Rescue, Rehoming and Sanctuaries Survey 2026

Key Findings

The UK equine welfare sector: A safety net at breaking point

Rescue centres, sanctuaries and rehoming organisations are the safety net for the UK's equine sector – but that safety net is under significant and growing strain. As the cost-of-living crisis continues to affect horse owners, welfare cases are growing in number and complexity, with the burden falling on rescue organisations whose own costs continue to escalate.

At the same time, the support structures holding the equine welfare sector together are weakening, with donations and rehoming applications falling as intake numbers rise. This year's findings follow trends that have intensified over the last three surveys since 2023, and the result is a bottleneck: all respondent organisations are now at or near capacity, with a combined total of over 4,500 equines in their care.

Many have already had to take difficult measures to remain viable, including redundancies and intake restrictions. Two centres are facing planned or guaranteed closure. Organisations are clear that they will not compromise on the welfare of the animals in their care, but their ability to absorb further pressure is rapidly diminishing.

The impact of extreme weather was already a major concern for 97% of centres when this survey closed in April 2026. Since then, the UK has experienced a record-breaking period of high temperatures and widespread drought. The full impacts of recent weather patterns are yet to be felt, but increased pressure on hay and grazing supplies are likely to add to the list of compounding challenges facing the sector.

This year's survey paints a bleak picture of a welfare sector which is struggling to sustain current levels of provision. Rescue centres are at their limit, and if current trends continue, there is an increasing risk that equines in need will soon be left with nowhere to go.

Key finding 1: Demand for welfare support is outstripping capacity

Demand for equine welfare support has risen across the UK, and with increasing numbers of animals coming through their doors, rescue organisations are close to their limit.

Welfare requests are increasing...

↑ 81%	↑ 67%	↓ 1/3rd
report an increase in requests to hand over an equine	report an increase in welfare concern calls	report a decrease in rehoming applications

81% report an increase in requests to hand over equines, 67% have seen a rise in welfare cases, and 68% report an increase in welfare calls. Meanwhile, over a third have seen more equines returned by adopters, further adding to the flood of incoming animals.

"We are not able to help as many other horses at present, nor do we see the situation improving."

...But rescue centres are at capacity

❌ 50%	⚠️ 50%
are at or over capacity	are close to capacity

For organisations to be able to offer sustainable support to every equine that needs their help, rescued animals must flow out of, as well as into, their centres. Despite the vast majority aiming to rehome equines in their care, around a third have seen a decline in rehoming applications, meaning that horses are remaining in rescues for longer.

With around 4,500 horses already in the collective care of respondent organisations, this has created a bottleneck. Half of respondent organisations are now at or above capacity, and the other half are almost full, leaving limited room remaining to respond to rising demand.

"There is significant pressure across all species with more animals requiring assistance than there is capacity for."

Key finding 2: Organisations are under growing financial pressure

As the cost-of-living crisis continues, maintaining financial stability continues to be a serious challenge for equine welfare organisations, with many struggling to balance spiralling outgoings with decreasing sources of funding.

Costs are on the rise...

⚠️ 90%	↑ 84%	↑ 89%
are concerned about the increased cost of living	report an increase in management costs	report an increase in maintenance costs

Over 90% of respondents are concerned about the impact of the increased cost of living on their operations, and all are facing cost increases across the board. On top of increases in vet, farrier, transport and insurance costs, 84% have seen a rise in management costs (including forage, feed and bedding), 89% have seen maintenance costs go up (including electricity, gas and water) and 74% report rising staffing costs.

"The overall longevity of operations is currently at risk due to the financial crisis."

...But organisations are losing funding

↓ 63%	↓ 65%
have received fewer large donations this year	are finding it more difficult to secure major donors

Meanwhile, dwindling sources of funding are leading many to worry about their ability to meet these rising costs. Few receive any government funding, and many rely on reserves, grants, legacies, donations and fundraising to stay afloat. However, over the past year, 63% have received fewer large donations, and 65% are finding it more difficult to secure major donors. As welfare demands and costs continue to escalate, this is income that organisations cannot afford to lose.

"Financial security in these worrying times is a whole different game!"

Key finding 3: Organisations have limited response options

Welfare organisations are actively taking steps to mitigate rising pressures and increase financial and operational efficiency. However, with respondents clear that they will not take measures which compromise welfare, their options are increasingly limited.

Organisations won't compromise on welfare...

94%

are concerned about the impact of current pressures

71%

will not reduce amount of forage fed

76%

will not switch to cheaper forage

65%

will not reduce amount of bedding used

With 94% of organisations concerned about the impact of current pressures, most are already implementing cost saving measures, including reduced opening hours, grazing rotation systems and alternative bedding such as deep litter and rubber matting. Changes to management practices made for welfare reasons have also yielded cost benefits, including increased turnout time, use of track systems, and barefoot trimming.

However, respondents are not prepared to take any steps which reduce health or welfare standards: 71% will not reduce the amount of forage fed, 76% will not be switching to cheaper forage, and 65% will not reduce the amount of bedding used.

"We always review our working practices and will make savings were possible that do not compromise welfare and horses' needs."

...But they are running out of options

Over 1/3

have implemented stricter intake criteria

Over 50%

have reduced intake numbers

Over 1/3

have been through restructuring

2 centres

are facing closure

The impact that organisations are seeing from smaller cost-saving measures is limited, and many are being forced to make tougher decisions to stay afloat. Over a third have implemented stricter intake criteria, and over half have reduced their intake numbers - a difficult move at a time when the number of animals needing support is on the rise.

With intake numbers reduced and centres at capacity, options for equines in need are now severely limited. For some organisations, the worst-case scenario has already become a reality: Two centres are facing planned or guaranteed closure.

“We do not have the funds to remain open another full year. Closure is guaranteed.”

About this survey

This survey was undertaken by World Horse Welfare and Redwings Horse Sanctuary on behalf of the National Equine Welfare Council (NEWC) from 30 March 2026 to 27 April 2026.

The purpose of this survey was to better understand, and raise awareness of, the current pressures facing the UK’s equine welfare sector. Previous surveys were conducted in 2023 and 2024.

38 complete responses were received from equine welfare organisations from across all regions of England, Scotland and Wales. The majority of responses came from managers from rescue organisations which operate at least one site in England.

All respondents had horses in their care, with a total of approximately 4500 equids within the care of all respondent centres combined at the time of the survey.