

Maximising collaboration for equine health: working with livery yard owners and managers

Livery yard owners and managers are important stakeholders in managing the health and wellbeing of horses within their yards, yet their importance is often overlooked. Finding ways to collaborate positively with local livery yards could help veterinary professionals on many levels, from offering optimised preventative health strategies to the horses within local yards, through to ensuring trust and good professional relationships with managers and their clients.

<https://doi.org/10.12968/ukve.2023.71.42>

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Key words: behaviour change | equine welfare | livery yards

Literature shows that there are many cases of livery yards promoting equine management which is problematic in various ways: for example, inadequate biosecurity practices (Schemann et al, 2012; Furtado et al, 2021), interval deworming (Tzelos et al, 2019), not offering modified grazing for sufferers of common issues such as laminitis and pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (Furtado et al, 2020), and promoting practices such as reduced turnout, which may not meet horses' ethological needs. While there are schemes that promote the importance of meeting certain standards, these are voluntary and are taken up by only a subset of yards (British Horse Society, 2022). Working with livery yard owners and managers to assist managers in implementing best practice approaches to common issues, and promoting those who already meet the highest standards, could therefore improve equine wellbeing at a community level. This article describes a behavioural analysis of livery yard management following an indepth study based at the University of Liverpool and funded by the Horse Trust, and seeks to help veterinarians to collaborate with livery yard owners and managers. The study involved semi-structured interviews with the owners and managers of 45 diverse yards (ranging from 'do it yourself' to 'full livery', and including retirement yards), and focus groups with a further seven yard managers. More information about the methodology is reported elsewhere (Furtado et al, 2021).

Livery yard manager behaviour change

Livery yard managers have to manage horse care within a balance of complex, intertwining and sometimes conflicting factors, in-

cluding management of the land, clients, facilities, business and their personal life (*Figure 1*). As such, implementing any one change can have knock-on effects on many other factors. For example, a new biosecurity protocol might require a redistribution of facilities in order to create an isolation stable, which could in turn disrupt the yard's business model because of a reduction in available stabling or a change in the type of clientele willing to come to a yard which requires initial isolation. Similarly, making changes to field management to allow for a laminitic horse could impact the field management and care of all the other horses on the yard, which could impact client satisfaction with the yard.

Livery yard owners and managers may therefore be dissuaded from making changes which might be too disruptive to any one of the yard's component parts. Changes which are to be brought in on yards must therefore be considered within the context of the yard's individual 'ecosystem', and brought about in ways which create positive knock-on impacts as far as possible.

The 'Capability, Opportunity, Motivation, Behaviour' (COM-B) model is a well-evidenced model of behaviour change which can be used to assess the factors impacting any behaviour (Michie et al, 2011; West and Michie, 2020). This model assists researchers by splitting the factors which could potentially influence how a behaviour occurs into three components – capability, opportunity, and motivation – each with two sub-components, as explained in *Table 1*.

The use of the COM-B model highlights how five of the six areas combine to create a change-limiting environment in which livery yard owners and managers are likely to be dissuaded from

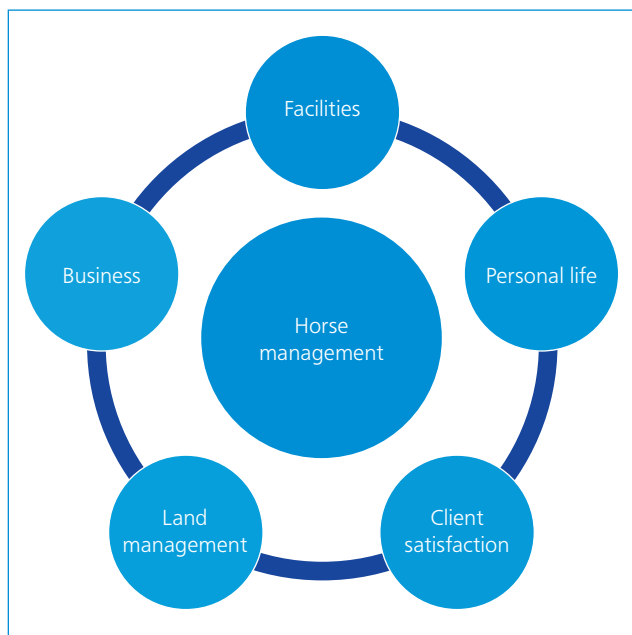


Figure 1. The interconnected components of livery yard management.

considering making changes to equine management. This highlights the reasons that change might be slow on livery yards, and suggests that alleviating the pressures in some areas (for example, providing support from professionals such as vets, increasing knowledge, and sharing information about the reasons for updated practice) might help to influence change.

Automatic motivation (habits, emotions and deeply held beliefs) is likely to be one of the key factors prohibiting behaviour change. Each yard is set up according to the individual livery yard owner’s and manager’s perception of ideal horse care, and the resulting equine management is heavily embedded in automatic processes, such as habits. For example, livery yard owners and managers who preferred horses to be stabled described how their care practices were built around the provision of comfort and safety for horses; this was then enacted through the daily routines and culture of the yard. Comparatively, livery yard owners and managers who prefer horses to have free choice might gain enjoyment from creating a lifestyle and environment for their horses which suits their ideals, such as providing an enriched field environment or watching the herd interact. Additionally, when changes do occur that upset the balance of the yard, this often involves negative emotional experiences such as conflict and frustration.

