

VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENTS IN THE UK BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

BDOR Limited, notably Jeff Bishop and his colleague Ian Davison, were engaged by the Countryside Commission in England almost from the start of the story below. They invented the Village Design Statement (VDS) name and format, ran the pilot programme and produced the basic guidance. Since then they have trained numerous professionals and community groups in the UK and other countries and have supported (and continue to support) practical VDS projects. This note is based on that experience.

The Context that Shaped VDSs

In 1989 the Countryside Commission published a consultation paper entitled 'Planning for a Greener Countryside'. They were astonished that the single issue attracting most concern was the poor quality of design of new buildings in the countryside and in villages. However, the Commission had no remit for design or staff to address the issue. Design, especially as linked to conservation and heritage, had however been a key driver in community concerns for years, as shown by the numerous national and local bodies, books and articles on the issue.

The Commission had, at much the same time, finished a research programme entitled 'Countryside Community Action' which included 17 community action initiatives. One in particular focused on what had by then become called 'Local Distinctiveness' (and others touched on this). The term gained further currency in subsequent years, especially within Local Agenda 21 and then sustainable development. Another of the 17 initiatives was Parish Appraisals which showed that community level action can produce high quality results valued by professionals. Finally, the initiative as a whole had shown not just a high level of interest but also a high level of capability by local communities to take leadership on their own affairs.

Also at around the same time, a very innovative grant aid scheme called Rural Action had been launched, which provided some interesting approaches to funding community-led initiatives, for example valuing the voluntary time of local people against cash, and enabling communities to pay for consultants.

Within the now explicit concern for design quality there was also a more hidden set of concerns about development generally, for how much and where it might happen, even though the normal expectation for villages was just 10 houses here, 20 there (and very occasionally something more significant).

Although the Commission was not supposed to comment on some planning and development issues, BDOR had now been commissioned and their initial advice was that attention to design could nevertheless be a way to at least influence 'whether and where' decisions – for example by showing that regular open spaces and gaps with views are a key part of the distinctiveness of a village and hence that those gaps should not be filled with development.

A complementary issue was the growing concern, which BDOR not only shared but to some extent helped to initiate, about traditional Design Guides. These had become almost universal but had also become (a) very professionalised and top-down, (b) very generic, so covering large areas with more than one local pattern, ritualised into drawings with ticks ('we like those') or crosses ('never do that') and (c) rigid devotion to what is in the guide. The evidence was that local distinctiveness was being eroded by this format. There were also debates underway about the prime motivation for Design Guides - how to stop developers building poorly designed, standard houses everywhere; (an issue that, interestingly, some developers were already aware of).

This raised a problem, however. How could one open up to real local distinctiveness without creating entirely *ad hoc* approaches that the planning system would then have problems backing up at appeals etc.? This came to a head when an authority used their landscape design criteria to refuse an application. The developer appealed and was successful because the authority could not provide objective arguments to back up the landscape appraisal criteria. Something robust and nationally consistent was then developed for landscape work and that challenge also then needed to be applied to rural design, i.e. to find an approach capable of celebrating highly specific local distinctiveness yet being demonstrably consistent across the country with its methodology in a way that could be backed through the planning system.

The challenge was more significant for rural design because of the need to bring together approaches to landscape issues, settlement patterns and building design itself. And this in a context in which architects focused in their analysis mainly on buildings (a little on their general arrangement but never on their landscape setting) while landscape architects tended to focus on landscape only (treating villages and towns almost like holes in Gruyere cheese, often leaving them out completely).

In similar vein, ideas were also developing at the time about design not solely as an aesthetic area of debate but as something essential to local identity, a community's sense of self-worth, even a possible contributor to the local economy (i.e. to sustainability). This was strikingly obvious by comparing books about rural development, which covered absolutely everything except design, with those about rural design, which covered nothing but design.

Three other points about the English context need to be noted:

- There had been, for some years, an extensive planning system at all levels from whole county planning through district planning to specific site allocation design guides, area briefs, development briefs and so forth.
- There was already a long tradition of statutory and elected Parish Councils in rural areas with the power to raise funds through what is called a precept on the local authority rates. Parish Councils – some 8,500 in England - are also statutory consultees on all planning applications in their areas.
- All counties also had, and still have, a Rural Community Council which supports community development issues, usually through specific grant-aid projects and occasionally through more regular service provision for local authorities.

From this Context to Village Design Statements

All the above set a number of key criteria for what a new approach might be, as follows:

- It had to be an approach which focused mainly on how development might best happen rather than what basis type of development or where it might take place, i.e. on design in particular, but taking design in its broadest sense.
- The approach needed to be able to set a local distinctiveness challenge open to endless but locally appropriate, and even contemporary, design solutions, yet be robust enough at a national level to be sustained through the planning system's legal processes.
- The new approach should, in most circumstances, be community-initiated and community-led, if with extra skill and input always being available from others.
- Whatever approach was adopted needed to be able to secure support through grant aid programmes (especially Rural Action which enabled access to consultant skills) and access to some time - deliberately kept to a minimum - from planning officers and others.
- It was also important to ensure that the processes would not be led directly or solely by a Parish Council but which could then be lodged with one, and through one, at adoption and implementation stages.

