

Shopfront Design Guide

Supplementary Planning Document

DRAFT



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1. Introduction

Aim of the Document

The purpose of this Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) is to promote and encourage good shopfront design, restoration, and refurbishment across County Durham. The SPD builds on the requirements of policy 29 (Sustainable Design) of the County Durham Plan, which requires all development proposals to achieve well designed buildings and places, and policy 44 (Historic Environment) which applies to development in areas of historic importance.

The aim is to improve the general standard of design across the county when carrying out general shopfront alterations and when bringing vacant buildings back into use. This is especially important in areas that are designated as a conservation area or affect designated or non-designated heritage assets.

Although there is an emphasis on historic or traditional buildings, the principles and guidance are also relevant to new buildings and modern frontages.



Shopfront featuring traditional materials, architectural detailing and hand-painted signage

Who is this document for

The SPD is for the use of building agents, owners and tenants who may be embarking upon the repair or replacement of a shopfront. It will be subject to consultation in accordance with the Council's Statement of Community Involvement. Once adopted it will be a material consideration in determining planning applications for shop fronts where planning permission is required.

Where possible we would always recommend that existing traditional features should be retained or repaired, and any historic evidence of a frontage should be used in developing a new design.

The SPD sets out the principles to be followed when designing shopfronts. It explains the national and local planning policies and the need for planning permissions and consents. However, we strongly recommend that you seek the advice of professional designers and

contractors who have experience of similar types of work. The guidelines are not prescriptive but are tools to allow for inventiveness in achieving good design that contributes to the public realm and character of the area.

A shopfront is the first point of contact between a business and the public, a well-designed shopfront will entice customers inside. Shopfronts contribute to an immediate impression and can create a lasting image of a place. High-quality, well-maintained shopfronts make an area feel more welcoming to locals and visitors.

The document refers extensively to repairs, refurbishment, or replacement of traditional-style shopfronts. However, the guidance throughout is also applicable to more modern properties. New commercial strategic developments may typically have specific design briefs to aid proposals and should be consulted where appropriate.



Historic streetscene in Durham City, featuring numerous traditional shopfronts.

Feedback

This is the first draft of this SPD If you would like to comment on its content you can do this by:

- email to spatialpolicy@durham.gov.uk
- post, you can send us your comments to our freepost address (all you need to do is write this one line on an envelope - no other address details or postage stamp are needed):
FREEPOST Spatial Policy
- or by using our planning consultation portal:
<https://durhamcc.objective.co.uk>

Please return your submission by 5pm on 14th July 2024.

2. Background and Context

Towns and cities have always been associated with the buying and selling of goods. The “shopping street” gained popularity in the late 17th Century, although prior to this, goods were sold from storage units, often open to the street, or brought to market with most towns having a marketplace.

Shopfronts were often very simple with a “door between two windows” with the surrounds and details based on the Greek Classical orders of architecture. Great importance was placed on proportion and balance with the use of columns or pilasters to emphasise the vertical proportions.

The best remaining old shop fronts show these principles in action and there are examples across the county which are recognised with listed building status. These shopfronts show a wealth of creativity within the rules of the time and were often richly decorated and expressed.

During the 1920s and 1930s there was a reaction against this style with emphasis placed on the horizontal rather than the vertical and increased requirements for larger floor areas and in turn glazed shop fronts. Changes in post war design and technologies over the last 60 years has seen the shop front often reduced to a simple sheet of glass within aluminium or upvc framing, extending to the full width and height without any relief of intricacies in the design.

These changes have often been at the expense of the original shopfront’s basic rules of scale and proportions have tended to be ignored. Often brash plastic signage has been added to buildings, together with a proliferation of applied signage and lettering to the glass.



There is an increasing recognition that these changes in design have had a negative effect on the character of a place. There is a need to respect the interest and character of the street scene and a demand for a return to individuality and distinctiveness. Behind modern shopfronts can be original detail that’s hidden but is enough to provide a lead for restoration and incorporation into a sympathetic new design. This can bring balance back to the relationship between the shopfront and building frontage, complementing the intended character of the upper floors and improving the general streetscape.

3. Policies and Strategies

The SPD is based on the following national and local policies.

National Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out government’s planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. It recognises that planning should support the role that town centres play at the heart of local communities by taking a positive approach to their growth, management and change. Planning should promote a town’s long-term success by allowing them to grow and develop in a way that can respond to continuing changes in the retail and leisure industry, allowing a good mix of uses (including housing). All changes should reflect the character of the town.

Local Policy – County Durham Plan

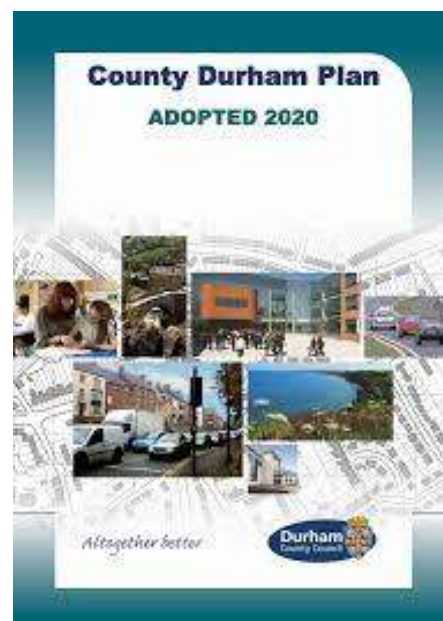
National policies and guidance are reflected in County Durham Plan (CDP) which is the local planning framework for Durham.

Policy 29 (Sustainable Design) requires all development proposals to achieve well designed buildings and places and includes the provision for signage, adverts, street furniture and public art to be appropriate and sympathetic to users and local setting and not detrimental to visual amenity or public highway safety.

Policy 44 (Historic Environment) applies to proposals that affects or are within designated conservation areas, listed buildings, the World Heritage Site and non-designated heritage assets (NDHAs). Development will be expected to preserve and enhance the significance of designated and non-designated heritage assets, including any contribution made by their setting.

Neighbourhood Policy

Numerous communities across County Durham now have adopted Neighbourhood Plans. These plans often feature specific policies which relate to design, and heritage/conservation matters which should also be consulted. Further information on the status and availability of Neighbourhood Plans can be found on the [Durham County Council website](https://www.durham.gov.uk/).



4. Heritage Assets

Many buildings across the county which incorporate shopfronts and retail units could be classed as designated or non-designated heritage assets. For any application for planning permission, listed building consent or advertisement consent which affects such a building or is within the setting of one, as well as visual amenity, consideration should be given to the potential impact on the significance and setting of heritage assets.

Designated heritage assets include (amongst others):

- UNESCO World Heritage Sites
- Scheduled Monuments
- Listed Buildings
- Conservation Areas

Non-designated heritage assets are defined as *a building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified by the local planning authority as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions.*

Significance is the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest that can be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic.

Significance derives not only from a heritage asset's physical presence, but also from its **setting**. This is defined as the surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of an asset and may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral.

For more information, consult Historic England's [Conservation Principles Policies and Guidance \(2008\)](#).

Numerous town centres are also covered by Conservation Area designations. When this is the case, a major consideration of any proposal must be the potential impact on the character and appearance of the conservation area. Maps of conservation areas across Durham City can be found on [the Durham County Council website](#).

Within **Durham City**, consideration of the impacts on the significance and/or setting of Durham Castle and Cathedral World Heritage Site must also be taken into account. Consult [Policy 45 of the County Durham Plan](#) for more information.



Historic shopfronts lining Silver Street in Durham City Conservation Area

5. Pre-Application Enquiries

Given the unique nature of the historic environment you would be advised to seek pre-application advice from the Local Authority.

If you believe you may need planning permission or listed building consent or want confirmation of whether or not any form of permission is required, Durham County Council offers a high-quality pre-application service. Through this route you can receive

professional advice on what permissions or consents will be required, and 'in principle' guidance on the acceptability of development proposals.

