

Jesse Norman

Road safety touches all of us, whether rural or urban, pedestrian, cyclist, horse rider or driver.

The British Horse Society has shown itself to be a formidable campaigning engine in the way that it has managed to lobby my colleagues across the House, and I take my hat off to it. The very first debate in which I took part in my present job was a Westminster Hall debate on the safety of horse riders on roads. Ever since then I have had a very careful concern for the matter.

As my right hon. Friend will know, we are in the middle of a safety review of cycling and walking and of vulnerable road users generally, including horse riders and others. We have not yet reported on that. I expect that we will do so by the end of this year, and we will cover a very wide range of potential interventions that improve cycling safety and that go towards better infrastructure.

Sir Desmond Swayne: New Forest West

On the horse riders, may I bring to my hon. Friend's attention the B3058 as it travels through Bashley where I have witnessed the most shocking and thoughtless behaviour? The principal victims are horse riders, as they are throughout the New Forest often enough. Was not an opportunity missed in the revision of the Highway Code in not specifically dealing with the problems faced by riders and appropriate measures that motorists should take?

Jesse Norman

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the concern in his own constituency. He may not be aware that, actually, horse riders are mentioned in the Highway Code. Measures are taken in the Highway Code to ensure the protection of horse riders alongside other users of the road.

Vicky Ford: Chelmsford

On the issue of horse riding, I took up the challenge to get back on a horse this summer after many years of not riding and to experience for myself how dangerous it is on the road. It is very clear that drivers need greater awareness. Will the Minister possibly champion the work of the British Horse Society and its "Dead? Or Dead Slow?" campaign in this area?

Robert Courts: Witney

The Minister rightly draws attention to some of the dangerous behaviours that people display when driving. May I return to the issue of horses? Would he consider asking for the Highway Code to be amended to incorporate the British Horse Society's "Dead Slow" advice?

Alistair Carmichael: Orkney and Shetland

I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts). This matter becomes ever more pressing. Across the whole country, rights of way are being salami-sliced, piece by piece; and, piece by piece, horse riders are being forced on to the highway. That is why this matter is important, and its importance will only continue to grow.

Jesse Norman

I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is very interesting that he makes the point about not only the danger to horse riders, but the reason for that danger. It is therefore rather important that all the unregistered roads and byways are properly acknowledged, notified and recognised in order to make sure that spaces are available for people to be able to ride happily and safely without having to go on to the highway.

Tracy Crouch - Chatham and Aylesford

I could speak about many issues, including the protection of horses, which others have mentioned, and the worrying growth in young drivers who use seatbelt alarm disablers, which my local fire and rescue service raised.

Alan Brown - Kilmarnock and Loudoun

As other hon. Members have mentioned in interventions, another vulnerable cohort is horse riders. I live in a rural constituency with lots of minor country roads that are great for walkers, cyclists and horse riders, providing, of course, that vehicle drivers pay attention. I know myself to give respect and plenty of room to horse riders, but unfortunately not all car users do. Several of my constituents, including the chair of north Ayrshire riding club, have contacted me to express their concern that horse riders and carriages have not been included in the Department for Transport's review of the highway code. I share their concern and that of the British Horse Society, which has highlighted the fact that, over a seven-year period, 40 horse riders and 237 horses have been killed as a consequence of road injuries. Why not include them in the review?

I also echo the call for the Minister to consider strengthening section 215 of the highway code to include the British Horse Society's "dead slow" advice to drivers.

Alison Thewliss: Glasgow Central

My hon. Friend is making some good points on horses. Mine is an urban constituency, but we often get police horses going about the city, so it is important that different road users—

Chris Elmore – Ogmore

Many Members on both sides of the House have already commented on the plight of horses and horse riders, which, I think, shows the power of the British horse lobby.

This debate is particularly important in the light of a recent report by the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, which states that since 2010, there has been no significant reduction in the number of people killed on UK roads. That shows that the Government need to do more to improve the safety of our road network.

I want to speak specifically about the review of The Highway Code. I understand that the review, which was announced by the Minister last month, focuses on

"how road users should behave in relation to cyclists and pedestrians".

I welcome the review and any steps that are taken to make our roads safer for all, particularly those who are vulnerable on the roads, but I believe that there is an omission in the definition of vulnerable road users in the review, which was commissioned by the Minister. It is extremely important for cyclists and pedestrians to be protected on our roads, but I believe that horse riders should be included and categorised as vulnerable road users.

According to the British Horse Society, there are 2.7 million horse riders in the UK. This year, the society reported that since 2010 there had been more than 2,914 reports of road incidents involving horses, in which, sadly, 237 horses had died and 40 riders had lost their lives. Those statistics speak for themselves, and the safety of horse riders and their vulnerability on the roads should be taken very seriously.

Rule 215 of The Highway Code provides guidance for drivers in relation to horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles. It states:

“Be particularly careful of horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles especially when overtaking. Always pass wide and slowly.

