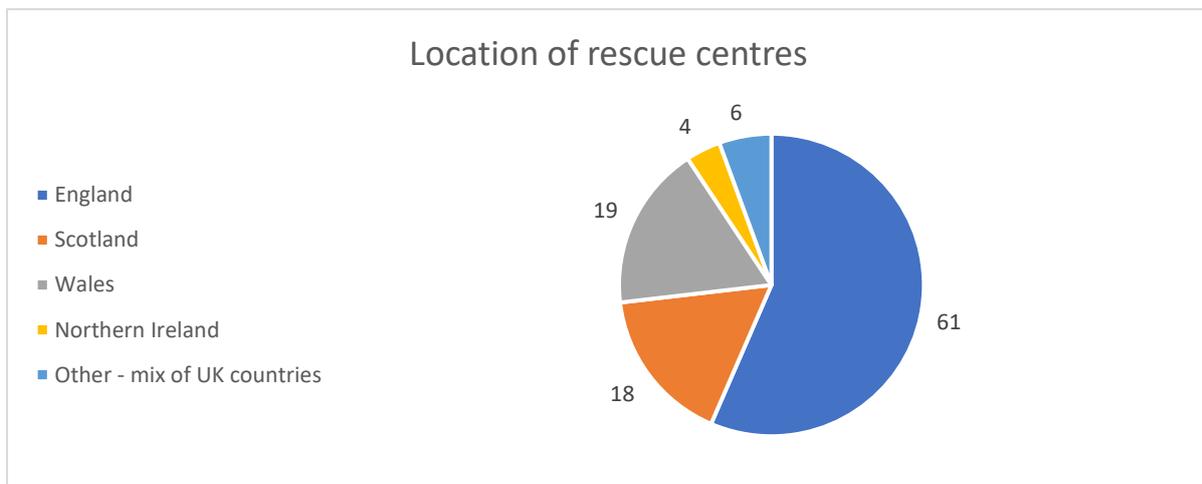




Summary: Impact of Covid 19 on Equine Rescue Organisations

About NEWC and ADCH

The National Equine Welfare Council represents 37 equine organisations in the UK and The Association of Dogs and Cat Homes (ADCH) represent 150 member organisations in the UK and Ireland. To assess the long-term impact of Covid-19 on the rescue sector, ADCH and NEWC conducted surveys in May to assess the potential long-term impact of the Covid-19 virus on animal welfare and on the viability of the rescue sector. This survey was open 13th – 22nd May 2020 and was sent to 150 ADCH members alongside 450 other rescues that are not ADCH members and to 37 NEWC members as well as an additional 126 other equine rescues. This briefing focuses solely on those organisations that care for equines, of which 74 responded from across the UK and 42 percent of those are multi-species organisations and, where appropriate, also includes information and references from additional sources to provide context.



The survey was intended to help assess the long-term impact of the Covid-19 on animal rescue organisations, including on their operations, funding and sustainability, and to understand what measures would best mitigate the impact to the sector.

Key findings

The clear message from the equine rescue sector is that Covid-19 has negatively impacted on all respondents, although to different degrees. NEWC is concerned that, while the below shows the sector has been significantly impacted, the full effect of Covid-19 will not be felt until we come into winter – when caring for equines becomes more labour and resource intensive, with increased costs. At the time of the survey:

- 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.

- NEWC's understanding is that the majority of equine rescue centres were at or over capacity before Covid-19, with an estimated 7, 000 horses estimated to be 'at risk' from a welfare perspective in England and Wales alone. The initial ban and subsequent restrictions on rehoming will only have added pressure and additional costs to an already overloaded sector.
 - 66% of those who responded had stopped or reduced rehoming.
 - While only 38% of all rescues had stopped taking in animals.
- Only 16% of respondents had not taken action to mitigate impact of Covid-19 on their organisation, of these some rely purely on volunteers while another was planning on furloughing staff imminently:
 - 41% had furloughed staff with 8% already having taken the decision to make staff redundant.
 - 26% had applied for grants.
- 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%.
- Access to veterinary care appears to be a key concern 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.
- Over 83% of rescues reported that restrictions have had a negative impact on fundraising, with 53% reporting a reduction in income of over 50%.

