



# REIN

Riding Establishments Inspectors' Newsletter | *Spring 2025*

## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

*Update on recent work and what's coming up*

**W**elcome to the 2025 edition of the Riding Establishments Inspectors' Newsletter.

As ever, the Riding Establishments Subcommittee continues to work hard to support the work of the inspectorate in assuring horse welfare at licenced riding establishments in England, Scotland, and Wales. As well as running the online refresher and in-person new inspector training, the Subcommittee and RCVS team both respond to inspector queries, and lobby the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) for improvements to the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018. The Subcommittee also engages and collaborates with stakeholders across the equestrian industry to ensure veterinary influence and input into equine welfare standards at licenced establishments.

As part of showing leadership, and to support inspectors in their assessment of equine welfare and in having the necessary conversations with establishment licence holders and employees, we want to highlight

some of the current areas of equine welfare research to ensure a good life for equids.

We are all familiar with the five domains of animal welfare – nutrition, physical environment, health, behavioural interaction and mental status, and the 'three Fs' of friendship, freedom and forage being synonymous with positive equid welfare. There is increasing focus in the UK on the social licence with respect to horses in sport and many equestrian disciplines are working hard to review their sports through this lens.

We need good quality research and evidence on which to base decision making and this is taking place not only in the UK, but also globally. Our understanding of behaviour and facial expressions of horses, to recognise negative indicators of mental status but also positive indicators, is increasing. There is innovative use of artificial intelligence to assess equine emotions, with the potential to be applied to horses when they are working – be that in a licenced establishment or during competition.

As inspectors, we need to continue to challenge our thinking, stay curious, embrace new evidence, and advocate

for equine agency in the way horses are managed. Animal welfare is a societal concept that evolves with human knowledge and our acceptance of an animal's capacity to experience and perceive. Small changes matter and inspectors have the skills, position, and perspective to effect change in the interests of equine welfare at licenced establishments. On this note, a new equine welfare webinar (in the context of riding establishments) has been added to our 2025 webinar series course.

Thank you for your work in this area as inspectors and thanks also to the RCVS team – Stephanie, Ky, Emma, Jessica, and Lawrence for their hard work and support to the Subcommittee. We said farewell this year, and with heartfelt thanks, to inaugural Subcommittee member Bertie Ellis who has retired, and welcomed Mark Tabachnik to join current members Anne Blackburn, Ben Mayes, Caroline Foalks, Carolyn Madgwick, David Reed, and Rebecca Hamilton-Fletcher. My enormous thanks to you all.

*Linda Belton BVSc MRCVS, Chair of the Riding Establishments Sub-Committee (RESC)*

# Introducing new Subcommittee member Mark Tabachnik

It was last spring when REIN 2024 arrived in my inbox, and, as ever, I found it to be a very useful reminder of the importance of the work we do to ensure that horse welfare at riding establishments is kept to the highest possible standard. However, the final article on page two really caught my attention - the Riding Establishments Subcommittee was looking for a new member. It must have resonated with me, as I remember being really excited about the possibilities this could bring.

I've had an interesting and varied career, mostly in private practice, and largely with my focus on equine dentistry, but I started performing riding inspections just over five years ago, when my previous boss hung up his stethoscope. I had been initially sceptical, thinking that this type of work was a dull exercise in tick boxes and form filling.

However, when I attended the introductory CPD day and later started to ply my newfound skillset, I realised there

was much more to it. Doing the inspection work made me think about how important RCVS inspectors are in maintaining high standards in the professional riding establishments community, allowing them to set themselves continuous opportunities to improve their business.

I find the work enjoyable, and I feel it gives me a chance to help small equine businesses keep up to date with the latest veterinary advice and seek guidance from the veterinary inspector about how to best look after the horses in their care. I have become a firm fan of the riding establishments inspection, and I think it's another great privilege that being an MRCVS allows us to perform.

