

Running a Horse Sanctuary – Love is Not Enough



Redwings regularly receives enquiries from people who are thinking of setting a horse sanctuary of their own and are looking for ideas and advice. The most honest answer we can give anyone on this subject is that, unless you are familiar with every aspect of what running a sanctuary and a charity involves and can be prepared for all the circumstances you may have to deal with, do not consider it.

Caring for equines and wanting to do the best for them, especially if they have been neglected, ill treated or are facing an uncertain future, is an admirable desire and definitely one that we share here at Redwings. But running a successful sanctuary is equally dependent on practicality, realism, good business sense and the ability to take tough decisions and stick to them. If a sanctuary fails, some or all of the equines may need to be put to sleep before their time as the only solution. Ask yourself if you could deal with this potential outcome. If you couldn't then it would be advisable to find other ways of supporting equine welfare and helping horses in a practical way (see below for some ideas).

Animal sanctuaries are usually complex organisations dealing with a wide range of people and widely differing attitudes and expectations. They must have very clear aims and objectives, met through the application of well planned policies. Just some of the resources and policies a sanctuary should have in place are outlined below:

Location

A horse sanctuary requires space if it is to provide for its residents well. Suitable grazing is central to equine welfare, both to rehabilitate and maintain a horse's health and wellbeing. You also need to be able to offer suitable stabling, even if it is not used routinely, areas for veterinary and farriery work, the possibility to establish a quarantine area if needed and a place to contain a muck heap. Security is vitally important and all paddocks, yards and perimeter fencing must be able to safely contain any equine that is being cared for.

A site also needs to be safe for both humans and horses. There should be adequate water and electricity supplies and buildings need to be properly maintained. Think about how a site will function in adverse weather conditions: ice and snow, heavy rain, high winds or baking sun. Access is also an issue, can a horsebox or trailer get to the site easily and be able to transport equines to or from the sanctuary whenever needed.

People caring for horse residents will also need to be provided for, with a comfortable rest room and toilet. Opening a site to the public, even only on limited days, involves a significant level of extra responsibility to comply with health and safety and planning laws and you would need to look very carefully into this.

Funds

Caring for even one horse is not cheap, caring for several is very expensive. The routine costs of farriery, worming, vaccinating, dental care and providing food, water and bedding will add up to a considerable monthly outlay and the potential for expensive veterinary bills and extra requirements

are often particularly high for rescued or unwanted equines. You will need to look into insurance as an important consideration to protect your site and facilities, employees or volunteers and the public. Passports are a legal requirement for all equines and can also create regular added expense and administration. If you are faced with an equine requiring life-saving surgery, expensive long-term treatment or the sanctuary suffers an outbreak of a contagious disease, without having reserve funds available, horses may need to be put to sleep as the only viable alternative.

Having a steady flow of income and an emergency cash reserve is the lifeline of sanctuary work, and fundraising is a specific area of expertise. Do not assume that you will always find the money from somewhere. One of the main reasons well intentioned sanctuaries run into difficulties is that they simply don't have the money to care for their residents properly. Sanctuaries also need to be familiar with financial regulations and able to comply with the legal requirements governing not for profit organisations.

Manpower

Horses need time as well as money. How many equines can be cared for at a sanctuary is dependent on the number of man hours that are available, as well as facilities and money. Most sanctuaries require at least a few dedicated individuals to put the needs of the horses before their own. You may be able to recruit committed volunteers to help out with various tasks, but this needs to be carefully planned and people given support, training, a pleasant working environment and recognition of the work they do if there is to be an incentive for them to develop loyalty to the organisation. Volunteers and employees both have legal rights with regard to issues such as working hours and health and safety and you need to be prepared to put time and effort into your team as well as the horses.

Professional Support

A sanctuary will also need to be supported by a sympathetic vet and farrier. Research what services are available locally and the ability of any equine professionals to assist with the type of animals you plan to be looking after. This should be one of the first areas of research undertaken as without a network of professional support, the sanctuary will be unfeasible.

Policies

Any horse sanctuary should define clearly what it can and cannot do. Having established policies that everyone involved in running the sanctuary understands and accepts is vital. Whether you are looking after one or two equines, or a bigger sanctuary operation, careful planning and management are essential. Policies should cover the following areas:

- **Intake criteria** – this is one of the hardest lines to draw and maintain. Which horses do you want to help? Do you want to reserve your spaces for welfare rescues or are you happy to accept equines simply because they are unwanted. If you want to help rescued equines, what do you define as a welfare case? Most sanctuaries receive far more requests for spaces than they can offer and it is important to draw a clear line to establish when you can help and when you can't. Will you take in rideable equines or concentrate on those that have special needs or are retired. Do you have the knowledge and facilities to accept horses with behavioural problems or those with ongoing management requirements such as laminitis, arthritis or sweet itch?
- **Maximum capacity** – every sanctuary has a limit to the number of equines they can reasonably care for. This probably won't be static number, as the size, breed and individual needs of each equine can take up more or less space, time and resources. Looking after 10 elderly and frail

Shires will be very different from caring for 10 healthy Shetlands. It is absolutely imperative that a sanctuary knows when it is full and does not keep trying to squeeze in more equines than it can actually care for. No one can rescue all the equines in the UK in need of help, and taking on too many simply compromises the welfare of all the horses you are trying to provide for. Anyone running a sanctuary must be able to say no, even when they desperately want to say yes.

