



STATION SQUARE HARROGATE CIRCA 1950's

A VISION FOR HARROGATE – BEING BEST, BEING DIFFERENT

A DOCUMENT FOR ONGOING DISCUSSION

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How can good Urban Design contribute to Harrogate

Urban Design defines the nature of creating a **'vision'** to show the economic, social and environmental benefits of investment or changes over a long period of time.

It is the **collaborative and multi-disciplinary process** of shaping the physical setting for people and life – the skill of making places. It establishes frameworks and procedures that will deliver successful development by different people over time.

Urban Design inspires, illustrates and defines how a place could be improved or protected to bring benefits to **investors, developers**, the community and wider society. It defines the nature of buildings and the spaces between them.

Urban Design is a skill that **brings together ideas** from developers, local businesses and communities, architects, town planners, conservationists, landscape architects, traffic engineers, transport planners and many others, to resolve problems and conflicts to create better places for everyone to work in, live in and attractive to visit.



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FORWARD

Over a number of years prior to the creation of NYC, concerns have been raised about challenges facing Harrogate town centre. These concerns remain relevant today and highlight the importance of thoughtful and inclusive planning. It is vital to treat Harrogate as a valuable asset, engaging with business rate payers and addressing the underlying issues before implementing significant changes or new initiatives.

While there is a clear intention to ensure that Government funding is used to benefit Harrogate, it is important that spending decisions are guided by long-term value and tangible improvements. Public realm investments should be carefully evaluated to ensure they support local businesses and contribute positively to the town's future.

To achieve this, it is essential to move forward in close consultation with all businesses operating in the town, as well as groups such as BID, the Chamber of Commerce, Independent Harrogate, local Councillors, and other stakeholders with valuable insights.

A coordinated and well-considered approach is needed. Ideas should be developed collaboratively, avoiding piecemeal solutions that could hinder the town's economic success. Inclusive dialogue will help ensure that any changes made today will be beneficial for Harrogate in the decades to come.

It is suggested that this document is read in conjunction with the following related documents.

A Vision for Harrogate – An Alternative Approach

A Vision for Harrogate – Beyond Gateway

Links to these can be found on -

www.independentharrogate.org/2025/01/31/station-gateway-our-proposal

A VISION FOR HARROGATE – BEING BEST, BEING DIFFERENT

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Harrogate is a unique town with a long-standing reputation for quality and success. But that success isn't guaranteed—it must be actively protected and built upon.

Change is not unwelcome here. Harrogate has always embraced progress, and its legacy reflects that. However, future development must be thoughtful, strategic, and true to what makes the town special. We should avoid generic, one-size-fits-all approaches. Harrogate's strength lies in **being different—and being the best.**

A refreshed, long-term Masterplan is essential. It should bring together all key issues, not just isolated projects, and involve everyone who cares about the town—businesses, community groups, and local leaders.

Traffic congestion remains a major challenge. Any vision for the future must address this head-on, balancing active travel with broader needs. Solutions must be inclusive and practical.

Ultimately, Harrogate's future should reflect its own identity—not that of Leeds, York, or anywhere else. A successful vision will proudly say: "This is Harrogate."

2.00 AN AGENDA FOR CONSIDERATION

STRENGTHS

- **Spa Town Heritage:** Harrogate's identity as a spa town dates back to the Victorian era and is central to its historical and cultural appeal. This heritage continues to shape its brand and tourism.
- **Victorian Architecture & Conservation Area:** The town's well-preserved Victorian buildings and cohesive conservation area contribute to its charm and visual appeal, attracting both visitors and residents.
- **Festivals & Cultural Events:** Harrogate hosts a wide range of festivals (e.g., Harrogate International Festivals, Literature Festival, Crime Writing Festival) that bring in high-profile guests and boost the local economy.
- **The Stray:** This large area of open parkland is unique and offers a green gateway into the town. It's a defining feature of Harrogate's landscape and lifestyle, supporting recreation, wellbeing, and visual identity.
- **Global Recognition:** Harrogate is known internationally, often appearing in travel guides and rankings for quality of life, beauty, and tourism.
- **Independent Retail Scene:** The town has a strong mix of independent shops, which sets it apart from many high streets dominated by chains. This diversity adds to its character and appeal.
- **Historic Family Businesses:** Ogden of Harrogate, Woods Fine Linens, Bettys Café Tea Rooms, and Smiths of Harrogate are iconic, long-standing family businesses with over 100 years of trading each. Alongside them, the Harrogate Chamber of Commerce—founded in 1896—also reflects the town's enduring tradition, quality, and continuity.
- **Urban Environment & Architecture:** The town's layout, scale, and architectural richness create a pleasant and walkable environment that enhances the visitor and resident experience.
- **Floral Reputation:** Harrogate is known for its floral displays and has won awards such as "Britain in Bloom," reinforcing its image as a beautiful and well-kept town.
- **Proximity to the Dales:** Its location near the Yorkshire Dales and other attractions makes it a strategic base for tourism and leisure.

CONCERNS

- **Loss of Vibrancy & Civic Pride:** Many towns across the UK have experienced a decline in town centre vitality due to changing retail habits, online shopping, and economic pressures. A perceived drop in civic pride and rise in anti-social behaviour are common symptoms of this.
- **Declining Trading Conditions:** Local businesses in Harrogate, especially independents, have voiced concerns about footfall, rising costs, and competition from out-of-town retail and online platforms.
- **Traffic Congestion:** Harrogate has long struggled with traffic congestion, particularly during peak times and events. The town's road network and limited bypass options contribute to this.
- **Poor Access for Road Users:** Congestion affects not just residents but also tourists and delivery services, making access to the town centre more difficult and potentially discouraging visits.
- **Lack of a Tourist Information Centre:** The closure of Harrogate's dedicated Tourist Information Centre has been noted as a gap, especially given the town's reliance on tourism and events.

