Evaluation of current equine welfare issues in Ireland: Causes, desirability, feasibility and means of raising standards

J. A. COLLINS*, A. HANLON, S. J. MORE, P. G. WALL†, J. KENNEDY† and V. DUGGAN

Veterinary Sciences, UCD School of Agriculture, Food Science and Veterinary Medicine, and †Geary Institute, UCD School of Public Health and Population Science, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland.

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Summary

Reasons for performing study: Significant potential threats to the health and welfare of horses exist in Ireland when supply exceeds demand and the identification system for horses is not yet robust.

Objectives: To secure engagement with stakeholder groups and determine their perception of equine welfare in Ireland and encourage the development of inclusive, rather than imposed, policy solutions.

Methods: A 3 round, web-based Policy Delphi incorporating novel vignette methodology was conducted from November 2007–March 2008 to canvass opinion (in both quantitative and qualitative forms) on the perceived most significant equine welfare issues. Vignettes (narratives depicting potential compromise to equine welfare) were employed. Quantitative data were collected in the form of scoring on a 9 point Likert scale with labelled end-points, qualitative information as text subsequently analysed for themes.

Results: All 44 respondents completed all rounds. Major equine welfare issues were identified as welfare of horses during the disposal process and at unregulated gatherings. Assessed quantitatively on a 9 point Likert scale (0 = minimal; 8 = maximal), respondents scored the desirability and feasibility of improving standards, median 8 and 6, respectively, for both issues identified. Basic themes identified in respondents’ quotes as reasons to raise equine welfare standards were ideological, protection of animal welfare, safe-guarding the reputation of the equine industry and safety (of people, horses and environment). Themes for reasons for low standards were societal norms, fiscal pressures, indolence, indifference and ignorance. Themes underpinning potential means for achieving meaningful change (solutions) were legislation, enforcement, education/training, fiscal remedies, increasing awareness and a combination of these.

Conclusions: Mechanisms aimed at raising standards must be based on an understanding of motivational drivers for currently low standards.

Potential relevance: The challenge is to translate the findings and this heightened awareness into meaningful change to the benefit of horses and those who care for them.

Introduction

Industry context

Until 2007, the equine industry in Ireland, mirroring economic conditions generally, has enjoyed a period of approximately 10 years of sustained growth characterised by increased horse production and improved sales returns (Anon 2008). It now, however, faces a series of major challenges with a reduction in demand and continued over supply at a time of significant global and national economic difficulty. In vibrant economic times with strong demand for product (horses), potential welfare concerns are likely to be masked: horses that are no longer in demand or valuable are less likely to be valued.

There is a developing trend, underpinning government policy generally, that only genuine public goods should be funded by the public purse; a more concentrated focus on ensuring returns on public funding in terms of enhanced public good; and a heightened sense that those who most benefit from an activity should be best placed to fund and manage it (Heffernan et al. 2008). Government support to Horse Racing Ireland for 2009, for example, has been reduced by 9% in comparison with 2008.

Even throughout the recent period of economic vibrancy, a lack of cohesion and collaborative spirit between stakeholder bodies in the Irish equine industries has hindered the development of coordinated industry success with public attention, for example, often focused on controversies within the industry, such as infringements of equestrian competition rules on permitted medication, rather than on achievements, such as competition success (Hennessy and Quinn 2007). Also during this period, problems in the form of current and future threats to the health and welfare of the horses, which represent the raw material for these industries, have been described (Collins et al. 2008). These authors identified the need to engage stakeholder groups in a study of attitudes to equine welfare as the way forward in developing effective inclusive, rather than imposed, policy solutions to address threats to equine welfare.

Animal welfare context

Effecting change in animal welfare may be achieved in different ways. In the food animal industries, legislative provisions have

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

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been supplemented by coordinated industry mediated codes of practice and quality assurance schemes to improve welfare standards. The Welfare Quality scheme funded by the EU, for example, achieves these aims by linking on-farm welfare monitoring systems to food labelling, in a time of heightened consumer awareness of animal welfare, to add economic value while also raising welfare standards. Similar initiatives have yet to occur in the equine sector(s). This may be due ‘in part’ to fragmentation within the industry: this comprises a broad spectrum of diverse interests and uses of horses. These in turn inform the intrinsic value and therefore the welfare status conferred on this species. Any meaningful study examining attitudes to equine welfare which hopes to inform the development of welfare policy must be inclusive of a broad range of industry sectors.

