



Comhairle Contae **Lú**
Louth County Council

Shopfront Design Guidelines



Your Council

*for Your
Community*

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INTRODUCTION

Shopfronts are one of the most important elements in determining the character, quality and perception of retail streets in towns and villages. Louth County Council aims to promote good-quality shopfronts which encourages good contemporary designs. The purpose of the guidelines, alongside the statutory development plans for Louth, is to encourage a discipline in this area based on clear principles of good shopfront design that provides for assistance to designers, retailers and planners alike in understanding and implementing these principles.



This Guide encourages the ongoing maintenance and protection of existing worthwhile traditional shopfronts. Consideration will be given to more contemporary design approaches for new and replacement shopfronts.

In reinforcing the significance of the individual elements of the shopfronts and the value of well-considered materials, signage, lighting and security arrangements, it is hoped to encourage a culture of high quality shopfront and retail design throughout the county.

Every proposal to upgrade or replace a shopfront presents an opportunity to improve the appearance both of the buildings to which the shopfront relates and the streetscape in which it sits. Most shopfront works require planning permission, and an architect with expertise in this area should be engaged for any proposal.



STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Planning Permission is required for most works to shopfronts. This includes significant works, such as the construction of new or replacement shopfronts, but may also include lesser scale works such as alterations to existing shopfronts, the erection of security grilles and shutters and the installation of canopies.



The erection of signs and most advertisements also require Planning Permission as does some 'Changes of Use', even changes between commercial uses.

Consultation with the Planning Department is advisable when works to shopfronts and associated signage, security and lighting are under consideration. This will help determine if permission is required and will facilitate further advice, particularly in the context of the County Development Plan.

A formal determination on the requirement for Planning Permission can be obtained by requesting an Exemption Certificate (Section 5) or in the case of protected structures a Declaration (Section 57).

CONSERVATION

The County Development Plan includes the Record of Protected Structures and describes the location and extent of the Architectural Conservation Areas (ACA) - these designations seek to protect and enhance built heritage. Shopfront signage and associated works on protected structures or buildings in ACA's are required to go through a more rigorous assessment than non-designated structures, the prevailing design policy is one of conservation and enhancement.

Works, which materially affect the character of a protected structure, or any element of special interest, require permission. In some cases, this can even include the repainting of the external walls. Similarly, for the exterior of buildings within an ACA, Planning Permission is required for works, which materially affect the character of the area. Louth County Councils Architectural Conservation Officer can be contacted where confirmation is required.

GENERAL APPROACH

Council policy requires shop owners to consider the wider context in developing proposals in relation to their shopfronts. Initially, however, the shop owner will be faced with a major decision - whether to retain the existing shopfront or to construct a new one. County Louth has a number of traditional shopfronts, some of which are part of protected structures. Regular inspection and maintenance is essential to avoid serious defects and decay.

Where alterations are being proposed to traditional shopfronts, care must be taken to ensure that they are in keeping with, and do not detract from, the integrity of the

original design of the shopfront. Specialist conservation advice should be sought when dealing with alterations, repairs and improvements to traditional shopfronts, particularly those which form part of a protected structure.

When new painted timber shopfronts in the traditional style are suggested, an authentic, traditional design and detailing and a high standard of craftsmanship are required. Appropriate elements may be copied or adapted from adjoining buildings or others of similar age nearby, but must be carefully integrated into a meaningful overall design.