Recommendations

With equine rescue centres already operating at capacity before Covid-19, due to a consistently high level of demand on their services, the real concern is that the impact of the pandemic on the sector will undermine their ability to respond to and care for welfare concerns. To compound this, we also anticipate that welfare concerns will rise as a result of Covid-19, particularly if the economy does not recover quickly and we face further redundancies. We would therefore like to make the following recommendations:

- The UK Government and devolved administrations should release funds for animal rescue organisations. 82% of respondents felt that access to grants would best help mitigate the impacts of Covid-19.
- We believe a subsidised national fallen stock scheme should be put in place until the end of 2020, which would give responsible owners, who may not otherwise be able to afford to, the option of putting their equine(s) to sleep before they become a welfare concern.
- Funding for local authorities and enforcement agencies, with clear direction that equine welfare should be considered a priority, to ensure they can help respond to a potential increase in welfare concerns as a result of Covid-19. This is of particular importance in situations where other attempts to resolve the issue have been unsuccessful, although we recognise that circumstances are different in Scotland as the SSPCA has greater powers to investigate animal cruelty.
- We believe a temporary uplift in the rate of Gift Aid should be introduced.
- We would suggest that business rate relief for veterinary practices should be introduced, as has been done for other sectors. We believe this would benefit both equine rescues who run their own clinics for the public and those that are reliant on private veterinary practices for much of their rescue work.
- The UK Government and devolved administrations should clarify in their Covid-19 safety employer guidelines which guidelines apply equally to volunteers; over 30,000 members of the public volunteer at animal welfare shops and centres and clear guidance will alleviate complex interpretations.
- Banks and mortgage lenders should not penalise animal rescue organisations for having reserves when applying for grants or other measures such as mortgage holidays.

Impact of Covid-19 on Equine Rescue Organisations: Analysis

Background

There are around 847,000 equines¹ in the UK, with at least 7,000 estimated to be in an 'at risk' welfare category in England and Wales before Covid-19. In 2012, equine charities declared a 'horse crisis' and for a number of complex and interrelated reasons this situation has remained stubborn, and can no longer be deemed a 'crisis' but must be recognised as the result of systemic failure of ownership, the law and its enforcement.

A key concern is that Covid-19 will only have exacerbated an already fragile situation, potentially placing additional pressure on an equine welfare sector that is already operating at capacity. It is common knowledge that before the pandemic the number of horses requiring help from animal rescue and rehoming charities in England and Wales continued to outpace the approximately 3,000-4,000 spaces available. For example, one of NEWC's member organisations – World Horse Welfare - has been over ideal capacity at its four rescue and rehoming centres for the past 2 years, with 366 in their care at the start of March, before restrictions were introduced.

Impact of Covid-19

Equine sector

While the full impact of Covid-19 across the entire equine sector may not start to be properly felt until late autumn, when horse care becomes more expensive and labour intensive, we have good reason to believe that the pandemic will exacerbate an already challenging situation and if there is a subsequent recession this will only add further pressure. This is based on the below:

- Of those who responded to the survey, 14% of equine rescue organisations are already reporting more calls about cruelty to animals while only 5% are receiving fewer calls. In addition, 24% believe that more animals are being abandoned compared with only 3% who think there are fewer abandoned animals. However, it should be recognised that a perceived 'abandoned' animal may, in reality, be 'fly-grazed'.
- 31% of respondents said they were receiving more calls from the public wishing to hand over an animal, this is double the number of those who had seen a reduction in calls (15%).
- An early survey – which had around 6,000 respondents - aiming to capture the practices and concerns of equine keepers, undertaken by Dr David Marlin, Louisa Taylor MRCVS and Dr Jane Williams, showed that around a third were worried the financial fall out of the pandemic would impact the welfare of their horses.
- We have heard reports from across the equine sector in the UK that breeding at all levels, regardless of breed or intended use, continues unabated despite uncertainty as to whether there will be a market for young stock. For example, equine sales for semi-feral native ponies, such as the New Forest sales, have already been cancelled and in Wales some of the regular sales, including Llanybydder and Brecon, are currently closed. 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, NEWC members have intelligence that some dealers and breeders are seeking additional land as they are having to care for expanding herds, we assume this is because there is currently no outlet for their stock. During the summer months, when equines can be put out to grass, this should be manageable but, as we stated

