

**Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine meeting on the topic of
welfare and treatment of horses and their traceability.**

**Opening Statement by Michael Sheahan, Department of Agriculture, Food and the
Marine.**

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Leinster House

Dublin 2

I would like to thank the Chairman for this invitation to address the Committee in relation to the topic of welfare and treatment of horses and their traceability.

I am joined this evening by my colleagues James Choiseul, Director, Ms Avril Hobson, Senior Superintending Veterinary Inspector and Ms Frances MacAodhain, Principal Officer.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine takes its overarching responsibility regarding animal welfare policy in Ireland and in relation to the welfare of horses most seriously and I welcome the opportunity to demonstrate our on-going commitment in this regard. The Committee's request to discuss this topic with reference to equine traceability is also welcome. Traceability is an important component which supports animal health, animal welfare and the integrity of the food chain and again I can share with the Committee the on-going efforts of the Department, in parallel with the wider EU approach, to improve traceability in the equine sector.

I am conscious that our discussions today are framed by the recent RTE programme and the shocking and distressing footage that was broadcast showing appalling mistreatment of horses. The public reaction to the scenes broadcast has understandably been one of universal revulsion. The Department shares this view and condemns any mistreatment of horses. The Department has commenced an investigation into these matters with the support of An Garda Síochána and we can assure the members of the Committee and the general public that the full force of the law will apply to those responsible.

It is understandable that scenes like those broadcast prompt people to question how this happened and whether the Department as the regulator should itself have identified such activity. This is something we have been reflecting on ourselves.

Unfortunately, despite making very significant progress in the area of animal welfare over recent decades, ill treatment of and cruelty to animals does continue in our society. The 2013 Animal Health and Welfare Act was a very progressive piece of legislation. The Department has in excess of 200 officers authorised under the Act who during the course of their work carry out welfare inspections around the country and are out on the ground every day, providing advice and support to the keepers of animals. Members of An Garda Síochána and the Customs Service are authorised officers, and under a service level agreement inspectors of the Irish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ISPCA), the Dublin Society for

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (DSPCA), the Irish Horse Racing Regulatory Board (IHRB) and Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCE) are also authorised under the Act. The Local Authorities are also empowered to appoint authorised officers under the Act.

Authorised officers regularly carry out inspections and investigations and work towards ensuring the welfare of animals and legislative compliance, with interventions ranging from advice, to warning and legal compliance notices. When necessary, legal sanctions are imposed, and prosecutions are taken when other efforts to ensure compliance have failed or there is blatant disregard for an animal's welfare. Since the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 came into operation in March 2014, 162 individuals have been successfully prosecuted. This figure includes 18 equine related prosecutions. A number of other investigations are ongoing.

In 2021, Minister McConalogue launched "*Working Together for Animal Welfare*", Ireland's Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025. This is Ireland's first stand-alone animal welfare strategy, and it reflects the significant animal welfare commitments in the Programme for Government.

The Department is committed to supporting the welfare of equines and provides support to a number of urban horse projects nationwide. This gives effect to the Programme for Government commitment to develop additional urban horse welfare programmes, working with local authorities, charities and community stakeholders. These projects have proven very successful and are aimed specifically at equine welfare and marginalised communities. The projects can foster community leadership and education in responsible horse ownership. These projects greatly benefit the welfare of equines and of young people from disadvantaged communities or backgrounds. From 2015 to date a total of over €1,860,00 has been spent on urban horse projects by the Department, with €350,000 allocated for these projects for 2024.

In December last, the Minister provided some €6 million to support the work of 101 animal welfare charities. Of this, €3.372 million went to 24 organisations who have activities that directly support horse or equid welfare. This funding recognises the importance of the role such charities play in education, awareness raising and dissemination of knowledge to improve animal welfare. The supports provided to these organisations help with actions focused on preventing poor horse welfare outcomes – 'prevention being better than cure'.

The work of these charities and of our own officers show however that there is still work to be done in better ensuring the welfare of animals across our society. For example, of the 1,609 animal welfare complaints received by the Department's animal welfare helpline in 2023, 635 related to horses, all of which are followed up.

With regard to the specifics highlighted on the RTE Primetime programme, you will now be aware that the majority of the recorded footage took place in a building adjacent to but not part of the approved Shannonside slaughter plant. This holding is separate from the Department approved slaughter facility where the Department had a permanent presence during the day on which animals were being slaughtered – usually one day a week. This building was not the slaughterhouse lairage where the Department inspected and carried out its ante-mortem checks on the animals being presented for slaughter. It was not subject to the specific regulations that govern slaughter plants, however it was subject to general animal welfare regulations that apply to all holdings where animals are kept. We have asked RTE to provide the Department with all footage and any other evidence they may have, and arrangements for the handover of the footage are in train. The events witnessed are now subject to a live criminal investigation and I can assure members that the investigation will be thorough.

