Welfare Plan for Wales 2021-26

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-11/animal-welfare-plan-wales-2021-26.pdf>

This report provides an overview of the Welsh Government’s Animal Welfare Plan. The Plan is strategically aligned with the Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework 2014-2024. More broadly, the report aligns the Plan with the concept of One Welfare and highlights veterinarians as key enablers in improving animal health and welfare. The main point of relevance for equine welfare is the plan to introduce a licensing requirement for animal exhibits and establishments including sanctuaries and rescue/rehoming centres.

Eurogroup for Animals (2022) From Stable to Fork: EU horse meat imports

<https://www.eurogroupforanimals.org/library/stable-fork-eu-horse-meat-imports>

Equine meat industry, equine welfare, and traceability. Based on Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) data from 2020, the global herd size of horses classed as livestock is 60.8 million. Overall, EU consumption and total EU trade in horse meat have declined between 2000 and 2015. Declines before 2013 were mostly due to a fall in horse meat production in Italy, while post- 2013 decreases could be attributed to the EU horse meat scandal. Since 2015, however, at least intra-EU trade in horse meat seems to be increasing. Key issues identified include welfare at slaughter, identification, and traceability, labelling and consumer awareness, and horses from equine chorionic gonadotrophin (eCG) farms being used for meat.

FEI Equine Ethics and Wellbeing Commission Interim Report (2022).

<https://equinewellbeing.fei.org/key-documents.html>

In June 2022, the international governing body of equestrian sports the Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI), launched an independent commission in response to growing concerns being voiced by the public over the use of horses in sport. This interim report and supporting documents are available online as above.

The interim report includes summaries of the two international surveys conducted by the Commission exploring attitudes about the use of horses in sport – one survey was of equestrian stakeholders, the other of members of the public. In the equestrian survey, while vets and leisure riders were the stakeholders most concerned about the welfare of horses used in sport, 78% of respondents agreed with the statement that welfare standards need improving. The top three concerns mentioned by stakeholders were the life of the horse outside of training or competing (the ‘other 23 hours’), the tack and equipment used on the horse, and training and riding practices. The public survey demonstrated the international sentiment that welfare standards in horse sport need improving. Two-thirds of respondents thought that horses sometimes or never enjoyed being used in horse sports. The findings also highlight concerns related to the use of horses for leisure purposes.

Initial recommendations arising from the Commissions work were included in the report and underpinned by the supporting documents. The three early recommendations were: that double bridles should not be mandatory, that spurs should not be mandatory, and that nosebands should not be too tight.

Defra (2022) Improvements to equine identification and traceability in England: consultation results and government response.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improvements-to-equine-identification-and-traceability-in-england>

A total of 394 individuals and organisations responded to the Defra consultation, representing a variety of stakeholder groups. The report covers the pros and cons of digital versus paper-based systems, thoughts on being able to access your horse’s ownership history, who should be allowed to digitally update information, enforcement – most respondents felt that current enforcement was inadequate. BHC findings (see below) fed into their response to the consultation.

British Horse Council (2022) Equine identification: a broken system.

<https://www.britishhorsecouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/BHC-Report-Low-res.pdf>

Reports findings of BHC survey conducted April-May 2022 on horse passports, that gained 3,424 responses. The goal was to establish an evidence base specifically derived from horse owners who are the “end users” of horse identification systems. The survey covered breeding, enforcement, and challenges from differing devolved government identification regulations. Findings were comparable to those of Defra’s consultation on the same subject (see above). Only 20% respondents felt that the current horse passporting system was working well – complaints included that it was fragmented, open to abuse, and had no clear benefit. Enforcement of horse passports is currently not effective. The report suggests improvements moving forwards e.g., streamlining, moving to a digital system.

All Party Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW) (2022) Improving the Effectiveness of Animal Welfare Enforcement.

<https://apgaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Improving-Animal-Welfare-Enforcement-Report.pdf>

This report covers who is enforcing animal welfare currently and has information on how local authorities are structured. Lower tier or unitary local authorities are responsible for dealing with fly-grazed horses, County Council Trading Standards and unitary authorities enforce the Equine Identification Regulations. Low tier local authorities may check identification when licensing riding establishments under LAIAR 2018 and may investigate instances of horses illegally grazed on council owned land.

The report highlights the current problems with proactive animal welfare enforcement and how varied it can be across localities. The report specifically mentions the challenges facing equines given they fall between companion animal and livestock legislation as well as between enforcement agencies. The report points out that at present, issues regarding equine welfare seem to be left to the RSPCA to deal with. The report closes by making recommendations for how the situation can be improved, with the first recommendation being a requirement for local authorities to have access to Dedicated Animal Welfare Officers.

Julie Taylor (2022) 'I can't watch anymore' The case for dropping equestrianism from the Olympic Games. An open letter to the IOC. Epona Media

While not technically a report, this open letter to the International Olympic Committee published in the form of a book by Epona.tv's Julie Taylor makes an evidence-based case for why equestrianism should be dropped from the Olympic Games. The book is formed of 11 chapters covering subjects such as the lack of inclusivity in equestrianism, performance enhancing practices, and the inability to enforce rules aimed at safeguarding welfare. The role of social media and the repression of the media within equine sport are also considered. The book is part of the wider societal shift we are experiencing, where normalised activities with animals are increasingly being questioned and challenged, and equestrianism is in danger of losing its social licence.

Reports published outside of 2012-2022 that are relevant to the research question

Irish Traveller Movement (2002) End of the Road: Report on the Socioeconomic Consequences of the Control of Horses Act 1996 on the Traveller Community.

<https://itmtrav.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/End-of-The-Road-report-on-the-socioeconomic-consequences-of-the-control-of-horses-act-1996-on-the-Traveller-community.pdf>

Results of a questionnaire conducted in the summer of 2000 on the impact of the Control of Horses Act 1996. The questionnaire generated 41 responses. The issues raised included poor notification of impoundments, horses often impounded far away from owners making it too costly to get them back, the quality of the pounds, inconsistent actions under the Act, arbitrary fees to redeem horses. The Act is felt to be highly unfavourable to Travellers – seen as a class and cultural issue.

Environmental Scrutiny Committee (2005) Stray Horses in Cardiff.

http://archive.cardiff.gov.uk/Government/english/Cabinet_Papers/05_06_28_Cab/Reports/EBM28June05ScrutinyReportStrayHorses.pdf

It was estimated that there were 150-200 stray horses in Cardiff at any one time, primarily owned by Gypsy and Traveller communities, with the majority believed to be owned by a small number of commercial horse dealers. Data were gathered at two meetings with 12 witnesses to discuss this issue and potential solutions. To inform these discussions current practice regarding straying horses in Cardiff was described along with how the problem is dealt with by other local authorities and in Ireland where the robust response to this issue was held as an example. The report contains 10 recommendations for tackling stray horses going forwards including adopting a new strategy with four key elements: “swoop and impound” operation, a continuous programme of microchipping, application of the horse passport regulations and use of antisocial behaviour orders.

*CAWES (Companion Animal Welfare Enhancement Scheme) (nd but project concluded 2011)
Northeast Wales Equine Project. Is equine welfare a problem in Wales?*

In depth study of Northeast Wales. Instances of both very good and very bad welfare were identified. Also highlights the practices that compromise welfare that are endemic in the equine industry.

Makes key recommendations covering breeding equines (over-production of low quality and/or value equines), import, export, and transportation (lack of enforcement), feeding, diet and nutrition (ragwort), identification (currently not working), stabling, livery and location (equine welfare reported as variable with the highest welfare found in riding schools licensed by local authorities).

CHAPS (Community Horse and Pony Scheme) An overview of the challenges, needs and opportunities involved in improving the welfare of Swansea’s urban horses (nd)

Relates to the urban horses in Swansea, the work and impact of the CHAPS project and their response to the Friends of Swansea Horses 7-point plan to address the welfare issues. Summarises the welfare issues affecting urban horses in the area (illegal grazing, where horses are kept). Issues raised include the negative consequences of a ban on tethering, the consequences of addressing the symptoms rather than the causes of equine welfare problems.

Scoping study on the equine industry in Scotland (2015) Micoud N, McKnight G, Mauchlen H. Rural Policy Centre SRUC, in collaboration with BHS Scotland

A snapshot of the equine industry in Scotland at this point in time. The report explores the size and distribution of the equine industry with current trends suggesting that there is a continued increase in horse numbers and riding activity throughout Scotland and opportunities for the sector to grow. The report highlights the lack of regulations concerning breeding and keeping horses and how this may be a challenge for uniting the sector. It also draws attention to the increase in the UK horse population and concerns that while the current situation in Scotland is not in crisis as is the rest of the UK, this may change if horses start being moved up from England. Obesity was flagged as a key welfare concern. Recommendations include the need for a national equine register and database, certification for horse owners and yard managers, and the introduction of basic licensing for breeding and livery yards.

Summary

The published reports reviewed here cover a broad spectrum of issues that relate to equine welfare including identification, traceability, enforcement of legislation, fly-grazing, wellbeing of equines in sport, and the impact of COVID-19. The progression from *Left on the Verge: the approaching equine crisis in England and Wales* (2012) to *Britain's Horse problem* (2020) document the ongoing problems with equine welfare and the evolution of what started as a crisis and may have become the norm. On a positive note, the recent consultation on equine identification, albeit likely triggered by Brexit, and the establishment of the Ethics and Wellbeing Commission by the FEI may reflect a tide change in attitudes and a move from away from talking, into tangible action.

Points to explore further

- Slaughter of horses in the UK
- The impact of the Control of Horses Act (2015)
- The impact of COVID-19 – including on breeding
- The impact of the cost-of-living crisis
- Role of local authorities in equine welfare
- Riding schools – impact of COVID-19 closures, cost-of-living crisis, impact on practical equine education and opportunities to upskill
- Regional variations in equine welfare concerns across England and Wales
- Donkeys and their hybrids - not considered separately in any of the reports

Popular media articles

Online searches were used to identify relevant popular media articles, typically published in local and national newspapers and in the equestrian publication Horse & Hound. Some of these articles drew on press releases from equine welfare charities, or the publication of the industry reports discussed above. There was also a large number of articles relating to incidents concerning individual horses, particularly in the local news. These usually covered issues of tethering, straying, neglect or abandonment in the area.

When taking a broader focus, the wider narrative adopted in the articles found can be summarised into three themes: the ongoing horse crisis, the impact of COVID-19, and the cost-of-living crisis.

The ongoing horse crisis

Articles published from 2012 up until March 2020, i.e., before the COVID 19 pandemic, tended to reference either the “equine crisis” or the “overpopulation crisis” either in relation to the specific case of an individual equine or group of equines, or as part of a commentary on the equine sector.

Examples include:

- Wakefield Express (August 2018) *Rise in reports of loose horses as rescue centre struggle to cope with 'overpopulation crisis'* <https://www.wakefieldexpress.co.uk/news/rise-in-reports-of-loose-horses-as-rescue-centre-struggle-to-cope-with-overpopulation-crisis-829408> This article actually does not refer to the issue of loose horses beyond the title. Instead, it combines a report of the findings of a Freedom of Information (FOI) request made to the local council.

The request asked for information concerning equine welfare across a 4-year period, 2014-2017. The council received an average of three equine related calls per month across this period. While 163 stray horse reports were made 2014-2017, only 60 were from 2015-2017 suggesting that the authorities may be starting to get on top of the issue. The article also highlighted the cost of straying equines to the council – seven horses had been taken into council care during between 2014 and 2017, at a cost of over £2,700. The BHS were also quoted, saying that the problem is widespread and stems from owners and rescue centres struggling to cope with an “overpopulation crisis” of horses. They also reference their imminent ‘Healthcare clinic’ in the area and the value of microchipping to aid own identification.

- BBC (March 2019) *Nottinghamshire dumped horses related to 'overpopulation'* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-47581716> An article on the abandonment of ill horses in Nottinghamshire. Included quotes from the BHS referring to the “equine overpopulation crisis” and highlighting the risks of people getting horses cheaply or for free without understanding the expense of ongoing care. The RSPCA, local equine rescue charity Horses for Friends, and Defra were also quoted.
- Elder L (March 2020) *Horse crisis shows 'no sign of easing' as emaciated pony found dead on roadside.* <https://www.horseandhound.co.uk/news/warning-upsetting-image-horse-crisis-shows-no-sign-of-easing-as-emaciated-pony-found-dead-on-roadside-710521> The article quotes an RSPCA statement “We believe that the impact of the recession, over-breeding, the high and rising costs of veterinary care and hay, and the falling price of horses have all contributed to this equine crisis. And we do not see any sign of it ending just yet.”

The impact of COVID-19

Articles mentioning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic primarily concerned the increased abandonment of equines who were often unwell during lockdown, and concerns for the future should there be a financial recession triggered by the pandemic.

Examples include:

- ITV (June 2020) *'The worst is yet to come': RSPCA fears second wave of equine crisis as more sick horses are dumped during lockdown* <https://www.itv.com/news/anglia/2020-06-09/the-worst-is-yet-to-come-rspca-fears-second-wave-of-equine-crisis-as-more-sick-horses-are-dumped-during-lockdown> Article highlighting the number of equine incidents reported to the RSPCA during lockdown within the Anglia region. The article also draws attention to the fact horses are still being bred despite existing owners being likely to financially struggle to keep their horses and pay their vet bills.
- Rockett K (October 2020) *Animal crisis as number of abandoned horses and ponies rockets during lockdown.* <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/number-abandoned-horses-ponies-triples-22786741> RSPCA warning that “Britain is facing an equine welfare catastrophe”. Article relates to the recent changes making microchipping equine compulsory, with the RSPCA CEO stating that they do not believe it will have the same impact on reducing the number of strays that it had on the dog population following its introduction, particularly without “rigorous enforcement”. Also highlights increased number of calls but reduced number of donations since the pandemic began.
- Network For Animals (October 2020) *Thousands of Horses and Ponies Are Abandoned During the UK's Lockdown* <https://networkforanimals.org/news/thousands-of-horses-and-ponies->

[are-abandoned-during-the-uks-lockdown/](#) Short article from international welfare organisation highlighting the increase in equine abandonment seen in the UK during lockdown and the precarious situation of the equine welfare charities left to care for the animals despite their reduction in donations since the start of the pandemic.

The cost-of-living crisis

Articles under this theme were evident within the public media during 2022 and up until the present time, as concerns were voiced about how the cost-of-living crisis would impact horse owners and what this might mean for equine welfare charities. The majority warned of what may happen should the crisis continue, rather than reporting an observable impact of the crisis so far.

Articles in early 2023 reported information on the NEWC survey on how horse owners were being affected by the cost-of-living crisis, and World Horse Welfare 'Cut costs, not care' initiative.

Examples include:

- Blue Cross (August 2022) *Recession May Be Starting To Impact Horses, Warns Blue Cross*. https://www.vetclick.com/news/recession-may-be-starting-to-impact-horses-warns-blue-cross-p8733.php?fbclid=IwAR2xmTwF12N7GvaeFB_VJ5-OqTqvIPFeZCslNMk0AraiKKjTi6hJcePWU0s This article is one of the few that reported an observed change that was attributed to the cost-of-living crisis. It highlighted that an increased number of horse carers may be struggling to keep their horse financially – over 70% of those asking Blue Cross to help them rehome their horse now cite personal or financial circumstances. The number of people seeking to rehome their equine had already doubled the level seen this time last year, and there is still 4 months of the year remaining. The article encouraged owners to get in touch before problems escalate and impact welfare and drew attention to the Blue Cross's Home Direct service whereby, they can help owners rehome their equine from their current home rather than admitting them to a centre.
- Spereall D (August 2022) *Fears more horses may be left tethered alone on public land in Leeds*. https://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/people/fears-more-horses-may-be-left-tethered-alone-on-public-land-in-leeds-3822016?fbclid=IwAR1Tk-0j6jZGBaVOVHO-PdKlgMw_SGWwdCznuQeVgliMp9GxXPV86N92yfw The city council revealed they receive 60 calls a year about fly grazing equines with the RSPCA warning that while fly grazing had declined since the introduction of the Control of Horses Act (2015) it may get worse again as maintenance costs for horse owners increase. The article highlights the fact the council does not have the facilities to accommodate these horses and has to pay for specialist care until they are reclaimed, amounting to around £20,000 per year.
- Elder L (Sept 2022) *Rising bills and winter on its way: how cost of living crisis is hitting the horse world*. <https://www.horseandhound.co.uk/news/cost-of-living-horse-world-804270> The article included quotes from Blue Cross, World Horse Welfare, and BETA (British Equestrian Trade Association) about how the increasing cost of living is impacting horse owners and those working in the horse industry, particularly as winter approaches. There was also consideration of those employed in the equine sector with quotes from the British Grooms Association and Equestrian Employers Association. These highlighted that people are already leaving the industry as they can no longer afford to live on their salary, while others have stopped paying their professional insurance to save money.

- Murray B (December 2022) *Fears rise in 'unwanted' horses will overwhelm charities this winter* https://www.horseandhound.co.uk/news/fears-rise-in-unwanted-horses-will-overwhelm-charities-this-winter-812815?utm_source=Selligent&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=20230104_XHH-X_NWL_EO&utm_content=20230104_XHH-X_NWL_EO&utm_term=9512559&m_i=Ji6Vw1G3Plofrq%2B7nOtFDPOFLJulYZ_%2B20HqPehEepXI03V8tWNZKopRZJiVlomfNGmkuTFMtnlpQAsKOKmexElrY7fdotJJ0&lrh=c48ce36123dc818ba3e1ace204dc25d42f4c48eee50018eb19221e133a2e1082&M_BT=45245859066802
 Horse & Hound article about equine welfare charities concerns that the cost-of-living crisis will lead to an increase in unwanted horses. Rehoming figures have remained stable in 2022 but concerns an increase in unwanted horses is around the corner. RSPCA quotes about an increase in the number of horses they are received in poor body condition. Charities are receiving more calls from owners needing help due to financial difficulties.
- Your Horse (December 2022) *Emaciated mare and newborn foal 'discarded like rubbish'* <https://www.yourhorse.co.uk/news/horseworld-mare-and-foal-dumped/> This article reported a case taken in by HorseWorld, and included a quote by HorseWorld's Fundraising Co-ordinator suggesting that the cost-of-living crisis was being felt by equine welfare charities: "The cost of living crisis is hitting charities hard and we anticipate the need for our services to increase dramatically as horse owners feel the pinch. We are already seeing a higher-than-average number of horses being abandoned and neglected. As the winter draws in, we need to be prepared to help as many as we can."

Riding schools

It is worth noting two articles that were published in early 2023. While these articles did not fall directly into the three themes above, the issue they raise is important in light of the other data found during the desk-based research. Both articles were featured in Horse & Hound and concern the current state of British riding schools.

- Jones E (February 2023) *Riding schools in 'national crisis' over 'unfit for purpose' licensing system* <https://www.horseandhound.co.uk/news/riding-schools-in-national-crisis-over-unfit-for-purpose-licensing-system-778607> This article highlights the challenges riding schools face given the current licencing system which is managed by local authorities
- Jones E (March 2023) *'Riding is at risk' as 250 schools have closed in four years* https://www.horseandhound.co.uk/news/250-riding-schools-close-in-four-years-818389?utm_source=Selligent&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=20230310_XHH-X_NWL_EO_8PM_TEST&utm_content=20230310_XHH-X_NWL_EO&utm_term=9512559&m_i=PnkPzteux_PZ0kaJsQ29Vy580Ho1Dwqpw2F_IMDT_b6eFucKm7SCgeiK7QVwnF7IZg0BhaZ2JIYRtCpCrzAJW1vtYRdmNQ%2BPPQ&lrh=c48ce36123dc818ba3e1ace204dc25d42f4c48eee50018eb19221e133a2e1082&M_BT=45245859066802
 This article refers to a presentation by British Horse Society chief executive James Hick at the 2023 National Equine Forum. The most common reason for closures was the owners retiring or an inability to recruit staff required.

Summary

A broad overview of the articles published in the popular media revealed four key themes relevant to this research question (the ongoing horse crisis, the impact of COVID-19 the cost-of-living crisis and

the state of British riding schools). All these issues require further exploration. In addition, the role of the local authority in receiving and responding to equine welfare inquiries in their area was also flagged up under two of the broader themes and requires further investigation.

Points to explore further

- The impact of COVID-19 – including on breeding
- The impact of the cost-of-living crisis
- Local authorities, capacity for enforcement and equine welfare
- Riding schools – impact of closures
- Donkeys and their hybrids – not mentioned specifically in the media

Published industry surveys

BEF Riding School Health Check (2022)

<https://www.abrs-info.org/article/be-publishes-findings-from-riding-centre-health-check-survey-carried-out-in-march-2022/>

Survey conducted March 2022. Responses from 311 equestrian centres across UK. Centres currently operating at approximately 75% capacity. They receive a high number of enquiries but have lower workforce, and challenges around the availability and affordability of suitable horses. The majority felt these issues have been exacerbated by pandemic, but other challenges include difficulties recruiting workforce, increasing costs, reduced income, and licensing demands. Most are not in a position to capitalise on potential customer demand. There were concerns expressed about long-term sustainability due to increasing costs. But many (especially larger) centres were positive about the future.

Blue Cross Big Pet Census (2022)

<https://www.bluecross.org.uk/all-about-horses-and-ponies>

(Plus, full results slides received from Blue Cross)

Census closed end of June 2022, had 97,262 responses, of which 6% own a horse or pony providing data on 11,587 UK horses. Considered as part of the family by 87%, 52% consider their horse or pony their best friend. Of all species covered in the census, horse owners were most interested to know if their horse was happy (30%).

Costs were top concern regarding horse welfare, with 55% of horse owners are worried about the cost of vet bills, with a further 31% worried about the costs of keeping a horse and 30% worried about the cost of insurance.

Asked what their top concerns were for horse welfare across the UK more generally: 72% said they are worried about lack of owner knowledge; 57% say they are worried about horse abandonment; 52% of people are worried about the rising costs of owning a horse; 50% are worried about selling

scams; 47% of respondents are worried about horse theft across the UK; 38% of owners are worried about end-of-life care for horses.

The full results obtained from the Blue Cross, showed that horses were most likely to have been obtained from online classifieds (primarily unspecified or Facebook), a friend/family or friend of a friend. 43% of respondents felt that the government should be responsible for animal welfare, followed by 38% saying individuals. The most common question that owners would like to be able to ask their pet is 'Are you happy?' followed by 'How can I make you happy?' this is consistent across species. The third most popular question for dogs and small pets was 'What are your favourite things?' The third most popular question for cats and rabbits was 'Do you love me?' The third most popular question for horses was 'Are you in pain?'

Blue Cross National Equine Health Surveys (2010-2018)

These are summarised elsewhere in the report but noted here for completeness.

Heijtel MG (2012 - unpublished undergraduate thesis) Movement of horses between owners in Great Britain: Investigating the movement of leisure horses, by focusing on equine trading and flexibility of equine ownership throughout Great Britain.

An online survey of 635 horse owners in Great Britain. Owners kept to a certain 'wish list' when buying a horse and found their horses via their social network, Internet, and horse magazines. They mainly used them for sport and leisure riding. Professionals bought horses that were located further away than leisure horse owners. When buying via a breeder, horse market, horse magazine or the Internet, horse owners tended to find their preferred horse further away from home than when they searched for it via a local newspaper. Most owners had detailed background information on their horse, and this was not related to the method of acquisition.

Horses, sold in the past by the participant, had stayed with the owner on average for three years and were sold because of behaviour problems, unsuitability, physical and mental outgrowing of the owner, financial reasons and because the owner felt no 'click' with the horse. Both professionals and leisure horse owners bought their horses close to home, through their social network, Internet, and horse magazines. Horses which were sold via veterinarians or horse magazines ended up further away from their previous location than horses which were sold via the owner's social network.

Professionals tended to buy and sell more horses in total than leisure horse owners and when they have not used a certain media type during the buying process, they will not try it in the selling process either (and vice versa). It appears that horse owners stick to what they know.

Liddell ACD, Hall C and Upton SE (2020) A survey investigating public knowledge and perception of the equine welfare crisis

Abstract and poster presented at UFAW 2020 showing findings of a small survey (n=127) to understand public perceptions of the horse crisis. Overall, 86.6% of respondents did NOT agree with the statement that equine abandonment and neglect is an issue in the UK. Most respondents were aware of the Animal Welfare Act (2006) (80.3%, and 40.2% were aware of the Control of Horses Act (2015).

NEWC (2023) The impact of the rising cost of living on equine rescues, rehoming centres, and sanctuaries: Survey findings June 2023

<https://newc.co.uk/equine-col-surveys/>

NEWC surveyed equine rescues, rehoming centres, and sanctuaries in December 2022-January 2023 to explore their experiences of the cost-of-living crisis. In total 36 organisations responded to the survey from across the UK. All responding organisations reported rising operational costs due to the increase in fuel, electricity, gas, and water prices. An increase in calls from owners who wanted to hand over their equines to their organisation was reported by 80% of the organisations, and 60% reported an increase in potential welfare cases. Quotes picked out in the report indicated that one centre was receiving a higher intake of elderly and retired horses, while another highlighted the reduction in donations further impacting their financial status. Over 80% of respondents reported that they were still recovering from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic so were not in a strong position even prior to the cost-of-living crisis.

NEWC (2023) Caring for equines and the cost of living: Survey findings June 2023

<https://newc.co.uk/equine-col-surveys/>

In parallel to the equine rescue, rehoming centre and sanctuaries survey, a similar survey on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on equine owners was also undertaken by NEWC in December 2022 to January 2023. This survey yielded 8,252 complete responses. Responses indicated that 40% of owners were making additional sacrifices to meet their horses need, with 1% admitting that they were unable to provide basic care for their horses due to increasing costs. Respondents expressed concerns about how they were going to meet their horses needs if the situation continued, raising concerns for equine welfare and human mental health due to the anxiety and stress this caused. Some owners reported euthanising their horses as they could not afford ongoing veterinary treatment, while over 25% said that they would need to borrow money or cut other costs to pay for their horse to be euthanised. Reductions in the routine use of professional services, e.g., farriers, dentists, vets and physiotherapists, and routine preventative treatments were also reported. On a more positive note, some of the cost-cutting changes made by owners may have improved equine welfare, for example increasing turn-out to save on bedding, reducing, or eliminating hard food provision in favour of increased forage, and changing to a targeted worming strategy. Some owners felt that they were being priced out of horse ownership and expressed concerns that equestrianism would inevitably become more elite.

SEIB survey of livery yard owners and clients (2022)

<https://www.britishequestrian.org.uk/news/seib-survey-finds-costs-are-biting-for-livery-yard-owners-and-customers-alike>

The current financial situation is putting mental wellbeing and equine welfare on livery yards under pressure. SEIB conducted surveys of livery yard owners and livery yard clients to get both perspectives. Highlights livery yard price increases, that people are prioritising their horse over other costs and cutting down on some things like competing and physiotherapy sessions. Livery yard owners who had not yet increased prices stated this was because they worried that their clients could not afford it if

they did. Some have had to reduce staff hours or let staff go and take on more work themselves to mitigate rising costs.

Summary

Together the findings of these surveys highlight the ongoing challenges faced by riding schools and livery yards operating in Great Britain, as well as those faced by horse owners, especially in the current economic climate. The survey by Liddell et al (2020) suggests a potential disconnect between public knowledge and perception, and the equine welfare crisis, although it should be noted that the survey sample was small for this study. Some positive points to note include the continued high demand for riding school services, and that owners appear to be proactively questioning whether their horses are happy and whether they are in pain.

Points to explore further

- Challenges faced by riding schools and livery yards
- Lack of owner knowledge – why? Has this changed? Or does this continue?
- Unrecognised pain as a welfare issue
- Buying and selling of equines
- Donkeys – not mentioned specifically in any of the reviewed surveys

Papers published in peer-reviewed journals

The papers reviewed are presented here in alphabetical order. The literature searches conducted revealed a paucity of published peer-reviewed scientific research into the factors believed to be contributing to the equine crisis in England and Wales. To this end, the search was broadened to encompass papers that reported research conducted in other geographic locations that might have relevance to the research question, even if focusing on a different geographic sample, most commonly the horse sectors in Ireland and North America. For clarity, the location of the study is specified with the reference.

Arango-Sabogal, J.C., Mouncey, R., de Mestre, A.M. and Verheyen, K., 2021. Retrospective analysis of the population dynamics and racing outcomes of the 2014 and 2015 UK and Ireland Thoroughbred foal crops. Veterinary Record, 189(5) <https://doi.org/10.1002/vetr.298> (UK and Ireland)

This study utilising retrospective data on the Thoroughbred foal crops in the UK and Ireland from 2014 and 2015 aimed to quantify losses from the racing industry from birth until the end of the horses third year of life. The data will provide a better understanding of the extent of losses from the industry and can act as an incentive to improve transparency around the fate, and traceability, of Thoroughbreds bred for racing.

A total of 28,282 live foals were born over the two seasons captured by the study period, with 47% of these entering training by the end of their third year. Horses who did not enter training are considered lost from the industry. While some data are presented regarding import/export transactions for horses who did not enter training, these were only available for 10% of this population.

It is possible that a proportion of these horses could have transitioned to other equestrian sports or the leisure horse population but there are no data available to evidence this. The authors suggest that improving the traceability of horses bred for racing, as recommended in the recently published Welfare Strategy, would help to determine the outcome of horses not appearing in training or on the racecourse and understand the fate of individuals after the end of their racing careers.

Bell, Y., Gibson, T.J. and Gregory, N.G. (2013) Procurement of equids for the horsemeat trade in Great Britain. Veterinary Record 173(8) doi: 10.1136/vr.101636 (Great Britain)

Abattoirs showed a preference for buying larger animals and avoided buying ponies (to cover costs?). Also showed preference for TB and general-purpose riding horses over native ponies and their crosses.

Boden, L. A., Parkin, T. D., Yates, J., Mellor, D., & Kao, R. R. (2012). Summary of current knowledge of the size and spatial distribution of the horse population within Great Britain. BMC Veterinary Research, 8(1):43 <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1746-6148/8/43> (Great Britain)

The aim of this study was to examine the data quality of the NED (National Equine Database) and critically examine the discrepancies between the spatial distributions of horses in the NED and independently collected equine demographic data provided by other stakeholders in the equestrian industry (at regional and postcode area resolutions). There were similar distributions across the datasets indicating that there were few regional biases in the NED data and that data from other stakeholders could be used to monitor changes in horse demographics.

There was a higher density of horses in England in both datasets, followed by Wales, then Scotland. In England, the southeast and northwest had particularly high densities of horses. The paper contains figures illustrating horse population density by region which may be useful for reference.

Boden, L. A., Parkin, T. D., Yates, J., Mellor, D., & Kao, R. R. (2013). An online survey of horse-owners in Great Britain. BMC veterinary research, 9(1), 188 <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1746-6148/9/188> (Great Britain)

Online survey to obtain information about the location and activities of GB horses to better understand geographical distribution and population (management, transport, preventative treatment) with regard to traceability, disease transmission and biosecurity. The survey generated usable data for 4417 respondents. Most respondents were female, and around half were younger than 45 years of age. A total of 48 donkey owners responded to the survey.

The greatest population density of horses was found in Greater London. Most respondents kept their horse(s) within ten miles of their own home. Respondents could provide multiple different location types for their horses and findings suggested that some may live at multiple locations throughout the year. Horses that were kept in riding schools and livery yards were more likely to be in urban or industrial environments. Most respondents used their horses for riding and hacking within 10 miles of where their horse was kept. Few participants travelled internationally with their horses and those who did were more likely have a horse with a foreign passport, be a riding instructor or professional equestrian, a breeder or involved with the Thoroughbred industry.

Collins, J. A., Hanlon, A., More, S. J., Wall, P. G., & Duggan, V. (2011). *Aspects of the owning/keeping and disposal of horses, and how these relate to equine health/welfare in Ireland*. *Irish Veterinary Journal*, 64(1), 1-9 <https://doi.org/10.1186/2046-0481-64-11> (Ireland)

Ireland has long been renowned as a major centre for the breeding, rearing, and keeping of horses. Since 2007, however, there has been increasing concern for horse health and welfare standards, and links between these concerns and the structures, governance and funding of the Irish equine industries have been reported. This paper addresses two central issues: firstly, the local governance of trade in and disposal of unwanted horses; and secondly mechanisms employed to improve standards of care given to horses owned by certain communities.

Primarily revolves around the implementation of the Control of Horses legislation (1996). The study included visits to three horse pounds, three horse slaughter plants, record requests from knackeries (plus visits to two sites), visits to five horse dealers, visits to five ferry ports involved in the import/export of live horses, four social horse projects, and Smithfield Horse Fair.

Abattoirs reported difficulties sourcing suitable horses for human food chain – as received a lot of youngstock, athletic horses, horses in poor condition, horses either undocumented or documented as excluded from food chain.

Cullinane, M., O'Sullivan, E., Collins, D. M., Byrne, A. W., & More, S. J. (2015). *Horse impoundments under Control of Horses legislation in the Munster region of Ireland: Factors affecting euthanasia*. *Veterinary Record*, 176(4), 100 doi: 10.1136/vr.102742 (Ireland)

In Ireland, stray horses, particularly in urban areas, are a problem. The Control of Horses Act 1996 was enacted in response to an ongoing problem of uncontrolled horses in public places. This paper describes horses impounded under the Act in the Munster region of Ireland during 2005–2012 and the factors influencing decisions regarding their disposal.

Risk factors for euthanasia included poor body condition, being male and age (either 1-5 or aged 10 and over). Eight-year study 2005-2012, with a substantial increase in impounded horses in the last 4 years. Horses were often impounded in groups with only horses in best condition and of highest value reclaimed. Over half impounded horses were coloured. From 2009 onwards more single colours likely due to crossbreeding cobs and TB to produce trotters.

Dashper, K. (2014). *Tools of the trade or part of the family? Horses in competitive equestrian sport*. *Society & Animals*, 22(4), 352-371 doi 10.1163/15685306-12341343 (England)

This ethnographic study of competitive equestrian sport in England, including 26 interviews with elite riders, explores the horse-human relationship within the milieu of modern competitive equestrianism.

Dashper highlights that horses do not choose to participate in equestrian sports, consequently they will never have an equal partnership with the human competitors who actively choose to take part. The sports under discussion (the Olympic disciplines of dressage, show-jumping and three-day eventing) are perceived to be less physically damaging to equine athletes than horses competing in other events such as racing or rodeos. Whereas previously horse-human relationships in this sphere were considered as trusted partnerships, the horse is becoming more of a commodity to be bought and sold for financial and competitive gain. The themes identified including the changing nature of equestrian sport, namely it becoming increasingly commercial and competitive; the influence of

owners now that riders are more reliant on sponsorship and third-party owners for their mounts; lastly, while the dynamic of horse-human relationships was seen to have changed, there was still an affection and respect between elite riders and their horses.

Fernandez, E. B., De Blas Giral, I., Thiemann, A. K., & Vázquez Bringas, F. J. (2021). Demography, preventative healthcare and reason for relinquishment of donkeys to an equine charity in the UK (2013-2015). Equine Veterinary Journal, 53(2), 324-330 DOI: 10.1111/evj.13310 (UK)

Data from the Central Equine Database estimate the UK donkey population to be 27,592, with 16.4% (n=4,524) being in the care of The Donkey Sanctuary. This study describes the cohort of 596 donkeys admitted to The Donkey Sanctuary in a 30-month period spanning 2013-2025. The relinquishing owners provided information on how their donkey(s) had been managed and each donkey underwent a health check on arrival.

Over half the donkeys were geldings (53%), 32% were mares and 15% stallions. Median age at relinquishment was 8 years, with a range of 0-42 years. Overall, 32% of donkeys arrived without a passport and 50% without a microchip, but neither were significantly associated with region of origin. Only 23% of donkeys had received the recommended protection against tetanus and equine influenza, 21% had no previous anthelmintic treatment history and 44% had not received dental treatment in the last year. Just over half of donkeys (53%) had no abnormal hoof conditions on arrival, with the median time since their last hoof trim being 10 weeks. Body condition score was associated with age, but overall, 26% were classed as overweight and 9% as obese.

Background information on the donkeys was not consistently available. The origin of the donkeys included brought from a private owner (27%), rescued (4%), acquired from a local farm (3%) or market (2%). The most common reasons given for relinquishment were the owners health (24%), moving house (14%), donkey health (12%), lack of suitable environment (11%) and problem donkey behaviour (11%).

Holcomb, K. E., Stull, C. L., & Kass, P. H. (2012). Characteristics of relinquishing and adoptive owners of horses associated with US nonprofit equine rescue organizations. Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, 15(1), 21-31 DOI: 10.1080/10888705.2012.624049 (US)

Data from 144 nonprofit equine rescue organisations across 37 states in the US provided data about 280 horses that had been relinquished between 2006-2009, 72 of which had been adopted by new owners. The study aimed to identify characteristics of both relinquishing and adoptive owners, with the aim of using this information to inform education programmes and assist rescue centres in their rehoming efforts.

Relinquishing owners were predominantly Caucasian and female, ranging in age from under 18 years to 60 with approximately half falling into the aged 31-50 years category. When known, annual income was evenly distributed across the four categories provided. The majority of horses (57%) had been privately purchased, 13% were the offspring of mares owned by the relinquishing owner, and 11% had been acquired from a rescue, rehabilitation, or shelter facility. For most owners, this was not the first horse they had owned. Over half (53%) of the horses had been owned for 1-5 years, 22% for less than 1 year, 15% for 6-10 years and 10% for more than 10 years. Relinquished horses had been used for a variety of purposes, 24% pleasure riding/driving, 22% were companions or non-ridden retired horses, 16% were breeding mares, stallions or youngstock, 15% were from the racetrack, 8% were working

horses (school, ranch, or mares from the pharmaceutical industry and 2% had been free roaming. The majority (70%) of horses had been purchased for less than \$1,000.

Families and couples rehomed 62% of the 73 adopted horses, while individual women adopted 25%. The largest age category of adoptive owners was 31-40 years old (39%), followed by 41-50 (26%). Adoptive owners under 18 years of age adopted 7% of the horses. The majority of adoptive owners had other horses on their property. Horses were mainly adopted for pleasure riding/driving (64%) or as companion horses (23%). During their time at a nonprofit organisation over 70% of horses received deworming or parasite control, hoof care, vaccinations, and dental care. Training or behaviour modification was received by 56%. Adopters tended to have a higher income than relinquishing owners.

Horseman, S.V., Buller, H., Mullan, S. and Whay, H.R., 2016. Current welfare problems facing horses in Great Britain as identified by equine stakeholders. PLoS One, 11(8), p.e0160269
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0160269> (Great Britain)

Stakeholders: Equine Health, Riding/Training, Welfare charity/enforcement work, leisure -> 31 interviews were conducted.

All 31 of the stakeholders discussed health as a welfare problem, with the main concerns being under/over-weight, poor foot care, internal parasites, and laminitis.

All 31 of the stakeholders also discussed management as a welfare problem, with the main concerns being stabling horses in 24 hours a day, under/over-feeding, inappropriate rugging, lack of water, and social isolation.

23 out of 31 stakeholders discussed riding/training as a welfare problem, with the main concerns being inappropriate use of training aids and poorly fitting tack.

The racing sector was discussed by 17 out of the 31 interviewees as an area responsible for poor welfare – Overbreeding and intensive training were highlighted as particular problems within the sector and there was concern over what happened to the horses when they could no longer race.

The root causes of welfare problems, as raised by stakeholders, in descending order of importance, were lack of knowledge, finances, advice seeking behaviour, indiscriminate breeding, horses being viewed as commodities, welfare legislation, passport legislation, and euthanasia costs.

Janczarek, I., & Wilk, I. (2017). Leisure riding horses: research topics versus the needs of stakeholders. Animal Science Journal, 88(7), 953-958 doi:10.1111/asj.12800 (Review article, authors based in Poland)

Review paper that highlights the disconnect between the leisure and sports horse sectors whereby leisure riders and horses form the majority of the equestrian population, yet horses are not specifically bred or selected for leisure activities. Instead, former sports horses are often used as they are cheap, but they may have physical and behavioural issues and be otherwise unsuitable for a leisure role. Research focuses on sports horses and this review recommends that greater research attention should be paid to the leisure sector.

Leadon, D. P. (2012). *Unwanted and slaughter horses: a European and Irish perspective*. *Animal Frontiers*, 2, 72–75 <https://doi.org/10.2527/af.2012-0053> (Europe)

Since the onset of the current global recession in 2008, there has been an increase in ‘unwanted’ horses in Europe. Highlighting that rescue charities do not have the facilities or financial capacity to cope with demand, the author recommends the slaughter of unwanted horses as a humane and cost-effective alternative. The author raises concerns regarding the long-distance transport of horses for slaughter, as seen in the US following the slaughter of horses being banned. Investing in Europe’s slaughter horse industry is an effective way of dealing with unwanted horses while preventing horses for slaughter being imported from further afield. It would also provide an outlet for horses seized by local authorities.

FAO data indicate that from 2002-2009, horse meat consumption in Europe has declined. The same data show that the UK is the fifth largest source of horse meat for human consumption providing approximately 20,000 animals per year during this period.

Leadon focuses on Ireland, illustrating the inaccuracy of population estimates, the apparent correlation between the number of horses slaughtered by Irish abattoirs between 2005-2010, and Irish National Debt (as % of GDP), and the increasing number (as resultant cost) of equine seizures by local authorities.

Leadon, D. P., O’Toole, D., & Duggan, V. E. (2012). *A demographic survey of unwanted horses in Ireland 2005-2010*. *Irish Veterinary Journal*, 65(1), 1-11 <https://doi.org/10.1186/2046-0481-65-3> (Ireland)

Uses the definition of ‘unwanted horses’ provided by the Unwanted Horse Coalition (2010) in the US, as “those that may be sick, injured or old, or be those that owners are no longer able to afford, fail to meet their owners’ expectations or simply be those that their owners no longer know what to do with”. Paper describes the increase in the Irish horse population, and the reported increase in calls to Irish horse welfare groups, stating that in Ireland as in the US, unwanted horses have become a social and economic problem.

This study aimed to provide data on the unwanted horse population in Ireland from 2005-2010. Data gathered via online surveys from owners, vets, equine welfare organisations, local authority vets, managers of knackeries and managers of abattoirs slaughtering horses for human consumption, as well as Thoroughbred and sports horse breeders.

Detailed data presented from all respondent groups, including breakdown of horses sent to abattoirs, those local authorities were called out to, those euthanised by vets.

The main findings indicated that unwanted horses were an increasing problem during this period, with welfare groups receiving growing numbers of call, visits and an increasing number of horses seen per visit. There appeared to be increased involvement of the veterinary profession in equine welfare, reporting similar trends in numbers as the welfare groups. These trends were also apparent in the data from the local authorities. More horses were admitted to the care of local authorities than to the care of welfare groups, although it was noted that the records kept by welfare groups were often poor. The role of abattoirs as a disposal route for unwanted horses was highlighted.

Leadon, D. P., Jeffery, R., O'Toole, D., & Duggan, V. (2013). A demographic survey of unwanted horses in Ireland in 2011 and totals for 2012 and a comparison with 2010. *Irish Veterinary Journal*, 66(1), 1-7 <https://doi.org/10.1186/2046-0481-66-20> (Ireland)

Follow-up paper to Leadon et al 2012, summarising data from 2011 and 2012 to build on that previously reported for 2005-2010. Additional data presented includes breakdown provided by welfare organisations on the most common medical problems in relinquished horses. These varied across the organisations who provided data but foot problems, parasite infestations, emaciation were cited across most organisations.

Government data showed an increase in the numbers of horses seized under the Control of Horses Act (1996), the numbers disposed of by local authorities by knackeries, the numbers slaughtered at DAFM (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine) approved abattoirs, and the numbers slaughtered at local authority approved plants, from 2010 to 2012. A total of 24,207 equines were slaughtered in 2012. Breed and age data were provided for a small subset of these and indicated that cobs and ponies made up the majority of equines slaughtered, and those under the age of five years old were the most commonly seen age category.

The role of Category 2 plants and abattoirs as an important route of disposal was again highlighted. Disposal via these routes increased during the economic downturn, and this trend continued through 2011 and 2012.

While the data presented in this paper indicate that the unwanted horse crisis was continuing in Ireland, the authors state that by July 2013 there was a reduction in numbers from previous years suggesting that this might be changing.

Liddell et al (2020) A Survey investigating public knowledge and perception of the equine welfare crisis. UFAW Conference Abstract (no doi available) (UK)

(Also included under Published industry surveys)

Abstract and poster presented at UFAW 2020 showing findings of a small survey (n=127) to understand public perceptions of the horse crisis. Overall, 86.6% of respondents did NOT agree with the statement that equine abandonment and neglect is an issue in the UK. Most respondents were aware of the Animal Welfare Act (2006) (80.3%, and 40.2% were aware of the Control of Horses Act (2015).

Owers R. (2013) The equine welfare crisis. Equine Health 13: 12
<https://doi.org/10.12968/eqhe.2013.1.13.12> (Great Britain)

Short commentary on the early days of the horse crisis highlighting the low cost of horses with people struggling to give them away, the risk of cost cutting vaccinations and footcare, asking if you need to breed and promoting rehoming.

Owers, R. (2019). Should we slaughter horses at abattoirs? Veterinary Record, 185(18), 577-577
<https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.l6414> (UK)

Debate piece in the Vet Record arguing that humanely slaughtering horses at abattoirs and entering them into the food chain could help to mitigate one of the key welfare challenges facing UK horses – delayed euthanasia. By remaining in the food chain rather than being signed out, a horse will always have its meat value which may mean it avoids be given away for free with the welfare implications this can have.

Robin, C. A., Lo Iacono, G., Gubbins, S., Wood, J. L. N., & Newton, J. R. (2013). The accuracy of the National Equine Database in relation to vector-borne disease risk modelling of horses in Great Britain. Equine veterinary journal, 45(3), 302-308 <https://doi.org/10.1111/evj.12018> (Great Britain)

Two questionnaires used to assess accuracy of NED data, particularly separation between location of owner and location of the horse. Coming at it from a disease control perspective, risks of inaccurate data are highlighted as is the problems associated with the lack of enforcement of passport legislation.

Data from local authorities indicated that the majority of passports they checked were accurate (91% 95% Confidence interval 8.7-9.5%). Of those that were non-compliant, 3.5% (95% CI 3.2–3.8%) were missing and 5.6% (95% CI 5.3–6.0%) contained information that was obviously inaccurate.

A total of 1382 horse owners responded to the owner survey, with the majority reporting that they currently owned the horse registered to them on the NED. Overall, 28% of passports were deemed obsolete as the horse they related to had died or had been sold on without the passport going to the new owner.

The authors conclude that the majority of data they sampled indicate that the NED is accurate and up to date, however there are some inaccuracies that could cause problems during a disease outbreak. Similarly, 92% (95% CI 90.3–93.7%) of horses were found to reside within 10 km of their owners suggesting that while using keeper address to determine horse location is not ideal it is an adequate substitute in the absence of more accurate location information.

Rioja-Lang F.C., Connor M., Bacon H., Dwyer C.M. Determining a Welfare Prioritization for Horses Using a Delphi Method. Animals. 2020; 10(4):647. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10040647> (UK)

This study used a Delphi Method, whereby an expert consultation process was used to prioritise welfare issues facing equines in the UK. An initial list of 84 different welfare issues was derived from a list generated by the British Veterinary Association, supplemented with suggestions from the expert panel.

Over two rounds of questionnaires and a two-day workshop, the list was distilled down into a ranked list of welfare issues. These were divided into those perceived to be most prevalent (ranked 1-10 as lack of biosecurity, delayed euthanasia, lack of owner knowledge of equine welfare needs, fear and stress from use, obesity, indiscriminate/inappropriate breeding, poorly fitting and restrictive tack, unstable social groups, unsuitable diets for equine feeding behaviour, and poor weaning methods), and those perceived to cause greatest suffering for individual horses in terms of severity and duration (ranked 1-10 as delayed euthanasia, lack of recognition by owners of pain behaviour, large worm burdens, obesity, being fed unsuitable diets for equine feeding behaviour, hunger, inability to perform normal social interactions, negative affective states, overworking, and overweight riders).

The authors highlight the commonalities between these findings and those of similar studies in terms of the issues raised, which they felt validated their findings given the limitations in using expert consensus.

Rosanowski, S., & Verheyen, K. (2019). Factors associated with rehoming and time until rehoming for horses listed with an equine charity. Veterinary Record, 185(12), 373-373
<https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.105398> (UK)

This study used data from an equine rehoming charity to identify factors that may influence whether a horse can be rehomed and how long it takes to be rehomed. Horses may become unwanted due to owner-related factors (financial reasons, lack of time, poor health, owner death, change in circumstances) or horse-related factors (health issues, old age, unsuitability for intended purpose, undesirable behaviour).

Data from horses listed for rehoming with the charity between 1st January 2013 and 1st January 2014 (n=791 individual horses (1 horse was listed and rehomed twice during this period)). Most commonly cited reasons for giving up the horse were owner-related 'other reasons (40%), followed by lack of time (39%), change in family circumstances (25%), lack of money (25%). The most common horse-related reason was that the horse was unsuitable (11%). Overall, horses available for rehoming were 58% male, with a median age of 12.5 years. The sample was comprised of 25% native breeds, 20% thoroughbreds, 15% partbreds and 13% warmbloods. Previous health issues were reported for 25% of horses, 15% had to be rehomed as non-ridden companions.

Overall, 52% of horses were rehomed during the data collection period. Median time to rehome was 39 days (IQR 24-75, min 2 days, max 197 days). Horses were at higher odds of finding a new home if the owner were prepared to transfer ownership rather than loaning the horses to a new home, if they were suitable for beginner riders, if they were rideable, if there was no geographic restriction on where they could go. Horse aged between 11-17 years and over 17 found home more quickly than horses under 5 years of age. Sports horses were rehomed more quickly than native breeds, and horses with a suggested donation amount between £250-£499 were rehomed more quickly than horses with a suggested donation amount of less than £100.

Recommend owner education around the commitment of horse ownership.

Rowland, M., Coombs, T., & Connor, M. (2019). A study of traveller horse owners' attitudes to horse care and welfare using an equine Body Condition Scoring system. Animals, 9(4), 162
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9040162> (Ireland)

Although equine welfare concerns exist across the Irish horse industry, particular concerns have been expressed about the welfare of horses owned by the Traveller community. Travellers account for at least 0.5% of the Irish population. Horses are central to the Traveller way of life, although their roles have changed over time as people become less dependent on them for transport. The paper discusses Traveller horses, Travellers not being consulted on the implementation of the Control of Horses Act (1996), the consequences of the Act and the difficulties Travellers have in leasing land, possibly due to negative stereotyping and discrimination. Details several horse related education programmes that have worked with Travellers.

Study comprised of qualitative interviewing (3 semi-structured interviews, 4 focus group discussions) and body condition scoring with the aim of better understanding Traveller attitudes to horse care and welfare.

Detailed discussion of results and Traveller beliefs and practices around horse management and welfare. Good understanding of natural behaviour, reflected in their management practices, and positive attitude towards welfare. Participants recommended either an absolute ban on horse breeding or some kind of control of breeding, with most stressing the importance of resource availability and provision to ensure optimal welfare. Contrast with perception of the indiscriminate breeding of horses by Travellers. BCS tool was easily adopted. Main barrier to good welfare identified by Travellers was lack of availability of land for their horses.

Rowland, M., Hudson, N., Connor, M., Dwyer, C., Coombs, T. (2022) The Welfare of Traveller and Gypsy Owned Horses in the UK and Ireland. Animals 12, 2402. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani12182402> (UK and Ireland)

Travellers and Gypsies keep, breed, and sell horses, with horse dealing considered an important activity. The welfare of horses owned by these communities is typically deemed to be poor despite there being few empirical studies to support this.

Follow on from study above, assessing welfare of a convenience sample of 104 Traveller and Gypsy owned horses in the UK and Ireland with a bespoke welfare assessment protocol and Qualitative Behaviour Assessment (QBA).

The majority of horses sampled were cobs (59%), 24% were trotters and 17% were 'other' breeds of horses. Mares comprised 54% of the sample (5 with foals at foot, the remainder not in foal), 23% were stallions and 23% were geldings. When assessed, 53% were tethered, 11% were loose in a field, 3% were individually stabled, 1% stabled in a group and 33% were assessed while being hand-held, attached to a gig and/or standing in a yard. Some were assessed at horse fairs, some in health clinics, some in their home environment. Detailed breakdown of assessment findings, but overall BCS, and coat condition were good with horses showing few skin or joint issues, although 27% had neglected hooves (most commonly cracks and breakages). The QBA indicated that the horses were characterised by more positive affective states.

Findings do not support perceptions of poor welfare in this group of horses.

Weiss, E., Dolan, E. D., Mohan-Gibbons, H., Gramann, S., & Slater, M. R. (2017). Estimating the availability of potential homes for unwanted horses in the United States. Animals, 7(7), 53 <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani7070053> (US)

An estimated 6,000-10,000 horses are in equine rescues in the US at any one time. Many unwanted but otherwise rehomingable horses are shipped to Canada or Mexico for slaughter (estimated 82,000-150,000 annually). It is difficult to ensure lifelong care of horses as they tend to have multiple owners, can live up to 30 years and are expensive to keep.

Aim of this study was to see if there enough potential homes to make rehoming unwanted horses a viable option. Used a national telephone survey (n=3036), and from that gained a sample of 500 people interested in horses, and extrapolated findings. Out of the 500, only 28 were considered potential adopters due to their answers. Of these 12 were inexperienced, while 16 had owned a horse

in the past 5 years. Respondents were more interested in adopting a horse that might be abandoned if their owner is not found, than a horse that no longer has an owner. A smaller number would adopt a horse with health or behavioural issues.

By scaling up their findings the authors conclude that there are potentially enough homes for the unwanted horses but acknowledge there are limitations with their approach.

Williams, B., Harris, P., & Gordon, C. (2022). What is equine hoarding and can 'motivational interviewing' training be implemented to help enable behavioural change in animal owners? Equine Veterinary Education, 34(1), 29-36 <https://doi.org/10.1111/eve.13391> (UK)

Introduces the issue of animal hoarding. Four characteristics of animal hoarding have been suggested – these are (i) failure to provide minimal standards of space, sanitation, nutrition, and veterinary care, (ii) the failure of the person hoarding to recognise the impact this has on the animals, the household and the environment, (iii) obsessive attempts to accumulate more animals or maintain current collection in ever deteriorating conditions, (iv) denial or attempt to minimise the problems and living conditions for humans and animals. Dead animals may also be kept either where they fell or deliberately stored somewhere. Three types of hoarding behaviour have been proposed: overwhelmed caregiver, rescuing/mission driven, and exploitative hoarding.

Hoarding of equines appears to be under-recognised, perhaps because focus has traditionally been on small animals, but also as horses are herd animals you would expect to find them in groups. This study interviewed 6 WHW field officers about cases with multiple equines to see if they fit the criteria for hoarding, and then looked at whether motivational interviewing could help field officers in practice.

Many of the described cases fit the criteria for animal hoarding, all three types of hoarding behaviour had been seen by officers. Two additional types emerged that were equine-specific – indiscriminate breeding, and naïve owners (which fitted across overwhelmed caregiver and rescue/mission driven. Field officers also reported that equines were often 'contained' within the hoarding situation e.g., segregated into small buildings or outdoor areas.

The majority of the paper is about training the field officers in using MI (Motivational Interviewing) and the practical consequences of this when they applied it in the field to deal with hoarding cases. It worked very well! Especially with overwhelmed caregiver, rescue/mission driven and naïve owners. Some maintained positive relationships with these people going forwards which is unusual in hoarding cases.

Williams, J. (2019). Gaining insights into factors associated with rehoming of horses from equine charities. The Veterinary Record, 185(12), 370 DOI:10.1136/vr.l5481 (UK)

Research comment on Rosanowski & Verheyen (2019) article. Despite the recent growth in the British equestrian sector with economic growth and more people participating in riding, 'Great Britain has arguably been in the maelstrom of an ongoing equine welfare crisis since the start of the current decade'. Highlights the lack of statutory equine database, the absence of regulation for breeding and ownership, the increased costs of horse ownership in the current economic climate, poor knowledge of horse owners and obesity in recreational horses. There is an increasing burden on equine welfare charities, and it is essential that they find responsible homes for the horses in their care.

Flags up need to understand human behaviour and the value in developing and maintaining a strong positive horse-human relationship. Discussion around the finding that horses may be easier to rehome if ownership is transferred – implications for ongoing monitoring of that horse's welfare.

Summary

The paucity of published data and other research discussing or critiquing the equine crisis in England and Wales, or exploring factors believed to be contributing to, or associated with, it is disappointing but not surprising. Research on the unwanted horses of the US, and equine population in Ireland provide insight into some potentially relevant considerations, but the dearth of research in England and Wales needs to be addressed. This would provide a baseline understanding of the equine population and provide an evidence based for ongoing monitoring and enable the impact of any intervention to be evaluated.

Points to explore further

- Donkeys – donkey ownership, welfare, relinquishment, rehoming
- Data around unwanted horses and equine slaughter in England and Wales
- Population sizes of different elements of the equine sector – the travelling community feature in a higher proportion of articles than other equines communities. Is this representative or indicative of discrimination?

Concluding remarks

Each element of this review of the published literature about, or relevant to, the equine crisis has identified key points that warrant further investigation within this research project. Common areas that arose across more than one of the publication types included the role of local authorities, riding schools, Traveller communities, slaughter, the impact of COVID-19, the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, and issues specific to Wales and donkeys. It was very telling that apart from one paper in the scientific literature (Fernandez et al 2020), there was little, if any, consideration of donkeys in reference to the equine sector, the equine crisis, and equine welfare.

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005. Google data report

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Introduction

In support of the RSPCA, University of Bristol, University College Dublin and HBCL's research seeking to understand the use and care of horses, ponies, donkeys and their hybrids across England and Wales, secondary research was undertaken into the supply and demand of horses in these countries and the impact this has on horse welfare and the population. Commissioned from the perspective of researching the drivers of the 'Equine Crisis' - the definition of which is Equine Overpopulation, Overbreeding, Neglect and Abandonment - it builds on the 2020 report "Britain's Horse Problem" ([Britain's Horse Problem Report FINAL 9 Dec 2020 small.pdf \(redwings.org.uk\)](#)). The search engine Google was used to gather an understanding of what information is available when these search terms are used. This offered a greater understanding of what information is in the public domain, what media coverage has focused on the welfare crisis and what information can be accessed by people in the horse industry.

In December 2022 various search terms (appendix C.i) were undertaken in both Firefox and Chrome web browsers and the Google Scholar search engine, looking at the first or first two pages of links generated:

- The horse/equine market in England and Wales/UK
- Supply and demand of horses in England and Wales/UK
- The horse crisis/the equine crisis/the equid crisis
- Overpopulation
- Horse neglect
- Overbreeding
- Abandonment

Overpopulation and Horse neglect were researched in more detail initially to indicate whether there were any research gains in using the search terms ‘England and Wales’ rather than ‘UK’. The aim was to identify the most efficient term so that future searches used the most cost- and time-effective search terms to optimise results. Adding ‘UK’ rather than ‘England and Wales’ captured all the most relevant results, although two potentially pertinent academic links were only found by including the search term ‘+ England and Wales’.

Google Scholar gives an option to narrow the results down to post 2019 versus all results. Interestingly, a comparison of these produced different results (Figure 1 and appendix C.ii). For the key searches both sets of results and impressions were captured, but not analysed. Although it is unlikely that many “horse people” would use Google Scholar for a quick equine-related search, it may be worth undertaking a fuller analysis to assess whether any useful information for the overarching project would be gained, especially open-access academic papers. One annoyance to using Google Scholar however is its generation of non-open-access articles that could be useful, for example Cutress’ ‘The challenges of an equine welfare charity’ (2020).¹ The use of other search engines was not considered.

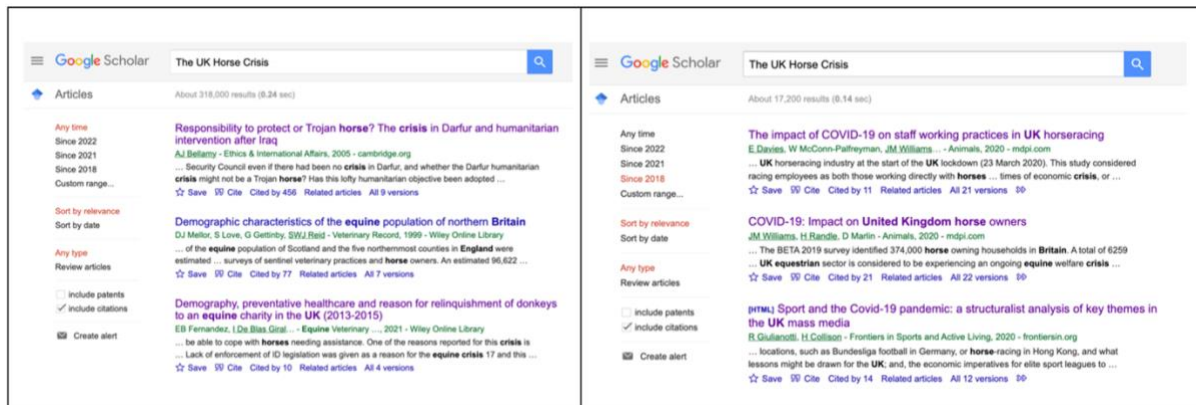


Figure 1: An example of the different results generated using the same search term but with and without the ‘Since 2018’ option.

Supply and demand in the UK horse market

Versions of this search term generated different results in Google, depending on whether the Firefox or Chrome browsers were used (appendix C.iii). Slightly differing search terms were used to investigate Google’s algorithmic response to the UK (United Kingdom) equine market. The following searches were undertaken for ponies, donkeys, and their hybrids initially to identify whether they triggered different results or were likely to be included under more general horse/equine/equid searches (Table 1).

Table 1: Top line results of web links generated for ponies, donkeys and their hybrids using a supply and demand search term.

Search term	Top line summary of web links generated
Supply and demand for ponies + UK	Current issue (2022) reported by various grey media on riding schools struggling to meet demand; two links from online websites selling horses online on the recent increase in the price of horses, not ponies (Whickr and RightHorseRightHome) and two out-of-date Government reports from 2004 and 2005.

¹ Cutress, L., 2020. The challenges of an equine welfare charity. *Equine Health*, 2020(51), pp.30-33.

Supply and demand for donkeys + UK	Primarily the threat to donkeys from the hides trade for e'jiao, plus a link to the Government's 2018 Welfare Codes of Practice for equids.
Supply and demand for mules + UK	Links primarily to articles about donkeys and mules and the hides trade. One historical link (to 18C cotton mills) and one to mule gimmer lambs. Only one link to an open-access academic paper on global donkey and mule populations.
Supply and demand for hinnies + UK	Links to an old Government link on a horse industry strategy; a £260 book on Amazon, entitled The World Market for Asses, Mules, and Hinnies (which obviously did not come up in the previous two searches); one to the 2022 UK/New Zealand Free Trade Agreement and one to the vulnerabilities of post-Brexit supply chains.

The Google algorithm relates the term 'horse market' primarily to horses, not other equids although both 'the horse market' and 'the equine market' are terms that occur occasionally (for example, a 2005 UK (United Kingdom) government strategy for the "Horse Industry" (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategy-for-the-horse-industry-in-england-and-wales>)). However, one impression given by this secondary research is that there is no one UK horse/equine market. Further analysis reveals the horse market is made up of many sectors that are difficult to compare as they have very different needs and aims, especially around the management, ownership, population and welfare of horses (similar to the "broad spectrum of diverse interests and uses of horses" referred to in a paper on the Irish horse industry (Collins *et al.*, 2010, p. 106). As noted in Table 1. websites links arising in the first page results when searching for the supply and demand for other equids is sparse and mostly irrelevant.

Search terms around 'the UK horse market' and 'Supply and/or Demand for horses + UK' (appendix C.i) results almost exclusively in links to horses, horseboxes, and tack for sale through various routes (from traditional, established horse markets to online sites only, including Facebook). The term "online equine marketplace" is being used and within these links, for example the Equestrian Notice Board, (<https://theequestriannoticeboard.co.uk/>), horses of varying value are being bought and sold, including ponies, but not donkeys or their hybrids.

The online versions of the traditional equine press do report the welfare charities' appeals and concerns about the on-going crisis affecting horses in the UK, although rarely under this search term. Presumably, these articles appear in the print versions, but few, if any of the online horse-selling sites refer to horse welfare sites or 'The Horse Crisis' in their blogs or PR/'news' sections. For example, despite promoting its blog as "talking all things horses; buying horses, advertising horses for sale, breed profiles, and training exercises for horse and rider" Whickr touches on "covid and the price of horses for sale" and "the price of horses for sale online" (<https://www.whickr.com/blog/the-price-of-horses-for-sale-online/>) in general posts (<https://www.whickr.com/blog/>).

The exception was the search 'horses free to a good home + UK,' where links to re-homing animal welfare charities like the RSPCA and Blue Cross are generated. Occasionally - in varying degrees of prominence - the text in a link directs a searcher that suspects a horse is being neglected or abused to primarily contact either the RSPCA or Blue Cross. These animal welfare charities are themselves included in separate business listings on the 'horsemart' website, under the horse welfare and equine charities headings (<https://www.horsemart.co.uk/business-list/horse-welfare/A>).

On many searches related to the term 'horse market,' results on the first web page occasionally include a small number of paid for advertisements to commercial Horse Industry Reports, usually towards the

bottom of the page. There are a few links to market reports and top line statistics, plus links to one-stop-shops for equestrian businesses set up to support the leisure rider and a range of equestrian sports (department store sites for sector-specific horse owners). However, one link to the British Equestrian Trade Association’s Market (BETA) Information site – which quotes a 2019 survey – appears more regularly. Additionally, some links focus on horses for loan: a topic that rarely cropped up as a subject in its own right under any other search term.

North American sites, not surprisingly predominate if the words ‘+UK’ or ‘+England and Wales’ are not detailed in the search term up front. Searches specifying results for ‘England and Wales’ only were ineffective in comparison to searching for ‘+ UK.’ Including the words ‘market trends’ in the search term (appendix C.i) led primarily to links to horse riding equipment sales and market and statistical reports (including the BETA 2019 survey, plus one UK Government Horse Industry Strategy from 2005 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategy-for-the-horse-industry-in-england-and-wales>)). These searches rarely, if ever generated links to further details, reports or charity sites detailing ‘The Horse Crisis’ or any element thereof. The exception was one link to The Horse Crisis on the World Horse Welfare website under the search term ‘Demand for horses in England and Wales’.

