

## **Animal Welfare Committee – report on longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak restrictions on animal welfare**

The first report already covers a number of the potential impacts; however, we have identified a few additional points below that we would ask are taken into consideration in advance of any second wave or regional lockdown.

### **Business**

**Equestrian arenas:** Equestrian covered arenas (also called indoor riding schools) could not be used (in the same way as swimming pools and gyms) until recently. This has hopefully now been addressed, as the Government has clarified that equestrian covered arenas can now be used, provided social distancing guidelines can be followed, as these facilities are large, open and well-ventilated structures and therefore not considered 'indoor for the purpose of the guidance'. However, if there is a second wave, including local lockdowns, then any restrictions need to be treated in a sensible way to recognise that riding in a covered arena lends itself in almost all cases to social distancing measures.

**Riding schools:** There is a concern that as riding schools are not able to operate at full capacity, due to restrictions, they will have to put up the cost of lessons – with reports that this is already happening in some areas. This may exclude continued participation of some customers who can no longer afford it, potentially impacting on their exercise and mental health. In addition, if there are further redundancies, in the wider public population, this may have a knock-on effect as riding school customers may no longer be able to afford lessons at riding schools. This could result in decreased income for these businesses and have a potential negative impact on providing care for their horses, or they will have to reduce the numbers of horses they keep, and this could be difficult if there is a restricted market for them.

**Racing:** British based Thoroughbred breeders produce over 50% of the horses in training in British racing and are also facing their own financial pressures from the pandemic. Key sales at the start of the flat season were postponed or cancelled, and therefore these breeders were having to pay for the upkeep of young horses that in usual times would have been sold on to prospective owners. With most financial models in this sector entirely dependent on selling young horses on for profit, any future lockdowns affecting business operations could be very damaging.

The sector's aim is to support as many jobs and businesses in the industry as possible, but they cannot guarantee every job or business will be retained in racing given the prolonged economic impact of this pandemic. Previous experience in times of negative economic growth indicates that there may be a contraction in the size of the British racing industry. The clearest example of where this contraction may occur – based on the industry's relatively recent experience following the 2008 financial crash and subsequent recession – is in the bloodstock and sales sector, which will have a long-term impact throughout the industry.

UK based thoroughbred sales houses are estimating a significant contraction in turnover – of up to £180 million (50% of revenues) – from the effects of the deep recession which the country is now entering. This could have supply side effects in the medium to long-term, as if thoroughbred breeders do not believe a market exists, then the foal crop in future years will be reduced, meaning fewer horses to race and service British racing's fixture list. Figures from the breeding sector already demonstrate that the lockdown has had an impact on the 2020 covering season, which was at an early stage when the lockdown started. Whilst protocols were introduced to respect social distancing and ensure safe working practices by the TBA in consultation with the Chief Veterinary Officer, there is evidence emerging that some breeders have been put off by the current economic

uncertainty. It is anticipated that coverings in 2020 will be down on 2019 levels and will be further affected in 2021 if sales turnover falls later this year. Furthermore, many businesses could exit the sector altogether, reducing the thoroughbred breeding industry's £427 million annual contribution to the British rural economy, supporting some 19,000 jobs.

### **'Just-in-case' approach**

In the current pandemic there was a level of panic buying previously unseen as lockdown occurred. Companies coped with demand due to it falling at a time of year when production is geared down to accommodate for horses being turned out as spring grass appears. Should a second wave occur at a less optimal time of year (e.g. autumn or winter) there is a risk of shortages both in the quantity available and in the raw material available. There is of course an inherent risk to horses' health should feed need to be changed at short notice.

There was a risk of certain key imported materials such as vitamins and minerals typically sourced from Germany and China being short in supply but should a second wave occur the risk is heightened not only from Covid-19 but also by the impact of the end of the EU/UK transition period which will create its own challenges in sourcing of materials and packaging for feed and supplements, much of which comes from or through Continental Europe.

