

# **Lost in Translation? Some issues encountered in transferring Village Design Statements from England to Ireland**

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## *Abstract*

*The erosion of the distinctive character of smaller rural settlements in England has been addressed with some success through the preparation of Village Design Statements (VDS) by local communities. Adopting a more or less unmodified version of the English VDS model, the Heritage Council introduced a VDS programme in Ireland in 2000. This paper reports on an evaluation of that programme and indicates that VDSs in Ireland have had very limited success to date in terms of their stated objectives. The paper reflects on some of the difficulties experienced in transferring an established community-led initiative from one cultural, political and institutional context to another and concludes that aspects of that context need to be addressed before VDSs are likely to redress the loss of distinctiveness in Irish villages. Further, it concludes that in many situations a community-led instrument embracing broader social, economic and environmental matters might be more appropriate than a VDS.*

## **Introduction**

The erosion of the distinctive character of rural settlements is part of a much wider, in many cases, global, phenomenon in which the individual identity of specific places, customs, behaviours and much else is being submerged in a seemingly inevitable slide into homogeneity. This phenomenon, usually referred to as the 'loss of distinctiveness' has been addressed extensively over the past quarter of a century. Here, though, we are concerned specifically with the distinctive character of smaller rural settlements, in terms of both the unique features of each individual place and the important contribution that their collective characters make to the identity and attractiveness of wider rural areas. Although we focus mainly on Ireland and the UK, the issues appear to be similar across Europe and beyond.

Further, we are particularly concerned with the role that local communities can play, together with professionals and politicians, in safeguarding, recovering or even enhancing the distinctiveness of their own localities. Alongside the increasing disquiet about the loss of distinctiveness an equally significant concern has grown over the past 25 years that local communities should have much greater influence in determining many more aspects of their own futures – and there has been a consequent blossoming of community-led initiatives to that end.

One carefully, and in some ways quite narrowly, targeted contribution to the developing toolkit of community-led initiatives was Village Design Statements (VDS). These were introduced in the UK in 1993 with the express aim of involving local communities in trying to reverse the loss of distinctive character of their villages and small towns, mainly in terms of the built environment. Since then VDSs have become established as a community-led technique in many local planning authority areas in the UK. The various evaluations that have been undertaken indicate that they have had some success in influencing the design of new development and in fostering

both community awareness of local distinctiveness and a willingness on the part of the local community to engage actively with the issues around the design quality of new developments.

Following the apparent success of VDSs in the UK, the Heritage Council began a VDS programme in the Republic of Ireland in 2000. This was in response to widespread unease about the erosion of the identity of Irish villages similar to that which had motivated the introduction of VDSs in the UK. After the programme had run for eight years the Heritage Council decided that it was an appropriate time to assess its progress. So in 2008 the Council commissioned a research project to evaluate the programme's successes and shortcomings, and this paper in part reports on the findings of that evaluation.

By and large – and with some notable exceptions – the VDS programme in Ireland does not seem to have been successful in meeting its stated aims and objectives. Some of the reasons for this seeming lack of success are dealt with in the main body of this paper. However, it is important to draw attention at this point to two observations deriving from the evaluation that have influenced the paper's main themes and conclusions. The first is that, as is often cautioned, there can be problems in simply transferring a 'ready-made' community planning instrument from one country to another without addressing aspects of the cultural / political / institutional contexts that inevitably will influence the extent to which such an initiative is likely to be successful. The second observation is that, in many situations and because of their originally rather narrow design remit specific to the UK planning system, VDSs might not be the most appropriate community planning instrument to apply; an instrument with wider scope embracing social, economic and environmental matters might be more appropriate to the concerns and priorities of the local community.

Accordingly, the overall purposes of the paper are threefold:

- to explore the role that community-led planning, particularly VDSs, can play in addressing the erosion of local distinctiveness in rural settlements;
- to report on the findings of an evaluation of the VDS programme in Ireland;
- to reflect on some of the difficulties experienced in transferring an established community planning instrument from one cultural / political / institutional context to another and on the importance of selecting the most appropriate instrument for particular circumstances.

The structure of the paper follows this sequence.

## **The erosion of local distinctiveness**

The erosion of local distinctiveness has been tackled trenchantly and comprehensively by Clifford and King in a series of publications as part of their work with *Common Ground*:

Local distinctiveness is essentially about places and our relationship with them...many of us have strong allegiances to places, complex and compound appreciation of them, and we recognise that nature, identity and place have strong bonds...Places offer an exposition of their evolution, given sensitive development... every place is its own living museum, dynamic and filled with sensibilities to its small riches...Places are different from each other (Clifford and King, no date).

The distinctive character of a specific kind of place – villages and small towns – that so many people find admirable and worthy of sustaining has evolved over centuries, both as individual settlements and as types of settlement constituting a key element of the character of the wider rural context. The formation of this identity has resulted from the ebb and flow, usually over centuries, of a range of influences, whether economic, cultural or technological. The physical manifestation of a village's character is an amalgam of features such as: legible settlement structures; building scale that is appropriate to the appearance of the village in the wider landscape; built forms that have been respected continuously throughout the evolution of the village and are integrated with their natural surroundings; distinctive landmarks, often churches; specific patterns of roads, lanes and pathways; and unity, but rarely uniformity, of building materials of recognisably local origin. Together, these features contribute to the physical sense of place that links directly to a community's sense of identity, which can enhance people's overall sense of being and belonging and quality of life – in Jeff Bishop's phrase: 'in order to know who we are, we need to know where we are'.

