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**Opening Statement**

**Joint Committee on Transport and Communication Networks**

**Chris Horn**

**12<sup>th</sup> October, 2020**

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I am grateful to the members of the Joint Committee for their courteous invitation to appear. I speak to you today in my role as the former Chairman of the Aviation Taskforce (TF), which operated during June and early July last.

The TF produced both an Interim and Final Report. We deliberately kept the format of both reports reasonably short. I would hope that members may have had an opportunity to appraise them, particularly the Final Report. I believe that the recommendations therein are reasonably succinct, and I will not repeat them here.

As I explained to the Joint Committee Secretariat, I have no direct involvement in the aviation industry. Rather, my background is in software engineering and entrepreneurship. More recently, I have been involved in venture capital especially focussed on early stage technology companies in Ireland. I am currently a Venture Partner at Atlantic Bridge.

By way of full disclosure, one of the start-ups with which I am involved as a Non-executive Director is Coras.io, a company which offers ancillary revenue (such as event tickets, theatre, and live sport tickets) to international airlines, including Ryanair. In my past career, I was co-founder and CEO of the Nasdaq-listed IONA Technologies which amongst its many customers and partners worldwide, was a major supplier to the manufacturing systems across the Boeing Commercial Aircraft Group from 1996 to 2008. I no longer have any involvement with Boeing.

I was contacted, quite out of the blue from my perspective, by the former Minister of Transport, Tourism and Sport, Shane Ross, on 8<sup>th</sup> June last to ask whether I would consider becoming the Chairman of an Aviation Taskforce, which was being assembled from across the Irish aviation sector to produce recommendations to Government for the sector in the light of Covid-19. The Minister noted a strong desire to appoint a Chairperson from outside of the sector. He also noted that the work of the Taskforce was urgently required, and that he hoped that it could produce its recommendations in an efficient manner.

Having reflected overnight, and on the basis that the duration of the Taskforce would be relatively short, I rang the Minister back on the 9<sup>th</sup> June and gave my consent. I then (virtually) met with the Mr Fintan Towey and Mr Ronan Gallagher of the Department for a further briefing on the proposed mechanics of the process. I also spent most of 11<sup>th</sup> June on a number of one on one calls with as many of the 14 appointed members of the Taskforce as I could reach at short notice, so as both to introduce myself and to directly hear their own various assessment of the challenges then facing the sector.

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The TF membership was by invitation of the Minister and I had no role in its determination. As the Committee may be aware, the TF membership included senior representatives of both Aer Lingus and Ryanair; the DAA; Shannon and Ireland West airports; ICTU; the aviation leasing sector; the maintenance, repair and overhaul sector; the aviation regulator; and other experts. Several of the TF members have already addressed this Committee.

Our first meeting was held (virtually) on the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> June. All 14 members of the TF spoke and contributed their views. I noted that the work was urgent, and that we should collectively strive to produce an agreed set of Interim Recommendations within two weeks.

The minutes of that meeting, and of all our subsequent meetings, were kindly published via the TF Secretariat on the Department's website.

We also invited interested parties not directly represented on the TF, to make written submissions for our collective consideration. We received some 26 submissions in all, and all were also then published on the web site.

We continued to hold (virtual) meetings every Friday, for four weeks: June 12<sup>th</sup>, June 19<sup>th</sup>, June 26<sup>th</sup> and July 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Our Interim Report was finalised the weekend after our second meeting, and was made available to Government via the Minister, by the evening of Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> June. It was then published on the Department's web site.

Our Final Report was submitted to Government on July 7<sup>th</sup> and published via the Department's web site on July 10<sup>th</sup>.

I insisted that we reach unanimity for their contents, so that all members of the TF could support each and every recommendation. If we had failed to reach consensus on a particular issue, then that item would not have been included in our reports.

On July 10<sup>th</sup>, a (virtual) meeting to brief Minister for Transport Eamon Ryan and Minister of State Hildegard Naughton was held. In mid-July, the TF was advised by the Secretariat that a meeting between the Secretary to the Government, the Deputy CMO and senior officials of the Departments of Transport and of Public Expenditure and Reform, and the TF members would be (virtually) held.

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That meeting duly occurred on July 30<sup>th</sup>, although the Acting CMO did not in fact attend. The TF members used the opportunity to brief the officials on the final TF recommendations (of July 7<sup>th</sup>) and industry developments since then.

The TF has not subsequently convened (since July 30<sup>th</sup>).

I have already thanked the TF members, and the TF Secretariat, for all their help and support in producing the two Reports but use this opportunity to do so again. The atmosphere at all times was highly professional and engaged, despite the competitive background of some of the members.

I should gently note that my own involvement was entirely pro bono, and I charged no expenses for my role.

As I noted above, I have no direct involvement in the aviation sector. However as an entrepreneur working with high potential technology start-ups founded in Ireland, I would take the opportunity to re-iterate how important international connectivity is to the Irish economy. It is indeed possible to do some routine business purely via the web and virtual conference calls. However it is extremely challenging to internationally develop new business relationships, to expand sales to new customers, to nurture new commercial partnerships, to internationally recruit, and to raise financing capital and further investment all without face to face meetings. It is even more concerning when competitors in other jurisdictions may be able to internationally travel with less restrictions than currently apply here in Ireland. All of these challenges are acutely felt by the start-ups with which I am involved, and I believe also right across the high potential technology start-up sector.

I thank the Committee for their interest, and would be happy to take any questions.

Chris Horn