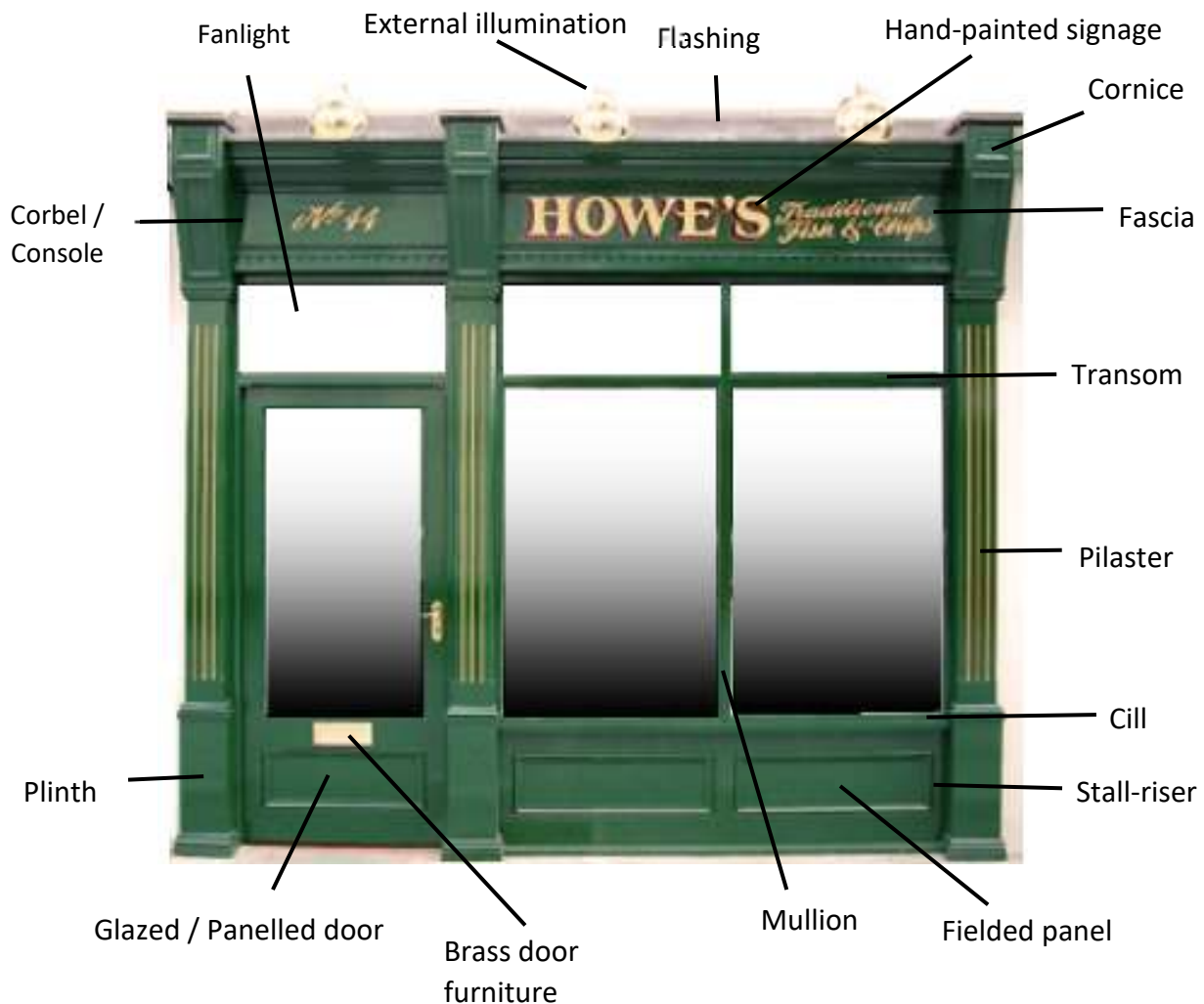
This service will help you find out if your proposal is likely to be acceptable without the expense of making a formal planning application. [Planning advice and enquiries - Durham County Council](#)



6. Principles of Shopfront Design

There are basic principles which apply to the repair/alteration or replacement of a shopfront. Generally, the shopfront should respond to the character of the local area and streetscene and reflect the traditional pattern of frontages, which are comprised of several distinctive elements.

Elements of a Shop Front



Plinth: These tend to be simple details which become the starting point for the pilaster and link to the stall riser. The materials can be timber, stone, tile, render or brick.

