



Northumberland  
County Council

# Alnwick Shopfront Design Guide





# Contents

<b>Glossary of terms</b> .....	3
<b>Preface</b> .....	4
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	4
1.1 Status of the design guide .....	4
1.2 Policy context .....	5
1.3 What is a conservation area?.....	5
1.4 What is a listed building? .....	6
1.5 Why have a design guide? .....	6
<b>2. Alnwick Conservation Area</b> .....	6
<b>3. Shops and Shopfronts in Alnwick</b> .....	6
<b>4. Guidance on Good Shopfront Design</b> .....	7
<b>5. Principal Elements of a Traditional Shopfront</b> .....	8
5.1 Spanning the opening .....	8
5.2 Entablature and pilasters – the ‘goal posts’ .....	8
5.3 Shop window .....	9
5.4 Doorway .....	10
5.5 Materials and colour .....	10
5.6 Awnings .....	10
5.7 Window displays .....	11
5.8 Access for all .....	11
<b>6. Signage</b> .....	11
6.1 The fascia sign .....	12
6.2 Different types of signs .....	12
6.3 Sign lighting .....	12
<b>7. Security Measures</b> .....	13
7.1 Shatterproof, toughened laminated glass .....	14
7.2 Internal security shutters and grilles .....	14
7.3 Decorative external grilles .....	14
7.4 External roller shutters and grilles .....	14
<b>8. Further Information</b> .....	14

## Glossary of terms

**Corbel or bracket** – moulded timber element at top of pilaster, ‘holding up’ entablature

**Entablature** – horizontal feature at top of shopfront, comprising moulded projecting cornice, flat fascia for signage, and moulded projecting architrave beneath

**Fanlight** – window above a door – can be decorative

**Glazing bar** – timber sub-dividing glass in window or door, narrower than a transom or mullion

**Jamb** – side face of any projecting element, such as a door or window

**Mullion** – vertical timber dividing glass in a shopfront

**Pilaster** – flat or moulded timber panel either side of a shopfront

**Plinth** – base of a pilaster

**Sill** – horizontal element below shop window, projecting to disperse rainwater from stallriser

**Soffit** – underside of any recessed element, such as a recessed doorway

**Stallriser** – timber or masonry element beneath a shop window

**Top light** – high level glass in shop window

**Transom** – horizontal timber dividing glass in a shop window

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Fenkle Street, Alnwick

## Preface

Northumberland County Council is committed to retaining the special character of its conservation areas. In a market town such as Alnwick, shops and commercial premises are a key element of the conservation area, and have a considerable impact on its overall appearance. Achieving a high standard of design in relation to shops and other businesses is important in underpinning its commercial success. The visual appeal of the town centre, with its medieval burgage plots and classical stone-faced buildings, is critical to attracting and retaining businesses, thus contributing to the vitality and viability of the town centre.<sup>1</sup> Well-designed shopfronts and other commercial frontages make the street attractive to shoppers, thus helping to support the local economy as well as enhancing the street scene.

The Alnwick Shopfront Design Guide contains guidance to assist developers, retailers, design professionals and building owners to prepare designs for shopfronts and other commercial premises which respond well to local character. It provides the Council with a set of criteria against which to assess the quality of proposed works when determining applications for planning permission and listed building consent.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Status of the design guide

This guide replaces the Design Guide for Shop Fronts which was adopted by Alnwick District Council in 1995. It has been produced in partnership with Alnwick Civic Society. The updated Design Guide is in line with national and local planning policies and provides guidance and advice to developers and to the local planning authority in considering and determining relevant planning and listed building applications. In cases where planning permission is not required, the Council encourages adherence to the design principles set out in this guide.



Bondgate Within, Alnwick

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<sup>1</sup> A review of retail and town centre issues in historic areas. English Heritage, Historic Towns Forum, Strutt and Parker and Allois and Morrison Urban Practitioner, June 2013.

