

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT GUIDANCE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This guidance is published by Wiltshire Council (“the council”) to assist communities that are interested in preparing a Village Design Statement (“VDS”).
- 1.2 While the ethos of a VDS is to reflect local character and distinctiveness, this document seeks to provide guidance to communities as to what the council would expect to happen in order for a VDS to be approved as a material consideration to be taken into account when making planning decisions.
- 1.3 It is hoped this guidance will enable communities to be fully aware of the expectations the council would have of a VDS and the implications, and commitment required, for its preparation.
- 1.4 This guidance is intended to provide an overview of the VDS process and explain the role of the council. It should be read in conjunction with the advisory booklet, Village Design, published by the Countryside Commission, available from the council.

2.0 WHAT A VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT IS

- 2.1 The concept of the VDS was proposed by the Countryside Commission (whose functions are effectively now undertaken by Natural England) in its 1996 publication *Design In The Countryside*, which focused on the themes of regional diversity, local distinctiveness, and the harmony between buildings, settlements and the wider landscape setting.
- 2.2 VDSs influence the way the statutory planning system operates locally, through their approval as a material consideration in the planning system. They provide a context for new development, based on identification and analysis of local character. The purpose of a VDS is to manage change, whether that change occurs through major new development or cumulative, small-scale additions and alterations.
- 2.3 However, a VDS is not concerned whether or not development should take place. That role lies with the development plan. The VDS provides more detailed guidance as to how development should be carried out, so that it complements the character of its site and surroundings, and conserves and - where possible - enhances the local environment.
- 2.4 Many people feel unable to contribute to the planning policy system because they have no formal training or experience. However, good design stems from principles and standards that can be described in terms of size, shape, scale and materials. Anyone can agree on how those principles should apply to their own village and how new development should protect and enhance its local identity.
- 2.5 Local communities have a unique appreciation and understanding of their own place: a VDS is based on this knowledge. It describes the qualities and characteristics that people value in their settlement and its surroundings and sets out clear and simple guidance for the design of all development in the village based on that quality and character.
- 2.6 The VDS is an advisory document produced by the community - not by the council. It cannot prevent or authorise development, but it will help to influence how new development is carried out.

3.0 OBJECTIVES AND BENEFITS OF A VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

3.1 The objectives of a VDS are to:

- Describe the distinctive character of the village and surrounding countryside;
- 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.
- Draw up design principles based on the distinctive local character;
- Work in partnership with the council, in the context of existing local planning policy, and to influence future policies.

3.2 An approved VDS is important to local people because it:

- Sets out the character of the village in a way that will encourage locally distinctive design;
- Gives the community a recognised voice in the planning processes that affect the visual quality of the village;
- Supports and strengthens the role of the Parish Council when consulted over planning applications;
- Is a representative view of local people of the character of the village;
- Demonstrates local commitment to high quality design and appropriate development that will improve the quality of life of the village;
- Contributes to securing a thriving and viable future for the village;
- Enables local priorities to be considered in the development process;
- Enables local people to be able to respond in an informed and professional manner to planning and development proposals in the village; and
- Is applicable to all villages and settlements, not just conservation or specially designated areas.

3.3 An approved VDS is important to the council because it:

- Is undertaken by, and represents the views of, the community;
- Complements the existing planning system and strengthens the council's position when advising or negotiating on design and at appeal;
- Provides a structured, flexible approach to assessing village character;
- Is applicable to all areas not just conservation or other designated areas;

- Enables local people to make a positive contribution to the development debate, rather than having to rely on objections to proposals to make their views heard;
- Provides support for elected members' decisions;
- Can be used as guidance in design and development briefing;
- Enables informed dialogue to take place with the community; and
- Can be used as material evidence when used at appeals.

3.4 An approved VDS is important to designers and developers because it:

- Describes the visual qualities and character of the villages as an inspiration for design;
- Describes the character of the village as perceived by local people;
- Can shorten the process of planning negotiation and application by reducing conflict and objections;
- Encourages villagers to take a positive view of development.