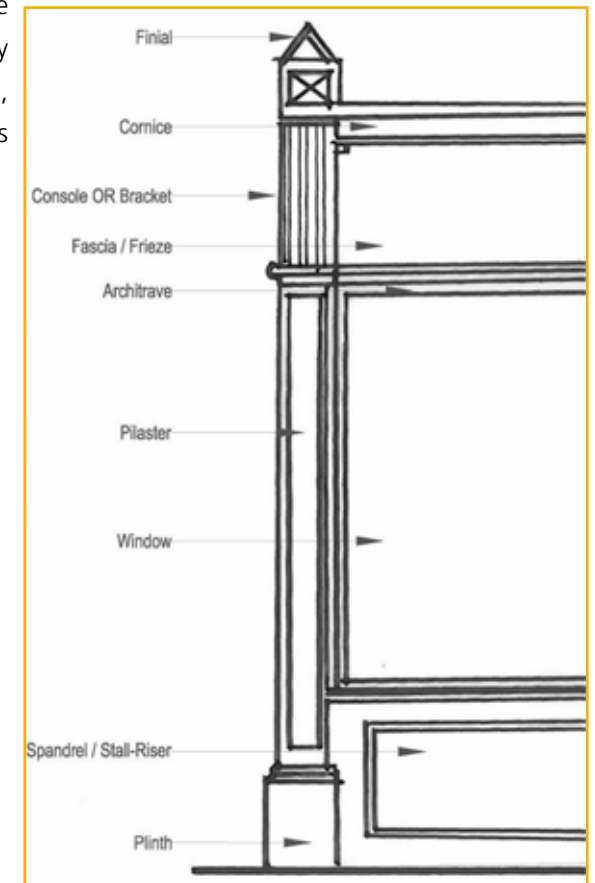


ELEMENTS OF THE SHOPFRONT

The shopfront has a number of important functions in a streetscape, and these need to be borne in mind when approaching shopfront design. The primary function of a shopfront is to identify a retail premises within a street using a combination of name sign and window display to attract custom. The shopfront also has an important role in expressing the architectural character of the overall building at ground-floor level to passersby on the street while integrating successfully with the floors above. Both these commercial and architectural functions should be addressed in the design process.

An understanding of the essential elements of the shopfront is central to addressing shopfront design. The basic structure, derived originally from Classical Architecture, consists of the following elements (illustrated alongside)

- Cornice
- Fascia
- Pilasters
- Stall Riser



OVERALL GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. THE SHOPFRONT IN CONTEXT

The shopfront is not an independent entity. It is an integral part of the building to which it relates and to the adjoining building and shopfronts in the streetscape. Therefore, the starting point for the design of the shopfront must be its architectural context - its relationship to the building overhead and to adjoining buildings. Care must be taken not to detract from the overall character of the street especially in an Architectural Conservation Area (ACA). Where new buildings or alternatives to existing shopfronts are proposed, they should complement the existing character of the street in relation to proportions, materials, colours and details. (Corporate retail image, with standardised shopfront design, corporate colours and materials, is rarely appropriate in a historic streetscape. Compatibility with individual buildings and with the street scene will be considered more important than external uniformity between the branches of one company).



2. RELATIONSHIP TO THE BUILDING OVERHEAD

The design of a new shopfront should relate to the architecture of the building and to the upper floors in proportion, scale and alignment. Features of the building such as stringcourses, arches, etc. are elements, which may be reflected in the details of the scheme. The proportions of the individual elements of the shopfront may also be

suggested by the composition and proportions of the upper-floor details and window openings. Failure to relate to the form, proportion and materials above can result in a formal composition that is misaligned, top heavy and poorly proportioned with bad visual results for the premises.

3. RELATIONSHIP TO ADJOINING BUILDINGS

The new shopfront design must respect the scale and proportions of the streetscape by maintaining the existing grain of development along the street and respecting the appropriate plot width. The character of historic town centre building derives from a narrow plot width and a strong vertical emphasis to the buildings. It is important to reflect this vertical emphasis in the shopfronts. Elevational modelling and vertical division or features should break up long horizontal facades. Appropriate alignment and proportions of elements may be suggested by similar elements in adjacent shops.



Shopfronts should not extend across separate premises, the established hierarchy and variations of building plot widths are important components of the streetscape. Removal and omission of windows or doors to facilitate direct trading onto the street is generally unacceptable.



1. NECESSITY FOR A STRONGLY DEFINED FRAMEWORK

It is important to create a good visual frame for the shopfront. This frame will generally be formed by the cornice, pilasters, fascia and stall riser, and should be treated as one coherent unit. The detailing of each of the constituent elements is critical to the visual strength of the framework and to the successful functioning of the individual elements.



- **CORNICE** - the cornice is a narrow projecting detail over the fascia. Its functions are to keep rain off the fascia sign and to provide a strong definition to the top of the shopfront. It is therefore critical from a visual point of view.



- **PILASTERS** - Pilasters are rectangular columns projecting slightly from the face of the building. Sometimes they stop underneath the fascia panel, but often they run up to the cornice and act as ends or brackets/consols to the fascia board. The traditional bracket design has often been very elaborate, with scrolls and fluting. The top of the pilaster is often capped (with a finial) to stop the penetration of water and should always sit on a plinth, usually of stone or plaster.



