

Opening statement
Denis Duggan, Chief Executive, Horse Sport Ireland

I would like to thank the Chairman, Deputy Cahill and the Members of Committee for the invitation to discuss Horse Sport Ireland and our role in the future strategy for the sport horse industry and its development going forward. Before we begin, I'm joined today by our Chairman Michael Dowling, independent director Dr. Kevin Smyth and members of the senior management team, Dr. Sonja Egan, Head of Breeding, Innovation & Development and Avalon Everett, Head of Sport, Legal and Governance. Today, we will provide an overview of the background and functions of HSI, as well as our vision for the future.

The future of the Sport Horse Industry in Ireland should be a matter of significant importance to our nation. As we chart the course ahead, it is crucial that we recognise the pivotal role this industry plays in our agricultural landscape, our economy, and our cultural heritage.

Firstly, for ease of differentiation it is best to think of Thoroughbred as the horses that race, and for which Horse Racing Ireland have authority; and the Irish Standardbred Trotter which dominates Irish Harness Racing, under the authority of the Irish Harness Racing Association, whereas the sport horse industry we are discussing today is everything else, and dominated by the main equestrian Olympic sports of show jumping, eventing and dressage.

To fully understand the current functions and role of Horse Sport Ireland, it may be helpful to Committee to know some of the history of the sport horse industry and the evolution of the State involvement and support to the sector which we have included as an appendix to the opening statement for Members reference.

As members will be aware, Horse Sport Ireland was formed in 2006 after the effective merger of the former Equestrian Federation of Ireland and former the studbook functions of the Irish Horse Board. Ten years after the formation, the Department of Agriculture, Food & Marine, commissioned international consultancy firm Indecon in 2016, to review certain matters related to Horse Sport Ireland as an entity central to the sport horse industry. The report aimed to strike a balance between representative functions and developing commercial opportunities, enhancing cooperation, and maximizing the sector's contribution to the economy. HSI proactively implemented the recommendations of the Indecon Report from August 2017 to July 2018, following which a significant restructuring of the HSI Board took place, reducing the number of members from 20 since 2008 to 9 from 2018 as recommended by Indecon.

While today is about looking to the future, the Members will be aware that the years after Indecon were turbulent for Horse Sport Ireland. The organisation was marred with multiple crisis' arising from within the industry and from within the Board itself. The lack of defined leadership was among a range of constant issues.

As the members will be aware, such issues became very public last November and ultimately the entire Board of Directors put in place in 2018 post Indecon resigned over a 1-2 week period.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine appointed four independent directors in December 2022. As I mentioned earlier, we are joined today by our new Chair Michael Dowling, and his fellow

independent director Dr. Kevin Smyth. Professor Niamh Brennan and Zoe Kavanagh complete the current members of the Board of Directors appointed by Minister McConalogue.

The HSI Board of Directors, effective December 2022, are undertaking an in depth review of the governance structure of Horse Sport Ireland. The review is currently focused on the appointment of Directors arising from the industry and whether the appointment process as recommended by Indecon has served the organisation well or requires adjustment. Earlier this week, (week commencing June 19th), the Board of Horse Sport Ireland initiated a public consultation process on proposed new methodologies for the selection and appointment of directors originating from the industry. Post Indecon in 2018, four industry directors were elected from within four advisory councils by the membership of those councils. As part of the ongoing review, and in keeping with the good governance principle of having a skills based board, the Board of Directors has published a consultation paper to seek stakeholder & industry views on proposed changes to the selection process for industry derived directors. In summary, it is proposed that Horse Sport Ireland will move to a skills based board, with an open call to all equestrians to apply to become directors. Once a prospective candidate is a member of one of the 30 affiliated organisations to HSI, or a member of active stakeholder group within the equestrian community, one can apply directly for consideration as a director. It is further proposed that an external selection committee will select and recommend the most suitable candidates to the HSI Board of Directors for appointment based on the skills needs of the board. The selection committee will be minded ensure gender balance. The open call gives every equestrian the opportunity to apply for consideration as a director. It broadens the pool of skilled people available and willing to join the board of directors of a complex organisation.

