

# Design Guidelines for the conversion of shops to residential use

Technical Services Department  
**Borough Planner's Service**



**Wandsworth Unitary Development Plan**  
Non-statutory supplementary planning guidance

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# Design guidelines for the conversion of shops to residential use

## Introduction

1

These guidelines have been prepared to explain the Council's planning policies on the conversion of shops into residential accommodation and help applicants meet the required design standards.

2

Shop premises are spread across the Borough. Five Town Centres and eight Local Centres are linked by a network of roads, many of which are lined with shops. Shopping parades and corner shops are also scattered throughout residential areas.

3

Changing shopping patterns mean that in some locations there is falling demand for shop premises. Wandsworth is, however, an increasingly popular residential area. Consequently there is a demand to convert shops into flats or houses.

4

The conversion of shops into residential units requires careful thought and a considered approach if the change is not to damage the appearance of the property concerned or that of neighbouring properties.

## Planning policies

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Planning permission is necessary to change a shop to residential use.

6

In order to maintain sufficient shopping facilities, policy TCS7 of the Council's Unitary Development Plan states that residential conversions will not be permitted in the Town and Local Centres and Important Local Parades.

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Policy TCS8 states that, outside these protected locations and subject to there being adequate alternative shopping provision, the change of use of shops to residential accommodation will be acceptable, provided that certain criteria are met. These relate to the impact on the amenity of the area, the compatibility of the new use with the surrounding area, and the compatibility of the design with surrounding development. A satisfactory standard of amenity should be ensured, where practicable by the provision of an enclosed front garden/forecourt.

**This document must be read in conjunction with relevant policies in the Council's UDP and Guidelines for Housing Development. The advice contained within this document relates only to the external aspects of any conversion scheme.**

### Questions to ask

8

The Planning Service will be able to advise you if a shop is in a location where a residential conversion would not be appropriate. They can also advise you about the space and other standards including floorspace, amenity space, outlook and daylight that apply to residential accommodation generally. This will be a particularly important consideration if you are planning a new ground-floor flat separate from the accommodation above.

9

If a conversion is acceptable in principle, design of the new accommodation should start with a careful study of the exterior of the property in relation to its surroundings:

Is it part of a terrace or parade of shops?

Is it adjacent to shops that are still in use?

Was the property built as a house that was subsequently converted?

Will the converted shop form a separate unit or will it be part of a larger dwelling including the upper floor(s) of the property?

10

It is essential to consider the overall appearance of the property and the impact of any changes on the exterior of the property itself and on neighbouring properties. The works to the former shopfront should not be seen in isolation.



*Shopfront removed: new door without fanlight inserted along with a small window with horizontal emphasis*

### **Original shopfront features: corbels, pilasters and fascia signs**

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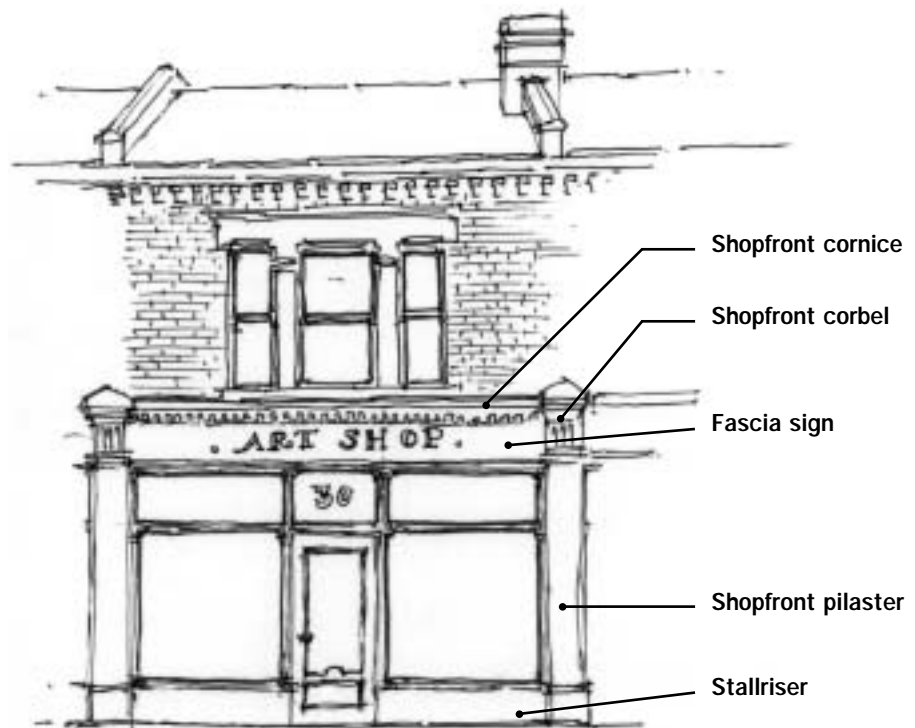
Shop buildings in Wandsworth date largely from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many incorporate decorative features which are an interesting part of the architectural heritage of the Borough.

