State of Horse Welfare in Kenya

2026 Assessment

Lead consultant - Lidewij Rouhof
May 2026

For the Kenya Society for the Protection and Care of Animals, supported by Brooke East Africa.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the production of this assessment. For reasons explained in the report, contributions have been anonymised; we hope this does not hide the fact that we appreciate the time and reflections of the contributors.

Special thanks to the members of the KSPCA Horse Welfare Committee who have passed many hours in vigorous debate and reading documents, with little reward other than the occasional cheese sandwich and the knowledge that they are helping horses in distress; long may they continue.

Abbreviations

KSPCA	Kenya Society for the Protection and Care of Animals
BEA	Brooke East Africa
HAK	Horse Association of Kenya
JCK	Jockey Club of Kenya
Federation	Equestrian Sports Federation of Kenya (also ESFK)
(C)DVS	(County) Department of Veterinary Services
CAP 360	The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Laws of Kenya Chapter 360

State of Horse Welfare in Kenya 2026

Table of contents

1 Executive Summary 1
2 Background 3
3 Scope, Methodology and Limitations 4
4 What it means to keep a horse 6
5 Observed welfare issues 7
6 Specific issues observed 8
7 Understanding why 9
8 The current picture: horses in Kenya in 2026 12
9 The illegal pony trade: what we know now 15
10 Observed welfare challenges: what has changed since 2023? 16
11 Geographical spread of welfare concerns 19
12 The KSPCA’s horse welfare work: rescues, cases, and enforcement 19
13 Who is involved? A refreshed stakeholder analysis 21
14 Animal welfare organisations: KSPCA and BEA 24
15 Why is the situation worsening? Understanding the root causes 25
16 What is working? 27
17 To argue or to act – forms of resistance to calls for action on horse welfare 28
18 Updated recommendations 31
19 Conclusion 35

1 Executive Summary

In 2023, the Kenya Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (KSPCA), with the support of Brooke East Africa (BEA), conducted a Horse Welfare Assessment in the Greater Nairobi Area. That assessment identified serious and widespread welfare concerns and proposed a series of recommendations to address them. Three years on, this refreshed assessment revisits those findings and finds that **the situation has deteriorated further**.

The welfare challenges documented in 2023 have not only persisted but grown in scale and geographic distribution.

The number of horses in Kenya is increasing, driven by increasing public interest in equestrian activities, and therefore the expansion of riding schools, increased importation of horses from, among others, South Africa, and an apparently growing illegal trade in ponies across the Ethiopian border. At the same time, the regulatory and institutional frameworks do not recognise the specific needs of horses and the patterns of their use. It is very difficult to estimate the horse population in Kenya, for reasons explained in the report.

What is striking is not only the scale of this growth, but also its speed. The KSPCA and the Kenya Police seized over 30 horses from extreme abuse situations in Nairobi and Mombasa alone in the year prior to this report, and this has resulted in the initiation of 6 criminal prosecutions. This is a rate of intervention that would have been unthinkable in 2023. Of course, these numbers reflect not only the severity of the welfare challenges on the ground but also the increased capacity and willingness of the KSPCA to act. Nevertheless, it reflects the growing levels of concern about the use and misuse of horses in Kenya.

Yet enforcement alone is insufficient: convictions are very difficult to secure. The same individuals who lose horses to confiscation reappear with new horses. **The structural conditions – fragmented oversight, absent licensing, and diffused accountability - allow the welfare challenges to persist**.

This refreshed assessment draws on a new round of stakeholder interviews, the KSPCA's case records, and an expanded geographic scope that includes observations and reports from Coast and Mount Kenya regions, in addition to the Greater Nairobi Area. Its findings are intended to inform the design and implementation of the Horse Welfare Programme, launched by the KSPCA and BEA in April 2026, and for the use of all and any party interested in promoting horse welfare in Kenya.

The key findings of this assessment are as follows:

- The total estimated population of horses in hotspot areas including Greater Nairobi and the Coast has grown since 2023. We believe there are at least 1 500 horses around the Greater Nairobi area. Firm numbers remain elusive due to a paucity of data and a certain secrecy connected to the illegal pony trade, but informants consistently describe significant growth in almost all sectors.
- In 2023 a structural shift was identified - horses are no longer seen as a luxury indulgence but rather the expectation is that leisure riding is a weekend treat for many and that there is money to be made from the business. This shift has deepened and is now even more obvious.
- This shift has not been matched with the development of a wider understanding of what horses need, making these judgements highly subjective and often based on inadequate knowledge.
- It is very expensive to keep horses. It can be cheaper to buy new ponies for work than to maintain them in good condition. They are increasingly treated as disposable assets.
- Horses are visible and a growing presence along the coast, still primarily used by private horse owners for their leisure, but also increasingly acquired by unknown owners and being overworked at hotels and beaches for tourist rides.
- The illegal cross-border pony trade is continuing to grow, with credible evidence of organised criminal networks and high-level connections.
- There is no formal qualification, certification, or structured education for horse ownership, stable management or riding instruction. Anyone can call themselves a trainer or open a riding school or stand in a park selling pony rides, and horses are frequently managed as though they were donkeys, a familiar animal in Kenya but one with fundamentally different needs. Where expertise does exist, it tends to be concentrated among a small established community and is rarely shared.
- No major stakeholder organisation, such as the Federation, HAK, the Jockey Club and Kenya Polo, has yet taken meaningful responsibility for welfare challenges beyond its own immediate constituency, though there is growing interest in doing so and so there is an opportunity to work together.
- The legal framework (CAP 360) is adequate in principle, but its enforcement is hampered by limited police capacity, insufficient knowledge on animal welfare issues among prosecutors and officers, lack of recognition of the specific needs of horses and the absence of a horse identification system. Devolution has diffused responsibility.
- Veterinary care for horses is critically insufficient and difficult to expand: most areas, especially Coast, lack equine-specialist vets; they are in any case in short supply even in Nairobi. The veterinary curriculum devotes minimal time to equine medicine, and it is hard for new entrants in the field to make a living.

2 Background

2.1 The 2023 assessment: findings and reactions

In 2023, the KSPCA and BEA commissioned and published a Horse Welfare Assessment covering the Greater Nairobi Area, believed to be the first study of its kind in Kenya. The assessment found a total estimated horse population of approximately 1 000 horses of which around 500 horses were unregistered by any organising body. It identified serious welfare concerns at virtually every stable and riding school visited, including inadequate nutrition, overwork, poor veterinary care and ill-fitting tack. It also documented an active illegal cross-border trade in ponies.

The 2023 report concluded that the causes of poor welfare were multifaceted, including:

- insufficient knowledge of horse-keeping,
- inadequate financial resources,
- divergent attitudes towards horses and their welfare,
- a near-total absence of monitoring or regulatory oversight.

It proposed a series of recommendations, including the establishment of a horse welfare coalition, a voluntary stable certification scheme, a registration and licensing regime, groom training, public education campaigns, and specialised educational training in equine medicine.

Reactions to the 2023 report among the horse community were mixed. Several informants acknowledged that it raised important issues but noted that it was read primarily by those who already cared about welfare and that those most in need of change were unlikely to engage with it. One informant said:

"It wasn't new information; it just put it all on paper. But to really change something, we need to put policies in place. People who are misusing the horses are not reading a paper."

Another informant described how the 2023 report was valued as a first documentation of a known but unrecorded problem: *"It was a good baseline; there was nothing documented previously"* while also recognising that documentation alone does not drive change. However, the 2023 report did seem to create greater public visibility on the reported challenges. Awareness of the horse welfare issue has grown, and the number of incidents reported to the KSPCA has increased. This does not reflect a worsening of the situation at every individual stable, but greater public awareness and willingness to report concerns, a shift that is welcome.

Some voices questioned why the report did not give greater recognition to what is going well. This feedback is noted. Many individuals within the Kenyan horse community work hard and with genuine commitment to their animals. Nevertheless, the 2023 assessment was honest in its appraisal of a situation that was, overall, deeply concerning and the following three years have only reinforced that judgement.

2.2 Why a refreshed assessment was needed

The Horse Welfare programme, developed by the KSPCA and BEA, launched in April 2026. It represents the most significant response to the horse welfare challenge in Kenya to date. For this programme to be well-targeted and effective, it needs to be grounded in an up-to-date understanding of the situation.

Since 2023, several important developments have occurred: the number of horses has grown, the geography of welfare concerns has expanded well beyond Nairobi, the KSPCA has accumulated substantial case experience and legal learning, and the organisational landscape has shifted, most notably with the establishment of a national Equestrian Sports Federation. This refreshed assessment aims to capture these changes and provide a reliable foundation for programme design, further resource mobilisation and awareness raising.

3 Scope, Methodology and Limitations

3.1 Scope

The 2023 assessment was deliberately limited to the Greater Nairobi Area, reflecting both the concentration of welfare concerns at that time and practical resource constraints. This refreshed assessment expands its geographic scope to include findings from the Mount Kenya area, the Kenya coast, and references welfare situations in Nakuru, Naivasha, and other parts of the country where credible evidence has emerged of significant horse populations and welfare challenges.

As in 2023, the primary focus remains on horses and ponies outside of the regulated frameworks of the Jockey Club, Kenya Polo and HAK, though these organisations are discussed as key stakeholders with important responsibilities and roles. The assessment focuses on privately owned horses, horses at stables for riding lessons whose ownership status is often unclear or rather informal, pony rides at hotels, malls, parks and safari activities.

