



NIVA

North of Ireland Veterinary Association

EQUINE WELFARE PRIORITIES

**A Consensus Report arising from the
NIVA Equine Welfare Symposium**

*“Putting Equine Welfare On
The Northern Ireland Agenda”*

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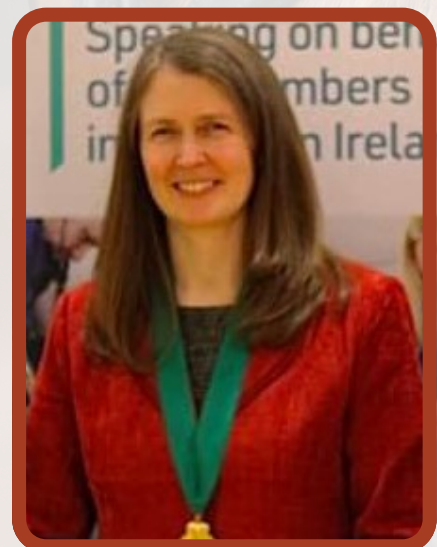
The welfare of the horse is one of the most challenging debates affecting animal health and welfare in Northern Ireland. On behalf of NIVA, I am very pleased to share with you our consensus paper on priorities for equine health and wellbeing.

The process to develop this paper was itself a significant step for NIVA, bringing together equine professionals and representatives from the equine industry to have a voice on equine welfare in this country. This mix of perspectives has been important. Industry representatives have brought a wealth of knowledge and expertise.

I would like to say a personal thank you to everyone who contributed, to my colleagues in NIVA and in particular to Dr Esther Skelly-Smith, NIVA Senior Vice-President, who has worked tirelessly to produce this paper in a comparatively short timeframe, whilst juggling other roles as a veterinary surgeon and elsewhere.

I am excited by the opportunities and challenges this paper presents to all of us. There is much for us all to do but, by working together, we can undoubtedly succeed.

Dr Sharon Verner
President
North of Ireland Veterinary Association



The health and wellbeing of horses is a major part of my “raison d’etre”. As an equine veterinary surgeon, it is an enormous privilege to work with horses and equestrians. The positivity which emerged from the NIVA Equine Welfare Symposium bodes well for the future of equids in Northern Ireland. However, we continue to be disappointed that there is a significant lack of government policy and strategy for these wonderful animals. Horses and the industry behind them make a significant positive contribution to the life of people here and to our economy. We believe they deserve better.

I am really indebted to my colleagues on NIVA Council who supported me to take a lead on organising Ireland’s first ever equine welfare symposium in February this year, and this report has been a key outcome of that workshop. I want to personally thank the people who took time to attend the symposium, participate and give us their views. This report is the first of its kind and we sincerely want to strive to do justice to the information contained therein. A particular thanks must go Agria Pet Insurance for sponsoring this initiative, and our supporters World Horse Welfare and The British Horse Society Ireland.

The recommendations herein are straightforward and most do not require significant financial investment. They rather require a willingness to give due consideration to an animal which I believe to date has been largely overlooked.

Dr Esther Skelly – Smith
Author
Senior Vice President NIVA



This paper was developed by the North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) in response to the current vacuum which exists around equine welfare strategy and policy in Northern Ireland. It records the proceedings of an equine welfare symposium and documents the views and experiences of leading experts and a wide cross section of stakeholders from the equine industry.

In association with equine industry stakeholders, NIVA presents this paper as a call to action for equine welfare in Northern Ireland and makes key recommendations based on priorities from stakeholders (as set out in Section 3).

Topics that are the subject of our recommendations are as follows:



The need for an equine strategy in Northern Ireland



The continued supply of essential veterinary medicines following the implementation of the Windsor Framework



Legislation to ensure the regulation of farriery.



Appropriate enforcement of current welfare legislation



Equine Traceability



The adequacy of current regulations regarding transportation of horses



The educational requirements for horse ownership

NIVA will continue to review the issues raised in this report and seek to influence decision makers and professionals working on equine welfare so that equines, and people working in the industry, have the best life. The intention is that this paper will now stimulate further collaborative working and action.

Recommendation 1

That the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) considers the issues and priorities raised within this report and put in place arrangements to address the need for an equine strategy as recommended within Deloitte Analysis of the Equine Industry (DAERA, 2019). NIVA would ask DAERA for a formal response to this report outlining their plans for the equine industry.

Recommendation 2

That all stakeholders including the UK Government, veterinary organisations, local politicians and industry stakeholders continue to lobby to ensure a continued supply of essential veterinary medicine following the full implementation of The Windsor Framework. NIVA will continue to make this a priority in their agenda.

Recommendation 3

That the Northern Ireland Assembly should legislate to regulate farriery in Northern Ireland, ensuring that all farriers operating in Northern Ireland are qualified, registered and regulated.

Recommendation 4

That there should be appropriate enforcement of current welfare legislation. Executive Departments must collaborate to ensure that there are clearly identified processes including lines of responsibility for equine welfare.

Recommendation 5

That DAERA engages with the Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine and other key stakeholders such as Horse Sport Ireland, Horse Racing Ireland, Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board and Weatherby's to scope the feasibility of having an equine traceability scheme. Ireland, both in the North and the South, have some of the best bovine and ovine traceability systems in the world and has consistently innovated in this area. A similar scheme for horses would provide a high degree of assurance to owners and purchasers in the equestrian markets, as well as a safeguard for equine welfare.

Recommendation 6

That DAERA review the adequacy of current regulations regarding the transportation of horses especially those being exported for slaughter.

Recommendation 7

That DAERA, through CAFRE, establish a working group (in partnership with relevant stakeholders such as the British Horse Society Ireland and The Pony Club) to address the concerns outlined in Priority One (See page 33) which advocates of regulation of horse ownership and educational requirements for all owners. This group should also have opportunity to review the broader range of issues highlighted in this report.

On 22nd February 2024, the North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) delivered the first equine welfare symposium to be held on the island of Ireland. Some 126 delegates registered for the event. Attendees included veterinarians, politicians, government officials, horse owners, equestrian charities, representatives from all equine disciplines and types of establishments, and allied professionals. Collectively they represent a considerable force for the good of equines.

Attendees heard from several keynote speakers and had the opportunity to participate in the development of this consensus paper via a qualitative questionnaire. This now forms the basis of a call to action for equine welfare in Northern Ireland.

This paper provides:

- a record of the proceedings of the symposium
- an analysis of the questionnaire responses which set out industry priorities
- recommendations designed to underpin equine welfare in Northern Ireland

The event was kindly sponsored by Agria Pet Insurance and supported by British Horse Society Ireland and World Horse Welfare.

