

LEFT ON THE VERGE

In the grip of a

horse crisis

in England and Wales



Introduction

In October 2012 the major equine rescue and rehoming organisations in England and Wales released a report showing the immense pressure they are under due to the increasing number of horses and ponies needing their help. The organisations warned that, should there be another harsh winter, they will be physically unable to cope with the estimated 6,000 horses that were at that point defined as being at risk.



This report details and updates the challenges that these organisations face, showing that they are investigating more welfare concerns and taking in more horses than ever before. In addition, the number of horses in England and Wales that are at risk has increased to almost 7,000.

The welfare charities want to make it clear, now, that they cannot solve this problem alone and need the support of the horse-owning public, government agencies and local authorities to handle what has become a highly visible 'horse crisis' in England and Wales.

Recommendations for actions to help mitigate this crisis are outlined in this report.

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What is the problem?

The number of horses that equine charities are caring for and the number of welfare cases investigated have increased significantly over the past five years and continues to increase into 2013. World Horse Welfare has seen a 43 percent rise in the number of horses it has taken into its centres since 2006; from 129 in 2006 rising to 185 in 2012. In the first quarter of 2013 the organisation took in 40 percent more horses than in the equivalent period the previous year. In 2012 Blue Cross admitted 157 horses and the RSPCA admitted 760 horses, the highest number in any year to date. Despite operating close to capacity with 1300 horses in its care, Redwings Horse Sanctuary took in 161 horses in 2012 and has already admitted more than 100 since the start of 2013.



Most of the horses rescued by equine charities are those suffering from welfare problems, and the number of welfare cases has increased. The RSPCA report an increase of 117 percent in the number of convictions for horses in 2012 compared to the previous 12 months, and in the first quarter of 2013 investigated over 7,000 complaints involving horses compared to 25,900 for the whole of 2012. World Horse Welfare investigated 22 percent more welfare complaints in the first quarter of 2013 compared to 2012. This upward trend is also apparent for dogs and cats but is more extreme for horses. Two important factors seem to be at play.

- **ECONOMICS** – The continued poor economic climate has meant that horses, which can cost up to £100 per week to look after, are suffering as people cut back on veterinary costs, routine care, shelter and feed.
- **OVERBREEDING** – despite the gloomy economic picture, horses continue to be bred as some dealers and some horse owners believe that they can still make a profit from breeding horses. In reality, prices for horses have dropped significantly and a pony can be bought for £5 at some markets. Meanwhile horse owners are having difficulty rehoming their unwanted horses and, increasingly, cannot even give them away.

Overbreeding

The population of horses in the UK is unknown but is estimated to be just fewer than one million. The vast majority of these are owned privately for leisure (according to the British Equine Trade Association Survey 2011), but this is the most unregulated of the horse sectors, unlike those bred, for instance, for horse racing.

Irresponsible dealers are at the heart of the problems in the equine market. They are still buying, breeding and importing horses but as the market has become saturated the market prices for horses and ponies have crashed. Animals can now be found at sales for £5 and still remain unsold.



One likely result is an apparent increase in the number of horses being illegally fly grazed on public and private land. One dealer alone is estimated to have 2,000-3,000 horses fly grazing across various locations in Wales. The practice of leaving horses to graze on public or private land without permission has long been common across England and Wales, particularly among the travelling community (but by no means restricted to them). This has caused little concern on a national scale up until now but within the past two years more incidents of fly grazing have been reported across all areas of Britain. Increasingly, fly grazing has become a significant problem for landowners, farmers and local authorities and in some cases posing risks to the public. It is also leading to increasing welfare problems as the animals are left to fend for themselves. As these horses are kept communally animals continue to breed despite there being no market for them.

This, in turn, puts pressure on the local authority who may have no choice but to euthanase certain groups of horses should charities be unable to take them in.

Irresponsible dealers are also importing and exporting horses from France and Ireland under the Tripartite Agreement, which allows free movement of horses without health certification between these countries. However, as sales on the continent have been depressed, dealers are left with more horses being supplied than there is demand.

