



Committee and Date

Item

Public



Oswestry Shop Front Design Guide: Standing Pre-Application Advice Note – Adoption

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Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):	Chris Schofield		

1. Synopsis

1.1. This report seeks approval for Shropshire Council to adopt the final draft of the Oswestry Shop Front Design Guide: Standing Pre-Application Advice Note (hereafter the Design Guide) so that it forms a material consideration when taking planning decisions.

2. Executive Summary

2.1. The Shropshire Plan includes the strategic objective to “develop Shropshire as a safe, strong and vibrant destination to attract people to live in, work in, learn in and visit” and “maintain, protect, and enhance our outstanding natural and historic environment”. This will be done through “Decisions that are taken about where you live will be made using a strong evidence base which supports a better understanding of the likely impacts on Shropshire communities”.

2.2. The Design Guide will deliver against these Shropshire Plan objectives by: -

- A. Providing guidance for business owners, applicants and council officers on how good shop front design can enhance the character and appearance of the town centre in Oswestry, thus safeguarding its historic environment;

- B. Providing guidance to business owners, applicants and agents on what designs are likely to receive support from planning officers, providing greater certainty and enabling them to make efficient and effective use of their resources;
 - C. Providing planning officers with guidance upon which to base their decisions.
- 2.3. The Design Guide was produced as part of the successful Oswestry High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) project, which was completed in March 2024. This delivered a £2.1m package of enhancements within the town centre through a partnership between Historic England and the members of the Future Oswestry Group (Shropshire Council, Oswestry Town Council and Oswestry BID). This included 11 new residential units, 16 enhanced and reinstated shop fronts, 730 square meters of enhanced commercial space, and 690 square meters of enhanced public realm. The Design Guide was also produced in collaboration with the Oswestry and District Civic Society
- 2.4. Oswestry Town Centre falls wholly within the Oswestry Conservation Area, which also includes 125 listed buildings. The Design Guide will assist Shropshire Council, as the local planning authority, to fulfil its statutory duties by helping to ensure that new shop fronts and signage preserve and enhance the character and appearance of the Conservation Area, and the special architectural and historic interest of listed buildings and their settings.
- 2.5. The Design Guide provides guidance in support of the planning policies contained within Shropshire Council's adopted Local Plan (comprising the Core Strategy Development Plan Document 2006-2026 and Site Allocations and Management of Development (SAMDev) Plan 2006-2026 documents). It will also provide guidance to the proposed planning policies contained within the draft Local Plan 2016-2038, which is currently subject to Examination by the Planning Inspectorate.
- 2.6. Poorly designed and incongruous town centre shop fronts form the basis of an increasing number of complaints to the Council's planning teams from residents, businesses and business groups, and amenity groups across the authority. The Design Guide, whilst focused on Oswestry, has the potential to provide a template that could be adapted for other towns in the county.
- 2.7. Approval was given by Cabinet on 20 November 2024 to undertake a formal 8-week public consultation on the Draft Design Guide. This was subsequently undertaken between 2 December 2024 and 25 January 2025. In addition to the consultation documents that were hosted on the 'Get Involved' section of the Council's website, an in person drop in event was held in Oswestry on 15 January in partnership with Oswestry Town Council and Oswestry BID. The full results are presented in Appendix 1.
- 2.8. Following consideration of the comments received through the consultation minor amendments have been made to the Design Guide.
- 2.9. The purpose of this report is to present the final draft of the Design Guide to Cabinet (see Appendix 2) and seek authority for Shropshire Council to formally

adopt the Design Guide, so that it can be given weight as a material consideration in the making of planning decisions.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. To approve adoption of the Oswestry Shop Front Design Guide: Standing Pre-Application Advice Note (Appendix 2) to provide guidance on application of Local Plan policies and form a material consideration in the planning application process.

