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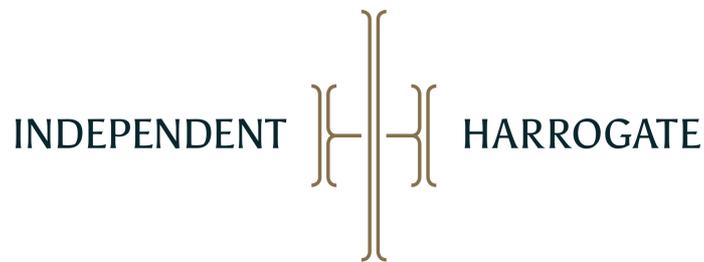
## **Independent Harrogate Meets with North Yorkshire County Council**

Independent Harrogate (IH), now the voice of over 170 businesses in Harrogate town centre, held a positive meeting earlier this week with senior members and officers of North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) to discuss the future of the town.

Among the main issues discussed were the appearance of the town centre and the need to increase footfall and business activity. Both parties agreed that many of the problems afflicting Harrogate are echoed nationally and there has been a widespread and recent downsizing of national retailers, creating holes in the high street. While efforts are being made by Independent Harrogate, through the British Independent Retailers Association (BIRA), to lobby central government to level the rates playing field with online-only businesses, there was wide agreement that more could be done to improve the street furniture and cleanliness of Harrogate town centre to increase its attractiveness to new retailers and visitors, and NYCC stressed its willingness to look further at ways in which it can support a tidying up of the town.

With regards to parking, NYCC was keen to stress that despite reports to the contrary, no final decision has been made on increasing parking charges, and even if implemented the increases would not be seen until April 2020 at the earliest. There was less agreement over IH's view that an element of free parking should be introduced in the town centre to increase footfall. NYCC are firmly of the view that there is a need for traffic management in the town centre to reduce congestion, the principal means for which is increasing parking charges, and that the present situation would be made worse by introducing any free parking. There have also been studies conducted into possible further pedestrianisation of the town centre. IH made clear that it understood NYCC's arguments but was coming at the problem from a more economically driven angle, where it saw any increased barrier to town centre flow and activity as perilous for Harrogate in its present state. William Woods, of IH, said,

*“It was particularly refreshing to have such a positive, yet robust, meeting with NYCC, as they play such a significant role in the lives and work of all of us in Harrogate and the district. Although we were glad that there was agreement on the importance of maintaining vibrancy in Harrogate's town centre, at IH we are adamant that pedestrianisation or any attempt to remove cars from the town centre through increased parking charges would have a damaging effect on the local economy and people's livelihoods.”*



There was appreciation on both sides of the financial and technical restrictions that NYCC had to work within, and the complex division of responsibility between NYCC, Harrogate Borough Council, the Harrogate Chamber of Commerce and the Harrogate BID. NYCC is going to look further at some ideas which were explored, and they appear very willing to work together with local businesses and other organisations to make positive changes.

Both IH and NYCC agreed that a Town Team of all relevant local interests pulling together in the same direction would help to transform the fortunes of Harrogate, and the constructive meeting indicated that NYCC should make a good contribution to such a team.

There are a number of key players that IH feels should be actively involved in a Harrogate Town Team. These include, but are not limited to, Harrogate Chamber of Commerce, Harrogate BID, Harrogate Borough Council, North Yorkshire County Council, North Yorkshire Police, Harrogate in Bloom, The Stray Defence Association, Zero Carbon Harrogate, Independent Harrogate and significant local landlords. It is essential that such a group has sound leadership and funding and logic suggests that the BID could fulfil this role. BID is at present going through a process to elect a new board of management and IH looks forward to the BID working with it to play an appropriate and active part in improving the fortunes of our town.