

# Looe Heritage Guidance Notes



## No. 1: Shopfronts and Signage



**CARADON**

DISTRICT COUNCIL

Working for South East Cornwall

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*These Guidance Notes have been produced by Caradon District Council as part of the Looe Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (HERS). The views expressed are intended to stimulate discussion and the adoption of positive approaches in the town.*

*This is one of three Heritage Guidance Notes prepared with the aim of encouraging an approach to building management that will preserve or enhance the character of the Looe Conservation Area. The guidance is based on the premise that in historic settlements the sensitive repair and adaptation of heritage assets is fundamental to the broader aim of economic regeneration. The special character of Looe should inform all decisions, on old and new buildings alike, with the specific aim of achieving incremental enhancement of the town.*

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## 1.0 Introduction

Looe is an historic place that has a variety of old buildings which reflect its location, development and the activities that have combined to give it a distinctive appearance. Whilst many of the buildings of Looe are of modest architectural character, their collective value is significantly greater than the sum of its parts. The special character of the buildings that add to the historic streetscape is derived from their form, the quality of the materials used and the workmanship expressed in constructional details. As well as the physical character the range of historic and contemporary uses of buildings adds further layers of interest.

There has been a Conservation Area in the town since 1973. Whilst Conservation Area status does offer some limited extra controls to the Local Planning Authority, it does not of itself guarantee preservation or enhancement of the special qualities of the place. The cumulative effect of decisions made by local people regarding the repair, maintenance and improvement of their homes and businesses is the most significant factor in overall townscape quality.

In order to preserve or enhance character it is essential to have some understanding of how it has evolved and what may threaten it in the years ahead. This will be addressed in the Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan currently being produced for the town. These Guidance Notes are intended to support the broad aims of these documents and provide a foundation for the adoption of design standards as called for in the Looe Action Plan. It should be read in conjunction with the Caradon Design Guide that incorporates specific guidance for shopfronts (Section G).



*Archive photograph of Fore Street, East Looe*

## 2.0 Historic Background

Until the 18th century the idea of shopfronts as we know them did not exist. Goods were sold at markets or from commercial premises that appeared much the same as entirely residential properties. Merchants selling specialised or valuable goods would use some ground floor rooms to offer their wares to customers, but they were not on display to the passer-by. Potential customers would have identified the nature of the business from indicative signage, but much of the trade would be done with local people anyway, so passing trade was less of an issue.

Some types of produce may have been displayed in front of the building and occasionally a shuttered opening would allow a display to be both sheltered and a temptation to passing customers.

The street pattern of both East and West Looe retain much of their medieval character and this gives a notable intimacy and pedestrian scale. There are significant buildings surviving from earlier times and although the majority of shopfronts are later, the historic context is deeper than may be immediately apparent.

During the 18th century the shopfront became an essential element of the townscape and there were plenty of shops in both East and West Looe at this time. Initially they took the form of enlarged windows with a clear association to domestic windows of the time. *[Fig 1]*



*Fig 1: A charming shopfront of the later 18th or early 19th century*

Before long pretty much the whole of the ground floor of many buildings became glazed to the street. Glass was very expensive though, and could not be manufactured in large sheets, so Georgian shopfronts were divided into the same multiple panes as the windows. *[Fig 2]*





*Fig 2: The Georgian pattern of glazing here sits on a later panelled stall riser that is obscured by temporary signs*

As the desire for more architectural presence and the taste for classical design spread, so these large display windows became framed by pilasters supporting some form of entablature. From late Georgian times pattern books were widely available that included shopfront designs for local shopkeepers, builders and joiners to discuss and use as the basis for new work. Invariably local traditions developed and were often passed down through generations of craftsmen, but a degree of homogeneity spread throughout the country.

The advent firstly of sheet glass and then of plate glass in the 1820's began to bring about a change in the approach to shopfront design.



