Use of qualitative methods to identify solutions to selected equine welfare problems in Ireland


This paper explores the views of those in the Irish equine industry, organisations and government regarding necessary improvements to equine welfare in Ireland at unregulated gatherings and during the disposal process. Three qualitative research methods were employed, namely semistructured interviews, focus groups and a structured, facilitated workshop. Representatives from industry, welfare societies, socially disadvantaged groupings and government engaged with this process and shared their views regarding horse welfare and implementable solutions with merit to address welfare problems. A consensus was achieved that equine welfare in Ireland could be improved by the development of a comprehensive identification system, a Code of Practice for horse gatherings, a horse licensing scheme, ring-fenced funding to promote responsible, humane horse disposal and better means of raising awareness of the value of safeguarding horse welfare for the benefit of all parties.

Qualitative research techniques may complement quantitative scientific methods by providing fresh insights into the meaning of results (Amaratunga and others 2002, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004), while open and honest knowledge exchange is thought to improve the subsequent application of research findings by decision makers (Gagliardi and others 2008). In this study, the authors adopted an innovative qualitative approach not previously employed in equine welfare science. The Delphi method is one such qualitative research technique which may be used to effectively both canvas the views of key opinion formers and inform each of the others’ views (Linstone and Turoff 1975). Following a study of the structures and governance of the equine industry in Ireland (Collins and others 2008), these authors conducted a web-based iterative Delphi study investigating current welfare concerns in Ireland (Collins and others 2009, 2010a). The aim of this study was to stimulate discussion, facilitate the exchange of information about equine welfare between disparate stakeholder groups and determine if a consensus view might be achieved with a view to developing inclusive rather than imposed policy solutions to agreed problems. Key outcomes included concerns about the welfare of horses during the disposal of no-longer wanted animals (Issue 1) and at unregulated horse gatherings such as fairs and markets (Issue 2).

Individuals in these stakeholder groups were subsequently requested (on the basis of their position as key opinion formers) to further explore these outcomes through the medium of three additional qualitative methods: semistructured interviews (October/November 2008), focus groups (October 2009) and a facilitated workshop (November 2009). The authors chose these methods as best facilitating a comprehensive examination of participants thinking around contested issues, such as animal welfare (Velde and others 2002).

This paper presents and explores the views of key members of Irish equine industries, organisations and government bodies regarding necessary improvements to equine welfare in Ireland at unregulated gatherings and during the disposal process. Contextual information supplied to participants in advance of meetings and full results (which are summarised in the paper) are provided as supplementary information.

Materials and methods
There were three components to this research:

Semistructured interviews
Interviewees participated on the basis that the subject matter was confined to the two issues identified in the Delphi study; that the interviews would be recorded and last approximately 40 minutes; and that no quotes would be directly attributed without the interviewee’s express permission. Background information was provided to prospective interviewees.

Eleven interviews in total were conducted with the following persons: a lead person from an animal welfare charity; two prominent horse breeders (one of sports horses, one of thoroughbreds); the owner of a horse slaughter business; an equine consultant in a semi-state advisory body; a rights advocate from the Traveller community (an ethnic group with a distinct horse culture); and five veterinarians, namely a private veterinary practitioner with an advisory appointment to government, a state veterinarian with an animal welfare role, a state veterinarian with transport and trade responsibilities, a local state veterinarian with transport and trade responsibilities, and a state veterinarian with an animal welfare role, a state veterinarian with transport and trade responsibilities, and a state veterinarian with an animal welfare role, a state veterinarian with transport and trade responsibilities, and a state veterinarian with an animal welfare role.
authority veterinarian and a state veterinarian working in the local community.

A thematic analysis of the recorded material was performed. This involved the systematic extraction of lowest order premises (basic themes), categories of basic themes grouped together to summarise higher order principles (organising themes) and overarching themes encompassing the principle metaphors in the text as a whole (Attride-Stirling 2001). The key concepts were identified and converted to text, transferred to Atlas.ti 5.5.9, a qualitative software programme (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development) and systematically analysed for basic themes, organising themes and global themes.

Focus groups
Two meetings were convened with Traveller men, comprising five and 20 individuals, respectively. The sessions were held at the offices of Traveller representative organisations and involved Travellers with an interest in horses and Traveller horse culture. It was agreed that notes could be taken during the meeting but that individuals and their views would not be linked.

