

Agenda item	<b>8.1</b>
Report no	<b>HLC/005/19</b>
Restricted	✓

**NOT FOR PUBLICATION on the grounds of disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973**

## **THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL**

**Committee: THE HIGHLAND LICENSING COMMITTEE**

**Date: 18 January 2019**

**Report Title: Application for renewal of a licence under the Riding Establishments Acts 1964 And 1970**

**Northwolds riding Centre, Fendom, Tain (Ward 7 – Tain and Easter Ross)**

**Report By: Environmental Health Manager**

### **1. Purpose/Executive Summary**

**1.1** This Report relates to an application by Highlands Unbridled, Northwolds Riding Centre, Fendom, Tain, for the renewal of a riding establishment licence

### **2. Recommendation**

**2.2** Members are asked to determine the application in accordance with the Hearings Procedure.

### **3. Legal background**

- 3.1 In terms of the Riding Establishments Acts 1964, no person shall keep a riding establishment except under the authority of a licence granted under the Act. A person keeping a riding establishment shall be regarded as keeping it at the premises where the horses employed for the purposes of the business concerned are kept. For the purposes of the Act, premises includes land.
- 3.2 A riding establishment is regarded as the carrying on of a business of keeping horses for either or both of the following: the purpose of their being let out on hire for riding; or the purpose of their being used in providing, in return for payment, instruction in riding. The Council, as Licensing Authority must ensure that the applicant appears to them to be suitable and qualified, either by experience in the management of horses or by being the holder of an approved certificate or by employing in the management of the riding establishment a person so qualified.
- 3.3 Furthermore, the Council must ensure that the health, safety and wellbeing of the horses is protected in various respects as set out in the legislation. The Council must obtain a report from a specialist veterinary surgeon authorised to carry out inspections advising whether in the view of the veterinary surgeon the premises are suitable for use as a riding establishment and describing the condition of the premises and the horses found there.

### **4. Current Renewal Application**

- 4.1 Mrs Jan O'Neill has applied for the renewal of a licence to operate a riding establishment at North Wilds Trekking Centre, Fendom, Tain, IV19 1PE. The proposed number of horses applied for is **34**. The application form dated 16 October 2018 is provided in **Appendix 1**.

#### **4.2 Licensing history**

- The applicant operated a licensed riding establishment from Keepers Cottage, Doll, Brora from 2008 until 15th December 2014.
- The business moved in 2015 to its current location at Fendom, Tain. A 3 month provisional licence was issued on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2015 by the Highland Licensing Committee. Under delegated powers, a full licence was issued for the remainder of 2015.
- For 2016, a full licence was issued under delegated powers.
- At its meeting on 6th December 2016, the Highland Licensing Committee granted a 3 month provisional licence to carry out local trekking, hacking and lessons, operating from Northwolds only.
- Powers to grant a further 3 month provisional licence were delegated to the Environmental Health Manager. Following an inspection on 10th March 2017 by the vet and an EHO, a further provisional licence was granted.
- At its meeting on 9th June 2017, the Highland Licensing Committee granted a full licence (subject to additional licence conditions) to operate a limited number of long-distance treks for the remainder of 2017.

- For 2018, under delegated powers a full licence was issued (subject to additional licence conditions) to operate a limited number of long-distance treks. The licence expired on 31<sup>st</sup> December 2018.
- The applicant has applied for a renewal of their full licence as issued in 2018.

4.3 A copy of the 2018 licence and conditions is provided in **Appendix 2**.

## 5. Consultees and objections

5.1 Following receipt of the application, the following agencies were consulted:-

- Police Scotland – no objections
- Scottish Fire and Rescue Service – no response received at time of preparing report
- Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals – no response received at time of preparing report

5.2 No objections from the public were received by the deadline for responses.

## 6. Determining Issues

6.1 Section 1(4) of the 1964 Act allows a local authority the discretion to withhold a licence on any grounds. The Act, unsurprisingly for its age, does not state what the general objective of the legislation is but from its terms it would appear to relate to the welfare of horses and perhaps the welfare of customers. Any reasons for refusal should relate to this and the matters detailed in section 1(4) of the Act which can be summarised as the suitability and qualification of the applicant and the welfare of horses.

6.2 The Act also states that in determining whether to grant a licence, the authority have regard to certain issues relating to the welfare of the horses and that the licence holder possess a valid certificate of insurance. Licence conditions specify these requirements.

6.3 Section 1(5) of the 1964 Act states that any person aggrieved by the refusal of a local authority to grant such a licence, or by any condition subject to which such a licence is proposed to be granted, may appeal to the Sheriff who may on such an appeal give such directions with respect to the issue of a licence or, as the case may be, with respect to the conditions subject to which a licence is to be granted as he thinks proper.

6.4 A veterinary inspection for relicensing purposes was carried out on 23 November 2018 and the related report and covering letter are provided in **Appendix 3a and 3b**. Please note the vet has requested that two previous reports are also included (dated 3 October 2018 and 20 October 2018) which are provided in **Appendix 3c and 3d**.

6.5 The vet has recommended that a provisional licence be issued, for local trekking, starting and finishing at North Wilds, work in the sand school but no trail riding at this time.

The vet has recommended licence conditions which include all those conditions as per license number RE/003/9536 (**Appendix 2**) with the following additions or removals:

- (1) Resolution of the lack of grazing for the numbers of horse either by reduction in the number of horses or an increase in suitable grazing to achieve a ratio of 1 animal per acre or thereabouts. This is a priority and needs to be actioned without delay before the winter weather arrives.
- (2) Clarification of the situation as regards the siting of the stable, tack room and containers in writing from the landlord.
- (3) No trail rides (conditions 19 & 20 amended)
- (4) Saffy on light work only with max 1 hour's work and regular monitoring
- (5) Stan to be assessed by yard's own vet
- (6) McKenzie on light work and regularly monitored for any respiratory signs.

6.6 The applicant has responded with concern over the vet's recommendations and a copy of the letter is provided in **Appendix 4a**.

The applicant has also provided an annotated copy of the veterinary report, a new plan for long distance rides, information on resting horses and on rain scald in support of their application which are provided in **Appendix 4b, 4c, 4d and 4e** respectively.

6.7 Members are asked to determine the application in accordance with the Hearings Procedure for miscellaneous licence applications.

## 7. Timescale

7.1 The acts do not specify a timescale within which to determine an application

## 8. Powers

8.1 The Committee may grant a full licence subject to the standard conditions, in which case it would last for one year, grant a provisional licence lasting for a period of three months; or otherwise refuse the application.

8.2 If minded to grant a full or provisional licence, the Committee may attach such reasonable conditions, in addition to the standard conditions, as they think fit.

## 9. Implications

9.1 Not applicable.

Date: 8 January 2019

Author: Alan Yates, Environmental Health Manager

Background Papers:

Riding Establishments Act 1964

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1964/70>

Riding Establishments Act 1970

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1970/32/contents>

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Renewal application form

Appendix 2 – Riding establishment licence - 2018

Appendix 3a – Veterinary cover letter dated 26 November 2018,

Appendix 3b – Veterinary report dated 23 November 2018

Appendix 3c – Veterinary letter dated 20 October 2018

Appendix 3d – Veterinary letter dated 3 October 2018

Appendix 4a – Applicant's letter of support dated 14 December 2018

Appendix 4b – Applicant's annotated copy of the veterinary report dated 26 November 2018

Appendix 4c – New plan for long distance rides

Appendix 4d – Information on resting horses

Appendix 4e – Information on rain scald

# Animal licence

Reference number: **FS92074874**

Date: **16/10/2018**

Type of licence: **Riding establishment licence**

Type of application: **Renewal**

Reference number: **010659/IAM01768**

Type of applicant: **Partnership**

## Your details

Are you an agent? **I am the applicant**

Name: **Mrs Jan O'Neill**

Date and place of birth: [REDACTED]

Email address: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

Address: [REDACTED]

## Details of your organisation (if applicable)

Name of the organisation: **Highlands Unbridled**

Your position within the organisation: **Senior Partner**

Address: **Highlands Unbridled North Wilds Riding Centre Fendom Tain IV19 1PE**

## Details of partners/directors

Name	Date of birth	Place of birth	Address
Mrs Jan O'Neill			[REDACTED]
Mr Graham O'Neill			[REDACTED]

## Day-to-day management

Are you day-to-day manager? **Yes**

What are qualifications and/or experience of the applicant and/or day-to-day manager in handling animals? **Have run Highlands Unbridled for 10 years plus**

**NC Equestrian Studies/HNC Equestrian Studies/ HSE 3 day first Aid at Work/ Riding and Road Safety Certificate**

**BET Ride Leader/BET Senior Ride Leader/ TRSS Riding Centre Operator license.**

## **Premises details**

Name and address: **Highlands Unbridled Highlands Unbridled North Wilds Riding Centre  
Fendom Tain IV19 1PE**

Are you the owner of the premises?

## **Description of premises**

**Period when the establishment is normally operative: All year**

**Premises construction: Static Caravan as office. 2 stables and tack room of wooden construction, field shelters and wind breaks of wooden construction. metal shipping container as feed store. Three storage sheds of wooden construction. Sand school with wooden post and rail fencing and lighting. Fencing in fields of post and wire - split into smaller fields with electric rope and posts. Fencing is electrified. Property has CCTV cameras covering the car parking area, front of office and over all fields.**

**Size of quarters: Two stables. 12 x 12 and 12 x 10. shelters and wind breaks in fields**

**Temperature control:**

**Lighting: battery powered in stables and tack room. Mains electric in office.**

**Ventilation: airflow under eaves.**

**Cleanliness: Rubber matting on top of sand. Can be removed for thorough cleaning. Fields are cleared of manure in rotation or harrowed depending on time of year.**

**Drainage: Sand beneath rubber matting gives free drainage. Fields are sandy soil, and drains freely.**

**Storage and preparation of food and drink: Feed is stored in metal shipping container and is prepared in there too. Water is mains from tap in yard and also from IBC tank in case pipes freeze in winter, Hay is provided in fields in winter fed from round bale feeders and water is available at all times in troughs with mains supply, or via IBC tanks in winter if pipes are frozen.**

**Bedding material: Rubber matting with straw on top.**

**Exercise facilities: Fields and sand school.**

**Method of transporting animals to and from the premises:**

**Precautions taken for preventing and controlling the spread of infectious and contagious diseases among animals: Isolation paddock with separate field shelter.**

**Steps taken for the protection of the animals in case of fire or other emergency: Notices with instructions in the event of fire and contact details are posted throughout the property. Fire drills. Landlord lives adjacent to property.**

**The name and address of your usual veterinary surgeon / practitioner: Kessock Vets  
the Paddock**

**Drumsmittal  
North Kessock  
Inverness**

**Is a responsible person living in establishment? Yes**

### **Animal details**

<b>Type of animals to be kept</b>	<b>Number of animals</b>
Horses including mare, gelding, pony, foal, colt, filly, stallion, ass, mule and jannet	34

### **Convictions**

**Have you or anyone responsible for the day-to-day management of the animals ever been convicted and/or disqualified under any animal health and welfare legislation? No**

### **References**

**Reference numbers of all necessary planning permissions obtained:**

### **Declaration**

**The information you have supplied will be used for the purpose for which you have provided it and any relevant procedures following from this. This data will be maintained in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and will not be passed on or sold to any other organisation without your prior approval unless this is a legal requirement.**

**I declare that the particulars given by me/us on this form are correct to the best of my/our knowledge and belief.**

**I understand that a licence fee is non-refundable and that there may be some additional charges, if applicable (e.g. vet fees).**

### **Payment**

**Total cost: £144.00**

**Payment method: Debit or Credit Card**

**Transaction reference (this should always be present if the customer selected Debit / Credit Card payment): 167252**

**If this is blank for Debit / Credit Card payment, then the payment was unsuccessful and the customer must be contacted to arrange a payment.**





**RIDING ESTABLISHMENTS ACT 1964**

**Licence to Keep a Riding Establishment**

The Highland Council, by virtue of the powers conferred upon them by the Riding Establishments Act 1964 hereby grant a Licence to:

**Mrs Jan O'Neill**

To keep a riding establishment at:

**Highlands Unbridled  
Northwolds Riding Centre,  
Fendom,  
Tain,  
IV19 1PE**

Licence Number: 44939/010145/2017

For the period from 01/01/2018 until 31/12/2018.

The maximum number of horses which are authorised by this licence to be used at the riding establishment specified above is 34.

This licence is granted subject to compliance with the Riding Establishments Act 1964 and to conditions 1 to 25 attached hereto. Failure to comply with the conditions of this licence is an offence.

Signed ....  ..... Date 5<sup>th</sup> December 2017

John Murray, Senior Environmental Health Officer  
on behalf of the Highland Council.

Community Services,  
38 Harbour Road  
Inverness, IV1 1UF

Tel: 01463 228700  
Email: [envhealth@highland.gov.uk](mailto:envhealth@highland.gov.uk)

---

### Licence Conditions

1. Any horse found on the premises by an authorised Officer to be in need of veterinary attention shall not be returned to work until the holder of the licence has obtained at his/her own expense and has lodged with the Local Authority a veterinary certificate that the horse is fit for work.
2. No horse will be let out on hire for riding or used for providing instruction in riding without supervision by a responsible person of the age of 16 years or over unless (in the case of a horse let out for hire for riding) the holder of the licence is satisfied that the hirer of the horse is competent to ride without supervision.
3. The carrying on of the business of a riding establishment shall at no time be left in the charge of any person under 16 years of age.
4. The licence holder shall hold a current insurance policy which insures him/her against liability for any injury sustained by those who hire a horse from him/her for riding and those who use a horse in the course of receiving from him/her, in return for payment, instruction in riding and arising out of the hire or use of a horse as aforesaid and which also insures such persons in respect of any liability which may be incurred by them in respect of injury to any person caused by, or arising out of, the hire or use of a horse as aforementioned.
5. A register shall be kept by the licence holder of all horses in his/her possession aged three years and under which are normally kept on the premises. This register shall be available for inspection by an authorised Officer at all times.
6. The total number of horses permitted by this licence to be kept at the Establishment is **34. At no time shall this number be exceeded.** This number is dependant upon the area of grazing land being maintained at the current level. Should this area be reduced or altered in any way, the licence holder must contact the Highland Council without delay. In the event that the land available is decreased, the number of horses will also be decreased by the Council.
7. There will be available at all times for the horses accommodation suitable as respects construction, size, number of occupants, lighting, ventilation, drainage and cleanliness.
8. Where the horses are maintained at grass, adequate pasture, shelter, water and supplementary feeds shall be provided.
9. All stabled horses shall be adequately supplied with suitable food drink and bedding material.
10. All horses shall be adequately exercised, groomed and rested and so far as is necessary, visited at suitable intervals.

11. All reasonable precautions shall be taken to prevent and control the spread of infectious or contagious diseases and veterinary first-aid equipment and medicines shall be provided and maintained in the premises.
12. Appropriate steps shall be taken for the protection and extrication of horses in case of fire or other emergency. In particular, the name, address and telephone number of the licence holder or some other responsible person shall be kept displayed in a prominent position on the outside of the premises and instructions as to the action to be taken in the event of fire with particular regard to the removal of horses shall be kept displayed in a prominent position on the outside of the premises.
13. All horses shall be maintained in a good state of health and shall be suitable for the purposes for which they are kept.
14. Adequate storage accommodation shall be provided for forage, bedding, stable equipment and saddlery.
15. The feet of all animals shall be properly trimmed and if shod, their shoes are properly fitted and in good condition.
16. Suitable storage facilities shall be provided for the storage of manure, these facilities to be to the satisfaction of the Director of Community Services.
17. A copy of this licence shall be suitably displayed to the public in a prominent position within the Establishment.

### **Additional Conditions**

18. Trekking, hacking and riding in the sand school – all activities shall start from and finish at North Wilds using those horses and ponies declared fit to do so whether at an inspection or by the yard's own veterinary surgeon.
19. Trail rides – those involving overnight stops and long distances shall be carried out only on specific routes as detailed in the schedule supplied to the Highland Council on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2017. Any amendments must be advised beforehand to the Highland Council.
  - I. April Fools
  - II. Easter Ride
  - III. Great Glen 4 Day
  - IV. Great Glen 5 Day
  - V. Outlander
  - VI. Coast to Coast North
  - VII. Coast to Coast South
  - VIII. Wild West
  - IX. Cairngorms and Castles
  - X. Cairngorms to Coast
  - XI. Ben Nevis Bothies

- XII. Three Coast Ride
- XIII. Bonnie Prince Charlie

20. All trail ride horses and ponies shall be checked during the course of the working season by the yard's own vet during the last week of June 2018 and the last week of September 2018. A copy of the vet's report to be sent to the Highland Council following each visit.
21. An adequate ratio of suitably qualified ride leaders shall be maintained on all hacks or treks.
22. All business operations shall be risk assessed (including biosecurity on both trail rides and local treks) and assessments reviewed annually or as necessary, whichever is more frequent.
23. A professional saddler shall be engaged in early spring in order to inspect the saddles of all animals and a written audit of tack shall be maintained.
24. The licence holder shall ensure regular attendance by a recognised farrier and a written audit of farriery shall be maintained.
25. Any new arrivals must be isolated for 3 weeks for biosecurity purposes and checked for their suitability by the yard's own vet before being used for any client of the business. Written evidence shall be maintained and submitted to the Council. The limit of 34 animals is to be maintained at all times. Therefore, no new arrivals shall be permitted until others have left.

## **NOTES**

- (a) Any person aggrieved by the conditions (except conditions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) subject to which this licence is granted may appeal to the appropriate Sheriff Court; and the Court may on such an appeal give such directions with respect to the conditions as it thinks proper.
  - (b) Any person who wilfully obstructs or delays any person in the exercise of his powers of entry and inspection under the Acts, shall be guilty of an offence.
  - (c) If any conditions subject to which a licence is granted in accordance with the provisions of the Acts is contravened or not complied with, the person to whom the licence was granted shall be guilty of an offence.
-

Fraser & Fraser (Vets) Ltd  
Church Street  
Dingwall  
IV15 9SB  
Tel 01349 863117

Chris Ratter  
The Highland Council  
Ross House  
Dingwall

Dear Mr Ratter

26.11.2018

**Riding Establishments Acts 1964 and 1970**

Highlands Unbridled (HU), North Wilds, Fendom, Tain; owned and managed by Jan O'Neill of Juniper Cottage, Fendom, Tain.

Please find enclosed the Veterinary Inspector's Report following our joint visit on Friday 23.11.18 to North Wilds for the annual inspection of this riding establishment (RE).

This report should be read with the reports I sent from 03.10.2018 and 20.10.2018 following extra visits requested by the Council by you and me following complaints from members of the public.

At Friday's visit (23.11.18) there were 35 horses on site. One (Ghost) will be taken away again to a friend's grazing as she is still being brought into work.