## 1.2 Policy context

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which came into force in 2012 and was revised in 2019, replaces previous planning policy documents and sets out the government's intent in relation to all planning matters. The requirement for good design is a thread that runs through the document:

*Paragraph 9. Pursuing sustainable development involves seeking positive improvements in the quality of the built, natural and historic environment... including replacing poor design with better design.*

*Paragraph 17 deals with Core Planning Principles, one of which is to 'always seek to secure high quality design and a good standard of amenity for all existing and future occupants of land and buildings'.*

*Paragraph 56. The Government attaches great importance to the design of the built environment. Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, is indivisible from good planning, and should contribute positively to making places better for people.*

*Paragraph 57. It is important to plan positively for the achievement of high quality and inclusive design for all development, including individual buildings, public and private spaces and wider area development schemes.*

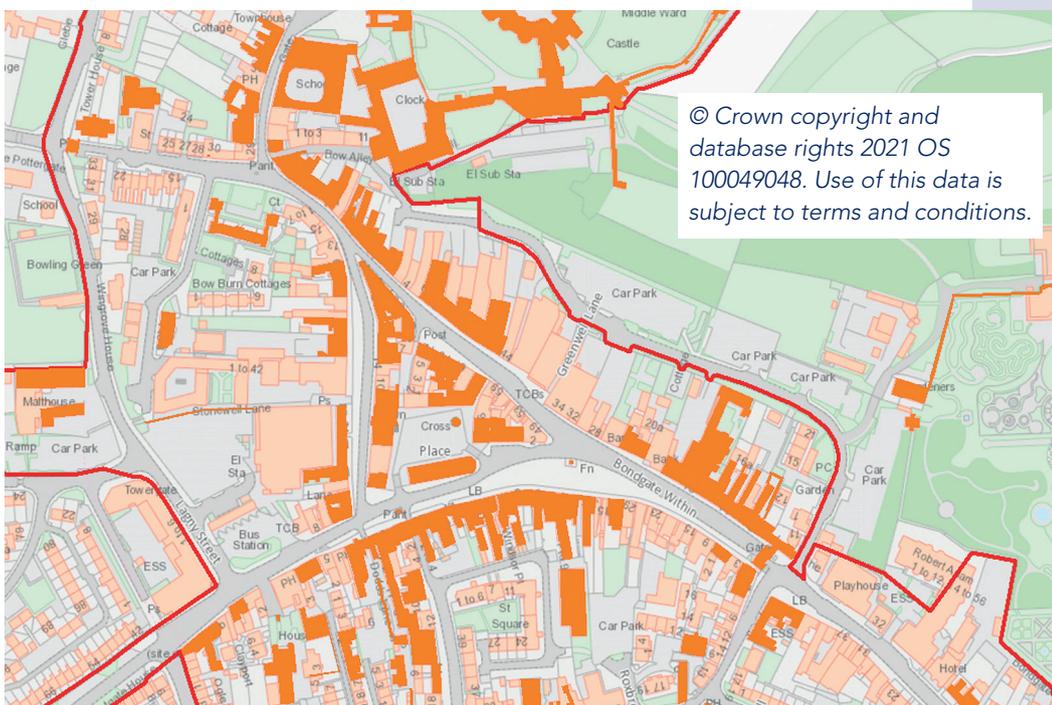
The Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan<sup>2</sup> was made in 2017 and contains Policy HD7 Design in the Historic Centre. It sets out a series of design principles as requirements for good design.

<sup>2</sup>[Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan 2014-2031](#)

<sup>3</sup>[Planning \(Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas\) Act 1990](#)

## 1.3 What is a conservation area?

Conservation areas are 'areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance'.<sup>3</sup> They are designated by local planning authorities using local criteria. Their special character derives primarily from the quality of the historic buildings in the area and the relationship of buildings to open spaces, views, landscaping and street patterns. All these elements combine to create a locally distinctive sense of place, which the statutory designation seeks to protect by managing change in such a way that it respects the special character of the conservation area. More detailed information can be found in the Alnwick Conservation Area Character Appraisal, adopted in 2006, and available on the Northumberland County Council website.



Map of central Alnwick with Listed Buildings (dark orange) and Conservation Area boundary (red).