At the start of each meeting, it was emphasised that the Traveller community was not being singled out for attention but that all industry sectors were being examined and each questioned about horse welfare issues that seemed most relevant to that sector. The focus of the meetings with Travellers was explained as a desire to better understand the role of the horse and horse fairs in Traveller culture. Pictures and video clips illustrating potential equine welfare problems were used extensively, in place of text to stimulate discussion in the groups; contemporaneous notes were taken and used as the basis for the extraction of concepts and themes; and audio recording was not employed because of concerns expressed by the participants.

Facilitated workshop
Prospective delegates were identified from work conducted by the authors during the previous two years (Collins and others 2006, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011) and an information sheet was provided before the workshop. The fifth author acted as workshop facilitator overseeing the method while other authors introduced participants to the work mentioned above, collated findings and participated in the final discussion. The issues to be considered at the workshop were equine welfare during the disposal process (Issue 1) and at unregulated horse gatherings (Issue 2). Participants were divided into three mixed groups based on their background. A moderator was appointed within each group and tasked with coordinating the group’s activities and outputs. Three break-out sessions were each followed by a feedback session involving all three groups. Session 1 was titled ‘What are the main problems associated with each of the 2 issues?’, Session 2 ‘What practical solutions are there for each issue?’ and Session 3 ‘Who/what specifically is needed for implementation of the solutions identified?’ Finally, the three groups were gathered together, a synopsis of the delegates’ views was presented by the facilitator, and there was general discussion by all participants.

Results
Semistructured interviews
Detailed results of respondents’ views regarding horse welfare standards for Issue 1 (Disposal of horses) and Issue 2 (Unregulated gatherings) were collated and analysed as follows: Overarching ‘Global Themes’ (factors driving poor standards and solutions), grouped principles as ‘Organising Themes’ and ‘Basic Themes’ (the building blocks). These results are summarised here.

For Issue 1, respondents highlighted current over and untargeted production, particularly of moderate horses, and problems of access and cost with existing routes for horse disposal; they opined that subsidised disposal options were urgently needed (but pointed to real difficulties with securing funding for any such schemes); they exhorted equine industries to work more publicly to promote responsible horse breeding, ownership and disposal; and they identified the need to counter poor public perception of this latter trade.

For Issue 2, respondents offered the view that it is people, not horses, who determine the animal welfare standard and that the focus for change must thus be on people, in particular via targeted educa-

tion initiatives; they opined that there were particular problems, but no easy solutions to dealing with the Traveller community at horse fairs (especially males for whom there are strong cultural drivers); and agreed that problems with trading of horses have been exacerbated by an overproduction of moderate animals which should be addressed by stricter enforcement of the rules on horse identification (with regards to the trading, transport and competing of horses) and possibly also consideration of a horse licensing scheme.

Focus groups
The findings of the focus groups (presented in the Supplementary material) are summarised here.

In general, Travellers acknowledged that there were issues of particular concern with regard to Travellers and horse welfare. They accepted that ‘Traveller practices such as horse tethering, weaning foals at fairs and ‘flashing’ (excessive exercising) can look bad and seem dangerous but are often simply misunderstood by the ‘settled community’, that the wider social significance of such practices to the Traveller community is not appropriately recognised and that similar perceived ‘bad practice’ in the general equestrian community, for example, use of the whip in racing, is not similarly denounced.

There was much negative comment concerning Traveller interaction with authority bodies – on the one hand condemning legislation such as the Control of Horses Act, 1996 as ‘anti-Traveller legislation couched in niceties’ while on the other suggesting that leaving it to the ‘Traveller community to police itself was a ‘cop-out by the authorities’.

Facilitated workshop
Detailed results for each of the three break-out sessions (problems, solutions and implementation) for Issue 1 (Disposal of horses) and for Issue 2 (Unregulated gatherings) were collated and analysed. These results can be summarised as follows.