Horses are also being bred by people who breed small numbers of domestic horses for sale or for their own use. This increases both the supply of horses and the likelihood that other horses will become welfare concerns. In addition, the foals they produce can, in some cases, be from poor stock and therefore have little use or sale value. Over time these can become welfare concerns if their owners try to sell them or find them new homes.

There are also owners who let their horses breed indiscriminately then become overwhelmed with the numbers produced, resulting in welfare problems. Some of these cases can involve around 100 horses.

So where do these horses go? Some go into the meat trade and as the horsemeat scandal of 2013 underlined, some horses on fraudulent passports were going to abattoirs. There were five to seven abattoirs operating in the UK, paying around £230 for a horse or around £80 for a pony to dealers for meat, which was, and still is, exported to The Netherlands, Belgium, France and Italy. The number of horses sent to slaughter in the UK for human consumption has almost doubled since 2008. The lack of control on this business could have played a role in driving up the incentive for dealers to breed and trade in horses. The recent closure of two of the abattoirs may also be resulting in an increase in horses being fly grazed and abandoned. Invariably, those with welfare problems end up with equine charities.



Upsurge in welfare concerns

All the major organisations have seen an increase in horses being admitted, the majority of which are related to welfare complaints. The rising costs of food, veterinary care and stabling, and the poor weather (especially over the past winter) probably account for some of the extra calls from the public reporting welfare concerns.



The British Horse Society has seen a 50 percent increase in welfare concerns reported to it in the last six months.

Redwings has seen an increase in abandoned horses being reported to their welfare team from 160 in 2009 to an astonishing 768 in 2012. By the end of April 2013 this figure had already reached 447.

The **RSPCA** has seen an increase in complaints about equines from just over 1,500 in 2006 to 25,972 in 2012. In the first quarter of 2013 the organisation investigated 7,140 complaints relating to horses.

World Horse Welfare has seen welfare investigations rise steadily from 2006. In the first three months of 2013 their officers investigated 577 complaints, a 22 percent increase compared to the same period in 2012. The charity took in more multiple horse cases and has taken in 40 percent more horses in the first quarter than in the same period in 2012.

Blue Cross reported that, in the second half of 2012, 30 percent of horses dealt with by their centres were admitted for welfare reasons, compared to 21 percent in the first half. In the first three months of 2013 this had increased again to 37 percent.

January to March 2013 vs same period 2012



Upsurge in prosecutions

This increase in welfare problems has inevitably led to an increase in the numbers of cases and prosecutions.

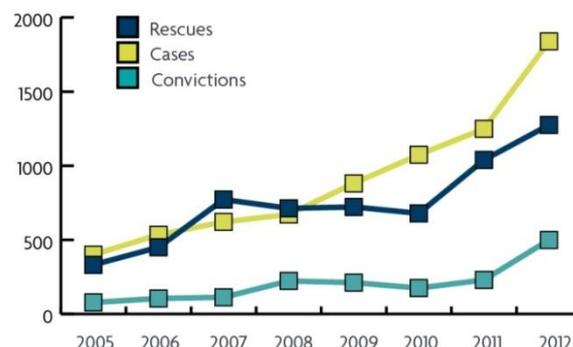
Over the past three years there has been a 134 percent increase in the numbers of charges brought under the Animal Welfare Act by the RSPCA involving horses and an increase of 87 percent in the number of horses rescued (Figure 1). Prosecutions undertaken for horses are now the third most common types of cases after those concerning cats and dogs. Many of these cases are multiple cases where the owners have been trying to breed horses.

World Horse Welfare has seen a greater than three-fold rise in the number of prosecutions in which they have assisted since 2006. Of the 85 horses taken into their care in the first three months of 2013, thirty-eight are prosecution cases. This is almost half the horses and is up from 31 in 2011.