For far too long equines have been seen as lower priority when it comes to the development of welfare strategy and policy in Northern Ireland. NIVA is resolved, in collaboration with other stakeholders, to keep equine welfare as high priority within Northern Ireland.

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SECTION 1:

NIVA Equine Welfare Symposium

Proceedings

EQUINE SYMPOSIUM WELCOME SPEECH

Dr Esther Skelly-Smith, NIVA President and Practising Equine
Veterinary Surgeon

“Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests on behalf of the North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) it gives me great pleasure to welcome you here this afternoon to our Equine Welfare Symposium.

We have representatives from many sectors and disciplines of the equine industry from leisure through to high performance. Many of us will come from differing viewpoints about what constitutes good equine welfare and a life well lived for a horse. I see vets not only from private practice but also academia, government, and industry. I see leaders from the equine industry, government, politicians, and academics. I also see some very highly regarded equestrians, and allied professions. I think this afternoon’s gathering is quite unique.

Despite the variety in our life experiences there is something that unites us – our love of the horse and a passion to do the right thing by our equines.

NIVA has been in existence for well over 100 years representing the views of the veterinary profession here in the North and lobbying with legislators and policy makers here, in London and Brussels. Locally, NIVA champions veterinary causes with our own Assembly and endeavours to ensure that government policy including animal health and welfare policy issues are in line with veterinary science.

This afternoon is a unique, yet exciting and hopefully positive opportunity for the veterinary and equestrian community to come together and have their say on the future of equine welfare in Northern Ireland. The purpose of the event is not only to hear from world leaders in equine welfare but also to engage the equestrian and veterinary community in considering the changing landscape of equine welfare, and to support NIVA in its vision to co-produce a consensus paper as a call for action for both the equestrian community and the government in Northern Ireland around key priority areas. The timing of this event could not be better with the very recent return of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Throughout the history of Northern Ireland, horses have been an integral part of the culture; from the work companion of choice for many generations in the agricultural community to the leisure sector and competitive disciplines we see today. Northern Ireland is a land of small family farms and within living memory most of those farms had a horse that worked the land during the week and at weekend took the family to town for shopping and to church on a Sunday. Things have changed with the mechanisation of agriculture, but the horse remains a very deep part of our DNA. Ireland is still known as the land of the horse. It is the largest producer of thoroughbred horses in Europe and the 4th largest in the world. It is also a major exporter of Irish Sport horses, Irish Draughts and the wonderful Connemara pony.

There are thought to be over 34,000 horses in Northern Ireland. In 2019 DAERA-commissioned an analysis of the industry which valued the equine industry's economic contribution to the country as exceeding £210 million (DAERA: 2019). This report made several very useful recommendations, yet these have yet to be taken on board. In fact, the equestrian industry in Northern Ireland continues to suffer from a lack of government policy, legislation, and strategy. This symposium aims to raise awareness of this and seeks to help fill that gap particularly around equine welfare.

It would be disingenuous of me not to state clearly that I am severely disappointed that the government of Northern Ireland has yet to have a strategic plan for the equestrian industry. The horse as an animal is so much part of our heritage and yet it, and the industry behind it, are left out of any legislation or planning with the NI Assembly - Leaving huge concerns about animal welfare. One stark example of this is that fact that Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK which does not regulate farriers. This is a major welfare concern not only for us, as vets, but also for those highly professional farriers who have worked tirelessly to raise standards of hoof care.

Those of us who have grown up in the Pony Club, attending shows, competing in all the major disciplines and attending events such as Dublin Horse Show often see horses at their best. Daily, veterinary surgeons and the people represented in this room have helped to improve the lives of horses.

In my work as a vet, I meet people who own horses and dearly love them; it is fair to say many would go without themselves to make sure their horses are well cared for. But sadly, this is not always the case, and our animal sanctuaries and rescue centres bear testament to this fact that many horses do not have assurance of the 3F's - Freedom, Friends and Forage.

Our understanding of what constitutes good welfare is changing. We understand that horses are sentient beings that should "thrive not just survive". We are now moving from the 5 freedoms model to the 5 Domains model of animal welfare. It considers 4 physical areas: nutrition, environment, health, and behaviour and how they are intrinsically linked to the fifth domain of the horse's mental state.

In a time of increasing scrutiny, we as an industry have a collective responsibility and opportunity to show real leadership in proactively addressing obvious and less obvious welfare concerns. A holistic and proactive approach to equine welfare by the industry will be the key in ensuring a justifiable, ethical argument in favour of equestrian sport continuing.

Coming from a non-horsey family as a child growing up I had the enormous privilege of being educated by a fantastic BHS Coach who gave me a wonderful grounding in equine welfare and placed great emphasis on the holistic care of the horse – including having regard for a horse's back, its teeth, proper fitting of saddle, the environment the horse was kept in and many basic management techniques which make a huge difference to equine welfare. As a veterinary student and as a young veterinary surgeon working in the Animal Health Trust in Newmarket I learnt the importance of science and research to advances in equine welfare.

In Northern Ireland thanks to research and development, much of which involves the veterinary surgeon, I see huge strides in equine welfare – including the fabulous standards set by the Donkey Sanctuary, the use of active turnout for horses at CAFRE and in racing yards, and the great work done by organisations such as the British Horse Society.

Yet on the other hand in my own practice, I still come across cases where issues such as inappropriate stabling, poor dental care or hoof care, ill-fitting saddles, inappropriate nutrition, obesity, delayed euthanasia, unresolved stress and pain behaviours, coercive training methods etc. are the cause of poor wellbeing in horses. So, we are on a journey.

In addition, our relationship with the horse is changing – for example we see a rise in equine assisted therapy and learning. Here in Northern Ireland this worthwhile development is being championed by the One Equine Trust. This also brings a different perspective on equine welfare and the need for standards which specifically support these services. Countries such as Sweden are well advanced in this area.

In recent years we have seen more focus on the equestrian industry's social licence to operate (SLO). Most societies regulate human activities using laws that state clearly what is, and is not, legally permissible. However, there is a second layer of permission that is granted—or revoked—by the public.

This second layer is known as a ‘social licence to operate’ and it represents an intangible, implicit agreement between the public and an industry or group. The public may approve of an activity, in which case it can proceed with minimal formalised restrictions, or it may disapprove, and this may herald legal restrictions, or even an outright ban.

Experience from other industries suggests that, to maintain its SLO, equestrianism should take an ethics-based, proactive, progressive, and holistic approach to the protection of equine welfare, and should establish the trust of all stakeholders, including the public. Trust will only ensue if society is confident that equestrianism operates transparently, that its leaders and practitioners are credible, legitimate, and competent, and that its practice reflects society’s values. Earning and maintaining this status will undoubtedly require substantial effort and funding—inputs that should be regarded as an investment in the future of the sport.

