



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Library Service Briefing Paper

Paper 31/11

22 December 2010

NIAR 657-10

Mark Allen

The Horse as an Agricultural animal – implications and opportunities for the equine industry in N.I.

1. Background and context

Within Northern Ireland there are estimated to be more than 35,000 horses and ponies and the equine industry as a whole here is estimated to employ the full time equivalent of 5,657 people equating to an annual labour value of c£54 million¹. Furthermore the value of the c30,000 acres of land used by the equine industry here is valued at £150 million (2006 prices) and the total stock value of horses and ponies is valued at £108 million(2006 prices)². Given these figures it is clear that the equine sector plays a major role within the local economy.

Currently within Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK the horse is not defined as an agricultural animal. The 1949 Agriculture Act (Northern Ireland) which still applies, makes reference to those animals which could be classed as agricultural livestock as

¹ [Research on the Equine sector in Northern Ireland, equine sub-group of the rural stakeholder forum, DARD 2006](#)

² [Research on the Equine sector in Northern Ireland, equine sub-group of the rural stakeholder forum, DARD 2006](#)

being, ‘...**any animal kept for the production of food, wool, skins or fur or for the purpose of its use in the farming of land.**’³

Looking at this definition it is not hard to see why the horse fails to meet the criteria for classification as an agricultural animal within Northern Ireland. Whilst horses were undoubtedly a key component of farm work in the past, the rapid mechanisation of agriculture from the late 19th Century onwards has seen the majority of roles traditionally undertaken by horses on a farms now being the almost exclusive preserve of tractors and other specialist agricultural machinery. By way of example, **a study into the impact of mechanisation on farming in England showed that the number of working farm horses fell from 856,713 in 1938 to 167,000 in 1958**⁴, and whilst there are no readily available similar statistics for Northern Ireland the same trend occurred. The net effect of this change is that there are now very few horses that are actually involved in the farming/working of land within the UK, save for those involved in some small scale forestry operations and in organisations performing pre mechanisation farm re-enactment shows.

In addition to the changes in farm methods, the **horse has rarely, if ever, been kept for the production of food, skin, or fur within Northern Ireland or the rest of the UK.** With the exception of times of national crisis when meat was in short supply, such as World War 2, there has effectively been a **taboo around the eating of horsemeat across the UK.** This taboo has effectively meant that horses are not farmed for their meat or other by products within the UK. **This compares markedly to other countries within the EU where horses are farmed for their meat and horse meat is a regular and normal part of many peoples’ diet.** Table 1 below highlights the horse meat production figures for a number of EU countries in 2009.

| Country | Horse meat Production in tons |
|---------|--------------------------------|
| Italy | 16,000 (including donkey meat) |
| Romania | 14,000 |
| France | 7,500 |
| Spain | 5,000 |

Table 1: Horse meat production in tons 2009⁵

The **UK does not feature in any statistics for horse meat production or consumption in either EU or world terms, as the production and consumption figures are so low.** As a result it is easy to see why the horse is not classed as an agricultural animal utilising the production of food criterion contained within the existing legislation. Interestingly however, the recent economic downturn has seen a growth in the export of unwanted horses and horsemeat from the UK and to horsemeat consuming countries such as France⁶. In this regard whilst the horses being exported

³ [Agriculture Act \(Northern Ireland\) 1949](#)

⁴ [Long, Harwood W., The Development of Mechanization in English Farming, 1963](#)

⁵ [Argentina - The horse meat industry, Meat Trade News Daily, 6th October 2009](#)

⁶ [SCANDAL OF THE BRITISH HORSE MEAT TRADE, Daily Express article, May 19 2010](#)

either alive or slaughtered/butchered are not agricultural animals upon the start of their export from the UK, upon the completion of export to countries such as France these horses and the meat obtained from them are very much agricultural animals given that the meat is used as food for human consumption in their final destination.

2. The situation in the rest of the EU

The UK appears to be in a unique position compared to other EU countries when it comes to the classification of the horse. However, this is not the result of legislative differences. **As revealed previously within this report the 1947 Agriculture Act⁷ (adopted here as the 1949 Agriculture (Northern Ireland) Act) has provisions for the horse, along with any other animal, to be classed as an agricultural animal providing that it is either involved in or kept for the production of food.**

Whilst the previously examined changes to agriculture through mechanisation have been applied equally across the EU and greatly diminished or eradicated the use of horses in food production, the fact remains that horses are still considered and consumed as food across the EU. **Ireland for example, in its 1930 Agricultural Produce (Fresh Meat) Act⁸, formally recognises and legislates for horse meat in conjunction with that from pigs, poultry and cattle as being agricultural products, but this explicit recognition appears not to exist in any UK legislation.**

The taboo around both the farming of, and consumption of horses as meat, is the major difference between the UK and the rest of the EU in terms of how the horse is viewed. In effect the current UK legislation provides a means whereby the horse can be classed as an agricultural animal but social convention prevents the application of this designation as it is based upon the horse being consumed as food.

