



# The Findings

**BGA Survey 2024**

**The Impact of Poor  
Employment Practices on  
the Mental Health and  
Wellbeing of Grooms**



**BRITISH GROOMS  
ASSOCIATION**

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# 1 Introduction

## a) About the author

1.1 Simone Sear is a certified health and wellbeing coach and workplace wellbeing consultant.

Simone's career began as a groom spanning the equestrian and horseracing industries before moving into the health and wellbeing sectors in charitable and statutory services.

For 15 years she oversaw the development and delivery of Racing Welfare's wellbeing services to the workforce of British horseracing. Her interests are in both individual and workplace wellbeing.

Simone has an MA in Health Research, specialising in organisational health and wellbeing. She is also a graduate of the thoroughbred horseracing industry's MBA programme where her research identified occupational stressors for racehorse trainers and their impact on health and wellbeing.

Simone also commissioned and collaborated on seminal mental health research across the horseracing industry with Liverpool John Moore's University. In 2020 Simone was nominated for and won the Godolphin Stud & Stable Staff Community Award in recognition of her work in developing and transforming access to health and wellbeing services across horseracing.

## b) Acknowledgements

*"I would like to extend my thanks to the British Grooms Association (BGA) for the opportunity to present this report, reflecting the voices and experiences of grooms within the equestrian industry. It's a profession that is close to my heart.*

*My sincere gratitude goes to each respondent who took the time to participate in the survey, sharing their insights and experiences with openness and honesty. This level of engagement has provided invaluable depth to the understanding of the challenges and positive aspects of employment practices within the sector.*

*The commitment of respondents who have spoken so candidly highlights the importance of this report, which aims to contribute to meaningful improvements in workplace conditions and overall well-being for grooms and other equestrian professionals. Thank you for your trust and willingness to be part of this essential dialogue."*

*Simone Sear*

## 2 Overview

### a) The equestrian industry

2.1 The equestrian industry, known for its physically demanding roles and long working hours, employs approximately 40,000 individuals in the UK. However, there is limited data regarding the working conditions within the sector, with much of the available information being anecdotal.

2.2 To address this gap, the British Grooms Association (BGA) conducted a survey to explore the extent of poor employment practices, such as the absence of contracts, unlawful wage deductions, and bullying.

The survey also aimed to assess how these conditions may be impacting the mental health and wellbeing of grooms.

2.3 Research from other sectors consistently shows that working conditions have a significant impact on mental health (Belloni et al, 2022). Key factors such as job autonomy, working hours, and the physical environment have been linked to psychological wellbeing.

2.4 These concerns are particularly relevant for vulnerable groups within the workforce, including younger workers under 35 and older workers over 50, both of whom are well represented in the equestrian sector.

2.5 This report will draw on the findings of the BGA 2024 survey to provide an overview of the challenges faced by grooms and highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to address these issues.

2.6 The mental health implications of poor working conditions have been well documented by health organisations such as the UK's Health and Safety Executive (HSE, 2024) and the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022, 2024)).

Both organisations emphasise that work-related stress, if left unchecked, can lead to serious mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Employers have a legal duty to assess and manage these risks.

In the equestrian industry, where grooms frequently experience long hours, limited job control, and isolated working environments, the impact on mental health may be particularly severe.



2.7 The British Grooms Association (BGA), established in 2007 by former grooms, serves as the professional body for individuals working with horses.

The BGA provides support, education, and advocacy to its members across the equestrian industry, promoting professionalism and improved working conditions.

As a non-profit organisation, the BGA's mission is to enhance the working lives of all grooms working in any sector, ensuring they are represented in key industry decisions.



### 3 Existing evidence

The section below explores some of the previous evidence and articles regarding employment conditions and mental health, specifically among grooms. The authors of these papers and articles are referred to in brackets and the full references can be found in Appendix 1.

#### 3.1 **Bullying and harassment**

Recent research has identified workplace bullying and harassment as an issue in equestrian centres, particularly among senior staff and those in authority. This research shows that such treatment leads to feelings of isolation and emotional distress, and in many cases results in workers leaving the industry. The long-term impact on mental health can be significant, affecting both job satisfaction and overall wellbeing (Watson et al. 2024).

#### 3.2 **Mental health challenges**

The Grooms Minds survey, conducted by the BGA in 2017, reveals that more than 80% of grooms report experiencing stress or mental health challenges, with over 70% having faced bullying at work. These findings point to a broader issue of workplace exploitation within the industry, with many grooms facing unsustainable workloads, long hours, and insufficient support, which contribute to high levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Jones, E., 2017).

#### 3.3 **Financial insecurity**

Financial insecurity is also a recurring theme for grooms who responded to a survey carried out by the Equestrian Employers Association (EEA). An article in The Horse & Hound reports that nearly half of grooms are not receiving the legal minimum wage, with unpaid overtime and lack of time off in lieu being common issues. This financial strain adds to the psychological burden on grooms, leading to increased stress and anxiety as they struggle to meet basic living expenses (Jones, 2023).

#### 3.4 **Injuries and their psychological consequences**

Research carried out in the horseracing industry shows that racing grooms are at high risk of injury, which often goes untreated due to job insecurity and financial pressures. The study shows that this not only impacts their physical health but also contributes to mental health challenges, as injured grooms may experience anxiety, depression, and fear of re-injury, which are often compounded by inadequate rehabilitation support (Davies et al., 2022; Davies et al., 2023).

3.5

### **Work-Life balance and job expectations**

More research in horseracing shows that many grooms report their work often feels more like a 'lifestyle' than a job, due to the long hours and constant demands. This blurred boundary between personal and professional life can exacerbate stress and contribute to mental health problems. The lack of time for recovery and self-care further intensifies these issues, making burnout a common outcome (McConn et al., 2018).

3.6

### **Inadequate impact of industry initiatives**

An analysis of recent industry initiatives designed to retain grooms in the profession reveals their ineffectiveness in addressing the root causes of poor mental health. The study found that initiatives like awards did not address the key concerns of high workloads, inadequate pay, and lack of time off.

As a result, the initiatives had little to no impact on improving grooms' mental health or encouraging them to remain in the industry (Ole & Wolframm, 2024).

Overall, the existing evidence highlights the impact of poor working conditions in the equestrian industry, with issues such as bullying, harassment, financial exploitation, excessive workloads, and poor injury management all contributing to negative mental health outcomes.

Without meaningful reform, these conditions are likely to continue driving experienced workers out of the industry. There is a clear need for stronger enforcement of employment laws, improved mental health support, and workplace reforms that directly address the key stressors faced by grooms.



## 4 Survey aims and objectives

4.1 The aim of the survey is to gain deeper insights into the specific challenges faced by grooms across different sectors of the equestrian industry, such as eventing, showjumping, and riding schools.

The BGA seeks to explore whether certain types of employment, such as lacking a contract or legal protections, correlate with poorer working conditions and mental health outcomes.

4.2 By asking detailed questions, the BGA aims to identify trends and issues unique to grooms working with horses, with the broader objective of advocating for better working conditions and mental health support within the industry.

