

Local business is not being best supported

Two weeks ago the Advertiser printed a letter from me regarding the financial losses my family-run franchise (United Colors of Benetton in the Montpellier Quarter) faced during the UCL.

That was the first time that I had ever written to a news outlet and I certainly did not expect to be putting pen to paper so soon again.

But, just two weeks after the UCL, while businesses in our town are all still trying to come to terms with the financial impact of the event, NYCC announce they are planning to increase parking charges in Harrogate.

With footfall already at an all-time low and retailers desperately looking at ways to encourage people into the town centre, this is yet another prime example of our councils ignoring us and, it would seem, determined to work against us.

The council cites congestion as the major issue. In which case why did both HBC and NYCC each contribute £45,000 of rate-payers' money to the 'Appy Parking' scheme at the beginning of the year?

Why install all those sensors, spend all that money, insist it is to make town centre parking more 'hassle and stress free' at the beginning of the year, only to announce



Montpellier Hill, Harrogate.

they want to deter cars from the town centre a few months later?

Could it be that the proposed increased charges are less to do with congestion and more to do with revenue raising; so various vested interests can spend our money on a series of vanity projects which leave our historic Stray battered and our small businesses bruised?

If so it is a short-sighted policy as it will reduce parking revenues as less shoppers come into town and more importantly lead to more empty shops, more ruined businesses and less in business rates for our myopic council.

Like many others, I believe the council's parking policy is

muddled and detrimental to ensuring a thriving and vibrant town centre.

We have already seen a large decrease in footfall on the weekends, largely due to the introduction of Sunday parking charges but also due to families heading to out-of-town shopping venues where parking is easy and crucially, free.

Free parking at certain times, the removal of Sunday parking charges and cheap park and ride schemes should be the focus.

Consultation with borough residents and town centre businesses would help formulate a coherent parking strategy.

Surely retailers, who speak with locals and visitors on a

daily basis, are one of the best (and free) resources available to the council to gauge public opinion?

But on the basis that no councillor has visited my premises to consult in 12 years, I am not holding my breath.

I have to say I agree wholeheartedly with the president of the Chamber of Commerce who stated in last week's Advertiser, that he was "absolutely astounded" by the council's response to his letter regarding the UCL.

I too have found the response from HBC to the UCL debacle eye-opening and almost as disappointing as the event itself.

How can HBC possibly shirk all responsibility for an event they agreed to host in their town and contributed at least £600,000 of rate-payers money to?

Councillor Cooper, leader of HBC, responded to the Chamber of Commerce by apparently agreeing to "take action over rates and rents" but then goes on to explain that the council "collects business rates on behalf of the government but it does not set them or retain them" and, as it is private landlords responsible for most rents, "the council does not set business rents" either.

So what do the council actu-

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ally propose to do to help local businesses? Boasting between the lines, absolutely nothing.

Maybe Councillor Cooper is simply too busy juggling his numerous roles.

I have been shocked to discover that as well as leader of HBC, he is office manager to Andrew Jones MP, on NYCC, on the board for 'North and West Yorkshire Business Rates Pool' and even on the board for the controversial 'Welcome to Yorkshire', to name but a few.

I am clearly naive because I don't understand how on earth there aren't any official conflicts of interest in among that lot!

I have come to the sad conclusion that we can not rely on our council to act in our best interests.

Their ineffective response to the UCL, combined with the ill-timed threat to increase parking charges, has meant even the most private amongst us are feeling the need to be heard.

I have signed a petition on www.change.org for 'free three hour parking in Harrogate', set up by other frustrated independent retailers. If you want to see your local shops survive and your town remain an attractive place to visit, please sign it too.

I am on my shop-floor most days and I can tell you that the feelings down here 'on the street' are as grim and downtrodden as The Stray itself.

And just as The Stray is in desperate need of some help (and money), so it can once again flourish, so are the local businesses.

Clare Bulmer