## 1.4 What is a listed building?

A listed building is one which is included on the National Heritage List for England and which is designated by Historic England. Alnwick Conservation Area contains over 220 listed buildings, many of which are located in the commercial core of Alnwick. Listed building consent must be applied for if you propose to make any changes, including many seemingly minor alterations, which could affect a building's special interest.

## 1.5 Why have a design guide?

The aim of the guide is to promote high standards of design for new shopfronts and alterations to existing shopfronts. Good design is a fundamental part of the Planning process and design guides are produced to assist the Planning application process by setting out the design principles which are expected to be applied by anybody who wishes to carry out alterations that would affect Conservation Areas or Listed Buildings.

# 2. Alnwick Conservation Area

Alnwick Conservation Area was designated in 1972 and revised in 2006. Its historic environment is of high quality and its traditional shopfronts contribute to the character of the area. The design guide seeks to maintain that quality through the Development Management process.

# 3. Shops and Shopfronts in Alnwick

Alnwick's function as a market has always been an important one with the Market Place at its heart. The earliest form of 'shop', the temporary market stall, is still present today in market towns throughout the country. The desire to seek more permanent, covered premises for trading led to the development of purpose-built structures.

The next development was to insert shops into the ground floor of existing buildings. If manufacturing was carried out on the premises, a common arrangement was to have the workroom behind or above the shop area, and the proprietor and assistants living in the same building. The shopfront, in the form that we recognise, first appeared around the turn of the 17th century, although the earliest surviving complete shopfronts in the country date from the mid-18th century. Early 19th century shopfronts are more common survivals and a popular design was the multi-paned bow-fronted window.

Most surviving historic shopfronts date from the Victorian era. The arrival of plate glass (made by casting rather than blowing) led to a wave of shop window replacement, particularly from 1840 onwards. The advent of cast iron technology was another turning point in architecture, allowing bigger areas of glazing, and even two or three storeys of glazed frontage.

The early 20th century was a dynamic era in architecture, where movements such as Art Deco and Art Nouveau made their way into shopfront design.

The 20th century has seen the growth of national companies, many of whom developed a distinctive brand identity through shop design. However, this has translated into bland corporate identities which are uniform throughout the country, often at the expense of local distinctiveness. Technological advances in the late 20th century have seen the proliferation of cheaper, lower quality materials, particularly plastic, which often has a detrimental impact in sensitive historic areas.



*Market booths in Northumberland Hall*



*Bow-fronted shop in Dodd's Lane*



*Simple shopfront in Green Batt*



*Detail from the Arts and Crafts Co-op, Fenkle Street*

## 4. Guidance on Good Shopfront Design

A good shopfront is more than just large windows, a door and a sign. It is important to consider all the individual components which make up a shopfront and how they go together to form the finished design, and especially the proportions of each element. This involves understanding the host building and the space available for the shopfront where no single element should dominate. The choice of materials and colour also needs careful consideration to ensure that they are sympathetic to the overall building.

Where an entirely new shopfront is required and there is good historical evidence of an appropriate earlier design, such as an old photograph, then replicating the earlier design is often the best option. Sometimes unsympathetic later shopfronts are found to have covered older, more traditional shopfront elements. This can be good news and means that the older elements can be refurbished as part of a more appropriate scheme.

Contemporary designs are sometimes acceptable if they are of high quality, use traditional scale and proportions, and respect the host building and the streetscene. New frontages should represent locally distinctive characteristics in terms of design, scale, massing, height and materials.