5 ponies are either retired or for sale. One of the 30 on the list for the RE was "Tonks", belonging to the yard manager, [REDACTED]. Tonks is kept in [REDACTED] rented field at North Wilds which is not included in Mrs O'Neill's grazing and which is the first field on the left hand side as one enters the RE. This field was previously rented by HU and had been used for quarantine/isolation during the Strangles outbreak. Tonks was lame on Friday so cannot be used until certified fit for use by the yard's own veterinary surgeon.

- Of the remaining 29, Pi had returned from being trained by an external trainer in Caithness. He was quiet and healthy but as an inexperienced horse would be best for selected competent riders only.
- Saffy was presented as being back in work; Mrs O'Neill authorised Kessock Vets to speak to me about Saffy as in October he was off work with a significant painful back condition. I have just spoken with [REDACTED] the Clinical Director at Kessock. At Friday's inspection he appeared to have a stilted gait, a roach (somewhat hunched) back, was scuffing his hind feet but was not observed to be unilaterally (one-sided) lame. [REDACTED] had seen Saffy at the start of November at which time his findings were similar; he advised that Saffy be put on light duties only, with maximum one hour's work in the school, no trekking nor long distance work. He was to be monitored regularly.
- Maverick is off work with a chronic leg wound; I saw him in the loosebox and the wound appears to be responding to treatment by Kessock Vets.
- Connie is also off work, again under the care of Kessock Vets as she has weight loss and diarrhoea diagnosed as encysted redworm in the gut.

- Solo is still a "work in progress" ie is being schooled by the RE with a view to being brought into work. Like Pi, he will be suitable for selected riders only until he gains experience and proves himself safe for more novice riders.
- Rabbie is a large strong Highland pony, brought into the yard in July. Having asked Mrs O'Neill for a copy of his vet check report, she has advised that there has been a communication problem with getting reports from the vets for
- Stan is a large Clydesdale cross horse who has what the vet apparently diagnosed as a locking stifle-his gait improves significantly with exercise and the abnormality disappears when trotting. I suspect he may have a condition called Stringhalt, which is involuntary contraction of the hindleg muscles so that the horse raises the hindleg then swiftly stamps the hoof onto the ground. With permission from Mrs O'Neill I asked [redacted] about Stan's condition with regard to his work [redacted] has not seen Stan so could not really comment. My concern is that Stan could be at risk of developing secondary problems such as osteoarthritis in the longer term, and would appreciate [redacted] opinion on Stan. Stan, having thick long hair (feathers) on his lower limbs, also has crusting and scabs on the skin in this region which are most likely caused by Chorioptic mange mites. This is a common and often recurrent problem in horses with feathering on the limbs and requires veterinary treatment. I would therefore advise that Stan is seen by the vet for both his skin and his gait. Any recommendation by the vet regarding his suitability for work is to be followed.
- Fern has a melanoma (a type of tumour common in grey horses) around the anus which has been treated by Kessock Vets, but which has recurred. At the moment it is neither painful nor inflamed and is not affecting her overall health or work. It will need to be monitored regularly and fly control is essential to avoid fly strike in the warmer months.
- McKenzie was examined as although he had been expected to be returned to his owner, he is still on the yard as a working livery. The skin on his back has now settled since last seen in October. NB he has bilateral irregular fatty deposits (probably a consequence of being overweight at one time) below and behind the saddle area which do not appear to interfere with the saddle but which should be monitored. He had a mildly elevated respiratory rate and respiratory-noise in both lung fields for which the most likely reason would be mild Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). This is best managed by environmental controls rather than treated; in practice this means outside grazing, not being stabled, and being fed thoroughly soaked hay to avoid dust.
- Holly is being brought into work and trained; she has a tendency to rear which is clearly a trait that needs to be addressed before she is safe to use for the public and will only be suitable for competent riders initially. Her feet were overdue for trimming and were rather long.
- Ariel was introduced on trial at the same time as [redacted] horse, Breagha, from the same establishment. Ariel is a Friesian x Warmblood, a type of horse that is less well suited to trekking in the Highlands and living outside all year round than native breeds. Additionally there can be more health problems with this type of breed, for example, dental problems. I have therefore recommended to Mrs O'Neill that Ariel, although a healthy and gentle horse, is not a good candidate for this type of work in our environment and is likely to be more costly in terms of feed requirements and care.
- Breagha is a Friesian, acquired from the same yard as Ariel, belonging to [redacted] and may be used in the RE, the same comments would apply regarding suitability for this environment but that is a decision for the owner to take. Long unshod feet but much better than when arrived in August when she had very long feet with multiple sandcracks (photographic evidence provided).

Overall on Friday the horses were in good body condition with a good standard of footcare except a couple with long feet as mentioned above. Skin lesions from rainscald were very few, white hairs observed much as described in the reports from October.

#### **Tack**

Much of the tack was rather dirty with no evidence of recent cleaning of the non trail-riding ponies' saddles. Stan's browband was very loose and the bridle had not been correctly assembled before being put on the horse.

#### **Grazing**

Stacks of large round bales which were created in previous years by the landlord to offer shelter have diminished down to one or two bales high, still within their plastic netting wrap. The bales are fenced off with electric fencing but the wrap should be removed to avoid accidental ingestion, as should really the bales which are decaying and also cause problems if ingested. Otherwise the fencing perimeter must put the bales completely out of reach of the animals.

Of significant concern is the situation regarding the rented grazing and facilities at North Wilds. Of the estimated 32 acres available November 2017 at North Wilds, the landlord has suspended access to more than 50% of that grazing. Furthermore it is my understanding that there is a Planning Permission issue regarding the siting of the current stables and tack room (which have containers used for feed and other storage adjacent). These are apparently incorrectly sited and should be relocated to their correct position in the field to the north side of the current yard, which is within the area to which access by HU is suspended by the landlord. Additionally as mentioned earlier, what was previously the "quarantine" field (which is in a poor state being heavily poached) is now rented to [REDACTED] the yard manager. Mrs O'Neill has a one-year lease on a field in Tain (seen on 15.10.18 by ourselves) of an estimated 6 acres and a similar sized field which we saw on 23.11.18 in Balintore. Both these fields have natural shelter by means of trees and good rough grazing apparently free of poisonous plants. However they are located at some distance from North Wilds-especially the Balintore field and are only therefore suitable for grazing of non working horses. Large bales of good quality hay are fed in ring feeders.

This change to the available grazing leaves Mrs O'Neill in the difficult position of having to locate suitable grazing at or very near to North Wilds. Typically I would allow 1 acre per horse, depending on the grazing type/shelter available/drainage and so on. In discussing the situation with Mrs O'Neill, she told us that she had been trying to contact the landlord and had only the previous day been advised by him of the withdrawal of available grazing. I advised that her first priority is to reduce where possible the horse numbers, such as not buying Ariel but returning her to the vendor. Clearly it is not possible to downsize with little warning, but horse welfare will become compromised if the horse numbers and the suitable local grazing are not of a ratio close to 1 animal/acre. It should be noted that two of the fields at North Wilds (numbered 13 and 4 on the plan) are muddy and have little grass available. Field number 13 could be used for isolation if the far end were adequately fenced off from any neighbouring grazing; otherwise either the Tain or Balintore field would need to be used for isolation in the event of an outbreak of contagious disease. Furthermore the incorrect siting of the stables and tack room is of concern so the situation going forward needs clarification.

#### **Staff**

Staff training and qualifications: the staff situation has changed from November 2017. The yard manager is [REDACTED] since March 2018; she is entrusted with the day-to-day running of the yard when Mrs O'Neill is away on a trail ride, which in 2018 has been a significant proportion of the time. I still do not have references for [REDACTED] despite requesting them first in October. I have a single reference for [REDACTED] from a RE in Romania and an affidavit/CV provided by [REDACTED]. Whilst I recognise the enthusiasm and variety of equine experience, none of these staff have any UK qualifications relevant to Riding Establishments and in a large RE such as this where the owner cannot supervise everything herself I would advise that staff should have the appropriate training and qualifications.

Since the last annual inspection in November 2017 under the conditions of her licence Mrs O'Neill has introduced a second ride leader on trail rides. For the majority of the rides Mrs O'Neill led the ride, accompanied by [redacted] or [redacted]. On one trail ride, (which [redacted] had been on before) [redacted] and [redacted] were the ride leaders, with Mr and Mrs O'Neill providing back up support. In my opinion, despite the backup by the O'Neills, this was not an advisable level of responsibility to entrust to the two members of staff. Workaway and members of the public on working holidays are also present on the yard, which itself requires an additional demand on the staff in supervision.

Vet checks of trail riding horses were carried out on 20.06.2018 and 27.10.2018. When I spoke to Mrs O'Neill by telephone on 04.10.2018 (the day after our visit to see Mckenzie) she told me that Woody had been drafted in for the current trail ride but hadn't been inspected by the vet at the previous week's check of the trail riding horses as he hadn't been trail riding before this week (w/c 01.10.2018). She then on 18.10.18 provided to me details of Woody's trail riding at which point it became evident that Woody had done 5 trail rides between June and the end of August. When I examined him on 15.10.2018 I found him to have a painful area on the left side of his lumbar spine, which had not been found by the RE.

The following animals, according to Mrs O'Neill's records were vet checked on the dates indicated, but she did not receive reports from her vet:

- 12.04.18 Rae and Pi
- 30.03.18 Holly (vetted at Brodie)
- 08.06.18
- 25.07.18 Rabbie and Maigold (Mai)

Skin lesions/rainscald was found to be a problem at the visit of 15.10.18, and one of the factors had to be the very wet week of trail riding that preceded the visit. It had also been a problem earlier in the year. A concerned member of the public had sent photographs of ponies to John Reid at the Council, which he forwarded to me. He then sent text and voicemail messages to HU asking for a vet to check the animals in question. Whether or not this was actioned, there is evidence that trial riding horses had rainscald type lesions at that time. As noted in my report of 20.10.18 Rainscald is a risk for any trial riding ponies, at any RE, and prevention can pose a challenge.

#### Conclusion

It is my opinion that Mrs O'Neill has not demonstrated the key skills required to run such a large and complex operation. She has not fully complied with presentation of trail riding horses as per the conditions of her licence. In the past there have been concerns regarding lack of resources (human, financial) and this continues to be an issue, with few staff and lack of proper qualifications. Standards at North Wilds are not maintained and Mrs O'Neill is not present for significant periods of time as evidenced, for example, by dirty tack and on previous occasions inadequate levels of farriery. Furthermore I am concerned that regular long trail rides are significantly increasing the risk of welfare problems, and following from that is the potential for human safety issues. There is no easy answer, but operating from a licenced permanent base, more veterinary checks, reduction in the hours spent in the saddle, increased assessment of the clients (particularly overseas visitors) and more staff training on recognised courses would be some of the measures that would need to be discussed before I could recommend any further trail riding. In particular an improved standard of management with more highly qualified permanent staff is required in order to run this extraordinary business.

Commented [CF1]:



My recommendation to the Council, taking into account the points I have made above and taking account at the present time of the uncertain situation regarding grazing at North Wilds, is that a provisional licence be issued, for local trekking, starting and finishing at North Wilds, work in the sand school but no trail riding at this time.

Recommended licence conditions include all those conditions as per Licence number RE/003/9536 with the following additions or removals:

- Resolution of the lack of grazing for the numbers of horse either by reduction in the number of horses or an increase in suitable grazing to achieve a ratio of 1 animal per acre or thereabouts. This is a priority and needs to be actioned without delay before the winter weather arrives.
- Clarification of the situation as regards the siting of the stable, tack room and containers in writing from the landlord.
- No trail rides (conditions 19 & 20 amended)
- Saffy on light work only with max 1 hour's work and regular monitoring
- Stan to be assessed by yard's own vet
- Mckenzie on light work and regularly monitored for any respiratory signs

Charlotte Fraser BVM&S MRCVS



Commented [CF2]:

**Riding Establishments Acts 1964 and 1970**

**Veterinary Inspector's Report**

This inspection must only be carried out by approved Veterinary Inspectors on the current RCVS/BVA Inspectorate (see Riding Establishments Act 1964, s.2(3)). This report should be completed with reference to the RCVS/BVA Guidance for Local Authorities and their Riding Establishments Inspectors.

This inspection is made at the request of:

Name of Local Authority: THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Date: 23/11/18

Address of Riding Establishment: HIGHLANDS UNBRIDLED  
NORTH WILDS, FENDOM, TAIN.

Name of owner and address: JAN O'NEILL, JUNIPER COTTAGE,  
FENDOM, TAIN.

Name of manager and address: as above.

**Description of business(es) operating from these premises (indicate all that apply)**

*Involving horses and/or donkeys ridden for hire and/or teaching*

- |  |                                      |                                     |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • Riding School using school's horses or part liveryies  | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input type="radio"/> NO            |
| • Hacking horses for hire                                | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Hunters for hire                                       | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Trekking horses and ponies                             | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Trail Riding horses and ponies                         | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Polo ponies hired for practice or instruction          | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Beach donkeys or ponies                                | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Ponies for pony parties involving riding - Village etc | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Club including riding as part of membership            | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • College including riding as part of curriculum         | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |

*Not involving horses, ponies and donkeys ridden for hire*

- |   |                                      |                                     |
|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • Riding Instruction on rider's own horse or pony       | <input type="radio"/> YES            | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Livery yard for privately owned horses and ponies     | <input type="radio"/> YES            | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • DIY livery yard for privately owned horses and ponies | <input type="radio"/> YES            | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Training establishment for private horses or ponies   | <input type="radio"/> YES            | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Horses for sale (not for hire) <u>NOT DEALER.</u>     | <input checked="" type="radio"/> YES | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Breeding establishment or stud                        | <input type="radio"/> YES            | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Farm  | <input type="radio"/> YES            | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Other animal establishment (specify).....             | <input type="radio"/> YES            | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| • Other business (specify).....                         | <input type="radio"/> YES            | <input checked="" type="radio"/> NO |
| ..... <u>working holidays, Workaway</u>                 |                                      |                                     |
| ..... <u>data involving the R.E.</u>                    |                                      |                                     |

**A. The horses**

- 1. Total number of horses on the premises
- 2. Number of horses on the premises used wholly or partly (part livery) for hire, teaching, escort or demonstration purposes
- 3. Number of horses not used for hire etc (i.e. full livery or for sale)
- 4. Number of horses 3 years old or younger (a register of these animals should be seen and signed)

35 *2 going to friends.*

30. *(Tankes lives in [redacted] field)*

5

0

**Manager / Owner's declaration**

I hereby confirm that I have presented for inspection all horses as referred to under 'A' The Horses item 2.

Signed [redacted] Date 23/11/18  
(Manager/Owner)

**B. Horse inspection**

ALL horses on the premises may, at the decision of the veterinary inspector, be inspected under the Acts. All horses in Part 'A' Section 2 above **must be inspected**.

Inspectors should use the 'Schedule of Horses Inspected' attached to this report to provide additional notes on the condition of each individual horse.

- |  |                      |     |  |
|--|----------------------|-----|--|
| 1. Are they visited at suitable intervals?                       | YES                  | NO  |  |
| 2. Are they adequately:  |                      |     |  |
| rested?  | YES                  | NO  | North Wilds Grazing - yes                              |
| exercised?   | YES - see letter     | NO  | Tani Grazing - yes                                     |
| groomed?   | YES - but see letter | NO  | Balintore Grazing - yes. Both the latter at a distance |
| supplied with bedding? Mainly N/A                                | YES - re Raincoat    | NO  | so visited less frequently, not necessarily every day. |
| supplied with food and water?                                    | YES                  | NO  |  |
| 3. Is there a satisfactory infectious disease control programme? | YES                  | NO  |  |
| Are they routinely vaccinated against:                           |                      |     |  |
| Tetanus?   | YES                  | NO* |  |
| Influenza?   | YES                  | NO* |  |
| Other (specify).....   | YES                  | NO* |  |
| *If no, was vaccination against disease discussed?               | YES                  | NO  |  |
| Is there provision for isolation of new horses?                  | YES                  | NO  | See letter   |
| **Testing of new horses for strangles (specify test) Blood Test  | YES                  | NO  |  |
| Detail what other steps are taken.....                           |                      |     |  |

\*Please note that vaccination is not a legal requirement under the Acts, but Inspectors should indicate whether this was discussed.

\*\*The latter is particularly important on a multi equine business premises and/or where some or all of the preceding are not carried out. If necessary include further details in a separate letter and attach this to the report.

- |   |     |    |                              |
|---|-----|----|------------------------------|
| 4. Is there a satisfactory parasite control programme?    | YES | NO | Reviewed with Vet recently   |
| Faecal egg counts?  | YES | NO | following illness of a pony. |
| Strategic worming?  | YES | NO |                              |
| 5. Is adequate First Aid equipment for horses available?  | YES | NO |                              |
| 6. Is the farriery and foot care satisfactory? [Redacted] | YES | NO |                              |

**Condition and type of horses**

- |   |     |    |            |
|---|-----|----|------------|
| 1. Are the horses in good condition?                    | YES | NO | see letter |
| 2. Do they appear capable of the work required of them? | YES | NO |            |

**Injured or sick horses or those otherwise incapable of work for any reason**

- |   |     |    |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Have any been found during the inspection? | YES | NO |
|---|-----|----|
- If yes, give details on a separate letter and attach this to the report.

Maverick - under care of Kessock Vet for chronic leg wound => off work.  
 Connie - " " " " " for weight loss & diarrhoea diagnosed as encysted redworm.

Baffy - appears recovered from bad back. Requested authorisation from JON to speak to Kessock Vets re his fitness & capability for work.