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

earlier, our concern is for when we approach winter and costs associated with caring for equines escalate.

For equine welfare organisations more specifically, while the type of impact felt as a result of restrictions imposed across the UK has been broadly the same, it should be noted that there may be slight variations as to the extent of their impact across the four jurisdictions as they have been in place for different periods of time. For example, restrictions on rehoming were lifted earlier in England and Scotland than they were in Wales and non-essential shops have been allowed to open earlier in Northern Ireland and England compared to the other two jurisdictions.

All respondents reported that Covid-19 had impacted on their work or ability to operate. This impact can be broadly split between the following categories: ability to respond to welfare concerns, rehoming and intake, income, staff and volunteers and access to veterinary services.

Ability to respond to welfare concerns

During March-May, when the most stringent restrictions were in place across the UK, welfare organisations were only responding to emergencies, although with restrictions easing many are now also attending lower priority welfare concerns. However, this does mean that during an almost three-month period equine welfare organisations were not intervening with advice in low-priority cases to ensure they did not become more serious. In addition, 23% of organisations who responded to the surveys reported that they had stopped travelling to welfare concerns – meaning that capacity across the sector to deal with welfare concerns was reduced.

Rehoming and intake

Of those who responded to the surveys, 46% reported they had stopped rehoming and 20% had reduced rehoming. While easing of restrictions on rescue centres to allow for rehoming has helped, many organisations did not stop taking in animals before restrictions were eased and will have seen increased costs, associated with caring for more animals, while their income was decreasing. Indeed, only 38% of rescues reported they had stopped taking in animals.

On a more positive note, 27% reported that they were receiving more calls from members of the public who were interested in rehoming an equine, compared to just over 10% who reported a drop in calls from potential rehomers. However, it is unclear from the surveys whether those who demonstrated an interest were suitable rehomers and, therefore, whether this will translate into horses being successfully rehomed to responsible homes.

Income and confidence in the future

Over 83% of organisations that responded to the survey reported that restrictions have had a negative impact on fundraising (Figure 1). Over 52% of equine rescues reported a drop in income of over 50%; over 21% a drop of income between 20% and 50%; and only 9% a drop of below 20% in income. This is due to a number of factors including: cancellation of fundraising events, closure of premises and shops – a vital income stream for many smaller organisations - and a drop in legacies and donations. In addition, for some rescues income also comes from rehoming fees, although in reality this rarely covers the cost of rehabilitating an equine and for larger organisations tends to be a token fee.

Only 16% of equine rescues had not implemented contingency measures at the time of the survey to counteract the impact of Covid-19 on the organisation. This included furloughing staff and applying for grants, with 46% of respondents having applied for funding from a variety of sources including the Equine Emergency Rescue Fund with PetPlan Charitable Trust, local authority small business grants and bank overdrafts. To-date, the only central governments to offer specific grants to third sector organisations are the Welsh and Scottish. Despite these measures it is clear from the results of the

surveys that Covid-19 has had an impact on the sustainability of equine rescue organisations (Figure 2). Of those who responded, 18.5% believed they may not survive past another 3 months and an additional 9% estimated they only had funding for another 6 months. While this may not seem high, it should be borne in mind that for equines the summer period is less labour intensive, and costs can be kept to a minimum if horses are kept at grass. As we have stated previously, we anticipate the full effects of Covid-19 not to be fully felt until we enter the winter season. In addition, 25% were unsure how long funding would last and from associated comments this appears to be largely because there are too many variables and unknowns for them to comfortably predict how long their funds might last. Those who responded in this category were largely pessimistic about their outlook, citing concerns that included: the need to be able to re-open to the public to survive; no guarantee as to whether the current level of support in the form of one-off and regular donations will continue; not knowing when restrictions will be fully lifted and uncertainty over whether the public will feel confident to return to rescue centres when they are.

