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## **A preliminary study investigating the physical welfare and welfare code compliance for tethered and free-ranging horses on common land in South Wales**

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### **Abstract**

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*The scientific literature on horses kept on common land in the UK is limited. Welfare codes and legislation are in place to safeguard the welfare of these horses; however, it has little scientific validation. This study investigated the welfare code compliance and physical welfare of both tethered (T) and free-ranging (F) horses kept on a public common in South Wales. A welfare assessment was developed using resource-based and animal-based measures. The assessment was carried out weekly over a six-week period on all horses found on the common, a total of 37 horses, 21 tethered and 16 free-ranging were observed during some or all visits. The mean prevalence of welfare measures assessed during weekly observations of individual horses was calculated. The highest mean prevalences were recorded for rainscald, hoof overgrowth and hoof cracks. Overall, no significant differences were found between welfare indicators for tethered and free-ranging groups of horses on the same common. There were high levels of compliance with the Welsh Government code of practice covering tethering in some areas, eg having a 4-m gap between tethered horses (96% compliance), however, in other areas there was poor compliance, eg exercise off the tether for a period each day (0% compliance). Changes to management, including provision of shelter, increased access to water, exercise and farrier attention, may significantly improve welfare. However, there was no evidence that tethering itself had a significant negative impact on the physical welfare of horses.*

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**Keywords:** animal welfare, common land, horses, legislation compliance, physical assessment, tethering