Stall Riser: This became an essential component of the shop front; it gives protection to the base of the window from damage and water splashing and roots the frontage to the ground. The material is likely to be the same as the base or plinths and the

most robust and maintenance free treatments are those that use masonry.

Timber panelling is used as a cheaper alternative that allows the design to be built up from moulded panels. The drawback is its inability to withstand damage and constant wetting without regular maintenance; this may be annually to ensure the stall riser can have an extended life.

Pedestal: The pedestal is equivalent to the classical *pedestal*. A pedestal supports a

pilaster and bounds either end of the stall riser. The pedestal is best executed in durable materials; timber should be avoided.

Shop Windows: The shop window may be subdivided with mullions, transoms and glazing bars. The subdivision of the shop window should reflect the proportions of the building and its vertical or horizontal emphasis. The subdivision of the shop window also has the advantage of reducing the amount of glass that has to be replaced in the event of breakage.

Threshold: The threshold should be level (i.e. it should offer a slope no greater than 1:20) and the route across the threshold should provide weather protection. A recessed entrance provides weather protection and may account for a sloping threshold. It also offers additional space for advertisement and shop window display.

Entrance Door: The entrance door should be accessible to all. The entrance door should be wide enough to allow unrestricted passage for a variety of users including wheelchair users. An entrance door with powered operation is the most satisfactory solution for most people. The entrance door should be glazed to allow people to see others approaching from the opposite direction.

Corbels and Capitals: A capital finishes off the top of the pilaster. Visually the pilaster line is carried through with a moulded bracket or "corbel". These were elaborate timber carvings traditionally formed in an "S" profile with the upper part larger than the lower part. These were often bought "off the shelf" from pattern makers, some of which still exist today.

Fascia: The fascia is used to display an advertisement and is equivalent to the classical *frieze* and *architrave*. A fascia is supported at either end by a pilaster and in turn it supports the cornice. A fascia is

bounded at either end by a bracket. The fascia should be in scale with the shop front and the building as a whole. As a rule of thumb, the

height of the fascia and cornice should be no more than one sixth of the height of the shop front overall.

The colour of the advertisement on the fascia should reflect the character of the building. As a general rule, rich dark colours may be appropriate and were typically the colour palette on historic shopfront. The illumination of the advertisement should also reflect the character of the building. As a general rule, a flush fitted 'strip' or 'trough' light may be appropriate, depending upon the use of the unit and its location. Internally illuminated signs are rarely appropriate in conservation areas or on listed buildings.

Cornice: The cornice is equivalent to the classical *cornice*. A cornice is supported by the fascia and at either end by a bracket. A shop front should incorporate a cornice to enclose the fascia and offer visual support for the upper part of the premises.

Other Ironmongery and Metalwork: When surveying the existing shopfront or researching the building care should be taken in order that any other metalwork is recorded. This could range from the more obvious letter boxes and handles to boot scrapers and brackets for awnings and or seasonal hangings which may have been temporary.

7. Design Principles

This section of the SPD relates to relevant design principles that apply to all proposals for shopfront alterations, including the approach to signage/advertisements.

Corporate Image

Whilst it is acknowledged that corporate branding is part of the identification of a business, this needs to reflect the character of the area of building occupied by the business. In conservation areas and on listed buildings some corporate colour schemes, styles and logos can be obtrusive and overbearing.

A conservation style approach to corporate signage can be achieved that satisfies the requirements of DCC and the applicant, and we encourage discussion early in the process at pre-application stage. This is particularly relevant for major or high-profile developments where there may need to be an agreed site-wide signage strategy.

Use of colour

Colour within the overall shopfront design should be considered in the context of the street and overall character of the area. In some cases, the overall character and quality may be less than satisfactory, and the opportunity should be taken to address that in any new proposals. The colour of the shopfront and signage should be in keeping with the historical character of the area. Where this has been lost through inappropriate changes, research should be carried out to allow an informed decision to be taken. External paint finishes should not be excessively bold, or garish and Matt or Satin Matt paint should be selected. Most paint manufactures provide “Heritage” paint ranges,



Traditional muted colour scheme

often broken down into periods - for example Victorian and Edwardian, and this makes an initial selection easier.