*Fig 3: Larger sheets of glass were still used in a traditional configuration, simply with larger glazing bars*

It was not until later in the 19th century that this revolutionary product became available and affordable in places like Looe. The shopfront was, however, the main way for a business to advertise itself and traders would try to obtain the highest quality of materials and detailing they could afford. Larger sheets of glass meant fewer glazing bars. [Fig 3]

Lower stall risers and millions or columns became a more important element of the composition, with decorative flourishes. [Fig 4]



*Fig 4: Mullions often had decorative capitals and bases*

Towards the latter part of the 19th century the use of hardwood for turned and decorated mullions became a more common sight. Curved glass began to be incorporated into designs that invited shoppers in and offered display spaces that were an attraction in their own right. [Fig 5]



Old photographs of Looe show how traditional shopfronts contributed to the streetscene and the character of the town, but for the most part designs appear to have been simple and modest. The majority of historic shopfronts in the town date from after 1850 when the economic fortunes of East Looe in particular began to revive.

Fascias tended to become somewhat deeper over time and from the later Victorian era they sometimes incorporated awnings. These offered shelter from sun and rain but also provided a more prominent presence in the streetscene and the opportunity for additional advertising.

*Fig 5: Curved plate glass was a technological advance*

This increasingly applied to the floorscape as well, with encaustic tiles, mosaics or engraved stone being used for thresholds. [Fig 6]

A more diverse attitude to advertising prevailed through late Victorian and Edwardian times, but usually with an underlying demand for quality. Evidence for these features is not common in Looe but it seems likely that such features were present in the past.

*Fig 6: Decorative floor tiles and glazed die stall riser add richness to the streetscene*



The arrival of the railway had a tremendous influence on places like Looe. Tourism expanded and businesses adapted signage to attract the new tourist trade. Local customers also started to have greater opportunities to make shopping expeditions to larger towns; progressively the ability of the town to support its traditional diversity diminished and more shops catered for visitors.

A number of smaller shop units have been converted to full residential use, especially in West Looe, though some have successfully retained their shop windows. [Fig 7]



*Fig 7: Shopfronts contribute to the townscape character even if they no longer serve their original purpose*



The retention of shopfronts is supported by both Local Plan policies and an Article 4 Direction.

Many of the remaining shops have had their frontages altered or replaced with a general loss of character. Blanked off windows may allow more shelf space but they offer nothing to the streetscene; plastic dutch blinds obscure and confuse the appearance of some shopfronts. A legacy of haphazard shopfront design, poorly detailed joinery and inconsiderate signage is all too apparent in Looe. [Fig 8]



*Fig 8: This chaotic scene occupies the vital entry point to the town centre*

The reinstatement of lost features and authentically detailed or well designed contemporary shopfronts is very desirable. This is not driven by a naive fondness for the past; there is strong evidence to show that historic towns with a high proportion of traditional and well kept shopfronts tend to have a sounder economic base. [Fig 9]



*Fig 9: This traditional historic shopfront is being repaired and refreshed ready for more years of service*