**C. The premises**

*Need to remove plastic mesh wrap from big bales + improve fencing to avoid contact at all / remove bales.*

1. For horses at grass:

*Fields 1, 2, 3, 4 & 13 available; rest unavailable atm => lost > 50%*

- is the pasture adequate? YES NO
- is there adequate windbreak or shelter? YES ~~NO~~ NO *see letter*
- is there an adequate water supply? YES NO
- is the pasture free of poisonous plants? YES NO

For horses kept in exercise or turnout pens for any part of day:

- is the surface dry and safe? YES NO
- is there adequate windbreak or shelter? YES *N/A* NO
- is there an adequate water supply? YES NO

2. Are the fences properly maintained? *Generally not bad.* YES NO *Post a electric.*

3. In the event of severe weather, disease or injury  
 a. can the horses be stabled or otherwise accommodated? YES *only 2 loose boxes.* NO

4. Description of the accommodation for housing horses:

*Field shelters*

<u>Loose boxes</u> <sup>-2</sup>	Stalls	Barn	Other (specify) <u>3 entrance field shelter but in field no longer available to RE.</u>
Are they: <u>Purpose built</u>	Converted buildings		
Construction: Masonry	<u>Wood</u>	Other (specify)	

Do they conreport to the provisions of the Act in respect of:

- Construction? YES NO Lighting? YES NO
- Drainage? YES NO Water supply? YES NO
- Ventilation? YES NO

5. Is there sufficient accommodation for all the horses? (This need not be individual provided that there is plenty of space for one or more occupants) YES NO *NOT REALLY.*

6. Are the premises maintained in a clean and tidy state? YES NO *MODERATE.*

7. Are the premises in a good state of repair? YES NO

8. Is there provision for an isolation box? YES NO *See letter re isolation field.*

9. Is there adequate accommodation for:  
 feedstuffs? YES NO  
 bedding? YES *N/A* NO  
 stable equipment? YES NO

**Teaching facilities:**

1. Is there:  
 an Indoor School? YES NO  
 an Outdoor School? YES *SPAN D SCHOOL* NO  
 a paddock for teaching? YES *SCHOOL* NO

2. Are the boundary walls/fences constructed and maintained to avoid injury to the horse and rider? YES NO

3. Is the riding surface properly maintained? *- needs some levelling* YES NO

**D. Saddlery and tack**

1. Is there adequate accommodation for the saddlery and other tack? YES NO

2. Is saddlery/tack free from signs of defect or damage likely to cause suffering to the horse or accident to the rider? YES *largely - see attached letter.* NO

3. Is saddlery/tack suitable for use on the horses on these premises? YES NO *Not very clean.*

*Span's browband too loose.*

**E. Fire protection**

1. Establishments must comply with the Regulatory Report (Fire Safety) Order 2005, specifically:

- a. Is there an up to date written Fire Risk Assessment?  YES  NO
- b. Has the establishment confirmed that a pre-incident planning YES  NO report has been logged with the local fire service?

2. Is a plan available for the safe evacuation of horses if necessary?  YES  NO

- 3. Are fire-fighting appliances available?
  - water buckets  YES  NO
  - hoses  YES  NO
  - fire extinguishers  YES  NO

4. Have any fire hazards been detected?  YES  NO

A short guide to making your premises safe from fire is available from the UK gov.uk website using the following short link: <https://goo.gl/Pq5TnP>

**F. Statutory Notices under the Riding Establishments Acts 1964 and 1970**

- 1. Are the name, address, postcode and telephone number of the licence holder/manager displayed prominently on the outside of the premises?  YES  NO *at the car park. At roadside main sign*
- 2. Are NO SMOKING notices prominently on display?  YES  NO *has phone no only. But shared*
- 3. Is a notice prominently displayed advising what action should be taken in the event of a fire?  YES  NO *entrance.*

**G. Compliance with related legislation**

- 1. Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
  - a. Are risk assessments in place?  YES  NO
  - b. In particular, is appropriate practical guidance in place relating to:
    - Riders' headgear?  YES  NO
    - Footwear? *All stirrups have toe cages*  YES  NO
    - Clothing? *incl. larger ones.*  YES  NO
    - Handling of and safety around horses? *Range of boots to loan.*  YES  NO
- 2. Horse Passport Regulations 2003-2013
  - Are passports available for horses?  YES  NO

It is recommended that a sample of passports are checked to ensure reasonable compliance such as that horses may be medicated lawfully.

3. Animal Welfare Act 2006 and Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006

Are the provisions of the Equine Code for the country concerned broadly complied with?  YES  NO *see attached letter*

**H. Management**

1. To the best of your knowledge, is the applicant suitable to manage and care for horses and supervise the establishment? YES NO  
*see attached letter.*

2. Is this suitability by virtue of:  
 a. Qualifications YES NO  
 b. Experience YES NO  
 c. A combination of both YES NO

3. Qualifications held (if any):  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

4. Where an owner or manager is determined to be suitable to hold a licence by virtue of experience only, specify the evidence produced to justify that recommendation

a. Curriculum Vitae YES NO  
 b. Professional references YES NO  
     i. ....  
     ii. ....  
 c. References from previous employer YES NO  
     i. ....  
     ii. ....  
 d. Previous licence holder under the Act (specify) YES NO  
     i. ....  
     ii. ....  
 e. (continued on separate letter as required) YES NO

5. Are there any recommendations for improvements? YES NO  
 If yes, please specify in a separate letter and attach this to the report.

**I. Licence**

All recommendations made should be set out in a separate covering letter attached to this report when it is returned to the local licensing authority.

If a provisional licence only is recommended, please specify in the covering letter the reasons for this along with any improvements that should be made during the three months before the next inspection.

If it is recommended that no licence be issued, please specify in the covering letter the reasons for this.

1. Are the premises suitable within the terms of the Act? YES NO *change of available facilities/grazing*  
 2. Should a full licence be issued? YES NO *-see attached letter.*  
 3. Should a provisional licence be issued? YES NO  
 4. Have recommendations been made? YES NO  
 (see covering letter for full detail)

**Veterinary Inspector's declaration**

I hereby confirm that I am a current member of the Riding Establishments Inspectorate as maintained by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and British Veterinary Association and that this inspection has been carried out in accordance with the Acts of 1964 and 1970.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_  
(Veterinary Surgeon)

Date 26/11/2018



## Horses for Inspection November 2018

	Horse Name	Passport Number	Breed	Colour	Height	Age	Sex	Body condition	Feet
1	Annie	826069 0000127838	Irish Cob	Skewbald	14.3hh	22	F	3/6	US gd.
2	Bonnie	11/292 AQHA UK Skin back to normal.	QH x	Palomino	14.2hh	16	F	3/6	US Ad.
3	Connie	diarr → home last trail → 826067 PHS018449	Fell x	Black	13hh	21	F		
4	Lexi	2 small intra dermal lumps LHS 12202 HPS	Highland	Grey	14.3hh	16	F	3/6	US gd.
5	Magic	skin on saddle LHS healed. APB M350	Appaloosa	Few-spot	14.2hh	18	F	3/6	Shod all 4 Ad.
6	Molly	Impacts back had dental exam 826013 NFO050864	Welsh x Ex	Bay	11.2hh	18	F	3.5/6	US Ad
7	Rae	33195 HPS	Highland	Grey	14.2hh	23	F	3/6	US good
8	Saffy	Back to work. Still a flat AHSB V19 2327	lumber spine Arab	Grey	14.1hh	20	M	2.5/6	US Ad. Scuffs H feet. Stiffed gait
9	Maverick	826031 2007322MR	Highland	Grey	14.2hh	11	M		off sick
10	Mhaia	826031 2007207FR	Highland	Mouse Dun	14hh	11	F	3/6	US Ad.
11	Brodie	RHS 2x white patches 826031 2009226FR	Highland	Dun	13.2hh	9	F	3/6	US Ad
12	Brooke	White LHS 3-5cm 826069 000191595	App x	Black	15.1hh	8	F	3/6	US Ad
13	Salty	826005 GCM003494	Appaloosa	Chesnut Varnish pt	15hh	9	F	3/6	Shod front Ad.
14	Corrie	Sweet Itch - try scrub @ saddle 826069 000204872	Connemara X	Dun	14hh	11	F	3/6	US Ad
15	Pi	Returned from training in Carthness 372414 020207874	Irish Sport	Skewbald	16hh	7	M	3/6	UNSHOD Ad
16	Woody	No soreness in back. Healed remains rscald. 826073 003075432	High x CB	Dun	15.1hh	23	M	3/6	US Ad
17	Joe	826069 000131026	Highland x Arab	Mouse Dun	13.3hh	15	M	3.5/6	Un-shod some any scabs from straps
18	Stan	Lochmup Suple. old ch. mange 826069 000087432	Clyde X	Skewbald	17.2hh	18	M	3/6	US Ad
19	Breagha	PTD - see at end list		Friesian	Breagha				
20	Solo	work in progress - 826046 010086618	Welsh	Palomino	12.2hh	9	M	3.5/6	US feet long
21	Rabbie	(Amir) - 826046 010086618	Highland	Grey	14.3hh		M	3.5/6	US Ad.
22	Poppy	826083 0000104	Irish	Bay Roan	13.2hh	15	F	3/6	US Ad
23	Ginny	UENL Small dry area scab lifting 826011HFS000863	Cob x WB	Skewbald	16.3hh	19	F	3/6	Shod front Ad.
24	Fern	Chronic melanoma, tx'd, returned but no pain/irritation 826073 001645922	Highland	Grey	14hh	18	F	3/6	US Ad.
25	McKenzie	Poss v low grade COPD, some fatty deposits back. 826069 000217340	Irish Cob	Dark Brown	15hh	?	M	3/6	US Ad
26	Paige	826069 000120950	Cob X	Black	15hh	16	F	3/6	US Ad
27	Holly	Feet long 826031 2007036FR	Highland	Fox dun	14.3hh	11	F	4/6	US long
28	May Maigold	Agitated & good. 826031 2007036FR	Halfinger	Palomino	14.2hh		F	5/6	Shod front

**Possible keepers/may sell - undecided**

29	Connor X	FC02259	Connemara	Grey	14hh	12	M	} not seen - Belinore if to be used need vet check
30	Juno X	826073 07356052	Appaloosa	Grey roan	13.3hh	12	F	
31	Ariel		Black	Friesian X				

Breagha (on previous page) Black. Friesian. F 3/6. US ad

**Retired/Not ridden/On Loan (winter)**

32	Rain X	826058 000000402	Appaloosa	Near Leopard	15.1hh	16	F	} Tainfield - Retired
33	Blue X	826047 000977096	Irish Cob	Skewbald	14.2hh	21	F	
34	Joey X	826073 001030520	Cob X TB	Bay	16hh	14	M	Belinore Retired.
35	Ghost	826069 000179423	Irish Cob	Piebald	13.3hh	7	F	US long 3/6.

was at friend's grazing  
brought down for insp.

\* cf when arrived

Angust - multiple  
cracks

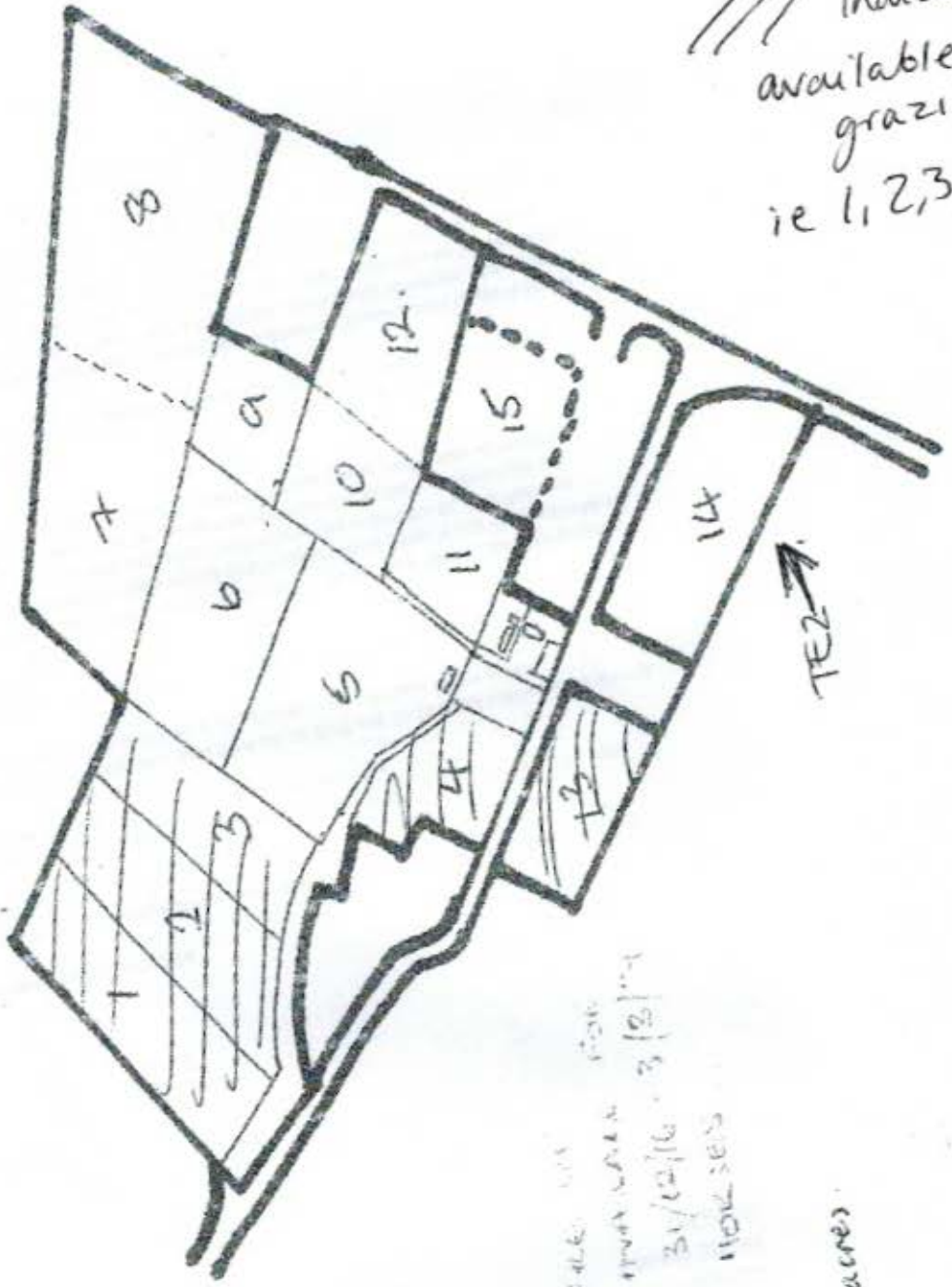
Tonks lame RF Skewbald Cob c 13.3  
(s pony).

F lame 3/6. US ad.

36	...	...	...	...	15.1hh			
37	...	...	...	...	13.3hh			
38	...	...	...	...	17.2hh			
39	...	...	...	...	...			
40	...	...	...	...	12.2hh		M	
41	...	...	...	...	18.7h		M	
42	...	...	...	...	12.7hh		F	
43	...	...	...	...	16.3hh		F	
44	...	...	...	...	16.5			
45	...	...	...	...	12.0h			
46	...	...	...	...	12.0h			
47	...	...	...	...	12.0h			
48	...	...	...	...	12.0h			
49	...	...	...	...	12.0h			
50	...	...	...	...	12.0h			

AS AT  
23/11/18

/// indicates  
available  
grazing  
ie 1, 2, 3, 13.



2017

RESERVED  
RESERVED  
RESERVED  
RESERVED  
RESERVED

DATE: 31/12/16  
BY: [signature]  
TOTAL 37 MOLESSES

Approx 32 acres

Fraser & Fraser (Vets) Ltd  
Church Street  
Dingwall  
IV15 9SB  
Tel 01349 863117  
Fax 01349 865282

Chris Ratter  
The Highland Council  
Ross House  
Dingwall

20.10.2018

Dear Mr Ratter

**Riding Establishments Acts 1964 & 1970; Highlands Unbridled owned and managed by Jan O'Neill, North Wilds, Fendom, Tain**

At our joint visit to this Riding Establishment (RE) on 15.10.2018:-

Those present were Jan O'Neill, [REDACTED], yourself and me. The visit was scheduled to follow up a complaint made about the trail riding horses by a member of the public, and was timed to allow inspection of trail riding horses who had returned only 2 days previously from a long distance ride. Mrs O'Neill was asked to present all horses used for trail riding.

The Trail Riding horses were inspected with findings as below. I have also indicated relevant comments from Kessock Vets following inspection on 27.09.2018, or replies to queries I have put to Mrs O'Neill since 15.10.18. Further vet check reports are awaited from Kessock. [REDACTED] is in the process of preparing a report with details of which horses went on each trail ride.

AT NORTH WILDS

**Brodie** (Dun mare): BCS 3.5 out of 6, alert and responsive, patch of white hairs some 5cm x 1cm approx. below right side of withers, skin not scabbed here but a few small (3-4mm) scabs both sides under the saddle area. 1cm subdermal non-painful lump LHS of spine near base of thoracic spine. Spinal palpation indicated mild tenderness in lumbar region.

2cm thicker scab under throat causing irritation when handled, possibly secondary to tick bite. Shoes worn (records show shoeing on 08.08.18), farrier due.

Last trail ride last week, previous one 4-6 weeks earlier. **Not fit for trial ride later this week**  
**Not inspected by Kessock on 27.09.18.**

**Brooke** (Black mare) BCS 3 out of 6, alert and responsive, 3cm patch white hairs left side just below and behind withers, a few white hairs right saddle area. These developed after use of saddle recommended by saddler employed in 2017. No pain nor skin lesions, spine no discomfort. Sound when trotted. Only on light work following tying up episode earlier in the year.

**Inspected by Kessock 27.09.18-white hairs under saddle area LHS, recommended only mild exercise for now continue to monitor following tying up episode earlier in the year.**

**Corrie** ( light dun mare) BCS 3 out of 6, alert and responsive. Suffers Sweet Itch which is an allergic skin complaint (in response to midges or flies). Skin twitch when touched lightly, not bothered by firm touch or when saddled. One scab in saddle area c 3-5mm. Skin generally in good condition considering Sweet Itch, base of tail has rubbed short hairs.

**Inspected by Kessock 27.09.18, sweet itch controlled with rug, but flare up at present**

**Lexi** (grey mare) BCS 3.5 out of 6. Shoes touching frog, so potential for mud, stones, stalks of grass etc to become trapped-need attention by farrier. Two 3mm scabs either side of saddle area. Healed cut on right caudal shoulder. No pain, spinal palpation fine.

