

# Design Guidelines for the 2026 Galway City Shopfront Enhancement Scheme



Galway City Shopfronts & Signage

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# Introduction


## Using the Guidelines

These guidelines are intended to assist applicants in designing and preparing grant applications for the 2026 Galway City Shopfront Enhancement Scheme.

The full Galway Shopfront and Signage Design Guidelines can be downloaded on the Galway City Council website.

The simple principles set out in these guidelines apply equally to historic structures as well as to contemporary shopfronts. The importance of context, balance, restraint and the use of good quality, durable materials is universal.

New design should aspire to be of such quality that it will in time be considered a valuable part of the city's heritage.



## The Importance of Shopfronts

Shopfronts are a key feature of Galway City, adding vibrancy and character to the city's streetscapes.

By enhancing visual interest and encouraging social interaction, shopfronts contribute to the unique atmosphere of the city, and preserve a living connection to Galway's rich past, whilst also contributing to economic vitality by attracting more visitors and enhancing their shopping experience.



## Older Buildings

Galway City has a rich built heritage which is reflected in the protection of many buildings as Protected Structures, or groups of structures within Architectural Conservation Areas (ACAs).

There are many buildings which have no legal protection, however whether or not a building is protected, it is important that this valuable architectural heritage is conserved and enhanced in order to support the vibrant commercial and cultural economy for which the city is famous for.

# Galway City Shopfronts

## Signage in the Past

Galway City has several distinct characteristics that have evolved over time. In understanding these, we can learn about how best to replicate, enhance or simply preserve these important qualities.

Historic photographs of familiar streetscapes are often surprising as they record the very prominent levels of signage and advertising that existed a hundred years ago.

They do, however, illustrate that this earlier signage was more sensitively designed and integrated than modern signage. This gives the impression that these early scenes were much less cluttered than our city streets have now become.



Williamsgate Street towards Eyre Square - National Library of Ireland (Lawrence Collection).



William Street towards Shop Street - National Library of Ireland (Lawrence Collection).

# What is Galway City's Local Character?

Local distinctiveness has evolved through the use of locally sourced building materials, techniques, and trades. These are an important part of any historic streetscape and the promotion and protection of this distinctiveness should be encouraged.

Economically, Galway did not undergo an extensive industrial period of new building and alterations to the city core as experienced in other Irish cities from the 18th to 19th centuries. Shopfronts were therefore a mix of grander bespoke built commercial properties such as the now Brown Thomas, and more modest family owned properties which operated out of existing buildings, which were likely of medieval origin.

In Galway the buildings were constructed of locally sourced limestone, which is dark grey in colour and relatively hard to work. As a result the majority of walls were plastered with lime and sand to keep out the rain, with only the door and window surrounds, quoins and or other decorative elements carved and left uncovered. The predominant traditional building materials in Galway City were therefore rendered walls, with limestone dressings, timber windows / shopfronts, and natural slate roofs.

In more recent times the use of a variety of colours has become popular, which in itself has seen a new local characteristic evolve.

**It is important that this simple palette of materials, and the use of appropriate colours is respected and maintained.**

The principles of good design as outlined in the following pages will ensure that this rich traditional is maintained and enhanced.

