

Hold your horses -

an introductory investigation into the
online sale of equines



Introduction

In 2012 equine welfare charities reported the UK was in the midst of a horse crisis. Six years on and the situation seems to have become the norm. With pockets of horses across the country abandoned, left to fly-graze or with unmet welfare needs, these hidden horses are often left to suffer in silence.

Irresponsible breeding and over population have resulted in too many horses and not enough knowledgeable homes, causing the market to become saturated. Ongoing issues with the implementation and enforcement of identification and traceability protocols have contributed to the numbers of horses needing charitable help. Horses with poor welfare take priority at equine welfare charities and private owners might be looking to online selling platforms to rehome their beloved horse in times of difficulty. Accompanied by the ease of buying and selling online, family pets are frequently falling into the wrong hands and an uncertain future.

With horses living 25 years plus, the cost, time and commitment often means that a horse can change hands a number of times throughout its lifetime. It is estimated that an owner spends £3,600 per year on their horse (BETA, 2015) highlighting the importance of adequate research into what owning a horse involves before taking that next step. The evolving process of selling horses online, like other pets, means people expect something instantly. They can fall into the trap of an impulse buy, the false pretence of 'rescuing' a horse in need, causing a negative experience for both horse and owner. An owner might be swayed into an inappropriate purchase and with all the best intentions, may end up with a horse they don't have the experience or time to care for properly. Blue Cross, along with other charities, have seen the devastating outcome of when an irresponsible sale has left a path of destruction for horse and

owner. To safeguard our UK horses it is vital owners choose the right horse for them and take into consideration what they would do should their circumstances change. Breeders and owners can also help alleviate the current horse crisis by ensuring they breed responsibly and don't add to the market of poor quality and low value horses.

What we did

To provide us with an overview of horses out there looking for homes online, volunteers recorded adverts from six classified websites and Facebook over a period of 12 weeks. Duplicates were removed leaving 3,340 unique selling adverts. Blue Cross then analysed the contents of the adverts and grouped relevant information, to build a picture of the equine online sales market. Selling a horse online seems to be an emerging market and on 22 August 2018 alone, there were 8,061 ads selling one or more horses on the six classified websites we looked at.

TERMINOLOGY

Breeder/seller: An individual selling a horse that they have either bred themselves or have acquired from another source to sell. It is often very difficult to distinguish between the two in online classified adverts.

Rehoming: An individual who has purchased a horse but is no longer able to keep it and is advertising the horse giving a reason for wanting to relinquish ownership.

Rescue: An individual or group who takes in unwanted, abandoned, abused, or stray horses and attempts to find suitable homes for them.



Recommendations

- 1** **Further research:** Investigate other selling mechanisms for horses such as auctions and markets, to build a fuller picture of the UK's horse market.
- 2** **Legislation:** Continue to push government to develop regulations around online sales of pets, to help safeguard horse health and welfare alongside other species.
- 3** **Education:** Develop further education on the responsibilities of owning a horse and what to consider before people take that next step. Create practical tips for people who look to purchase a horse online, to help ensure an informed purchase process.
- 4** **Explore best practice:** Look at horse ownership legislation in other countries to see if we can share best practice and ensure our UK horse industry isn't left behind with the development of forward thinking strategies to improve horse ownership and welfare.



Findings



Adverts posted by region

82%	England
8%	Wales
5%	Scotland
5%	Unclear

Adverts posted by type

64%	of adverts were from a breeder or seller
33%	of adverts were for rehoming
3%	of adverts were from rescue

76%

of all adverts were described as a riding horse and pony, or has having the potential to be





Cob Mare and colt foal

Minnie Mouse is only suitable as a companion or brood as she is permanently lame. She had broken the wing of her pelvis before she came to me, however it has been checked by a vet and causes her no pain, but causes her to be lame. She requires no medication, however it does mean she isn't suitable for a ridden or driven job. It doesn't impact on her ability to be bred from, and she foaled fine this year with no assistance.