Since 2017 SLO has become a major focus for equestrian organisations. With many developments including the FEI’s Equine Ethics and Wellbeing Commission being established, along with the British Equestrian Federation Equine Welfare and Ethics Advisory Group, Sport Horse Welfare Foundation, British Racing’s Horse Welfare Board five-year welfare strategy “A life well-lived”, HRI and Irish Thoroughbred Welfare Council’s “Our Industry, Our Standards – Principles of Animal Welfare in Ireland Horse Racing Industry”.

What drives changes like these are issues around animal welfare. The social contract that allows the use of animals in sport is changing and it is key to realise that both organisations and individuals hold the balance to our social licence, and the collective actions will determine if it reaches a tipping point. So, this afternoons’ event also aims to build collaboration. Use this afternoon to make introductions and acquaintances, and start conversations about how we take this agenda forward particularly here in Northern Ireland. I consider it the role of all of us to guarantee that these ties continue to get stronger.”

From local to global: What are the important issues affecting equine welfare?

Roly Owers MRCVS, World Horse Welfare

World Horse Welfare

World Horse Welfare, established 1927, is a leading equine charity that works to promote the horse-human relationship in all its forms, often in partnership with governments, universities, regulators and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). World Horse Welfare's approach is focused on 4 pillars: **care, research, education, and influence.**

World Horse Welfare is the only equine welfare charity globally to actively support the responsible involvement of horses in sport and is welfare advisor to sport regulators including the International Equestrian Federation, International Horse Sport International Horse Sport Confederation and British Horseracing Authority.

Welfare challenges: Local

Farriery: Good farriery is essential for good welfare. Unlike GB, there is no legal requirement for farrier registration in Northern Ireland which has negative implications for both short- and long-term welfare. NI legislation that covers both farriers & barefoot trimmers would undoubtedly improve welfare.

Availability of Veterinary Medicines: priority needs to be given to the issue of access to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland to ensure a long-term solution that safeguards future supply is found.

Transport and Export: There are challenges in compliance and enforcement of export and welfare rules across the UK. This has implications for:

- Biosecurity;
- Equine physical and mental welfare;
- Export to slaughter;
- Integrity of veterinarians.

Solution - Fully digitised ID; horse identification and movement traceable via digitised system, including photographs. Closer NI – GB – ROI co-operation.

Vets are well placed to promote equine welfare, the 3 Fs (Freedom, Friends, Forage), and signpost owners to educational resources.

Social licence to operate

Improving welfare is linked to maintaining social licence. Several recent surveys have found that a significant percentage of members of the public and people involved with horses believe that welfare and safety measures in horse sports need to improve.

Social licence is typically lost through a series of phases – negative media, loss of public trust, loss of political support, revised legislation and outright ban. Trust is key; equestrianism needs people outside and inside the sport to trust that those involved will do right by the horses. Maintenance of the social licence is an investment in the future of the sport.

Welfare challenges: Global

Global welfare issues in relation to the social licence to operate include:

- Provision of horses' basic needs - the 3Fs: Friends, Freedom, Forage;
- Understanding how horses learn;
- Recognising pain;
- Recognising inappropriate rider weight and size;
- Humane use of tack and training aids;
- Noseband tightness;
- Overweight horses;
- Multiple veterinary interventions.

Summary

Northern Ireland's geographical and legislative situation make for specific welfare issues, but many welfare issues are relevant internationally.

Equine welfare must be prioritised in all jurisdictions for 2 main reasons:

- It is the right thing to do
- We may lose our industry if we do not

Changing the reality for horses will involve challenging the status quo, enforcing the rules (and making new ones), and educating ourselves and others. In this way, public trust will be fostered.

How can we support equestrianism in the current social climate?

Dr David Marlin, Cambridge, President (UK) National Equine Welfare Council

Does horse sport need to change?

“In our industry Social Licence to Operate (SLO) is the term given to society’s acceptance of the practice of equestrian sport and all its related activities”
(Ingmar De Vos, FEI President)

Negative impact on SLO in recent years includes:

- Negative coverage of horse sports in the media and documentaries;
- Loss of SLO after events in Tokyo Olympics (2020) with result that horses will no longer be used in Modern Pentathlon after Paris 2024;
- Ban on jump racing in southern Australia;
- Petitions to ban horse racing in UK and Ireland.

Why does public opinion matter?



Equestrian attitudes regarding the involvement of horses in sport

Pulse Survey Report (September 2023) What does the equestrian public think of threats to horse sport? Respondents identified a range of issues including training and riding practices, horses treated as an object or equipment, and emotional and physical distress.

Facebook Poll (January 2023) received over 4000 responses from a wide range of people involved with horses. Most respondents felt the welfare of sport horses is sometimes or often compromised and agreed that equine/animal activists sometimes have a point regarding welfare issues in horse sport; almost half of respondents felt that horse sport’s SLO is moderately to greatly under threat at this point in time. Responses from people based in NI/ROI largely correlated to the overall response.

What can we do to try and ensure the continuation of horse sports?

Be proactive - take steps as a community to improve equine welfare and to improve the perception of equestrianism both within the equestrian public and the lay public.

Base changes on evidence rather than opinion as informed decision-making will be more likely to lead to good outcomes.

Three key steps:

1. **Research** - understand the issues / objectives; collect subjective data; identify risk factors and themes for poor welfare; and undertake research where required.
2. **Rules and Regulations** – review current regulations regards equine welfare; introduce or modify rules and regulations where necessary; appropriate enforcement and sanctions.
3. **Education** – we can all benefit from education and updating our knowledge.

Summary

Equestrianism IS being lobbied from inside and outside. Lobby groups are informed, intelligent, resourceful, and passionate. In many cases lobby activists have valid points to make:

- This is only going to INCREASE. It is not going away. We should review objections with honesty;
- There is an urgent need for action and change. Changing attitudes and practices is not easy;
- The fact that we are a globally and culturally diverse community is challenging;
- It is preferable that we as a community / industry are PROACTIVE as opposed to reactive.