Pilasters give vertical definition to the shopfront and are critical in reflecting the pattern or grain of buildings in the streetscape. Where premises are linked internally, it is important that the architectural integrity of the individual units is expressed externally with pilasters provided between each unit. Existing original pilasters should not be removed or clad, and damaged pilasters should be repaired or reinstated.

- **FASCIA** - The function of the fascia panel is to carry the shop name and street number. Fascia panels should be of a depth appropriate to the size of the building and the proportion and length of the shopfront. (Normally, fascia depth should not exceed a quarter of the distance between the fascia's lower edge and the pavement.) A single fascia should not be used to link buildings of different architectural identities. The lettering should always be in scale with the fascia panel.



An over-deep fascia can spoil a shopfront. Its reduction to a more appropriate scale can be problematic due to a dropped internal ceiling height, an existing RSI, or security shutter housing. Where it is not possible to relocate offending structural elements, the visual impact can be lessened in a number of ways.

- **STALL RISER** - The stall riser is the horizontal elements between the bottom of the window and the ground. It is desirable to include a stall riser of at least 30cm to 60cm in height, to give a strong visual base to the shopfront and to protect the window from ram-raiders, splashing and road dirt. Stone and plaster are the most common materials, but where timber stall risers or pilasters are used, a small recessed stone plinth should be provided between the timber and the ground.



Stall risers are often omitted from contemporary designs to maximise the impact of the display area or for simplicity of form. This can produce a very stylish effect, but its visual success is heavily dependent on the use of highquality external and internal materials and detailing. The omission of the stall riser will, therefore, only be considered appropriate in instances where this has been achieved.

2. NECESSITY FOR WINDOWS, DOORS AND ACCESS TO UPPER FLOORS

Windows and doors are vital parts of the shopfront, and their removal or omission from shopfronts is unacceptable as it dilutes the visual strength of the building at ground level, and that of the streetscape. Direct trading onto the street through a gap in the shopfront, or the removal of windows or doors is unacceptable for the same reason, but also because it changes the nature of the retail character in the street. Doors to facilitate access to upper floors of buildings must be retained.



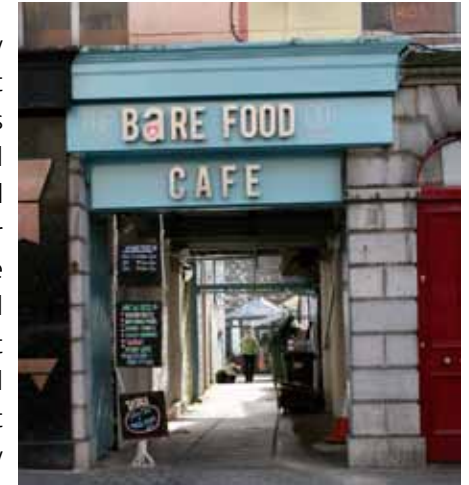
The appropriate proportions of windows and doors are likely to be suggested by the proportions of openings in the upper part of the building. It is advisable to design doors and windows in sympathy with other features of the building - for example, lining up the height of the stall riser to pilaster plinth height. If a shop is part of a terrace, it should reflect the established pattern of openings and proportions so that it does not undermine the visually coherent streetscape.



While there is a trend for very busy shops to consider widening the entrance or entrances to their premises, it is critically important that the dimensions of the openings are kept in a scale with the building and adjoining buildings.

1. SIGNAGE

The main objective of signage is to identify a premises and its occupant, and shopfront designs should provide for identification as an integral part of that design. Signage shall be of a high standard of design, finish and installation. It should relate to the character of the streetscape and the scale of the shopfront, and integrate into the overall building design. Plastic or neon signs will not be permitted as they detract from the visual quality of the street. Ancillary signage that does not relate to the fascia will be generally discouraged.



In order to avoid visual clutter, the number of attachments to premises should be minimised. Using the public footpath for advertising or supplementary signage, such as sandwich boards should be kept to a minimum to avoid visual clutter and obstruction to pedestrians and mobility impaired.

- FASCIA SIGNS - in general, only the name and street number of the shop should be on the fascia panel. The details of the sign - its form, scale, colour and materials - should be complementary to the design of the shopfront. These details should form part of the planning application. Signs comprising individually mounted lettering or hand-painted lettering is the most desirable and generally appropriate solution. Box signs, particularly where they are internally illuminated, are unacceptable.