3.2 Methodology

This refreshed assessment employs a qualitative and exploratory research design, consistent with the 2023 approach. The primary methods are:

- Semi-structured key informant interviews with a range of stakeholders, including stable owners, private horse owners, veterinarians, horse welfare advocates, KSPCA staff, BEA staff, lawyers, horse safari operators, and members of the KSPCA Horse Welfare Advisory Committee. Some informants were interviewed in 2023 and have provided updated perspectives; others are new informants.
- Review of KSPCA case files, correspondence, and medical assessment records relating to horse seizures and criminal proceedings since 2023.
- Field observations at stables and riding schools.
- Review of publicly available information including international horse welfare standards and legislation, social media, online marketing of horse services, and organisational communications.

All quotes and personal communications cited in this report have been anonymised. Given the sensitive nature of findings in certain situations, and the risks that informants may face, confidentiality of sources is strictly maintained throughout.

3.3 Limitations and gaps

Several significant limitations apply to this assessment and should be kept in mind when interpreting its findings. First, the absence of a horse registration system means that population estimates remain approximate. As one informant put it:

"I was able to make an estimation in 2023. Not anymore, not anymore at all."

The horse population is more fluid, more geographically dispersed, and more opaque than it was three years ago. Numbers cited in this report are best estimated based on triangulated informant accounts. An effort is ongoing to continue to map, and this needs to be continued.

Second, the culture of secrecy and reluctance to disclose information identified in 2023 persists. Horse ownership is often deliberately obscured and informants, including some who are well-disposed towards welfare improvement, are sometimes unwilling to name individuals or locations. In some instances, this reflects understandable fear of reprisal; KSPCA staff have received direct threats in connection with their enforcement work. Some individuals who have tried to raise welfare issues at places where horses are used have described being chased off or refused future access.

Third, the coastal dimension of this assessment is exploratory. While field visits were conducted in Diani, Vipingo and Watamu, this represents an initial scoping rather than a comprehensive assessment. The number of horses, their locations, and the full range of welfare challenges along the coast remain only partially mapped.

Lastly, a word on what we mean by welfare. Almost every person interviewed for this report expressed a commitment to the welfare of horses. Nobody, when asked, wants horses to suffer. And yet, the situation has deteriorated. Part of the explanation is that there is rarely consensus on what good welfare looks like in practice: how many hours a horse should work, how often it needs veterinary attention, what constitutes adequate feed etc. Without shared and understood standards, welfare becomes whatever the owners decide it is, and that definition tends to shift in the direction of convenience. Where owners genuinely care but lack knowledge or resources, the gap between intention and outcome is understandable. Where the commitment to welfare is more performance than reality, the absence of clear standards makes it easy to claim the bar is being met when it is not.

4 What it means to keep a horse

Keeping a horse anywhere requires effort, knowledge, responsibility and considerable financial and human resources. We estimate that to keep a horse at a stable, and providing all the needs it requires, will cost between KES 30 000 – 40 000, per month, excluding veterinary expenses. At a high-quality boarding facility (livery) around Nairobi, costs can start from KES 60 000 a month for basic care. This is in the context of the average monthly income in Kenya being about KES 25 000 according to a range of sources.

Horses need access to shelter to protect them from weather conditions such as rain and heat. The shelter needs to be enclosed and constructed with material that doesn't pose a risk of injury. The shelter needs to provide enough space for the horse to lie down and to have a visual horizon, and there needs to be access to bedding material.

Horses require a balanced diet. They need constant access to hay, supplemented with grains or pellets according to their nutritional needs. Feed needs to be of adequate quantity and quality depending on their size and workload. Horses also need clean, fresh water at all times, as they can drink up to 10 gallons of water a day.

Horses need regular exercise to stay healthy and happy. They require daily turnout in a paddock or pasture.

To ensure optimal well-being, horses require proper conditioning for work. It is essential to tailor the workload to the horse's capacity and to avoid overburdening the animal with appropriate rest periods.

If horses are being used for work, they need properly fitting tack which also requires maintenance.

Horses need training and socialisation at the appropriate age, which is skilled work and may take years. Horses should generally not be ridden under the age of 2, ideally much later, nor worked after 20-25 years old, depending on fitness levels. Horses can live more than 30 years and should not work during their retirement.

Horses need regular grooming to maintain their health and hygiene. This includes brushing their coat, cleaning their hooves and checking for injuries.

Regular veterinary care, including vaccinations, dental checkups and deworming, is essential. Horses also need regular hoof trimming and teeth floating.

Horses are large and powerful animals and as handling them can be dangerous, it is important to take precautions to ensure the safety of both the horse and handler. This needs to be done through training and socialisation, as well as by wearing appropriate footwear and hard hats, and handling the horse with care and respect.

5 *Observed welfare issues*

There are as many as 1 500 horses in the Greater Nairobi Area alone.
Most of these horses are kept in poor conditions.
Many of the stables and riding schools in the Greater Nairobi Area do not adhere to the horse welfare standards established for the assessment.
Consumers of horse services are at risk of injury.
Ponies are brought into the country illegally.
The provision of specialised care for horses is very limited.
The welfare issues are unrecognised and / or unaddressed by key stakeholders.
Immediate causes
There is a widespread lack of knowledge on horse welfare and horse keeping.
No formal institutional arrangements for welfare assurance, such as monitoring and regulation.
There is no central registration or ownership tracking system for horses.
There is a lack of accountability, with unclear delineation of responsibilities and complexities of mandates of involved actors.
There are limited opportunities for veterinarians to pursue specialised training; there is very limited expertise in equine medicine in Kenya.
Underlying causes
Horses are not indigenous to Kenya and there is no ingrained positive tradition of horse care and use. They are difficult to care for and not well adapted to the environment.
The historical context also creates tensions around inequality and control of horses and related knowledge.
Equines are often considered solely as a commodity with profit as the main objective.

6 *Specific issues observed*

Accommodation

- Broken down stables
- Small spaces
- No proper bedding
- A substandard environment
- Very limited space for turn out

Diet

- Not always having access to clean water
- Not enough food, often no quality food

Exercise and work

- Working long hours and little to no rest
- Working while having injuries
- Evidence of being backed too young
- Overloading with heavy weight.

Health care

- Limited dental care
- Limited feet care
- Not properly vaccinated or dewormed

Safety

- Ill-fitting / broken tack
- Unskilled staff
- Excessive use of violence
- Dangerous practice such as running on roads

Horse rescued by the KSPCA with a group being used for leisure riding. Horse subsequently died.

7 Understanding why

Many informants agreed that there are welfare problems and described their own attempts to deal with them. An individual who previously engaged in horse riding elaborated on her attempts to improve the conditions at some of the stables, but she cannot anymore.

"Because of the conditions really, it breaks my heart to see that, nothing improves or only very slowly."

She described some of the welfare concerns mentioned above and blames a lack of knowledge among those charged with the care of horses.

"We Kenyans are no riders," she said, adding, *"Horses were brought into our country by the British and the horses have been in Karen. We don't know what to do with a horse! We deal with them like we would with our cattle and sheep."*

Problems with care are attributed to inadequate knowledge and a poor understanding of horses in general, as multiple informants have expressed, *"We believe that horses should help us, not the other way around, just like with donkeys."* Another informant said that the same approach used with donkeys applies to horses, *"If you don't work the donkey, it will die."*

Some of these same informants do not agree that there are pressing horse welfare challenges.

There are divergent perspectives regarding what animal welfare entails and these attitudes are best understood in the broader discourse on horse welfare in Kenya. While malnutrition and wounds from improper tack use are symptoms of poor practice, understanding the underlying context in which these practices occur is crucial in addressing the animal welfare challenges effectively. As one informant noted,

"Animal welfare concerns entail considerations of religion, culture, policies, and individuals' perceptions of animal welfare."

Horses are not indigenous to Kenya and there is no longstanding practice of horse ownership. Horses were introduced by the British in the late 19th century. The first recorded import of horses was in 1890 by Frederick Lugard, a British colonial administrator, who brought six polo ponies to Mombasa. From then on, the British continued to import horses, mainly for military and recreational purposes. In the following century, horse racing became popular and several racecourses were built throughout the country, including the Ngong Racecourse in Nairobi, which opened in 1914. Horse racing was a pastime for the British colonisers, and it wasn't until after Kenya gained independence in 1963 that horse riding slowly gained attention from Kenyans of all backgrounds.

Capt. Tryon, a professional racehorse breeder and trainer based in Molo during the colonial period.

Following independence, horse ownership diversified only slightly. Horses continued to be used within the racing and equestrian sectors, while working horses became increasingly important in certain regions and industries. In urban and peri-urban areas, particularly around Nairobi and other major towns, horses found roles in security operations, tourism, leisure riding, and recreational businesses.

Nevertheless, the horse world is still mostly associated with rich white Kenyans as an informant mentioned: *"You find the horses in Karen. Karen is elitist."* The prestige that comes with the horses sometimes leads to unfortunate situations:

"*It is expensive and people don't seem to understand that you not only buy a horse, but you also have expenses to keep it. And that is a lot of money."*

Some informants are not convinced that the problem is cultural context, nor insufficient knowledge, nor a lack of capacity. A veterinarian observed, *"All of them [stable managers] will tell you that they vaccinate and deworm themselves, but I can tell you that they do not. Most horses that are being treated at those stables are not being taken care of in that way."*

Another challenge to the idea of lack of knowledge came from the observation that even where the KSPCA has intervened to direct improvements repeatedly and over years, practice does not change. This issue is illustrated by an informant who refers to a stable owner with whom the KSPCA has had dealings:

"The horses are repeatedly being exhausted before kids will ride on them because he [the stable owner] knows that the horses otherwise will be a risk to hurt them [the children]. He knows that his horses can be aggressive because they are not being handled in the way they are supposed to be."