Strategy

Most Irish people of a certain generation have very fond memories of watching the likes of Eddie Macken, the late Paul Darragh, Jessica Kurten, Tommy Wade, Lt. Col Ned Campion, to the current generation of riders such as Shane & Trevor Breen, Niamh McEvoy, Jessica Burke, Conor Swail, Shane Sweetman, Cian O'Connor, Max Wachman and others. The Irish sport horse industry has long been a source of immense pride for our nation. With a rich history deeply intertwined with our equestrian tradition, it has propelled Ireland to the forefront of global recognition. Our horses are revered for their exceptional athleticism, temperament, versatility, and competitive spirit, qualities that have brought glory to our riders and prestige to our nation.

Moving onto the future strategy, the Irish sport horse industry in Ireland holds immense significance, not only for its cultural and sporting value but also for its economic contributions. Last year, the Central Statistics Office reported export sales of horses as worth €400m to the Irish economy. It is estimated by Irish Thoroughbred Marketing that €215m in Thoroughbred export sales was achieved, leaving the balance of €185m in exports of Sport Horses. The industry is worth nearly €1bn annually to the Irish economy and is spread across every county in Ireland, where approximately 15,000 jobs are supported.

As we contemplate the road ahead, we must confront the challenges and seize the opportunities that lie before us. The landscape of the equine industry is rapidly evolving, and we must adapt and pivot our strategies to ensure the continued success and sustainable growth of the Irish sport horse industry.

Our vision for the future must be twofold: to maintain and strengthen our global leadership in sport horse breeding, and to foster an ecosystem that supports the development and nurturing of talent across all segments of the industry. We must strive for excellence in breeding, production, and competition, while simultaneously ensuring the well-being of our horses and promoting a diverse and inclusive environment for all participants.

To achieve these objectives, we must invest in research and development, harnessing the power of cutting-edge technologies and scientific advancements. By leveraging genetic research, we can further enhance the quality and performance of our sport horses, breeding generations that surpass their predecessors in excellence. Members of the committee will be well versed in the genetic research and scientific advances made by ICBF in the cattle sector. Horse Sport Ireland are leading the implementation of similar genetic research funded by DAFM in the equine industry in Ireland. We are stepping out a hugely ambitious and world-first programme that will ensure that Irish equine farming remains the most pioneering sport horse sector in the world. This programme is the outcome of constructive engagement domestically with the other DAFM equine studbooks including the Connemara Pony Breeders Society, Leisure Horse Ireland, Warmblood Studbook of Ireland, and others.

We must prioritise the welfare and care of our equine partners. Members will be familiar with the concept of social licence and how other industries are meeting the challenges associated with maintaining a social licence to operate. Equestrianism is no different, Horse Sport Ireland is actively engaged at European level through the European Equestrian Federation at exploring the many challenges and responses that exist to assist equestrianism maintain its social licence to operate for athletes, horse owners, trainers, and producers. Such prospective initiatives included codified frameworks of standards and training programmes which will endeavour guarantee the highest standards of welfare throughout the industry.

Moreover, fostering a culture of inclusivity and accessibility should be the pillars of our strategy. We must foster an environment that enables individuals from all backgrounds to participate in the sport horse industry. This means expanding educational opportunities, supporting grassroots initiatives, and promoting diversity in our training programs and competitions. By nurturing talent across all socio-economic strata, we can ensure that our industry thrives with fresh perspectives, ideas, and contributions. To that end, Horse Sport Ireland with financial support from Sport Ireland provides grant funding on an annual basis to the 30 affiliate bodies to encourage grassroots participation in our sports. Furthermore, it is essential that we strengthen our international collaborations. Building strong partnerships with other leading equestrian nations will open doors to shared knowledge, cross-cultural exchanges, and increased trade opportunities. By fostering global alliances, we can expand the reach of our sport horses and promote Ireland as the destination of choice for riders, breeders, producers and enthusiasts worldwide. Horse Sport Ireland is fortunate to have such strong links with a range of European and International partners.