It was only once the words ‘key issues’ or ‘current issue’ were added to the original supply and demand or markets +UK or +England and Wales search terms that one or two links to key issues were generated on the first web page, but not necessarily to ‘The Horse Crisis.’ Across all searches, key issues identified on the first web page of the search included:

- Riding centres facing supply and demand issues
- Britain’s Horse Problem on the Blue Cross website
- Horse prices: for example, “Prices soar during lockdown (RightHorseRightHome, posted by ‘Rebecca’ 31.12.22)
- Horse racing staffing crisis
- Catastrophic lack of equine workers
- Disruption to vaccine supplies of equine influenza vaccines
- RSPCA Australia: welfare issues of horses
- The cost-of-living crisis:
 - cut costs, not care/re-home responsibly
- Links to the overbreeding of horses, although the term was not used in the link title: its focus was gleaned from the two-line description under the actual hyperlinks to the websites

The Horse Crisis

Initially, results from the search term ‘The Horse Crisis’ gave rise to a majority of North American sites. Excluding American references to wild horses and burros by including ‘+ UK’ in the search term, there are minimal references to ponies, donkeys, and hybrids: an estimated 90% plus results referred to horses, even using the equid/equine search terms.

All the search terms relating to the equine/horse crisis were dominated by the key UK equine charities: “[Britain’s Horse Problem” Report](#) was available from the largest number of results on page one of the search term ‘The Horse Crisis + UK.’ However, few grey media reports of the horse crisis - including the specialist horse/equestrian press - actually included a link to the report. Reports of the crisis through online versions of local newspapers and on the TV and were more likely to be found under the search term ‘Equine Crisis’, rather than ‘Horse Crisis’, with TV news items accessible through YouTube links, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuvF34OH0a0>). Not surprisingly there were no links to radio news reports on the subject.

A search result included an article from a newspaper article which highlighted the ongoing nature of the crisis. The RSPCA's Inspectorate National Equine Co-Ordinator Christine McNeil said in 2018: "We've been talking about the horse crisis for several years now, but the truth is the situation is just as severe today as when it started (<https://www.hampshirechronicle.co.uk/news/16190889.hampshire-middle-horse-cruelty-crisis-charity-warns/>) However, it could be argued that searching for information on "the UK's horse crisis" doesn't give the impression of an on-going "crisis". The majority of the first page results are dated 2018 – 2021, which could imply that the horse crisis is covid-related or over:

- These links are primarily to the 2020 "Britain's Horse Problem" report on the UK animal welfare charities responsible for its production. However, one link leads to the "Left on the Verge" Report from 2012, produced by UK animal welfare charities in response to the 2008 financial downturn, which states:

"World Horse Welfare has seen a 50 percent rise in the number of horses it has taken into its centres since 2006. Redwings have seen a 28 percent increase in equines being taken in from 2006 to 2011; including a record 303 in 2009. The RSPCA took in more than twice the number of horses, 304, in the April to March 2011/12 period as it did the corresponding period the previous year."

- The use of the term the "cost-of-living crisis" appears to be increasing, possibly slowly replacing the term 'The Horse Crisis' under the market trends search terms (see section on 'Supply and demand in the UK horse market'), but not under the search term 'The Horse Crisis' at the moment.

Overpopulation

Without including a specific country in the search term, the links generated are primarily to American sites. Their wild/feral horse/burro issues dominate the first web page with the search terms 'Equine Overpopulation' and 'Equine Overpopulation + definition'. The most effective search term for the terms of reference for this desk research was 'Horse overpopulation + UK,' which included one veterinary media result (<https://www.veterinary-practice.com/article/how-to-address-equine-overpopulation-in-the-uk>). There was also a link to a 2021 UK government petition, which received 42,751 signatures, to introduce national limits on horse breeding ('Overbreeding' section: https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/585547?reveal_response=yes).

However, the first web page resulting from this search term has no links to any article/paper on 'The Horse Crisis.' The only reference to a crisis is in a 2015 blog (authored by "Hannah") posted on Viovet's website. Viovet is an online pet and horse supplies retailer, which refers to the Horse Overpopulation Crisis (under Pet Discussion), rather than a horse crisis. The blog blames "Irresponsible dealers for the problem" ('Overbreeding' section). The blog includes contextual timelines and covers all elements of the horse crisis succinctly, except abandonment.

Horse Neglect

Various search terms were used around Horse Neglect to assess what, if any, differences resulted. The search terms equid neglect, equine neglect and horse neglect were all combined with 'England', with 'Wales,' with 'England and Wales' and with 'the UK' – primarily to evaluate the time and cost-effectiveness of each option.

The search term ‘Equid neglect + UK’ resulted in Google searching for ‘Equine neglect + UK.’ Google had to be instructed via the “search only for ...” option to provide results for ‘Equid neglect + UK’ only. (appendix C.iv) Interestingly, only one result related to ‘The Horse Crisis’ was shared on the first web page for both sets of results (<https://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/what-we-do/our-positions/horse-crisis-in-the-uk>). The related searches elements to both searches however are completely different (Figure 2).

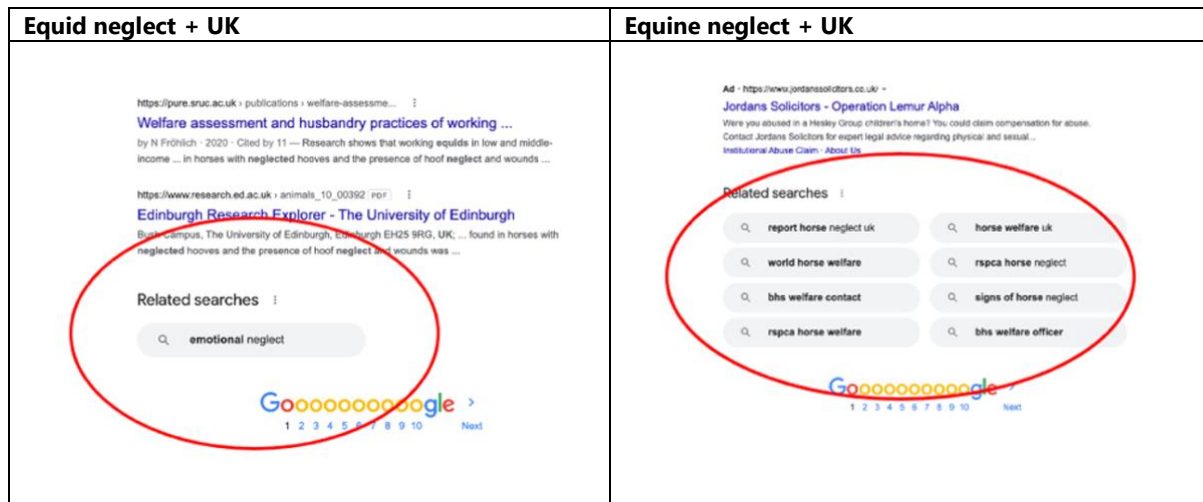


Figure 2: The differences between the ‘Related searches.’ generated by Google to the search terms Equid and Equine neglect in the UK

Looking at the top results from the first web page from both options, the differences between them are clearly different (appendix C.iv):

- Two of the four suggested “People also ask ...” links are the same; ‘How do I report horse neglect UK?’ and ‘How do I know/tell if a horse is being neglected?’
- Six of the ‘Equine Neglect + UK’ results also appear on the ‘Horse Neglect + UK’ search, including the one link that arose from all three searches (Horse crisis in the UK – World Horse Welfare (<https://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/what-we-do/our-positions/horse-crisis-in-the-uk>))

Broadly, the results from the search terms:

- ‘Horse Neglect + England & Wales and ‘Horse Neglect + Wales are linked to grey media local news reports of neglect/cruelty cases
- ‘Horse Neglect + UK’ was dominated by the major equine charities, with the word crisis in their titles
- The first twenty results on Horse Neglect + UK (i.e., across two pages) were found on the ‘Horse Neglect England & Wales and ‘Horse Neglect +Wales searches, although it did miss a few specific Welsh cases, including one academic paper
- Generally, it appears that horse neglect generates links to cruelty, not to, or as, a specific element of the horse crisis

Overbreeding

The search term ‘Horse Overbreeding + UK’ was used for this specific search and was dominated by links to UK animal welfare charities and horse journals. Two out of 10 links between overbreeding and the horse crisis were immediately visible, but there were also a similar number of visible links between overbreeding and welfare, so it was not immediately clear that Overbreeding is an element of the Horse Crisis. However, links in both this search and its Google Scholar equivalent revealed a range of sectors that breed horses to meet their needs, including professional equestrian sports, traveller communities and casual breeders (<https://www.veterinary-practice.com/article/how-to-address-equine-overpopulation-in-the-uk> and <https://www.vettimes.co.uk/app/uploads/wp-post-to-pdf-enhanced-cache/1/welfare-considerations-surrounding-the-management-of-breeding-horses.pdf>).

There was also a link to a UK government petition: Introduce national limits on horse breeding (<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/585547> which states: “Unrestricted horse breeding has led to an excessive number of equines. The result is the slaughter of thousands of horses each year. We call on the Government to introduce a national limit on the number of equines that can be produced by horse breeders, reducing the number of unwanted horses” (also generated in the Overpopulation searches).

Overbreeding was also the only issue of the Horse Crisis that generated links to animal rights sites: PETA (<https://www.peta.org/issues/animals-in-entertainment/horse-racing-2/horse-racing-industry-cruelty/overbreeding-and-slaughter/>) and Animal Aid (<https://www.animalaid.org.uk/the-issues/our-campaigns/horse-racing/>). Both organisations make their point that “only a tiny minority of horses are capable of excelling on the track and in the stud yards. But because the potential rewards are so high, the Thoroughbred commodity market (i.e., the bloodstock sales) is buoyant (<https://www.animalaid.org.uk/the-issues/our-campaigns/horse-racing/bred-to-death/>).

Abandonment

The results from the search terms around horse abandonment do not give the impression the issue is related to an equine welfare/horse crisis. The primary links on the first web page relate to property, property law and bailiffs as the term ‘abandonment’ appears to be linked to the term ‘fly-grazing’. Consequently, instructions as to what to do with an abandoned horse and further information for property owners dominate. However, a press release from the UK Government (link three on the first web page) promotes its animal welfare credentials under the banner “New protection for horses as fly-grazing act comes into force.”

Eight out of ten of the results from ‘Horse Abandonment + UK’ are also found using the search term ‘Abandoned horses + UK.’ However, it is worth noting that the related Google searches and “People also ask ...” Areas of these two similar search terms are slightly different (Figure 3.).

There could be value in undertaking an initial analysis comparing Google’s Related Searches and “People who ask ...” data from a relevant search term, to evaluate whether it would generate useful information about what people are broadly searching for, especially if combined with using Keyword Planner and Trends tools.

Interestingly, in a separate search (under the term ‘The Equine Crisis’) the Northamptonshire Chronicle and Echo in 2020 interpreted the RSPCA’s equine crisis phrase as the county’s “dumped horse crisis,” which was not found with either of the abandonment search terms (<https://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/people/rspca-warns-worst-yet-come-northamptonshires-dumped-horse-crisis-2880003>).

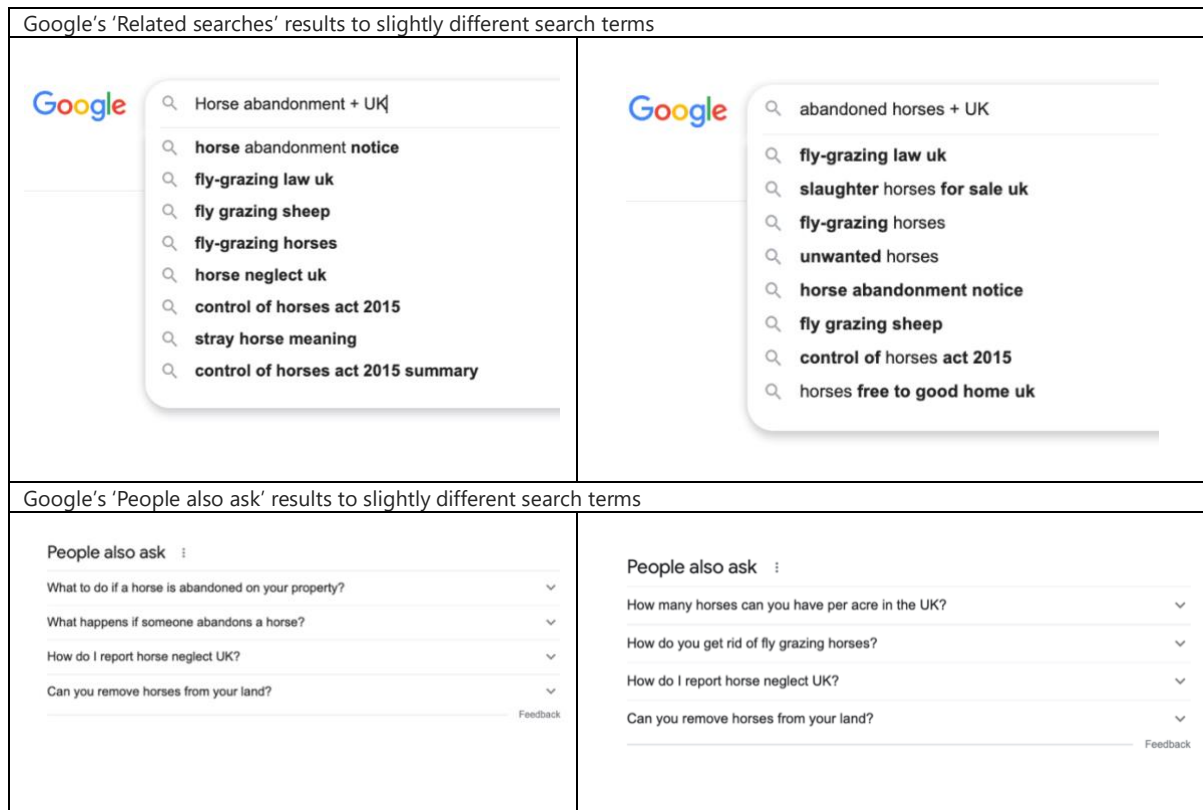


Figure 3: The differences between the 'Related searches' and 'People also ask' links generated by Google to the slightly different search terms 'Abandoned horses +UK' and 'Horse abandonment + UK.'

Discussion

A specific search for 'The Horse Crisis' does generate links to the key reports by the welfare charities, especially the 2020 "Britain's Horse Problem" and, to a lesser extent, the "Left on the Verge" reports. Overall, including 'the UK' in all search terms reaches more relevant sites than adding '+England and Wales.' The focus is on horses - which automatically includes ponies - but appropriate links to donkeys and their hybrids are scarce, even when searched for separately. Whether this reflects a lack of media related to donkeys and their hybrids or is because donkeys and their hybrids are not considered to be in crisis, cannot be determined.

Where visible, the dates of many of the results, especially searches related to overpopulation, are now quite old: (government reports from 2004/2005, reports from 2012/13 relating to the financial crisis of 2008), implying the results are out-of-date. Does this leave a subconscious impression that the horse crisis and/or each separate element of it, are old problems – and/or that they have been solved?

The grey media, especially the traditional equine-focused journals, appear to have been assiduous in reporting news about the Horse Crisis generated by the animal welfare charities. Veterinary comments

to the Horse Crisis and its four core elements were in a very small minority and perhaps not surprisingly, they appear more frequently on Google Scholar. Therefore, the three private businesses that included serious comments on ‘The Horse Crisis’ - Viovet, Equesure and Matchy Horsey - stood out as unusual.

However, the results of the specific UK searches into the horse market using terms including supply and demand, overpopulation, neglect, overbreeding and abandonment do not necessarily give the impression that there is a horse crisis: here, the 2020 Horse Problem Report is markedly less visible. The search term ‘the supply and demand for horses’ overwhelmingly generated top line links to sales and purchasing sites for horses (including ponies), horse boxes, tack, and other equipment through various media. Horse welfare and ‘The Horse Crisis’ topics are virtually invisible with these searches, although Google’s tailored personal algorithm to each individual searcher should be noted.

Across the individual elements defined as constituting ‘The Horse Crisis,’ there were more links to the 2013 “Left on the Verge” report than the 2020 “Britain’s Horse Problem” report. From such a top line search, the impression given is of unconnected, standalone problems, and a comparison of the first one or two web pages under various similar search terms indicate:

- The results from a top line search for the individual constituent elements of ‘The Horse Crisis’ broadly give the impression that they are associated with other issues, not to a crisis facing the UK’s horse population happening now:
- Overpopulation appears linked to “Left on the Verge” reports. The dates of links appearing in the first web page to this search term (2008 – 2015-ish) imply the results are out of date
- Neglect is linked to cruelty
- Abandonment is linked to property/property owners
- Overbreeding is linked to a wider range of issues than the other constituent elements welfare/racehorses/slaughter/cruelty/animal rights (PETA and Animal Aid)

It can be argued that overbreeding is the core issue underpinning the other constituent elements of ‘The Horse Crisis,’ especially overpopulation. However, the problem appears to be attributed to different sectors, by different actors. The use of the official term overbreeding² independently of the term overpopulation in this context implies that the contribution of overbreeding to the horse crisis is placed at the door of leisure horse owners/casual/backyard breeders who breed for “sentimental” reasons. It was reported that this sector is more likely to breed without regard to the quality of breeding stock, unlike professional thoroughbred breeders for whom it is of paramount importance, although research to underpin this “feeling” is limited³. A Canadian site describes “the horse breeding industry’ as “sitting on a precipice between human freedoms and rights, and animal welfare. This article looks at the problems of overbreeding, and how selective horse breeding is less costly and more humane” (<https://equinewellnessmagazine.com/responsible-horse-breeding/>). Although a North American site, it does beg the questions: is there one-horse breeding industry, or several? Does each sector have its own horse breeding industry and if so, what are the links between them and does one contribute to overbreeding and overpopulation more than the others? Are their drivers the same, or different? Would the actions needed to overcome these problems be the same in each sector, or different?

The animal rights organisations state their position unambiguously: “racehorses are speculatively bred in their thousands, risk being injured or killed while racing, and may be disposed of when they stop being useful. Around 14,000 foals are ‘produced’ annually by [Britain and Ireland] combined. There is no regulation on breeding numbers. This is a major welfare problem as supply is greater than demand” (<https://www.animalaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Horse-Slaughter-in-the-UK-Briefing->

² To breed to excess especially without regard to the quality of the breeding stock

[Document.pdf](#)). The rspca.au website also clearly states that the oversupply of racehorses “increase[s] the chances of finding the winning champion, [so] the racing industry depends on breeding a high number of horses and a high turn-over rate (<https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/what-are-the-animal-welfare-issues-with-thoroughbred-horse-racing/>).

However, only one link, through Google Scholar, was found to research providing evidence that more than one sector of the equine market is responsible for overbreeding - and therefore contributing to overpopulation. Campbell’s 2017 paper ‘Welfare Considerations Surrounding the Management of Breeding Horses,’³ states that although “the number of Thoroughbred foals registered dropped by 25% [...], overbreeding across the equine sector (all breeds) has been identified as an underlying cause of increased horse abandonment and welfare issues.”³

Much of the research in ‘the horse/equine industry’ for reports is produced by specific sectors for that sector: few links to cross-sector equine research were generated using the specified search terms, even via Google Scholar. Without undertaking a full statistical analysis of each sector that make up ‘the horse/equine industry’ this top line search revealed mixed messages regarding market trends: links to the same topic, from different times give different results and the impression given can be confusing.

Many of the reports discovered by the search terms used in this secondary research do not tease out the nuances of the fragmented equine sectors which constitute ‘The Horse Industry’. This may be because the search terms used were not relevant and did not pick up existing research: the Google Scholar results were top line and not analysed in any depth. Or such research does not exist, as the cost and time resources to undertake it are unavailable as it would be a large, long-term undertaking and therefore expensive:

- Is giving a horse up because of the cost-of-living crisis the same as abandonment?
- Are the actors in Horse Sector X causing horse abandonment, the same actors causing overbreeding? If they are - or if they are not - do they come from the same sector, a different one or more than one sector?
- Are the actors from Horse Sector Y who neglect their horse(s) the same actors from the same, or different Sectors causing overbreeding or abandoning their horses - or are they different?
- Without knowing accurately what members of each sector search for - and whether they search for the same things - it is difficult to understand what percentage of ‘horse people’ in each sector are aware of – or see – the horse overpopulation issue. This appears especially true for the casual leisure riders in England and Wales

In effect, are the underpinning drivers of each constituent element the same and from the same equine sector actors? Are any of these drivers working across sectors? Would knowing the answers to these questions contribute to resolving ‘The Horse Issue?’ For example, if current recommendations are aimed unknowingly at the wrong driver for that constituent element it is less likely to achieve its aim.

As stated, these searches gave no indication that there is one horse/equine market, despite these terms being used occasionally: the sector appears too fragmented. The needs and objectives of one sector may favour one over others, or conflict with those of another. However, without an in-depth knowledge of every constituent sector it is difficult, if not impossible to pick up from this desk research

³ Campbell, M.L.H., 2017. Welfare Considerations Surrounding the Management of Breeding Horses. Vet Times, pp.1-7. Available at: <https://www.vettimes.co.uk/app/uploads/wp-post-to-pdf-enhanced-cache/1/welfare-considerations-surrounding-the-management-of-breeding-horses.pdf> Accessed on 3 December 2022.

any conscious or unconscious biases, unless acknowledged, as it is with the two animal rights organisations.

Interestingly, only one comment on “market-based solutions” was found from these searches, from an American site (<https://www.perc.org/about-us/what-we-do/current-initiatives/reining-in-the-wild-horse-crisis/>). Although the 2020 “Britain’s Horse Problem” report mentions failure of ownership, no mention was found of market failure, despite mentions of market elements. Is the problem actually linked to a failure of ownership, market failure or a combination of the two? Is the lack of one, coherent ‘horse market,’ rather than overlapping sectors, a problem in using the term, despite the links between, and impacts on, each of the horse industry’s constituent sectors?

Another potentially significant omission could be the lack of links generated assessing the impact, if any, of the UK leaving the EU (European Union) on the Horse Crisis – and that the only link to Brexit raised was found under a search for hinnies. Written before the UK left the EU in September 2020, ‘Vulnerabilities of Supply Chains Post-Brexit’ by the London School of Economics and Political Science was an analysis of the “realistic” scenario for Brexit, considering the wider implications for the food and beverage sector. It assessed the consequences of higher trade barriers from Brexit on food products, across a wide range of potential disruptions and mitigation measures in no deal and FTA (Free Trade Agreement) scenarios(<https://www.lse.ac.uk/business/consulting/reports/vulnerabilities-of-supply-chains-post-brexit>).

Conclusions

It is not possible to identify from these searches what ‘horse people’ are searching for without invoking tools like Google’s Keyword Planner and Trends services. Despite possibly raising more questions than it answers, some broad conclusions can be drawn from this secondary desk research.

For those horse people who have access to the internet and only search for the supply and demand of horses in the UK, it is likely that they will see little information on horse welfare or ‘The Horse Crisis’ unless they read a physical or online horse magazine. These media are good at reporting issues raised by animal welfare charities.

- For those that do, they are hopefully receiving horse welfare and ‘The Horse Crisis’ messages.
- For those that do not, there is a possible danger that they are in an echo chamber of horse sales information only and horse welfare or ‘The Horse Crisis’ messages are not visible to them.

The term ‘The Horse Crisis’ has been used since 2012 (<https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/blog-the-horse-crisis>) but is not universal. The terms crisis and catastrophe have been used and applied to other aspects of ‘the horse/equine industry over time:

- Overpopulation crisis
- Over dumping crisis
- Horse overpopulation crisis
- Horse racing staffing crisis
- Horse welfare catastrophe
- Catastrophic riding school employment situation
- Cost of living crisis

An impression is given that the term “The Horse Crisis” is potentially being replaced by the “cost of living crisis” as it is appearing in more recent search results, apparently having been co-opted from the mainstream media and the UK’s general economic position. However, it may be that this term does not relate to all constituent elements included in the term ‘The Horse Crisis’ (overpopulation, overbreeding, neglect, and abandonment), only certain of them.

Christine McNeil’s 2018 comment quoted above “We’ve been talking about the horse crisis for several years now, but the truth is the situation is just as severe today as when it started,” is supported by the results from this research. A December 2020 headline in Horse and Hound builds on these results: “Leading UK equine welfare charities have created a report looking into what can no longer be called a horse crisis, as it has become the norm” (<https://www.horseandhound.co.uk/plus/news-plus/uk-horse-crisis-broken-system-allows-horses-to-suffer-733557>). These insights beg further questions:

- whether ‘The Horse Crisis’ is the new, permanent norm, rather than just a trend?
- are people who have been consistently exposed to a “UK horses in crisis’ message since 2012 now tuning it out, as they have heard it so often in the past and its meaning and impact are therefore waning?
- if this is true, it could be argued that either:
 - i) actions undertaken to date to ameliorate ‘The Horse Crisis’ have not worked, and novel approaches are required, or
 - ii) without the actions taken to date to ameliorate ‘The Horse Crisis,’ the situation on the ground now would be much worse than it is

One further question worth considering is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these findings given the possibility that the increased demand for horses at this time may have had a dampening effect on both ‘The Horse Crisis’ and related messaging.

006. Results from several freedom of information requests

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Introduction

Local authorities are involved in equine welfare incidents through several channels, from responding to reports of issues by members of the public to detaining and holding horses. In addition, they may have information about licenced slaughter premises in their areas. Defra and the Welsh Government hold information about the numbers of equines registered, imported/ exported, and slaughtered in abattoirs. Freedom of Information (FOI) requests allow citizens to access state-held information in the public interest within certain limits and were applied in this case to identify trends in the activities of local authorities and government-held data regarding equine welfare.

Methodology

A list of all local authorities in England (308) and Wales (22) and the associated email address for Freedom of Information (FOI) requests was provided by the British Horse Society. An FOI request was sent to all of those on 23/1/23 requesting the following information:

“We specifically request information you have on the following aspects in your area each year for the last 10 years, and welcome associated information you have:

- 1. Number of licenced equine establishments (both riding schools and those hiring out horses, ponies, and donkeys)*
- 2. Number of livery yards*
- 3. Number of licenced equine slaughtermen (knackermen) and abattoirs*
- 4. Number of equines slaughtered in the abattoirs and killed by knackermen in your area*
- 5. Number of complaints/ calls relating to equine welfare, and the outcome of those calls*
- 6. Number of calls received about fly grazing or equine abandonment with number of horses, ponies and donkeys involved.*
- 7. Number of horses, ponies and donkeys detained after being reported as fly grazing or abandoned*
- 8. Number of equine welfare related prosecutions*
- 9. Number of equine passport fixed penalty notices*

Please return the information to us by email, in either Word or Excel format.”

In addition, FOI requests were made to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Welsh Government requesting the following information:

“We specifically request information you have on the following aspects in your area each year for the last 10 years, and welcome associated information you have:

- 1. Number of equines in England and Wales*
- 2. Number of new equine microchip/passport registrations*
- 3. Number of equines entering the UK (United Kingdom)*
- 4. Number of equines leaving the UK*
- 5. Number of equines with returned microchip/passport numbers due to death*
- 6. Number of licenced equine slaughtermen (knackermen) and abattoirs*
- 7. Number of equines slaughtered in the abattoirs and killed by knackermen*

Please return the information to us by email, in either Word or Excel format.”

Results

Local Authorities (LA)

A total of 238 (77%) of English and 20 (91%) of Welsh Local Authorities provided a response to at least one of the questions, giving a total response rate of 78%. One LA stated it would take 1660 hours to complete the task, which was beyond their obligation, whilst another stated it had cost them £62.50 to complete.

- 1. Number of licenced equine establishments (both riding schools and those hiring out horses, ponies, and donkeys)*

Local Authorities either provided this information for each of the years they had information for (86 LAs (Local Authorities)), or just the current number of licenced equine establishments (172 LAs). A total of 1218 equine establishments are currently licenced in the 258 LAs. The type of establishment was rarely provided and therefore is not presented here. The mean number of licenced equine establishments per LA over the last 10 years is presented in Figure 1.

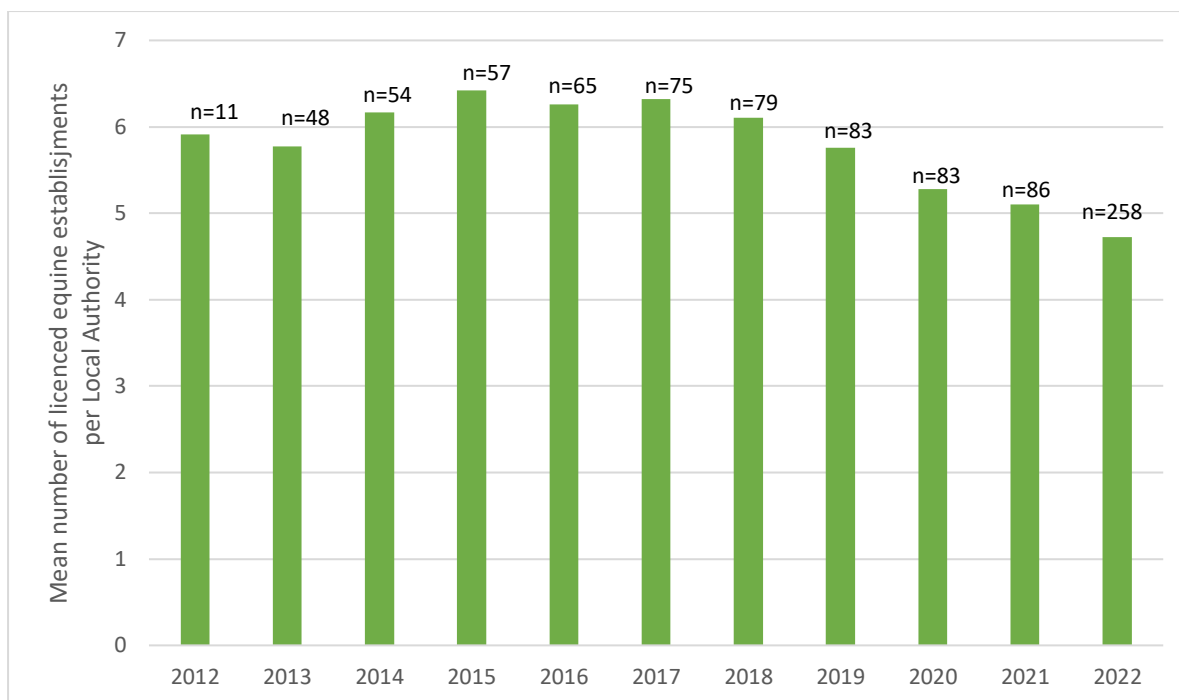


Figure 1: Mean number of licenced equine establishments per Local Authority 2012-2022

The 23 LAs with the 11 or more licenced establishments in 2022 are presented in Table 2 and 31 LAs (12%) reported they had no licenced establishments.

Table 1: LAs with 11 or more licenced equine establishments

Local Authority	Country	Number of licenced equine establishments
Mendip District Council	England	39
East Suffolk Council	England	28
New Forest District Council	England	27
Wiltshire Council (Unitary)	England	27
Shropshire Council (Unitary)	England	25
Buckinghamshire Council	England	19
Cornwall Council (Unitary)	England	17
Scarborough Borough Council	England	16
East Lindsey District Council	England	15
Malvern Hills District Council	England	15
Winchester City Council	England	15
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	England	14
Herefordshire Council	England	14
Wealden District Council	England	14
Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead	England	13
Northumberland Council	England	12
Wychavon District Council	England	12
Carmarthenshire County Council	Wales	11
Cheshire East Council (Unitary)	England	11
Guildford Borough Council	England	11
Horsham District Council	England	11

Stafford Borough Council	England	11
Wyre Forest District Council	England	11

2. *Number of livery yards*

Most commonly LAs reported they did not have information relating to livery yards as they did not require licencing, but for the 80 that provided data 44 stated they currently had no livery yards, four LAs reported between 16 and 20 livery yards, three LAs reported 11-15 livery yards, two reported 6-10 livery yards and 15 LAs reported fewer than 5 livery yards.

3. *Number of licenced equine slaughtermen (knackermen) and abattoirs*

Most commonly LAs reported they did not hold information relating to licenced equine slaughtermen and abattoirs. A total of 106 of the 113 LAs that provided information on licenced equine slaughtermen stated they did not currently have any, three LAs stated they had 1, two stated they had 3, one reported they had 5 and one reported they had 6 licenced equine slaughtermen. Responses from 120 LAs indicated they did not currently have an equine abattoir and Wiltshire Council (Unitary), Bath and Northeast Somerset Council, Bedford Council (Unitary) and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council each indicated they had one equine abattoir.

4. *Number of equines slaughtered in the abattoirs and killed by knackermen in your area*

Most LAs reported they did not hold this information but 94 and 91 LAs reported that no equines were killed in their area in abattoirs and by knackermen respectively.

5. *Number of complaints/calls relating to equine welfare, and the outcome of those calls*

A total of 190 (57%) LAs responded to this question, however 123 LAs provided only a single figure in response to this question, making it difficult to interpret whether this figure related to the current year, or across several years. Of these 123s LAs there was a mean of 3.7 welfare complaints per LA, including 75 (61%) who reported no welfare complaints. Of the 67 LAs who provided data over more than one year there was an initial rise in mean number of complaints per LA to 22.1 in 2014, followed by a gradual reduction to 7.0 in 2022 (see Figure 2). Of the LAs who reported data in more than one year 37 (55%) reported no welfare complaints in 2022 and the five LAs with the highest number of complaints were Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (“average calls 6/7 per week, averaging 312 to 364 per annum”, 338 per year 2012-2022 entered into data), City and Council of Swansea (205 calls in 2014), Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (94 calls in 2013), Northumberland Council (41 calls in 2014) and Kingston-Upon-Hull City Council (39 calls in 2013).

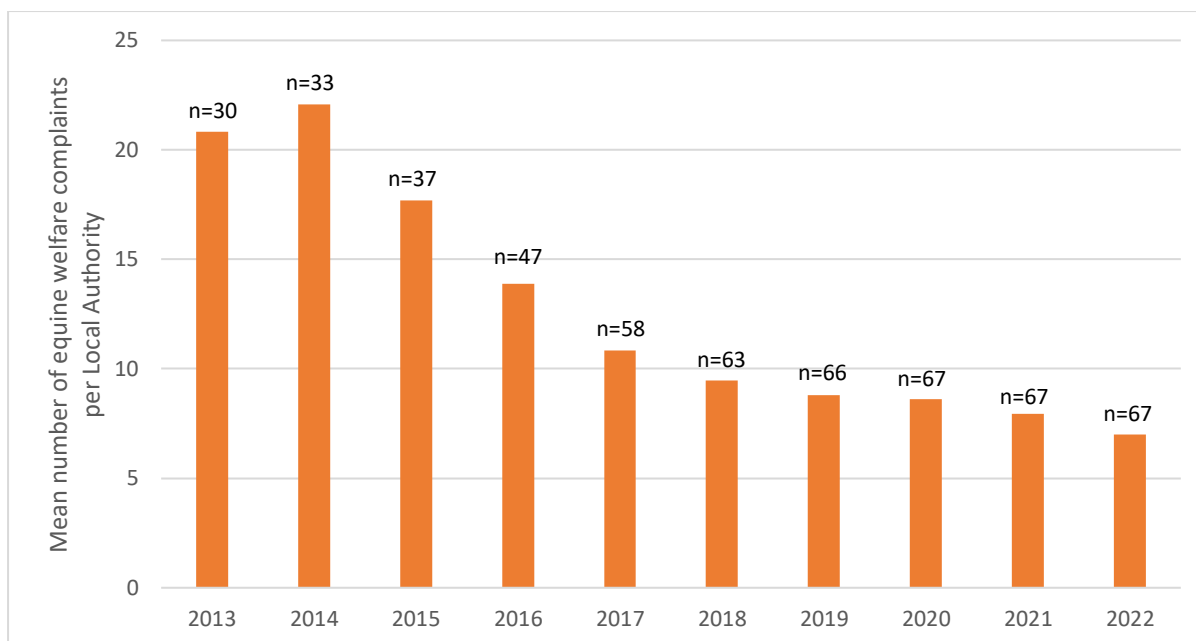


Figure 2: Mean number of equine welfare complaints per Local Authority 2013-2022

The LAs that provide data for more than one year who received two or more welfare complaints in 2022 are shown in Table 2. Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council did not provide a precise number.

Table 2: The number of equine welfare complaints received in 2022 by LAs who provided data for more than one year, and who reported more than one complaint. A further 14 LAs received a single call in 2022.

Local Authority	Country	Number of equine welfare complaints
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council	England	“Average 312 to 364 per annum”
Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council	England	22
City and County of Swansea	Wales	15
Cardiff Council	Wales	13
Kingston-upon-Hull City Council	England	11
London Borough of Newham	England	11
North Lincolnshire Council	England	10
Mid Sussex District Council	England	7
Waverley Borough Council	England	7
Vale of Glamorgan Council	Wales	5
Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council	England	4
Newport City Council	Wales	2
Cheshire West and Chester Council	England	2
Cornwall Council (Unitary)	England	2
East Lindsey District Council	England	2
South Derbyshire District Council	England	2
Warwick District Council	England	2
Wirral Council	England	2

6. Number of calls received about fly grazing or equine abandonment with number of horses, ponies and donkeys involved.

The number of calls received about flygrazing or equine abandonment was reported by 185 (56%) LAs, however, in a similar way to the welfare complaints, the majority of LAs providing data (132, 71%)

reported a single figure without further context of which, or how many years, this figure represented. Of these 132 LAs 104 (79%) reported no calls about flygrazing or equine abandonment and the mean number of calls received per LA was 6.8. Of the LAs that reported data for more than one year there was a gradual decline in number of calls per LA since a peak mean of 20.6 in 2014 to a mean of 9.5 in 2022 (see Figure 3), with 32 (60%) receiving no calls in 2022.

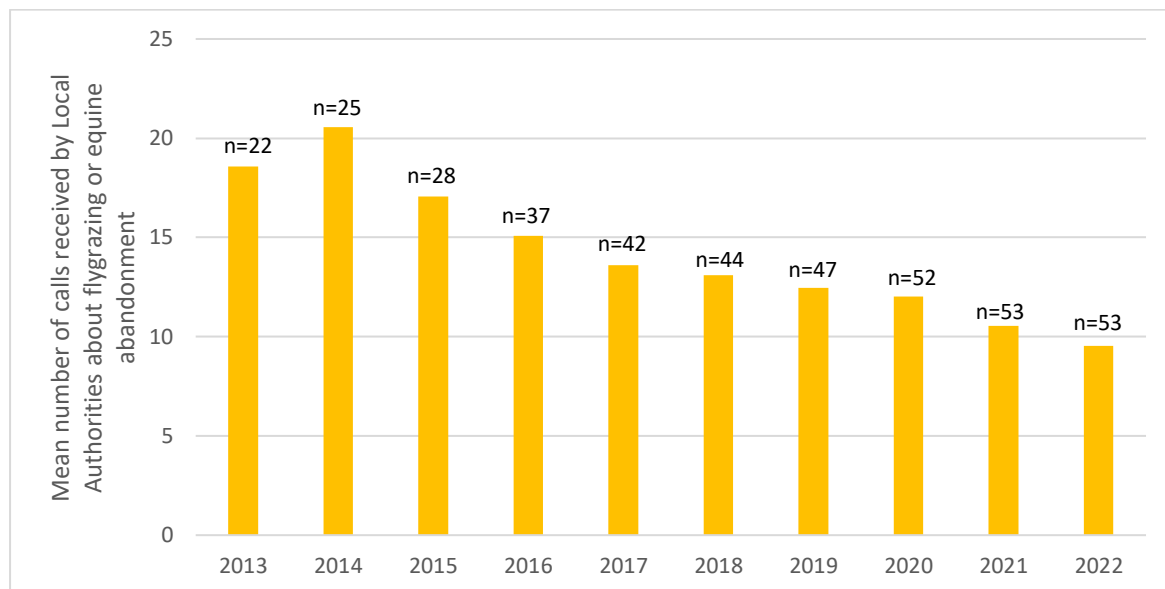


Figure 3: Mean number of calls received by Local Authorities about fly grazing or equine abandonment 2013-2022

The LAs that provide data for more than one year who received two or more calls about fly grazing or equine abandonment in 2022 are shown in Table 3. Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council did not provide a precise number.

Table 3: The number of equine welfare complaints received in 2022 by LAs who provided data for more than one year, and who reported one or more complaints.

Local Authority	Country	Number of calls
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council	England	“Average 312 to 364 per annum”
Bradford Metropolitan District Council	England	42
Cardiff Council	Wales	31
Leicester City Council	England	27
Wolverhampton City Council	England	15
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council	England	11
Eastleigh Borough Council	England	10
Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council	England	4
Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council	Wales	4
Buckinghamshire Council	England	4
Hartlepool Borough Council	England	3
North Lincolnshire Council	England	3
Dartford Borough Council	England	2

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council	England	2
Vale of Glamorgan Council	Wales	2
Newport City Council	Wales	2
Salford City Council	England	2
East Hampshire District Council	England	1
Swindon Borough Council	England	1
Pembrokeshire County Council	Wales	1
Flintshire County Council	Wales	1

Insufficient LAs reported any information about the number of horses involved in the calls to be able to report data.

7. *Number of horses, ponies and donkeys detained after being reported as fly grazing or abandoned*

A total of 192 (58%) reported information about the number of horses, ponies or donkey detained after being reported as fly grazing or abandoned, however, similarly to the previous two questions the majority of these (160, 83%) provided a single uncontextualised response. Of these 160 LAs over 90% (150) reported not detaining any equines and the mean number of equines detained by the remaining 10 was 2.5. The mean number of equines detained by LAs that reported more than one year of data is shown in Figure 4 and again mirrors the preceding question in the decline since 2014. In 2022 there were 26 (81%) of LAs that reported not detaining any equines.

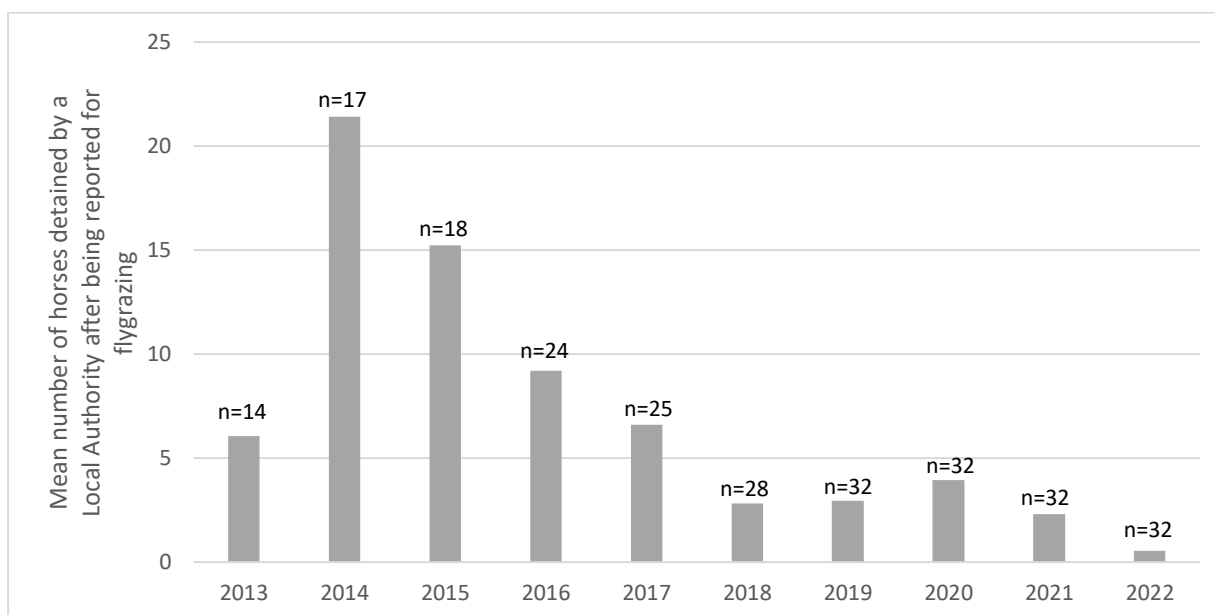


Figure 4: The mean number of equines detained by Local Authorities 2013-2022

8. *Number of equine welfare related prosecutions*

Data on the number of equine welfare related prosecutions was reported by 225 LAs (68%) with 209 reporting a single figure without context of time. A total of 19 prosecutions were reported by these 209 LAs, with 202 (97%) reporting no prosecutions, and 16 LAs reported data over more than one year which included 7 prosecutions. There is therefore data relating to 26 prosecutions over the 10 years.

9. *Number of equine passport fixed penalty notices*

A single prosecution by Northumberland Council was reported for equine passport fixed penalty notices from the 198 LAs that responded to question.

Defra and the Welsh Government

Responses from both Defra and the Welsh Government were received.

1. Number of equines in England and Wales

Table 1 provides the data from the Central Equine Database on the number of live equines in England and Wales.

Table 4: The number of equines in England and Wales in the Central Equine Database (CED)

Country Name	Live Count
England	1065056
Wales	189831

Note 1: This data is based on the owner location as the horse location is not currently kept on CED

Note 2: Excludes those equines where country is unknown as well as those outside of scope of this enquiry in other devolved administrations and the Channel Islands.

2. Number of new equine microchip/passport registrations

The total number of new equine passport registrations from 2013-2022 in England is 190,939 and in Wales is 39,838, totalling 230,777. The breakdown by year is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: The number of new equine passport registrations.

Country Name	Year	New Passports issued
England	2013	31313
England	2014	29651
England	2015	28670
England	2016	18664
England	2017	18181
England	2018	12965
England	2019	11901
England	2020	11251
England	2021	12941
England	2022	15402
Wales	2013	5522
Wales	2014	5198
Wales	2015	4507
Wales	2016	3334
Wales	2017	3617
Wales	2018	3074
Wales	2019	3254
Wales	2020	3316

Wales	2021	3762
Wales	2022	4254

Note: Data from Passport Issuing Organisations (PIOs) only started to be imported into the CED in 2017. The numbers shown in the years prior to 2017 are from historical data provided by the PIOs at the time of on-boarding to the CED

The number of new microchip registrations is available from 2017 onwards and from 2017-2023 totals 1,108,48 for England and 200,945 for Wales, 1,311,793 altogether (see Table 6).

Table 6: The number of new microchip registrations in England and Wales 2017- 2023

Country Name	Microchip Created Date	New Microchip Count
England	2017	248134
England	2018	624855
England	2019	133632
England	2020	26705
England	2021	40830
England	2022	36692
England	2023	2249
Wales	2017	24498
Wales	2018	83515
Wales	2019	70257
Wales	2020	4510
Wales	2021	11119
Wales	2022	7046
Wales	2023	447

Note: Data from PIOs only started to be imported into the CED in 2017. We are unable to report on new microchips prior to this date.

The numbers report the number of new microchips registered by PIOs in the period and excludes any that are registered at the time of issuing a new passport.

3. *Number of equines entering the UK*
4. *Number of equines leaving the UK*

Data is provided on imports and exports in 2020, 2021 and 2022 for the whole of GB in Table 7. It should be borne in mind that COVID-19 restrictions were strongly in force in 2020, and still present to some degree in 2021 and early 2022.

Table 7: The number of animals imported into GB and number of export health certificates issued for GB.

Year	Number of Animals Imported	Number of Certificates Issued (For Exports)
2020	7372	14887
2021	18914	26266
2022	24639	30762

Note: For the export data the number of export health certificates issued by the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), rather than number of animals exported is provided. APHA's data retention period is three years so data cannot be provided prior to 2020.

5. *Number of equines with returned microchip/passport numbers due to death*

Table 8 provides the number of equines registered as dead in the Central Equine Database.

Table 8: Equines registered as dead in the Central Equine Database 2013-2022

Country Name	Year	Death Count
England	2013	2607
England	2014	2679
England	2015	2792
England	2016	2559
England	2017	3798
England	2018	6372
England	2019	3792
England	2020	3096
England	2021	3103
England	2022	3976
Wales	2013	606
Wales	2014	896
Wales	2015	815
Wales	2016	803
Wales	2017	726
Wales	2018	2483
Wales	2019	814
Wales	2020	468
Wales	2021	343
Wales	2022	438

Note: The data from PIOs only started to be imported into the CED in 2017. The numbers shown in the years prior to 2017 are from historical data provided by the PIO's at the time of on-boarding to the CED.

6. *Number of licenced equine slaughtermen (knackermen) and abattoirs*

This information was not provided by Defra or the Welsh Government.

7. *Number of equines slaughtered in the abattoirs and killed by knackermen*

The number of equines slaughtered in abattoirs is provided in Table 9. The number killed by knackermen is not provided.

Table 9: Number of equines slaughtered in abattoirs in England and Wales 2018-2022

Country Name	Year	Slaughter Count
England	2018	610
England	2019	670
England	2020	368
England	2021	268
England	2022	194

Wales	2018	280
Wales	2019	343
Wales	2020	284
Wales	2021	100
Wales	2022	62

Note: this data has only been recorded on the CED since 2018.

Summary

There are around 1.2M horses registered in the CED in England and Wales. The number of welfare-related incidents dealt with by local authorities is a tiny fraction of this and has substantially declined by all measures since around 2014- from equine welfare calls to the number of horses detained. Many local authorities stated that this was due to the proactive policies they had employed to tackle issues such as fly grazing. It was clear that there is a great diversity between local authorities in their experience of equine welfare incidents, with many only rarely or never dealing with such cases. However, there are a handful of LAs who have a very great involvement with equine welfare and must invest a significant resource in dealing with them. There was also a great variation in the way the FOI was responded to by the LAs, with data being held in heterogenous ways, and some seemingly poorly accessible. We recommend a harmonisation of data relating to equine welfare and even a central database to allow the form of monitoring over time and between LAs that has been conducted here. Taking the data at face value it appears that, for whatever reason, many of the indicators of the original 'horse crisis' have improved substantially. However, it is important to note that according to reports from other sources, Local Authorities had massive budget and resource cuts in 2010 and 2014/15, which could be an alternative explanation for the decline in calls recorded.

007. Information on horse slaughter numbers

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This section contains information regarding the numbers of horses slaughtered in England and Wales from several sources, including our own research, over the past few years. As some of the information in this section was obtained from interviewing stakeholders, we have only reported on the information provided, as a result further questions have arisen that require further investigation. Where there are contrasts between sources of information, consideration should be given to the different perspectives obtained. We have presented various perspectives in this section to illustrate the challenges of understanding and describing the sector, and the importance of not relying on single sources of information to form conclusions that might not accurately represent of the situation.

Data from FOI (Freedom of Information) request

The data obtained from the FOI request for this research project contained some information about the numbers of equines slaughtered in the section subtitled: '*Number of equines slaughtered in the abattoirs and killed by knackermen*'. The number of equines slaughtered in abattoirs is provided in Table 9 in that section. The number killed by knackermen is not provided.

FOI Report, Table 9: Number of equines slaughtered in abattoirs in England and Wales 2018-2022

Country Name	Year	Slaughter Count
England	2018	610
England	2019	670
England	2020	368
England	2021	268

England	2022	194
Wales	2018	280
Wales	2019	343
Wales	2020	284
Wales	2021	100
Wales	2022	62

Note: this data has only been recorded on the Central Equine Database (CED) since 2018.

Information from Hansard Parliament- 29th November 2016

Angela Stone: “In the equine sector only five abattoirs are licensed to slaughter horses and all of those premises slaughter other animals as well. Indeed, in one case 10 other species are slaughtered at the same place. The latest figures suggest that around 4,000 horses per annum are slaughtered at those 5 establishments.” and “When asked, more than 40% of horse owners agreed that slaughterhouses must remain available and nearly two thirds agreed that sending a horse to a slaughterhouse is better than allowing it to suffer. – from the horses in our hands report for World Horse Welfare. “

From the same debate, Dr. Paul Monaghan: “the public would undoubtedly be surprised to learn that a total of 12,431 horses have been slaughtered in those abattoirs over the past 3 years. Indeed, according to World Horse Welfare 4,515 UK (United Kingdom) horses were killed in slaughterhouses in 2014 alone.”

And again, from the same debate, George Eustice: “We should also note that the number of horses slaughtered at abattoirs in the UK has been in steady decline since 2012, when 8,426 horses were slaughtered. That fell to 5000 by 2013 and in this past year it is down to just 3,280. That partly reflects a changing view among owners about end-of-life choices that they have for their horses. It also reflects how more people are choosing to have their horses euthanised.”

Information from the Food Standards Agency (FSA)

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) advised that in the UK there are 12 slaughterhouses licensed for equines – 11 in England and 1 in Northern Ireland (3rd March 2004).

2022 FSA Slaughter Sector Survey: A survey taken over a week, across UK, to represent what they see over a year. Results were compared with those of the previous survey from 2018.

According to pages 8-16 of 47:

- Number of horses slaughtered in 2022 – 16 (at a single abattoir)
- Number of horses slaughtered in 2018 – 67 (single abattoir)
- All horses in 2022 were from dealers
- All horses in 2022 were exported for meat.
- Whereas in 2018, 9% of horses were from farm, 91 % were from dealer
- In 2018 94% were directly exported and 6% were Other UK (includes butchers, restaurants, individual customers and other UK destinations)

In the UK, there is specific guidance for when horses are killed at slaughterhouses, you cannot kill a horse in sight of another horse or in a room where there are remains of another animal or horse. Fletcher et al (2022) paper which was a review of papers regarding equine welfare at slaughter highlighted the shortage of published research assessing equid welfare at slaughter. The World

Organisation for Animals Health does not provide species specific guidance for equids. There was no published research on the efficiency of stunning or slaughter of donkeys or mules. The papers that were included in the study, the majority were from high income countries, were in agreement that horses showed stress related behaviour prior to slaughter. This lack of information can impact on the welfare of equids before and during the slaughter process. As a large, social, prey species there are species specific behaviours and needs to consider ensuring optimal welfare for the animals, and safety for handlers.

Information taken from interviews with two equine slaughter stakeholders

Unhandled and Thoroughbred (TB) horses going to slaughter have about a 50/50 split, cobs make up a smaller number. All generally in good condition, so in better nick than those found on the side of the road. TB that go for slaughter are generally lame.

Passport system failures – passports are not enforced and not updated throughout a horse's life. There is a problem with signing a horse out of the food chain, in the sense that often the person who signs out is not the one left with the responsibility at end of life. There was a huge fall off in numbers in early the 2000s and with the 2008 financial crisis, but in the last couple of years there was a massive drop off. This may reflect an increase in demand for horses or a large amount being destroyed without entering the food chain (highlights waste)? Now we only see a couple of thousand. Export for slaughter has probably declined since Brexit. Most of the meat goes to France and Holland – they want high quality red meat, and the UK has a good reputation for this. But now we see a lot of low-quality horses passing through dealers and that have been moved around a lot (meat not as good). You do not get individual owners bringing in animals they care for as much. There are problems of lack of continuity with Defra changing rules around passports and legislation, and rules regarding signing out of food chain.

An interviewee explained that there has been a massive decline in horses coming for slaughter for meat during the last 10 years, reducing from 2300 to 1700 (over what time period this decrease occurred is unclear and was not clarified during the interview). Less than 1% now come from private owners. Have had a situation where an owner has tried to bring horses, but they have been signed out of the food chain over 18 years ago.

TBs come from a highly professional industry with the public turning away from what it does not want to face. Approximately 17k foals born per year but fewer than 8k would race - so the racing industry is abused for over-production. However, there is no guarantee in breeding and so it is inevitable that there will be some wastage. Since all racehorses are now signed out of the food chain by default, a big outlet has been lost for those that are not up to standard. The industry will now need to think about the numbers they breed and will have problems all the way through.

We need to change the permanent exclusion of horses from the food chain in the passport and allow horses back into food chain after 6 months removal from vet treatment (see also the Timeline Narrative document in the Appendices for comments regarding human health and the risk of bute entering the human food chain). The horse passport system has destroyed the slaughter industry.

Research Team note: it would be helpful to define what is meant here by "low quality" as described in the interview above. Does this mean the horses are not worth any money alive? Or are underweight or unhealthy? Or are they a less desirable breed, capable only of providing low value cuts? Similarly,

“meat not as good” - is this because the horses have been moved around too much, or for the same reasons they are “low quality”?

Information for WHW interview

Understanding the movement into and out of the UK is complex, there are no figures for the horses being exported to Ireland and from there they can travel to slaughterhouses in Europe. After a piece of work visiting UK and European slaughterhouses, they did not experience horses sent from the UK for slaughter. There were horses that had travelled to Europe and then ended up at slaughter but not specifically exported for the slaughter.

Racing

In 2021, the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) introduced the rule that all horses involved in the racing industry are to be signed out of the food chain (potentially to prevent owners withholding medication if there was a chance of getting money for the horse at slaughter). This prompts the question - if Thoroughbreds are over-bred to get ‘the best,’ what happens to the unwanted “lesser” animals now that they cannot enter the meat chain? This issue warrants further research.

Wilsher, Allen, and Wood (2006) tracked the outcomes of 1022 foals and the low productivity associated with their training: 28% were exported, 17% were not intended for racing, 6% were kept for National Hunt racing, 2% kept for racing as 3-year-olds, 6% died or were destroyed and 4% were untraceable. 52% entered training as 2-year-olds, of whom 61% raced at least once and 5% won enough prize money to cover the costs of their training. The following year 80% of the original 2-year-olds were still in training, plus the additional horses who entered training as 3-year-olds. Of these 456 3-year-olds in training, 76% raced at least once and 17% recouped their training costs. The most common veterinary ailments were “sore shins,” inflammatory airway disease, joint problems, and fractures (depending on age group). Of the 562 horses who raced at all, by the following year 189 continued to race as 4-year-olds, 149 had retired to stud, 92 had moved abroad, 34 were used for National Hunt racing, 22 were dead and 76 were untraceable.

Information from formal interview with anonymous knackerman (edited from interview/transcript)

A third generation knackerman, moved away from the original yard in London due to complaints about the smell and set up in a knacker's yard in a new area dating from 1929. Originally, they would take all types of animals, skin, and bone them to make dog food. After he took over the business 15-16 years ago, he changed business, he felt that meat and hides were no longer worth anything and he moved towards doing horse cremation.

The service they offer is to collect and cremate horses that have been put down by a vet or to shoot the horses themselves. A trend that has been noted over the last 6 to 12 months is that owners are opting for horses being shot, they have a 50/50 split of horses being shot to PTS (put to sleep) by the vet. *“The trend at the moment is a lot of people have them shot because obviously it's cheaper than using the vet current situation, where it is people trying to save money.”*

There was not perceived to be a difference in the type of horse shot rather than put down by a vet but there was considered that there was rhythms or patterns to busy periods. It was noted that when there

was a wet period followed by sunshine, they would expect to get colics or laminitis horses, but they could go 2 weeks with few horses and then a week with 4 to 5 a day. Over the last decade he feels people are less likely to keep a horse alive with the support of veterinary intervention, they are more likely to make the decision sooner to put the horse down if there is a physical or behavioural issue. There have been very few cases where he has put a physically healthy horse down, if he has it was due to behaviour issues which would potentially impact on its welfare if it were sold on.

The industry has changed over the last forty years, with people's interest in where the body of the horse goes increasing. The perception was that people are seeing them more as a pet than livestock or a working animal. It was felt that people are trying to achieve having the dream of a horse on a small amount of money, renting land cheaply, buying a cheap horse but then having a horse that they cannot control or a horse that requires several thousand pounds in vet's bills. As people see them as a pet more than a horse they are not as strict and end up with a horse they cannot control. If they buy a horse from a dealer, keep it for a few weeks trial they then get attached to the horse. If there is an issue, behavioural or physical they are then attached and so generally do not return it.

"I think what's changed when we was here, moved here in the early 80s, we'd go and pick a horse up and pay for it because it went for pet food. And as the years went by, it would go and pick a horse up because of getting rid of the stuff and the way things show. It'd be pick it up for nothing and then it got to stage where we actually charged to pick it up and take it away now, because obviously disposal is very expensive, and we give options like just a disposal or individual cremation for the horse so they get their ashes back. So that's where a lot of change has been for us. "

Due to people's interest in where their horse goes, he no longer sells the meat of horses, they are all cremated. At times he is asked to buy a horse for meat or shoot the animal for them to keep the meat and he declines. As an active member of the horse community, he is aware of the importance of trust, he refuses to be involved with the meat industry in case it affects his reputation, and he is cautious of social media.

The local environment where they are based has seen a significant change since 1970s, he has seen a steady decline in the dairy farms to livery yards. A feed merchant who was a friend of his knew how many dairy farms there used to be, between 200 and 300, but now there are just 20 in the area. Dairy farms are hard work, it is easier to sell the cows and rent the farm out for livery. Farm diversification has been an important aspect of farm business over recent years, dairy farms have fields and buildings available which make them easy to convert to horses. The yards he generally sees have individual paddocks and a sand school available, the individual paddock that he has experienced is to avoid injury as horses are expensive. The family horse lives in a single paddock, it has limited turnout and limited forage to ensure it does not get fat.

Abandonment is not something that he sees often, it is mainly bodies of horses that already died and generally in traveller area communities. Other bodies he has picked up have been of horses in road traffic collisions, the police call him to collect. He raised concern that the police cannot destroy horses without permission, so a horse who is badly injured may have to wait an extended period to be euthanized, this suggests a lack of clarity concerning the ability of the police to euthanise an animal in distress.

It is not often that neglect is seen, he saw more neglect cases in the 1970s or 80s. At this time, he feels that if a horse is neglected that more people are likely to see it and report it, welfare organisations are present and prevent the animals getting to the advanced stages of suffering.

One aspect that he is aware of through his family's interest in horses and showing is how elitist the competing world is becoming; the prices are rising, and it is not just one show, but you need to qualify for shows. The lorries and events are time and money expensive. The attitude of parents with children learning to ride now is more cautious, with less messing around on ponies and more fear around falling off. The BHS (British Horse Society) is not as well-known anymore.

Summary

Horse slaughter is in decline partly due to the extensive paperwork that is now involved in the process (i.e., microchipping/passports and ruling horses out of the food chain). Although a decline could be considered a positive outcome for animal welfare, it begs the question of what happens to the horses instead. In recent years, when horses have nowhere to go, they have no value, and as having a value preserves their welfare, this situation poses a welfare concern. The reported perception that there has been a 'decline in quality of horses' has been noted but clarification is needed as to what is meant by 'quality'.

There is the potential for several welfare issues due to this decline in horse potential. For example, now, dealers might try to re-sell unsound horses (and therefore put them at risk of continued compromised welfare depending on the action taken by the new owner) whereas they would have previously sent them to slaughter, which could sometimes be a better welfare outcome. Slaughter remains an affordable way to dispose of unwanted or 'poor-quality' animals.

References

- Fletcher, K.A. et al. (2022) A systematic review of equid welfare at slaughter, (2022) *Livestock Science*, Vol 263,104988, ISSN 1871-1413, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.livsci.2022.104988> (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1871141322001676>)
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008. RSPCA data

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Methodology

RSPCA data regarding the equine related complaints received and the number of equine intakes between 2012 and 2021 were shared with the research team.

Complaints concerning equines made to the RSPCA (2012-2021)

Due to the change in the RSPCA Inspectorate Incident Management Application (from TAILS to Wilberforce) in 2018, the complaints datasets are not entirely consistent pre- and post-2018.

Considering this, higher level analysis has been undertaken to summarise trends in variables that were consistent in name across datasets and aligned with the working definition of the equine crisis forming our research question (overbreeding, overpopulation, abandonment, and neglect). These variables included the annual number of complaints received, the annual number of cases of abandonment, the annual number of cases of neglect and the annual number of cases of improper killing. Trends in these variables were viewed as cases for England, Wales, and the total number for each year. For abandonment, neglect and improper killing, data were summarised for the number of calls received, the number of equines involved (total across all complaints that year), and the average number of equines involved per complaint for each year.

Analysis of complaint type sub-categories was not undertaken given that these differed pre- and post-2018.

RSPCA equine intakes and departures (2012-2021)

The dataset provided details of the sex, breed, colour, intake reason and departure reason for all equines taken in by the RSPCA during the period 2012 to 2021. Trends in key variables related to the research question were investigated over this duration to identify any relevant patterns in the data. Variation in intake and departure reasons across years was explored and then these were broken down further to see how this varied by breed or species. These data could not be stratified by country.

Notes relevant to data interpretation

The change in RSPCA data management system in 2018 has been mentioned above. It is also important to recognise the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on RSPCA activity, as well as behaviour patterns of the public which are likely to have influenced the sightings of equines and consequently the complaints received. During the first lockdown (March 2020), the RSPCA inspectorate went into emergency only measures whereby only horses that were coded P1 and P2 were investigated (P1 is emergency attend within 5 hours, P2 is urgent/priority attend within 24 hours). In addition, in 2014 there was an agreed change in the approach taken by the inspectorate regarding equine cases, meaning they were left in situ unless they were categorised as P1 or P2. This change was still in effect going into the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that this was the situation, it was felt that closures to RSPCA equine centres that occurred after 2014 would not have had an impact on intake numbers.

Results

Complaints concerning equines made to the RSPCA (2012-2021)

The number of equine complaints received declined from 2012 to 2021 in both England and Wales, with the total number of complaints falling from 25972 in 2012 to 6474 in 2021 (figure 1).

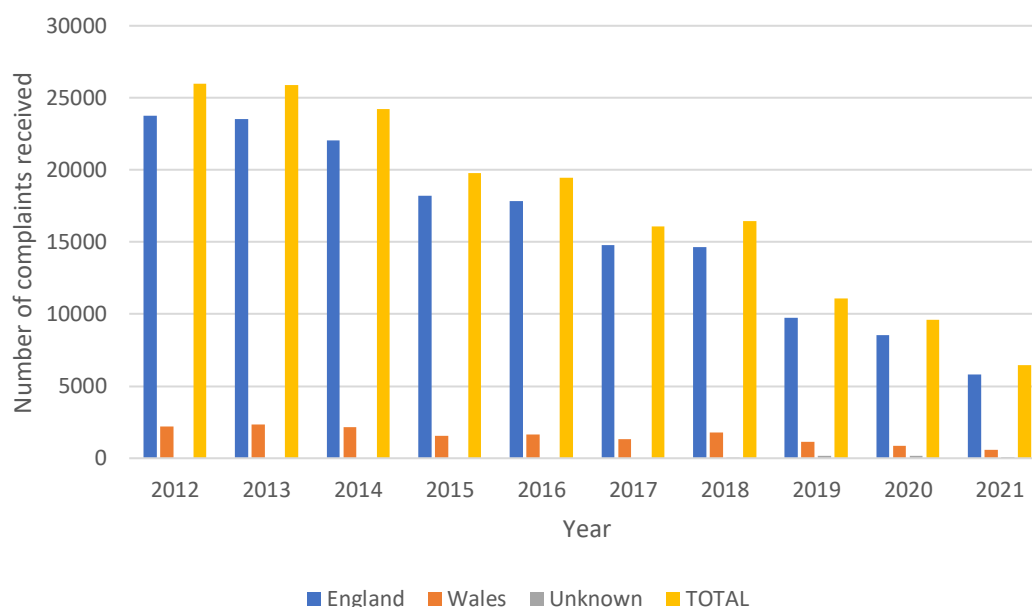


Figure 1: Number of equine related complaints received annually by the RSPCA from 2012-2021, in England, Wales and in total

Complaints concerning the abandonment of equines also dropped during this time from 692 to 70, although differences were apparent between complaints made in England and Wales (Figure 2a). While the number of equines involved in complaints concerning abandonment declined from 2012-2021, this trend was more pronounced in England (figure 2b)

The different trends seen in England and Wales was particularly evident when viewing the average number of equines per complaint per year that concerned abandonment, with complaints in Wales tending to involve a larger number of equines per complaint, peaking in 2019 and 2020 with an average of 11 equines involved in each abandonment related complaint.