Various elements of the equine sector, including the veterinary sector, reacted swiftly and decisively to the Government lockdown at the outbreak of Covid-19. The responses were sometimes based more on the successful media messages than specific governmental advice and in some parts of the sector it took longer than was necessary for the restrictions to evolve from "severe" to "appropriate". This could have impacted on horse welfare and any future restrictions should be applied with welfare to the fore.

### **Personnel**

Charities and equine businesses have less money coming in, but they face the challenge that if they furlough staff then they may not be able to provide adequate care for their animals (see section on charities and rescue centres). This was very evident with the veterinary sector struggling with the three-week furlough period, attending to animals needing care (under the Animal Welfare Act) and looking after the wellbeing of their employees whose rotas were not compatible with supplying the necessary care safely. Any future furlough arrangements might be improved if they included flexibility in relation to animal husbandry / veterinary provision.

### **Behaviour**

From a human behaviour perspective, as people were restricted in where they could take exercise and for how long, they were not coming into contact with welfare cases they might normally see and report. We believe this has led to a delay in identification of such cases and could have compromised animal welfare. Rescue centres will likely be seeing the effects of this for months to come (see below section on rescue centres).

The requirement to return (human handled) paper passports in the mail to PIOs to have their details updated poses not only an unnecessary health risk to PIOs but a reduced likelihood that owners will make the changes needed. A fully open central digital system to enable these changes to be made online without the need to return the paper passport would address this concern.

### **Breeding**

In some parts of the equine sector there are concerns that breeding continued throughout lockdown despite uncertainty as to the future demand. For the Thoroughbred sector this is understandable as the covering season was already in full swing and breeders were already locked into nomination

contracts before the lockdown restrictions were introduced. The market for British bred thoroughbreds is a global one, and the long-term impact of Covid-19 on demand will only start to be understood at the yearling sales later this year.

For sport horses, in the AI sector, because lockdown was eased at the beginning of the busy season it looks like being a bumper year. The uplift in breeding activity is partially in response to the absence of competition, where owners and riders have decided to breed with horses they would normally have been out competing with. It is likely that there will be a higher number of young horses available for sale in the coming few years. In addition, there has been an increase in the number of stallions entering collection centres for semen freezing, as a result of not competing, so there will be an increase in availability of choice of frozen semen. The sport breeding sector has responded to Covid-19 health requirements by partnering with digital channels to host online horse auctions during 2020.

For the wider sector there is real concern around the limited number of horse sales taking place. For example, equine sales for semi-feral native ponies, such as the New Forest sales, have already been cancelled and some of the regular horse sales, such as York, remain closed or will not start again until September or later. We know the number of sales has greatly reduced anyway, such as the closure of Brightwells horse sales earlier this year, and we are concerned that some may now not resume, in which case breeders and owners will have reduced options for selling their stock going forward. In addition, BHC members have intelligence that some dealers and breeders sought additional land as they are having to care for expanding herds, we assume this is because there is limited outlet for their stock. However, we have also heard reports that some dealers are seeing a rise in demand now that restrictions have been lifted, but the long-term impact – particularly if the UK economy does not recover quickly – on markets and horse sales cannot yet be fully understood.

Furthermore, the BHS/BEVA Trust led clinics have not been able to take place – which generally castrate or passport approximately 50 equines at each clinic – and this could contribute to an increase in indiscriminate breeding or potentially see equines castrated by people who are not professionals. And if we continue to see businesses making people redundant, financial constraints might lead to fewer entire animals being castrated.

### **Transport**

We have heard reports that the furlough scheme has worked well for transporters, in one case we were made aware of it ensured that the company remained viable. We are aware that a large proportion of 'responsible' transporters stopped all work when the restrictions came in initially, unless it was for a veterinary emergency or some other urgent requirement to remove a horse. Shared loads were not allowed due to human health concerns and these transporters had a set of instructions which were relayed pre-journey to keep everyone safe. However, it has been reported that unauthorised transporters continued to move horses in shared loads, over the whole of the UK – and even to Europe – during lockdown. Below are some of the concerns that have been highlighted:

- There was a lack of large goods vehicles testing as it was suspended during lockdown. The sector believes that many substandard horse vehicles are not being picked up anyway, and the concern is this will be even worse by the time the testing catches up with the backlog. This will only be exacerbated if there is a second wave and restrictions are re-applied.
- As mentioned above, unauthorised transporters continued through lockdown while others stopped movements. We heard that one unauthorised transporter went to meet a Scottish ferry for his load and hadn't planned their journey meaning that they arrived in Scotland with nowhere to stay as nothing was open.