4.3 The survey data will be analysed to inform future initiatives and all responses will be consolidated to provide a snapshot of the industry's current state.

### a) Methodology Overview (how the survey was conducted)

4.4 The survey titled '**Does poor employment affect our mental health and wellbeing**' was launched by the BGA, to shed light on the impact of poor employment practices on the mental health and wellbeing of grooms working in a wide range of equestrian sectors.

4.5 This survey was designed by the BGA with questions based on anecdotal evidence they were hearing from grooms.

4.6 The survey was open between 1st – 11th October 2024 and was promoted by direct emails to BGA members as well as a paid for social media campaign to attract non-members, both in the UK and Internationally. This resulted in responses from both BGA members and non-members.

4.7 The survey consisted of a combination of 12 multiple-choice questions and open-ended prompts, providing respondents the opportunity to express their experiences anonymously. Respondents were given the option at the end of the survey to enter a prize draw for a £100 voucher and BGA hoodie. The survey was completed by 551 people.

4.8 The data were analysed independently post survey closure. A mixed methods analysis has been used to capture breadth from the quantitative data, while the context and lived experience has been represented through a thematic analysis of the rich, qualitative data from open-ended questions

## **b) Survey limitations**

While the survey offers valuable insights into the effects of poor employment practices on the mental health and wellbeing of grooms working within the equestrian industry, a few important limitations should be considered for transparency and balance.

- 4.9 The sample size is informative but isn't large enough to fully represent the entire equestrian workforce. Most respondents are members of the British Grooms Association (BGA), which may mean they have an awareness of their employment rights or access to support, influencing their responses. This concentration within the BGA membership limits how well the findings reflect those outside the association and may not fully capture the experiences of the broader workforce.
- 4.10 Geographically, most responses came from the South of England, meaning the data may not account for regional variations in work conditions, mental health support, or local employment practices. Experiences of grooms in other areas, particularly those with different regional and cultural experiences, might differ from the trends identified here.
- 4.11 Additionally, the survey relied on self-reported mental health experiences, which were not measured through clinically validated tools. Since responses are subjective and based on personal perception rather than clinical diagnosis, the results may not provide precise measures of mental health but rather general indications of wellbeing issues in this workforce.
- 4.12 As a survey of a point in time, this snapshot of respondents' experiences doesn't track changes over time or reveal long-term impacts of poor employment practices. To understand how these issues evolve, longer-term studies would be necessary to capture potential shifts in mental health and workplace conditions.
- 4.13 Given the focus on BGA members and the non-random sampling method, these findings may not extend to the wider equestrian industry or other sectors. Workers not affiliated to industry organisations may face different challenges, access various levels of support, or have differing mental health outcomes, so care should be taken in applying these results more broadly.
- 4.14 Finally, while there is a clear trend between poor work conditions and mental health struggles, the survey does not establish a direct causal link. Other factors, such as personal circumstances or regional differences, could also play a role, meaning that these employment conditions may not be the sole cause of reported mental health concerns.

4.15 While this survey reveals significant insights into the challenges faced by workers, more expansive research with larger, varied samples and validated mental health measures would be essential to grasp the full extent of these issues.



## 5 Results

### a) Demographic profile

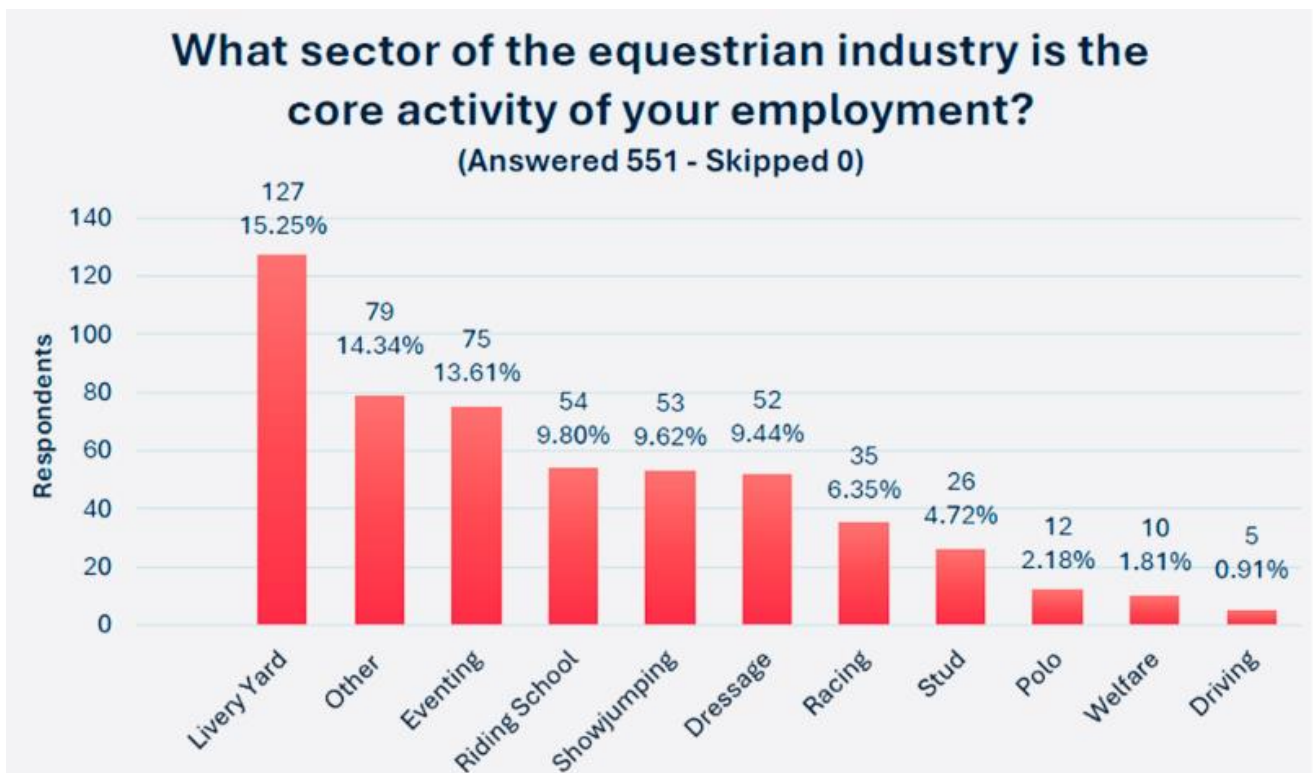
5.1 The following section summarises the demographic data from questions which focus on the respondents' sector of employment, location, and age. These results give an overview of the variety of roles and geographical spread amongst respondents, as well as the age distribution of those who completed the survey.

#### 5.2 Sector of employment

Out of 551 respondents, the most common sector of employment is Livery Yards (15%), followed closely by Eventing (14%) and the Other category (14%), which includes freelance or private yard work.

The least represented sectors include Driving (1%), Welfare (2%), and Polo (2%).

This breakdown highlights the diversity of the industry, with significant representation in competition-focused and multi-service yards, while more niche sectors are underrepresented.



