

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 of them but the legal requirements in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from those in England and Wales.

Riders and drivers of horses are referred to generically as equestrians.

More advice is available on [www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice](http://www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice).

**IMPORTANT** This guidance is general and does not aim to cover every variation in circumstances. Where it is being relied upon, The Society strongly recommends seeking its advice specific to the site.

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Riding or driving horses — 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,<sup>1</sup> 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 as equals.

Whether for exercise, pleasure and 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Mounted orienteering and obstacle course <https://trecgb.com/>

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 from low activity.

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 equine industry in Britain contributes £5bn a year to the economy.<sup>2</sup>

The British Horse Society has over 125,000 members, 86 Equestrian Access Groups and 266 volunteer Access and Bridleways Officers (January 2026).

## 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.

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, 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.

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<sup>2</sup> British Equestrian Trade Association National Equestrian Survey (2023)

## Social value

In October 2025, [British Equestrian announced its research on the social value of involvement with horses](#), with the finding that "Equestrianism generates £1.2 billion in social value each year". [The report](#) has numerous useful findings to emphasise the social and economic value of equestrianism, with key findings on page 5. 'Social value' is defined by the UK government as "all significant costs and benefits that affect the welfare and wellbeing of the population" (HM Treasury 'Green Book', 2020) and includes the direct benefit and value to individuals of improved wellbeing, and the wider value to society, including the state, which can be interpreted as improved productivity and reduced pressure on health services as a result of better wellbeing. The emphasis of the research and findings is on riding schools, but may be extrapolated to include riding or driving out.

## Reconomics 3

'Reconomics 3 The Economic and Social Value of Outdoor Recreation in the UK' is a report of the Sport and Recreation Alliance and the Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society published 26 January 2026 in [summary](#) and [full report](#).

£22bn of the UK economy comes from outdoor recreation, of which £5bn is equine sector, nearly 23%.

Participation in 'horse riding' is greater than in water sports, but water sports are given higher priority and appear more often in discussion of access to the outdoors.

## 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](http://www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice) under Other publications.

## 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 returning
- 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 accidents to be significantly under reported, to it, to the police, or any other body. In 2025, Road Traffic Incidents reported on BHS [horseaccidents.org.uk](https://horseaccidents.org.uk) included:

- 2,810 road incidents involving horses
- 59 horses died
- 82 horses injured
- 86 people injured
- 83% of incidents occurred because a driver passed too close or too fast

The view that reporting to BHS is below actual is supported by the [Hospital Episode Statistics](#)<sup>3</sup> which reported 2,516 episodes in 2024-25 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.

Horses are not included in government data on road collisions, casualties and road user types.

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<sup>3</sup> Hospital Admitted Patient Care Activity External Causes V80

The cost of a fatal road traffic collision in 2024-25 was £2,718,861 per casualty; with even slight incidents over £20,000 per casualty.<sup>4</sup> Any incident has a high individual cost on medical, police, insurance, lost output and 'human' (distress, suffering, pain) costs. This is without considering the impact of life-changing injuries, which are common for a horse-rider in a collision even where, as is likely, the horse has taken the force from the motor vehicle.

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 plus loss and grief.

Even considering only the 'non-sentient' aspects, a figure for a horse casualty is not available, but is likely to be over £1,500 for basic transport and disposal of a dead horse, quite likely significantly more, depending on location. A veterinary surgeon euthanising a horse may add another £1,000. Replacement for most horses is likely to be several thousand pounds, assuming that their owner can still ride, drive or care for a horse.

## Gender split

The study *Equestrian Road Safety in the United Kingdom: Factors Associated with Collisions and Horse Fatalities* provides helpful information:<sup>5</sup>

- 1,031 injury incidents involving ridden horses with 2,243 road users
- 1,187 road users injured, 81.4% were female, 84.1% were horse riders
- 238/267 serious injuries and 17/18 fatalities were horse riders

Failure to accommodate riders in facilities free from motor traffic therefore has greater impact on women.

[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. Observation suggests those proportions to be accurate today.

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<sup>4</sup> [DfT September 2025 table RAS 4001](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Cars dent, horse riders break: Analysis of police-recorded injury incidents involving ridden horses on public roads in Great Britain](#) Danica Pollard and John Duncan Grewar, Journal of Safety Research, Volume 84 2023, p86-98

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 2024-25 reported 87% 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 more than 90% being female. However, it is possible this reflects a bias in sex of respondents.

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

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