

Carriage Driving Seatbelt Update September 2025

This document includes the updated position statement on keeping participants safe during Carriage Driving in September 2025. The earlier statement, published in June 2024, is no longer in use

Executive Summary

We would like to inform you of an important safety update regarding Carriage Driving (CD).

In June 2024, we shared a position statement explaining our decision to reduce the risk of harm to CD participants who were required to be strapped into the carriage during activity, if a carriage were to tip or run away. We understand this decision has caused some frustration, and we want to acknowledge that. Decisions like this are not taken lightly as we balance the needs of our participants with the acceptable levels of risk in a changing external context.

There is unwavering empathy for the reasons behind the frustration that this decision has caused. It is in the fabric of RDA to do everything it can to provide the widest potential opportunity. We are aware this is being driven by:

- The limited product options available on the market to support some participants.
- The decision has resulted in a small number of participants who are no longer able to carriage drive.
- The feeling that RDA UK is not moving fast enough to develop alternative solutions for Groups.

Whilst frustrating, it is important that we take responsible decisions and develop effective solutions that provide access to the largest possible number of participants whilst also not exposing Groups and their trustees to potential litigation. We take the overall financial and reputational risk to RDA incredibly seriously and must balance this with the impact on individual participants in all our decisions.

Groups are understandably seeking their own solutions, and this pioneering spirit is at the heart of RDA's impact. However, following advice from Health and Safety experts and insurers **RDA UK cannot support equipment that has not been thoroughly tested to a standard that demonstrates that they are robust, durable, and reliable in normal and extreme conditions.**

We are currently working hard to find a range of solutions. Products are currently in testing, and while we know it feels slow, we are doing everything we can to speed up the process. It is of paramount importance that we protect the safety of participants and the legal reputation of RDA Group Trustees.

Updated Position Statement – Securing participants during Carriage Driving September 2025

To protect the safety of participants, whilst a wheelchair may be fixed to the carriage, no participant should be tied or strapped into a wheelchair or carriage in any way during the drive without a reliable quick-release mechanism that allows the participant to move clear of the carriage in the event of a tip or runaway.

A piece of equipment can be used to secure a participant if it has been agreed by RDA UK after it has met testing principles that demonstrates that equipment is robust, durable, and reliable in normal and extreme conditions.

If a participant needs to be secured, following a risk assessment they can do so, via:

- rope, webbing, or a belt (the Zilco Driver's Safety Belt meets this criteria), providing it is only fastened on one end and the other end is held or sat on by a coach, volunteer or backstepper.
- an RDA UK approved 'quick release harness', which is released by a rip cord attached to the coach or backstepper via a suitable release mechanism and does not rely on the coach, participant or backstepper releasing it manually.

RDA's position statement, above, must be observed. The RDA Carriage Handbook has been amended to reflect the revised statement.

Acknowledging the vast experience of the CD community, if your Group has found something that might work, please contact Emma Briggs (ebiggs@rda.org.uk). This means together we can then explore if and how the product can be tested by RDA UK, with the aim of sharing safe solutions across all Groups.

We want to sincerely thank everyone for your ongoing patience, passion, and dedication to keeping carriage driving safe. We are committed to working with you to find the best way forward.

Key Points

- RDA UK, as the national body in our federation, has a duty and responsibility to guide Member Group trustees on the best course of action in any given scenario to protect the Group and trustees as individuals.
- RDA has inclusivity at its heart and must do everything that it can to support disabled people to access activities. However, there are scenarios such as those that pertain to safeguarding or safety, where access to activities may be affected.

- Following a position statement in June 2024, which was approved by the RDA UK CD Advisory Group, Groups were required to ensure that no participant is tied or strapped into a carriage during driving.
- There is currently limited tested equipment available that has been specifically designed for CD. For participants who require a supporting harness or seatbelt while driving, it is essential that this equipment includes a reliable quick-release mechanism. This allows the participant to move clear of the carriage in the event of a tip or runaway.
- The Zilco Driver's Safety Belt Seat Belt can be used to support participants, it is however acknowledged that it is not suitable for all participants.
- Every participant is different, and so are their support needs. That's why a single solution is unlikely to meet everyone's requirements. To address this, RDA UK has invested in the development of two separate prototype designs for supporting harnesses.
- We are now working urgently to facilitate robust testing of these prototypes. This includes securing the necessary funding and identifying partners with the right skills and experience to carry out the testing to appropriate safety standards.
- In their pioneering spirit, some Groups have developed their own solutions to enable participants to continue driving.
- Groups are commended for their efforts, but to our knowledge, these solutions have not undergone formal testing to verify their safety, durability, and reliability under both normal and emergency conditions.
- As such, the use of untested equipment may expose Groups and their trustees to legal liability in the event of an incident, including potential action by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) or claims of negligence under civil law.
- RDA UK's position is that untested solutions must not be used within Groups.
- In line with this, RDA UK insurance currently only covers the use of the Zilco belt. No other equipment is insured until it is formally tested and approved by RDA UK.
- Please note that the requirement to use a supporting harness or seatbelt applies only to those participants who, following a risk assessment led by the coach, have been identified as needing additional physical support while driving.

