

LEFT ON THE VERGE

The approaching
equine crisis
in England and Wales



Introduction

All of the major equine rescue and rehoming organisations in England and Wales are under immense pressure due to the increasing number of horses and ponies needing their help. There is a real concern among all of these charities that should there be another harsh winter, they will be physically unable to cope with the number of horses needing urgent care.

The charities have been working together to cope with the rising number of suffering horses that need to be rescued. This report details the challenges that these organisations face, and highlights the main reasons why the welfare of an estimated 6,000 other horses is at risk, with over 2,800 horses already in charity centres.



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

Read our recommendations for actions to help mitigate this potential crisis.

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What is the problem?

The number of horses that equine charities are caring for has increased significantly over the past five years. All equine organisations have experienced rises. 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.



As most of the horses rescued by equine charities are those with welfare problems, these have increased. Horse rescues undertaken by the RSPCA over the past 12 months alone have doubled, and those by World Horse Welfare increased from 129 in 2006 to 194 in 2011, despite capacity remaining the same. This upward trend is apparent for most other pets such as 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. Organisations have reported a rise in hoof and worm problems, as horse owners cut costs by reducing veterinary checks.
- **OVERBREEDING** – despite the gloomy economic picture, more 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 under one million and 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 in the past, but within the past two years more incidents of fly grazing have been reported in certain areas, including Wales and the West Midlands. Fly grazing is a problem for landowners and local authorities and in some cases poses risks to the public. It can lead to welfare problems if the owner can no longer care for the animals and sometimes the animals are left to fend for themselves. And as these horses are kept communally animals continue to breed despite there being no market for them.

It also puts pressure on the local authority who may have no choice but to euthanase certain groups of horses should charities not be able 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 between these countries. But as sales on the continent have also been depressed, dealers are left with more horses being supplied than there is demand.

Horses are also being bred by hobby breeders who breed small numbers of horses for sale or for their own use. Too often the foals they produce are from poor stock and therefore have little use or sale value, and over time can become welfare concerns if they are not kept by their owners.

So where do these horses end up? Some go into the meat trade. There are five abattoirs operating in the UK, which pay a guaranteed price of around £230 (horse) to £400 (mare and foal) to dealers for meat which is then exported to Belgium, France and Italy. They could be playing a role in driving up the incentive to breed horses from dealers, but it does not appear to account for the fact that many horse owners are still breeding because they perceive a financial advantage from breeding horses. Others, particularly those with welfare problems, end up with equine charities.



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 coming into centres continues to rise. Undoubtedly these numbers would be higher still if the charities had capacity to take in more. However in response to the increasing number, many organisations over the past three years have had to restrict admission due to a lack of resources.



Priority has been given to 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 for field staff to work with their owners to improve conditions.

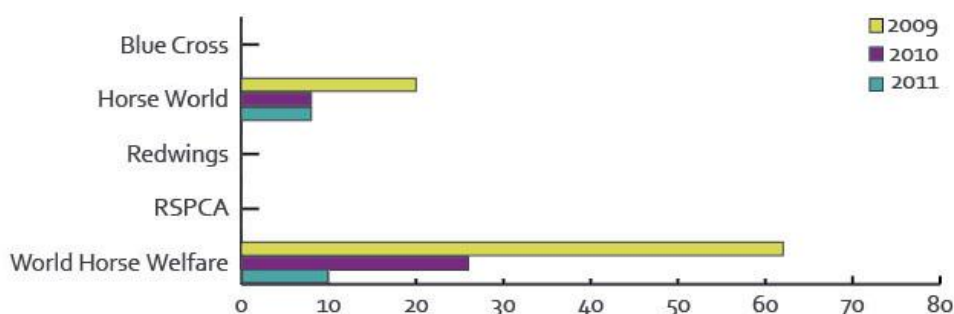
This is against a backdrop of an increasing number of horses being rehomed by equine charities. In 2011 the RSPCA rehomed 240 horses, double the number rehomed in 2010. World Horse Welfare saw a slow decline in rehoming after 2007, but has seen numbers recover after repackaging and promoting its scheme in 2011. Redwings has increased the number of horses it rehomed from 46 in 2006, to 109 in 2011. Blue Cross has a new fostering scheme to provide short-term respite care for horses and ponies.

This approach is not sustainable for the future. Existing resources are strained. Figure 1 shows the spare capacity for the major horses rehoming organisations at the end of 2011. The number of places available has been steadily reducing over the past three years. The National Equine Welfare Council, which has more than 40 members who keep horses, estimates that the total number of places available in these organisations is 2,800 but less than three percent of these places are free at present. Indeed many of the larger organisations have no spare capacity at all and are already holding horses in foster homes.

HorseWorld has a capacity of 125 equines although an average of 129 horses were on site over the past 12 months. Blue Cross, World Horse Welfare and Redwings are all close to capacity. Redwings cares for more than 1,250 horses and ponies at its sanctuary sites and has already extended its capacity by 100 horses in the past year to try and meet demand. The RSPCA has more than 600 horses in its care, but only capacity for 120 in its centres. The others are cared for in private boarding increasing costs to more than £3 million a year.

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

Figure 1: Spare capacity at the horse rehoming charities 2009-2011



Upsurge in welfare concerns

All the major organisations have seen an increase in horses being admitted (Figure 2) and an increase in equine welfare complaints. The rising costs of food, veterinary care and stabling, and the poor weather during the last few winters, probably accounts for some of the extra calls from the public reporting welfare concerns.



