



# Riders must 'walk the talk' to ensure our sport survives

Will we still be riding in 20 years? We need to change how we do things to make that a certainty

By ELEANOR JONES

THE horseworld has to "walk the talk" and show collaborative thinking to ensure involving horses in sport continues.

Experts discussed the topic "Will we be riding in 20 years' time?" at a webinar organised by the Showing Council on 17 March. *HEJH* has reported extensively on social licence; public acceptance of horses being ridden and taking part in equestrian sport, and the real threat of that being lost.

Showing Council chair Jane Nixon said the internet allows people to watch more horse sport than ever, which means it is under huge public scrutiny, often by an audience that is not familiar with the equestrian world.

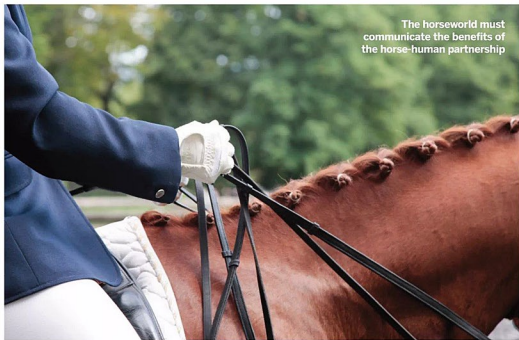
She pointed out rulings in other countries; jump racing is banned in many Australian states, there have been demonstrations at events in Germany and protestors ran into the ring at the 2019 European Showjumping Championships.

"Public exposure of any harm will only increase," she added.

Dr Nixon said one key is producing horses who are fit for purpose; conformationally sound and properly handled and trained from the start to ensure they are suitable for certain careers.

"It's vital to have a clear picture of what the problem is," she said. "An increasing proportion of Western media believe the horse shouldn't be ridden at all, on ethical, physical and mental grounds. This challenge isn't new, but its scope and rate of change have increased massively."

Dr Nixon added that the industry must respect the views of those who feel it is morally wrong to ride, but another group, who feel the horse is compromised physically and mentally by being ridden, is a different matter.



The horseworld must communicate the benefits of the horse-human partnership

"We need to change our mindset to challenge the status quo," she added. "To make changes where justified, even if that's difficult or needs investment in research to prove evidence-based decision-making."

It was stressed, as it has been previously, that key to social licence is not only horse welfare being the top priority at all times, but also demonstrating this to the public. In the panel discussion that followed Dr Nixon's talk, it was asked whether social licence only involves a small section of

never underestimate the ability of things to build up steam and we must take this very seriously."

The possibility of tack checks was raised and supported by panellists, to ensure and show that horses are comfortable.

World Horse Welfare CEO Roly Owers said racing has introduced pre-run trot-ups at some meetings, adding: "I think there's a communication aspect. It may change behaviour, so people don't run a horse that isn't quite right, and if people know tack will be checked, it might mean long-

can understand and implement."

Mr Owers cautioned against the "it's antis on social media" view, adding that there have been a number of viral horse-related issues in the last year, and that we must communicate the many positives of the horse-human partnership, to both parties.

"The key is looking at it through the lens of the public, not the horseworld," he said. "Not talking down to people, but ensuring we're clear on the benefits of the partnership."

Mr Owers added that it does not matter to the public which discipline it is - eventing, racing, dressage or modern pentathlon are all "people riding horses".

Ms Iggulden agreed, adding: "Horse sport needs joined-up thinking about the answers to difficult questions."

Asked whether the number of UK governing bodies makes this harder, Mr Owers said no, as although coordination and consistency is so important, each discipline has different issues.

"There are things relevant to all; the three Fs of friends, forage and freedom apply to racers as much as dressage horses, and it's a collective responsibility. All disciplines have to play their part. It's so damaging when people say lovely words but do nothing; we have to walk the talk."

*"Everyone has an opinion on animal welfare"*

SALLY IGGULDEN

society, as "most of the public don't have views on horses and whether they should be ridden".

But Beverley racecourse CEO Sally Iggulden said: "I think that's a very dangerous assumption, that it doesn't matter to people; it's already happening. You only have to look at the Olympics to see horse sport, on the biggest stage in the world, is under pressure. Will it be included in future years?"

"Everyone has an opinion on animal welfare and that's what this comes down to. We should

term behaviour change."

The importance of education was stressed, as was communication, to the horse world itself and the general public.

"That's absolutely paramount," said Kezia Allen of the British Horse Foundation (BHF). "It's fundamental at the BHF, making that education accessible to everyone. We all want to do the best by our horses, so it's incumbent on us all to do the research, get evidence and present it to every yard in a way people