# Principles of Good Design

## What were Shopfronts of the Past Trying to Achieve?

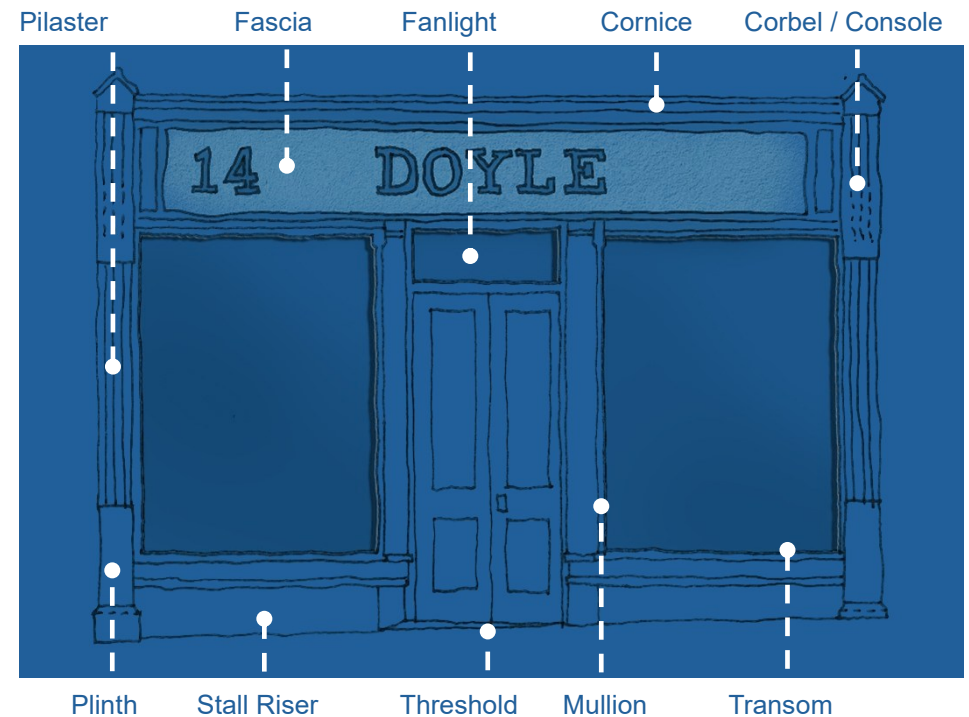
The purpose designed and built traditional shopfront in Ireland evolved from the early 19th Century onwards when the neoclassical style became popular.

Many shopfronts from this period aspired to be tiny temple fronts designed to convey an impression of individuality, good taste, towards giving the impression of a long-establishment.

The overall aim was to create an elegant and sophisticated frame to a picture window to attract custom, and which would integrate successfully with the floors above.

## What are the Parts of a Traditional Shopfront?

The basic shopfront components of a fascia, pilasters, stall risers, brackets, friezes and cornices all had their classical precedent in the columns, plinths, consoles and entablatures of Greek and Roman buildings.



# What are the Principles of Good Shopfront Design?

## Harmony

Shopfronts should always relate successfully to its neighbours and the floors above it as part of a harmonious whole (see diagram page 7).

## Clarity

The overall composition of the shopfront should be balanced and a clear entity in its own right.

## Simplicity

Avoid complexity and over elaboration, less is often more. Clutter gets in the way of promoting your business and the built heritage.

## History

When taking inspiration from the past, shopfront enhancement should be based on authentic traditional design and detailing.

## Visibility

Avoid cluttering a shopfront with overcrowded merchandise, services and signage that detract from the business premises.

## Materials

Good quality natural materials such as local stone and timber, which are sustainable and environmentally friendly, and will long outlast inappropriate modern materials like vinyl, plastic, uPVC and aluminium.

## Legibility

Signage should be properly sized. Unfussy small plain lettering is often more legible than large, cramped lettering which takes up all of the space on a fascia.

## Detail

Crete good overhangs at the top and robust plinths at the base will reduce the need for maintenance and the prolong life of the shopfront.