The industry encompasses a wide range of activities, including breeding, competition, and the overall promotion of equestrian sports. Recognising the industry's potential, HSI has been diligently working towards developing a robust strategy that addresses the key areas crucial to its sustainable growth. To ensure the success of the Horse Sport Industry, HSI focuses on several strategic pillars within our 2019-2024 Strategy:

- Leading the Sector
- Developing a Sustainable Funding Model
- Competing on the World Stage
- Building our Organisational Capability
- Engaging with the Equestrian Community and stakeholders

Leading the Sector:

The Irish sport horse sector represents the very essence of our heritage—a harmonious blend of our deep-rooted love for horses and our rich agricultural tradition. From the emerald fields of County Kildare and the Golden Vale of Tipperary to the spirited competitions at the RDS Dublin Horse Show,

this industry resonates with our collective spirit, defining Ireland's identity as we compete and win on the international stage.

However, in the face of a rapidly changing world, it is imperative that we adapt our strategies to ensure a prosperous future for our sport horse industry. We stand on the cusp of unprecedented opportunities, but also face formidable challenges that demand our undivided attention.

First and foremost, we must recognise that this industry is not merely a source of entertainment or economic value. It is an embodiment of our dedication to equine welfare, sustainable land management, and the preservation of our rural communities. Our commitment to these principles will guide our decisions and actions as we forge ahead.

To that end Horse Sport Ireland under the pillar of Leading the Sector Horse Sport Ireland is prioritising the development of a (5) year action plan to roll out genomic breeding programmes; modernisation of our equine database and processing systems in preparation for e-passporting; and the prioritisation of best practice grounded in a strong scientific approach.

Horse Sport Ireland will also lead on Social Licence. Later this year, Horse Sport Ireland in partnership with the British Equestrian Federation will publish a sustainability and environmental roadmap for the equestrian industry in Britain and Ireland. The Irish dimensions of this research has been supported by the Department of Agriculture, Food & Marine. It will recognise many of the challenges the industry faces as we begin a journey to educate, inform and adapt towards net-zero carbon in 2050. At international level, the FEI, our international governing body for equestrian sport has created a welfare commission, the FEI Ethics and Well-Being Commission. The Commission will report to the FEI on its work to date in late November 2023. In tandem with that international work, later this year Horse Sport Ireland will establish a working group of experts to develop a baseline of data relevant to Social License to Operate. The group will report in 2024 and develop an industry report and action plan to protect the social licence of equestrianism in Ireland.

As an industry, much of the recommendations within the Reaching New Heights roadmap are substantially complete. This industry report will expire in 2024. Horse Sport Ireland will engage with DAFM, stakeholders and partners on a review of Reaching New Heights and on the development of the next long-term framework document for the industry.

Developing a Sustainable Funding Model

The organisation is fortunate to have excellent relationships with our primary funding bodies in Sport Ireland and Department of Agriculture, Food & Marine. Almost, €5m in funding comes annually from DAFM, with €1.5 allocated towards overheads and almost €3m in grants into the industry; approximately €2m in High Performance Sport and Core funding from Sport Ireland with additional funding year-to-year for specific purposes such as the €2.2m allocated to 19 of HSI's affiliate bodies during Covid, for example over €550,000k to Show Jumping Ireland in Covid supports. Sport Ireland also allocate Impact Funding to Horse Sport Ireland through competitive call processes which Sport Ireland manage, such funding is for High Performance only. Finally, Horse Sport Ireland funds the passporting function which is licensed by DAFM on a completely commercial basis, generating approximately €1m in revenue.