Canopies and Blinds

Historically blinds and canopies were used to protect goods from damage from the sun and could be retracted when not in use. Where used, they should not detract from the style of the shop front or from the character of the building or street scene. Traditionally blinds were retractable and made of canvas with a blind box incorporated into the cornice. Where existing blinds remain, we would encourage repair and retention. Care should be taken to ensure that architectural features are not obstructed. Canvas is the preferred material and colours should match or be in keeping with the fascia colours.

Garish colour schemes should be avoided. Any lettering should be minimal and should not dominate the canopy area. The lettering style should co-ordinate with the design of the shop front, especially the fascia sign. Regulations state that all blinds, fixed or retractable, must

be positioned at least 2.43m above ground level and with their outside edge at least 1.0m away from the outside edge of the kerb.

Where there is no historical evidence of canopies or blinds on a street or specific shop front, their insertion will be resisted to prevent the proliferation of street clutter and obscuring the architectural features of the building and wider street.



Retractable canopy above a shopfront

Security

Protecting shops and premises is very important, however very visible external roller shutters will detract from the street scene and may also appear unwelcoming to the shopper. External shutters should be avoided in favour of an internal shutter or lattice inside the glazing. This can be used in conjunction with toughened laminated glass to meet building



Security grilles installed internally.

insurance needs. Recessed doorways can be protected with decorative metal gates that can be retained in both the open and closed positions. External shutters mean a street looks dead when shops are all closed. If external security shutters are required for insurance reasons, then concealed shutter guides with a concealed shutter box behind the fascia should be provided. Consideration should also be given to perforated shutters.

Signage

One or two well-designed signs look better than a multitude of signs and clutter (including A-boards) that obscures the shopfront. One fascia sign and a hanging sign may be deemed enough. Care should be taken when positioning signs so as not to obscure any architectural features. Attaching a sign to the fascia of the shopfront is the most prominent place for signage but must complement the overall façade.

On traditional style shopfronts, timber should be used for sign boards, painted in a matt colour to match the shopfront scheme. Traditional handwritten sign writing, vinyl sticker letter or individually applied letters in timber or metal are preferred. Where individual letters are being applied, the fixings should not be visible.

Projecting box signs are unsightly and inappropriate in a conservation area or on listed buildings. Where a building has an upper floor that is in use it is recommended that lettering be applied to the inside of upper floor windows and a name plate installed to the side of the ground floor entrance, a hanging sign or individually applied letters to the front upper elevation are considered appropriate. The scheme for the upper floor should be

considered in relation to the ground floor signage.

Design of signage should also be well-considered in terms of the impact on visual amenity. This is of particular note in terms of colour palette and lettering, which should not be oversized and respect proportions of the fascia and building's architectural features.

Lighting

Modern street lighting should provide enough illumination for a shopfront or fascia. Internally illuminated fascia box signs and projecting signs are not in character in a historic location and would not be considered an acceptable lighting solution.

Where external lighting is to be used it should be discreet and minimal. External lighting may be achievable by trough lights to match the background colour of the fascia. Alternatively, the use of small individual spotlight units positioned appropriately and concealed as much as possible is preferred to large spotlights or swan-neck lights. On hanging signs if illumination is proposed it should be very discreet and ideally attached to the sign bracket.



External trough light

Internal lighting

Interior window lights can have a positive impact on the vitality and sense of security within a shopping street. Illuminating your window display can help to create an attractive street scape and allow people to window shop out of trading hours.

Illumination in Durham City

Within the centre of Durham City there are additional considerations on the illumination of shop fronts due to the impact on the World Heritage Site. Businesses which do not fall into a category that constitutes a night-time use will not be permitted to include external lighting or illumination on the shopfront.



Durham City Centre and World Heritage Site

Pavement Signs / A Boards

Signs on the pavement, such as A boards can obstruct the highway and be a hazard. Well designed signage incorporated into the shopfront, e.g. fascia/hanging sign should be the primary focus of any advertising strategy.

Window Displays

Shops are encouraged to consider how the use of posters, banners and vinyls in shop windows affect the overall impression of the shopfront. The extensive use of vinyl is not encouraged as it deadens the streetscape making the area look less inviting to shoppers. It is also worth considering how good merchandising and an attractive window display will attract customers into the shop and improve the character of the shopfront.