For Issue 1, workshop delegates agreed that the scale of the problem was unknown but that poor public perception of the process of horse disposal and the high cost (relative to the animals’ value) were real bars to progress. Delegates stressed the need to promote a policy of targeted breeding (to reduce the pressure on disposal routes) and the message that responsible disposal was a part of responsible ownership, while securing ring-fenced funding to promote legitimate disposal routes and not abandonment, indiscriminate sale and carcass burial.

For Issue 2, delegates felt that there was no agreed stance on seminarian issues such as animal welfare standards, event licensing, horse identification and public safety; that such would have to be enforced, not simply agreed, to have any worthwhile effect; and that a coordinated approach by industry bodies, non-governmental organisations and government is now needed to ensure that all in the horse-owning/keeping community safeguard equine welfare.

Discussion
Qualitative techniques are increasingly recognised for the rich insights they yield into potentially controversial social issues (Attride-Stirling 2001) and have been previously employed as a method of investigating specific equine issues with focused groups such as Pony Club members (Buckley and others 2004) and more diverse populations of horse owners/keepers (Hotchkiss and others 2006).

The issues presented to respondents in the studies reported in this paper emerged from a Delphi study exploring problems, motivational drivers and potential solutions. They concerned the management of horse during the disposal process, their transport over long distances (particularly overseas), the behaviour of horse dealers toward their stock, and horse welfare at unregulated gatherings such as fairs, markets and races (Collins and others 2010a). These issues can be seen to resonate with concerns previously identified (Collins and others 2008) regarding the indiscriminate production of horses, inadequate equine identification, uncontrolled import/export, weak oversight of owner responsibility and insufficient provision of viable, ‘attractive’ routes for the humane destruction of unwanted horses.

Semistructured interviews were next conducted with key participants in the Delphi process to further explore the views that emerged from that work. Veterinarians in diverse roles are over represented as interviewees because of their acknowledged expertise in matters of...
equine health and welfare. Focus groups were then conducted with Traveller men. These had been identified by Delphi respondents and interviewees as particular contributors to compromised equine welfare at unregulated gatherings and as part of the chain of trade and disposal of lower value animals. The authors felt that they should secure engagement with this community in anticipation of further involvement in a planned workshop.

Fairs, markets and impromptu race meetings are an acknowledged part of Traveller culture; horses in Traveller culture are almost exclusively a male preserve and Traveller boys are encouraged to buy horses as horse ownership is a source of status in their community. The Traveller perspective is that their community often value horses more and keep horses in better conditions than the Travellers themselves enjoy. Traveller standards of care and approach to horse husbandry, however, are often at variance with those deemed as acceptable by the ‘settled community’.

Some problems are highlighted here as integral to any attempt to address the standards of welfare for Traveller horses. Work is required to break a perceived link between horse identification and the Control of Horses Act 1996, and it was felt that local authorities (and subcontractors) abused the powers conferred by this Act to victimise Travellers. One credible idea that emerged and should be further explored was that Traveller associations could be engaged as an ‘honour broker’ to coordinate clinics where horses might be microchipped. Further, Travellers do not readily learn from those outside the community and where there is a breakdown in the flow of knowledge within the community from one generation to the next, there is a critical lack of ‘horse sense’. Traditional knowledge and practices of value are lost and the correction of negative practice adopted by younger Travellers does not occur.

The authors identify that there has been a change in the type of horses bred and kept by the Traveller community especially younger Travellers more concerned with racing speed than showing. Thoroughbred blood lines have been introduced into traditional cob stock (to add speed) at the expense of physical hardiness and stoical temperament. Traditional Traveller methods of horse management do not transfer well to this lighter, more delicate and more easily stressed horse type.

Many agencies share responsibility, both legal and practical, for promoting and enforcing appropriate standards of horse welfare: the Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (DAFF, subsequently renamed DAFM, SI 14 of 2008 in relation to horses on farms), Local Authorities (The Control of Horses Act 1996), Gardaí (The Protection of Animals Act 1911), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Police Service of Northern Ireland in relation to horses generally in Northern Ireland, industry bodies (Codes of Practice and Welfare Guidelines) and welfare charities (voluntary work) (Collins and others 2010b). The fragmentation of duty may mean that action is slow to commence or uncoordinated when it does. The facilitated workshop, in particular, has helped to highlight the lack of coherence between industry and government sectors. An honest broker may be required to facilitate better coordination of responsibility and resultant services. One specific solution to emerge was that the City and County Managers’ Association could be engaged in a discussion of how local authority powers could be better deployed to improve equine welfare, rather than simply control horse owners/keepers.