Aims

This study sought to identify significant equine welfare issues in Ireland, to determine key behavioural drivers and to canvass opinion on the most effective means of raising equine welfare standards. The purpose is to describe the results of this novel mixed methods approach.

Materials and methods

General

Policy Delphi survey methodology is a variant of the Delphi multi-round qualitative research method designed to facilitate the exploration of a complex policy issue (Turoff 1975). The method allows invited respondents to communicate their opinions anonymously and refine their stance between rounds. The method was originally devised by the Rand Corporation for the purpose of technological forecasting, the essence of this structured communication technique being that multiple rounds, interspersed by feedback, are used to sample and monitor the opinion of a group of diverse experts, expressed independently of each other, as they move toward a position of consensus opinion (Linstone and Turoff 1975).

The views of 44 key opinion-formers (identified based on an assessment of their role in stakeholder groups in the Irish equine industries) were gathered by means of a web-based Policy Delphi study incorporating vignette methodology and inter-round feedback (Collins et al. 2009). This research method contextualises issues and fosters engagement with a potentially controversial policy area (Barter and Renold 2000). Respondents were given identifier codes (based on a 4 group system) by the Delphi research team depending on their perceived role in the equine industry. Respondents subsequently indicated their own view of this role by placing themselves in one of these 4 groups (Table 1). A 9 point Likert scale with named end-points was used for quantitative scoring; respondents were invited to provide qualitative data in the form of free text at specific points; and inter-round feedback was provided to respondents via a dedicated website: www.ucd.ie/horsehealthandwelfare.

Round 1: Twenty-nine vignettes, narratives based on 3 themes (essentials, physical insult and psychological injury) themselves based on the 5 freedoms, were presented. Each depicted a potential equine welfare issue, e.g. ‘Sean weans his foals to the bucket anytime from a few days of age onwards, to ensure a ready supply of foster mares for commercial breeding farms’. The complete text of the vignettes is shown in Table 1 (see supporting information), as per Collins et al. (2009). Respondents were requested to grade each vignette for acceptability (9 point Likert scale; 0 = perfectly acceptable to 8 = entirely unacceptable) and frequency (9 point Likert scale: 0 = never to 8 = commonly). An opportunity was provided to respondents to describe additional welfare issues.

Round 2: Respondents were asked for their views in 3 subject areas: a) the likelihood that infringements to welfare occur in a given list of 17 broad-ranging situations where equine welfare might be compromised (9 point Likert scale from 0 = never to 8 = frequently); b) the most likely reasons for low welfare standards; and c), the likely efficacy of a given list of general mechanisms to raise standards (9 point Likert scale: from 0 = of no value to 8 = of maximum value). An opportunity was provided for respondents to expand upon their views in the form of free text.

Round 3: Information was sought in both quantitative and qualitative forms concerning 2 composite issues formulated following analysis of responses to Round 2: the disposal of horses trade and horse welfare at unregulated gatherings. These were illustrated using vignettes. Quantitative data were collected on the motivational drivers for problem behaviour (a choice of 2 in order of importance from a given list of 7), as well as on the desirability, feasibility and methodology of improving standards (each on a 9 point Likert scale with labelled end-points: 0 = minimal to 8 = maximal). Respondents were required to justify the scores given and choices made in free text format.

Delphi data management

The Delphi survey process was managed using EventHandler powered by Apache Tomcat/5.5 and electronic data were transferred to Microsoft Excel at the completion of each round. Information gathered in the previous round was uploaded onto a dedicated website using Macromedia Dreamweaver MX2004 and a link to this website inserted at the beginning of Rounds 2 and 3.

Delphi data analysis: Quantitative data were transferred from Microsoft Excel to SPSS.12.0.1 and electronic data were transferred to Microsoft Excel at the completion of each round. Information gathered in the previous round was uploaded onto a dedicated website using Macromedia Dreamweaver MX2004 and a link to this website inserted at the beginning of Rounds 2 and 3.