Figure 1

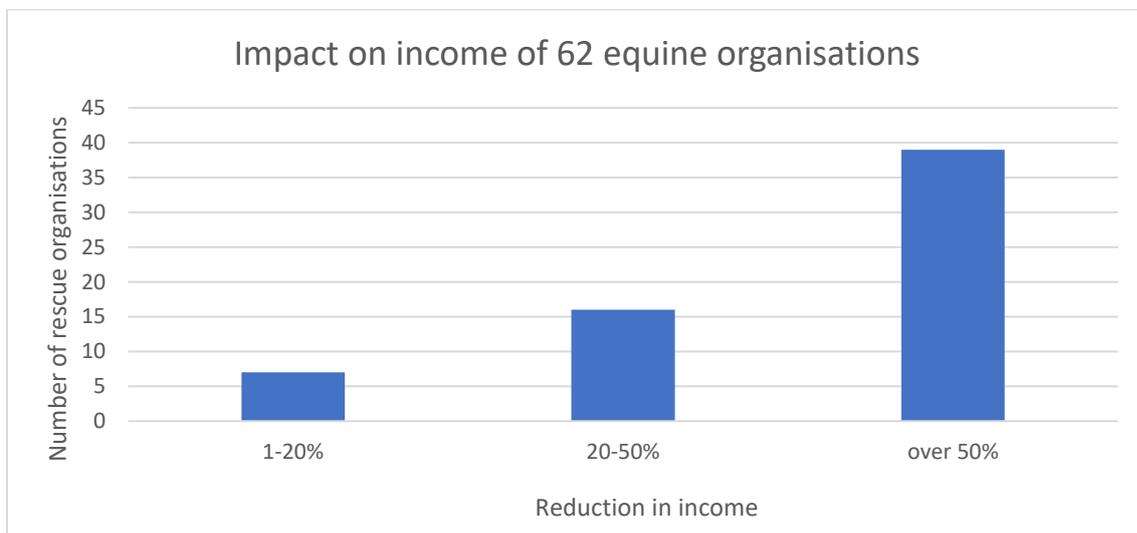
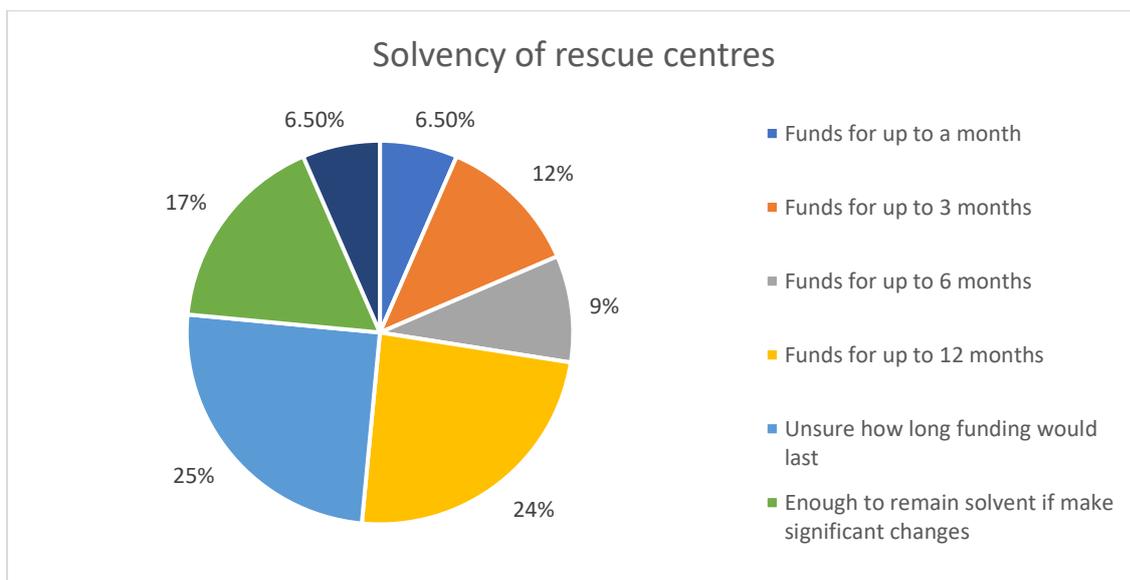