12

Vertical divisions between adjoining shop units are marked by pilasters, sometimes tiled or faced with granite. On older parades there are projecting corbels at the top of the pilasters. The corbels separate the fascia signs of adjoining shops and are often one of the most distinctive features of older shopfronts. Fascia signs running along the top of the shopfront with the name of the shop, divide the ground and first floors. The top edge of nineteenth and earlier twentieth century fascia signs is often marked by a decorative cornice and/or the housing for a retractable canopy blind.

13

Pilasters, corbels and fascia signs together make up the visual “frame” of the shopfront. This frame is often part of the original building and may be much older than the shopfront which it surrounds. In many cases, it will be desirable to retain the essential elements of the frame in a conversion scheme - building new walls and windows within it. This is particularly the case if the former shop is part of a parade of shops which retain their corbels and pilasters.



*Decorative shopfront corbel retained after conversion. The shopfront fascia sign has been replaced by a band of render.*

14

The removal of the fascia sign and its replacement by an area of brick in an attempt to match the exterior of the first floor often causes a problem as it alters the architectural balance of ground and first floors. This is particularly marked if the shop window is replaced by a smaller window, leaving a bald expanse of wall between ground floor and first floor windows. The balance of the elevation is disturbed and the appearance of the building suffers as a result.



*Shopfront fascia removed, small window with horizontal emphasis inserted*

15

A fascia sign will no longer be required when a shop has been converted. However, some form of visual separation between ground and first floors helps to maintain the visual balance between the floors and, if the former shop is part of a parade, the fascia also provides a link with adjacent properties.

16

One solution may be to insert a raised band of render or brickwork linking the retained corbels, along the line of the former shopfront fascia. Where appropriate, this could incorporate a decorative cornice. Careful detailing is necessary in the location of the fascia as it is likely to conceal the structural beam which spans the shopfront opening. This structural beam, which supports the main wall of the building above, is often in timber. The removal of the shopfront presents an ideal opportunity for the condition of this beam to be thoroughly checked.



*Retained shopfront corbels and fascia framing new ground floor window which mirrors the first floor window above.*

### Shop windows vs the need for privacy

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Shops are often located on busy roads. Shop premises usually feature large display windows which were designed specifically to attract the attention of passers-by.

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When a shopfront is removed, as part of the conversion process, one of the most important considerations is the need to create a living environment with an acceptable level of privacy. A converted shop directly adjoining the footway is unlikely ever to provide the same degree of privacy as that afforded by a house or flat set back from the street behind a garden.

19

The replacement of a large shop window by a smaller window can damage the appearance of the property, particularly if the altered property is situated amongst shops which retain large display windows. The proportions, size and placing of replacement windows is a key factor in determining the success of any conversion scheme.