In these examples, the implication is that profit is the primary goal and there is no incentive for these specific horse owners to improve the welfare situation.

There is substantial evidence that owners and users who are unable to maintain welfare standards are often those engaged in businesses that need to make profit from owning horses. We are seeing new entrants into the horse business who seem to believe a good living can be made. We have even found youth empowerment groups with very limited economic capacity encouraged to acquire horses to keep and hire out. This is concerning.

Emaciated pony found by KSPCA wandering loose looking for food in Nairobi in 2024.

7.1 The economic reality

To keep a horse well and still make money from it through commercial use, offering pony rides or other low-value services is virtually impossible in Kenya. The costs of maintenance are too high and the income potential too low.

There are limited options for dealing with this problem.

- Add value so that the owner can earn more money from the horse.
- Reduce the costs of keeping the horse.
- Work the horse harder to cover costs.

Pony waiting for work at the beach near Mombasa.

The first option is considered in the recommendations section; the second and third are seriously detrimental to horse welfare.

The reality is that, while horses in Kenya may provide a range of livelihood opportunities as stable hands, trainers, medical professionals and others, ownership is likely always going to be confined to those can afford to keep horses for their own use or subsidise a horse-related business with income from other sources. It is very difficult to make a living from a horse business that maintains welfare standards.

Foal being used to carry a large child in Mombasa in 2025. Photo taken as part of KSPCA and County investigation that removed 11 horses and 2 camels.

8 The current picture: horses in Kenya in 2026

8.1 How many horses are there?

Establishing the horse population with precision remains impossible in the absence of a mandatory registration system. Estimates must be triangulated across multiple informant accounts, institutional records and observable trends. With those caveats in mind, the following picture emerges.

In the Greater Nairobi Area, the HAK has approximately 120 registered horses. The Polo Club accounts for approximately 375 horses. Racing horses at Ngong Racecourse add a further 100 approx. Regarding the unregistered sector, informants consistently describe more stables, more riding schools, more pony rides being offered in schools and at malls, hotels and more horses wandering the streets and roadside than three years ago. In the last assessment we estimated that there were 500 "unregistered" horses in Nairobi; this number may have increased significantly.

A vet operating outside Nairobi estimates providing dental care over to 1,000 horses per year across Nairobi, Nakuru, Naivasha, Gilgil and Nanyuki, a figure described as a low estimate since it reflects only those whose owners can afford treatment. One vet practice has 600 horses under direct care in the Nanyuki region alone, encompassing polo, private, eventing, safari and breeding horses.

At the coast, horses are now a visible presence whereas even very recently they were rare. They are primarily used for beach rides and safaris, and increasingly for pony rides at hotels and events. This growth is driven by tourist demand, or at least the perception that a quality leisure experience includes a horse-related offer. Welfare concerns are high: the KSPCA Coast branch has been actively receiving reports of concern and has carried out horse seizure operations in the past 3 years. Demand for horses along the coast is also attracting new entrants. Several entrepreneurs have approached informants seeking advice on how to start a horse business. The coastal horse population is roughly estimated at between 350 and 400 animals, though this figure fluctuates: some hotels transport horses down from upcountry only during the high season.

8.2 How are horses used?

The primary use of horses in Kenya's informal sector remains consistent with 2023 findings, but each has evolved in important ways.

8.2.1 Riding schools and stables

The number of riding schools has continued to grow, driven by rising middle-class interest in equestrian sports and by social media's role in making horses appear aspirational. There is no licensing requirement to open a riding school, no certification requirement for instructors, and no regulatory body with oversight responsibility. As one experienced stable operator observed:

"Someone wandered next to a stable for two weeks and then started working as a trainer without ever even have worked with a horse before."

The riding school business is tough. Competition among stables has driven prices down, in some cases to KES 1 500 (US$12) per lesson. At these prices, corners must be cut somewhere, and savings are typically made on feed, veterinary care, and rest for the horses. By contrast, riding classes at high quality stables are offered in a range of US$ 80 to US$ 100.

8.2.2 Private ownership

Private horse ownership has expanded, but a pattern has emerged; new owners, often attracted by the prestige associated with horses or by pressure from their kids, lack the knowledge, time, or willingness to invest in proper care. As one informant described the typical trajectory:

"People with new money will treat horses like stray dogs. They let them graze and then they realise that it is not enough and that they are actually too much work. So, then they hire someone who is cheap, or rather the cheapest. A farmhand, at KES 5 000 to KES 10 000 a month who gives water and walks the horse a bit. The farmhand did not train on horses, does not know when the horse is sick and does not know what the horse actually needs. The owners are never there so they won't see the decline. Why do they have horses? To keep the land busy or for prestige mostly."

This dynamic, prestige ownership without the knowledge or commitment it requires, accounts for some of the welfare cases the KSPCA has encountered since 2023.

This pattern seems to be extending to the coast, where private owners are beginning to acquire horses with limited preparation. One example cited by informants in Diani involved a man who had a stable built before sourcing hay, only to discover that obtaining feed at the coast was both expensive and logistically challenging. The absence of good farriers and equine vets compounds the effects of the knowledge gaps that already exist among new owners.

8.2.3 Pony rides at malls, hotels and events

The market for pony rides at malls, hotels, weddings and parties continues to grow, fuelled by social media marketing. Lists of horses available for hire at events are actively advertised online. This sector is characterized by very limited oversight: there is no clarity on horse ownership, and it seems impossible to find out.

At the coast, a comparable and expanding market exists for horse and pony rides on beaches and hotels. Informants describe horses working at the beach, in high season, working from morning until late with charging rates of KES 50 to KES 200 for five-minute rides:

"I don't think they actually want to ride the horses for real; they just want to be seen riding them, for the photos."

At rates this low, horses must work extremely long hours to generate any meaningful income for their owners, creating severe overwork and minimal resources for care.

In all these contexts working horses rarely have access to water and hay. They often work injured, pregnant or with foal at foot. There is no limitation on who can ride if they pay, so they are often overloaded with extremely heavy weight.

8.2.4 Safari horses

The safari horse sector is generally characterised by better welfare conditions, driven primarily by commercial incentives: safari operations serving high-end international clients cannot afford the reputational risk of thin or visibly distressed horses, let alone the safety risks this would pose. Nevertheless, standards vary between operators, and the sector also remains without formal national oversight. While the Kenya Tourism Board reached out to horse safari businesses in early 2025 to better understand minimum standards for horse safari operations, this has not yet translated into shared guidance or any regulatory framework.

Horse rescued by the KSPCA from a trader, believed to be a former polo pony.

8.2.5 Racing, polo and other sports

Racing in Kenya has undergone a notable resurgence in the past five years, driven by an active effort to revitalize the sport. What was once a declining activity is gaining renewed visibility and momentum.

The welfare challenges associated with racing are not new nor unique to Kenya and are well documented across the world. The KSPCA has dealt with several cases of ex-racehorses that have been misused and abused. Horses race for two to three years, typically retiring at age three or four, and are then sold on. The traditional natural chain of the past, from racing to polo to eventing to safari, is breaking down, as safari operators increasingly prefer calmer horses. Retired racehorses are therefore increasingly ending up in informal riding schools and stables, where their condition, temperament and training history make them hard to manage and prone to poor welfare outcomes.

The Jockey Club is committed to horse welfare in principle but so far it is not clear that any practical measures have been taken to make that a meaningful stance.

Polo ponies are generally well-kept, according to informants outside of the polo world, and polo horses are preferred by safari companies for their quieter temperament. The Polo Club has not yet played an active role in addressing wider welfare, including horse retirement, and there are concerns regarding overloading and rough usage of polo ponies.

8.3 *From luxury indulgence to money-making commodity: a structural shift*

The structural shift identified in 2023, from horses as an elite leisure pursuit to horses as a commercial commodity, has deepened and accelerated. The comparison offered by multiple informants of horses as matatus is vivid:

"Put as many people on there as possible so you can make as much money in the shortest amount of time possible."

Historically, the typical horse owner in Nairobi was a wealthy individual or family on a large property, for whom horses represented a leisure interest and who had the resources and knowledge, or access to knowledge, to care for animals properly and who understood the activity to be an expensive hobby. That owner has increasingly been replaced by a new type: an investor who sees horses as a revenue-generating asset, who may own many horses and lease them to others who then deploy them at malls, hotels or riding schools, seeking to maximise return on their investment with minimal expenditure on care:

"It is almost cheaper to get a new horse than to look after it. Why buy hay for a month if I can buy a new pony in a few weeks?"

A further way money is made is through importing horses, a business that has grown alongside rising demand in the country. Most formal imports are from South Africa. High value horses, or those being imported by individuals with means, may often come by air and the process is compliant with applicable regulations. However, many more now come by road, a journey of about two weeks if there is no problem along the way, arriving without payment of import duties or proper health controls. Road transport offers greater opportunity to sidestep border formalities. The profit margins are substantial:

"Buy a horse in South Africa for a few thousand dollars. It costs around US$1 000 to transport by road to Kenya. Sell it for US$12 000 in Kenya and you will have a profit of US$7 000. And as soon as they know in South Africa that the horse will go abroad, they will not feed it anymore."