Horse riders are often children, so take extra care and remember riders may ride in double file when escorting a young or inexperienced horse or rider.”

The current rules for riding a horse on the road, rules 49 to 55, state, among other things, that riders should keep to the left, keep both hands on the reins unless they are signalling, and keep both feet in the stirrups. The Department for Transport’s THINK! campaign also provides guidance for horse riders on the roads.

It is the responsibility of local authorities to erect traffic signs to alert drivers to accompanied horses or ponies and to position them where there are stables or where riders cross roads from one bridleway to another. However, since the debate was announced, a number of my constituents, including many equestrians and members of communities with a large population of horse riders, have expressed concern that signs are not being erected or are not being replaced when they fall down. They feel that the Government should do more to tackle the problem.

The many keen horse riders in my constituency have expressed dismay that they have been left out of the review of The Highway Code. Furthermore, many of the roads in my constituency are narrow country roads, which are particularly dangerous when shared by horse riders and vehicles. That is why campaigns such as the British Horse Society’s Dead Slow campaign, which aims to educate drivers on driving at a maximum of 15 mph when passing horse riders, to be patient and not sound their horn, to pass widely—at least a car’s width if possible—and to drive away slowly, are so important. Some 85% of incidents between horse riders and vehicles occur because a car driver is driving too close to a horse and its rider.

I therefore have a simple request for the Minister: for these reasons, I am asking that he considers widening the review of The Highway Code and understands that horse riders are vulnerable on our roads as well, not just cyclists and pedestrians. This review should include a strengthening of rule 215 of The Highway Code to include the four messages of the Dead Slow campaign, so that our roads can

be safer and there can be more awareness and education of how to safely pass horse riders on our roads.

Rachel Maclean: Redditch

I must mention horses, because mine is a rural constituency. I support the very effective Dead Slow campaign to keep horses and their riders safe.

Vicky Ford: Chelmsford

My last point is about horse riders. I am told that Essex has the highest level of horse ownership in the country, but my constituency is almost entirely urban. If one goes on that amazing source of data that is Facebook, one can see that 960 people in my constituency like tennis—like you, Mr Speaker—1,800 like hockey, but 3,800 like horse riding, and they are mostly women. Women are nine times more likely to ride horses—it is the top outdoor pursuit for women. People on horses have a right to be on the road, and riders often have to use a road, even if only for a short time, to get to a bridleway or another safe place.

I admit to having been an experienced rider in the past, but I got back on a horse this summer and found it absolutely terrifying. It was not just about the amount of traffic, but the lack of driver awareness of what they need to do if they see a horse. Drivers need to pass wide and pass slow, and they must remember that if two horses are riding side by side, that could be because there is an inexperienced rider or a young horse. Finally, please do not beep the horn—that really is spooky for horses. I have been concerned by stories of some drivers finding it fun to be unsafe when a horse is nearby. It is not fun; it is deeply dangerous, and 40 people and over 200 horses have lost their lives.

We need more driver awareness, and one solution could be to use the bit of time between a learner taking their multiple-choice theory test at the test centre and getting the results. All those new learner drivers need to wait for their results, and the British Horse Society has some fantastic virtual reality headsets that will give those new learners a quick experience of what it is like to be on a horse when a car goes past too fast. Maybe we could use that little bit of time to do just a little more driver awareness.

Jim Shannon: Strangford

Finally, I want to refer to The Highway Code as it pertains to the safety of horse riders. If my understanding of the figures is correct, my constituency has the largest number of people involved in the horse industry and sector in Northern Ireland. A review is to be undertaken into this issue, but could the Minister ensure that there is a mention of horses in that? I underline that case because of the 40 riders killed, 237 horses killed and almost 900 horses injured on our roads in the last seven years. Some 85% of road incidents involving horses are because drivers pass too close or too fast to them. In particular, I ask the Minister to look at strengthening section 215 of The Highway Code on horse riders and horse-drawn vehicles, to include the British Horse Society's "dead slow" advice to drivers on how to pass horses safely. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

Jesse Norman

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Horse riders are vulnerable road users—there is no doubt about that, and there never has been—and they have been included in the work we are doing.

The following MPs did not mention horse riders:

Jim Cunningham – Coventry South

Maria Miller - Basingstoke

Andrew Selous - South West Bedfordshire

Kate Green – Stretford and Urmston

Andy Macdonald – Middlesborough

Dr Sarah Wollaston – Totnes

Matt Rhoda – Reading East

Sandy Martin – Ipswich

Simon Hoare – North Dorset

Patrick Grady – Glasgow North

Jack Brereton – Stoke on Trent South

Judith Cummins – Bradford South

Jim Fitzpatrick – Poplar and Limehouse

Jack Dromey – Birmingham Erdington

Stephen Twigg – Liverpool – West Derby

Liz McInnes – Heywood and Middleton

Luke Pollard – Plymouth South Sutton and Devonport

Wera Hobhouse – Bath

Justin Madders - Ellesmere Port and Neston