In the UK, appreciation of the distinctive character of villages is manifest in their frequent designation as Conservation Areas, the numbers of people who visit them each year, the number of books written and bought on the subject of English villages and the extravagant house prices commanded as a consequence of the demand from people to live there. The evolution and distinctive character of English villages and the values widely placed upon them is a well-trodden field and it is not explored further here.

In Ireland, due to the dispersed nature of the dominant Gaelic settlement pattern up to the sixteenth century, and the mitigation of Roman and Anglo-Saxon influences generally, the emergence of villages in Ireland has tended to be later and less pronounced than in the UK. The heritage of nucleated settlements is frequently associated with the *clachan* – a nested settlement of farmsteads, although such settlements did not necessarily have village functions. In the second half of the first millennium AD clusters emerged in the vicinities of monastic sites. Later, Ireland absorbed Viking influences and the creation of nodal settlements. Trade with the Vikings consolidated the market function of Irish villages. Indeed, the Irish word *margadh* (market/ bargain) is of Scandinavian origin. The contemporary layout of Irish villages has generally retained a focus on the marketplace. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the walled towns of the Anglo-Normans came to form part of Ireland's urban and village heritage. In Ulster, Laois, Offaly and other areas affected by plantations, a distinctive village heritage exists, which manifests characteristics found in English, Scottish and German villages. More recently, the so-called improving landlords of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have bequeathed planned villages, while the expansion of the rail and canal networks enabled the building of some resort and industrial villages (Simms and Andrews, 1994; Mitchell and Ryan, 2007). The famine of the 1840s and population decline between then and the 1950s led to the abandonment and contraction of villages, particularly on the western half of the island, while over recent decades, villages have generally experienced a demographic upturn. Irish villages are a focal point for community activities and a badge of local identity.

During the second half of the twentieth century the identity of villages in both the UK and Ireland has been subject to pressures – again economic, cultural and technological – that have begun to erode, sometimes significantly, the distinctiveness that is so essential to their attractiveness. Bishop (1994), citing the work of Sharp (1947) and Nairn (1955), emphasises that anxiety about loss of character has been around for more than half a century, and it also seems to be Europe-wide.

This and other social and economic pressures have led to the widely-held assumption that any new development inevitably detracts from the character of villages not simply because it is development (which might otherwise be welcomed) but because it is assumed that the design is bound to be nationally standardised. The dispiriting, repetitive, essentially suburban form of much recent development, particularly by volume builders, would seem to justify this assumption in many respects:

They are all made out of red brick (from the same brick company) with hardwood windows (from the same rainforest) with the same front doors and the streets have the same paving and kerb stones, the curves and cul-de-sacs mirror each other, the gardens have the same cypresses and whatever the garden centres are selling this year (Clifford and King, no date)

Owen (1995) argues that, essentially, loss of local distinctiveness in villages in England results from a loss of responsiveness to local phenomena including:

- the replacement of local need by widespread demand;
- the replacement of the close relationship between local client and builder by 'producer-client' relationship based on speculation;
- the widespread application of economies of scale in the development industry;
- clients of speculative building being almost wholly from one, middle income, social class;
- clear loss of understanding of, and empathy for, the natural environment on the part of planners, builders and others;
- site development and building technology being divorced from place: the site adjusted to fit the proposed development rather than the other way round;
- decisions being taken remotely from individual places by corporations and local authorities.

Furthermore, while these factors relate to design and development, they apply also to other aspects of the loss of localism - in food, transport, shopping, social networks and so forth.

In Ireland up to the second half of the twentieth century, many villages conformed to a well-established geographical footprint, and displayed overlapping layers of diversity, heritage and identity that had been built-up and preserved over the previous centuries. However, laissez-faire development practices and urban-oriented settlement patterns have, over recent decades, put pressure on the form, structure and character of Irish villages. The decline in the economic significance of agriculture and the associated process of rural re-structuring (Woods, 2005), whereby rural areas are increasingly dependent on the urban economy, have reduced the economic and social significance of Irish villages, and their market function has gone into relative decline. The contraction of rural market centres, together with the suburbanisation of villages associated with car-dependent commuting to urban locations has resulted in a 'hollowing-out' of villages, whereby the village core has tended to decline and the village periphery has taken on the characteristics of the peri-urban. The suburbanisation of villages, and their physical dominance by housing estates, which appear to have little aesthetic or social connection to the existing village have been most pronounced in villages within 50km of Ireland's major urban centres.

Some Irish villages, including ones that have trebled in size since 1990, are coming under the increasing influence of urban centres, and their main function is now as 'sleepover villages.' This phenomenon is classified by McDonald and Nix as the "Rochfortsbridge scenario" (2005; 54) – named after the County Westmeath village

that has become dominated by new housing estates, to accommodate a 'spillover' from the Greater Dublin Area. The physical and social fabric of such villages has been weakened, and their heritage diversity compromised.

It is important to re-emphasise that in both the UK and Ireland, those who value the distinct identity of small rural settlements or who lament the continuing loss of that distinctiveness are just as likely to be lay people as professionals. Local communities in the UK, for example, in expressing their concerns in community planning exercises, identify the loss of local character as one of the most pressing problems. Issues of local character are embraced with enthusiasm by local communities, notably as we shall see later, through VDSs

## **The recent growth of local community engagement in planning**

In the UK, as in many other European countries, there has been a burgeoning but uncoordinated growth of 'bottom-up' approaches to planning in rural areas in the past two decades: village appraisals, 'village action plans', parish maps, Local Agenda 21, 'Planning for Real®', the LEADER programme and VDSs (Moseley, 2002; Owen, 2002; Parker 2009). Discussing the stimulus for these initiatives, Moseley (2002) identifies the increasing emphasis placed by central and local governments on the active involvement of local communities in planning and delivering action to improve their social, economic and environmental conditions; this is an international phenomenon encompassing the UK, Ireland, the European Union, the United States and more widely the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. He cites three particular driving forces for this devolution:

- growth in popular concern at the perceived neglect of local communities by a variety of public agencies;
- a wish by governments to release the social capital that comes from working with communities<sup>1</sup>
- growing recognition that promoting sustainability requires attention to be paid to community development and empowerment.

