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trading standards law explained

Horse passports

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In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

Although the United Kingdom left the European Union (EU) in 2021, certain pieces of legislation (known as 'assimilated law') continue to apply until such time as they are replaced by new UK legislation, revoked or permitted to expire. This means that our guidance still contains references to legislation that originated from the EU.

This guidance is for England

All horse owners must ensure that their horse is correctly identified; they must also hold a valid passport (equine identification document) for their animal. The same requirement applies to all owners of equines. In assimilated Regulation (EU) 2015/262 *laying down rules pursuant to Directives 90/427/EEC and*

2009/156/EC as regards the methods for the identification of equidae (Equine Passport Regulation)
'equidae' or 'equine animal(s)' are defined as "wild or domesticated soliped mammals of all species within the genus *Equus* of the family Equidae, and their crosses" - for example, horse, donkey, mule, hinny (jennet), zebra, Przewalski, or their crosses.

A horse may be moved within Great Britain only if it is accompanied by a passport (with a few exceptions).

Identification requirements

All horses, regardless of age, need to be microchipped with a unique number, and this must be done before applying for a horse passport.

Microchips, which are also known as transponders, are read-only passive radio frequency identification devices that are implanted into a horse's body; they have an identification number unique to that particular animal. Only a registered veterinary surgeon of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (or equivalent professional body in an EU Member State) can implant the device. A vet must undertake procedures to detect any previous devices already fitted to a horse before beginning to implant a microchip.

Passport requirements

Horses must hold a valid passport issued by a recognised horse passport issuing body (IB) (also known as a passport-issuing organisation (PIO)) by 30 November of the year of their birth or within six months of their birth, whichever is the later.

Foals will need to be microchipped and get a passport earlier if they are to be sold before this time limit has elapsed. See below for more information on foals.

The passport must hold correct and up-to-date information. If the owner believes that the details in the passport need updating, they must ask the IB to modify and update the passport. This includes:

- Eligibility for slaughter
- A change in the horse's status - for example, a change in its registered status
- Application of an alternative form of identification
- A change of ownership

Where the passport has not been applied for within the required time limits, the animal will automatically be signed out of the food chain.

Only the owner of the horse (or the owner's appointed agent) can apply for a passport.

Why does my horse need a passport?

Horse passports are required by law. They are necessary in order to prevent horses that have been treated with certain veterinary medicines (such as wormers and analgesics) from entering the food chain. Although we do not consume horse meat in any great quantity in the UK, a large number of horses are slaughtered each year for export for human consumption.

Passports also help reduce the risk of a ban being introduced on up to 75% of veterinary medicines (including phenylbutazone, also known as 'Bute') currently used to treat horses.

Ensuring that your horse passport, microchip and registered information on the Central Equine Database is up to date will also allow lost, stolen or straying horses to be quickly reunited with their owners. It reduces the likelihood of theft and illegal sale, and prevents horses being slaughtered if they are signed out of the food chain. Additionally, the Central Equine Database can be used to identify horses and owners during a disease outbreak, and gives a clear picture of the country's horse population.

Horse owners can use the Chipchecker on the Central Equine Database. You enter the horse's microchip number and check that the centrally registered information about the horse is correct and up to date. If anything is incorrect, you should contact the IB to rectify.

What's in the passport and how do I get one?

A passport is a booklet (minimum A5 size), written in both English and French, that uniquely identifies a horse throughout its life and has been issued by a recognised IB. The passport details the horse's identity, including its unique life number and microchip number. This information will be laminated to prevent alteration. The later pages show the veterinary treatment history of the horse, its movement and ownership history, and a declaration as to whether the horse is intended for human consumption.

Applications for passports must be made by the owner of the horse (or the owner's appointed agent) in writing to an IB, and be in the format specified by that IB.

A list of IBs / PIOs is available on the GOV.UK website.

Foals

Foals need to be microchipped with a unique number that is matched to the owner's contact details, as well as getting a passport. This must be done before the foal is six months old or by 30 November in the year it is born, whichever is later. However, foals will need to be microchipped and get a passport earlier if they are to be sold before this time limit has elapsed.

Foals without a passport may be moved with their dam / foster mare for production purposes - for example, to and from a stud. They may also be sold without a passport, providing they remain with their dam. Owners should note that some auctioneers may require all horses to have a valid passport for sale at auction.

When must the passport accompany a horse?

The passport must accompany a horse at all times. The person with primary responsibility for the horse must have the passport made available to them if they are not the owner. The exceptions to this are:

- Emergency situations
- When a horse is being grazed or stabled, but the passport can be produced without delay in the event of an inspection
- When a horse is being moved on foot, where the passport can be viewed without delay
- When a horse is being used for competition or an event and is required to leave the venue temporarily
- Unweaned foals accompanying their dam or foster mare

Smartcard

A smartcard is a plastic device with an embedded computer chip capable of storing data that can be read by compatible computer systems. For movements into and within England, they can be used to accompany the horse (instead of the actual passport) if the animal is registered or being moved for breeding and production purposes.

Smartcards must contain the following visible information:

- IB
- Unique life number
- Name
- Sex
- Colour
- The last 15 digits of the code transmitted by the transponder (as appropriate)
- Photograph of the equine animal

Part A section I of the passport must be available electronically.

The same applies for the movement of registered horses and equines for the purpose of breeding and production within the UK, in circumstances where those horses have entered the UK from the EU.