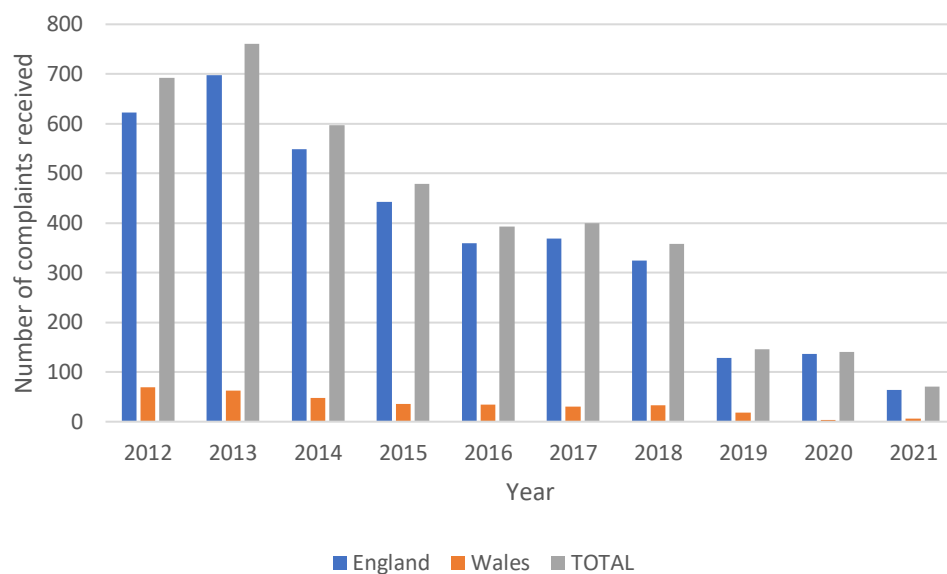


Figure 2a: Number of equine related complaints concerning abandonment received annually by the RSPCA from 2012-2021, in England, Wales and in total.

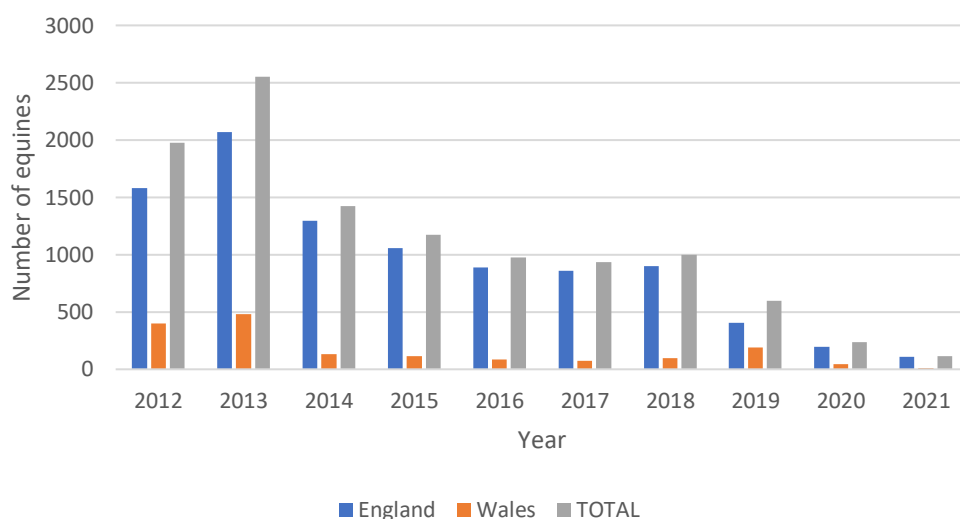


Figure 2b: Number of equines involved in complaints made to the RSPCA concerning abandonment from 2012 to 2021, in England, Wales and in total.

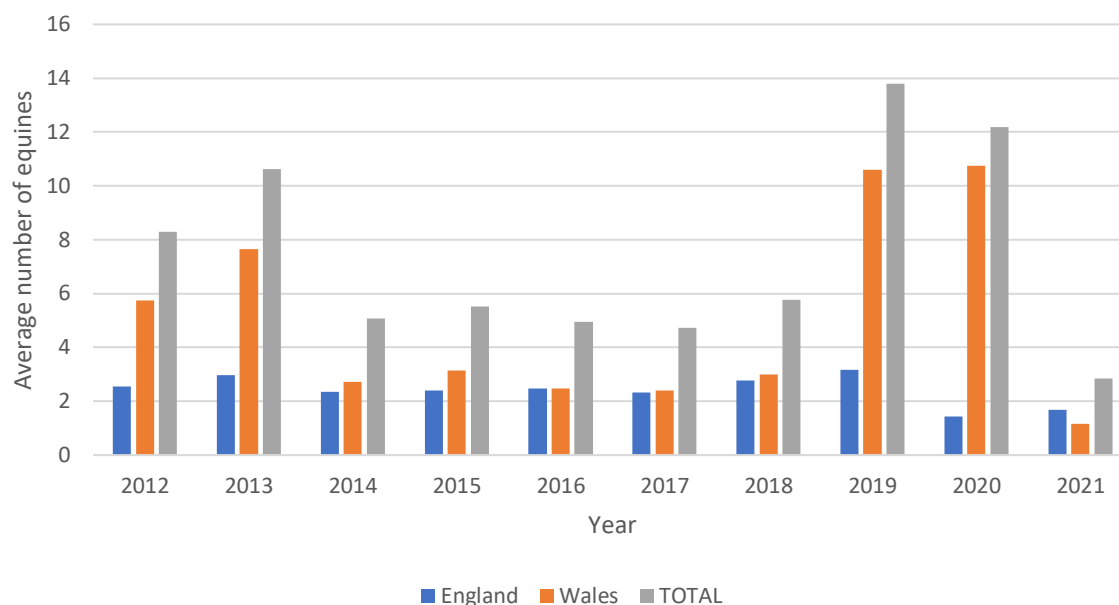


Figure 2c: Average number of equines involved per complaint of abandonment made to the RSPCA from 2012 to 2021, in England, Wales and in total.

Overall declines were also observed for complaints regarding neglect, although again there were some differences between England and Wales (figure 3a). The sudden drop in England in 2019 may reflect the change in the data system, although a similar drop was not evident in Wales. The number of equines involved in complaints of neglect was also found to decline from 2012 to 2021 in both England and Wales (figure 3b).

The average number of equines involved in each complaint of neglect also declined overall, although worryingly, the average number of equines involved in each complaint of neglect increased in Wales from 2 in 2020 to 3 in 2021 (figure 3c). It will be interesting to see if this increase is an anomaly or the start of a new trend. The average number of equines involved in each complaint was consistently higher in Wales than in England across the data collection period.

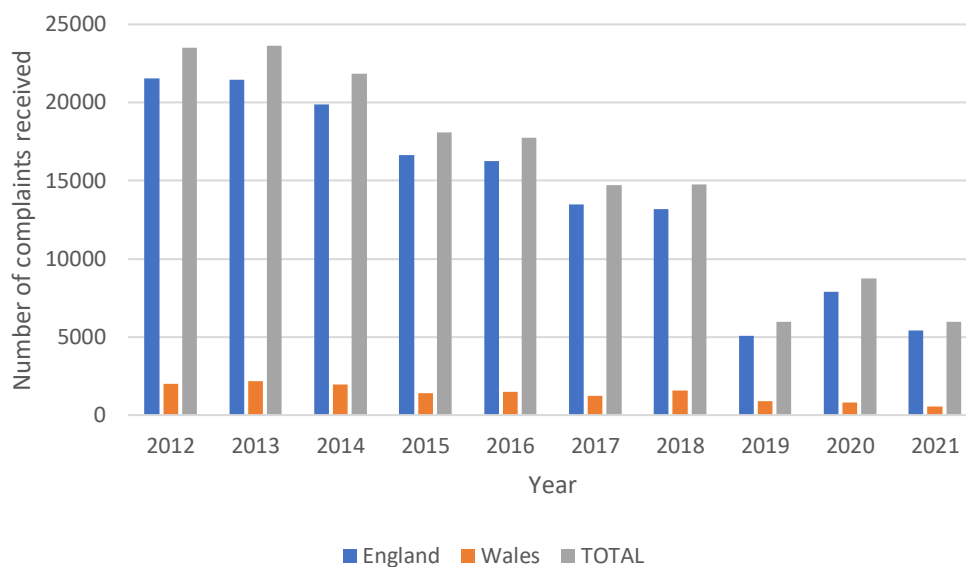


Figure 3a: Number of equine related complaints concerning neglect received annually by the RSPCA from 2012-2021, in England, Wales and in total.

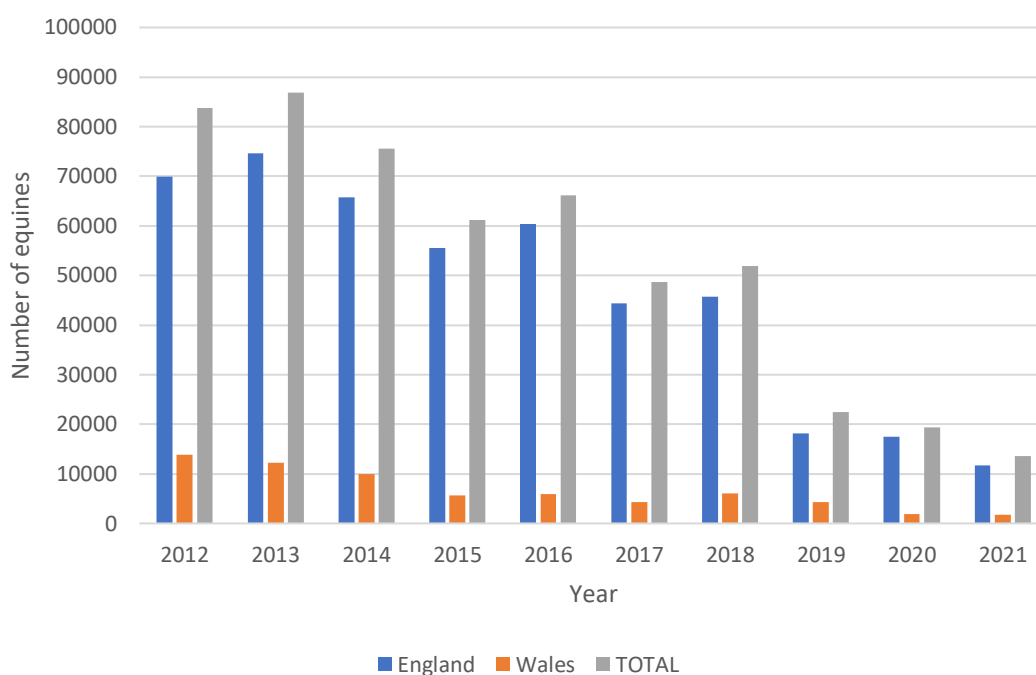


Figure 3b: Number of equines involved in complaints made to the RSPCA concerning neglect from 2012 to 2021, in England, Wales and in total.

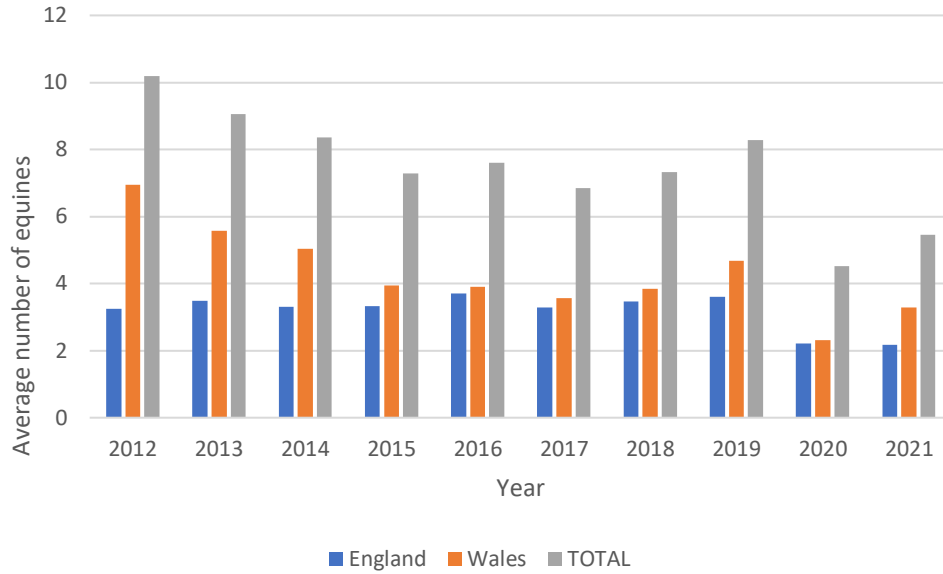


Figure 3c: Average number of equines involved per complaint of neglect made to the RSPCA from 2012 to 2021, in England, Wales and in total.

Improper killing was defined by the RSPCA as any allegation that an animal was illegally or inhumanely killed (Richard Claber, RSPCA, pers. comm.). It was less commonly reported in complaints made to the RSPCA than abandonment and neglect across the data collection period, although a similar decline in the number of complaints (figure 4a) and the number of equines involved (figure 4b) was observed. A higher average number of equines were involved in each complaint of improper killing in Wales than in England until 2015, after which point a higher number were involved per complaint in England.

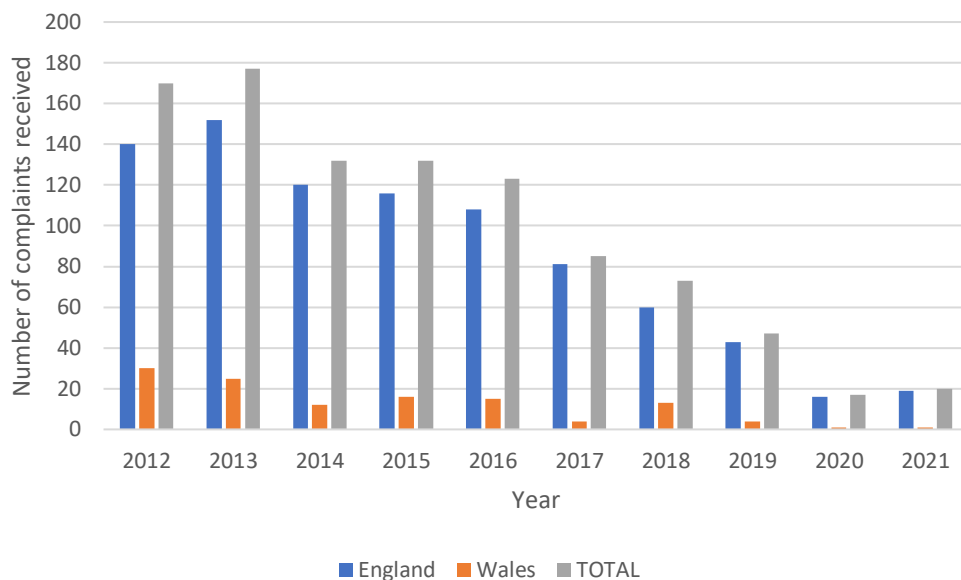


Figure 4a: Number of equine related complaints concerning improper killing received annually by the RSPCA from 2012-2021, in England, Wales and in total.

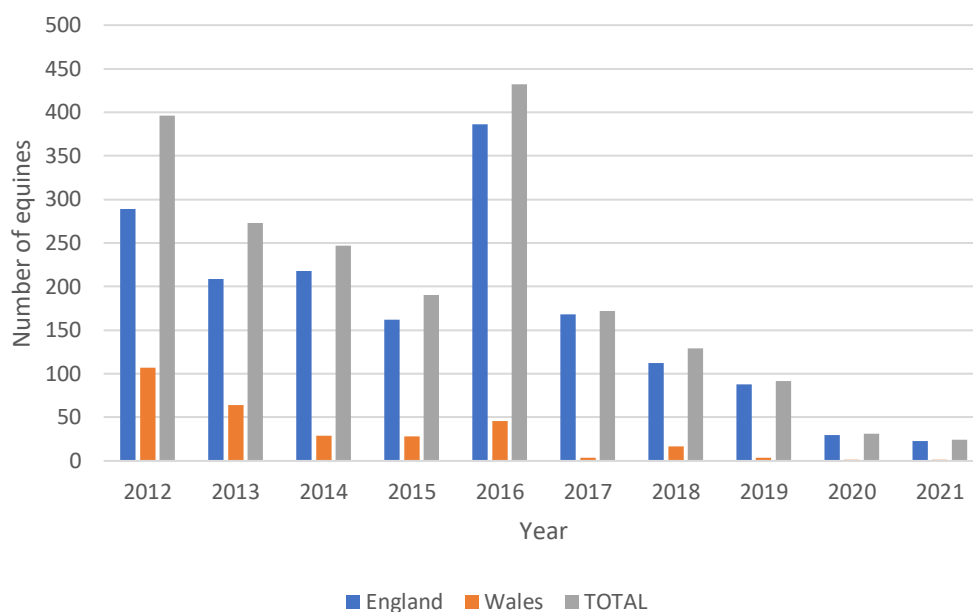


Figure 4b: Average number of equines involved in complaints made to the RSPCA concerning improper killing from 2012 to 2021, in England, Wales and in total.

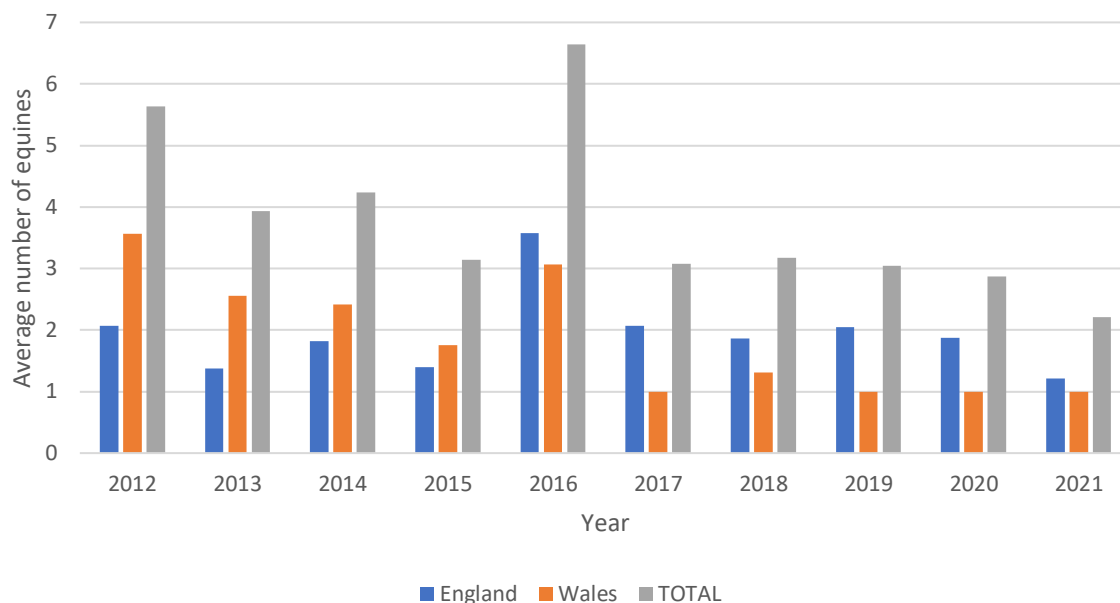


Figure 4c: Average number of equines involved per complaint of improper killing made to the RSPCA from 2012 to 2021, in England, Wales and in total.

RSPCA equine intakes and departures (2012-2021)

The total number of equines taken in declined from 2012 to 2021, from 792 to 463 equine admitted, respectively. It is worth noting however, that this decline was not consistent across the period; intake peaked at 1201 equines in 2013, declined again to 784 and then went up to 999 in 2017 before falling to 562 in 2020 (figure 5).

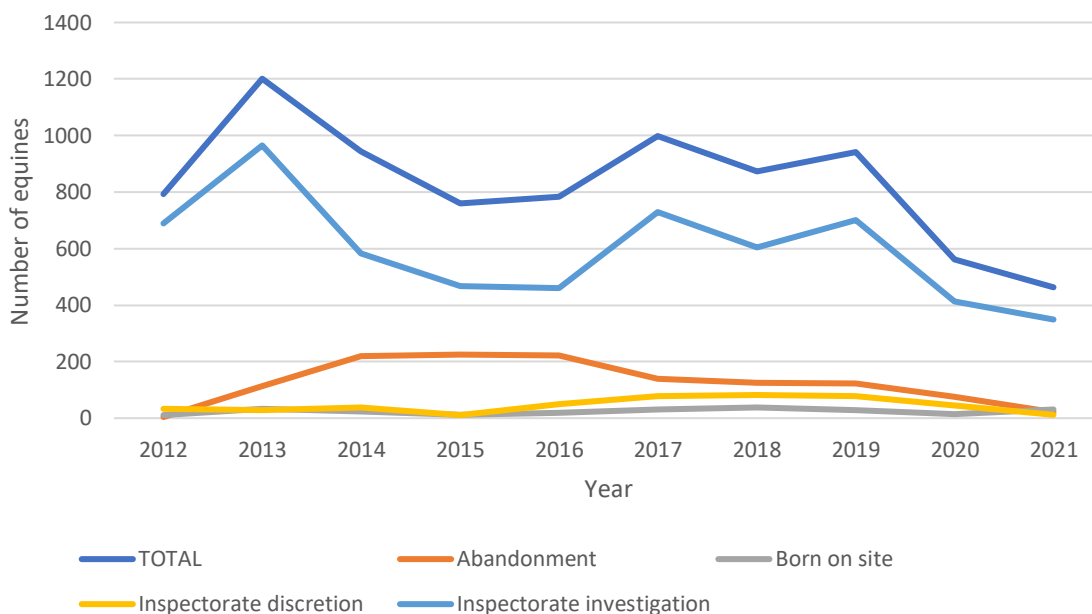


Figure 5: Annual number of equine intakes by the RSPCA 2012-2021, by the four primary intake reasons and in total.

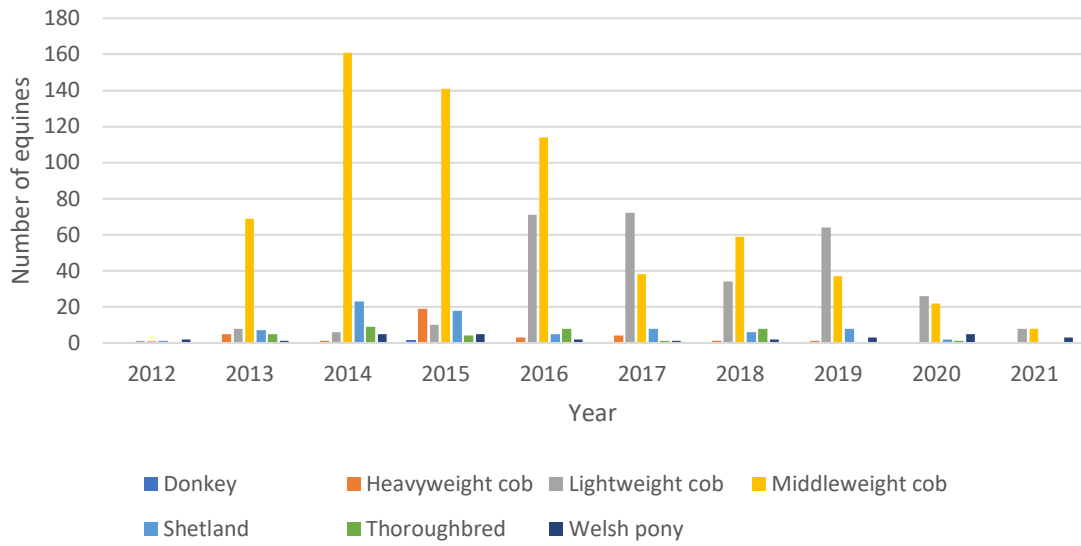


Figure 6a: Annual number of equine intakes by the RSPCA 2012-2021 due to abandonment, by breed/type.

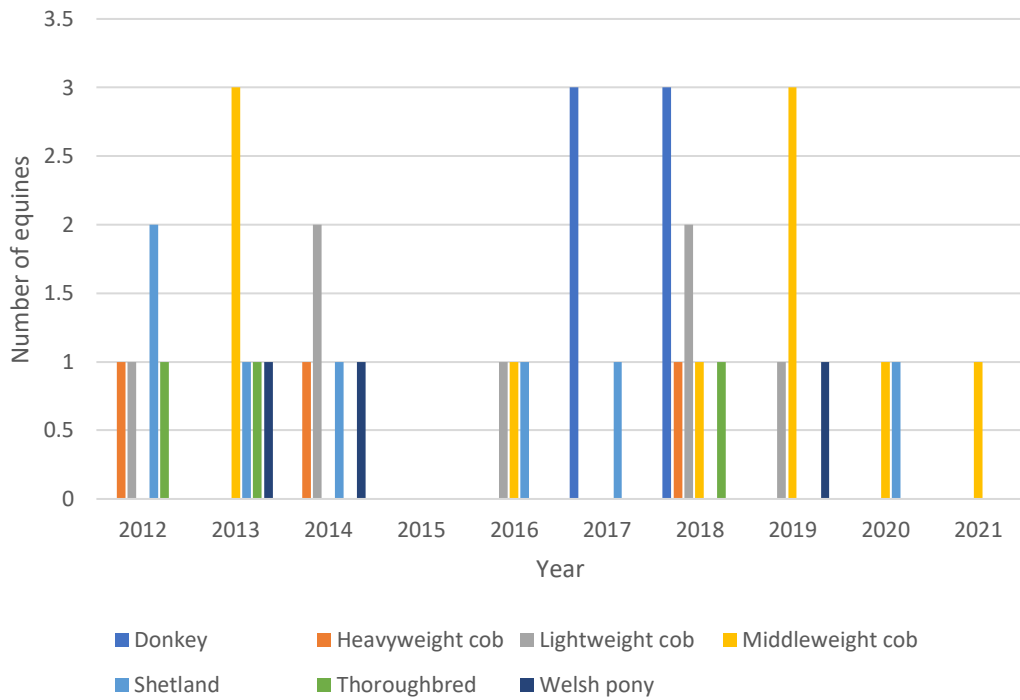


Figure 6b: Annual number of equine intakes by the RSPCA 2012-2021 due to a change in the owners' financial position/environment, by breed/type.

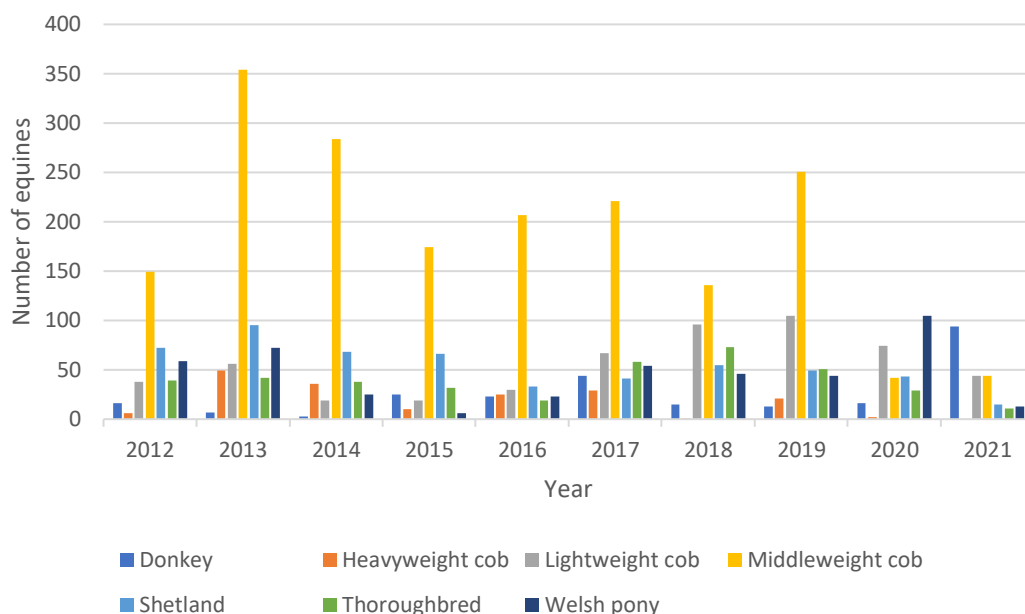


Figure 6c: Annual number of equine intakes by the RSPCA 2012-2021 due to inspectorate investigation, by breed/type.

Intake due to inspectorate investigation appeared to be the most influential factor in determining annual intake. Other reasons that equines were taken in not presented here included behavioural traits, centre manager discretion, change in financial position/environment, elective intake, Home for Life, Pet Retreat, RSPCA generated, temporary boarding, unowned healthy stray, unowned sick/injured, unprepared for commitment and unknown which together accounted for 391 equine intakes from 2012 to 2021.

Trends in three reasons for equines being taken in (abandonment (figure 6a), inspectorate investigation (figure 6b), and change in financial position/environment (figure 6c) were explored across years for seven equine groups: donkeys, heavyweight cobs, lightweight cobs, middleweight cobs, Shetland ponies, Thoroughbreds and Welsh ponies.

Middleweight cobs were the type of equines most reported to be taken in due to abandonment (figure 6a), with 161 admitted in 2014, 141 in 2015 and 114 in 2016. After this point the intake of middleweight cobs dropped, although number remained higher than other breeds/type except for lightweight cobs. Lightweight cob intake increased from 10 in 2015 to 72 in 2016 but appears to have been declining since 2019.

There was no consistent trend in the number of equines of each breed/type admitted due to the owners change in financial status/environment across the 10-year period from 2012 to 2021 (figure 6b).

Middleweight cobs were the breed/type most frequently admitted due to inspectorate investigation from 2012 to 2019, after which lightweight cobs, Welsh ponies, donkeys, and Shetlands were admitted at higher frequencies in 2020 and/or 2021 (figure 6c).

The spreadsheet of RSPCA intake data also included information on when the admitted equine departed the RSPCA including the date of departure and the form that departure took. Figure 7

presents the annual number of equine departures in total and the eight forms that departure took as categorised in the spreadsheet. Until 2019, adoption was the primary departure reason, however, adoptions appear to have declined since 2018. The number of equines still receiving care increased sharply between 2020 and 2021 from 12 to 153 equines.

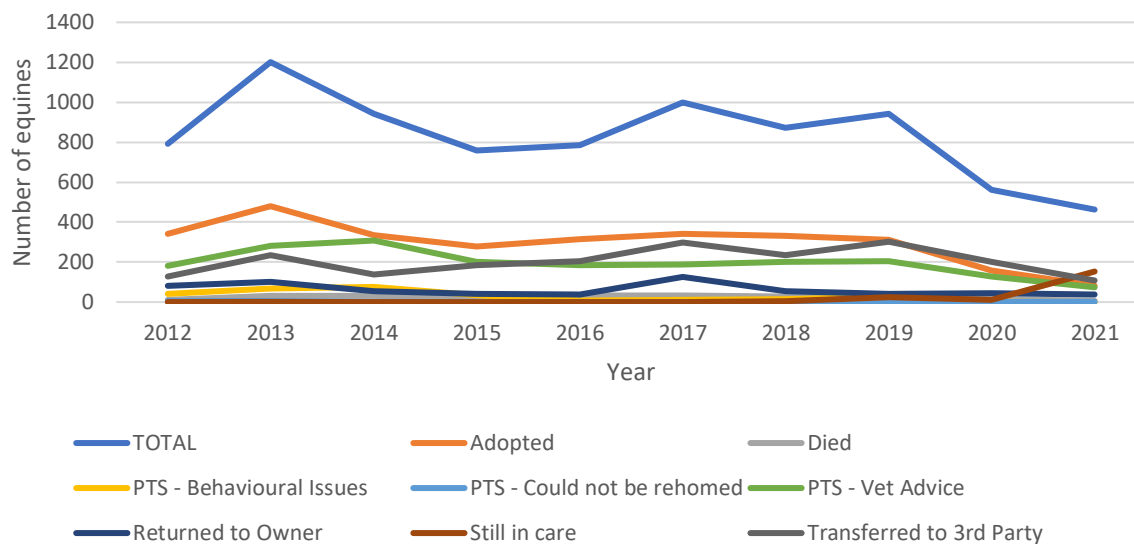


Figure 7: Annual number of equine departures from the RSPCA 2012-2021, by reason given for departure. (PTS = Put to sleep).

Three key departure reasons (adopted, put to sleep on veterinary advice, and still in care) were investigated by breed/type (figure 8a-8c).

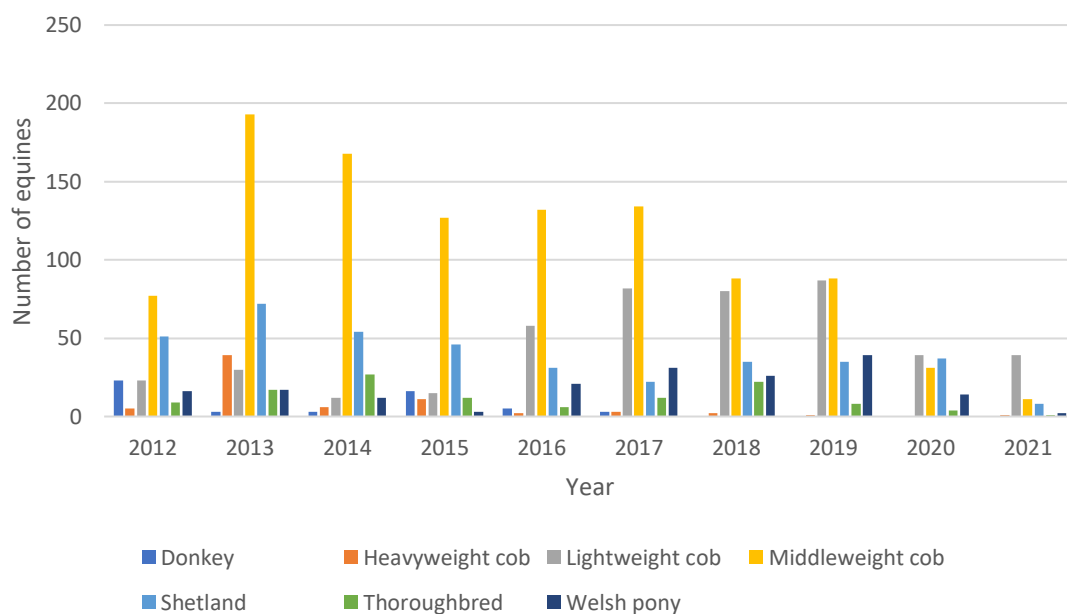


Figure 8a: Annual number of equine departures from the RSPCA 2012-2021 due to being adopted, by breed/type.

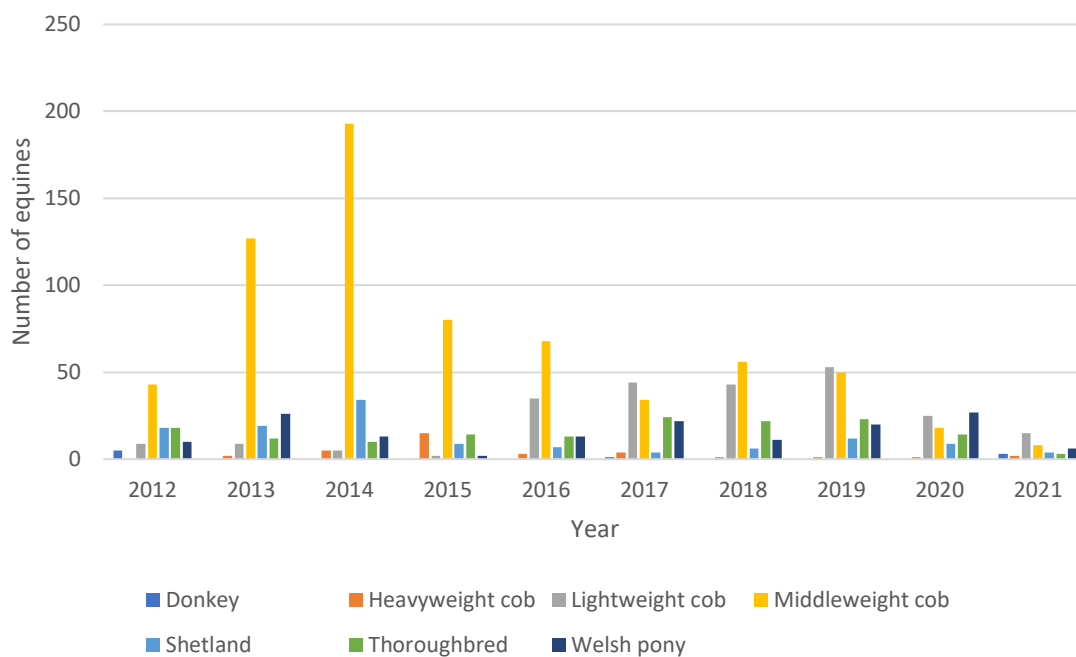


Figure 8b: Annual number of equine departures from the RSPCA 2012-2021 due to being put to sleep on veterinary advice, by breed/type.

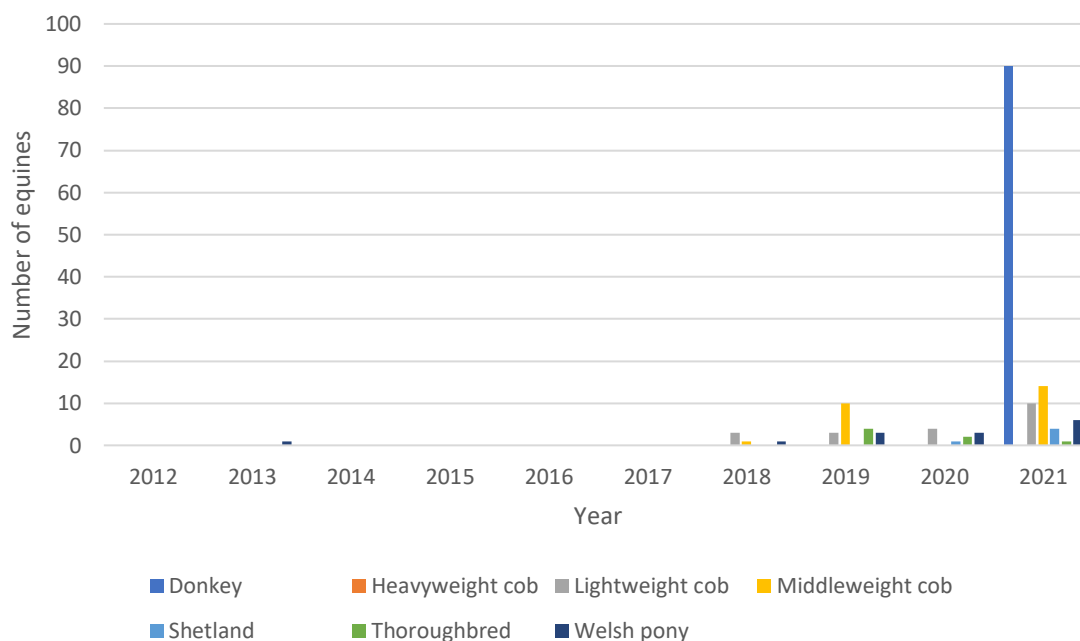


Figure 8c: Annual number of equine departures from the RSPCA 2012-2021 that were receiving care elsewhere, by breed/type.

Middleweight, and to a lesser extent, lightweight cobs were the breed/types most highly represented in the equines adopted (figure 8a) and the equines put to sleep on veterinary advice (figure 8b). While the numbers across all breeds/types fluctuate annually the overall trend is for a decline in adoptions and euthanasia, reflecting the overall decline in intake numbers from 2012 to 2021.

The extreme increase in donkeys receiving care elsewhere in 2021 (figure 8c) appears to correspond to an inspectorate investigation where 70 donkeys were listed as intakes on the same day in early February 2021. One of the 70 was put to sleep under veterinary advice after two months, but the remaining 69 were still receiving care.

Summary

In summary, the data provided by the RSPCA show a dramatic decline in the equine related complaints received between 2012 and 2021, and a corresponding although less extreme decline in equine intakes during this period. Communication with the RSPCA suggests that this decline reflects what the RSPCA has seen in practice and is not a consequence of the change in recording system for complaints received. However, this communication, and the data, need to be understood within the wider context of the activities of all equine welfare charities across England and Wales during this period before any conclusions can be drawn about broader trends. Other organisations may have expanded their reach between 2012-2021, with their increased activity in this area negatively correlating with that of the RSPCA. Triangulating the RSPCA data with data from other equine welfare charities would help clarify whether the data reflect RSPCA specific trends or broader trends across the equine welfare charity sector.

Further to this, the data must be interpreted within the context of wider events. The Control of Horses Act (2015) is likely to have impacted the number of abandonment cases, particularly given the shortened permitted time between detention and disposal (96 hours, down from 14 days under previous legislation). Restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic are also likely to have affected complaints, intakes, and adoptions.

In conclusion, these data offer an insight into equine welfare related activity of an animal welfare charity during the period 2012-2021. Triangulation with other data sources would enable us to determine whether the decline in equine related complaints and intakes is reflected across the equine welfare charity sector.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank David Bowles for his input and clarification regarding the data and RSPCA systems, as well as his insight in aiding data interpretation.

009. Data from National Equine Welfare Council members

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Methodology

Welfare-related activities

We requested data from NEWC (National Equine Welfare Council) members via email and provided an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) document to help members. We specifically requested information on the number and type of equine welfare-related activities as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: The information requested from NEWC members

Equine welfare calls /reports to organisation	Calls received	Numbers of call, type, what data do they capture?
Welfare inspector/field officer visits to welfare reports	Organisation database	Numbers, type, content, outcome? What do they capture?

Intakes coming into organisation or other places	Org. database	Numbers, type, outcome, procedure ... what do they capture?
Org. centres and partners	Org. database	Ongoing data capture, additional insights and perception that is the same or different from initial intake data. What do they capture?
Org. rehoming, links with partners	Org. database	Numbers, type, outcome, procedure, what data do they capture?
Other data - campaigns, comms, education, research, linked to equine welfare.	Org. database	Numbers, outputs, outcomes, impact

We also agreed that any data would be summarised and anonymised in all project outputs, and no organisation will be individually named.

British Horse Society (BHS) data

In addition to the general call put out to all NEWC members, the British Horse Society were approached with a separate data request to gain information on their annual membership numbers from 2012-2022, and the numbers of approved equestrian centres in the same period.

Results

We received data from 8 NEWC members in a variety of formats. Each organisation information is presented separately. Three organisations presented detailed data over time.

Organisation 1

The data relating to welfare activities was provided as follows (Table 2):

Table 2: Equine welfare-related data from organisation 1

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Equine Welfare Calls/reports to organisation										41
Welfare inspector/field officer visits to welfare reports									144	157
Non-Judgemental Advice									137	60

Intakes coming into organisation or other places	11	33	16	55	34	74	49	7	28	23
Rehomed		48		40	41	56	89	58	76	35
Returned to sanctuary from loan*		39		29	39	41	65	51	47	17

*Note we have a large number of ponies, who are returned more frequently than riding horses

In addition, this organisation provided information on the following aspects:

Data held:

Welfare calls: we store the information on our database - location, caller, owner, number of equines, issue - can add to this report as we get more information, including photos, video, visit reports, can be linked to an equine record if the equine comes into the sanctuary

Intakes to rescue centres: database stores all the relevant info on the equine, age, height, weight, type, colour. Medical notes, vaccines, dental, farrier, rehoming (link to carer page) can attach pictures and documents. We take some on temporary care for other organisations but if enter the sanctuary they remain owned by us for life. We rehome on permanent loan basis where we can but have some retired or in permanent sanctuary

Organisation 2

We received the information in Table 3 and represented in Figures 1-3 from organisation 2.

Table 3: Equine welfare-related data from organisation 2

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of welfare reports	268	255	169	240	207	222	271	260	223	153
Number of horses involved in welfare reports	994	941	480	1035	703	937	1074	1168	859	493
Type of report										
Underweight	42	66	44	55	33	23	38	36	46	29
Tethering	22	24	14	17	16	20	17	15	18	11
Ragwort	7	3	5	5	6	4	14	4	4	2
Overweight	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Out of hours	2	6	2	1	0	4	20	33	19	9
Welfare other	40	43	29	52	29	40	36	44	36	40
Long feet	14	10	6	16	5	14	4	15	16	7
Living Conditions	19	14	11	17	22	14	18	14	13	12
General lack of care	98	72	49	62	80	88	98	74	52	34

Abandonment/ strays	19	15	7	13	14	11	10	18	11	6
Other	3	1	2	2	2	4	16	7	8	3
Number of requests to rehome a horse	805	646	530	471	513	509	534	464	275	261
Number of horses asked to rehome	1234	1008	830	711	793	906	941	671	437	388

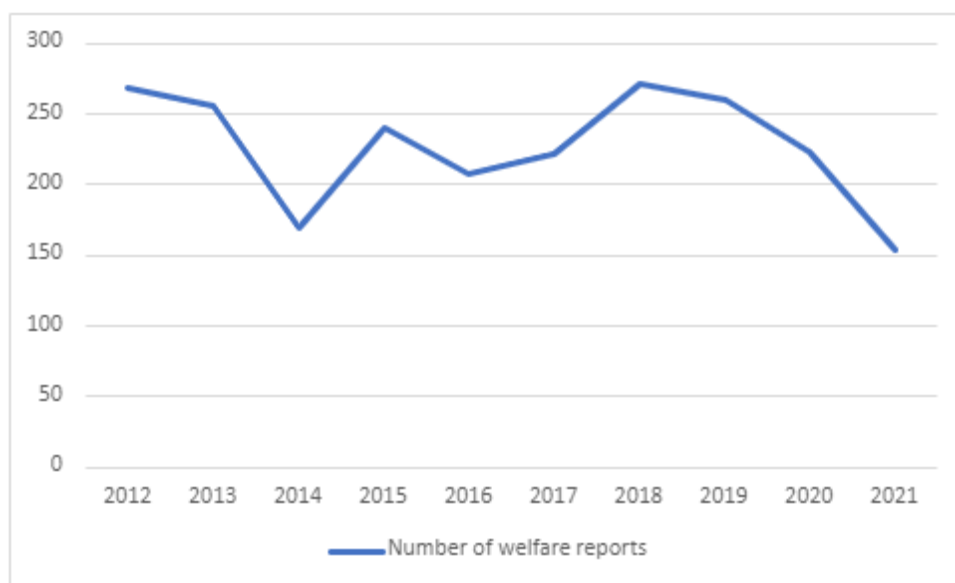


Figure 1: The number of welfare reports to organisation 2

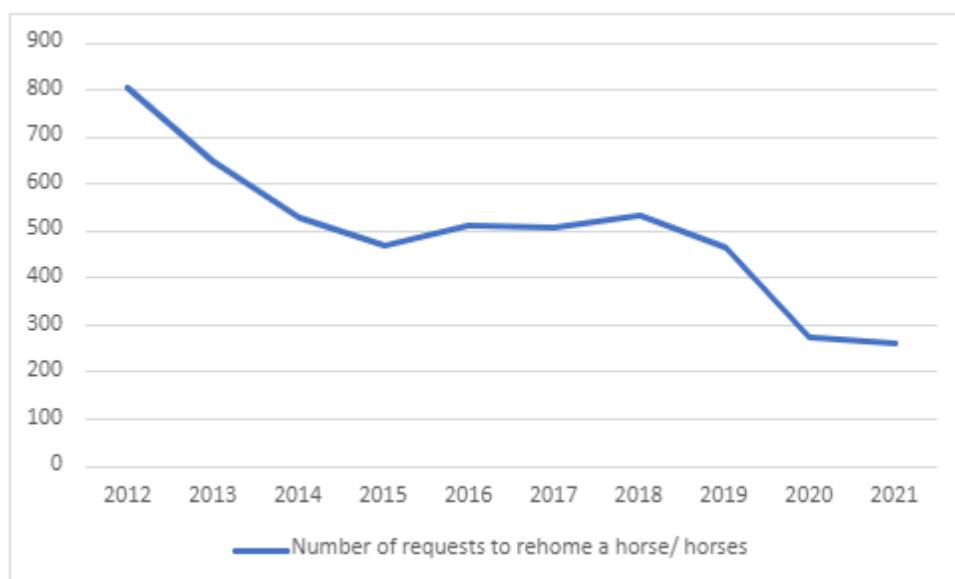


Figure 2: The number of requests to rehome a horse/horses by organisation 2

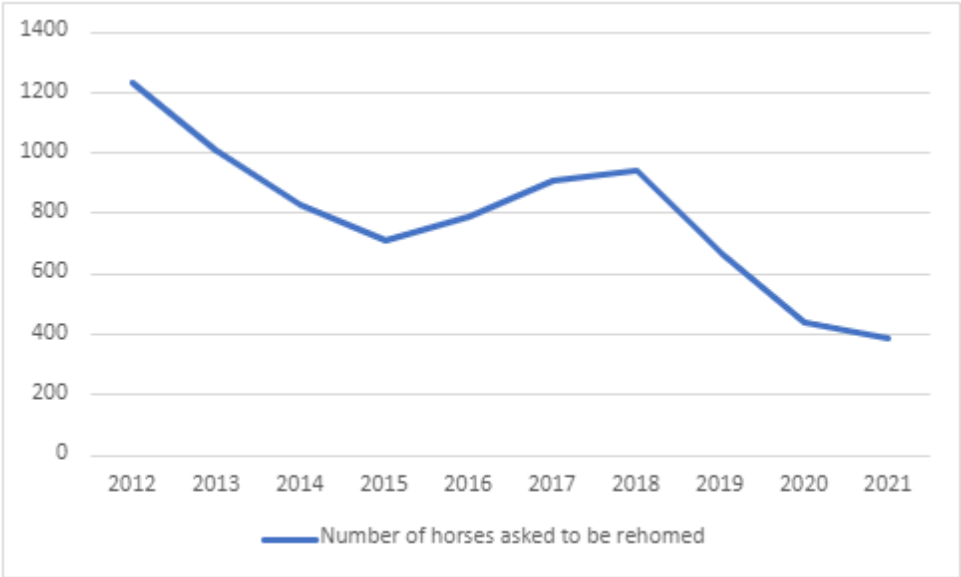


Figure 3: The number of horses asked to be rehomed by organisation 2

Organisation 3

Organisation 3 provided detailed data about their organisation including the total number of welfare reports/ enquiries (Figure 4), number of new horses admitted (Figure 5) and number of horses rehomed (Figure 6).

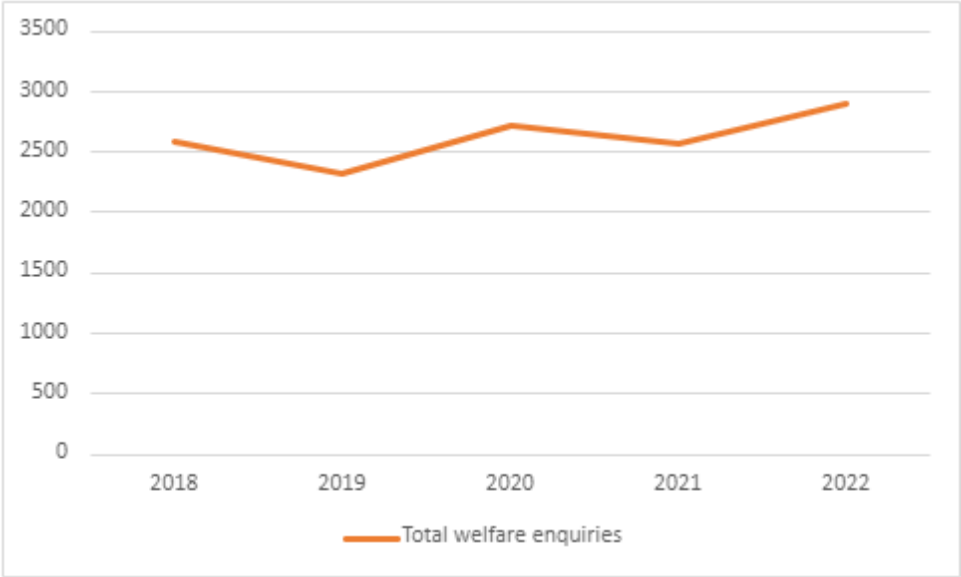


Figure 4: The total number of welfare enquiries to organisation 3

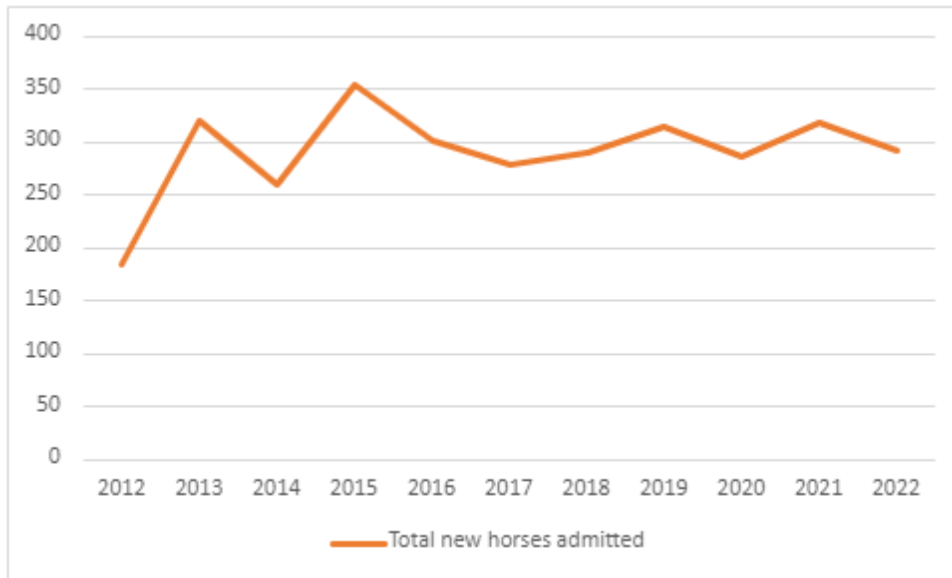


Figure 5: The total number of horses admitted by organisation 3

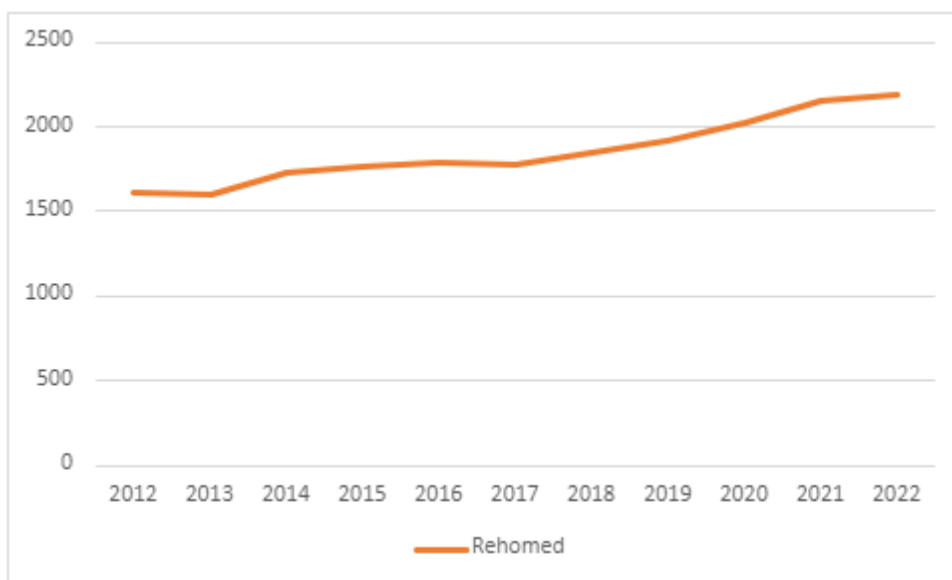


Figure 6: The total number of horses rehomed by organisation 3

Organisation 4

Organisation 4 reported that they receive approximately 14,000 welfare reports annually and conduct approximately 1400 cases in the field, as well as attending around 90 end of life discussions each year. They store information related to all of these in a database. They also reported that they are active in several campaigns and initiatives to improve equine welfare.

Organisation 5

Organisation 5 reported the total number of equine intakes over a 10-year period as being 123 donkeys and 24 horses/ponies. They have conducted 75 field visits to existing or potential homes. They average around 6-10 welfare reports/ year.

Organisation 6

Organisation 6 reported the number of welfare reports they received 2019-2022 (Figure 7). They also reported that during this time the number of equines in foster homes rose from 532 in 2019 to 606 in 2022.

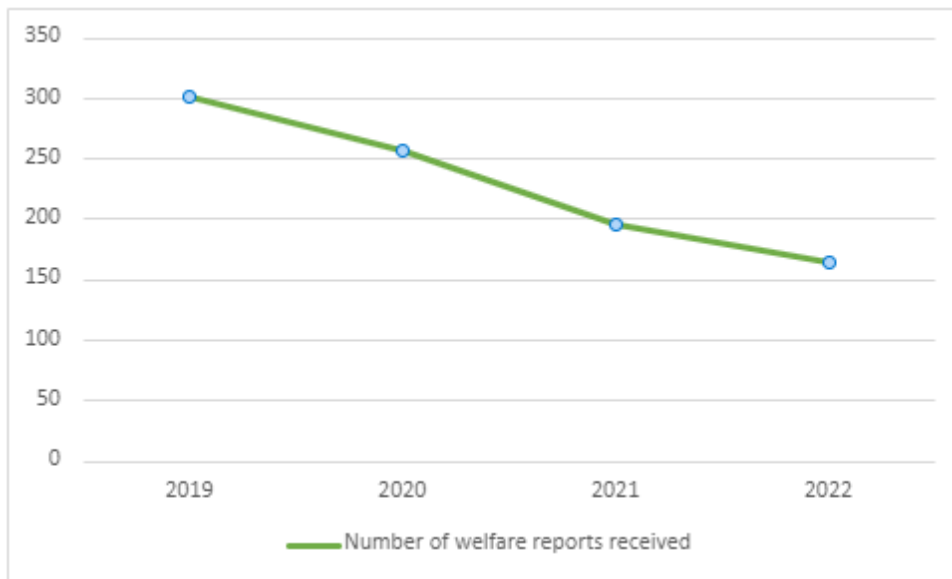


Figure 7: Number of welfare reports received by organisation 6

Organisation 7

Organisation 7 reported that from January-November in 2022 they had received 294 enquiries about 397 equines of which they took in 266.

Organisation 8

Organisation 8 reported that in a single year (2019) they were actively monitoring 20 herds of horses and made 160 visits. These related to 175 horses of the following breeds:

91 were Cob breed

5 were Donkeys

5 were Trotters

6 were Heavy Horses

17 were Thoroughbreds

5 were Natives

18 Were Welsh A, B, C or D.

26 Were Shetlands

2 were Arab X

and sex:

6 were stallions

3 were Rigs

57 were Geldings

37 were Colts

72 were Mares

They were contacted by 43 individuals and organisations to see what we could do to help and of all the requests received:

26 owners were giving their horses up for financial reasons

18 due to the Equine's illness

5 due to Owner's illness

10 due to the death of their owners

7 due to loss of land

4 for behavioural reasons

3 due to loss of ridden use in the horse

The remaining were for other reasons

Out of the horses we helped and visited externally:

22 were cases of Illegally grazing or straying

27 were tethered up

22 were entire herds of horses.

The remainder were in private homes.

They stated:

“Some of the saddest cases we deal with from a human perspective are those Equines whose owners have a terminal illness or have passed away, leaving a devastated family who are desperate to find a safe place for their beloved animal. We have helped many people and animals this year in this situation, and it requires a lot of sensitivity and innovative thinking to figure out a solution for these cases.”

British Horse Society data on membership and approved riding centre numbers

BHS annual membership

Table 4 contains BHS annual membership data for England and Wales from 2012-2022 where available. It is important to note that in 2019, the BHS underwent a review and reset of their membership data which they consider is likely to underlie the drop in membership numbers this year.

Table 4: BHS annual membership data for England and Wales from 2012-2022

Year	England	Wales
2012	Total only available	
2013	62,468	4,351
2014	66,718	4,657
2015	72,471	4,965
2016	No stats available	
2017	80,601	5,382
2018	84,267	5,630
2019	83,736*	5,814*
2020	92,956	6,149
2021	96,536	6,521
2022	98,203	6,531

* BHS data reset

BHS Approved centres

BHS Approved centres encompasses riding schools, livery yards, and Horses Welcome (equine holiday accommodation). Data were only available from 2017 onwards (Table 5).

Table 5: Number of BHS approved centres (2017-2022)

Year	Number of approved centres
2017	767
2018	720
2019	682
2020	675
2021	633
2022	593

Summary

The welfare data from the eight organisations who responded to our request provided an insight into their varied experiences of welfare-related activities, as well as the variation in the data recorded and held by these organisations which makes true comparison challenging. Where available, longitudinal data revealed trends in the number of welfare related calls and in rehoming interest and numbers, but this was not consistent across the organisations.

The BHS data portray a growth in membership numbers from 2012 to 2022, except for 2019 when they reset their membership database. As not all BHS members are horse owners, this may reflect growing interest in equestrianism over this period. The decline in approved centres corresponds to other data sources reporting the general loss of riding schools and livery yards

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the NEWC members who contributed their data in response to our request.

010. Supply and demand – the online equine marketplace

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Background

Online sales of equines and equine related paraphernalia have grown considerably in recent years as the purchasing of print magazines and newspaper has declined. There are now several equine specific online platforms available to advertise your equine for sale or loan and/or to post ‘wanted’ adverts for those seeking a new equine. The activity of these online equine marketplaces provides an insight into this facet of equine sector, particularly in terms of supply and demand.

Methods

A focused, point-in-time insight into the supply and demand of equines in the UK (United Kingdom) was gained through data mining the internet platforms Preloved (<https://www.preloved.co.uk/classifieds/horses-livestock/horses-ponies/for-sale>), Right Horse Right

Home (<https://www.righthorserighthome.co.uk/>) and Horsemart (<https://www.horsemart.co.uk/horses-for-sale.php>). These platforms were chosen as commonly used platforms in the sale of 'general' equines, i.e., they are not breed or discipline specific sites.

Two distinct periods were selected to enable comparison between seasons – summer (1st-12th August 2022) and winter (16th-27th January 2023). Only advertisements placed within the week prior to commencing data collection were recorded to prevent confounding due to legacy adverts that remained on the site despite the equine being sold or withdrawn from sale. Due to an access related issue in the second data collection period, Preloved and Right Horse Right Home were mined in the summer data collection period, and Preloved and Horsemart were mined in the winter data collection period.

The data were gathered on the date the advertisement was logged by the researcher, the date the advert was listed on the website, the age, breed, sex, height and 'type' (e.g., lead-rein, project, all-rounder, companion etc.) of the equine, the location and price. Where described on the advertisement, the reason the equine was being sold and additional information, for example regarding behaviour, level of schooling and physical health, were also noted.

Results

Equines for sale

Summer August 2022

Data were collected on 376 individual equines advertised for sale between 1st – 12th August 2022. Preloved was the most active site with equines more regularly listed over the data collection period, and accounted for 87% (n=326) of the advertisements recorded in comparison with 13% (n=50) derived from Right Horse Right Home. Three horses were advertised for loan during this period and 1 for share, all through Right Horse Right Home.

It is worth noting that few advertisements had been listed for more than 2-3 weeks, suggesting that most horses are being sold within this time.

Winter January 2023

Data were collected from 155 advertisements listed between 16th – 23rd January 2023; 53% (n=82) of these advertisements were listed on Preloved and 47% (n=73) were listed on Horsemart. All advertisements during this period listed horses for sale rather than for loan. The number of advertisements listed in the winter period was less than half that of the summer data collection period.

Type of equine

During both data collection periods only advertisements listing horses or ponies (hereafter referred to as horses) were observed. No advertisements featuring donkeys, mules or hinnies were observed on the sales platforms during these periods.

Summer August 2022

One-third of horses (n=124) were listed for sale as all-rounders (figure 1a). The type with the second largest representation were project horses (18% n=69), which included horses that had been backed

and needed bringing on and those sold the field as seen, closely followed by youngstock and horses that had yet to start their training to be ridden (18% n=66). Less well represented were horses advertised as companions (1% n=4), broodmares (1% n=3) and endurance horses (0.3% n=1).

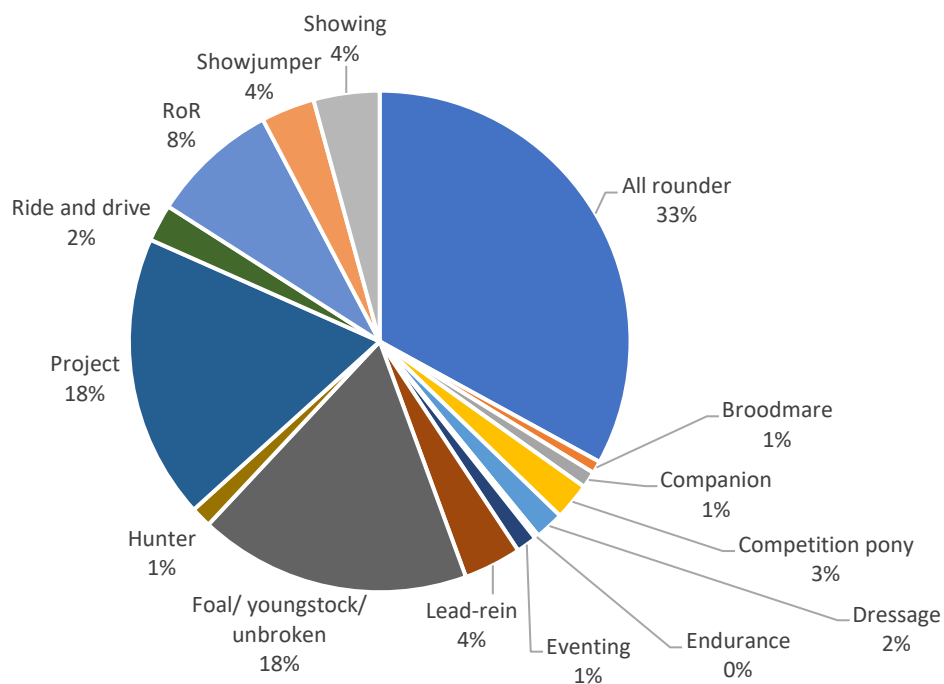


Figure 1a: Horses advertised online during the August 2022 data collection period, as categorised by type (n=376).