Engaging communities and stimulating citizenship are key features of the UK Government's local government modernisation agenda (Parker, 2002; NVCO, 2006) and similar features can be observed in respect of the 'Better Local Government' process in Ireland. David Milliband, when UK Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, claimed that:

Modern society will only reach its potential when citizens individually and collectively are able to use their knowledge and capacity to shape their lives and their communities.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard the Carnegie UK Trust (2007) suggests that the transformation to sustainable rural communities will depend on the effectiveness of three enabling factors:

- growing the capacity of local people, agencies and professionals;
- enhancing community assets through building capital;
- increasing the scope and quality of community planning.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop (2007) reports that on average a Parish Plan generates approximately £72,000 in voluntary effort (2007 prices).

<sup>2</sup> Despite this rhetorical Government commitment, Bishop (2007) observes that the White Paper 'Planning for a Sustainable Future' (DCLG, 2007) does not even directly mention plans produced at the local community level.

The most common community-led planning initiatives in rural UK have been holistic in scope: Village Appraisals and Parish Plans. Some 3,000 Village Appraisals have been prepared to date involving local communities taking stock of their village characteristics, opportunities and concerns. Their scope typically embraces the provision of local services and community facilities, concerns about land use planning, the local economy and environmental conservation. They have a very weak connection through to action and many initiatives run into the sand (Moseley, 2002; Owen, 2002). And while they have demonstrated some benefits in terms of wide community participation, there are doubts about their rigour and objectivity (Owen and Moseley, 2003). Village Appraisals have dropped away as Parish Plans have come on the scene.

The UK Rural White Paper proposed that *all* parishes should prepare a Parish Plan (DETR and MAFF, 2000) and in the interim some 1,500 have been prepared. Their stated purpose was to identify problems, to explore the key services and facilities a village needed, and to show how the character of villages might be preserved. They were to encourage active community engagement as a way of developing the community itself, influencing decisions and preparing for action. A Parish Plan was to encompass all those matters that the *whole* local community considered important and should include an action plan for those matters that could be addressed directly by the community itself.

In Ireland, a number of villages have prepared parish plans – usually with the assistance of their local LEADER Partnership. While such plans are generally prepared in a bottom-up manner, with considerably community ‘buy-in’, they have no legal standing and many tend to be aspirational rather than a blueprint for action. Since 2002 several County Councils, the local planning authorities in Ireland, have produced Local Areas Plans, which are an amalgamation and synthesis of plans for villages and their immediate hinterlands; community participation in the process of formulating those plans has gradually been increasing.

Gallent *et al* (2009) claim that the extent to which community-led plans can and should be aligned with statutory frameworks is *the* critical debate in community planning in England at present. However, there are particular difficulties in the relationship between holistic community planning initiatives and the statutory land use or spatial planning system, not least because both use the term ‘planning’ in very different ways. Parish Plans, unlike VDSs, seem to have had only modest success in integrating with the land use planning system and influencing what were called Local Plans, now Local Development Frameworks. While community-led parish planning *can* play an important role in rural spatial planning, one key way to make this meaningful is if their production becomes the norm rather than the exception (Gallent *et al*, 2009). As information comes out of parishes in an *ad hoc*, unsystematic fashion, this makes it difficult for mainstream agencies to use it in a consistent and meaningful way (SQW Consulting, 2007; Parker, 2009). Very local community-led plans might well have a more effective ‘fit’ with the wider canvas of holistic strategic planning through Sustainable Community Strategies (BDOR, 2006), particularly if this relationship is based on ‘bridging’, the systematic iteration between strategic top-down and very local bottom-up approaches to decision-making (Owen *et al*, 2007).

Since the late 1980s in Ireland, bottom-up structures have gained considerable currency, and they have had notable successes in rural development in particular. The EU-led LEADER Initiative has enabled the formation of community-based partnership structures, with representation from civil society (community and voluntary groups), the social partners (farmers, trade unions and employers), local government and statutory agencies. These collaborate in the implementation of area-

based development strategies (Kearney *et al*, 1995; O’Keeffe, 2006). Since 1996, LEADER has covered all areas outside of Ireland’s five main cities, and the current LEADER Programme includes all locations outside the cities and designated gateways and hub towns, as identified in the National Spatial Strategy. These area-based initiatives have proven more innovative and flexible than traditional top-down structures in responding to local needs and in identifying within-community potential, not least in respect of village enhancement and community development. LEADER Partnerships have animated and facilitated the establishment of community associations, including cultural and heritage groups, and they have provided technical support and financial assistance to enable village enhancement projects, usually in collaboration with local authorities.

Recognising the capacity of LEADER Partnerships, the Irish Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs introduced the CLÁR<sup>3</sup> Village Enhancement Scheme in 2002. In this scheme LEADER Partnerships co-ordinate the efforts and finances of central and local government as well as local inputs in the implementation of agreed village renewal projects. The LEADER approach to village renewal has generally been characterised by an emphasis on local ownership of the project design and implementation process and the maximisation of citizen participation, thereby contributing to conservation, community development and participative democracy. While the autonomy of each LEADER Partnership is one of the initiative’s distinguishing features, this can and has resulted in variations in the quality of village renewal projects and the degrees of citizen participation. In addition, the quality of village renewal projects has been shaped by local government responses, with a number of the more progressive authorities embracing partnership and responding to local communities and LEADER Groups, while others have remained trenchant in their top-down approaches.

