

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and The Marine

Wednesday 20th September 2023.

Challenges facing the Horse Sport Industry

Attending: Dressage Ireland, Eventing Ireland, ECVOA, Para Equestrian Ireland, ShowjumpingIreland.

Dear Committee Members,

We would like to thank you all for the invitation and opportunity to attend the session this evening to outline to you directly the concerns held by those that the attendees here this evening represent. Whilst there are concerns that we will address it is also important to be aware that we are also here to outline to you the aspirations, ambitions, and goals that we all envisage for the Irish Sport Horse Industry. We are all collectively focused on ensuring a vibrant and productive Equestrian Sport Horse Sector and all the bodies present this evening are singularly focused on this objective.

To briefly provide some detail on the five Bodies here,

Four of the major equestrian Sporting Bodies and Olympic Disciplines in Ireland together with the representative organisation for Equestrian Competition Venue Owners, ECVOA,

Para Equestrian Ireland: Karen Reilly & Ivor Harper

Dressage Ireland: Marguerite Kavanagh & Petra Larkin

Eventing Ireland: Nikki Potterton & Richard Eames

Equestrian Competition Venues Owners Alliance: Robert Fagan & Ciaran Glynn

ShowjumpingIreland: Ronan Corrigan & Christy Murphy

ShowjumpingIreland are the largest Equestrian Sporting organisation in Ireland, we are the Recognised Governing Body for the sport of Show jumping nationally. As such we are also an affiliate of Horse Sport Ireland who currently administer International Participation for Equestrian Sport. ShowjumpingIreland is the largest sporting affiliate and Olympic Discipline. ShowjumpingIreland are also part of the Sport Ireland Code of Governance and are listed as a Type C organisation and have entered the Sport Ireland process and are currently completing the on the journey section toward compliance. SJI currently has over 8,000 active members

Para Equestrian Ireland, (PEI), as you may be aware are the Recognised Governing Body for the promotion and inclusion in Equestrian Sports for non-able-bodied athlete's both Nationally and Internationally. As such PEI are an affiliate of Horse Sport Ireland, who currently administer International Participation for Equestrian Sport. Para Equestrian Ireland is probably the smallest of the affiliates with an Olympic Discipline. Para Equestrian Ireland are a type A organisation and a Registered Charity. PEI are required not only to subscribe to the Code of Governance for Horse Sport Ireland but are also required to run the organisation to adhere to the Charity Commissions Codes of Ethics and Governance and have successfully complied with both requirements.

Dressage Ireland is the recognised governing body for the development of Dressage on the island of Ireland and for its members overseas from amateur to Olympic level. We are an affiliate of Horse Sport Ireland who currently administer International Participation for Equestrian Sport. Dressage Ireland is a significant funding entity to Horse Sport Ireland for High Performance requirements. As a sport Dressage has grown rapidly in popularity and has almost 800 members immersed in the sport with an additional two hundred people supporting members in various roles. Dressage Ireland subscribes to the Sport Ireland Code of Governance, listed as a Type B organisation, and have completed a series of workshops on governance compliance. As an organisation Dressage Ireland are very aware of the obligations of organisations in relation to governance and work diligently to comply with the requirements of the Governance code. Our immediate and urgent concerns are for the Industry and Sporting activities.

Eventing Ireland is the recognised governing body for eventing in Ireland and is an affiliate of Horse Sport Ireland. Eventing is an Olympic sport for which we have successfully qualified for Paris 2024. The Irish Sport Horse ranks 2nd on the WBFSH Studbook Rankings for eventing. Eventing Ireland currently administers national and international eventing in Ireland, being the main point of contact for the riders and owners alike. Eventing Ireland is an organisation with strong governance. It is currently undergoing a process to fully comply with the Sport Ireland Governance Code by 2024.

ECVOA are the representative organisation of 18 of the busiest equestrian competition venues in Ireland. Formed in 2017 to address issues affecting the industry, ECVOA is the voice of the centres which host the vast majority of all equestrian activities held annually in the 32 counties. The equestrian venues which ECVOA represents are, in the main, family-owned businesses which have been developed and grown, at their own expense, by these families. With proper investment, ECVOA believes that the sports horse industry can continue to grow and contribute meaningfully to the state.