Competing on the World Stage

Our sporting teams compete on the world stage, against National Federations that are significantly more resourced than Team Ireland. Horse Sport Ireland's Team Ireland equestrian have qualified for

in Show jumping and Eventing for the Paris 2024 Olympics. The Members may be aware that our teams qualified at the first opportunity last year, they were amongst the first sports qualified for Paris, and that is the first time in nearly 50 years that Ireland qualified both jumping and eventing at the first opportunity so early in the Olympic cycle. Our entire Olympic campaigns across Showjumping, Eventing, Dressage and Para-Dressage has an approximately budget of €1m including €800k which we are deeply grateful to from Sport Ireland for along with contributions from Eventing Ireland and Dressage Ireland. While not directly an issue for the Agricultural Committee, the sports of jumping and eventing on the international stage are the effective shop window for our breeders and producers of horses which are ultimately beneficiaries of DAFM funding through HSI. The challenge for Horse Sport Ireland is always to secure significant corporate sponsorship to support our athletes compete at the highest levels, and especially those that compete on Irish-bred horses.

Our natural focus and attention within this strategic pillar is without doubt Paris in 2024. However, additional priorities over the next 18 months include the creation of high level plans for the Los Angeles and Brisbane Olympics in 2028 and 2032 respectfully.

Members may be aware that a key priority within Competing on the World Stage was the provision of a Centre of Excellence. The Organisation had identified Greenogue Equestrian Centre as a possible Centre of Excellence. Discussions during 2020 & 2021 with Greenogue Equestrian were concerned with the creation of a long lease. The procurement advice received by Horse Sport Ireland stated that a lease was outside of public procurement. However, any improvement works or construction works would have to have been tendered. Planning Permission was received for an office within Greenogue which would have enabled the relocation of staff from current facilities in Naas to Greenogue. The cost model for the project involved no capital allocation from state funds, but to enter a long-term lease to give certainty to the developer who would incur the capital expenditure after a HSI tendering process. Had a lease been agreed, the annual rent was dependent on the final construction costs. However, as construction costs were rising, no construction tender process was initiated. The CEO and CFO reviewed the financial forecasts and costs based on the rising construction costs during the summer of 2021. Based on that review, the Board of Directors decided not to proceed with the project.

Building our Organisational Capability

Several weeks ago, DAFM Secretary General Brendan Gleeson advised the PAC that the DAFM intention is to consolidate the position of the Horse Sport Ireland. Our view in Horse Sport Ireland is that DAFM and HSI Board of Directors and executive management team are ad-idem in terms our collective primary objective is to strengthen and solidify the organisation's current position and standing in the industry. It is vital that the position of the organisation is secure, stable and delivering on its purpose.

This security and stability is critical as part of the organisation's aspirations to build the organisation capabilities internally. Our objective is to solidify the position of the organisation through improving the financial stability, streamlining operations and optimising resources. We must do this to ensure that our valued staff have the necessary career development opportunities, training and development, and culture both in the organisation and within our wider customer base so that Horse Sport Ireland can attract and retained the skilled staff we need in a competitive employment market. Building our organisational capability is significantly important strategic pillar and includes key priority actions to modernise our IT infrastructure to drive a digital first approach for efficient, speedy service delivery.

Engaging with the Equestrian Community and stakeholders

The equestrian community is vast and diverse. It reaches into almost every parish of the country. There are tens of thousands of people from young children to adults involved weekly in everything

from young children learning to ride in the 163 AIRE approved riding centres, to amateur and professional athletes competing in sporting competitions every weekend. Our priorities in Horse Sport Ireland is to ensure that the community can participate in equestrian sport through our network of 30 affiliated organisations. To that end, Horse Sport Ireland administers participation funding to support specific participation projects and programmes within those affiliated organisations.

We recognise that that after the past number of years, the organisation has a body of work to do in rebuilding public trust and confidence. We will do this through our effective and efficient delivery of services such as passporting and clear straightforward communications. We are engaged in meeting the community & stakeholders around the country in a specific roadshow for breeders and producers.

It is essential that we strengthen our international collaborations, something that as the recognised National Federation for Equestrian Sport we are uniquely positioned to do through our memberships of the FEI, EEF, WBFSH and IGEQ (International Equestrian Federation; European Equestrian Federation; World Breeding Federation for Sport Horses and The International Group for Equestrian Qualifications). By continuing to building on the strong partnerships with other leading equestrian nations and by fostering global alliances, we can expand the reach of our sport horses and promote Ireland as the destination of choice for riders, breeders, and enthusiasts worldwide.