Within the extensive literature on community-led planning, two related challenges to its effectiveness and legitimacy are germane here: first, the tension between *representative* and *participative* democracy and, second, between *top-down* and *bottom-up* approaches to planning.

Until the recent legal requirements for greater community involvement in the preparation of strategic plans (and some would say even since that requirement) such plans were prepared mainly through processes of representative democracy, by elected bodies working through formal democratic structures as part of their representative responsibilities. By contrast, very local initiatives were and still are undertaken mainly through participative democracy, if often by self-identifying groups of articulate residents pursuing their own objectives in the form of one-off projects (Foley and Martin, 2000; Owen, Moseley and Courtney, 2007). It is widely argued that the aim should be to combine these two approaches to achieve more balanced outcomes, with participative democracy supplementing rather than replacing representative democracy (Selman and Parker, 1997; Hirst, 2002; Saurugger, 2004; Van Doosselaere, 2004).

Closely reflecting this tension is that between top-down and bottom-up approaches to planning. The top-down approach orchestrates a strategic perspective, coordinating the objectives of local authorities and other agencies; the bottom-up approach releases very local energies, with local communities having a say in the definition of priorities and delivery of services (Taylor, 2000). The top-down approach derives its legitimacy through representative democracy while the bottom-up approach is often,

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<sup>3</sup> CLÁR (Cenatair Laga Árd-Riachtanais) is a government initiative to promote rural renewal in areas of demographic weakness.

but not always, associated with participative democracy. Bottom-up planning is said to add value to local human and social capital and encourage self-help and mutual support. However, bottom-up approaches are typically patchy in the localities and issues they champion and there is a danger that those who shout loudest get the most resources, further marginalising some people experiencing deprivation (Parker, 2009).

Both of these two kinds of tension surface in the application of *all* community-led planning whether in the UK, Ireland or elsewhere and, as we shall see, VDSs are no exception in this regard.

## Village Design Statements

Compared with most other community-led planning initiatives that attempt to cover a wide range of social, economic and environmental matters, VDSs, with their specific focus on design, stand as an outlier. Unlike these other initiatives, VDSs were deliberately developed within a clear and narrow frame of reference (the design of new development) in order to ensure a close 'fit' with the statutory planning system and hence maximise their effectiveness.

Village Design Statements were first proposed by the Countryside Commission in 1993 using the research and development work of BDOR Limited. They were intended to help reverse the widespread erosion of distinctiveness in English villages, particularly with regard to the design and setting of new buildings. They were proposed initially as a planning tool to supplement local plans, based on the principle that involving local communities in assessing the character of their localities would best lead to designs that would be appropriate for locally distinctive new development (Countryside Commission, 1993). The concept and the early testing and implementation of VDSs have been well-documented (Countryside Commission, 1993; 1994; 1996; Bishop, 1994; Owen, 1998; 1999).

VDSs were meant to be a way of protecting, celebrating and enhancing what a local community believes to be the distinctive features that make their particular village unique. It was intended that a VDS should use those valued features to outline planning and design guidelines that could be used in early discussions with developers and designers. The role of the community is pivotal to the concept; a VDS should be community-initiated and community-led, thereby helping to build community capacity and produce unarguably location-specific guidance. VDSs were also required to focus on *how* rather than *whether* or *where* development might best happen.

The chief protagonist of VDSs, Bishop (1994), was concerned to open up the 'mystique and mythology' of design, which hitherto had been dominated by the notion that one cannot comment on design without training. He argued that by accepting what architects argue to be the special nature of design discourse, those aspects of design known by people in the street to be important planning considerations were poorly developed in terms of community involvement. Previously, local planning authorities had sought to influence the design of new development mainly through area-wide design guides – and most still do. Bishop saw it as a weakness that almost all design guides focused on buildings in isolation, on objects with no context or setting; such a narrow focus provided no framework by which practice could develop over time.

Initially, four pilot VDSs were prepared from October 1993. These were evaluated to establish the extent to which they had been useful in practice in guiding development and improving design standards and VDSs were then 'rolled out' nationally. Subsequently some 600 or so VDSs have been prepared. Over the past decade, several evaluations of, or commentaries on, VDSs have been conducted (Atkins, 1998; Owen, 1998; 1999; 2002; Countryside Agency, 2002; Hughes, 2006; Gallent *et al*, 2009) and most report that there is now widespread acceptance of VDSs as valuable contributors to the planning system.

The more recent evaluations suggest that some local authorities use VDSs systematically in development control and that VDSs are influencing the outcomes of planning decisions, mainly the determination of planning applications but also planning appeals. Often, through pre-application discussions, they have prevented inappropriate development and improved the quality of development that has been permitted. In some cases they are helping to shape the review of policies in what are now termed Local Development Frameworks (the new but also rather different replacement for Local Plans).

Specifically, Hughes (2006) records that in Kent Downs AONB, 14% of villages have produced VDSs and that *all* have been adopted as SPG. She argues that VDSs are becoming increasingly embedded and used in the planning system in Kent. They are taken seriously when planning applications are being determined and may be accepted as a material consideration during planning committee deliberations. They are more compatible with strategic planning frameworks than many other community-led initiatives and are more 'achievable' than less well-framed Parish Plans (Gallent *et al*, 2009).