While some informants argue that this is a legitimate business, and indeed not all imports are done improperly, others emphasise that these horses may suffer considerable physical and mental stress, pose health risks by evading controls and in many cases are then sold to buyers who lack the knowledge or infrastructure to care for them properly, establishing the conditions for welfare decline from the point of purchase.

9 The illegal pony trade: what we know now

The illegal cross-border trade in ponies was identified in 2023 as a serious concern. Three years on, the evidence suggests it has grown, become more organised, and acquired troubling connections to powerful individuals and networks. Most ponies come from Ethiopia, and possibly Somaliland. The trade is criminal in a straightforward sense: ponies are often brought across the border without import permits and veterinary certificates. The absence of the latter means a potential risk of introducing infectious diseases into the existing horse population.

9.1.1 Cross-border smuggling

Some communities in Ethiopia have a deep cultural relationship with horses, rooted in centuries of horse culture. The Awi Agew horse culture, for instance, was registered in 2022 by Ethiopia's Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage as national heritage, and as far back as 1914, the Ethiopian leader Lij Iyasu issued an edict preventing the export of pack animals, including horses, from the Awi Agew region (Kebede, 2023).

Whether a formal modern prohibition on pony export exists could not be independently verified during this research, but informants indicate that such a ban is in place. Despite this, ponies continue to cross into Kenya through the porous Ethiopian border in substantial numbers. In 2023, informants estimated approximately 30 ponies crossing per week. Current informants talk about 80-100 ponies per week, describing the trade as active and growing.

The route most described runs from Ethiopia into Northern Kenya, with Nanyuki identified as a key transit point, before they are moved south towards Nairobi. The welfare of animals during transit is extremely poor: they are walked long distances with inadequate food and water, often in severely compromised condition when found. Deaths, serious injuries and spontaneous abortions are described.

9.2 Organised crime and powerful connections

What is now clearer than in 2023 is the degree to which this trade involved organised networks with significant resources and powerful connections. The KSPCA's enforcement work has brought it into direct contact with this reality. In one case, a great number of Ethiopian ponies found in Nakuru were traced to a law enforcement officer from Northern Kenya, who eventually agreed to meet with the KSPCA. He explained that bringing in the ponies was his side hustle. In another case, the KSPCA identified serious neglect and abuse, alongside a suspected trafficking operation. The police supported the seizure, one of the officers even cried when he saw the state of the animals. But a few days later, a senior officer made the position clear,

"We were right to take the horses but don't expect us to make an arrest. Someone has a godfather. I have been called from the highest levels. It must be big business!!"

Another informant stated:

"A normal person cannot bring that number of ponies across the Northern border without any problems. Only a well-connected person can do that."

These are not small operations that slip through the cracks. In one case, we heard about fifty animals that supposedly appeared from nowhere:

"There were about fifty horses in these stables in Karen that no one was aware of. They were just there; no one knew who they belonged to."

This case is emblematic of the broader surveillance gap. Without a registration system, without mandatory stable licensing, and without adequate enforcement capacity, the extent of the informal horse sector is genuinely unknown, and likely substantially larger than any current estimate. Fifty unregistered horses of unknown origin, most likely arriving without veterinary inspection, also represent serious disease risk. African Horse Sickness, endemic in Sub-Saharan Africa, can be introduced and spread precisely through horses whose health status and movement history are undocumented. A population that no one knows about cannot be monitored, vaccinated, or contained.

Ponies in very poor condition rescued by the KSPCA in 2025 on their way to work.

10 Observed welfare challenges: what has changed since 2023?

The welfare challenges documented in 2023 remain and are outlined above. However, there is almost universal agreement among informants that the situation has worsened, and some specific examples are highlighted here.

10.1 Poor feeding

Malnutrition and low body condition scores are the most consistently observed welfare failures across the informal horse sector. Every batch of horses seized by the KSPCA since 2023 has included animals scoring below the acceptable threshold on the Henneke Body Condition Score [1], and almost all have been categorised as emaciated or extremely emaciated.

The root cause seems to be economic: the cost of adequate feed is treated as a discretionary expenditure, and in business models built on minimal margins, it is the first thing cut. The consequences are horses that are physically unfit for the work they are required to perform, a fact that compounds the problem, since an underfed horse requires more recovery time and is more susceptible to injury.

At the coast, feeding is a particular challenge due to the difficulty and cost of sourcing appropriate feed. Some stable owners pay high amounts for quality hay or make the considerable effort to source hay from Nakuru. Some owners replace hay with pollard – a low-quality wheat by-product – not a suitable alternative. Additionally, horses sweat more in the coastal conditions of heat and humidity, and they require additional salts and other adjusted nutrition to maintain condition.

Feeding is not only about cost though. There are common assumptions that horses are like other livestock and can survive by foraging. The KSPCA has found horses turned loose like donkeys to fend for themselves on rubbish dumps etc. This is quickly deadly. Horses need access to hay for hours a day and are unlikely to survive ingestion of plastic or other rubbish. A KSPCA staff noted that in one recent case,

"Three of the ponies were passing plastic in their poop for days after we took them. It's a miracle that they survived; we thought they wouldn't make it."

It should be noted that donkeys and other animals should not be treated like this either and are also at risk in the same conditions, although horses are particularly vulnerable.

Sadly, underfeeding also seems to be a common tactic for managing untrained, fearful or painful horses. It has been widely noted that weaker horses are easier to manage in a setting where they are being handled and used by unskilled people.

"The problem starts at the beginning. You want to use them too young, and you don't have the time and skills to train them. You use violence to force compliance and then a lot of the time they're in pain from this untreated injury or that bad bit of tack, or fearful of people. Your handler doesn't know anything about horses. This makes them dangerous and difficult to use for little kids or random members of the public. If you feed them too much, they have a lot of energy and spirit and will try to resist you. Who could blame them? But for the guy with the money mindset, you're better off keeping them too weak to resist. They won't act up and will carry the kids without any issue if you beat them a bit. Plus, it's cheaper to buy a new one than keep the one you have properly."

[1] The Henneke Body Condition Score is a standardized numerical scale, running from 1 to 9, used to assess a horse's body fat and overall condition. A score of 1 indicated an extremely emaciated animal, while 9 indicated severe obesity. The ideal range for a working horse is generally considered to be between 4 and 6s.

10.2 Overwork and inadequate rest

Overworking of horses is one of the most pressing welfare concerns, both in riding schools, stables, and at the beaches on the coast. At the worst-performing riding schools, horses are worked for eight hours per day, sometimes even longer, with minimal or no rest periods.

"The biggest issue is at riding schools; they are working the horses into the grave."

This dynamic is particularly acute for school horses, who are ridden by multiple riders of varying weight and skill. Several informants noted that some riding school horses now carry adult riders who are too heavy for them, and that jumping exercises, which are physically demanding and require skilled training, are being taught by instructors who themselves do not have adequate expertise.

Horses that are being worked on beaches or in schools, fairs and malls elsewhere, are also worked for very long hours. Their situation is worsened by the fact that they do not live at their place of work and must return home in the evening. This can extend their working day much longer. There are many reports of ponies being ridden, morning and evening, at high speed on tarmac by people who are too big for them – their handlers who are also tired and just want to get home. In one case, the KSPCA found ponies who were being ridden at least 30km a day to go to and from their places of work.

10.3 Dental, hoof and veterinary care

Dental care is almost totally absent across the informal sector. Every horse seized by the KSPCA in the cases reviewed for this assessment presented dental problems, most commonly excessively sharp teeth. Untreated dental disease causes pain during eating and riding, contributes to weight loss, and results in significant veterinary costs if allowed to progress.

Hoof care is similarly neglected. Worn or ill-fitting shoes, cracked hooves, and untreated lameness are common findings. Several horses rescued by the KSPCA had saddle sores from ill-fitting tack, open wounds that had not been treated and were continuing to be worked through the injuries:

"You always find wounds when the saddle is taken off, it is shocking what you see."

Vaccination against rabies, tetanus, and African Horse Sickness is sporadic or absent in the informal sector. Deworming is similarly inconsistent. Veterinary care is generally sought only in emergencies, and the various vets report being called by horse owners who have outstanding bills with other vets and seek alternatives. The shortage of equine-specialised vets, estimated to be not more than five in the country, constrains access to care even for those willing to pay.

10.4 No retirement provision

There is little provision for the retirement of working horses in Kenya. This is not a peripheral concern: it is a structural failure that affects every horse in the system. When a horse becomes too old, too injured or too ill to work profitably, there is no plan. The outcome is typically continued work until the animal collapses or is abandoned.

The problem is especially acute for racehorses, which retire as young as three or four years old, young animals that have spent their formative years being trained in ways that make them difficult to repurpose. Some owners and trainers try to be careful, but without a coordinated programme to rehabilitate, retrain, or rehome these animals, they can cycle through the informal sector in declining condition. One informant observed that retraining a retired racehorse takes approximately two years of investment:

"It takes two years to retrain and to put the money in. People don't want to do that."

Former champion racehorse rescued by KSPCA in 2025 from a building site with two others. Despite best efforts, the horses did not survive

The same absence of provision applies to private horses whose owners lose interest or financial resources, to riding school horses that are no longer fit for lessons, and to safari horses at the end of their useful working lives. Retirement, or other humane provision, is the missing final chapter in the life of nearly every working horse in Kenya.