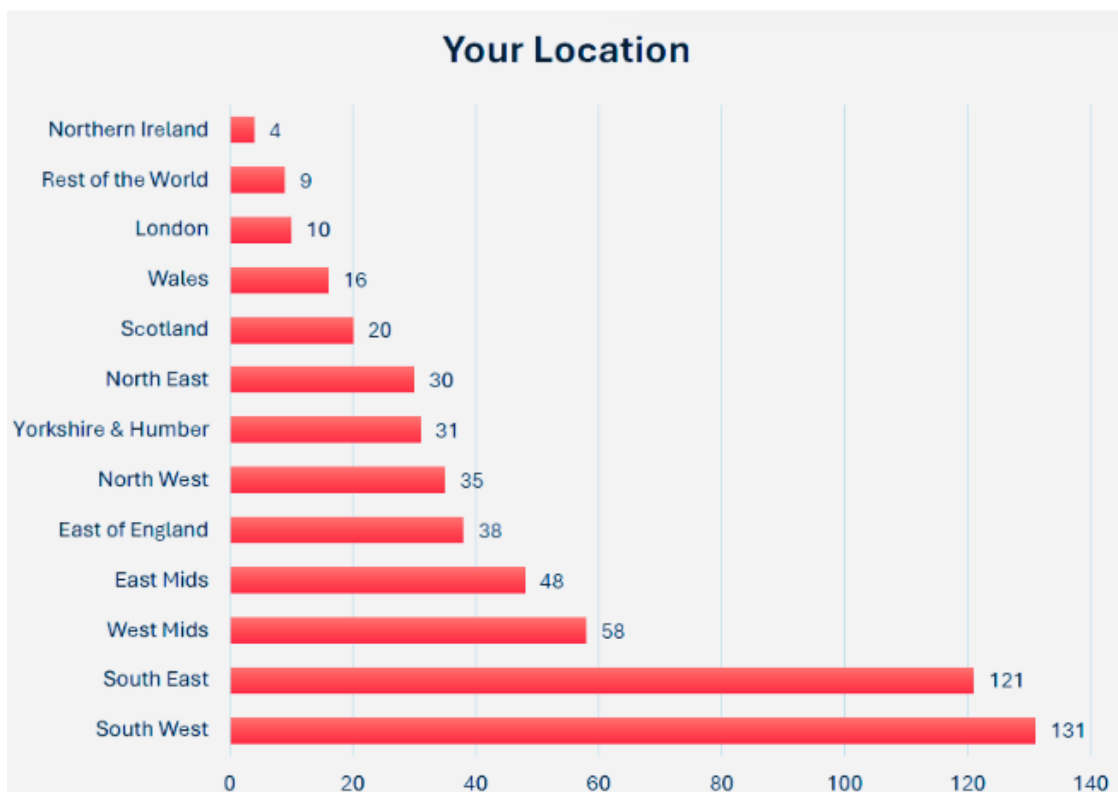
### 5.3

#### Location

The largest proportion of respondents come from the South West (24%) and South East (22%) regions of England, indicating a strong concentration of the equestrian workforce in these rural areas.

By contrast, regions such as Northern Ireland (1%) and London (2%) had the fewest respondents, likely reflecting the smaller equestrian communities in these areas.

This regional data suggests that findings from the survey are likely influenced by the experiences of workers in the southern regions of the UK.



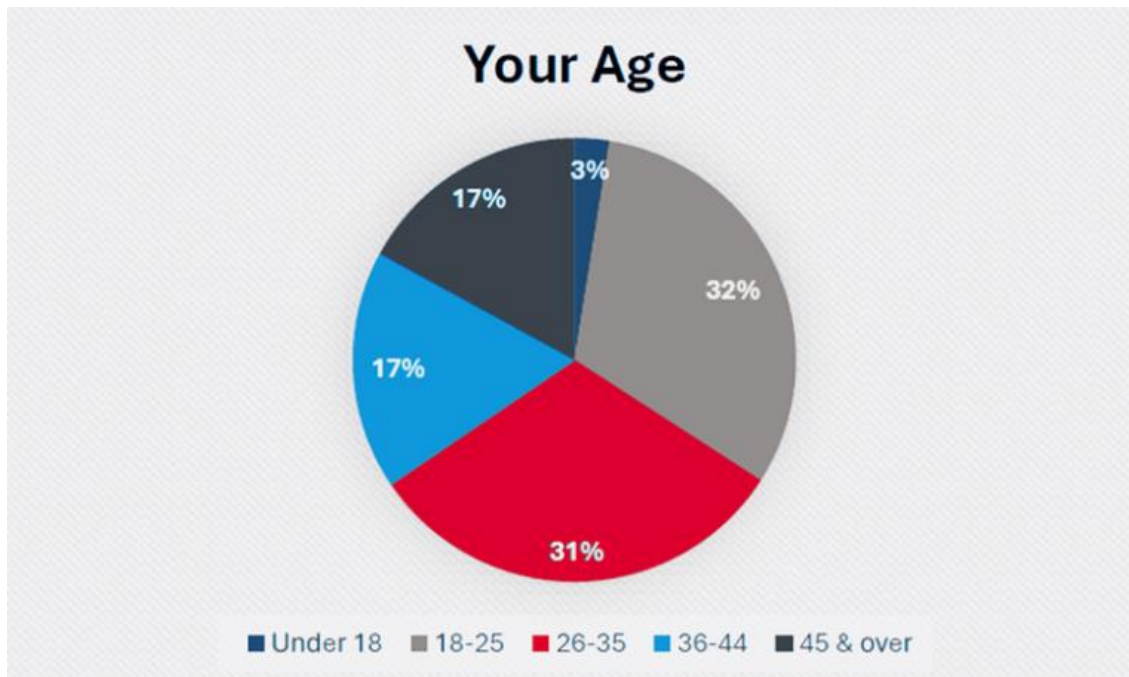
### 5.4

#### Age distribution

The majority of respondents are young, with 32% aged 18-25 and 31% aged 26-35, together representing over 63% of the total respondents.

The smallest group is those under 18 (3%), indicating that most workers enter the equestrian industry after completing education or training.

A combined 34% of respondents are over 35 years old, showing a mix of both early-career workers and more experienced individuals within the workforce.



## 5.5

### Respondents who were BGA members or non-members

62% of respondents are members of the British Grooms Association (BGA), while 28% are not, and 10% have considered joining but have yet to do so.

This suggests that a majority of the sample is already engaged with the BGA, potentially skewing the results towards individuals who are already engaged with the BGA and who may actively seek support to improve their working conditions.

This could impact the generalisability of the results, as those who are not members (38%) may have different experiences with workplace issues, such as being less aware of their rights or lacking access to the support offered by the BGA.