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<th>Allocation of respondents to groups by the Delphi research team</th>
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<td>Respondents</td>
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<td>D</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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*Group A, a = Strong health and welfare focus. Group B, b = Current, active voluntary role in equestrian organisation(s). Group C, c = Main livelihood-generally not hands-on. Group D, d = Main livelihood-hands-on with horses.*
Fig 1: A Forest plot representation of responses in Round 1 of the Delphi study. Respondents had been asked to grade their view, using a 9 point Likert scale, of the acceptability (0 = perfectly acceptable; 8 = entirely unacceptable) and frequency (0 = never; 8 = commonly) of the behaviour described in 29 vignettes. These are ranked in median order, numbered as they were presented to respondents and grouped in 3 categories: essentials, physical insult, and psychological injury. For the text of vignettes see Table 01 (supporting information) as per Collins et al. (2009). Median for each vignette is indicated by a vertical bold bar; 25th and 75th centiles by the edges of each horizontal box.
respondents and as allocated by the Delphi research team, were analysed for difference using a Kruskal-Wallis test. For those questions for which statistically different responses were identified, a Wilcoxon test was then applied as the data could not be assumed to be normally distributed.

Qualitative textual data from Round 3 were transferred to Atlas.ti 5.5.9 and the text analysed systematically for basic themes within the framework of the organising themes that had been presented to Delphi respondents. A thematic network was subsequently created and illustrated using RFFlow 5.04 for Windows.

Results

Round 1

Acceptability and frequency scores for 29 vignettes are shown in the form of a Forest plot (Lewis and Clarke 2001) in Figure 1. The reader is referred to Collins et al. (2009) and Table 01 (see supporting information) for the narrative text corresponding to each numbered vignette. With the exception of vignettes numbered 7, 9 and 20 (describing stallion breeding practices, local horse transport and cosmetic enhancement of show ponies, respectively), median scores, as indicated by a vertical bold bar, for the frequency of many of these same behaviours compromising equine welfare were between 6 and 8 inclusive on a 9 point Likert scale. Median scores (again indicated by a vertical bold bar) for the frequency of many of these same behaviours was between 4 and 6 inclusive. Qualitative textual data were used to inform the construct of Round 2 and were not analysed for themes.

Fig 2: A box and whisker plot representation (as per Figure 4 in Collins et al. 2009) of responses in Round 2 of the Delphi study. Respondents had been asked to grade their view, using a 9 point Likert scale (0 = never; 8 = frequently), of the likelihood that equine welfare is compromised in 17 given situations. Median is indicated by a bold bar; 25th and 75th centiles by the edges of the box; and 5th and 95th centiles by the elongated arms (whiskers).

Round 2

No pattern of difference in the responses between respondent groups (either as allocated by the research team or as self-selected) could be identified at P≤0.05. Quantitative scores for the situations where welfare standards for horses were deemed to be compromised are shown in Figure 2. These indicate a consensus view that equine welfare is most likely to be compromised at unregulated gatherings, such as fairs, markets, races and rides, by the behaviour of dealers, during the disposal process and transport overseas. Scores for a given list of general methods to address equine welfare problems are shown in Figure 3. These indicate a collective view that the industry structures, such as equestrian organisations, specialist media and horse projects in communities, are rate higher as means of delivering higher equine welfare standards than do more generic channels.

Round 3: Quantitative data

There was no difference in response between stakeholder groups (either allocated or self-selected) P≤0.05. The results for 2 issues (Issue 1: welfare of horses during the disposal process and Issue 2: equine welfare at unregulated gatherings) are considered under the headings desirability and feasibility, motivational drivers and solutions.

Desirability and feasibility of improving standards: the median score (on a 9 point Likert scale from 0 = minimal to 8 = maximal) for desirability for both issues was 8 with a 75th centile of 7 and 95th centile of 6; the median score for feasibility

Fig 3: A box and whisker plot representation (as per Figure 5 in Collins et al. 2009) of responses in Round 2 of the Delphi study. Respondents had been asked to grade their view, using a 9 point Likert scale (0 = minimal; 8 = maximal), of the likely efficacy of a given list of 12 methods to address equine welfare problems. Median is indicated by a bold bar; 25th and 75th centiles by the edges of the box; and 5th and 95th centiles by the elongated arms.
for both issues was 6 with a 75th centile of 5 and a 95th centile of 2.

