Equestrian workplaces: experiences of prohibited conduct

Research report summary

November 2026

Executive summary

The 2025 Equestrian Workforce Behaviours Survey, conducted by British Equestrian, the British Grooms Association and the Equestrian Employers Association, provides the first sector-wide insight into workplace culture, prohibited conduct and reporting awareness across the equestrian workforce.

While respondents demonstrated a good understanding of unacceptable behaviours, bullying, poor workplace boundaries and economic exploitation emerged as key concerns.

The findings also revealed low awareness of existing reporting mechanisms, significant barriers to reporting and evidence that some inappropriate behaviours have become normalised within the industry.

In response to the findings and resulting recommendations, British Equestrian is working on a programme of actions focused on increasing safeguarding awareness, improving reporting processes, supporting employers, promoting fair employment practices and strengthening understanding of workplace conduct. Together, these measures aim to foster a safer, fairer and more professional working environment across the equestrian sector.

Introduction

The equestrian industry relies on its people. Across the federation, we campaign together to create a culture where everyone in the workforce community feels respected, safe, free from abuse and empowered to speak up or report.

Introduced in 2025, our updated safeguarding policy introduces prohibited conduct provisions beyond the traditional safeguarding definition of children and adults at risk to cover *all* participants. As part of this, we wanted to conduct research to help us better understand the environment, culture and the peer-on-peer behaviours experienced in practice. Key to this was understanding the awareness levels of prohibited conduct, the behaviours being experienced by those working in the industry and the prevalence of such behaviours.

Process

In November 2025, the **Equestrian Workforce Behaviours Survey** was jointly launched by British Equestrian (BEF), British Grooms Association (BGA) and Equestrian Employers Association (EEA) as part of Good Employment Week. Working with Dr. Eleanor Boden, a

leading researcher in the racing industry, the anonymous outreach initiative was designed to understand the experiences of the paid workforce aged 18 and over – employees, those who are self-employed and employers. Additionally, we wanted to explore:

- **demographics,** to identify trends among specific groups without revealing identities
- **prevalence** and **context,** to gauge personal or witnessed experiences of misconduct
- **policy** and **reporting,** to assess awareness of current rules and reporting processes.

The survey was conducted in a de-identifiable manner and took around 10 minutes to complete, with a mixture of multiple choice and open-ended feedback opportunities where participants could share detailed context in their own words.

There was the option to supply an email address to enter a prize draw to incentivise participants. Working with member bodies, the messaging in promoting completion of the survey was centred around a culture of listening, learning and improvement – we were aware that for some participants, simply completing the survey would take courage and reassurance.

The survey was open for three weeks. The data was then analysed and reviewed, and a detailed report was produced for the three organisations in Spring 2026.

In summary: key numbers and data

Completion rate: 519 people answered at least one of the questions and 337 people completed the full survey for a 65% completion rate. This response pool was felt to be significant enough to draw accurate conclusions and findings are based on all available responses for each question.

Respondents: We heard from all participant groups, with the split of respondents being 45% employees, 41% self-employed and 14% employers, which is reflective of the proportional makeup of the equestrian workforce. Most were highly experienced, with 93% of employers and over 70% of employees having more than six years' experience in the sector.

Understanding of prohibited conduct: Aggregated data shows a high level of confidence in the understanding of prohibited conduct, with 78% of employers, 42.5% employees and 43.6% self-employed reporting their understanding was confident or very confident.

Experience of prohibited conduct: Approximately 80% of respondents reported either having witnessed or experienced at least one of the prohibited conduct behaviours listed in the survey during their career, which range from poor practice and unequal treatment to physical, emotional and sexual abuse as outlined in the Equality Act 2010 (part 2, chapter 2).

Tolerance of behaviours: 65.3% of respondents reported 'rarely' or 'never' feeling unsafe at work as the result of someone else's behaviour, but most ***had*** experienced some kind of prohibited conduct, suggesting a tolerance of behaviours, despite recognising them as inappropriate.

Prevalent behaviours: Bullying was identified as a relatively prevalent prohibited conduct behaviour, with 33.8% of employees and 31.9% of self-employed staff having had direct experience and 51.79% of respondents witnessing it. Nationally, this averages around 15% in historic data across UK employees (Chartered Institute of Professional Development Good Work Index, published January 2020)

The least frequently experienced behaviour is that of a physical sexual nature, with 2.4% of employees and 2.7% of self-employed workers reporting experiencing or witnessing unwanted sexual acts and/or pressure/manipulation into sexual behaviour. This is significantly less than the national average. The Government Equalities Office 2020 Sexual Harassment Survey found that 29% of all people in employment had experienced at least one form of workplace sexual harassment within the preceding 12 months.

Extreme behaviours: Reports of more extreme abuse behaviours such as sexual or physical violence were not prevalent (whether experienced or witnessed) among the respondents.