So, when I saw the vacancy for a subcommittee member, I jumped at the chance. I was delighted to then get chosen to join the team, and it makes the riding inspection work even more enjoyable. It's been a steep learning curve though! I've had to brush up on

the legislation, of course, but actually, a lot of the skills of the Subcommittee members is around interpretation of the Regulations.

We receive a constant number of challenging questions from vets across England, Scotland, and Wales - luckily there are a number of very experienced Subcommittee members who know the answers. So, I consider myself a beginner, but I'm learning fast. I was lucky enough to host our annual Q&A webinars, which we tried to make less formal, more conversational, and engaging. I have also been involved in auditing a couple of vets' inspection reports, which was humbling, as the submissions I reviewed were detailed and constructive, and far better than the ones I had written when I first started. We are now working on re-writing the Inspector's Form (England) which will keep me busy for the next few months.

*Mark Tabachnik MRCVS*

## Feedback from the 2024 audit of inspection reports

Many thanks to all inspectors who were audited this year, your prompt supply of the necessary paperwork is much appreciated.

Here are the key points from this year's audit:

- We were presented with many excellent inspection forms with comprehensive covering letters, and clarity was excellent on the whole.
- Some inspectors are continuing to use out of date versions of the requisite forms - up to date forms are available on the RCVS Riding Establishments website.
- Some establishments are being recommended for a licence when hats are not being worn by riders - we would consider this unacceptable.
- Please ensure paperwork is being signed. This includes by the owner/manager of the establishment and



- yourself as the inspector, for every establishment.
- If clinical abnormalities are noted, it is important to expand on this in your report and clarify whether the horse remains suitable for use. If unsuitable for use, a Notice to Withdraw Horse(s) Form should be completed and recorded in the report to the

local authority.

- Microchip numbers must be recorded for all horses. Ideally, these should be requested in advance of the inspection and checked on the day. The Schedule of Horses Inspected Form can be used for these purposes.
- Relevant qualifications of the owner/manager may be recorded - or, if relying on experience in place of qualifications, this must be evidenced by a suitable CV and references.
- Many establishments have no vaccination policy, yet the veterinary inspectors are agreeing that the disease prevention and biosecurity policies are appropriate. As veterinary surgeons, we should be encouraging best practice which should include vaccinations - hopefully we can all encourage an increased uptake over the coming year.

# FAQs

**T**he Subcommittee regularly receive questions and queries from you, our inspectorate - and we are always happy to help and provide advice.

We are also frequently approached by other industry equestrian bodies and stakeholders, such as the British Horse Society (BHS) and the Association of British Equestrian Riding Schools (ABRS), with questions which are relevant, but come from a slightly different perspective. It is some of these which we've focused on in this year's edition of REIN.

## **1. Who should arrange the inspection date?**

The local authority will first notify the vet in writing that they have appointed them to carry out an inspection - and beyond that it should be down to general good communication between the riding establishment, the vet inspector, and the local authority inspector as to a date that is convenient for all. Inspections need to take place during the riding establishment's normal trading season, with all the animals preferably fit and in work. Some establishments are seasonal and have different groups of horses for each period - e.g., polo yards, with summer season ponies, and a different group of winter arena polo ponies. In these situations, carrying out an additional 'horse audit' for the second group once they're in work seems a pragmatic and sensible approach.

## **2. There appears to be some considerable variation between vet inspector fees, which is beyond geographical influence. Why is this?**

The RCVS recommends charging the standard practice hourly rate, and beyond this cannot comment directly on individual fees. We try to have more than one inspector available in each local authority area, enabling a tendering process to encourage competitive charging. Fees will obviously be affected by variables such as travel time, whether it is a renewal inspection or a quicker annual interim inspection, and how organised the inspection is. Helping the riding establishment in advance to be as prepared as possible, and with plenty of staff present, will be to everyone's advantage.