Motivational drivers for low welfare standards: Respondents’ choices are shown in Table 2. Economic factors rank highly as perceived drivers of poor equine welfare in the horse disposal trade (Issue 1); societal acceptance that unregulated horse gatherings represent a traditional and therefore accepted practice can be seen to be a popular second choice for Issue 2; and a personal (nonfinancial) ambition for success ranks as the least likely reason for low welfare standards for either of the 2 issues presented.

Solutions: Respondents’ scores are shown in Figure 4. Respondents indicated that regulation (and its enforcement) represented the most effective means and equestrian organisations the least effective channel for raising welfare standards.

Round 3: Qualitative data

As depicted in thematic network form in Figure 5, the ‘global theme’ for Round 3 of both Issue 1 (disposal process) and Issue 2 (unregulated gatherings) in the Delphi study was ‘poor standards of equine welfare in Ireland’ and the organising themes as presented to respondents to elicit their views were: i) the desirability of raising standards; ii) motivational drivers of currently low standards; and iii) solutions to achieve better welfare standards. The basic themes informing these organising themes are presented with supporting quotes from respondents (see Fig 5).

Desirability of raising equine welfare standards

Ideology: Disposal process: “... societal expectations demand that responsibility should be a continuum from birth to death.”

Unregulated gatherings: “The very fact that these occasions are ‘unregulated’ leaves the horses open to every abuse imaginable while at the gathering”.

Protecting animal welfare: Disposal process: “These low value horses are the most vulnerable and need protection at this stage of their lives; their numbers are vast, they are hidden from public view and the ‘authorities’ are not interested . . .”

Unregulated gatherings: “Definitely yes, these fairs and markets can be places of cruelty,” and “... unacceptable from an animal welfare perspective.”

Reputation and image of the equine industry (optics): Disposal process: “… ‘Ireland Inc.’ should protect its image as the ‘Home of the horse’.

Unregulated gatherings: “The tourists who see this on a first hand basis may dramatically affect not only the equine industry but also the tourism industry.”

Safety for horse, man and the environment: Disposal process: “… possible food chain implications,” and “It poses a public health and environmental hazard”

Unregulated gatherings: “Safety of stock and people”

TABLE 2: The first and second choices of 44 respondents from a given list of potential drivers of poor equine welfare are shown for 2 issues: the disposal of horses trade and unregulated horse gatherings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disposal of horses</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic/fiscal factors</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indifference</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignorance/lack of knowledge</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tradition/socially accepted</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncaring/malice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal ambition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<th>Disposal of horses</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ignorance/lack of knowledge</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic/fiscal factors</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indifference</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncaring/malice</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tradition/socially accepted</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal ambition</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>44</td>
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Drivers of current problems

Social norms and acceptance of the status quo: Disposal process: “This type of behaviour seems to be accepted and other ‘horsey’ people tend to turn a blind eye,” and “It’s what their fathers and grandfathers before have always done . . .”

Unregulated gatherings: “Individuals who intervene in horse welfare issues are not well supported by the ‘horse public’. Often they are seen as interfering busy bodies. There is a culture in Ireland of walking away with the shrug of the shoulders from equine welfare situations,” and “In this particular area, lack of knowledge plays only a small part. It is more likely to be peer pressure and socially acceptable within the group.”

Ignorance and indifference: Disposal process: “It could be said that some of those disposing of horses do not know any better,” and “They don’t think about the welfare of the horse at all, if it’s not useful or valuable, it’s a problem, not a sentient animal. They don’t see anything wrong with this.”

Unregulated gatherings: “This type of behaviour is common at fairs. It is not caused by lack of knowledge, but by lack of concern and an uncaring owner.”

Fiscal: Disposal process: “These traders use horses as a commodity and not as animals and as they are trying to make a profit margin on their dealings, they don’t put enough resources into the welfare of the horses under their responsibility,” and “We do not have knackeries in Northern Ireland so in many areas there was little alternative other than to sell to the (dealers) of this world.”

Unregulated gatherings: “Some of these people are relying on the sale of these animals for their existence.”

Indolence: Disposal process: “(there is) no effort on the owner/trainer’s part beyond making a phone call to (the dealer). Owner/trainer can then believe he has (a) ‘sold’ horse, and can wash his hands about its future. In other words, it’s the easiest way to dispose of unwanted horses.”