20

When making changes, a successful approach may be to try and match the architectural language of the building as a whole by replacing the shop window with a modified version of the upper floor windows, employing similar proportions and architectural details. It is relatively unusual for nineteenth century houses to have exactly the same windows on ground and first floors and therefore a straight copy of the first floor windows may not always be appropriate.

21

Nineteenth and early twentieth century windows usually have a vertical emphasis. They are taller than they are wide. The appearance of many conversions suffers because a single relatively small window with strong horizontal emphasis is inserted into a space previously occupied by a large shop window. The use of sash windows divided into sections by timber or brick mullions can be an effective way of securing a degree of privacy whilst at the same time maintaining a visual balance with upper floors.



*Sash window divided into three sections*

22

In some situations, where there is no obvious historical approach to follow, glass block or some form of opaque material such as decorative acid etched glass may be the answer, allowing larger ground floor windows but maintaining a sufficient degree of privacy. A design based on that of a shopfront with a large window subdivided into smaller panes may be an appropriate solution in some locations.



*Interesting use of glazing bars creates sense of privacy*

23

The internal plan should be carefully considered. The room nearest the street will obviously be subjected to most noise and disturbance. A “live-work” unit occupying the ground and upper floor(s) might be a more satisfactory solution, in which case it may be possible to retain the existing shopfront.

24

In some cases a slightly recessed ground floor frontage may provide the necessary degree of privacy especially where this is coupled with railings.

### **Doors**

25

Older shops often have high ceilings. Shop doors usually have fanlights above them (in the space between the top of the door and the ceiling).

26

When shopfronts are removed it is important that any new door relates to the overall scale of the building. A modern door without fanlight is likely to appear rather small in relation to the scale of the building as a whole. Many shopfronts were constructed with recessed front doors set back from the street. It may be desirable to retain a recess in order to maintain a degree of privacy. The floor of the recess sometimes incorporates an attractive mosaic pavement, which can be retained.

27

To meet the requirements of the Building Regulations in terms of access for people with disabilities, conversion to residential accommodation will require the threshold to be level and the approach to be ramped if necessary. The door must be at least 775 mm wide.

### **Access to upper floors**

28

In some cases shops will be converted to form a single residential unit separate from the accommodation above. In others it will be linked with accommodation on upper floors.

29

Where the ground floor is to be a separate unit it is probable that there will be two doors on the front elevation. An arrangement featuring a central window with doors on either side can be successful. Otherwise, two doors can be accommodated in a single recess – this method was often employed on late Victorian and Edwardian flats.

30

### Wall treatments

There is usually a strong contrast between the wall treatments of the ground and upper floor exteriors on shop premises. The ground floor exterior will probably be mainly glass, the upper floor of wall and window. The solid elements on the ground floor may be timber, tile, render or marble. On older shopfronts brick was rarely used. It will often be sensible to retain some visual distinction between first and ground floor when a shop unit is converted for residential use, particularly if the converted shop forms part of a parade of similar properties. This distinction could be maintained by using a different facing material on the solid elements of the ground floor such as painted render. (Unpainted render should usually be avoided as a finished facing material).

31

The choice will be informed by the design of adjacent shops and to some extent by the way that any converted properties have been treated.

32

### Keeping the shopfront

In some cases, for example where shopfronts makes a particularly important contribution to the character of a conservation area, the Council may encourage the retention of an original shopfront as part of a conversion scheme. In this situation, blinds/curtains or areas of obscure glazing can be employed to provide privacy, particularly where a shop forecourt can be enclosed. The lower section of the shop window could be covered by internal slatted screens or obscured glass.



*Retained shopfront*

33

### **Shops that were originally built as houses**

Some shops were originally built as houses, the ground floors of which were subsequently converted, and in some cases extended over the front garden. There may be houses within the immediate area (e.g. part of the same terrace) which retain features such as the original doors and windows with their architectural frames which were lost at the time the property was converted. A change from a shop back to a residential unit could reinstate the original features, tying the property in with its neighbours. The success of such a scheme will depend to a large extent on the quality of the workmanship and the choice of materials.