11 Geographical spread of welfare concerns

In 2023, the welfare concerns were concentrated in the Greater Nairobi Area. The available evidence was limited, and this conclusion was based on an understanding of where most horses were being kept and what type of work they were doing. This assessment finds clear evidence that the problem is geographically widespread. Horses are particularly visible and the subject of welfare concern along the Kenyan coast, but reports of horses and ponies by the roadside, worked informally, without stables, grazing on verges, have been received from all over the country.

The Kenyan coast has emerged as a region of particular concern. Horses, once a rare sight along the shoreline, are now a visible and growing presence. This expansion is not fully matched with a welfare infrastructure that is still finding its footing. There are also particular environmental and health challenges for horses at the coast. Where horse-related activity grows fastest and institutional capacity is still being built, the risk of serious suffering is great.

This geographic expansion has important implications for programme design: the KSPCA's current capacity is concentrated in Nairobi, Nanyuki, and Mombasa, for equine welfare related activities, and a national welfare challenge will require a national response.

12 The KSPCA's horse welfare work: rescues, cases, and enforcement

The KSPCA has significantly intensified its horse welfare enforcement work since the publication of the 2023 assessment. This section documents recent cases and reflects on the institutional and legal challenges that enforcement work entails.

12.1 Overview of recent cases

Between mid-2025 and the time of this assessment, the KSPCA has seized more than 30 horses and ponies across 6 distinct enforcement operations in and around Nairobi. There have been other cases outside Nairobi.

These cases are stark reminders of the severity of welfare failures being encountered and the range of the issues, from road-side ponies to former winning racehorses. They also reveal a recurring pattern: owners who resist engagement, deny ownership, or attempt to reclaim animals without demonstrating the capacity or willingness to improve welfare.

At the Coast, cases resulting in seizure by the KSPCA include two horses in Diani in 2024, and 11 at Mama Ngina Waterfront Park in Mombasa in 2025 following a series of welfare reports that included a safety incident involving a child. Of these 11 horses seized, five subsequently died and two foals were born. The horses that remain are currently being fostered and criminal counts are filed.

12.2 The legal framework and its challenges

The KSPCA works with the police, and this enforcement work is grounded in the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (CAP 360), which prohibits cruelty, underfeeding, denial of veterinary care, use of pain or terror in training and other acts or omissions that cause unnecessary suffering. The Act empowers authorised inspectors to seize animals and to bring criminal complaints. However, the practical experience of using CAP 360 in horse welfare cases has revealed several significant challenges.

First, the prosecution process is slow and uncertain. Cases pass from the KSPCA to the police, then to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP) for approval before charges can be registered. At each stage, delays accumulate and the specialist knowledge required to understand animal welfare offences is often absent, as someone close to the legal team has shared:

"Animal cases rank lower than human cases and get less attention. At the end of the day, it is an animal, unfortunately."

"To be fair, the understanding of the law is limited. Then there is the very specialised knowledge needed to be able to assess the condition of a horse and understand what is acceptable or not. The law is very broad and does not give enough specific information to guide enforcement authorities on these cases. The KSPCA must supply all capacity – from forensic vet reports to suggestions on how to charge. It is detailed, time consuming and expensive work. The processes are not always clear, and police and prosecutors may not feel confident that they can understand a case well enough to charge and prosecute. They often ask for more and more steps over and above what is required in law, and do not have the capacity to follow up. Something as simple as not being able to prove ownership on paper can destroy a case."

The police hold significant discretionary power over whether a case proceeds. Officers who do not understand, or are persuaded to discount, the seriousness of an animal welfare offence can effectively stall a case. There is suspicion that deals are made informally between police and defendants. There is big money involved and some people have powerful connections.

"They have strings to control us to an extent. They can cut deals behind our backs. I suspect that that happens. I wish we had our own police station."

There are real practical problems. It can be very difficult to prove who owns a horse due to the lack of tracing mechanisms in Kenya. The police do not have veterinary capacity and the KSPCA must provide forensic vet reports and expert witnesses.

In addition, witnesses who report concerns are difficult to retain. Members of the public who report welfare concerns are often unwilling to appear in court, citing fear of identification and potential retaliation. The chilling effect is made worse by long delays and a lack of confidence in the outcome. The reality is that in recent years, the KSPCA has only been able to get convictions on animal welfare offences in rare cases, none of them involving horses.

"These cases are tough and can remain unresolved for years. Meanwhile the horses have to be cared for at great expense. It's normal for there to be a lot of pressure too – there are people would rather pay lawyers than care for their horses properly. Some others think nothing of threatening KSPCA officers or concerned members of the public with violent retaliation for pursuing cases."

During 2025 the KSPCA made several police reports regarding physical and verbal threats connected to horse welfare work.

13 Who is involved? A refreshed stakeholder analysis

Understanding who the key stakeholders are, their roles, interests, capacities, and attitudes, is essential for understanding the issues and designing solutions. This section updates the stakeholder analysis from 2023 considering new information.

13.1 Riding schools and stable operators

It is difficult to generalise about riding schools and stables providing services to the public. At one end are professionally managed operations with good welfare standards, experienced staff, and a genuine commitment to animal wellbeing. There are multiple examples of these operations, many of whom have contributed to this assessment. At the other end are operators running marginal businesses in which costs must be minimised as a priority. The majority falls in the latter.

A pattern identified in multiple interviews is what might be called the 'revolving door' problem: operators whose horses are seized by the KSPCA continue to operate, with new animals, often under different arrangements or at new locations. This is partly a consequence of the absence of business licensing: nothing prevents a person whose horses have been confiscated from immediately acquiring new ones. It also underlines the fact that enforcement alone, especially when it is so complex and difficult, is ineffective as a measure to improve welfare.

13.2 Private horse owners

As described earlier, the profile of private horse owners has shifted significantly. The growth of a broad interest in horses has brought into the market many owners who lack the knowledge, time, and sometimes even financial resources to meet their animals' needs. The gap between the prestige of owning a horse and the reality of caring for one is often only discovered after purchase.

Private owners who house their horses at livery stables face the additional challenge that stable-owner assurances of good care are not always reliable. Multiple informants described scenarios in which horse owners were shocked to discover, on visiting their animals after an absence of weeks or months, that the condition of their horse had deteriorated severely.

13.3 Stable hands and syces

Grooms (known as syces in Kenya) remain critical, and overlooked, actors in the day-to-day welfare of horses. Their training is informal, their pay is poor, and their working conditions often difficult. Investment in training and rewarding grooms well can deliver an economic argument that can be made to stable owners: a groom who can identify and respond to health problems early can prevent the large veterinary bills that arise from neglected conditions. Framing welfare improvement as cost reduction may prove one of the most effective entry points for engagement with operators who are otherwise resistant.

There is at least one example in Kenya of an operator who seem to seriously invest in this area. This operator has developed a three-month syce internship programme that has so far produced eight graduates, who have gone on to take up positions in high quality stables.

Beyond the question of groom competence, there is also a broader opportunity in how stables choose to involve their staff. As one informant described their own approach:

"We taught all of our staff to ride. Our house staff, and of course everyone who works at the stable. We want to be inclusive, show that riding is not only a white people activity."

This kind of deliberate inclusion speaks to something that goes beyond welfare and reflects a different relationship between horses, workplaces and the communities around them.

13.4 Veterinarians

The shortage of equine-specialised vets, along with the difficulty of obtaining specialist equine medications through official channels, remain significant constraints. The absence of a formal equine specialisation pathway within Kenyan veterinary education means that expertise is developed only through informal mentorship and self-directed learning. Learning opportunities exist. The KSPCA vets are, for instance, undertaking an online European veterinary course that includes equine specialisation.

Multiple informants confirmed that the veterinary curriculum at the Kenyan universities allocates minimal time to equine medicine. One informant recalled encountering only one horse during her entire veterinary training and describes the general atmosphere of equine practice as being protected by a small group of established practitioners and effectively closed to new entrants.

Horse owners are also in the habit of treating their own animals, considering their knowledge and experience to be superior to most vets. This a practice that is not unique to Kenya. It can make it difficult for vets to make a good living if they specialise in horses, and so their professional development efforts lead them elsewhere.

13.5 The organised horse sport sector: HAK, Jockey Club, Kenya Polo and the Federation

The organised equestrian sport sector comprises HAK (Horse Association of Kenya), the Jockey Club of Kenya, Kenya Polo, and, most recently, the Equestrian Sports Federation, which was established as part of the Kenyan government's promotion of Olympic sports and is now a legal entity with government funding.

The common thread across the first three organisations, in terms of their relationship to the wider welfare challenges, is a reluctance to accept responsibility beyond their own immediate constituency. The phrase heard most often is 'it is not part of our mandate.' Each organisation occupies its own lane – racing, polo, competition – and treats the welfare problems accumulating outside those lanes as someone else's concern. The result is a sector that is, as one informant put it:

"All connected, but people don't build on the linkages that are there."

This fragmentation has direct and practical consequences. HAK is, by most accounts, the organisation most logically positioned to extend welfare engagement to young riders and riding schools: it has the membership base and the infrastructure for organising equestrian activities. Capacity is limited but there is a growing interest, and this is an opportunity. The Jockey Club has not taken any practical action on welfare beyond the racetrack. The Polo Club has similarly not yet engaged with the wider welfare picture beyond its own stabling.

A welfare challenge of the scale and complexity described in this report cannot be addressed by the KSPCA and BEA alone. It requires the organisations with reach, legitimacy, and resources within the horse world to accept a share of that responsibility, and to recognise that the reputation of equestrian sport in Kenya is, ultimately, shaped by the conditions of every horse on a roadside as much as by those competing. An informant said:

"It is a case of united we stand, divided we fall."