Age: 10 yrs | Ready to leave: Now

Although the number of horses listed with a potential use for breeding was fairly small at one per cent, the quality of adverts raised concerns over their health and welfare

“ In 2017 alone our rehoming centres took in **15** mares in foal, these are the lucky ones. Not all are as fortunate, many mares and foals are left to suffer due to being irresponsibly bred. Breeding without giving any consideration to a mare and foals future, adds to the current horse welfare crisis. ”

Kerry Taylor - Blue Cross Education Manager

- **55%** were horses and **43%** ponies **1%** were donkeys*
- **53%** were males and **46%** female**
- **84%** of males were recorded as geldings **10%** colts and **2%** stallions***
- The average age reported was eight years old with **6%** adverts selling under the age of 12 months.

*1% unknown, **1% mixed, ***4% unrecorded

28% of all adverts used terminology that implied the horse was not straightforward, needed work, green or displayed behavioural problems.

“ I bought, via an online advert, a 17.1hh ID X who was sold as being backed in 2017. He was advertised as easy to handle, lunged and long reined regularly.

“When the horse arrived with me, he was ok to handle but was very spooky and extremely nervous, even when tied up. Despite six months of groundwork training, he bucked his rider off when they first sat on him and took off when long reined.

“I contacted the previous owner and eventually more information was divulged; the horse had been in several loan homes due to behavioural issues. Neither the previous owner nor trainer gave me his correct history and I am now in a position where I own a horse who is extremely difficult and unridable at present. It will take a vast amount of groundwork to get him to the point where he might make a possible ridden horse. ”

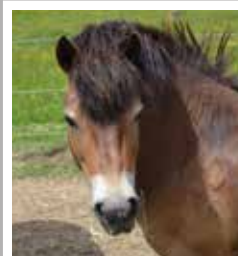
Amy West* - horse owner

*real name not used.



“ Taking on a horse that has a specific training need is a big commitment and owners need to be confident that they have the experience, time and facilities the horse or pony needs. Many behaviours people deem to be difficult are the horses way of showing us that they are not happy or even in pain. It is always important to remember that a horse's welfare is not just about their health, but also their mental wellbeing. ”

Vicky Alford - Blue Cross Horse Rehoming Manager



Exmoor Ponies

Two Exmoor ponies for sale. Bought as foals and due to personal circumstances have just been in the field since! They are 6 years old fully registered and passported. These mares are unhandled and need to go together.

Age: 10 yrs | £400

Reasons for rehoming

Out of the adverts listed as rehoming, the top three reasons were:

1. Lack of time 2. Outgrown 3. Unsuitable



LACK OF TIME

Cob Mare

Stunning little cob mare approx 13 hh. I have had this pony two weeks and she has come on beautifully in that time - she is really nervous and has not had a good start however I feel with time and one to one she would make a super little ride or drive pony - unfortunately we do not have the time that she needs on a daily basis.

Age: 4 yrs | Available now

OUTGROWN

Mare

Lady is being sold through no fault of her own the children have grown up and she doesn't get the time and attention that she deserves.

Available now



UNSUITABLE

Cob Mare

My mother bought her 6 months ago as a happy hacker. Unfortunately she was completely miss-sold. She has been backed and we have used her on the lead rein with children. She is very green but not a bad bone in her. Her passport says 4yrs but I believe she is younger. She can be Mareish and pull faces but has never bitten or kicked

Age: 4 yrs | Available now



£2,560

was the **average price** for a horse being rehomed

1.5% of adverts listed a horse as either free or under **£100**

Health issues

Four per cent of adverts mentioned a health issue from sweet itch and arthritis to laminitis and lameness.

“ Health issues can affect horses at many stages throughout their life, whether acute or chronic. However, some conditions can impact on their health and welfare more than others. Before buying a horse it is important to obtain as much information about any health concerns they may have as it could result in more time, cost and commitment than you had anticipated. ”

Vicki Alford - Blue Cross Horse Rehoming Manager



Mare

14.2, 7 year old mare. For sale due to lack of time...

Rosie has got laminitis, which has been caught early so needs someone who is going to meet her needs to get her back on track

Age: 7 yrs | £900

* All photos used in the adverts are for illustrative purposes only, however the text is from genuine online adverts.

Blue Cross is a charity registered in England and Wales (224392) and in Scotland (SC04015)