*Bondgate Within*



*Well-considered shopfront designs*

*Good traditional shopfront designs*

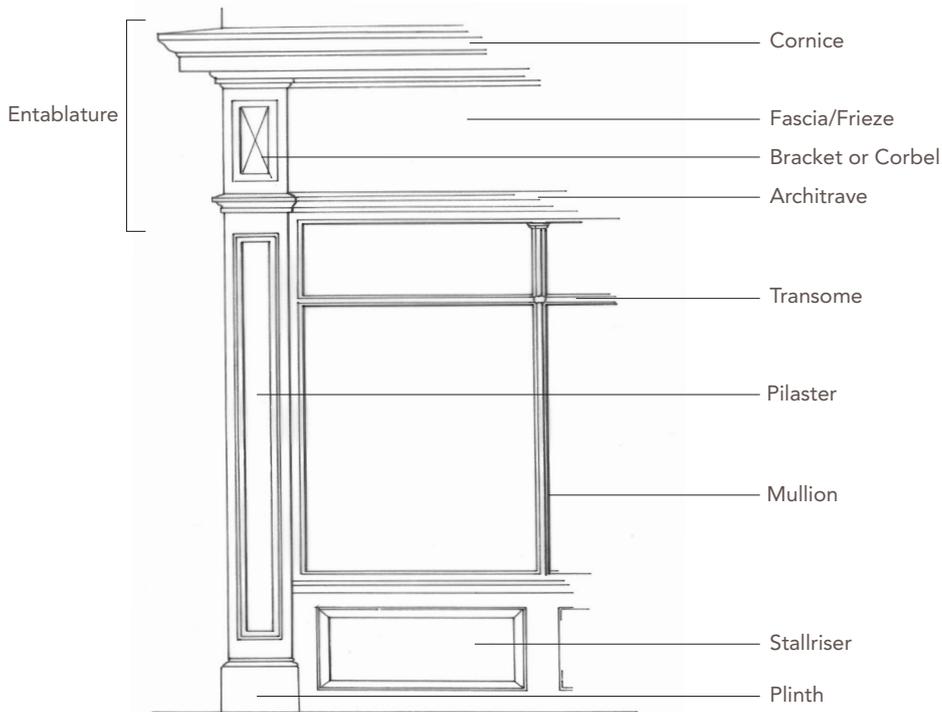


## 5. Principal Elements of a Traditional Shopfront

### 5.1 Spanning the opening

Shopfronts are bigger than domestic windows. The wider opening was traditionally spanned by a timber beam and in modern times by a steel girder. Inside the opening, masonry piers, steel or timber columns are used to support the main load-bearing element. The essence and variety of traditional shopfronts comes from the way the decorative external elements are arranged to hide these underlying structural elements.

### 5.2 Entablature and pilasters – the 'goal posts'



*Elements of shopfront design*

Traditional shopfronts are framed by the **entablature**, the long, horizontal section at the top, which is supported at either side by **pilasters**, the vertical sections. The opening is usually wider than it is tall, hence the goal post analogy.

The **entablature** normally consists of a cornice, a fascia and an architrave:

- The **cornice** has a practical and aesthetic purpose. As well as providing an attractive visual break between the shopfront and the rest of the facade, it should project sufficiently to cast rainwater clear of the fascia and window head, thus protecting the timberwork from decay. The cornice itself is usually protected by a lead flashing tucked into the masonry above and can also be used to house a retractable canvas awning.
- The **fascia** is the wide band which usually carries the name of the shop. There is some flexibility in the maximum height of the fascia, but it should always be kept in proportion with the shopfront and the whole elevation of the building. The introduction of an oversized fascia is often one of the most damaging modern interventions that can be applied to a historic shopfront. Overly deep fascias should always be reduced and brought back into proportion where possible. Newly applied fascias should never hide existing architectural details.



*Cornice, corbels and fascia*



*Above: unusually detailed corbels*

- The **architrave** is sometimes no more than a narrow moulding above the window. This frames the fascia and gives character and depth to a shopfront.

**Pilasters** represent the columns of Classical architecture and cover the sides of the structural opening.

- At the base of each pilaster is a **plinth**, providing a visual anchor to the structure.
- **Corbels** are decorative features at the top of pilasters which visually 'support' the cornice, or the whole entablature. These are often the most varied and distinctive elements, providing an opportunity for interesting design.

### 5.3 Shop window

The purpose of the shopfront is to showcase the merchandise within. It comprises the window itself and a stallriser which lifts it off the ground.