**Not inspected by Kessock 27.09.18.**

**17.10.18 email from Mrs O'Neill re [REDACTED] (farrier) visited that morning, he said Lexi had been shod on 20.09.18 & he wasn't concerned re condition of her shoes.**

**I have asked another farrier's opinion, who said that shoes that are positioned right up to the frog require management of any grass, mud or stones which may become lodged between shoe and frog.**

**Saffy** (grey Arab) off work for some weeks, under treatment from Kessock Vets for back disorder. Found bright & alert, but significantly painful lumbar and lower thoracic spine. **Off work for foreseeable future on anti-inflammatories. Also had dental work on 08.10.18 by Kessock-infection around incisors and sharp edges on molars treated**

**Woody** (light bay gelding). BCS 3 out of 6; older horse brought in to work after gaining weight with dietary management after November 2017 inspection. Not inspected at this time as the intention was to euthanase but following being checked by Kessock Vets in January 2018, brought back into work at North Wilds doing short then longer rides. Then used on trail ride as substitute for Lexi (who had suffered a bite/cut on her shoulder). Today found to have area on left side of lumbar spine giving significant discomfort on palpation, coincides with area of white hairs. Diffuse white hairs elsewhere on saddle area, no scabs. **Not fit for work owing to lumbar pain.**

**Not inspected by Kessock 27.09.18- see discussion below**

#### AT GRAZING IN TAIN

**Joe** (dun gelding) BCS 3 out of 6, a few white hairs and scant scabs (<5mm) saddle area. Dorsal pastern both front feet 1.2cm scabbed skin lesions reported to have occurred as result of straps of the boots that are worn by many of the horses on trail rides. The straps were padded as soon as the lesions were noted by the staff. The lesions today were dry and non-painful. **Cannot wear normal boots.**

**Can wear boots with clips to avoid contact with the scabbed areas. Monitor closely (take daily photos)and must be withdrawn from work if any progression of lesions or discomfort.**

**Inspected by Kessock on 27.10.18-crusting scabs above coronary bands on pastern noted but no saddle lesions noted. Mrs O'Neill sent photos of clip on boots but cannot see detail-need clearer pictures**

**Bonnie** (palomino mare) BCS 3 out of 6. Has white hairs either side of spine, result of treeless saddle. Saddle area skin and spine fine otherwise. Regrowing hair under saddle bag area behind saddle. Multiple 0.5-1cm scabs under girth area of thorax, one small lump c 1cm dia in this area. **Cannot work owing to girth lesions**

**Inspected by Kessock on 27.10.18, white hairs noted under saddle R & L, baldness under saddle bag at back, historic.**

**Mhaia** (grey mare) BCS 3.5 out of 6, no skin lesions, spine ok.

**Inspected by Kessock on 27.09.18, identified as Mya. Suspected sarcoid left pectoral area (reported by owner's representative to be unchanged, advise monitor), windgall, mild filling of hocks and historic splint, sound at walk & trot**

**Annie** (skewbald mare) BCS 3 out of 6. Hooves in good condition, no deficit or loss of hoof wall. White hairs on saddle area. Caudal to white hairs there is a recently developed dried exudation c 4cm diameter left lumbar saddle area, not yet scabbed. **Cannot work as fresh skin lesion developing**

**Inspected by Kessock 27.09.18, noted history of crusts over saddle area, NAD (no abnormality detected), not sore on palpation. Sound but stiff which improved with exercise**

**Rae** (grey mare) **off work** as recovering from skin lesions on saddle area. Lesions are dry, with patchy hair loss. Otherwise in good health, BCS 3.5 out of 6. Shoes worn and need replacing.

**Inspected by Kessock on 27.09.18, noted a bit tentative on hind on hard surface trot but that she normally wears boots on hard surface**

**Magic** (Apalooosa mare) **off work** due to suspected insect bite left caudal saddle area and secondary skin scabs affecting this plus two other 1cm areas both sides. Shoes needing replaced.

**Inspected by Kessock on 27.09.18, history of mild LF lameness on 20.06.18, prescribed anti-inflammatory/painkiller. 27.09.18 vet found her to have windgalls on all four legs, no pain on palpation, non responsive on limb palpation and sound at walk and trot**

**Connie** (black mare) BCS 3.5 out of 6. Has recently formed 5cm diameter area of white hair on right caudal saddle area. History of overnight hair thinning followed by white hairs without any apparent primary skin lesions. This happened second week of September during trail ride. No skin lesions, thickening nor any spinal discomfort detected today.

**Inspected by Kessock on 27.09.18. White hairs dorsal RH saddle area 3cmx6cm occurring during past long distance ride. No pain on palpation. Sound.**

#### MAIN FINDINGS

- The skin lesions seen on the saddle area of several of the horses and ponies today are mainly consistent with the appearance of Rainscald or infection with *Dermatophilus congolensis*. This is a type of skin infection by organisms closely related to bacteria. Small scabs at the base of a tuft of hair develop and typically take some 3 weeks to heal. Factors which can lead to the establishment of infection include prolonged wetting by rain, high humidity, high temperatures and sometimes insect bites. Trail riding horses and ponies are exposed to all types of weather with saddles on their backs for long periods of time, so the development of rainscald affecting a high proportion of the group after persistent rain during the trail ride during the first week in October, which was exceptionally wet, is not surprising. Treatment is generally the use of topical washes such as chlorhexidine. Rainscald was not noted at the Kessock inspection on 27.09.18. and would appear to have largely developed during the period between 27.09.18 and 15.10.18. Some suspected rainscald occurred earlier in the season and various measures (which appeared successful) were taken to treat and prevent its occurrence.
- Those with shoes on are all in need of being attended by the farrier. Update-Farrier (██████████) attended 17.10.18. He was happy with Lexi's shoes as mentioned above. Annie's hooves

all appeared normal with no hoof wall deficits. She is the trail riding horse who most closely resembles the horse photographed with an alleged chunk missing from it hoof.

- Lameness- a low incidence of lameness was found either by the Kessock vet or myself at our inspections
- Staffing-unfortunately some of the main members of staff who were working at the time of last November's inspection are no longer on the yard, either having left (eg [REDACTED]) or through injury ([REDACTED]). [REDACTED] had started the day of last November's inspection. She has considerable experience in long distance riding and provided a reference on 15.10.18 from a riding ranch in Romania. [REDACTED] has also been with HU for most of 2018, having stayed previously at the Brora HU site as a Workaway. Both are PVG checked and have done a 3-day first aid but not TRSS qualifications as attendance on local courses fell through either because of confusion over the course date, or a clash with trail riding. [REDACTED] CV/references are yet to be forwarded. [REDACTED] had told me at our visit on 03.10.18 that Mrs O'Neill had asked for references and that it hadn't been followed up as everyone was busy. I asked her to follow up on her references from previous employers.

While the staff I met appeared engaged and competent, especially [REDACTED] who accompanies Mrs O'Neill on trail rides, Mrs O'Neill needs to have in place the evidence of this in the form of recognised training qualifications, reliable references from previous employers and so on. I was told on 15.10.18 that [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] had taken a long distance ride although Mrs O'Neill had been available to act as guide when necessary and the usual backup from Mr O'Neill was provided.

- Woody: Mrs O'Neill told me neither Woody nor Brodie were inspected on 27.09.18 as she had not planned on taking either of them on the ride as they were not 'regular' trail horses. When she found Lexi to have a cut on her left shoulder, Woody was drafted in at the last minute. He ended up staying out on the trail as Magic then developed a rainscald/lump on her back which resulted in him then being unavailable for inspection by Kessock on 08.10.18 as arranged.

Following up from the inspection on 15.10.18, at my request, I received on 18.10.18 from Mrs O'Neill more detail about the work which Woody had done over the summer. 5 trail rides were completed between June and the end of August. There were then the CC North 29.09.18 and CC South 08.10.18 when he was unavailable for inspection. In my opinion this *is* regular trail riding and Woody should have been presented on 27.09.18. under the condition of the licence which requires all trail riding horses and ponies to be checked during the course of the working season during the last week of June and the last week of September.

HU operate an exceptional business. Horses are committed to 4 or 5 consecutive days' riding repeatedly over the season. The stresses and strains of this can be seen in the diminished pool of fit horses, as health or soundness problems develop over the course of the season and horses have been withdrawn from work. This increases the risk that horses may be used when not completely fit for the job they are intended to do.

When I make a recommendation about the issuing of a licence or conditions relating to a licence, I have to be able to trust that the applicant will follow those conditions and apply the terms of the licence as

well as the relevant legislation at all times. Not presenting Woody for inspection when required on 27.09.18 as a trail riding horse is a failure to comply with the licence conditions.

I am available to discuss the contents of this report further, should that be necessary

Charlotte Fraser BVM&S MRCVS



Fraser & Fraser (Vets) Ltd  
Church Street  
Dingwall  
IV15 9SB  
Tel 01349 863117  
Fax 01349 865282

Chris Ratter  
The Highland Council  
Ross House  
Dingwall

03.10.2018

Dear Mr Ratter

**Riding Establishments Acts 1964 & 1970; Highlands Unbridled owned and managed by Jan O'Neill, North Wilds, Fendom, Tain**

Following our joint visit to North Wilds this morning as a result of complaints submitted to the Council by a member of the public:

Those present at the visit were [REDACTED], Yard Manager in Mrs O'Neill's absence, plus you and me. Mrs O'Neill was away on a Trail Ride.

The main complaint concerned "**McKenzie**" a Bay gelding with white blaze some 15 hands high, of a slightly heavier build. McKenzie has extensive white hairs on the saddle area of his back.

Background:

McKenzie was inspected by the yard's own vet on 08.01.18 and found to be fit and suitable for work, having arrived in November 2017.

A treeless saddle was used initially, which his owner had provided (as evidenced on the saddlery inventory created after the saddler's visit in April). White hairs started to appear either side of the spine, he was withdrawn from work but further lesions spread in the skin. Some other horses also had a skin complaint which was thought to be fungal and responded to treatment. The result in McKenzie's case was extensive white hairs. The treeless saddle was replaced with a different saddle that has not appeared to cause McKenzie any discomfort.

Clinical inspection 03.10.18:

McKenzie was alert and in good body condition (4 out of 6). He had areas of relatively dense white hairs covering some 20cm diameter over both sides of the saddle area. On his right side there were several 1cm diameter sparsely haired pigmented areas of skin within the white area and a few more on the right shoulder region. There was no discharge or scabbing or broken skin. There were several flattened firm swellings of some 1.5cm diameter x 0.5cm thickness mainly affecting the right side within the white area. No pain was elicited on examination. There was a firm bony swelling in his lower spine protruding slightly above the line of the spine, non-painful and no apparent heat or inflammation in the area. In the skin fold inside the right front leg was a soft skin swelling 3cm diameter, with a 3mm diameter scab on the surface, not painful. Adjacent to this (medially) a 3cm scab lifting off the skin with no swelling underneath and no pain or resentment on examination. These two lesions are most likely the consequence of a kick from another horse or wounds from going through gorse or similar.

Comment: McKenzie's white hairs and thickening of the skin are secondary changes indicating that inflammation has occurred, such as saddle sores, infection (eg bacterial, fungal or Dermatophilus-rain scald) or some other inflammatory process. I advised ██████████ that although there are no scabs, crusts or discharging lesions and no apparent pain, nonetheless McKenzie should be withdrawn from all work. The significance of the bony spinal swelling is unclear, and appears to be of chronic duration and inactive. McKenzie is apparently going back to his owner in November as he is on loan.

**Paige**, a black mare, was inspected. Paige had been certified fit to work on 08.01.18 by Kessock Vets. A complaint had been made that she had returned from the Longest Ride lame. ██████████ informed me that Paige does not do trail rides. Paige was sound when trotted, and clinically well. Body condition score 4 out of 6. She was observed bullying McKenzie and Salty with whom she was grazing, by putting her ears back and chasing Salty off the feed ring, however, when taken out for examination was very well behaved and is reported to be well schooled and good in the school for teaching. She does half or one hour lessons in the school. She has been identified by Mrs O'Neill to be sold in the past.

**Salty** does not do trail rides. Body condition 4 out of 6. Several small superficial wounds on her thorax and flanks, which look like bites, probably from Paige. Salty was reported to be a bit too lively to be used very much.

On questioning ██████████ it was established that:-

Woody, and Annie (the horse in the picture with the alleged chunk missing from her hoof) were away on a trail ride with Mrs O'Neill and ██████████, so could not be examined.

There is always a second member of staff on trail rides-ie ██████████.

There is always a ratio of 1:6 on local treks or 2 staff members if more than 6 guests. If the riders are beginners the staff walk rather than ride themselves as this is safer.

██████████ is employed as a farrier, and farriery is recorded in a blue notebook (shown to us). The diary for the yard was seen and also has entries relating to the farrier visiting, and which horses are being attended as well as which horses were used for clients each day.

Maverick had been brought home from trail riding as he was lame and Rae used as a substitute.

██████████ has been the yard manager since March 2018, has worked in a number of equine establishments in Australia since 2009 including a Racing Yard, a stud farm and was a ride leader in an establishment before coming over to the UK in March. She has a Certificate 4 in Holistic Farriery (Australian qualification) and is currently doing an Equine Sports Massage qualification in the UK. She does not have any TRSS or British Equine Tourism nor other BHS qualifications.

She told us that ██████████ likewise has experience but no UK qualifications. Other staff included ██████████ and ██████████

She had been asked for references by Mrs O'Neill but had not yet supplied them, as she had been busy. I advised that she should provide them to Mrs O'Neill.

04.10.2018

Mrs O'Neill telephoned me today. I explained the reason for withdrawing McKenzie from work. She said she had found the hot weather had caused significant sweating under the saddles on the trail rides and

had taken the saddles off at lunch breaks, washed and dried the horses' backs and used dry pads under the saddles. She had been away much of the summer on trail rides so couldn't fully comment on the situation at any one time at the yard, but hadn't been happy with McKenzie's treeless saddle that his owner had provided.

She confirmed that neither Paige nor Salty have been used on long distance rides this year. She said Woody had been drafted in for the current trail ride but hadn't been inspected by the vet at last week's check of the trail riding horses as he hadn't been trial riding before this week.

During the summer Saffy had been substituted as he had a sore back, with Lexie being drafted in. Annie (Skewbald with alleged chunk out of her hoof) had been inspected by the vet last week and has no chunk missing from the hoof.

I advised that it was important that she obtain references for staff such as [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], who have no formal UK qualifications relevant to a riding establishment, to provide evidence of their competence, and send this on to the Council as soon as possible.

I asked her to give consent to her vets for me to speak to them regarding McKenzie and other horses as necessary, also to ask them to supply certification from last week's inspection of the trail riding horses as soon as possible.

I asked her about the allegation that the landlord was going to evict them-she has no knowledge of this whatsoever.

I have called Kessock Vets this afternoon but Mrs O'Neill hadn't been in touch, so I'll call again tomorrow.

Charlotte Fraser BVM&S MRCVS



*Highlands Unbridled  
Northwolds Riding Centre  
Tain  
Ross-shire  
IV19 1PE*

*Tel: 01862 735007*

Alan Yates  
Environmental Health Manager  
Community Services - Environmental Health  
The Highland Council  
38 Harbour Road  
Inverness  
IV1 1UF

14<sup>th</sup> December 2018

Dear Mr Yates

RE: Veterinary Inspectors Report, Fraser & Fraser Vets 26.11.2018

Please find attached our response to the Veterinary Inspectors Report from Charlotte Fraser regarding our Riding Establishment License application. I have copied the letter into a word document allowing me to annotate the points raised with our responses in red.

I would appreciate it if you would read this letter carefully, together with our responses to the vets' inspection report attached, as the consequences of not doing so directly affect the welfare of our horses, our livelihood and our future. Many issues raised by Charlotte Fraser are either incomplete in their assumptions or can be refuted by our own factual evidence.

We are very disappointed in the recommendation contained in the vets' inspection report relating to the curtailment of our long distance trail riding operation. We are surprised, because we had a really good trail riding season – everything went extremely well with the rides. In November we had a good inspection and the horses were all in great condition. However, It appears that Charlotte had made her mind up before the inspection even took place. From her comments, it is evident that she has not taken into account the revised plan of action we sent her regarding the changes we planned to make to our trail riding schedule as per our discussions with her. We are concerned that she has not had time to consider the document before leaving on holiday.

We understand that the reason that the vet has recommended a provisional license (although we might not like it!) is because of the uncertainty over the available grazing and relocation of the existing yard into the adjacent field. What we do not understand though, is why we cannot operate between 31<sup>st</sup> December and 18<sup>th</sup> January.

We were under the impression from the last Committee meeting in 2017, that the Environmental Health department had delegated powers and that you could issue our license yourselves without going to Committee – particularly as there had been no objections to our license received. If it had to go to committee, then there was a committee meeting on 4<sup>th</sup> December, 9 days after the vets'

recommendations were made – why was it not discussed then? Instead, we are having to basically cease trading for 18 days in January, at a time when every penny earned is crucial. During this time period we will lose in excess of £4050 in income, having to cancel the riding that has already been booked in early January – detailed below:

- 2 weeks of Saddle Club for 10 local children - £500
- 4 Regular weekly lessons - £220 (plus any extras that might have booked in)
- 4 regular weekly lessons/rides for local disabled people - £410
- 2 x day rides for 2 people - £400
- 2 x 2 hour rides for 2 people - £160
- Horsey Hogmanay, which is our main earner at this time of year and brings in much needed cash-flow. Will have to cancel 4 people's holidays and associated accommodation, which will incur a cancellation fee. - £2360
- In addition, we will not be able to take any other bookings that may come in for this period
- If our customers have to go elsewhere to ride during this time frame, then they may just decide to stay riding there and we will have lost custom from them forever – the impact is huge.
- We have found in the past that it is vitally important to our business during the winter to keep our regular customers coming week after week. Once momentum is lost, it takes a while for people to get back into the habit of regular lessons again and some riders may not return for regular lessons until the spring, when the better weather returns.

Can you confirm whether or not we can take bookings for later in the year during our 'un-licensed' period? I presume that we cannot take any bookings at all until our license is actually granted. This will have a huge impact on the rest of the years' income from trekking as people like to book their rides for the summer well in advance (although they pay for them when they get to us)

Do the Council have the power to issue an interim license starting on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019 to cover the period up to 18<sup>th</sup> January? After all, it is not our fault that our license could not be discussed at the committee meeting on 4<sup>th</sup> December and the consequential losses associated with the enforced closure of our business for 18 days, in addition to the loss of riding income detailed above, include increased bank charges relating to overdraft facilities, loss of income, loss of jobs for staff, etc, etc... I'm also presuming that because Highland Council have all of their licenses running from 1<sup>st</sup> January each year, any license that we may be issued on 18<sup>th</sup> January will still run from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> December..... despite not being able to trade for 18 of those days.

We realise that the Council and committee are not animal health experts and therefore need to rely on the information presented to them by vet employed to carry out the riding establishment license inspection. However, as you can see from the annotated vets report attached, there are, we feel several important discrepancies in the presentation of her facts. This is worryingly misleading.

What also concerns us greatly, is that the decision on the future of our business, our horses and our livelihood, is given to the Council and the Committee - yet the Committee are advised to make their decision based on the vets' recommendations. The Council are creating the illusion of a democratic process, when in fact the issuance of our license depends entirely on the personal opinion of one person alone, the vet. Surely this cannot be right?

After discussions with Chris ratter we will be contacting Charlotte Fraser on her return from annual leave in early January to discuss the discrepancies contained in the report, before the committee meeting as these need to be addressed before the report is given to the committee.

From our previous discussion with Charlotte Fraser and Chris Ratter, Charlottes' opinion seemed to be that there was a potential for welfare issues with trail riding holidays in general – not just at our establishment and that she did not believe that trail riding holidays could operate in the Highlands without welfare concerns. Does this mean therefore, that trail riding holidays are not allowed in Highland Region at all anymore? If so, there are three other riding centres with whom this issue would also need to be addressed.