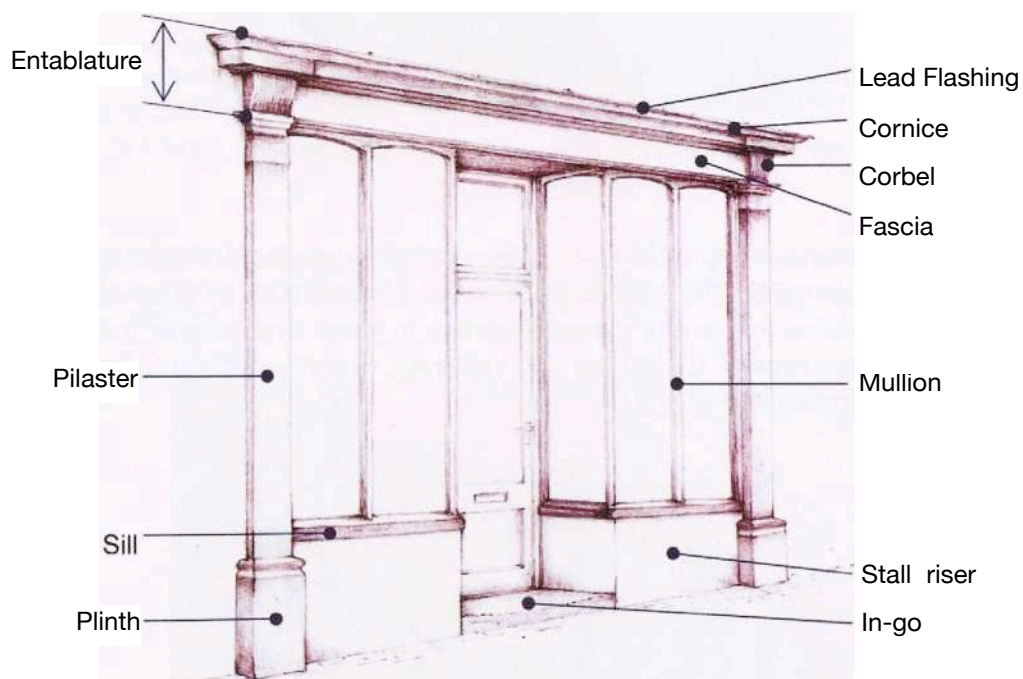


Attractive historic townscape encourages more trade and can influence the amount spent by visitors; good shopfronts are often indicative of a place where people want to spend time, and the longer people stay, the more vibrant the economy.

Issues like security and signage have always been around and they can be satisfactorily handled following historic precedents or sensitive new design. Nowadays there are additional considerations of accessibility and this can be a challenge in some situations. Access can nearly always be improved significantly, even if ideal standards cannot always be achieved. In Looe the plethora of freestanding temporary signs that clutter the public realm are arguably the greatest obstacles to those with visual or physical impairment. Signage is such an important issue it is dealt with in its own section later.

### 3.0 The Anatomy of a Traditional Shopfront

Although details may vary considerably, the form and structure of a traditional shopfront is remarkably consistent. The drawing below identifies the typical components that are commonly combined to give a design with character.



*Fig 10*

Not all of these components are essential and how this guidance is interpreted must be informed by the particular context of each individual building. These principles can be applied in a straightforward historic manner; they can also be adapted to a more contemporary form.



*Fig 11: A modern shopfront incorporating traditional design principles*

In Looe there are quite a number of shopfronts which exhibit a clear absence of this tradition; plain unframed windows with a simple, unsupported fascia are in themselves something of a character feature. It would be quite inappropriate to impose a more formal shopfront design onto such buildings.



*Fig 12: Unusual designs demand creative signage solutions*



*Fig 13: Informal evolved units also need thoughtful signage*

### 3.1 Stall Risers

The stall riser is the solid part of the shopfront below the display window. It is often prone to being damaged or becoming dirty so is generally constructed of durable materials. Even an understated stall riser is an important visual element of a shopfront design as it 'grounds' the unit and acts as a base or plinth to balance the entablature above. Having a solid base is also helpful in terms of security and safety.

In Looe the finish for stall risers is most commonly render, though ceramic bricks, [Fig 6] tiles and stone may have been more common in the past. Occasional quirky features may reflect the personality of an individual and where they exhibit craft skills they add to the sense of place. [Fig 14]



*Fig 14: A personalised pebble mosaic that is not historic but has character and can be said to compliment the remnant of old cobbled pavement*

Occasionally modern materials such as imitation stone have been used and that has generally been detrimental to character.