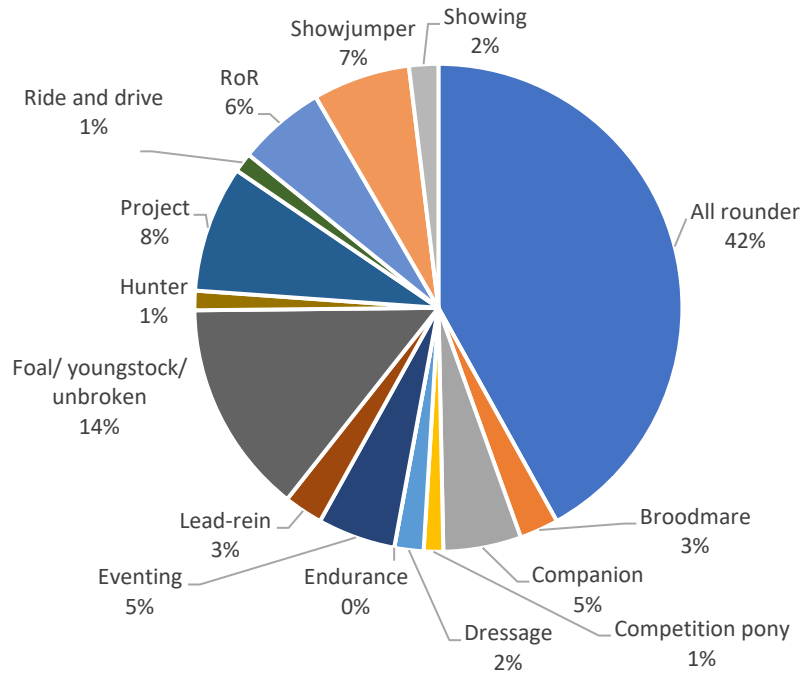


Figure 1b: Horses advertised online during the January 2023 data collection period, as categorised by type (n=155).

RoR=thoroughbred eligible for Retraining of Racehorses competitions

Winter January 2023

In comparison to the summer data collection period, a larger proportion of horses for sale were listed as all-rounders in the winter data collection period (42% n=65; figure 1b). The proportion of horses advertised for specific disciplines (showjumping 7% n=10, eventing 5% n=8) was similarly higher in the winter data collection period. There was also an increase in the number of horses listed as companions (5% n=8), although these still represented a small proportion of the advertisements overall. There were reductions in the proportions of youngstock (14% n=22), project horses (8% n=13) and thoroughbreds eligible for Retraining of Racehorses (RoR) competitions (6% n=9).

Age

Summer August 2022

The listed age of equines for sale ranged from 2 months to 27 years, with a mean age of 7.5 years across both platforms. Differences were seen between the two websites with horses advertised on Preloved having a mean age of 7 years (2 months to 21 years), and those on Right Horse Right Home having a mean age of 10 years (6 months to 27 years), reflecting the trend that the majority of horses advertised through Right Horse Right Home were in ridden work.

Winter January 2023

The age of horses listed for sale in the winter data collection period ranged from 6 months to 22 years, with a mean age of 8 years across platforms, slightly higher than the mean age of 7.5 years observed

in the summer data collection period. This could be attributed to the large number of foals being sold prior to weaning in the summer period, which were not present in the winter data collection period.

Considering the sales platforms separately, Preloved had a mean age of 8 years (7 months to 22 years). Horsemart was very similar with a mean age of 8 years (6 months to 22 years).

Sex

Summer August 2022

Across both websites, mares and geldings made up the majority of the horses advertised, together accounting for 85% of the sample (table 1). There were differences between the platforms, with fewer mares and more geldings being advertised for sale on Right Horse Right Home.

Table 1: Sex distribution of the horses advertised online during the August 2022 data collection period.

Sex	Frequency n (%)					
	Summer 2022			Winter 2023		
	Preloved	Right Horse Right Home	Overall	Preloved	Horsemart	Overall
Mare	143 (44%)	16 (32%)	159 (42%)	37 (45%)	30 (41%)	67 (43%)
Gelding	135 (41%)	28 (56%)	163 (43%)	41 (50%)	33 (45%)	74 (48%)
Stallion	8 (3%)	2 (4%)	10 (3%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	2 (1%)
Colt	15 (5%)	2 (4%)	17 (5%)	4 (5%)	6 (8%)	10 (7%)
Filly	25 (8%)	1 (2%)	26 (7%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	2 (1%)
TOTAL	326	50	376	82	73	155

Winter January 2023

The sex distribution of advertisements in the winter period reflected the lower proportion of youngstock for sale at this time in comparison to the summer data collection period, with few colts (7% n=10) and fillies (1% n=2) listed for sale, and a reduction in stallions (1% n=2). Both sales platforms had higher proportions of geldings for sale than mares.

Breed

Summer August 2022

Overall, 92 different breed descriptors were used across both websites. These were grouped into five categories for summary (figure 2a).

Native ponies or native pony crosses were the breed category most highly represented overall (37% n=140), and on Preloved (39% n=128). Right Horse Right Home had Cobs and Cob crosses and Sports horses as their most highly represented breed categories (both 14% n=14) reflecting the likely difference in user demographics for each individual site.

Thoroughbreds made up 12% (n=44) of the sample overall and made up a higher proportion of horses advertised through Right Horse Right Home than Preloved (14% n=7, and 11% n=37 respectively). It is interesting to note that the Thoroughbreds on Right Horse Right Home were listed for a higher price

on mean than those on Preloved (£3,836, compared with £3,282), although they were below the mean listed price across all breeds on both sites (see below).

Winter January 2023

Across both sales platforms 50 breed descriptors were used which were categorised into 5 groups as for the summer period (figure 2b). As in the summer period, the most common breed type overall were native ponies and native pony crosses (33% n=51), and on Preloved (42% n=34%). Sports horses were the most highly represented category on Horsemart (44% n=32). Again, this is likely to reflect differences in the interests and user demographics for each platform.

The proportion of Thoroughbreds for sale in the winter period matched that of the summer period (12% n=18), with a higher number advertised through Preloved (15% n=12) than Horsemart (8% n=6). The mean Thoroughbred price was £3,172, £3,458 on Preloved and £2,600 on Horsemart, both substantially lower than the overall mean horse price listed in the winter period (see below).

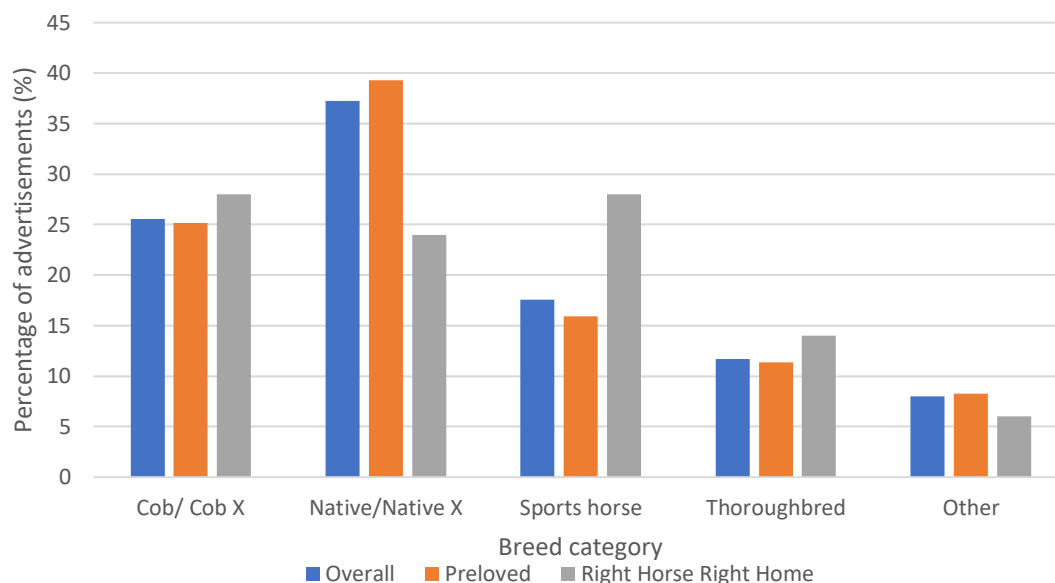


Figure 2a: Distribution of horses advertised for sale in the summer (August 2022) on Preloved and Right Horse Right Home by type of horse (n=376).

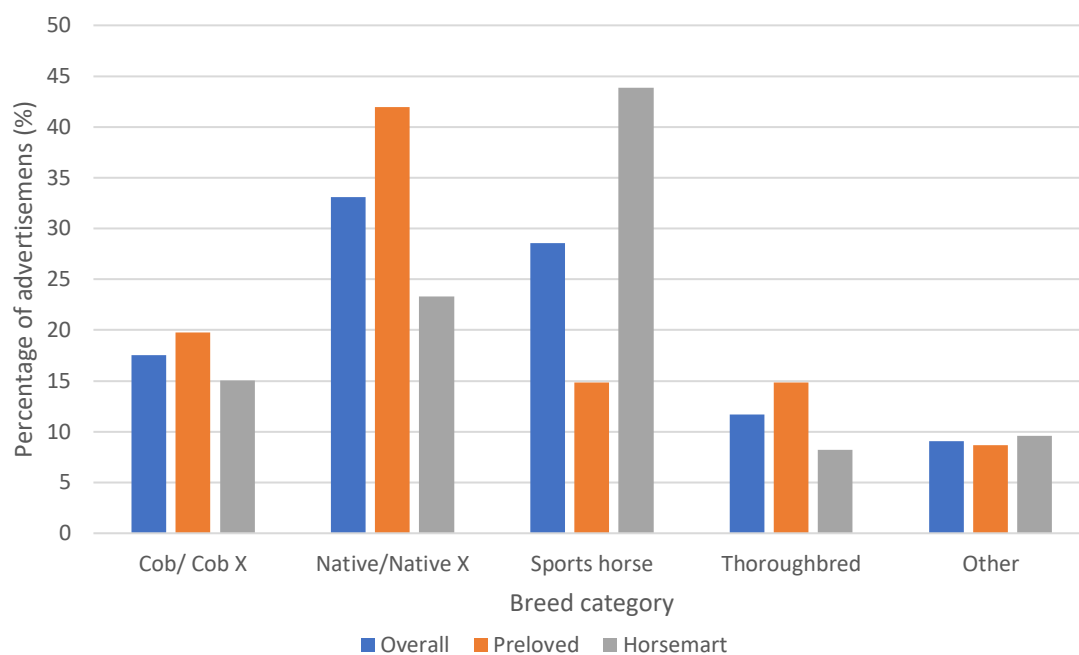


Figure2b: Distribution of horses advertised for sale in the winter (January 2023) on Preloved and Horsemart by type of horse (n=154).

Height

Summer August 2022

Listed heights ranged from 6hh for two miniature Shetlands (Preloved), to 17.3hh (one Shire and one Warmblood, both listed on Preloved). Overall, the mean height listed was 14hh (n=336, when excluding the 'to make' heights listed for youngstock). Again, variation between the horses listed on each site was seen with Preloved (n=289) listed horses having a mean height of 14hh and Right Horse Right Home horses (n=47) having a mean height of 15hh.

Winter January 2023

The listed heights in the winter data collection period showed a similar range, from a 6hh miniature Shetland colt, to two 17.2hh horses, a thoroughbred and a Shire. Overall, the mean height listed was 14.3hh (n=151, when excluding the 'to make' heights listed for youngstock). As for the summer data collection period, horses advertised on Preloved (n=81) had a mean height of 14hh, while those listed on Horsemart had a mean height of 15hh (n=70)

Location

Summer August 2022

The majority of advertisements listed horses located in England (87% n=327), with 11% (n=41) in Wales, 2% (n=7) in Scotland and 0.3% (n=1) horse located in Jersey. The horse in Jersey was listed on Right Horse Right Home; with this exception both sites showed a similar distribution in location of horses listed.

Winter January 2023

Again, the majority of advertisements listed horses for sale in England (88% n=137). Preloved had an equal number of advertisements in Wales and Scotland, each representing 6% (n=5) of horses listed. In contrast, 89% (n=65) of Horsemart advertisements were for horses in England, 5% (n=4) in Wales and 3% (n=2) in Scotland.

Price

Summer August 2022

Prices of equines for sale ranged from £300 to £18,000, with a mean listed price of £3,871. The two equines listed for £300 were Welsh Section A yearling colts, one based in Norfolk, one in Wales, both advertised through Preloved. The £18,000 equine was a 7-year-old Irish Sports Horse mare who was advertised as an eventer advertised through Right Horse Right Home. Listing prices differed between the two sales platforms, with equines listed on Right Horse Right Home typically offered for sale at a higher price. The mean price for an equine on Right Horse Right Home was £5,322 (£800-£18,000), compared with a mean listed price on Preloved of £3,667 (£300-£15,000).

Overall, 11% (n=41) of horses were priced at less than £1,000, and 5% (n=19) at £10,000 or more.

Winter January 2023

The prices of horses for sale ranged from £200 (a 22-year-old cob mare) to £30,050 (a 7-year-old Friesian dressage stallion listed on Horsemart), with a mean listed price of £4,327. When the dressage stallion was removed, the highest price was £18,000 for a 7-year-old Connemara eventer mare, with the mean price falling to £4,158 which was still higher than that of the summer period. Again, this is likely to reflect the reduction in the proportion of youngstock for sale in the winter period, as these were frequently listed under £1,000 in the summer period.

Overall, 10% (n=16) of horses were priced under £1,000, and 6% (n=10) at £10,000 or more.

Reason for sale

Summer August 2022

Only 17% (n=64) advertisements gave reasons that the horse was listed or sale, 16% (n=51) of Preloved advertisements and 26% (n=13) of Right Horse Right Home advertisements.

One third (n=21) of advertisements cited horse related factors including the horse being outgrown by the rider, unsuitable due to the rider being over-horsed or the horse not enjoying/not able to do the activity the rider wanted. Non-horse related reasons cited primarily concerned the owners lack of time (31% n=20), or the owner losing interest or going to university (14% n=9).

Winter January 2023

Fewer advertisements in the winter data collection period gave reasons for the horse being sold (6% n=10) and these were equally divided between the two websites under review.

Horse related reasons cited for the sale included the loss of the horse's companion (10% n=1), the horse being outgrown (10% n=1) and the rider being over-horsed (20% n=2). The majority of reasons

were not horse related (60% n=6), with work commitments and personal circumstances both cited in two advertisements, financial status and the owner losing interest each cited in one advertisement.

Additional information

Summer August 2022

Additional information was provided in 11% (n=43) of advertisements – 11% (n=35) of those listed on Preloved and 16% (n=8) of those on Right Horse Right Home. Additional information typically related to health issues (26% n=12) (e.g., sarcoids, sweet itch and laminitis), behavioural issues (9% n=4) (e.g., wind sucking, bucking), level of training (19% n=8) and whether tack or other equipment was included in the price (12% n=5).

Winter January 2023

Additional information regarding the horse was given in 8% (n=12) of the advertisements in the winter data collection period. Over half of these (58% n=7) stated that the horse was not currently in ridden work and was being “sold from field”. This group comprised of four thoroughbreds and three sports horses. Two additional comments related to the horses colouring, two related to the horse’s jumping experience, and one related to the horse’s behaviour, calling it “quirky”.

Table 2 summarises the equines for sale data described above.

Table 2: Summary of the features of the equines listed for sale on the online platforms viewed across the summer (August 22) and Winter (January 2023) data collection periods.

		Frequency n (%)					
		Summer 2022			Winter 2023		
Feature		Preloved n=326	Right Horse Right Home n=50	Overall n=376	Preloved n=82	Horsemart n=73	Overall n=155
Type	All-rounder	-	-	124 (33%)	-	-	65 (42%)
	Project horses	-	-	69 (18%)	-	-	13 (8%)
	Youngstock	-	-	66 (18%)	-	-	22 (14%)
Age*		7 years	10 years	7.5 years	8 years	8 years	8 years
Sex	Mare	143 (44%)	16 (32%)	159 (42%)	37 (45%)	30 (41%)	67 (43%)
	Gelding	135 (41%)	28 (56%)	163 (43%)	41 (50%)	33 (45%)	74 (48%)
	Stallion	8 (3%)	2 (4%)	10 (3%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	2 (1%)
	Colt	15 (5%)	2 (4%)	17 (5%)	4 (5%)	6 (8%)	10 (7%)
	Filly	25 (8%)	1 (2%)	26 (7%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	2 (1%)
Breed	Native/native X	128 (39%)	12 (24%)	140 (37%)	34 (42%)	17 (23%)	51 (33%)
	Cob/Cob X	82 (25%)	14 (28%)	96 (26%)	16 (20%)	11 (15%)	27 (18%)

	Sports Horse	52 (16%)	14 (28%)	66 (18%)	12 (15%)	32 (44%)	44 (29%)
	Thoroughbred	37 (11%)	7 (14%)	44 (12%)	12 (15%)	6 (8%)	18 (12%)
Height*	Other	27 (8%)	3 (6%)	30 (8%)	7 (9%)	7 (10%)	14 (9%)
	14hh		15hh	14hh	14hh	15hh	14.3hh
Location	England	-	-	327 (87%)	-	-	137 (88%)
	Wales	-	-	41 (11%)	-	-	5 (6%)
Price	<£1,000			£3,871 41(11%)			£4, 327 16 (10%)
	>10,000			19 (5%)			10 (6%)
Additional information				43 (11%)			12 (8%)

*Mean values

Equines wanted (Summer only)

The requirements of people listing online equine ‘wanted’ notices provides an insight into this aspect of consumer demand facet of the equine sector. In total, 110 ‘wanted’ posts on Right Horse Right Home were reviewed between 4th and 12th August 2022.

Most of the people were located in England 89% (n=98), with 7% (n=8) in Scotland and 4% (n=4) in Wales. Over half of the posts viewed (56% n=62), were seeking a horse to loan from its current owner. Where people were looking for a horse to purchase, 33% (n=37) of posts gave an indicative budget. The mean amount specified was £6,568, ranging from £4,000 to £12,000). No indicative budget was mentioned in 10% (n=11) of posts.

The posts specified the type of horse being sought, with 56% (n=62) of posts seeking an all-rounder, 31% (n=35) wanted a horse primarily for hacking, and 10% (n=11) seeking a horse for a specific discipline (dressage, showjumping, and/or eventing). The sex of the horse was not considered important in 81% (n=89) of posts, but where sex was specified, geldings were preferred to mares, (17% n=19, 2% n=2 respectively). Similarly, 19% (n=21) of posts stated the ideal breed they would like, with 11% (n=12) seeking a Cob or Cob cross, 5% (n=5) seeking a sports horse and 4% (n=4) seeking a Thoroughbred or Thoroughbred cross. All posts specified the height of the horse they were looking for. The majority of people were only seeking horses over 15hh (65% n=72), with only 9% (n=10) were looking for a pony less than 14.2hh.

Summary

Differences were identified in the horses listed for sale via online platforms across seasons and across sales websites, likely reflecting the common equine breeding period and the user demographics of the individual platforms. The type of horses listed varied with season, with youngstock and project horses represented at higher proportions in the summer, and all-rounders and specific disciplines in the winter. This seasonal variation was also reflected in the distribution of horses within the five breed categories, particularly sports horses. Thoroughbreds were looked at in greater detail and were listed below the mean prices for both data collection periods. The mean age of horses listed in the winter period was 8 years old, in contrast to a mean age of 7.5 years in the summer period, likely due to the

higher proportion of youngstock (aged less than 4 years old) listed for sale during this time. Despite the impression that horse prices had dropped between the summer and winter data collection periods, this was not strongly evidenced through the data, with similar proportions listed below £1000, and equal to or over £10,000 in both periods. Advertisements were more likely to provide reasons for the horse being for sale and additional information in the summer than the winter. Financial status was only listed explicitly in winter advertisements.

While the posts for horses wanted seemed to reflect the types of horses available for sale in terms of breed and type, it is worth noting that cobs were in demand and that people seemed to be seeking horses over 15hh. In contrast the mean height of horses listed in both data collection periods was below this (summer 14hh, winter 14.3hh).

The seasonal comparison was hampered by the inability to compare both platforms in both seasons, necessitating the substitution of Right Horse Right Home for the winter data collection period. That said, seasonal differences were evident within the data, as were differences in the adverts posted on the different platforms.

011. Online survey: horse management, ownership, population and welfare in England and Wales

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The objective of this project strand was to capture the perspectives, understandings and experiences of multiple stakeholders across the equine sector. Data were collected via a survey that was administered online to facilitate distribution across England and Wales.

Methodology

Ethical approval for the online survey (Strand B) and interviews (Strand C), has been granted by the University of Bristol Faculty Research Committee for Health Sciences (Ref: 12282).

Survey development was informed by the desk-based research undertaken and aligned with the key aims and research questions. Care was taken to make the survey objective in the language used to prevent biasing respondents. Questions were worded in a way that was not 'leading' and the use of open questions with free-text boxes enabled respondents to give responses that reflected their own understandings and perceptions, rather than forcing respondents to solely select from response options of our choosing.

Prior to going live, the survey was piloted by eight people with experience in the equine sector, including a vet, racing work rider, event groom and rider, horse owner, and an equine lecturer. In light of their feedback, small adjustments were made to question wording.

The survey was created using the platform Jisc Online Surveys (<https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>). The final survey was comprised of 24 questions, 12 of which were free text/open questions. A full copy of the survey is available in appendix F.

The survey, entitled '*Horse management, ownership, population and welfare in England and Wales*', went live on 17th November 2022 and closed at 23.59 31st January 2023.

A proactive, targeted recruitment approach was adopted. Sharing of the survey details was actively encouraged in a form of snowball sampling to better reach all parts of the equine sector (Figure 1). The online survey platform (Jisc online surveys) allowed us to track responses as they came in. This enabled us to identify any locations and facets of the equine sector that were less well represented in the survey respondents and focus recruitment accordingly. This facility also allowed us to monitor responses as they come in and ensure that the survey was generating the data required.

Analysis

Quantitative data are presented descriptively and analysed statistically by Mann-Whitney U tests and Pearson Chi-square tests as appropriate. For Mann-Whitney U tests the data was transformed into binary options so the factor in question could be compared to the rest of the relevant options combined, for example, 'groom' vs 'non-groom'. For response variables where the options were 'yes', 'no' and 'don't know' the Pearson Chi-square tests were run on 'yes' vs combined category of 'no' and 'don't know'.

Qualitative data generated by the open, free text questions were analysed using qualitative content analysis¹.

¹ Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative health research*, 15(9), 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>

Results

Quantitative results

A total of 1133 responses containing data were received. The age of respondents is shown in Figure 1 with half of all respondents being 50 years old or older, similar to the England and Wales population age profile², although survey responses from (40-69) are over-represented.

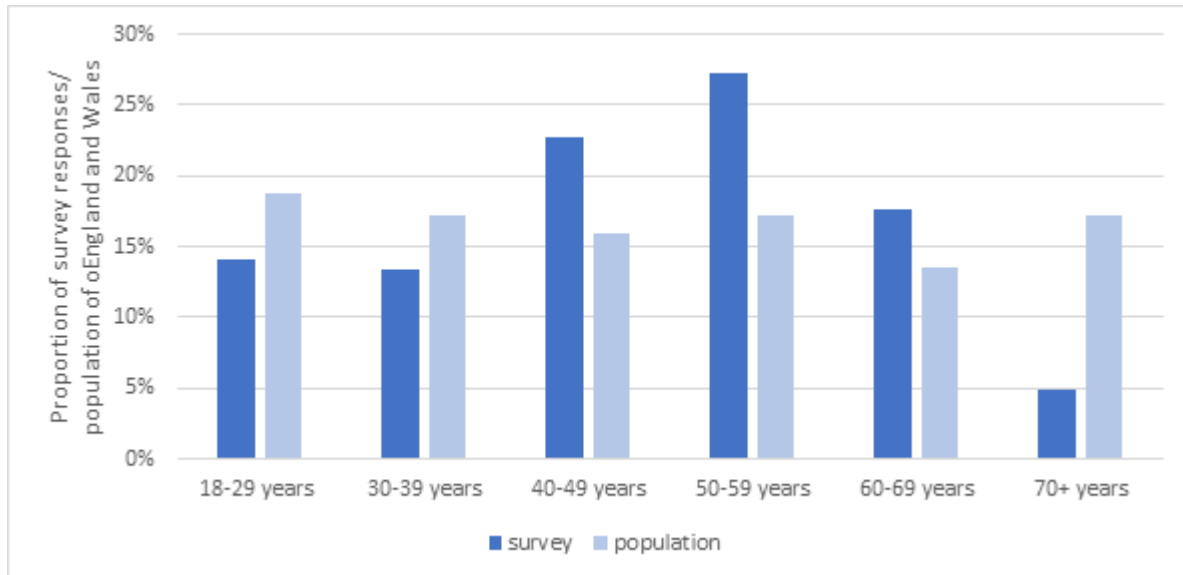


Figure 1: Proportion of survey respondents in each age category (n=1132) and the proportional population of each age category of the total adult population of England and Wales.

The region that respondents lived in is shown in Figure 2 along with the comparison with the population of England and Wales by region³. Note that London was not offered as a region in the survey, and this accounts for 14.6% of the population in England and Wales. The Southwest and Southeast of England are overrepresented in our survey compared to the population and there is a small under-representation of responses from the Northeast England and West Midlands. Almost all (98.4%) of respondents' involvement with horses took place in the region where they lived.

² [https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/age-groups/latest#:~:text=data%20shows%20that%3A-29.1%25%20of%20all%20people%20in%20England%20and%20Wales%20\(17.3%20million,aged%2060%20years%20and%20over](https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/demographics/age-groups/latest#:~:text=data%20shows%20that%3A-29.1%25%20of%20all%20people%20in%20England%20and%20Wales%20(17.3%20million,aged%2060%20years%20and%20over)

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationandhouseholdestimatesenglandandwales/census2021#population-sizes-and-changes-for-regions-and-local-authorities>

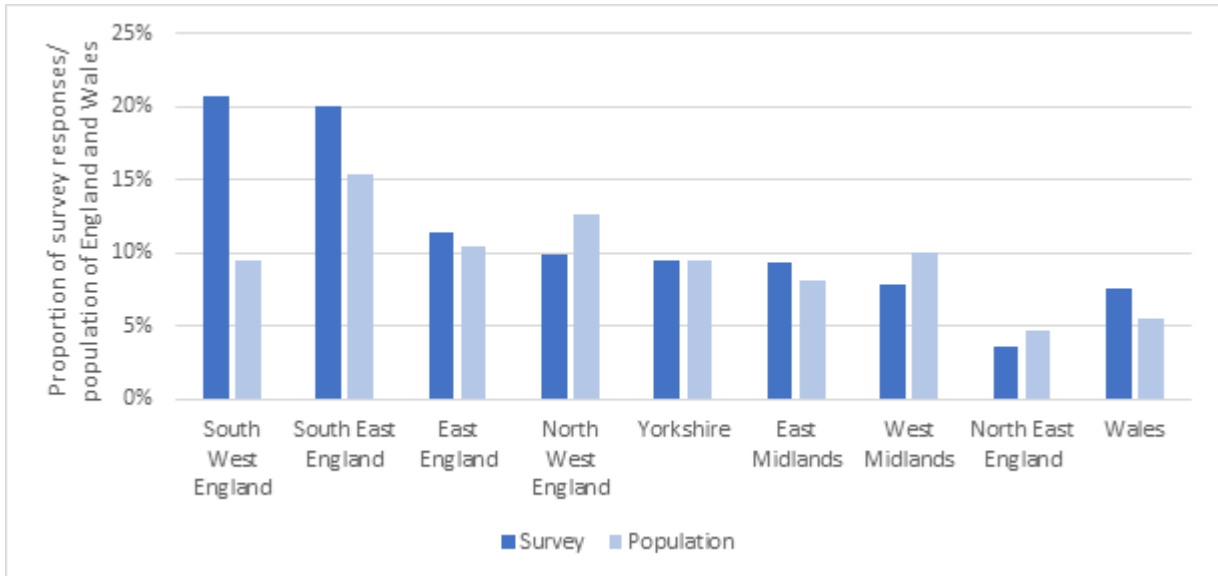


Figure 2: Proportion of survey respondents living in each region (n=1131) and the proportional population of each region of the total population of England and Wales.

Almost all respondents had a long involvement with horses through work or pleasure, with 92.3% involved for 11 or more years (see Figure 3). Only 0.2% (n=31) respondents had been involved with horses for less than 1 year.

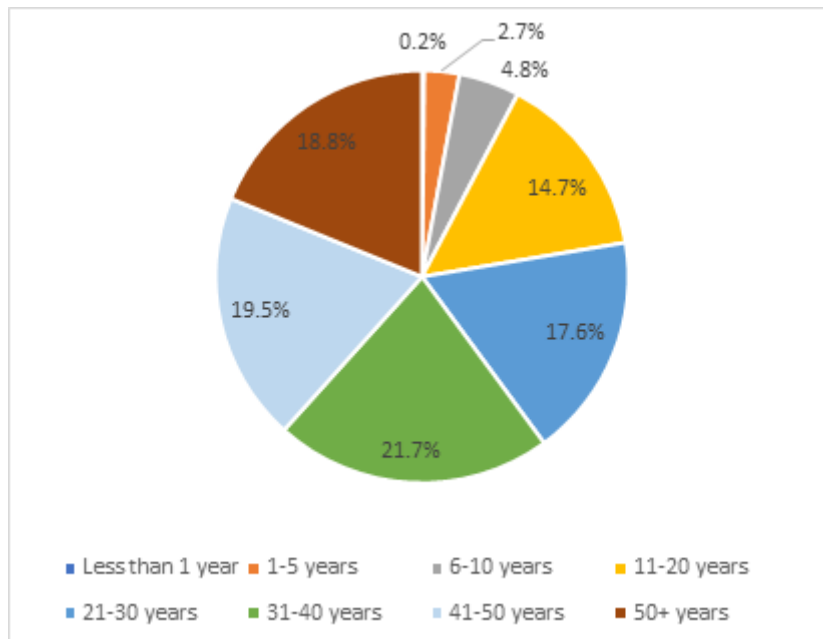


Figure 3: Proportion of survey respondents reporting each length of involvement with horses (n=1132)

Respondents most commonly reported being regularly in direct contact with 2-5 horses (see Figure 4) and having daily contact with horses (89.1%, see Figure 5).

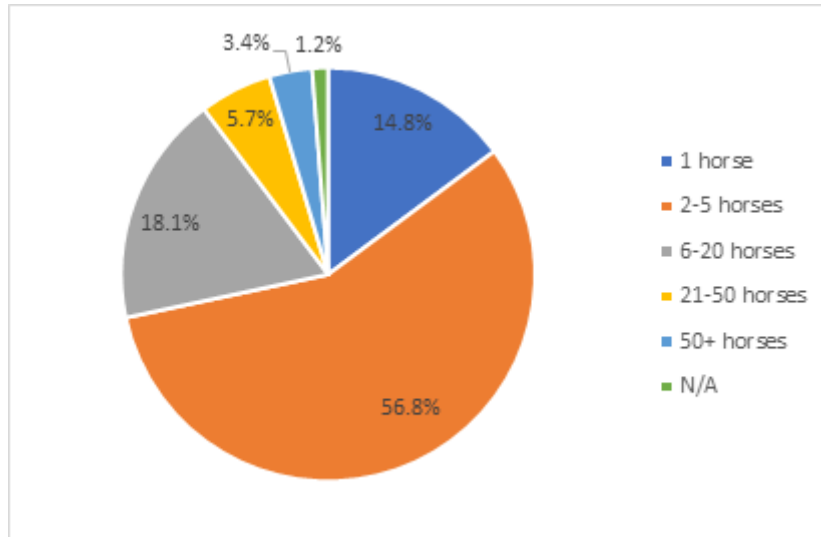


Figure 4: Proportion of survey respondents reporting the number of horses they are involved with (n=1132)

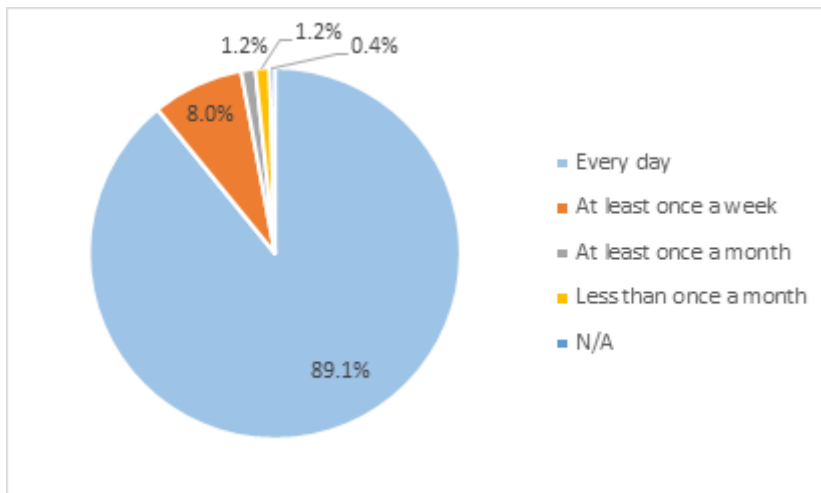


Figure 5: The proportion of respondents reporting the frequency of their involvement with horses (n=1131)

For 15.0% of respondents their involvement with horses was their main source of income, and a further 17.0% derived some of their income from horses. The remaining 68.0% reported not deriving any income from their involvement with horses (n=1132).

There were respondents with a range of roles relating to horses, however by far the most common was to be a horse owner, loaner or carer (89.0%, n=1130) (see Figure 6).

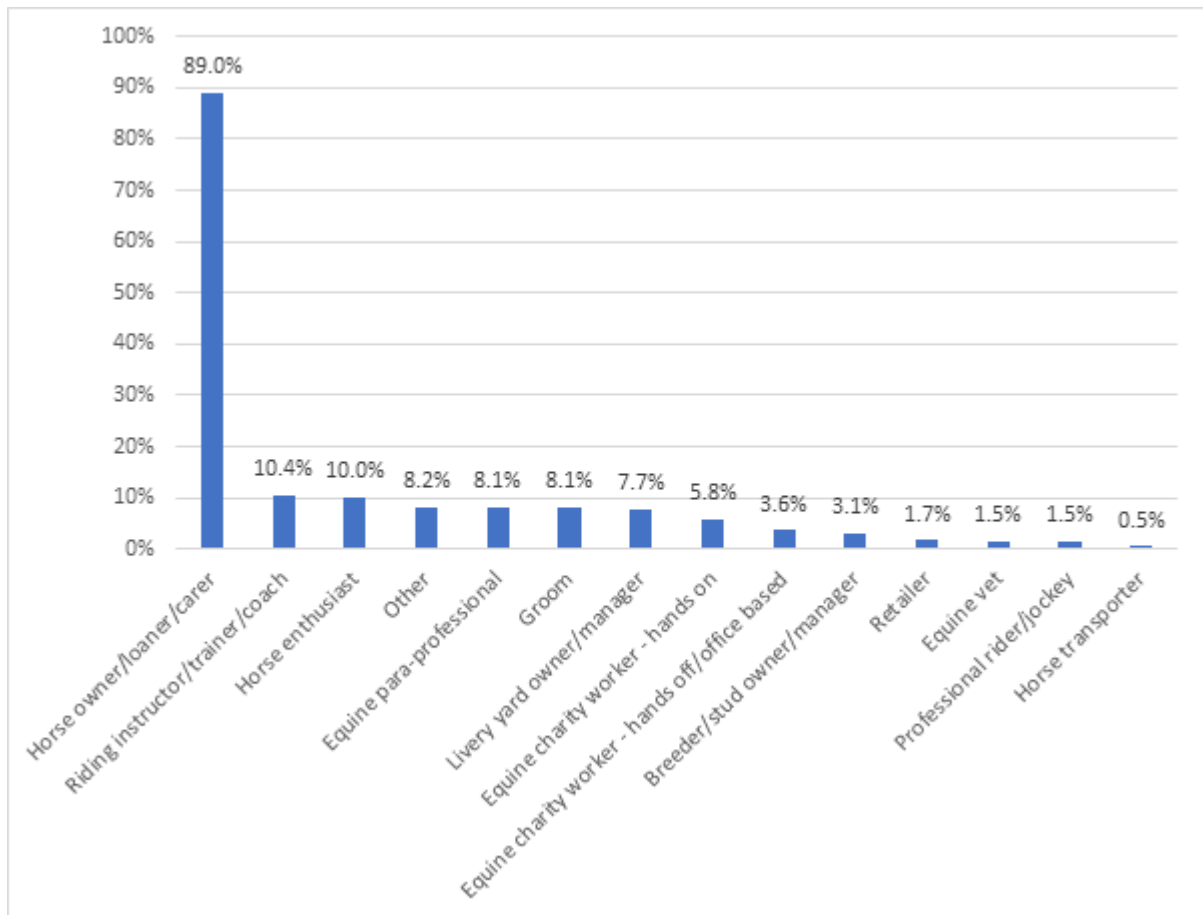


Figure 6: The proportion of respondents reporting their role with horses (more than one answer could be selected) (n=1130).

Two thirds (66.5%) of respondents (n=1130) said they were a member of an equine organisation. Figure 7 illustrates the types of organisations that respondents were members of. Overall over 200 different organisations were mentioned by respondents, by far the most common being the British Horse Society (n=540), followed by British Dressage (n=97), British Riding Clubs (n=77), British Eventing (n=31), World Horse Welfare (n=24), Endurance GB (n=20), Pony Club (n=19), local riding club (n=18), Trec GB (n=13) and British Grooms Association (n=15).

between supply and demand’ received the highest ratings of very important (59.0% and 44.8% respectively) (see Figure 9).

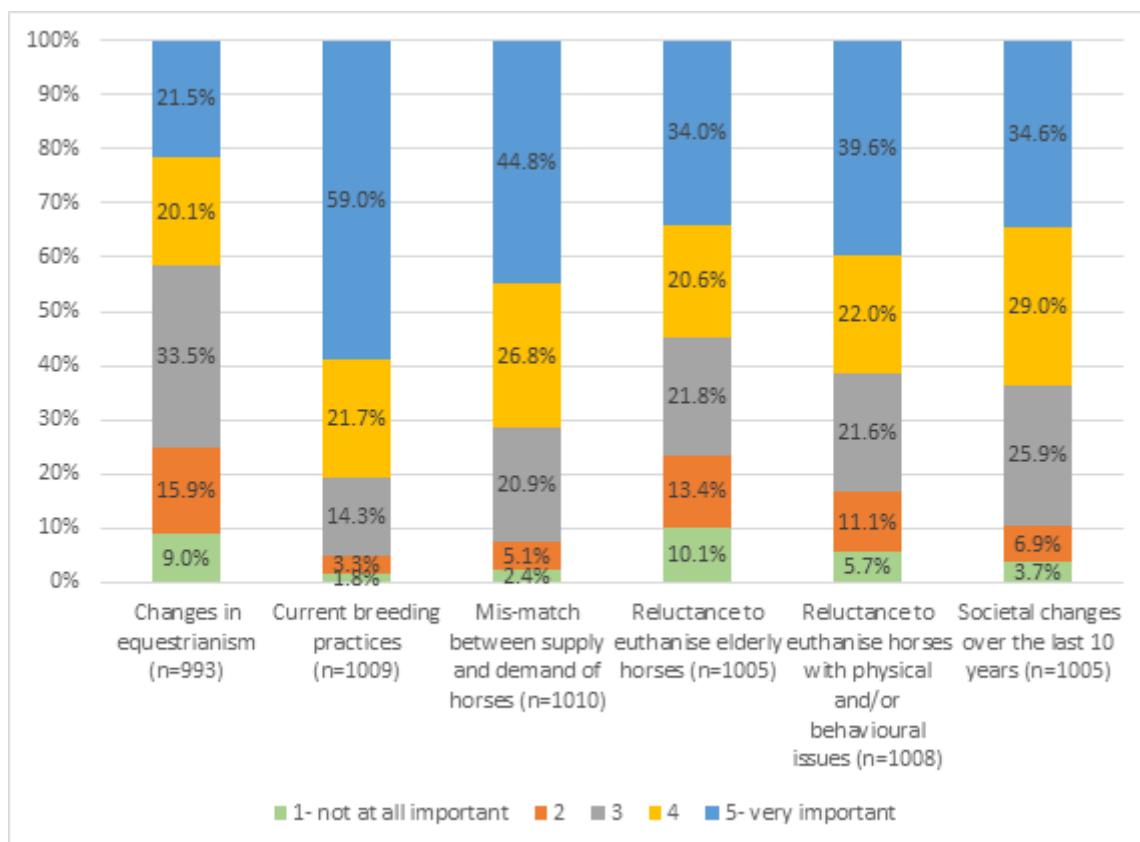


Figure 9: Respondents’ rating of how important they considered various factors in driving the horse crisis (n=993-1010).

The influence of respondent attributes on their ratings for importance of six aspects contributing to the equine crisis are shown in Table 1. There were relatively few regional differences, but some interesting findings related to occupation included that those who were breeders/studowners/managers gave significantly lower scores for the importance of current breeding practices and mismatch between supply and demand to the equine crisis. Those respondents who had personal experience of the horse crisis ascribed significantly higher importance of all potential causes than those who did not have personal experience, and likewise for those who considered ‘horse crisis’ to be an accurate term.

Table 1: The p values for the Mann-Whitney U test for differences in ratings of importance of six attributes in contributing to the equine crisis with significant values (p<0.05) and trends (p≤0.6) highlighted.

Green = significant increase	Pale Green = trend towards increase				
Pink = significant decrease	Pale Pink = trend towards decrease				
Changes in equestrianism	Current breeding practices	Mismatch between supply and demand of horses	Reluctance to euthanise elderly horses	Reluctance to euthanise horses with physical and/or behavioural issues	Societal changes over the last 10 years

	behavioural issues					
Occupation						
Horse owner/loaner/carer	0.603	0.099	0.464	0.409	0.177	0.489
Riding instructor/trainer/coach	0.003	0.946	0.806	0.134	0.351	0.138
Horse enthusiast	0.937	0.21	0.285	0.42	0.099	0.699
Equine paraprofessional	0.11	0.58	0.987	0.832	0.584	0.563
Groom	0.019	0.722	0.511	0.013	0.058	0.426
Livery yard owner/manager	0.064	0.052	0.283	0.518	0.76	0.049
Equine charity worker - hands on	0.343	0.321	0.664	0.397	0.105	0.836
Equine charity worker- office-based	0.838	0.225	0.03	0.146	0.333	0.819
Breeder/studowner/manager	0.814	0.001	0.021	0.051	0.084	0.493
Retailer	0.278	0.406	0.238	0.02	0.115	0.222
Equine vet	0.201	0.003	0.058	0.465	0.336	0.75
Professional rider jockey	0.781	0.906	0.356	0.092	0.402	0.137
Horse transporter	0.509	0.069	0.022	0.284	0.079	0.755
Region						
South West England	0.658	0.323	0.059	0.112	0.117	0.567
South East England	0.338	0.059	0.162	0.106	0.23	0.304
East England	0.83	0.707	0.824	0.112	0.309	0.384
North West England	0.281	0.593	0.251	0.796	0.458	0.647
Yorkshire	0.254	0.22	0.526	1	0.407	0.043
East Midlands	0.053	0.928	0.781	0.785	0.886	0.214
West Midlands	0.836	0.113	0.182	0.284	0.179	0.627
North East England	0.202	0.143	0.153	0.417	0.227	0.695
South Wales	0.187	0.032	0.659	0.522	0.737	0.456
North Wales	0.59	0.503	0.573	0.174	0.155	0.912
Wales	0.379	0.107	0.489	0.215	0.316	0.489
Age						
18-29 years	0.423	0.032	0.013	0.299	0.001	0.174
30-39 years	0.738	0.583	0.178	0.644	0.199	0.814
40-49 years	0.687	0.359	0.496	0.049	0.042	0.395
50-59 years	0.922	0.419	0.121	0.056	0.191	0.517
60-69 years	0.228	0.196	0.189	0.845	0.754	0.217
70+ years	0.022	0.073	0.068	0.152	0.188	0.306
Horse contact						
Contact with 6 or more horses	0.699	0.428	0.698	0.32	0.086	0.85
Contact with horses for 20+ years	0.441	0.114	0.034	0.003	<0.001	0.626
Daily contact with horses	0.051	0.01	0.335	0.226	0.062	0.792

Some/all income derived from horses	0.004	0.069	0.674	0.015	0.109	0.561
Member of an equine society	0.554	0.684	0.224	<0.001	<0.001	0.219
Familiarity with horse crisis						
Have heard of the horse crisis	0.721	<0.001	<0.001	0.035	0.044	0.381
Stated horse crisis is an accurate term	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.001	0.013	<0.001
Have personal experience of the horse crisis	<0.001	0.001	0.016	0.039	0.052	0.003

The factors affecting likelihood of having heard of the horse crisis, considering it an accurate term, having personal experience of it, and being a member of an equine society are shown in Table 2. Riding instructors, paraprofessionals and office-based and hands-on charity workers were all significantly more likely to have personal experience of the horse crisis, and horse owners/carers/loaners were significantly less likely than others. Respondents with contact with 6 or more horses, with horses for 20+ years, and who derive at least some of their income from equine work were also more likely to have personal experience of the horse crisis.

Table 2: The p values for the Pearson Chi-square test for respondent attributes and their responses relating to the horse crisis and membership of an equine society with significant values ($p < 0.05$) and trends ($p \leq 0.6$) highlighted.

	Have heard of the horse crisis	Stated horse crisis is an accurate term	Have personal experience of the horse crisis	Member of an equine society
Green = significantly more likely	Pale Green = trend towards increase			
Pink = significantly less likely	Pale Pink = trend towards decrease			
Horse owner/loaner/carers	0.467	0.603	0.032	0.005
Riding instructor/trainer/coach	0.513	0.47	0.008	<0.001
Horse enthusiast	0.219	0.006	0.365	0.187
Equine paraprofessional	0.569	0.891	0.009	0.008
Groom	0.747	0.036	0.268	0.99
Livery yard owner/manager	0.406	0.517	0.004	0.002
Equine charity worker - hands on	<0.001	0.044	<0.001	0.708
Equine charity worker- office-based	<0.001	0.565	<0.001	0.296
Breeder/studowner/manager	0.338	0.407	0.231	0.048
Retailer	0.702	0.241	0.693	0.509
Equine vet	0.587	0.776	0.433	0.855
Professional rider jockey	0.501	0.706	0.656	0.726
Horse transporter	insufficient data			
Region				
South West England	0.752	0.366	0.122	0.024
South East England	0.785	0.429	0.207	0.841
East England	0.919	0.946	0.875	0.008
North West England	0.027	0.56	0.159	0.412

Yorkshire	0.424	0.219	0.662	0.175
East Midlands	0.001	0.943	0.597	0.684
West Midlands	0.002	0.206	0.576	0.377
North East England	0.161	0.074	0.872	0.249
South Wales	0.999	0.738	0.622	0.912
North Wales	0.917	0.799	0.831	0.033
Wales	0.958	0.661	0.583	0.254
Age				
18-29 years	0.051	0.839	0.409	<0.001
30-39 years	0.577	0.913	0.311	0.12
40-49 years	0.395	0.57	0.767	0.749
50-59 years	0.281	0.465	0.852	0.305
60-69 years	0.233	0.405	0.25	0.008
70+ years	0.19	0.103	0.922	0.166
50+ years	0.015	0.49	0.316	<0.001
Horse contact				
Contact with 6 or more horses	0.02	0.692	<0.001	<0.001
Contact with horses for 20+ years	0.023	0.347	0.026	<0.001
Some/all income derived from horses	0.026	0.318	<0.001	0.002
Member of an equine society	0.025	0.866	0.909	
Daily contact with horses	0.51	0.011	0.127	0.025
Personal experience of equine crisis		<0.001		

Qualitative results

1. Horse management, ownership, population and welfare in England and Wales

In this section respondents were asked to give their views and experiences of how seven factors may have influenced horse management, ownership, population, and welfare (for good or bad) in England and Wales over the last 10 years.

Current breeding practices

Free text answers to this question were provided by 829 respondents, with 12% (n=102) of these saying that they had no experience or opinion to give regarding the influence of current breeding practices on horse management, ownership, population, and welfare (for good or bad) in England and Wales over the last 10 years.

The impact of COVID-19 on equine breeding and horse prices was mentioned, although some respondents believed that this trend may be declining or even reversing.

“Over population is rampant right now, especially post Covid, there are a lot of youngsters available that perhaps shouldn't have been bred”

“I work in the New Forest. After covid, there was a significant increase in New Forest foals being born, due to increased demand and selling prices. This trend has plateaued and is maybe going the other way.”

“Generally, my perception is there has been an overbreeding of horses at all levels of equestrian industry, from people who simply want to have a foal from a horse they already have to the professional sports. High prices for “good” horses in the last few years has disguised this factor to some extent but I would think there are now certainly more horses out there than is sustainable.”

Unregulated and indiscriminate breeding

The practice of breeding from a mare that can no longer be ridden for physical or behavioural reasons was mentioned by many respondents. Concerns related to the contribution this makes to the size of the equine population, the fact that many of these individual breeders are novices and so inexperienced in the practicalities and costs associated with breeding equines, and the quality of the horses being produced by these breeders.

“Breeding from unsound mares really needs to be addressed. So many private owners breed from their mares that have had to be retired early. Breeding from mares with either undiagnosed issues, early joint issues or KS [kissing spine] gives such a high risk of passing this issue on. I’ve also experienced a lot of homebred horses[sic] who’ve been raised in normal yards with no other young stock. All of these horses have had hefty behaviour issues as they were not socialised.”

“Horses are used for breeding if the owners are incapable of using them for anything else. This means not the best horses are used and unpleasant traits are being bred on.”

Breeding was seen to be increasingly for financial gain, rather than being a selective and informed process conducted by people with an interest in a specific breed.

“Breeding should be selective to produce the best horses. Currently it’s seems like people breed anything to gain money”

“the amount of poorly put together and bred horses you come across is astonishing. From backyard breeders to proper studs”

The regulation or licencing of breeding was seen as a necessity by some respondents, whether this was the licencing of all breeding establishments, or the licencing of individual stallions. The lack of enforcement of current legislation regarding equine identification as also raised.

“Personally I think the whole country needs to crack down on breeders and make it so you have to have a licence to breed and are checked every year. And any foals or horses sold must be geldwd[sic] so only official breeders can breed horses.”

“Zero enforcement of microchip laws allow culprits to continue breeding with no responsibility”

“Needs to be better regulated so we don’t get over run like stray dogs. Horses are living longer and most owners don’t want lifetime responsibility”

While the majority of respondents shared the view of this respondent;

“Breeding has seriously deteriorated over the last 20/30 years resulting in horses which suffer from poor conformation and health issues,”

it is important to recognise that this view was not universally held by the sample, with some respondents expressing their opinion that improvements had been seen in the quality of horses being bred.

“Breeding has significantly improved producing top quality horses today”

“Breeding quality has improved markedly”

Type of horses being bred

Respondents flagged up a range of concerns relating to the types of equines currently being bred. This encompassed the apparent trend in breeding to the extremes in terms of cost, quality and height, leaving the middle of the market – those wanting an averagely priced, quality and sized horse – undersupplied.

“Too many breeder[sic] wanting to breed the next Olympic winner when 85% at least just want a gentle all rounder. Not enough 'bog standard' horses being bred”

“Excessive top level or competition animals being bred I think rather than animals suitable for the everyday- or pleasure / casual riders and aren’t suitable for novices but if they end up in the wrong hands I think the horses suffer.”

“There are too many sharp horses bred that whilst talented, can’t be ridden by amateurs and if they aren’t good enough for a pro struggle to find homes”

“Too many ameturer[sic] breeders breeding to mares that are unsound/unsuitable. Too many sports horses being bred to be over 16.2hh or ponies under 14.2hh lack of cover for the middle of the market.”

“Too many ‘Ferrari’ and not enough 4x4 or SUV types”

The size of horses being bred currently was particularly remarked on when their diminutive size makes them unsuitable for ridden work.

“I believe there is an overpopulation of certain breeds who are bred too small and therefore struggle to find a job with most people”

“The market appears flooded with small coloured cobs. I have also noticed that shire breeders are breeding away from the standard with a preference for massive horses which wouldn't have been entertained years ago. They seem to be breeding for the show ring”

Concerns were raised over the increasing practice of crossbreeding horses rather than producing purebred horses. This led to concerns over the market demand for purebred British breeds, particularly given the vulnerability of many native breeds and the absence of any controlled and well managed breeding plan in place for those at risk.

“There need to be more focus on British breeding. We are at risk of loosing our native breeds entirely due to cross breeding or lack of understanding”

“not enough done for the rare breeds”

“Increased cross breeding bringing more variety but limiting purebred markets”

“Breed standards changing , more poor quality traits being bred into certain breeds as opposed to what was being bred 50 years ago. Foreign warmblood influence producing horses with predisposed problems such as kissing spine and poor jock[sic], joint conformation. No real support or breeding plan for British breeders. No money in breeding horses in the uk results in more back yard breeders and a glut of poor quality animals in the UK.”

Breeding for performance at the expense of soundness and longevity, the breeding of horses with genetic issues, or selective breeding for specific traits that comprise health, was also mentioned by respondents, with one associating this with the growth of the leisure sector.

“Breeding for specific areas ie dressage is, I feel, producing horses with more vulnerable limbs etc. Hyper flexion etc. Arabs with dished noses that look truly deformed.”

“I don't know a huge amount about breeding but it seems to me that sport horses are being bred for movement / extravagance without considering soundness & longevity.”

“Too many people breed unsuitable horses, e.g. coloured cobs with genetic PSSM [Polysaccharide Storage Myopathy] traits, Connemaras with HWSD [Hoof Wall Separation Disease] , poor conformation (breeding from family horse as can't ride it anymore) etc”

“Too many poor quality horses being bred from with no concern about long term health of the foal. This is at all levels from 'gypsy' horses through to top level warmbloods. Horses with degenerative conditions and/or poor conformation are being bred from.”

“Breeding for fashion I.e extreme concave faces for Arabs etc”

“As the leisure horse industry has expanded there seems to have been horses produced without thought to their potential soundness of mind and body.”

“I feel that the current breeders of high end horses are increasingly producing them too young. Also we pay absolutely no regard to the incidence of the various strains of PSSM [Polysaccharide Storage Myopathy] traits, Connemaras with HWSD [Hoof Wall Separation Disease], especially in Warmbloods and ISH [Irish Sports Horses]. Connemara ponies used to be lovely, sensible and sturdy ponies. Now too many seem to have been mixed with Anglo Arabs to produce a finer and frankly neurotic small riding horse. We also see them crossed with ISH and showing signs of possible PSSM variants. The current high value of horses, especially post pandemic, is making this issue worse.”

“Producing horses too young” in this context was taken to mean that the respondent felt these horses were being started and trained for their future ridden careers too soon, at an age when they were not fully grown and developed.

Other changes in breeding practices

Recent changes inside and without the equine sector and the influence these have had on breeding practices were frequently commented on. These included the consequences of Brexit and the pandemic, the costs associated with breeding, who is breeding horses and breeding technologies.

Brexit was reported to have increased the costs associated with importing equines, which may potentially have implications for breeding activity within the UK (United Kingdom) and has also made it challenging to access semen from stallions from abroad.

“I used to import horses from Sweden but it is no longer viable due to VAT. I have bred horses previously but no youngsters now - am considering importing a yearling from Ireland (as my usual supplier in Sweden is now too expensive due to Brexit/VAT)”

“Semen from stallions based abroad (e.g. in Europe) is generally of higher quality than UK based stallions but is now harder to get hold of due to Brexit.”

“A lot[sic] has changed with more horses coming over from Ireland, more horses bought unseen via the Internet. It seems rarer now to buy a horse bred in the UK, or if you do it's likely the breeding/blood lines of the horse are important to you. However this does seem to be changing again due to brexit and the cost of transporting horses increasing.”

There were contrasting views of the pandemic, with respondents mentioning both an increase and a reduction in breeding they perceived as associated with this event.

“I think the number of private breeders has increased- especially through Covid-19 when demand for horses and the amount people could charge sky-rocketed”

“I think lockdown reduced numbers being bred, but it has picked up again this year”

As seen above, the increase in private or individual breeders was seen by some respondents to be associated with lockdown and the potential for financial gain. The actual costs of breeding were perceived by some respondents to have increased in recent times, and this associated with the current economic climate could potentially lead to a reduction in breeding in the near future.

“Bred in 1990s, not worth it now, too expensive”

“breeding horses is 'cheap', but raising them is expensive. most hobby breeders have little understanding on cost and genetics, or physical/mental suitability of their breeding mares. I dont think this has really changed much. however i expect to see less youstock in the next 2/3 years, as hobby owners wont afford to breed. a few hundred for a stud fee is not something they will now spend. I dont think this lack will be a bad thing studs tend to be very clear about how much they want to sell their stock for, so put more effort into haveing mares/stallions with a showing/working/competition history.”

However, this was not always the case with some respondents reporting a rise in people breeding their own horses rather than buying a new horse.

“I have noticed in the last 5 years a lot[sic] more people are breeding from their mares instead of buying.”

The increase in private breeders and consequently the increased availability of cheaper horses meant that some respondents believed that this has changed buyer behaviour away from purchasing horses through studs, which are often more expensive in comparison.

“Horses have become easily available through amateur breeding and so the high quality well-bred purposeful horses are actually less attractive to the everyday owner because they can easily find an average horse easier.”

“Reproduction is probably the biggest growing sector within our practice. It seems like more individuals are choosing to breed their mares at home rather than through studs.”

“Buyers still seem unaware of the true cost of breeding and raising a horse to 3-4 yrs old properly and are reluctant to pay true value except at the top end of the market.”

Concerns were also raised around practices at some studs, particularly around the repeated breeding of mares and their disposal once their breeding days were over.

“Studs appear untouchable by law, especially when they are linked to large companies. There needs to be a review about breeding regulations to stop mares being forced to pump out foals and then just receive a bullet. There is essentially an equivalent of the puppy farming crisis.”

Conflicting opinions were also expressed, although these were in the minority.

“I have seen more of a shift from private breeders to stud and more of a focus on pedigree”

Concerns were raised about the use of modern breeding practices such as artificial insemination and embryo transfer.

“I don't like how AI is involved so much now”

“Professional breeding seems to be getting close to the wire in terms of what is acceptable in breeding (clones, surrogates, embryo transfers, selection) but at least they generally breed for a specific purpose so the horse won't go unwanted.”

“Strong concerns for recipient mares in embryo transfer centres welfare (from personal experience).”

Issues surrounding early weaning, the production of young horses, and young horse competitions were also mentioned.

Positive perceptions of breeding

It is important to note that not all respondents had negative comments about current breeding practice. Although those expressing more positive opinions were in the minority, the positive views expressed encompassed the quality of horses, the strength of the breeding industry and the improved availability of information on breeding.

“I am happy with the current situation regarding breeding”

“I think the quality of breeding has improved massively, with more consideration to it”

“The current breeding industry in horseracing is very strong and appeals to a wide range of people. They have differing views about what they want from a racehorse and this ensures that there is variation within the industry. The welfare of young stock within the industry is paramount and is regulated well by the British Horseracing Authority who continue to make improvements across the board”

“Good, there's more on media platforms about breeding”

Supply and demand

A free text response relating to the influence of supply and demand on horse management, ownership, population, and welfare (for good or bad) in England and Wales over the last 10 years was left by 866 respondents. Responses were grouped into five areas (commonalities with breeding

The mismatch between the demand for mid-sized, sensible riding horses and the horses available for sale was frequently commented on.

“Everyone wants a 15.2/16.2 sensible all rounder up to carrying 14 stone and jumping 100cm. Why don't people breed more of this type?”

“Going purely on price, there is an unmet demand for medium in large size horses that will do no more than pleasure riding. And an oversupply of small cobs and thoroughbreds.”

“Horse market is flooded with horses of little value and are too small for general riding / children's ponies. Horses for general purposes, all rounders are in short supply sending prices up and out of range of happy hackers, riding schools, RDAs [Riding for the Disabled Association] etc”

“Lots of demand in recent years but I think the demand is for ‘useable’ animals and so many are not fit for work that they end up back on the market. Supply of equines is there but it's not a supply of good quality useful animals.”

“I've heard at the stables that it's currently very difficult to find a good family horse and this is a big change from 5-10 years ago.”

“Too much supply at the low/bottom end of the market and with thoroughbred racehorses.”

The equine marketplace and equine welfare

The equine marketplace over the past 10 years was portrayed as “crazy” due to the sudden increase in demand for equines that was attributed to the pandemic, although there wasn't a consistent view as to whether this price rise had slowed.

“Horse prices have gone bonkers during and post covid.”

“Slowed down slightly now, but over the past two years it has been crazy!”

Some respondents expressed their pleasure in the price increase, suggesting prices now better reflected the true cost of breeding and producing horses, and others implying higher costs may lead to better welfare.

“Finally people seen to be asking more realistic prices which reflects the work and money it costs to breed good horses. Long may it last!”

“Prices have shot up since covid making the sport hard to get into for some groups of people, such as families with a horse mad child. On the other hand its worth it as tbs arent being sold for peanuts to the inexperienced”

“The supply of talented and athletic horses is better than ever. But the price of all horses has gone up a lot more than inflation having been stagnant for many years. That may be of benefit if it means people take better care of an expensive asset.”

Other respondents felt that the price rise would lead to poorer welfare as people, particularly novice or inexperienced owners, purchased what they could afford rather than what was most suitable for them. Horses were also reported as being put into work earlier than they would have been in the past, to facilitate selling.

“Horses are being produced too young, buyers are expecting 4yr olds with experience so they are being started at 3, this is a viscous cycle or buyer and seller” “The demand for younger horses pre trained

appears to be high. Therefore too demanding on the horses body. Again leading to health issues and then being passed along."

"Huge increase in demand for horses in general, but specifically 6-10 year olds with reasonable experience. The supply of horses of this category is low which has driven the price up. Additionally the high price has caused people to buy cheaper horses which do not match ability leading to a potential down turn in horse welfare."

"The demand was high last year, prices rocketed, so some people were breaking horses early to get them saleable. Additionally lots of people who are inexperienced with ownership have bought, often over-horsed themselves, have realised that they're struggling both with time and money, so are not looking after the horses properly. Prices have also increased breeding, people wanting to make fast money, but with prices stabilising, and supply up there's a worry that there will be a glut of unwanted youngsters in a couple of years, who haven't been well handled / wormed / vaccinated etc."

"What seems to be happening is people buy young, green horses that they don't know how to train and this causes issues for both horse and rider."

Another welfare concern expressed, was the apparent increase in unfit and 'problem' horses advertised for sale.

"seeing a lot of people selling horses 'straight from the field' or 'out of work', can't help but think there are know[sic] issues in these horses and they are being passed on. Very sad to see."

"The market is flooded with 'problem' horses. I spent 9 months trying to buy a horse before my current one I now have. I travelled up to 150 miles to view horses. Lots of people were not truthful about the animals they were selling. 3 intended horses from different sources all failed vettings, despite the owner / dealer saying there was nothing wrong with them. Many horses I went to see had behavioural problems (some of the owners were clearly not able to handle the horse properly). All the people I know in the horse world have had similar experiences to me. It is a minefield trying to buy a horse.... Most dealers do not know any of the history/temperament of the horse they are selling so dont know if it is suitable for the purchaser. They are looking for a quick turnaround to maximise profit. No one gains, horses get the wrong owners, owners the wrong horse!"

"Cost of buying is stupid money. Means a lot of horses that should be retired or euthanized are being passed to dodgy dealers to sell. You used to expect to oay a few grand for a family type horse, nowadays theyre upwards of 6k, amd the cheaper ones that 1st time owners or less knowledgeable[sic] people buy are broken."

Older horses who were no longer fit for purpose were also perceived to be sold on in a way they hadn't been previously.

"Too many people trying to unload old horses with issues to novice homes rather than seeing through there[sic] responsibility to keep or PTS[put to sleep]"

"I think owners don't take responsibility for their old horses, better to put them down than pass them around - makes me furious when I see 'looking for forever companion home' - maybe this is a reflection of either £ restraints or people turning a blind eye to reality."

"The price of horses shot up in the pandemic as people had available time and some spare cash. I have seen 17+ years riding horses, with known pathology, advertised for £15k. How can that be justifiable? The horse already has an issue which will need ongoing care and is likely to aquire more as the years progress. We have seen clients of ours sold "schoolmasters" for £10k+ only to find that the horses had

serious issues. In one case the horse was suspected to have been injected in multiple joints and was crippled as it wore off. What do you do? Return the horse to an uncertain future? The caring new owners had her euthanized as she couldn't even be a pasture pet. Horse who would have been retired are being patched up and sold in far too big numbers. Now, as the cost of living begins to bite, many overstocked sellers will want to move horses on before prices take a hit."

"seeing more older horses (late teens upwards) being sold in the last couple of months "

The availability and ease of purchasing donkeys was also commented on, reflecting a mismatch between supply and demand in this part of the equine sector.

"Hard to buy donkeys from respectable places"

"I work for a charity that has a long waiting list so some people don't want to wait to have donkeys from us so buy from breeders then often 6 months later they call us to relinquish those donkeys as they are difficult to handle/pregnant/not as described. I have a large mule personally and there are very few of these available in the UK so I know quite a few people who have imported from Spain."

The same was also true for horses being sought for ridings schools and 'Riding for the Disabled' programmes.

"Riding schools are reporting that they are struggling to find suitable horses for their specific needs as the high costs are a barrier."

"Currently there seems to be a lack of big weight carrying horses for riding schools such as riding for the disabled."

Throughout the respondent's responses, expressions of mistrust in the equine marketplace were not uncommon,

"A complete lottery now. Price unrelated to experience/ breeding or any plausible factors."

"Trust no one"

"As a relatively inexperienced person, the prospect of buying is terrifying, to be honest. It is very easy to be mis-sold a horse (in terms of either health or ability of horse versus person) and a very expensive and difficult issue to rectify once the purchase has been made. The purchase price (for a leisure horse) is small compared to the cost of keeping a horse, even now that prices have risen dramatically. However it is still not an insignificant sum."

Regulation and monitoring

The lack of trust in the current equine marketplace led some respondents to express the need for regulation and monitoring of this practice, particularly to protect the buyer.

"Absolute minefield, little or no regulation, no recourse for miss selling."

"So many poor quality animals on the market ranging in various pricing and quality. Should be more consequences on vendors for the selling of lame/bad horses being sold under false pretences"

"Selling needs better management, laws in place for disclosure of previous veterinary treatment or behavioral issues"

While others felt that sales of horses perceived to be vulnerable or at risk should be monitored.

“Buying and selling is not great but alright at the moment in the UK. Most young horses are sold to good owners. Old horses' sellings need to be monitored though, since that can go very badly wrong.”