## **3. There still seems to be considerable overlap between what the vet inspector and the local authority**



## **inspector do. Why is this? Are we being charged more because of this?**

We recognise this is still a problem, not helped by a delay to Defra's review of the Regulations. It is our intention to redraft the Inspector's Form (England) and Guidelines (England) in a manner which reflects what we now feel to be 'best practice'. In the meantime, building a good relationship with your local authority inspectors, such that you can agree between you who does what, will help. We suggest that anything directly involved with equine welfare should always be covered by the vet inspector. Any areas of the current Inspector's Form not inspected should be crossed through, with an explanation as to why, written clearly on the page.

## **4. Why do some vet inspectors insist on seeing every horse ridden? It means extra staff having to be drafted in, it takes longer, and is subsequently more expensive.**

The Subcommittee does not promote inspectors seeing riding as absolutely necessary because of the reasons above. Our primary focus is on tack quality, safety, and general fit - with any evidence of trauma due to poorly fitting tack being carefully checked for. Protocols for assessing saddle fit annually can also evidence a good approach, however, ultimately, the decision lies with the individual vet inspector.

## **5. Are there any guidelines for staffing ratios?**

There are no specific guidelines as there are so many variables. The local authority inspector and/or vet inspector will need to make an informed judgement on whether there are enough staff employed, and on what basis.

## **6. Rider maximum weight allocations - is there any further clarification on this?**

Not yet - this is an emerging subject area which obviously requires sensitive and diplomatic handling. Generally, we feel that it is reasonable to recommend the 15 to 20% rider and tack: horse ratio in terms of weight limits, based on increasing evidence that carrying more than 20% of their body weight can negatively impact horse health. One must also consider the animal's workload, work-type, age, shape and topline, and general health before determining a maximum rider weight. Care must be taken to ensure equine obesity is not being indirectly encouraged, however. The British Horse Council's 'Suitably Mounted Group' includes Riding Establishment Subcommittee members, British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) representatives, academics, and experts from across the industry. The BHS and the ABRS are happy to help riding establishments with putting this guidance into practice (both have riding school approval schemes) and Riding for the Disabled (RDA) and Pony Club Centres have detailed guidelines. The BHS can provide resources on how to engage with this topic without being seen as discriminatory, to help riding establishments engage with their clients.

## **7. Various industry survey findings have suggested that some veterinary (and local authority) inspectors are perceived by the riding establishment in question as being judgemental and unnecessarily critical. How can this be improved?**

We recommend that any 'criticism' should be portrayed as constructive, with assurances to the riding establishment that we are trying to help them improve their business, maximise their star rating, and enhance the welfare of their animals so that they can continue working happily into older age. Giving some positive feedback and spontaneous congratulations at frequent opportunities will always go down well.

The Subcommittee is happy to provide advice to veterinary inspectors. If you have questions, you can contact the RCVS Standards and Advice Team on 020 7227 0789 or [advice@rcvs.org.uk](mailto:advice@rcvs.org.uk)



# What does it take to be an inspector?

The question of what veterinary surgeons need to do in order to be an inspector is one which establishments that are being inspected occasionally ask the Subcommittee, so it might be timely to remind ourselves of what is involved.

So, what do we all need to do to be an inspector and to be fit to carry on inspecting?

Firstly, and self-evidently, an inspector needs to be a UK practising veterinary surgeon. They must adhere to all their professional responsibilities, including meeting annual CPD requirements and complying with the Code of Professional Conduct and its supporting guidance. This means maintaining the five principles of practice set out in the Code:

1. **Professional competence**
2. **Honesty and integrity**
3. **Independence and impartiality**
4. **Client confidentiality and trust**
5. **Professional accountability**

Paragraph 3.1 of the Code requires veterinary surgeons to take reasonable steps to address adverse physical or mental health or performance that could impair fitness to practise; or, that results in harm, or a risk of harm, to animal health or welfare, public health or the public interest. Accordingly, inspectors must be both physically and mentally able to carry out their role safely without endangering animal or public health, welfare or interest.

As with all other professional activities, inspectors must ensure that all their professional activities are covered by professional indemnity insurance or equivalent arrangements.

Of particular relevance to the role of riding establishment inspector is Chapter 21 of the supporting guidance to the Code which sets out the 10 Principles of Certification, including avoiding conflicts of interest.