4.0 GETTING STARTED IN PREPARING A VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

- 4.1 Dependent on the size of the village and the resources that can be committed to the project, the production of a VDS should take between six and 18 months. It is advised that a VDS Group is set up to take forward the project.
- 4.2 The VDS Group should be representative of the community, although it would of course assist if Members' skills covered areas that would help in the VDS process, including matters such as finance and project management as well as design related.
- 4.3 VDSs are often initiated by Parish Councils but can come forward through other community groups. If not obtained already, an initial approach should be made to the Parish Council to seek their support, in principle, for the VDS project. An open public meeting should then be arranged to hear the views of the wider community and ascertain if they are supportive. This meeting should be widely publicised by means of posters and leaflets, and specific invitations should be given to any persons representing existing groups in the community. At this meeting, invitations for volunteers for the VDS Group should be elicited, and a date set for the initial meeting of the Group.
- 4.4 At the initial group meeting there should be an election of officers comprising at least a Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer, but perhaps also including individuals responsible for managing matters such as publicity and document design.
- 4.5 The project plan for the VDS should also be scoped out at this initial meeting. The aim should be to produce a well researched and supported VDS, which is appropriate for approval by the council. There is no statutory process involved in achieving this, as each group should determine what works best for its own village.
- 4.6 However, a number of steps towards producing a VDS are suggested in Section 6.0. This is not intended to be comprehensive and the group should consider whether all of these steps are necessary, or indeed whether any additional steps might be appropriate in their case.
- 4.7 The formulation of the timetable for these steps should be carefully considered to ensure it is realistic. Subsequent group meetings should also be built in. Allowance should also be made for the timings of Christmas and other holidays.
- 4.8 At this stage it is worth reviewing approved VDSs and contacting those involved in their preparation, in order to get a feel for what exactly is involved. Links to those VDSs already adopted and approved in Wiltshire are provided in Section 8.0.

5.0 SUPPORT FROM THE COUNCIL

- 5.1 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. Conversely, it would be unrealistic to expect the council to approve a VDS as a material consideration that, for instance, would conflict with its own planning policies.
- 5.2 The level of support required from the council is likely to vary from group to group. Some groups may feel they have the technical abilities and confidence to progress with very little direct involvement from council officers, while others might prefer a higher degree of interaction.
- 5.3 For this reason, the council is not making specific suggestions as to the degree of involvement officers will have in every VDS project. Groups should also appreciate that there will be occasions when priority will have to be given to competing pressures, including other VDS and community based projects (there are 253 Town and Parish Councils within Wiltshire).
- 5.4 It is suggested that in terms of preparing the VDS, officers of the council can help with:
- Attending the initial open public meeting.
 - Attending the initial public event.
 - Commenting on the output of the initial public event (attending a group meeting if necessary).
 - Providing copies or extracts of relevant national and local planning policy and relevant policy studies that have already been published.
 - Providing access to other relevant material already held by the council, such as statistical and mapping information.
 - Providing advice as to the levels and methodologies of consultation that would satisfy the council's Statement of Community Involvement
 - Commenting on all iterations of the VDS (attending group meetings where necessary).

6.0 PREPARING A VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

6.1 There is no set format for preparing a VDS. A number of steps are suggested below, but this is not intended to be a comprehensive list and the group should consider whether any additional steps might be appropriate in their case.

- Initial research
- Planning and publicising public event
- Holding public event
- Presenting results of public event
- Producing village survey
- Presenting and publicising village survey
- Producing a VDS
- Presenting and publicising the VDS
- Finalising the VDS

6.2 The advisory booklet, Village Design (published by the Countryside Commission), provides comprehensive advice on these stages of the process and can be obtained from the council (see Section 8.0 for contact details).

7.0 APPROVAL OF THE VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

- 7.1 Provided the council has been appropriately involved in the VDS process as suggested in Section 5.0, Officers should be in a position to recommend that the finalised VDS be approved as a material consideration in the planning decision making process.
- 7.2 This stage of the process will be kept simple: a report will be taken as soon as is reasonably possible to the relevant area planning committee seeking a resolution that the VDS be approved by the council.
- 7.3 Approving VDSs as material planning considerations is a fast and simple 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.

8.0 CONTACTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

- 8.1 For further assistance on the process, please contact the Council using the following email or telephone number:

neighbourhood.planning@wiltshire.gov.uk

Tel: 01225 713223

- 8.2 An electronic copy of the Countryside Commission Guidance can be obtained - from the Council.