Example of ventilation hopper



Example of decorative top-lights



Decorative and vertical mullions

- The **window**: traditional shopfronts are often subdivided into bays using moulded mullions. Mullions enhance verticality, add balance, and provide a feeling of greater solidity. They should look slender when viewed head-on, but can often be quite deep, front-to-back, to support the glass panes. Mullions also have a practical aspect – if a shopfront has only one pane of glass, then that entire pane must be replaced if it gets broken; if a window is divided and one pane gets damaged, the cost of replacement is somewhat less. The temptation to install a large picture window is rarely compatible with a traditional shopfront and can harm the proportions and character of a historic frontage.
- Horizontal subdivision can be part of the design, often with a transom at the same height as the top of the door creating a **top-light window** beneath the architrave. Top-lights have a number of functions: opaque glazing to obscure a suspended ceiling; stained or leaded glass for decoration and sun shading; 'hopper' mechanism to allow inward opening for ventilation.
- **Glazing bars** can be incorporated to subdivide the window, as with Georgian glazing patterns in houses. This normally indicates an earlier date when the size of glass panes was more limited.
- **Stallriser**: the shop window normally rests on a stallriser, which gives the shopfront a visual anchor, and protects the glass from damage by lifting it off the ground. The stallriser is usually in panelled timber to match the shopfront, but may also be of masonry or rendered. Tiling is often an option for more modern designs but can also be found on Victorian pub and other frontages, such as butcher's shops, as it easily cleanable. Where the stallriser has been altered to an inappropriate type, every effort should be made to reinstate the style that was intended for the particular shopfront.



Example of glazing bars



Masonry stallriser



Timber stallriser

## 5.4 Doorway

- **Glazing:** in traditional shopfront design, the door is usually part- or all-glazed to echo the shopfront it adjoins; the bottom of the glass will often be set at the same height as the top of the stallriser.
- It is not uncommon for there to be a **second doorway** giving independent access to the upper floors of the building. This second door should be considered as an element in the overall shopfront design and should normally be a solid, panelled domestic door, rather than a glazed shop door. Both doors should be similar in their basic design to provide continuity.
- **Recessed doorways:** in larger shopfronts, the door is often set back into a recess. This allows shelter from the elements, whilst affording the shopper the opportunity to look in the windows that flank the recess. It can also accommodate a shallow change in levels from street to door, thus avoiding the need for a step and providing easier access. Historically, the floors of recessed areas were often decorated with mosaic patterns, to add to the status of the shop. Equally, plain, non-slip material can be very useful for assisting access to the shop. Steps up into shops are a common feature and some have wrought iron handrails.
- **Fanlight:** where a shop window is particularly tall an extra panel above the door may be inserted, often traditionally designed as a decorative fanlight. Today, plain glass is more common, which might also incorporate signage.
- **Door furniture** should be selected with the character of the building in mind, and with a view to ease of use for customers with mobility and access needs.

## 5.5 Materials and colour

- **Timber** is the material of choice for a traditional shopfront in a historic building. It adds authenticity and allows for easy working of details such as mouldings and corbels. It is important that each element is correctly moulded to avoid a heavy clumsy look to the finished article. Aluminium and plastic are not acceptable as they have a poor appearance and are difficult to replicate correct details.
- Timber should always be finished in **paint**, not stained. A colour scheme should be restrained and in harmony with its context, not brash and competitive. A monochrome scheme is not always essential as details are often traditionally picked out in a shade which complements the main colour. Garish colour combinations should be avoided. Further advice on colour is given in the Alnwick colour scheme guide, which is available on the Council website.

## 5.6 Awnings

Fully retractable canvas awnings are a traditional form of shading, but they are not common in Northumberland. Where they exist in a historic shopfront they should be refurbished and used. Proposals for new awnings are carefully considered, particularly their means of incorporation with the shopfront. Where a former dwelling has been converted into a shop, but retains its domestic character, it is unlikely a proposal for an awning could be supported. Fixed awnings, 'pram hood' blinds, and plastic or shiny materials are not acceptable.



