

## **Village Design Statement Protocol November 2012**

### **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 In 1996 the Countryside Commission (now Natural England) launched the 'Design in the Countryside' initiative and produced advisory packs to help villages understand the concept, process and method of producing a Village Design Statement (VDS).
- 1.2 The purpose of VDSs is to manage change, whether that change is major new development or just cumulative, small-scale additions and alterations. They are not about whether development should take place but about how planned development should be carried out, so that it is in harmony with its setting and contributes to the conservation and, where possible, enhancement, of the local environment.
- 1.3 VDSs are prepared by local communities. They offer a framework for engaging local people in constructive debate about defining the special character of their village, as a basis for ensuring that new development in their area fits its surroundings and is in keeping with that character. The VDS can help everyone involved in a development to understand local views and perceptions at the outset of the design process. This helps new buildings to be designed in a way that is more likely to gain local support, rather than generate opposition. VDSs provide a tool to help manage long-term change, not prevent it.
- 1.4 Some development in villages is both healthy and desirable to maintain thriving village communities. A VDS offers a positive way for local people to ensure that the nature and quality of development makes a natural progression from village past into village future. In particular, the VDS helps to manage change and demonstrate how new and locally distinctive design can add to the visual quality of the village.
- 1.5 A VDS contains a descriptive analysis of the relationship between landscape, settlement patterns and buildings and describes the qualities and characteristics that people value in their village and its surroundings. From the survey analysis the VDS identifies principles to be applied to new developments, such as the design of buildings and the spaces between them. The document should benefit local people, developers, new occupants and planners.
- 1.6 An effective VDS:
- is developed, researched, written and edited by local people;
  - is representative of the views of the village as a whole;
  - has involved a wide section of the village community in its production;
  - describes the visual character of the village;
  - demonstrates how local character and distinctiveness can be protected and enhanced in new development;
  - is compatible with the statutory planning system and the local planning context;
  - is applicable to all forms and scale of development;

- is about managing change in the village, not preventing it.

## 2.0 **What status should be given to a VDS?**

- 2.1 Many communities across Wiltshire have already prepared VDSs which have had formal recognition and acknowledgement from the Council.
- 2.2 The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 has changed the way VDSs can be adopted by local planning authorities. Previously, they could be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance (as referred to in the Countryside Commission's guidance). However, this has been replaced by Supplementary Planning Documents which have more stringent and onerous requirements.
- 2.3 Currently, VDSs can either be approved by a local planning authority as a material planning consideration or adopted as Supplementary Planning Documents. Both 'material considerations' and 'Supplementary Planning Documents' must be considered for all planning applications along with all the other relevant planning guidance.
- 2.4 However, for a VDS to achieve status as a Supplementary Planning Document, the document must fulfil statutory requirements for public consultation and undergo rigorous consultation, and hence the process can be time consuming. It is therefore considered more appropriate to approve VDSs as material planning considerations, rather than adopting as Supplementary Planning Documents.
- 2.5 The wording of the Council Constitution allows for this, advising that one of the roles of the area committees is:
- “To consider matters of local importance within the area such as:
- Village design statements and parish plans where Council approval is required for them to be considered as material considerations in dealing with planning applications.”
- 2.6 Approving VDSs as material planning considerations is a much faster and simplified way forward. Their approval by Committee, following an Officer appraisal of the VDS including an assessment of the robustness of the consultation undertaken to inform its preparation, gives the documents weight in decision making. The Council in approving VDSs as a material consideration will ensure that these are taken into account in determining planning applications.
- 2.7 It is also important to note that by approving VDSs as material planning considerations, the VDSs will also always be owned by the village or parish that undertakes the work.
- 2.8 If approved as a material planning consideration, the VDSs will assist in making decisions upon planning applications, through the Development Management process. VDSs have also been given weight by Planning Inspectors in individual planning appeal cases.

## 3.0 **VDS Validation Checklist**

- 3.1 It would be unrealistic to expect the Council to approve a VDS as a material consideration if the VDS did not fulfil the remit of a VDS, for example, if it conflicted with the Council's own planning policies. The information contained within a VDS will need to be used by planners, designers and developers and should be straight

forward, clear and unambiguous. To achieve this, the production of the VDS has to be structured and well organised. Whilst the document belongs to the local community, it is necessary to assess how they interpret relevant existing planning policies. They must be robust enough for planning officers to put them into active use in decisions on applications.

3.2 The VDSs will therefore need to be assessed against a validation checklist. This checklist is based on the former Countryside Commission's VDS guidance, and seeks to ensure that the VDSs are fit for purpose:

(i) **Does the VDS describe the distinctive character of the village and the surrounding countryside?**

For example, to meet this objective, the VDS could include:

- A brief description of geographical and historic background.
- A short description of the village as it is today.
- The people, economics and future prospects.
- Any special considerations that affect development pressures in the village, such as tourism or mineral extraction, etc.

(ii) **Does the VDS show how character can be identified at three levels?**

- The landscape setting of the village.
- The shape of the settlement.
- The nature of the buildings themselves.

**The character of the landscape setting**

- The visual character of the surrounding countryside.
- The relationship between the surrounding countryside and the village edges.
- The relationship between the village and any special landscape features, such as ancient monuments, woodlands or nature reserves.
- Buildings seen in the landscape, e.g., farm buildings.

**Settlement pattern character**

- Overall pattern of village, distinct zones and layouts.
- Character of streets and routes through the village.
- Character and pattern of open spaces in the village and connections with the wider countryside.
- The relationship between buildings and spaces.

**Buildings and spaces in the village**

- The character of distinct areas of building types in the village.
- The height, scale and density of buildings.
- The mixture of sizes, styles and types of buildings.
- Hedges, walls and fences.
- Distinctive village features, materials or building details.

(iii) **Does the VDS draw up design principles based on the distinctive local character?**

Are the design principles locally specific, rather than just repeating good practice/design principles?

(iv) **Does the VDS work in the context of existing local planning policy and influence future policies?**

The scope and content of the VDS must be both relevant and complementary to the local planning context.

The importance of compatibility between the VDS and the statutory planning process cannot be overestimated. A good working partnership with the local planning authority will be of particular value when the VDS is used in the planning process.

(v) **Has the VDS been developed, researched, written and edited by local people? Is it representative of the views of the village as a whole? Has the process involved a wide section of the village community in its production?**

It is important to ensure the Council does not influence a VDS to the extent that it does not accurately represent the views of the community. The more people who are involved and contribute to the production of the VDS the better. It must not just represent the view of a single interest group, it has to be seen to be a shared and representative view of the village as a whole.

Consultation needs to be undertaken from the outset of the project and the programme of action and range of methods used should be well documented.

- Always try to stress that the VDS is the view of the village and not that of the local planning authority.

3.3 A template summarising these validation criteria will be used to assess each VDS to ensure it is fit for purpose.