Figure 2:

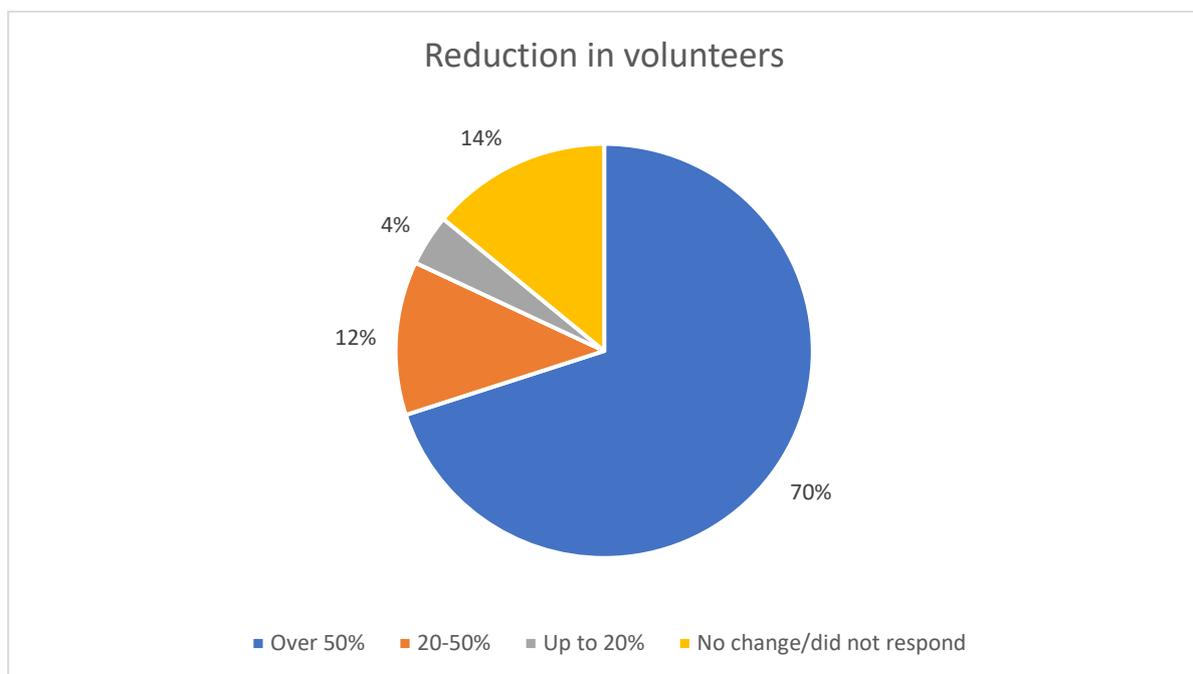


Staff and volunteers

Those who responded to the survey vary significantly in the number of staff they employ from 0 to 1600. To mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on their organisation, over 41% had furloughed staff while 8% had already made staff redundant.