In many instances VDSs have helped to improve relationships between planning officers and local communities, and everywhere they appear to have contributed to community development. Specifically they have enhanced design awareness amongst all communities involved in their preparation. They can, however, be dominated by a small number of people and there remains the danger that parish councils – and through them the wider community – sometimes feel excluded from the VDS process (Owen, 2002).

Notwithstanding this valuable community development role, VDSs are seen principally as a planning tool; they are intended to influence the design of new development and their adoption as Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD), originally Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG), is regarded by many as crucial. Hughes (2006), though, identifies some recent problems with getting VDSs adopted as SPD, particularly in the light of the need to go through an exhaustive Sustainability Appraisal process during VDS preparation. In 2006 some local planning authorities were recommending suspension of work on VDSs until this matter had been resolved, but Hughes reports that the situation is beginning to ease and community-led initiatives have now been adopted in Surrey, Cornwall and Hampshire. (The requirement for Sustainability Appraisal for SPD is soon to be removed.)

Reflecting on the progress of VDSs in England between 1993 and 2008, CCRI and BDOR Ltd (2008) observe that most local planning authorities have taken a highly supportive approach even though a few have refused to support any VDSs. Most VDSs have been adopted formally as SPG, and where they have been used at appeals they have almost always been successful. The less successful VDSs in England seem to have been those where:

- the framework and guidance provided at the national level by the then Countryside Commission were not followed;

- the guidance in the VDS was solely about traditional design and pastiche;
- the VDS strayed into ideas about what development might happen where;
- the VDS included wish lists for things well beyond design.

By contrast the most effective VDSs seem to have succeeded in:

- building both general and design-specific community capacity at the local community level;
- helping good projects to move quickly and easily through the planning process;
- assisting planners in ‘filling’ a policy for which they had neither the skills nor the resources to fill on their own; and
- helping to deliver designs and developments which are, if not substantially then certainly noticeably, more locally distinctive.<sup>4</sup>

In the present discussion, one of the most important aspects of the VDS initiative in England was that they were introduced into a largely *supportive context*:

- there was an established statutory planning system, with Local Plans covering all areas thereby providing a comprehensive statutory framework and the opportunity to adopt VDSs as SPG, which afforded them status within the system;
- there was an established concern about the loss of distinctiveness generally and about the erosion of the distinctive character of English villages specifically;
- the support of key agencies at the national level such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England (formerly the Council for the Preservation of Rural England) and the National Housebuilders’ Federation was secured from the outset;
- experience of local community engagement was already developing within and around the planning system through, for example, Village Appraisals.

Of course it was not all plain sailing; there was suspicion, sometimes hostility, from some planning officers; there were problems with the adoption of VDS as SPG in some areas, and there was an early tendency of some local communities to try to use VDSs as a way of preventing development. But in the main, VDSs have been effective since their inception

In addition to this supportive context, VDSs were usually the *appropriate community-led instrument* in the situations where they were used. Individual communities themselves recognised the distinctive character of their villages and the need to arrest the erosion of that distinctiveness. *They* initiated VDSs rather than having them imposed ‘from above’. And it was clear to all participants that VDSs were to focus on design. Where communities had wider social and economic concerns, these had sometimes been addressed already in Village Appraisals or were the spur to subsequent involvement in Parish Plans on the basis of a good experience with VDSs.

## **The Project: evaluation of VDSs in Ireland**

The loss of character experienced by many Irish villages and reported above has been well documented. Organisations such as An Taisce (National Trust) and Friends of the Irish Environment have been tireless in pointing out instances of ‘poor planning’ and disregard for Ireland’s natural and built heritage. An Taisce has referred to a ‘tidal wave’ of development sweeping Ireland’s coastal areas. McDonald

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<sup>4</sup> One particularly interesting recent development in the UK has been to combine VDSs and Parish Landscape Statements in Cheshire (James and Gittins, 2007) Another is the newly developing approach, based directly on that of VDSs, entitled ‘Community Landscape Character Assessment’ being promoted by the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

and Nix (2005) castigate Ireland's planning system and the lack of enforcement of planning regulations; they describe aspects of the current system as 'developer-led' (49), and they instance how suburban-style housing has negatively altered the appearance of Irish villages, 'blotted' the landscape and threatened historical structures without regard for the natural environment or for local citizens, and has destroyed the distinctiveness and heritage of many Irish villages.

In response to this perceived loss of distinctiveness the Heritage Council, adopting most of the attributes of the English model, introduced a VDS programme across Ireland in 2000 with a stronger emphasis on local heritage. Over the past eight years around 40 VDSs have been produced, most of them as part of that programme. In 2008 it was thought that the lapse of eight years was an appropriate interval to allow the success of VDSs to be assessed and to this end the Heritage Council commissioned the CCRl and BDOR Ltd to undertake an evaluation of the programme's progress.

The purpose of the evaluation was to inform national policy on issues relating to the conservation, enhancement and sustainable development of villages in Ireland, and the stated aim was: "*to examine the ways in which Village Design Statements have progressed and developed in Ireland, with particular emphasis on the involvement of the Heritage Council, Local Authorities / Local Authority Heritage Officers in VDS and the adoption of VDS as Supplementary Planning Guidance*".

The project method comprised four main, overlapping stages.

