

Statement on behalf of Kevin Merry Carriages to be read at the council meeting 19th December

First of all I'd like to thank the full council for the opportunity to make a statement in support of our proposal.

We are very happy that the General Purposes Licensing committee have approved the proposal to provide horse drawn carriage rides in Oxford. It has taken over 2 years to reach this point and we are pleased that the committee are satisfied that this will be a positive contribution to the city.

Numerous meetings have taken place over the last 2 years and we have worked closely with the licensing team to make sure our proposal takes full consideration of the welfare of our 2 horses as well as those of the general public and road users.

We recognise that there have been a number of concerns over congestion and animal welfare, we fully understand these concerns, but as has been outlined many times the welfare of Kevin's horses has always been paramount to his business. In addition, we have absolutely no intention of operating more than 1 horse drawn carriage and given the route that has been agreed upon, we feel that there will be minimal impact on traffic congestion. The speed limit for traffic in the city centre is 20 mph, normal travelling speed for our carriage is 12 mph which represents only 8 mph less than the maximum speed other road users are allowed to travel at. If there was the odd occasion where we experienced a "tail back", there are numerous places en route that Kevin would be able to pull over. In addition, we have sought and listened to the advice of the highways dept and licensing team. For example, in the initial proposal the route included Turl Street – it was suggested that given this was a narrow right of way, albeit restricted, it might potentially cause congestion. On the advice of the Highways dept. the route returns to Broad Street through Queens lane, a far quiet and safer route.

Regarding safety, we recognise that having large animals in a city centre with many pedestrians, will inevitably lead to health & safety concerns. Friesian horses are, by nature, compliant creatures and have been bred for over 300 years specifically to pull carriages. Kevin's horses have been under his guidance and instruction for many years. He has over 30 years experience of working with horses, including the breaking in of horses for some of the most highly regarded racing stables in the world. This is a practice that requires patience, a high level of skill and, most importantly, a finely tuned sense of empathy with horses. During the course of Kevin's 10 year history of running his horse and carriage business, he has never experienced a horse getting out of control. However, in the highly unlikely occurrence of such an event, few people are better placed than Kevin to manage the situation swiftly and safely. Our horses are very experienced with traffic, the recently introduced 20 mph speed limit within the city will make carriage travel even safer and as an extra precaution, Kevin has even fitted disc brakes to the wheels of the carriages.

There were also concerns over the route suggesting that 2/3rds of it was on cobbled streets potentially causing painful bruised soles of the horses feet. Cobbled streets in fact make up around 15% of the route - and were introduced some 500 years ago specifically to improve the welfare and safety of horses and passengers when pulling carriages. Horses are far more likely to experience bruised soles if travelling over large loose stones or gravel.

In opposition to our proposal, cases have been cited to suggest horses running amock and collapsing through heat exhaustion is commonplace. It is not. We are not denying that this has ever happened but in those extremely rare incidents it is because of unscrupulous often unlicensed traders sacrificing welfare for profit. Kevin's horses always receive ample attention, feed, water and rest. The carriage rides will take place for a maximum of 7.5 hours per day and following each 30 minute ride will take a 30 minute rest stop.

Kevin's horses have always been treated with respect and dignity not purely as a commercial commodity. In fact throughout Kevin's working life, each month a portion of his profits are sent to a charity set up specifically to assist in rehabilitation of maltreated horses.

There have also been concerns raised over the horse droppings. Again there will only ever be two horses involved therefore this should not represent a major issue. Nevertheless, we have stated that the droppings would be collected at the end of each day; should the council insist that they are collected after each route, then we'll be happy to do so. There will follow a 30 minute rest period between rides so there would be ample time to do so by the driver's assistant.

And so to the future, we hope that you will agree with the general purposes licensing committee who after serious and measured consideration have approved the proposal. We are confident that our business will resonate well with Oxford's rich history, will help attract tourists and visitors which will ultimately be to the benefit of both Oxford's businesses and citizens alike.