## 5.6

### Demographic conclusions

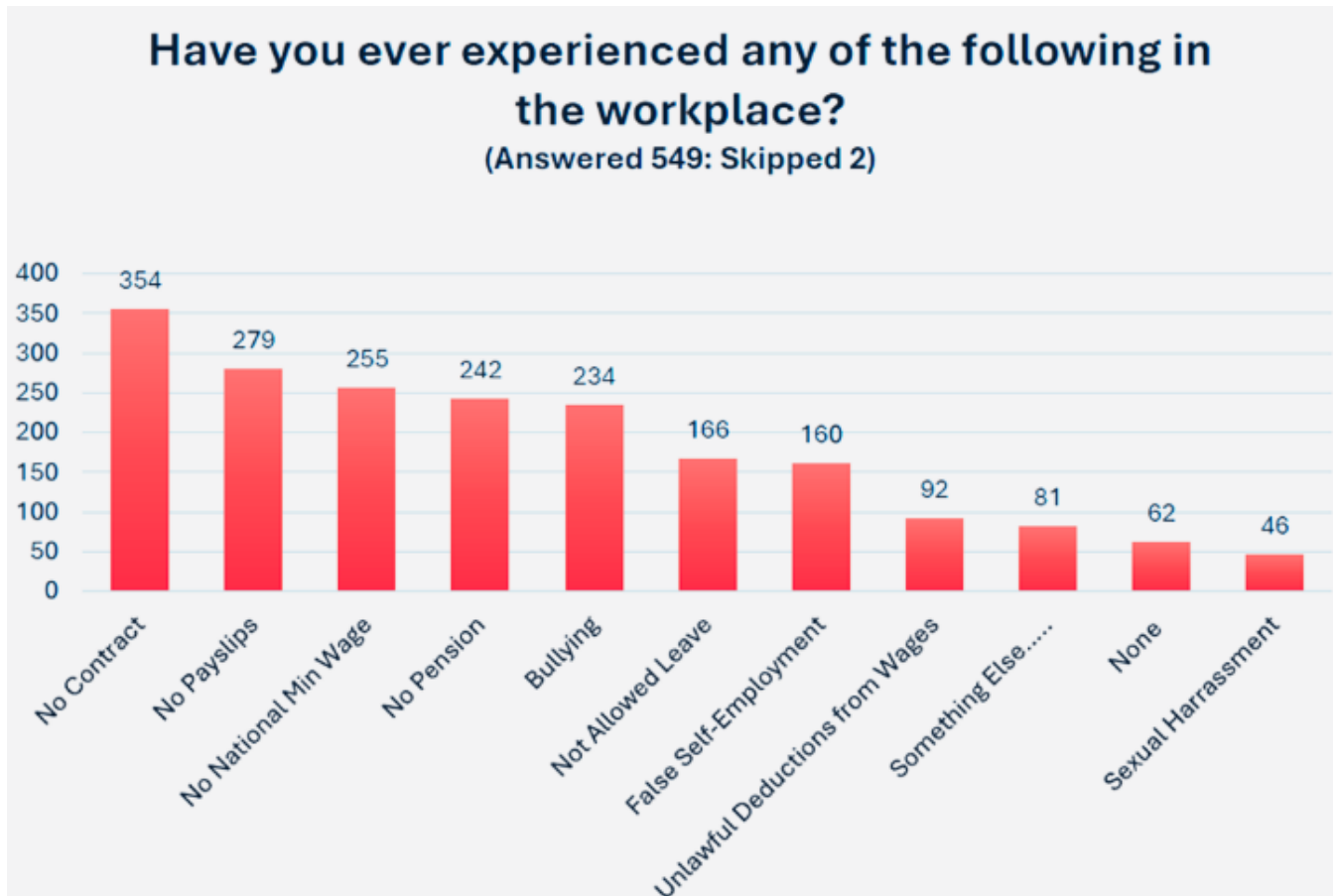
The demographic data from the survey paints a picture of diverse roles amongst respondents in terms of both sectors and age groups, with a heavy concentration of workers in the South of England and younger adults dominating the workforce.

Understanding these demographics is crucial for analysing the broader implications of employment practices and mental health challenges in the industry.



**b) Breaches of employment rights and poor working conditions**

5.7 The BGA wanted to find out if respondents had ever experienced any breaches of employment rights and/or poor working conditions while working as groomers. This question included 11 multiple choice answers and an open-ended question for respondents to type their experiences of 'something else'.



5.8 This question shows the employment conditions experienced by respondents. 549 people completed this question and 2 skipped.

5.9 These findings suggest significant non-compliance with UK employment laws, as well as unethical workplace practices amongst respondents. Below is a summary of the key findings, which highlight the prevalence of employment rights breaches and poor working conditions.

## c) Key quantitative findings on employment breaches

### 5.10 Widespread lack of formal contracts

Over 64% of respondents (354) indicated they did not have a formal employment contract, whether in a full-time or part-time position.

This is a fundamental breach of UK employment laws, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation, unclear job terms, and difficulties in asserting their rights. Without a contract, employees lack clarity on their roles, wages, working hours, and entitlement to leave.

### 5.11 Minimum Wage breaches

Nearly half (46%, or 255 respondents) reported being paid below the National Minimum Wage. This suggests widespread underpayment, which not only breaches UK law but also indicates the financial precarity faced by respondents which is likely to place these workers in economically vulnerable positions.

### 5.12 Payslips and pension rights

Half of the respondents (51%, or 279 people) reported not receiving payslips, which makes it difficult for them to track their earnings and deductions. Similarly, 44% (242 respondents) stated they were not receiving a pension, jeopardising their long-term financial security and contravening legal requirements for employers to contribute to employee pension schemes.

### 5.13 Unlawful deductions and false self-employment

Some respondents (17%, or 92 people) reported unlawful deductions from their wages, signalling direct financial exploitation. Additionally, 29% (160 respondents) stated they were falsely classified as self-employed, depriving them of protections like sick pay, holiday pay, and pension contributions.

### 5.14 Bullying and sexual harassment

Workplace culture also emerged as a significant concern, with 43% (234 respondents) experiencing bullying, and 8% (46 respondents) facing sexual harassment.

These figures suggest concerning levels of misconduct and intimidation, raising ethical and legal concerns about the treatment of grooms.