Unregulated gatherings: “Because they can. Without proper regulation and the use of penalties and fines people will continue to do things the wrong way as it’s the cheapest and easiest for them.”

Solutions that are likely to be effective or ineffective in raising equine welfare standards

Education/information/training: Disposal process: “Education, education, education. Knowledge is the basis of everything,” “Until the raison d’être for any standards that are to be imposed are explained and out there for public consumption you are going nowhere,” “Education/training - would probably be ineffective because it is usually those who least need it are most likely to avail of it,” and “It is really unlikely that people who mistreat horses do not know that their actions are inappropriate.”

Fig 5: The structure of a thematic network of Delphi Round 3 textual data, with basic themes at the periphery linking to organising themes, and these to a central global theme.

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Unregulated gatherings: “Educational programmes would be ineffective because the people involved would be immune to instruction.”

Regulation and enforcement: Disposal process: “The only reason why some ‘light’ or threshold regulation might be required is because as a society we are dealing with a sentient being, which demands respect and cannot be left totally to market forces,” and “... rogue traders would have to be afraid of censure.”

Unregulated gatherings: “Voluntary compliance is a myth in animal welfare. Unless there are appropriate fines and penalties administered by a body with teeth, nothing will change,” “Effective policing of the fairs and markets probably offers the only cast iron method to improve the situation,” “Urgently make it obligatory that every mart or sale operates under a Code of Practice,” “Forming an all encompassing ... welfare strategy by individual governments has to be a starting point. ... However, this should not be left in the hands of civil servants alone-advice should be sought from those people working at the coalface,” and “The government agencies are not doing their part to enforce the present rules, so what chance for new ones?”

Fiscal: Disposal process: “I think a levy on (horse) registration would be counterproductive - it would only reduce the number of animals registered,” “A subsidised scheme for disposal ... could clearly be effective in incentivising the less affluent to do the right thing,” “High penalties and fines applied to those who cause neglect. Those that adhere to good standard of practice should get subsidies. After all these people are in it for money. Make it worth their while for better standards,” and “Government/EU funding supplemented by equine industry - levy every passport application- i.e. write in a disposal levy (like they do with fridges/freezers!). Levy would have to be statutory. Abattoirs are licensed - they would dispose of the horses if there was a subsidy as per cattle.”

Unregulated gatherings: “Registration costs to decrease indiscriminate breeding. It should be made more expensive to breed from stock which has failed to attain the desired levels within each designated group. This has the merit to dissuade people from breeding from the poorer mare,” and “Financial sanction would be ineffective as the gatherings would rapidly become ad hoc events out of view with I fear even less regard for welfare.”

Pressure on equestrian organisations: Disposal process: “Associations/groups - pressure groups are very fragmented and find it difficult to provide strong useful agreed views,” and “Associations/groups have little effect because they are easy to ignore.”

Unregulated gatherings: “It is hard to see what associations or organisations could be specifically targeted in order to bring about change.”

Change acceptance of current standards by heightening awareness: Disposal process: “Focusing on the horse community is the best way to increase awareness. This will champion the cause,” and “The transfer of information to the general public has to be driven by the most effective method of communication possible...”

Unregulated gatherings: “All convictions should be made public and should be in publications such as the ‘The Irish Field’. This should encourage people to discuss the welfare issues and make us all aware,” “Stop Bord Failte from promoting traditional Fairs like Ballinasloe etc. as tourist attractions - it puts Ireland in a bad light, and gives legitimacy to the abuses carried on there,” and “Involvement needs to be made from public figure heads within the equine industry to show their support.”

A combination of approaches is necessary: Disposal process: “There is no ‘silver bullet’ that will fix the problem. It will require a multistranded approach.”

Discussion

General

Qualitative methods have enjoyed a growing popularity in the recent past throughout the social sciences (Morse 1989; Attride-Stirling 2001; Denzin and Lincoln 2003) and have been gaining recognition in domains traditionally inclined to a more quantitative approach (Ritchie and Spencer 2002). Qualitative techniques have recently been employed in the context of animal welfare studies (Verbeke and Vlaene 2000; Velde et al. 2002; Harper and Makatouni 2002). Delphi qualitative methodology has previously been employed to study animal welfare (Whay et al. 2003; Bennett et al. 2004; Collins et al. 2009).