“Navigating the Equine Welfare Journey – a personal perspective”

Dr Meta Osborne, veterinary surgeon, stud owner, and MSc in Animal Welfare, Ethics, and Law

Insights

- Difference between animal welfare and animal ethics:
 - Animal welfare is the state of the animal’s body and mind and the extent to which their needs are met
 - Animal ethics is a human philosophy concerned with moral questions around how we use / keep animals
- Animal sentience – the capacity to have positive or negative experiences such as pain, distress, or pleasure
- Positive animal welfare – the absence of negatives is not sufficient for good welfare
- Moving from the Five Freedoms model to the Five Domains Model that considers both positive and negative experiences that contribute to the horse’s overall welfare. Opportunities to experience the good life must be provided.
- Equitation Science and Learning Theory – key to improving equine welfare. Learning theory is a set of principles that explain how animals (and humans) learn which makes it as easy as possible for the horse to respond and succeed during training and avoids behavioural side-effects. Equitation science is the measurement and interpretation of interactions between horses and riders, which leads to improved training techniques, improved welfare, reduced wastage rates and increased rider and handler safety.
- SLO is built on trust and trust requires confidence, transparency, shared values, legitimacy, competence, and credibility. Credibility, transparency, and shared values are the key issues in equine welfare now.
- Human behaviour change – fundamentally important. Change is inevitable so it is time to start looking outwards, not just inwards, and being proactive by making positive changes that improve equine welfare.

What is Irish racing doing about welfare?

Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (IHRB) Rulebook: RULE 148 (i) *A Trainer shall be responsible... for everything connected with the welfare, training and running of all Horses under the care of that Trainer...*

Other measures include; stable inspections, medication and doping controls, welfare training for licensees, traceability, pre-race examinations, horse racing Ireland co-design project, monthly column in the Irish Field, work on obstacle design and location, technological solutions to welfare challenges, IHRB Equine Injury in Irish Racing Risk Reduction Project and Horse Racing Ireland Equine Welfare Symposium, 24th May 2024.

The Way Forward

- Evidence-based horse human interactions – equitation science, veterinary science, horse husbandry
- Human behaviour change – look at what we do
- Systems thinking.

Sport Horse Welfare In An Evolving World

Dr Jane Williams, Head of Research; Associate Professor Hartpury University

Equestrian practice has a strong traditional foundation largely based on anecdotal practice, trial and error learning, personal experience or peer influence, rather than being informed by science. While human and equine culture is intertwined across history, in modern times the public's broader experience of horses has become more remote and general attitudes to animal welfare have shifted. We are living in a time where our relationship with the horse and how we discharge our duty of care to them or equestrianism's social licence is under public scrutiny. This presentation aimed to consider how an evidence-informed approach to horse management can result in improved sport horse welfare.

Recent surveys have demonstrated two thirds of the public and just under 80% of equestrians question current equine welfare standards in sport. The FEI Equine Ethics and Wellbeing Commission Survey (2022) asked the question, 'Do horses enjoy being involved in sport?' 67% of public and 50% of equestrians responded, 'Not adequate'. At the elite level of horse sport, we consulted with professional equestrian stakeholders to determine what factors should be considered essential for sport horse health and welfare. Health and performance related factors featured highly, with welfare assessment and management not agreed as essential as stakeholders felt these were generally managed well but acknowledged were managed differently across the sector and that they were 'tricky' to accurately define. A trend was also observed to consider welfare (minimum standards) rather than wellbeing (providing a good life and considering physical and psychological components or the emotions / affective state of the horses within this). To manage horses well and provide them with a good life, we need to consider all aspects of their management including how our actions influence their wellbeing. Mellor's Five Domains Model is a good tool that can be applied as a framework to assess how management practices affect equine wellbeing.

Human attitudes, knowledge and understanding and decision-making have a direct influence on horses' quality of life. The horse-human relationship has evolved over the years; as public engagement with horses has reduced, attitudes change, and what was once considered acceptable about how we interact with horses is being questioned.

There is an appetite for change. Equestrianism has a diverse cultural base comprised of multiple communities with different motivations and beliefs perhaps united by a love of the horse. Not all existing practice is bad; there are many examples of good horsemanship that are ethical and research has demonstrated are evidence-based. However, generally, a lack of evidence exists across equestrianism to support an evidence-informed approach to practice, and where this is present often a lack of translation or language used can prevent uptake by the general horse owner. On a simpler level, look at the day in the life of a sport horse. What are the positives and what are the negatives, is there balance? Extend this out to a month, and then a lifetime. Do they have a good life? How do we measure this? To consider if a horse has a good life, we should review the horse's life over time and consider the experiences the horse has within this as a continuum, with the aim that overall, for most of the time, the horse has a good life.

Athletes at elite level competition are often competing near the edge of their optimal performance and experience physical, physiological and psychological pressures or stressors that can lead to transient stress, which they need to learn to cope with to be successful. As humans, we can articulate when we want to stop and can be in control of ourselves. However, sometimes the occasion, pressure, potential fatigue or other factors can lead to poor decision-making which is not in the athletes' best interest for them, their peers and the wider support team. If we agree with the use of horses in sport, we therefore acknowledge they will experience some transient stressors. The difference is that the horse has little agency, and the rider (and wider team) direct the level / duration / content of performance and have the responsibility to prepare for these as well as 'they can and support them to reduce impacts when they occur. This is encompassed in principles of training, which should prepare the athlete for the demands of the test they will encounter, physical fitness and psychologically; require skills training to be able to perform specialist activities specific to the sport, underpinned by strength and conditioning, and finally, if these are undertaken well, should reduce injury and increase career longevity (and performance / success). Managing sport horse wellbeing can improve safety, health, behaviour, performance, career longevity and ultimately help to safeguard the future for horse sports.

How can we manage and support horse wellbeing?

Research helps us to understand horses. Horses' three key needs are Friends, Forage and Freedom. Humans drive the horse-human relationship and therefore have a duty of care to the horse. Research and the evidence generated can help support the equine industry to improve sport horse wellbeing. We need to remember and acknowledge that horses do not view the world the same as humans and do not have the same complex problem-solving skills, so require socialisation, appropriate nutrition and opportunities for free exercise i.e. friends, forage and freedom to function and have their welfare needs met.

Mellor's five domains model is a good starting point in assessing horse welfare in competitive environments. We should consider the health, behaviour and mental or affective state domains and ask over the course of the competition and in training – are the horses having a good life? Across practice we should recognise, applaud, and measure positive examples of wellbeing, not just the negatives. In humans, poor mental wellbeing is also well documented to result in poor performance and health outcomes. Initial evidence suggests the same could apply to horses, so promoting positive wellbeing or a positive affective state could improve performance. Scientific studies have identified a range of measures that can be applied to objectively judge welfare including physiological changes, emotions, and pain. The approach has to be consistent and of key importance is to assess if each individual horse is having a good life.

Managing horses in training: Research is ongoing in several areas such as warm-up, health monitoring, and practice. Preliminary evidence suggests that a reduction in sleep duration appears to have some negative effect on a horse's cognitive performance.