The devices can be authorised to be used for export to EU Member States, to accompany the horse instead of the passport, which allows equines to move within agreed European national boundaries. It is recommended that you check with the relevant Member State before using a smartcard.

The smartcard must be issued by the same IB that issued the paper passport.

What if I buy or sell a horse?

When a horse is sold, the owner must give the passport to the buyer at the time there is a transfer of ownership (whether or not any money changes hands). Within 30 days of transfer, the new owner must:

- Notify the IB of the change of ownership. The new owner must provide their name, address and contact details
- Return the passport to the issuing agency for updating

In the case of auction sales, the passport must be given to the auctioneers, who must then give it to the buyer to follow this process.

There is no exemption for dealers that sell a horse within 30 days of purchasing it.

A horse cannot be sold without a passport (veterinary or breed certificates are not sufficient).

Note: it is advisable to thoroughly check a passport before purchasing a horse to ensure the details provided are accurate, and in particular to check that the date of birth has not been altered.

What do I do if my horse dies?

When a horse dies, the keeper must return the passport to the IB within 30 days of death, and can request that it is sent back once the procedure of logging the death and cancelling the passport has been

completed. The same requirement applies if the horse becomes lost, including theft.

When a horse is sold to a slaughterhouse, the occupier of the slaughterhouse will give the passport to the official veterinary surgeon.

What should I do if the passport is lost or damaged?

Where a passport has been lost but the horse's identity can be established and an ownership declaration is available, any person may apply to the IB for a replacement passport for that horse (if the IB is known).

Where the original IB is not known, and there is no microchip that can be traced, the owner should apply to any IB to obtain a replacement passport.

Veterinary treatment

Article 37 of assimilated Regulation (EU) 2015/262 states: "An equine animal shall be deemed to be intended for slaughter for human consumption except where it is, in accordance with this Regulation, irreversibly declared as not so intended in Part II of Section II of the identification document by ..." the signature of (a) the owner at their own discretion, or (b) the keeper and veterinarian responsible (for administering veterinary medicine); or where applicable the IB issuing a duplicate or replacement identification document in accordance with the relevant articles.

The passport needs to be available at the time of treatment with a veterinary medicine. If the horse is not already signed out of the food chain and the veterinary medicine to be administered will require it, the vet is obliged to ensure this is done in part II of section II of the passport. The vet may also need to 'invalidate' part III of section II.

The substances that must not be administered, supplied or prescribed to a food-producing animal are:

- Any product that contains an active substance, with a maximum residue limit (MRL) and determined withdrawal period for horses, not contained within the GB MRL Register
- Medicines containing substances included on the 'Prohibited substances' list within the GB MRL Register
- Any product **not** on the list of essential substances in assimilated Regulation (EU) No 122/2013 *amending Regulation (EC) No 1950/2006 establishing, in accordance with Directive 2001/82/EC on the Community code relating to veterinary medicinal products, a list of substances essential for the treatment of equidae* (such as phenylbutazone)

Your vet will be able to advise you further regarding the above products and medicines.

If any of these substances are administered, the horse can never be slaughtered for human consumption and the declaration in section II of the horse passport must be signed by the veterinarian or the owner as 'Not intended for human consumption'.

Animals subject to the administration of essential substances in assimilated Regulation (EU) No 122/2013 may be considered for entry into the food chain, but only after a six-month withdrawal period following the date of administration.

You are advised to think carefully before deciding whether you wish to voluntarily sign your horse out of the food chain. A 'not intended' declaration at part II of section II of the passport cannot be reversed and a horse may not be consigned for slaughter for human consumption if this section has been signed.

If unplanned or emergency veterinary treatment is required and the passport is not available, the vet will not know whether your horse is signed out of the food chain, and will therefore be permitted to administer only substances suitable for food-producing animals. The vet is required to record all vaccinations a horse receives in sections VII and VIII of the horse passport.

The vet is also required to enter the date of the last administration, as prescribed, of that medicinal product in section II of the passport. The animal treated with that medicinal product can be slaughtered for human consumption only after the end of the general withdrawal period of six months, following the date of the last administration.

Wild or semi-wild horses in designated areas

Wild or semi-wild horses identified in the lists kept by the Dartmoor Commoners Council, the stud book of the Exmoor Pony Society, the lists kept by Verderers of the New Forest, the stud book of the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society, or identified in the lists kept by the National Trust as Konik equines located at Wicken Fen, are exempt from the requirement for horse passports until such time as they leave those respective areas, or are brought into domestic use. This exemption applies to those animals so listed and contained within the designated areas. All other horses in those areas are required to have horse passports.

Import and export

There are extra requirements when horses are coming into or leaving the country. See 'Importing animals' and 'Exporting animals' for more information.

Guidance on importing or exporting live animals or animal products is also available on GOV.UK.

Enforcement

Authorised officers have the power to enter premises (and vehicles) and inspect horse passports and other documents at any reasonable time.

Further information

More comprehensive information on horse passports can be found on the GOV.UK website.

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards services and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law, please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

In this update

No major changes.

Last reviewed / updated: May 2026

Key legislation

- Assimilated Regulation (EU) 2015/262 *laying down rules pursuant to Directives 90/427/EEC and 2009/156/EC as regards the methods for the identification of equidae (Equine Passport Regulation)*
- Equine Identification (England) Regulations 2018

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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