- In addition, some transporters were travelling in and out of the UK and all over Europe, while not being compliant with the rules. The majority of these were not authorised transporters and a fine was cheaper than becoming authorised.

On the positive side, with Covid-19 restrictions in place, sales (like Tattersalls) will be publishing the available transporters on their website making it more difficult for non-authorised transporters to trade there. Furthermore, one transporter highlighted the good work that APHA did to continue to produce health certificates within 24 hours, allowing movements to continue to happen. Going forward, transporters need direct access to exporters at APHA as they are experienced and know what they are doing, unlike frontline staff who can be blockers.

### **Slaughter/End of Life**

As we understand, the restrictions have not prevented slaughterhouses from processing equines or knackermen from euthanising and disposing of equines. If restrictions, local or national, are put back in place then we would ask that these do not impact slaughterhouses and knackermen. As there are so few licensed equine slaughterhouses in the UK, and most horses that are sent to slaughter are not farmed but are generally at the end of their life or 'unwanted', any closures could have a real impact on equine welfare.

Delayed euthanasia was identified as one of the top four major concerns pre-pandemic. With potential for further redundancies and, as a result, for people to be unable to afford to adequately care for their horses (and reduced outlets to sell them on) this may become an even bigger issue.

### **Health & Disease**

As part of the pilot work during Covid-19, University of Liverpool research reported that priority horse health concerns, such as obesity, may be exacerbated by the restrictions due to recommendations not to ride so as not to overstretch the NHS. Likewise, veterinary efforts to increase influenza vaccination rates virtually stopped whilst routine vaccinations were not being carried out.

We are concerned that the October retrospective microchipping deadline in England is not likely to be met by some horse owners as microchipping was tied in with vaccination. In addition, horse owners may be less able to afford the cost of microchipping if they have been financially impacted by Covid-19.

If equine owners are financially impacted by the pandemic, including losing their job, then they may be unable to afford veterinary care or medication for chronic conditions. They may also cut back on preventative healthcare such as physio, saddle fitter, worming or worm testing, vaccinations for tetanus and equine influenza. This could have welfare implications for the horses in their care. The loss of the Animal Health Trust, especially the disease surveillance equine team, could have long-term implications for the sector if no one else picks up this work. It is critical that a solution is identified as soon as possible to ensure that the identification, control and prevention of equine disease outbreaks continues as a disease outbreak or emergence of a new disease could have a huge impact not only on individual horses but the whole equine sector, and its recovery post-pandemic.

### **Charities, Rescue Centres and Educational Farms**

A NEWC survey carried out from 13<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> May, which 74 equine rescue centres responded to, highlighted that all had been negatively impacted by Covid-19:

- Over 81% of respondents had closed their premises to the public and all who have shops had closed them (43%), a key source of income for many of these organisations. Many are unlikely to open this season due to concerns that if staff or volunteers contract Covid-19, these rescue centres will not have

sufficient people to care for their horses adequately.

- 66% of those who responded had stopped or reduced rehoming.
- 41% had furloughed staff with 8% already having taken the decision to make staff redundant.
- Many equine rescue centres rely heavily on volunteers to care for their animals, yet over 70% reported they had reduced the number of volunteers by over 50%.
- Over 83% of rescues reported that restrictions have had a negative impact on fundraising, with 53% reporting a reduction in income of over 50%.