- **Decline in Appearance & Maintenance:** Weeds, graffiti, and general upkeep are visible indicators of reduced maintenance. These issues can affect perceptions of safety, pride, and attractiveness.
- **“Scruffy” Image:** While subjective, this reflects a real concern that Harrogate is not living up to its historic image as “a jewel in Yorkshire’s crown.” Visual cues matter greatly in tourism and local morale.
- **Lack of Vision in Current Proposals:** Some residents and business groups have expressed that recent planning and development proposals lack coherence or ambition, and don’t reflect Harrogate’s unique identity.
- **Limited Local Understanding by Decision-Makers:** With the shift to North Yorkshire Council (NYC), there’s a concern that decisions are being made by those less familiar with Harrogate’s specific needs and character.

OPPORTUNITIES

- **Enhance First Impressions:** Every part of the town should offer a welcoming and lasting impression. A consistent, high-quality appearance across all areas will reinforce Harrogate’s reputation.
- **Learn from the Past:** Reflect on the qualities that made Harrogate the “Jewel in the Crown” and use these insights to shape a future that honours its legacy.
- **Celebrate Uniqueness:** Identify and promote what sets Harrogate apart from other towns—its heritage, setting, and character.
- **Benchmark Against the Best:** Visit and study other successful destination towns in the UK to understand what makes them work—particularly in terms of design, atmosphere, and visitor experience.
- **Prioritise Good Design:** Quality design doesn’t always require large budgets. A shift in mind set and commitment to thoughtful aesthetics can add lasting value.
- **Reimagine the Spa Town Identity:** Like Bath, Harrogate can modernise and celebrate its spa heritage, creating a refreshed identity that appeals to today’s visitors.
- **Strengthen Cultural Assets:** Maximise the potential of the Convention Centre and Royal Hall by offering diverse programming that appeals to a wide audience and positions Harrogate as a cultural hub.
- **Boost Footfall and Vibrancy:** Develop initiatives that make Harrogate more attractive and convenient for residents, workers, and visitors alike.
- **Create a Welcoming Experience:** Ensure the town is enjoyable, accessible, and memorable for all who visit.
- **Engage Local Knowledge:** Involve long-standing residents and the business community in shaping the town’s future. Their experience and insight are invaluable.
- **Support Local Businesses:** Increase footfall to shops, cafés, and restaurants—the economic heart of the town.
- **Improve Parking Access:** Ensure on-street and off-street parking is convenient and fairly priced, with consideration for older and less mobile visitors.
- **Invest in Public Transport:** Improve bus services, especially to and from surrounding villages, to make the town more accessible.
- **Upgrade Rail Connectivity:** Lobby for the electrification and improvement of the Harrogate–Leeds–York line to enhance regional links for commuters and tourists.

- **Celebrate Local Identity:** Incorporate the historic town crest into boundary signage to create a more distinctive and welcoming arrival.
- **Address Congestion:** Reassess the need for a bypass that avoids sensitive areas like Nidd Gorge and prioritise better access to the town centre and other retail centres.
- **Introduce Park & Ride:** Reduce congestion and improve access, particularly for visitors, by developing a Park and Ride system whether it be for business or any other reason, supported by a “Drop and Ride” scheme for schools.
- **Plan with Purpose:** Address challenges through a long-term, joined-up vision that supports Harrogate’s unique retail and visitor environment.
- **Elevate Seasonal Events:** Reinforce Harrogate’s identity with high-quality, locally focused Christmas celebrations—avoiding generic or low-quality attractions.
- **Protect Key Spaces:** Avoid placing temporary attractions like Ferris wheels in sensitive landscaped areas such as the War Memorial, which can damage the environment and detract from the town’s dignity.
- **Respectful Festive Design:** A simple, beautifully lit Christmas tree can offer a more elegant and meaningful seasonal display.
- **Enhance Montpellier Quarter:** Improve pedestrian connectivity across the A61 to better link this distinctive area with the rest of the town centre.
- **Develop Distinctive Quarters:** Extend the concept of “Quarters” to other parts of the town to highlight their unique character and identity.
- **Learn from Leeds Victoria Quarter:** Explore how consistent, high-quality shopfront design can elevate the feel and success of retail areas.
- **Revitalise Key Streets:** Upgrade the tired appearance of Cambridge and Oxford Streets—particularly Oxford Street—to make them more inviting and commercially vibrant.
- **Commit to Maintenance:** Establish a regular cleaning and maintenance programme for street furniture, signage, planting, and paving.
- **Green Urban Spaces:** Introduce a “living wall” along the back of the Bus Station and Station Car Park to soften and improve this prominent area.
- **Create a Strong Arrival at the Station:** Consider a well-designed, glazed canopy at the railway station to enhance the sense of arrival and civic pride.
- **Improve Cycling Infrastructure:** Revisit the East Parade Cycle Route proposal to create a safer, more ambitious network that avoids congested roads like Station Parade.



HARROGATE: WINTER GARDENS 1906
(Now a Wetherspoons Pub)



HARROGATE: Behind the Royal Hall 1938 Davies Cup
(Now an Exhibition Hall)

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3.00 CONCLUSION

A “Vision for Harrogate” must be an inclusive and forward-looking framework—one that fully understands and embraces all the elements that make a town vibrant, distinctive, and full of life. Above all, we want Harrogate to be different - and to be highly successful once again.

Local businesses, with their deep expertise and long-standing commitment to the town, alongside key landowners and residents, understand what lies at the heart of Harrogate and what makes it truly special. Let us build on that knowledge and embrace the principles of **BEING BEST, BEING DIFFERENT**

“places only come to life when people bring life to them”

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