Another informant said

"We need to step up on this issue. There is willingness but perhaps it's not clear what can be done. To recognise that we all have a responsibility is important; it's not our fault that horses are being mistreated but we are part of the industry and we have helped create the demand and interest that can result in suffering. It's not our fault but we are part of the problem in a way, and so we should do what we can to deal with it."

The Equestrian Sports Federation is a new and potentially significant actor. It has government backing and a legal mandate, but its relationship to other actors, formally separate but informally connected, is still emerging. How it develops will be an important factor in whether a meaningful regulatory framework for equestrian activities can eventually be established.

Now more than ever there is an opportunity to work together for improvements, and the moment must be seized.

13.6 The criminal element

As documented in previous sections, a dimension of horse ownership and trade in Kenya involves actors who are deliberately hidden and who benefit from the absence of oversight. As an informant put it:

"These owners are well-connected people and well-influenced. It is a cartel. People are not willing to reveal horse owners. They don't want to get known."

This hidden ownership structure creates specific challenges for enforcement. Without knowing who owns a horse, responsibility cannot be assigned. Without a registration system, ownership is almost impossible to prove. And without adequate support from police and prosecutors, in most cases, the KSPCA's enforcement capacity remains limited.

13.7 Government bodies

Obviously, the overarching authority and responsibility holder is the Government of Kenya through its various executive arms.

The government actors with most direct relevance to horse welfare are the Directorate of Veterinary Services (DVS), County Veterinary Officers, the police, and the prosecution service. Their engagement with horse welfare remains understandably limited.

The DVS has formal responsibility for animal welfare regulation and is the body most logically positioned to lead welfare coordination, and issue and enforce a horse licensing regime. In 2023, a DVS officer indicated that the department was unaware of the illegal border trade and would investigate. It is not clear what, if any, investigation followed. Horse welfare remains a peripheral concern within a department focused primarily on livestock and food security.

Police, as documented above, hold critical discretionary power in whether cases proceed and are susceptible to pressure from well-connected defendants.

14 Animal welfare organisations: KSPCA and BEA

The KSPCA remains Kenya's primary animal welfare enforcement body, with the legal mandate and institutional capacity to act on horse welfare cases. Its horse welfare work has expanded significantly since 2023, supported by the dedicated engagement of KSPCA staff and the work of the Horse Welfare Advisory Committee volunteers, which includes interested expert individuals and BEA. The KSPCA's experience in rescues, legal cases, stakeholder engagement, and the practical challenges of fostering and caring for seized horses, gives it an unmatched understanding of the landscape. But constraints remain significant. The KSPCA's facilities have improved but are not ideally suited to horses, which need quiet, space, and separation from other animals. Its human and financial resources are stretched. The fostering and rehoming process for rescued horses, crucial for managing the ongoing influx, requires strengthening.

With the right resources, KSPCA could take on a range of roles, such as that of a registration authority for horses, tying registration to mandatory vet care, rabies, tetanus and other vaccinations as well as microchipping. However, the practical concern was raised that if the KSPCA were the registering body, horse owners might be reluctant to register for fear of KSPCA inspection and potential seizure. This suggests that a phased approach, starting with a voluntary accreditation of stables and public awareness campaigning, before moving to a mandatory registration regime, may be more effective than immediately mandating registration. A coalition of responsible bodies working to similar aims would also make a difference.

BEA, being one of the world's leading equine organisations, brings complementary expertise in equine welfare (especially experience and learning from other contexts that have faced similar issues), advocacy, community engagement, and programme design, and its partnership with the KSPCA in the Horse Welfare Programme represents a significant effort.

15 Why is the situation worsening? Understanding the root causes

The welfare challenges documented in this assessment are not accidents: they arise from a set of structural conditions. The following is an analysis of these root causes.

15.1 Knowledge and capacity gaps

Insufficient knowledge of equine management - what horses need, how to recognise ill-health, how to manage a working horse responsibly - is widespread across all levels of the informal sector, among stable owners, grooms, private horse owners, and the public who consume horse services. Some of the issues behind this are covered in the 2023 Horse Welfare assessment – not least of which is that horses are not indigenous to Kenya and we do not grow up with an innate common understanding of what looks "normal". Where expertise does exist, it tends to be concentrated among a small, established, internally referential community of "insiders" that is rarely inclined to share it. There are interesting historical, cultural, socio-economic factors at play here, touched on in the 2023 report. It is not, however, a sufficient explanation on its own: some actors who have been repeatedly advised on correct practice do not change their behaviour:

"There is no general idea of how to take care of horses."

"There is no horse education whatsoever. Anyone can claim anything about horses: there is no certification, no teaching, there is nothing at all."

At the coast, the knowledge gap is compounded by geographic isolation from expertise. There is effectively no resident equine specialist vet, and only one farrier available to coastal horse owners. Well-intended owners report being unable to find out what they need to know, they said:

"[Elsewhere]... you have an expert guiding you, here you need to figure it out yourself."

This lack of access to basic services, being caused by an absolute shortage of skills and capacities, impacts all horse owners regardless of status.

The absence of any formal pathway for training stable hands, riding instructors, or indeed horse owners, means that knowledge is transmitted informally, inconsistently, and sometimes, perhaps often, inaccurately. Addressing this knowledge gap required a structured, sustained, and most of all, an education programme that is accessible to all.

1.1 Financial pressures

A recurring theme across interviews is the competitive pressure that drives welfare decline. Riding schools or stables who cut corners on feed, veterinary care, and rest do so in part because it reduces cost and allows them to undercut competitors on price. Responsible operators, those who spend properly on horse welfare, find themselves at a disadvantage precisely because they do the right thing. If minimum welfare standards are established and enforced across the sector, operators can no longer use welfare neglect as a competitive advantage. Everyone is required to meet the same minimum. The playing field will be levelled, and responsible operators are no longer penalised for their standards.

15.2 Absent regulatory framework

There is no requirement to register a horse, no requirement to obtain a specific licence to run a riding school, no certification requirement for riding instructors, and no systematic monitoring of welfare standards. In this regulatory vacuum, the self-regulating mechanisms of the market, reputation, consumer choice, professional norms, operate weakly or not at all. Consumers typically lack the knowledge to assess welfare standards and have no objective criteria to guide their choices.

"I took my kids riding and I could see it was not good. I'm no expert but I felt really bad for the ponies and scared for my kids. I would pay more if I knew the place was safe and the horses were treated kindly. But as it is I'd rather not go to such places at all."

15.3 Fragmented responsibility:

The welfare challenge in Kenya's horse sector is a shared problem with no shared owner. Each major stakeholder organisation like HAK, the Jockey Club, and Kenya Polo, have mandates narrow enough to limit responsibility for the challenges documented in this report. The informal sector sits in the gaps between those mandates.

"It is all connected but there are no links right now. The links are not there. Or do people not want to establish the links? I don't know if the not working together is resistance or apathy."

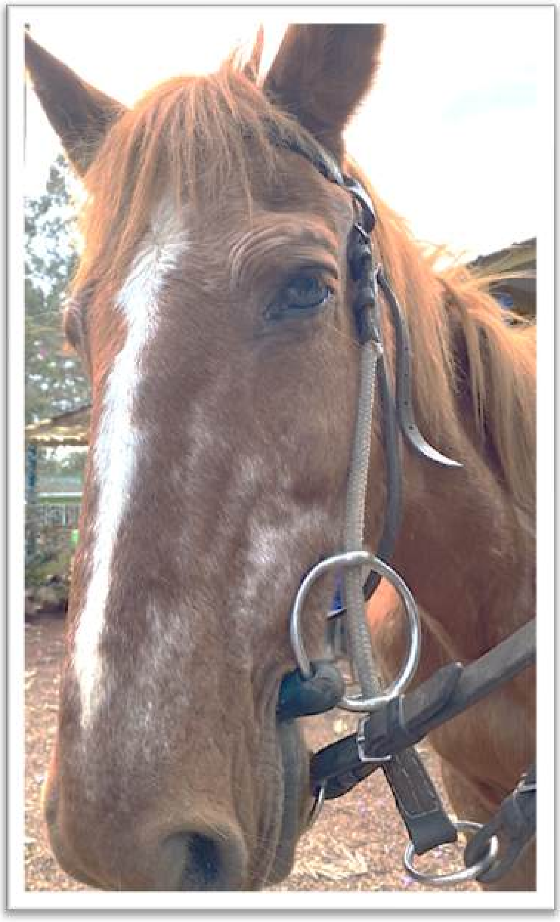
It could be that the issue is neither resistance nor apathy, but a need for information, leadership and a sense of what action could be taken. There is interest in welfare among key stakeholders.

15.4 Social media, prestige and the demand surge

Social media has played a significant role in accelerating both the demand for horse services and the entry of operators who lack the knowledge and resources to provide those services responsibly. Horses have become, for a segment of Kenya's growing middle class, a symbol of aspiration: something to hire for a wedding, to photograph at a mall, to place a child upon for riding lessons. This demand is not inherently problematic, but without visible standards or certification, buyers have little basis to choose beyond price, and price competition comes at the expense of horse welfare.

15.5 The retirement gap

There is no provision for horse retirement in Kenya. This is both a welfare failure and a root cause of downstream welfare problems: horses that should be retired continue to work until they break down or die, and horses that have been retired without provision end up in informal circulation in declining condition. Realistically, long retirements may not be an option for many working horses. But planning for end of working life is an important responsibility for any owner.



