

Benefits of including horses in local policy, planning and infrastructure in Essex

All new green space development, connectivity and infrastructure must be inclusive of equestrians.

Why deliberately exclude one user group?

Cycleways must be designed as **multi-user routes (MURs)** to ensure inclusivity for all non-motorised users. MURs function as public highways and are best defined as **restricted byways**—open to *pedestrians, horse riders, cyclists, and users of non-motorised vehicles*—or as **bridleways**, which permit access for *pedestrians, horse riders, and cyclists*.

Bridleways are not just for horses and do not require any additional infrastructure beyond that of a cycleway. They do not cost more money. A lack of knowledge about equestrian user groups is not a sufficient basis for discrimination. Sustainable transport charity (**Sustrans**) has signed a memorandum of understanding with the **British Horse Society (BHS)** (the UK's largest equestrian charity), providing further evidence that sustainable means of travel can be shared between walking, wheeling, and equestrian users without conflict. The document can be viewed [here](#).

England has 117,250 miles of recorded Public Rights of Way, of which only 22% are bridleways and just 5% are byways. This places equestrians, as vulnerable road users, at risk on the busy Essex road network.

The reason bridleways are so fragmented, and there is no bridleway network, is that they have been reclassified or upgraded to roads and are now only usable (safely) by motorists.

Who rides?

Horses are distributed uniformly across the country and are found in both urban and rural areas. Riders cover a broad age range, from the very young (a third are under 15) to the very old, with the largest single group – 38% – aged 25-44. The number of people aged 50 and over who ride is growing, and people continue to ride into their 70s and 80s.

Carriage drivers also come from all socio-economic categories and are found in both urban and rural areas. Driving is a highly collaborative activity, with many family teams. Due to road safety concerns, the sport experiences a relatively high attrition rate, with as many people leaving as joining each year.

The urban equestrian is almost entirely dependent on the public rights-of-way network for places to ride.

What do riders want?

Horse riders and carriage drivers want a local network of rideable and drivable routes which gives a variety of local rides and links to wider networks. Riders want to get off the roads, away from tarmac and traffic.

What needs to be recognised is:

- equestrian access is vital for local economies.
- equestrian access has a valuable tourism potential.
- equestrian access is a form of sustainable recreation and travel.
- equestrian access gives more people the chance to participate in sport and leisure activities.
- equestrian rights of way are especially needed in urban areas, where there are many riders and drivers who are totally dependent on them for exercise.
- many women and children feel safer when riding alone than they do when walking or cycling alone.

The current situation facing horse riders and carriage drivers calls into question current policies on gender, health and well-being, welfare, equality of opportunity, discrimination, and personal freedom. Where provisions have been made, there are very few problems; it's not making provisions that causes the problems.

Equestrian revenue- the economic benefit of investing in horses in Essex

Horses are fundamental to Essex's rural identity, economy, and community life, making the equestrian sector indispensable. With more than 37,000 horses, Essex boasts the second-largest equine population in the East region—surpassed only by Suffolk.

According to the British Equestrian Trade Association, each horse contributes £6,887 annually to the rural economy, resulting in a total local impact of £260 million for Essex ([BETA, 2023](#)).

Nationally, the equestrian industry is the second-largest employer in rural areas, second only to agriculture. These figures highlight the urgent need to safeguard and promote equestrian businesses in Essex, which rely on safe riding environments, high-quality facilities, and accessible routes.

Overlooking the profound economic, social, and cultural value of horses would not only be a mistake—it risks driving the equestrian community to more supportive regions, at a cost of £260 million in annual revenue, £1.2 billion in social value, and £500 million in overseas trade ([British Equestrian, 2025](#)).

Each riding school alone contributes around £292,000, further illustrating the sector's significance. Recognising and supporting the equestrian community is not merely advantageous—it is vital to ensuring Essex's future resilience and sustainable growth.

Communities – more than just walking, wheeling and cycling

Essex is home to exceptional equestrian centres that play a vital role in supporting local children and young people, particularly through the BHS transformative **Changing Lives through Horses programme**. By harnessing the unique bond between people and horses, these centres provide a nurturing environment where disengaged youth can develop essential life skills, build confidence, and self-esteem. The positive impact extends far beyond the riding arena, empowering young people to reconnect with education, society, and their own potential. [Learn more [here](#)].