Letter design should be simple and legible. The dimensions of the fascia should dictate the size and height of the letters. Letters of more than 40cm will not normally be acceptable. The material for the letters should complement the materials in the shopfront. These may include:

- Incised, painted or gilded
- Back-painted or gilded onto a glass fascia
- Anodised-metal letters fixed individually and directly onto the facade proportionate to the depth of the fascia board.



Illumination should be discreet, either by concealed neon tubing where the fascia detail permits, or by rear illumination of the individual letters. Spotlights should only be considered where they can be discreetly located, where the supporting arms and the hoods of the lights are treated to match the background.



- **PROJECTING SIGNS** - in general, projecting signs will not be permitted in order to avoid clutter in the streetscape. In particular cases the proposal will be evaluated on its merits - the size of the sign, its relationship with the building, footpath width and streetscape generally.
- **BANNERS AND FLAGS** - banners and flags are considered to be unsuitable forms of identification, and will not be permitted.

- **CORPORATE SIGNS** - companies must accept that corporate signs, logos, colour schemes or shopfront designs will not be permitted to override compatibility with individual buildings and must be adapted to respect the character of building and shopfront and shall sit comfortably and unobtrusively within the character of the street. Windows shall not be obscured or covered with photographs or corporate branding/logos. The character of the building, its material and colour scheme, and those of adjoining buildings will determine the appropriate design response in any instance.



- **PARAPET SIGNS** - signs above parapet height and intruding on the skyline will not be permitted.



GAELIC

Bilingual signs are encouraged, using a distinctive Gaelic-style script on hand painted wooden signs, in order to protect and promote linguistic heritage.

OVERALL

Avoid the excessive use of signs, posters and stickers particularly on shopfront windows and doors. They create clutter, obscure shop displays and compete with architectural details.

Signage is normally discouraged on upper floors. Individual lettering, illumination and fixing of an appropriate scale only will be considered. Lettering applied directly to glazing will be open for consideration where appropriate, but shall not exceed 30% of the glazed area when viewed from the street.

2. MATERIALS

A wide range of materials is suitable for use in shopfronts. The material chosen, its colour and texture, should complement the architectural character of the building and integrate with the overall visual unity of the streetscape. Whether a traditional or contemporary shopfront, achieving a high-quality, durable finish, should be a prime consideration. The standard and detailing of a material have a significant impact on its appearance. A high level of attention to details and craftsmanship is required to achieve a quality appearance, particularly where traditional shopfronts are concerned. Materials like stone, steel and aluminium, particularly appropriate in a contemporary context, can be visually bland, especially when used in single plane. This can be avoided by modelling and detailing.

Avoid the use of cement pointing to stonework and replacement of timber sash windows with uPVC or metal types. These can damage the architectural heritage visually and physically and are not acceptable in Architectural Conservation Areas or to Protected Structures.



The design stage should include careful consideration and integration of all of the various elements, including services and any other attachments such as canopies or hanging signs.

Gutters and downpipes have an impact on the appearance of a building. In historic buildings, original rainwater goods should be conserved or replaced with traditional cast iron types.

The use of quality flooring materials at the entrance to shopfronts is very important, particularly where these are recessed. Some original shopfronts have original tiles within the threshold; these are important elements as they may have been specifically designed for the shop relating to its use. Generally, a dark-coloured stone works best. Materials such as small, light-coloured ceramic tiles, terracotta tiles etc. tend to be inappropriate for the public domain.



3. COLOUR

The colour of a shopfront and the colour of materials chosen for a shopfront should be determined by the need to harmonise with the rest of the building, adjoining buildings and the streetscape generally. Colours that create an overly strident visual effect should be avoided. The use of stains and varnishes on timber shopfronts is better avoided as a high-quality finish is seldom achieved, and maintenance can be problematic in Irish weather.



While encouraging vibrant and interesting colour choices, colours should complement rather than clash with neighbouring premises or stand out too strongly - use of a separate colour at ground floor on render results in poor outcomes generally.

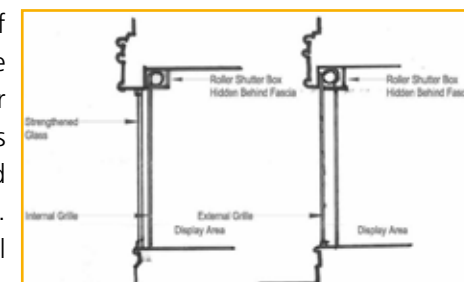
Timber shopfronts should be painted in a single colour, with generally a complementary colour in contrast for the lettering. Colours to signs or joinery in cut-stone facades should generally be muted to avoid detracting from the many qualities of local natural stone. Good quality, durable materials such as timber should be used to enhance the qualities of the stonework.