How to assess welfare in practice? There are emerging opportunities to use technology to increase visibility and knowledge and understanding of learning theory to evaluate riding, and to support event officials to help them objectively assess horse welfare during events, such as identifying early onset of fatigue. As individual horse owners and riders, we should also question our practices and ask how it impacts our horse's wellbeing. There is also scope for the wider equestrian professional network – vets, farriers, physios, coaches etc. to come together and share knowledge and help translate research into practice.

Future Opportunities include:

- Technology – perhaps federations and other leaders in horse sports have to support development and integration into practice
- Research and evidence – bringing industry and researchers together within projects is needed to inform and expand practice
- Big data - regular monitoring / collection of data at an individual, local or discipline level can help showcase what is working in training and competition, identify health, injury and performance trends, assess the impact of management and training interventions, inform practice and improve performance
- Roles for other equestrian stakeholders.

Summary

We all need to work together to evolve how we manage horses and give them a GOOD LIFE! We need to:

- Understand current practice better
- Apply evidence-informed approach more
- Develop more evidence - keep improving;
- Effectively articulate research - practice, communication and education.

Remember the world evolves and we need to keep challenging what we do, why we do it and change where needed. We should engage across our diverse equestrian communities to unite for the horse and to safeguard the future of horse sports.

Summary of panel discussion

Chair: Dr Malcolm Morley, Senior Vice President of the British Veterinary Association.

Panel: Dr Jane Williams, Dr Meta Osborne, Dr David Marlin, Roly Owers, and Dr Inge D’Haese

Chair, Dr Malcolm Morley, poses the following question to panellists:

What do you think are the top priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?



What do you think are the top priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

Dr Inge D’Haese:

1. ***Farrier registration*** – “From a Northern Ireland perspective ...registration of farriers is a big thing, but it’s not just farriers. I think it’s bigger than that, it’s also dentists, therapists, physiotherapists, osteopaths - all those paraprofessional people that owners don’t necessarily know what qualifications they have”.
2. ***Live transport***
3. ***Veterinary medicines*** – “There is potential that we lose access to 50% of our equine veterinary medicines by the end of next year if there is not a consensus within government”.
4. ***Transparency and communication*** – “Northern Ireland is unique ... horse people here can be secretive about their horse’s veterinary history and health ... owners see multiple vets ...needs to be more transparency and open communication to ensure welfare of the horse”.
5. ***Reporting abuse and enforcement of penalties*** – “In NI, if we are faced with cruelty or a serious welfare issue there are difficulties ... if reported to the police it is not always followed up on ... from a Government perspective, we should lobby for a clear pathway of reporting and that it can be enforced if required”

Dr Jane Williams:

1. ***An advocate for the horse*** – “Taking a wider approach I think [NI] needs an advocate for the horse, a committee, which works with government, policy, and all the different stakeholder voices so they can challenge what’s happening and maybe think about how we could start to implement some regulatory change and support horse owners and those across horse sport.”
2. ***Research*** – “More research to generate evidence to inform practice and that requires money, engagement, and support to drive that forward”
3. ***Develop education*** – “Education in the broadest sense ... how can we articulate some key messages in a user-friendly manner? For example, develop some good guides that could support horse owners on a ground level”.

What do you think are the top priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

Roly Owers

1. **Register farriers** – [agree with previous speaker] that issues with allied professionals is more than just farriers – “but farriers see the horse more than any other professional, including vets, so registration of farriers should be fast tracked”.
2. **Equine ID and traceability (GB and Ireland)** – “regulation is useless if you don’t know who owns the horse, if you don’t know who is responsible for a horse, then there is nothing that can be done and we see that in the welfare world continuously...The system at the moment is complicated and owners can’t be bothered and no one enforces it, so the system is wide open for fraudSo having a digitised ID system is so important, not least because it would be of huge benefit to owners in terms of biosecurity, traceability, and access to veterinary medicines”.
3. **Enforcement** – “significant trade in the low financial value of equines in and out of Ireland, in and out of the UK, and the rest of the continent of Europe...happens because it is so easy to get away with and therefore digitised ID and traceability would aid enforcement and help make life a lot more difficult for these people who continue to trade horses in pretty poor circumstances”.
4. **Dialogue** – “there are going to be differences of opinion but to be able to do that in a really constructive way is so important, so having this [symposium] as an annual gathering would be great”.

Dr Meta Osborne

1. **Traceability** – being able to trace every horse in Ireland from birth to death.
2. **Shared values** – “when sitting down with the strategy group realising that no-one is going to lose out and there will be gains down the line”.
3. **Involving social scientists** – “human behaviour change is where it’s going to happen but look in the mirror first”.

What do you think are the top priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

Dr David Marlin

Equine Welfare Symposium – “what you are doing today is the most proactive step you could take to understand what the welfare concerns are in Northern Ireland, it’s the first step to identifying priorities, you’ve got such a broad range of people there...The days are gone where we can pretend that everything is ok and we don’t have any issues, whether we are talking racing, or equestrian, or private horse ownership....We have to be honest about what isn’t right within our industry and be open to how we have to change”.

The Chair invites all panellists to share their final comments:

Roly Owers – Transport: “I do not think we can rest on the current regulations as they are absolutely unfit for purpose ... it is unenforceable, and we need new regulation to protect our horses being transported”.

Dr Meta Osborne – Systems mapping

Dr Jane Williams – “Do not lose sight of **the individual horse** in all of this. We must look at each individual horse and their context when assessing welfare as well as having that broader framework”.

Dr Inge D’Haese - Communication – “everyone in the horse world in Northern Ireland knows each other. Communicate at all levels about welfare”.

Dr David Marlin – Changing mindsets – “being really honest and to work together as an industry, accepting that this isn’t going to be easy and that we are going to face a lot of challenges”.

SECTION 2: PARTICIPANT VIEWS

Those attending the Equine Welfare Symposium were given the opportunity to complete a questionnaire. The aim was to gather attendees' current thoughts and views on equine health, and welfare in Northern Ireland and to identify key priorities for equine health and welfare in the future.