The physical environment of the yard can prohibit alterations to yard practice; for example, it might be difficult to implement a new turnout system, or biosecurity practices such as isolation of new horses, because of the way the yard is already structured. Factors such as soil type and land layout also have a significant effect on the way that turnout paddocks can be used across the seasons, and these factors can subsequently prohibit behaviour change.

Because there is little direct contact between livery yard owners and managers, and each yard is viewed as an individual unit with its own merits, cultures and complexities, yard management is unlikely to be subject to peer pressures and social norms which can be powerful influencers of behaviour change (Kelly and Barker, 2016; Wallen and Daut, 2018). While customer demand plays a

Table 1. A COM-B analysis of influences surrounding livery yard managers’ behaviour change

COM-B main component	COM-B subcomponent	Explanation	Relevance in yard management behaviour change
Capability	Psychological	The cognitive skills and knowledge required to perform the behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is no requirement to update knowledge There is rarely any opportunity for measurable or tangible benefits (either financial or personal) from making changes
	Physical	The physical skills required to perform the behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Least applicable component – most altered practices would be within physical capabilities
Opportunity	Social	The way the social environment (such as social norms or peer pressure) influences the behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is little direct contact between yard managers, hence a lack of social norms regarding practices Although customer demands might impact practice, there is a diversity and no lack of potential customers, so little reason to change based on pressure from customers When changes are introduced, social conflict ensues Yard set up around avoidance of conflict
	Environmental	The way the physical environment influences the behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yard environment is usually pre-set; alterations to practice are expensive (such as the cost of setting up biosecure area or using non-grass turnout)
Motivation	Automatic	The emotions, habits, beliefs and values which may affect the behaviour being performed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Livery yard owners and managers have inherent ideas about what a good life looks like for a horse, and the yard is set up around this Inbuilt routines, traditions and habits are core to care practices Emotional upheaval when clients do not behave within rules (such as in the case of neglected horses) Compassion fatigue
	Reflective	The extent to which the person believes in the behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unclear why change would be necessary, ‘if it ain’t broke....’ mentality

KEY POINTS

- Livery yards managers and owners are key stakeholders in managing equine wellbeing in the UK, but their importance is often overlooked. Working supportively with yard managers will deliver major benefits for all parties.
- Livery yards are set up according to a delicate balance of factors, which makes behaviour change difficult because altering one factor can upset the equilibrium. Yard managers balance these factors according to their perception of ideal horse care.
- The 'COM-B' behaviour model helps us split behaviours into six component parts: in the instance of livery yard behaviour change, we can see that factors such as automatic motivation (emotions, habits and beliefs), and the physical environment, make it particularly hard for yards to make changes.
- Support which takes into account the complex 'ecosystem' of the yard is most likely to be successful in helping yards bring about behaviour change, particularly when offered in a supportive rather than paternalistic capacity. Individuals such as nurses are therefore ideally placed to support yards in implementing strategies for issues such as weight management, biosecurity, or worming.

role in livery yard owners' and managers' business practices, the number and diversity of their clientele means that livery yards rarely change their practices in response to customer requests.

There is no formal qualification, license or requirement in order to run a livery yard, and as such livery yard owners and/or managers have no need to update their knowledge, skills or expertise in ways which might influence their reflective motivation to change, or their psychological capacity for equine care. Some livery yard owners and managers may choose to update their knowledge and practice based on personal desire to learn, however, there may be little perceived reason to do so when implementing any change is potentially problematic and could upset the balance of the yard management and culture.

Conclusions

What does this behavioural analysis tell us about working with livery yard owners and managers? First, it is important to develop a collaborative and supportive relationship in which potential changes can be discussed and tailored to that individual yard. A directive 'telling' approach (Bard et al, 2017) about a potential change may simply result in a livery yard owners and managers seeking advice elsewhere, in order to find an approach which better suits their yard practices. Second, when working with livery yard owners and managers to implement a possible change, it is important to understand the yard as an ecosystem with balanced, interconnected components which impact one another, particularly when changes are applied. Third, using approaches which acknowledge and respect the complex work of the livery yard owner and manager rather than adding to it, is key. For example, livery clients might react with frustration when a new process such as an

altered worming or biosecurity protocol is put into place, so working with them to put in place a veterinary-led, evidence-based approach will minimise dissent from clients and allow efficiency in the change, as well as improving equine welfare.

Veterinary professionals are ideally placed to build supportive, mutually beneficial, long-lasting relationships with livery yard owners and managers with the ultimate aim of both parties being able to maximise equine health and wellbeing. For example, initial activities trialled as part of the author's projects have included the opportunity for informal discussions with ambulatory vets and local livery yard owners and managers around the management of common issues such as wound care and laminitis. These informal discussions have allowed the time and opportunity for reflection, better understanding and relationship-building on both sides. Improved collaboration between veterinary professionals can therefore lead to improved management and processes for veterinarians, livery yard owners and managers alike, particularly for the management of preventative health, common conditions and emergency procedures.

However, opportunities for relationship-building can be easily missed because of the high demands of veterinary work. Veterinary nurses are ideally placed to provide time-sensitive visits, such as weight clinics and discussion of change implementation. Additionally, ensuring service continuity (organising visits, as far as possible, with established vet-livery yard owners and managers pairings) and promoting activities such as opportunities for informal evening discussions, practice talks, or offering yard-level service packages could help to build long-standing, trusted relationships which will maximise wellbeing for veterinary staff, livery yard owners and managers, clients and horses alike. [EQ](#)

Conflicts of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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