Natural stone should never be painted, including string courses, cornices and window sills. The removal of render to expose rubble stonework is generally not accepted - this is unsightly and makes the walls vulnerable to water penetration from driving rain.

Murals can add to the vibrancy of the street and building facades when executed imaginatively and sensitively, except where these would have an overbearing visual impact in the context of the building and the streetscape. Planning Permission may be required in such instances.

4. SECURITY

Providing security for premises is an issue for most retailers. In the past, shopfronts were protected either by timer shutters which formed part of the shopfront framework, or by detachable open-mesh grilles which could be removed during opening hours. The visual impact of both methods was minimal and generally complementary to the appearance of the shopfront. Contemporary security methods, particularly close-gauge roller-shutters are, by contrast, much more visually obtrusive and can detract seriously from the appearance and ambience of a shopping street. For this reason the use of roller-shutters on the exterior of shop premises where such shutters would detract from the streetscape and ambience of the town will be restricted. Planning Permission is required to install external security shutters.



In choosing a security system, retailers must strike a balance between securing their premises and keeping the area attractive, particularly after normal shopping hours where window shopping can play an important role in generating night-time pedestrian activity. Solutions involving traditional wrought iron window guards or shutters which provide a high degree of transparency will be considered. Shutters shall be placed internally behind the window display and security shutters or mesh shall be see-through in all cases. Solid roller shutters will not normally be permitted. No part of the shutters, their supports or fitting shall encroach on the public footpath.



Box-housing for shutters mounted externally will not be permitted. Alarm boxes shall be carefully positioned to minimise impact on shop front design. The colour of the shutter or grille should either be neutral in a single colour or complement the overall colour scheme of the shopfront.

5. FALSE CEILINGS

At times, it is necessary to install a suspended ceiling to address issues of lighting, ventilation or other service requirements inside a shop. This can give rise to problems when the ceiling abuts the shopfront window. False ceilings should be raked or angled to meet the shop window. It may be possible to insert a solid panel in the line of the window glazing below the fascia but recessed from the fascia line and in proportion to the overall shopfront design.



6. WINDOW GLAZING

Lettering or logos should not be affixed directly to the ground-floor glazing of any shop or business windows as a rule. All sign displays inside the shop shall be kept to a minimum of 300mm from the glazing. Signage shall not exceed one quarter of the window through which it is displayed or one quarter of the glazed area between 1m and 2.5m above ground level.

7. CANOPIES AND BLINDS

If the shop front requires protection from the sun blinds should be traditionally incorporated into the shopfront fascia and designed to be retracted into it when not in use. Curved and dutch style canopies are unsympathetic to the traditional streetscape and are discouraged.

8. VIEWS OF SHOP INTERIOR FROM THE STREET

Traditionally, the shopfront and enclosed window display area obscured the interior of the shop from street view. Contemporary shopfronts often emphasise the interior of the shop, making it visually significant from the street. If this is the case, the design of the interior becomes an important consideration in assessing the shopfront. The choice of materials and the internal layout should be determined by the need to complement the character of the building and shopfront.

9. RETENTION OF ACCESS TO UPPER FLOORS

The elimination of an independent ground-floor access to the upper part of a building undermines the diversity of uses essential to living streets, and can even have serious consequences for the longer-term viability of the entire building. Council policy is to create a living environment, with mixed-uses and multiple entrances generating street vitality. Generally, the removal of these accesses will not be permitted.



10. ILLUMINATION OF SHOPFRONTS

The illumination of the interior and exterior of shop premises requires careful consideration to ensure that the lighting is not overly dominant in the streetscape. Internal lighting of window displays plays an important part in facilitating after-hours window-shopping and creating warmth and colour in the street. The choice of lighting is key to avoiding an overly strident impact.

External illumination of the shopfront should only be considered where the lighting can be subtly concealed by feature details of the building. Spotlights, which are supported by projecting arm brackets, are to be avoided.



Consideration shall be paid to the use of renewable energy and reducing light pollution, and the careful choice, positioning and size of fittings to integrate successfully into the shopfront design.