It seems unfair that she is basing her decisions on things that she feels 'might' happen, even though it is far more likely that in fact, they would not. We have already provided her with answers and solutions to the concerns she had. We have thoroughly risk assessed our trail riding operation, having also risk assessed every route that we ride in minute detail – both yourselves at the Council and Charlotte were given copies of these previously.

We are very aware that both Charlotte Fraser, the inspection vet and your department within the Council have been inundated by complaints over the years from a particular group of people. And when complaints are made, vexatious or otherwise, we understand that the Council has to follow up on them – getting Charlotte to visit too if deemed necessary. It all costs a lot of time, a lot of effort and a lot of money. We are concerned that the Council now (understandably), feel that Highlands Unbridled has become a bit of a financial burden – and the easiest way to solve the problem is to just to get rid of the inconvenience, by making it so hard for us to function as a business that we are forced to close down.

We are aware that vexatious complaints were also lodged against Charlotte Fraser with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons accusing her of professional misconduct and accusing her of not being strict enough with her vetting of our establishment. Because the vexatious complainers did not get the result they wanted, ie. getting Highlands Unbridled closed down, they lodged malicious complaints against her, which is ridiculous and totally unjust.

Although Charlotte Fraser has told us that her recommendations regarding our business are not swayed by the complaints against her personally and the constant barrage of complaints against us, it surely must affect her judgement – how can it not? She is only human and has her own reputation to consider. I believe that this is why her recommendations regarding our license are now over cautious and why she has recommended that we are no longer allowed to offer trail riding holidays.

Trail riding holidays are a very specialised niche market in the UK (although not in the wider world). Not many riding centres offer this option in the UK as logistically it is very challenging. Even fewer riding establishment vets have experience of this kind of operation. There is no recognised qualification for this leading this type of ride, which is very different from leading short treks. The only way to learn is by experience and we have been running this type of holiday for 10 years now, and learning something new every year. Yes, over the years we have made mistakes – we are human – but we have learned from them, changing the routes we use, adjusting our operating plan, replacing our tack etc. according to what we have learned and to what works best for our horses and our clients.

We have upward of 50 people waiting patiently to hear if we will be offering trail rides in 2019. Eight of these people have ridden with us multiple times over the years, enjoyed the experience and want to return to ride with us again. If we are stopped from offering this activity, then our customers wanting to experience Scotland on horseback will go elsewhere, to other Riding Establishments offering a similar experience. There are a few new Trail Riding operations now, mostly that sprang up in 2017, when we were unable to offer trail riding holidays after the strangles outbreak. Their councils have had no problem licensing them – indeed some are issued a license without even having to state that they are offering long distance riding holidays!

These new riding establishments will face the same challenges that we have had to face over the years and like us, they will have to find solutions to these challenges if they are to be successful. They have only been offering these rides for a couple of years and just because they haven't had any problems so far does not mean that they won't in the future. For example; they all ride their horses in traditional metal shoes; we stopped using shoes a long time ago, because we believe that rubber hoof boots offer more grip, better protection for the hoof and foot and are better for the horses' joints as they reduce concussion. They all use cotton saddle pads and general purpose saddles; we use wool saddle-pads and custom endurance saddles, because over the years we have found that these work best. They use traditional saddle bags that sit UNDER the saddle; we use ones that sit behind the saddle, because we know that the traditional ones create pressure ridges on the horses backs etc. etc. etc....

These Operators will be allowed to offer long distance riding holidays, but we will not, because we are in Highland Council area, despite probably knowing more about and having more experience in long distance trail riding than any other riding establishment in Scotland. We have faced our challenges over the years, met them head on and found solutions, that have allowed us to improve our customer experience as well as our horse welfare standards year on year. You only have to look on TripAdvisor to see the great reviews we have – people love what we do, they are confident in our abilities and our standards of horse care – many referring specifically to how well the horses are cared for on the rides (three of these were from vets – one, an equine specific vet).

The welfare concerns expressed by the vet would be the same for any establishment offering similar rides to tourists across Scotland. These issues are inherent with working with horses and are not a reason for eliminating trail riding holidays in the Highlands. Most of the concerns raised could equally apply to horses working in trekking or in riding schools. If this is the case then ALL trail riding holidays in Scotland should be subject to closure until satisfactory veterinary inspections specific to long distance riding holidays, have been carried out on all premises. We have thoroughly risk assessed our entire operation, including health and safety on the trail and horse welfare. Can the other riding establishments say that they have done the same? We have seen copies of their riding establishment licenses and we know that they cannot.

We genuinely do not believe that there is a welfare issue with our horses. We know how well we look after our horses and so do the guest on our trail rides. So far this year we have spent just over £9300 on veterinary care for our horses. This comprises of routine stuff, like dental work, the required fitness for work vettings for new horses or horses returning to work as well as the June and September vetting for the trail horses. It also includes call outs for various things, such as Magics conjunctivitis and medications and the course of Chemotherapy and melanoma removal for Fern as well as the long term help and care for Mavericks leg injury (multiple visits, x-rays, anti-biotics and enough wound dressings to sink a battleship!) Plus, routine wormers, Dectomax and other sundries like Deosect and Sweet Itch treatments.

In addition, we spent over £4000 on farriery – plus another £4600 on boots for the horses (instead of shoes), £10,000 on hay and a further £7200 on hard feed! Not to mention field rent, tack, etc. etc. etc.....

I mention the above figures, only because several of the complaints made against us very publicly on Facebook and no doubt to the Council and Charlotte as well, made reference to the 'fact' that we 'earned thousands' from the riding holidays, but were unwilling to spend any of it on the horses' welfare, depriving them of basic veterinary and farriery care. Which as you can see is totally ridiculous and illustrates the level of misinformation being disseminated about us!

If the vets' recommendations are followed, the decision taken will in effect close down a major part of our business and as such we feel it should be open to a more in depth discussion before any final decision is made. It is obvious to ourselves that our long distance rides are subject to different and more stringent regulation and veterinary scrutiny than other existing establishments. This is no longer acceptable to ourselves and threatens our livelihood, business and all welfare issues associated. We are disappointed that the Council have failed to support us in our efforts to establish a long distance riding centre by not providing a clear policy and framework from which we can operate. We have worked very hard for 10 years to accommodate all recommendations made, only to be suddenly told we can no longer offer our trail rides.

It has got to the point now that we have decided to move our business away from Tain – in fact right out of the area completely. I suspect that the complaints will continue wherever we are – certain people will never give up, but we no longer want to stay somewhere where our neighbours are toxic.

We need to get our license this year, preferably with the trail riding holidays too, to enable us to keep the business going in Tain, whilst we relocate and get new premises licensed.

I have checked with Councils in several different areas across the UK (including several in Scotland) with regard to their policies on issuing Riding Establishment Licenses for businesses operating long distance riding holidays. I want to be sure that we are operating on a level playing field. So far, it appears that some riding establishments licenses are non-specific. Their horses are vetted, their premises checked and when they are granted a license to operate as a Riding Establishment - the activities they then do under that license, is up to them.

From our investigations, we appear to be the only riding establishment that has been required to risk assess every long distance ride we do. We appear to be the only riding establishment where questions are asked about which horses will be doing long distance rides and which will not. We appear to be the only riding establishment where riding on the road has been seen as a problem. We appear to be the only riding establishment where grazing our horses on farms away from home and not returning to the yard each night, is seen as a problem. We appear to be the only riding establishment that is not allowed to do a series of 'petal rides' from a remote base without having to get each 'base' approved by the Council as a separate riding establishment – one other business in particular, has three separate 'bases', spending a couple of months at each during the season, yet this is something we were told that we could not do several years ago! There seem to be an awful lot of rules that apply to us, but no-one else.....Why is this?

We feel that the reasons given by Charlotte Fraser for being refused trail riding are vague and lack substance –

1. Not presenting Woody for inspection. I have explained my reasons previously. I believe they are valid.
2. Staff Qualifications. No official qualifications, but years of experience. Official qualifications cannot be gained until the spring, when the exams are available again. The 'staff' leading the trail rides are myself and [REDACTED], my qualifications have been listed, and [REDACTED] has a wealth of experience (also detailed in accompanying letter) – including leading long distance rides at Highlands Unbridled now for a full season.
3. Horse Welfare – Yes, some of the trail horses got rainscald as a result of the wet, cold week at the start of October – but as Charlotte states in her report, this could happen to anyone – indeed two horse at our stables that have not been ridden all year also developed patches. Even Woody, who showed no signs of rainscald at all when Charlotte vetted him in October, developed a patch about two days later – it can happen that quickly. All of the horses were vetted the week before and were found to be fit and healthy with no rain scald. We learned a lot this year on how to prevent rainscald and sent Charlotte our plans for minimising the risk in future. Saffy developed a sore back, which happened in the field and Woody



developed a lump, which came and went in a couple of days and again, we believe from our evidence that this happened in the field, not on the trail. And McKenzie, (who was reported to you by the usual vexatious complainers) was inspected by Chris Ratter, Dougie Campbell from SSPCA, Charlotte Fraser, [REDACTED] from Kessock vets – none of whom found his back to be painful. Any horses that showed any sign of discomfort for any reason whatsoever, were returned from the trails and rested until we were sure that they were fit to work again. We did the right thing – why are we being pilloried for it? She cannot base her decision on something that ‘might’ happen – because in all probability, it will not.

4. My Key Skills – Charlottes comments regarding this are not precise or helpful. I have listed my qualifications and experience. I require clarification on which skills I need to develop.
5. Lack of resources - All we need it another good year financially like 2018 to get back on our feet again, and this will not happen if we are not allowed to do trail riding holidays.

The Council rely on the vet to provide an expert opinion, but we believe that this opinion has been influenced heavily by the complaints and misrepresentations of the truth constantly being fired at her by the ‘hate’ campaigners. She has herself been reported to the RCVS by these people for ‘not doing her job properly’ because she has continued to allow us to trade – how can this NOT influence her decision? In addition, we are unable to discuss this further with Charlotte at present as she left on holiday a few days after our inspection and will not return until January! We sent Charlotte answers to all of the points that were raised at the inspection and at the previous meeting with Chris Ratter and herself, but her wording of her report it appears unlikely that she had actually had time to read them before she left on holiday.

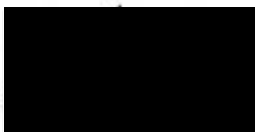
We will be bitterly disappointed if we are forced to cease operating the long distance riding holidays.

We have at least 50 people who have been waiting patiently for our dates for 2019 to be released and who we will have to let down. Hotels with whom we book year on year, will not get our bookings. We spent over £70,000 on accommodation for our guests during the 2018 season – mostly in small, often remote hotels. We bring a lot of business to remote areas, staying in hotels and B&B’s, buying food in local shops, renting fields from small farmers, using rural service stations, etc. Your decision does not just affect us, but impacts on all of these other small businesses throughout the Highlands.

Whist at present we will be happy to get any license, If we are not granted a full license including trail riding holidays, then we will appeal, because in the light of the above, I really believe that we are being unfairly treated.

We look forward to your comments and would like to arrange a meeting with you to discuss the points raised as soon as possible please.

Yours sincerely



Jan O’Neill  
Senior Partner  
Highlands Unbridled

## Copy of Riding Establishment inspection report from Charlotte Fraser annotated with my responses in red

Dear Mr Ratter

26<sup>th</sup> November 2018

Riding Establishments Acts 1064 and 1970

Highlands Unbridled (HU), North Wilds, Fendom, Tain: owned and managed by Jan O'Neill of Juniper Cottage, Fendom, Tain.

Please find enclosed the Veterinary Inspector's Report following our joint visit on Friday 23.11.18 to North Wilds for the annual inspection of this riding establishment (RE)

This report should be read with the reports I sent from 03.10.2018 and 20.10.2018 following extra visits requested by the council and by you and me following complaints from members of the public. **The 'members of the public' as you know, are NOT random genuinely concerned members of the public - they are members of a small group of people, led by an ex-business associate of ours with a huge grudge and fuelled by a neighbour who feeds them misinformation, which they then disseminate to anyone who will listen on a Facebook site owned and administered by one of our main competitors! They are now being dealt with through legal channels as we have more than enough evidence of libellous defamation to easily win our case against them.**

At Fridays visit (23.11.18) there were 35 horses on site. One (Ghost) will be taken away again to a friend's grazing as she is still being brought into work.

5 ponies are either retired or for sale. One of the 30 on the list for the RE was 'Tonks', belonging to the yard manager, [REDACTED]. Tonks is kept in [REDACTED]'s rented field at North wilds which is not included in Mrs O'Neill's grazing and which is the first field on the left hand side as one enters the RE. this field was previously rented by HU and had been used for quarantine/isolation during the Strangles outbreak. Tonks was lame on Friday so cannot be used until certified fit for use by the yard's own veterinary surgeon.

- Of the remaining 29, Pi had returned from being trained by an external trainer in Caithness. He was quiet and healthy but as an experienced horse would be best for selected competent riders only.
- Saffy was presented as being back in work; Mrs O'Neill authorised Kessock vets to speak to me about Saffy as in October he was off work with a significant painful back condition. **Saffy was brought back from a trail ride on 14<sup>th</sup> September, because he developed a rub on his heel. We were unsure whether this had been caused by something (stone/heather twig?) being caught in his boot or if he had trodden on his own heel in the field, which can sometimes happen. Anyway, we sent him home to recover. When he was inspected by Kessock vets on 27<sup>th</sup> September, they found that he had a sore back, behind the saddle area, so they signed him off work and prescribed anti-inflammatories. As he had not been ridden during the previous 2 weeks and had shown no sign of discomfort whatsoever on the trail ride, we presume that this injury had happened in the field, sometime during the previous week. He may have slipped and twisted something whilst galloping about in the field. We just don't know. His back is now fine. I have just spoken with [REDACTED], the Clinical Director at Kessock. At Friday's inspection he appeared to have a stilted gait, a roach (somewhat hunched) back, was scuffing his hind feet but was not observed to be unilaterally (one-sided) lame. [REDACTED] had seen Saffy at the start of November at which time his**

findings were similar; he advised that Saffy be put on light duties only, with maximum one hour's work in the school, no trekking nor long distance work. He was to be monitored regularly. Saffy has always scuffed his toes when he is walking on flat ground – but on rough ground he picks his feet up just fine, likewise when he is trotting slowly he will scuff his hind toes, but once he's allowed to stretch out and trot more quickly, he picks his feet up fine. We've had him for about 14 years and he's always been the same.

- Maverick is off work with a chronic leg wound; I saw him in the loosebox and the wound appears to be responding to treatment by Kessock Vets. Field injury – possibly kicked by another horse. Wound is now healed and Maverick is out in the field again, but still wearing a neoprene sports boot to prevent the newly healed area from getting knocked; or him from scratching it with his opposite foot, which is what prevented it from healing properly in the first place.
- Connie is also off work, again under the care of Kessock Vets as she has weight loss and diarrhoea diagnosed as encysted red worm in the gut. Despite all of our horses being regularly wormed, small red worms can become encysted and difficult to get rid of. Connie was treated with Fenbendazole wormer immediately, but did not improve. The vet felt that from her blood tests, small red-worm were the most likely cause of her diarrhoea and advised us that small red-worm are showing signs of resistance to Fenbendazole wormers so we treated with a Moxidectin wormer, to which we were told there was less resistance. She also had steroid injections and an anti-biotic. However, Connie did not respond to the treatment so the vets suspected that there may be something more sinister going on with her gut (cancer maybe?) We decided that as she is an older horse, we were just delaying the inevitable, and that it was kinder to end her suffering and put her to sleep.
- Solo is still a 'work in progress' ie is being schooled by the RE with a view to being brought into work. Like Pi, he will be suitable for selected riders only until he gains experience and proves himself safe for more novice riders
- Rabbie is a large strong Highland pony, brought into the yard in July. Having asked Mrs O'Neill for a copy of his vet check report, she has advised that there has been a communication problem with getting reports from the vets for. I have covered this in a later paragraph. We have since managed to get Kessock Vets to send a letter confirming that his vet check cleared him as fit for work. This has been forwarded to Charlotte and Chris.
- Stan is a large Clydesdale cross horse who has what the vet apparently diagnosed as a locking stifle – his gait improves significantly with exercise and the abnormality disappears when trotting. I suspect he may have a condition called Stringhalt, which is involuntary contraction of the hind leg muscles so that the horse raises the hind leg then swiftly stamps the hoof onto the ground. With permission from Mrs O'Neill, I asked [REDACTED] about Stan's condition with regard to his work. [REDACTED] has not seen Stan, so could not really comment. My concern is that Stan could be at risk of developing secondary problems such as osteoarthritis in the longer term, and would appreciate [REDACTED]' opinion on Stan. Stan, having thick long hair (feathers) on his lower limbs, also has crusting and scabs on the skin in this region which are most likely caused by Chorioptic mange mites. This is a common and often recurrent problem in horses with feathering on the limbs and requires veterinary treatment. I would therefore advise that Stan is seen by the vet for both his skin and his gait. Any recommendation by the vet regarding his suitability for work is to be followed. [REDACTED] from Kessock Vets did the original fitness for work vetting for Stan when he first arrived. Both he and his previous owner's vet, believed the problem to be a locking stifle not stringhalt. To explain.... The stifle joint is the equivalent of our knee joint and it is actually meant to lock when standing. This enables the horse to sleep standing up. Locking

occurs when one of the ligaments in the stifle joint remains hooked over a ridge on the head of the femur bone. Normally, the horse can flex the joint with little effort to unlock it. However, in some horses, unlocking becomes delayed. A small delay will cause mild symptoms – such as with Stan, where he has learned to swing his leg slightly outwards when he walks as this unlocks the stifle. There is speculation that young horses may develop this condition due to rapid growth spurts when the bones grow faster than the muscles develop. Another theory suggests that an unfit horse (or one that has suddenly lost muscle tone) may develop this condition for similar reasons—the joint angle becomes compromised and therefore, locks. Stan’s symptoms are mild and only appear in walk, normally after he has been standing around for a long time, as he would have been whilst waiting for the vet to inspect him or when he is standing around a hay ring munching hay during winter instead of moving around grazing as he is during the summer. Previous vets have confirmed that it causes him no pain or distress and the symptoms disappear once he gets moving and are not present at all when he is trotting or cantering. The advice we were given was to keep him in work as building up his muscles in this area is good for him and that hill work was particularly beneficial. The other concern was leg-mites, which are a really common problem with horses with feathered legs such as Stan. They are almost impossible to eradicate completely, but can be controlled with Dectomax injections when the horse shows signs of irritation. We generally get all of our horses with feathered legs treated at least once a year – more if they need it. In between times we use a solution of Pig Oil and Sulphur, which is a traditional remedy, which works well and is well recognised in the horse world as a treatment for leg-mites.