Alongside the reduction in paid staff, 86% of organisations had seen a reduction in the number of volunteers working for them. The primary cause seems to be because travelling to an equine rescue centre is not generally perceived to be as an 'essential journey' for a volunteer under Covid 19 restrictions. The majority of organisations (70%) had reduced the number of volunteers by over 50% (Figure 3), which is of particular concern for smaller rescues who generally rely heavily on volunteers for the day-to-day care of the animals and premises and as we move into autumn/winter this need will only increase. Whilst the effects of their lack of presence may not be felt initially, long-term it could have a detrimental impact on the welfare of the animals.

Figure 3:



Access to veterinary services

While veterinary work was always considered an essential business and veterinarians as key workers, only emergency work was permitted until 14 April². This has now been widened to include neutering, microchipping and vaccinations³, although this is assessed on a case-by-case basis to determine whether treatment or the veterinary procedure is possible to carry out safely and within government guidelines.

² <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/news/coronavirus-bva-and-rcvs-statement-on-changes-to-veterinary/>

³ <https://www.bva.co.uk/coronavirus/coronavirus-advice-for-veterinary-professionals/>

Over 51% of respondents reported they had limited access to non-essential treatments, such as microchipping and castration. More worryingly, 32% said they had reduced access to essential veterinary interventions, with one organisation referencing a delay to necessary dental work, and this could potentially have negative implications for the welfare of the animals in their care.

Conclusion and recommendations

While the general picture of the equine rescue sector is not as bleak as the sector feared it could have been if Covid-19 had hit the UK over the winter months, it has still had a significant impact on income and rehoming activities with the full implications for the equine sector, including rescue organisations, potentially not being felt yet. With every indication that there has been no cessation in breeding in the UK - across the entire equine sector - despite a restricted market for much of the stock produced, combined with an uncertain economic outlook⁴ for the UK – with the potential for further redundancies – we are deeply concerned that coming into winter 2020 we are going to see an increase on the already high number of equines we have at risk across this country.

We recognise the ‘horse crisis’ is a long-term issue and the root causes must be addressed to have any lasting impact. This will include combined and continued efforts across the sector to reduce the number of horses being bred without an intended purpose or quality future. However, the harsh reality is that the rescue sector is at full capacity and would be hard pressed to cope with any increase in equine welfare concerns across the UK – even if we had not been significantly impacted by the restrictions rightly imposed to control the spread of Covid-19. Therefore, we need to consider any fall-out from the pandemic separately and deal with it as a matter of urgency.

The equine welfare sector continues to work collaboratively to ensure we are effectively identifying concerns and practical solutions to the welfare challenges that have, and will, result from the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, we have 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, central and local government support is needed, both to alleviate the direct impact to equine rescue organisations – to ensure they can continue to operate - and to address any rise in equine welfare concerns that are caused directly or indirectly by Covid-19.

Therefore, while we support all the recommendations laid out at in the summary (which broadly align with ADCH), from an equine perspective we would particularly like to stress the following:

- The need for the UK Government and devolved administrations to consider funding for the equine welfare sector.
- A subsidised fallen stock scheme to enable responsible owners, who may not be able to afford other forms of euthanasia, can put their equine(s) to sleep before they become a welfare concern. This will enable front line workers and welfare line operators to sign-post these owners to an affordable solution, although we recognise the decision to put an animal to sleep is never easy. Currently, they believe their only option to be signing-over their unwanted equines (which can often be herds of equines) to rescue centres. However, as we have stated previously the sector

⁴ <http://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/june-2020/#Country-scenarios>

does not have the capacity to help them all and we need to give them a viable solution to ensure we can safeguard the welfare of these horses.

- Funding for local authorities and enforcement agencies and a clear direction that equine welfare must be a priority, particularly if it is evident that their area has seen an increase in welfare concerns compared to previous years or the welfare sector is struggling to cope with demand. We are aware that even prior to Covid-19 local authorities – particularly in England and Wales – were not prioritising equine welfare and, given the economic impact they themselves have felt as a result of Covid-19, we are concerned that they will now have even fewer resources to assist where needed.