External masonry

Many existing buildings have external finishes which have been painted over the years, this includes, stone, brick and render. Prior to completing any new decoration, the existing background should be checked and repaired as required. Often painting traps moisture within the existing fabric and a suitable “breathable” paint or lime wash should be selected. Consulting a suitably qualified heritage specialist is important to ensure that the specification is correct.



Rendered building

Access

Many older shops and properties have steps up to the ground floor or a single step at the door position. Any upgrading of a property must carefully consider how access for all can be accommodated. The use of colour and texture is important when considering the design of the entrance in order that it is obvious and clearly defined for those with impaired vision. The use of the recessed doorway can assist in providing a gently ramped nonslip surface instead of a stepped arrangement for wheelchair users.



Level access into a highly detailed timber shopfront

Alarms

Alarm boxes should be sensitively positioned upon the building and not onto the fascia. Garish colours should be avoided, and alarm boxes should be coloured to closely match the existing building.

Materials

Where there are original materials within a shopfront, particularly if the building is considered to be a designated or non-designated heritage asset, including buildings located within conservation areas, the principal approach will be their preservation and repair repaired using appropriate techniques, minimising the need to replace materials on a like for like basis. When within the historic environment, including conservation areas the design of new shopfronts should aim to use these same materials and techniques or achieve the characteristics of these historically appropriate materials and external finishes.



Timber shopfront with stone base to stallriser

Fascia panels should be made of solid natural timber and not a lower grade equivalent that may delaminate. The use of stone, brick, or ceramic tiles or other such impervious materials should be considered for stall risers as they are vulnerable to rising damp and splashing from passing vehicles or pedestrians. The use of plywood, chipboard, MDF or other timber composite panels is discouraged. Traditional joinery techniques should be applied to timber shopfronts if they are to remain robust and attractive. Materials should be from a sustainable source.

On more modern buildings outside this context consideration should be given a material palette appropriate for to the local

context. Excessively glossy or reflective materials such as acrylic or plastic will not normally be supported in new shopfront design or alterations. In new or replacement shopfront design, it is preferable to have a matt finish to prevent an overly reflective or bright surface.

The focus of a shopfront design or alteration should be on the appropriateness of materials to the age, style and character of the building. Replacing original timber, aluminium or other metal shopfront frames with uPVC will not be supported on shopfronts within the historic environment. Consulting a specialist such as an architect or heritage consultant when designing a shopfront is recommended.

Maintenance

We recommend that an annual maintenance plan is drawn to ensure that the shop front remains in good condition. Regular maintenance is less costly than large repairs that may result from neglect, it also protects the value of the property and keeps the street scene looking smart. This helps maintain business and shopper confidence.

The landlord and tenant should agree who does what and ensure it happens. Checking a timber shopfront annually is recommended, including touching up paintwork, minor repairs with resin, if required and a full repaint at least every 3 years.

Timber stall risers should be checked as they are subject to a lot of damage when they are carried down to the ground as they are splashed with water from the pavement. Clearing out gutters at the top of the building will avoid overflowing water damaging stone or brick. Flashing should be checked to ensure they are not cracked and are sufficiently

pinned back to the wall. Downpipes should be kept clear and checked to ensure they discharge properly into drainage and do not splash back onto the shopfront.

Where there is the potential for flooding, appropriate mitigation measures should be considered, to minimize impact on the building, including barriers or shields across shopfronts and particularly doorways.



Regular maintenance regime

8. Contemporary shopfronts

In terms of shopfronts on new buildings / within new developments, the same basic principles apply in terms of balanced composition between the various elements of the shopfront.

Shop fronts with full height vertically glazed frontages, lateral framing elements, and simple configurations can give a 'clean' aesthetic which generally fits well within contemporary commercial developments. The contemporary approach can sometimes relate sensitively to a historic building if well designed, based on an understanding of character and significance, and following the key traditional principles of scale, proportion, simplicity, and detailing. With contemporary designs the use of powder coated aluminium with visually muted colour finishes may be an option for consideration.