It may be helpful to the Committee if I explain in detail the controls that are applied by the Department at the slaughterhouse. The Department staff in the slaughter plant take their responsibility to protect the food chain and ensure animal welfare extremely seriously and carry out official controls as required under food and feed hygiene law to ensure that the human food chain is protected and that the horses presented to them meet welfare standards.

On the day of slaughter experienced Department staff - a veterinary inspector and at least two technical officers - attend the plant from early morning. One technical officer carries out an inspection of the facility to evaluate its cleanliness and that it is suitable to allow slaughter take place, including checking that the sterilizers and chills are functioning. The veterinary inspector and other technical officer, with the assistance of an employee of the food business operator, undertake a detailed ante-mortem examination of each horse on an individual basis. This involves

- scanning the horse for a microchip.
- cross checking the microchip with the identification document.
- checking markings of the horse against the presented identity document.
- evaluation of age of the animal and cross checking with the identity document.
- checking the medicines page on the identification document to ensure that the animal has not been excluded from the food chain.
- cross checking the microchip against the central equine database to ensure that the animal has not been excluded from the food chain.
- checking and evaluating the food chain information provided by the animal keeper.
- undertaking a veterinary assessment of each animal from an animal health and animal welfare perspective, to determine its suitability and fitness for slaughter for human consumption.

If the animal passes all ante-mortem checks they move forward for slaughter, at which time post-mortem examinations are carried out by a veterinary inspector, samples are taken for trichinella testing and, where relevant, for checks for residues as part of the national residue control plan. Further checks on the microchips are carried out and the piece of the carcass in the neck area in which the microchip is located is removed and sent for destruction. Further verification checks on age may also be performed at this stage.

If all checks are passed successfully, the carcasses are passed for human consumption; if any checks fail at any stage, the carcasses are rejected, excluded from the food chain and sent forward as animal by-products.

Turning to the over-arching issue of traceability - Ireland's equine traceability system operates within the requirements of and is fully in compliance with the requirements of EU law. In recognition of the importance of traceability to equine health, equine welfare and the integrity of the food chain, the Department has placed significant focus on improving equine traceability in recent years. There have been a number of significant advances including:

- the introduction of a central equine database in 2013.
- improved security features on equine passports in 2014.

- Also in 2014, the Department made it a legal requirement to register all premises where equines are kept.
- In 2021, the first equine census was carried out and this was repeated in 2022 and 2023.
- A portal to check the validity of equine microchips or passports numbers was launched in 2023, (this allows anyone check a microchip against the Irish central equine database), and
- 2023 also saw the Department provide funding to Passport Issuing Organisations to support the development and introduction of e-passports, which will help simplify the updating of information in relation to the movement of equines.

The Department acknowledges that our work in relation to equine traceability system is far from over, but these developments, particularly the recent ones in relation to technology and e-passports will continue to move equine traceability forward.

Notwithstanding all the improvement and advances, the Prime Time programme prompts us in the Department to critically examine what more needs to be done. Whilst the appalling abuse of animals witnessed is clearly a national issue, the questions posed about the robustness and effectiveness of the EU traceability system, which itself is among the best in world, is a broader issue. It is clear that we need to work with the EU Commission and other Member States to further improve this system. The EU Agri-Food Fraud network is due to meet on this Wednesday (26th June) to consider from an EU perspective the issues raised in the Prime Time programme.

Considerable progress has been made over the last decade at National and EU level in tightening up on equine traceability, and I have outlined some of those measures. The recent programme has shown us, and our EU colleagues, that we need to do more, and we will.

Considerable progress has also been made over the last decade in dealing with the significant unwanted horse problems we had. The scale of the unwanted horse problem, which is one factor underlying horse welfare issues, is now considerably smaller than it was a decade ago. The numbers of stray/abandoned horses seized by Local Authorities has fallen considerably over the last decade, from 4,727 in 2013 to 432 in 2023. There are a number of reasons for this very significant decrease in unwanted horses- but at least some credit must go those

horse welfare organisations who have worked hard to reduce indiscriminate horse breeding which was a major cause of the problem. The welfare groups, supported by the Department have worked to educate horse owners to try to steer them away from indiscriminate breeding, but they have also provided very practical support, by organising subsidised horse castration clinics (often with subsidised horse microchipping/passporting as well). These initiatives have had a real, lasting and hugely positive impact on the unwanted horse situation in this country.

I hope that I have given members of the Committee an overview of the Department's activities in support of horse welfare and the improvement of equine traceability.

I will conclude by re-stating the Department's commitment to improving horse welfare and traceability. We are determined to take what lessons we need to from the RTE programme and use this as a catalyst for positive change for how we regulate horses in Ireland.

My colleagues and I will be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.

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