

The industry must appreciate the true cost of keeping horses

Livery yards are feeling the pinch perhaps more than many other types of business in this climate

THE true cost of keeping a horse must be appreciated by livery yard owners and clients now more than ever, if businesses are to survive.

This is the message from across the industry, which has been as much affected by recent price increases as any other – but which had existing issues.

Cheryl Johns, who set up yard directory Livery List followed by an online support group for yard owners, told *H&H* businesses are facing huge and varied challenges.

"I work with thousands of yard owners, and have done for many years, and know that now, more than ever, there is an unavoidable level of concern around the future of this industry," she said.

Ms Johns said the cost increases mean yards have to charge more to be viable. But as there is no regulation or licensing of yards, reputable businesses are competing with others that may be less so.

"There are yards that may not pay business rates, or have insurance, or do maintenance, so maybe aren't as affected by prices," she said. "So livery yards are handing in notice at the decent yards to go to the cheap ones, and many good ones are closing or on the brink of it, because they can't do it."

Ms Johns added that some owners do not appreciate how much it costs to keep horses; not only bedding and feed, but everything from insurance and rates to muck removal – and good staff. She said many yard owners



Yards must calculate costs and price accordingly

By ELEANOR JONES

do not calculate what their costs are, and so what they should charge to make profit – which every business needs to survive.

"Many are subsidising their livery," she said. "Unfortunately, a lot of yard owners aren't business people, they're horse people, and they don't know how to cost a business. I put up a guide to likely costs, and so many people

"I look at others' prices and think how are they doing that, are they doing magic!" she told *H&H*, adding that when she told her clients of the increase, some said they could not afford it.

"I said that was OK as I couldn't afford it either; I can't afford to pay for other people's horses," she said. "Other businesses have a 50% mark-up; can you imagine if I put that on my costs? I charge nothing for my yard management, but it still costs

"I'm recouping winter costs, not going to Barbados"

ELAINE MACDONALD

have done it and realised they were in effect paying people to keep their horses there."

Christine Shubrook of Thundry Farm Livery & Training Yard in Surrey told *H&H* she has three "full livery" packages. She has had to put the cost of her middle package up from £265 to £420 per week – but this only makes her £20 per horse.

me £400 per week per horse.

"Horses aren't cheap and if you can't do it yourself you have to pay someone. And that person has to make a profit or they can't do it."

Elaine MacDonald, of Thornhill Stables in Ayrshire, told *H&H* she had been looking at doggy daycare locally, for which people pay £20–27 per day.

"The owners supply food and

you need a 1–2m space per dog to get a licence," she said. "You don't have to do fencing or pasture management, or have the staff I have, and the dogs go home at 5pm. Horses are 24/7."

She agreed that the number of cheap but unregulated yards is an issue and there could be welfare risks, adding that at some yards' prices, "they can't be doing it correctly and making money".

She added, as an example of costs, that it costs £6,000–7,000 per year for field maintenance and her insurance has gone from £2,000 to £8,500 since 2007.

"In summer, when the horses are out, we can sometimes recoup a bit, but that's offset by winter costs; I'm not going to Barbados," she said. "I have a fabulous yard manager, which lets me have another business that makes money. It's rare an exclusively livery yard makes money, which is sad as people will go to a £30 yard where welfare is an issue."

CONCERNS

EQUESTRIAN EMPLOYERS ASSOCIATION president Tullis Matson told *H&H* yards faced a tough time anyway.

"So they're going to feel the effects even harder," he said. "You're meant to put costs up every year with inflation, but that doesn't happen often [in livery], so when inflation goes up this much it hits them harder. I worry about employees too because they're the ones who could suffer."

Tullis has said before that owners and yards need to be aware of the costs involved and charge and pay accordingly.

"Yard owners have to understand they need to make a profit and horse owners have to be realistic about how much it costs," he said. "Hopefully if this happens, that will help, and filter to employees, as they're such an integral part of our industry."

Pictures by Alamy, FEI/Lucasz Kowalski and OTeata

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS



Olympic champion **Ben Maher** made history when he became Global Champions Tour

champion of champions for a third time, on 22 October. Ben won the title in 2018 and 2019. Report, p58.



Paralympic medallist **Natasha Baker** is a British Horse Society ambassador.

She will share her "knowledge, enthusiasm and determination" on accessibility and participation.



Dressage rider **Annabella Pidgley**, 17, has made a victorious grand prix debut with Charlotte

Dujardin's Tokyo medal-winning ride Gio, on plus-73%. Annabella took over the ride in autumn 2021.