5.15

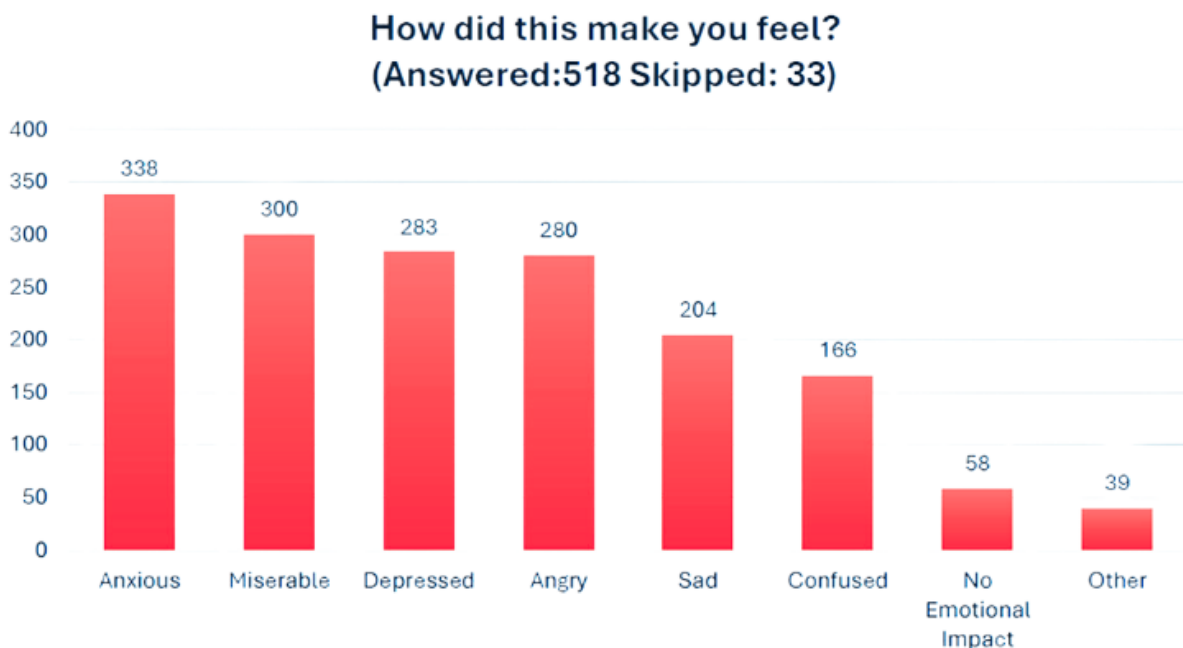
### Denial of leave

Around 30% (166 respondents) reported being denied their legal right to annual leave. Denying workers time off can contribute to physical and mental burnout, further exacerbating already challenging working conditions.

### d) Impact of poor working conditions on the mental health of respondents

5.16 The responses in the survey reveal some concerning trends regarding the mental health and emotional wellbeing of respondents. The data shows that the majority of respondents have experienced significant emotional distress as a direct result of their working conditions, with feelings of anxiety, depression, and anger prevalent.

5.17 This suggests that the employment practices and work environment in this sector are not only contributing to financial and physical strain but are also taking a toll on workers' mental health.



### e) Key quantitative findings

This section focuses on the key quantitative findings about the impact of employment on mental health and wellbeing.

5.18 **Levels of anxiety and emotional distress**

65% of respondents reported experiencing anxiety, making it the most commonly reported emotional response to poor working conditions. This is followed closely by 58% who described feeling miserable, pointing to a widespread sense of emotional hardship.

5.19 **Depression and mental health struggles**

Over half of respondents (55%) reported feeling depressed, suggesting that mental health challenges are a significant issue for respondents. Depression in this context is likely linked to the ongoing stress and exploitation that many workers face.

5.20 **Frustration and anger**

54% of respondents felt anger about their employment situation, indicating a sense of frustration and resentment toward their employers or the industry as a whole. This emotional response is likely to be driven by experiences of mistreatment, financial exploitation, and lack of recognition.



5.21

### Sadness and Confusion

Sadness was reported by 40%, and confusion by 32%, further emphasising the emotional disorientation and low morale experienced by respondents.

These feelings suggest that workers are struggling not only with the immediate stress of their jobs but also with the longer-term uncertainty about their rights and future in the industry.

5.22

### Few workers remain unaffected

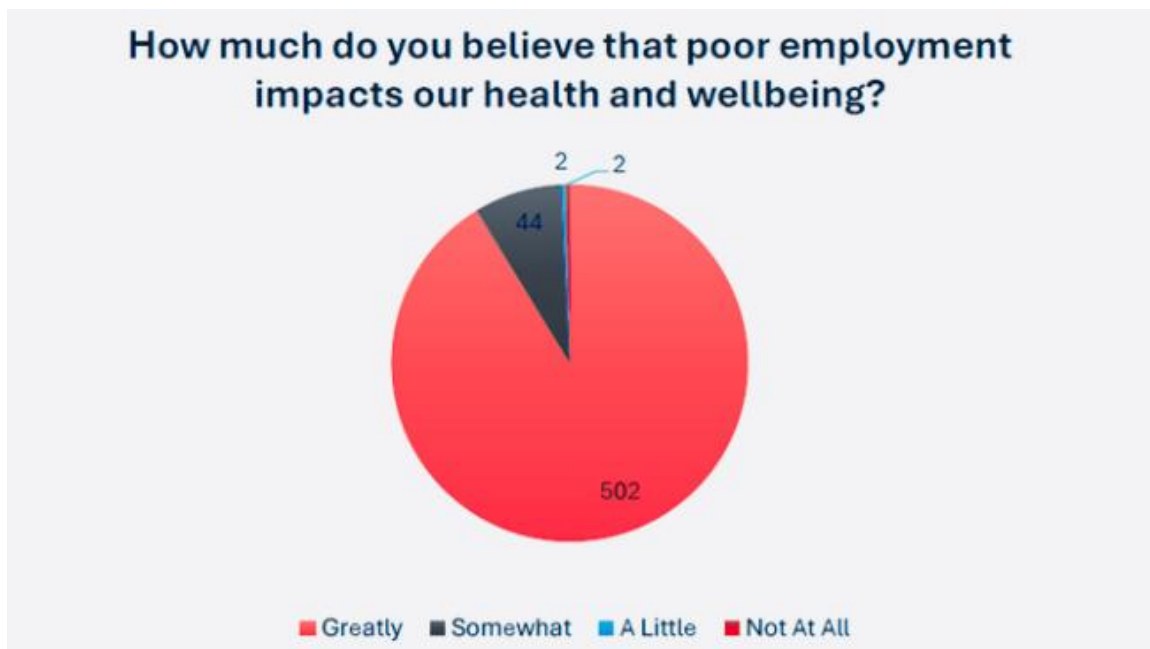
Only 11% of respondents reported no emotional impact from their work. This suggests that the vast majority are negatively affected by their employment conditions, with emotional distress being the norm rather than the exception.

