

Support Guide for Coaches and Officials:

Is the Rider Suitably Mounted?

Prioritising the well-being of horses and ponies is vital, particularly in relation to horse or pony and rider compatibility.

A horse or pony's capacity to carry a rider depends on several factors, including the weight, height, suitability, and capability of both the horse or pony and the rider.

While The Pony Club is committed to helping children and young people develop their riding skills, it's **important to balance this with equine welfare**.

If a rider is not suitably mounted, excessive demands on the horse's strength, balance, and endurance can lead to physical strain on the pony's back, joints, and muscles, potentially causing long-term health issues. Horses and ponies may be more likely to show undesirable behaviours if ridden by someone who is not suitable for them.

To address any concerns about suitability of horse or pony and rider, The Pony Club encourages an **open and supportive discussion**, stressing that it is not about the rider, it's about ensuring the safety and comfort of the horse or pony.

As children grow, it may become necessary to transition them to larger ponies or horses that are better suited to carry their changing shape and weight. This change is not a reflection of their riding ability or weight, but rather a proactive step in caring for the ponies' welfare while allowing them to continue progressing in their equestrian journey. When a rider is too heavy, too tall, or too unbalanced for a horse or pony, several concerns can arise.

Through **education and understanding**, we can ensure both riders and horses and ponies enjoy **safe, happy, and fulfilling experiences** together.

When a child out grows a horse or pony, it can be a delicate subject to broach, particularly if parents are in denial about the situation. Parents naturally want to support their child's enthusiasm for riding, but sometimes emotional attachment can lead to an underestimation of the impact their weight and size may have on the horse or pony's welfare. Addressing this concern with care, respect, and understanding is key.

The Challenges of Denial

Riders of all ages may find it difficult to accept that they have outgrown a pony or horse. **Riding is often a deeply personal and rewarding activity**, fostering confidence, friendships, and valuable skills. For many, it also holds emotional significance, particularly when a pony or horse has been a much-loved long-term companion. The idea of no longer being able to ride the same horse or pony can feel like a loss or disruption to their equestrian journey, which may lead to reluctance or resistance to change.

Prioritising Welfare with Sensitivity

It's important to approach it by focusing on the welfare of the horse or pony rather than directly challenging the parent's or Member's perspective. A calm and compassionate explanation that emphasises the potential harm to the horse or pony's health, such as back strain, joint issues, and discomfort, can help them see the situation objectively.

Stressing the importance of maintaining a safe, healthy experience for both rider and

the horse or pony can be more effective than discussing changing weight in personal terms.

Educating with Guidelines and Evidence

Providing clear, factual guidelines around compatibility recommendations are not subjective, but are about the well-being of the animal.

Explaining that exceeding the recommended limits can have long-term effects on their physical health often resonates more than a conversation centred solely on the rider.

In the absence of industry-approved guidance, The Pony Club encourages ongoing discussion and careful consideration of whether a horse or pony is suitably mounted.

The combined weight of the rider and equipment, including tack, should **never exceed 20% of the horse or pony's body weight**. This ensures the pony can move freely, work comfortably, and remain healthy in the long term.

If any of the factors listed below are present, the percentage ratio should be reduced further:

If the Horse/Pony:

- is displaying signs of difficulty in carrying their rider.
- is under seven or over sixteen years of age.
- is over or underweight (an optimal body condition score should be between 2 and 3, see appendix 1).
- has a history of musculoskeletal pain (e.g., requires joint injections, has had back pain, has PSSM, etc.).
- is not fit.

Or if:

- The rider is over-height, even if within an appropriate weight range.
- The rider is a novice and does not have a secure, independent seat.
- The saddle has not been checked in the past six months by a qualified saddle fitter.
- The workload is intense (e.g., lasting over an hour and requiring significant strength or stamina).
- Weather conditions are likely to place additional strain on the horse (e.g., extreme heat).

Explaining that a pony should only carry a percentage of their body weight, including tack, makes it easier to convey the message that it's about numbers, not judgment.

Offering families information about how this limit is designed to protect the horse or pony, prevent injuries, and ensure a positive riding experience for all involved can help reduce any defensiveness.

Sometimes the concern is not just about weight but also the rider's height and balance in relation to the horse or pony. A rider who is too tall may find their position in the saddle affected, for example, tipping forward, having their legs pushed too far back, or, because of their higher centre of gravity, unintentionally unbalancing the horse or pony when moving their body. This can place additional strain on the pony's back and joints, while also making it harder for the rider to develop a secure, effective position. In some cases,

this can even delay their riding progression. **Framing the discussion around the pony's comfort and the rider's development** can be a constructive way to approach the conversation with parents or Members, as it **reinforces that the issue is about safety, welfare, progression and compatibility**.

Reassuring Parents of Ongoing Opportunities

Reassuring parents that this is a normal part of the riding process can alleviate concerns. Many Members eventually outgrow ponies, and transitioning to a larger pony or horse is a natural progression in their riding journey. Emphasising that this shift is not only about the safety and welfare of them and their pony, but it also **reflects their growth and development as a rider**, it can help them feel more positive about the change. Offering solutions, such as helping find a more suitable horse or pony for them or identifying alternate riding activities that continue to nurture their love of horses, can also ease the transition.

Compassionate and Open Dialogue

Maintaining a **compassionate and open dialogue is essential**. Parents and Members need to feel heard and supported as they navigate their development in riding. Avoiding confrontation and **fostering a supportive environment** where both the rider and horse or pony's well-being are considered will help facilitate a more understanding and cooperative conversation.

By focusing on the horse or pony's welfare, providing clear information, and offering positive alternatives, it's possible to guide families through this challenging situation while ensuring that both the Member and the horse or pony are set up for a healthy, happy future.

When and where to have the conversation

Timing and setting play a crucial role in how well these conversations are received. To ensure a productive and respectful dialogue, whether you're speaking with a parent or directly with a Member over 18, consider the following:

- **Choose a private and calm setting**, away from other onlookers. This helps avoid embarrassment and allows them to process the information without added pressure.
- **Have the conversation at a time when emotions are less likely to be heightened**—not straight after a disappointing performance or a stressful situation.
- **If possible, give advance notice** that you'd like to have a chat about their riding development, so they aren't caught off guard.
- **Come prepared with observations and facts**, not assumptions. Be ready to explain how your concern relates to equine welfare, not to their performance or physicality.
- **Frame the discussion as a partnership**, aiming to find the best path forward for both rider and horse or pony.
- **Follow up in writing if needed**, offering relevant resources, guidelines, or referrals.

By tailoring your approach to the individual, whether a parent or an adult Member, you help ensure the message is received with understanding and respect. Choosing the right moment and setting demonstrates care in these sensitive conversations.

Discussing a Member moving on from a much-loved horse or pony can be challenging, but **equine welfare must always remain the priority**. If a rider is not suitably mounted, it will not only impact the comfort and well-being of the horse or pony, it can also send the wrong message about horse and pony welfare to observers. Addressing these situations protects not only horses and ponies but also the reputation of The Pony Club, helping to safeguard the future of the sport for generations to come.

Whether at a rally or competition, the decision of The Pony Club's Coach, Volunteer, or Official is final. If they believe the safety or welfare of a Member or horse/pony has been or is at risk of being compromised in any way, they have the authority to stop and remove them. Failure to respect their decision is considered a breach of the Members'/Parents' Code of Conduct.

If you have any queries, or wish to report a Safeguarding or Equine Welfare concern, please contact:

Safeguarding – safeguarding@pcuk.org

Equine Welfare – equinewelfare@pcuk.org