In addition to the Code and supporting guidance, the Subcommittee requires that the following criteria should be satisfied by inspectors:

- a. **The applicant is physically fit to practise, with five years' minimum post registration experience as MRCVS.**
- b. **Attendance at an approved Refresher Course every five years.**
- c. **An average of 10 hours per week minimum of equine work.**

There are exceptions, particularly, for example, in remote and rural geographical areas.

New applicants must meet the course requirements before joining the inspectorate and will then attend a refresher course every five years. The current course involves webinars as well as in-person training (which is compulsory for new applicants and



optional for refreshers).

Failure to meet course requirements may result in removal from the inspectorate unless dispensation is agreed in advance.

The course allows the RCVS to demonstrate that inspectors undertake ongoing CPD for the role and are suitable to be included on the Inspectorate List, which is accessible to local authorities when they are seeking to appoint an inspector.

To summarise, our role as inspectors is one which is based on a mixture of experience and training, while observing all our professional responsibilities and delivering a quality service to the client – the local authority which appointed us.

# Perils and pitfalls

**S**o, now you've qualified as an inspector, what comes next?

Like most aspects of our profession, you are about to enjoy a diverse range of experiences and will learn as much doing the job as you learnt doing the theory.

You will come across instances which will teach you to look at specific potential pitfalls, and every inspection will potentially teach you a new lesson. Certain situations arise more than others and it is those that we will discuss in this article.

When arranging the visit, liaise with the local authority and check whether the premises is a client of yours if you are in clinical practice. Ideally, noting the 10 Principles of Certification set out in Chapter 21 of the supporting guidance to the Code, you should not carry out an inspection which might raise questions of a possible conflict of interest, for example, where the riding establishment is an existing client of your practice. In such cases, you should, where possible, suggest an alternative inspector and notify the local authority. If, for practical or other reasons, you wish to proceed with the inspection and the local authority is content with this approach, you may do so, though you should still check that the client is content to progress on this basis, as well as complete the necessary paperwork declaring your conflict of interest.

You will also want to speak to the riding establishment owner before the visit to advise how you intend to carry out the inspection, and whether you will require all the horses tacked up in advance.

On the day of the visit, check that you have all the equipment you like to have with you – this might include a stethoscope, chip reader, ophthalmoscope, small torch, hoof testers...and don't forget, spare batteries! I personally also like to take a flexible ruler to show shape at withers vs. shape of saddle gullet etc.

You might also like to carry the Riding Establishments Guidelines with you in digital or printed form in case you might wish to refer to it at any point.

Don't forget to print your paperwork (including Notice to Withdraw Horse(s)) and carry a few spares - use the correct current forms for your area of the UK and

don't use scraps of blank paper.

We see a few sheets of blank A4 paper being used for the Schedule of Horses Inspected during the audit process and they look unprofessional and often miss out the information the forms are designed to capture.

On the day of the actual visit, it is very important to be on time. Being late is never a good start to an inspection and can set a negative tone for the rest of the visit.

Once the inspection begins, what traps might be lying in wait for you?

Horse ages is one area that needs a watchful eye, for example, for replacement passports with made-up dates of birth, missing ages, or horses near the cut off for being used that are actually below the necessary age on dentition. This can extend to horses that have joined the licence during the year based on a certificate from the registered veterinary surgeon who trusted a passport age.

When inspecting the horses, don't be pressured into giving a diagnosis of any issue found; that isn't our role. Instead, direct the applicant to their registered veterinary surgeon. Similarly, we aren't there to give an applicant the benefit of anything approaching a 2 Stage Vetting – we inspect the horse; we don't examine it.

It is during this part of the inspection that an applicant might suggest that previous inspections haven't included parts of the process you want to carry out. For example, the applicant might say, "the previous inspector never asked to see tack on the horse" or something similar.

The format for an inspection is discussed during the training course – simply follow it and ignore the "noise" – you want to inspect the horses, examine their tack, and see the tack on the horse.