### 3.2 Sills

Shopfront sills were usually significantly deeper and more substantial than domestic ones; they often incorporated decorative moulding to add visual interest, [eg. Fig 15]

### 3.3 Frames, Mullions and Transoms

The vertical and horizontal elements of a traditional shopfront usually incorporate a moulded detail of some kind. In Looe this is usually quite plain but even a simple moulding uses light and shade to create interest. Mullions and frames may be embellished with decorative bases and fluting; in the past these may have been picked out as part of a decorative scheme. [Fig 15]





*Fig 15: Flat mullions fluted in the style of pilasters*

### 3.4 Pilasters and Corbels

The pilasters frame the shopfront and visually support the fascia. They may be plain and simple or quite decorative, but they will normally reflect the principles of classical entablature by incorporating base and capital. Sometimes the capital takes the form of a plain or decorative corbel that supports a moulded cornice. Variations on a similar theme are a feature throughout Looe. [Figs 16, 17 & 18]



*Figs 16, 17 & 18: Simply decorated corbels, supporting modest entablature, are found throughout the town*

### 3.5 Entablature

Distant echoes of Ancient Greek and Roman architecture can be found in the old shopfronts of every town. There is, however, an absence of formality with no strict adherence to the proportions and forms of the classical orders. With most shopfronts being designed as an individual entity there is a subtle

variety of heights and forms seen in traditional cornices and fascias which is particularly characteristic.



*Fig 19: Even a simple entablature creates depth and interest, though here that depth is diminished by the applied fascia sign. It is better to have signage painted directly onto the fascia itself.*

### 3.6 Entrance

Many shopfronts would have a recessed entrance, sometimes called an in-go. [Fig 20] This would draw customers in from the street and added to the quality of display space. Occasionally there may be expensive curved glass to attract the interest of passing pedestrians; it also offered shelter from the elements. Additional interest was often added in the form of a quality threshold; sometimes this could be a stone slab but often it would be decorative tiles or a mosaic which could include the name of the shop.



*Fig 20: An historic recessed entrance. (The plastic sign board here probably covers the original timber fascia that could be restored)*

## 4.0 Materials and Design

### 4.1 Materials

Timber has always been the most commonly used material for shopfronts; softwood being the norm for painted units and occasionally imported hardwoods were used for a higher class of finish. It remains the most versatile material and if it is well sourced and prepared it will be durable. Softwood is also much more likely to be obtained from a genuinely certified sustainable source, so it is the most environmentally sensitive option.

Although there may be occasions when other materials are incorporated this is certainly the exception rather than the rule. Where materials like metals or plastics are proposed it must be as an effective and incidental part of a demonstrably coherent design and not simply a product of price or perceived maintenance benefits.

Composite materials such as marine plywood may be used for fascias but if lesser quality is used it will tend to crack and peel so caution is needed. Careful preparation is also necessary for painting, otherwise it is likely to fail and allow water penetration.

There has been a tendency in recent times for shopfronts to be designed down to a budget and with a view to a short lifespan. With shop units changing regularly and many users having a rigid attitude to corporate branding there has been a general loss of quality. Shopfronts have increasingly been seen as another form of packaging that meets a short-term need and is then discarded. Apart from the resulting lack of character this approach is wasteful, unsustainable and fails to support the skills of local craftsmen, as all too often generic shopfronts are hastily installed by a team that has travelled a great distance.

It is a fundamental truth, however, that a well designed shopfront, crafted out of carefully selected materials, will endure through a wide range of uses with only the internal displays and graphic content of signage changing. It is this traditional and truly sustainable approach that this document seeks to encourage.