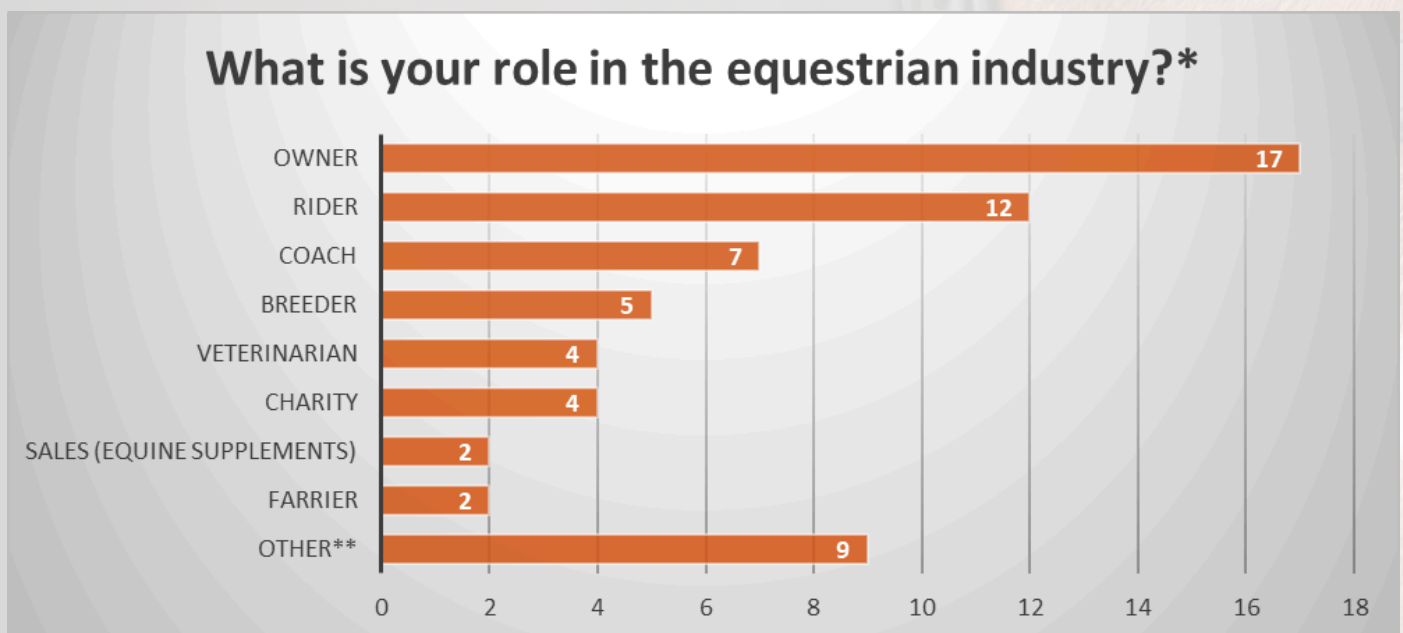
We asked questionnaire respondents three key questions:

1. What do you think is working well for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?
2. What concerns you about equine welfare in Northern Ireland?
3. If you were the new Minister for Agriculture what would be your top three priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

A total of 40 people completed the questionnaire.

Questionnaire respondents had experience in a range of areas within the equestrian industry (see **Figure 1**). Almost half of all respondents said they were horse owners.

Figure 1: Questionnaire respondents' role in the equestrian industry

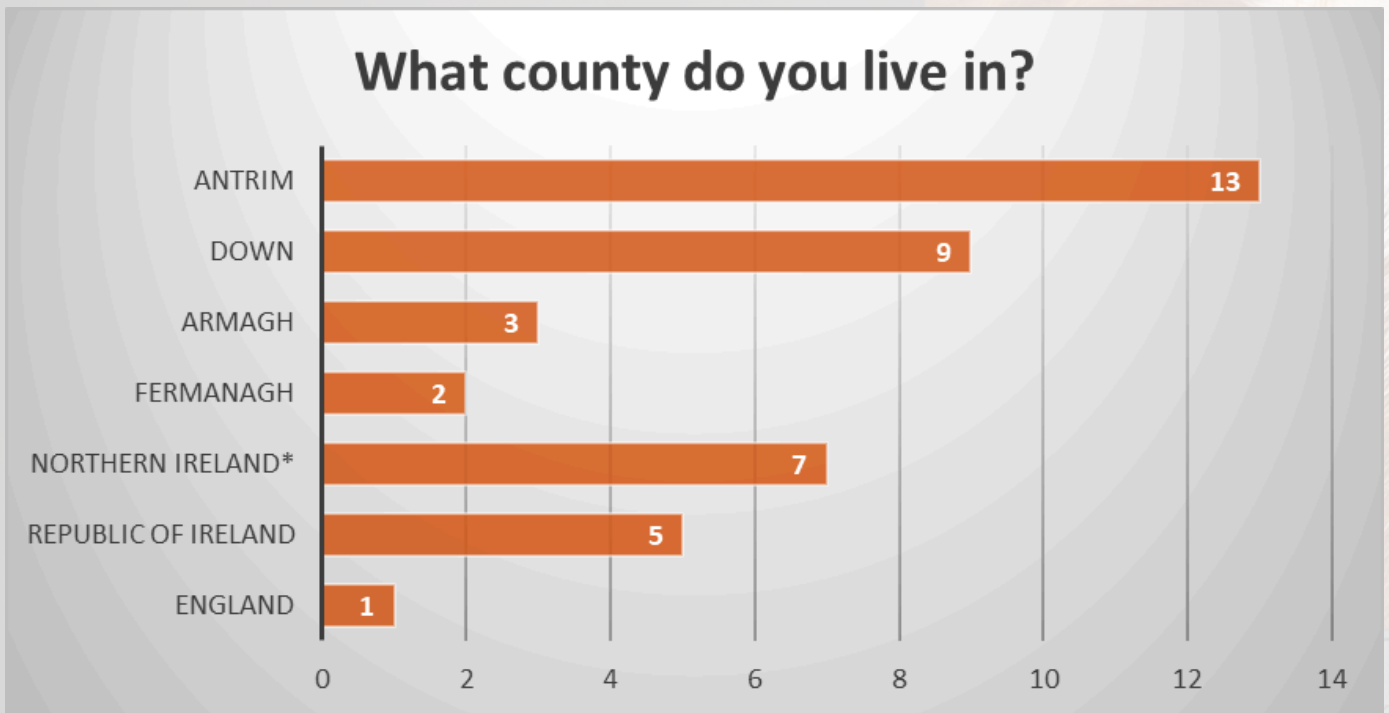


*Many respondents listed several roles within the equestrian industry

**Other refers to a role mentioned by 1 individual respondent: yard hand, saddler, equine massage therapist, equine assisted facilitator, farrier, equine dentist, clinical equine behaviourist, researcher, thoroughbred administration support, and National Governing Body (breeding policy)

The majority of questionnaire respondents live in Northern Ireland, with a small number coming from the Republic of Ireland and England (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Where do you live?



*Some respondents specified a county while others just answered 'Northern Ireland'

What do you think is working well for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

We asked questionnaire respondents if they could identify what is currently **working well** in terms of equine welfare in Northern Ireland today. Please note that responses are listed in order of how frequently they are mentioned in questionnaires.