When examining tack, be thorough and if there is any disagreement regarding whether tack is fit to be used or not, you might suggest a saddler report on the report to the local authority.

The current video on the RCVS Academy is clear and helpful – follow a routine and you shouldn't miss anything.

If stitching is fraying and looks unsafe, give the tack a little tug to see if the stitching gives away further, indicating that it needs attention as soon as possible.

Don't forget to check the bits – easy to do if horses are tacked up when you

arrive – and make time to go into the tack room later and check tack on the racks.

When it comes to inspecting the actual premises, remember you can inspect everywhere if you wish. We have been trained to observe and if we look everywhere and remember to look up then we should see all we need to see.

If you want to look at something more closely and the applicant is trying to move things along, simply explain why you need to spend longer observing and do so.

While we are not trying to inconvenience anyone unduly, we must also do our job thoroughly and that takes as long as it takes.

Note your findings on the forms as you go along, and record/explain the significance – be that in terms of lens opacities, worming issues, broken trees, poor feet, etc.

Any areas of the forms you wish to leave blank you can score through and put a note as to why they are incomplete. Bear in mind that these forms, and your report, may be made public at some point and also come under the 10 Principles of Certification outlined in Chapter 21 of the supporting guidance to the Code.

During audit, we find blank areas of forms, forgotten signatures, and other issues – these are potentially serious issues should there be a Freedom of Information Act request or subsequent court case over the outcome of an application.

The penultimate act of the inspection is to write a report – every time. This should cover a basic outline of the premises and your findings, both good and bad – commending improvements is as important as noting deficits. Keep a copy of your own paperwork as that is the best way of ensuring you can comply with an audit and refer back in future inspections to your own findings.

Lastly, prepare and send an invoice. How you choose to prepare your invoice is your own choice – visit plus time, on a time basis only etc. We can only advise that you use an hourly rate as per your other professional roles but don't forget to include time spent preparing your reports. It is important however, that the invoice is sent to your client – the local authority – and not to the riding establishment.

*David Reed MRCVS*

# Inspectorate survey

To ascertain the spread of work amongst the inspectorate, the Subcommittee has asked if inspectors can provide information on how many inspections they actually carried

out in 2024. To provide this information, please email Ky Richardson, Senior Standards and Advice Officer/Solicitor, by 9 June 2025 at [k.richardson@rcvs.org.uk](mailto:k.richardson@rcvs.org.uk).

## Annual Q&A sessions

The Subcommittee will continue to run the Annual Q&A sessions in 2025, in an interactive format using breakout rooms before returning to the main group for wider

discussion.

The Subcommittee will continue to provide considered answers to questions sent into the College via the Standards and Advice Team email or using the

Q&A form on the Riding Establishments webpage. These questions will be discussed at the sessions, in addition to questions that are asked live during the session.

## Passports

The checking of passports is an important part of the licensing inspection due to its welfare implications, and we commonly see several passport irregularities that we should advise on at our annual inspections.

The RCVS Guidance for Local Authorities and Riding Establishment Inspectors was last updated in 2022, and these state:

*6.19 All horses and ponies must be microchipped and passported. The horses' microchip must be scanned, cross referenced with the passport and noted.*

*7.67 the licence holder must ensure that all records are kept up to date and readily produced including a valid passport showing its unique life number and microchip number as required by the Animal Welfare (licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018.*

The Riding Establishment Acts 1964 and 1970 do not require horse passports to be checked, however, inspectors should make reasonable enquiries to satisfy themselves that the horses on the establishment are in possession of valid passports and make a record of this.

The inspectorate needs to get this right as we are signing our names on the Veterinary Inspector's Report that asks us (section B5) whether passports are



available for every horse, and whether we have scanned and cross-referenced microchips against each passport.

So, it is worthwhile checking passports as you go throughout your inspections. Common issues that you should look for include:

- Passports from overseas (e.g., France or the Republic of Ireland) that have not been endorsed/overstamped by a UK passport issuing organisation;
- Passports with incorrect owner details, or registered to a previous owner; and
- Passports with different microchip details for the horse.