Metals were sometimes used for window frames or decorative mullions in the past - from ornate Victorian cast iron to sleek art deco bronze - but these are not found in Looe so there is no justification for their introduction. Lead flashings are an important feature though and they need to be carefully considered. Existing flashings above fascias and cornices are often punctured by careless electrical or telephone installations and poorly executed repairs. This leads in turn to water penetration and, inevitably, rotten timber. Leaded glass is an occasional feature from a range of dates and can add variety to the streetscene. *[Fig 21]*





*Fig 21: This 20th century leaded glass has bulged due to poor installation and maintenance but could be restored*

Powder coated metals and plastic are commonplace on modern shop units, but they are invariably utilitarian and lacking in design detail or finesse. As they still get marked and damaged over time this means that lack of maintenance often leads to a tatty appearance. Timber may need to be painted but that regular maintenance means that it looks fresh and new every few years - it also offers an opportunity to re-brand by a change of colour scheme. Conversely, most attempts to re-paint damaged or faded factory coatings are invariably unattractive and short-lived.

The use of alternative materials as part of a thoughtful and innovative design can be very successful. Examples may include the use of stainless steel or bronze for lettering or an artistic hanging sign; sometimes found or reclaimed materials may be used to good effect. These approaches will usually be exceptional though and ought to be seen as an interesting occasional feature rather than a general trend. Unusual solutions must add to local distinctiveness and offer a demonstrably positive visual contribution to a particular building or streetscene.

Cut plastic lettering can often look cheap and inferior, whilst plastic fascias are nearly always disappointing, especially when internally illuminated.

There is a notable use of open grained softwood signs in Looe and they are something of a trend. The effect appears to be created by shot-blasting the timber and it is quite effective. So long as there remains an element of individuality in design, colour and graphic content the spread of such detailing is acceptable so long as the context is appropriate.

## 4.2 Workmanship

The joinery skills needed to produce a shopfront of genuine quality are far less prevalent these days, but there are suitably skilled craftsmen out there. By seeking out and employing such contractors, owners and specifiers can have a significant role in supporting the survival of these specialist skills. It is very desirable that these skills remain available locally; not only for the reasons of heritage and townscape, but also because they offer sustainable and worthwhile career opportunities for local people.

This principle also applies to signage, as the best form of advertisement for a business often results from the commissioning of a local artist to create something unique and special.

## 4.3 Design

In recent years there has been a growing tendency for so-called 'traditional' shopfronts to be produced by shopfitters who cut corners on details and materials. In a planning drawing at 1:100 or 1:50 scale these can appear an attractive addition to the streetscene, but much is lost in translation to a finished article. Problems can include:-

- The use of inferior materials such as MDF and flimsy plywood.
- Decorative pilasters that offer no more than a few routed grooves, or mullions that are just standard rectangular timber sections with a routed chamfer.
- The incorporation of bland and insubstantial moulded profiles that are simply planted onto an uninspiring background.
- No attempt to use curves, rounded profiles or genuinely creative decorative elements.

It is important, therefore, that initial designs offer sufficient information to demonstrate the quality of the final shopfront. A combination of elevations and cross sections at a minimum scale of 1:20 must be accompanied by a written specification and details of mouldings at 1:5 or even 1:1. It is true that historic shopfronts were often formed by combining quite standard components; but features like cornices were usually more than just a standard piece of architrave planted on a fascia board.

There will always be scope for contemporary design, but on an historic building that is more likely to be successful when developed within the context of traditional shopfront form and language. A proper understanding of the character of an individual building and its setting is of fundamental importance and has to be the starting point for any design. Challenging contemporary designs are perhaps more likely to be acceptable on a building that makes a neutral or negative contribution to the conservation area; in that context the introduction of a 21st century statement may add to the richness of the townscape.



*Fig 22: A lack of historic character can offer an opportunity for something different. In this instance, as elsewhere in Looe, less signage may have more impact if it is well designed.*

#### 4.4 Security

Whilst security is a serious issue for some types of business, it is important that any measures do not dominate the character of the shop unit. Off-the-peg security shutters or grilles are not an acceptable solution externally. Laminated glass, although expensive, does provide a good alternative. If the need for extra security is clearly demonstrated then an internal grille may be acceptable in some instances. Timber shutters were sometimes used historically and may occasionally find a use today, though the justification and detailing need to be strong. [Fig 23]



*Fig 23: These shutters are eye-catching but are they necessary?*



## 4.5 Access

Where an entrance has steps and stands at the back of a narrow pavement it can be very difficult to provide full access for all and compromise is essential. In many cases access can be greatly improved through either amendment of an existing threshold or the addition of a ramp; conventional doors may be adapted to open electronically. Such works must, however, be very carefully considered and executed with materials of a suitable quality; in some instances an assistance bell push may be a partial solution.