What has prompted this update?

The position statement issued in June 2024 outlined specific requirements for suitable quick-release solutions.

Although not originally anticipated, some Member Groups have independently developed their own equipment. As understanding has progressed, RDA's insurer has requested evidence that these locally developed solutions have undergone thorough testing and that training is provided for their use which is agreed and governed by RDA UK.

We recognise that this situation is challenging. Purpose-built solutions are currently very limited. Discussions with other British Equestrian Federation (BEF) members and the British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) have not identified any readily available, viable alternatives.

The risks to Groups and their trustees are significant. In the event of an accident involving untested or improperly managed equipment, trustees could be personally liable. This would leave them without protection from RDA's trustee indemnity insurance and could complicate legal defence in proceedings by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) or in civil court.

We also understand there has been uncertainty about whether Groups could source their own solutions. This update aims to provide clear guidance on this matter.

What is the risk to Trustees?

In the UK, when a health and safety incident is reasonably foreseeable, the legal basis primarily comes from common law duties (negligence) and statutory duties under health and safety legislation, particularly the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 (HSWA).

Whilst it is acknowledged that Groups know their equines and their temperament, and as cantering is strictly prohibited in RDA activity (Page 21 CD Handbook) Groups operate at a walk and trot, it would be ill-informed to conclude that a scenario may not arise when an equine could react out of character. As this is known, there would be a reasonable expectation that any safety equipment that is designed to release during an incident would be tested in these extreme conditions.

If a health and safety incident is reasonably foreseeable in the UK:

Please note 'employer' in the instance of RDA does refer to a Group

- Employers have a statutory duty under HSWA 1974 and associated regulations to prevent it.
- Failure to address it can result in criminal liability (HSE enforcement) or civil liability (negligence).
- The standard is "reasonably practicable," meaning action is expected if the risk is foreseeable and the cost is not disproportionate.
- If a risk is foreseeable, then employers must take steps to mitigate the risk.

- There must be an assessment of any foreseeable risk of the applied mitigations. In this case any safety equipment must be tested to explore any potential problems, especially under extreme conditions.

Health and safety developments and expectations have changed significantly over the last few decades. Practices once considered acceptable may now be regarded as unsafe or disproportionate. Today's environment is characterised by increased scrutiny and a higher risk of litigation which means trustees are more exposed. It is therefore important to take active steps to provide protection.

Working hard to find the right solutions

- It is important to acknowledge that when the decision was taken for participants to no longer be strapped in the carriage without a means to quick release during incident, there were limited products available to support some individuals to continue to drive.
- It would not however, have been reasonable or responsible to delay this decision based on the foreseeable risk.
- The impact is that some individuals could no longer drive and there is understanding and empathy of how difficult this has been for Groups, participants, and their support networks.
- Since the position statement in June 2024. It would have been practically difficult for individual Groups to invest the time and money to develop equipment that has been robustly tested, and so RDA has commissioned two separate prototypes to support Groups.
- We must not underestimate this task, the need to be confident in solutions that have been suitably tested ensures the safety of participants and the protection of Groups.

Robust Testing

In consultation with the CD network. the overall goal is to produce products that balance secure support during use with fast, intuitive release during emergencies.

The legal expectation is that safety products must be designed, tested, and proven to work effectively and reliably during their intended use and foreseeable extreme conditions. If a product fails under conditions that could reasonably be anticipated, it risks being deemed defective in law.

Even though new options may feel slow to arrive, there is not an agreed industry standard. That is why we need to take our time and use a careful, scientific process. Each product is being checked in stages to make sure it aligns with expectations in law:

- Stage One – Prototypes: Two different designs have been created. Both are designed to be quick to use and help keep participants safely secured.
- Stage Two – Feedback from CD Groups and Regional CD Representatives: The Carriage Driving Advisory Group, Regional Driving Representative, and some Groups have tested one prototype for fit and comfort. They looked at how well it works and how easy it was to release. Testing so far has been positive.
- Stage Three – Real-life testing: This will take place in the autumn, using extreme conditions to check safety and reliability.
- Stage Four – Scientific testing: The designs will then be tested in a lab to measure force, weight, and stress. RDA UK is speaking with testing companies to plan the timeline and cost of this stage.
- Stage Five – Testing in a practical environment – Testing in a range of practical scenarios in an RDA setting.
- Stage Six – Training – Adequate education and training of use.