There is no need for horses to be signed out of the human food chain within the passport section II part IX, although the annual inspection and examination of passports presents

a good opportunity to have this conversation with the licence holder.

Ultimately, it is the licence holder who is considered the keeper of the horse in the owner's absence. Therefore, the establishment has a legal responsibility to make sure that the horse has the correct and up to date documentation. It may be worth reminding the licence holder that it is an offence not to update the owner's details in a passport via the relevant passport issuing office within 30 days of taking possession of a horse.

Bear in mind the Schedule of Horses Inspected Form, which can be downloaded from the RCVS Riding Establishment website, and which encourages the licence holder to fill in the horses' details before you arrive, saving time and allowing you to focus on your role. You can also encourage the establishments to look up the horses' microchip numbers on the Digital Stable website to see if the animal is correctly recorded and follow up where the details are not accurate.

It is ultimately the local authority inspector's responsibility to ensure the horse passports are compliant, however, as most licensing inspectors are from district councils, this is the only time they have involvement with passports. As vets, we usually have a far better understanding and can assist with this aspect of the inspection.



# National Equine Forum update

## *Overview of the 33rd National Equine Forum*

**M**y fellow subcommittee member Rebecca Hamilton-Fletcher and I attended the National Equine Forum (NEF) in Westminster on 6 March 2025. The NEF is held every March and is a cross-equine-industry forum with approximately 200 people from all equine organisations. These include charities such as World Horse Welfare and the Horse Trust, the National Equine Welfare Council, as well as membership organisations such as the British Horse Society (BHS), Association of British Riding Schools (ABRS), Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA), British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA), and British Equestrian. It also includes educational establishments and interested MPs, (including the no longer practising equine vet Neil Hudson). For the first time, this year, the forum was live streamed free of charge.

Dr Pat Harris MRCVS opened the NEF by setting the scene and leading a discussion on feed and forage. The NEF scheduled this topic as there is a lot of confusion out there with a lot of different information and inevitable misinformation on equine diet. Perhaps the higher requirement set out in the English Regulations regarding obtaining independent nutritional advice is wise - I wonder if this session counts towards meeting this licence criteria!

The highlight of the morning was the industry update session, chaired by Roly Owers OBE MRCVS, World Horse Welfare CEO who introduced the 'new'

minister, Baroness Hayman of Ullock, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Biosecurity, Borders and Animal Welfare). David Mountford MRCVS, CEO of BEVA and current chair of the British Horse Council (BHC), discussed the government's lack of progress in the equine industry over the last 12 years following equine identification (passports) having been added to the agenda. The recent five-year Post Implementation Review for the English Regulations stated that "no action was required", which means that unfortunately, there is no current plan by Defra to review/update these Regulations.

Richard Newton MRCVS of the Equine Disease Surveillance Group did a whistlestop tour of equine infectious disease, which is also a major part of the English Regulations which cover biosecurity policy, disease prevention policy, isolation policy and so on. There was a question regarding avian flu and cross-over into horses, and Richard pointed out that this is far more likely for humans - not sure how the world would cope with another epidemic right now!

Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal attended lunch and the afternoon session. British Equestrian showed off the Olympic equestrian success - although the pre-Olympic welfare dressage incident, the withdrawal of equestrianism from Modern Pentathlon, and social licence in general is still at the forefront of the equine industry's minds. Most of the afternoon was about Equine Assisted Services

(EAS). This is important to us and the industry as a whole - not equine athletes, but lots of little ponies, cobs, and donkeys are all part of EAS organisations.

Ed Bracher, chair of the EAS Partnership humorously gave us an overview of this rapidly emerging part of the sector. An educational consultant tried to get us up to speed on SEND learning, and then we listened to the founders of Strength and Learning Through Horses and a father and son story 'Changing Lives Through Horses'. Many of these establishments are funded through social services and the NHS as well as local educational authorities, and it is rapidly growing.