Report

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. It is considered that the recommendations within this report do not pose a significant risk to the Council, as they relate to adopting the Design Guide, which is intended to positively influence the management of existing and the design of new shop fronts in Oswestry town centre.
- 4.2. Not adopting the Design Guide could adversely impact the heritage significance of the Oswestry Conservation Area, as a result of the gradual erosion of its character and appearance through inappropriate shop front design and signage. Badly designed development of this type also risks the positive investment and enhancements that have arisen through the Oswestry HSHAZ.
- 4.3. By preparing the Design Guide, the Council are taking a proactive approach, in partnership with Oswestry Town Council and the Oswestry BID, to plan positively for the town centre, creating a longer-term legacy for the Oswestry HSHAZ project.
- 4.4. The Design Guide provides a template that could be easily and cheaply adapted to provide similar guidance for other town centres in the county.
- 4.5. An Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA) initial screening record was completed ahead of the proposed consultation exercise; a further follow up ESHIA has now been carried out. This is at Appendix 3.
- 4.6. Following the consultation, it is considered that the equality impacts will remain as anticipated, ie neutral - low positive across the nine Protected Characteristic groupings defined by the Equality Act 2010. There remains potential for positive equality impact for the groupings of Age, Disability, Pregnancy and Maternity, and Sex, in terms of mental well-being opportunities arising for people living in and visiting a vibrant, well-designed and cared for environment in Oswestry town centre. As no issues were identified during this consultation process, the Council's ongoing challenge will be to continue to act in the best interests of the groupings for whom we have identified positive impacts, and to seek to enhance such impacts in the course of implementing the Design Guide.
- 4.7. The ESHIA records that within the wider grouping of Disability, for whom there may be additional positive impacts, are people with less visible disabilities or

conditions, including people with neurodiverse conditions, and people with visual impairments. For example, a cluttered and poorly designed spaces can cause overstimulation for some people with autism. Additionally, sensitive use of appropriate lighting, such as minimal use of fluorescent lighting, as well as clear signage, will be anticipated to provide further benefits for people with neurodiverse conditions and for others including those with visual impairments. This then includes their families and carers, bringing in intersectionality with those in the groupings of Age and Sex.

- 4.8. There would also be a projected neutral impact for those individuals and households that we may consider to be vulnerable by virtue of their circumstances. Whilst these are not defined as Protected Characteristics within equality legislation, it has been a matter of good practice in Shropshire for us to consider their needs as well, within a tenth grouping termed Social Inclusion. This includes low income households, households in rural areas, and young people leaving care.
- 4.9. From a health and well-being perspective, it is anticipated that the Design Guide will encourage the submission of well-designed development relating to the enhancement and replacement of shop fronts within Oswestry town centre. It promotes the use of appropriate shop front signage and lighting, avoiding overstimulation, as well as reducing possible light pollution causing unnecessary distractions and other issues (including effects on sleep of nearby population). There are additional positive impacts in terms of the recognised positive mental well-being that may accrue from employment. The Design Guide will promote the protection, conservation and enhancement of the Oswestry Conservation Area, aiming to thereby create a well-cared for and healthy environment that helps people maintain active lifestyles and good mental health.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. Shropshire Council is currently managing an unprecedented financial position as budgeted for within the Medium Term Financial Strategy approved by Council on 27 February 2025 and detailed in our monitoring position presented to Cabinet on a monthly basis. This demonstrates that significant management action is required over the remainder of the financial year to ensure the Council's financial survival. While all Cabinet Reports provide the financial implications of decisions being taken, this may change as officers review the overall financial situation and make decisions aligned to financial survivability. Where non-essential spend is identified within the Council, this will be reduced. This may involve
- scaling down initiatives,
 - changing the scope,
 - delaying implementation, or
 - extending delivery timescales.
- 5.2. The Design Guide was produced as part of the Oswestry HSHAZ project using Historic England funding. The value of the Design Guide lies in its ability to

maintain a well-designed town centre in Oswestry, driving up visitor footfall and promoting a strong and more resilient local economy. The large proportion of independent retailers in the town has helped to establish Oswestry as an attractive place to visit, live, work, and invest, and to maintain a strong visitor economy as a result.

- 5.3. The Design Guide would assist the Council in continuing to make the most effective use of its resources and support the efficient delivery of the development management process.
- 5.4. The adoption and use of the Design Guide will be met from existing resources and budgets.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. The Design Guide promotes sustainable development that conserves and enhances the character and appearance of the Oswestry Conservation Area, together with the special architectural and historic interest of the listed buildings and their settings within it.
- 6.2. The Design Guide promotes the retention and repair of existing historic shop fronts and the architectural detailing associated with them, together with the use of traditional materials and non-illuminated (i.e. low energy) signage. It also includes a link to Historic England's latest guidance on adapting historic buildings to improve their carbon and energy efficiency. As such, it is considered that the Design Guide will promote positive outcome in terms of climate change.