Equally significant are the **Riding for the Disabled Centres (RDA)** across Essex. As a pioneering charity, RDA leads the way in therapeutic equestrian activities and disability sport. Their innovative programmes harness the healing power of horses to improve mobility, enhance physical health and mental wellbeing, build confidence, and teach valuable skills to those facing life's challenges. These centres are a cornerstone of inclusion within the Essex community. [Learn more [here](#).]

Horses also serve as powerful catalysts for community building in Essex. [Research](#) shows that working with horses can significantly enhance social connectedness, especially for individuals with complex needs. From livery yards and

riding schools to competitions and community events, equestrian activities unite people, bridge generational gaps, and nurture meaningful relationships. At a time when loneliness and isolation are pressing societal issues, the equine community's role in building strong, supportive networks is more vital than ever.

Public Sector Equality and gender bias

Equestrians are a vital segment of the community, representing many underrepresented groups, including women, older adults, and people with disabilities. Given this diversity, it is crucial that equestrians be included at all stages of planning and policy development. Their inclusion ensures that planning is truly representative and accounts for the needs of everyone—not just the majority. Unlike many other sports, equestrianism offers an exceptional example of gender equality, with men and women competing side by side for the same prizes. This unique aspect of equestrian sport serves as a model for fairness and inclusion, which should be reflected in public policy and infrastructure decisions.

Statistics from **The Ramblers**, **Cycling UK**, and the **BHS** illustrate the following ([BHS,2025](#)):

- Walkers: approximately 50% male and 50% female
- Cyclists: 70-75% male
- Equestrians: 80-90% female
- 45% of carriage drivers are aged 55 and older
- Many disabled individuals also use horses for riding and carriage driving

Participation in horse-related activities is particularly high among women, people with disabilities, and adults aged 45 and older. Nearly 40% of equestrian participants do not engage in other forms of physical activity, making equestrianism essential for the well-being of a large group of people who are otherwise at risk of physical inactivity. Recognising and including equestrians in planning is therefore not just a matter of fairness, but also of public health and social responsibility.

The gender distribution among equestrians is particularly striking: 88% of adult equestrians and 85% of young participants are female, according to Sport England. Similarly, BHS membership is overwhelmingly female, as are the majority of those injured in horse-related road incidents. Hospital data and research surveys consistently show that women make up more than 85% of participants and those affected by equestrian accidents ([British Equestrian, 2023](#)).

In contrast, other active travel groups—such as cycling—are predominantly male, with males making two to three times as many journeys as females. This highlights a significant gender disparity in access and risk, emphasising the need for greater gender equity in planning. Excluding equestrians from planning and infrastructure not only overlooks a predominantly female user group but also perpetuates gender discrimination in access to safe and inclusive travel and recreation.

Discrimination is defined as treating someone 'less favourably' than someone else because of a protected characteristic. **The Equality Act 2010** protects individuals from discrimination on the basis of these characteristics, ensuring they are treated with respect and have equal opportunities. Mobility impairment is a protected characteristic under the **Equality Act 2010**. For some people with mobility impairments, horses are not just a leisure activity but a vital means of transport and a source of independence, enabling them to access the countryside and participate in daily life. Therefore, individuals who rely on horses—whether for carriage driving or riding—should not be discriminated against or excluded from active travel routes and public spaces.

Road safety and deaths

Horses and their riders or carriage drivers are officially recognised as vulnerable road users in the Highway Code.

As Essex develops, equestrians are increasingly required to navigate busier roads in both urban and rural areas. With fragmented bridleways and byways, they often have no choice but to use unsafe highways. Improving off-road access for all users is essential to protect this vulnerable group and ensure safer travel for everyone.

Horses can be easily startled by traffic or loud noises, putting both horse and rider at risk of serious injury or death. Despite these risks, equestrians are often excluded from road safety planning and must use busy, unsafe roads with no suitable alternatives.

