

## **Calls for Simpler Horse Passport System as Survey Results Highlight Poor Understanding and Compliance**

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For immediate release

The UK's horse passport regulations are in urgent need of simplification and strengthening after sector-wide survey results revealed a dramatic lack of confidence and worrying shortcomings in most parts of the system meant to safeguard the human food chain.

Following on Secretary of State Owen Paterson's commitment to review the horse passport system in the wake of the horse meat incident earlier this year, in March the Equine Sector Council for Health and Welfare conducted surveys amongst all those involved with the passport system, asking five core questions across all surveys and additional detailed questions tailored for each group.

Almost 3,000 horse owners, 100 local authority enforcement agents, 600 veterinary surgeons, 54 Passport Issuing Organisations (PIOs) and two abattoirs shared their understanding of and experiences with the regulations.

World Horse Welfare's Roly Owers said: "The results of these surveys are incontrovertible evidence that most parts of the system have failed to some degree. More importantly, the findings clearly show what we need going forward: a simple system for identifying equines that is easy-to-understand, comply with and enforce, and inspires public confidence. This will only be possible through universal microchipping and a single, central database. Any improved system will also need significant education and communication about our responsibilities to our horses and the safety of the food chain – and how we must fulfil them."

For the foreseeable future, horse carcasses are currently being held until test results confirm they do not contain bute in order to safeguard the food chain.

Further to this, in April the European Commission published its Five Point Plan to address to the horse meat incident, which includes the intent to require member states to maintain their own central database and move to a single PIO. This will require the UK to review its current system of 75+ PIOs.

At a meeting on 22 May the equine sector council steering group presented the survey findings to Lord de Mauley (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Resource Management, the Local Environment and Environmental Science) and Defra officials and they explored how the system might be improved in the short and longer term.

Environment Minister Lord de Mauley said "By working closely with the equine sector we are making good progress to strengthen the horse passport system in this country. Together, we will continue to work with the European Commission to introduce a robust, centralised passport issuing system."

The survey results demonstrated a catalogue of misunderstanding, patchy compliance, lack of enforcement and a struggling system without controls or consequences. A staggering 80+% said they did not believe the system fulfilled its purposes. Reasons for this lack of confidence included:

### **Misunderstanding of the rules**

No group surveyed appears to fully understand the rules, even in their own areas of responsibility. Across the board there was a fundamental lack of knowledge about which

types of equine needed passports, who could issue them, and when a PIO needed the passport sent back to them for updating. Worryingly there was little difference in awareness of the rules between horse owners and the average PIO, and even abattoirs did not recognise the system's prime purpose of protecting the human food chain.

#### **Lack of compliance -- and enforcement**

Weak enforcement was cited as the key reason why the passport system did not fulfil its purposes. Many local authorities admitted to not enforcing the regulations at all and often they had been given a lower priority in light of restricted resources. All groups pointed to a lack of compliance with the current system that has been allowed to go unchecked and so undermined its integrity and compromised motivation to comply.

#### **No central database**

All groups stated that they believed that a lack of central database was a top reason for poor compliance because, with no central database, enforcement was rendered impossible.

#### **Complex or impractical rules**

Veterinarians pointed to the impracticalities of the current system which, unless they have done so previously, require them to check every horse's passport before any medication is given. Their experience shows that in as many as 50% of cases the owners or keepers do not have a valid passport available and so many vets take a pragmatic approach to the regulations by recording whether patients are signed out of the human food chain on their practice databases. Owners cite vets as a trusted source of information, yet a significant proportion of vets report that even they do not completely understand the rules.

"We have long recognised that the passport system was far from perfect. As a result of this extensive survey, we are now in a much better position to demonstrate the scale of misunderstanding of the rules. The survey results tally precisely with the highest priority risks in the Equine Health and Welfare Strategy review: Poor identification and enforcement, lack of central database and overbreeding of low value horses. We clearly need to move forward now to create a simpler system and ensure that communication is improved," asserts sector council Chair Jeanette Allen.

"It is essential that any improved system works in practice and not just on paper," said David Mountford, chief executive of the British Equine Veterinary Association. "To minimise the chances of unacceptable veterinary residues entering the human food chain the individual sending a horse for slaughter must be culpable if the carcass returns a positive test."

Advancing Equine Scientific Excellence's case studies, carried out by 12 participating UK academic establishments, also highlighted weaknesses within the current systems and made innovative recommendations for engaging all sectors of the horse community, improving communication and understanding, all through a new central equine information system.

"In light of these results, the Five point Plan's revelation that the UK will have a new central equine database as well as moving to one PIO is going to help a great deal, as long as the breed societies can continue to preserve the integrity of their studbooks under the forthcoming revised zootechnical regulations," said Martin Taggart of the Donkey Sanctuary.

The sector will continue to work with Defra on these proposals, carry out further research and consultation to make sure that all members of the equine community are better equipped to comply with regulation and can access the information they need more readily.

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