It is certainly the case that historic character ought not to be used as an excuse for inaction on access issues. With thought and care the accessibility of virtually all buildings can be improved significantly, even if the optimum resolution is unachievable.

## 4.6 Townscape Character

The way in which shopkeepers use their premises to address the street is another important factor. The ephemeral art of shop window and pavement displays can add hugely to the character of a place. [Fig 24] This ostensibly 'old-fashioned' approach can engage and intrigue passing customers if it is done well. All too often though the option of more and more 'temporary' signs is favoured and in Looe it is fair to say this has reached epidemic proportions.



*Fig 24: The produce on display here is undermined and obscured by the extra signs.*

## 5.0 Signage

### 5.1 General Issues

The tendency for shopkeepers and other businesses to seek the largest, most numerous and often brightest possible signs is unfortunate and detrimental to the quality of the Looe townscape. Garish and ill-proportioned signs will often deter potential customers and when a row of shops all compete for attention

the result is detrimental to all [see Fig 8]. When this inconsiderate treatment marks the approaches to the town centre the negative impact is felt even more widely.

By comparison, carefully considered signs that demonstrate a degree of artistic input and the use of durable high quality materials are more likely to attract passing trade. [Fig 25]



*Fig 25: A hanging sign that exhibits the value-added quality of a one-off commission*

The fundamental issues are the size and form of the signs themselves, (whether fascia, hanging or projecting), [Fig 26] and the graphic or artistic quality of the actual signage. It can be really helpful for signage to in some way reflect the business that is being advertised. [Fig 27]



*Fig 26: Has any advantage been gained here by applying a fascia board that overlaps the cornice and pilaster capitals? The light units are also poorly designed, oversized and probably unnecessary*



*Fig 27: A simple and effective sign relates to the business well*

Illumination of signs is only justified where a business is open after dark; even then there is a need for discretion as the light flooding from open premises can attract attention anyway. Internally illuminated box fascias destroy the profile of a traditional shopfront and cumbersome 'swan neck' [Fig 26] or poor quality trough lights can all detract from the appearance of the whole building. If the principle of illumination is justified in a particular case then it ought to be approached as a design challenge. The variety of lighting options available today offers a great opportunity for creative effects using inconspicuous physical fittings.



*Fig 28: Whilst the oval sign is unusual, a better solution would have been to use the existing fascia for the shop name. The lighting, however, is not needed and detracts from the appearance of the whole building*

Where a number of shop units are within a single building, (or coherent row of buildings), it is very desirable for signage to be complementary. That does not mean uniformity of design; but consistency of scale, proportion and moulded details is usually more attractive.

## 5.2 Examples of Appropriate Signage



*Fig 29: The lettering used here is visually lightweight but effective; despite the repetition of content, the scale and font do not dominate the building. The shopfront itself can be enjoyed in its own right as all of the detailing is visible*





*Fig 30: The fact that this signage whispers to the passer by instead of shouting seems to reflect the nature of the business*



*Fig 31: A simple graphic hanging sign on a functional bracket says all it needs to*



*Fig 32: Although there is no fascia here the temptation to fill the available space is resisted and such modesty respects the historic setting*



*Fig 33: A versatile menu board that does all it needs to in the narrow medieval street scene without causing visual clutter or obstruction*

### 5.3 Examples of Inappropriate Signage



*Fig 34: The wall mounted blackboards are surely enough? The unfixed menu boards simply add clutter and detract from the historic building*