11. SHOPFRONT SERVICES

External services being fixed to shopfronts of building facades should be carefully coordinated to relate to the configuration of the shopfront, the entire building facade and the adjoining buildings.

Cables and switch gear should always be concealed within the shopfront or the facade.

Lighting and other services equipment should be well-designed so that they enhance the appearance of the shopfront and reduce the likelihood of vandalism. Redundant cabling and electronic equipment attached to the shopfronts and buildings should always be made safe and removed.



12. STREET FURNITURE

Free-standing street furniture to be erected on the footpath outside of shops and business premises must be licensed by the Planning Authority under Section 254 of the Planning & Development Regulations 2001, as amended. In addition to normal criteria for assessing such applications, the granting of a licence will depend on good design and the use of high-quality materials.

Covered barriers when used together with canopies, create a feeling of enclosure along narrow streets. This makes the street less welcoming and claustrophobic and obscures the shopfront behind. Barriers should be of good quality, painted metal or stainless steel, robust but lightweight and easily demountable. Barriers should not exceed 1.1m in height and canvas is the most suitable covering material. Plastic or glass infill panels are not permitted.

Canvas barriers should be fabricated using a single colour that complements the shopfront and canopy and should not contain signage or advertising. Tables and chairs used for outdoor seating areas should be durable, high-quality designs that will integrate well with the streetscape.

Structures such as seats, bins and bollards should be located so as not to impede circulation on busy streets.

Some types of shops, such as bookshops, vegetable and flower shops have traditionally set out stalls to the front of their premises to display their goods. These can enhance the character and vitality of the street provided they do not impede pedestrian flow or contribute to street clutter. Furniture, white-goods and other large goods shall not be displayed or positioned on the pavements in front of the shop.

Sandwich boards and other free-standing display racks can also cause obstruction and clutter and are generally to be avoided.

No amplified announcements, music or other material should be played from any premises to advertise goods or services and no loudspeakers or other amplification apparatus should be affixed on or about the front of any premise for such a purpose. Any such sounds within the premises should be controlled so as to be inaudible for adjoining premises or at 2m from the frontage.



13. ACCESS FOR THE DISABLED

The design of shops should provide access for the disabled and comply with Part M of the Building Regulations. All shop entrances and thresholds should maximise access for all including people with disabilities. Level access should be provided where possible, otherwise ramps may have to be installed.

Doorways should be easy to operate and have a minimum clear width of 900mm with clear markings on glazed panels.

Signage should be clear and contrasting with its background to improve legibility. Braille at low-level is encouraged where deemed valid.

The provision of visual contrast through the use of colour highlighting to aid way-finding for the visually impaired, is to be encouraged, especially to shop entrances.

RETAIL SHOPFRONT GRANTS

A retail shopfront grant scheme is intended to improve the appearance of independently owned shops fronting the main public streets in Drogheda, Dundalk and Ardee.

For full details on the Shopfront Grants available and all Terms and Conditions

Please logon to www.louthcoco.ie

Or email shopfrontgrant@louthcoco.ie

APPENDIX 1

CHECKLIST OF BASIC POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. Any new shopfront or material alteration to an existing shopfront or new signage requires Planning Permission. It is advisable to seek the advice of the Area Planner prior to making an application.
2. Shopfronts should relate to the building overhead in terms of design, proportions and materials.
3. Security shutters, if required, should be located behind a window display. Window displays should be lit at night.
4. Hand-painted or individually mounted lettering are recommended for fascia signage.
5. Careful selection of shopfront colour, signage and lighting, and details such as flooring material and door handles can make a positive impact without major costs.
6. Projecting signs clutter a streetscape - if badly located or poorly designed, they can block views of signage on adjoining premises and can detract from the building on which they are located.
7. Corporate colours are generally not appropriate to the character of the building or street. Their use may be restricted for this reason.
8. A separate access to the upper floors of shops provides opportunity for other commercial or residential development at that level. Development of such access will be encouraged.
9. Good shopfront design enhances the shopping environment, leading to increased profits for traders.
10. Every owner can contribute to the upgrading of an area by installing a good-quality shopfront.
11. Works which materially alter the character of a protected structure or any element of special interest requires Planning Permission.
12. Similarly, for the exterior of buildings within an ACA, Planning Permission is required for works, which materially affect the character of the area.

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