We are here today to appeal to you to provide assistance where possible, direction where necessary and to exercise your oversight role to work with us to ensure state and public investment in the Sport and Industry is utilised in a manner which will deliver the maximum benefit to the sport and industry and provide value to the exchequer. Our Sports and Industry are somewhat unique insofar that they cover a multitude of activities across all parts of Irish Society and bridge a diverse Equestrian and rural Industry. Our various bodies are made up of Breeders, Producers, Owners, Professional Competitors, Amateur competitors, families, children who compete and the many coaches, officials and volunteers show organisers and venue owners who assist in making the industry vibrant and successful. We are an active industry who also encompass and bring together members from both Rural and Urban environments and our common thread is the desire to interact in a sport that involves Horses and Ponies and develops a strong sense of responsibility, integrity and common purpose to work to improve the sport and industry. These traits are instilled from an early age as all present today encompass a huge underage body of members who are the true future of our industry.

All present also interact on daily basis with the large number of breeders nationwide and many of the breeders are indeed active members of the respective organisations. Their investment of time and resources are progressed and developed through the activities of the various bodies here. The success of the Irish Horse has been fundamentally attributable to the foundations laid and put in place by the organisations here today and we continuously look to improve and develop to retain the reputation of the Irish Horse. With our breeders we grow and develop the industry and the economy and create vital economic activity to grow and enhance the industry and all the organisations work closely with the many commercial suppliers to the industry to continuously develop opportunities to encourage further investment which will make the production of the Irish produced and bred horse more viable. Similarly all the organisations work diligently to ensure animal welfare and that the care, management and understanding of all animals needs is promoted, monitored and that any areas of concern are identified and addressed immediately. All organisations have a well-trained bank of officials who monitor and oversee these requirements and have detailed Regulations and guidelines to refer to when necessary.

All the organisations also invest heavily in the athletes who take part in our various activities, every Irish Athlete has predominantly learned their trade through the National Circuits and at the hundreds of events nationwide which run under the guidance and auspices of the various bodies here. We can be rightfully proud that the many custodians of the Sport and Industry over the last decades have produced so many Worlds Class Riders and Competitors. It is due to the vision and the energy of the hundreds of volunteers in the organisations that our Competitors across all Equestrian Activities have achieved so much and have made our country and systems the envy of the world. No other Sports can boast of having the national Flag and National Anthem played so many times each year and in so many countries worldwide. We only need to review the past few weeks where our various disciplines have brought so many European medals home to Ireland.

So far, I have given you the highs and unfortunately it is at this juncture that we must move to how we fear for the future and for the best interests of our Industry and Sports. As you may all be aware the Four Equestrian Disciplines here are all Affiliates of Horse Sport Ireland, you will note that I have not said members of Horse Sport Ireland and here lies one of what might be the issues that we are asking you to assist with. We have previously written to this Committee and indeed also to the various Ministers and Departments who have a relationship with Horse Sport Ireland and a responsibility to ensure Horse Sport Ireland carries out the role for which it was originally set up. It was originally set up as an umbrella body to enhance, support, develop and to act as a conduit to help increase state funding to the industry. It brought together the breeding and sporting bodies and the Olympic and High-Performance Disciplines transferred NGB powers to Horse Sport Ireland from the previous NGB then known as The Equestrian Federation of Ireland where all those bodies-maintained Board Seats and acted to guide and develop the International Sports from the National Governing Bodies. The initial Horse Sport Ireland structure paid heed to the need to retain the expertise necessary to develop and improve the Industry and whilst the Board was large it was also diverse, unpaid and acted in the collective best interest of the Industry and the Sports. It permitted the Affiliates to ensure that the entity was governed to deliver the maximum benefit to the Industry

and Sport whilst also allowing a large degree of communication and transparency to be maintained through the general interactions. It also meant that each affiliate felt a sense of membership due to their nominations of their direct members to the Board of Horse Sport Ireland. Whilst it might not have been perfect it would be fair to say that the initial model had the ability to develop and maintain trust and communication far better than the current model of Horse Sport Ireland.

The current Structure of Horse Sport Ireland and the direction of travel will more than ever distance the Body from its Industry and Sporting Stakeholders and will bring into question how and why the bodies would continue to interact with it as the current plans seek to distance the ability of the stakeholders to influence their Sports and Industry. The current and proposed Structures of HSI are as many believe and have highlighted flawed and not fit for purpose. The recent history of HSI shows it is driven towards administration and self-preservation with a total lack of understanding of the industry or its pressing needs. One only has to look at the criteria the Board of HSI are proposing to engage to select its future members of the Board of HSI. This current direction must be halted, and an Industry led review of their actual needs carried out with the aspiration of rebuilding a Horse Sport Ireland entity that would once again be truly representative of the Industry and Sport. The distinct lack of relevant equestrian expertise within HSI both at Executive and Board level is a serious cause for concern to the Equestrian Industry. Decisions being made by HSI that affect the future viability of our Sport from a sustainability perspective are a cause for great anxiety. We must at all costs avoid a situation that could continue to cause harm or fracture to the Sport and Industry.