3. Investigations/efforts into designating the horse as an agricultural animal – UK and Northern Ireland.

Investigations into the merits of explicitly designating the horse as an agricultural animal not based upon the premise of it as a source of meat have been ongoing within the UK for a number of years. In March 2004 for example Defra and the British Horse Industry Confederation published research into the horse industry in Great Britain which identified a number of key strategic issues facing the development of the industry⁹. Amongst the strategic issues identified was the need for a ‘cohesive view’ across the entire industry on whether or not to pursue moves to designate the horse as an agricultural animal. The report highlighted the fact that there was a lack of consensus across the industry as to whether such a step would be a good move. In

⁷ [Agriculture Act 1947](#)

⁸ [Agricultural Produce \(Fresh Meat\) Act, 1930](#)

⁹ [A report of research on the horse industry in Great Britain, The Henley Centre, British Horse Industry Confederation, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, March 2004](#)

effect whilst some stakeholders saw potential economic and business benefits others saw increased costs that could damage the competitiveness of the industry.

In a similar approach research commissioned by DARD into the equine sector in Northern Ireland in 2006 highlighted the cost burdens that the equine industry here was subject to¹⁰. The research catalogued concerns around the levels of VAT and rates paid by the equine industry in Northern Ireland and highlighted that fact that farmers here who farmed animals such as sheep, pigs or cattle, were not subject to these costs. The report also drew attention to the fact that classifying the horse as an agricultural animal could address many of these cost issues.

The net effect of both of these pieces of research within GB and Northern Ireland was the creation of strategies for the Horse Industry. In England and Wales this strategy was published in 2005¹¹ and contained a specific action to establish a working group under the leadership of the British Equestrian Trade Association and British Horse Industry Confederation to **‘..determine whether the status of the horse is a significant issue, and if so to establish an industry-wide position and make a convincing case for change, with consideration being given to the situation in other (EU)member states.’**

The strategy for the Equine Industry in Northern Ireland was published in March 2007 and mirrored the proposals in the English and Welsh strategy by advocating the creation of an **‘...industry wide working group to determine whether the status of the horse is a significant issue.’**

It has not been possible to identify whether any progress has been made on either of these actions to date.

In relation to specific legislative attempts to change the classification of the horse within Northern Ireland, Mr Billy Armstrong MLA brought a proposal for a Private Member’s Bill seeking a change to the previously mentioned 1949 Agriculture Act (Northern Ireland) in October 2002¹². In effect Mr Armstrong’s Bill proposed amendments to the Agriculture (Northern Ireland) Act 1949, Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 and the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 which would have seen the formal and more explicit recognition of horses as livestock/agricultural animals. The proposed Bill did not however proceed beyond the first stage of legislation and to date there have been no further attempts to progress either this or any similar piece of legislation within the Northern Ireland Assembly.

¹⁰ [Research on the Equine sector in Northern Ireland, equine sub-group of the rural stakeholder forum, DARD 2006, page 52](#)

¹¹ [Strategy for the Horse Industry in England and Wales, British Horse Industry Confederation, 2005, page 48-49.](#)

¹² [Agriculture Amendment Bill, Explanatory and Financial Memorandum](#)

Appendix 1 : Benefits and Drawbacks from the designation of the horse as an agricultural animal