Some respondents proposed solutions to address the risks for people and horses associated with buying and selling, as well as expressing their thoughts on the current passporting system.

“Selling needs more governance and you don't know where the horse will end up so perhaps some way of better tracking ownership “

“Dealers should be monitored/inspected on a regular basis.”

“I think it's incredibly sad how many 'broken' horses are for sale. I believe strongly that the veterinary record should belong to the horse, and not to the owner. I see horses who have clearly had veterinary intervention to improve their level of soundness for sale, which in time wears off - the new owners then need to begin the investigation process again, if they are willing.”

“there should be regulation on dealers e.g., like yhe[sic] farrier society, must be registered to practice”

“Not bought a horse in over 10 years but it's easier to buy a horse than a car, it shouldn't be so easy. The passport system is not fit for purpose. Too many horses are sold on without correct paperwork and passports are not updated.”

“Unregulated; buying seems to have become harder, more dodgy since social media made it so easy for anyone to advertise. Vets have even said it's best to buy from dealers now as you have some legal protection.”

The buying process

Changes in current practice around buying and selling horses were also noted by respondents.

From a buyer's perspective, changes in behaviour were mentioned in relation to pre-purchase exams (vettings) and in buying horses without viewing them first.

“We perform a lot of pre purchase exams- it seems that demand is massive which is driving prices higher and higher. Most of the horses we see being sold are youngsters intended for performance sports, usually 3 or 4 years old. We rarely see horses younger than this, though of course many people would not have a vetting on such animals. “

“Buying/selling prices significantly Increased over covid, lots more buying unseen, lots more failing vet checks.”

“More care should be taken when buying. ie vet checks and taking time to get to know the horse before buying, rather than buying horses unseen and untried.”

“Too many people buying unseen & not getting proper vetting done”

“Ridiculous market currently. Horses being sold unseen and to unsuitable homes, without proper vet checks and very expensive! There is fault on both sides here, but it is more than likely the horse that will suffer for it.”

One respondent described their recent experiences of trying to buy a new horse:

“Having purchased a horse this year there are a number of horses that are misadvertised, or being sold on due to being purchased by an inexperienced owner. Although I agree with the pricing to produce a

horse a lot or people are selling untested horses at the price of a proven horse. I found private sellers were strongly against vettings and I had over 4 sellers continue to advertise the horse despite me putting a deposit down in the hopes someone wouldn't want a vetting. The dealer i spoke to all encouraged vettings."

The issue of vetting was raised by many respondents, often with conflicting viewpoints;

"More people are having vettings done now on cheaper horses,"

"There is less vetting's being asked for, and people seem more wary of spending money this year."

"Buying is a nightmare with vetting, using outdated flexion test and failing horses on minor issues which seems led by insurance. "

Selling related changes included the increased use of the internet as a sales platform and an increase in the number of dealers selling horses.

"Social media plays a huge part in the sale and purchase yet is largely unregulated it seems."

"internet contributes to reach of buyers and sellers, but also to fraud/unscrupulous people. Dealers have increased but quality of those dealers still varies wildly."

Changes in the equine sector

Respondent responses reflected a range of perceived attitudinal and behavioural changes within the equine sector. Concerns were expressed over horses being more frequently moved between homes and not given a chance to settle into a new home or role before being deemed unsuitable and sold on.

"I have seen horses bought and sold on or returned quickly if they don't perform as advertised, as if the horse were a car, not a sentient being who might need time to feel safe in a new home and build trust and understanding with new people. I find this very sad."

"Prices are very high at the moment but buyers also seem less committed to their horses their is lots of changing horses now which is obviously detrimental to the horse"

"Horses and ponies moved on quickly, forever homes seem to be decreasing."

"I don't agree with selling horses on just because they no longer serve a purpose to you. Too many horses are passed from pillar to post. Horses are family members and should be treated as such. You wouldn't sell your child."

"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."

"I have noticed in the last few years older horses who should perhaps be enjoying retirement are being sold and then are not sound enough for the work they have been sold onto"

"Horses seem to be treated by alot of people like a car and are often passed from person to person which I think is a sad state for the animal, although probably unavoidable. People seem to have a checklist of items for the ideal horse and will sell them as soon as they step a foot out of line. Hence I understand those selling want value for their horse, but prices are silly at the moment asking £££££ for young, arthritic horses."

“Another negative welfare impact. All about money. Horse ignored as a sentient being. Horses are passed on far too much. Few have secure, safe lifelong homes.”

“I personally do not like the fact that horses are passed on to numerous owners during their lifetime, this is standard practice, you regularly hear people saying, they want a nice home for their old horse, so he can have a nice retirement. If they were prepared to look after him in his old age, why do they think someone else will. We owe them more, we owe them dignity and safety in their old age”

Although, one respondent expressed the opposing view,

“I think people are keeping horses longer because it is harder to find good quality horses.”

The suggested change in how horses are viewed within the sector was captured succinctly by some respondents,

“Horses/ponies treated as disposable commodities.”

“Commodification of equines - this obviously influences the previous question. Horses are objectified for a use, very few get to live with a static herd because they are bought and sold or moved for other reasons.”

“Horses seem to be 'disposable' nowadays - no-one wants to spend the time that is necessary to bond and listen to the horse.”

One respondent, however, suggested that this commodification may not have a negative impact on equine welfare.

“Horses are now bought and sold for far more than they were 10 years ago! I believe there is a great demand for horses and a shorter supply, which has affected this. I believe this has caused a shift in focus onto horses as commodities, but hope that it means greater care is taken as horses are 'worth' more to breeders and dealers.”

Other changes within the equine sectors that respondents commented on are the apparent increase in novice horse owners and implications of this in terms of expectations, knowledge and buyer behaviour.

“A LOT more novice owners now than 10 years back, leads to less use of riding centres and also less correct knowledge of riding and management of horses”

“Demand from novice riders seems higher”

“Cobs are up in price, finer breeds down as a lot of novices are buying”

“People's expectations are higher today ie they all want ready made but quite often can't ride them”

“I have found the rise in the cost of horses over recent years has affected people from buying what they wanted. ie buying youngsters or taking on ex racers without experience as they are cheaper”

Fads and fashions relating to the popularity of certain breeds or types are nothing new however, the influence they have on the market and on equine welfare as they change over time should be noted.

“There seems to be fads in ownership of certain bloodlines/breed at anytime. Connie's come to mind here”

“Seems to be influenced by fashions, eg for Connemaras, sportshorses, warm bloods.”

It wasn't all about a lack of available places, however as one respondent explained: *"There's a lack of suitable livery yards rather than a lack of livery yards!!"*

The increase in stocking density in the remaining yards was mentioned frequently amongst other concerns.

"Multiple issues from over-crowding, lack of suitable turnout, inappropriate stable sizes for increasingly larger horses, very poor service for part and 'full' livery, lack of knowledgeable yard owners, inflexible and ill equipped yards, poor locations with too much traffic..."

"We have 3 livery yards and 3 private yards in our little village alone. The demand has changed from full livery to DIY, probably due to the cost of living rises. I have seen more horses in one particular livery yard and the size of the paddocks reducing!"

What was evident through respondent responses was that the changes in planning and development policies have led to a loss of yards and available land in several areas.

"All the small meadows that we used to rent in villages have been built on!"

"I know of many yards in my local area that were sold to become housing, with us also having the stress of the land owner applying for planning permission on our yard, which would mean everyone would have been evicted... it was a big worry as each time a yard was sold for housing, all those horses had to move somewhere else, each time leaving less space, putting up prices, and meaning more horses ended up being crammed onto smaller pieces of land."

Other respondents blamed the lack of available places to keep horses on the rise in horse owners during this period.

"Getting smaller all the time, especially with the rise in horse ownership"

"Increased in ownership has placed huge demand on yard availability and less suitable areas are being used increasingly, along with increased stocking densities."

Respondents mentioned having to make difficult choices when it came to choosing somewhere to keep their horse, rather than finding what they wanted.

"Horrendously difficult where I am I can't have my horse at home and are so limited locally I keep mine at diy where it is poorly maintained and very over priced"

"I am welfare focussed and I wanted a yard/farm with winter turnout. It was like trying to find hens teeth in the green belt of Manchester where I live. I've settled on a field share rent instead but the yard is so scruffy and certainly not perfect."

"I found it so difficult to find a yard where my horse would be able to live out 24/7 in a herd. I ended up on a retirement yard for the sake of his welfare, as we know horses are herd animals I find it worrying that so little places keep horses together."

"I live in the New Forest. I would ideally like my horses to live out full time on a yard with facilities. I believe this is healthier for the horse and cheaper for me. But there are no livery yards that offer this service. Due to the cost of grazing land in the area (£50K per acre typically) there are very limited places to keep horses."

The increasing development of rural areas and green spaces also gave rise to concerns over the availability of safe hacking.

“In rural areas there is still a good quantity of farmers and farmers fields available however I have noticed the sheer volume of house building on green field sites in rural areas and the dramatic spread of villages and towns meant for many people their options for horse ownership are livery yards only who are already squeezed by increasing costs , not to mention driving riders into arena based activities rather than simply enjoying hacking and again the danger of the roads due to sheer volume of traffic , speed of cars and driving , and lack of knowledge of the riders , has made hacking so much more dangerous than even just 10 years ago”

“Local planning policies are starting to dictate that stable development needs to be near to established bridleways. With such a poor network of bridleways and those that do exist connecting to main roads this seems to me to policy to deliberately prevent equine business es from developing”

Type of yard available

The types of livery yard available also appears to have undergone a change over the past 10 years. The majority of respondents reported a loss of do-it-yourself (DIY) yards and an increase in yards offering only full or part livery, although there were a minority of respondents who said the opposite.

“Available for a price. Decrease in the number of DIY yards as this is an uneconomic business model.”

“Professional yards becoming less, more DIY yards popping up”

“Reduced over the past 10yrs. Expensive Insurance, small farms shutting, less arable land for rent, increase in cost of land. Fewer DIY yards, increase in full livery yards (£). “

“livery yards are closing at an alarming rate in our area, and diy yards in particular are now very few and far between. there seems to be an increase in top tier livery yards with a big investment in infrastructure”

“All the DIY livery yards are shutting down and being replaced with part and full. This is particularly difficult because personally I want to do my own horse because I know the care will be 5 star. I also cannot afford part or full livery so my options are always limited.”

The type of yards with space available seemed more of an issue than the quality of the yard, and largely reflected the respondents priorities when it came to their horse and themselves.

“I have not had a problem finding livery yards in SE. although the facilities vary greatly, there are some very nice yards about but full livery is costly. I would never do diy again, a lot of the diy owners clearly havent got enough money to look after their horse properly. Many are stressed and rushing from horse to work and back again, two diy yards I tried were really stressful. Horses were stressed too because they were all being fed at different times, being turned out, and brought in at different times, very unsettling for a herd animal which likes routine. I have been on 2 different 'full livery only' yards and they are both excellent. Happy owners, well kept horses, all in a regular routine, fed and turned out at the same times. Been at this yard now over 7 years and it is excellent.”

“DIY livery seems to be becoming much rarer these days which is a shame as caring for your own horse is a huge part of owning one.”

“Plenty of livery spaces available, but the types of yards available don't always suit what people are looking for... +R[positive reinforcement], traditional, natural horsemanship, competition, happy hacking, etc... “

“I've found it very difficult to find somewhere to keep my horse where I feel puts her welfare as a priority and considers species needs. There is often limited options when you do not own your own land

and it often leads to compromises in welfare for the horse, due to poor management practices, which priorities human needs over horses.”

Respondents expressed concern over the number of yards with no-one experienced in charge, particularly for novice owners. These responses included reference to the decline in riding schools, especially those offering a livery option, and the consequent impact on horse welfare.

“Many riding schools have ceased trading so livery for ithe[sic] inexperienced is limited “

“Now so few riding schools where horses can be kept at livery (and their owners have knowledgeable/good help and advice immediately to hand).”

“Limited spaces in our area of Lincolnshire, lots of budget DIY yards popping up from Farmers with little or no horse knowledge. Land also getting sold. leaving poor wet land as grazing options.”

“there seem to be more places popping up offering 'livery' with little or no horsemanship skills.”

“The standard livery yard is found less often (sadly). Prices are very high, and DIY yards are hard to find. Most yards offer full or part livery, so a lot of people seem to rent individual paddocks (leading to more benign neglect of animals through lack of knowledge and support, which years ago you would have found at your livery yard).”

Cost and willingness to pay

The increased costs associated with keeping horses, and for those offering livery services, were mentioned frequently, with concerns raised about this potentially pricing people out of horse ownership and making equestrianism elitist.

“Not so much availability but affordability. Also suitability of those environments for laminitics/rehabs”

“Fewer places offer the more affordable DIY livery services anymore and it has hugely restricted the availability of suitable yards for all budgets. Where I live, there is a massive lack of DIY yards where Part and Full livery has taken over as a money earner for facility and owners, the cost of this is not feasible for all owners, especially for non-ridden horses and children's ponies.”

“Over the last 10 -15 years I have noticed that the availability of DIY livery yards has decreased, a variety of reasons - don't want the hassle / make no money / land sold for housing. Some places move from DIY to part and full livery, but in the SW not everyone can afford these prices and horse owning, I fear, may become an elitist hobby for those that can afford part/full livery or have facilities at home”

“Becoming ever harder for livery yards and riding schools to make an income far fewer in our area than 10 years ago which sadly opens the market for less competent businesses under cutting approved or licensed establishments”

“It seems that good livery yards are getting fewer and further between, the selling of land for building at premium prices entices landowners/yard owners to seel[sic] as prices increase rapidly in terms of insurance, feed, rates etc. It could mean that horse owners have to keep their horses in less than suitable accommodation or are travelling miles to see to them.”

“ive heard many looking for cheaper alternatives. trying to cut corners, but also heard a friend in scotland say her livery has gone up to 125 a week. meant to have winter turnout in field, currently getting hardstanding turnout. prices going up , but not necessary proportionatly[sic] to the quality of care being manintained.[sic] ie prices going up, And corners been cut at the same time”

“Less and less affordable options available for keeping horses will potentially lead to livery yard closure. Many livery yard owners have little knowledge of business management and there is a growing trend to ditch low income DIY for more profitable part or full livery moving horse ownership into an at risk area. Livery yard owners are also seeking licencing of all yards no doubt at high additional cost pushing horse ownership further out of reach of many and potentially causing closure of many very good yards.”

Some respondents commented that horse owners seemed unwilling to pay realistic prices for keeping their horse, especially when they wanted facilities such as arenas too.

“More demand for better facilities yet people often unwilling to pay realistic prices.”

“lots available but depends on what you want and are prepared to pay for, problem is not quantity but quality and affordability and those willing to pay for decent quality”

“Decent livery is still available but people seem more reluctant to pay for a quality service.”

Other respondents pointed out that livery yards were under pressure too and it was harder to make a profit running them properly.

“Decent, insured, well run yards are on the decline because people aren't willing to pay a fair price for services etc. Yet the dilapidated £15 a week sheds are booming”

“Good quality livery yards are reducing and the amount of grazing at those yards is often minimal in relation to the number of horses. There seems to be an attitude within the equestrian sector that profit in the livery business is a dirty word and yard are closing as owners struggle to make a living and maintain standards.”

“Lack of availability of GOOD places to keep horses is definitely a factor in welfare. I believe ALL livery yards should be licensed. Horse owners unfortunately have to bear the REAL cost of good welfare, not expect to be able to keep a horse on the cheap (though economies can be made without compromising welfare). If good yards could charge enough to make a living there may be more of them!”

“Rise in horse ownership has increased demand but quality of supply is suffering. Unfair cost of non domestic rates for quality facilities makes turning a profit very difficult. Land registry should be under pressure to revisit rateable value for equine premises”

Ethical horse keeping

One often-repeated concern was the decreasing availability of turn-out offered by livery yards, particularly the option for horses to live out year-round or get some turn out opportunities over winter. Much of this was blamed on overstocking yards without the appropriate amount of land available.

“I feel all yards should be regulated and inspected each year because in many places horses are denied turnout because they have overstocked their fields.”

“Becoming less and less options available especially land to have horses living out 24/7”

“How has it become acceptable for horses to have little or no winter turnout .”

“Definitely a lack of decent places which allow turnout all year round. More horses are kept in poached fields or stabled 24/7 in winter negatively impacting welfare.”

“Too few, and many dont have the appropriate land. Too many horses stand out in sectioned off patches of land, no shelter, no trees or anywhere to browse, probably no grass and lonely.”

Other reasons for reduced turn-out included a perceived normalisation of horses spending their time stabled, and owners sacrificing their horse’s turn-out opportunities to be on a yard with better facilities.

“Becoming few and far between, those that are available have declining space and more horses. More and more horses are spending their life in stables with minimal turnout in favour of better facilities ie walkers arenas etc”

“Improved but the facilities have maybe switched from horse focussed to rider focussed (eg, more riding facilities but less turnout)”

“Dire. And far too old fashioned. The yards do not have enough grazing, you are told you have to keep your horse in, there’s a trend towards single turnout when the advice and science says herds are better. It’s quite frankly awful. “

There was evidence that some respondents were seeking an alternative to the more traditional ways of horse keeping, yet there were numerous challenges relating to the availability and affordability of more horse-centred options.

“Judging by the number of calls received by my friends who own livery yards, there are a lack of facilities locally. There is also an increasing demand for 24/7/365 turnout and herd living, which many liveries are unable or unwilling to meet.”

“Poor. 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.”

“Getting harder to find and very few where they can live in small herd groups”

“Very tricky finding places to keep horses especially when looking for ethical set ups (24/7 turnout etc).”

“getting harder, particularly for a more 'natural" environment eg most places only do turnout of 1 or 2 horses in smallish field”

“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 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.”

“I consider there a serious lack of livery yards offering 24/7 turnout and of fields with SAFE fencing. I haven't noticed a change in the past 10years. However I do feel larger fields and multi owner groups have decreased in favour of smaller divided paddocks with less social contact. Lack of social contact is one of the largest welfare concerns in England and Wales.”

“Limited and hard to find a good yard near us, also hard to fi d yards with year round turnout or alternative living situations other than stables“

Although one respondent responded, *“More livery yards etc are open to horse-centered keeping, such as allowing access to turnout all year, track systems etc”*, this perception was rare.

“Definitely harder to keep a horse now versus 15 years ago”

Although the sentiment expressed by this respondent was common, there were a variety of underlying reasons given reflecting world changes over recent years that have influenced equestrianism, as well as changes inside the equestrian sector itself. To avoid repetition, responses relating to breeding and livery yards are not reported here. Responses were grouped in to four areas: economic changes, climate change, changes in equestrian infrastructure, and wider public perception.

Economic changes

The current economic situation, frequently labelled the ‘cost-of-living-crisis’, was a common feature in respondents responses. The costs associated with horse ownership led some respondents to decrease the number of horses they owned or give up having their own horse.

“Another reason why I won’t be buying another horse – I can’t afford it. The cost of living and having some security does not leave me with enough money to fund owning my own horse.”

The increase in costs led to suggestions that owners may be starting to cut corners in their horse’s care to save money, which many highlighted would have welfare implications.

“Changes in the world have a huge impact on management, ownership and welfare of horses. The cost of living crisis means that horse owners cut back on what they see as “non-essentials”; for example forgoing an equine body work session or having them less regularly. More worryingly from a welfare point of view is if they have to also cut back on “essentials” like feed, hoof care and veterinary care....Compared to 10 years ago, I also see many more shared horses, with sharers making a financial contribution in return for the opportunity to ride.”

“unstable economies and resulting loss of incomes - sometimes overnight - can be devastating to the expense of horse ownership and welfare issues”

“The cost of living crisis obviously makes it much harder to care for horses appropriately, routine procedures eg farrier, dentist etc being stretched out longer. It will eventually lead to welfare issues”

“Cost is a major factor to all in the equine world. Owning horses is a luxury these days and not a hobby as it used to be. Yards are not being invested in even down to simple ‘maintenance’. Bedding and feed has gone up dramatically... and there is a concern of animal welfare moving forward. Horse. insurance is costly and therefore I foresee this is an area people will be looking at where to save.”

“Cost of keeping an equine is going up across the board - livery, feed, farrier and vets - noticeable increase in costs. Euthanasia is also an expense which is rarely factored into owners' thinking.”

The cost of bedding and feed was mentioned by many.

“Bedding has seen the biggest increase I have ever seen, I have clients who are struggling to find reasonably priced bedding even if they buy a pallet load in bulk.”

Some respondents commented on the economic downturn particularly affecting owners who brought their horses during the COVID-19 pandemic,

“Cost of living increase impact on horse welfare and covid lockdowns having an impact on welfare, especially those who bought horses during lockdown and are now struggling as they are going back to normal life as it was before”

“Covid unfortunately encouraged people to buy horses as an excuse to get out of the house, now they're unwanted with the cost of living rising.”

Vulnerable horse groups mentioned in relation to rising costs were older horses and thoroughbreds.

“Horses especially TB are expensive to keep narrowing opportunities[sic] for them”

“I think cost of living has caused an increase in old/retired horses winding up for sale. Which then encourages them to be bought and sold on as sound”

“Cost of living has a dramatic effect of owners. Riding stables closing, feed merchants closing, market flooded with older horses.”

The time-lag due to the equine gestation period mean that respondents voiced concerns that breeding was at odds with the current economy.

“Breeding numbers cycle probably out of synch with economy.”

“Economic downturn impact the demand for equines increasing the burden on Rescue organisations. The long scale of foal to sale means that economic problems hit the market before suppliers can react.”

Brexit and the war in Ukraine were mentioned with respect to costs of feed and fuel, albeit very rarely in comparison to the cost-of-living-crisis. This may reflect the topical concerns at the time the survey was conducted.

Climate change

Closely tied to the economic concerns were concerns relating to the impact of climate change. These concerns spanned the availability of hay, bedding and feed due to the impact of the hot summer on crop production, the consequences for disease and parasite risks, and the need to make fundamental changes in how horses are managed to better suit the climatic conditions.

“Changes in climate impacts the availability of hay, bedding and feed, causing fluctuations in the management and cost of keeping horses.”

“Global warming is proving to give us vets some extra challenges! Parasite control and atypical myopathy have been a real struggle this year.”

“Climate change and its effect on pasture management and equine wellbeing.”

“Climate change! It's becoming harder to predict the weather, this has led to over feeding and over rugging during the winter months. Worming is also something that needs closer management due to increased winter temperatures”

“Clips aren't lasting as long anymore, horses can't cope with the weather fluctuations. Research suggests that worming cycles will change and tapeworms will be later which old fashioned yards who seasonally worm aren't keeping up to date with. More acorn and sycamore linked deaths due to higher toxicity levels.”

“We are going to have to change the way we manage our horses if this summers heat is going to become more regular. The times we ride / turnout / travelling / lack of grazing due to heat and lack of rain. In time, this will bring us new diseases to cope with.”

“Never known so much laminitic horses...is this breeding, lack of knowledge or environmental changes. Difficult compared to 30-50 years ago as we now have runs of very wet/very hot/dry weather...I have found these issues present challenges to our horses’ health.”

Changes in equestrian infrastructure

Many respondents focused their responses on changes within the equestrian sector. Of particular concern was the loss of bridleways and increasing risks associated with hacking.

“hacking out round us is now a deathtrap”

“increased traffic on the roads makes hacking hazardous”

“Roads have got busier, it’s why I haven’t replaced by broken horses with a rideable one, too dangerous. The off road places are being lost to house building.”

“My experience is that many people moved from urban areas to more rural areas during 2020/2021 as working from home became more popular and feasible and these people do not understand the reality of rural life. They are frustrated by farm traffic /cyclists/horse riders etc holding them up. I am now very anxious riding or carriage driving on any roads due to the rapid decline of considerate drivers and increase in examples of dangerous driving from people with no understanding of how to pass a horse safely. And I have also experienced an increase in verbal abuse based around the attitude that horses shouldn’t be on the roads. Also in the last 2years I have experienced a marked increase in people walking dogs off lead when they have no control of the dogs which is a real issue in my area.”

“Its very difficult to hack these days because of the sheer amount of traffic (higher population/building on land). Places i used to hack happily I would now never dare. Also commons I used to hack or take my children on their ponies when younger are now bordering on dangerous with so many dog walkers and their out of control dogs. Lack of parking if we try to box anywhere because lots of areas have been closed or have height bars. Feel like that side of horses is being really constricted and forcing everyone into riding in manages (we dont have one) or hiring places. Our local riding is now horrendous compared to what is used to be due to traffic, dangerous roads, unkept bridleways, people everywhere and land owners who are more city (keep off my land' types rather than sensible country people”

Concerns were also raised that horses were increasingly being kept as pets which was associated with welfare consequences.

“People treating horses like pets, increase in fat horses, over rugged horses “

“Generally, a lot more horse owners now that have them as pets. This can cause welfare concerns especially with Obesity and understanding of End-of-Life decisions. It is cheaper to get a horse now or be gifted a problem/ rescue. keeping them can be low cost but at the compromise of good welfare and access to knowledgeable people”

“horses are seen as pets and little understanding of how to care correctly for them also used as mental health crutch often to their detriment when euthanasia decisions are delayed as a result”

There was a perception that the products available of equestrians and their horses had dramatically increased. However, some pointed out that these weren’t always needed, and the costs involved were another challenge.

“Worldwide trade brought fantastic choice of goods, feed, bedding etc yet almost over-complicated the industry.”

“Prices of everything have increased over the last 10-20 years, equestrian equipment has even more of a premium attached than it used to, for lots of unnecessary equipment.”

“Many unnecessary products are pushed on owners. Basic horsemanship and common sense is hard to find. “

“Products more complicated - too much choice!”

“Family have run a livery yard for 50 years. In last 10 years it seems people are spending more on their horses. Far more unnecessary stuff. Multiple boots heavy rugs . Horses living less naturally”

“Accessories for horses are at an all time high such as saddles, bridles, girths etc. All adding to the feeling of unaffordable situations.”

“There is a huge range of horsey accessories and fashion”

The accessibility of horse riding and ownership also concerned respondents due to the ease of purchasing a horse with no knowledge of how to care for the animal.

“Horse riding has become more accessible and I think this has led novices to buy unsuitable horses without the support in place”

“Now there are more places to keep horses and parents like to provide children with hobbies. After a few lessons they buy a horse thinking it will provide a cheaper way of riding”

“Lack of knowledge an issue where money has allowed a horse purchase but no idea how to look after it”

“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”

“Once upon a time, you only owned horses if you had the time and / or money to do so. Nowadays, teenagers can buy an ex-racehorse, if they can find somewhere they can afford to keep it. However, they can't afford the necessary care (teeth, farrier, saddle, lessons, vet, etc) to keep the horse at what I believe is an acceptable welfare standard.”

Other issues that were seen to have changed within the equestrian sector, included the pressure to take part in activities with your horse, the loss of competition venues and cost of competing, and the increasing size of riders.

“Less show venues, we've lost half the venues within an hour radius of the yard post code. Less show jumping shows.”

“I don't compete much now due to costs involved”

“I think there is much more pressure on people now, before you hunted or hacked and did a bit of faffing about in the summer and some hunter trials in the winter, now people are aghast if you don't compete regularly or go to clinics with professionals.”

“People are getting bigger so need larger horses to ride.”

“People have no time or money to do things properly (slowly and compassionately). Our culture is too results driven and it is the horses who suffer. Issues in the wider environment and economy are only going to increase the pressure.”

Wider public perception

Changes in public perceptions towards equestrians were raised as concerns by some respondents. Some were broad in nature, including the role of social media, the sustainability of horse keeping, and the increasing discussion around social licence to operate.

“I am concerned that in the future the keeping of grazing animals may become restricted and there may be pressure against riding or driving horses”

“I do have worries about owning horses and the changing environment - sometimes I do wonder if it is sustainable in even owning horses. Wouldn't it be great if we could use horses to be sustainable e.g like Finland who use AD plants and horse manure and bedding for energy.”

“Increase in social license/judgement by social media now affecting how horses are handled and kept. Reducing level of knowledge in the general public as to what is healthy and what isn't”

“Social media very impactful- both negative & positive.”

“Social licence has become known and will become a bigger factor in the years to come as people inside and outside the horse world put welfare of horses more to the fore. Due to the economy I believe horse ownership will become more elitist also.”

“Social media is starting to rule over common sense”

There was a fear that equestrianism was seen as, or was becoming, an elite activity, and that this could be associated with prejudice from the wider public.

“Changes in the world will probably force the likes of myself out of horse ownership. It gained in popularity after London 2012 but I feel it's becoming more elite in nature again.”

“Equestrianism is fast becoming an elite sport again, where only the rich can afford to buy and keep a horse.”

“Owning horses is still perceived as "posh" and as such horses and their riders often are abused when out hacking by others using the roads/tracks.”

Changes in the 'use' of horses

In total, 772 respondents left responses to the question regarding how changes in the 'use' of horses may have influenced horse management, ownership, population and welfare (for good or bad) in England and Wales over the past 10 years (Figure 14). Responses were grouped into three broad areas for discussion: changes in the role of horses, the aging horse population, and broader equestrian and societal perspective.

need a 'job' to do, a 'job' typically seeming to be defined as ridden work. Being a pet or companion did not appear to be considered a 'job' by many.

"More lawnmowers"

"Horses need a job not to be kept on some bare patch of land as a giant pet. They need to work, it's no wonder owners have so many problems."

"Most are just field ornaments"

"Horses being kept as 'pets' instead of working = welfare issues such as obesity, laminitis etc."

"More horses being under utilised"

"Increase in 'pleasure' use. Too many horses as pets with no real jobs to do, poorly looked after by inexperienced but well meaning people."

"I see a lot of people keeping horses as a hobby. They are ridden very infrequently, never compete. I also see a lot of people who are a bit scared of their horse. The reason they don't ride I think."

Others celebrated the apparent acceptance that horses could take on non-ridden roles in people's lives.

"Finally it's beginning to be ok to have a horse without needing to ride them"

"I do feel like people are more considerate of their equine friends and want more of a personal relationship than just a horse to ride. More people doing groundwork etc than I noticed before."

"Increasing numbers of owners realising that horses don't actually "need" to be ridden, opening up alternatives e.g. agility, pony-packing."

"I hope that people are starting to see that one can have a wonderful relationship with an equid without having to ride it and can engage in enjoyable activities together e.g. agility, scentwork"

"I think 10 years ago the horse was already cemented as a leisure/companion animal and part of the family, but it has continued to be more common for people to keep horses purely as companions. I know more people that have bought or adopted horses with no intention to ride or work them but just have them as they enjoy spending time around and caring for horses."

Others did not feel that this level of acceptance was there yet but hoped it would become more accepted with time.

"I think there needs to be more done to make people realise that horses aren't just here for us. They don't need to have a use to be worth something - in the same way our dogs don't need a job. If this mindset was changed, we may see a dent in the number of non ridden horses waiting for homes or sold by dodgy dealers to ridden homes."

There seemed to be a differentiation between people keeping a horse but not riding, with the consequences that may have for welfare, and people keeping horses as pets. These non-ridden horses were often perceived to basically be treated as pets but were managed as if they were 'in-work'.

"I've noticed coming back to horses after many years that hardly anyone seems to regularly exercise their horse, yet they still seem to stable them all the time."

"Horses seem to be in more, fed more and worked less."

“Fewer of our clients horses are kept in medium to heavy work, than they would have been 30 years ago. A lot are only ridden a few times a week lightly. They are often more a pet to a lot of clients.”

In contrast to the narrative of horses as pets, came the views that horses were increasingly treated as commodities, with one implying that this was a progression on from being seen as a pet.

“Gone from being an integral part of home, to a pet, now seem to be commodity and non- feeling entity to a lot of people”

“I think their is an increase in owners only wanting horses that are useful to them ie rideable and casting aside those that become retired for others like charity to cover their expenses!”

“Horses seem to be machines to most people. As soon as they can’t be ridden they get thrown away.”

The perception of horses as a commodity was often linked to their use on sport or for competitive purposes.

“Increase of horses as a commodity, a piece of 'sports equipment”

“Hate the rise in demand of competitions equines. No issues with competing a horse if horse is happy with that, but this catalogue of “horses solely seen as a competition brings” is unacceptable. No other domesticated species sees this, they are horses, provide for them as individuals.”

While some competitive activities were seen as declining, others were seen to be on the increase.

“BD have had an increase in membership but BS and BE have not”

“I’m not sure this has changed that much in the last 10 years, there are still a mixture of leisure riders and competitive riders. I understand that affiliated Eventing now has much smaller number taking part compared to when I used to event (over 20 years ago), but British Dressage seems to have strong demand for classes.”

“Less hunting, more dressage.”

Interestingly, more than one respondent attributed the increase in competitive riding to the lack of hacking opportunities leading to more arena work and therefore more interest in competing.

“More and more people seem to have lost the ability to just enjoy their leisure horses. With the decline in bridleways and safe roads most now just want to showjump or compete. This is hard on those animals who would make lovely happy hackers but are not particularly talented. Every other person seems to have a "Trainer" trying to make a competition horse out of a nice, friendly, sensible hack. It is vital that we back the retention and improvement of access routes. Horses need to hack fro the good of their minds and bodies. Constant schooling and competing may be causing the epidemic of injuries such as suspensory ligament damage.”

“Horses are not so much hacking buddies anymore due to a lot of the reasons outlined above (unsafe hacking/roads, restricted bridleways /tracks that go nowhere), hence everyone wants a competition type horse to ride in a school”

Competing was seen as becoming more elitist, something you could no longer get involved in if you did not have the right horse or equipment.

“Hasn’t really changed on the last 10years. When a horse is ‘used’ for work it’s become more elitist. No longer can you cobble together the equipment & compete/work locally. Now you must travel your horse to events.”

“Less competitive and more focused on pleasure - but the higher echelons of competition have gotten more elite. Less access for “normal” people with your bog standard horse or pony.”

Common concerns associated with this perceived shift to competitive riding included rise of year-round work for the horses, working younger horses, and the rise of performance associated health problems.

“A lot of horses are expected to work for 52 weeks of a year now instead of having a season of work, due to indoor arenas and seasonal events either virtual or in person (why so many young stock are breaking down).”

“It seems to me that more and more people are becoming involved in competitions, and are wanting higher levels of performance from their horses. This means more people need 6 monthly vaccines to comply with competition rules, and I think means that we are seeing more “performance issues” like lameness.”

“I think horses are expected to do too much too young and are often broken and discarded by professionals by the time they are 7. Modern dressage is a prime example of this. Horses should not be competing at such high levels at 4 years of age, they should be given the time to grow and mature and trained for longevity and wellness”

Other respondents were of the belief that competitive riding had actually decreased over recent years due to the rising costs involved.

“I think more people now buy horses and keep them as pets rather than compete as they can't afford to”

“Less competing due to costs especially eventing - BE level.”

“As the price of everything increases it's harder for the amateurs to compete”

“Competitions are struggling with entries due to economic impacts. Horses ending up as field ornament to save cost”

In addition to the discourse on the role of the horse, came several concerns about the rise of novice owners, their lack of equestrian knowledge and the influence this could have on equine welfare.

“Lots more inexperienced people now own horses with sometimes little idea of how to look after them properly”

“Increasing numbers of novice leisure horse owners”

“Increased pony ownership with no or very limited knowledge”

Many of these concerns related to the perceived mismatch between horse and owner.

“Amateurs are buying these completely unsuitable professional type horses, and then cannot ride them. Creating more welfare issues! Social media doesn't help as everyone wants to show off them looking like a pro on flashy big moving sharp horses. That they then drug up or bit up to the eyeballs in order to manage to ride them.”

“I don't see a change in the use of horses. But I think too many inexperienced people are buying horses that they are not able to ride and end up being passed around.”

With the lack of knowledge, another shift in how horses were perceived and in the ‘type’ of owner was mentioned.

“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. 10 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.”

“As a PC DC seen a clear change towards “people who own horses” v “horse owners”. Less knowledge or interest in becomin knowledgeable.”*

Other role changes mentioned by respondents included increases in horses being driven, used for therapy or equine facilitated learning, and used in ground-based activities such as horse agility and ‘natural horsemanship’.

The aging horse population

The issues surrounding older horses featured in several respondent responses. Although horses were seen to be living longer than they had previously, this was not always perceived to be a good thing.

“More horses living longer, medicated brings on more ‘companions’ than we could ever need”

“older horses are being kept alive longer because of their own emotions and not the well being of the horse”

“Horses are living longer but welfare as they get older and have no “use” is put at risk due to lack of daily contact if turned out. Stabling of arthritic individuals a welfare concern as lack of mobility increases mobility problems.”

Some concerns related to the ‘use’ of the horse, with many older horses reportedly being sold on when they were no longer able to be ‘used’.

“A forever horse does not exist anymore ...the reality is ...I see it ...if a horse no longer serves a purpose through injury its tossed aside and sold on ..breaks my heart”

“I see a lot of older horses for sale and it makes me feel sad. I have no idea where they will end up, but I imagine for some it won’t be a favourable destination.”

“Again throwaway society, rarely are horses kept to end of life.”

Or alternatively, being made to continue work when it was no longer appropriate.

“Especially within the feeding market alot of feeds and supplements are now focused towards the older horse with horse still being in work in their mid 20's these days, although people should be aware that some horses cannot be worked for this long and don't recognise when enough is enough”

Broader equestrian and societal perspective

Some respondents took a wider view of the issues surrounding our ‘use’ of horses in their responses, questioning this themselves or reporting the concerns of others.

“Increasing element who feel horses should not “work” for our social or economic benefit”

“I increasingly feel uncomfortable about horses being used for commercial gain especially in the high end competitive world.”

“More questioning of what horses are for and why we ride them or use them in sport”

There was mention of polarisation of views regarding horses and their ‘use’, as illustrated by the two quotes below;

“Becoming more polarised as options widen, but tradition in racing - for example - is going unquestioned and yet must be challenged. Everything from the keen amateur who wants to win at all costs (including their horse’s well-being) to the owner that just wants companionship and risks a very bored and stressed horse in other ways. Owner time availability has somewhat improved due to working from home and more flexible working patterns, meaning more opportunities to enrich a horse’s routine. This could also have the opposite impact though, and the unpredictability of owners showing up at a yard May also impact on horse mental wellbeing”

“feel there is a greater divide in peoples opinions about using horses. i feel that a horse should have a job if there are physically and mentally capable[sic] of having a job. And that job should suit the horse. i also feel that horses should have a retirement, if they are physically and mentally able to do so. And if not, then they should be seen by a vet, and put to sleep. Not sold on, or given away I do think that more people feel that riding horses is exploiting them, and are vocal about it - but that doesnt necessary[sic] mean they have/had anything to do with horses”

Respondents also mentioned public perception of equestrian activities and social licence to operate.

“Hasn't happened yet, but will--if horses are still part of our landscape--we know that the public are not really behind us”

“I think we are also going to have to answer the general publics perception of what we do with our horses as at the elite level, especially racing, it can be seen as cruel and negatives of that will filter down to the general, everyday rider”

“I think we’re starting to see a shift in the general public’s acceptance of how horses are used. There’s also a shift within the horse world that’s now gaining traction in the approach people take to training and “using” their horses to be more understanding of horses’ behaviour, their reasons for it and how to help them learn more positively.”

“I think with the rise of social media and peoples perception of riding horses / owning horses being scrutinised by a lot more people the way horses are used in general will change and this will hopefully be for the better. Anything where societies need to address the bits / spurs / whips / manner of riding / weight or, size of rider compared to the horse has to be a good thing. However, it, would be easy for it to go too far and horses being ridden at all being seen to be cruel, resulting in even more animals being neglected.”

“The use of horses is certainly under more intense scrutiny from those within the equine industry and members of the public and rightly so. Changes must be made to ensure that the welfare of the horse - physically and mentally - is never compromised for their use in sport, recreation, companionship or human emotional support. I think its good that the industry looks from the outside in and makes some much needed changes.”

Welfare featured highly in many respondent comments, with some perceiving the issue of welfare is receiving more consideration than it has previously, and others appearing to think the opposite.

“Disappointing that, how to 'protect' the social licence to operate is the main point of the conversation. Not how we can legitimately and truly improve and meet the welfare needs of the horse. Which when done with integrity and authenticity would actually protect the social licence to operate. Seems like a

practical skills, with respondents explaining their responses through differentiating between theory, knowledge and practical skills.

“What I have seen practical skills are just fine, underpinning knowledge is often what is lacking.”

“Often good theory now due to internet/reading but can lack practical skills- bandaging, brushing correctly”

“Knowledge and skill definitely isn't the same.”

“More common sense and less ‘theory practice’ is often required.”

Respondents also expressed the belief that people were less inclined to seek out new knowledge and skills, instead turning to ‘quick fixes’.

“Declining - so much more information available now but it seems there is far less knowledge. People don't seem to be interested in acquiring knowledge either.”

“Too many people just want quick fixes and don't understand that you need to know the basics. A lot of youngsters aren't interested in training & the reasons you do certain exercises”

“In general there's a reluctance to take up options such as BHS courses to actually learn how to care for a horse”

“In my current area very poor limited education and no interest to learn more”

“We are in a world where everything is immediate due to technological advances. This can encourage people to do quick fixes ie stronger bit, instead of working at what is missing in the horses training.”

“We now live in a “quick fix” society and this is moving into the equine world ... everyone is in a rush with there[sic] horses & there training”

Even if people had sought out knowledge and practical skills through equine colleges and BHS training opportunities, these were not always perceived as being of practical use.

“I have seen a downward turn in practically minded people coming into the yard work industry. college/ uni[sic] educated do not seem to be acquiring the hands on experience, book knowledge is good but they tend not to be very aware of coping with animals that don't behave in a textbook way often appearing easily intimidated by bolshy/ aggressive horses.”

“Declining, people go to equine college and come out with a degree but often zero ability.”

“BHS quals are hard to find training for and expensive and fail on tiny irrelevant issues and fail to keep up with science, varying ways to keep horses etc colleges are resource limited and closed shop to most”

““The college system.is not sufficient to prepare candidates for industry”

“University equestrian courses tend to lack on practical elements and focus on theory. Leading to people with excellent equestrian knowledge but poor practical skills around horses.”

Opportunities to develop practical skills

Much of the perceived reduction in practical skills was attributed to the declining opportunities available to gain these skills, largely through the loss of riding schools and the opportunities for young people to work at yards and gain hands-on experience.

“It does seem more commonplace to buy a horse without having any practical skill. 10 years ago you would have gone to riding school, progressed through that, had a loan then maybe another loan then buy your first horse.”

“H&S[sic – health & safety] also means teenagers working for rides and learning on the job is no longer an option.”

“I think that this is decreasing, largely due to health & safety legislation. Children can no longer help in riding schools in return for lessons which reduces the size pool of young people with actual experience of handling horses”

“It worries me that there are a falling number of riding schools that can pass these skills on”

“I had a long time to work at my local riding school where welfare was paramount. I learnt how to keep a horse healthy. Very few places teach young people properly. Insurance is high and curriculum driven. You can't learn practical horse keeping in a few months.”

“Opportunities to learn horse handling skills are few & far between”

“There doesn't seem to be the same route to get skills as there used to be, working your backside off to get an half hour ride, or months and months of doing menial tasks before you can do anything interesting.”

“Practical skills with horses have been impacted by the reduction in riding schools in the past 10 to 20 years. Unless someone has learnt growing up through pony club, there is now limited opportunity to learn riding and horse management skills before owning your own horse. This inexperience can lead to issues for both horse and owner.”

Other barriers to gaining skills were seen as lack of access or willingness to engage with the British Horse Society (BHS) and Pony Club, only experiencing handling a single horse, and the rise of full livery yards meaning owners did not need the practical skills themselves to care for their own horses.

“The pony club and BHS are invaluable for promoting good horsemanship skills, sadly not everyone has access or wishes to join perhaps because of pre conceived ideas of snobbery within these organisations”

“Riding skills have probably improved, however day to day care skills have certainly declined as there are huge numbers of owners who have only ever had horses on full livery and have no idea about the care of horses”

“People spend less time with their horses than they used to, in general, and so the skill level has gone down. If people own one horse, they are not exposed to the level of experience that comes from handling or working with multiple horses, and this has a detrimental effect on their management and handling skills, in many cases.”

“More people that have the money but not the knowledge or time hence full livery yards being more prevalent”

“People have horses in livery and therefore miss out on caring for the horse which gives you the skills needed. “

“Anyone seems to be able to own a horse now- a few lessons or a college nvq and they think they know it all! Full livery also feeds into this (have witnessed myself) people can afford to buy a horse and pay

the livery bill but don't have to do any care of the horse so their skills are rubbish. Some owners on full livery don't even know what their horses are fed!"

Inexperienced owners – the bad and good

Within respondent responses, closely linked to the reduction in riding schools, was the rise of the novice, inexperienced horse owner who were seen to possess few practical skills and often little knowledge, instead relying on learning as they go along with their horse.

"I have seen some shocking examples at DIY livery of new horse or pony owners without a clue and without a budget. In the right environment they will be supported by the other owners but unless they upskill rapidly this reliance on other busy owners wears thin."

"I've first hand seen the dangers of novice/unknowledgeable people buying horses. A livery before has bought a horse without even knowing how to put a rug on a horse, other liveries are willing to help but if simple tasks like rugging are unknown, when delving deeper, are they knowledgable enough to keep the horse healthy? Would they recognise the signs of colic, laminitis, CPL, EMS, the list goes on."

"Diabolical! When I was a child you had to have a certain level of competence and knowledge before you were allowed to have a pony. These days I see complete novices buying horses with no idea how to care for them and no support. I really do think there ought to be some kind of exam people need to pass before being allowed to buy or loan a horse."

"As a riding school proprietor I have seen parents greatly over estimate their knowledge and experience. I have always advised them to increase the riding lessons for the children but no - they bought a horse. Quite often the cheapest horse they could find and more often than not it was a disaster."

"the increase in ease to source a horse to buy (finances allowing) means the beginner owner can just buy rather than put time and effort into learning at a riding centre."

"Since the demise of riding schools, people have had to become owners to enjoy riding - meaning the vast majority of owners and handlers and riders have no background or training or skill or even understanding of what horses require physically, mentally, or emotionally, nor how humans need to provide these."

But novice owners were not always perceived as bad with some respondents remarking that inexperience can mean that these owners are more open to new ways of doing things.

"As a new person to owning a horse, I asked LOTS of questions and everybody knows everything and offered help - but actually there is so much that people don't actually know or they just know because of tradition and follow old protocols that don't necessarily offer their horses (and them) the best. Horses put up with a lot of abuse from unknowing owners."

"Familiarity with horses has fallen so practical skills[sic] have gone with it in many cases, apart from the few groups of families where there are many generations of experience. However, this also means fresh views on means of horse keeping can be considered. Newer owners are less likely just to continue what has always been done and so arguably maybe able to take more informed and independent advice into account (e.g barefoot horse foot care rather than automatically steel shod, or 24/7 turnout rather than always stabling)."

"Having only recently entered the horse world I can see how many people are rigid in their ideas and closed to another way of doing things. I have been trying to work in a force free way and it has shocked

me how much hostility and defensiveness this brings out in some people. I don't want to learn their 'skills' and find that my way of doing things is often not respected"

Some practical skills that were perceived as more welfare-friendly were also reported to be increasing.

"Hopefully improving as positive reinforcement becomes more widespread and owners want to learn more about behaviour."

"Things are changing slowly and with the help of social media there had been a definite change in more people wanting to manage the horse in more natural ways, yet there are still so many stuck in traditional methods that are outdated"

The role of the internet and social media

The influence of the internet and social media on practical equestrian skills engendered conflicting responses, often from the same respondent.

"Social media may help but so much conflicting advice and slick marketing puts people and horses at risk."

"There is more information open to them with social media, but many lack the skills to sift the good sources of information from the poor."

"The internet seems to be a double edged sword, with more awareness of mistreatment and pressure on bodies like FEI to act on things, but unfortunately also social media being used to promote unnecessary unhealthy practices."

"Because of social media, it is more apparent how lacking some people's practical skills are but conversely there is for more information freely available."

"Improving, on line tuition, influencers etc mean people have more access to horsemanship and husbandry advice."

"Advice is much easier to obtain but can be conflicting"

The commonly made point was that just because the information is there, it doesn't mean that people are going to find it and use it.

"I do think there is more expertise and knowledge out there it's just whether horse owners seek it out and apply it"

Relevance and necessity of qualifications

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was not uncommon for respondents to suggest that people should undertake equestrian qualifications before getting a horse.

"A lot of people shouldn't own horses. They have no concept of the complexities of horse management and I personally would like to see a Horse Management Course mandatory to all owners."

"I personally wouldn't mind it if people were required to pass a test to allow them to own a horse!! (Like with a driving licence)"

Respondent responses regarding the influence of euthanasia and end of life options have been grouped within six areas (perceived changes in equine euthanasia, perception of euthanasia and end of life decisions within and outside of equestrianism, delayed euthanasia of horses, financial considerations at end of life, availability of equine end of life support for owners, and euthanasia of healthy horse,) to provide an overview of the responses obtained.

Perceived changes in equine euthanasia

Respondent responses suggested that there had been improvements around equine euthanasia and end of life in the last 10 years, both in the options available to owners and in the way in which these were delivered by vets and other professionals.

“I think there are more options now and its[sic] dealt with in a much more compassionate way (for the owner)”

“I think this is improving and more options than in the 1980/90’s. There are people locally offering a kind and gentle euthanasia service.”

Respondents suggested that there seemed to have been a shift away from shooting, with more horses being euthanised by injection delivered by their vet.

“Horses used to be taken to abattoir[sic] or shot at home. Now our vet does it through injection”

“Has improved for the horses, less get shot!”

“I remember as a child a gun always being used, whereas now usually an injection.”

“I think these are pretty much the same as they have always been during my lifetime, although injection by vet has become more common than the old gunshot method.”

The increase in euthanasia by injection was perceived to be more humane by some respondents. In contrast, shooting was associated with being sent for meat which was considered negatively.

“There are only 2 options for EoL for horses - shooting or injection. Personally I feel it is a betrayal of an animal which gives so much and asks for so little and whom we profess to 'love' to end it's life with a bolt or bullet. This to me seems callous - you shoot something because you hate it or it is a danger to you, not to end a loved animal's life. It doesn't make you a 'horseman' to be able to shoot a horse, no matter how kind you think you are being. Humane injection is a peaceful end in reward to a faithful friend/servant - go quietly over the rainbow bridge.”

“at least horses are not often shot nowadays unless sent to a slaughter house which I view as a horrible end”

“Better options than just sending for meat.”

Other respondents mentioned improvements in the information available to inform owners on equine end of life options.

“As good as if not better options for end of life.more informative than used to be”

“More owners seem to justify making a call earlier now with the help of vet professionals than they did couple years ago. I think it is partially down to the accessibility of social media and internet where owners can research themselves and make decisions in there[sic] own time.”

Other perceived improvements included the increase of equine retirement homes and end of life plans.

“End of life plans seem to be becoming more thought through and in recent years I have seen many owners selflessly deciding to let go of their horses before winter.”

“Retirement livery and euthanasia is a positive development for horse welfare”

“Lots of retirement homes for horses now”

Respondents also noted other changes in practice, including the increased use of crematoriums and corresponding reduction in the use of hunt kennels as a method of disposal.

“Change in respect to more cremations, rather than horses going to the kennel man, as they did years ago”

“Where hunt kennels used to collect and take carcass FOC owners tend to have to pay for cremation, with or without ashes returned.”

Perception of euthanasia and end of life decisions within and outside of equestrianism

Although a minority of respondents thought that equine end of life was still largely a taboo subject amongst horse owners, the majority felt that this had changed over the last 10 years or was in the process of changing.

“Recent media has highlighted this for the good. Hopefully it will enable people to make better choices for the right reasons. Guilt will always be a factor though unfortunately”

“I hope the stigma around having a horse pts is reducing - there are SO many worse fates for a horse than a quick/calm death.”

The fear of judgement by others, either the public or other horse owners, was commonly mentioned. This fear may impact on when the decision to euthanise is made (or not) as well as the method used. Wider concerns were voiced about the welfare implications for the horse resulting from the owner's fear of judgement.

“Some judgement over euthanasia that is seen as financially motivated, i.e horse no longer able to be ridden/do job pts rather than retired”

“See judgement on social media of what are difficult choices”

“People avoid death all of the time and can't cope with it. Too many people have horses but don't have the guts to call it a day or they just pass on unwanted, unsafe, mentally ill and unrideable horses and make them someone else's problem. People judge people for having anything put down that is not physically on its last legs. Result is maltreatment, chronic pain and being passed from pillar to post and over spilling rescue centres.”

“It seems a subject that is still seen as cruel and many owners are reluctant to go through. Owners who are capable of making the decision to euthanise their horse often get criticised especially if a gun is used.”

“The public calls it murder. Making us feel that there is no conversation to be had”

“People are afraid to raise the option of euthanasia with their vet in case they are seen to be negligent/neglectful”

“Options available out end are abbatoirs, hints, knackermen and vet however I feel the first few may be demonised and therefore horse welfare will be compromised as a result.”

“Very rarely are horses euthanised in the correct sense of the word, far more often killed for economic reasons. The cost of palliative care can be expensive and also time consuming so more often than not horses will be killed sooner than the condition is impacting them to the extent that they would wish to die.”

“A lot of pressure from social media is felt about having a horse put down and some avoid having it done for fear of how others may see it. The local hunt can be a very good option and a cheap option but again stigma and social pressure makes this a far less common method now.”

“Rehoming unsound old animals isn't a safe option for them, so owners spend a lot of money and time keeping the horse going for fear of being judged harshly, by vets and others.”

“I HATE the modern keep them forever “they'll let you know” philosophy. Forty years ago it was He's terminally lame 18 year old let him go now. Today it's “Oh you have such a lovely bond, he looks gawjus, how can you think of that, buy him mash, give him Bute, bosweila, Devils Root” so here I am spending nearly £300 a month and 14 hours a week caring for a lovely 25 year old with stubby top teeth and arthritis who is happy to have a 30 minute plod up the road twice a week. And God forbid I should dare say I'll have him shot rather than injected when he hates needles! Injections are too slow, indulgent to the owners and outrageously expensive.”

One respondent seemed to sum up this sentiment nicely; *“people don't[sic] see it as the blessing it should be but as a failure”*.

It was positive to note however, that there were some respondents who felt that perceptions were changing. Although currently in a minority, hopefully this is a perspective that will only grow within the equestrian community.

“it's much more acceptable now to have a horse pts for welfare reasons”

“increasing awareness of ethical issues surrounding euthanasia and more positive welfare for hoses at end of life.”

Delayed euthanasia of horses

While the sentiment *“Better a week too soon than a day too late”*, or variants of this, were given by a number of respondents, delayed euthanasia was commonly mentioned in respondent responses.

“A slight shift towards keeping a horse alive as long as possoble rather than making the difficult but kinder decision of eithanasia if the horse is in pain”

Responsibility for delayed euthanasia was attributed to different stakeholders as discussed below, ranging from vets to insurance companies.

The most commonly mentioned stakeholder in respondent discussions around delayed euthanasia were vets, and they were typically not portrayed in a positive light. Respondents questioned the financial motivations of vets, as well as suggesting they were more concerned about owner feelings than the welfare of the horse involved.

“vets are good at advising euthanasia but sometimes don't advise it 'hard enough' ie QOL discussions aren't as clear as they should be, owners may not be grasping or be able to ignore some advice given leaving horses suffering longer than needed.”

“vets need to take a more proactive role. I have seen too many horses suffer for the owner rather than being put down at the right time.”

“The loss of any horse will always be devastating however I personally feel that veterinary surgeons should be more forthright in telling an owner when enough is enough, unfortunately this has not always been my experience”

“I do think vets are very wary of suggesting you pts these days”

“I think vets sometimes take advantage to do surgery on colic for example if you have insurance. I have experienced this and the recovery from colic is extremely difficult and we lost the horse in the end. Maybe euthanasia would have been a better option from the beginning. Also had similar experience with a dog, ended up paying over £1000 when death was probably inevitable, but we trust and listen to vets.”

“I wish vets would take a stronger stance with owners where welfare is an issue due to long standing health issues”

“I personally feel overall that many equines are allowed to suffer at the end due to delayed euthanasia. On occasions I have felt unsupported by an attending vet, for example looking at a chronically laminitic donkey that had removed itself from its companion, was bilaterally lame, weight loss, conformational changes, VERY dull, and struggling to move about or get up and down. Was told by the vet they would just up it's Bute. Took a further 6 weeks of back and forth for me to get the donkey PTS. This is not uncommon.”

“I think owners are more reluctant to euthanise horses than previously. I think owners are encouraged by vets to continue multiple treatments which aren't in the best interests of the horse. The horses welfare becomes compromised in order to keep it alive as that seems to be the priority.”

“I think often vets will try to treat for owners benefit rather than the horses. “

Delayed euthanasia was also attributed to owners, particularly “new” owners and those who see their horse as their “pet”.

“A lot more of the "new" horse people keep horses going longer for their own feelings compared to true horse people.”

“I have seen and dealt with first hand horses that should be put down but owners are too precious and will do anything to keep them alive, but alive doesn't mean happy!”

“Move from tool to pet makes this choice harder emotionally but easier when not depending on horse for livelihood”

“I also recognise there are horses who will be kept going regardless, as the owner can't bear the idea of letting them go, and that raises a whole other dilemma!”

“I've seen many private owners keep their horse alive when it humane euthanasia would be the kindest option.”

“people are anthropomorphising more and can be reluctant to make appropriate decisions at an appropriate time.”

Insurance companies were mentioned by a few respondents, with their existence perceived to delay euthanasia through encouraging the continuation of treatment or deferring decision-making or end of life action being taken.

“Because of the way insurers work, we cannot euthanise unless they first agree in writing. Vet says this is because it is not listed as one of the conditions that allow euthanasia without prior consent. He is clearly in pain despite Bute but I am unable to end his suffering until the insurance company agree I find this quite frankly, absolutely disgusting “

“Whether increased diagnostic and treatment options funded by insurance means that hard decisions are sometimes avoided with many more horses retired to the field as a companion where their needs may not be met.”

“I think as vet technology improves more options open. Obviously sometimes this is a good thing... others it really isn't. Just because you can try another new fangled treatment doesn't necessarily mean you should. Because of 12m insurance limits people have to throw everything at it immediately- they don't have the option to turn away for a few months to see if there's a gentle improvement. When there have been life or death situations, it seems vets don't want to suggest PTS as a valid option, in the best interests of the horse (and owner). There's a push to always try something else, even if the odds are slim, and it requires a long boxrest/rehab”

Many respondents noted that due to improve health care and nutrition, equines are now living longer than they have before. They might, however, no longer be fit for their original purpose into old age and that presents new challenges for owners around end of life decision making. Older horses were seen to increasingly be sold on or given away as companions when they could no longer work, both of which create welfare concerns.

“Horses living much longer than before. A lot of older horses still in work. People keep horses alive that would have been euthanised years ago due to specialised feeds available and better pain medication.”

“A lot of people try to sell on old horses as they don't want to look after them in their old age - euthanasia would be a kinder option rather than older horses being passed pillar to post but there is not enough education around this”

“I worry seeing ads for big horses offered as companions “not to be ridden”. Big horses cost a lot to feed, shoe/trim, etc and I'm sure a certain number of them end up being ridden or passed from pillar to post. I do believe euthanasia is potentially a happier alternative than an uncertain future.”

“Horses are living longer now due to better science etc however there still seems to be a reluctance to discuss end of life and anecdotally some owners will put older horses through surgery etc with an uncertain prognosis when PTS may have been a kinder outcome for the horse”

“Passing an old horse round in the hope that the final call will be somebody else's problem, is selfish and cruel.”

“Owners do not realise that they are going to have to make this plan and decision. They are not aware of what help is out there because they dont want to think about it. They also expect Vets to make this call for them, which is not always the case. Often feel that they should explore all avenues at great cost despite outcome likely to be the same. More support in this area by those allied professionals is key. Also pressure to not have a horse PTS if healthy, such as behavior and can no longer be ridden. Peer

pressure to keep it or find a home. Often leads to a poor end. PTS should be encouraged as an option and part of responsible horse ownership."

"Far too many horses are either passed on in old age or left neglected with increasingly poor quality of life - often because owner not strong enough to make decision to euthanase."

Financial considerations at end of life

Unsurprisingly, the financial cost of equine end of life featured highly in respondent responses.

"A difficult topic however the options are there but as with most things you need the ability to pay for them."

"Financial implications of end of life are also a consideration (eg cheaper to buy a new horse and 'get rid' of the old one, and too expensive to euthanise, remove, transport and cremate is another conversation."

The overall sentiment was that the costs associated with equine euthanasia have increased. Some of the increase cost was attributed to changes in availability of knackermen or hunt kennels for disposal, as well as rising fuel costs and fewer vets offering payment plans.

"Less and less cheap options. Less knacker men or hunt to take away."

"Hugely increased cost due to hunts not being able to take fallen stock."

"Our local equine crematorium has had to double its prices due to fuel costs, and it concerns me that people may not be in a position to have their horse euthanised and correctly disposed of."

"The cost of euthanasia by a vet or a huntsman has risen and disposal via cremation is now very expensive. I believe that this could result in more animals being left to suffer for longer as owners can't afford the bills and very few vets practices these days will offer credit / payment plans."

"Cremation now very expensive due to cost of diesel. My big cob had to be pts in November 2022. Individual cremation was going to be almost £1400"

The increased costs of euthanasia and disposal were seen to have some negative consequences for equine welfare, in terms of delayed euthanasia, the selling on of elderly and/or unfit animals, and the mention of illegal operations performing equine end of life services.

"Have known people not be able to afford to have their horse pts"

"This is becoming an increasing worry. Many "knackermen" no longer shoot horses. Collection is now Mon-Friday 9-5 in many areas. Increased cost for a Vet to euthanise and then disposal leaves people with bills they can't afford. More people now take to rehoming the elderly horse as they can't afford euthanasia."

"Very expensive to do via vet, no longer able to send horses for hunt meet, laws restrict burial for environmental reasons. However, there are illegally-operating people willing to shoot and remove horses."

"Cost of euthanasia and body disposal means that some old horses are suffering and find themselves being passed on for a small sum or given away"

Ultimately the overarching concern expressed by respondents was that *“the cost puts people off making right decision for the horse.”*

Availability of equine end of life support for owners

One positive area that emerged through respondent’s answers was the improvements in the equine end of life information and support services available for owners. Commonly mentioned were the British Horse Society’s Friends at the End scheme, the Blue Cross’s Pet Bereavement Support Service, and the resources made available by World Horse Welfare and The Donkey Sanctuary.

“The BHS friends at the end scheme is the best thing i know of where people can be supported during an end of life process. My own vet is very good but not all have time to be supportive.”

“Great support from charities such as Blue Cross and BHS with their support services.”

“Every Horse owner should have a practical plan for End of Life. There are schemes and many places for support (social media very helpful).”

“Good service from BHS end of life. I talk to clients really early on about how they’ll manage the end of life phase. Much easier on owners if they have a thought through plan”

“Many of the equine charities such as Blue Cross, TDS and WHW do have some superb resources to support QOL and EOL.”

“I don't know how this has changed over the years but have noticed the British Horse Society supports owners in making this decision, I think that's a relatively new service.”

“A number of the Equine Charities have very good schemes to help support owners (BHS and Blue Cross)”

While respondents noted that the availability of resources had improved, they also reflected that more could be done to raise awareness of them amongst horse owners, whether this was through equine vets or improved promotion by the charities themselves.

“There has definitely been an increase in the availability of resources to support euthanasia and EOL decisions e.g. equine EOL services and resources by many of the equine charities. Many people do not know of these resources' existence though.”

“Lots of support from BHS, Bluecross and other charities not sure how many general new horse owners would know about this. Maybe something theequines vets should spread the news on?”

“World Horse Welfare has produced a really helpful guide which should be better promoted”

Euthanasia of healthy horse

The most contentious topic discussed by respondents was euthanasia of a healthy horse. There was a very strong sentiment that euthanising a horse that was no longer fit for their intended use or that the owner could no longer care for was wrong.

“A lot of people do it because it’s “easier”. They are big animals with big hearts and we need to consider what is right for them. We are lucky we can just put animals to sleep when it’s the right thing for us. How fair is that on an innocent horse that is healthy and happy.”

“But some are pts more easily by owners as deposable society”

“Should only be allowed if the health of the horse means that a there’s not other option. Too many euthanasias nowadays just for convenience to the owners or because the horses are ‘trouble’ which is always nonsense it’s just a byword for people that don’t understand horses. Or as I like to say people that don’t talk horse. “

“We live in a throw away society. It is sad to see people selling their 25 year old horse or PTS a horse that can’t do a 3 day event but would make a good happy hacker.”

“Becoming an option that is used more commonly when vet bills are too expensive or if they want to make room for a new horae”

“Despite advances in veterinary medicine, performance horses are being euthanised because if they underwent a neurectomy procedure they would be ineligible to compete under FEI rules.”

“Too many horses being euthanised which are fit and healthy but bought by someone without the riding ability and knowledge and then have the horse PTS as they can’t manage. Seen it over and over again”

“Euthanasia is unfortunately an easy option in cases where owners aren’t interested in treating their horses or finding them a new home. There should be more strict regulations in place before horses are put to sleep.”

“It is far too easy to have your horse euthanised. That is why people hesitate less before buying a horse”

This sentiment is the opposing view to that expressed earlier concerning delayed euthanasia, namely that owners were too eager to pass horses on to new homes rather than take responsibility for them and humanely euthanise them. The difference lies in what is perceived as a healthy horse, and what is not. This is likely to vary significantly between individual owners, and this variation likely contributes to the lack of understanding, and often the judgement over another horse owners’ actions.

2. The horse crisis

What do you think ‘horse crisis’ means?

Before they were provided with a definition of the ‘horse crisis’ in the survey (*for the purpose of this research, the RSPCA has defined the horse crisis as "Overpopulation, Overbreeding, Neglect and Abandonment"*), respondents were asked in an open, free text question what they thought the term meant. As illustrated by figure 17, respondent responses indicated a mixed understanding of the meaning of the term, although all four areas covered by the RSPCA definition were encompassed. Of the 950 respondents who answered this question, 8% (n=77) explicitly said that they didn’t know or had to look it up, although more than this indicated that their response was a guess through the wording they used.

[‘Horse crisis’ is an accurate term](#)

Respondents who felt that ‘horse crisis’ is an accurate term highlighted the scale of the problem, with the size and severity requiring a strong word like ‘crisis’ to adequately describe it.

“A crisis is exactly what it is. Horses can be bought relatively cheaply, no need to prove you can look after them well. Economic crisis is beginning to hit. Things are going to get a lot worse”

“We do have a crisis in how horses are being bred, managed and used. The mainstream has moved away from horses actually being allowed to be horses.”

“Yes, I think there is a crisis in the number of horses suffering through abandonment, lack of appropriate care and living the life of kings (perceived by humans) yet having their species needs completely ignored.”