## Colour

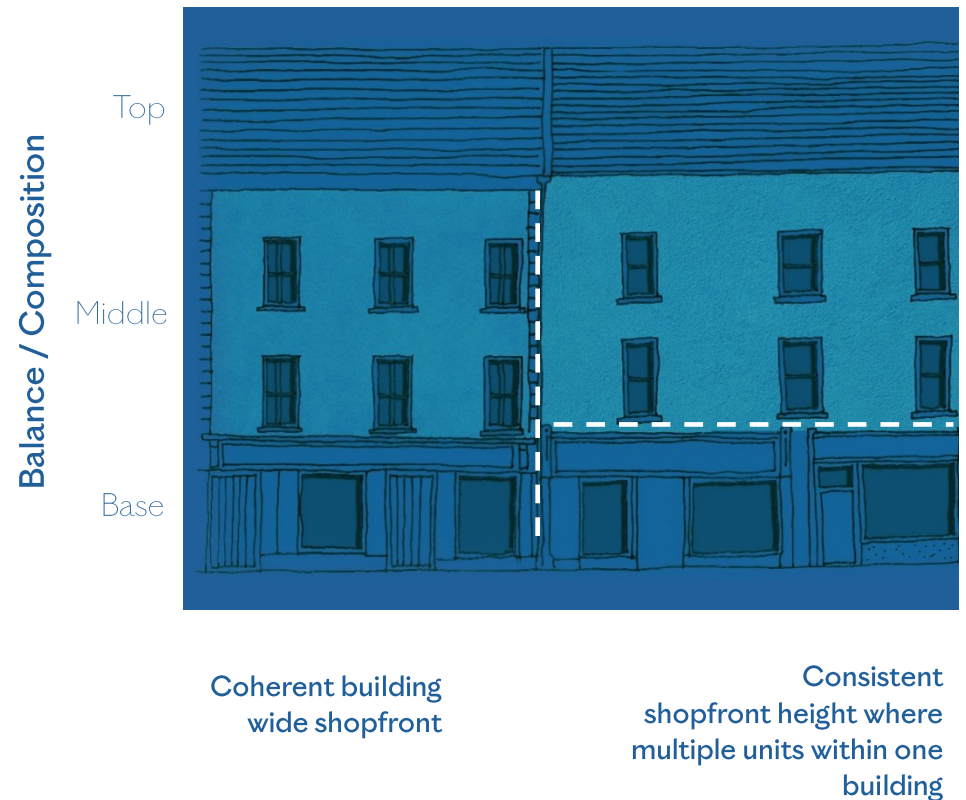
Use colour to add richness, variety and warmth - it should not be used to make a building or a shopfront stand out. The use of colour to gain attention is a race to the bottom. When every shop tries to stand out, no one shop stands out.

# What Should be my Approach to Enhancement Proposals?

When developing your proposal, the following should be considered and integrated within the application.

- Consideration of the location of the building within the streetscape. Care must be taken not to detract from the overall character of the city streets, especially in Architectural Conservation Areas.
- Alterations to existing shopfronts are proposed, they should complement the prevailing character of the street and buildings in relation to proportions, materials, colours and details.
- Where modern shopfront enhancements are proposed, they should utilise the principles outlined in this guidance. Whether traditional or contemporary, the principle of excellent design and the use of durable materials applies.
- New materials should complement the existing materials of the host building, and should be well-detailed.

- Special care should be taken in the integration of new fittings or wiring for services so that they do not detract from the appearance of the shopfront or host building.



# Shopfront Elements

## Signage & Advertising

There are many well designed and executed hand painted signs on shopfronts in Galway City. This rich craft of sign writing should be preserved and encouraged.

Excessive, often over-sized signage is a significant contributor to the deterioration of the visual appearance of Galway City's main shopping streets. Well designed signage enhances the architectural character of shopfronts and the streetscape.

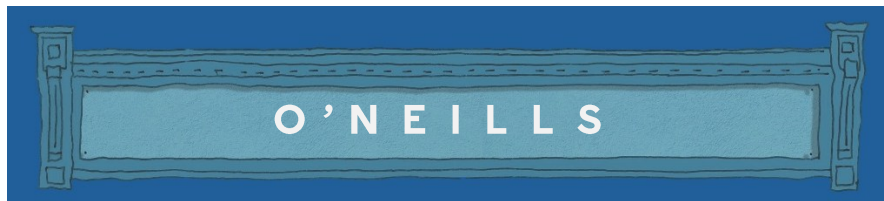
By following the guidance outlined below, signs can be clear and attractive, more legible and effective in a way that will enhance the character and visibility of the shopfront.

In general the following design principles apply:

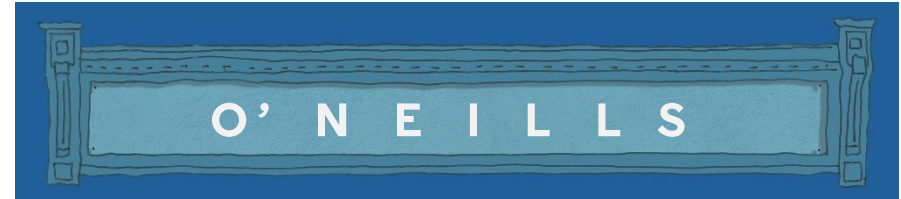
- Too many signs in close proximity detract from each other, causing confusion.
- It may seem counter intuitive, but oversized lettering is less powerful visually than smaller, well proportioned fonts within a generous space given to lettering.