Horse seized by KSPCA and the police being used for work in schools. Horse was severely emaciated, scarred, wearing broken tack and partially blind.

16 What is working?

It is important to acknowledge what is going well within Kenya's horse welfare ecosystem.

Several stable operators are running genuinely good operations: informed, committed to their animals, mindful of welfare issues and engaged with – even supporting - the KSPCA. These operators are valuable advocates and proof points for the argument that good welfare and good business are compatible. The high-end safari sector provides another positive example. Safari operators serving international guests at premium prices have strong commercial incentives to maintain horses in good condition, and the best of them do so effectively.

The KSPCA Horse Welfare Committee brings together dedicated individuals with genuine expertise and commitment. The committee's voluntary work has kept horse welfare on the KSPCA's agenda, supported individual cases, and provided a forum for the exchange of expertise and development of action.

There are many other individual supporters and advocates out there. Many of them have considerable expertise and influence and have been concerned about horse welfare for a long time, without necessarily having an outlet for that concern.

"I heard about the welfare programme and I thought, 'Finally someone is taking this up and now I can contribute to making a change because the situation is pretty desperate and doing things on my own hasn't made much of a difference'".

Young riders are being encouraged to put welfare at the top of their agenda by initiatives such as the International School of Kenya Pony Club. These youngsters can be a resource in support of developing public awareness initiatives that young people will relate to.

Furthermore, individual veterinary practitioners, particularly those who have taken on equine work outside formal specialist training, are providing critical services that would otherwise be unavailable. Their commitment deserves recognition.

Lastly, at the coast, a small number of committed horse owners demonstrate that responsible horse management is possible even in a challenging environment.

17 To argue or to act – forms of resistance to calls for action on horse welfare

17.1 It's not about welfare; it's about an elite trying to hold on to power

The reality is that the maintenance of a horse is an expensive venture, requiring continuous resource investment on behalf of an owner, stable or other stakeholder.

At the same time, there is a view that fuels the resistance to horse welfare minimum standards; a belief that welfare interventions are aimed at maintaining the historical status quo of horse ownership in Kenya, limiting horse ownership, trade and use to a minority elite that has vast economic power and is generally from one particular community.

"They just don't want black people to own horses".

This is not helped by the fact that the elite horse owning community can be exclusive, clannish and unwelcoming to new entrants. Some informants have described behaviour that feels exclusionary and racist.

We know that welfare issues are not confined to a particular class or identity of person and that there are problems among the elite owners and users.

It is important that any attempt to establish standards, regulation and capacity building support is based on the laws of Kenya, objectively verifiable facts and is implemented with an even-handed approach.

It should also be noted that the KSPCA itself is sometimes associated with this colonial legacy. The global SPCA movement spread through Empire connections. While the KSPCA is now a local civil society organisation with a national remit, led and, in large part, funded by Kenyans, this perception may impact a view about KSPCA's impartiality that must be acknowledged.

17.2 It's not our problem

It is true that owners and users who have high standards are not directly responsible for the actions of others. However, it is important to acknowledge that actions that generate interest in the use of horses (e.g. marketing of services or sports) generate demand for access to horses. The nature of the horse business – for example, the tendency to sell on ponies once kids have outgrown them, or to dispose of horses at the end of their short racing careers – means that horses may end up in difficult situations.

It is important that interested parties, especially organisations claiming to represent or control parts of the industry, acknowledge the negative impacts of their use of horses, however unintended they may be.

In the long term, this can only benefit key stakeholders as the growing interest in animal welfare in Kenya will mean that members of the public will start to raise concerns as has happened elsewhere in the world.

17.3 You should not deny people a right to earn a living

In a country with enormous economic challenges, this is an important issue. However, the law in Kenya protects animals from suffering. It is not acceptable for any party to support the "livelihood opportunities" that do not respect the law.

We should also be careful not to see that the fact that most people who own horses are wealthy as an indicator that there is an opportunity to make money from horses. All over the world, keeping horses well has often been challenging, because of how much It costs to keep horses healthy and humanely, and how much work they can reasonably do. Horses, as a status symbol or venture of passion and/or recreation, are not owned by wealthy people as a primary way of acquiring that wealth. It follows that any programming should not encourage people to seek to earn a living from horses if they are not able to meet minimum standards.

"If you can keep a horse well, that is God's way of telling you that you have too much money," said one informant.

There is the potential to support horse welfare and add value so that people can earn decent livings – which for many is currently not the case. If respect for welfare becomes more normalised amongst those providing horse-based services, and those using them (the public in varying capacities) many people could also benefit from the suggested interventions of this welfare assessment. An industry that offers adequate training, capacity building and knowledge dissemination should be able to offer public services at rates that reflect not only what it requires to run a horse centred business whilst adhering to minimum welfare standards, but also the knowledge and skill level of trainers, grooms and handlers involved. In other words, improved standards should result in better wages for personnel with skills and experience.

17.4 We can never agree on standards

Kenya is not unique in that there is a broad spectrum of views about how horses are trained and used. These views are deeply held and stand in opposition to others. These long-held disagreements can result in entrenched positions that make agreeing on common approaches difficult. These disagreements can be about philosophies and ideas, or about very practical matters.

"Get three horse people in a room and you will get four different opinions about everything."

Context and detail are also extremely important. What is good for some horses in some situations is not acceptable in others. This makes establishing firm standards difficult.

For example, racehorses are backed at a very young age. Generally, welfare guidance recognises that horse skeletons do not develop fully until 6 – 8 years old. Some cite this as an example of the cruelty of racing, others present evidence that the Thoroughbreds used for racing are physiologically different, treated differently and so on.

This programme will need to focus on shared common ground and on working with minimum standards. Focus on arguing about detail may prevent action to deliver wider improvement.

17.5 It will always be a shady business.

Horses are associated with sharp practice and shady business in many parts of the world. There is criminal financial interest in many aspects of horse ownership and use. In Kenya, this is obvious around the import of ponies from Ethiopia, and in the many failures to treat horses in line with the laws of Kenya.

Where there is such interest, resistance to engaging in programming to establish identification and tracing mechanisms, better stable management or improve equine vet skills is not surprising. Corruption and menaces are common when working on these matters.

It is difficult but it is not a reasonable position for honest actors to deny the rule of law. Support is needed to authorities to enforce the law. The KSPCA has encountered security threats as part of its horse welfare work and the positive support of law enforcement authorities is needed.

Aspiring politician using a horse to draw attention outside Parliament. The horse was recovered by the police and brought to the KSPCA. The horse was found to be seriously emaciated and with a range of very serious health problems and injuries; the horse did not survive.

Ponies seized by the KSPCA and police in 2025 on their way to work at an international school.

17.6 It's not possible

Change can be complicated and take a long time.

However, the horse sector in Kenya is a small world where a few individuals and a few organisations could commit to some welfare related action and make a big difference in a short time.

First steps may be limited in scope. Nevertheless, action in line with this report's recommendations will have a positive impact.

18 Updated recommendations

The recommendations that follow are grounded in the findings of this assessment, the 2023 report's proposals, the accumulated learning of the KSPCA and BEA, and the priorities and insights of the many informants who contributed to this work. They are intended to inform the design and implementation of the BEA/KSPCA Horse Welfare Programme and are presented in an order that reflects both urgency and logical sequencing, though in practice they will need to be pursued in parallel.

18.1 Establish a horse welfare coalition

While relevant stakeholders have already initiated collaborative efforts to address horse welfare challenges, the establishment of an official coalition comprising all relevant stakeholders at different authority levels, is desirable. The current situation presents a critical moment to address the issues before they escalate further, and several organisations and individuals have already demonstrated an impetus to act.

One option would be to convene it under the auspices of the AWAKE structure – the animal welfare coordination structure convened and hosted by the National Department of Veterinary Services. Members could include organising bodies, animal welfare organisations and any other representative groups.

Regardless, the most important thing is that a coalition of the willing engage and start to work together. Some will not be willing or interested. This should not prevent progress. There is already a positive momentum towards this effort.

There is the immediate opportunity for such a Horse Welfare Coalition to work together on a voluntary certification scheme, develop and implement groom training, and to advocate for business licensing.

18.2 Set the standard, spread the word: minimum welfare standards and public awareness campaigns

Minimum welfare standards, including checklists and education posters to be distributed at all stables and riding schools, and other places where horse-related services are offered. The KSPCA Horse Welfare Committee has already produced a working draft set of standards and guidance. But standards alone are insufficient without the public awareness to back them up. A rider who knows what a healthy horse looks like, and who is willing to refuse to ride an underfed or otherwise mistreated animal, exercises a form of market pressure that can drive welfare improvement from the demand side. Public awareness campaigns directed at riders and clients, not just at stable and riding school operators, are therefore an essential complement to supplier-side interventions.

A promising and largely untapped entry point for education campaigns are schools. Virtually all schools in Nairobi visit ridings schools, or have horses and ponies brought to them, as part of their activities. Reaching children at this early point of contact offers an opportunity to build a generation of informed and well-conscious riders and horse owners. Pony clubs can also make great allies and offer creative and practical input into educational activities.

18.3 Establish a horse identification and registration regime

A horse registration and licensing regime is foundational to every other enforcement and monitoring effort. Without it, ownership is untraceable, accountability is unassignable, and the scale of the problem is unknowable. This is a particular problem because of the complicated ways horses are owned, leased, housed and traded. Owners often do not keep horses on their own premises but give them to stables or caretakers to keep them, and if 20 horses are in one yard they may have 20 different owners.

