Design Guidance for
Shopfronts, Signs and Advertisements
ADVISORY LEAFLET

1) INTRODUCTION

Suffolk Coastal District Council, as Local Planning Authority, has the responsibility for safeguarding the character and integrity of numerous attractive towns and villages as well as a wealth of traditional shopfronts and historic shopping areas.

In many instances historic shopfronts, traditional signs and attractive advertising can contribute much to the quality of an area. Good modern designs can also add interest. Conversely, those that are poorly designed and intrusive can have a particularly detrimental impact.

The Council recognises the fact that retailers and other commercial organisations need to be competitive and advertise their existence and their wares in order that their business remains economically viable. However, individual traders' eagerness to be prominent amongst their neighbours and competitors can lead to unwelcome changes to the visual character of the area.

It is therefore considered that additional guidance and advice on the design of shopfronts and advertisements would be helpful in order to ensure that when change does take place it serves to preserve or enhance the important characteristics of the District.

This leaflet outlines the principal points contained in the District Council's adopted Supplementary Planning Guidance No 14 Shopfronts, Signs and Advertisements.

(Above) An ornamental pilaster on a Listed building in Woodbridge.

New shopfronts in Wickham Market (above) and Yoxford (right).

On 1st April 2019, East Suffolk Council was created by parliamentary order, covering the former districts of Suffolk Coastal District Council and Waveney District Council. The Local Government (Boundary Changes) Regulations 2018 (part 7) state that any plans, schemes, statements or strategies prepared by the predecessor council should be treated as if it had been prepared and, if so required, published by the successor council. Therefore this document applies to the part of the East Suffolk Council area formerly covered by the Suffolk Coastal District until such time that it is replaced.
2) GENERAL ADVICE RELATING TO SHOPFRONTS AND SIGNS

When shops change hands or owners wish to alter or improve their property, it is likely that works will be proposed to the shopfront. Such alterations will almost certainly require permission from the District Council. It is important, therefore, that at an early stage shop owners or their agents should seek advice and discuss the suitability of their proposals. Informal consultation is encouraged and may well save the applicant time in abortive work.

3) LEGISLATION

Most alterations to shopfronts will require consent of some form, either one or more of the following: Planning Permission, Conservation Area Consent, Listed Building Consent, Advertisement Consent or Approval under the Building Regulations.

PLANNING PERMISSION

This will be necessary when carrying out any works which involve a material change in the external appearance of a building. Apart from straightforward repairs or replacement with a replica design of the same materials, Planning Permission will be required for most external alterations.

CONSERVATION AREA CONSENT

This is needed for works involving substantial demolition of an unlisted property or structure in a conservation area.

LISTED BUILDING CONSENT

Any work to a Listed building which externally or internally affects its character as a building of special or historic interest needs consent. This will often include the display of signs and advertising on a Listed building. It is strongly advised that contact be made with the Development Control Section of the Planning and Leisure Department before carrying out any alterations to a Listed Building. Undertaking unauthorised works is a criminal offence.

ADVERTISEMENT CONSENT

Consent under the Regulations controlling advertisements is required for many signs. Virtually all advertisements which are illuminated will need permission. The Advertisement Regulations are complex and it is not possible to fully explain the legislation within the scope of this leaflet. Advice should be sought from the Council’s Development Control Section.

BUILDING REGULATIONS APPROVAL

This may be required for works, whether or not any of the above Consents are needed for the work you propose, so check with the Building Control Group before commencing any work.

4) EXISTING SHOPFRONTS

Throughout the District there are a great many attractive shopfronts which are important not least because of their historic significance. Only a few survive from the 18th Century but there are many interesting examples from the 19th and 20th Centuries which are still in their original form. It is important that those are retained because they contribute so much to the character and appearance of the area.

Other buildings have remnants of good period shopfronts, including fascias, consoles, pilasters, stallrisers and other details. Examples abound and in many cases not only should these features be retained for their own sake, as historical artefacts, but their existence should also influence how changes are carried out on other parts of the shopfront.

An example of an 18th Century shopfront on the Market Hill, Woodbridge.

Examples of traditional consoles brackets.
5) NEW SHOPFRONTS

Where existing shopfronts are of little merit, or of a poor design, their replacement, if sensitively handled, can often improve the appearance of the building and the surrounding area. Designers will need to take into account the characteristics of not only the immediate street scene but also the local distinctiveness of the town or village as a whole.