5.23

### Other emotional responses

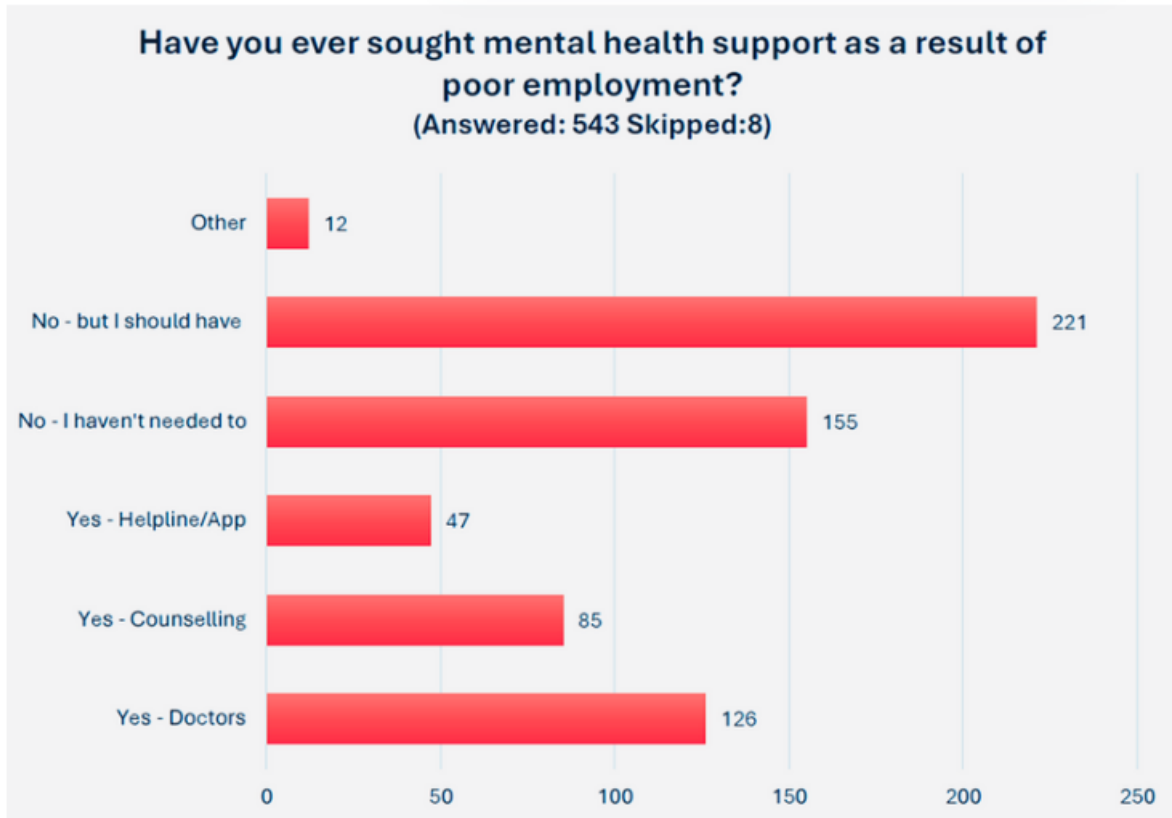
39% of respondents highlighted other responses in open-ended comments that indicated a sense of emotional and physical burn-out from the demands of their work combined with often unfair working conditions.

Additionally, an overwhelming 91% of respondents believed that poor employment can greatly impact on mental health and wellbeing



**f) Seeking support for mental health and wellbeing issues**

5.24 The survey also asked if respondents had ever sought mental health support as a result of poor employment:



**g) Key quantitative findings about seeking support**

5.25 **High rate of unaddressed need**

41% of respondents admitted that they did not seek help but felt they should have, indicating a significant portion of the workforce is struggling with mental health issues linked to their employment but is not accessing support. This suggests that barriers (such as stigma, lack of access, or denial) prevent workers from seeking help.

5.26 **Substantial support seeking**

23% sought help from doctors, and 15.65% used counselling services, indicating that nearly 40% of respondents did seek professional mental health support (counselling or medical).

**This is a considerable figure and points to the serious mental health toll that poor employment conditions take on workers in this industry.**



A smaller percentage (9%) used helplines or apps, which could suggest that while some prefer less formal routes for help, they are not as widely used in this workforce, or workers may be unaware of these resources.

5.27

### Stigma or denial

29% of respondents reported that they hadn't needed mental health support, which may reflect a portion of the workforce that either feels resilient or is in denial about the impact of their working conditions on their mental health.

Combined with the 41% who felt they should have sought help but did not, this suggests that while there is widespread acknowledgement of poor working conditions, there may be significant denial or minimisation of the emotional toll among a sizable portion of respondents.

5.28

### Other sources of support

2% cited alternative forms of support, such as friends and family, self-help, or even legal action, showing that informal support systems play a role in some people's coping strategies.

Notably, one respondent mentioned receiving advice from the BGA, indicating that the organisation is already providing some level of mental health support to its members.



## h) Awareness of the Equestrian Employers Association

5.29 The survey results revealed that just over 5% of respondents knew whether their employer was a member of the Equestrian Employers Association (EEA), with most either unsure or indicating no membership.



5.30 This limited awareness might suggest a gap in transparency about employment standards and associations that promote fair practices.

### 5.31 **Key insights**

- **Low Awareness of Standards:** With over half unsure of their employer's EEA affiliation, there seems to be a communication gap on employment standards and affiliations.
- **Limited EEA Influence:** Low EEA membership among employers suggests the association's reach may be insufficient to support widespread fair practices.
- **Possible Link to Poor Practices:** The lack of EEA membership could correlate with poor employment conditions, as non-member employers may be less committed to formal standards like fair pay and safe conditions.
- **Need for Industry Engagement:** There's an opportunity to increase awareness and EEA membership, which could improve standards and satisfaction across the industry.

## 6 Thematic analysis of qualitative data

### 6.1 The impact of poor employment practices on mental health and wellbeing

The open-ended responses provided by BGA members paint a vivid picture of how poor employment practices affect mental health and well-being in the equestrian industry.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), qualitative data, such as the written responses in the open-ended questions of this survey, provide rich, detailed insights into people's experiences, behaviours and emotions.

Unlike quantitative data, which focuses on numerical patterns, qualitative data captures the depth and complexity of human experiences through words, images or interactions. It allows researchers to explore how individuals make sense of their world, revealing themes and patterns that highlight social or cultural phenomena.

By analysing qualitative data, we can better understand the meaning behind people's experiences, uncover hidden issues and gain a deeper, contextualised understanding.

6.2 There were a total of 452 qualitative responses across the survey questions in the 'other' categories. 179 of those were written in the final question asking respondents if there was anything else they wanted to say in relation to the survey question.

While it is important not to quantify qualitative data the extent of the responses highlights how strongly respondents felt. This report will focus on the most repetitive and recurring themes that emerged.

These include financial abuse, overwork, unsafe conditions, emotional distress, and a lack of professional recognition. These themes capture the lived experiences of the respondents and provide a human voice to the survey's quantitative findings.

#### a) Theme 1 - Financial insecurity and exploitation



6.3 One of the most prevalent themes in the responses is financial abuse, with many respondents describing late or incomplete wage payments, underpayment for overtime, and unlawful deductions.

As one respondent describes their experience of late payment and the reason given by their employer, **"I wasn't paid for two months... they claimed none of their liveries had paid them."**

6.4 The result is a deep sense of financial insecurity, that paints a picture of highly precarious work and which adds to the stress of already demanding jobs. Respondents also said they often feel undervalued, working for wealthy employers while struggling to make ends meet.

One respondent wrote about their frustrations in having to ask for their wages:

**“It’s really depressing and quite embarrassing when working for super wealthy people to have to ask for your wages to ensure you have fuel in your car to get back to work the following day.”**

These stories highlight the disparity between the financial situations of employees and employers, with grooms often feeling helpless and taken advantage of.

## b) Theme 2 - Overwork and exhaustion



6.5 Excessive workload, long hours, and unpaid overtime are common and recurring complaints seen throughout the ‘other’ responses. Many respondents reported working seven days a week for extended periods, with little or no rest, as one describes how they were **“Expected to work 7 days a week for usually 6 months minimum.”**

6.6 This relentless overwork frequently led to physical and emotional exhaustion, with respondents describing feeling ‘burnt out’ and ‘used’ citing the impact this has had on their mental health.