This presents problems for everyone. Almost all the criminal welfare cases with which the KSPCA is involve encounter problems due to difficulties proving ownership. There are also many stories of horses being sold by people that did not own them etc. Fixing this issue with a sensible tracing scheme would benefit everyone except those with bad intentions.

The regime preferably includes mandatory microchipping of all horses, a national database maintained by, or accessible to, an independent body, or the KSPCA, or county vets; a "logbook" for each horse (a modified "horse passport" with identification information and the history of ownership) and a business licensing requirement for any operation using horses commercially.

Informants suggested that registration could be linked to vaccination and vet care requirements, and be considered proof of ownership, creating a practical incentive for registration.

Given practical concerns, a phased approach is recommended: begin with voluntary accreditation of stables and public awareness, then move to improved registration by organising bodies, then mandatory registration by an independent body as the regulatory environment matures and trust is established.

Microchipping is now quite cheap and is usually only done once in the animal's lifetime; the KSPCA or private vets would be able to implement a scheme at an affordable rate.

18.4 "Welfare assured" - a certification scheme for stables and riding schools

A voluntary certification scheme for stables, riding schools, safari companies and other service providers would create a visible quality signal for consumers and a base of welfare standards below which licensed operators cannot operate. The scheme should include minimum physical facility requirements; health management protocols; training requirements for staff; and regular inspection by the KSPCA, peer inspectors and/or county vets.

There are good examples of this kind of industry self-regulation in other countries, and learning suggests that these schemes can add value to the service provider, enabling them to justify premium rates for high quality services.

At the same time such a scheme would help consumers. A consumer-facing checklist, communicating what parents and clients should look for before enrolling their child in riding lessons or hiring horses for events, can help parents and others make safe choices, and drive demand toward certified operators.

Additionally, KSPCA and other social media can be used to showcase one or two certified stables with exemplary welfare standards, operators. This approach turns good stables into advocates, justifies their charges and demonstrates that certification is attainable.

18.5 Strengthen regulation and legal enforcement

The KSPCA should continue to pursue criminal cases under the laws of Kenya (CAP 360) and should invest in building the capacity of police and prosecutors to understand and act on animal welfare offences. This could include providing technical briefings to prosecution offices on the nature and significance of horse welfare violations, as well as on the scope and mandate of the KSPCA's own work, ensuring that prosecutors and police have a clear understanding of the organisations' enforcement role and the (legal) tools available.

The Horse Welfare Coalition should work towards improvements to regulation. There are opportunities at national level. Animal welfare is a devolved function, so this can create challenges. However, there is a need to pursue improved regulation at county level also.

An obvious area of action could be around business licensing: whether it be a riding school or a service provider of pony rides. There is no current specific licence needed to operate commercially despite the uniquely sensitive and risky nature of the business. Having such an appropriate licensing regime perhaps managed by the CDVS, could help ensure compliance with welfare standards, registration schemes and health and safety protocols.

18.6 Help organising bodies contribute to horse welfare

Organising bodies such as the Federation, HAK, Jockey Club and Kenya Polo do not control the whole horse business, but they do have the opportunity to exert considerable influence, as well as taking measures within their scope of control to ensure that there is a culture of and incentives for good practice.

For example, it is well recognised that riding competitions that judge young riders on height jumped and speed of round alone can create a culture of riding in a manner risky to horse and rider alike. HAK has already implemented some measures to change these incentives, and there is potential to do more.

In racing, there are many examples of horse welfare schemes that can inspire action. The fate of retired racehorses is of particular concern, and the Jockey Club could take positive action around this issue inspired by these examples.

Organising bodies could support schemes like the establishment of a horse "logbook"; action on this could be a good start.

18.7 Establishment of specialised KPSCA equine centre

This would include growing the horse welfare capacity within the KSPCA with dedicated staff. Priority actions include: equipping KSPCA with the knowledge and space to handle equine rescues and keeping horses (short-term) responsibly, mapping horse populations more thoroughly, creating a network of committed horse and/or stable owners who can support each other and serve as a resource for fosters; setting-up a fostering process including fostering surveys and checklists to inspect level of care, developing veterinary and feeding protocols.

18.8 Groom and stable hand training programme

Groom training could be among the highest-impact, most cost-effective interventions available. A structured, accessible training programme, with tiered certification like the model used by the Kenya Professional Safari Guide Association, with bronze, silver and gold levels, would create career pathways for grooms, incentivise employers to support training, and directly improve day-to-day horse welfare at the stable level.

Training content should cover basic horse care; nutrition and water management; recognition of injury and illness; dental and hoof care awareness; safe handling; and first aid.

The KSPCA can lead the development and delivery of this training, potentially in partnership with experienced stable managers or with operators who already have such training programs in place.

18.9 Improve equine education in the veterinary curriculum

Advocacy for improved equine content in Kenyan veterinary curricula remains a worthwhile long-term goal, but two immediate constraints on the ground are identified. Firstly, the costs of qualified veterinary care already places it out of reach for many horse owners. Also, existing equine specialists have shown limited openness to new entrants in the field. Those realities mean that expanding the number of qualified equine vets alone is unlikely to translate into improved welfare outcomes in the short or medium term.

A more practical approach would operate on two parallel tracks. First, an online knowledge platform, drawing on existing international resources and accessible to Kenyan vets and vet students, could support self-directed equine specialisation without requiring curriculum reform. Second, and more immediately impactful, would be the development of trained welfare paraprofessionals: individuals with sufficient knowledge to advise owners on routine care, recognise welfare problems early, and refer to a vet only when genuinely necessary. Brooke has piloted comparable community-based animal health worked models elsewhere, and the approach could be well suited for this context.

18.10 Retirement and end of life

Every horse owner, whether running a race yard, a riding school, or keeping a horse privately should have a plan for what happens when that horse can no longer work. At present, almost none do and horses are worked until they drop.

A retirement provision framework is therefore needed that begins with awareness: the expectation that responsible ownership includes thinking ahead, and that a horse's final chapter is as much the owner's responsibility as its first.

For horses in sport, this requires engagement with the organising bodies to see how it might be possible to promote a clear chain of responsibility after retirement, potentially including rehabilitation, and rehoming protocols and how they be implemented. For private and riding school horses, this could require practical provisions like funded or low-cost euthanasia where quality of life cannot be maintained.

19 Conclusion

Three years after the publication of the first horse welfare assessment, the situation facing horses in Kenya is more serious, more geographically widespread, and more structurally entrenched than it was. The horse population has grown; the informal sector has expanded; the welfare challenges have deepened; and the underlying conditions of commercial pressure, regulatory vacuum and fragmented responsibility, remain unaddressed.

At the same time, the knowledge, relationships and institutional experience built by the KSPCA BEA and others since 2023 provide a stronger foundation for action than has ever previously existed. The KSPCA and BEA Horse Welfare Programme represents a genuine opportunity to shift the trajectory of horse welfare in Kenya, not by confronting every actor in the system simultaneously but by building coalitions, establishing incentives, and creating the conditions under which good welfare becomes the norm rather than the exception.

That opportunity can only be realised, however, if the organisations and individuals who care about horses in Kenya choose to pull together. The challenge documented in this report is too large for any single organisation, and the history of fragmented responsibility has already cost too many horses too much. A better industry is achievable, but it will require those with a stake in it to act as though it is a shared one.

The situation of the horses described in this report - the emaciated ponies walking 30km a day to carry school kids, the former racehorses found in a building site, the riding school horses who worked six to eight hours a day without rest - is not inevitable. They are the predictable consequences of a set of structural conditions that can be changed. The purpose of this assessment is to describe those conditions clearly enough that the programme designed to address them can do so effectively.

Improving horse welfare in Kenya will require a long-term commitment and a multifaceted approach. With an increased interest in welfare and the setting up of the new Federation, the opportunity is upon us. It requires all of us: welfare organisations, equestrian bodies, government agencies, stable operators, horse owners, and the public, to agree to three things:

- to accept a share of responsibility,
- to reconsider strongly held positions in the interests of moving forward, and
- to commit to trying to work across boundaries

Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.

This report is dedicated to P. First a winner and then a loser, but who retired happily in the end thanks to a team of well-wishers.

About the Kenya Society for the Protection and Care of Animals

The KSPCA is Kenya's leading animal welfare organisation working on the front line for the well-being of communities and their animals.

Programmes include

- community-based approaches to animal health and welfare, including vaccination and sterilisation at scale
- rescue and rehabilitation of injured and abused animals
- enforcement of welfare regulations including humane slaughter and enforcement of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act.

Furaha ya Farasi
Horse Welfare Programme

Kenya Society for the Protection and Care of Animals

+254 (0)709 007 500 Info@kspca.or.ke
www.kspca.or.ke

About Brooke East Africa

Brooke's mission is to achieve immediate and lasting positive change in the lives of working horses, donkeys and mules and the communities that depend on them.

Brooke East Africa was set up in Kenya in 2013, and since then the programme has gradually expanded into Somaliland, South Sudan, Tanzania and part of Northern Uganda.

BEA works with partners to deliver projects including

- animal health
- community engagement
- research, policy and advocacy.

BEA is particularly known in Kenya for its work to challenge the illicit trade in donkey skins, that has decimated the donkey population and harmed donkey-dependent communities deeply.

Brooke East Africa
+254 (0) 700 307709
brookeea@thebrooke.org

www.thebrooke.org

KENYA SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION & CARE OF ANIMALS

KSPCA

BROOKE

ACTION FOR WORKING HORSES AND DONKEYS