- Fern has a melanoma (a type of tumour common in grey horses) around the anus which has been treated by Kessock Vets, but which has recurred. At the moment it is neither painful nor inflamed and is not affecting her overall health or work. It will need to be monitored regularly and fly control is essential to avoid fly strike in the warmer months. We had the melanomas removed in March this year and one was deeper than expected and treated with a chemo-therapy bead. This tumour has however returned and we will keep an eye on it’s development.
- McKenzie was examined as although he had been expected to be returned to his owner, his is still on the yard as a working livery. The skin on his back has now settled since last seen in October. NB he has bilateral irregular fatty deposits (probably a consequence of being overweight at one time) below and behind the saddle area, which do not appear to interfere with the saddle but which should be monitored. He had a mildly elevated respiratory rate and respiratory noise in both lung fields for which the most likely reason would be mild Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). This is best managed by environmental controls rather than treated; in practice this means outside grazing, not being stabled, and being fed thoroughly soaked hay to avoid dust. McKenzie had been vetted twice since being seen by Charlotte Fraser on 3<sup>rd</sup> October. Previous to this he had been seen by Chris Ratter and Dougie Campbell who could confirm that there was no pain response on McKenzies back when they saw him. He was also checked by the vet on 8<sup>th</sup> October (██████) and again on 8<sup>th</sup> November (██████) who both confirmed that his back was not sore in any way. His breathing and heart rate were checked at both of these vettings and there was no sign at either vetting of COPD. We will continue to monitor him.
- Holly is being brought into work and trained; she has a tendency to rear which is clearly a trait that needs to be addressed before she is safe to use for the public and will only be suitable for competent riders initially. Her feet were overdue for trimming and were rather long. Yes, Holly’s back feet were slightly long. Holly and Ariel were due to be seen by the

farrier the week before, however, we ended up having to get a shoe replaced on another horse, which was unplanned, meaning that the farrier simply ran out of time that day to trim them and was unable to do it before the inspection. They have since been trimmed.

- Ariel was introduced on trial at the same time as [REDACTED]'s horse, Breagha, from the same establishment. Ariel is a Friesian x Warmblood, a type of horse that is less well suited to trekking in the Highlands and living outside all year round than native breeds. Additionally there can be more health problems with this type of breed, for example, dental problems. I have therefore recommended to Mrs O'Neill that Ariel, although a healthy and gentle horse is not a good candidate for this type of work in our environment and is likely to be more costly in terms of feed requirements and care.
- Breagha is a Friesian, acquired from the same yard as Ariel, belonging to [REDACTED] and may be used in the RE, the same comments would apply regarding suitability for this environment but that is a decision for the owner to take. Long unshod feet, but much better than when arrived in August when she had very long feet with multiple sand-cracks (photographic evidence provided). Breagha's feet are actually in good condition – it was in fact Ariel's feet that were slightly long. Breagha and Ariel were standing next to each other during the vetting and as they are both completely black in colour and look very similar, I believe there has been some confusion by the vet, regarding which black horse's feet were good and which needed a trim. A case of mistaken identity.

Overall on Friday, the horses were in good body condition with a good standard of foot care except a couple with long feet as mentioned above. Skin lesions from rain scald were very few, white hairs observed much as described in the reports from October.

Yes, our horses were in good condition! They are well fed, kept fit and have regular farriery, are wormed regularly, have regular dental checks and as you can see from the list above, they have access to veterinary care whenever they need it. Some things, such as the weather conditions that caused the rain-scald, are out-with our control and all of the horses who used to be ridden in treeless saddles show (and will always show) white hairs from the pressure caused by those saddles.

As I have explained before on numerous occasions, we changed to treeless saddles because at the time, from the research we had done, we believed that these saddles would be beneficial to the horses as without a fixed tree, they would mould to each horse's shape, whether they gained or lost weight or gained muscle as the season progressed, eliminating the pinching that might be caused by a treed saddle, which might fit the horse at the start of the season, but not fit a few weeks later. We were wrong. Although the horses went really well in the saddles, after a season, patches of white hair began to appear where the stirrup ring sits as without a tree, the pressure from the rider's leg, pushes this towards the horse's back and even with two thick saddle pads, designed to be used with this type of saddle, the pressure causes the hair follicles to die, creating white hair.

### **Tack**

Much of the tack was rather dirty with no evidence of recent cleaning of the non trail-riding ponies' saddles. Stan's browband was very loose and the bridle had not been correctly assembled before being put on the horse. Some of the tack was dusty. Not 'MUCH' of it – these are two very different things! All of the leather saddles were clean as well as all of the bridles. Some of the synthetic saddles that had been used the day before had sand on them, as the stirrups we use have toe cages for safety. This means that they cannot be 'run-up' the stirrup leathers like normal stirrups and have to be laid across the seat of the saddle. We live in a sandy area – our yard and school is sandy. This means that sand gets knocked from the stirrups onto the saddle – it's sand – it dries and it's easy to brush off. Two of the saddles had not been used for some time as their horses had been out of work

and they had not been cleaned – one had cobwebs on it! We brought the horses in for the vet to look at and they need to be tacked up with these saddles – I should have cleaned them first, but as they were not being used, it was low priority. My fault.

Stan's bridle had been put on in a hurry – it is part of an endurance style bridle that doubles as a headcollar. The bit and reins just clip off. The throat lash hadn't been put through the keeper correctly. The brow band was a bit loose, although Stan had been vetted with the same bridle last year with no comment. I will fix the brow band – easily done.

### **Grazing**

Stacks of large round bales which were created in previous years by the landlord to offer shelter have diminished down to one or two bales high, still within their plastic netting wrap. The bales are fenced off with electric fencing but the wrap should be removed to avoid accidental ingestion, as should really the bales which are decaying and also cause problems if ingested. Otherwise the fencing perimeter must put the bales completely out of reach of the animals. **These bales have always been just two bales high and we have always fenced them off with electric fencing to ensure the horses cannot reach the balewrap.**

Of significant concern is the situation regarding the rented grazing and facilities at North Wilds. Of the estimated 32 acres available November 2018 at North Wilds, the landlord has suspended access to more than 50% of that grazing. Furthermore, in my understanding that there is a Planning Permission issue regarding the siting of the current stables and tack room (which have containers used for feed and other storage adjacent). These are apparently incorrectly sited and should be relocated to their correct position in the field to the north side of the current yard, which is within the area to which access by HU is suspended by the landlord. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, what was previously the 'quarantine' field (which is in a poor state being heavily poached) is now rented to Ms [REDACTED], the yard manager. Mrs O'Neill has a one-year lease on a field in Tain (seen on 15.10.18 by ourselves) of an estimated 6 acres and a similar sized field which we saw on 23.11.18 in Balintore. Both these fields have natural shelter by means of trees and good rough grazing apparently free from poisonous plants. However, they are located at some distance from North Wilds – especially the Balintore field and are only therefore suitable for grazing of non working horses. **The field at Tain is approximately 6 acres and the field at Balintore is 9 acres. They also both have water on site. During the summer we had used the field at Balintore for any horses that were not working and the field in Tain to rest the trail riding horses in between rides. During the winter, the field at Balintore will be left empty, in case bad weather makes it difficult to get there on single track roads.**

Large bales of good quality hay are fed in ring feeders. **Hay is available at all times and has been fed during this summer due to the lack of grass caused by the long hot dry spell of weather.**

This change to the available grazing leaves Mrs O'Neill in the difficult position of having to locate suitable grazing at or very near to North Wilds. Typically, I would allow 1 acre per horse, depending on the grazing type/shelter available/drainage and so on. In discussing the situation with Mrs O'Neill, she told us that she had been trying to contact the landlord and had only the previous day been advised by him of the withdrawal of available grazing. I advised her that her first priority is to reduce where possible the horse numbers, such as not buying Ariel but returning her to the vendor. Clearly it is not possible to downsize with little warning, but horse welfare will become compromised if the horse numbers and the suitable local grazing are not of a ratio close to 1 animal/acre. It should be noted that two of the fields at North Wilds (numbered 14 and 4 on the plan) are muddy and have little grass available. Field number 13 could be used for isolation if the far end were adequately fenced off from any neighbouring grazing; otherwise either the Tain or Balintore field

would need to be used for isolation in the event of an outbreak of contagious disease. Furthermore, the incorrect siting of the stables and tack room is of concern so the situation going forward needs clarification. **We are in the process of clarifying the situation with our landlord.**

### Staff

Staff training and qualification; the staff situation has changed from November 2018. The yard manager is [REDACTED] since March 2018. She is entrusted with the day to day running of the yard when Mrs O'Neill is away on a trail ride, which in 2018 has been a significant proportion of the time. I still do not have references for [REDACTED], despite requesting them first in October. I have a single reference for [REDACTED] from a RE in Romania and an affidavit/CV provided by [REDACTED]. Whilst I recognise the enthusiasm and variety of equine experience, none of these staff have any UK qualifications relevant to Riding Establishments and in a large RE such as this where the owner cannot supervise everything herself I would advise that staff should have the appropriate training and qualifications. **The wording of this report implies that we are unwilling to get put our staff through training programmes and qualifications, which is totally untrue. We tried to get all of our staff in 2018 through the relevant qualifications, but as I have explained previously, there were cancellations and mix-ups over dates on the TRSS side – We booked our staff in for their exams twice! In 2016 and 2017 we put all of our full time staff through their Ride Leader exams – including two workaways, so I resent the statement that our staff qualifications 'continue to be an issue' when in fact, they never have been an issue. We have put all of our staff this year through a first aid qualification and child protection course – even the temporary ones. In addition, [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] all completed a 3 day HSE First Aid at Work qualification and would have sat their Ride Leader exams, if the dates had not been changed.**

Since the last annual inspection in November 2017 under the conditions of her license Mrs O'Neill has introduced a second ride leader on trail rides. For the majority of the rides Mrs O'Neill has led the ride, accompanied by [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. On one trail ride, (which [REDACTED] had been on before) [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were the ride leaders, with Mr and Mrs O'Neill providing back up support. In my opinion, despite the backup by the O'Neill's, this was not an advisable level of responsibility to entrust to the two members of staff. Workaway and members of the public on working holidays are also present on the yard, which itself requires an additional demand on the staff in supervision.

**This makes it sound as though we irresponsibly just let the girls do the ride completely on their own – which isn't factual at all. Whilst [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were leading the ride Graham and I were actively backing up the ride and meeting with them at pre-arranged points along the trail. We were not simply just setting them off at the start of the ride and meeting them at the other end of the trail! It wasn't as if we were only available by phone during the day, we were actually meeting the ride at lunchtime, or at cattle grid gates etc to check everything was OK. On one day, where it was impossible to meet them at lunch time, we both walked in for 2 hours to meet the riders at the top of the pass, between Loch Choire and the Crask. This enabled us to check up on their progress through the valley from their lunch stop onwards with binoculars and we could also contact them via sat-phone (or vice versa) if necessary. We were aware that one of the riders, although a good rider, wasn't as fit on the ground as the others and might struggle to lead a horse on un-even ground downhill – particularly as it had been raining and would be muddy and slippery underfoot, so we wanted to make sure that we were there to assist if necessary. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] were not just left to cope on their own – even though they would have done so just as well.**

**[REDACTED] had actually done that particular trail twice before – once with me leading and her following, learning the route and the 'spiel'. The second time with her leading and myself in**

support, to check that she had got it right, correcting if necessary. We use this format on all of the rides and the third time she does a trail, she leads the ride and I back up, just to make sure she has 'got it'. In addition, [REDACTED] has been leading rides with me since April, very competently! She learns very quickly and effectively, but she learns better if she is in front. I trained [REDACTED] the same way.

[REDACTED] has lots of great reviews for her ride leading and so does [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] is an excellent ride leader and I trust her judgement on the trails completely. Unfortunately, both [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] missed the chance to sit their exams – not because we did not bother to put enter them, but because the TRSS cancelled the exam they were booked onto in May and re-scheduled to June. However, they gave me the wrong date in June so the girls missed their exam. The next exam was scheduled for the first week in October – when they were both away on the trail. We were only given the exam date about 10 days before the exam date!

In addition, at the age of 22 years, [REDACTED] completed a SOLO unsupported 40 day trip on horseback through Mongolia accompanied by 2 camels and a dog. For the past 4 years she has been travelling solo, mostly through Asia including Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and Eastern Europe. She is now 25 years old and has also worked previously at two other long distance riding establishments [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], both in Romania, where she was employed as a ride leader. She owned her own horse since she was 14yrs old and whilst in Iceland working she was responsible for the care of 100 Icelandic horses, as well as 300 sheep, using the horses to round them up! As well as being an excellent horse-woman, she is independent and resourceful. She can read the terrain and she is good with clients, being extremely attentive and helpful and recognising potential problems before they arise. Having worked closely with her all year, I have total faith in her abilities.

[REDACTED] spoke to Chris Ratter regarding her lack of official qualifications when he made an unannounced visit one day. She told him her experience level and he felt that her experience should be sufficient, but advised her to get official qualifications, if she could, to back her experience up. She will do that this spring and in the meantime she will be taking on-line courses to gain extra qualifications that are relevant.

[REDACTED] has been working with us all season. She has a degree in Zoology and is a qualified lawyer, working in a law firm before she went travelling. Her family own, breed and train racehorses and she has been involved in all aspects of the family business since she was a child. Whilst they may not have recognised qualifications, they have an abundance of relevant experience.

Whilst they were leading the ride and in between helping to provide back up to the ride, I was

- Defending Highlands Unbridled against the fallout from the Facebook hate campaign led by [REDACTED] which started up again on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2018.
- Speaking to solicitors regarding the possibility of taking [REDACTED] to court for defamation and libel.
- I was also dealing with Solicitors regarding the withdrawal from the Partnership by [REDACTED]

These were all things that needed immediate action and could not wait until my return from the trip. I could not have planned the date when these matters would need dealing with – but having [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] physically in the saddle each day, meant that I could catch up on correspondence whilst waiting in the car for the ride at check points. This time was invaluable in allowing me to speak with Solicitors regarding our options – something I would have been simply unable to do had I been riding.



Vet checks of trail riding horses were carried out on 20.06.2018 and 27.10.2018 (this date is wrong - actually 27.09.2018). When I spoke to Mrs O'Neill by telephone on 04.10.2018 (the day after our visit to see McKenzie) she told me that Woody had been drafted in for the current trail ride but hadn't been inspected by the vet at the previous week's check of the trail riding horses as he hadn't been trail riding before this week (w/c 01.10.2018) She then on 18.10.2018 provided to me details of Woody's trail riding at which point it became evident that woody had done 5 trail rides between June and the end of August. At no point did I EVER tell the Charlotte Fraser that Woody had not been trail riding before w/c 01.10.2018. He was inspected with the other trail horses on 20.06.2018 and copies of the vettings were sent to Chris Ratter & Charlotte Fraser shortly afterwards by post. I had also sent an email to Charlotte, confirming that previous to the October rides, Woody had only done one 6 day ride since the end of July, which I have a copy of and can provide. When I examined him on 15.10.2018 I found him to have a painful area on the left side of his lumbar spine which had not been found by the RE. I personally checked Woody (and all of the horses) each day on the ride – both in the morning and after riding. I was checking their backs thoroughly because two horses had already developed rain-scald from the very wet weeks at the start of October and I was making sure no new cases developed – this involved pressing and feeling the skin in the saddle area of his back firmly, making small circular movements to feel if any small lumps or crusts were forming. At no time did he show any discomfort whatsoever – if he had done, I would have returned him to the yard straight away – as I had already done with Magic and Rae. I have emails from the three ladies who rode Woody during the two weeks at the start of October – all confirming that none of them noticed any lumps, swelling or pain either. Therefore, we assume that this painful area came up after his saddle came off on the last day of the ride or the day after, just before Charlottes visit.

The following animals, according to Mrs O'Neill's records were vet checked on the dates indicated but she did not receive reports from her vet:

- 12.04.18 Rae and Pi
- 30.03.2018 Holly (visited at Brodie)
- 08.06.2018 Fern
- 25.07.18 Rabbie and Maigold (Mai)

We have since managed to trace the vet reports for Rae and Pi (12.04.18) and also Fern (08.06.2018) showing that they were cleared as fit to work. I have spoken to Kessock vets and they have gone through their records and confirmed that Holly, Rabbie and Maigold were all fit to work and have issued a letter to that effect, which I have now forwarded to both Chris Ratter and Charlotte Fraser.

Skin lesions/rain-scald was found to be a problem at the visit of 15.10.2018 and one of the factors had to be the very wet week of trail riding that preceded the visit. It had also been a problem earlier in the year. A concerned member of the public had sent photographs of ponies to John Reid at the Council, which he forwarded to me. He then sent text and voicemail messages to HU asking for a vet to check the animals in question. Whether or not this was actioned, there is evidence that trail riding horses had rain-scald type lesions at that time. As noted in my report of 20.10.18 rain-scald is a risk for any trail riding ponies, at any RE, and prevention can pose a challenge.

Photos were sent to John Reid and I asked for copies to be sent to me. The pictures showed Rae, Magic, Annie, Bonnie and Mhaia. The picture of Rae shows a perfectly healthy horse standing in a field – I presume sent just because Rae is an older horse. Pictures of Annie and Bonnie both show patches of white hair on their backs which have been there for years (a result of the treeless saddles previously explained) and Magic and Mhaia's girth areas were photographed, showing small areas of hair loss. Mhaia has had a small bald lump that sits in front of her girth area behind her elbow for at

least 5 years – it does not interfere with her girth. Although she was still in the field at the time the photo was taken, Mhaia was not in fact even scheduled to do the ride in question and had already been returned home by the time John Reid contacted us. Magic's 'bald' (although it's never quite bald) spot always shows itself when the horses moult their winter coats, although it's always been there, it disappears again as the season progresses, because the longer hair covers it. Magic is ridden with a sheepskin cover on her girth and this patch has never become sore for this reason. All of these horses were vet checked after the ride and all of them passed their vetting – there were no sores or rubs present, either on their backs, or girth areas.

We believe that this complaint was malicious and probably made by an ex-business associate who knew the horses well and knew exactly where to look – particularly on Magic and Mhaia as their 'bald' spots in the girth area would not be seen by a casual 'concerned member of the public'. These horses could not be seen easily from the road and whoever took the pictures knew exactly where to find the horses on that day and went into the field with the deliberate intention of taking photos. Also the photos of Rae were obviously taken just to show that she was there. Rae had been on winter loan and returned to us at Easter 2018 – the loanee lied to us about Rae's condition, telling us that she had been diagnosed with Cushings Disease by her vet and she had been told that Rae was not allowed to work more than 20 minutes a week! Her intention was that we would allow her to keep Rae. However, Rae was subsequently checked by our vets and was found to be perfectly fit and healthy and certainly did not have Cushings Disease! The loanee is a good friend of the ex-business associate that we suspect made the complaint, and this is why we believe Rae was included in the complaint.