7. Background

Oswestry HSHAZ

- 7.1. Oswestry has functioned as a market town for over 800 years. It flourished in the Middle Ages and its strategic location on the English-Welsh border means that it has a rich and diverse history. The town's standing architectural heritage spans the 14th- 20th centuries, and its commercial centre is characterised by 18th and 19th century rendered or brick two or three storey buildings, with shops to the ground floor, arranged in terraces. The whole of Oswestry town centre falls within the Oswestry Conservation Area, which contains 125 listed buildings (1 GI, 3 GI* and 124 GII) and a scheduled monument (Oswestry Castle).
- 7.2. The HSHAZ initiative was a government-funded programme led by Historic England, designed to secure lasting improvements and help breathe new life into historic high streets for the communities and businesses that use them. Oswestry was one of 68 Towns that was successful in securing funding to regenerate their town centres - with the programme beginning in October 2020 and running until March 2024. The Oswestry HSHAZ aimed to stimulate growth, investment and vitality in the Town Centre and leave a legacy through heritage led regeneration.

- 7.3. The Oswestry HSHAZ represented a partnership between Historic England and the organisations that comprise the Future Oswestry Group (Shropshire Council, Oswestry Town Council, and the Oswestry BID). The scheme delivered a £2.1m package of enhancements to the town centre, including 11 new residential units, 16 enhanced and reinstated shop fronts, 730 square meters of enhanced commercial space, and 690 square meters of enhanced public realm. The scheme also developed a Cultural Consortium comprising representatives of local arts and heritage organisations, which delivered a programme of cultural events and initiatives, including the annual Love Oswestry festival.
- 7.4. Following the formal closure of the Oswestry HSHAZ project at the end of March 2024, a number of initiatives are now providing a lasting legacy of the scheme. Oswestry Town Council has adapted and continued the shop front enhancement grant scheme under the banner of its 'Breathing New Life into Empty Buildings' grants programme. It has also acquired Llwyd Mansion, an iconic, Grade I listed timber framed building at the heart of the town, which it is working to repair, repurpose and bring back into use. Likewise, the Cultural Consortium has rebranded itself as Oswestry Cultural Connections and is delivering a programme of activities using UKSPF funding.
- 7.5. The Design Guide will therefore provide a further way in which Shropshire Council can help to sustain the longer-term legacy of the Oswestry HSHAZ by promoting a high standard of design for shop fronts through the planning process.

Planning Context

- 7.6. The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, under sections 66(1) and 72(1), imposes two positive duties on local planning authorities to place significant weight on conserving and enhancing the character and appearance of Conservation Areas and the special architectural and historic interest of listed buildings and their settings.
- 7.7. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) considers Conservation Areas and Listed Buildings to be designated heritage assets. Great weight must be given to their conservation and any harm to or loss of significance requires clear and convincing justification. Substantial harm or loss should be exceptional, and in the case of Grade II* and Grade I listed buildings wholly exceptional. The NPPF also directs local planning authorities to seek opportunities for new development within Conservation Areas and within the settings of heritage assets, to enhance and better reveal their significance.
- 7.8. Shropshire Council has worked with the other Future Oswestry Group partners to prepare the Design Guide, and its progression towards formal adoption is supported by them. The next stage is, subject to approval, a public consultation by Shropshire Council.
- 7.9. As a Standing Pre-Application Advice Note, the Design Guide provides guidance and information to support the implementation of the policies in the adopted Local Plan. As such, it is consistent with the policies of the adopted Local Plan, does not introduce new policy, and will not form part of the Local Plan.

- 7.10. The adopted Local Plan for Shropshire consists of the Shropshire Core Strategy (2011), the Site Allocations and Management of Development (SAMDev) Plan (2015) and any adopted formal Neighbourhood Plans. Planning applications should be determined in accordance with the adopted Local Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 7.11. This adopted Local Plan provides a robust set of planning policies for conserving and enhancing the historic environment, the most relevant of which include: Core Strategy policies CS3: Market Towns and Other Key Centres, CS6: Sustainable Design and Development Principles, and CS17: Environmental Networks; and SAMDev Plan policies S14: Oswestry, MD2: Sustainable Design, and MD13: Historic Environment.
- 7.12. The Design Guide will provide guidance and information to support the implementation of these policies, particularly policies CS6 of the Core Strategy (Sustainable Design and Development Principles), and MD2: Sustainable Design and MD13 (Historic Environment) of the SAMDev Plan.
- 7.13. The Council is at an advanced stage of a Local Plan Review, with a draft Local Plan 2016 – 2038 currently the subject of examination. It is therefore important to consider the updated policies that are relevant to the Design Guide. These include the following: SP1: The Shropshire Test, SP5: High Quality Design, DP23: Conserving and Enhancing the Historic Environment, and S14.1. Development Strategy: Oswestry Principal Centre.
- 7.14. The Design Guide provides guidance and information to support the implementation of the policies contained within the draft Local Plan 2016 – 2038, particularly policies SP1, SP5 and DP23.
- 7.15. Once adopted, the Design Guide would form part of a suite of documents, including the Local Plan and Future Oswestry Plan, that set out how development within Oswestry will be positively managed.