As more people are made redundant, there is a risk of seeing an increase in the abandonment of horses on livery yards, council land or private land. There is also a concern that with a potential rise in welfare issues, well-intentioned people may take on extra animals from a poor welfare situation, but they themselves may be struggling to cope or are hoarding animals and their financial situation may also change going into winter if there is a second wave.

Rising welfare need and decreased income across an equine rescue sector, who are already at capacity, with worst yet to come over winter (when horse care becomes more expensive and labour intensive) may mean that the rescue sector will find it challenging to take in all welfare cases – potentially even some section 4 cases.

The equine welfare sector continues to work collaboratively to ensure they are effectively identifying concerns and practical solutions to the welfare challenges that have, and will, result from the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, it has helped establish the Equine Emergency Rescue Fund with PetPlan Charitable Trust, which has given out its first grants to equine welfare organisations with further funding rounds planned as we head into winter. However, support from the UK Government and devolved administrations, including grants for rescue centres and a possible Government subsidy through the National Fallen Stock Scheme will be important factors as the welfare cases highlighted above come to light, with the latter potentially being the only option available to prevent these welfare cases deteriorating further.

### **Veterinary profession**

If veterinary surgeons are forced to go back to providing only emergency care, this will potentially impact on basic welfare provision throughout the sector. It would also cause significant concern for rescue centres, with the NEWC survey showing that despite restrictions having been lifted at the time of the survey, access to veterinary care was still a key concern amongst rescue centres with 51% reporting they had reduced access to non-essential veterinary interventions and, more worryingly, 32% said they had reduced access to essential veterinary care.

Whilst there were no significant shortages of veterinary medicines during the recent outbreak, there is concern about the long-term availability of equine veterinary medicines should the restrictions continue for an extended period.

We have also been made aware that some veterinary companies have increased their costs to see, treat and euthanise animals (this is applicable to all species, not just equines), even if the owner is bringing the animals to them. For some equine owners/keepers this may be a double hit if they have also been financially impacted by Covid-19 and could have a detrimental impact on equine welfare.

Finally, after the last recession people appeared less willing to give consent for more expensive procedures. i.e. more owners than had previously done so were opting for euthanasia rather than expensive colic surgeries etc.

## **Supplies**

The previous report raised concerns about the availability of bedding and we believe this is still a concern. Before lockdown there was increasing demand for wooden shavings from other businesses that was driving up some costs of this bedding type for horse owners. In addition, a lot of the large horse yards that normally purchase straw have moved to shavings. This is because the straw was not good last year and due to the weather not a lot of winter wheat was planted and then the spring barley crops haven't grown as much as normal so there is likely to be less straw around.

The complicating factor on the bedding front is that some producers of shaving bedding use felled timber imported from Scandinavia so we must also be aware of the combination of Covid-19 and the end of transition period on the availability and cost of the raw material.

We also understand that hay could be in short supply in some areas of the UK. This is potentially regional, and not nationwide, but has a cost implication if it has to be transported further. The dry spring has reduced the grass growth, in June growth was approximately 60% of what was expected, so yields are predicted to be very much reduced in some parts of the country. However, as stated this is likely to be regional, and not national, as some fields are producing better yields this year than last and, yet, we have not seen a significant increase in cost.

## **Research**

The spend on funding research grants has been greatly reduced or stopped. This will have an impact down the line especially coupled with the effects on research collaborations and access to research funding on leaving the EU. Serious scientific research into horse health conditions has been severely curtailed. For example, this year, important research into strangles, investigating alternatives to anthelmintics in horse worm burden management and work into equine allergies were not able to be funded. This will, in some cases, mean the loss of these researchers to UK establishments. With the work going unfunded, these skilled people will not be able to be retained.

As mentioned above, The Animal Health Trust's issues were essentially brought to a head by Covid-19 and this means that, unless picked up elsewhere, the UK's equine disease surveillance programme and the ICC are compromised.

## **Supplied by the British Horse Council**

**W:** [britishhorsecouncil.org](http://britishhorsecouncil.org)

**E:** [comms@britishhorsecouncil.org](mailto:comms@britishhorsecouncil.org)