Fascia signs should be in proportion with the fascia's dimensions; bulky or boxy designs that project too far forwards should be avoided, and signage should be clean and simple with limited information to avoid unnecessary visual clutter.

For contemporary shopfronts modest slimline hanging or projecting signs that respect the overall aesthetic of the shop front, and the visual amenity of the street scene can be appropriate. Careful consideration should be given to appropriateness of the colour scheme and contrasts. Level of illumination must not be excessive, with subtle forms appropriate to prevent excessive brightness and light spillage that can be detrimental to local visual amenity.



Contemporary shopfronts within a modern development

9. Permissions and Consent

Before embarking on any changes to the shop front consideration should be given to:

Planning Permission

Works that materially affect the building frontage, for example changes to the window/door positions, signage and installation of security shutters may require approval. It is advisable to consult with the local planning authority before commencing with any work. This can be done via the submission of a [pre-application request for planning advice](#).

Listed Building Consent

This is separate and distinct from planning approval, and it may be a criminal act to complete work on listed structures without consent in place. Refer to [Historic England's National Heritage List](#) for England for information relating to individual listing and locations. Design and Access Statements and Heritage Statements will be required for listed buildings, buildings in conservation areas and non-designated heritage assets. This statement should explain the design principles and concepts that have been applied to the following aspects: amount, layout, scale, landscaping and appearance. The access component should explain how the design ensures all users have equal and convenient access. The statement may take a proportionate approach based on the scale/sensitivity of the proposals.

Business Use

The Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 put uses of land and buildings into various categories known as "Use Classes". Change of use can occur with the same use class or from one use class to another. Depending on the changes proposed an application for approval of the change may be required from the County Council.

Please contact [Development Management](#) for more assistance regarding any necessary permissions for change of use.

Advertisement Consent

Many forms of advertising require consent under Control of Advertisement Regulations. It is best to seek advice from the Council as to whether consent is required and if it is likely to be granted. Where consent is needed, applications are considered based on size, form, location, materials, finishes and illumination. The two detailed considerations are impact on visual amenity and highway safety.

Building Regulation approval

Work involving structural alterations, changes to means of escape, sanitation and fabric alterations may require building control approval. These can be interlinked and are often complex in nature. [Contacting the local building control department](#) in advance is good practice when carrying out any work.

10. Glossary of terms

Alteration - To change or improve the function of a building or artefact or to modify its appearance.

Architrave - Moulded frame around a door or window.

Awning - Sheet of canvas or other material stretched on a frame and used to keep the sun or rain off a shop window or doorway.

Awning/Blind Box Area - integral to the shopfront surround often behind the fascia, but found elsewhere such as around the cornice, which contains a retractable blind.

Canopy Hood - suspended or projected over a door or window.

Capital - Topmost member of a column or pilaster.

Cill (or Sill) - Horizontal member at the bottom of a window or door frame often timber but sometimes granite or bronze or with a brass cill plate.

Conservation Area - Area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which is desirable to preserve or enhance.

Console Bracket - At the top of a pilaster and/ or either end of the fascia forming a bracket, often moulded and decorative. They are a characteristic feature of Victorian shopfronts, typically carved from wood with a curved outline. Usually of greater height than projection.

Cornice - The ornamental moulding or projecting structure along the top of a wall, arch or building exterior (including the shopfront).

Façade - The whole frontage of the building including shopfront and upper floors.

Fanlight - A window over the door within the main door frame.

Fascia - A plain horizontal band projecting slightly from the surface of a wall, forming a part of the entablature above the shop window. Angled fascia was introduced in the Victorian period and pressure to accommodate larger fascia lettering resulted in increasingly larger fascia areas.

Flashing - A sheet of thin, impervious material used to prevent water penetration or seepage into a building and to direct the flow of moisture in walls.

Fielded Panels - A raised or recessed panel with a wide flat surface surrounded by mouldings also such a panel divided into smaller panels.

Intervention - Any action which has a physical effect on the fabric of a building or artefact.

Pilasters - A rectangular shaped column or shallow pier which projects out slightly from a wall often with a decorative moulding.

Plinth - Found at the base of the pilaster in a traditional shopfront often with a decorative moulding, or chamfer at the top.

Stall Riser - Material installed between the shop window and the ground.