

The keeping of horses and ponies in the Cotswolds AONB



www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk

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Within the Cotswolds AONB there are around 18,000 horses kept for a wide range of recreational and business purposes as well as for racing. These include casual riding, competition riding, hunting, pony trekking and polo. The value to the Cotswold economy is estimated to be at least £54 million a year based on feed, bedding, farriery and livery charges and the total value could easily be double.

With rising popularity of horse riding the number of horses kept has grown considerably. Whilst this expansion has had benefits for the local economy, in some cases the way horses are kept is having an undesirable impact on the character and quality of the Cotswold landscape, as well as on animal welfare.

Climate change predictions for the Cotswolds are for milder, wetter winters, drier warmer summers and more frequent, unpredictable extreme weather events. This could result in soils becoming more prone to winter poaching and grassland more susceptible to desiccation in the summer and therefore a need for pasture for horses to be managed more carefully.

Impacts

There are a number of potential issues associated with the keeping of horses in sensitive landscapes, many of which can be exacerbated where there is an over-concentration of equine activities or where they are not developed or managed correctly.

IMPACTS ON THE LANDSCAPE

The physical structures and equipment associated with horse keeping, if not sited correctly and sympathetically, can have a detrimental effect on the quality of the landscape. There needs to be appropriate siting of stabling, field shelters, manèges, fencing, muck heaps, parking for horse boxes, lighting, schooling rings and jumps. Any tree planting should be appropriate to the area in terms of scale, location and species

selection to ensure it contributes to the character of the Cotswolds. The Cotswolds Conservation Board has published a guide to woodland and tree planting which is available on the Board's website www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk

A particular concern is the increased use of white electric tape to divide paddocks which can be visually intrusive. Green or brown tape, which is readily available and equally visible to horses, should be used in preference to white tape.

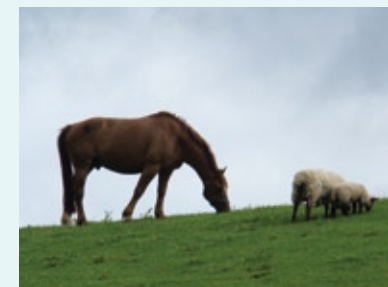
Many of these physical structures require planning permission and are therefore under the control of the local planning authorities.



IMPACTS ON PASTURE AND TREES

Horses are selective feeders with a preference for the finer grasses and herbs. This can create pastures with some areas which are closely-grazed and others which are rough and tussocky, particularly in fields where the droppings are not removed regularly. Without appropriate pasture management important grassland species may be permanently lost through overgrazing.

Damage to pasture can also occur in other ways. Some areas may be worn completely bare by horses rolling, fence walking or congregating in one place. In wet conditions, horses may damage the sward by trampling or 'poaching' the ground. All of these problems are likely to be exacerbated where paddocks are too small for the number of horses they contain. Damage to pasture may result in the permanent loss of beneficial plants, as well the proliferation of undesirable invasive species, such as ragwort, dock and thistle, which thrive on bare ground.



Trees can be damaged and even killed by horses that develop the habit of 'Crib clutching' resulting in bark being ripped off trees. A minority of horses can develop a taste for the bark with devastating effects. Recent survey work has shown this to be a particular problem in orchards.

HORSE WELFARE

Increasingly, horses are being kept in individual paddocks isolated from one another but horses are social animals and preventing them from exhibiting their natural social behaviour can result in behavioural problems. These include fence walking, where the horse, out of boredom or frustration, continuously walks around the perimeter of the fence or back and forth along the fence wearing a rut in the ground.

Horses can also have a positive impact on landscape and biodiversity where the land on which they are kept is well managed. For example, native ponies are used across the country to graze wildflower rich grassland including a number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Planning regulations

In most circumstances planning permission will be required for the keeping of horses and for the provision of associated stables and other necessary structures. The only exceptions are the keeping of horses for use in agriculture (working horses), for grazing land and in some cases where the keeping of horses is incidental to farming use.



There have been a number of court cases and appeal decisions which have upheld the view that simply turning horses out to graze land is not a change of use. However, if the horses receive supplementary feeding on the land, i.e. their needs cannot be met by grazing alone, there has been a change of use to the 'keeping' of horses on the land and planning permission is required. Whether or not the horses reside in permanent stables on the land itself is not a relevant factor in deciding if they are being 'kept'.