Recent data highlights the risks: in 2023-24, there were 2,493 hospital admissions for horse-related road accidents, and the BHS recorded 3,118 road incidents involving horses, though most incidents go unreported. In a single year, 58 horses and 80 people lost their lives or were injured, and over 80% of accidents were caused by vehicles passing too close or too fast ([BHS](#), 2025).

New developments often increase traffic and disruption, worsening the situation. Excluding equestrians from safe infrastructure is not only unfair but also dangerous. Providing safe, off-road routes isn't a luxury—it's essential to protect vulnerable users. Future planning must include equestrian access to prevent further harm and ensure the safety of all.

For more information, see the BHS Dead Slow campaign [here](#).

Public health- how can horses help?

The literature review, aligned with [Sport England's Social Value](#) model, identified compelling evidence of equestrianism's positive contributions across five social outcome areas.

1. Physical health

- 43% of disabled people feel they have the chance to be as active as they desire, compared to 69% of non-disabled people. Disabled women are more likely to feel the disparity in perceived opportunity compared to disabled men (39% vs 48%, [Activity Alliance](#), 2024).
- Almost 1/3 of children and young people are inactive – 12.4 million adults and 2.3 million children and young people undertake less than 30 minutes of activity a week ([Sport England](#), 2022)
- Physical inactivity is associated with 1 in 6 deaths in the UK ([GOV](#), 2022).
- Equestrian activities, including riding and yard work, are classified as physical activity, improving cardiorespiratory function.
- Hippotherapy (the use of horse riding as a therapeutic or rehabilitative treatment) enhances motor functions such as balance, walking and posture, as well as reducing chronic pain.

2. Mental health

- The number of children in England needing treatment for mental health problems has risen 27% in just three years ([The Royal College of Psychiatrists](#), 2024)
- The happiness and confidence of 16-25 year-olds has flatlined at an all-time low in fourteen-year history of research, with young people most unhappy about their money and mental health ([Prince's Trust](#), 2023).
- Equestrianism benefits individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and substance abuse by providing a calming and therapeutic environment.

3. Subjective well-being

- Horse ownership and equine-assisted therapy contribute to higher satisfaction levels, reduced stress and improved quality of life.
- Caregivers of individuals with disabilities also reported enhanced well-being due to their participation in equestrian activities.

4. Individual development

- Volunteering in equestrian settings builds long-term skills, employability and confidence.
- Equestrianism fosters prosocial behaviour and boosts self-esteem, although competitive settings can sometimes challenge confidence.

5. Social and community development

- Engagement with equestrian activities improves communication skills in neurodivergent individuals and those with dementia.
- Equestrianism helps participants develop strong community bonds through shared passions and experiences.

The research findings closely align with the government's [Get Active strategy](#) and the health outcomes it seeks to achieve. Many of the benefits associated with equestrian activities identified in social value research could help address these emerging trends. This supports ongoing initiatives to promote the equestrian industry's positive impact on public health.

Active travel considerations for horses

Despite confusion among some authorities, official guidance confirms that horse riding is recognised as a form of Active Travel. The Department for Transport defines Active Travel as any physically active mode of transportation, and recent manuals explicitly include horse riding alongside walking and cycling. A full document is available [here](#).

Including equestrians in Active Travel plans is crucial for road safety and equality. Equestrian travel offers physical benefits comparable to walking and cycling and is essential for many people's health and well-being, especially for those who rely on riding as their main form of exercise.

The government should prioritise multi-user routes (MURs) that connect communities and safely accommodate walkers, wheelchair users, cyclists, and equestrians. Excluding equestrians—without a compelling safety reason—constitutes discrimination and undermines equality obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

Horse riding and carriage driving are practical for leisure and utility trips, from daily errands to accessing green spaces, and are especially important for people with disabilities. Horses also serve vital roles in work and community life, including police duties and ceremonial services.

To fulfil both legal and social responsibilities, Active Travel networks must be inclusive of equestrians, with any exclusion based solely on clear safety grounds.

Conclusion

The above information shows the reasons why it is important to include equestrians in all safe off-road access in Essex and to protect the natural surfaced rights of way. There needs to be a change of mindset from exclusion to presumption of inclusion of all.