34

### **Corner shops**

Corner shops may have shop windows on two frontages. Providing an adequate level of amenity may require one of these windows (usually on the side road return) to be removed altogether. The main frontage can then be converted in line with this guidance.

35

### **Conversion of public houses**

The principles set out in these guidelines also apply to the conversion of pubs. These tend to be prominent buildings, often on street corner sites and originally designed to stand out from surrounding development. It is particularly important to retain ground floor exterior features which contribute to the character of such buildings.

36

### Enclosure of forecourts

Many shops are set behind a private forecourt which can be enclosed as part of a conversion scheme. Where this is practicable, the Council will make it a requirement of planning permission for the change of use. The detailed design of any boundary features, including walls, fences and gates, will be an important factor in determining the success of the overall scheme. Nearby residential properties may provide a guide to the most appropriate boundary treatment, and if other shop forecourts in the group have already been enclosed in a considerate manner, this may provide a suitable model to follow.



*Enclosure of forecourts to form private amenity space*

37

### Other standards

The conversion will need to meet general planning requirements for housing accommodation, as well as the requirements of the Building Regulations. The Council has published guidance on housing development standards and on access for people with disabilities. This is available from the Planning Service.

### Contacts

For further information on the Council's planning and design policies, contact the Planning Service.

Borough Planner  
Wandsworth Town Hall  
Wandsworth High Street  
LONDON SW18 2PU

*Telephone: (020) 8871 6636 Fax: (020) 8871 6003  
e-mail: boroughplanner@wandsworth.gov.uk  
or visit our website: www.wandsworth.gov.uk/planning*

## English

If you have difficulty understanding this in English please contact:

Wandsworth Interpreting Service  
Bedford House,  
at 215 Balham High Road,  
SW17 7BQ  
Telephone: 020 8672 1043/3649

## Bengali

এই লিফলেটটি বুঝতে অসুবিধা হলে  
দয়া করে যোগাযোগ করুন:

ওয়ান্ডসওয়ার্থ ইন্টারপ্ৰিটিং সার্ভিস  
Bedford House  
215 Balham High Road  
SW17 7BQ  
দুস্বোন:(020) 8672 1043/3649

## Gujarati

જો આને અંગ્રેજીમાં સમજવી તમારા માટે  
મુશ્કેલ છે, તો મહેરબાની કરી સંપર્ક  
સાધો:

વોન્ડસવર્થ ઇન્ટરપ્રિટિંગ સર્વિસ  
Bedford House  
215 Balham High Road  
SW17 7BQ  
ટેલિફોન: (020) 8672 1043/3649

## Hindi

यदि आपको इसे अंग्रेजी में समझने में  
कठिनाई होती है, तो कृपया सम्पर्क करें:

वॉन्डसवर्थ इन्टरप्रेटिंग सर्विस  
Bedford House  
215 Balham High Road  
SW17 7BQ  
टेलीफोन: (020) 8672 1043/3649

## Punjabi

ਜੇਕਰ ਇਸ ਨੂੰ ਅੰਗਰੇਜ਼ੀ ਵਿਚ ਸਮਝਣਾ  
ਤੁਹਾਡੇ ਲਈ ਮੁਸ਼ਕਿਲ ਹੈ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ  
ਕਰਕੇ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ:

ਵॉन्डसवर्थ इन्टरप्रेटिंग सर्विस  
Bedford House  
215 Balham High Road  
SW17 7BQ  
ਟੈਲੀਫੋਨ: (020) 8672 1043/3649

## Urdu

اگر اسے انگریزی میں سمجھنے میں آپ کو کوئی  
مشکل ہے تو براہ مہربانی رابطہ قائم کریں:

واؤنڈسوارث انٹراپریٹنگ سرویس  
Bedford House  
215 Balham High Road  
SW17 7BQ  
فون: (020) 8672 1043/3649