The basic principles of good design for shopfronts are applicable to both modern and traditional styles. It is important that the elements used relate to each other in terms of scale, balance, harmony and proportion.

Use of materials and attention to detail are also very important in order to achieve a successful, unified and attractive composition.

Although most historic shopping streets have buildings with a strong vertical emphasis, with tall windows interspersed with glazing bars, mullions and pilasters, there is also often a great deal of variety. New shopfront designs should be sympathetic to the age and architectural style of the building into which they are fitted. They should not be seen as just a horizontal band along the street, forgetting the buildings above.

![Elements of a Traditional Shopfront](image-url)

![Section through the cornice and sloping fascia, showing how a roller blind is often concealed](image-url)

![Elevation of console, cornice and fascia](image-url)
6) ELEMENTS OF A SHOPFRONT

When designing a new shopfront it is always useful to consider the principle elements which make up a traditional shopfront.

WINDOWS

Modern retailing methods can demand large expanses of glass to enable goods to be displayed to as many people as possible. This is often at the expense of the scale of surrounding buildings and shopfronts, and should, in many instances be avoided. By sub-dividing windows into traditional proportions, the overall space is maintained but a more sympathetic relationship can be achieved between the shopfront and the building as a whole.

FASCIAS

The transition between the shop on the ground floor and the upper floors of a building is an important design consideration. Traditionally, the fascia formed a strong, definite line, visually supporting the weight of the building. The fascia should appear as though it is an integral part of the shopfront rather than being applied in a random fashion, ignoring or obscuring existing features.

The size and scale of the fascia should be in proportion to the shopfront, the building and the street scene. There has been a trend over recent years to increase the depth of fascias in order for the shopfront and associated signage to be more prominent. Fascias should be kept a reasonable distance away from the cills of the first floor windows and avoid obscuring architectural details in order to prevent the shopfront from dominating the rest of the building.

Any attempt to link two buildings of different designs with a common fascia is bound to have an adverse impact on their appearance. Each building should retain an individual shopfront with its own separate fascia. With careful detailing and choice of colours and materials it should be possible to create an appropriate design with a visual sense of unity so that a single occupancy is reflected.

CORNICES

It is usual for a traditional fascia to have a moulded projection above it. The cornice, usually covered in lead, formed a sound weatherproof joint between the building and the shopfront below, and terminated the top of the shopfront in a visually strong manner.

CONSOLES

The console was introduced to enable a well-formed junction to be created between the pilasters and the fascia. It provided a visual stop to the horizontal and vertical elements and drew attention to the fascia and its message. Consoles also provided depth, which enabled the fascia to be tilted down towards the pavement and helped to screen blind boxes which were often accommodated within the cornice. Late Victorian and Edwardian shopfronts tended to have large, elaborate and intricately detailed consoles.

A detailed section and elevation of a traditional panelled timber stallriee.
PILASTERS

These form the visual vertical support for the fascia and the building above, they frame the shop window and stalliser. In a traditional street, where there is normally a strong vertical emphasis, excessive spans and large shop windows without intermediate pilasters for support, appear weak and create a discordant horizontal emphasis.

STALLRISERS

The stalliser provided the traditional shopfront with a visual anchor to the ground and raised the glass of the shop window up away from potential damage and water splashes. It also allowed the floor inside the shop window to be raised, so the display was more visible.

MATERIALS AND FINISHES

Historically, timber was the traditional material used for the construction of shopfronts, occasionally others, such as stone and cast iron were used. Although in the majority of cases timber is still the preferred option, it is possible to use new materials with success in historic shopping streets. In some instances, with well thought out design solutions, it may even be appropriate to use modern materials in conservation areas and on historic buildings.

Some new materials however, such as perspex and other forms of acrylic sheet and certain types of metal, like untreated aluminium, do have a detrimental effect on the character and appearance of buildings in many locations and as such their use may be discouraged.

There has been a recent trend to use hardwood and brown stained softwood for windows and the construction of shopfronts. In traditional locations, the result is invariably a building which appears out of keeping with the historic character of the area. A painted finish is normally required in these instances.

CORPORATE IMAGES

For many years now many larger retailers have adopted standard designs so that their premises are clearly identifiable. The imposition of a "corporate image", however, regardless of the context, can be very destructive and severely erode local distinctiveness. A flexible approach will be required, especially in conservation areas and on historic buildings, and it will be expected that modifications to standard shopfronts and signs will be made where the location justifies it.

