

Written evidence submitted by The British Horse Society (AB71)

House of Commons Public Bill Committee on the Agriculture Bill

The British Horse Society

The British Horse Society represents the interests of over 104,000 equestrian members and the 2.7 million people in the UK¹ who ride or who drive horse-drawn vehicles. With the membership of its Affiliated Riding Clubs and Bridleway Groups, the BHS is the largest and most influential equestrian charity in the UK. The British Horse Society is committed to promoting the interests of all equestrians and the welfare of horses and ponies through education and training.

The British Horse Society represents 758 equestrian land based businesses, 736 in UK & Republic of Ireland with 22 overseas. The Society welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry.

The Horse Industry is of vital importance to Agriculture and land use. Whist farming is the primary land use in the UK, the Society believes that the horse industry is the secondary land use accounting for approximately 1,000,000 hectares of grassland in the UK, and catering for nearly one million horses.²

The economic value of the equestrian sector, excluding racing, stands at £4.3 billion of consumer spending. There are 1.3 million regular riders in the UK.³

It was estimated that in 2015 horse owners spent £3,600 on each horse per annum compared with £2,650 in 2011.⁴

The British Horse Society welcomes the inclusion of funding for public access to and enjoyment of the countryside. We believe that this is entirely in keeping with the government's public statements on the importance of countryside access as a form of 'public good'.

The British Horse Society believes that responsible access to the countryside is inherently beneficial to society. The benefits of countryside access, not only to physical health but also to mental health and wellbeing are well proven. Increasing and enhancing access supports the Government's aim in its 25 year Environment Plan to connect people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing.

The British Horse Society commissioned the University of Brighton and Plumpton College to research the health benefits of recreational horse riding. A key finding of this research was that horse riding

¹ <http://www.beta-uk.org/pages/industry-information/market-information.php>

² <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmenvfru/544/544we15.htm>

³ <http://www.beta-uk.org/pages/industry-information/market-information.php>

⁴ <http://www.beta-uk.org/pages/industry-information/market-information.php>

and activities associated with horse riding, such as mucking out, expend sufficient energy to be classed as moderate intensity exercise.⁵

Additionally, with an increasingly urban society, an improved and enhanced rights of way system that encourages activities such as horse riding, and carriage driving provides vitally important opportunities to better connect the equestrian public with the natural environment and understand the critical work undertaken by farmers. However, in England horse riders have access to only 22% of public rights of way and horse-drawn carriage vehicle drivers to only 5%.

Furthermore, many rights of way are now disconnected from each other because the roads that should connect them are no longer safe for equestrians to use because of the speed and volume of motorised traffic on them. This leaves many equestrians without a safe local route to use.

Historically equestrians have not been included when legislation has introduced new access; equestrians like cyclists are excluded from the coastal path and from access land.

In the past six years the Society's records show that there have been 2914 reports of road incidents involving horses, 40 Rider deaths, 237 Horse deaths, 840 Horses injured; 85% of these incidents were because vehicles passed too fast or too close to the horse.

Increasing off road access opportunities is vitally important to enable vulnerable road users to exercise off the road and thereby save lives. The 'Future Farming and Environment Evidence Compendium' states that cereal farms used the largest amount of farmed area in the country (33%), over 3 million hectares. Whilst not all of this would be suitable for access, it illustrates the scale of possibility for using headlands for access. Headlands can provide vital 'behind the hedge routes' for equestrians removing them from roads. Likewise the one million hectares of woodland on agricultural land within the UK offer similar opportunities.

Projects undertaken in the past to provide new access and improve existing access have shown that new and improved facilities can increase not only the number but also the diversity of those able to enjoy the benefits of outdoor access.

We note that the Bill focusses on payments in order to "support" access. We suggest that the scope of the "support" remains somewhat unclear, without creating a clear aim of facilitating, delivering or improving opportunities for public access. It would appear somewhat inadequate if significant payments were made for simply maintaining the status-quo regards public access, most of which is already underwritten by legislation such as on public rights of way or access land. A clearer commitment to fund improvements in access to (and understanding of) the countryside would clearly be preferred.

We believe that such funding ought to:

- Offer farmers and landowners an annual payment to help better maintain existing rights of way and access across their land

⁵ <http://www.bhs.org.uk/enjoy-riding/health-benefits>

- Financially incentivise farmers and landowners to increase public access, particularly through improvements in the rights of way network
- Reimburse farmers and landowners for capital works that are required to create new routes across their land

It is particularly important that funding is available:

- to fill in missing links in the existing rights of way network; such as where two sections of bridleway or byway were disconnected, or were connected only by a length of footpath, or where a bridge is missing. This would open up many more connected routes, enabling and encouraging people to explore more of the countryside than is currently possible.
- to allow users to avoid dangerous roads; for example where a footpath or bridleway meet a busy road, forcing users onto that road for a distance before connecting with a different right of way. Providing safe alternative routes would reduce road casualties and make horse-riding, cycling and walking more attractive to users.

Payments for enhancing existing access could include:

- improvement in path widths,
- leaving a bridleway/restricted byway across arable fields undisturbed and uncultivated, and regularly mowing and preventing encroachment by vegetation
- regularly mowing a headland bridleway/restricted byway and preventing encroachment by vegetation,
- mowing and marking a bridleway/restricted byway across grass leys, moorland
- mowing, regrading and rolling green lanes,
- improving the accessibility of gates and the replacement of stiles with gates, so that they comply with the Equality Act, and are easily accessible by equestrians and those with disabilities.
- additional or improved way marking and signposting,
- the provision of parking spaces for horse trailers so that riders who cannot access public rights of way from where they keep their horse can park and access the countryside easily.
- the provision of higher rights (the difference in subsidy between footpaths and bridleways or restricted byways should be substantial to encourage upgrades where it is appropriate for all users).

Improvements in countryside access opportunities would be a huge benefit to countryside users, encouraging healthy outdoor recreation and greater engagement with nature while also strengthening rural tourism and diversification opportunities for rural businesses. Investment in delivering these public goods would therefore yield significant economic benefits for rural communities.

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