The ‘reverse engineering’ principle might also be applied to good effect to improve horse welfare at gatherings: identify what works currently, for example, at Spancil Hill Horse Fair, which charges an entry fee per horse and not per person, and awards prices for horse-showing classes. Since the introduction of these initiatives, the standards of horses presented at the fair have improved. Such an approach offers a workable solution, which could be transferred to other organising committees.

Funding sources and allocation to welfare may be additional critical issues to be addressed before horse welfare can be improved in any tangible fashion. Industry perception is that improved welfare means added cost, not added value. Industry thus shies away from taking ownership of equine welfare. Government moves are toward cost sharing – that those who are engaged in industry and are most likely to benefit must partake in funding regulation. Time frame and targeting are critical considerations: how to set limits on levies, penalties or subsidies; and how to ensure that the ‘polluter pays’ and not the more responsible horse producer.

There was general agreement that production of horses has outstripped demand in Ireland and negative reception to anything resembling a stallion is a worry for the industry. In addition, with increasing stories of adverse horse welfare in the media, the idea of a humane cull might become more acceptable to the general public if sensitively presented. The equine industries are perceived to have residual wealth, are known to have thrived in the years of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy, and might now be castigated if sensed to be disposing of surplus stock, as if this were inanimate product. Horses to be culled would have to be carefully selected using criteria such as age, type, health and welfare status, breeding potential and performance record. Careful consideration would need to be given to explaining the need for the humane disposal of horses.

The identification of horses, and its use to control and trace both disease and owner responsibility, is a theme that runs through the narrative from the interviews and meetings conducted. A comprehensive system of identification and tracing of responsibility with multi-agency check points could provide an opportunity for safeguarding welfare. This issue is further examined by the authors in a separate paper (Collins and others 2011). A horse licensing scheme should be considered as should the re-introduction of a stallion licensing scheme (that is enforced) to reduce indiscriminate breeding.

Education across all industry sectors regarding the value to them of taking ownership of horse welfare has to be a critical long-term goal if Irish horses are to be protected from poor standards and the Irish horse industries from negative public perception. There are current comprehensive documents (FAWAC 2005, ITBA 2008, TEAGASC 2009, HSI 2009) which should be much more widely disseminated. New initiatives are also needed to reach largely uneducated sectors such as the Traveller community and the large undereducated sectors of the general equestrian community. A single joined-up conduit for information on horse health and welfare would be a boon to the equine industries.

Not only is the message important, but so also are the credentials of the messenger. ‘Champions’ of welfare are frequently mentioned by respondents in this study. These serve to promote a subject and drive actual behavioural change by example and by virtue of their respected position in a given community. These may be high-profile figures (and thus potentially expensive) or simply key members in a given community. Identifying these should be a priority.

In conclusion, this work has identified that horse owners are not a homogenous group and that issues exist among a subset of all sectors. The authors have identified a need to tackle the problem of poor welfare for horses on several fronts; specific key-suggested solutions have emerged from this research; and these have been explained in detail elsewhere by the authors (Collins and others 2010c). These solutions include the need first, to introduce and maintain a comprehensive identification system for horses, with a focus on particular industry sectors, for example, the Traveller community and critical control points such as fairs (where there is also a need for a licensing system and associated ‘Welfare Code of Practice’). Second, the feasibility of a horse licensing scheme should be re-examined – either for horses generally and/or specifically for stallions – thus helping to fund improvements in horse welfare standards and dissuade untargeted breeding of horses. As a related issue, there is a need to ring fence financial returns from horse production and registration specifically to fund the humane disposal of horses. And finally, this research has identified the need for a single comprehensive conduit for science-based information, education and training on horse health and welfare for the equine industries, using a trusted source, and involving ‘champions of welfare’ as high-profile messengers.

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Supplementary material

This paper is accompanied by supplementary material detailing information provided to participants in the semistructured interviews and workshop, and the data gathered from the interviews, workshop and focus groups. The supplementary material can be viewed on the Veterinary Record website at http://veterinaryrecord.bvapublications.com

References


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