- **The majority of owners in Northern Ireland care about the welfare of their horses, and understanding of equine health and welfare is improving.** Almost a third of respondents felt that the majority of horse owners care about the health and welfare of their horses and that standards, knowledge, and understanding around equine welfare have improved in recent years with more open discussion on the subject and growing recognition of the need for change.
- **There is passion and drive within the industry to improve on equine welfare and excellent professionals and resources across the field.** Just over a quarter of respondents mentioned professionals, across the field, who were working hard to promote and prioritise equine health and welfare as well as excellent facilities and resources.
- **Events like this one where people are turning out to discuss equine welfare.** Many respondents noted that the Equine Welfare Symposium was a positive initiative and helped to highlight the importance of bringing stakeholders together to discuss and debate the issues around equine welfare.
- **Education on equine welfare available locally.** Many respondents mentioned opportunities for education around health and welfare available in Northern Ireland, particularly at CAFRE.
- **Good veterinarians.** Almost a fifth of respondents mentioned access to great equine vets who were proactive, professional, and aware of the need for improvements in welfare.

What do you think is working well for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

Other points made by a small number of respondents include:

- Sporting organisations taking more responsibility for welfare;
- Organisations like the British Horse Society, particularly events;
- Low level riding groups such as Pony Club;
- Better quality feeds and nutrition;
- Media coverage of equine welfare; and,
- The geography of Northern Ireland (lots of space for horses).

What concerns you about equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

We asked questionnaire respondents if they had any concerns about equine welfare in Northern Ireland. Responses are listed in order of how frequently they are mentioned in questionnaires.

- **Some horse owners have little knowledge or understanding of equine health and welfare.** Many respondents expressed concern over inexperienced owners who lack the knowledge and understanding to provide a good standard of care. It was suggested that there should be minimum requirements for horse ownership, including a standard level of education on equine health and welfare.
- **Lack of enforcement of penalties in cases of poor welfare or mistreatment.** Respondents noted a range of related concerns in this area. Firstly, how should the public report concerns about equine welfare, “who should we speak to?”. Secondly, who is able or willing to enforce penalties when cases of poor welfare are reported, “who has the ability to prosecute?” Some respondents said that despite evidence of neglect and mistreatment there appeared to be little action to discipline offenders or enforce penalties.
- **Lack of regulation for farriers.** Almost a quarter of all questionnaire respondents said they were concerned about the lack of licencing or regulation for farriers in Northern Ireland.
- **Lack of regulation for other equine health professionals.** As with farriers (see above) some respondents were concerned about the lack of licencing or regulation for a number of other allied professionals such as equine physiotherapists, equine dentists, and equine nutritionists.
- **Traceability.** Respondents expressed concern about transparency around equine information, history, and identification.
- **Poorly fitting saddles and lack of regulation for saddlers**
- **Poor access to turn out**
- **Welfare issues in some equestrian competitions**

What concerns you about equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

Other points made by a small number of respondents include:

- Mis-information on equine welfare in the media;
- Threat to the Social License to Operate;
- Funding for equine welfare;
- Access to veterinary medicines;
- Resistance to change from some people within the equine industry;
- Lack of co-ordination and co-operation between the different equestrian fields;
- Unnecessary breeding;
- Firing / blistering;
- Racetrack facilities.

If you were the new Minister for Agriculture what would be your top three priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

We asked questionnaire respondents to state their main priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland. The **top ten priorities** identified by respondents are listed in order of how frequently they are mentioned in questionnaires.

See **Figure 3** for the number of respondents who identified each priority.

Priority 1: Regulation of ownership and education requirements for all owners

Almost half all respondents said that a top priority for equine welfare should be regulation of ownership. There was concern that people buy horses with little or no experience or knowledge of how to provide proper care. Some respondents added that there should be minimum requirements for equine ownership that should include a level of education / training on equine health and welfare. More education and training in equine welfare for everyone who currently owns or works with horses was also identified as a priority (examples include free educational programmes with local providers, horse ownership refresher courses, and more funding for courses at CAFRE)

Priority 2: Regulation of farriery in Northern Ireland

Ensuring that all farriers operating in Northern Ireland were qualified, registered and regulated.

Priority 3: Improve measures for traceability and identification

Implementation of better traceability measures and full transparency in the identification and tracking process. A few people mentioned the importance of an accessible, reliable digital system as part of improved identification and traceability measures.

If you were the new Minister for Agriculture what would be your top three priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

Priority 4: Develop an equine strategy for Northern Ireland

Just over a quarter of respondents said that the development of an equine strategy for Northern Ireland should be a top priority. Respondents felt that a clear strategy for the equine industry would be positive for equine welfare because it would lead to improved standards and legislation on welfare, facilitate collaboration between disciplines and help develop practical ways to implement change.

Priority 5: Ensure appropriate enforcement of current welfare legislation

Almost a quarter of all questionnaire respondents identified better enforcement of current welfare legislation as one of their top three priorities. Respondents said they wanted to see more action and tougher penalties on reported cases of cruelty, mis-treatment and poor welfare.

Priority 6: Maintain Veterinary equine medicine supply

Maintaining access to and supply of equine veterinary medicines was a top priority and huge concern for many questionnaire respondents.

Priority 7: Review equine transport regulations

A complete review of equine transport legislation, including movement of horses for slaughter, was another frequently mentioned priority.

Priority 8: Regulation for allied professionals

A top priority for many questionnaire respondents was better regulation and monitoring of allied professionals, including a register of all qualified professionals working with equines. Specific professions mentioned by respondents include the equine physiotherapist, dentist, and massage therapist.

If you were the new Minister for Agriculture what would be your top three priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

Priority 9: Legislate against keeping equines alone

Some respondents felt that Northern Ireland should follow the example other European countries and legislate against keeping horses alone without good reason.