Communication and Consultation is to be frank poor between those here today and Horse Sport Ireland, some will state that we are willing to meet, or we have met but lip service is not enough and if the best return on investment and value for money is to be achieved it is essential that we stop duplicating tasks. A significant amount of money is consumed by administration and whilst many of those within Horse Sport Ireland are diligent and hardworking their efforts do not reap the reward that could be achieved due to the lack of interaction, consultation and co-operation with the relevant bodies who run the sports on a daily basis nationally.

There is concern that we are seeing a further distancing from the industry and whilst some activities do take place between Horse Sport Ireland and the Affiliates they are in some instances as previously mentioned ill-conceived and badly planned when they come to the affiliates, these are areas that we might be able to discuss further later. We would also harbour serious concerns relating to the ability of Horse Sport Ireland in its current form to understand the actual functioning of the Industry, Stakeholders and Affiliates and we are informed that these entities are regularly referred to as being “unmanageable” “ungovernable”. This has been an easy sell as the funding entities have never met the said bodies to understand their aims and goals. Bodies have frequently been referred to as being troublesome and badly managed, but this is far from true, all the bodies are made up of democratically elected persons in the same manner as our Dail and Government and these elected members are required to act in the best interests of their members and be fully accountable to them. These people take their duty of care toward member assets extremely seriously and expect full transparency and accountability from those they interact with.

Now we ask you to look at the entity Horse Sport Ireland in its current form and ask the question, does it conform to the same high standards? did you as members of the Dail, Seanad and this committee receive the information requested from Horse Sport Ireland when they sat before you several months ago? All the Bodies present today can confirm that they have experienced serious difficulties in obtaining answers to quinine queries and requests. Avoidance of action on serious Governance issues and various interactions and items of correspondence which are well below the standard expected of an organisation which seeks to maintain the title of NGB and Industry Representative to Government.

As budget 2024 is imminent one must also ask what consultation has taken place between the State funded Bodies and the Industry Stakeholders and Affiliated to understand the actual Industry needs, the answer is NONE.

Whilst maybe not this committee's area we must highlight the serious concerns all Olympic Disciplines hold in relation to the Management and support of the High-Performance Programmes. Sport Ireland provides significant funding to Horse Sport Ireland and Affiliates are expected to provide funding toward a total budget. We would all wish to see additional funding available, particularly to assist our athletes develop their sporting careers through supports and bursaries. We are noted as being medal winners at all levels and across all age categories. The shocking reality is that all this is achieved on the backs of families and supporters funding and supporting the Irish Flag and the country abroad. This phenomenal success is as stated due to the sound principles and competitions together with training, education and development created at NATIONAL level by the Bodies here before you today. We want this success to grow and to allow those that may not have the resources available to get a chance to shine, this will not happen under the current structure being proposed by Horse Sport Ireland and the direction being adopted by Horse Sport Ireland under the guise of Governance review and improvement needs to be suspended and the funding entities need to engage with the Stakeholders , National Governing Bodies and the Industry to establish the best method to support and develop the Industry in a constructive and inclusive manner. There is without doubt a place in this process for Horse Sport Ireland but not with its current direction , it needs to retrace its steps to where it was at one time on solid ground with the Industry and Stakeholders rather than believing that it there to dictate terms to those same bodies A strategic plan needs to reflect what is needed for the future of the Industry, based on clear objectives for the Industry that captures future capital development, the Sport and the breeding aspects of our industry.

A strategic Plan needs to focus on the long term and examine how the above can be achieved and what supports can be provided.

We believe that through direct consultation with the Departments of Agriculture and Sport a more beneficial model of funding could be achieved and that such funding could help attract additional outside development funding. The bodies here today are eager to develop and improve the Sport, Industry and to maximise the understanding of the Departments toward the needs and potential of our sports and industry. We will facilitate and action this medium, and we urge you to use your good offices to encourage and direct the relevant Ministers, departments and officials to interact in a meaningful way. We also ask you to bring to their attention that radical change is needed but that change must come with the input, support and blessing of those that it will most impact.

Once again, we thank you for this invitation and we hope that from this presentation we will see progress actioned in a manner that is inclusive and that recognises the importance of the knowledge available through the Bodies before you and the vast grassroots memberships of each who cross the entire industry. We will be happy to address and answer any questions that you have relating to the Industry, Sport and entities and people involved in the industry.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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