- Signage should be of a high standard of design, finish and installation.
- Consideration should be given to the character of the streetscape and the scale of the shopfront. Signage should be so designed to be an integral part of the building.
- Signs should be located where they will not obscure the architectural features of the building nor add visual clutter along the street.
- Lettering on signs and shopfront fascias should be simple and legible and in proportion to the size of the fascia sign.
- The use of handpainted traditional lettering is encouraged.
- Bilingual signs are encouraged, using a distinctive Gaelic-style script in order to protect and promote the distinctive Gaeltacht culture and linguistic heritage of the city, while ensuring legibility and accessibility for all users.
- Other traditional types of signs include raised fascia lettering, and gilded lettering under glass are also encouraged.

- Signage and logos should be of an appropriate scale using good quality materials. Colour choice should be restrained using tones that complement the surrounding streetscape.
- Transparent or painted lettering on glazing, when carefully designed, can be an effective way to advertise without compromising the overall appearance of the shopfront.
- Avoid the excessive use of signs; posters, stickers, and vinyl graphics. They create dead shopfronts (no animation), clutter, obscure shop displays and compete with architectural details.
- In general, no projecting signs shall be permitted. Consideration will only be given to small scale signs of a type that are integrated with the shopfront.
- Signage is normally discouraged on upper floors. Lettering applied directly to glazing may be open for consideration where appropriate.



Appropriately sized signage should be proportionate to fascia and allow for clear space above below and to the sides of the shop name.



Appropriately sized signage allows for flexibility with the kerning of name, i.e the space between letters. Note that whilst the font size has increased, sufficient clear space is maintained.



Plaster or timber example from Eyre Square (1860—1920).



Hand painted example from Eyre Square (1860—1920).

# Colour

The use of vibrant colours is a particular feature of buildings in Irish streetscapes. Buildings within terraces are often painted individually using different colours to striking visual affect.

While this practice is to be encouraged care must be taken to avoid choices that upset the harmony of the street. Generally, the streets of Galway City feature painted plaster walls and timber or cut-stone shopfronts.

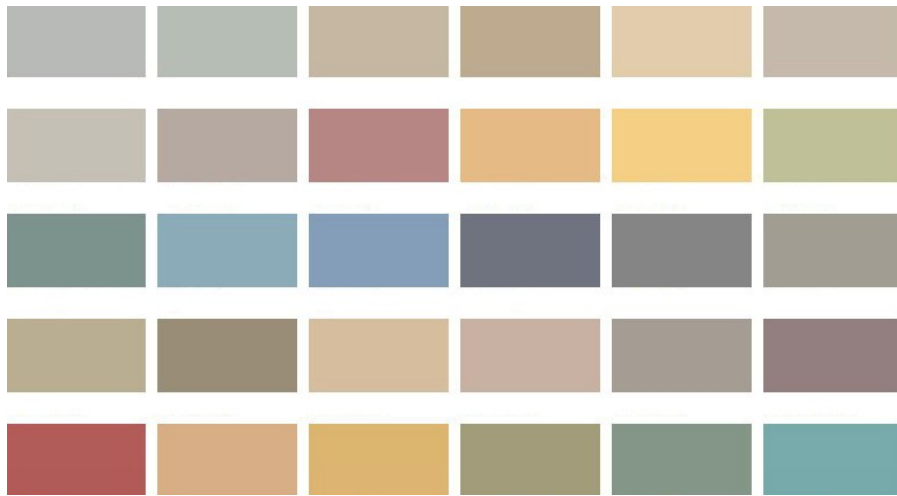
Heritage colour palettes are now available from all major paint manufacturers and these provide more subtle, harmonious colours while still allowing for impressive overall statements.