- An *evaluation framework* was devised to ensure rigour, consistency and continuity of focus throughout the project. This 'anchor' of the methodology was drawn upon explicitly in framing questionnaires, analysing documents, writing reports and framing recommendations for the future of the VDS programme.<sup>5</sup>
- A *national synoptic view* of VDSs built up a comprehensive and picture of VDS preparation in Ireland by a review of all the available VDS documents and by an initial appraisal that drew on the opinions, experience and expectations of key, mainly national, stakeholders.<sup>6</sup>
- *County case studies* comprised a survey of all the VDSs prepared in each of three sample counties to provide deeper and broader understanding of the process of VDS preparation by reference to the 'hands-on' experience of participants.<sup>7</sup>
- *Case studies of VDSs in four villages* involved *in situ* studies to achieve a richer and more robust understanding of the dynamics of individual VDS preparation.<sup>8</sup>

Thirty five documents that bore significant similarities to VDSs were reviewed. The VDSs examined cover a range of villages of different sizes and situations, with the smallest villages having a population of 100 to 250 people and the largest around

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<sup>5</sup> The framework was structured around four sequential elements in the process of promoting, developing and using VDSs:

- encourage - encouraging planners, communities, decision makers, etc. to ensure that more and better VDSs are developed;
- enable - assuming people get enthused and wish to proceed, where do they go next?
- engage - how is the actual preparation work managed?
- employ - what happens to each completed VDS and to VDSs as a whole?

<sup>6</sup> Key stakeholder organisations included: civil servants, local government elected members and officers, private consultants, national interest groups, national and regional agencies and universities. Respondents ranged from those who had been actively involved in preparing VDSs, through those who had a strategic interest in the concept of VDSs, to a small minority who had not previously heard of VDSs.

<sup>7</sup> For each county, extended telephone interviews were conducted with local authority officers, with representatives involved in the preparation of each VDS, and other significant actors such as LEADER staff / representatives.

<sup>8</sup> During the visit, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with community groups, local authority officers and staff of other organisations.

1,800 people. A variety of approaches had been adopted in selecting villages for VDSs, focusing on villages experiencing poor quality fringe development, villages subject to urban and village renewal initiatives, or a cross-section of villages in a county. The most common funding arrangement for VDSs was for the Heritage Council to fund 50% of the costs (usually the cost of employing consultants) at a rate of 25,000 Euro including VAT (2008 prices) per VDS.

More than two-thirds of the VDSs were similar in scope, content and structure. Indeed, where more than one VDS had been prepared in a county, these were almost identical in these regards. A majority focused heavily on the 'historic' core of the village, using this to describe those characteristics that should serve as a model for new development elsewhere in the village. This inevitably led to a conservation emphasis in most VDSs. Guidelines for future development set out in VDSs tended to be in the form of professional urban design proposals, but most also had a concluding 'wish list' generated through community consultation and clearly dominated by concerns over services, facilities, traffic management and infrastructure, with the form of the physical environment rarely being seen as a priority.

While the original intention was for VDSs to be initiated and produced by local communities themselves, few actually developed this way. Most were initiated by local authorities with the funding support and involvement of the Heritage Council, and in the majority of cases employing consultants to provide urban design and community involvement support. County Heritage Officers were actively involved and in two counties LEADER organisations influenced VDS content and process. In many villages there was an established and positive tradition of community involvement and action on social and economic issues, but none on planning or design.

There was a consistent pattern of community involvement. Typically the process, led by consultants, started with community workshops that were well attended and enjoyed by the community. These were supplemented by activities such as a walkabout, questionnaires and the use of disposable cameras for people to record what they liked and disliked about their village. The work was then taken away by the consultants and turned into a draft version of the VDS. Many members of the community were never involved in the process again. While there was widespread agreement that the local community *should* be actively involved in preparing VDSs, it was suggested that there were few structures in Ireland to support bottom-up approaches - and community engagement must be undertaken carefully otherwise there was a danger that it would be dominated by powerful interests such as landowners, the property industry and small builders. While the positive contribution of many LEADER Partnerships in respect of community empowerment must be acknowledged, this is not uniform, and in many cases community associations with a vision for village design have run into opposition from public bodies.

Links between VDSs and the statutory planning system were not addressed consistently; a few made no mention of these links at all. Most, rightly, emphasised that VDSs are not able to influence *whether* development should take place but rather what form it should take. About one-third of local authorities stated their intention to adopt the VDS as SPG, but it was emphasised that SPG is not a formal part of the Irish planning system and any attempt to use detailed guidance that has not gone through a formal statutory process might well be open to challenge. None of the VDSs in the individual case studies had been adopted as SPG.

## Main findings of the project

Overall, the findings from the research suggest that in most respects, despite the Heritage Council's enthusiasm, support and leadership, the VDS programme in Ireland has not been successful. The evaluation addressed two main questions. The first was whether the completed VDSs have actually been used and have, either directly or indirectly, helped to generate more locally distinctive design. The overall conclusion is that, with some informative exceptions, *VDSs in the main have not generated more distinctive design*. It is clear that the final Statements, regardless of their planning status, have not been used to any real extent by planners, designers or developers.

The second question was whether the process of preparing VDSs has raised general community awareness of design and heritage issues and generated projects around existing, historically significant local features. With reference to this question, *the VDS initiative has had some genuine success in raising people's awareness*, but there are few if any signs that this has directly affected action on minor heritage features or on the re-use of important old buildings. Nevertheless, the process of community involvement in VDS preparation has almost always opened people's eyes to what is special and distinctive about their villages or towns.

There has been slow progress, sometimes none, in delivering practical outcomes from VDSs because priorities and therefore resources have been focused elsewhere (especially within the planning system). Many VDSs have been completed only recently, so it might be too early to discern any significant effects; nevertheless there were virtually no examples of the use of VDS by the local authority, the local community or developers / designers. Once a VDS had been completed, there was no apparent mechanism, procedure or person to ensure that it was used; there had been little or no follow-up to by any of the participants. In the main VDSs have not affected the actual design of new development, nor have they affected other kinds of physical change, or the implementation of projects identified by the local community as desirable. This has caused significant frustration amongst communities. In particular they were very disappointed by the replication of almost identical design guidelines for different villages across a county; there was little prescriptive content that highlighted the distinctive features of each village. Too often this appeared to have damaged or eroded the build-up of social capital that had taken place during the early work on the VDS.