*Glazed doorway*



*Two doorways within one shopfront*



*Recessed doorways, with and without steps*



*Decorative fanlights*



*Subtle colour complements the natural sandstone of the building*



*Awning*

## 5.7 Window displays

Shopkeepers are encouraged to consider how posters and banners within shop windows affect the overall appearance of their shopfront. There is a big difference between the neatly-arranged property advertisements in an estate agent's window and the untidy clutter of random stickers in a general store or garish illuminated signs. In contrast, displays, logos and shop names etched into door or window glass can be very effective, particularly if cleverly back-lit.

## 5.8 Access for All

Access for all applies to those with mobility and access needs. Consideration must be given to:

- manoeuvring a wheelchair or pushchair at a doorway
- lighting, colour contrast, signage design, strength of door closers and obstruction to free movement in front of the shop
- Building Regulations requirements in the context of new work, although there are concessions which can be applied in the case of a listed building.

Good management can also help, for example if the shopkeeper can give assistance to those struggling to open a door and a push-bell is often a good solution. Some elements can be chosen for ease of access for all, such as door furniture and closers.

## 6. Signage

Signage is the element of a shopfront that changes most frequently. Advertising should be simple and direct, avoiding a cluttered or fussy appearance to the shopfront. The fascia is the prime location for displaying the name of the shop and it is often helpful to include the street number. Signage is controlled by the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (England) Regulations 2007.

The advertisement control system covers a wide range of advertisements and signs but some types and sizes of advertisements are not within the Local Planning Authority's control as they do not require their consent. Frequently displayed types of advertisements for which you need the Local Planning Authority's consent includes fascia signs and projecting signs within the Alnwick Conservation Area. When determining applications for advertisement consent they can only be considered in the interests of amenity and public safety. Any signage attached to a Listed Building requires Listed Building Consent.

Vinyls are unlikely to be allowed on any listed building. Vinyls on non-listed buildings could require consent and are usually not appropriate in the Conservation Area.

If there are plans to alter or add any new signage on a building, please check with the Local Planning Authority as to whether advertisement consent is required.

Pre-application advice can be sought as to whether the proposed signage would be acceptable.



Window displays



Level access into shops



Handrail

## 6.1 The fascia sign

A painted timber fascia is normally the most appropriate solution for historic buildings in the Conservation Area, with letters either painted or applied individually in timber or metal. The lettering style should be clear and easily legible with a good contrast between the lettering and the background. Classical fonts are often best for traditional shopfronts. Lettering height should be in proportion to the depth of the fascia, and there should be a gap between the letters and the top and bottom edges of the fascia. Plastic and plastic-coated or highly reflective materials and garish colours will not normally be acceptable, particularly for listed buildings. Signs should sit neatly within the fascia, clear of the framing detail. Boldly projecting box fascia signs, particularly those which are internally illuminated, will not be acceptable. Imaginative symbols or logos related to the business can often enliven signage, but should not replace lettering altogether.

## 6.2 Different types of signs

- **Projecting and hanging signs** can have a significant impact on the street scene and their use should be limited to avoid unnecessary clutter. A single hanging or projecting sign for ground floor premises should be installed at fascia level, at one end of the fascia board and should not obscure any important architectural features. Such signs above fascia level are only acceptable if they can be satisfactorily accommodated without covering details or interfering with the symmetry or architectural composition of the facade. Projecting signs should be painted timber or cast metal. Plastic is not acceptable. Signs should be fixed (or restrained by chains) rather than swinging and should be mounted on suitably designed metal brackets fixed into mortar joints. Minimum height requirements for projecting signs in the street must be adhered to for pedestrian and highway safety.
- **Box signs** on the fascia or projecting are unacceptable as they are out of keeping with the traditional character of Alnwick's shopfronts and commercial buildings.
- **Nameplates and internal lettering:** Business use of upper floors is important to keep whole buildings in use and broaden the retail and service base in the town centre. Where advertising on buildings containing more than one business is limited, signage for upper floors should be restricted to lettering applied to the inside of windows (traditional painted letters look better than applied transfers) and a nameplate by the ground floor door.