A large, bulky fascia applied across adjoining properties fails to respect the individual buildings.

The matching shopfronts in the adjoining properties create a unity that helps to reflect the single occupancy.

These shopfronts respect the divisions between the buildings and their overall character.

This shopfront does not respect the style or the division of the building above.

Unbroken areas of plate glass relate poorly to the character and proportions of the building above.

Shopfronts with individual fascias respect the building divisions.

Traditional hanging sign.

Smaller areas of glass are in scale with the design of buildings.

The use of pilasters helps to properly frame the shop window and provides visual support to the buildings above.
Over the past few decades the advent of projecting box signs fixed directly to the building has been seen to portray a more modern image. As a result, in many shopping streets, standardised designs made out of modern materials have replaced the traditional hanging sign to the detriment of the townscape quality.

The District Council, therefore, takes the view that in historic shopping areas the use of traditional hanging signs will be encouraged where they will enhance the appearance of the building and the character of the area as a whole. Conversely, the use of standard, non-traditional projecting box signs, will not normally be permitted in an historic context.

With both hanging and projecting signs, only one sign should normally be provided on each building. The size and design of the sign should relate well to the style of the building and shopfront and be located in a position where it does not detract from, obscure, or damage any architectural features. In many locations the use of glossy or reflective materials will not be appropriate because they can be particularly intrusive. Signs should also not cause obstruction, annoyance or danger to passers by or to adjoining occupants.

OTHER SIGNS ON BUILDINGS

Sometimes additional signage can be provided below the fascia by having well designed signage painted directly onto the glass of the shop window. Where no fascia exists it may be appropriate to advertise the name of a business by sign writing on the glass of an existing window. This is particularly useful for businesses which operate from the high street but do not have, or require, a window display.

Where a building has no shopfront or a shopfront without a fascia, it may be acceptable to sign write onto a plastered or already painted wall, as there is an historic precedent for it. Painted timber boards also have an historic precedent. Such boards may be acceptable on some buildings but they should not be over large and should have a moulded edging.

LETTERING

As well as the nature and image of the business, the choice of lettering should also be influenced by the architecture of the building and the character of the surrounding townscape. Lettering can have a major impact if it is out of scale, character, the wrong colour or just plain garish.

ILLUMINATION

Lighting in towns and villages and the countryside needs very careful consideration. In general the District Council will only grant consent for illuminated signs where there is a functional need and they are sympathetic to the character and appearance of the building and the locality. In many cases, therefore, the illumination of a sign or advertisement which makes it stand out from its surroundings in an intrusive way will not be acceptable.
The type of lighting will need careful consideration. Background or halo lighting can appear overly modern and out of place in historic areas or on historic buildings. Internally illuminated fascia and box signs can create a strong horizontal feature in the street scene. Similarly, fluorescent lighting on a building or a number of large individual lights, such as metal swan-neck spot lights, can also appear over-dominant.

In some instances, for example where a business is open regularly in the evening, some illumination may be justified. However, in order for lighting to be acceptable, the level of illumination will need to be carefully considered and the source of the light should be as discreet as possible.

**SMITHS**

(Left) Lettering hand painted onto a fascia by a sign writer is in most instances the preferred option. (Top) Alternatives include raised letters (Middle) and the use of spacers to raise the letters slightly (bottom).

(Right) Boxed out fascia signs, and projecting box signs will not normally be permitted in an historic context.

**DIRECTIONAL SIGNS AND "A" BOARDS**

To protect the character of towns, villages and the countryside, free standing signs and advertisements, especially in locations unrelated to the premises concerned, will be strictly controlled. Consent will only be given in exceptional circumstances and steps will be taken to remove unauthorised signs. In some locations a well designed "A" board on a private forecourt may be appropriate in townscape terms. However, the unauthorised position of such signs, especially on the highway, can be dangerous as well as visually intrusive. In such circumstances the Highway Authority may take action to seek their removal on highway safety grounds.

**GARAGES AND OTHER DRIVE-IN FACILITIES**

Garages, drive-in restaurants, car sales sites and similar facilities are to be of a high standard of design, in keeping with the architectural and landscape quality of the area. Whilst highway safety will be a consideration, strict control will be exerted over signs, advertising and levels of illumination.