VDSs were thought to have had some value in pre-application discussions and there were second-hand anecdotes about VDSs being used in planning appeals and inquiries, and elsewhere small-scale projects have been 'tweaked' in response to the VDS. However, examples were also cited where VDSs, even those adopted as SPG, have been ignored and one that was amended retrospectively to fit with an appeal decision!

There did not seem to have been any genuine higher level or corporate commitment to VDSs by the County Councils. This was exacerbated by the lack of a clear and positive role for councillors – and in any case there were cautionary comments throughout about councillors to the effect that many were judged to be linked strongly to local development interests. The common approach of not directly encouraging planners or elected members to be involved in VDSs from the outset resulted in the work not being genuinely collaborative and contributed in part to the subsequent lack of use of VDSs; there was no real feeling of ownership amongst those who would ultimately have to use the VDSs.

Although there remains general community support for the idea of VDSs in principle, there is scepticism whether they will ever be used by County Councils. None of the counties intends to undertake any further VDSs until an evaluation of their use has been conducted – their value is not yet seen to be sufficient to warrant further resources.

The motivation for initiating VDSs and the selection of villages for VDS preparation varied, although in no case was design *per se* given as the motivating factor. Concern for heritage was a common theme, linked directly to the likely impacts of large numbers of new houses. It proved difficult to ensure the maintenance of a clear, strong focus on design issues in the resulting VDSs, except where aspects of heritage were already important to local people. In some cases there seemed to local people to be nothing obviously distinctive about their villages and no preparatory work was undertaken to raise awareness of what was distinctive. There was widespread confusion over the scope of VDSs. In very many cases, matters to do with inadequate services and facilities were seen by the local community to be more basic concerns of a much higher priority than the physical character of the village. In addition, in most cases the VDS was being prepared in the absence of the relatively new format known as a Local Area Plan, coverage for which is as yet minimal. Such plans might have addressed some of these issues (and some new ones are doing so). In these respects, perhaps in a majority of cases, a VDS was not the appropriate community-led instrument to have chosen.

Community involvement on the whole was rather minimal and, after an enthusiastic start, tended to drop away. Too often a VDS had been an enjoyable experience with a high profile launch but then had just got left 'on the shelf', resulting in people's raised expectations being frustrated. As a consequence there was little sense of ownership amongst the local community; they felt that the consultants had 'done it for them'. A feeling remained that community involvement in the VDS had been a gesture on the part of the local authority and that decisions would still be taken elsewhere. Despite this, VDSs were not seen as a waste of time; it was the overwhelmingly positive view that the process had been worthwhile as a community endeavour and in terms of raising local awareness about village design and heritage.

#### *Where it worked well and why*

The research unearthed only one VDS that seemed to have influenced the design of new development. The small town has the advantage of strong heritage and distinctive character understood and valued by many in the community. The local authority officers had had experience of 'Planning for Real®' and, perhaps by default, managed the VDS more directly than was the case elsewhere – and actually ran some of the initial work before consultants were brought in. People applying for planning permission were said to use the VDS all the time. Planners used it in judging planning applications and the Conservation Officer used it in applying stringent development control. Community representatives thought that major developments that had taken place *before* the VDS would not have been allowed in that form had the VDS been completed and that the small amount of development undertaken *since* the VDS had conformed to it. There was, however, an additional factor that made a significant difference; the whole initiative had a vigorous 'champion' within the County Council to drive forward the initiative throughout the process.

#### *Improvements to the process of preparing VDSs in Ireland*

The relative lack of success of VDSs in Ireland led the project team to conclude that VDSs would be more likely to fulfil their stated aims if their preparation met a series of conditions.

Greater care should be given to selecting villages for VDS preparation; the most appropriate settlements are likely to be those subject to major change, mainly as a result of development pressure.

There should be a clear focus on what makes each place distinctive. Though villages and towns can vary dramatically, there is something distinctive about every place and a local community will know this best. VDS content should be focused on design, even in its broadest sense, and should avoid drift into wider issues. The VDS should look beyond the historic core of the village, finding ways to value more recent developments.

There needs to be genuine commitment amongst the local community to engage actively with decisions that affect the future of their village - notably its distinctive character – and, further, a shared commitment to proceeding with the VDS between a community and its local authority. The VDS process should be community-led, but a collaborative venture and with some form of 'champion diving it forward throughout.

The nature and form of a VDS should be well-fitted to the relevant parts of the planning system, mainly but not only Local Area Plans. The system, particularly development control, should be supportive and mechanisms should be available for ensuring proper status for the VDS - and it should be clear from the outset what these mechanisms are.

Finally it should be emphasised that once a VDS is finished, its use is not! It is there to be used in a continuing process that continues to engage local people.

Notwithstanding the improvements that could be made to the process and use of VDSs in Ireland, that alone would have made little significant difference. The principal explanation for the lack of positive progress was that several aspects of the *context* for VDSs in Ireland at the time made that progress difficult. Aspects of the context explored more fully below include:

- the stage of evolution of the planning system, notably the only recent emergence of Local Area Plans,
- the degree of corporate commitment to VDSs and partnership amongst key agencies at national and local levels,
- the extent of experience of community involvement in design, and the availability of skills in village design and facilitation.