*Fig 35: The traditional shopfront is very attractive, with a massive sash window that formerly allowed produce to be openly displayed to the street. By comparison the corporate branding of this local convenience store is clumsy and quite unnecessary*



*Fig 36: The scale and proportion of the frontage is overbearing while the number of signs is confusing and incoherent*



*Fig 37: These signs obscure an important historic doorway and are also a physical obstruction*



*Figs 38 & 39: Ad hoc signboards are scattered throughout Looe, which tend to clutter and undermine the aesthetic value of the historic environment. They are also a physical obstruction when the tight streets are full of visitors - especially for people with visual impairment.*



*Fig 40: The problem of portable temporary signs is so endemic in East Looe that some businesses think nothing of putting signs in front of other people's buildings. It has clearly taken some time for these practices to evolve and the perpetrators are probably oblivious to the negative impact. The way that visitors perceive a place is directly and subliminally affected by these discordant items; so ultimately all businesses are likely to be damaged by this clamour for attention*

## 6.0 Action summary

### **Caradon District Council**

As Local Planning Authority (LPA) Caradon is responsible for the Local Development Plan/ Framework which sets the policy context for planning decisions. It is also responsible for planning enforcement where breaches occur. The LPA has a statutory duty to seek to 'preserve or enhance the special architectural or historic character' of conservation areas. As well as using planning powers Caradon has a commitment to providing advice and guidance to owners, occupiers and contractors.

The Council has all the necessary policies in place to control new shopfronts and signage; it has also stated its commitment to enforcement in the past. Generic guidance relating to shopfronts has been available in the Caradon Design Guide for more than a decade.

This guidance note marks a further demonstration of support for good design and will be supported by a renewed vigour in matters of enforcement. The nature of the issues in Looe is such that meaningful success and progress can only be achieved with the positive participation of all stakeholders.

This document has identified the main concerns relating to shopfronts and signage in Looe. It is most desirable that there is agreement among local representative groups concerning the image of the town. In particular the issue of ad hoc 'temporary' signage is one that is best dealt with through collective voluntary action by individuals and businesses.



One way forward would be for local organisations and business people to agree and adopt a good practice 'Charter'. Below are some suggestions which could form the basis for discussion on the content for this:-

1. Shopfronts and business premises will be kept clean and in good decorative order.
2. Only signage that has advertisement consent will be displayed and the number of signs will be limited to that which is reasonably necessary. Duplication of content adds to the visual clutter that undermines the character of the town and will not be supported.
3. When new shopfronts or signs are planned there will be a commitment to using good quality sustainable materials and local artists or designers. Creative artistic images, details and graphic content will be encouraged.
4. Temporary signage will be limited to that which is justifiable for a particular business type; it will be either temporarily fixed to the building or within a display window.
5. There will be a 'zero tolerance' attitude to freestanding temporary signs within the public realm as they are unattractive and cause obstruction.
6. Generic advertisements for a particular manufacturers products, (eg coffee or ice cream), will be limited to small window signs.
7. Historic shopfront detailing will be uncovered, restored or reinstated wherever possible.
8. Shop windows are best used for the display of produce or to allow views into the premises; glass should not be obscured or covered by sticky plastic.
9. Illumination of signs will only be supported where the needs of the business justify it. There will be an emphasis on subtlety and design quality in both the lighting units and the actual use of light itself.
10. Businesses should always be considerate of how their ideas for shopfronts, signs and displays will impact on their neighbours, the streetscene and other users of the public realm.

At the end of the day it is the responsibility of the business community in Looe to take matters into their own hands and exert peer pressure on the worst persistent offenders. In recent years there has been a 'free for all' when it comes to the way in which some businesses choose to express themselves. The end result is an historic townscape whose genuine character and charm is severely diminished; which is ultimately to the detriment of all who trade in Looe.

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