

The law and management of public access rights vary widely between the four countries of the United Kingdom. Practical elements of the following advice apply in all countries but the legal requirements in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from those in England and Wales.

More advice is available on www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice.

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Equestrianism is a popular and healthy activity for people of all ages from extreme sports like horse-boarding, through racing, polo and eventing, to TREC, dressage and hacking on rural bridleways. It is a diverse and family-friendly activity and equestrian sports are among the few where men and women compete on an equal basis.

Whether purely for recreation or when riding or driving professionally, equestrians may use public rights of way (including roads) and open spaces, and may rely on them as the only place they may ride or drive. Routes free from motorised traffic are preferable, for safety and for freedom from noise and pollution, providing a healthy respite for body and mind (see Health Benefits of Riding below).

Horse activities engage a high proportion of people with disabilities, women participants and participants over the age of 45. Nearly 40% of those taking part do not participate in other forms of physical activity. All these factors are very important in recognising that equestrianism is vital to the health of a significant section of the population which is known to be at risk.

Equine and equestrian businesses include riding schools and coaches, livery yards, competition yards, trekking centres, breeders, trainers, welfare charities, veterinary services, farriers, feed merchants, tack, equipment and clothing manufacturers and retailers, shows and event services.

The British Horse Society has over 124,000 members, 90 Equestrian Access Groups and 266 volunteer Access and Bridleways Officers (January 2025).

BETA figures

The British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) represents more than 800 member companies. The most recent BETA National Equestrian Survey (2023) indicated:

- £6,887 per horse to the economy
- £5 billion economic value of the equestrian sector
- 726,000 horses in Britain
- 1.8 million regular riders of 3 million total
- Lack of access to horses and riding facilities is a barrier for 22% of lapsed riders returnin
- 58% of riders identify as female* (though for hacking rather than competition, this percentage is likely to be higher)

*This figure is well below others, see [Gender split](#) below.

Road incidents

The BHS considers horse-related traffic incidents to be significantly under reported, to it, to the police or any other body. This view is supported by the Hospital Episode Statistics in 2023-24 (latest available from NHS Digital) which reported 2,493 episodes requiring treatment in hospital for 'animal-rider or occupant animal-drawn vehicle injured in transport accident', compared with a fraction of that reported to the BHS.

In 2023, Road Traffic Incidents reported on BHS horseaccidents.org.uk included:

- 3,383 road incidents involving horses
- 66 horses died
- 86 horses injured
- 3 people died
- 94 people injured

85% of incidents occurred because a driver passed too close or too fast

The cost per casualty of a fatal road traffic collision in 2023 was £2.4 million. Even slight incidents have a high individual cost based on medical, police, insurance, lost output and 'human' (distress, suffering, pain) costs. There are then secondary costs to other people affected by a road traffic incident, for whom the consequence of delays could be considerable.

In UK law a horse is property, not a sentient being, but most horse owners will attribute the equivalent of human cost (distress, suffering, pain) as well as veterinary and insurance costs and lost benefits of ownership.

A figure for a horse casualty is not available, but is likely to over £1,500 for basic transport and disposal of a dead horse, quite likely significantly more, depending on location. When a vet has been required to euthanise a horse, the cost may add at least another £1,000. Replacement for the majority of horses is likely to be several thousand pounds. For some horses there may be lost output in terms of stud fees or prize money.

The study *Equestrian Road Safety in the United Kingdom: Factors Associated with Collisions and Horse Fatalities* provides helpful information.¹

Gender split

[Sport England](#) states 88% of adult equestrians and 85% of children or young people are female.

[BHS Health benefits of riding 2010](#) 90% female, 37% over 45.

BHS membership data 2022, 89.1% of membership female.

Department for Transport police recorded statistics on injury incidents involving ridden horses on roads in Britain 2010 and 2019: 1,187 road users injured, 81% female, 84% horse riders, 25% (n = 293/1,161) aged 0–20.

Hospital Episode Statistics in 2023-24 reported 88% of 'animal-rider or occupant animal-drawn vehicle injured in transport accident' attendances were female.

BHS research on awareness of its horse incident reporting tool, resulted in 7,124 responses to a survey in June 2021, of which 96% of respondents were female (leisure riders (77%), training or competitive riders (18%), carriage driving (4%) or in-hand activities (1%)) which is consistent with other surveys of the general horse owning population with usually >90% being female. However, it is possible this reflects a bias in sex of respondents.

For comparison, [CyclingUK](#) data shows males make a lot more miles and journeys than female, at least two to three times more in most questions asked.

Public bridleways and byways

England has 117,250 miles of recorded public rights of way, of which only 22% are bridleway or byway (available to riders), 5% byway (available to riders and carriage-drivers).

Wales has 20,500 miles of recorded public rights of way, 21% bridleway or byway, 6% byway.

¹ https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/10/12/2403?type=check_update&version=1

Many of these paths are unusable with horses because they are isolated by busy roads or truncated by development or a failure to record a through route. Others are unavailable through obstruction or lack of maintenance. Some areas may have a network of bridleways or byways, other areas have none at all, including the whole of adjacent parishes, meaning that riders may have no off-road access for a ten mile radius or more, and carriage-drivers may have nothing within tens of miles.

Health Benefits of Riding

The BHS commissioned research into the physical health, psychological and wellbeing benefits of recreational horse riding in the United Kingdom which was published in 2010. It assessed riding as a moderate intensity exercise and examined the frequency with which individuals take part. Reliable evidence indicates that physical exercise produces wellbeing benefits linked to social interaction and changes in mood, anxiety, self-esteem and other personal emotions.

The report is available on www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice under Other publications.

If this is a saved or printed copy, please check www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice for the latest version (date top of page 2).