- Any approach needed to be able to be valued equally by all professions, by communities and even by developers, notably (but not exclusively) through formal adoption as Supplementary Planning Guidance.

From all of this emerged the idea of Village Design Statements that:

- focused on design and directly related issues;
- would be developed mainly by local communities;
- operated with a consistent framework;
- yet celebrated truly local distinctiveness;
- did so in a way that challenged designers (rather than tied them);
- helped to build community capacity and skills and
- would be valued at the heart of the current planning system and by developers.

Once the model was developed:

- VDSs were promoted mainly through a widely advertised package of guidance from the Countryside Commission;
- BDOR and others put articles in many newspapers (including national ones), journals, magazines and newsletters;
- the approach was also heavily endorsed by the then Minister for the Environment, HRH Prince Charles and other luminaries;
- numerous training courses were put on for planners, councillors, architects and local groups and organisations, often with mixed audiences;
- a video was produced, funded by the Housebuilders federation;
- VDSs were mentioned positively in national planning guidance and
- BDOR have supported many specific VDSs.

There were also at least two formal evaluations of VDSs, both with highly positive results.

Key changes since the start of Village Design Statements

Since the early days:

- **Several hundred VDSs have been produced in England (and a few in Wales).**
- In nearly all cases they have been produced by communities themselves, if occasionally with outside help in terms of content (design etc.) or process (community involvement).
- National guidance was produced and has been used to varying extents, from fully to almost nothing, by communities and also to varied extents by local planning authorities.
- Some authorities took a highly supportive and proactive approach (one even employed a VDS officer for a few years) while others offered little help.
- A few authorities refused to offer support or back any locally produced VDSs.
- Most VDSs have been formally adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) but a few authorities refused to allow that.
- VDSs have also been used at appeals, almost always (to our knowledge) successfully.
- The less successful VDSs are those where:
 - the framework and guidance was not followed;
 - the guidance was solely about traditional design and pastiche;
 - the guidance within the VDS strayed into ideas about what development might happen where;
 - the VDS was produced by a small group without wider involvement;
 - the VDS included ideas and wish lists for things well beyond even the broadest notion of design.
- However, even some of the latter were adopted!

The key contextual factors to note since the start of VDSs are as follows:

- Rural communities started to become aware that simple resistance to new development could well be damaging – loss of a local school, loss of shops, becoming an older person's settlement etc.
- More recently there has been a shift towards favouring some development in villages (notably or even exclusively social housing) although planning policy has in general now swung against this with simple ideas about sustainability, especially as linked to transport.
- The success of community-led initiatives, notably Parish Appraisals and VDSs, led to the idea that Parishes could produce their own 'Parish Plans'. Guidance was produced, backed up by government funding. It was also anticipated at the time that Parish Plans would become adopted as SPG.
- The national guidance, often supported at local level, tended to suggest to people that they should either do a Parish Plan instead of a VDS or before it. This was probably because (a) several VDSs had started, as mentioned above, to include patently non-design issues (street lighting, safety, litter, even development) and (b) the community development processes of VDSs had got people rightly concerned to take a broader view and not get limited just by design. However, Parish Plans now almost cover so many non-planning issues that they should not, or even cannot, be adopted as SPG.
- Since the early 1990s, issues of sustainable development have started to gain status and, in principle, there is no doubt that reinforcing local distinctiveness is a key part of this. Sustainability arguments are affecting development location debates and, more recently, many aspects of building design. The latter is important because of the likely forthcoming visual changes of truly 'sustainable houses' (eg. in relation to energy conservation).
- There were also some awkward repercussions from the requirement for SPG documents – now SPD (Supplementary Planning Documents) – to be subject to Sustainability Appraisal. That requirement has now been dropped although it produced some very interesting and actually valuable approaches.
- Around seven years ago the Countryside Agency (Commission as was) started to move on from Village Design Statements to promoting Town Design Statements. Once again, some pilot projects were done and guidance was produced but take-up has been far more limited than it was for VDSs.
- This probably also connects to the fact that the Rural Action grant aid scheme was stopped (despite an extremely positive evaluation) and, more recently, financial support for Parish Plans has been cut back.

Spin-offs

- As outlined above, Parish Plans were in part a next stage in the development of a range of tools for local communities to address local issues such as, but not limited to, design.
- English Heritage has, over the years, taken a little interest in VDSs but is now looking to produce an advice note to local communities about how to highlight and address heritage issues.
- Promotion and training of VDSs has taken place (by Jeff Bishop) in the USA, Slovenia, Ireland and Italy.
- The Heritage Council in the Irish republic launched a pilot programme of VDSs in 2004.
- Jeff Bishop (with Prof. Steven Owen) evaluated this programme. They found that over 30 were produced but (a) they were developed mainly by consultants with limited community involvement, (b) they covered issues often well outside design and (c) there was no appropriate planning context in which to embed them.
- A second pilot phase is now underway with Jeff Bishop as an adviser.