**“Burnout is common... it greatly affects mental health and is rarely acknowledged.”**

These examples of overwork and being relied upon 24/7, 365 days per year demonstrate how the industry’s relentless pace leaves little time for personal recovery, pushing individuals toward burnout and exhaustion.

## c) Theme 3 - Unsafe and substandard working conditions



6.7 Unsafe work environments were another significant theme throughout the qualitative data.

Respondents wrote about working in dangerous conditions with inadequate support, as one described, **“I had an accident at work, and they just expected me to carry on as normal.”**

6.8 Another respondent described having **“two accidents in the same workplace, damaging their back and sustaining a head injury”** and how they were made to carry on working. They go on to talk about developing mental health issues and life-changing injuries and disabilities as a result of their workplace accidents and injuries.

6.9 Living in substandard accommodation, often tied to jobs was another recurring issue which resulted in exacerbating feelings of vulnerability and neglect. One respondent writes how their bedrooms above stables were causing rodent issues in sleeping areas.

6.10 Another writes, **“I would never recommend living on site. No proper time off, being knocked on the door on a day off, payments stopped and they knew with no money we could not leave.”**

6.11 These conditions highlight a lack of concern for workers' basic rights and for their health and wellbeing, further contributing to both physical and psychological strain.

#### d) **Theme 4 - Emotional distress and toxic work culture**



6.12 The emotional toll of working in an abusive or demoralising environment was a common thread throughout.

6.13 Respondents frequently mentioned being subject to bullying, emotional manipulation, physical assaults and sexual harassment by their employers or colleagues. The sense of isolation, worthlessness, and mental exhaustion was pervasive.

6.14 One respondent writes about their treatment and the impact of this by their employer,

**“They exploited me and took advantage of me in almost every way. The impact it had on me after being there for a couple of years was massive. I have since had to up my medication for anxiety and depression. Awful, awful place to work.”**

6.15 Others wrote about being **shouted at and blamed for no reason, how physical assault was part of their workplace experience and how poor management and angry outbursts made their work so emotionally charged that it became demoralising.**

6.16 These stories reveal the damaging emotional effects of poor management and toxic workplace cultures, which significantly impact mental well-being.



### e) Theme 5 - Lack of proper leave and guilt for taking time off

6.17 Many respondents described being denied annual leave or being pressured to find their own cover when taking time off. Even when time off was granted, feelings of guilt and obligation weighed heavily, leading to physical and emotional exhaustion.

6.18 One groom describes their experience, **“working on an event yard 6 days a week and not being ‘employed’ led me to being exhausted and burnt out. I felt guilty even having 1 day off a week as my colleague had to do the yard by herself and vice versa. Having holiday was absolutely not in the question.”**

6.19 Others described how they were made to feel guilty about taking time off so worked 7 days a week and others were made to feel that the yard would collapse without them.

This pressure to continuously work without breaks contributes to ongoing stress and burnout, impacting both mental and psychological health.



### f) Theme 6 - Lack of professional recognition and desire for change

6.20 Respondents frequently expressed frustration with the lack of professional recognition for the highly skilled work they do.

6.21 There was a clear call for change, with many wanting to be treated as professionals, compensated fairly, and recognised for their contributions to the industry.

Two respondents highlight this theme when stating, **“We are highly skilled employees... we should be paid accordingly.”**

**“It would be lovely for the role of groom to be seen more as a professional job.”**

6.22 This theme speaks to a desire for systemic change in the industry, where grooms' skills are properly acknowledged, and working conditions are improved.



### g) Theme 7 - Freelancing as a coping mechanism

6.23 Many respondents described how they were left with no choice but to turn to freelancing as a way to regain control over their working conditions and avoid exploitation. Freelancing offered them the ability to choose their clients and create a healthier work-life balance.

One groom writes, **“I work freelance now as I have had too many bad experiences with yards.”**



Another states, **“I went back to freelance after the bad employment and would never return to contracted employment because of the treatment I received.”**

6.24 The theme of freelancing for gaining autonomy and self-control was highly repetitive throughout the open-ended comments and can be seen as a strategy employed by many respondents, who describe how this enables them to select what they can deal with in their day-to-day work.

Freelancing then can be seen as a potential escape from the industry's exploitative structures, offering a path, albeit a highly precarious path, to greater autonomy and job satisfaction.

## **h) Theme 8 - Poor employment practices and mental health**



6.25 The qualitative data throughout the response provides powerful evidence of how poor employment practices in the equestrian industry directly impact the mental health and well-being of grooms as well as supporting the findings from the quantitative data.

6.26 Financial insecurity, overwork, unsafe working conditions, emotional and physical abuse, and a lack of professional recognition contribute to a culture of exploitation that leaves many feeling burnt out, undervalued, and unsupported. These lived experiences suggest that meaningful change must address both the industry's structural problems and the emotional and physical toll on its workers.

6.27 The voices of respondents echo a clear message: without fundamental improvements in working conditions, pay, and recognition, the mental health of those working in the industry will continue to suffer and the future workforce is likely to diminish.

One experienced and long-standing respondent sums up the situation, **“After 30 years in the industry, I find it so difficult to be happily employed. My qualifications and years of experience are never taken into account and I am still paid like a 16-year-old!**

**I went through a really rough patch 10 years ago and was unable to consider work outside the industry so took a position where I was paid a nominal amount just to try and get by. I'm now in the process of leaving the industry as my body and mind can't take the beating anymore.”**

## 7 Discussion

- 7.1 The survey responses provide a clear picture; poor employment practices are taking a toll on the mental health and wellbeing of the grooms who responded to this survey.
- Respondents reported experiencing serious breaches in employment rights, like underpayment, unsafe working conditions, and denial of leave, which reflect a broader pattern of systemic issues.
- Many workers feel undervalued and overworked, and these experiences are tied directly to mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, and anger.
- 7.2 The survey revealed that over half of respondents reported anxiety, and more than half reported experiencing depression and anger.
- 7.3 This shows that, for many, it's not just a bad day at work but a deeper, ongoing mental health struggle that they link to their job. In fact, 40% of respondents acknowledged that they probably should have sought help for their mental health struggles but didn't, possibly because of stigma, lack of resources, or fear of negative consequences for their careers. Some turned to friends or family rather than formal support, but serious mental health issues need professional care.
- 7.4 This indicates an urgent need for mental health resources and support within the industry, as informal networks alone are unlikely to provide the necessary help for more serious concerns.



## **a) Wider research context**

7.5 While it is important to remain balanced and to be aware of the limitations of the survey, these findings echo what other research has shown: job conditions strongly impact mental health, and industries with higher rates of exploitation often see higher levels of emotional distress among workers.

7.6 This survey adds to existing evidence by highlighting the specific struggles within the equestrian workforce. While poor conditions in the industry aren't new, the link to mental health issues reinforces the need for industry-wide changes, with particular attention to the long-term wellbeing of employees.

## **b) Freelancing as a coping strategy**

7.7 One notable trend is that some workers have turned to freelancing as a way to escape poor employment practices. Freelancing can offer more control over work conditions, but it often comes at a cost. Freelancers can face job instability, a lack of benefits, and further economic vulnerability.