Any equipment agreed for use will as a minimum need to go through this process.

Our endeavours to be inclusive

We recognise the importance of inclusion and are committed to creating environments where everyone feels welcome and supported.

However, it is also essential to acknowledge that inclusion must be balanced with safety considerations. While every effort is made to ensure participation and equal access, there may be circumstances where full inclusion is not possible due to risks to the well-being or safety of individuals or others.

This is sensitive and emotive, but it is important to recognise that it is not about compromising inclusivity, rather it is about applying reasonable safety-based limitations. Similar to how someone with severe vision loss, narcolepsy, or uncontrolled heart conditions might also face UK driving restrictions.

Every person and their needs are different. Solutions are being developed but Groups must prepare themselves for the possibility that solutions may not be able to be found for every individual that ensure that they are comfortable and safe.

Supporting participants in different ways

Everyone's motivation for riding or driving is different. In some cases, it is recognised that driving provides freedom and independence. For many others, their connection with RDA is positively benefited because of social connections and connections with horses and nature. All of which has proven to improve mental well-being.

We urge Groups to consider alternative ways to provide social and equine connection if a participant cannot drive. This may be through an alternative RDA programme such as Horse Care or Tea with a Pony.

RDA UK is here to support groups to consider a range of programmes that could support participants.

Does everyone need to wear a harness or belt?

The guidance released in June 2024 applies to those who were required to be strapped during activity. The decision on whether somebody requires a harness or seatbelt (that must be able to be released quickly) should be based on a risk assessment and the Group's personal understanding of a participant and their needs. This should be led by the coach in consultation with regional physiotherapy, GP's, or occupational therapists.

Waivers

Signing waivers cannot replace the legal 'duty of care' to ensure safety and manage risks appropriately. The most effective way to prevent liability is to proactively manage risks. This includes taking reasonable steps to address all foreseeable dangers.

A waiver cannot, therefore, substitute a quick-release harness or belt.

What was the rationale for the position statement that refrained from tying or strapping participants during driving

There are several principles that we are confident all can agree on, that govern this important debate:

- Any activity involving horses comes with inherent risk.
- It is the correct logical and responsible position to take a safety led approach, to protect all individuals involved in RDA activity.
- Whilst occurrences may be limited, the impact of the risk to participants and volunteers could be devastating (most likely fatal) and for that reason we all have a responsibility to work with a safety framework.
- RDA must not stand alone in our approach, British Carriage Driving and the British Driving Society do not permit strapping, this precedent takes a safety led approach and at the time put RDA and group trustees in a position that was difficult to defend should an accident arise.

The decision was logical but difficult. The original decision was confirmed by the CD Advisory Group in June 2024, following consultation that started in December 2021 and continued into August 2022.

In November 2024, all CD Regional Reps met and unanimously confirmed their commitment to the communicated decision.

The identified risk that led to the position statement

Any activity involving horses comes with inherent risk, they are flight animals. The risk increases when the horse's vision is restricted (for example, by blinkers) which can reduce their awareness and make them more likely to panic. Incidents can arise in a range of everyday situations, such as:

- A sudden noise, movement, or unfamiliar object causing the horse to spook.
- A loss of balance in the carriage (e.g. on uneven ground or at a corner) leading to instability or tipping.
- Tack or harness failure resulting in loss of control
- The equine reacting unpredictably when moving off, stopping, or changing pace.

If a carriage were to tip or a coach were to be ejected, the risk increases significantly. Without the coach in control, a horse in panic could bolt. With a participant seat-belted into place, they would be unable to move clear of danger, creating the potential for devastating consequences.

Although research is limited, the potential consequences for participants and volunteers are serious and, in the worst cases, could be fatal. It is therefore vital that all involved take shared responsibility for operating within a consistent safety framework.

CD carries inherent risk. To manage this effectively, every participant must undergo a comprehensive assessment before driving. This assessment should be formally documented in their Participant Assessment Form and must specify the equipment required. This should include any adaptations, or stability aids necessary to safeguard both the participant and the RDA Group.

Next Steps

- Testing is ongoing. We aim to have at least one product available for circulation to Groups ready for the spring. This will depend on the timeline with external testers.
- Planning is underway to host 4 proposed CD training days so that we can effectively support CD Groups.
- We will host two separate online calls to discuss the development of safety equipment in the Autumn. Dates will be circulated by the end of September.