- **Euthanasia** – anyone caring for a horse needs to be prepared to deal with euthanasia, and this can be even harder when an equine has had a difficult life or is discovered to be beyond rehabilitation. Having a clear idea of what quality of life is acceptable for an equine and when it is time to say goodbye is very important. It is always sad to see an equine that has enjoyed fantastic care being allowed to suffer at the end of its life because people found it difficult to recognise a poor quality of life and step in to prevent pain and discomfort. Knowing how an equine is to be put to sleep and having provision in place to dispose of the body also needs to be planned well in advance.
- **Re-homing** – some sanctuaries rely on re-homing rescued equines to create space for others. This can be a great way of providing a new lease of life for an equine in a private home but needs to be carefully considered and structured. What criteria will you use to select equines ready for re-homing? What will you look for in a potential home? Will you sign over legal ownership of the equine or will you retain legal responsibility? How often will you check on equines that are loaned and how will you accommodate equines that need to come back into your care? Always draw up a formal loan agreement under legal guidance to make it very clear how your scheme will work for everyone involved.
- **Management** – have a clear routine for managing your horses and facilities. Work out a worming program, farriery rota, feeding regime, and system of pasture management. Have a structured routine for ridden equines if appropriate to ensure they can be exercised regularly. Think carefully about preventing the spread of contagious disease should it arrive in a new equine. Quarantining every new arrival is more effort and expense but can save time, money and heartache in the long term.
- **Staff** – identify how many people you need to help the sanctuary to run successfully and what you are looking for in staff or volunteers. Be clear about what is expected from people in terms of their working hours, wages and / or expenses, holidays and sick leave and so on. Outline what training opportunities you can offer to staff and volunteers and ensure that tasks are allocated according to people's experience, ability and interests to protect the safety of people and horses. You will also need a formal health and safety policy, procedures and training to meet legal requirements regardless of how many or how few people you have helping at the sanctuary.

Charitable status and regulation

If you wish to be a registered charity, you will need to apply to the Charity Commission and be prepared to submit annual accounts and have information made available to the public. No one who is not registered with the Charity Commission can refer to their organisation as a 'charity'.

Sanctuary licensing is due to be discussed in the next couple of years with a view to establishing a national system of registration or licensing for any establishment that calls itself a 'sanctuary'. This will

be a legal requirement, whichever option becomes statutory. Redwings, along with many other animal welfare organisations, has regularly had to deal with poorly run and failing sanctuaries and will be pushing hard for sanctuary licensing to be brought in, to help ensure the highest possible sanctuary standards across the country.

Other Ways to Help

There are many ways that individuals who feel passionately about equine welfare can help horses in need without the need to establish their own rescue centre.

- **Volunteer** or apply for a job at an existing local sanctuary. This could involve working directly with the horses, or helping out with administration, writing newsletters, helping at open days or other key tasks.
- **Fundraise** for a charity that you believe does great rescue work (such as Redwings!) Supporters are hugely valued by any welfare organisation and you should be able to see where your hard earned money goes through newsletters, websites or visiting yourself.
- Offer a home to a rescued equine from a sanctuary with a **re-homing** scheme. This will help you to enjoy caring for an equine that has perhaps had a difficult past and help give the sanctuary room to rescue another equine in need. Most sanctuaries loan their equines rather than sign over ownership, meaning that your equine will be checked regularly and there is the ability for the equine to return to the sanctuary if you find you are no longer able to care for it.
- If you are unable to take on the day to day care of a horse yourself, consider **adopting** one of Redwings' very special rescued equines instead! The small cost of adopting makes a real difference to the work of the Charity and you can visit your specially chosen friend for free at one of our visitor centres. Adoptions make great gifts too!
- Take an active part in **promoting equine welfare** by supporting campaigns, raising awareness and learning more about the issues that can promote or detract from positive equine welfare. If you ride as a hobby, for example, make sure you choose to ride at establishments where you are happy that the welfare of the horses is a top priority at all times and only equines that are suitable for the purpose of the centre are used.
- **Report concerns** if you see a horse that you think may not be being cared for properly. Redwings welfare team will always talk through welfare concerns with anyone who is worried about a horse in their local area and has a network of field officers that can make welfare checks in many parts of the UK. Redwings Welfare Helpline is 01508 481008.

If you have any further questions about setting up and running a horse sanctuary or would like to talk through any of the issues raised here in more detail, please do contact the welfare team by ringing us on **01508 481008** or emailing externalwelfare@redwings.co.uk