Members will be aware that in 2022 DAFM tendered for operators to provide 1) Studbook Services for five studbooks; 2) National Breeding Services & 3) Marketing of the Irish sport horse. HSI was the incumbent provided in all cases. Horse Sport Ireland successfully secured the contract to continue to provide Studbook Services and National Breeding Services. While, the Irish Horse Board Co-Operative won the tender to provide the marketing services for the Irish sport horse sector.

We hope that our presentation and opening statement gives you a flavour of the journey of innovation, sustainability, and engagement which we are embracing. By leveraging our expertise, embracing emerging technologies, and safeguarding the welfare of our horses, we will build a thriving and resilient industry that brings pride, prosperity, and joy to our nation.

In our pursuit of our strategy for the organisation and the industry, we acknowledge that we have faced immense challenges. Funding, infrastructure, governance, talent development, stakeholder engagement and satisfaction are areas that require continued attention and support from the equestrian community. HSI is committed to working closely with the Agricultural Committee, funding departments, government agencies, and industry partners to address these challenges and develop effective solutions.

In conclusion, HSI recognises the critical importance of developing a forward-looking strategy for the Irish sport horse industry. The future of the Irish sport horse industry lies in our collective hands – Governing body, athletes, owners, breeders, producers, coaches, legislators and society at large. We are dedicated to fostering growth, ensuring athlete development, promoting equine welfare, strengthening collaboration, and driving economic contributions. Together, we can create a thriving and sustainable industry that benefits not only the participants but also the broader society and economy.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this opening statement, and I am eager to engage in further discussions on this vital topic.

Appendix – History and Background

The administrative foundation of the Sport Horse Industry traces back to the Horse Industry Act 1970, which established Bord na Capall with the mandate to advise the Minister and perform various functions related to the breeding, sale, and export of horses, as well as the participation of national teams in international equestrian competitions and the licensing of riding establishments. Following the dissolution of Bord na Capall, the functions were transferred to the Minister of Agriculture, who maintained the Irish Horse Register and the listing of approved stallions through a Horse Breeding Advisory Committee.

In response to recommendations made by Mr. Michael Dowling in 2006, the Government Departments of Sport and Agriculture accepted the proposals to establish Horse Sport Ireland. In December 2006, Horse Sport Ireland was formed by dissolving the Equestrian Federation of Ireland and assuming the responsibilities for the Irish Sport Studbook, Irish Draught Studbook managed by the Irish Horse Board Co-operative, bringing together the breeding and sport sectors. HSI operates as a company limited by guarantee.

Since 2008, HSI has served as the Governing Body for equestrian sport in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, recognised by international governing bodies such as the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI), Sport Ireland, and the Olympic Federation of Ireland (OFI), and Sport Northern Ireland. In 2008, HSI took over the management and administration of the Irish Horse Register, including the Irish Sport Horse Studbook, Irish Draught Horse Studbook, and other approved studbooks. Additionally, HSI provides administration services for the Kerry Bog Pony Society in the context of their Studbook.

The primary functions of HSI encompass supporting the development and growth of the Sport Horse Industry in Ireland and internationally, acting as the national Governing Body for Equestrian Sport, maintaining the Irish Horse Register and various studbooks, administering breeding services to the sport horse industry, administering high-performance programmes, running the National Anti-Doping Program for Equestrian Sport, and operating the online database CapallOir, among other responsibilities. In essence, Horse Sport Ireland is an umbrella body for more than 30 affiliated organisations across the sport horse sector. Those organisations represent breeding societies, riding centres, Olympic sports disciplines, equestrian leisure pursuits and many others within a broad range of the overall equestrian community.

In 2015, under the then Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine, Simon Coveney, TD the Department along with HSI, the RDS and Teagasc prepared a 10-year industry strategy and roadmap to further develop the sport horse sector. This report is known as Reaching New Heights.