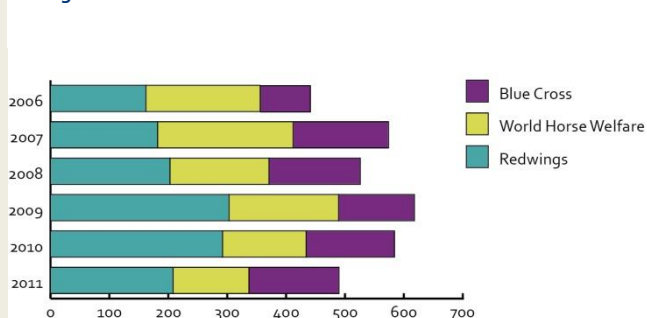
Redwings has seen an increase in abandoned horses being reported to their welfare team from 160 in 2009 to 450 in 2011, almost three times as high. By the end of June 2012 this figure had reached 491, exceeding the previous year's figure at the end of the first six months of this year.

The **RSPCA** has seen a 61 percent increase in complaints about equines in the past six years.

World Horse Welfare has seen welfare investigations rise steadily from 2006–2010 and in the first half of 2012 the charity took in 10 groups of horses highlighting a rise in multiple-horse welfare cases. Since 2009 the organisation has had to stop encouraging people to contact the charity for rehoming advice due to the volume of welfare calls, at a time when this advice is more important than ever.

Blue Cross has reported that 21 percent of horses admitted to their centres in the year to June 2012 were due to welfare reasons, an increase from the 12 percent reported for the same period in 2007–2008.

Figure 2: Numbers of horses admitted to three horse rehoming organisations 2006-11



Upsurge in prosecutions

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

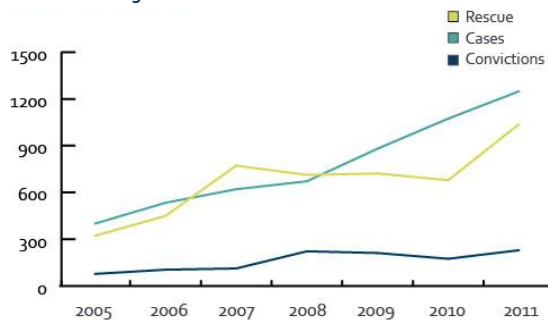
There has been a 210 percent increase in RSPCA horse prosecutions undertaken over the past six years (Figure 3). Prosecutions undertaken for horses now form the highest number of cases after cats and dogs. Many of these cases are multiple cases where the owners have been trying to breed horses.

World Horse Welfare has seen more than a three-fold rise in the number of horses in prosecutions that they have assisted in since 2006 (from 27 horses in 2006 to 110 in 2010, dropping only slightly to 93 in 2011).

Caring for horses that are the subject of prosecution can be very resource-intensive for welfare charities. Unless the horses are voluntarily signed over to the charity by the owner who is being prosecuted, the horse is not the property of the charity and therefore 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 do not have the financial resources to take prosecutions or have to stop midway through cases as costs have become prohibitive. Horses are not designated as one of the priority areas for local authorities – this should change.

Figure 3: Number of cases and rescues undertaken by the RSPCA for horses 2005-2011



Solutions

The equine charities believe that it will take time to reverse these trends. The situation is highly likely to get worse before it gets better. What is needed is a holistic approach to tackle the root causes of horse overpopulation, and the political will to tackle some of these issues. The charities believe the following solutions are needed:

- **CRIMINAL LEGISLATION** is needed to target fly grazers and make them accountable for their animals; no existing laws address the problem.
- **A BETTER LINK BETWEEN HORSES AND THEIR OWNERS** improving accountability for irresponsible horse ownership. A National Equine Database is a critical tool for enforcement and a solution needs to be found for funding it following Defra's recent decision to withdraw funding.
- **EDUCATION** – 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. Awareness-raising 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.
- **HELP LANDOWNERS RESOLVE FLY GRAZING CASES QUICKLY** and punish fly grazers with fines and seizure of horses. Where it is difficult to link horses with owners (e.g. where they are not microchipped or branded), legislation should be amended to allow local authorities and landowners to seize and assume ownership of any horses left on their land, rather than undertaking a more lengthy abandonment process.
- **SHARING BEST PRACTICE** by liaising with the travelling communities to stem fly grazing and tethering. Welfare charities and local authorities have many good case studies to help educate travelling communities on better horse care including discounted passport and microchipping and gelding clinics.
- **IMPROVING ENFORCEMENT** – using 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 together with each other and welfare charities to improve enforcement and welfare. This is starting to happen, particularly in Wales, where a summit between the enforcement bodies has looked at information sharing.
- **GOVERNMENTS TO LOOK AT THE TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT**, which allows free movement of horses between Ireland, the UK and France, to assess its part in the current overpopulation and how this should be addressed.
- **MORE ASSISTANCE TO HELP LOCAL AUTHORITIES** particularly with resources to allow enforcement of passport regulations and forward planning regarding fly grazing incidents. This should include training of animal welfare officers in horse handling and identification, and the provision of green yards or similar spaces where horses can be kept pending investigation or claims by owners.
- **MAKING SURE THE HORSE-OWNING PUBLIC 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.
- **PRODUCTION OF GUIDANCE NOTES** for landowners to explain what they can do if horses are left on their land. This guidance should be widely available and seek to facilitate resolution of these situations and help reduce the need to take costly legal advice.

The welfare charities know that there is no spare capacity in their ability to react to 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 some of those 6,000 equines presently at risk need immediate help. The winter of 2012 could provide such a test. Government agencies, local authorities and the equine charities all need to work together on these solutions to prevent this happening.