“It IS a crisis. If we don't use that word then the seriousness of the welfare situation won't be acknowledged and acted on.”

“It is a crisis. The equine community is largely blind to the numbers of horses who are being failed”

“Crisis means a big problem and I think that describes the situation spot on”

Some respondents specifically mentioned equine rescue charities in their explanations.

“Charities are stuffed to capacity”

“Yes because it is a crisis horses and charities are finding themselves in. It is also a crisis for people who love their horses but are struggling to keep them, they need financial grants for feed etc.”

“It's a crisis as it's at a dangerous level, welfare is not being met more than ever these days, rescue Centres are bursting and education is poor in the equine world”

Interestingly, the survey itself led to one respondent recognising the current situation as a ‘horse crisis’.

“I had never thought about it before. After doing this survey and thinking about it. There is a horse crisis and people are not realising it”

[‘Horse crisis’ is not an accurate term](#)

Overall, there appeared to be two main stances taken by respondents who regarded ‘horse crisis’ as an inaccurate term. One stance focused on the duration of the problem and suggested that as the situation was no longer acute but rather a chronic issue, the term ‘horse crisis’ was not appropriate.

““Crisis” implies short term. This is sadly our normal state.”

“A crisis is more of a short-term, perhaps sudden or unexpected, and acute problem, while the current situation is more systemic, built up long-term, ubiquitous, and widespread.”

The other stance taken by respondents was that there is no ‘horse crisis’ because equine welfare is actually very good.

“There is no crisis, welfare is at an all time high”

“It seems to overshadow all horses whether they're a children's pet or a racehorse and the fact is that most horses in the country are extremely well looked after and in the best care anyone could ask for”

“I believe the situation has improved somewhat from 1-2 years ago, demand and upfront costs are reducing, therefore there are less mismatches between horse and owners. Additionally, the cost of living crisis has made people reconsider purchasing a horse in the current climate.”

“Horses are being more and more well cared for, with increasing knowledge and better practices these days. Social media is the problem, not most practices.”

Other comments referred to the lack of specificity in the term, which they felt hampered understanding of what it is.

“It is not specific enough. People need to know what the actual issues are”

“Think it should be horse overbreeding crisis”

One respondent felt the term ‘horse crisis’ was not strong enough

“It is truly a horse catastrophe, I wrote to my MP about horse breeding some years ago, but unless you are part of the horse community you don't see what is really going on until it is too late and 'suddenly' there are abandoned, suffering and ill-treated horses turning up UK wide and the horse charities are overwhelmed. This is not new and not caused by the economic crisis, the economic situation has just exacerbated it.”

Don't know

Nearly half of the respondents did not know whether ‘horse crisis’ is an accurate term or not. This was attributed to lack of awareness of its existence and the scale of the problem and the perception that equine welfare is not an issue compared to 20 or 30 years ago

“Wasn't aware things had got that bad to be considered a crisis to be honest. There has always been a certain amount of unwanted animals sadly”

“I've never heard of it & don't know what it means”

“Crisis is a strong word and I believe in general our welfare standards are far better than 20/30 years ago”

Lack of a better term than ‘crisis’ was mentioned;

“Everything is a crisis these days, energy crisis, cost of living crisis. Don't suppose there is another way of describing it !”

Interestingly, some respondents made the point that in the term ‘horse crisis’, the ‘horse’ part seemed to attribute blame to the horses rather than the human.

“It probably is. I think crisis is fair but 'horse crisis' makes it sound like the issue is horses whereas, in my view, the issue is the over breeding etc”

Do you have personal experience of the horse crisis?

The majority of respondents (62%) reported that they did not have personal experience of the horse crisis, 35% said they did have personal experience of the crisis and 4% did not know (see Figure 17 above). Respondents were asked to expand on the answer if they had had personal experience of the horse crisis and 403 respondents took this opportunity. Their responses encapsulated all four aspects of the horse crisis as defined by the RSPCA, as well as drawing on welfare concerns relating to practices they had seen including on social media (Figure 20).



Figure 21: Word cloud illustrating the words used in respondents free text responses (n=908) to the question what do you think needs to be done about the 'horse crisis', if anything?

Some respondents responded that they were unsure how the situation could be changed, but many gave one or more suggestions, as summarised below:

- Education, for example through the BHS and Pony Club
- Review of current legislation
- Improved enforcement of legislation – including passporting and microchipping
- Licencing breeders and/or stallions, dealers, equine ownership, and equine premises including rescue centres
- Harsher punishments for those neglecting equines
- Culling surplus equines
- Greater regulation and monitoring of all parts of the equine sector (racing, travelling communities, and breeders mentioned repeatedly)
- More effective passport system
- Greater adoption of payment plans by equine vets for those who can't afford to pay in one go
- Trade in horse meat to give unwanted horses some value
- Changing current attitudes and social norms
- Awareness campaigns
- More resources for local authorities
- Government support
- Greater powers for rescue/welfare organisations so they can intervene earlier, also rehome sooner so not having to pay costs of keeping equines during prosecutions (referred to recent change in legislation in Scotland)
- Cheaper castration and euthanasia
- Return to freezemarking so easier to trace
- Better signposting of advice and support
- More proactive prevention by charities rather than rescuing to break the cycle
- Changes to insurance policies to facilitate euthanasia

“Everyone in the horse industry and equine organisations need to stick together to educate, protect and monitor.”

There was also a sense of futility given the size of the problem, and the perception that there was little difference an individual could make.

“The problem is huge and I do feel powerless to effect any kind of change - stand on the sidelines feeling desperately sad and very angry but don’t know what to do. In an ideal world, none of this would happen, we wouldn’t have to call it a horse crisis and if there was any wrong doing, the law would be swift and true - but that’s a pipe dream...”

Some respondents left negative comments about some organisations and their perceived lack of action to date which influenced who they believed should take responsibility in their answer.

Please could you rate how important you think each of these factors are in driving the horse crisis?

Respondents were given the option to expand on their response to the question *“Please could you rate how important you think each of these factors are in driving the horse crisis?”* (see Figure 9) and 520 took the opportunity to do so. Some clarified that as long as the owner could afford to care for their horses appropriately and their horses were not suffering, there was nothing wrong with not euthanising elderly horses or those with physical or behavioural issues.

Final comments

While many respondents referred back to their answers to previous questions, some raised areas of concern that they felt had not been covered in sufficient detail within the survey. These are summarised below:

- Too many people are looking for the ‘perfect pony’, won’t deal with existing issues and move on those equines who fall short of perfection
- Racing and competitive sports flooding the leisure market with their breeding surplus and those who can no longer perform at the required standard
- Current attitudes – entitlement (everyone who wants one should be able to get a horse), euthanasia (putting quantity of life over quality), negative perception of non-ridden horses (either those that can no longer be ridden or those kept as a companion or pet), horses increasingly seen as a disposable commodity (fewer people keeping a horse for life)
- The “toxic culture” in equestrianism
- Lack of awareness of equine welfare needs, behaviour, signs of pain
- Vets not always being the advocate the horse needs, especially at end of life (financially motivated or for fear of offending client)

Concluding remarks

The online survey generated an enormous amount of data from over 1,100 respondents on their understandings, perceptions and experiences of the horse crisis and factors related to it. The quantitative analysis identified associations between the role a respondent held within the equine sector and the importance they placed on different potentially contributing factors. A breadth of views

and understandings were also reflected in the qualitative free text data. It was apparent that while less than half of the respondents had heard of the horse crisis, the majority had concerns around the factors presented in the survey (breeding practices, supply and demand, availability of places to keep horses, changes in the world, changes in the ‘use’ of horses, people’s practical skills with horses, and euthanasia and end of life options).

Together, the findings of this survey provide a point-in-time insight into understandings and perceptions of equine welfare in late 2022, early 2023. The nuances of these understandings were teased out during the stakeholder interviews.

Appendix:



Figure 17: The survey flyer was shared electronically by email and across social media platforms including Facebook and LinkedIn.

012. Informal interview analysis

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Introduction and methodology

A total of 24 informal interviews were conducted between January and May 2023. The interviews followed a journalistic approach of following interesting leads, with semi-structured guiding questions. The interviews were conducted by five members of the research team (one team member per interviewee) and the answers were recorded in an Excel sheet during the interview. The people interviewed were from a range of backgrounds with variable levels of experience in different areas of the equine sector. The interviewees included: livery yard and riding school owners, equine dentists, barefoot trimmers, equine vets, informed equine owners, farriers, charity workers, an equine slaughterhouse manager, behaviourists, and trainers.

The questions first explored the interviewees history with equines and within the equine sector. The interview allowed discussion about their direct experience of equine welfare and their perceptions of trends regarding equine welfare now, over the past 10 years and what their thoughts are about the future of equine welfare. Common themes were extracted from the interviews and grouped into relevant sections of interest including, overpopulation, overbreeding, neglect, and abandonment. Emerging issues, that do not fit into the identified sections, have been explored further in relevant

sections. A ‘strong’ theme is one that is consistent across a range of interviewees, with specific aspects highlighted if from a particular specialist area in the field, such as a welfare officer.

Abandonment

A strong theme that emerged was that abandonment is not commonly seen by the interviewees. A few participants recalled stories from third parties of horses being left at livery yards but there were few first-hand stories of this. Where abandonment had been encountered, the animals were sometimes euthanised as they were not able to work, and one of the interviewees ‘rescued’ abandoned colts, trained them, and then rehomed them. A yard owner of a small charity discussed the ‘definition’ of abandonment – for example, they come across stray horses without microchips each year, which would meet the obvious label of abandonment, but the interviewee also questioned whether a child that loses interest in a pony and gives the animal away, or relinquishes him/her to a charity is also abandoning their pony. It was discussed that abandoning horses has become more difficult due to legislation, passports, and microchips. Ten years ago, it was common that colts would be ‘dumped’ but there is a perceived reduction in this type of abandonment, and it was felt that castration clinics have helped to address the cause of this abandonment too. Dartmoor was previously known as a dumping ground for poorly ponies, but few have been recorded in recent years. There was discussion that elderly hill farmers, particularly in Wales and the New Forest, may abandon animals, which was connected to being unable to cope with the number of animals they had and the farmer’s old age.

Interviewees working in the welfare sector felt that there were few genuine abandonment cases, most of which tended to be of dead or dying horses. There are more cases of seized welfare issues than abandonment. It was previously common to have coloured cobs abandoned at the end of the summer, but this stopped overnight during the COVID pandemic.

A general consensus across the interviewees was that during COVID there was an upsurge in the cost to purchase a horse, which made all horses more valuable and caused abandonment to reduce dramatically. Animals that would have been abandoned or euthanised, were now being sold on due to having some perceived value. This trend may feed into the welfare issue of people keeping older horses with chronic pain in work, and unethical sales practices by dealers including not disclosing medical issues or behaviour concerns.

Overbreeding

The effect of overbreeding appears to be different according to geographic regions of the country. There are specific areas, including Yorkshire, New Forest and the moorland areas including Wales, Dartmoor, and Bodmin Moor, where interviewees reported large numbers of small native ponies being bred, often by older generation breeders. It was explained by interviewees that these ponies can be bred cheaply but are not highly desirable and so often achieve low prices when sold. Charities in the southwest reported that a high proportion of their intake is unhandled ponies and an abattoir felt that 40 % of their intake was made up of these types of ponies. In many cases, it was felt that breeders acknowledge that some of the ponies they breed have little worth. In some cases, with older animals kept on moors or in grazing schemes, both vet and welfare workers acknowledged that sometimes elderly breeders lose control of their herds, including allowing colts to remain out or allowing inbreeding and breeding more ponies than usual. It is thought that this is an effect of old age of the owner, with some reported relinquishments of ponies being related to the owner’s age-related challenges such as dementia or falls.

It was considered by a variety of interviewees, including a yard owner and a racehorse trainer, that there are more horses being bred than imported now due to Brexit. The quality of racehorses is perceived to be reducing, but the same perception was not made regarding dressage horses. It is not economically feasible to breed a horse to sell that meets the market demand of well-trained ridden horses with experience and potential to compete. One participant eloquently summarised this sentiment by explaining that when foals are sold, they are selling a dream, a hope of what could be, but often these foals do not meet that expectation. At times, this might be due to a physical aspect such as size, or a behaviour issue, which might be related to inexperienced owners.

Another strong theme related to overbreeding and raised by several vets and professionals, was people's inclination to breed from inappropriate mares - often well-loved mares that have been ridden horses but are now unable to be ridden due to physical or behavioural issues. It is thought that breeding a foal is easy and a Southwest vet mentioned that they actively encourage people to not breed their mares due to the high risks to the mare's health, and the huge costs involved; *"It gives the mare a purpose, something to do, when actually this may be a way of trying to get something from the horse"*.

There is a high motivation to breed more animals when they gain a good market price, but most mares that are being bred do not have a high value as they do not meet the demand regarding type of horse. There appears to be considerable breeding of the wrong type of horse for the current market, some breeders are willing to breed an excess to improve their chances of a good quality animal to sell or show.

Neglect

Unintentional neglect

A strong theme that came across from all interviewees was described as unintentional neglect - allowing horses to suffer due to delay in treatment, inappropriate tack, poor management, obesity, delaying routine procedures, too much reliance on alternative therapies or selling of horses due to issues stemming from lack of knowledge or confidence. The reasons that were given for the unintentional neglect included lack of knowledge or experience, increasing costs and attempts at cutting costs. Vets and other professionals commented on owners gaining inappropriate information from social media, contributing to delayed or misinformed treatment. It was recognised that there is a real mix of economic and social issues tied into this subject (including ill-health, mental health issues and increasing age). The increase in horse prices appears to have kept horses in the market and being sold when they would have either been euthanised, abandoned or left in the field ('retirement'). For some horses, this means a new opportunity for a home, which might have gone well, but for others this could cause ongoing suffering if they have chronic pain such as arthritis. A southwest vet commented that a real issue in welfare that she sees is the retired pony in the field, often obese, borderline laminitic and with arthritis. The increased use of rubber mats was mentioned by several people; they are seen to be convenient for the owner but cause a welfare issue for the equine due to reduced comfort for horses to lie down on and reluctance to urinate on that surface. This is especially important given increasing awareness of equine sleep disorders.

Also, on the theme of unintentional neglect was where owners might not seek professional help at the appropriate time. In agreement with work published in the scientific literature, interviewees described horse owners as being poor at identifying pain and stress in horses; a lack of knowledge might mean that the pain is not identified by the owner. However, it was also recognised that the increasing cost of living and increasing cost and availability of forage may mean that there is less money available to pay the vet bills. A vet practice manager commented that the increase in corporate

owned vet practices was causing issues through increased costs, alongside the reduced amounts of vets available in the U.K (United Kingdom) (United Kingdom) to work. Increasingly, locums were at practices and vets were closing their books to new customers, reducing out of hours service, and refusing clients who did not pay. One concern that was highlighted by a behaviourist in Wales was the tendency of owners to register with several vets to get the cheapest option from each practice, which means no single practice has a general oversight of the horse. This reduced availability of vet care, along with spiralling costs could become a welfare issue.

Other issues that come under unintentional neglect included concern over a lack of understanding about worming and the importance of targeted worming (sometimes known as intelligent worming), rather than blanket (on a schedule) worming. Worming issues were mostly described in relation to welfare cases, where substantial numbers of ponies are kept without a suitable worming programme being put in place. Interviewees made several comments around owners having flawed sense of priority regarding their spending in relation to their horse – for example, buying the latest fashion numnah, rather than ensuring appropriate bills are met, such as feed, and this was tied into a basic lack of horsemanship.

Lack of knowledge

A lack of basic knowledge and experience was a strong theme in both the formal and informal interviews as well as the surveys. Interviewees described how people ‘buy to learn’ about horses. The role of social media was also highlighted – where an idealistic vision of horse-riding and ownership is sometimes painted, and people do not fully appreciate the time and cost commitments associated with caring for a horse. Lack of knowledge was also thought to be linked to the decreasing number of riding schools operating in the UK (United Kingdom). For a time before COVID, it was cheaper to buy a horse than go through the stages of gaining experience including going to the riding school, completing BHS (British Horse Society) stages, and joining a local riding club. A riding school owner based in the southeast, also touched on how stressed the children of this generation now are with less time for after school activities due to homework and school.

The lack of basic knowledge of many horse owners is influencing the management of horses. The perceived traditional way horses are managed, in a stable with paddock access is being shifted with more focus on stabling and less on turnout posing a welfare concern. Traditionally, horses were a work animal, worked hard during the day and then turned out to graze with stabling being overnight. In modern times, horses are mostly used as leisure animals. A southwest vet felt that many horses are not getting suitable amounts of ridden exercise. Concern was expressed from vets and yard owners that people did not have the confidence to ride horses anymore; one interviewee described owners as being ‘*too scared to hack.*’ This lack of knowledge was also considered by farriers and vets to be a contributing factor to horse behaviour issues, often leading to the selling on of horses, where the lack of knowledge is creating problems. An inexperienced owner may miss the effect of ill-fitting tack and may resort to harsher tack, using pain and discomfort to control the horse rather than investing in appropriate training. When the lack of knowledge is considered alongside other factors, the extent and breadth of the problems emerge.

Other factors include increasingly yards have less knowledgeable owners; increasing volume of information on social media; increase in use of alternative therapies; less accessible vet care; economic pressures to reduce costs; and lack of available forage. An inexperienced owner, without suitable support could make uninformed decisions on forage, turnout access, stabling and riding or training needs, which could negatively impact on the horse's wellbeing.

Obesity and laminitis

Several interviewees outlined obesity and subsequent laminitis as a concern for equine welfare rather than the more typical perception that neglect refers to skinny horses. A Southwest vet commented that it is not always lack of knowledge that means that people have obese horses, but the lack of ability to do anything about it, with contributing factors including, time, ability to do appropriate exercise and enough ability to manage the environment to alter diet mentioned as significant. There is increasing awareness that management of horses is often not horse focused and can be a welfare concern. To diet horses effectively, they often need to be restricted from grass, which can cause reduction in social opportunity and movement. There has been a rise in track systems to help to address this issue, but due to lack of knowledge these can be implemented poorly causing behavioural issues and social stress for the horses that use them.

Land use and climate change

Interviewees described a decreasing availability of land for equine use together with closure of riding schools, equine centres, and livery yards due to the land being developed for housing. This scarcity of land leads to increased business rates and insurance, further exacerbating the issues.

Across many discussions was a strong theme of people not having enough experience to be able to look after a horse effectively. In part, it was perceived that this was due to a reduced number of riding stables. A riding school owner from the Southeast had experienced five neighbouring schools closing and some diversified to become livery yards. The closures were considered to have occurred for a variety of reasons, including increased cost of horses, business rates and insurance increases. A farrier from the same area had the perception that Surrey was being built on and that yards were closing. In the Southwest, an equine vet perceived that there was, in some cases, overpopulation on livery yards. It was considered that this occurred to enhance profits rather than for land availability reasons, but in the Southeast the perception was that increased land rules meant that less turnout was allowed to keep land looking neat. There are agricultural incentives that do not pay if the land is poached, so this could be affecting yards on diversified farmland. These agricultural incentives may also impact on farmers being willing to let out small parcels of land to potential horse owners, there appears to be areas of the country where this is more prevalent and that may relate to land prices and farm type. An arable farm is less likely to have available pockets of land, but also an agricultural land will be swayed more towards green conservation incentives, which include letting land go fallow and growing bird seed rather than renting for equestrian use, which is possible going to poach the land. The use and availability of land use for horse owners does appear to influence the welfare outcomes of horses regarding management and cost of upkeep and forage. A charity welfare officer described the different horse welfare cases coming into their organisation: across Scotland they have mainly failed performance horses who are now lame or have behaviour issues; Norfolk having more cobs, little ponies and riding ponies with good rehoming potential and few welfare cases; and in the southwest (Somerset) they have an influx of small, poorly bred ponies who are unhandled.

The interviewees who managed livery yards did not discuss land access as a challenge, instead the focus of challenge to them was on rent costs, insurance and covid creating a logistical overwhelm regarding biosecurity. Due to the English climate the availability of land for grazing over winter can be affected by rain. However, this is also related to stocking density, if the density is low enough then poaching and mud may not be a significant issue as it is in many places now.

One area that affects all horses is the effect of climate on the hay crop each year, the past two summers (2021 and 2022) there have been extended drought periods which have impacted on hay and haylage availability. In many cases, hay was being moved across the country to meet demand, as well as an increase in price there was shortages of availability for consumers. The availability of straw

was also reduced, impacting donkey owners, as donkeys' diets includes straw, but also due to the amount of straw in horse feeds. There are various feeds that have inflated prices or change in composition due to the lack of available straw.

During the interviews, an owner and a vet mentioned an increase in colics, there did not seem to be an understanding of why but there was a mention that there was consideration that the dry weather at the end of 2022 could have impacted on the colic rates. This is unclear, but an area of interest that could become more significant if more dry periods are seen, especially in relation to climate change.

Overpopulation

Overpopulation was not a discussion point that was specifically focused on by most interviewees. When asked about overpopulation, most interviewees, aside from the welfare officers, responded that they do not come across this as an issue in their professional lives. Areas that stood out as a concern in terms of overpopulation were, lack of land for horses, livery yards that have a high population of horses, riding schools and livery yards closing to allow land to be built on and the numbers of horses passing through abattoirs.

In certain areas of the country, specific large-scale breeders were discussed as having hundreds of ponies, breeding large amounts of poor-quality animals. Overpopulation was not discussed directly but there would be an effect on welfare through access to adequate grazing, parasite control and routine procedures occurring including feet. It would be challenging to ensure all these aspects were met with a large population of animals that are not regularly handled.

There appears to be a limited opportunity for horses to enter UK abattoirs, with only one licensed to slaughter for human consumption. The approximate percentage of horse type passing through was 40% semi feral, 20% cobs and 40% thoroughbreds. The thoroughbreds originate most often from dealers or were very young, had not made the standard required for racing or competition. A racehorse re-trainer felt that breeding is now focussed on poorer quality animals and that more are being bred in the UK than in previous years and are often not fit to go onto other careers after racing. A horse being sold repeatedly without disclosure of medical or behavioural issues can be a welfare issue for the horse - persistent attempts to settle into new social groups, moving locations, routines and diets are all challenging for horses and could contribute to chronic stress. If the quality of thoroughbreds is reducing (through inbreeding and the fact that race horses are bred for speed not longevity or equestrian disciplines other than racing) then this could be contributing to the selling on of inappropriate horses, when horses are sold by dealers without full disclosure of medical or behavioural issues, often to people not able to manage the challenges posed by this type of horse. This chain of events (including the fact that professionals are often not able to recognise pain in horses and that the cost of veterinary treatment is often prohibitively high) could see dealers sending horses to the abattoir after return, or owners having the horse euthanised at home.

The proportion of semi-feral animals at the abattoir is also high, which is unsurprising as the perception is that it is not economically viable to breed for what people want to buy. Instead, it is felt that people breed high numbers of small, affordable ponies, that are unhandled, and the profit is made from some of these animals. Those that do not sell, may go to market, the abattoir or to inexperienced homes that may not be able to adequately train them.

A theme from several interviews was that of unscrupulous dealers. There was concern that it was hard to find a good horse, buying horses was challenging and it was common for medical and behavioural issues to not be disclosed. When an inexperienced owner meets a horse from a dealer, they may not be able to suitably experience their character to ascertain whether they are a suitable match. A concern was raised, from a person who had recently been looking for a horse, that often trying a horse

would be a 30 minute, ‘meet them and ride them’ experience. Such an approach provides little time to get to know a large, complex animal that might have experienced years of training, good or bad, to lead it to the point in behaviour that it is today. It is unclear whether dealers are getting worse, or if owners are becoming less experienced and are therefore unable to assess potential horses, alongside fewer horses being available that are affordable for most people. The switching of homes for horses is a welfare concern, it also reduces the likelihood of a vet's practice having a good knowledge of the horse and routine procedures may be overdue. Integrating horses to new yards and social groups presents a situation where acute stress and injury may occur.

Buying and selling

The frequent selling of horses - passing horses from person to person - was also highlighted and has been mentioned through the interviews in different sections. There were several descriptions, from vets, yard owners and welfare employees, of people being sold horses that were not as described or were inappropriate for their needs. This frequently leads to horses being sold on or sent back to the dealer. It was felt that owners were more likely to send horses back to the dealer rather than donkeys - horses were perceived as more likely to have a specific job whereas a donkey was seen more of a pet. The role of the equine is important – equines are expensive to keep and so if they are not ‘useful’ or can do a job, the likelihood of selling them or trying to make a use for them such as breeding is increased. With the horse price market remaining high and the perception that there are lots of homes available, then potentially people think the horse will find a better rider, trainer, or situation. This may not be the case as highlighted by the proportion of horses at abattoirs that came from dealers.

Economy

According to the informal interviews, the cost-of-living crisis is not yet being perceived as causing an issue with keeping horses although some interviewees mentioned the increasing cost of equine food. However, there is a concern that it will come. The farriers and vets that provided informal interviews all said they had not yet put their prices up, the high-end yard owners felt that owners were not struggling to feed their horses yet and would prioritise their horse over themselves if necessary. The professionals described client behaviour as a challenge - some clients are starting to stretch the time between appointments or try to use alternative therapies, to save money. However, in some cases it may be more complex than that. The veterinary chains seem to be causing distrust of the veterinary industry, where prices are appearing inflated, and vets are harder to access. There is also the influence of social media, with inaccurate and conflicting messaging being put across to horse owners, some of which are inexperienced. The effect of the livery yard is also influential, with owners being led by others perceived success over veterinary or professional advice.

In general, the perception from the informal interviews appeared to be that equine owners are affluent, but not necessarily experienced, although many are keeping horses on a shoestring budget. This mix of economic status is enabling the price of ‘good’ horses to remain high yet retains a market for the breeding of poor-quality ponies or the sale of medically or behaviourally unfit horses, to less affluent and/or less experienced owners. The price of horses appears to be reaching a plateau, but vets are still surprised by the high price of mid-teen cobs, which are desirable now but were not 10 years ago. This could be why abandonments have reduced. Also, if they are riding cobs for adults they are very much in demand, abandoned cobs are typically too small to ride.

Social media

The influence of social media was discussed across several topics by the interviewees. There is the potential for useful information to be passed to the horse owning population and to the public through social media, however it is also a platform for bullying and the spread of misinformation.

Several vets commented that people were choosing alternative therapies or discussing diagnostics that they themselves would not consider due to the influence of social media. The rise in gastric ulcer diagnosis was one example, even though more gastric ulcers are being diagnosed, they cannot be sure to be of clinical significance to the horse. There is still a lot to learn, however, they have become fashionable to blame for a multitude of issues, which may limit what other tests and treatments are performed.

An interesting example regarding the rise of social media was that it can offer an idealistic image of owning, riding, and producing horses. The 'Instagram vs reality experience,' where inexperienced owners may only see the training journey, they have in front of them with rose tinted glasses on, without the background in knowledge which would inform them of the time, skill, and patience it takes to work with horses.

Social media was recognised to have immense potential in communicating with owners as it has the potential to reach huge audiences, is freely available, and it offers access to the younger generation who may be more open to learning new information and potentially changing their perspectives than older people.

Perception of charities

It was acknowledged that the RSPCA is not highly thought of by the equine community. This was reflected by frustrations expressed by most welfare employees of other organisations. It was felt that often they should be doing more, sooner, but were limited by staff shortages and enforcement limitations. The focus in some situations was to get enough evidence for the prosecution, with cost being factored into decisions about treatment or end of life decisions. It was acknowledged that the Local Authorities and police are directing all equine welfare concerns to the RSPCA, which was putting extra pressure on the organisation.

The term horse crisis was not widely recognised in the informal interviews apart from understanding that the term was generally connected to a few high-profile cases about 10 years ago where the RSPCA widely advertised the problems and, in many cases, placed horses into riding schools.

Solutions

There was an interesting array of solutions put forward in the informal interviews. The main theme that emerged was a need for education and training – across all areas of the horse industry, from children to vets. It was suggested that vets would benefit from increased training in horse behaviour, to include this aspect in vetting and to be able to start to offer accurate interpretations of behaviour that they see. There was a call for professionals to work together better and with more interaction between the vet led team, appreciating, and respecting the relevant professions. The availability and accessibility of professionals was mentioned, with respect to veterinary and farrier care. The role of social media in this education was mentioned, reaching out to the young generations and engaging people who want to listen, and change could begin the cultural shift that is needed.

A strong theme of basic horse knowledge for owners was put forward, with a variety of ways to deliver this information including social media, training on yards, accessible BHS training or other governing

bodies. Improving knowledge and skill set before people buy horses would be beneficial for the horses that they may or may not purchase. However, this knowledge could include more information about what a good horse is, how you might find one and potentially considering safe ways of securing a safe and sound horse. The suggestion of a knowledge test for ownership was put forward, but more strongly was a recognition that it might not be achievable and that an entire cultural shift was required. It was interesting to hear the consideration for the cultural shift being required, with the perspective that everyone needs to take responsibility for the equine welfare crisis. The onus is not necessarily to license stallions and stop breeding, but to ensure people have appropriate knowledge so that better quality horses are bought, sold, and bred. There is a recognition that the knowledge and information is available and accessible but not everyone appears to want to hear it or consider how they may have to change to affect good welfare change. Governing bodies and charities are beginning to offer thoughts and advice about horse welfare including behaviour, but as it does not always fit well with peoples preconceived ideas then it is discounted.

An engagement of the next generation with increased focus on horse care and horse focused management was considered important by several interviewees and would potentially be a good opportunity to start the cultural shift that is perceived to be required. The investment in young person education could begin to increase the basic skills for horse care and horse sense that is perceived to be lacking at present. There is currently good investment in the riding aspect for young people but less about handling, management, and behaviour.

A welfare-orientated vet highlighted the benefit of consideration of further rules from governing bodies such as FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) to improve the standards of welfare for competing horses. These legislations could act in multiple ways, by strengthening the message that horse welfare matters and that science led information is being respected, and it could reduce the risk of horse sport being reduced or stopped due to the social license to operate pressure that is currently being felt by the equine industry. An increase in legislation in terms of welfare law could enforce better welfare for horses, by putting restrictions on time in the stable or requiring horses to have adequate social experiences. Another avenue that was suggested was improved training for Local Authorities and trading standards, as there was a perceived knowledge gap in this area.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there was a strong sense that the equine world is fundamentally flawed in terms of understanding horse welfare and that it holds a skewed view of what good horse welfare looks like. Basic horse welfare is not being met in many cases, with inexperienced owners potentially missing important basics such as worming, teeth and foot care. The welfare of horses in their day-to-day management by owners was considered to not meet the horse's behavioural needs. The welfare of ridden horses was questioned through poor breeding, training and inappropriate tack use and there is pressure on the equine industry regarding the social license to operate to consider the welfare of equines in sport. Equine owners are perceived to have a lack in basic knowledge that can cost a horse their basic routine care requirements and increase the risk of passing horses on through multiple owners due to inadequate training or the wrong horse being bought in the first place. When a horse reaches the end of their working days, they are not safe from being passed on again due to high price opportunities and economic pressures or, in many cases, becoming a welfare concern themselves with their loving owner through unintentional neglect by being left to become obese, at risk of laminitis and potentially in chronic pain from unrecognised low level conditions.

013. Formal interview analysis

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In total 22 interviews with equine stakeholders in England, Wales and Ireland were conducted by the research team, either online via Zoom or face-to-face depending on interviewee preference and geographic location. The sample was purposive in nature with interviewees selected through personal networks of the research team and snowball sampling to capture distinct roles and experiences within the equine sector. Interviewees were also recruited via the online survey, again using a purposive sampling strategy to address any gaps with the sample. The sample is described in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the sample of interviewees according to their connection to the equine sector and the geographic location on which their perspective is founded.

Connection to equine sector	Location	Abbreviation
Equine Vet	East of England	EE-Vet
Equine welfare charity investigator	East of England	EE-EWC-Inspector
Equine Welfare Charity Department Head	UK perspective	UK-EWC-Department Head
Knackerman / equine disposal / cremation	East of England	EE-Knackerman
Equine Vet	Northeast England	NE-Vet
Equine Vet	South England (New Forest)	New Forest-Vet
Equine Welfare Charity Deputy CEO	UK	UK-EWC-Senior
Equine Welfare Charity CEO	UK and Europe	UK-EWC-Senior2
Equestrian professional (riding school/livery owner, breeder, competitive showjumper)	East of England	EE-Equine Professional
Equine Welfare Charity Vet	UK	UK-EWC-Vet
Riding school owner/vet	Southwest England	SW-Riding School Owner-Vet
Equine vet	Southwest England	SW-Vet
Equine Welfare Charity advisor (donkeys)	Southwest England	SW-EWC-Donkey advisor
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)	Ireland	Ire-DAFM
Equine Welfare Charity CEO	Ireland	Ire-EWC-Senior
Riding school owner	Southwest England	SW-Riding School Owner
Livery yard owner	Northwest England	NW-Livery Yard Owner
Breeder/online tack shop owner/equine welfare charity volunteer	North England	North-Breeder-Charity volunteer
Equine Vet / former racehorse consultant	Southwest England	SW-Vet2
Local authority worker	Wales	Wales-Local authority
Equine Welfare Charity Head of Welfare	Southwest England	SW-EWC-Senior
Equine Welfare Charity Inspector	Wales	Wales-EWC-Inspector

The interviews were semi-structured enabling key areas to be explored but allowing space for spontaneous themes to emerge and relevant lines of enquiry to be followed. The audio recordings were transcribed for analysis. A hybrid coding approach was taken whereby a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used to interpret the interview data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006).

The findings of the analysis are presented below, with the stakeholders' understandings of the term 'horse crisis' taken as a starting point. Throughout the following analysis it is important to remember that the interviewees are each recounting their personal experiences as viewed through the unique lens of their particular involvement in the sector, their location, background, and personal beliefs. The findings draw on the commonalities and points of conflict between these accounts and are not

intended to be representative of the wider population. As such they provide a detailed insight into individual perspectives.

Understandings of term ‘horse crisis’

There was a mixed understanding of the term ‘horse crisis’ across the interview sample, with some not having heard the term before participating in this research, others having heard the term but not really understood it, some having a misconception about what it meant, and others expressing opinions about the relevance of the term today.

There was a tendency for those who had heard of it but not understood it, to link it to the current discussions around social licence and the use of equines in sport, for example *“it's just reflecting on the fact that people think that horses shouldn't be ridden going forward”* (EE- Vet) and *“So whether there's going to be horses in the Olympics and all that sort of thing in the future, horses being ridden, that sort of thing. I've seen articles about that sort of thing... I think for me, a horse crisis would be tragic if people were to stop riding horses”* (EE-Equine Professional)

For those who understood the term, the sentiment expressed was that it was no longer relevant today given the length of time the crisis had been running. Indeed, one interviewee said that instead we needed to *“talk about the new normal”* (UK-EWC-Senior2). The vagueness of the term was highlighted by many interviewees, particularly those who had not initially heard of it or had misunderstood its meaning:

“It's quite a broad term, horse crisis... I am certainly not a marketing brand consultant, but I don't know, maybe something that was a bit more targeted at the problem rather than horse crisis” (New Forest-Vet)

“I think if we're going to use the term horse crisis, it needs to be clarified what that is implying” (NE-Vet)

The working definition of the ‘horse crisis’ utilised within the interview questions was that provided by the RSPCA - the overbreeding, overpopulation, neglect, and abandonment of equines. The interviewees’ personal experiences of these key areas were explored within the interviews and summarised below. Overbreeding and overpopulation are considered together given the difficulty some interviewees reported in differentiating between them.

Breeding

Overbreeding was perceived to happen across all facets of the equine sector, including the higher levels *“there's complete overbreeding in every sector and over production of sports horses”* (Ire-EWC-Senior), although some populations seemed to draw more attention than others *“The cobs and thoroughbreds, the small cobs. They are definitely the ones that are overbreeding”* (Ire-EWC-Senior).

The subject of equine breeding practices proved to be one that the interviewees tended to have strong opinions on, not only what types of equines are being bred and by who, but also in relation to the role of veterinary professionals within this process, and between vets themselves.

“this is actually a topic which I know that as vets we're all very divided” (SW-Vet)

“...she's no longer fit as a dressage horse because she can barely walk, but my God, we're going to have foals out of her’ and I think that's not being monitored and it's happening under our noses in the hands of very well-paid professionals” (UK-EWC-Vet)

The concern raised in the second quote, breeding from mares who are unsound or have behavioural issues, was a particular worry, not only regarding the inexperience of these small-scale breeders, the quality of foals they would produce and the lack of long-term commitment to their care, but also for the welfare of the mare.

“I think there's a big tendency for ‘if it can't have a ridden career, we'll just have a foal off it’, but I don't think people necessarily think too far down the line of, right, well, why has it not got a ridden career? Is there something that's it's going to pass on in its genetics that's going to mean that its progeny is going to have a detrimental [effect] or no ridden career. And I think there is still that mentality of a horse has got to have a purpose, so if it can't be ridden, then let's have a foal out of it” (NW-Livery Yard Owner)

Some interviewees reflected that the specific qualities being selectively bred for may also influence longevity within the equine's future role,

“some of the competition horses that we've seen bred over the last 10 years or so, particularly, I would say, in the dressage field, have actually been bred for flashy movements rather than longevity. And to me, that is actually one of the factors that means that horses break down and suffer injuries at an earlier age, or indeed at any age, than they should do” (UK-EWC-Senior)

This practice of individual owners breeding from their mare was not perceived to have changed with the current economic climate. Larger scale enterprises, including professionals and commercial breeders, also raised concerns amongst the interviewees, particularly regarding the numbers being bred. Not all will make the grade for whatever purpose they are being bred for, be it physical traits or performance, and these lower grade horses will enter other facets of the equine market,

“You've always got to remember that the top studs... that are breeding for high end competition. Not everything's going to be high end, yeah, that they breed when they're breeding 200 foals a year. So, there are always really nice horses at these studs to go and buy as well that are on the cheaper side, that are more riding club style. And that's what they do” (EE-Equine Professional)

For some owners, the value of breeding was seen to lie in the breeding itself, rather than for any financial gain or the desire to breed from a beloved mare,

“I used to work for someone back up in Bristol who bred thoroughbreds not that we need more... They did nothing. The horses did nothing. They didn't go into training, but equally they didn't get sold on as riding horses or pets. She just, they just kept breeding. I was never quite sure of the point of breeding them” (SW-Riding School Owner)

Perceptions were largely shared across the interviews, although a distinction was made regarding the travelling community,

“for travellers, the wealth and the worth of a certain horse compared to what it would be like in in our community is completely different. I seized the horse once and they told me it was worth £60,000 and in Brecon sales, you probably wouldn't have paid at the time like 400 pounds for it, but in their community it's about bloodlines” (Wales-Local Authority)

With that in mind, one interviewees perception was that breeding practices may have changed less within the travelling community in response to the recent increase in equines prices that they have elsewhere as travellers were seen to trade primarily within their own communities. However, interviewees in other regions of England and Wales did not mention this. The breeding of semi-feral or moor ponies was similarly considered differently to the general equine population, with recent

increases in foal numbers in the New Forest being part of a planned strategy attributed in part to the need to increase the number of stallions in the forest to promote greater genetic diversity, as well as in response to the increased demand and prices the ponies were fetching at sale. In semi-feral native populations more wisely the breeding practices were perceived to have been influenced by *“an awareness from all the pony breeders that they can't just breed because they just end up with a bad press of ponies ending up going to the dodgy dealers and the backyard slaughtermen if they produce too many for the sales”* (UK-EWC-Vet).

In contrast, the financial rewards of breeding were considered motivation for some,

“We are in a situation where there is still a real question mark over breeding, and especially how much the breeding is going to be driven by the bonkers market over the last two, three years” (UK-EWC-Senior2)

Overbreeding was related to the practice itself as well as the numbers being bred. The drive to produce equines displaying a specific trait, often at the expense of their overall health and longevity, was discussed in relation to those breeding high performance dressage horses as well as backyard breeders trying to produce a specific colour. Such targeted breeding practices generate a surplus of equines not exhibiting the desired trait, and raise the issue of what happens to those who don't make the grade,

“if you're breeding for something as we know that you're not necessarily going to get what you want so you just keep breeding until you do and then what you do with the offspring you don't want or that haven't reached the right mark is the problem and that's in all sectors, isn't it? From racing and competition down to, I don't know, children's miniature Shetland pet ponies or whatever, so and everything in between.... the wastage is massive” (EE-WCI)

“If we want only the best to be surviving and going out there, do we condone the fact that breeders then just kill the stuff that they can't sell or don't want to keep breeding or don't want to have bred from?” (UK-EWC-Vet)

For sports horses in particular, it was mentioned that fewer were being imported with many now being bred in the UK, *“they'll get the odd one or two perhaps but they're just not coming over in the droves that they were”* (EE-Equine Professional), potentially linked to the challenges in importing equines as a result of Brexit, as discussed further below.

Technological advances in relation to breeding practices were also considered, although the impact of these on welfare was not clear-cut,

“I think there's also some improvement with the veterinary side of the breeding as well. Whether because we do much more sort of AI and embryo transfer, I think there are some benefits to that. And there obviously are negatives associated with that as well. But if we're looking at simply mare welfare, if the mare is a very high, valuable animals with good genetic lines, but maybe it's got injury, that means she wouldn't be safe to carry a foal. Doing an embryo transplant putting the embryo into a healthy mare, so they would carry that pregnancy is probably a good thing” (SW-Vet)

Ultimately, it was suggested that across the sector *“they keep breeding because people keep buying, because they're well known, because they've always done it”* (EE-WCI). Buyer behaviour was seen as key,

“I think it's a chain reaction, isn't it? And if buyers were more aware of where to responsibly source horses from hopefully it would have a knock-on effect that people would stop breeding them” (SW-EWC-Senior)

Neglect

The term neglect means ‘a failure to care for properly.’ Yet the majority of interviewees appeared to interpret the question on their experiences of neglect as referring to extreme cases of neglect such as those frequently depicted on welfare charity social media posts and websites. Consequently, this may have led to the perception that cases of neglect may be declining in number,

“I haven't seen a welfare issue for quite a while. I saw more of it in the 70s and 80s” (EE-Knackerman)

“I don't see a huge amount of in in this part of the world with our clients. We don't see a huge amount of neglect” (SW-Vet2)

However, rather than changing through declining in number, it seems instead that neglect cases may have changed in nature. Welfare issues were raised by many of the interviewees that could come under the banner of neglect, although few interviewees explicitly labelled them this way. Examples included obesity, inappropriate feeding, poor management in terms of prolonged stabling and restricted social contact. Where people kept equines was also part of this, keeping equines in inappropriate locations, fly-grazing and tethering were mentioned within the interviews. However, this appeared to vary with the location of the interviewee, for example

“keeping horses in unsuitable places. I think it's quite unique to Wales, you know, I've seen horses in allotments, I've seen horses in Cellars. I've seen horses in front gardens next to the Millennium Stadium, you know, just where people can keep a horse. It doesn't matter whether they should keep a horse, if they can fit it in there, they'll fit it in there somewhere” (Wales-EWC-Inspector)

When cases of neglect cases were mentioned, some interviewees stated that these had changed from involving individuals or small groups of equines to larger numbers, and this was frequently linked back to overbreeding,

“[neglect cases] tend to come into us through the RSPCA, and I would say they probably to me, it feels like it stayed about the same... similar maybe, maybe slightly less... It feels like that kind of hoarding situation is on the increase. I suppose that's a combination of overbreeding and hoarding going hand in hand” (SW-EWC-Senior)

“So increasingly now, compared to when I first started, we're getting bigger groups that need to be spread across our centres and potentially across other charities as well, which never used to be. It was very rare for that to be the case and now it's pretty normal.” (UK-EWC-Department Head)

“I think a lot of the cases, I would say, are not intentional cruelty...I suppose it's maybe more hoarding behavior. They've maybe got a small holding, they've got a patch of land that might be suitable for two horses, completely fine, but for whatever reason, they get another one. Or they've got a mare and a stallion and here we go, we've got another one. So you end up in a sort of fairly short period of time with a bit of land that just can only sustain one or two equines and you've ending up getting 15-20 animals on there, which is obviously then leads to problems with parasitism nutrition, because then feeding all these equines, hard feed, hay, haylage is very expensive” (New Forest-Vet)

“The number of cases that we're getting, welfare cases, is actually fairly static, I would say, over the last few years. We haven't seen an increase in the number of cases that have been reported to us. But what we have seen is a change in the balance, perhaps. I'm going to say we have seen more hoarders rather than individual cases, and we have seen larger groups of herd horses that are being bred specifically in their herds” (UK-EWC-Senior)

There was a perception that the current legislation was not always helpful when it comes to addressing cases of neglect no matter what the cause was attributed to,

“The welfare law is not good, and our welfare officer will go and do if we get a report, she will go and have a look and obviously it's very sensitive. She will go and ask the owners if they need help. ... And they go. No, no, we don't need any help. And she said, well, they obviously are suffering... She can only do what she can do... And we did what we could. But that that was just neglect because they didn't understand. They didn't understand what they were doing” (North-Breeder-Charity volunteer)

“there are problems as well in terms of seizing these animals at an early stage because they have to meet fairly strict criteria in terms of if they have got access to food and water and shelter in the loosest possible sense. It can be sometimes really hard to actually in a court of law, stand up and say that their sort of freedoms are not being met. But we all know that ultimately if we leave that horse or that equine with that owner probably three, four months down the line, it's going to be a deteriorating situation.” (New Forest-Vet)

This was compounded when the neglect wasn't physical in nature, but impacted the equines psychological welfare,

“if you've got something where the horse's body condition is okay, but the circumstances it's living in are not, and it's more of a mental wellbeing, that's a lot more difficult to prove, isn't it?” (UK-EWC-Department Head)

One interviewee mentioned less obvious forms of neglect,

“the other neglect that you see is just like I said, a lot of people around here have land and so they have a pony in their back garden. Most of those ponies are too fat, which is neglect in its own right. I mean, I think neglect can go as far as you keep your horse in a square paddock, maybe on its own, or maybe with one other friend, but it never leaves that square paddock. It never has any enrichment. It never does anything” (SW-Riding School Owner)

It may be these more subtle but no less serious forms of neglect are of growing concern in the new era of equine welfare.

Abandonment

Interviewees had less to say about the issue of equine abandonment than they did about breeding and neglect,

“the abandonment bit has been helped by Control of Horses Act and the fact that there's ways of actually resolving those problems that were a lot more complicated before” (UK-EWC-Department Head)

“there are still people who have unwanted cob foals that are quite happy to just dump them, and we pick up the odd one here and there. So I think those things are still happening, but they're probably not on the scale of what we were suffering from” (UK-EWC-Vet)

The Control of Horses Act was perceived to have led to a marked reduction in the cases of fly-grazed horses, although interviewees noted that these still do occur. The other forms of abandonment noted by interviewees were equines left at livery yards by their owners when they were unable to pay their bills, and individual or small groups of equines being left on common land when their owners can no

longer support them, although both of these forms of abandonment seemed to occur at relatively low levels, but relatively consistently over time in the interviewees' experience.

"we have a closed group on Facebook, which is a livery yard owners' group. It's about 3 1/2 thousand followers now and every week without fail, there's an abandonment" (NW-Livery Yard Owner)

"occasionally people will just abandon their horses on the forest... there is probably a few a year and to be honest, it's been a fairly consistent thing" (New Forest-Vet)

An alternative viewpoint was given by one interviewee who stated that *"we don't see many genuine abandoned abandonments. We just see people who've got horses that they want to sell and can't. And sooner or later that is going to result in serious welfare issues"* (SW-Vet2)

From the interviews conducted there appears to have been a reduction in equine abandonment, a trend that is reflected in other elements of the project, although they still seem to occur consistently at low levels. Yet, how abandonment is defined is also important in this context. Where the boundary between inadequate care due to infrequent visits to an equine blurs into abandonment warrants further clarification.

Has the equine sector changed in the ten years since the initial report on the 'horse crisis was published?

The interview questions also sought interviewees perspectives on changes over the last 10 years that may influence equine welfare and their experiences of these. The themes that emerged from the interviews fell into two distinct groupings, those that described changes within the equine sector, and those external to it and will be discussed below as such.

Changes within the equine sector

Themes within this grouping were intertwined and connected, relating to the humans, the equine and the infrastructure that supports them.

"I have seen that myself even in 4 years I've worked as an equine vet the type of owner now owning horses and ponies is different. And likewise, I think also it's possible that the role of the horse or the pony is changing as well. Actually, I do think those factors have had an effect on the welfare issues" (SW-Vet)

The role of the equine

"there's a lot of these things that we've talked about in terms of patterns of change with horses, how they can impact on ownership, because horses can be an important, pivotal part of people's lives, whether it's just leisure or whether it's competition or whether it's sale and bringing money in. They have a key role, don't they?" (NE-Vet)

Some interviewees felt that for many owners, the role that equines play in people's lives was changing, with more being perceived as pets or family than as working animals. *"In the 70's a horse was a horse, now it's a dog, if you understand what I mean"* (EE-Knackerman). This was attributed at times to the rise in leisure and novice owners (discussed below) and linked to whether the equine performed a ridden role, *"they buy horses, they can't ride them, but they love them."* (EE-Equine Professional). The consequences of this shift were manifested in how these equines were treated, the care they received, and decision-making around euthanasia, with both positive and negative influences reported. Despite being treated like a pet, the physical distance between most equines and their owners was seen to

impact the care they received in comparison to pets that share the owners home *“I think if horses lived with people like their dogs did, they wouldn't let them go through that [sweet itch]”* (SW-Riding School Owner). The therapeutic value of equines was also mentioned, particularly in relation to mental wellbeing. While many interviewees mentioned this as a benefit for the owner, *“the use of animals and therapy, for example, and Equine assisted activity, as it's known, has exploded and that certainly is not showing signs of slowing down”* (UK-EWC-Senior2). This is a relatively new role for equines within society, as their benefits for mental wellbeing are appreciated outside of the equine sector and is certainly an area warranting further research to understand the welfare implications.

Equines were reportedly still seen *“as a tool rather than a sentient being”* (SW-EWC-Donkey advisor) by some owners, particularly those who use them for a purpose such as riding or competing. While this view was not explicitly expressed by any of the interviewees, one did acknowledge that if she could no longer ride her horses, she would have to sell them on to new homes. Viewing equines as a tool was not restricted to riders, competitive or not, as one interviewee stated,

“the ownership of horses is definitely a therapeutic thing, that people see it as the therapeutic tool. Without a doubt” (NE-Vet)

Linked to this viewpoint was the belief that these owners adopt a *“human centric perspective”* (SW-EWC-Donkey advisor) and do not understand the equines' needs. Horses owned by people with this viewpoint were seen to change hands more often,

“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” (EE-Equine Professional)

Changes in who is owning equines

The shift in who is owning equines away from families who had kept horses for generations, to novice owners - primarily middle-aged women keeping horses for leisure purposes – was a profound change mentioned by many interviewees. This shift was associated with the perceived increase in the accessibility of horses to those who had not previously had one, *“it's not an elite thing to have a horse anymore... Anyone can earn one”* (North-Breeder-Charity volunteer). This corresponded to changes in equine infrastructure and the shift away from keeping a horse on land you own, to keeping a horse at a livery yard, which may become a social hub for these people and become significantly tied to their mental wellbeing, either positively or negatively depending on the yard.

Concerns surrounding this shift in owner type included a loss of equine knowledge *“the old school breeders who, as a vet, you would learn loads from just because their knowledge is so astronomical, they're less than they were because they're a dying breed, aren't they?”* (EE-Vet). Welfare concerns were also raised for the equines in the care of novice owners, including the perception that they may be more inclined to do things *“on the cheap”* (EE-Knackerman), less able to read equine behaviour and consequently start to fear the horse or delay veterinary treatment,

“I think when you've got newer horse owners, I'm not tarring everyone with the same brush, but you just don't have that level of experience and maybe things happen with horses that they don't notice, so we maybe get called in a little bit later” (New Forest-Vet)

But the increase in novice owners was not seen as all bad. Life-long owners were maybe less receptive to new information, *“they're just getting on and doing what they've always done without necessarily being aware of the new thinking that's come out”* (UK-EWC-Senior), which may have implications for equine welfare and more widely raised concerns in relation to social licence.

Supply and demand

“over the last ten years online has been fabulous because you just go on Horse Quest and you just put in what you want and 500 horses will come up, so there is never going to be a shortage. But you do have to weed out the ones that are broken” (EE-Equine Professional)

While there does not appear to be an issue with the supply of equines in terms of numbers available, there is perhaps an issue with the type of equines available. It appears to be *“actually quite hard for what I would call your average horseman now to find an average horse”* (UK-EWC-Senior).

While demand is still there, evidenced by interviewees as the high prices that some equines are still achieving, the supply does not appear to match what the market are seeking,

“You just want a good safe horse, really, but they're very hard to come by and find. I don't know, you used to have all the Irish horses and things coming in nice sensible ones, didn't you? But I think that's tailed off now, whether it's Brexit or that's affecting things, I suppose we used to have lots of people used to breed Welsh ponies and used to breed sort of yeah, sensible, good sort of what I call general all around riding horses. Whereas now you've got sort of the top level, warmbloods retrained racehorses, or I suppose there's fewer people breeding the sensible family pony type, which are very saleable, aren't they? ... You don't want to encourage breeding because there's loads of horses out there. But are the horses of the right useful type?” (EE-Vet)

The lack of weight-carrying, sensible riding horses not only impacts individual owners, but it has also had a detrimental effect on riding schools who rely on this type of horse *“the main thing we can't get, we can't source big horses for adults”* (SW-Riding School Owner). When such horses are available the cost is too high for many individual owners and riding school to afford. While it appears that some individual owners may be turning to ex-racing thoroughbreds, which typically comprise the more affordable end of the 15hh plus market, this is not considered an option for riding schools.

“[Prices are] coming down, but even you know. Really, the only horse you can buy cheap quote now is a thoroughbred. And that's no good for our job. And even those are £3000 and to my mind they're £500” (SW-Riding School Owner)

Furthermore, this 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 ulcers, stereotypies, and behavioural issues due to their upbringing,

“I think with specific regards to the Thoroughbreds there was those places where the only horse you could buy for a reasonable amount of money was a retired thoroughbred. And so that did mean that there were potentially a lot more unsuitable horses being ridden by people who didn't have the knowledge or the back up to be able to to ride them properly. And that was a danger to them and a danger to the horses. And that problem was exacerbated by the fact that the price of horses went through the roof” (SW-Vet2)

“unfortunately they do require more specialist care than your average crossbred ... they end up very often in the wrong hands with the wrong people and I think the main thing that people can't do for a thoroughbred, it's not that they're wild or feral it's that they can't feed them. They can't keep the condition on them. They can't keep the weight on them. They're actually lovely horses. But sometimes I do think actually they might be better put to sleep rather than rehomed into general population with people who don't know what they're doing” (SW-Riding School Owner)

Interestingly, the demand for weight-carrying cobs appears to have been relatively recent,

“The ridden cobs are definitely coming into fashion again. Well they've been in for a long time now. They again, but 20 years ago when we were breeding, nobody wanted coloured cobs because they were common” (North-Breeder-Charity volunteer)

While there does still seem to be a large supply of coloured cobs, these appear to be smaller in size and consequently are unable to be ridden by adults which reduces their desirability and market value, both within the sales market and the charity rehoming market

“the 12.2s, 13.2s, they are the most popular and is driving this it seems. I would say like to try and get yourself a 15-hand cob now like you know it's it's big money, it's really big money” (Wales-Local authority)

“if you want to rehome something, rehabbing something big and ridden is much, much easier” (UK-EWC-Department Head)

Interestingly, the situation was comparable in Ireland, *“There does seem to be a shortage of them at the moment...I suspect maybe good cobs are going to the UK because they have an immediate market for them there, and they just go. Maybe not a shortage of little small cobs, but the shortage of bigger animals” (Ire-EWC-Senior).*

It is worth noting here that concerns were raised by interviewees regarding the misconception that cobs are easy horses to care for and manage. Cobs are not without their own specific challenges and while awareness of these is growing, many equestrians remain unaware of the potential health issues that cobs can face, as such these often remain undetected and untreated in this population. Examples include chronic progressive lymphedema (CPL), mallenders and sallenders, and feather mites.

There appears to have been a concurrent increase in equines that are unsuitable for riding being sold on cheaply as companions as well as elderly horses who are no longer wanted. It is unclear who the market for these horses is,

“Try[ing] to sell or give away your big horse as a companion like who wants it? Nobody wants it. If you can't keep it, then don't expect somebody else to keep it” (SW-Riding School Owner)

“you keep seeing them being sold, you just think, Why don't you just put it down? Because for me, and it breaks my heart when I see 20-year-old horses being sold on Facebook, you know, I just don't think that's right. And that seems to be happening a lot” (EE-Equine Professional)

Within the equine marketplace, the honesty and accuracy of sales adverts was questioned by some, given the potential repercussions of miss-selling. It was felt that sellers often did not take responsibility if the equine they sold proved unsuitable for their new home, although this was perceived to vary with equine type,

“it would be nice if breeders and dealers could take responsibility, I think they do with horses more so because you know, larger sums of money changing hands. If people aren't getting what they paid for, they are going to kick up a fuss about it and not worried about necessarily sending it back and buying

something different I think when you buy it for a purpose. I think they're getting away with it a bit more when selling donkeys and mules actually and not selling them as described” (SW Donk).

Changes in equine health

Advances in veterinary care, dentistry and farriery were recognised by interviewees but with the acknowledgement that they may be a mixed blessing for equine welfare. Equines who would previously have been euthanised due to laminitis or old age are being kept alive for longer with management changes and supportive medication, yet whether this was in the horses’ best interests was questioned in some cases.

“Is it fair to keep putting these horses for this treatment?...just because we can, should we be doing this? I think as vets, we need to stand back and think“(EE-Vet)

Poor owner recognition of equine quality of life and health problems was a concern for many,

“I would say 90% plus anything that's come in that's been from a a caring home has got something wrong with it that's been missed or ignored” (SW-EWC-Senior)

Low grade chronic pain and health conditions were seen as particularly troubling in this regard.

It was felt that often vets were often failing to take on the responsibility of making owners aware that their horse was suffering, and that euthanasia should be considered, and were enabling the owner to keep the equine alive, whether this was due to financial reasons, personal sensitivities, or concerns regarding client retention. There were also conflicting views about the pressures owners were under when making end-of life decisions for their equines from their peers,

“We're also dealing with situations on a reasonably regular basis where somebody is quite correctly considering putting their horse down, but they're on a livery yard and the livery yard members are saying, Oh, no, you can't do that to poor old Fred. He's fine at the moment. He'll keep going for another two years” (UK-EWC-Senior)

“five years ago, someone tried to put a horse down, everyone around them would be desperately trying to get it rehomed into another rescue and stop the euthanasia. But I think the numbers of euthanized animals the last year has actually gone up significantly based on what Vets and Farriers and knackermen have seen for themselves and been involved in” (UK-EWC-Vet)

There was a perception that more ‘traditional’ horse owners were more pragmatic around end-of-life decision making, whereas new owners and those who consider their horses as pets or family members may be more reluctant to make a decision and have more constraints on how they want this to be done,

“like years ago, if you used to go and collect someone's horse, as long as that wasn't put down by injection, because you can't use meat, if you have to go and collect someone's horse, all they want to know is how much I was going to get for it. They didn't really care where that was going. But these days, people very funny about where their horse is going. It's much more part of the family type thing. And if I was to get involved with putting anything we've involved with the food chain or pet food, I would lose all my customers. As simple as that” (EE-Knackerman)

Obesity was seen as a serious but recent development in equine health concerns,

“ten years ago I never saw a horse in an RSPCA holding centre for being fat. But that has happened as well” (New Forest-Vet)

“overweight horses is common problem. Owners are not given the horses enough exercise probably a lack of knowledge as well...Just people aren't aware that the horse is overweight. Yeah, we tell them it's [overweight] sometimes which isn't always well received” (SW-Riding School Owner-Vet)

The lack of awareness of obesity and its implications extended to welfare calls from members of the public,

“Thin horses tend to attract more attention than fat horses do. It's that's a that, you know, equine obesity is another welfare issue because that is a huge issue at the moment. But the Joe public don't always see it and. Most horse riders don't you know, horse owners don't see it. So thin, thin horses will always if you got thin horse in the field and a fat horse in a field. We will always get the phone call about the thin horse” (Wales-EWC-Inspector)

The concurrent increase in rider weight has also led to problems with equine health,

“people aren't getting any lighter. So that means that bigger, heavier people are getting on smaller, lighter horses, basically. I mean, certainly we see way, way more horses with back problems than we used to. Now ... I don't know if that's just that there's better understanding of back problems, but I spend half my life looking at horses with bad backs these days. Well, ... I never used to do that” (SW-Vet2)

One interviewee made the observation *“I've noticed now there's so many sort of horses that you can't get through a vetting out there now as well, for whatever reason” (EE-Vet)*, suggesting a wider deterioration in equine health and fitness despite advances in veterinary care.

It was not all negative, improvements in the responsible use of antimicrobials and anthelmintics were also acknowledged as recent changes in equine health related practices, although it should be noted that there were still caveats with these.

Riding schools

The subject of riding schools was commonly raised by interviewees, although different people picked up on different challenges they are facing these were largely inter-related. Interviewees raised concerns about the diminishing numbers of riding schools and the increased financial outlay they are facing in terms of insurance and day-to-day running costs.

“They're closing down all the time.... I think they're all finding it harder and harder and harder to make it. What kills them is the insurance” (EE-Knackerman)

“in 2009, I would say I'm just trying to think we had one, two, three, I'd say six or seven sort of decent sized riding schools, and we're probably down to one, and that's in about twelve years. So it's quite a dramatic decline” (New Forest-Vet)

Accompanying this decline is a loss of knowledge and opportunity. There was the perception that this is driving people into horse ownership at an earlier stage than they would have historically got their first equine.

“But there's so few decent, accessible riding centres around because it's costs so much money to keep going. But then that sort of if you can't find a decent, accessible riding centre that you get on with, that you like, then you're more likely to go out and just buy a pony. Whether you're ready for one or not” (SW-Riding School Owner)

“traditionally, that's where people started in horses and, like you say, got their knowledge, even if it was helping out at a riding school, that kind of thing. So if you're going, instead of having that kind of start and then going just straight into horse ownership, because there's nowhere else” (EE-WCI)

This fed into other concerns, with interviewees pointing out that these new owners were then likely to keep their horse at a livery yard. Unlike riding schools these establishments are not licenced, and the quality of equine knowledge and care can be highly variable, within the management and staff as well as the liveries themselves.

Those riding schools that are still operating are facing additional concerns relating to the COVID pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living-crisis which have led to reductions in their capacity to provide lessons for clients,

“So since COVID, they've reduced the amount of stock that they hold, even though they're busy. Yeah, all reporting being busy because I don't I still don't think the amount of people holidaying abroad has gone up, so if you're saying local people are tending to like, do things more or less like horse riding and stuff, but they just haven't got the need and they can't afford because whilst they're busier, actually the cost of keeping the horses is higher” (Wales-Local Authority)

Other relevant comments about riding schools included the quality and content of the riding being taught. Despite the requirement for licencing by the local authority, the quality of the teaching that is provided is one element that is not currently inspected. Furthermore, the nature of teaching is perceived to have changed as insurance, health and safety, and the litigation culture have worked together to make activities such as riding bareback and hacking too risky for many schools to endorse, activities that have traditionally built balance, confidence, and experience within and outside of a riding school arena.

One interviewee expressed their frustration that there was not more assistance for riding schools in the UK,

“So in Europe, riding is subsidized and riding schools are subsidized and show centers are subsidized. And they're helped because it's a big thing in Europe. In England, we're penalized, we're rated vastly, we don't get any help. And they keep bringing in more and more paperwork to make it harder and harder to keep going. So, unless you're dogged and like a bone and you just keep going, this is why everyone is shutting down. And it's sad because people still want to ride” (EE-Equine Professional)

The changing nature of riding schools and ultimately the reduction in their numbers appears to have had significant implications for equine welfare as inexperienced people are being motivated to buy horses sooner than they perhaps would historically due to the lack of alternatives if they want to ride or have contact with equines.

Broader changes in equestrianism

“The horse world's a bit of a mess. They're too easily accessible for people who shouldn't have access to them. Businesses like ours which are struggling are here to get you able to be ready to own one. People don't support [them] enough. And then there's... the racehorse rehoming, 50% of me thinks that's really good and the other 50% thinks they should put them to sleep because actually what's gonna happen to those horses. Are they gonna have a nice life? Probably not. Some of them might” (SW-Riding School Owner)

Perhaps the most notable trend described by interviewees, and reflected in the quote above, is people buying an equine with very little or no knowledge or experience, *“I am finding more and more people rushing into buying a horse before actually learning”* (EE-EQUINE PROFESSIONAL). Interviewees attributed this trend to the cost of riding lessons and the loss of riding schools, which will be discussed in more detail below. These purchases were seen to impact equine welfare through owner inexperience and lack of equine education, as well as through the tendency for equines to be sold on if they were subsequently found to be unsuitable for the owner. The problem was considered to have been compounded through the move to online equine sales, with many owners buying unseen, particularly if they were seeking a high demand equine such as a safe riding horse. The move to online sales was not just seen within the leisure sector but was also witnessed at the extremes with high-level performance horse studs now having online auctions, and the reductions in equine sales at markets.

“there are pressures on horse care, horse ownership, which are different pressures to how they used to be” (NE-Vet)

As mentioned previously, many of these new owners are keeping their equines at livery yards due to the difficulty in acquiring land for equines. Here too change has been seen both in availability, which is perceived to have declined, and in the type available, with yards offering full livery as opposed to DIY options seemingly on the increase. The facilities available are also influencing how people manage their equines and what they do with them, *“when I first started, nobody had a surface, you all went hacking and horses didn't go around in circle. Today... what you're seeing as a vet is definitely different”* (EE-Vet). The scarcity of safe places to hack out was raised by interviewees, and the rise in schooling may be in part as a result of this. Within a livery yard it is often difficult for owners to control aspects of their horse's environment which may affect management decisions,

“unfortunately, because a lot of people can't keep their horses at home, they've got no control over the herd environment of their horse. So I do understand in a way why they want them kept individually, but obviously for the welfare of the horse, in an ideal environment, a nice stable herd environment would be the best thing that they can have, but in reality, trying to achieve that is very difficult in my experience.” (New Forest-Vet)

One interviewee stated *“they are now much more intensively managed than they were before. And that I suppose it's, it's hard to know whether that's a positive or a negative welfare outcome”* (SW-Vet2)

One surprising corollary to the comments above relating to owner lack of knowledge was that for some interviewees a significant change seen in equestrianism was *“the explosion of knowledge”* (UK-EWC-VET). This was informing how equine welfare charities are now *“working with people rather than taking horses away... looking at things differently to how we did before”* (EE-WCI), as well as how vets are now handling the equines in their care including using more positive reinforcement.