Priority 10: Raise awareness of importance of regular turn out

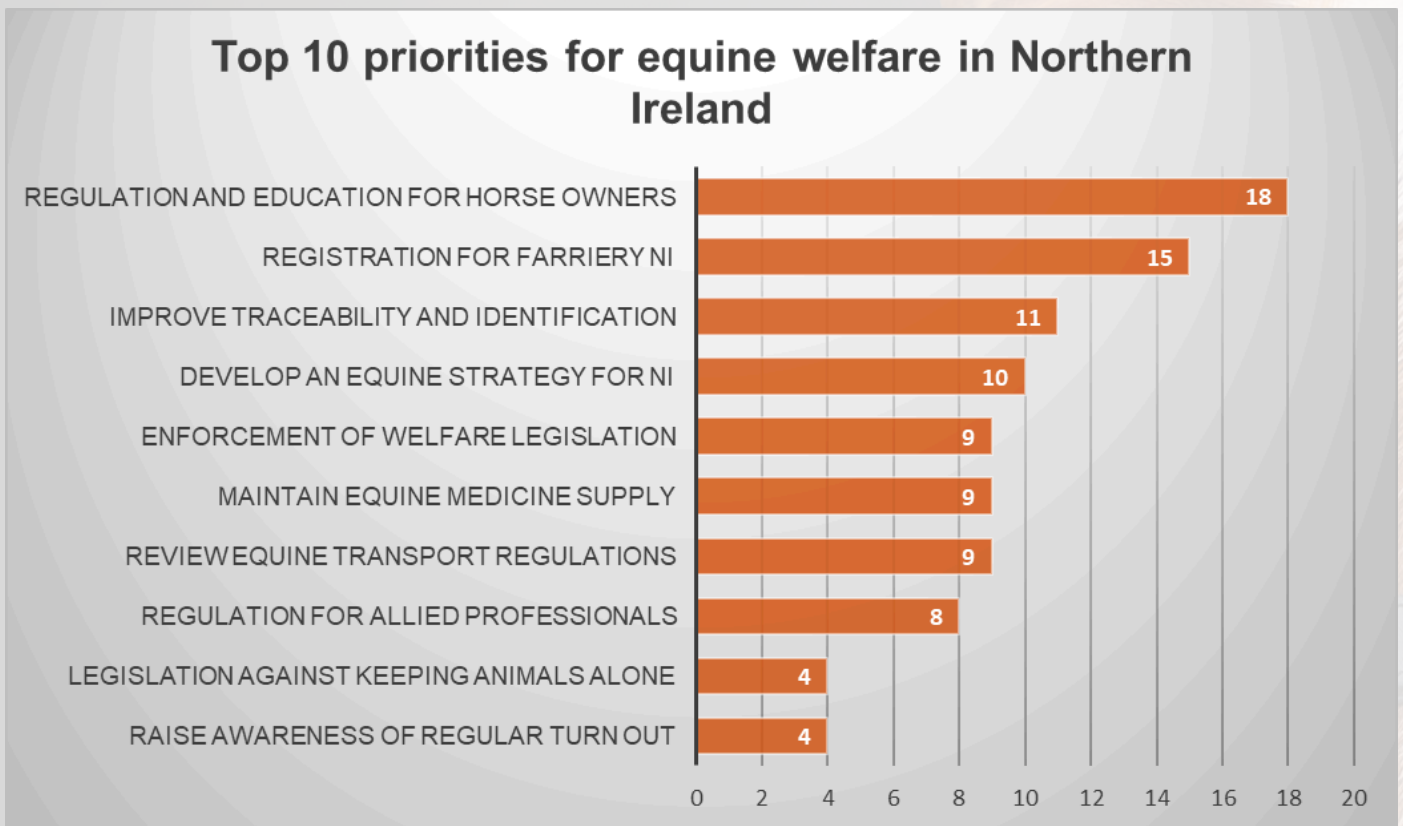
Promote awareness of the importance of daily turn out and possibly legislation against keeping horses confined to stables for long periods was a top priority for some respondents

Other priorities identified by a small number of respondents include:

- Standards and regulations for riding schools;
- Promotion of positive work on equine welfare in media;
- Creation an umbrella organisation for equine welfare in NI that brings all stakeholders together;
- Improvement of focus on animal nutrition;
- Addressing issues of equine obesity;
- More regulation for equestrian competitions;
- Standards and regulation for rescue centres;
- Support for equine assisted activities;
- Licencing of horse breeding.

If you were the new Minister for Agriculture what would be your top three priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland?

Figure 3: Number of questionnaire respondents who identified each of the top 10 priorities for equine welfare in Northern Ireland



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report summarises current thinking on equine welfare, outlines the views of leading industry stakeholders and highlights the significant equine welfare issues which really matter to equine veterinary surgeons and people within the equine industry.

NIVA would like to thank those who took part in the symposium and the study, including the speakers, delegates, our sponsor, and supporters. NIVA will continue to review the issues raised in this report and seek to influence decision makers and professionals working on equine welfare so that equines and people working in the industry have a better life.

In association with equine industry stakeholders NIVA therefore makes the following key recommendations:

Recommendation 1

That the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) considers the issues and priorities raised within this report and put in place arrangements to address the need for an equine strategy as recommended within Deloitte Analysis of the Equine Industry (DAERA, 2019). NIVA would ask DAERA for a formal response to this report outlining their plans for the equine industry.

Recommendation 2

That all stakeholders including the UK Government, veterinary organisations, local politicians and industry stakeholders continue to lobby to ensure a continued supply of essential veterinary medicine following the full implementation of The Windsor Framework. NIVA will continue to make this a priority in their agenda.

Recommendation 3

That the Northern Ireland Assembly should legislate to regulate farriery in Northern Ireland, ensuring that all farriers operating in Northern Ireland are qualified, registered and regulated.

Recommendation 4

That there should be appropriate enforcement of current welfare legislation. Executive Departments must collaborate to ensure that there are clearly identified processes including lines of responsibility for equine welfare.

Recommendation 5

That DAERA engages with the Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine and other key stakeholders such as Horse Sport Ireland, Horse Racing Ireland, Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board and Weatherby's to scope the feasibility of having an equine traceability scheme. Ireland, both in the North and the South, have some of the best bovine and ovine traceability systems in the world and has consistently innovated in this area. A similar scheme for horses would provide a high degree of assurance to owners and purchasers in the equestrian markets, as well as a safeguard for equine welfare.

Recommendation 6

That DAERA review the adequacy of current regulations regarding the transportation of horses especially those being exported for slaughter.

Recommendation 7

That DAERA, through CAFRE, establish a working group (in partnership with relevant stakeholders such as the British Horse Society Ireland and The Pony Club) to address the concerns outlined in Priority One (See page 33) which advocates of regulation of horse ownership and educational requirements for all owners. This group should also have opportunity to review the broader range of issues highlighted in this report.

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Pulse Survey Report (September 2023)

“Equestrian Attitudes regarding the Involvement of Horses in Sport”

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Additional Resources

Animal Sentience - RSPCA Animal Sentience Conference (2019) Available at:
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Applying the Five Domains Model

<https://www.openlearning.com/une/courses/une-equinecourse/?cl=1&redirectTo=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.openlearning.com%2Fune%2Fcourses%2Fune-equine-course%2Fhomepage%2F%3Fcl%3D1>

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Human behaviour change - Useful foundation course on Human Behaviour Change: <https://hbca-online-learning.thinkific.com/>

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