Consultation and engagement

- 7.16. Following Cabinet approval on 22 November, a public consultation was undertaken from 2nd December 2024 to the 24th January 2025. It included both a drop-in event held in Oswestry on 15 January with the Future Oswestry Group partners and an online survey. The consultation was publicised in the local media via the Council's Communications Team and partners social media channels. The consultation complied with Shropshire Council's Statement of Community Involvement.
- 7.17. The Consultation Report included at Appendix 2 provides an analysis of the results of the consultation. Despite extensive promotion, only 24 responses were received. The feedback suggests overall support for the Design Guide.
- 7.18. The suggestions that were made include the provision of advice on graffiti removal, thermal insulation and security; taking care when using timber at floor level due to the potential for damage from water and street cleaning machines; and queries over the appropriateness of some shop names and very modern looking street signs. The top concerns relate to whether the guide can be

enforced and will be adopted in a way that ensures compliance, and the potential cost implications for business owners.

- 7.19. In response to this feedback, it is considered that the draft Design Guide already contained sufficiently robust guidance on the use of traditional signage and colour schemes that are appropriate within a Conservation Area, and on the introduction of security measures. The Design Guide also contains a link to Historic England's guidance for improving energy efficiency in historic buildings. Formal adoption of the document by the Council will ensure that it forms a material consideration when making planning decisions, including in planning enforcement cases.
- 7.20. However, the section advocating the use of durable traditional materials for stall risers at ground level, and discouraging the use of timber, has been strengthened in the final draft Design Guide.
- 7.21. Overall, the draft Oswestry Shopfront Design Guide has been well-received, with general support from the consultation respondents. The low response rate may indicate a lack of objections to the draft guide.
- 7.22. To ensure continued engagement and feedback, Shropshire Council will review the guide quinquennially and maintain collaboration with partners, including Oswestry BID and Oswestry Town Council.

8. Additional Information

How the Design Guide would be used

- 8.1. The aim of the Design Guide is to provide guidance and information to support the implementation of policies in the adopted Local Plan. It will provide residents, businesses, agents, and other organisations with information on how relevant planning proposals relating to shop fronts and signage can conserve and enhance the character and appearance of the Oswestry Conservation Area when they are considering preparing a planning application.
- 8.2. Following adoption the Design Guide will be used by Shropshire Council as a material consideration when determining planning applications relating to shop fronts within the Oswestry Conservation Area.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. The Design Guide will provide guidance and information to support the implementation of policies in the adopted Local Plan, which will in turn strengthen the way the planning system conserves and enhances the character and appearance of the Oswestry Conservation Area.
- 9.2. The Design Guide provides clear and consistent advice relating to shop fronts within the Oswestry Conservation Area. It will assist businesses and agents in the submission of relevant planning applications, and the Council when determining

relevant planning applications. This will add to the positive management of the Conservation Area and provide a greater surety of outcomes for planning applicants, local communities, and partner organisations.

- 9.3. Despite the low response rate during the public consultation the draft Design Guide was well received. The Council's response to the key points raised is set out in 7.19 and 7.20 paragraph above. In most cases it is considered the guidance contained in the draft Design Guide was sufficient. However, the section relating to stall risers has been strengthened in the final draft to encourage the use of durable traditional materials. The full results of the public consultation are presented in Appendix 2.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Shropshire Council Core Strategy 2006-2026 –
<https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/media/8534/core-strategy.pdf>

Shropshire Council SAMDev Plan 2006-2026 –
<https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/media/8503/samdev-adopted-plan.pdf>

Draft Shropshire Local Plan 2016 – 2038 –
<https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/media/21100/sd002-draft-shropshire-local-plan.pdf>

Future Oswestry Plan –
<https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/media/24868/future-oswestry-plan-final-draft-report.pdf>

Local Member:

Cllr Duncan Kerr -

(The local members have been consulted on taking the final draft Design Guide to Cabinet for adoption)

Appendices

Appendix 1: Final Draft Oswestry Shop Front Design Guide: Standing Pre-Application Advice Note

Appendix 2: Oswestry Shropfront Design Guide Consultation Report Feb 2025

Appendix 3: Equality, Social Inclusion and Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA) for Final Draft Oswestry Shop Front Design Guide: Standing Pre-Application Advice Note