## 6.3 Sign lighting

Illuminated signage can be detrimental to historic areas and will only be acceptable in certain circumstances:

- **Internal illumination** is only acceptable for signs such as Pharmacy signs, otherwise it should be avoided.
- **External illumination** can be considered for certain businesses that are open into the evening, such as pubs and restaurants. This may take the form of spotlights or carefully designed trough lighting. Lights should be carefully focussed on the sign to avoid nuisance or glare to pedestrians, motorists, or nearby windows. Subtle lighting can often be very attractive during the hours of darkness. Swan neck lights and floodlighting of entire facades is discouraged.



Legible lettering on painted timber fascia



Attractive hanging and projecting signs



Example of internal lettering



Externally illuminated hanging sign



## 7. Security Measures

The Council recognises that there is a need to achieve a balance between addressing a shop's security issues and responding to wider environmental and public interests. Ideally, all security measures should be incorporated into the design of a new shopfront at the outset, as the retrofitting of security can be visually poor and functionally less effective. However, there are suitable ways to improve security within existing shopfronts.

CCTV cameras and alarm boxes will always require Listed Building Consent if the building is listed and will usually require Planning Permission for installation on a shopfront within the Conservation Area. They should be incorporated sensitively into the overall design of the shopfront. Whilst alarm boxes require to be visible to act as a deterrent, they should be as unobtrusive as possible and painted in a suitable colour. CCTV cameras should be small and can often be sited internally.

Satellite dishes should be restricted to the rear of commercial premises and sited in an unobtrusive location. A wide range of security products is available which specifically aim to enhance shopfront security without detracting from the overall appearance. Any planning application must demonstrate that the choice of security measures would have a minimum effect on the architectural features and appearance of a building and of the wider townscape character.

Provided overleaf is a list of possible security solutions. It is also recommended that advice should be sought from the Police Architectural Liaison Officer (see <https://www.northumbria.police.uk>).

*Painted timber fascia and external security measures on doorways*

## 7.1 Shatterproof, toughened laminated glass

Where appropriate, consideration should be given to the installation of specialised glass, as this is one of the most visually unobtrusive security measures. It aims to maximise natural surveillance opportunities without affecting the overall appearance of the shopfront. However, it is only an option where no historic glass survives and where the window framing is of sufficient dimension to take the extra width of the glass pane without significant alteration.

## 7.2 Internal security shutters and grilles

Internal perforated or lattice shutters that sit behind the shop window and are colour coated allowing visibility through to the shopfront display are the preferred option. This type of shutter system provides a visible form of security measure that does not compromise the external appearance of the shop. Subject to the design, internal security shutters do not generally require Planning Permission. However, consent is always required in the case of a Listed Building.

## 7.3 Decorative external grilles

Decorative external grilles offer similar advantages to internal security shutters, although they are more noticeable. Once mounted, well designed security grilles should visually enhance the appearance of the shopfront. External grilles are not suitable in every instance, but they will be considered in certain circumstances. All external grilles, whether removable or fixed, require Planning Permission, and consent in the case of a Listed Building.

## 7.4 External roller shutters and grilles

External roller shutters and grilles should be the last option to be considered, as they have the greatest visual impact on a shopfront. Planning Permission is required for all types of external security shutters and Listed Building Consent is required in the case of listed buildings. It is important to note that permission (Listed Building Consent) is required even when changing from one type of external shutter to another, as the appearance of the building will be altered. Permission and consent will be refused for poorly designed shutters even if a similar example exists in the locality. Perforated, slotted or lattice-type colour coated external shutters may be considered acceptable under some circumstances. However, closed, or solid, shutters or galvanised shutters are not acceptable in Conservation Areas and particularly not for use on a Listed Building.

# 8. Further Information

Further advice and guidance regarding the design of buildings and signage within the Conservation Area or affecting a Listed Building can be found in the following:

- National Planning Policy Framework 2012, revised 2019 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>)
- Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/9/contents>)
- Outdoor Advertisements and Signs: A Guide for Advertisers 2007 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/outdoor-advertisements-and-signs-a-guide-for-advertisers>)



*Internal shutters*



*Above: External security measures on doorways and windows*





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