Examples of suitable colours can be found on the next page.

In this context the following should be taken into consideration:

- Bold primary colours and strong colours should be avoided. Whilst encouraging vibrant and interesting colour choices, colours should complement rather than clash with neighbouring premises or stand out too strongly.

- Natural stone should never be painted, including string courses, cornices and window sills.
- There should be a colour contrast between the ground floor and upper floors.



Suitable colours for shopfronts



Suitable colours for floors above shopfronts

## Services & Lighting

Changes in retail practices and the development of new technologies have led to a steady build up of electrical equipment on the exteriors of many buildings.

Artificial lighting, power, data, audio, security and fire alarm services all need to be carefully positioned and the wiring concealed to avoid visual clutter or physical damage to buildings.

The presence of poorly located and redundant electrical clutter is a major source of detracting of Galway City's streetscapes.



Redundant, excessive, or poor coordinated cabling and services greatly degrades the character of Galway City.

In this context the following should be taken into consideration:

- External services fixed to shopfronts of building facades should be carefully co-ordinated to relate to the configuration of the shopfront, the entire building facade and the adjoining buildings.
- Redundant cabling and electronic equipment attached to the shopfronts and buildings should always be made safe and removed.
- 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.
- Floodlights and projecting spotlights fitted to shopfronts and illuminated signs should be avoided.

## Accessibility

Galway City Council is committed to the promotion of universal access to the city parks, streets and buildings for the enjoyment of all.

In some instances this aspiration must be balanced by the need to protect the architectural heritage, so alternative approaches may be required. In certain circumstances alterations to improve access to buildings will require planning permission and a disability access certificate. All new buildings or works to alter existing buildings should comply with Part M of the Building Regulations.

In general the following guiding principles apply:

- 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.


## Detail & Maintenance

Proper detailing of shopfronts for weathering and durability is very important. Work poorly undertaken is unattractive and unlikely to perform well over time, requiring early replacement. Traditional details are often the best as they work well and have withstood the test of time.

The conservation of original windows, doors, and other features that contribute to the character of the streetscape is encouraged.

The following guiding principles should apply:

- Materials should be of good quality, they are more long-lasting and should make a better return on the initial investment.

- As part of a well-designed shopfront, use of good quality natural materials contribute to the appearance and convey a positive impression of establishment and permanence to customers.
  - 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.
  - The design stage should include careful consideration and integration of all of the various elements - including services and any other attachments such as 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.
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## About the Scheme

### What Works are Not Covered Under the Scheme?

The scheme focusses on the enhancement and repair of existing shopfronts, as such wholly new shopfronts are not covered under the 2026 Galway City Shopfront Enhancement Scheme.

New canopies are not covered under the 2026 Galway City Shopfront Enhancement Scheme. The removal of poor quality canopies are encouraged under the scheme. The removal of such will increase the amount of provisional grant funding offered.

New security grilles and shutters are not covered under the 2026 Galway City Shopfront Enhancement Scheme. The removal of poor quality security grilles and shutters are encouraged under the scheme. The removal of such will increase the amount of provisional grant funding offered.

New street furniture is not covered under the 2026 Galway City Shopfront Enhancement Scheme.

## Do I Need Planning Permission?

Planning permission is typically required for works to shopfronts. This includes significant works such as the construction of new or replacement shopfronts, and also lesser scale works such as material alterations to existing shopfronts.

The purpose of the 2026 Galway City Streetscape Enhancement Scheme is for the enhancement of existing shopfronts. The emphasis is therefore on repair and improvement of existing shopfronts.

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## What if My Building is a Protected Structure or in an ACA?

If your building is a Protected Structure or a historic structure in an Architectural Conservation Area (ACA), there may be a need for the provision of an appropriate conservation methodology (targeted at the proposed enhancements only).

This will be prepared by a conservation professional(s), who will inspect the completed works. The methodology need only be supplied following the offer of a provisional grant.

Galway City Council will be available to advise on whether your building is a Protected Structure, and historic structure located in an ACA, and the content / scope of a methodology.

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**Comhairle Cathrach  
na Gaillimhe**  
Galway City Council