“Even at the higher levels, I think over the last few years, many people have become far more aware of things like the need for turnout and those sorts of things to just give the horses the right level of social interaction, to understand the horse's mental state as well” (UK-EWC-Senior).

The statement above, while reflecting the increase in knowledge, is noticeably in conflict with the earlier observation regarding individual turn out on livery yards. This may reflect an inability for people to change their behaviour (equine management practices) as a result of their increased awareness of equines needs or may be an example of cognitive dissonance.

The *“people are keeping larger number of horses than they ever have done before... there were tens and 20s, but it was unusual, whereas now those larger numbers are more normalized”* (EE-WCI). This has obvious implications for equine welfare even with the most dedicated owner should their circumstances change.

Lastly, the relatively recent increase in retirement livery yard is worth noting. This reflects the change in the role of the horse and decision-making around equine end-of life discussed previously, providing owners with an alternative option if they would like to keep their horse alive somewhere that may better cater for their needs, provide day-to-day care or be cheaper financially.

“there's a lot more retirement livery yards turning up” (North-Breeder-Charity volunteer)

Changes external to the equine sector

“I think a lot of things have changed just because of the way the world's changing, really” (EE-Vet)

Changes in society

The equine sector does not exist within a bubble and as such it is influenced to a varying extent by wider changes in society and the times in which we live. A big part of this for the equine community is the rise in discussions around what is acceptable use of equines for human sport and enjoyment. These discussions of equestrianism's social licence to operate are taking place within and outside of the equestrian arena and reflect a shift in public attitude towards human interactions with animals. This potentially reflects a *“wider piece around an increasingly urbanised society”* (UK-EWC-Senior2) as people's understanding of, and proximity to, animals is changing.

Changes within the human populations also have implications for equine welfare. The rise in human obesity and the sensitivity surrounding this has proved an issue, particularly for riding schools,

“We've got a weight limit. I do put people on the scales, but obviously unfortunately society is set up to not ever insult somebody about their weight, but actually sometimes it's like, no, you're too fat to ride that horse like get off it, so that's a bit of a problem” (SW-Riding School Owner)

People's inability to take responsibility for their own actions and the problems arising as a result of them was mentioned by several interviewees,

“There does seem to just be this weird shift in attitude of people being a little bit more selfish and a little less concerned” (SW-EWC-Donkey advisor)

One vet specifically stated that they had discussed this with colleagues in small animal practice and they were experiencing the same issue, so it does not appear to be a problem confined to the equine sector.

The apparent increase in mental health issues within the population was mentioned by several interviewees, although some questioned whether this reflected growing awareness of mental concerns and an increased tendency to talk about them rather than an increase prevalence per se.

“Mental health issues, I think is a major thing, I don't know if that's covid related or whatever, they've always been there that distinction between that we do see a huge amount of mental health issues” (SW-EWC-Donkey advisor)

Either way, it was apparent through the interviews that human mental health concerns can have significant implications for equine welfare, whether in the context of equine hoarding, neglect, or relinquishment.

The other societal changes discussed included the growth of litigious society, which as previously discussed has implications for riding schools, and the loss of dairy farms due to changes within the agriculture sector and their subsequent repurposing as livery yards.

Equestrianism and the environment

“equine welfare will increasingly be impacted by environmental change...it's like all of these things until it affects individuals, they don't tend to take it too seriously” (UK-EWC-Senior2)

The recent changes in the climate have had numerous consequences for equine welfare, both direct and indirect.

“the weather the last couple of years has created quite a lot of issues in itself. I would say I've had more colics this year than I've had in the whole time that I've had the place - 16 years because of the very hot summers we seem to be getting and then the very cold winters. Well, wet winters, I would say” (EE-Equine Professional)

Direct consequences identified by interviewees included the increase in sycamore poisoning *“because of the dry autumn”* (NE-Vet) and the dry summers increasing the incidence of sand colic in certain areas. The dry summer also resulted in a poor crop of hay, meaning that prices have gone up and in some places no hay was available, *“it was so dry, you know, because of the heat wave we had last year. They've got there's no hay, there's no hay at all”* (North-Breeder-Charity volunteer). Wet winters have led to reduced turnout opportunities as efforts are made to try to protect land from poaching at the expense of equine mental wellbeing.

The current climate was also seen by one vet to have interfered with the natural cycles that many equestrians depend upon,

“that natural cycle of a horse losing weight through the winter and then gaining in the spring and summer and then losing again because the grass has died off. I think that cyclicity has, I wouldn't say disappeared, but it is definitely reduced... I think that's certainly due to the climate, it's got to be” (New Forest-Vet)

“from a sort of parasitism point of view, one of the wormers we use is moxidectin Equest Pramox. And we always recommend that that's used after, traditionally after your first frost. And that used to be probably many years ago. You'd be talking about October, something like that. Now that's moving back and back because we don't actually have the first frost till probably later in the year and sometimes it's quite hard to find a time when you have a really decent frost...So I think the parasites in the ground survive longer. So, I think that's quite a key thing as well” (New Forest-Vet)

In contrast, some perceived and described these weather events were as isolated events rather than an ongoing trend,

“Some years where we've had warm, wet winters, we'll see a lot more poaching in the ground and things like that. But then the following year it'll be colder and icier and it will return to the more normal. So I can't say that there's actually an ongoing trend with that at the moment” (UK-EWC-Senior)

It should be noted that climatic changes that were negative for some equines were actually positive for others,

“I think the drought last summer didn't help. I think a lot of skinny horses going into winter didn't have the fodder throughout summer. It actually aided a lot of the donkeys, did us a favour but it hasn't done especially thoroughbred population in favour at all” (SW-Vet)

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living-crisis and Brexit

“So suddenly things went from quite doom and gloom to rebounding with horses flying off the shelves from the charities. But I think now that we've got the post COVID economic recession and then of course the war in Ukraine has added to that with global price of fuel and shortage of food, I think also Brexit has certainly hampered quite a lot of trade that the question world is active in. So quite how you weigh up the different components...” (UK-EWC-Vet)

Since 2020 the UK has undergone an incredible period of change resulting in considerable change in human behaviour and attitude, as well as in the economy. The UK officially left the EU (European Union) at the end of January 2020. In March 2020, the first COVID-19 lockdown restrictions were implemented and as we left COVID restrictions behind, the cost of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine led us into what has been termed the cost-of-living crisis. All these events have impacted the equestrian sector and equine welfare and continue to do so directly in terms of cost and availability, but also indirectly via the impact the events have had on their human caregivers including mental health challenges, financial concerns, and potentially the shift towards a more selfish attitude as discussed above.

During COVID, the prices of horses “went through the roof” (Wales-Local Authority) and while many interviewees perceived that the market had slowed down, no one stated it had come back down to pre-COVID levels.

“we have been told that the horse prices have gone down, but they haven't crashed.” (EE-WCI)

The increase in prices meant that some owners took advantage of this,

“what we saw, and not just our practise but multiple practices, we saw horses coming to market that probably people wouldnt have sold in the past but because the price has increased in horses they thought, hmmm we will see if someone will buy it. So we saw an increase in horses and ponies for sale that had more complex medical needs” (SW-Vet)

There was a reported increase of people buying horses unseen, often without a vetting – although some vets reported an increase in vettings during this time. Together, this led to concerns that this activity could not be sustained, and a crash was inevitable,

“I think we all expected that during COVID and sort of once we were a year or so into it, that it was going to be absolutely horrendous from a welfare perspective and we were going to have loads of problems and loads of horses needing to come in, and we all kept holding our breath for it. And miraculously, it never really happened” (UK-EWC-Department Head)

Benefits of COVID and the behaviour changes it evoked were also mentioned,

“actually from COVID we have a huge range in welfare concerns coming into us. And that's because a lot of people are walking and they were finding donkeys and maybe helping out, people actually being proactive and wanting help and support and knowing where to turn for it. It put a lot of pressure on

equine charities, but a lot of things were discovered in lockdown when people were walking more and people were really keen to hold people accountable for that and let us know what's going on” (SW-EWC-Donkey advisor)

One interviewee stated that “actually COVID taught us some lessons” (UK-EWC-Senior2), referring to the use of virtual rehoming checks, a change they have sustained even now movement is no longer restricted.

The cost-of-living-crisis appears to have had a great impact on the equine sector and equine welfare than the pandemic, due to the increase in the costs of keeping an equine given the shortages in feed and bedding, increased costs of electricity, water and gas driving up livery prices, as well as the cost of fuel. The cost of competing has been driven up leading to a reported reduction in this activity, however it was the consequences for veterinary care that formed the focus for most interviewees. Some practices had changed what they offer to clients in light of this,

“[owners are] probably a little bit more resistant to repeat visits, to reexamine so with wounds, and we're aware of that, we're trying to be careful, that we monitor closely, monitor the owners doing some of the bandage changes, assessments. A lot of use of photographs and videos” (NE-Vet)

Others expressed concerns that owners’ money saving strategies may have longer term implications,

“I don't think people can afford to maybe give them the treatment they did and the first thing to go is things like the regular stuff. The vaccines, you know, like £50-60.00 for a vaccine. Can they afford it anymore? Equine influenza hasn't been a problem since before COVID because we weren't having all these meetings. But now that the big events starting to happen again. Are we then going to start to see that?” (Wales-Local Authority)

One interviewee highlighted a potential positive of the cost-of-living-crisis,

“if you look on the bright side, it may improve horses welfare because if people do turn out more and do feed less then horses are hopefully going to become a little less obese, you know, so you kind of try and find it for the silver lining in every cloud” (Wales-EWC-Inspector)

The cost-of-living-crisis also appears to be impacting end of life decision-making,

“The trend at the moment is a lot of people have them shot because obviously it's cheaper than using the vet current situation, where it is people trying to save money” (EE-Knackerman)

Interestingly, while welfare problems may be increasing, and veterinary callouts reducing, there is still movement in the equine marketplace albeit slower than it was during COVID,

“So I'd say, since sort of January and February, I've seen more welfare issues and welfare problems than I did in the past two years. Even during COVID, people would still ring you when an issue happened. Whereas I would say in the past few months, they're waiting a little bit longer... I'd say we definitely seeing an impact of the cost of living. And I would also say that people are more willing to have horses put to sleep rather than put them say to spend money for investigation...people are maybe looking more for grass livery because they can't afford the stable situation. So there is definitely an impact. However, is that stopping people buying horses? No, we haven't seen that at all” (SW-Vet)

“as much as people are saying there's no money in the world and we're all skint, which we are, there always seems to be money for horses” (EE-Equine Professional)

The impact of Brexit appears to be more confined to elements of the equestrianism rather than the whole sector. The complications to movement of equines across UK borders in particular was felt to

have led to reductions in equine imports, riders competing abroad, and increased the journey times for the individual horses involved. Less obvious concerns were also flagged,

“There's certainly a concern Dartmoor used to get subsidies for the ponies that were linked to livestock and stewardship schemes and I think the ponies haven't been factored into the new way of working under the post Brexit rules” (UK-EWC-Vet)

With the exception of these facets of the UK sector, the impact of Brexit appears to have been minimal compared to the broader consequences of COVID and the cost-of-living-crisis.

The rise of social media

Like the rest of society, the equine sector has been greatly impacted by the advance of social media. Within the equine sector, it has influenced owner behaviour, for example when selling their equine,

“It's a lot easier to advertise... back in the day when I was looking to buy a horse. You weren't gonna spend £30 to put on an advert in Horse and Hound to advertise your field companion, were you? You know? But then now you can quite easily just pop it on a Facebook post and somebody will pick it up, somebody will want it” (NW-Livery Yard Owner)

This corresponds with the changes discussed above in relation to the rise in online auctions, virtual viewings and buying equines unseen.

Social media was seen to have made information more accessible for owners and been used for some positive initiatives to increase owner awareness of issues such as equine obesity and sycamore poisoning. Yet, it was not all positive,

“I think in some ways, social media can be both useful and the problem” (SW-Vet).

Selecting the right knowledge from the plethora of information out there was one concern identified, as was seeking advice from non-expert sources,

“It is shocking what you see on Facebook sometimes of people saying oh my horse has got a sarcoid and like see What do people say? And just asking joe public for advice and taking it rather than getting a professional in, same with behaviour issues and all sorts of things just being asked on social media I think that's what got a lot to answer for” (SW-EWC-Donkey advisor)

One interviewee described one of the consequences of social media for equine welfare charities,

“The biggest difference I've probably seen in that time is the impact of social media, because we will get people frequently reporting things that they haven't seen themselves, but they've seen something online. And then you might get somebody saying nobody cares, nobody's doing anything. We've been reporting it for years and nothing changes. But actually, we might have no knowledge of that situation at all, because no one's ever told us” (UK-EWC-Department Head)

Outside of the equestrian sector, social media has had a role to play in raising public awareness of equestrian issues,

“It's definitely at extreme ends of the scale. There are some really good bits about it. It has raised issues that people haven't overly concentrated on in the past, and it's made everybody think, which is absolutely right. But equally at the other end of the scale, there's extremism that comes out whereby people are obviously saying horses just shouldn't be ridden” (UK-EWC-Senior)

“I think social media probably is a big factor [in swaying public opinion]. It has a large reach, and certain activists and advocates will use it as a means to encourage people to contact their public representatives” (Ire-DAFM)

Identification, regulation, legislation, and enforcement

The changes within and outside of equestrianism over the last ten years took place against a regulatory backdrop. Many of the interviewees working in equine welfare, either for a charity, as a vet or for a local authority, referred to equine identification, regulation, legislation, and enforcement in relation to their experiences and their views are summarised here.

Equine identification and traceability were the key issues mentioned whether the value of passports and the current passporting system, or the need for an equine register or database to allow equine welfare charities and others to take a more proactive approach to equine sector challenges,

“Passports, which are just a complete waste of time. All it does, the only benefit to that passport as far as I can tell, is that you're not scrambling around looking for a piece of paper when it needs vaccines, that's literally it. And if they come with one that doesn't match them, you just make them another one” (SW-Riding School Owner)

“Certainly, horses that are eligible for slaughter might have a value because obviously their passports say they're eligible for slaughter, but then the fraudulent use of passports or the Reidentification of Horses is still rife. But it's not just for slaughter, it's to reidentify them to hide something or to give them a new life” (EE-EWC Inspector)

“it's very difficult because we don't know who has horses, there is no equine register as such. How can we then find these people to try and support them it's very difficult. Likewise, you don't have to be registered with a vet” (SW-Vet)

“I think the big part of getting equine id sorted is we can maybe have a much better way of monitoring numbers and be aware of what's happening. And it might also be a way of focusing interventions in the future on reducing breeding of certain types of animals” (UK-EWC-Vet)

Two specific pieces of legislation were mentioned by interviewees: the Animal Welfare Act (2006), and the more recent Control of Horse Act (2015).

“The Animal Welfare Act. It's 2006 legislation like, you know, there's different pieces of legislation that fit underneath of it but there's a lot of gaps in that, you know, no budgets for local authorities to really, like, do anything. Like it's a poor state of affairs, really. When actually animal welfare is quite high in the eye of members of the public now it's quite well noted” (Wales-Local authority)

The Control of Horses Act appeared to be viewed more favourably and have had a bigger impact of equine welfare improvement,

“it is useful is a very useful tool for being able to take control of horses that have strayed on or been dumped on or on your land that is very, very useful tool” (SW-EWC-Donkey advisor)

“in England and Wales, the control of Horses Act is written differently, so in England the Control of Horses act can be used by a private landowner. In Wales it can be used for a private landowner by the local authority, but at the landowner's cost. So you know, like they've got tools and legislation to help

them with those type of problems. But you know what happens to those horses?” (Wales-Local authority)

The impact of the current legislation on the ability to rescue and rehome equines was also highlighted,

“If you mention horses, everyone just runs off screaming because obviously it's the costs involved in keeping them, particularly in England and Wales, because the mechanisms aren't there to get the horses out very quickly. They have to wait to the conclusion of the case if it's a prosecution case, or unless they can get a Section 20 and get them signed over. Whereas in Scotland they have they're different and they can actually move them on very quickly” (EE-EWC-Investigator)

One interviewee referred positively to the discussions currently underway regarding the proposed licencing of animal sanctuaries, rescue, and rehoming centres, with the caveat being that the value would depend on efficacy of enforcement. The subject of legislative enforcement was an emotive one for interviewees. The underfunding of local authorities to the extent that they cannot fulfil their enforcement responsibilities was a key concern,

“I think the local authorities, a lot of them, have just chosen not to touch animal welfare with a barge pole anyway. So it's difficult to get worse than nothing from a local authority when that's all they've given you is nothing. But those who have been working their level best, I think, have struggled. A lot of people haven't been replaced when they've left, or they've been reassigned. And people who've got a good talent in animal welfare, there's no progression. So when the council have another job that pays 20% more, they'd be stupid not to take it. So you've got very skilled people leaving the sector while staying within local authorities. I think I'd like nothing more than local authorities to be the kind of backbone of the enforcement working in partnership with the RSPCA” (UK-EWC-Vet)

“There are some local authorities that are very good and there are others that are utterly useless. It does relate a lot sometimes to the areas that have got a history of horses. I mean, for example, Hampshire with the New Forest, actually dealing with the local authorities there tends to be fine. Although we'd be dealing with the adjusters and vurdurs on the New Forest as well then. But then there can be other areas where the council are just not willing to engage on horses whatsoever” (UK-EWC-Senior)

“The local authorities, the staff numbers have gone down, definitely.... local authority resources are very limited.” (EE-EWC-Inspector)

One interviewee highlighted that it was commonly left to an animal welfare charity to pick up responsibility for equine welfare enforcement when local authorities cannot or will not take action themselves, and that there would be serious repercussions if that changed,

“why should the third sector organisation be doing an enforcement of criminal legislation and how can we get from A to B and recognising that? The thing that would be disastrous if the RSPCA stopped prosecuting is the skill base that they've got, which doesn't exist anywhere else at the moment, both for the prosecution and the day-to-day enforcement” (UK-EWC-Vet)

Equine welfare – problems, solutions, and areas where progress has been made

The last section of the analysis summarises areas that the interviewees raised as problems within the sector, potential solutions, and areas where they felt that tangible improvements had been made over the last decade.

Commonly cited problems

“I think ignorance is a thing that needs to be knocked out of the system because, like I say, you can always find answers and there's always help” (EE-Equine Professional)

- ignorance,
- weak legislation – difficult to enforce and to intervene early enough to prevent suffering,
- the lack of a comprehensive equine register,
- lack of budget and resources for local authorities,
- inadequacy of equine identity, traceability, and enforcement,
- the loss of RSPCA inspectors,
- lack of join-up between human and animal welfare.

Potential solutions

“I think human behaviour change is key. If we could find a way to magically make all those [owners] engage with us better and respond to suggestions or guidance, or to consider that they might need to change things themselves, we could resolve a lot more problems” (UK-EWC-Department Head)

- improved signposting to high evidence-based information,
- licencing horse ownership, for example doing something similar to the horse ownership licence recently introduced in France
- training evenings for horse owners in basic care,
- improved equine identification and registration would enable welfare charities to be more proactive,
- More collaborative initiatives e.g., for livery yard owners,
- Information events for those considering entering horse ownership or publishing the costs of keeping equines so the potential owners are more informed.

Progress over the last decade

- More research in this area, therefore more evidence-based information is available,
- Accessibility of information,
- More proactive, campaigning initiatives,
- Greater awareness of equine needs and desire to keep them in a more suitable way,
- Feed companies seem to be providing more responsible guidance,
- Improved veterinary care,
- Improved dentistry,
- Improved geriatric care,
- Standard of foot care and farriery,
- More cross-sector and professional collaborations,

- More high-profile advocates for the horse

Concluding thoughts

The formal interviews of equine stakeholders in England, Wales and Ireland yielded a wealth of insights into the 'horse crisis' and factors influencing equine welfare over the last decade. This has been a period of intense change particularly in the last 3-4 years, both within and outside of the equine sector, and the impression received from the interviewees is that this period of change has yet to stabilise.

It is clear that equine welfare in England and Wales is still facing multiple challenges. Some of these, such as neglect, may have changed in nature over the last decade and others may be consequences of more recent global events. It is important to note that our understanding of equine needs has improved during this time. With the spread of this knowledge, some areas of welfare compromise may be more readily identified than they were historically, however there is still much work to do in this area. Decision-making around equine end of life in particular highlights the complexity surrounding equine welfare challenges. When, how, and indeed if this decision is made, are all influenced by the perceived role of the equine (family member v. commodity), societal pressures, professional advice, financial capability, resource availability, and personal understanding of equine quality of life and prioritisation of different elements of welfare (e.g. euthanising a horse because their mental wellbeing is compromised despite them still eating).

While there were multiple commonalities in perceptions and experiences of equine welfare over this period across the interviews, it is important to note that there was considerable regional variation regarding some aspects, for example in hay shortages, breeding practices and the types of equines affected. Our sample was not truly representative of the wider population, nor was it intended to be, and further investigation into these regional variations is recommended. Yet, the interview findings suggest that a blanket approach to welfare challenges is unlikely to be successful for some issues if applied uniformly across regions.

The interviewees shone a light onto some of the positive changes that have occurred in equine welfare since 2012. These bright spots need to be explored further to tease out the nature of these successes and see what can be learned from them.

It is evident that the 'horse crisis' is not what it was in 2012 when the term was first coined, it has evolved. Our understanding and subsequent action needs to reflect this.

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014. System thinking analysis

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Using systems thinking to consider horse welfare across England and Wales

Introduction to systems thinking

The horses in England and Wales are part of a system, which is multifactorial and affected by lots of different things – nothing happens in isolation and the outcome of one element is more than the sum of the system of its parts.

To answer the project question of whether the situation regarding equines in England and Wales should be referred to as a ‘crisis’, it is first important to understand the whole system relating to equines and equine welfare. Systems thinking can aid in developing understanding by drawing upon the research data and findings from across a project, to identify the elements of the system, including the sub-systems within it, the interconnections between them, the wider environment, and the emergent properties that arise from the system. By taking this innovative approach, moving away from reductionist, siloed thinking, and recognising that the world is made of a myriad of interrelated systems, it is possible to understand a system. From this opportunities and challenges to delivering change can be identified, which in turn can be used to design future interventions.

Just like Google maps, systems thinking enables us to take a world view of the planet or to focus right into an individual house on a street, a systems approach provides us with the lens to look up close and in detail but also to take a view of the bigger picture, which is invaluable when dealing with difficult and challenging problems. It is this concept upon which this piece of research has been based.

Data included and factors to consider

This research has drawn together a range of information including peer reviewed and grey literature, responses from 1133 survey representatives, 24 informal-journalistic and 22 formal semi-structured interviews from a range of representatives from the equine sector and data from 258 local authorities. The data captured includes both quantitative data, and qualitative data including the perceptions of those involved and connected to equine animals, whether as owners, carers, or other professionals and interested parties.

It is important to note, that the information obtained from the surveys and interviews are based upon people’s own perceptions, and as such they provide insight into the situation, but should be considered as opinion, which is subject to the range of human biases and influences that everyone is subject to. This in itself is valuable information in aiding the research team to understand the beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours and factors impacting on equine animals. The information included looks back to

past trends, comparing them to current situation, while also exploring and forecasting what could happen in the future.

This research is unique in the breadth and depth of materials and sources it is exploring to build a picture up of the equine crisis and whether this remains a challenge for the equine sector, and a critical element of this work is exploring the situation through different lenses, from the perspectives of the myriad of stakeholders involved and connected to equines, but most importantly, exploring the situation through the lens of equine welfare, to ensure the voice of these animals is represented. To aid this process, the Five Domains (Mellor et al 2020) have been used to inform thinking around identifying past, current, and potential future challenges and opportunities regarding equine welfare.

We feel it is important to start and end this discussion by drawing focus to the driver of both positive and negative equine welfare, namely, the human animal. It is important to remember this, in analysing and mapping the past, current, and possible future situation regarding what has been referred to as the equine crisis. It is recognised in this research that one of the biggest issues facing equine welfare relates to the beliefs, decisions and actions people take or do not take regarding the management and care of equines, whether they take responsibility or not for these decisions and actions. This is true whether we are talking about the contributors to the size of the equine population (e.g., breeding, importing) the breeding of animals, the care, or conversely neglect and abandonment of equids.

Our analysis used a systems approach to bring together the vast and diverse data in this project, explore the human drivers and decision making around equine lives, and explore the interconnections between factors within the system.

Context of the horse crisis: supply and demand or, demand and supply?

This research explores the drivers of the ‘Equine Crisis’, as defined by the RSPCA, as equine overpopulation, overbreeding, neglect and abandonment. It seeks to understand if there is still a crisis, and if so, what factors are driving it now. It is therefore essential to examine the supply and demand of equines regarding what has happened, what is happening currently, and how that might impact on what happens in the future. Systems thinking and mapping have been used to assist this process (see chapter 003 for diagrams).

It is important to explore the ‘push-pull’ factors that work between supply and demand in driving the breeding, use, and end of life decisions around these animals. Supply and demand have been defined in economics as the “*relationship between the quantity of a commodity that producers wish to sell at various prices and the quantity that consumers wish to buy.*” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2023). So how many horses do breeders want to sell and at what price, and what number of horses do prospective owners wish to buy and what price will they pay?

A picture of a historic rise in demand for horses (particularly through Covid), as well as early signs that this demand may be plateauing, and potentially declining, has emerged from the research. The question is, will a drop in the demand for horses gain speed with the cost-of-living crisis impacting on people's disposable income? The findings have also highlighted a mismatch between supply and demand, with certain breeds and types of equine being in over-supply for the market demand (e.g., small ponies, mini-cobs, thoroughbreds, ‘broken and old’ horses), while others are in under-supply for the market demand (e.g., safe, sound, reliable all-round horses for the average leisure rider between

15 and 16hh that can carry weight which are being sought by both leisure riders and riding schools for leisure rider clients).

The research suggests a fluctuation in supply and demand over the years, with the equine crisis in 2012 being a tipping point. Reflecting on the wider environment, there may have been indicators that a problem was on the horizon, such as the move from boom to bust with the collapse of the economy in 2008 (CBS, 2023), followed by the ‘Great’ recession (Q.ai, 2022) causing people to tighten belts. Other indicators could have been the type of welfare case arising involving multiple equines (e.g., Spindles Farm, the collapse of the Celtic Tiger impacting on Irish racing). Two of the key elements of the equine crisis defined as overpopulation and overbreeding, could be said to link to over-supply, perhaps due to previous demand during a time of economic prosperity. A sense of financial security may have encouraged the buying and selling of horses, and thus the breeding of foals, possibly even after the economy crashed, as the sector lagged behind hoping that fortunes would change, or that producing a horse could provide income when the animal was sold? Sadly, the collapse of Celtic Tiger (Morelle, 2011) example shows what happens when periods of prosperity stimulate demand for horses, which stimulate increased breeding of horses in relation to supply; as the outcome once the bubble burst, was large numbers of horses were slaughtered.

For now, the questions when considering the future are:

- Has the increased demand for horses and hence increase in prices of horses linked to the Covid lockdown, stimulated an increase in people breeding?
- Will this, together with a cost-of-living crisis, depressed economy, and other systemic factors, lead to an increased number of equines becoming at risk of neglect and abandonment, due to a drop in demand and then price?
- Can economic boom and bust predict the rise and fall in supply and demand of equines? Should it become an indicator to assist with future planning to reduce the impact of equine welfare crisis in the future, and move it from reactive to proactively managed?

It is important to note, that through mapping the supply and demand of equines as it rises and falls, that while neglect and abandonment can occur because of over supply through overbreeding and overpopulation, they can also occur quite independently. Neglect and abandonment can occur at any point in an animal's life. Even if supply and demand were in equilibrium (Figure 1), where the number of equines bred and available from a supply perspective match that being demanded, equines could still be subject to neglect and abandonment. This will be explored in more detail later.

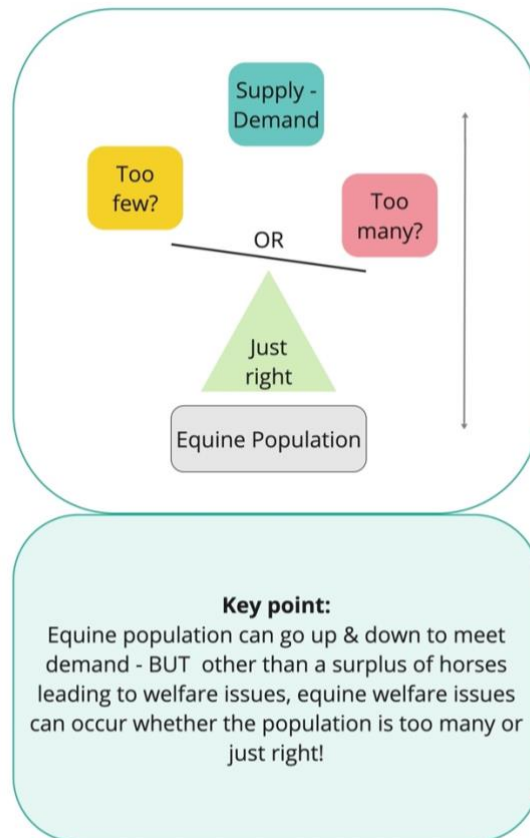


Figure 1: Simplified visualisation of the effect of supply and demand on the equine population.

The economic situation of the UK and the horse crisis

Our timeline evaluation shows a time lag between the 2008 recession and the ‘Horse Crisis’ taking hold in 2012. Early indicators that a problem was emerging may have been events such as Spindles Farm Amersham in 2008, where 111 horses, ponies and donkeys were seized due to their severely compromised welfare, and 32 horses found to be dead at the site. The Horse Crisis placed the equine charity sector and the authorities under significant strain, which resulted in sector discussions and a working group to review the situation. Over the subsequent years a number of reports “*Left on the verge: the approaching horse crisis in England and Wales*” (2012), where the term “horse crisis” was first used, “*Left on the verge: in the grip of a horse crisis in England and Wales*” (2013) and “*Britain’s Horse Problem*”(2020) were produced and measures put in place to address the problems identified (e.g., Control of Horses Act 2015 – to address fly grazing and abandonment). It is evident from the literature, survey, and interviews, that while there have been continued issues that link to the original report and declaration of a Horse Crisis, things have changed significantly.

In the wider context, the country faced a period of austerity that lasted from 2010 to 2019 (Jordan, 2019). This change included an announcement of the easing of austerity in September 2019. Then, in late 2019 cases of Covid-19 started to be reported, and by January 2020 cases were occurring in the UK. This led to additional changes to the equestrian industry, which will be discussed later.

Covid and its impacts on the horse crisis

With Covid and its associated lockdowns, horse prices went up rapidly (Your Horse, 2021), indicating an increase demand to buy horses and ponies, which paralleled the many reports of an increase in pet acquisition ownership during Covid. There was also an increase in demand for houses and a house price rise as people looked to escape the city and their houses for the countryside, people worked from home, and wanted to spend more time outdoors. This increased demand and price during Covid was referred to many times in the surveys, interviews and relevant literature reviewed, as was the increase in people buying online without trying/seeing the horse, potentially leading to mismatches between horses and new owners. The research findings also include reports of old horses and those with medical problems being advertised for sale, and high prices being asked for some of these animals. High purchase prices may erroneously lead purchasers to assume that the horse being sold is sound and fit for their desired activities.

The Covid pandemic also led to changes in available veterinary services. Our data show reported increases in pre-purchase examinations due to increased purchasing behaviours. It was also reported that some buyers were being prevented from vetting the horse they were seeking to buy by the seller – raising questions over the horse’s soundness and overall physical and psychological health status.

Interview participants also commented that buyers were not committed to the horses they bought and were prepared to sell them on like a car, resulting in horses being passed from home to home. Alongside the rise of online platforms for advertising horses for sale, and auctions taking place online (from the New Forest to high performance competition horse sales) it became increasingly easy to purchase horses. Collectively, it is possible that this is reinforcing the practice of reselling and viewing horses as disposable in the equestrian sector.

Comments made in the interviews by those representatives from the welfare charities talk about the upsurge in the numbers of horses rehomed, with one person talking about horses “*flying off the shelves*”. There were concerns that there would be an increase in welfare problems during or after Covid, but according to some participants this has not happened. Innovation also occurred during Covid, with welfare organisations having to find new ways to rehome and check up on their animals virtually. Some of these positive approaches have continued post-Covid and become part of the ongoing practice of some charities due to the lessons that were learnt; with organisations taking a blended approach to virtual and in-person checks and communications.

Post-Covid, fuel prices, war, and the Cost-of-Living Crisis – influence on the horse crisis

Turmoil has continued following Covid, with the fuel crisis, the war in Ukraine, the cost-of-living crisis, the NHS (National Health Service) crisis, mental health crisis, and the climate crisis, among several other impactful and relevant events. There is a feeling from the research data that there may be a dampening effect on the demand for horses, as people become more cautious of where their money is going with cost rising across the board from goods and services, including mortgages, and the essential food items in their supermarket trolley. Vets report a slowing down on the demand for pre-purchase examinations, and people not replacing animals that have been put to sleep. Welfare charities talked about a reduction in requests to rehome a horse from them, and an increase in the numbers of calls they are receiving regarding returns and people seeking advice or, asking the charity to take their equine because they cannot afford them anymore.

Cost of horse keeping in the cost-of-living crisis

With the costs of living driven up and inflation rising this brings a very real challenge for those in any walk of life. It has been said that those in the equine sector have seen a 10 to 50% increase on costs when compared to other sectors, with increases to some of the core requirements for care, such as food/forage, bedding, veterinary and livery costs. However, reports on forage costs have varied depending on where people are located in the country, and there are signs that this summer's harvest may have helped calm the market (AHDB, 2023). Research identified through the literature review supported by other research sources, suggest owners are feeling the pinch, but going without things themselves rather than let this impact on their horse.

It was suggested in our data that people are doing more themselves to save money rather than turning to vets, and that people worry about their horse becoming ill, for example going lame, having colic, or getting injured. One vet talked about people being resistant to paying for repeat visits by the vet, and that their practice was working to reduce the need for lots of repeat visits by using telemedicine (i.e., photos, film). There were suggestions that people may be cutting back on how frequently the farrier comes and moving from shoeing their horse to keeping them barefoot. Also, comment was made that people were cutting back on bedding and forage and turning out for longer, looking for grass livery, and reducing additional care such body work (massage, physiotherapy etc).

There were positives and negatives identified regarding these changes. Examples include – animals potentially having more time turned out which would be better for their physical and psychological wellbeing but could present welfare challenges regarding animals prone to and suffering from laminitis, where careful management is needed regarding types of grass and forage access. The reduction in use of bedding may be environmental gain, particularly in relation to the use of shavings and other materials that negatively impact of the environment. However, if people are stabling without adequate bedding to encourage a horse to take recumbent rest, this will place the horse under physical and mental challenges that are negative to their wellbeing. If people cut back on forage, they may not be providing adequate long fibre in the horse's diet, which again can cause issues around overall wellbeing.

It was deemed to be harder to keep horses than 15 years ago, with costs rising, people cutting back on aspects of care. Also, comments were made regarding people having animals put to sleep earlier than they might have, due to costs, then also finance impacting on their choice of euthanasia technique, with some opting to have animals shot to save money. Finally, as stated, the welfare organisations have been seeing an increase in the number of calls asking them to take in equines due to people not being able to afford them, and for people requesting financial support. Indeed, one of the organisations is considering this for targeted cases to reduce the need to take animals in, when people may just need one-off financial help when costs are biting hard, and such an approach has proved beneficial in other situations where people are struggling financially (Give Directly, 2020).

Birth-related factors affecting the horse population

Motivation for breeding from equines

The breeding of horses, ponies and donkeys is a pivotal part of the equine system, as people seek to meet certain needs, wants, demands, and desires. Equine breeding can be explored as a system, with varying sub-systems about the type of horse and the breeding approach taken. The emergent properties include a foal, or profit from breeding and selling a foal; kudos from breeding a champion

competition horse; or the associated emotional rewards of breeding foals. In the context of the equine crisis overbreeding was seen to be one of the driving catalysts back in 2012, so understanding what is happening now, over ten years later is crucial.

The qualitative interviews undertaken during this project resulted in themes around the different types and sectors related to breeding. The different factions within the breeding world were seen to be distinct: e.g., these were described as – low, middle, and elite, or references to “*high end and the other end*”. The high/elite end of breeding referred to sports horses used for competition (including racing) and breeding, the middle being lower-level sports and leisure, and the lower end - low value. The information collected underpinned the concern that overbreeding was occurring in every part of the equine sector at every level, from elite competition and racing to the lower-level sport and leisure, to equines left to breed indiscriminately.

Reasons for breeding given included emotional reasons such as breeding for love of a mare or a particular breed, type, or activity; and breeding for money, such as in the case of sports horses or those meeting the market demand for particular breeds and types (e.g., certain colours). Finally, linked to both for differing reasons, are people who hold the belief that horses need to ‘have a job’, so if they cannot be ridden, they are used for breeding. In all these cases breeding takes place because of conscious decision-making and action, where a person is consciously seeking certain characteristics and breeding for those. In contrast to this is indiscriminate breeding, which involves little or no thought or active practical management.

It is the latter – indiscriminate breeding, which could benefit from further consideration regarding its definition, as it appears that this may mean different things to different people. For example, “*breeding without due care and attention to the conformation, soundness, use and temperament of the parents*” (Horse and Hound forum, 2013) or “*Horses bred without consideration of whether there is a market for them. Limited market results in them becoming ‘low value’*” (Horseman et al., 2016). Although it is assumed that there is an overlap and connection in relation to producing animals that are of low value due to their poor breeding and resultant health challenges, a recognised definition could aid in considering the nuances of the current situation. For example, in the interviews reference was made to hoarding behaviours, where people acquire several animals, some of which may be mares and stallions who breed without the owner making any conscious decision for breeding to take place. Then there is the situation regarding animals of a low value and/or poor conformation, soundness, and/or temperament, placed together where the intention may be to breed and sell whatever is saleable. There is intention to breed, but the animals being placed together are done so with little thought for their suitability, and with little or no active management or care. For example, people who breed from a mare they cannot ride, which came out frequently in both the survey and interviews. This also fits under the definition of indiscriminate breeding, as no thought has been given to the physical or behavioural qualities of the mare that make them unsuitable, as these will be passed on to the foal.

It is the breeders and dealers of low value horses that were highlighted as being a problem in the past, particularly at the bottom end of the market. There were particular individuals that were responsible for breeding large numbers of horses – in the hundreds and thousands and being associated to equine welfare problems. Some of these individuals have had legal action taken to ban them from keeping and owning animals. However, as history has shown, where there is a potential gap in the market, someone is likely to fill it. So, although these individuals may have been stopped or their practices hampered in relation to breeding and selling horses and other animals, there is the risk that others may take their place, particularly when perceived demand is high.

There seems to be some difference in opinion as to whether breeding practices are better or worse now than in the past. Welfare challenges connected to breeding that were highlighted through the research include: people who breed a foal with little consideration for conformation; competition horses being bred for characteristics like flashy paces for dressage rather than soundness, leading to an increased risk of horses breaking down, getting injured and ending up with medicated joints; as well as references to deformities, kissing spines, soundness and behavioural issues. One participant talked about *'breeding deformed horses'* through selection for sport or abandoning horses to breed indiscriminately. Comments were made about issues with thoroughbreds and warmbloods regarding lameness and dentistry and that these horses are not bred for good feet and teeth, but for sports performance; with comparisons made to hardy native ponies such as the New Forest ponies with fewer health issues. One welfare issue that came up repeatedly was breeding stock welfare, such as professional sports horse breeders breeding from unsuitable mares placing them at risk and raising concerns about the soundness and behavioural characteristics of any future foals. The welfare of mares being left in fields with little care and management, and stallions being confined to stables for extended periods of time and therefore unable to move adequately, were also raised. Of interest was the strength of feeling among vets and people working in equine welfare about breeding practices and the need to address welfare issues that result in poor physical and psychological outcomes for the animals concerned.

Several areas requiring ethical consideration were raised, including the references to an increase in demand for artificial insemination and embryo transfer, with differing views as to whether this was a good or bad thing. There may be parallels to what is happening in the dog world, and the ethical, health risks and unforeseen consequences that may emerge, and may have already emerged (i.e., selecting for certain traits and characteristics at the expense of good health). Another area for consideration is whether it is acceptable to breed more animals than is needed, and *"kill off wastage"*, a practice that already occurs in the equine sector and other parts of the animal sector. For example, our review of data around slaughter found that a number of horses bred for racing were euthanised or untraceable, prior to even entering race-training, due to health issues or not showing an aptitude for sport. The concept of overbreeding and euthanising unwanted animals is a complex area regarding cultural beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, it draws upon ethical frameworks and a person's perceptions of right and wrong. As such, it is an area that warrants further discussion and research as to the welfare implications and therefore, the implications for those facilitating this, such as vets, and how it sits with their oath *"to do no harm"*. As an aside it is worth noting that without formal welfare science and ethics training it might be difficult for vets to assess if they are doing harm or not.

Breeding – demand driving supply, but supply not always linked to demand

The different sources collated indicated that the prices for horses went up during Covid. Reference was made to people putting mares into foal during lockdown because of increased demand and inflated prices for horses, while taking advantage of the opportunity as they could not ride. It was suggested that demand for certain types of animals may be fuelling breeding practices, for example the rise in popularity of the coloured cob, where there has been an increase in the numbers bred, owned and in welfare charities. The rise in demand for cobs and horses suitable for the novice leisure rider, appears to be coming both from the leisure owner market and from riding schools, who have seen increased demand for riding lessons from novices once able to open back up after locked down. Comments were made about not being able to find the right horse, as highlighted in the section on demand, that people were looking for safe, sound, and sensible horses that could carry weight, were allrounders and suitable for a leisure rider. Also, the prices have been driven so high that riding schools cannot afford them. However, the supply of horses that fit this description appears a problem, with vets talking about horses failing the vetting, and having soundness, general health, and behavioural issues. The British Horse Society (BHS) established the BHS British Horse Society Second Chance

Project that rehomes horses to approved riding schools in 2019, to help link horses that had been welfare cases with riding schools looking for suitable animals.

A vet interviewed in this project talked about people choosing cobs thinking they were sensible, when that was not always the case, and conversely many thoroughbreds being really good horses in the right hands. Thoroughbreds were frequently mentioned across the data, as horses who were frequently cheap due to the high levels of availability, and perception that they might be complex to handle or have additional health needs. In addition, and linked to comments regarding demand, were points raised about only being able to find horses that were over 16.2hh and tended to be competition horses that were ‘too much’ for the average rider. Or, too small, below 14.2hh, which may not be able to carry the weight of many adult riders (increased human weight and the associated challenges for horse welfare was also raised several times). There were also concerns in some more ‘niche’ areas, such as the breeding of heavy horses for the show ring but being up for sale perhaps due to the cost-of-living crisis and increase in feed prices and suchlike, given heavy horses require additional costs for feed, farriery and care compared to more standard breeds.

Finally, the over-breeding of small ponies appears to be related to particular individuals or areas, rather than as it may have historically been viewed in the past. For example, references were made to groups of ponies on moorland and commons being a challenge regarding breeding (e.g., Gelligaer in Wales), and individual breeders of ponies, where the numbers have got out of control and stallions are left running with mares. Taking Gelligaer as an example, it was suggested that some of the challenges are due in part to those people who have traditionally bred the ponies getting older and passing away, but their children not having the same interest; so, the ponies being left to their own devices. This coupled with the solutions to this issue being deemed to be either ‘unpalatable’ or unaffordable for those involved, the problem has lingered. Although efforts are being made to take forward possible solutions including removing stallions from the moor, castration, and the consideration of contraceptive injection. With individual breeders or hoarders, there have been several cases where welfare charities have had to step in when individuals have allowed small ponies to breed indiscriminately. The result was inbred animals that are living in unsuitable environmental conditions, where their welfare needs are not being met.

Breeding of native semi-ferals – working to make improvements

In contrast, efforts over the last decade or so, might be having an impact regarding other semi-feral native pony populations (Forgrave, A. 2019), although ongoing work needs maintaining and supporting. For example, two New Forest vets were interviewed (one formal and one informal), who also both undertake work for the RSPCA through their practice. They talked about positive changes, outlining the move from the past where unregistered stallions were let out on the New Forest for long periods resulting in poorly bred foals that went for meat. However, it should be noted that another interviewee stated that some surplus animals from the New Forest are still going for meat even if conformation has improved. With the current situation stallions are registered, which includes several elements, for example testing and a conformation score, and a limited number of stallions are let out on the forest for a set time. References were made by others to Dartmoor being less regulated and structured than the New Forest, but that efforts had been made to regulate breeding and a niche created for the Dartmoor Hill Pony, which included reducing unnecessary breeding. Bodmin Moor has developed a council following several welfare issues in recent years and are taking measures to improve activities on the moor. The iconic and still rare Exmoor is bred very cautiously to protect the bloodlines.

Returning to the New Forest, it is worth noting that changes are happening. In recent years only 10 stallions were released on to the forest for six weeks, but with the numbers of foals dropping, increased demand during Covid, and a push for more genetic diversity, it has been increased to 15 stallions out for a longer period. The average number of foals born had been around 500-600 per year, now increasing to up to 1000 foals.

Donkey breeding – supply and demand

Issues around donkey breeding were infrequently mentioned in the data, including in the survey and qualitative interviews. Comments were raised about donkeys being in short supply and being imported from overseas, often from Ireland. This contrasted with information that the research team were aware of through contacts at the Donkey Sanctuary Ireland, where welfare concerns were highlighted regarding the numbers of donkeys in need, following donkeys being bred linked to land subsidy schemes.

Breeding in 2023 and beyond

An important consideration regarding current breeding practices was raised by participants, that those people breeding horses, ponies, and donkeys, were not taking responsibility for their actions. For example, not considering that equines live long lives, and therefore people need to plan for their future when breeding. When this point is explored in relation to the survey results, where breeders, stud owners and managers gave significantly lower scores to other participants regarding the importance of current breeding practices and the mismatch between supply and demand regarding the equine crisis, it suggests that breeders may not see breeding practices as an area for concern regarding equine welfare. A concern was also raised around the loss of knowledge and skill around equine care and handling, and in this case one of the vets interviewed summed this up as being the loss of “old school breeders” who had the knowledge and skill, and who had spent their life building up their herd. This could be suggestive of change regarding who is breeding horses and their abilities to do this in a way that promotes welfare and resultant physically and psychologically healthy and robust animals.

Reflections were made by participants about waiting to observe the numbers of foals bred and born in 2023, and the need to see what this means for the sector, including pressures on welfare. Linked to this is the impact of Brexit and the UK’s relationship with the EU (European Union) and other countries in which horses have been traded, either purchased as animals or semen for import or sold and exported. Consideration should be given as to how this has driven prices up related to this trade and may be impacting upon the number of horses being bred in England and Wales moving forward. This will require for ongoing research and monitoring.

Overpopulation and overbreeding conclusions

Due to the market fluctuations of supply and demand there is not constant, sustainable level of population, because the number of animals in the national herd will depend on other things in the environment, such as changing financial pressures, environmental pressures, and more. Importantly, we find that over supply can lead to low value, low levels of care, neglect, and abandonment. However, importantly, over supply will not always lead to neglect and abandonment, in the same way that neglect and abandonment can still occur even when there is balance between supply and demand, or where supply is low, and demand is high. There is not necessarily a causal link between supply, neglect, and abandonment.

Similarly, low levels of care, neglect and abandonment can happen to horses of higher or low value, or horses at different points in their career and lives. Therefore, although overpopulation and overbreeding are key welfare issues and will place pressures on the equine welfare sector, we find that it is not necessarily linked to the broader welfare issues in England and Wales.

Life-related factors in the equine population

Systematic neglect- equine welfare and neglect

Our interview data highlights that “neglect” is generally considered to be a failure to provide care resulting in what is thought of as a classic “welfare case”; a horse who is emaciated. Interview data highlighted mixed views about whether these types of cases were declining or had stabilised, and other data types suggest a possible reduction in this type of neglect.

However, the table below (Table 1) highlights the range of welfare issues facing the UK’s horses mentioned by participants in this project, and this highlights a range of other neglect-related factors which may be overlooked by some, because of the perception that “neglect” is as depicted in social media and by welfare organisations. All these issues arise because of a failure to provide care for an individual animal and can all therefore be considered in relation to neglect. The data showed that legislation, also, focussed on horses who “looked unhealthy” rather than horses who might be in other forms of serious neglect where they nevertheless had acceptable body condition.

The issues are organised according to the five domains model, and this highlights that many of the issues are related to physical health, including common conditions such as laminitis, colic, and equine gastric ulcers.

Table 1: Welfare issues identified by participants across the data in this project, organised according to the Five Domains model

Domain	Issues identified in this project	Positive factors identified in project
Nutrition	Obesity and malnutrition	
Physical environment	Poor environment/over-stabling/lack of turnout	Diverse horse-keeping premises opening aiming to meet environmental needs
	Unpredictable environments (e.g., changes in homes, herd mates)	
	Changing seasonal pressures (e.g., atypical myopathy because of climate change)	
Health	Lameness	Increasingly good farriery
	Laminitis	Increasingly good veterinary evidence base
	Delayed euthanasia	Increasing health in old age
	Antimicrobial resistance (note: awareness improving)	Improvements in antimicrobial and anthelmintic awareness (though issues remain)

	Inherited disorders such as ECVM, HWS, PPSM	
	Anthelmintic resistance	
	Low vaccination uptake	
	Breathing issues/asthma	
	Leg mites	
	Poor tack fit	
	Frequent injury associated with use e.g., suspensory injuries	
	Gastric ulcers	
	Colic, incl sand colic	
	Atypical myopathy	
	PPID	
Behavioural interactions with environment, other animals, people	Poor training practices	
	Limited social interaction	
	Poor environment/over-stabling/lack of turnout	Increased interest in allowing natural behaviour expression
	Rider weight	
	Rough handling	
Mental state	Poor owner recognition of stress, pain, and quality of life	
	Unrecognised stress	
	Needs not met	

Many of these factors are interlinked; for example, obesity is a result of poor nutrition, leading to health disorders such as equine metabolic syndrome and laminitis. Additionally, many of these factors may be worsened due to external factors such as the scarcity of equine vets, as discussed by many interview participants.

What is particularly important about the identified welfare issues is the finding that many of the factors contributing to them, can affect equines regardless of their value status. For example, obesity can be an outcome which occurs due to neglect (leaving the horse in a field without adequate exercise), or through over-care and under-stimulation, as in a stabled horse.

Additionally, many of the issues identified are a result of horse-keeping practices and social norms, such as over-stabling, under-socialising, and poor recognition of equine stress, pain, and quality of life. For example, livery yard practices can lead to owners keeping horses on inappropriate grasses leading to obesity; poor worming policies leading to anthelmintic resistance; dusty stables leading to equine asthma, and so forth; livery yard management therefore represents a key driver in the welfare of horses within each yard.

Our project also finds that poor handling is problematic across the board, partly due to an increasingly novice and nervous equestrian community. Many issues not traditionally considered “neglect”, but contributing to poor quality of life, should be included in these considerations; for example, failure to have tack properly fitted, or ensure appropriate rider: horse weight ratios.

As a result, this project finds that there remains a wealth of equine welfare issues, which may not have been considered in neglect as it was related to the equine crisis. However, we consider that a lack of provision for horses in a way that meets their needs as a species is a systematic neglect and can affect equines at all levels – from low value ponies to high-value riding club and competition horses.

Abandonment

Abandonment was one of the main concerns of the original horse crisis documents, and legally abandonment is now defined as leaving a horse for long enough that their needs are not met, or they risk suffering. There is, therefore, a blurred line between neglect and abandonment. Abandonment includes horses who are actively moved to a location where they are left (for example, they are sometimes moved to locations like the New Forest or moors, where they are often spotted by people more familiar with the local ponies; or moved to locations such as fields or golf courses). Alternatively, animals can simply be left at a premises while owners move on, such as when horses are left at livery yards, or in fields. Abandoned horses usually then become the property of welfare organisations, at which point the decision may be taken to end their life if they are unhealthy, or to enter rescue centres if there is a court case pending, or a chance they may be rehomed.

Our data, including the RSPCA statistics and interviews, suggests that abandonment has decreased since the Control of Horses act. However, cases are still occurring. We also find that livery yard managers may be shouldering some of the burden of abandonment cases, as horses are sometimes left at livery yards by non-paying clients; in this case, livery yard managers may decide to euthanise the horse at their own cost, sell, keep, or refer to a rescue organisation. We find that this is something most livery yard managers are concerned about, and many have been in this situation at least once; particularly on lower end and DIY yards. The numbers of these horses would be unlikely to be captured in any industry-level data.

Loss of equine vets

As already highlighted, it was apparent that the equine veterinary profession was busy during the initial phases of the COVID pandemic, with an increase in demand for pre-purchase examinations, routine treatment and in some cases support for those deciding to breed. This coupled with the current shortage of vets proved to be a challenge. This shortage was brought up by several participants and was evident from the literature and Google searches, with a practice manager involved in the informal interviews, talking about the challenges of recruiting equine vets and keeping hold of them. There was also mention of fewer equine vets being willing to work out of hours, resulting in some practices not offering these services. The situation has been discussed by the British Horse Council and is covered extensively in the media and literature (BVA, 2022; Webb, 2022), and is not just a UK issue, although Brexit appears to have contributed to it, as vets from EU countries choose to return home, or are less likely to come to the UK to work. Animal owners and carers are already struggling to access veterinary services, but the increase in pet ownership, including equines went up significantly during Covid. Some veterinary practices have been forced to close their books to new clients. Many reasons have been given for vets leaving the profession (e.g., increase litigious society, pressures on mental and physical health related to working conditions – linked to high suicide and injury rates (Webb, 2022)), so what impact is this having on animal welfare and what does it mean for the future?

Following Covid, there were less PPE (Pre-Purchase Examination) visits taking place, and reports of people cutting back on certain diagnostics and treatment, like lameness workups and mild dental disease, which is thought to largely be due to the cost-of-living crisis and price increases (which include veterinary costs). Although veterinary practices seek to support clients, through offering a variety of options and care plans, uptake in such initiatives has been reported to have slowed recently. There was also mention of how costly certain events could be for owners. An example given was a strangles outbreak on a yard, which may be due to a person moving to a yard or going out to an event where their horse is in contact with the disease, and the costs being high for the owners involved in these cases, which can cause tension on yards and between friendship groups. Varying thoughts were given about the uptake of flu and tetanus vaccinations, from it being ok, to there being a shortage in the vaccine which resulted in competition organisations and venues changing their vaccination policies, to

a drop-off as people may be trying to save money. The general consensus was this was something to monitor and watch, as it could be an indicator of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and would also be placing the equine population at risk.

There was also reference to the perception of vets, both by vets themselves, but also by other stakeholders such as professionals and equine owners/carers. Comments varied from positive to negative, regarding people looking to vets for support and trusting them, to vets being perceived as money grabbing. Also, there were a few questions raised, again by vets and non-vets regarding whether too much time and money was spent on diagnostics and treatment that may not be in the best interest of the animal concerned. It was highlighted that this was not necessarily about making money, but in some cases may be about using the diagnostic tools that the vets had been taught to use. Some of the vets mentioned differences between themselves and younger colleagues regarding decision-making – whether it be about pain relief or end of life for an animal. An encouraging and key point was raised by one vet of the value and need for vets and vet nurses, to understand, have training in, and use equine behaviour informed approaches, including learning theory, in their and others handling of animals.

A loss of knowledge and opportunity was said to be driving people to acquire horses earlier. Reference was made by vets to fewer decent riding schools, and new owners likely to keep horses at livery yards where knowledge and skill of peers and those managing the yards could vary greatly. Concerns were raised that many new owners and carers were less skilled at reading equine behaviour and identifying health issues with their animals, resulting in things going untreated or delays that could be critical, such as in the case of colic. Ultimately this lack of knowledge and skill is placing the welfare of equines at real risk and in some cases is causing harm; while it may be due to ignorance it is still a form of neglect.

Death in relation to the equine population

Equine end-of-life is usually a result of human decision-making rather than natural death, and this stage of life has the potential for multiple welfare issues, as highlighted across our data.

Firstly, decision making about when to euthanise was shown in our data to be extremely complex and challenging, and depended on human perceptions and values around quality of life and what constitutes a “good death”. The data showed conflict on this point, with some participants taking a traditionalist view that early euthanasia before the horse was in pain was preferable, as in cases where “healthy” but ageing horses are put to sleep in Autumn in order not to endure another winter. Typically, this was a set of values associated with more experienced and pragmatic horse people. Conversely, participants described alternative values which prolonged life into old age or through health challenges, and euthanasia in relation to more acute health conditions. Indeed, additional end of life care options are now arising, including equine retirement homes (specialist livery yards) to cater for more horses kept in old age, and more specialist crematoriums for animals: this indicates how values around end of life, and indeed the role of the horse in people’s lives, are changing from the more “traditional” view toward a valuing of life in old age. Changing cultural values, veterinary advancements, emotional management around death, and horse-human relationships were thought to contribute to these differing viewpoints.

External influences were also thought to play a major part in decision making; for example, vets interviewed in this project discussed that livery yard pressures contributed to decisions to euthanise, or to delay euthanasia, depending on the situation, and other participants described the role of social

media. Welfare organisations described receiving increasing numbers of calls requesting advice about end-of-life decision making and euthanasia. Veterinarians were often sought for advice, yet several participants were concerned that vets were not trained in assessing welfare or quality of life. In addition, vets might be compromised in their perception of acceptable interventions for ageing animals by the range of new medical advancements available. Some survey participants also raised their concern that vets seemed more reluctant to tell owners when it was time to let their horse go, letting the situation go on at the owner's request while horse's welfare deteriorated. Insurance was also discussed as an external influence.

There was concern across the data that some equestrians chose to avoid needing to consider death in their animals, by selling or giving away ageing or compromised equines who are nearing end of life. This behaviour might be partly as a result of the cost of euthanasia and carcass disposal, or the financial costs of supporting an older horse while being told by other people that they should not put the animal down, either way, it is a serious welfare concern.

Some factors external to equestrianism may have contributed to changing euthanasia decisions. For example, interviews with vets and welfare organisation staff suggests that equines were more readily euthanised during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this aligns with data from some Passport Issuing Authorities who described having additional passports returned. It is not known why animals might have been more readily euthanised during the pandemic, particularly given the upsurge in purchasing behaviours. However, a "knacker" interviewed also suggested additional euthanasia being performed in 2022-2023 for economic reasons due to the cost-of-living crisis, and it is possible that concern over financial stability contributed to some decisions made over the pandemic, as well as the general uncertainty experienced at this time.

Mode of death was also important and has changed in recent decades, influencing decision making. Some participants felt that the injection was preferred by horse owners because it is "kinder", while others felt that shooting was quicker; this was partly personal preference, but also seemed to relate to the values around what was seen to be a "good death". Survey information showed that shooting was more readily associated with horses being sent for meat. Death by "knacker" was cheaper than by the vet, which might influence horse owner choice; however, in both cases horses need to be cremated, which is expensive even when communal cremation is chosen.

Equine slaughter in the UK is now relatively uncommon, with only 256 horses killed in abattoirs in the UK and Wales last year, and figures show year-on-year decline. There is little demand for horse meat in the UK, and this may be a partial result of the "horse meat scandal" of 2012. However, several horses are thought to travel to Ireland for slaughter, or for further shipping to EU countries for slaughter there; these figures remain unknown. Slaughter was considered more taboo and unpopular with survey participants. Our FOI (Freedom of Information) request shows that horses entering slaughter are most likely to come from dealers rather than private homes, and they are then sold for meat. Around 40% of horses entering slaughter are likely to have been involved in the racing industry (although noting that in 2021 there was a change in the rules - all horses entered to run in a race in Britain must be signed out of the human food chain via the passport scheme). Importantly, several participants mentioned a limitation with the passporting situation in which horses can be "signed out" of the food chain early in their life, yet the same person is unlikely to be making decisions around their end of life several years later. As a result, horses were sometimes rejected by abattoirs due to decisions made decades earlier by past owners. This can limit end-of-life options for current owners, who may not be able to pay for other forms of killing.

Equine value and the cost of horse care, medical intervention, euthanasia, and disposal were all frequently discussed as contributors to decision making around death. Our data show that at times,

cost of euthanasia and disposal might be higher than equine value, leading to horses being sold or given away rather than euthanised. Equine carcasses hold little value for meat, and thus cremation is the most frequent option.

The human element of the equine sector

Loss of practical knowledge and skill- the demise of riding schools

The loss of riding schools and equestrian centres came out strongly across the research data gathering approaches. Of concern is how this has and is impacting on the practical knowledge and skills level of those caring for equines, either in a non-professional and professional work perspective. Traditionally, riding schools were the place that many people from an early age had their first ride, learnt to tack up, muck-out, handle horses and read their behaviour, under the guidance of experienced horse people. The increase in insurance costs, a litigious society and health and safety, have increased the burdens of cost and paperwork on riding schools to the extent that many have closed their gates and ceased business. The loss of these places for learning and practicing skills, means there are fewer places to teach and train young people and novices, who do not come from a family with a background in horses, the skills of equitation and looking after a horse. An example of how this demise has hit was given by one vet who recalled that there had been six to seven riding schools in their local area, and now there was one, and this had happened over a 12-year period. Other comments relating to the change in attitudes to riding, linked to riding schools, were that people do not understand riding is a risk sport, and they do not expect to fall off. With parents worrying about their kids, gone are the days of vaulting on bareback with a headcollar and lead rope in an open field, or spending the whole weekend at the stables away from parents' eyes. The loss of riding schools has not been linked to a reduction in those wanting to ride, indeed many centres have waiting lists due to the increasing scarcity of the schools, and recent article referred to the loss of 250 schools since 2018 (Jones, 2023). People talked about being able to hack for miles in the past, but this was now limited. This may also be linked to other comments made about people being nervous to hack out – in part due to a lack of experience and skills around riding on the road, and the busy roads making it more dangerous.

The rise of equine colleges has affected riding schools in a variety of ways, the riding school used to be the place to gain equine knowledge and practical skills. However, colleges and universities now offer a different route to a potentially higher paid role in the horse world without the years of physical labour alongside the learning. Class-based qualifications are now more readily available and often require fewer practical skills to be practised and tested on. The graduates from the colleges are potentially going to be less inclined to do day to day yard duties, such as, general horse care and mucking out if that is not what they qualified for, even though these jobs are incredibly important to run a yard. The college graduates may also be lacking in practical experience and confidence in certain areas such as, teaching groups, where a knowledge of individual horses and horse behaviour in a group is vital to keep the lesson running smoothly. This lack of experience may also impact their confidence during teaching, regarding health and safety risk taking, therefore limiting the riding and care experiences for their students.

Covid has had an impact on riding schools, as well as the challenges of adapting to work in a covid safe way they also had to manage the health of their herd with increased time out of work. Many riding schools reduced the numbers of horses they owned during the pandemic. The character and experience of a horse must be suitable to be a riding school horse, with large amounts of time and training needing to be invested to ensure they are safe for less experienced riders. Since horse prices have increased it is increasingly hard to find horses and ponies which are suitable behaviourally and

physically to do the job of a riding school horse at an affordable price. The RSPCA started to rehome horses into riding schools (BHS, 2022) which gave an affordable route for getting horses, but those horses were not suitably trained. A riding school owner who experienced this scheme discussed that it took a lot to train them to an appropriate level and some were not suitable to do the job (Formal interview).

Finally, the fact that riding schools while licenced are not well-regulated poses issues and is a potential factor driving welfare concerns at some establishments.

Challenges with legislation and lack of enforcement

Several issues were raised in the surveys and interviews regarding different parts of legislation. For a detailed consideration of legislation for each key area of focus see the Table in the document entitled 'UK Relevant Debates and Legislation' in the appendices.

The enforcement of legislation by Local Authorities is severely under resourced in terms of funding and staff, resulting in them not being able to fulfil their enforcement responsibilities. This was a key concern expressed by interviewees. There is an inconsistency between different Local Authorities (LAs) regarding the level of engagement with animal welfare. The division of responsibility seems to be that animal welfare charities are doing the case work and evidence collection and the LAs are responsible for enforcing and prosecuting (except for the RSPCA, which has traditionally done some of these activities too). The lack of funding at local authority level is seen to be the key reason few cases are taken to court and may also explain why call levels noted in '006. *Results from several freedom of information requests*' are low. There have been several reports in the media, by a thinktank and by the UK Parliament (Walker 2022; Atkins and Hoddinott 2022 UK Parliament 2023) that have referred to the impact of the austerity measures introduced in 2010 and 2014/15, and how this has resulted in a reduction of funding to LAs, and therefore reduced their ability to undertake work at previous levels. Several organisations working in equine welfare referred to the challenges of working with LAs, with it depending on the particular LA and the contact person they had as to whether action would be taken. Reference had been made to LAs not wanting to get involved in animal welfare issues, and it being left to animal welfare charities to pick up the responsibility for equine welfare enforcement when local authorities cannot or will not act themselves. In addition to this, comments were made about the lack of progression and opportunities for LA employees making working in animal welfare an unattractive career prospect.

Along with issues relating to LAs were challenges that equine welfare charity field officers were facing on the ground, with reports of having to wait long times for police attendance at cases and lengthy delays in removing horses (section 18, Powers in relation to animals in distress) making effective law enforcement a challenge. Section 20, relevant to what happens after horses have been removed, is also a problem for welfare charities as there is often difficulty and delay in getting Section 20 orders in place (partly due to the requirement to permit transfer of ownership and treatment including gelding of a seized animal).

Two specific pieces of legislation were mentioned by interviewees: the Animal Welfare Act (2006), and the more recent Control of Horse Act (2015); there is also the Control of Horse Act (Wales) (2014). The impact of a lack of funding and support from LAs and the police could be a factor in why some of the interviewees referred to challenges with the Animal Welfare Act (e.g., Section 4 and Section 9) and welfare organisations ability to rescue and rehome equines regarding whether enforcement action was taken or not. The Control of Horses Act appeared to be viewed more favourably regarding its impact on the ability to resolve equine welfare issues connected to abandonment and fly-grazing.

Equine identification and traceability were also key issues mentioned, whether the value of passports and the current passporting system, or the need for an equine register or database to allow equine welfare charities and others to take a more proactive approach to equine sector challenges.

Social license

Survey data and interviews highlighted that the equestrian community is under increasing levels of pressure around social license to operate (SLO), as the public and equestrian audiences question the ethics of various horse-keeping practices and horse sports. Horse sports are the most affected at the present time, with the racing industry particularly under threat, due to concerns over management, training, and horse safety. While this is much discussed in the equestrian media, the “threat” of changing social license presents some opportunities to equine welfare. For example, public pressure to limit unpopular practices such as early training of competition horses, or over-stabling, may alter those practices and thus alleviate some of the pressures on sports horses which contribute to them having low welfare and longevity after their sporting careers are over. Additionally, public demand to improve traceability and assurance of lifetime welfare of ex-sport horses is likely to put pressure on the industry to make changes.