Rainscald is a challenge – particularly in very hot conditions where horses sweat a lot, or in very wet rainy conditions. Two of our horses back at the stables also got rainscald in October in the very wet cold week – and neither of them have been ridden at all this year! We learned a lot about how best to control rainscald this summer and this was illustrated clearly by the fact that all of our trail horses were clear of rainscald at their vetting on 27<sup>th</sup> September, having come through the hot (sweaty!) summer in good condition. The cold, continuously wet week at the start of October proved a much more difficult challenge as we were unable to follow our usual routine of washing backs, without making the horses cold and uncomfortable. We thought it was better for them to get their rugs on as quickly as possible and keep them warm and as dry as possible.

### **Conclusion**

It is my opinion that Mrs O'Neill has not demonstrated the key skills required to run such a large and complex operation.

I resent and refute this. I am unsure what the 'key skills' Charlotte refers to are! Yes, this is a complex operation, but employing a good Yard Manager to look after the day to day running of the yard should alleviate a lot of pressure in this department, leaving me to concentrate on the trail riding side of the business. I work very long, hard hours and have done for the past 10 years. During this period, I have led approximately 150 long distance rides through remote and wild terrain, leading over 1000 riders safely through the hills on these trails. We have hundreds of great reviews. In addition to all of these years and miles of experience, I am a fully qualified Riding Centre Operator, I have both my Ride leader and Senior Ride Leader qualifications, plus Riding and Road Safety, HSE 3 day first aid at work, NC and HNC Equine Studies with Thurso College and my Child Protection certificate. I also did an extra module a few years ago on First Aid in remote areas. I would welcome Charlotte's advice on which key skills she feels I need to develop in order to run things better.

She has not fully complied with presentation of trail riding horses as per the conditions of her license. The condition in the license isn't really very clear – when this condition was discussed at our inspection in 2017, I was under the impression that the whole purpose of these extra inspection in June and September were to ascertain the condition of the horses being ridden on the trails AT THAT TIME, to check their general health, that there was no sign of soreness in their backs and that they were not lame. In June I had sent Ginny home from a ride because she had developed a small patch of rainscald. I did not present her for inspection at the June vetting, because I had already taken her out of work and yet Ginny was not mentioned. If I have already sent a horse home because I am concerned at all for it's welfare, then why would I get it vetted, when it is not working? Just so the vet can tell me what I already know? I had already told Chris that I had sent Ginny home – she did not do any other trail rides this year.

There seems little point of producing a 'trail' horse for vetting if it had not been ridden on the trails for several weeks – it's not going to give the vet any useful information on what the horses condition was when it came in from it's last ride, weeks before and with Woody, I had no intention of taking him on another trail ride – why therefore would I get him vetted? Each horses vetting costs approximately £50, so to get a horse vetted unnecessarily is a waste of money for us when that £50 could buy us 2 bales of hay instead. The new conditions on our license already mean that the extra vettings required for trail horses in June and September add over £1000 to our annual vet bill. Woody had not done any trail rides in the preceding 4 weeks and had only done 6 days in the previous two months. We did not intent to take him on the trail again, but he had to be drafted in at the last minute, with no time to get him vetted before the ride. I did however tell Charlotte this when I spoke to her on the 4<sup>th</sup> October and I also told her that I had booked him in to be vetted as soon as he returned, which I thought was the RIGHT thing to do. I volunteered the information that he was on the trail – why would I have done this if I was trying to hide anything? If I hadn't told her, she would not have known.

In the past there have been concerns regarding lack of resources (human, financial) and this continues to be an issue, with few staff and lack of proper qualifications. Standards at North Wilds are not maintained and Mrs O'Neill is not present for significant periods of time as evidenced, for example, by dirty tack and on previous occasions inadequate levels of farriery. (When?)

Of course, there has been a lack of financial and human resources over the years .... In 2013 – Things were actually looking pretty bright financially at this point after 4 years of very hard work and putting everything we earned back into the business whilst we built it up. But since then we have had a series of year where circumstances out-with our control have impacted on our business.

- 2014 – The Council decided that our access was insufficient and we had to stop our trekking operations, whilst we got new planning permission for alternative access and a new car park
- 2015 – we moved from Brora to Tain because our landlord sold the property. Again, the season was compromised as we had to rely almost entirely on trail riding holidays, having had the trekking in Tain curtailed because of planning issues.
- 2016 – Should have been a good year but the horses caught strangles so we lost all of the income from mid-August onwards, plus had the expense of large vets' bills for trying to prove the horses clear. It was a huge struggle to get through the winter.
- 2017 – No trail riding was allowed because of the strangles the year before, so we had to rely on only the income from trekking and lessons and were forced to take on a business partner, [REDACTED], to survive. In addition, we were still paying huge vets bills to prove that the horses were clear of strangles.

- 2018 – Was looking up financially, with plenty of trail riding bookings and plenty of interest in the 2019 season too. We have had huge solicitors' bills relating to the withdrawal of [REDACTED] from the business, but managed to invest in four new horses, a new horse trailer and a Land Rover, plus a single bale carrier and chain harrows. We put a lot into assets that were sorely needed.

Of course, there is a lack of financial resources – All we need is a couple of years where we can actually get on and run the business in the way we want to (trekking, lessons and trail riding holidays), but every time we start to get back on our feet, either the Council or our Landlord takes the rug out from under our feet! And obviously, the finances dictate the staff we can afford to employ, impacting on human resources too. Give us a chance!

Furthermore, I am concerned that regular long trail rides are significantly increasing the risk of welfare problems and following on from that is the potential for human safety issues.

I recognise Charlottes concerns, but feel it is unfair of her to base her conclusions on her views that welfare problems 'might' happen – when it is actually far more likely that they will not. Any time we recognised a potential problem with any horse on the trail, (such as rain scald) they were returned home immediately. We did the right thing – why then, are we being pilloried for it? All of our horses have veterinary care whenever they need it, regular farriery etc – and by Charlottes own admission, all of the horses were in good condition when she inspected them.

There is no easy answer, but operating from a licensed permanent base, more veterinary checks, reduction in the hours spent in the saddle, increased assessment of the clients (particularly overseas visitors) and more staff training on recognised courses would be some of the measures that would need to be discussed before I could recommend any further trail riding.

I had already sent a document to Charlotte detailing our revised plan for how to improve the trail riding operation (where all of these points were covered), volunteering for additional vet checks, detailing how we assess our clients and offering a revised ride schedule with a day off midweek, factored into the rides of 5 days or more (if they did not already have one, as some already do – or have one or more half days of riding included) However, it appears that her report was written before she had even read this – despite me telling her that I would send one in.

In particular and improved standard of management with more highly qualified permanent staff is required in order to run this extraordinary business. Staffing levels and qualifications can be addressed once we have a license. I cannot employ 'permanent' staff on a provisional license.

My recommendation to the Council, taking into account the points I have made above and taking account of the present time of the uncertain situation regarding grazing at North Wilds is that a provisional license be issued, for local trekking, starting and finishing at North Wilds, work in the sand school but no trail riding at this time.

I understand that a provisional license has been recommended because of the uncertainty over the relocation of the stable yard into the adjacent field etc due to the new planning permission. However, this may not happen for months, or even this year. I believe that this should be addressed if and when the situation arises and we should not be penalised for this now by only being granted a provisional license. We cannot plan for the future or take any advance bookings for the summer on a provisional license and this is essential at this time of year. Lots of people book their holidays at this time of year and like to arrange their activities, such as pony trekking well in advance. If we are forced to tell people that we cannot take their booking for treks in the summer, then they will go elsewhere and this business will be lost. We do not take payment for treks until the day of the ride,

but the loss of the advance bookings will severely impact on our business during the summer. In addition, a provisional license does not allow for secure or long term employment for any potential candidates for a Yard Manager or Ride Leader position.

Recommended license conditions include all those conditions as per License number RE/003/9536 with the following additions or removals.

- Resolution of the lack of grazing for the numbers of horse either by reduction in the number of horses or an increase in suitable grazing to achieve a ratio of 1 animal per acre or thereabouts. This is a priority and needs to be actioned without delay before the winter weather arrives. This is being addressed, with two horses already sold and others being put on loan – either long term or on winter loan. We already have the fields at Tain and Balintore – 15 acres in total, which addresses some of the shortfall and are actively looking for additional local grazing. (we need another 5 acres to make up what we have lost)
- Clarification of the situation as regards the siting of the stable, tack room and containers in writing from the landlord. We hope to get this before Christmas.
- No trail rides (conditions 19 & 20 amended) I simply do not understand Charlottes reluctance to recommend a license for trail riding. We had a good year on the whole, any minor issues were addressed quickly and effectively. All customers were happy and we have many 5\* Trip Advisor reviews this year. I will refrain from sending you copies of all of them, but I can tell you that 36 of those reviews (received during 2018) make comments on how well our horses are looked after on the trails and what good condition they are in. Three of them are in fact written by vets who have ridden with us – one was an equine specific vet. There are a further 35 comments on our care of the horses on the trail in Facebook posts – all of these people have actually ridden with us. They have seen first-hand how the horses are cared for on the trail. All of these reviews are there online for anyone to see. You can easily see that this is the truth, not an exaggeration!
- Saffy on light work only with max 1 hour's work and regular monitoring
- Stan to be assessed by yard's own vet
- McKenzie on light work and regularly monitored for any respiratory signs

Charlotte Fraser BVM&S MRCVS

## New Plan for Long Distance Rides

I will address the vetting issue first. We felt that the two extra vettings at the end of June and the end of September were fine, but if more frequent vettings would make the difference between us getting our license and not, then we would be happy for that to happen. We would suggest the end of May, end of July and at the end of September, which would cover the season more evenly – however if we needed to have them monthly, then we would be willing to do that.

We cannot cut the number of rides down much more that we already have otherwise it becomes financially unviable. We had already factored in three longer breaks for the horses throughout the season and depending on the length of each ride, between 2 and 7 days off between rides with an average of four.

It is difficult to shorten the hours ridden each day on most of the rides as the length of the days riding is dictated somewhat by the available grazing.

We could have two teams of horses doing the long distance rides and alternate them every 2 to 4 weeks, or we could have a slightly larger pool of trail horses and rotate the ones being ridden weekly, so each week, 2 horses would be taken home and a different two brought out to replace them, then the following week another two horses would be taken home and a different pair brought in to replace them and so on..... This way we would not have the three long breaks throughout the season as we would not need to.

What we can do quite easily is factor in a rest day on most of our routes of 5 days or more. Some already have several half days during the week, so on these it might not be necessary, but I have outlined the rides we do and the days off as they stand at the moment and suggestions as to what days off might work.

**North route Coast to Coast** – probably would not need one as there are only 4 full days of riding with 3 days with less than 3 hours, so the horses get plenty of time to rest out in the fields. This is a difficult ride to add a full day off into as the locations are remote and they already have most of the day Altnaharra off. However, should it be required that a day off is factored in, then we would make it day on day 6, when we could take the riders on a day trip to Durness, where there is at least something for them to see and do.

1. **Half day** - 3 hours, Brora to Glen Loth
2. Short day – 5 ½ hours (4 ½ riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Glen Loth to Badenloch
3. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Badenloch to Crask
4. **2 hour ride** - Crask to Altnaharra
5. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Altnaharra to Achfary
6. Half day - 3 ½ hours (2 ½ hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Achfary to Kylestrome
7. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Kylestrome to Clachtoll

They then get 2 days off at the end of the ride before heading back on the 6 day South Route Coast to Coast ride.

**South Route Coast to Coast** - Although this ride starts with a half day ride, all of the other days are of a similar length, with no half days to give the horses a rest. It would be possible to add a rest day in midweek, making this a 7 day holiday now.

1. **Half day** - 3 hours, Clachtoll to Glen Canisp
2. Short day – 5 ½ hours (4 ½ hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Glen Canisp to Ledmore
3. Short day – 5 ½ hours (4 ½ hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Ledmore to Oykel
4. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Oykel to Bonar Bridge
5. **Day off** -
6. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Bonar Bridge to Rogart
7. Short day – 5 ½ hours (4 ½ riding and 1 hour lunch break) Rogart to Brora

Horses then have a 4 to 7 day break, depending on the length of the following ride.

**Outlander** – We can easily go back to our original format of taking a day off to do sightseeing mid-week.

1. Short day – 5 ½ hours (4 ½ hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Dores to Whitebridge
2. Short day – 5 hours (4 hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Whitebridge to Fort Augustus
3. **Day Off - Touring**
4. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Fort Augustus to Tomich
5. Short day – 5 hours (4 hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Glen Affric ride
6. Full day – 7 hours (6 days riding and 1 hour lunch break) Tomich to Achederson

The remaining two days of the tour are done on foot, sightseeing.

**Cairngorms and Castles** – This ride already has a day off midweek

1. **Half day** – 4 hours (3 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Inchriach to Glenmore
2. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Glenmore to Tomintoul
3. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Tomintoul to Braemar
4. **Day off - Braemar**
5. Full day 7 hours (6 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Braemar to Glen Muick
6. Full day 6 hours (5 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Glen Muick to Glen Esk
7. Full day 6 hours (5 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Glen Esk to Brechin

The horses then get 4 days off at Brechin.

**Cairngorms to Coast** – we have revised this route, adding in two full days off on days 4 and 8. This will make this route into a 10 day tour. This ride may be ridden in reverse, but the days off would still be 4 and 8.

1. **Half day** – 4 hours (3 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Montrose to Brechin
2. Full day – 6 hours (5 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Brechin to Glen Esk
3. Full day – 6 hours (5 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Glen Esk to Glen Muick
4. **Day off Ballater**
5. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Glen Muick to Glen Doll
6. Short day – 5 hours (4 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Glen Doll to Glen Muick
7. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Glen Muick to Braemar
8. **Day off Braemar**
9. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Braemar to Glenmore
10. **Half day** – 4 hours (3 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Glenmore to Inchriach

**Monarch of the Glen** – Formerly the Ben Nevis and Bothies ride. There are already 2 half days in the middle of this ride, which will give the horses bit of a rest, but should a full day off be required, we would combine days 2 and 3 and give the horses a full day off at Fersit, taking the riders to Fort Augustus for the day.

1. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Kinlochleven to Fort William
2. **Half day** – 4 hours (3 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Fort William to Spean Bridge
3. **Half day** – 3 hours (2 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Spean Bridge to Fersit
4. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Fersit to Glen Sherro
5. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Glen Sherro to Ruthven
6. Full day – 6 hours (5 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Ruthven to Inchriach

**Wild West Highland** – This ride already has a very short (2 hour) day in the middle of the ride. We felt that this was sufficient as it is a 6 day ride. This ride can be ridden in either direction. Should another day off be required then we would do it on day 4 after the longest day. In one direction it would be a tour to Skye and the other would be Loch Ness and Urquhart Castle.

1. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Spean Bridge to Fort Augustus (or Drumnadrochit to Fort Augustus)
2. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Fort Augustus to Tomich
3. Long day – 9 ½ hours (6 hours riding plus 2 x 1 hour breaks and ½ hour with rider on foot) Tomich to Shiel Bridge
4. **2 hour ride** - Shiel bridge to Dornie
5. Full day – 7 hours (5 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Dornie to Strath Carron
6. Short day – 6 hours (4 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch) Strath Carron to Torridon

In future years we hoped we might be able to split the longest day by camping at Altnamulloch at the head of Loch Affric. This takes a lot more planning as the logistics are quite complicated..... but it would be great if we could break the longest day into two more manageable chunks. Although we would love to stay at the Youth Hostel at Altbeithe, taking electric fencing and feed in for the horses would entail having two pack ponies with us, so unfortunately this rules it out. At Altnamulloch there is at least vehicular access (although only with permission)

**Great Glen 5 day** – All of the days on this route are short days on easy trails, so we wouldn't normally have a day off – however, if one is required then we would have one on day 4 at Invermoriston.

1. **Half day** – 4 hours (3 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Fort William to Spean Bridge
2. Short Day – 6 hours (5 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Spean Bridge to Invergarry
3. Short Day – 6 hours (5 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Invergarry to Invermoriston
4. Short day – 6 hours (5 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Invermostiston to Drumnadrochit
5. Short day – 5 hours (4 hours riding and 1 hour lunch) Drumnadrochit to Bunchrew

#### **The Longest Ride –**

1. **Half day** - 3 hours, Brora to Glen Loth
2. Short day – 5 ½ hours (4 ½ riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Glen Loth to Badenloch
3. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Badenloch to Crask
4. **2 hour ride** - Crask to Altnaharra
5. Short day – 6 hours (5 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Altnaharra to Tongue
6. Long day – 7 hours ( 6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Tongue to Eriboll
7. **Day off** - Durness
8. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Eriboll to Achfary
9. **Half day** - 3 ½ hours (2 ½ hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Achfary to Kylestrome
10. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding plus 1 hour lunch break) Kylestrome to Clachtoll
11. **Day off** – Lochinver
12. **Half day** - 3 hours, Clachtoll to Glen Canisp
13. Short day – 5 ½ hours (4 ½ hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Glen Canisp to Ledmore
14. Short day – 5 ½ hours (4 ½ hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Ledmore to Oykel
15. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Oykel to Bonar Bridge
16. **Day off**
17. Full day – 7 hours (6 hours riding and 1 hour lunch break) Bonar Bridge to Rogart
18. Short day – 5 ½ hours (4 ½ riding and 1 hour lunch break) Rogart to Brora

I look forward to your comments on the above and should they be acceptable, then I will update my ride schedule for 2019. The proposed 2019 ride schedule follows a similar format to 2018, but with the addition of extra days off, the longer breaks of 7 to 10 days would need to be reduced accordingly.



## Resting Horses

When we planned our long distance riding schedule for 2018 we factored in rest days for the horses. This was approved by the council at the time.

As well as breaks of between 2 to 5 days (depending on the length of ride), between the long distance trail rides and some half days whilst on the trail rides too. In addition, the horses had four longer breaks between May and the end of September of between 7 and 14 days, allowing them time to get a good rest. Rest is important because it allows the body time to repair and strengthen itself in between trails. However, finding a balance is important as too much rest is detrimental – it is not good; either physically and mentally, for fit trail horses to be standing around in the field, eating all day and getting no exercise as this can make them more susceptible to other health problems, such as laminitis. In the wild, horses cover many miles a day whilst grazing.

Having more horses capable of doing the long distance rides and resting the horses in rotation, would mean that each horse would get more rest. Or we could have two teams of trail horses and alternating them – but the first option would be more practical and allow for easier replacement of horses that need to be returned home from a ride for any reason (rain-scald/lameness etc). The horses could have a few days off, then just do some shorter rides based at the stables until their next long distance ride

I think what no-one (including myself when we started out) takes into account is that the horses on the long distance rides actually enjoy their jobs. Yes, they work hard, but they also get fed three meals a day and they are happy going from good grazing to good grazing in their own little herd – its natural horse behaviour.