This escape strategy might provide short-term relief, but it can also lead to other challenges, like financial insecurity, isolation, and stress over inconsistent income.

## **c) Gender impact**

7.8 While gender wasn't part of the survey questions, it's worth noting that approximately 85% of BGA members are female, and the wider equestrian workforce is also known to be largely female.

This suggests that issues in the industry will disproportionately affect women, which aligns with other sectors where women are more likely to be in underpaid or undervalued roles.

Recognising this aspect could help in developing more targeted support and protections, particularly around issues like job security, mental health, and work-life balance, which can be especially important in predominantly female workplaces.

## **8 Further insights**

### **a) The cost of ignoring grooms' wellbeing**

8.1 Ignoring the employment and mental health issues highlighted by this survey not only harms individual grooms but also risks wider consequences for the equestrian industry as a whole.

Poor mental health among workers can lead to high turnover, increased absenteeism, and decreased productivity. These outcomes create a cycle where understaffed teams face even more intense workloads, exacerbating stress and mental health challenges.

This self-perpetuating issue underlines the economic and operational costs of not addressing worker wellbeing, making a proactive approach to employment practices a matter of sustainability for the industry.

### **b) The role of industry standards and accreditation**

8.2 A pathway for improving conditions could lie in developing or enforcing clear industry standards for employment practices. Industry bodies like the BGA and EEA might consider creating accreditation standards to recognise employers who commit to fair working practices and invest in mental health support.

By introducing a framework that encourages accountability and rewards supportive employment, the industry could improve working conditions while making it easier for grooms to identify reputable employers.

### **c) Addressing the need for targeted mental health resources and training**

8.3 The survey responses indicate that mental health support tools, such as external helplines and apps, are not widely used within this workforce. It is hard to say based on this survey whether this is a personal preference issue and/or a lack of awareness.

8.4 However, this gap suggests the need for targeted mental health resources and interventions that reflect the unique stresses and experiences of grooms, ideally developed with grooms themselves. Industry-specific mental health interventions like peer support networks, or mental health workshops, may offer a more accessible, tailored approach to mental health support for those in this profession.

**d) Workplace culture and power imbalances**

8.5 An underlying challenge may be a hierarchical and “tough it out” culture of the equestrian industry, which can discourage workers from speaking up about poor treatment or seeking mental health support.

This culture often creates a power imbalance, making workers feel vulnerable to exploitation or unfair treatment. Addressing this embedded culture is essential to support those facing employment and mental health challenges and could involve training and advocacy efforts to foster more open, supportive workplace environments.

**e) Long-term impact on industry reputation and recruitment**

8.6 These survey findings carry implications for the industry's reputation and ability to attract new talent. If the issues of poor working conditions and mental health struggles continue unaddressed, prospective grooms may choose other career paths, leading to a shortage of skilled professionals.

8.7 For an industry that relies on dedicated, trained grooms and other equestrian staff, addressing these issues is essential to attract and retain talent, and it may become a necessary recruitment strategy for industry leaders looking to protect the sector's future.

**f) Mental health impact as a wider community concern**

8.8 The mental health burden revealed by this survey could be framed as a wider community issue due to its potential ripple effects on families and communities beyond the workplace.

High levels of distress among workers impact not only their professional lives but also their personal relationships and overall community wellbeing.

As such, there is a compelling case for considering these mental health challenges as a broader concern, emphasising the need for systemic support for workers facing long term, work related stress.

**g) Recommendations further research and actions**

8.9 To build on these findings, further research could explore the mental health impacts of specific employment practices or assess the effectiveness of different mental health interventions within the equestrian industry.

Such studies could provide valuable data to support improvements in employment practices and targeted mental health interventions.

8.10 Actionable steps could also include advocacy for an industry-wide mental health and wellbeing strategy, policy reform, industry-led mental health training, wellbeing champion training, and collaborations with mental health organisations to design interventions tailored to grooms.

8.11 Most important though is the need to address the working conditions with those whom it impacts the most, to consult and design solutions with people rather than doing things to them.



## 9 Good Employment practices

### a) Key points from positive findings

#### 9.1 High levels of positive employment experiences

The majority (59.67%) of respondents also reported they had experienced good employment conditions, which made them feel valued and safe. This is significant, as it shows that fair practices, such as reasonable working hours and respectful treatment, foster higher job satisfaction, loyalty, and mental wellbeing among employees.

#### 9.2 Workplace wellbeing is linked to retention

Many respondents noted that positive employment experiences contributed to their decision to stay in the industry, demonstrating how supportive work environments encourage retention and contribute to a more stable workforce. This finding highlights the impact of employers who prioritise safety, fairness, and employee well-being on long-term retention.

#### 9.3 Freelancing as an empowering choice

While freelancing creates challenges as previously mentioned, for some people it does still provide greater control over their working conditions. This trend points to freelancers seeking flexibility and empowerment, viewing freelance work as a constructive response to challenges faced in traditional roles.

### b) Resilience despite the challenges

9.4 While some reported that good employment alone did not significantly impact their mental health, these responses emphasise the complexity of mental health and wellbeing and suggest that many grooms do also demonstrate resilience.

This finding highlights the value of employers who foster supportive environments while recognising that additional mental health resources may further benefit workers.

### c) The potential for systemic improvement

9.5 Responses show that where good employment practices are in place, they contribute positively to employee morale, suggesting that an industry-wide commitment to fair practices could improve the overall quality of work life. Addressing systemic challenges could further extend these positive outcomes, helping create a more inclusive and supportive work culture industry-wide.



## 10 Conclusion

- 10.1 This survey report has revealed **the serious impact poor employment practices have on the mental health and wellbeing of grooms in the equestrian industry.**
- 10.2 The survey findings point to a clear answer to the core question; yes, poor employment practices, such as unpaid work, lack of contracts, unsafe conditions, and excessive hours, are linked to high levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout among workers.
- 10.3 These conditions not only harm individuals but also destabilise and threaten the industry, contributing to high turnover, dissatisfaction, and a sense of vulnerability amongst the grooms who responded.
- 10.4 **The findings also highlight the need for urgent reform.** The equestrian industry must address these deep-rooted issues by committing to enforce fairer, safer, and more transparent working practices.
- 10.5 The BGA, EEA, industry leaders, stakeholders and employers have a responsibility to raise standards and support grooms through initiatives like fair pay, mental health resources, and access to support networks that promote a healthier work culture.
- 10.6 Encouragingly, the survey also reveals that good employment practices, where they exist, can make a positive difference. Grooms who feel valued, supported, and safe report greater job satisfaction and improved wellbeing.
- 10.7 Expanding these positive practices industry-wide is not just an ideal but a necessity and legal, moral and ethical obligation. The equestrian industry has a clear path forward; enforce fair employment, prioritise mental health, and ensure that every worker feels secure, valued and respected. Taking these steps can foster a healthier, more resilient workforce, ultimately benefiting both grooms, the horses they care for and the wider industry.



# 11 Appendix

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