Qualitative techniques may complement quantitative methods by providing fresh insights into the meaning and further explanation of results, revealing both unexpected problems and appropriate solutions (Amaratunga et al. 2002; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). A mixed-methods approach gathering both qualitative and quantitative information, such as that adopted in the present study, may provide greater insight into accepted norms within a specified group and enable an observer to better assess how individuals translate understanding expressed quantitatively into behaviours, dispositions, reactions, and interactions.

Thematic analysis, as has been conducted on the qualitative data gathered in Round 3 of this Policy Delphi study, is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data; it is a process for encoding qualitative information that can be thought of as a bridge between the languages of qualitative and quantitative research (Boyatzis 1998).

Round 1: The perceived value of an animal can be illustrated by reference to the sociozoological scale (Arluke and Sanders 1996) which categorises animals according to their intrinsic and extrinsic value. Horses, in this scheme, can be considered variously as friends, tools and pests depending on the context of our relationship with them. Round 1 of the Delphi study explored the value that key persons in stakeholder groups placed on the welfare of the animals that form the basis of their industry. Respondents indicated that horse welfare should not be compromised in the ways described; worryingly, there was a perception that such compromise was relatively common practice. Though the views expressed were undoubtedly informed by the respondents’ experience it is not possible to determine from these data the actual frequency of the behaviours described.

Round 2: The statistical analysis of responses between groups (both as allocated by the research team and self-selected) indicated a high degree of agreement between respondents across diverse industry sectors on the ‘situations’ in which equine welfare infringements are likely to occur and the likely efficacy of general ‘mechanisms’ to address such problems. The most problematic ‘situations’ concerned
the display and trading of horses at unregulated gatherings such as fairs, and the gathering, transport (especially abroad) and actual slaughter of horses. Education and the provision of information through a variety of industry structures-social projects, equestrian associations and the equestrian press emerged as important means to improve welfare standards for horses. The efficacy of legislation (and its implementation via official channels: the police, courts and government) was considered surprisingly low as a general means but this view was tempered when respondents were asked to consider, in Round 3, specific areas highlighted as representing greatest concern.

Round 3: The failure to identify significant difference in responses between respondent groups (as indicated by Likert grading) again demonstrates that Delphi respondents across a diverse range of stakeholder bodies reached a high degree of consensus on the issues presented.

Desirability and feasibility of raising equine welfare standards

Excepting one comment (regarding unregulated gatherings: “Not sure that this is a significant problem?”), whose author never-the-less gave a score of 6 (on a scale of 0–8), the tone of the commentary invariably matched the quantitative scoring (median score of 8) which indicated that welfare standards for horses were currently considered to be unacceptably low. The basic themes developed in support of a need for higher standards were ideology, protection of animal welfare, protecting the reputation of the equine industry and safety (of people, horses and the environment). Perhaps not surprisingly, respondents were more sceptical about the feasibility of achieving higher equine welfare standards.

Causes or motivational drivers

It is highly significant that economic factors ranked highest as the motivational driver for behaviour compromising equine welfare during the disposal process (Issue 1) and that there was considerable support for ignorance, in the sense of a lack of knowledge of what occurred, and tradition/social acceptance as reasons for problems at unregulated gatherings (Issue 2). Themes underpinning the respondents’ quotes were: social norms, ignorance, indifference, fiscal reasons and indolence.

Solutions

An analysis of quantitative scoring shows that regulation (and its enforcement) ranked higher than education and fiscal remedies as a means to raise equine welfare standards in the 2 perceived problem areas. Financial remedies were considered more relevant to Issue 1 (the disposal of horses) than Issue 2 (welfare at unregulated gatherings) mirroring the findings on motivational drivers. Interestingly, the role of associations and organisations was considered to be minimal with reference to both issues under examination although it had featured strongly as a general means to improve equine welfare standards in Round 2. The themes based on an analysis of the quotes (which can be seen to follow closely upon a consideration of drivers of poor welfare by the respondents), are:

• Education: That the raising of the lowest standards by voluntary compliance e.g. by education/training is a worthy aspiration but in practice those responsible for the worst abuses remain inured.
• Regulation: That new legislation without the will and the means for enforcement is a ‘window-dressing operation’. Strong enforcement, whether of existing or new rules, is needed to tackle the worst abuses because of the types of persons involved.
• Fiscal: That money remains at the root of why equine welfare is not prioritised generally. Good welfare is perceived as an expense not a gain, as an optional extra luxury item not a core staple required for involvement in the equine industry.
• Pressure on equestrian organisations: Equestrian bodies can drive change only within a relatively narrow spectrum of the industry as membership and adherence to any code is largely voluntary and such organisations are not inclusive of the worst offenders. These bodies (and their members) should be supported and encouraged to address deficiencies where these exist, but not penalised for relatively minor faults.
• Increased awareness: There is little appreciation of the intrinsic merits of higher animal welfare standards.
• Combined approach: That people are generally more likely to adopt higher standards (which requires a behavioural change by themselves) if they believe there is personal benefit (in the form of financial gain, increased success, societal or peer recognition for example) and/or avoidance of negatives (in the form of financial loss, competitive failure or societal opprobrium for instance). Stakeholders should work to ensure a closer match between the image and the reality of Ireland’s horse culture for the benefit of all – industry, the wider economy, society and the horses themselves.

Impact of this work on policy and awareness

A socially contextualised approach to policymaking has not always been prioritised and stakeholder bodies have not always been actively engaged with, and thus involved in informing the process. Legislative agreements are often based on scientific certainties and statistical probabilities; little recognition may be accorded to the more socially attuned perspectives that can be derived from informed industry groups. Hefferman et al. (2008) among other authors has identified an apparent disconnect between stated attitudes and real behaviours in a study involving animal health issues, and identified that the perceived trustworthiness of the source of the message (as well as the trustworthiness of the message itself) is critical in achieving attitudinal change. Such would support the role of neutral agencies as an interface between government and industry. This study has engaged relevant stakeholder groups including government and industry, facilitating the sharing of information on a potentially controversial area in a nonconfrontational manner.

Conclusion

Key members of stakeholder groups in the equine industries in Ireland reached a consensus on the most significant equine welfare issues, namely unregulated gatherings (fairs, markets, races etc.) and the disposal of horses trade (behaviour of dealers, welfare at abattoirs, transport overseas). They also agreed and explained why it was highly desirable to raise equine welfare standards in these 2 problem areas. Identifying the priority points for intervention is
important if real progress is to be achieved. Textual analysis of respondents’ comments identified common themes in their stated views on the drivers of currently low standards and subsequently on potential solutions. An understanding of both is essential if any new policies, or initiatives, are to be effective at changing existing practice. A secondary effect of the Delphi approach has been that, by securing engagement with key opinion formers, it has raised awareness of equine welfare among stakeholders bodies in the Irish equine industry. Respondent consensus has focused attention on 2 key issues requiring action and it has created an expectation that these will be addressed. The challenge now is to incorporate some of the many suggestions into a strategy that, if implemented, will deliver tangible improvements. Though specific measures in the form of educational initiatives, fiscal remedies and legislative provisions were proposed, a combination of approaches is considered necessary. As already quoted from one respondent, “There is no ‘silver bullet’ that will fix the problem. It will require a multistranded approach.”

Acknowledgements

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Manufacturers’ addresses

1Apache Software Foundation, Los Angeles, California, USA.
2Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, Washington, USA.
3Adobe Systems, San Jose, California, USA.
4SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA.
5StatCorp, College Station, Texas, USA.
6ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, Berlin, Germany.
7RFF Electronics, Loveland, Colorado, USA.

References


Websites


Author contributions

The initiation, conception, planning and execution for this study were by J.A.C., A.H., S.J.M., P.G.W. and V.D. Its statistics were by J.A.C., S.J.M., and V.D. and all authors contributed to the writing of the paper.

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Table 01. The 29 vignettes that were used during Round 1 of the Policy Delphi, reproduced from Collins et al. (2009) with the kind permission of The Veterinary Journal. These are presented in the order in which they were presented to respondents and each is labelled with the category of welfare infringement it was deemed, by the Delphi research team, to represent: Category 1 “Essentials”; Category 2 “Physical insult”; Category 3 “Psychological injury”

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