(Right) Discreetly located uplighters or small spot lights may prove acceptable in some instances. The colour and finish of the light fitting will, however, need to be carefully considered.

(Above) The shape and location of applied board signs needs careful consideration. In most instances such boards should be finished with a timber moulded edging as shown left.

**The Three Feathers**

Public House
Meals served all day
Take away meals only

Advanced warning and directional signs will be strictly controlled because they can have a major impact on the character and appearance of an area.

Sign under window and vertical projecting sign appear tacked on.

Off centre sign disrupts the balance of the elevation

Over large signs appear squeezed into space

Take away meals only
8) SECURITY, SAFETY AND ACCESS

Today shops have to display their goods openly as well as meet the need for increased security, public safety and disabled access. These requirements can have an adverse affect on the appearance of the shopfront and street scene. Great care is needed to produce sensitive and appropriate design solutions.

GLASS

Many old shopfronts still have their original glass, sometimes it is decoratively etched or coloured. Both decorative and historic glass should be retained if possible and if the building is Listed permission will be required for removal or replacement. Increasingly, the glass used is dictated by safety and security. Toughened and laminated, or even stronger glass, is now available. This may mean intrusive types of security shutters or grilles can be avoided if these products are used instead.

SECURITY SHUTTERS AND GRILLES

Traditionally, shops were secured at night with external removable wooden shutters. The shop was designed to accommodate these and they formed an integral part of the character and appearance of the shopfront.

A shopfront can be dramatically altered by the addition of modern external security shutters. Even when raised or removed, roller shutter boxes, fixings and side rails are still visible. When lowered or fixed the whole frontage is often obscured, giving a blank, sterile effect to the street.

Whilst taking into account security problems, permission will only be given for security shutters in exceptional circumstances. If security shutters are necessary, they should be placed behind the glass. In all cases, security measures should be incorporated so they form an appropriate and integral part of the shopfront and the building.

BURGLAR ALARMS, SECURITY CAMERAS AND CASH DISPENSERS

Alarm boxes should be small, positioned carefully and be sited not to obscure or damage the architectural details. They should be painted to suit the colour scheme of the building as a whole. External security cameras will normally require consent. Their erection will only be acceptable if the need can be fully justified. Cash dispensers, due to their size and form, can be difficult to successfully integrate into the shopfront or facade. A preferred solution is to locate them in a lobby or entrance.

CANOPIES AND BLINDS

Traditionally, blinds were used to protect goods from sunlight and provide shelter for external displays and shoppers. Locally, the canvas roller blind was the type usually installed, although there are some fan blinds which exist in the District. Roller blinds have the advantage of being able to be fully retracted into a concealed blind box.

Whilst modern types of canopies may be appropriate in some locations in the District, non-retractable permanently fixed canopies, especially those made of a shiny plastic material, will not be suitable in historic areas or most traditional shopping streets, especially if they incorporate advertisements. These structures not only often obscure the fascia on shopfronts but also introduce a dominant shape which is out of character with older buildings and the historic street scene.

Some 20th Century buildings may be capable of accommodating modern rigid or retractable blinds. However, as explained above, such features on a building should not be considered in isolation. Account should also be taken of the impact on the street scene and the overall character of the area.

FORECOURTS

The display of goods or signs on a forecourt can sometimes give a cluttered appearance and obstruct the pavement, causing problems to people with disabilities, especially the blind. However, where there has been a tradition of external displays on private forecourts for example, or where a forecourt is suitable for use as a pavement cafe, there may be exceptions.

UPPER FLOORS

Traditionally, the accommodation over shops was occupied by the shopkeeper, now this is rare. In fact, much of this space is under-used or not used at all, leading to a lack of maintenance and neglect. The District Council wish to promote the use of upper floors, especially for residential use, to help increase the area’s housing stock. Where a separate access along the street frontage exists, this should be retained.

ACCESS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

New shopfronts must meet Building Regulations and other legislation covering the needs of people with disabilities. They, together with alterations to existing shopfronts, should meet these requirements whilst still achieving a high standard of design. On Listed buildings and historic shopfronts, the needs of people with disabilities should be taken into account but also considered against the requirement to preserve the special architectural and historic character of the building.

9) FURTHER ADVICE

Please contact the Development Control Section, Planning & Leisure Department, Suffolk Coastal District Council, Melton Hill, Woodbridge, IP12 1AU. Tel. (01394) 383789.