Caring for horses that are the subject of prosecution can be very resource-intensive for welfare charities. Unless an owner who is being prosecuted signs over the horses to the charity voluntarily, the horse is not the property of the charity and so cannot be gelded or rehabilitated until the case is judged and the horse formally signed over by the court. This means that prosecution horses can spend many months longer in centres than other horses, leaving less space for new admissions.

The costs of prosecuting horse cases are also rising, particularly for multiple horse cases, where costs can be up to £500 per day. This has placed a huge burden on organisations and agencies. Many local authorities now do not have the financial resources to take prosecutions or stop midway through cases as costs have become prohibitive. Horses are not designated as one of the priority animals for local authorities – this should change.

Figure 1: Number of cases and rescues undertaken by the RSPCA for horses 2005-2012



Horse charities have limited scope to act: space is running out

Space within rescue centres in Britain is limited and under severe pressure as the number of horses needing help continues to rise. Charities do not have a blank cheque to build more facilities to care for ever-increasing numbers of horses.



Priority has been given to the most severe welfare cases. Many horses are now kept in private boarding, which is itself a problem as increasing costs are unsustainable, while some horses are directed to other equine charities or are kept *in situ* while field staff work with their owners to improve conditions.

Charities' ability to rehome horses is also coming under pressure in 2013 in contrast with a rise in rehoming over the past two years. World Horse Welfare has seen 32 percent fewer horses rehomed in the first quarter of 2013 than in the same period in 2012. Redwings have increased the numbers they rehomed from 46 in 2006 to 109 in 2011 and Blue Cross loaned out 140 horses in 2012. The RSPCA increased the numbers of horses it rehomed in 2012 to 305 compared with 240 in 2011 (which in itself was double the number rehomed in 2010). Even this could not prevent the numbers of horses it was caring for continuing at over 600.

This approach is not sustainable for the future. Existing resources are strained. The number of places available across equine organisations has been reducing steadily over the past three years. The National Equine Welfare Council, which has over 40 members, estimates that the total number of places available in these organisations is 2,800 but less than 3 percent of these places are free for

new admissions. In fact, many of the larger organisations have no spare capacity at all and are already holding horses in foster homes.

World Horse Welfare has 320 horses in its care and with 40 waiting to come in its centres are full. The RSPCA has over 600 horses in its care, of which 80 percent are in private boarding. HorseWorld has a capacity of 125 equines, although an average of 129 horses were on site over the past 12 months. Blue Cross and Redwings are close to capacity. Redwings cares for more than 1,300 horses and ponies at its sanctuary sites and has already extended its capacity by 150 horses in the past year to try to meet demand, including opening a new centre in north Norfolk.

Some charities have more land but not sufficient resources to feed and care for any significant increase in horse numbers properly. Despite encouraging trends in rehoming, this alone will not create enough space in our centres to take in all the horses that may need help.

How many horses are at risk?

It is estimated that almost 7,000 horses are at risk in Britain, meaning that they are being irresponsibly fly grazed or their welfare is at risk because their owners cannot or will not give them the care they need. The largest number, an estimated 3,000, are in Wales and the surrounding area but the equine organisations have noticed that many horses are being transferred from county to county depending on enforcement action. In addition the numbers of horses in Scotland that are at risk has trebled in the past year to 300.

Local authorities are also struggling to cope with these numbers of horses, many of which are not legally identified. Many authorities do not have the budget or the sites to confiscate horses and under the main legislation used, the Animals Act 1971, are compelled to put the horses to auction, for which they have to be passported and microchipped. Often they are then bought back by their previous owners to be fly grazed once again.