For example, I recently inspected an establishment with a local authority animal welfare officer and found it had been using 25 horses/ponies for riding without a licence for several years, which is concerning.

At the NEF, I also learnt that the traditional riding school model is being outgunned (to a degree) by learning centres and I hope the local authorities can keep up in terms of looking after the animal welfare. If the centre is using horses to educate, along with other species, then the interests of the animals' welfare must be included - the local authority's exhibition licence includes non-ridden equines and other species. I hope that's enough.

*Ben Mayes MA VetMB MRCVS, RCVS RESC and Clinical Director, Mayes and Scrine Equine.*

## Reminder about Schedule of Horses Inspected Form

A reminder that we updated the Schedule of the Horses Inspected Form in 2024, and the new version is available for download from the RCVS Riding Establishment website.

It has been produced with valuable input from Subcommittee member Carolyn Madgwick and Subcommittee consultant Sharon Edwards, who are our British Horse Council and local authority

representatives. The hope is that it will become a universal form, adopted by both local authorities and veterinary inspectors.

The view is that the form can be forwarded to you by the local authority in question in advance of a renewal inspection and with the ID columns already filled in. For interim inspections, or where your local authority remains

unwilling to come on board, there is no reason why this Schedule of the Horses Inspected Form cannot be provided to the riding establishment for them to complete ahead of the inspection. However, we would still recommend cross checking the details against the relevant passport, especially for new arrivals whom you haven't inspected before - but it would certainly save significant time otherwise.

# Body Condition Score (BCS)

## *Statutory Guidance Schedule 2 section 6*

**T**he Regulations require that riding establishments monitor BCS, and records should be available proving compliance.

Horses displaying significant weight loss or gain must be checked by a vet and treated as needed.

BCS is a formalised system used to assess the amount of body fat on a horse. The system was originally developed for use in food production animals to assess muscle and fat reserves but is now widely used in horses to estimate fatness and is also known as fat scoring.

There are two commonly used BCS systems: The 0-5 system (developed by Carroll and Huntingdon) and the 1-9 system (developed by Henneke). Both systems provide an effective way of assessing condition of the horse using hands on technique to palpate the fat cover. The 0-5 system is most commonly used in the UK and inspectors are encouraged to use this system during their horse inspections and record their findings in the Schedule of Horses Inspected Form.

BCS do not provide any indication of internal fat deposits.

To form an opinion on an individual's level of fatness, inspectors must appraise at least three areas:

1. Neck and shoulder;
2. Ribs and spine; and
3. Quarters and tail head.

A BCS score should then be estimated averaging the score given for each of these sites, where:

- 0 is emaciated;
- 1 is poor;
- 2 is moderate;
- 3 is good;
- 4 is fat; and
- 5 is obese.

It is acceptable to use intermediate



scores and the ideal condition BCS is between 2.5 and 3 for horses. A condition score below 2 is not acceptable and the horse should not be worked. A score of 4.5 to 5 may also be unacceptable. The inspector should consider withdrawing an individual from the licence until the welfare aspects of the horse being so overweight have been addressed and a veterinary certificate from the premises vet has been obtained for inclusion on the licence. However, it is important for the inspector to exercise their professional judgement in each case, considering the BCS record of the horse, its care plan, and veterinary history.

As veterinary surgeons, we are all very aware of the welfare implications of the amount of fat carried by a horse, be it thin or fat. Therefore, making BCS estimation is an important part of the

horse inspection. Trends in BCS across an establishment will also give an indication of the standard of husbandry and horsemanship on those premises and can form a basis for discussions with management which aim to improve the wellbeing of horses on the premises. Care must be taken to make ensure obesity is not directly encouraged. BCS issues should be reported to the local authority as a welfare concern and as such may affect the grant of a licence. If inspecting in England, you could also mandate the need for the riding establishment owner to engage a professional (independent) nutritionist, if BCS is a concern.

A different fat scoring system needs to be used to assess donkey body condition score and details of this can be found on the Donkey Sanctuary website.