Financial exploitation: Inequal pay for the same role and unpaid overtime have been experienced by nearly a third of employees and self-employed workers, with nearly half of those working as freelance staff expected to carry out additional hours unpaid.

Contracts: Over 30% of employees reported that they don't have a contract in place, while nearly 70% of self-employed workers don't have written agreements with their clients.

Benefits: Certain workplace benefits (e.g. on-site accommodation) correlated with an increased risk of experiencing prohibited conduct, including peer-on-peer behaviours.

Reporting awareness: Over 80% of respondents were unaware of the BEF's reporting facility and most workers would rather tell a friend about a concern as opposed to the police, their employer, a coach, their member body or the BEF.

Barriers to reporting: The top three concerns reported by employees and the self-employed were fear of negative consequences, worry of future employment and concern of inaction of report.

What did we learn?

- Generally, respondents understand the different types of prohibited conduct, and they agree on what isn't appropriate in a workplace setting.
- Roughly 80% of respondents have either experienced or witnessed at least one of the identified prohibited behaviours in their career and the data suggests there may be systemic issues regarding bullying, fair pay and verbal boundary-crossing.
- There is universal rejection by employers, employees and the self-employed of certain behaviours such as unwanted physical contact and initiations for new staff.

- Contacting staff outside of work hours, raising the voice in frustration or commenting on somebody's weight were areas with more nuanced levels of acceptance, with more detail provided through the free text responses.

- Economic exploitation of the workforce continues to be an issue, particularly where there are workplace benefits such as accommodation and livery.

- Addressing these vital findings requires the sector to bridge the trust gap in reporting and develop a culture that prioritises clear, professional boundaries. One employer commented: *"Both employers and employees need to be held accountable for their behaviour."*

Recommendations

Based on the independent data analysis, the following recommendations were identified:

1. **Make participants aware of the safeguarding team(s):** Communicate and uphold the safeguarding policy and demonstrate a clear commitment to investigating reports as in line with the policy.
2. **Be transparent about actions taken:** Create awareness of BEF and member body actions around tackling prohibited conduct by using impact reports that include clear statistics connected to activities.
3. **Make reporting channels visible and easy-to-use:** Build on the Safe to Play hub and utilise digital assets to signpost reporting channels including member newsletters, social media and commonly used websites, particularly the British Equestrian homepage.
4. **Develop clear guidance on managing conflict:** Develop and provide comprehensive guidance for employers, employees and self-employed individuals on how to appropriately and sensitively address conflict situations.
5. **Support employers to prevent harassment:** Clarify their responsibilities under the new Prevent Duty in the Equality Act, provide guidance on common workplace issues and share best practice based on risk.
6. **Raise awareness of fair pay:** Utilise the EEA, BGA and other platforms to highlight the legal requirements around pay, tax, employment status and the importance of a written agreement to address the experience of self-employed individuals.
7. **Learn more about behaviours between staff members:** Further research into peer-on-peer behaviours and explore how to support employers in identifying any issues and managing the behaviours of their workforce.
8. **Develop a shared understanding of bullying:** Engage with the workforce to explain prohibited conduct using standardised language across the member bodies, with specific reference to bullying, retaliation and grooming.
9. **Encourage reporting to those organisations who have the jurisdiction to take action:** Any individuals or organisations who receive reports of prohibited conduct should, in accordance with GDPR, share information with the relevant member body

and/or British Equestrian, as well as any appropriate statutory authorities (e.g. police or social services).

Actions and next steps

The project team has reviewed the full report and produced versions for key stakeholder groups, including this summary for the industry. We are grateful to everyone who took the time to complete the survey and will work to ensure that their voice is heard and their responses are incorporated into actions to address the findings.
Progress has already been made in some areas:

- British Equestrian launched a new 'reporting hub' to cover equine welfare, safeguarding, anti-doping and integrity. This includes information around the process and related policies. Additionally, there is a clear button to report a concern on every page of the British Equestrian website.

- Development of a comprehensive comms plan for Good Employment Week 2026 (w/c 16 November) – an annual initiative by the EEA and BGA – to raise awareness of the survey findings and address some of the issues identified around workplace culture, fair economic conditions, contractual requirements and reporting – including how to report a concern and the process involved.

- A federation-wide campaign is in the planning phase, with aims to raise awareness of safeguarding provisions across member bodies and at British Equestrian – who, what, how, why – and to encourage reporting through the appropriate channels to those who are placed to act, and impose sanctions.

Conclusion

British Equestrian, British Grooms Association and Equestrian Employers Association would like to recognise the courage of all those who completed the survey and thank them for their time. Across the federation, we made a commitment to ensure the industry workforce is supported, valued and protected, and it's only through learning more about the landscape that we can improve. The survey has given us useful information and highlighted key issues. Only by acting on the findings can we truly thank those who took part.

There must be a shared responsibility from all who work and participate within the industry to promote a positive culture, ensure fair treatment of everyone and showcase how rewarding an equine career can be.

We look forward to working with a number of stakeholder groups to progress our shared commitment.