The adequacy or otherwise of the local bridleway and highway network for the safe exercising of horses can be an issue in the consideration of proposals for new or expanding equestrian developments.

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Advice on best practice

The following best practice advice has been drawn together from local planning officers, the British Horse Society, horse owners and equine businesses.

FOR THE LANDSCAPE

- 1 Where possible, existing buildings should be utilised and new stables and other structures kept to a minimum but of an adequate size to accommodate paraphernalia in order to avoid items being left outside when not in use.
- 2 New structures should be carefully sited and designed to minimize their impact on the landscape. Wherever possible they should be located close to existing buildings. They should be constructed from appropriate vernacular materials and should follow the form of the landscape, avoiding prominent skyline sites and slopes.
- 3 Any lighting should be designed to minimise light pollution, e.g. low level and directed downwards and fitted with timers.
- 4 Landscape planting should complement any existing trees and hedges. The use of non indigenous tree and shrub species should be avoided.
- 5 Historic field boundaries, such as hedges, walls and fences should be maintained or extended, and new boundaries should match the local vernacular wherever possible.
- 6 In some instances, hedges and dry stone walls may need protection by fencing to prevent damage.
- 7 Jumps, temporary fences and other equipment should be well maintained and removed when not in use.
- 8 Existing gates and access points should be retained if possible, and new gates should match the local vernacular.

- 9 Where pastures need to be subdivided into smaller paddocks, temporary electric fencing is better than more permanent structures.
- 10 Dark green or brown electric fencing tape is preferable to white, since this is just as visible to the horse and far less intrusive in the landscape. It should be used in conjunction with dark green or brown plastic posts, spaced closely enough to keep the tape taught. Remove temporary fencing when not in use.
- 11 Historic features, including ridge and furrow pastures, stone troughs and stone stiles, should be protected from damage by equestrian uses.
- 12 A concentration of horse paddocks and associated structures in any one area can have a cumulatively harmful impact on landscape character and should be avoided.

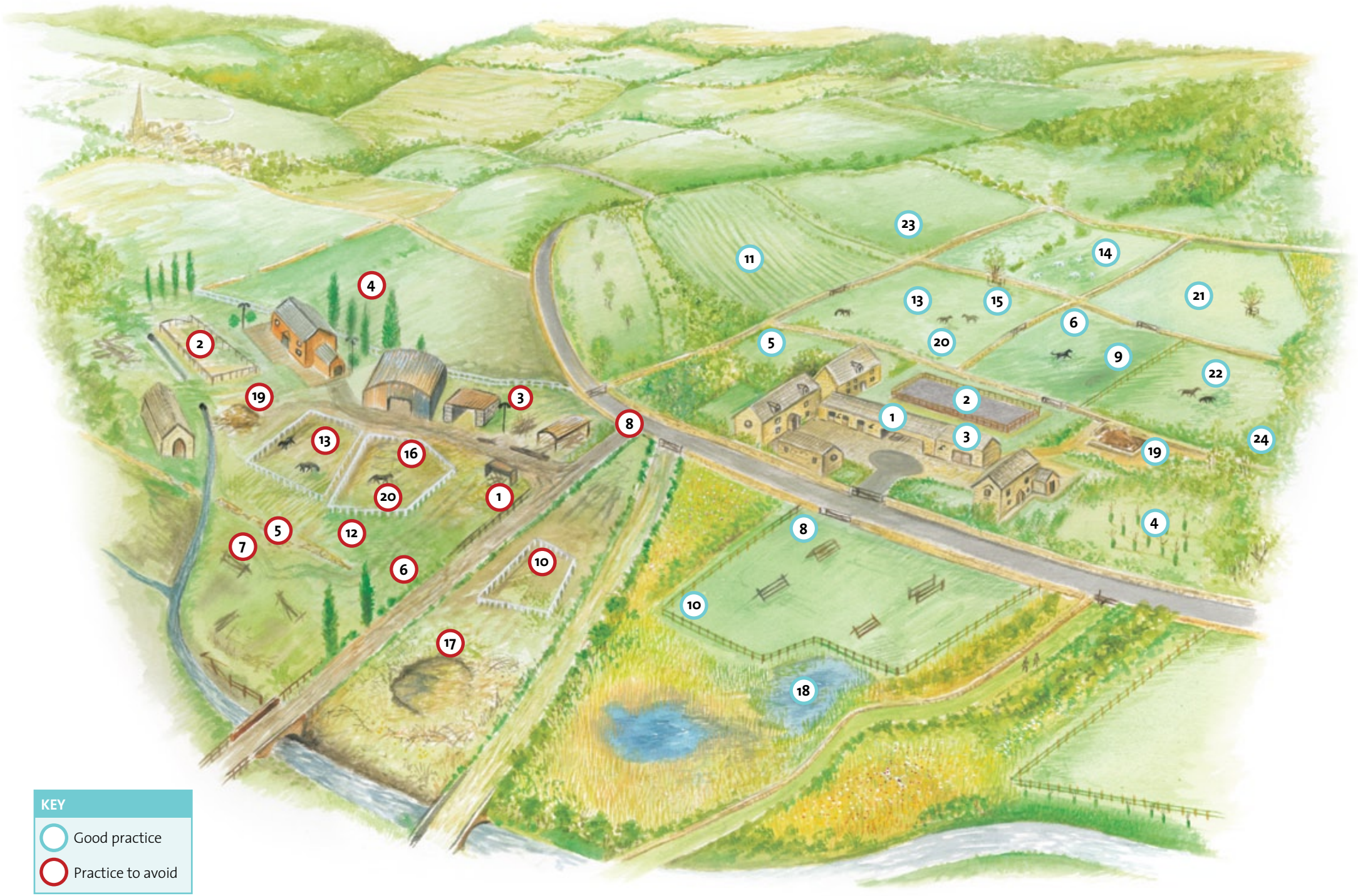
FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