These are mostly good, solid native ponies, well suited to the environment and are happiest living out in a field and not being confined in a stable. We take rugs to keep them dry in wet or colder weather, but apart from that they are happy living as nature intended.

From looking at other Trail Riding Holiday operators in Scotland's schedule, it appears that between the start of April and the end of October, [REDACTED] horses work for 8 days straight, have 1 rest day, then two days where they are available for work doing all day rides, then have another rest day, then back to another 8 day shift – a total of 35 days off. This is considerably less than ours get! During the same time period our horses got 95 days off!

The [REDACTED] only has 5 rides per annum scheduled, but will schedule more in for groups of 4 people or more.

[REDACTED] advertised 8 week long trail rides in 2017. Two rides a month between June and September.

Further afield, [REDACTED], who is the biggest trail riding holiday operator in the UK offers a similar number of long distance rides to us as well as short 2 day breaks in between....their dates are not available yet for 2019 so I am unsure how many days the horses get off in between, but it appears that they have 27 horses and different trail rides running simultaneously.

[REDACTED] – have about 5 long distance rides this year (one a month) and several short breaks too, but their horses are also used on the daily treks and trails throughout the year.

I feel that all in all our horses get sufficient rest between rides, but we are willing to give them more, should the Council require this for our license. However, there has to be a balance between the work they do, the rest they get and the number of rides we need to do during the year to earn now require.

# Stresses caused by riding

## Long distance trail riding – this is not endurance riding!

Most of the riders on the long distance rides are very experienced riders, who ride in a good, balanced position. Occasionally we get 'western' riders, who tend to slouch in the saddle and do not post when trotting. We make it very clear that they are expected to post and try to correct their position wherever possible. We keep an eye on them!

Much of the riding on the long distance rides is done at walk. The nature of the terrain means that more often than not the horses are just walking – either because the terrain is rougher, for example on hill tracks, or because although we are on good, well made trails or estate tracks, we are either going up or going down hills.

Although horses cope very well with climbing hills, we tell our riders that if they feel at any time that their horse needs a break, please shout out and let us know, as it is important that they get a 'breather' on long ascents. We need to climb at the pace of the slowest, or least fit horse and ensure that they are not put under undue stress by being 'forced' to keep going at a pace that they find difficult. We take regular breaks on long ascents anyway, but our riders are briefed about the importance of this before-hand.

Horses find steep descents with riders on board much more difficult, so we get the riders to dismount and lead the horses downhill if the descent is prolonged, or steep in any way.

We trot mostly when we are on roads (to get off them as quickly as possible!). We do lots of short bursts of trot. Never more than a minute at a time. We find lots of shorter trots are easier on both the horses and the riders. They eat up the miles, without leaving riders feeling sore, or horses getting tired.

Most of the cantering we do is on forest or estate tracks that are well made and grassy or sandy underfoot. The length of the canters is dictated by the terrain – we would canter on flat ground, or slightly up-hill, but not on steep hills and not on downhills. This is easier for the horses. Although in some places, such as the Great Glen, we can get some nice longer canters, in general, because of the terrain, the canters are quite short. After each canter, we stop to check everyone is OK and also to check that the horses' boots are still in place and intact, fixing them if they need it.

Galloping is saved for the beaches or a rare open field. We always make sure that the footing is good and either level, or slightly up-hill. Riders must stay behind the ride leader.

This is NOT endurance riding – we are not up against the clock! We take our time on these rides, enjoying the scenery, with plenty of breaks for taking photos etc, where the horses can grab a bit of grass. Unlike on shorter treks, we encourage our horses to eat whenever we stop for any reason – photo stops, toilet breaks, when boots or tack is being adjusted – anytime WE decide to stop the ride. They are not allowed to just stop and eat whenever they choose to. It's important that they get a chance to have a mouthful of grass every now and again – it's good for their morale and it's good for their digestive system! Horses are designed to be trickle feeders – to have food passing through their gut practically all the time. Whilst it's acceptable for horses to NOT be allowed to eat when they are being ridden for 1 or 2 hours, we believe that it is totally unacceptable to try to stop them from eating when they are being ridden all-day. They need that food passing through their systems and we have to work with nature. In addition, each horse gets breakfast, a packed lunch and dinner. They get a good quality Alfalfa chaff, a conditioning cube, designed to provide slow release energy and keep weight on, without making the horse fizzy (Baileys No4), micronised linseed and a handful of a hedgerow herb mix. Some, such as Woody, have special diets and we make sure

that they get the same food when they are on the trail. In addition, they get good grazing at night and we chose lunch stops, where the horses have access to good grass and water too.

On the subject of water – it is essential that the horses are well hydrated – we allow them to drink whenever they show any interest in streams and stop regularly at the ‘watering holes’ they have favoured over the years. 2018 was exceptionally dry and hot and many of the usual places where they would usually stop to drink were bone dry. We carry collapsible water buckets that pack away to the size of my fist (they are actually back packing washing up bowls, but do the job perfectly). We use these to collect water from streams or water sources that the horses might not be able to access themselves safely and bring the water to them. We have found that this works very well.

Over the 10 years that we have been doing long distance rides, we have had very few problems or injuries to horses. Our horses wear boots, not shoes, so the wear and tear on their joints is significantly reduced – less concussion due to the boots construction and the fact that their feet are allowed to behave as nature intended when they come in contact with the ground – to foot can expand and contract without the rigid constraints of a metal shoe nailed to it and the frog is in contact with the ground (albeit through the sole of the boot) allowing it to do its job (pumping the blood up through the lower leg) efficiently – something shoes can prevent as they often lift the frog away from the ground. We have very few lameness problems with the trail riding horses – I believe in no small part, because of our decision to use boots, instead of metal shoes. In addition, should horses kick each-other in the field, the likelihood of injury is reduced without a horses rear feet being armed with metal shoes.

2018 was an exceptional year. It was very hot and dry for much of the summer, which meant that the horses sweated much more than usual. In addition, the first (and much of the second) week of October was exceptionally wet, with rain all day, for every day of the ride. These conditions created the perfect storm of conditions for rain scald. I have covered our experiences and treatment of this in a separate paper.

For comparison.....

## **Endurance Riding**

Endurance riding is an equestrian sport based on controlled long-distance races. Endurance rides can be any distance, though they are rarely over 100 km for a one-day competition. Most endurance rides in the UK are either 25, 50 or 100 miles long. The rides are done mostly at trot or canter on all terrain and the horses are checked by vets at the start of the race and at the end of the race – on races of 50 miles or over they are also checked at the half way point. Riding at trot or canter (or gallop) on uneven terrain can put more strain on joints than when just walking. Most horses enjoy the rides, but obviously the longer the distance, the more strain physically on the horse. The horses are very fit, but are covering distances greater than our full day rides, in only about 3 hours. The Cairngorms 100 race is a 100 mile race that takes place every year over a 24 hour period. We use the same trails on one of our Cairngorms rides – and it takes us 4 days over the same route, that they do in one day, because we are not pushing our ponies, just taking our time and enjoying the scenery.... The stresses and strains are not the same for our ponies as they are for the horses competing in endurance.

## **Trekking**

This covers all of the riding done outside the school from half hour rides for children to full day rides for adults.

We have riders of all abilities and we have different horses that we would use for beginners and experienced riders. The experienced riders are easy for the horses to carry as they are balanced, but

the beginners can be much more challenging. We give basic instruction before the ride and also whilst they are riding – however, the riders can be unbalanced, slouch in the saddle, pull back hard on the horses mouths to stop them or just generally bounce about!

The trekking ponies for beginners need to be calm and sensible and very tolerant of their rider. I feel they have the hardest job to do of all of our horses, but they do it with their ears forward and a kind disposition. They are very generous horses.

Most of what they do with beginners is at walk, but with the ones who try hard to get their riding right, we often try a short trot.

## **Lessons/Schooling**

As for trekking, lessons often involve riders who are just trying to grasp the basics – lots of beginners, learning how to ride, means the horses have to carry unbalanced, bouncy riders, who may haul on their mouths.

With more experienced riders, there is jumping or more complicated school movements, all of which put a lot of strain on joints.

## **Eventing/Jumping/Dressage**

Any or all of these disciplines, put a lot of strain on a horse, both mentally and physically. Although the riders are experienced, any kind of competition puts more strain on a horses joints and tendons. Plenty of opportunities for injuries to occur.

## **Racing**

Again, a lot of stresses and strains on a horse, both mentally and physically. More opportunities for injuries to occur. Add in jumps and these become even greater.

## **Conclusion**

Of all of the disciplines mentioned above, I think trail riding is the LEAST stressful for the horse. Although the hours may be long, they are behaving in a natural way – travelling in a small herd, from grazing to grazing (normally following a lead mare as they would in the wild). Mentally, it is very good for them. Physically, yes, it can be demanding, but nothing that tough native type horses and ponies cannot manage easily. They work hard, but they are well fed and happy in their work – and they keep going happily for many years - which is more than can be said for most school ponies, who go around an around in circles in a school all day, doing the same thing, day in day out. Horses and ponies who just work in the school often need to be moved on to private owners regularly as they get sour and dead to the leg. Yes, some horses and ponies thrive on this sort of work – but it's normally the ones who are doing more advanced stuff, not the ones who have to deal with beginners bouncing around on their backs all day.

Offering both trail riding holidays, local trekking and having a small school, means that our horses and ponies have a varied and interesting life! The long distance horses do a bit of schooling during the winter, keeping them fit and making sure that they are balanced and listening to the rider – although to be honest, they don't really seem to understand why they are being asked to go around in circles! They would much rather be out in the hills.

# Problems with Rain Scald

## What is Rain Scald and what causes it?

Rain scald is one of the most common skin conditions in horses and is often seen after prolonged periods of rain. It's caused by the organism *Dermatophilus congolensis*, which is a bacterium that behaves both like bacteria and fungi.

It causes crusty scabs and 'paint-brush' hair tufts that can easily be pulled off, leaving hairless, pink and raw spots that can merge into larger areas. It's mostly seen on the top of the head, neck and back and isn't usually itchy to the horse. It's not a serious disease, but may lead to more severe secondary skin infections if not treated.

## How is it treated?

Traditionally the crusts are softened with warm water or oil until they come away easily, then the affected area is washed with Hibiscrub - an antibacterial wash containing chlorhexidine gluconate which is effective against a wide range of bacteria, yeasts, some fungi and viruses or Betadine, which is Iodine based and also effective. The crusts have to be removed first so that the chlorhexidine can get to the skin underneath. The skin then rapidly heals and the hair grows back in about 10 days.

## Problems we have encountered with Rain-Scald caused by sweat

The spring and summer of 2018 have been exceptionally hot. This led to a few of our horses developing small patches of 'rain-scald' caused by sweat under the saddle area. Any that developed any sign of rain-scald were returned home to be treated. We looked at our horse management both during and after each days ride, spoke to our vet and took advice from some of our customers and staff who regularly ride in hot climates.

## How we treated this

Saddles were removed at lunch time and if we were near water, then the horses were washed off and allowed to dry thoroughly in the sun. (we already carried lightweight collapsible buckets, for getting water to the horses to drink on the trail, if streams are inaccessible for any reason and these were perfect for the purpose). Saddle pads were laid sweaty side up to dry in the sun. Our saddle pads are purpose made double sided wool fleece endurance riding pads, designed to wick moisture away from the horse. They are reversible and alternate sides can be used next to the horse each day. Backs were checked. After work, the horses were washed off with plenty of water with lavender wash in it. Lavender is cooling, healing and soothing – it's also mildly anti-bacterial and helps to deter flies. Twice a week the horses were washed off in the evenings with Hibiscrub – we had been advised by the vet not to use Hibiscrub every night as it would remove the good bacteria from the horses skin as well.

This approach worked really well and we felt that we had the rain-scald under control as we had no more problems during the summer.

## Problems we encountered with Rain-Scald caused by rain

During the last few days of September and the first two weeks of October, the weather was unseasonally wet and cold. On the Coast to Coast ride that we did starting on 29<sup>th</sup> September for 7 days, we had rain every day – and it rained all day on most days. This was a real problem for us, because although we had a plan in place for how to deal with rain scald in hot dry weather, cold wet weather created a whole new set of problems.

- As the weather was cold and wet, we could not remove the saddles at lunchtime, because the only dry part of the horse, was it's saddle area – and the last thing we wanted was to get this area wet and cold!

- We put waterproof horse blankets (rugs) on the horses at night to keep them dry as we did not want to have to put a saddle on a wet horse in the morning as this is a well-known cause of rain-scald and saddle sores. We wanted to keep our horses as dry as possible – particularly in the saddle area.
- Where normally we would groom the horses saddle area thoroughly both before and after work and wash them off thoroughly at the end of the day, the heavy rain meant that horses were just getting a really quick brush over to remove any loose hair or dirt and the saddle (or rug at the end of the day) being put straight on as quickly as possible to minimise the risk of the saddle area getting wet. Rug off, saddle on, or saddle off and rug - on as quick as we could!
- We couldn't wash them off at the end of the day – even just twice a week with Hibiscrub as there was no way of getting them dry afterwards and this would have meant putting a horse rug on top of a wet back. Although modern horse rugs are breathable, we didn't think any of the horses would appreciate having a cold wet sponge full of water sloshed onto the only warm dry part of them! We didn't want to give them a chill – or risk a cold wet back, turning into a warm wet back under a rug and causing rain-scald!
- The horses had started growing their winter coats, so although they did not appear sweaty on the surface, their bodies would have been warm and therefore possibly sweaty underneath.

Despite our best efforts, By the end of the week, one of the horses, Magic, who is a few spot Appaloosa, with pink skin on her back, (which is in general on most horses, more sensitive than black skin) had developed a small patch of rain scald. We returned her to the stables.

The following weeks ride, starting on 8<sup>th</sup> October was still wet – although not quite as cold, which was a relief. On day 3, another horse Rae, was showing signs of rain scald too and we returned her to the stables as well. That night it was warmer and the forecast was dry, so we washed all of the horses off with Hibiscrub and left them out without their rugs on so that they could dry overnight.

The rest of the week was rainy so it was back to wearing rugs at night and when we got in on the last day of the ride, some of the horses had tell-tale tiny bumps under their skin, which over the next day or two erupted into rain scald crusts.

### **Recommendations for prevention of rain-scald**

The best prevention is to protect your horse from rain, or sweat. This can be by providing shelter or by putting on a light breathable blanket when the horse is turned out (heavy rugs may trap moisture and worsen the condition).

We tried to prevent problems from sweat by removing saddles at lunch time and washing off regularly and from rain by putting lightweight rugs on the horses at night.

It's also important to keep any kit and tack that comes into contact with your horse clean and avoid sharing equipment with other horses. Each horse has it's own saddle pad and rug – but the grooming equipment is shared. We washed the grooming equipment in Hibiscrub twice a week.

### **Vets recommendations.**

Having spoken to the vets – both Charlotte Fraser and Kessock Equine vets, it seems we are doing what they would normally recommend! And to be fair, this was working fine in the summer.

Charlotte Fraser suggested that from her investigations into the best ways to prevent rain-scald, it appeared that it was better to wash horses under running water instead of using a sponge and bucket as we have been doing. She felt that saddle pads should be changed daily or liners used and

she also suggested that washing grooming equipment in Virkon (a powerful disinfectant) once a week, might help.

### **Our plan of action**

Doing what we did in the summer was working fine. We will continue to remove saddles at lunchtime and allow pads to dry in the sun. Obviously on rainy days, this would not be practical, but as the horses are not rugged at night in the summer, washing them thoroughly as we had been should keep things under control. To improve this, we will purchase two lightweight portable horse washers, which just use cold water for summer use – this will enable us to hose the horses down thoroughly after work (two units will speed up the process!). We will also continue to wash with Hibiscrub twice a week.

Each horse will have its own, named grooming kit, which will not be used on any other horse. It will also be disinfected twice a week and again after the ride ends in a solution of Virkon.

The saddle pads are a bit more difficult, as the ones we currently use are state of the art thick fleece pads, costing over £100 each. With an average of 10 horses on each long distance ride and each ride being around 6 or 7 days, we would be required to carry 70 bulky wool saddle pads! This would leave no room in the trailer for any of the other things we really need to carry with us – like horse feed, spare boots and tack and the riders' luggage!

Thin wool saddle pad liners are available and would be a better option, as these are less bulky or as our existing saddle pads are reversible, we could just get a second pad for each horse, using alternate sides each day then disinfecting with a spray solution of Hibiscrub and allowing to dry thoroughly for two days, whilst the second pad is being used. I feel that this would be the best and most practical solution.

The above measures should, we believe work well all year around and in most weather conditions, but the unusually wet, cold weeks we had in late Sept/early Oct, present more of a problem. We may never have this combination of weather again – it's unusual for it to rain all day continuously for a week in the Highlands – we normally get showers passing through. However, having searched extensively on the internet to find a solution, I think that the following additional measures may help.

Purchasing a portable hot water shower for the horses would be a sensible option – it would be useful on the yard in the winter too, so could be drafted into use on the trails, only when the weather conditions look like it may be required. Being able to wash the horses off with warm water would mean that they would object less and that they would dry off much more quickly too. We could wash them, give them a quick towel dry and then rug them with a 'thermotex' or woollen under-blanket beneath their waterproof (breathable) rug. This would help to wick any remaining moisture away whilst still keep the horse warm. We could still use this with a Hibiscrub solution twice a week.

### **Conclusions.....**

Although we had a problem with rain-scald this season, rain-scald is not caused by long distance riding! It is a really common problem with horses whenever their skin is allowed to get wet, either through sweat or rain.

Two of our horses back at the stables – neither of which had not been ridden for several months (one because of an injury sustained in the field and the other because she is young) both had rain-scald when we returned to the stables at the end of our long distance riding season! Presumably caused by the same wet, cold week that caused us so many problems on the trail.

Although over the years we have had the odd case of rain-scald, but this years' weather conditions made prevention exceptionally difficult. However, we formulated a plan and got it under control and had no further problems between June and the end of September – **the horses were vetted at the end of June and also at the end of September and the results showed that there were no problems with rain-scald in the trail horses during this period.** Our biggest problems were caused by the exceptional weather conditions during one week in early October. Problems that had obviously been brewing during that and the following week, but that finally erupted once we finished the ride.

All horses have been treated and their skin is now healthy again. For the record, we softened the crusts with vitamin E oil (a skin health product), then once the crusts could be picked off easily, we washed with Hibiscrub and treated individual lesions with colloidal silver cream, which seems to work really well as it is anti-bacterial and helps to speed up the healing process.

It's been a bit of a learning curve, but hopefully, now we have the situation under control.