| Issues | Benefits | Drawbacks |
|--|--|---|
| Planning permission for homes in the countryside | <p>CTY 10 –Dwellings on Farms under PPS21¹³ currently qualifies those operating equine businesses to apply for planning permission for a dwelling house on a ‘farm’. The policy also explicitly excludes the keepers of horse and or ponies for hobby purposes from the availing of this provision. The designation of the horse as an agricultural animal would potentially mean that keepers of hobby horses and/or ponies could however avail of the provision within CTY 10 and this could see a further growth in the rural population that might help to secure the future viability of some rural communities and the services within them.</p> | <p>The designation of the horse as an agricultural could potentially greatly increase the number of applications for individual homes in the countryside. Given that PPS21 was designed to deliver a sustainable countryside the impact of the creation of a loophole that could potentially greatly increase development pressures in certain rural communities would need to be carefully considered. In particular the environmental impact of an increased number of rural homes in relation to issues such as water, sewage, landscape impact and increasing service delivery costs may prove detrimental the to rural community and taxpayers in general.</p> |
| Rates pressures on the equine industry | <p>Agricultural buildings and land are exempt from paying rates but are rateable where non-agricultural activities take place on farms, under the auspices of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977¹⁴. The designation of the horse as an agricultural animal would therefore mean that those who kept horses would be exempt from paying rates on either the land or buildings in which their horses were kept.</p> <p>This would effectively level the playing field for many equine businesses who can sometimes find themselves in competition with ‘farms’ that are rates exempt but running equestrian activities. Any move which reduced the costs of the equestrian industry could also see the further expansion of the industry and the overall contribution that it makes to the Northern Ireland economy as a whole.</p> | <p>There are wider potential societal drawbacks due to the reduction in rates income from equestrian businesses, and potentially individual keepers of so called hobby horses/ponies, if the horse was classified as an agricultural animal. Such a drop in regional and local rates income would have an undoubted, and as yet unmeasured, impact on the types, nature and level of service provided by local and central government.</p> |
| Inability to access grant aid such as that available under | As things currently stand there are undoubtedly funding | It should be noted that the explicit re designation of the |

¹³ [Planning Policy Statement 21, Sustainable Development in the Countryside, Department of the Environment, June 2010](#)

¹⁴ [Rates \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1977](#)

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| <p>the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-2013</p> | <p>streams that remain inaccessible to the equestrian industry due to the fact that the horse is not explicitly identified as an agricultural/farmed animal within the UK. DARD's current Rural Development Programme which runs from 2007-13 for example theoretically has over £500million available to improve and sustain rural areas.</p> <p>However Axis 1 and Axis 2 of the RDP which account for over £400million are largely inaccessible to the equestrian industry due to the fact that the majority of measures under these axes are only accessible by 'farmers' and 'farm families'. As a result farmers who keep horses can qualify for many of these measures but equestrian businesses in rural areas are not eligible.</p> <p>As things currently stand the equestrian industry in Northern Ireland can really only apply for RDP monies under Axis 3 and Axis 4, accounting for around £100m, and also open to a wide range of rural individuals, communities and businesses so competition for these funds is even greater. The explicit designation of the horse as an agricultural animal could potentially make Axis 1 and Axis 2 available to equestrian businesses but this would require the criteria of individual measure to recognise such a change in designation. By way of example within Axis 2 the Less favoured Areas Compensatory Allowance Scheme (LFACA) is currently only accessible by '...farmers who use their land to maintain breeding herds of beef cattle, sheep, deer and goats.'</p> | <p>horse as an agricultural animal would probably not be universally welcomed by the farming community, given the potential impact such a move would have on both the level of funding available and the level of competition for funds within Axis 1 and Axis 2.</p> <p>There also remains some doubt as to whether a re-designation would actually make more funding available to the equestrian industry. Looking at the current Irish Rural Development Programme 2007-13 it seems clear that similarly to Northern Ireland the managing authorities are keen for the equestrian industry to apply for support under Axes 3 and 4 as evidenced by a guide released by Horse Sport Ireland.¹⁵ This advice is interesting given the fact that the horse is regarded as an agricultural animal within Ireland. Furthermore in looking at the summary of measures included under Axes 1 and 2 of Ireland's Rural Development Programme whilst there are no clear exclusions for the equestrian industry in terms of eligibility to apply there are equally no explicit references to the eligibility of the sector to apply for the grant aid available.</p> |
| <p>Issues with the traceability of horses</p> | <p>As things currently stand it is quite difficult to accurately measure the number of horses within Northern Ireland, never mind their movements. Under the Horse passport</p> | |

¹⁵ [A Guide to Axes 3&4 of the Rural Development Programme: Grant Supports for Ancillary Services to the Sport Horse Sector, Horse Sport Ireland, December 2010.](#)

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | <p>system which has been in existence since 2005 all horses, ponies, donkeys, and zebras are required to have a passport to identify them which includes the animal's appearance, age , breed, medication it has received and micro chip details. The researcher has been unable to establish the number of horse passports in existence within Northern Ireland and how this compares to the estimated horse population here. There are also questions around the effective enforcement of the requirement for horse passports given the fact that the National Equine Database¹⁶ is a privately run business and not part of government.</p> | |
|--|---|--|

¹⁶ [National Equine Database Website](#)