- 13 Pastures should be carefully managed and be of sufficient size to avoid over-grazing and the loss of species diversity. If necessary, a pasture management plan should be produced by a knowledgeable person.
- 14 Additional or follow up grazing with sheep can help 'tidy up' the pasture.
- 15 Trees, including orchard trees, must be guarded to prevent their bark from being browsed by horses.
- 16 Areas suffering from poaching, or worn bare by horses need to be regularly rotated or rested to allow pasture recovery.
- 17 Invasive weeds such as creeping thistle, ragwort and dock must be controlled in accordance with environmental legislation.
- 18 Wildlife-rich ponds should be fenced to prevent trampling and poaching.

- 19 The management and location of manure heaps must be in accordance with waste management regulations and consideration given to the risk of pollution. No manure heap should be sited within 10m of any water course.

FOR THE HORSE

- 20 The horse is a herd animal and should ideally be kept in social groups for their well-being. This should avoid undesirable behaviour, such as walking up and down fence lines.
- 21 Ideal forage for horses is provided by unfertilised, species rich pasture, containing a wide range of grasses and herb species rich in both fibre and minerals. Horses have evolved to live under extensive grazing systems where low quality, high fibre forage is abundant. They are 'trickle' feeders, naturally grazing for up to 16 hours per day, providing a fairly continuous flow of feed through the gut. To make best use of this feed, horses have a digestive system designed to process small, frequent, high fibre based meals, which pass relatively rapidly through the gastrointestinal tract, allowing the throughput of large quantities of feed.
- 22 Adequate space for animals to feed and exercise should be provided. A minimum area of 1 hectare per full sized horse (500kg) is highly desirable.
- 23 Pastures should be kept clear of noxious plants such as ragwort and yew.
- 24 Shelters, to provide protection in extreme weather conditions should be either naturally occurring or purpose built. Some hardy breeds, such as native ponies, are capable of living outdoors all year round.



KEY

- Good practice
- Practice to avoid

Further information

Cotswolds Conservation Board

www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk

Mid Cotswolds Tracks and Trails Group

www.midcotswoldtrails.org.uk

The British Horse Society

www.bhs.org.uk

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – horse pages

www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/pets/horses

Strategy for the Horse Industry in England and Wales

www.defra.gov.uk/publications/2011/03/29/pb11323-horse-strategy/

British Horse Industry Confederation

www.bhic.co.uk



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