To explore the world of high-level sports horses was outside the scope of this research. However, the systems elements of this sector are eloquently described in the 2022 book *'I Can't Watch Anymore': The Case for Dropping Equestrian from the Olympic Games* by Julie Taylor. This text was written as an open letter to the International Olympic Committee, with the intention of highlighting inappropriate practices in equestrian sport that are ignored or even seemingly condoned by the Fédération Équestre Internationale (FEI). Taylor provides an eloquent, well-researched and referenced account of, not only the welfare issues, but also the wider societal issues associated with high level equestrianism. Beginning with inequality and dispelling the myth that competitive equestrianism can promote wider participation at a grassroots level and/or in developing countries, Taylor quickly moves on to the issues that directly affect horses. The exploitation of sports horses is widespread, and Taylor challenges the commonly held views that horses “love to compete” and that “tradition” is a reason to continue with demonstrably forceful practices, particularly when competitive equestrianism has evolved away from more traditional classical riding.

The book catalogues and exposes what happens to sports horses, providing a historical perspective that includes some of the biggest scandals in the history of equestrian sport such as horse abuse, doping and cheating in high profile cases. Taylor demonstrates how, not only are the anti-doping rules easy to circumvent, several of the “doping agents” have been redefined as “medication,” thereby permitting the masking of physical symptoms in competition. Similarly, the FEI ban on horses who have received neurectomies has also been relaxed.

Taylor takes a wider lens to equestrianism including discussion on how all levels of equestrian sports - from unaffiliated through to the Olympics - are interlinked, with competitive riders emulated by novices. The normalisation of rollkur/hyperflexion is a prime example and social media has been instrumental in highlighting the problems associated with its use - leading to attempted media repression to avoid some of these exposés. And, perhaps surprisingly to a UK audience, the numbers of people world-wide who are interested in equestrian sport is considerably lower than the FEI have led us to believe, begging the question whether equestrian sport is at all sustainable.

Equestrian sector and cultural elements

It is important to note that animal welfare issues are across all levels of equestrian society – from ponies in semi-feral populations to high level competition horses. In the charity sector there has been some focus on engaging with the Gypsy Roma and Traveller members of the community to address animal welfare concerns in horses owned by this population, but it is important to note that sometimes a horse tethered with appropriate equipment and provided with shelter, food and water has more of their needs met than a horse kept in a stable 24 hours a day. As a sector, we need to consider that different people have different motivations for owning horses and different cultural backgrounds. The focus should be on equine welfare and not based on preconceived ideas regarding practices that vary between cultures. Welfare science is an established field and if considered through the lens of the Five Domains, the effect of different management practices can be considered.

Several interviewees and survey participants described the equestrian sector as fragmented with much activity focussed on things/elements that do not benefit the horse (e.g., abundance of fashionable horse accessories).

The challenges regarding finding safe places to ride was discussed bringing up the question of whether the countryside is closing to horses. For example, there is a decrease in bridleways due to development; an increase in fast road traffic meaning riders is increasingly avoiding roadwork; and challenges in sharing the countryside with other users (e.g., out of control dogs, trail bikes). These issues are causing riders to be nervous of hacking out, which in turn affects the horse's opportunity for exercise, enrichment and means they might be schooled more. All these factors have contributed to the rise of horses as pets, or in common parlance 'field ornaments', and potentially exacerbating issues around obesity and even contributing to horses being PTS (Put to sleep) if they cannot be ridden safely. This decreased focus on hacking is perhaps also contributing to a pressure to compete, however, there is a decrease in competition venues as land use changes perhaps indicating a mismatch between demand and availability. There are also veterinary issues emerging associated with the reduction in hacking – one vet explained that now seeing more suspensory and sacro-iliac issues with horses working on arena surfaces, fewer tendon injuries and arthritis, and navicular from roads and fields.

There is a country-wide trend in the average weight of a person increasing, and some media attention regarding the issues of rider weight posing welfare challenges for horses. Alongside this is the threat to riding more widely under SLO as societal views change on what is considered acceptable practice and use of animals.

As discussed, the decrease in the number of riding schools is perhaps fuelling the number of novices and parents who are buying horses when before they would have attended lessons at a riding establishment.

Also, there were differing views as to whether how horses were used had changed or not, with some thinking it had whilst others did not. For example, the divergence of differing views, beliefs, and values regarding the use of the horse was apparent in the survey results, the interviews, and the literature. From those who looked at the horse as a working animal that needed a job, to those that viewed the horse as a pet, a companion. There was a mixture of positive and negative references made to the different positions, and the language and framing was interesting in reflecting this. For example, there were some negative implications by some regarding animals seen to be kept as pets: 'lawn mowers', 'field ornament', with discussions around these animals being linked to issues with obesity and laminitis, poorly looked after and, people scared to ride. There were also positive comments made, for example that it being ok not to ride was something to be celebrated. This was also true of the more utilitarian viewpoint, with references to '*needs to work*', or needing a '*job*' to a '*kick-on*' culture taught

at Pony Club. This framing is important to note, as it is the language and framing, we use that cements our values and beliefs, which in turn links into our cultural identity.

Other ways the horse sector is changing includes the use of horses as a mental health crutch. The mental health of owners and how the horse impacts on them, and indeed how they impact the horse, was a recurrent theme in the research. Suggestion was made that it may impact on decision making and motivation (e.g., decision around PTS); could this mean that horses are being managed in a way that suits the owner more than the horse's welfare? Comments were made in the interviews connected to the challenges of mental health regarding welfare cases, and how its deterioration (e.g., dementia) may result in situations where animals had previously been well looked after going off track and a spiral of neglect starting downwards. Also, how the dynamics of livery yards and events such as an outbreak of strangles on a yard can place pressures on relationships and people's mental health, resulting in the breaking down of friendship and support groups and increase levels of stress for those involved. With human mental health becoming an ever more openly discussed societal challenge, it is important to be mindful of this and how it may impact equine welfare moving forward.

Contextual issues affecting the equine sector

Regions

The horse population, type of horses and use of horses differs region to region in England and Wales. For example, the New Forest has a semi-feral semi-managed population, together with ridden leisure horse's ponies and thoroughbreds. An interviewee from Northumberland described seeing mostly leisure horses that are typically sports horses from Ireland that are multipurpose rather than cobs. A vet based in Norfolk described seeing mainly happy hackers, lots of cobs, and Trotters at Yarmouth seafront (30-40 horses) and contrasted this current case load with the past when coloured cobs were far and few between. This interviewee also noted that few horses compete as it takes so long to drive out of Norfolk and described horses on marshes, the large number owned by the animal charity Hillside and a Shire stud. The Midlands was considered to have a strong sport horse population.

Climate change: a changing planet requires a changing equine sector

The changing climate is considered to have extensive impacts on the equestrian sector which can impact equine welfare, and this was mentioned in many of the data types including in this project.

For example, pasture management is increasingly being adapted each year, with winter turnout often restricted due to increasing rainfall, and some yards having space for horses heavily restricted. This can have direct impacts on horses who have their opportunity for turnout restricted; a readily mentioned, common and serious welfare concern for many respondents across our data. Some pasture management practices, such as restricting horses to small areas, can also increase the likelihood of issues such as sand colic from ingesting sand through grazing close to the soil. Interestingly, the welfare impact of these changes was perceived to vary with type of equine: one vet pointed out that the drought last summer meant some horses went into winter in poor condition due to the lack of fodder, but that the drought was beneficial for donkeys.

Climate change may also alter the availability of preserved forage, which may be limited some years, leading to increased costs in years where haymaking is problematic. While this is often a regional problem, it is likely to put pressures on horse owners who may already be struggling with the costs of horse-keeping.

Concerningly, climate change directly contributes to a range of equine diseases, including obesity and laminitis, colic, and infectious disease such as those carried by mosquitoes and midges, whose lifecycles are also being affected by changing climates. Obesity was a commonly mentioned welfare issue, and considered to be partially a result of warmer winters which meant horses did not have to use their energy to keep their weight, alongside the warm, wet summers which means grass grows very quickly. Alongside other factors, this can easily lead to associated issues such as laminitis, which is a serious welfare concern and one that may not be detected early enough by inexperienced owners.

There are also other unforeseen issues linked to climate change, such as the development of atypical myopathy, an increasingly common often-fatal disease linked to ingesting sycamore saplings and thought to be a response to toxins in the plant caused by changing climate.

Additionally, parasite management may need to be altered due to evolving parasite lifecycles due to changing climates and control practices, particularly considering the rise of resistance to commonly used anthelmintic drugs.

Brexit

Many of the interviewees and survey participants mentioned the effects and predicted effects of Brexit. It is important to note that the UK has not fully exited the European Union yet and as more regarding the exit is finalised, more effects will emerge. Interviewees mentioned in particular negative effects including restrictions on movement of animals (both positive and negative; potentially less trade but longer journeys and longer time in ports for animals travelling to and from international competitions), challenges regarding hiring vets from other countries, and changes in the availability of veterinary medicines.

For a more detailed consideration of Brexit, current and future effects, see the document entitled 'UK Relevant Debates and Legislation' in the appendices.

In summary

The equine crisis is itself a complex system. It is situated within the unique system of the UK equine sector and impacted by the wider system of societal change and global events in which the equine sector sits. Our findings reveal how intrinsically interconnected these systems are and how siloed thinking is unlikely to yield any positive change. It is evident that the equine crisis, as defined in 2012, has evolved as the wider system has evolved around it, rather than resolved to any extent. We highlight a diversity of equine welfare issues that are currently found across all groups of equines and across all life stages, be it owners lacking practical skills, absence of oversight of welfare through the equine's lifetime, scarcity of equine vets, or paucity of equine infrastructure. The role of the human animal in ameliorating these issues cannot be underestimated.

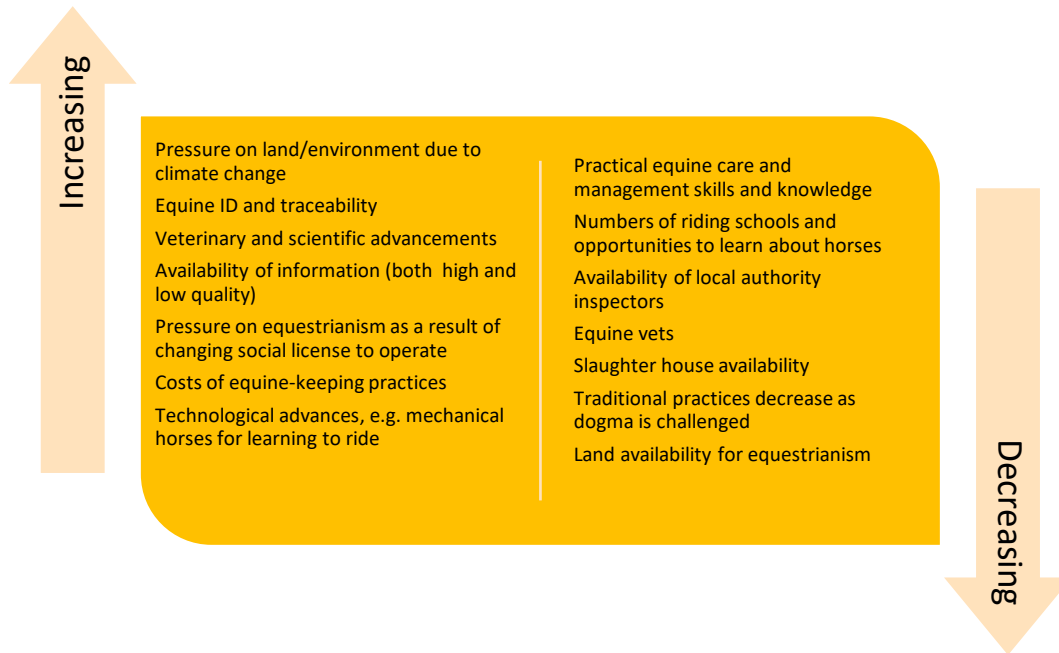


Figure 2: This diagram provides examples of factors that are increasing and those that are decreasing - with either positive or negative effects for the equine sector.

Forecast for the future

Looking forward to the future there are signs that further challenges may potentially be ahead for the equine sector. There is a sense that the sector is still waiting for the hammer to fall regarding the COVID-19 foals and the cost-of-living-crisis. More widely, unpredictable and extreme weather and a shortage of land, is causing uncertainty around the availability, and therefore the cost, of forage and feedstuffs, as well as access to land for turnout.

Equestrianism is situated in a changing world. There are multiple challenges ahead, but also multiple opportunities for positive change.

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015. Discussion

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Introduction to discussion

This is the first study to adopt a systems approach to bring together such diverse data to consider the equine issues at both individual and population level. In doing so, we have used the lens of human behaviour to consider the drivers and motivators contributing to the behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, and values of stakeholders at multiple levels. Each element of data included in this project brings a specific perspective or aspect of equine population and welfare management, and therefore triangulating these data creates the opportunity to holistically consider the ways in which the different components of the equestrian sector, and the political, social and environmental context, impact the equines in England and Wales (including horses, ponies, mules and donkeys). Importantly, this study finds that considering each element of data in isolation provides insight into particular components of equine welfare, but that considerable strength arises from aligning and comparing findings across our diverse data to contribute to a complete picture of factors which impact the UK's equids. This discussion section will consider the data presented in the previous sections collectively, reflecting on the impacts of each element on equine welfare, and opportunities for improving the issues identified.

Firstly, we consider what the data tells us about whether there remains a “horse crisis”, and if so, exactly what this concept might mean in practice.

Secondly, we will triangulate the data included in this project and show how the different components of the equestrian culture interact in an intricate, evolving system, and therefore tackling welfare issues

at any one point in this system requires careful consideration of knock-on impacts in other parts of the sector.

Finally, we discuss the outcomes and suggestions from this research, in relation to pragmatic suggestions about improving equine welfare at population level.

Is there a horse crisis, and if so, what is it?

The term “horse crisis” was originally coined in 2012 in relation to the report *“Left on the verge”*, as described in the literature review. In *“Left on the verge: the approaching horse crisis in England and Wales”* (2012) and its subsequent updates *“Left on the verge: in the grip of a horse crisis in England and Wales”* (2013) and *“Britain’s Horse Problem”* (2020) charities described the increasing numbers of horses being taken into their care, as a combined result of overbreeding and low demand for horses which reduces their economic value. These original reports described a *“saturated market”* of equines, and a subsequent upsurge in welfare concerns from horses who had been neglected or abandoned. The 2020 update *“Britain’s Horse Problem”* described an ongoing equine problem, including evolving challenges such as *“vigilante”* charities which had been initiated by well-meaning people in response to the horse crisis, who were unable to look after their rescued animals in the longer term. The 2020 update presents a picture of an ongoing issue with equine breeding, population, neglect, and abandonment, because of poor equine ID, lack of legislation, and lack of enforcement of laws that are in place.

The original report and information from welfare charities suggests that the Horse Crisis is a result of four interlinked elements: breeding, population, abandonment, and neglect, as shown in the diagram below.

The Horse Crisis: Our summary

The Horse Crisis: Our summary

- The original “horse crisis” documents focused on emerging issues at the time, which included a high level of abandonment and neglect as a result of over breeding and over-population.
- When looking at the wider context and the core components it can be seen that over-population is one part of a more complex system rather than the focus.
- Abandonment appears to have reduced, but figures may be distorted by abandonment being reported by some groups more than others.
- The research shows that neglect remains the most pressing component of the horse crisis, resulting in failure to meet the Five Domains. This can affect horses across the board, regardless of value.
- We suggest re-naming the “horse crisis” the “equine welfare crisis”.



Figure 1: image of interlinked aspects of breeding, population, abandonment, and neglect

One aim of the present study was to triangulate data from 2012 to now, to consider whether the term the “horse crisis” is still applicable, and if so, how the crisis can be conceptualised. We explore whether the four elements above apply to the current situation. Further sections in the report will consider the factors that might contribute to the development of the issue.

Data analysed in this project suggest that there remains a problem in the UK (United Kingdom) with equine welfare, but that there has been a shift in focus of the types of issues related to population, breeding, neglect, and abandonment. While breeding, population and abandonment were the primary issues identified in the original reports, we now suggest that the issues are predominantly around different aspects of neglect, including not meeting horses’ needs. We explore each of the four components below.

Firstly, we find an issue **over-population of certain types of horses**, as compared to the demand from potential owners. Because of the lack of traceability and an identification system, it is difficult to quantify the number or percentage of “at risk” animals who might contribute to this overpopulation. However, our data suggests that the equine marketplace remains “saturated” in some areas more than others. Specifically, we find that this effect is targeted in two particular areas: smaller ponies such as cobs and small native breeds who live feral lifestyles (e.g., some types of moorland ponies, though not all); and larger sport horses such as Thoroughbreds who are bred for competitive sport, then retired at a relatively early age and require new homes. Contrastingly, in other populations there was reportedly a dearth of available horses; for example, safe, sound, weight-carrying all-rounders who would be suitable riding school horses, college horses or leisure horses. This information helps to pinpoint the exact causes and contributors to equine over-population and clarify where interventions might be targeted.

The population appears to be being driven by a range of different human motivations for **breeding**. These range from breeding for sporting prowess in the relatively short term rather than for long term soundness; indiscriminate breeding (allowing entire males to mix with mares, without the specific aim of breeding; this can include people who are in hoarding situations, including some small charities);

and breeding from mares who cannot “work” for behavioural or physical reasons and who may therefore pass issues to their offspring.

The original horse crisis document suggested that the drivers of the crisis were leading to a high level of **neglect** and **abandonment** cases. Some data in this project find that numbers of horses being abandoned and taken into rescue as welfare cases have declined. Whilst this also triangulates with the experience of local authorities, we cannot rule out that there are interpretations aside from a general improvement in this aspect. For example, it is notable that other places such as livery yards may be shouldering a portion of the burden of horses abandoned while at livery, and these cases are not currently reflected in the welfare charity or local authority data. Additionally, the number of calls to welfare organisations such as the RSPCA and the local authorities also appear to have reduced, but it is not clear whether this is the result of genuine lack of cases; changes in public reporting behaviours (e.g., reporting to organisations other than the RSPCA); or changes in reporting systems. Notably, some other information from charities including those interviewed in this project, notes trends which differ to the local authority and RSPCA experience.

Other population-level issues with equine welfare remain, including different forms of **neglect**. Our data suggests that the equine crisis is a more complex system (see chapter 003, figures 4 and 5) from that originally outlined as over breeding, over-population, and neglect/abandonment cycle, toward an alternative picture in which several types of horses are likely to be subject to distinct experiences according to the demand from human purchasers, yet welfare issues manifest diffusely throughout the equine population. For example, sport horses and feral ponies are likely to be bred for very different reasons and have distinct paths in life, yet poor welfare and neglect are potential outcomes for both groups. Similarly, while there may be high human demand for groups such as middle-height and middle-weight cobs, neglect and poor welfare can nevertheless result because of other factors in the community such as lack of suitable premises for horse-keeping, and traditions and cultural values which do not meet equine needs (e.g., stabling for long periods, beliefs that horses should have a ‘job’).

An example of an important cross-cutting issue which was mentioned repeatedly in the results and affects a range of horses is lack of equine care skills. Our data strongly suggest that increasingly, novice or inexperienced owners are purchasing horses without the necessary skill, experience, or finance to fulfil their original ideas. The research also suggested that there was an increase in them acquiring young horses, untrained horses, or horses with physical or behavioural issues, thus exacerbating the situation further. This problem may be compounded by the pressures of the financial and political climate. Inexperienced owners who have limited financial means may then keep their animals in low-end premises with other inexperienced owners and yard managers, potentially leading to increasingly poor welfare. For example, owners may handle horses in ways which unintentionally cause physical or psychological harm; may not recognise pain and stress behaviours; and the horses’ health or behaviour may decline leading to either re-selling with the horse’s value lowered even further, or on-yard neglect and even abandonment if owners cannot cope. The rise in inexperienced ownership is thought to have occurred in part due to the increasing costs of riding schools, reduction in number of riding schools, and reduction in opportunities to learn about horses by “helping out” at riding schools due to litigation and insurance concerns.

Additionally, this report finds that there are several ongoing factors which contribute to placing **some horses at risk of neglect or abandonment**, which were not present during the writing of the original 2012 dubbing of the horse crisis. These include the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which has impacted the demand for horses; Brexit and its impact on the import/export of horses; the “cost of living crisis”, impacted by the war in Ukraine, which is having far-reaching economic impacts on UK citizens; and climate change, which is impacting available grazing land, availability of preserved forage

such as hay, and affecting other relevant factors such as parasite lifecycles. Cumulatively, these factors could potentially worsen the impact of an over-supply of certain types of horses compared to human demand, and the impact of inexperienced owners with horses who may have physical or behavioural issues. Welfare organisations and owners alike are likely to be over-stretched and not have sufficient financial reserves to manage horses. It has been posited that these factors are likely to lead to additional neglect, particularly for those horses who have a low market value; these include the populations mentioned above as well as ageing or chronically unsound animals. Collectively, these factors combine to create a system within which horses may be more likely to experience poor welfare across different points in their lives.

Data in the survey and interview components of this project suggested that the term “horse crisis” was not always well-received by the equestrian community. There was relatively low awareness of the existence of an equine crisis, and the survey in particular showed that 46.2% of respondents had not heard of the term. However, the idea of indiscriminate breeding was well-understood, and unanimously considered by survey respondents to be irresponsible. Abandonment and neglect were also considered to be related to the horse crisis, though through this term respondents commonly considered neglect in relation to a failure to provide care, and our analysis has highlighted a broader definition in relation to a failure to meet horses’ needs (which could therefore include a horse who is stabled and well-fed, but not exercised, given free time in turnout, or access to companions for socialisation). Additionally, some participants felt that the term “crisis” suggested an acute situation, whereas the population-level issues were felt likely to be longer-term in nature; however, notably in other sectors “crises” are now discussed in common parlance as chronic issues, as in the “climate crisis”. Further, the term “equine crisis” is non-specific and could relate to other issues in the equestrian community; for example, the interviews identified that social license to operate is now a well-discussed concept within equestrianism, and a non-specific term such as “equine crisis” was sometimes considered to relate to this issue.

Terminology, language, and framing should be considered to ensure it relates to the current situation and is well-understood; ultimately any term should aid those working to improve the welfare of equines by providing greater clarity. The Google search also supported this thinking as it highlighted the challenges around searching for these items as one understood area of concern, instead the four components of the crisis (population, breeding, neglect, abandonment) appeared to be fragmented and unrelated.

Thought should be given to whether the lack of clarity of the term, coupled with sporadic information communicated by certain parts of the equine sector has contributed to some confusion and the current perceptions of what is and is not happening, the questions then remain: does this perception match with the realities of equine welfare in the UK?

Overall, our data conclude that there is an ongoing problem in the UK with horses being bred without adequate consideration for neither their long-term welfare nor if there is a demand from potential owners. This issue is one of the factors contributing to a “crisis” involving high level of horses not having their welfare needs met, which sometimes results in abandonment. Therefore, we suggest that there remains a “horse welfare crisis”. However, the important elements here relate to the following: an over-population of some specific types of horses, the proliferation of inexperienced carers, the lack of horse-keeping facilities with adequate space for turnout and socialisation, and the lack of provision for the lifetime welfare of those horses. Importantly, the latter welfare issues affect horses of all types, regardless of value. The welfare crisis has therefore shifted from being predominantly around population/abandonment issues, towards being more purely focussed on welfare issues which can occur across the board.

The systems of UK equestrianism and the horse crisis

The figure depicted in figure 2 illustrates how the components identified in the data combine to create an environment which can enable equines to thrive, yet equally has the potential to lead to a range of issues such as neglect and abandonment. Each of the sections will be explored in turn, bringing together findings from across our data and comparing with elements of the literature. For in depth analysis of the data from each finding, visit chapter 003.

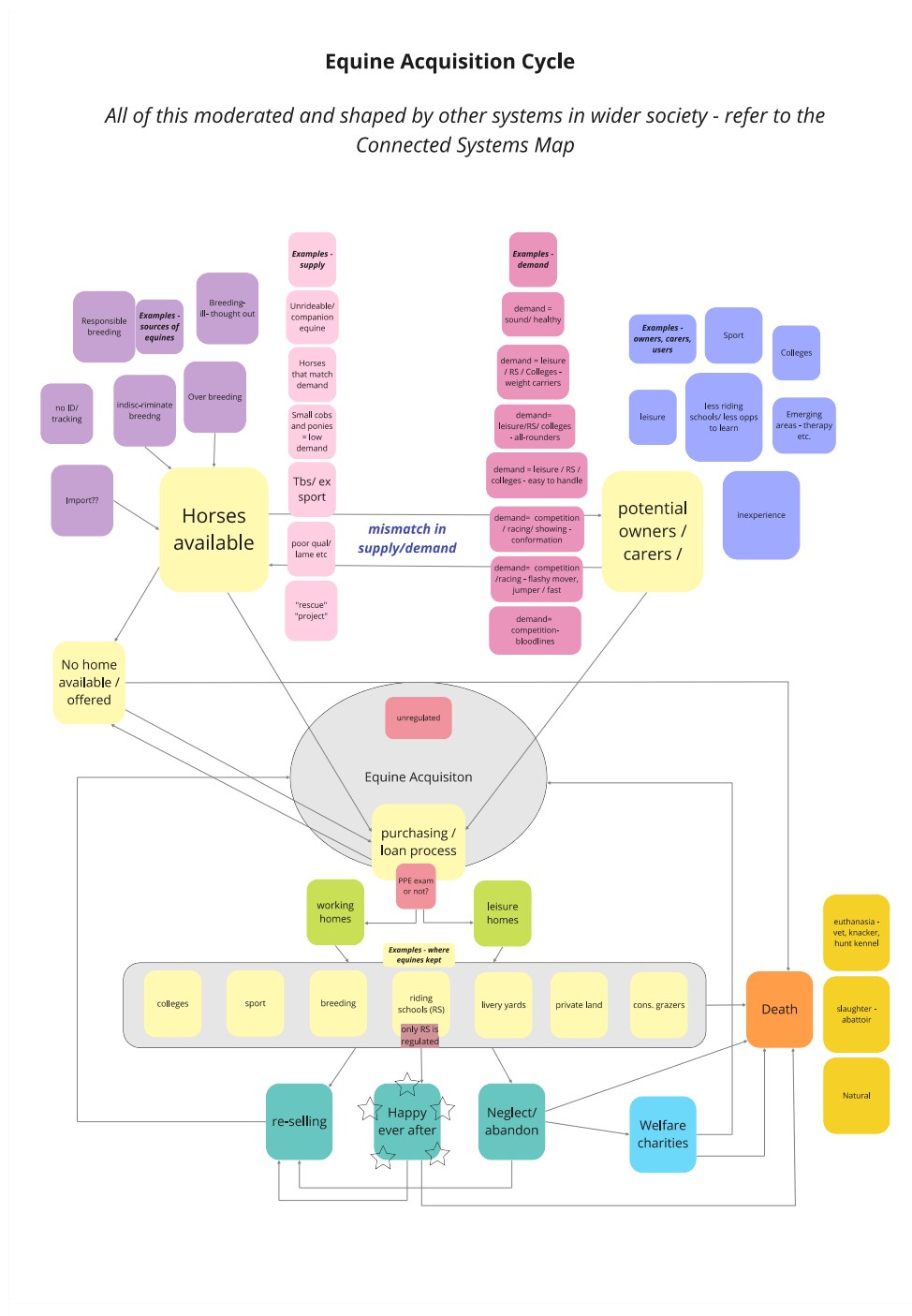


Figure 2: The Equine Acquisition Cycle

Equine population: The data in this project highlight that people are motivated to breed equines in higher quantities when there is a potential market for them early in their lives (e.g., sport horses, thoroughbreds), or to give horses a “job” (e.g., mares who cannot otherwise be ridden, such as those who are lame, have behavioural issues, or other chronic issues such as kissing spines). Additionally, horses are sometimes bred indiscriminately (e.g., breeding without planning, some feral ponies, hoarding situations, or smaller charities some of which have been reported to not remove entire males from groups). As a result, there is a high population of horses who have been bred for sport and are now retired from sport; of other breeds, often small natives, and cobs, who have been indiscriminately bred and may therefore have issues such as extremely poor conformation; and of horses with physical issues such as kissing spines, and sometimes high levels of maternal stress.

Additionally, our data highlights that some breeders may have overlooked congenital issues which may contribute to lifelong welfare problems such as polysaccharide storage myopathy (PSSM), Equine Complex Vertebral Malformation (ECVM) and Hoof Wall Separation Disease (HWDS) and many more, again contributing to a population of horses with ongoing – and sometimes expensive – health and welfare needs.

It is also important to note that, because of the relatively slow lifecycle of horses compared to other animals, genetic issues may take several decades to “breed out” of certain lines of heritability, and breeders may not always foresee issues on the horizon several years down the line. For example, youngstock breeders may commit to breeding and owning a foal until he or she is ready to be sold for starting and training at four years old, yet this cycle involves at least five years between breeding the mare and possible financial return. Given the quickly evolving political, social, and cultural landscape of the UK, extensive change may therefore happen around the breeder and foal across this early life period.

Additional issues in the equestrian sector may contribute to worsening this situation even further. For example, high stress weaning practices still proliferate in many settings such as sport horse breeding establishments, contributing to horses experiencing early life trauma and increasing their chance of issues such as gastric ulcers, and behavioural impacts such as separation anxiety. Secondly, pressures to breed certain traits (such as particularly flashy movement in dressage) can lead to poor long-term soundness, and the overlooking of other characteristics such as calmness, which could stand horses in good stead for longer and more diverse careers. Thirdly, early, and relatively intensive training is encouraged in industries such as the sports horse industry, in order to obtain competitive results and thus to increase value of youngstock as quickly as possible. This can put pressure on horses early in their lives, leading to stress, physical health issues, and sometimes chronic lameness. This contributes to the population of ex-sport horses with chronic pain or other issues. They are also not often adequately prepared either physically or emotionally for rehabilitation in other sectors. These horses are often passed on and on outside of the welfare sector, or euthanised because of their health issues.

Finally, early life training practices may also be potentially stressful or even traumatic for some horses, contributing to long-term physical or behavioural issues. Our data, particularly the interviews, highlighted inexperienced owners choosing to purchase young horses because they are relatively low-cost compared to a trained horse, yet not having the skills in training or handling to provide a consistent and positive training foundation. Unfortunately, even when help is sought for “starting” and early life schooling, the training world is entirely unregulated and harmful practices proliferate, including punishment. Again, this can lead to equine stress and ongoing behavioural issues, which are frequently misunderstood by the equestrian community (Bell et al., 2019).

The equestrian enthusiast population: this project aligns with other data sources to suggest that the equestrian community has changed dramatically in the past few decades. It is known that the leisure rider population is increasing, with people increasingly owning horses as “pets” (as described by interview participants in this project). By this, participants suggested that the motivation for horse owning was increasingly for companionship, rather than necessarily for sporting abilities – though, of course, they may also participate in sports. Participants in this project across data types suggested that closure of many riding schools, and increasing health and safety guidelines have meant that opportunities for learning horsemanship skills are fewer. For individuals motivated to learn about horses, the inaccessibility of riding schools could potentially lead novice owners to purchase a horse before they are adequately experienced. This may be compounded by perception that owning a horse is an equivalent cost to a once-weekly lesson. As a result, participants in this study repeatedly described the equestrian population as increasingly poor at horse handling, leading to some professional yards recruiting from abroad in order to gain sufficiently skilled staff.

Consequently, the demand for horses is described as changing toward horses who are easy for a novice person to handle and ride yet sound enough to engage in all-round competition. This can be seen from the sales data, which shows higher prices for “all-rounders” and competition horses. However, there was a lack of these horses being available, which may contribute to potential purchasers seeking other types of animals (e.g., younger horses or those with behavioural issues) in the hope of working with them to transform them into the purchaser’s ideals. The leisure market has also been shown to want to engage in a “journey” with their horses, and as such enjoy the prospect of “rescue” or having a “project” horse (Furtado et al., 2021a; Hockenhull et al., 2010). Purchasing horses who are lower-cost due to their age, health, or behaviour can be an attractive option to owners who are unprepared for the emotional and economic costs of caring for them.

This highlights the mismatch between the horses available, and human demand. The people contributing to the human demand are frequently inexperienced, may lack handling skill and knowledge of horse needs, and may see novice ownership as normalised by the equestrian community. A lack of regulated support structures and a plethora of opposing information about horse care may contribute to confusing inexperienced owners. New owners are faced with either purchasing a high-cost, low-availability horse, or purchasing a cheaper and more plentiful option such as youngster or ex-competition animal, often with behavioural or physical issues; yet without the support structures to help them.

Horse acquisition: The process of horse acquisition has also changed in past decades, moving away from in-person events such as markets and sales, toward private advertising – often online. As an unregulated industry, the equine acquisition arena is perceived by its users as fraught with difficulties such as the mis-selling or misrepresenting of horses.

The selling process can be moderated by a Pre-Purchase Examination (PPE), which is optional and paid for by the buyer; this involves a veterinarian assessing the horse’s fitness for intended purpose. However, this process in itself is seen as problematic by purchasers and sellers alike. For example, it is expensive (often more expensive than the lower-value horses being sold); it represents only a snapshot in time; and issues can easily be missed or disguised. Further, the process does not consider purchaser-horse suitability beyond considering whether the horse is physically capable of the purchaser’s intended purpose, and thus behavioural issues or other factors such as the owners’ level of experience, may not be discussed.

Therefore, the equine “virtual marketplace” does not necessarily match up horses and owners in an efficient system, and potential owners may find it hard to locate horses which suit their needs. Particularly lacking, as shown by the data, are “all-rounder” horses who are easy to manage and ride,

sound, and can carry weight. Riding schools and colleges described finding it particularly difficult to locate such horses.

Roles for horses: Our data highlight that horse purchase by a new owner was usually related to owner motivation to take part in particular activities or sports; this is reflected in interviews and sales data, where particular activities or “careers” are promoted for horses entering the marketplace. This highlights the utilitarian approach to horse-keeping, in which horses are expected to have a “purpose”, and this contributes to social norms around, for example, breeding from mares who cannot be ridden to give them a “job”. However, as mentioned, we also found that leisure owners who initially purchased horses with a particular activity or goal in mind, frequently altered their practice during horse owning and kept horses as companions, instead. Horses are predominantly therefore purchased either as a leisure animal, for sport, breeding, or work such as riding schools (of course, these categories are not necessarily distinct, and there may be crossover; for example, a novice leisure owner who keeps her horse on working livery at a riding school).

Leisure owners have been discussed above; as an increasing population, they represent individuals who may participate in equine sports, but primarily keep horses for the enjoyment of caring for their animals. As mentioned, the data strongly suggested that leisure riders are increasingly fearful of exercising and handling horses, which may be a result of the reduced opportunities for learning in a riding school environment. As a result, leisure horses undertake only very light exercise, and frequently become obese (Robin et al., 2015), leading to painful bouts of laminitis. Leisure horse owners have shown in the literature and in data from this project, to also be poor at identifying equine stress (Bell et al., 2019). Additionally, because the population average weight is increasing, riders who are too heavy or their horses are a frequently mentioned welfare issue; this was particularly the case for cobs (often thought to be “strong”), or for thoroughbred ex-racehorses (who frequently had physical weaknesses).

Leisure riders are also more likely to keep horses in retirement and old age than other factions of equestrianism. Retirement and ageing can lead to increasing health issues, and financial/temporal burdens for owners. Although some owners may be well-prepared to navigate this period and its challenges (Smith et al., 2021), welfare issues can occur such as inability to meet costs for chronic issues, inability to provide environments which suit the horses’ changing needs. As scientific advances are made, social norms proliferate in which increasingly invasive procedures are normalised at older ages, such as colic surgeries. Delayed euthanasia is another often-mentioned concern in our data and will be further discussed below.

Though leisure horses are often extremely loved and may sometimes be kept for life, the data and literature review therefore both suggest that welfare issues in leisure horses can be problematic, and sometimes life-threatening.

Opportunities for horses to “work” traditionally include options such as breeding, riding schools, or sport. However, the data in this project highlight opportunities for “work,” including the use of horses in therapy settings and the proliferation of equestrian courses at colleges. Of these options, only riding schools are regulated, and even these regulations do not necessarily mean that horse needs are met. Further, in such settings there is no requirement to make provision for the horse beyond his/her working life, and as such equines leaving any work placement rely on the outlook of their owner to ensure they are retired, are euthanised, or are re-sold, if appropriate, to an alternative life. However, our data also highlight that moving between “lives” can be problematic and stressful for horses, given the difference in expectation and lifestyle. For example, thoroughbreds in racehorse training have a very specific routine and workload and may be un-used to turnout at pasture. As these horses are

becoming increasingly popular for “recycling” as leisure horses, in therapy, or in other sports such as endurance, eventing or showing, they may have to adapt to new lifestyles and expectations. This can be stressful and demanding and can lead to unwanted behaviours as they struggle to adapt.

The increasing movement towards keeping horses for low-demand activities such as non-ridden leisure homes or therapy activities could sometimes present opportunities for the “at risk” equines noted in this project; for example, those with chronic health conditions who can no longer be ridden. However, improved recognition of equine stress and pain is also required to ensure that such horses remain comfortable and enjoy their lives.

Places to keep horses: As previously mentioned, most establishments which provide housing for horses are unlicensed and unregulated, and this project supports previous work suggesting that equine establishments do not always meet horse needs for movement, choice, companionship, and access to species-appropriate forage. This can contribute to ongoing issues with equine stress, as well as physical issues such as obesity.

For example, evolving livery yard structures may impact availability of suitable and affordable places to keep horses: around 60% of the UK’s horses are kept at livery (Furtado et al., 2021b). Our data suggests that livery yards are heavily impacted by the changing economic climate and are reported to have a higher density of horses than they might otherwise choose, leading to a lack of available space and turnout options for horse owners. Livery managers themselves report escalating costs, and frequent concerns over horses being neglected or abandoned on their property. Those seeking livery may struggle to find appropriate options which fulfil horse needs. Lower-cost livery options, which might be attractive to owners struggling with costs, may also be those who are uninsured and have made savings on important factors such as safe fencing, or pasture management practices. To increase income, some livery yards are turning to full-livery options to try and cover costs. While there may be regional variation in the impact on livery yards due to other factors, such as local land availability, horse owners across the country may face a need to alter their horse-keeping practices in response to changing costs and practices at livery yards.

Climate change is likely to contribute to considerable issues at all types of equine establishments by altering turnout practices, field management, and parasite management. This means that equine keeping premises need to constantly evolve and adapt to avoid climate-related welfare issues such as obesity, atypical myopathy, and laminitis.

Outcomes for horses, including end of life: As shown in the model (chapter 003, figure 3), the welfare of an individual is in flux and changes dynamically according to the motivations, attitudes, and behaviours of the humans around them at any point in time. Within each home equines may be kept for life, re-sold/given away, abandoned, or their lives may be ended.

Horses who are sold on or given away re-enter the equine marketplace, and depending on the experience in their prior home they may have lost or gained value, thus shaping the potential futures available to them.

Horses who are abandoned usually enter the welfare organisations at this point. Our data also suggests that abandoned horses are left at livery (for example, by non-paying clients) where they may be cared for by livery owners before being resold/given away or euthanised according to the circumstances. It is very difficult to capture data on the frequency of this occurrence but was raised as a serious concern for livery yard managers.

All horses will, of course, experience end-of-life sooner or later, most usually because of human decision making given that a very small percentage of horses are thought to die of natural causes. End-of-life options were also complex. Horses killed by lethal injection or shot require cremation, which can be an additional expensive on top of the cost of euthanasia. An interview in our dataset suggests an increasing trend toward shooting which may be cheaper than lethal injection; however, this is not verified. Little data exists about welfare outcomes for the horse in relation to each option, and both are accepted as ethical options. Our data suggests that the cost of carcass disposal can disincentivise euthanasia as an option for owners who are struggling with the equine care. This may be a particular problem for horses with ongoing health issues which require extensive medical management (for example, ageing horses), as owners struggling with finances and burden of care may not be able to meet their needs, yet also feel unable to euthanise them due to cost, or their attachment to the horse. Additionally, our data show that owners are frequently less comfortable with euthanising horses prior to their welfare being compromised by age-related issues, than they may have been previously. These additional burdens are a particular concern given that several projects have identified delayed euthanasia as a key welfare concern for UK horses (Horseman et al., 2016, Rioja-Lang et al., 2020). Additional pressures at end of life could therefore give rise to serious neglect and welfare issues, as horses whose welfare is compromised by their health are kept alive due to cost and practicalities associated with euthanising.

Options for slaughter are increasingly few, with only 256 horses being killed at slaughter in 2022, according to our FOI (Freedom of Information) request. It remains unclear if horses are exported to Ireland, and then shipped for slaughter to mainland Europe, but one investigator looking at this issue suggested it was not financially viable. Approximately 40% of horses slaughtered are TBs, and the other 60% includes cobs and small semi-feral breeds. Few horses being slaughtered came from private homes. With little demand for equine carcasses, there is an associated lack of value in slaughter, which could lead owners to abandon horses which had been previously earmarked for slaughter. The lack of ID and traceability was noted in our data as a potential issue in tracking equine slaughter and export.

Other factors: Numerous external factors in the model create pressures on the stakeholders involved. These factors can be equestrian-centred (e.g., changing social license; commercialism around horses; equestrian media), or broader in perspective (e.g., Brexit, climate change, COVID-19).

Equestrian factors include a multitude of interlinked social pressures which are creating pressure on the equestrian community to gradually change practice. For example, the changing social license to operate is a much-discussed area of equestrianism, as society questions the commodification and commercial use of animals in work and sport; this is likely to represent an ongoing pressure on sporting disciplines, shaping equestrianism (and racing in particular) in the coming decades. Society's increasing concern for welfare has become a norm, yet practices are changing very slowly, and we have shown above how other pressures, such as traditions, mean that outdated training and management practices which compromise welfare needs still proliferate.

The segmented, un-regulated nature of the equestrian industry is also contributing to such issues. For example, the world of racing and other equestrian sport is often entirely separate from the world of leisure riding, yet horses may cross the invisible social boundaries throughout their lives. Similarly, organisations such as welfare charities, riding schools, and equestrian colleges are often considered distinct areas of equestrianism with little crossover. Segmentation and a lack of clarity about acceptable practice contribute to confusion across the board.

In relation to non-equestrian influences, numerous factors are at play. For example, recent political upheaval has meant that animal welfare updates have been de-prioritised, with an example relating to the Kept Animals Bill being rejected in 2023. As shown in our data around legislation, laws exist which relate to some elements of welfare, yet they remain un-enforced (and sometimes un-enforceable) due to funding and temporal limitations of local authorities. Additionally, current regulation overlooks many of the key welfare concerns mentioned in this report and relates only to very minimum standards of acceptable care.

Brexit has led to extensive changes in the British economy, which have impacted horses. These include changes in import and export practices, including lengthy delays at borders; reduction in numbers of practicing vets; increased costs and food shortages, and more. Shaping the political and financial landscape, this impacts horses across the equestrian sector. Linked with these issues, the COVID-19 pandemic after-effects and cost of living crisis have led to reduced available finance for horse owners and all other sectors, putting even more pressure on equestrian businesses such as livery yards and riding schools, as well as the welfare sector. Climate change has already been discussed and is also contributing to changing land practices which impact equine care and welfare.

The model in figure 2, created by triangulating data across this project to create a map of the systems surrounding equines, highlights how the segmented equestrian industry has multiple complex components, each of which has the potential to lead to either good or poor welfare in an individual animal. Importantly, the outcomes for the equine depend on who happens to purchase them at each stage; the stages remain the same whether they are owned by a professional, leisure owner, or a specific community such as the traveller movement. Additionally, the current financial, political, and social climate (see appendix B) are contributing to issues in every component of the system which increase the chances of horses being poorly cared for, not having their needs met, experiencing neglect, and sometimes becoming abandoned. Understanding how these issues interact with one another in a systems-mapping approach, as in this section, helps to understand how we can make far-reaching improvements at population level, rather than tackling only one part of the picture.

What is being done about horse supply-demand mismatch, and what can we do better?

While some of the information in this report suggests that the picture for equine welfare is bleak, there are existing strategies which will facilitate improvements, and opportunities for change which can be explored. Importantly, this study highlights the importance of thinking about any opportunities at a systems-level, rather than considering any one segment or component of the equestrian industry in isolation.

One example of a positive, holistic change is the alteration to equine ID currently planned, in which ID systems will move from a paper to an internet-based system facilitating tracking of individual animals, ownership over time, location, vaccination status, and much more. This could enable vastly superior tracking of animal lives, thus improving opportunities for improvement.

An idea which has been much discussed is the opening of new markets for horses, to increase demand, subsequently increasing value. It has been suggested that increased value has the potential to lead to improved welfare (Owers, 2019). Examples of newer or potential markets include the therapy sector, which is increasing its use of equines and donkeys; the “brand” of retrained racehorses in competition, and the meat market, where the demand for horses has fallen in recent years. However, based on our

analysis of this project, we do not consider that encouraging new markets will necessarily increase value, or that increased value leads to improved welfare. It is possible that increasing markets will simply encourage even further breeding, and additionally welfare issues can easily proliferate in other settings where animals are in high demand, such as farming. Further, our data shows that welfare issues such as inappropriate socialisation, lack of freedom and poor handling/training can occur across the board, regardless of equine value; and indeed, sports horses whose value is very high, sometimes still have very poor welfare. We suggest that encouraging the opening of new markets will simply shift the focus population issues, rather than reducing them.

The therapy sector presents an interesting alternative life for equines and offers opportunities for animals who may be low value, for example due to age, chronic physical issues, or behavioural issues, as many equine therapy organisations require little physical effort from their horses and donkeys (though this does of course vary). However, these organisations do not necessarily offer a panacea and their practices have been questioned, particularly when animals such as ex-racehorses are used because they are prized for their sensitivity and therefore responsiveness to human clients. In this example, animals who have had stressful early life experiences and are highly sensitive are paired with people seeking a therapeutic outcome, meaning the clients may also be particularly stressed or upset. This has the potential to increase distress in the animal “therapist,” and care must be taken to ensure that high levels of welfare are maintained.

Another example of an emerging market is the promotion of retrained racehorses across competitive spheres. Our data highlight the complexity of the situation around promoting retrained racehorses for competition as a way of increasing the worth of ex-racehorses. While there are undoubted positive opportunities for racehorses, our findings also show that racehorses are frequently unable to be rehomed due to physical issues, and as such the responsibility for their care falls on the rescue organisations and private individuals who try to retrain them, rather than the racing industry. When they have physical or behavioural issues precluding their retraining, these organisations bear the burden of cost (and emotional upheaval) of euthanising or slaughtering such animals (excluding horses that have been entered into a race, which must be signed out of the human food chain - as of January 2022) and indeed 40% of the horses going through slaughter in our data were TBs. Encouraging racehorse uptake in competition will provide homes for some, but does not stop the over-supply of such animals, or the welfare issues associated with their early life experiences and being bred for racing performance which make them sometimes unable to thrive in other environments.

Rather than opening new markets and roles for horses, an alternative approach is to consider the source issue: the over-supply of certain types of animals, but the lack of supply of others. We suggest that efforts aimed at reducing the breeding of semi-feral ponies such as those indiscriminately bred, small cobs, and sports horses, would help to reduce the numbers of animals in the system. At the same time, schemes which encourage breeders to think about, and take responsibility for, the long-term health of animals they breed could help foster a “less but better” approach to breeding. Supporting those who are involved in creating positive early life experiences in relation to weaning and early training, could help to produce horses who are well-adjusted, confident, and healthy. It is also possible that technology could assist, for example using mechanical horses for beginner riders to learn upon, thus lessening demand.

Limitations

The limitations regarding each method of data collection have been briefly outlined in each relevant section (e.g., regarding the survey, interviews). This section outlines limitations that are relevant across the different sections.

Gaining representation across the sector and geographic regions

Although many people have provided input to this work only a proportion of people and views have been represented. Some areas of expertise were consulted until saturation, others need to know more – e.g., insurance, transporters.

There was a bias towards some areas of England and Wales in terms of people who responded to the survey. Although the research team tried to address this by actively targeting contacts in our network in underrepresented areas, there was not consistency across all regions.

Interpreting the data (and report)

We all have the tendency to take in new information that ‘fits with’ (confirms or supports) our current knowledge, beliefs, and values. This is called confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) and examples can negatively impact our understanding of a situation. The issue is recognised in the justice system, for example the tendency for police to respond to confirming rather than disconfirming information about a suspect. It is important that we try to look at an issue through many lenses to try to avoid our own confirmation bias.

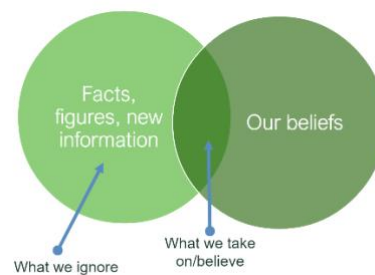


Figure 3: Illustration of 'confirmation bias'

Other biases are also important to recognise. For example, frequency bias, also known as the Baader–Meinhof phenomenon (Zwicky 2006), is the tendency to notice something more often after noticing it for the first time, leading to the false belief that it has an increased frequency of occurrence. This bias is significant for this project as, for example, the interviewees are experts/professionals in their respective fields and might be prone to the belief that the issues/elements they work on are more predominant than they would be when considered objectively.

Opposite to frequency bias is the ‘blindness’ people can have when things are very common. For example, occurrences that happen so often we no longer ‘register’ them – for example, lameness in dairy cattle is so common that farmers and other professionals often severely underestimate the numbers of lame cattle as they are so ‘normal’ to see.

Another factor that presents a barrier to both gaining an objective insight into the situation and to reading this report in an unbiased way, is that of cognitive dissonance. Humans seek consistency between their values and behaviours (Festinger, 1957) and sometimes when presented with information that goes against their current beliefs and knowledge, they

experience cognitive dissonance and struggle to fully take on the new information. There are well-documented ways to resolve cognitive dissonance including changing one of the concurrently held beliefs, gaining more knowledge to outweigh the dissonant belief, and reducing the importance of the dissonant belief (summarised by McLeod, 2018).

This project has brought together unprecedented diversity and volumes of data, to consider the horse crisis from several issues. Doing so has provided novel, robust, and multi-faceted insight into the issues facing the equine industry at population level. However, the project was limited by the lack of population level data on horses; greater clarity on the number, location, and type of horses would yield more specific conclusions about the equine crisis. Therefore, the equine ID updates which are planned across the equestrian industry in the coming years will facilitate future observations of change over time.

Secondly, numerous complex and interlinking issues have occurred in the five years prior to this project, including political upheaval, BREXIT, the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and additional attention to the impacts of climate change; cumulatively, these events have far-reaching effects which interact with one another, and make it hard to identify specific drivers of the factors impacting equine welfare and population.

Finally, although great effort was made to include a broad range of data, there still exist gaps in our findings; one notable example is data on donkeys and mules. These species are often overlooked and fall between the gaps in data collected by organisations; sometimes they are included in categories of “horse,” and sometimes omitted altogether. Many of the factors found in this project, such as the move toward owning equids as “pets,” the lack of good quality livery options, and the increase in novice owners are likely to also impact the donkey population. However, given that donkeys have unique behavioural and physical needs, and that donkey owners are an under-studied population, we suggest that data around donkey welfare and population should be handled and considered separately from horse welfare.

Concluding thoughts

The **equine crisis has ameliorated**, as originally outlined as over-breeding, over-population, neglect, and abandonment, although it is not eliminated. Rather, now, a **diversity of equine welfare issues** is found across the different groups of equines.

We suggest that there remains an ongoing “**equine welfare crisis**” consisting of:

- 1) a mismatch of the supply and demand of certain horse types *leading to* the over-population and low value of some horses, such as TBs, a scarcity of others such as leisure horse 'all-rounders', and welfare issues arising from a mismatch of owner skills with their horse's needs.
- 2) the proliferation of carers lacking in practical knowledge, skills and experience *leading to* an inability to provide for horses' welfare needs and detect and treat any welfare problems.
- 3) the lack of horse-keeping facilities with adequate provision for turnout, grazing and socialisation *leading to* unfulfilled welfare needs and fewer opportunities for positive welfare.

- 4) the lack of provision for the lifetime welfare of all horses *leading to* premature euthanasia, delayed euthanasia, abandonment, or poor end of life care.

In addition, there are reasons to predict that equine welfare could deteriorate, with the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic impacting the demand for horses; Brexit impacting the import/export of horses; the “cost of living crisis” impacting affordability of equine care; climate change impacting available grazing land, forage and equine health; the continued demise of riding schools further reducing the opportunity for practical equine care skills and knowledge development; and, a reducing equine veterinary workforce meaning that veterinary services are increasingly strained, which could have serious repercussions for equine welfare.

It is worth restating here that equine welfare is ultimately determined by human attitudes, beliefs, values, culture, knowledge, and skills. As such, humans lie at the heart of any solutions to address the issues identified. In light of our findings, we have drawn together a series of potential solutions and suggested actions for the sector. These are clustered into five themes; policy and process, education, and training, working with others/collaborations, societal approaches, and further research (discussed in full in chapter 017). Together these provide a comprehensive catalogue of potential avenues towards addressing the equine welfare crisis that can be explored and developed in the second phase of the project.

Final comment

Equine welfare in England and Wales is part of a complex, interconnected system. The research team has worked to guide the reader of this report on a journey of what has happened, what is happening, and what may happen in the future regarding equine welfare. The report identifies opportunities for delivering positive change and indeed what areas need to be addressed. The research team are aware that resources are finite and there will be a need for the RSPCA to focus upon specific areas, however, it is hoped that this report can be shared and utilised by those working in equine welfare and the wider equine sector to address the many and varied drivers of equine suffering. We hope that this report can be a catalyst for change both in relation to phase two of the work with the RSPCA, and beyond.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who contributed to this report, and to thank the RSPCA for funding this innovative and much needed area of research.

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016. Suggested solutions from the research and recommendations for the sector

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This section consists of suggested solutions that have emerged from all the data sources, clustered into themes. It is important to note that these solutions are from this project, and before interventions are identified more work needs to be done to consider different possible interventions, alongside consideration of the available capacity to implement them, and so on. Under each theme, several recommendations/potential actions for the sector have been provided following interpretation by the research team. There are many stakeholders in ‘the sector’ (see stakeholder map in the discussions section) and at this stage we have not outlined responsibilities regarding who would take the suggestions forward. The first stage of the second phase of the project will involve exploring potential solutions in more detail, however, some very brief points regarding the scope of types of possible interventions have been included at the end of this document.

Suggested solutions have been extracted from the key sources (formal and informal interviews, survey, and desk-based research) and clustered into the following themes:

1. policy and process
2. education and training
3. working with others/collaborations
4. societal approaches
5. further research

These solutions are listed as they appeared in the data source and in most cases have not been expanded to explore the logistics, or limitations of the suggestion.

In a nutshell, one of the underlying problems is that the equine sector is not joined up or cohesive. People, organisations, and businesses involved with horses are thinking individualistically, often without a strong foundation of appropriate knowledge and skills. Decision-making is largely based on tradition, finances and/or emotions – and this is being reinforced by social norms and the lack of any ‘messages’ that horses are experiencing compromised welfare at all levels of equestrian society.

Horses are suffering neglect, which includes their welfare needs not being met in terms of the Five Domains, and the sector is not sustainable (environmentally, economically, or socially) – particularly in the world we now live in regarding climate change, development, and removal of grazing, among other factors covered in this report. To end suffering of equines requires a strategic, radical change – a strategy that involves the sector from the bottom up and top down - co-creation – and this is likely to be uncomfortable for some as many common practices will have to stop.

We need a sustainable, ethical horse sector, where the welfare of the horses is paramount and central, and where the sector does no harm to others (including other animals, the environment and more).

Theme 1: Policy and process (e.g., schemes, guidelines, legislation)

Suggested solutions emerging from the research:

1. A more joined up approach is needed regarding enforcing the Animal Welfare Act 2006. We need to set more legal precedents using existing legislation to protect animals than is being done currently. When cases are being prepared consideration needs to be given that legal precedence could go against the hoped for outcome.
2. Legal professionals need to be given support to use the relevant elements of legislation.
3. The use and processes regarding the horse notification system for abandoned horses needs to be improved.
4. Equine identification schemes need to be enforced (e.g., passports, ID, food source, travel).
5. New regulations around breeding (e.g., how many per mare/owner) need to be introduced.
6. The horse’s vet record should belong to the horse not the owner (vaccinations, history etc.).
7. A livery yard licensing scheme that is welfare-focussed needs to be introduced.
8. Policies and processes involving sports horses and showing should be further strengthened, changed, and developed – e.g., considering rules regarding bitless bridles, amount of time stabled at events, travelling, jump heights, rider weight checks and so on.
9. Stronger processes regarding collaboration between welfare organisations should be adopted to gain added value from welfare improvement initiatives.
10. Stronger policies should be adopted that restrict building development to maintain fields and countryside and promote the use of brown sites over fresh ground.
11. More investment needs to be made regarding supporting addressing climate change by all stakeholders.

Brief comments on the above suggestions from the research team:

Although regulations and legislation can help to improve compliance with best practices, a wider approach needs to be taken to ensure that they are meaningful. Schemes, guidelines, and legislation need to be enforced, widely known about, and outlined in a way that minimises scope for misinterpretation. Consideration needs to be given regarding who new ‘schemes’ are run and managed by and the source of funding to do so sustainably. Multi-stakeholder alliances might be appropriate to run certain schemes to share ownership and responsibility.

Examples of interventions in this theme could include certification schemes promoting best practice, primary or secondary legislation/rules/ etc, or more flexible pledge-focussed schemes. Schemes that are already in place could be developed further to address some of the issues identified in this research. Examples of specific schemes given in the data sources include schemes regarding breeding (limit how many horses can be bred from a mare, and what conditions can the mare and stallion have if going to be bred from such as navicular, kissing spine, ECVM, for example), and schemes regarding rules and suggestions for practices at livery yards and other places where horses are kept. The implications of such schemes would have to be thoroughly researched as, for example, so many livery yards have insufficient land to meet the ethological needs of the animals that there is concern that a licensing scheme would end up setting a very low standard, essentially condoning poor practice. The research team also notes that the sports horse sector (racing, eventing, dressage etc.) is currently under increasing scrutiny and the FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) and other sporting bodies have been re-considering how to safeguard equine welfare. This research did not go into sports horse welfare in detail, but Julie Taylor outlined a detailed reform plan in her book 'I can't watch any more' that could be consulted to this end.

Suggested recommendations for the sector include:

1. Support legislation points above, e.g., by supporting magistrates to use the AWA more, create more legal precedents that can then lead to further use of the acts.
2. Consider how the equine sector as a whole can 'enforce' or facilitate enforcement of current schemes and legislation.
3. Consider introduction of new specific schemes addressing various elements of the problems identified in the research.
4. Clearly develop definitions for certain elements, such as indiscriminate breeding etc., to ensure policy discussions all coming from the same place.
5. Research the new French licence pass test system and follow progress to see if it is effective and whether it is a model to follow/adapt for introduction to the UK (United Kingdom).

Theme 2: Education and training

Suggested solutions emerging from the research:

1. Introduce mandatory qualifications/courses to own a horse (Scandinavian model).
2. Education and training from child to adult - formal and informal – to be provided and/or set as a requirement for horse ownership.
3. Improve/ include education in school and further education curriculum and through extra-curricular activities regarding compassion, empathy, and animal welfare (note the RSPCA Compassionate Society programme).
4. Increased skills-based focus to education of professionals (including rescue staff, veterinary paraprofessionals, breeders, grooms, etc.), owners, and hobbyists alike.
5. Improve behaviour education for vets and paraprofessionals (e.g., equine dentists, equine physios etc)
6. Increase awareness of appropriately qualified equine behaviourists across the sector and encourage vets to refer to behaviourists more often.
7. Could insurance companies offer discounts to owners who have completed certain qualifications?

8. Specific topics: what to consider when buying a horse; first aid for horse owners (including when to call the vet and when to self-treat); how to recognise pain and stress; basic welfare (horse's needs), learning theory and 3F's (freedom, friends, forage).
9. Training for solicitors regarding how to use the AWA2006 and other Acts in court.
10. Encourage nature connectedness so more people protect land and natural resources.

Brief comments on the above suggestions from the research team:

Although education and training approaches can improve knowledge and skills, such interventions need to consider the wider context to be sustainable and impactful. Much consideration needs to be given regarding who any training/education is run by how educational requirements are administrated/checked up on and how to ensure the quality and content of the training is appropriate. The research team has encountered lame horses being used in lessons in college settings, showing a disconnect between what is taught and what is practiced.

The opportunity to introduce far reaching, scalable skills such as mandatory training for horse owners and potential horse owners can be explored by looking more deeply into the schemes in Switzerland to learn more. We advocate that education and training are needed across all sectors involved with horses.

Suggested actions for the sector include:

1. Mapping education and training needs across all sectors of society, business and leisure that involve horses and currently available courses to better understand the gaps.
2. Mapping potential opportunities to introduce education and training into current professional qualifications.
3. Mapping partnership opportunities regarding delivery and content provision for current education providers.

Theme 3: Working with others- collaborations

Suggested solutions emerging from the research:

1. Improved collaboration between welfare organisations to enable a more joined up approach to not only rescue but also to lobbying, research and driving change.
2. Better collaboration between welfare organisations and the wider equestrian sector.
3. Improved opportunities for multi-stakeholder connection throughout the sector.
4. Values-based approaches to encourage incremental improvements (SLO (Social License to Operate) etc).
5. Extension of the collaborative initiative between welfare organisations regarding Appleby Horse Fair and wider engagement with the gypsy, Roma, and traveller members of the community.
6. Collaborations working to cross the bridge between academia and policy/practice and with the wider equine industry.

Brief comments on the above suggestions from the research team:

Although it is likely that any further work would involve multiple stakeholders, the above suggestions were thought to warrant a section to highlight the specific need for collaborative approaches to

potential interventions. Although the equine sector has historically been segmented and subject to ‘politics’ between stakeholders, it seems clear that collaboration is needed to drive sustainable change. The above suggestions are just a few potential approaches. In any collaboration it is important that interactions are facilitated well, that agreements are in place regarding etiquette in the group to ensure a respectful, safe, productive working space, and that momentum is kept through clear strategic thinking. Co-creation is key with all stakeholders truly involved and taking responsibility for the project. Lessons should be learned from successful collaborations and from failed multi-stakeholder initiatives to take ideas focussing on close collaboration forward. The research team appreciates that organisations such as NEWC (National Equine Welfare Council) are facilitating collaboration between welfare organisations, and EBTA (Equine Behaviour and Training Association) are working to cross the bridge between academia and owners, and a mapping exercise matching the needs to stakeholders aiming to provide for each need would be valuable. The mapping exercise could help identify organisations or areas of the horse sector that would be beneficial to or benefit from collaboration, this collaboration would need careful consideration to ensure the welfare of the horse is at the fore of these conversations.

Suggested actions for the sector include:

1. Identify key projects requiring a collaborative approach and develop strategic approaches as appropriate. Explore in more detail many of the suggestions that emerged from the research above. This will also involve consideration of how to convince various stakeholders of the value of collaboration; for example, approaches regarding how to encourage subsections of equestrians to find common ground with those focussed on improving welfare and make pledges for improvement.
2. Encourage better collaboration between not only welfare organisations and the wider equestrian sector but also with the commercial sector to address where products on the market do not always correspond to proving for what horses benefit from.

Theme 4: Societal approaches

Suggested solutions emerging from the research:

1. Facilitate a cultural shift to change norms around behaviours that compromise equine welfare.
2. Increase critical thinking to enable horse owners to better analyse options and make decisions that will benefit their horses
3. Focus on material goods (tack, rugs, and so on) that will benefit the horse, not just fashion.
4. Change attitudes to older horses, horses not disposable goods etc.

Brief comments on the above suggestions from the research team:

Approaches and interventions to change norms at the societal scale require considerable collaboration, planning and resource investment. However, arguably it is this theme that truly addresses the root causes of the issues driving and maintaining the equine welfare crisis. If planned well, interventions that work towards the above solutions could be of huge significance.

Suggested actions for the sector include:

1. Before outward facing activities to address harmful societal norms can be considered the sector itself needs to actively pledge to adopt certain actions. For example, the media, veterinary community, professionals, and all other stakeholders should adopt policies to recognise horses as sentient beings and talk about them as such – e.g., by not using the word ‘it.’ Before highlighting the need for horses to be kept in a certain way, charities, colleges, veterinary hospitals, and similar establishments keeping horses must ensure their practices are in line and so on.
2. Given the rise of social media it would seem logical for a multi-stakeholder campaign regarding prioritised issues to address the issue that bad practices are normed in the horse world.
3. Examples to change social norms in the equine world include:
 - a. Include positive welfare examples in policy elements, publications, social media activity and other outreach activities, training, and education.
 - b. ‘Lobbying’ key stakeholders to not use words like ‘it’ when describing animals (e.g., several veterinary publications have house style requirements to use ‘it’).
 - c. Social media campaigns to raise awareness of horses as sentient animals and to appreciate their nature wider than their use in sport.
 - d. Consideration of how certain messages can be ‘framed’ (e.g., there is some evidence that the term ‘equine mental health’ is preferred by some; and that reframing anthropomorphism to reflect that it can sometimes promote good welfare.
 - e. Lobbying education providers to provide education that takes into account the above and for experts to deliver the content rather than topics being introduced to courses at theoretical level without proper understanding and/or integration with contradictory course content.
 - f. Research barriers and opportunities regarding attitudes, beliefs, language etc and publish in the scientific literature to increase the visibility of this field of work. Press releases to highlight work in more mainstream settings.

Theme 5: Further research

Further research was suggested for nearly all the elements mentioned in this report. The more that can be understood regarding the ‘system’ of equestrianism we can understand the better, however, we recognise the urgent desire to be running an intervention.

Suggested solutions emerging from the research:

1. More research into the current numbers all the rescue centres in England and Wales, and map this against supply/demand data to predict how availability of spaces for unwanted horses matches with predicted numbers of horses who might need a rescue place.
2. More research regarding fear and stress to improve ability to identify those key elements in horses
3. More research into links between climate change and horse / livestock management

Brief comments on the above suggestions from the research team:

More research could be done on any element of the research outlined in this report. Depending on the direction chosen regarding an intervention, further, more specific, research will need to take place.

Suggested actions for the sector include:

1. Identify and prioritise top issues to work on.
2. Be integral part of the process.
3. Fund these initiatives

Concluding remarks

It can be seen that there are many opportunities to drive and facilitate positive changes to impact equine welfare in England and Wales. The recommendations outlined above are for 'the sector', of which the RSPCA is one stakeholder and, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, a key next step would be to consider what stakeholders are best placed to action these recommendations. The RSPCA could decide where it could lead and deliver change, where it could facilitate change and where it could contribute to change through collaboration with initiatives driven by other organisations.