Solutions

The equine charities believe that it will take time to reverse these trends. The situation is highly likely to continue worsening. A holistic approach is needed to tackle the root causes of horse overpopulation, and to create the political will to tackle some of the issues. The charities believe the following solutions are needed:

STRONGER LAWS TO PROTECT CITIZENS AND HORSES

- Amend the Animals Act 1971 to allow land owners and local authorities the powers to dispose of fly grazed or abandoned horses other than through markets and auctions, where they are too often simply bought back by their original owners for less than it cost to make the horse saleable. Wales is currently undertaking a consultation on ways to improve laws to address fly grazing and this, it is hoped, will allow local authorities more flexibility in dealing with this problem in the future.
- Until the Animals Act 1971 is amended, councils should provide guidance notes for landowners to explain what they can do if horses are left on their land. This guidance should be widely available and should seek to facilitate resolution of these situations and help reduce the need to take costly legal advice.
- Criminal legislation is needed to punish fly grazers and act as a deterrent to prevent them from using local authorities as a horse-disposal service.
- Mandatory microchipping of horses, and a presumption on the part of the law that a horse has no owner unless it is both passported and microchipped. Authorities, charities and landowners seeking and trying to prove ownership of horses left irresponsibly on others' land can waste considerable amounts of resources trying to prove ownership. Current law states all horses should be passported, and those born after 2009 microchipped as well, but these laws are not enforced and there are no consequences for non-compliance. This must change if abandonment and fly grazing are to be addressed; placing the burden of proof of ownership onto the horse owner would be an effective way to encourage compliance with the law.
- Defra to expedite negotiations with Ireland and France to restrict the Tripartite Agreement which currently allows free movement of horses between the UK and these countries, creating welfare problems, facilitating crime where horses are used as cover and opening the door to equine disease.

IMPROVED ENFORCEMENT

- More assistance for local authorities, particularly with resources, to allow forward planning regarding abandonment or fly grazing incidents. This should include training animal welfare officers in horse handling and identification and the provision of green yards or similar spaces where owners can keep horses pending investigation or claims.

- Proper enforcement of the passport and microchip regulations, with financial support for local authorities to undertake targeted enforcement of serial or aggressive fly grazing. When the passport regulations were first introduced in 2005, enforcement was given a low priority and there are little if any resources to undertake this responsibility. Enforcement must now be considered a priority for the passport system to work and for fly grazers to be held accountable for irresponsible ownership.
- Use best practice on improving coordination between the enforcement agencies, particularly for multiple-horse cases involving dealers. Trading standards, the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratory Agencies (AHVLA) and other agencies should work more closely with each other and with welfare charities to improve enforcement and welfare. This is starting to happen, particularly in Wales.
- A central equine database to aid enforcement of passport regulations, encourage responsible ownership and assist in preventing disease spread. Defra is currently undertaking a review of the passport system. The European Commission has recommended as part of its five-part plan the establishment of a central database and a reduction in the number of Passport Issuing Organisations (the UK currently has 75+), which the welfare charities would support.

EDUCATION

- Sharing best practice on liaison with fringe groups such as travelling communities to stem fly grazing and abandonments, and to encourage responsible horse ownership. Welfare charities and local authorities have many good case studies on working with travelling communities to promote better horse care including discounted passport and microchipping and gelding clinics.
- Guidance should be produced giving clear, strongly-worded advice on when not to breed from a horse such as if it has poor conformation or genetic defects. Government communications channels should be used to discourage members of the public from breeding horses to complement the educational initiatives of the welfare charities. Raising awareness among farmers, breeders and dealers of the scale of the problem and the lack of financial reward for breeding in this market could help stem the production of horses.
- Make sure the horse owning public should recognise this crisis –they can play an important part in alleviating this crisis by rehoming horses and ponies from charities and not breeding from their own horses.

The welfare charities know that there is no spare capacity in their ability to cope with the scale of the present problems. Whilst they are working together to share intelligence in the markets and trade and improve fostering and rehoming, they will not be able to cope if even a fraction of those 7,000 equines presently at risk need immediate help. The situation is not improving. The winter of 2012/13 demonstrated the scale of the problem as complaints, animals needing rehoming and prosecutions have all increased in the first three months of 2013. The horse meat crisis also showed the problems with identification of horses. Now is the best opportunity for government agencies, local authorities and the equine charities to work together on solutions and reverse the present trends.

