

Down Royal Racecourse
Submission to the AERA Committee
Horse Racing Bill

Introduction

- Down Royal Racecourse Limited (DRPR) commenced operation of the racetrack in January 2019
- Emma Meehan is the Chief Executive Officer of Down Royal Racecourse

Executive Summary

Down Royal Racecourse has been ineligible for support from the Horse Racing Fund since the change in operator in 2019. Despite the lack of access to the Horse Racing Fund, since Down Royal Racecourse Limited (DRPR) commenced operation of the racetrack in January 2019, an investment of c. £588,000 has been made in infrastructure and health and safety measures to date with further investment required for future sustainability. A further £212,000 per annum has been paid out in prize monies by the racecourse in respect of the only Northern Irish Grade-1 racing festival.

The affects of the Covid-19 pandemic have led to a 66% decrease in turnover at Down Royal Racecourse. During this time, Down Royal Racecourse Limited has secured internal group loans to maintain Grade-1 prize funds and invest in infrastructure and health & safety measures. This is not sustainable without access to the Horse Racing Fund.

Down Royal Racecourse Limited is proud of the successes achieved since operation of the racetrack commenced in January 2019, which have directly supported the objectives of the Fund. We have secured Stadium Status, increased attendance at race meetings year-on-year, gained an 80% increase in sponsorship investment, and increased the number of employees.

We are ambitious for a post-pandemic recovery. We aim to secure a 13th race day to add to our exciting racing calendar, in addition to increased attendance at race days year-on-year and increasing employment in line with the maturation of the business.

In order for us to ensure this, it is vital that we regain access to the Horse Racing Fund in a timely manner, as any further delay will have a negative impact on the sustainability of the Racecourse.

The Objectives of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill

Amend the named operator of Down Royal racecourse in the Horse Racing (Northern Ireland) Order 1990

1. Down Royal Racecourse has been ineligible for support from the Horse Racing Fund since the change of operator in 2019. As referenced by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the 1990 Order specifically names the “Government and Freeman of the Corporation of Horse Breeders, (the Corporation)” as the beneficial operator of Down Royal Racecourse. The Corporation no longer has any operational role at Down Royal Racecourse, due to this we have been unable to receive vital payments from the Horse Racing Fund since

the change in operator in 2019. In order for Down Royal Racecourse to receive payments from the Horse Racing Order, the named operator on the Order must be changed.

Facilitate Fund payments to both Down Royal and Downpatrick racecourses

2. The Horse Racing Fund is vital to the sustainability of both Down Royal and Downpatrick racecourses. The Horse Racing Fund is vital for providing and improving technical services with respect to the operation of racing; ensuring the safety of spectators at race meetings of the proper conduct of racing; and providing / supplementing prize money.
3. Whilst the Horse Racing Fund has not been available to Down Royal Racecourse, DRPR has secured internal group loans to maintain Grade-1 prize funds and invest in infrastructure and health & safety measures; but this will not be sustainable without access to the Horse Racing Fund.

Provide a legal framework to bring about future amendments to named beneficiaries more easily

4. The absence of the Horse Racing Fund provided by the Horse Racing Order has had a significant impact on Down Royal Racecourse, and any further delay in reinstating the Fund will have a negative impact on the sustainability of the Racecourse.
5. Due to our experience with the Horse Racing Order, Down Royal Racecourse believes that future changes to named beneficiaries being made through a resolution of the Assembly would help to avoid any delay or suspension to the Fund in the future.

Make other minor changes to the wording of the 1990 Order

Submission of Financial Statements

6. Due to Down Royal Racecourse and Downpatrick Racecourse being entirely separate entities, we do not believe making a joint financial submission for the Horse Racing Fund would be the correct approach.
7. A joint submission such as proposed would add a layer of complexity and administration which would be a hindrance to the operators of both Down Royal and Downpatrick racecourses.

Conclusion

8. The Department and Committee have both stated that this Bill is essentially a technical amendment of the 1990 Horse Racing Order which largely focuses on changing the named beneficiaries of the Horse Racing Fund.
9. We appeal for the timely passage of this Bill, to enable both Down Royal and Downpatrick racecourses to once again receive the vital funding that the Horse Racing Order provides.