## **Reflections**

So, reflecting on the evaluation of the VDS programme in Ireland, what are the main lessons learned and are they transferable to other settings? There is an almost universal concern to arrest the loss of distinctive character of villages in Ireland – as there seems to be throughout Europe – and specific concern on the part of individual communities to protect the character of their own locality. In principle, VDSs are the appropriate instruments for reversing loss of distinctiveness and stimulating community engagement in addressing that loss, particularly with the improvements to the process of preparing VDSs in Ireland outlined above - and they would not be difficult to achieve.

However, on their own, concern about loss of distinctiveness and an improved process that more fully involves the local community are not enough to deliver the main aims of VDSs. As intimated above, there are two significant *preconditions* that must be addressed and resolved first:

- several aspects of the *context* in which the VDS process is applied must be cultivated to ensure that the process has a greater likelihood of being effective;
- it must be clear from the outset that a VDS is *the most appropriate instrument* to reflect the concerns and priorities of an individual local community.

We address each of these preconditions in turn and emphasise that they would need to be satisfied wherever there was an intention to introduce a VDS programme, not just in Ireland.

### *Changes to the context*

Cultural, political and institutional contexts differ between countries, even between countries with at least superficial similarities such as Ireland and England. And those contexts are likely to influence the success with which a policy instrument is deployed. It is unrealistic to attempt simply to transfer an 'off the peg' planning instrument from one set of contexts to another. Here we highlight just three aspects of the Irish context that need to be cultivated before the transfer of VDSs to Ireland is likely to be effective: the capacity of the planning system to absorb the outcomes of VDSs; corporate commitment to VDSs amongst organisations at national and local levels; and the amount of experience of community engagement in planning decisions.

The statutory *planning system* in Ireland needs to be readier than it has been recently to accommodate (a) the process of preparing VDSs generally and (b) the outcomes of each individual VDS. Specifically, for example, there needs to be:

- a clearer link of VDSs to the statutory elements of the planning system – this should involve a clear and effective relationship with Local Area Plans;
- comprehensive coverage of all settlements by statutory development plans at different levels. Many VDSs in Ireland were prepared in the absence of a clear statutory planning framework and some local communities saw VDSs as a means to fill the gap, in effect by seeking to make land use planning decisions through the VDS;
- clarification of the status of Supplementary Planning Guidance. It is important that local planning authorities develop appropriate arrangements for dealing with locally derived Supplementary Planning Guidance in implementing local planning policies;
- readiness to use the outcomes of VDSs as a 'normal' part of development control.

This clarification of the role of VDSs in the planning system needs to be addressed at the national level as part of national policy guidance and then reflected at the local planning authority level in a willingness to implement those national guidelines in specific localities through planning decisions.

Complementary to this clarification of the role of VDSs in the statutory planning system - but across a wider canvas - there needs to be *commitment to VDSs as a community planning tool by a wider range of national agencies*. A multi-agency approach is needed that brings together various government departments (e.g. the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs), professions (e.g. the IPI and RIAI), national agencies (e.g. Irish House Builders Association and An Taisce) and community/voluntary organisations, all working in partnership. Linked with this, clearer guidance is needed at the national level about how VDSs might relate to the

many wider programmes of social and economic development in rural areas, including for example, well-established LEADER programmes or other forms of integrated rural development. Such a commitment to VDSs through the adoption of a partnership approach should again be reflected at the local level to include, for example, the different departments of the local planning authority, councillors, LEADER projects, developers and consultants.

*Community involvement in land use planning and settlement design* is not well established in Ireland. However, there *is* significant proven capability in community involvement in broader planning initiatives; Ireland is held up as an example of good practice in, for example, Integrated Rural Development and its participation in the LEADER programme (Moseley, 2003; Walsh and Meldon, 2004). The ‘cohesion’ process, which was completed in early 2009, has brought about the integration of LEADER and Local Development Social Inclusion Partnerships; this provides Ireland with a strong local governance structure, independent of county councils and with experience in community development, cultural resource management, environmental conservation and some aspects of village design. It is important to build on that experience by encouraging and helping local communities to engage actively - but to focus specifically on nurturing the character and distinctiveness of small rural settlements. This might well involve the development of skills relating to rural design and distinctiveness, community engagement and the preparation and use of VDSs - amongst local communities, professionals and elected representatives. In addition, local authorities need to respond in a supportive manner, and to strive to enhance the status and effectiveness of village design internally, and in their dealings with developers.

Running through all these aspects of the context in which VDSs are prepared is the inevitable tension that arises between representative and participative democracy and between top-down and bottom-up approaches to planning addressed earlier in the paper. Strategic decision-making will continue to be driven – in Ireland as elsewhere – principally by the structures and dynamic of representative democracy and through top-down planning. By contrast VDSs, like most other community-led planning initiatives, draw their energy from self-identifying groups acting through participative approaches to democracy and employing mainly bottom-up planning approaches. It is essential to recognise from the beginning that these tensions will occur and to be prepared to address them explicitly and constructively in trying to ‘bridge’ the gaps between them (Owen, Moseley and Courtney, 2007); if this is not done, VDSs will run into the sand.

When changes to the context such as these are in place, improvements to the VDS process could then be delivered relatively easily and effectively. And there are intimations that some aspects of the Irish context are beginning to change in ways that promise well for a more positive ‘fit’ for well prepared VDSs – not least the recent surge of work on Local Area Plans and proposed national guidelines for these plans in 2009. However, there is a further important precondition that must be satisfied before VDSs are likely to be successful. It should not be assumed by those outside the local community - policy makers, planners and designers working at a ‘higher’ level - that protecting or enhancing local distinctiveness is *the* priority amongst the concerns of *all* individual local communities, as this is manifestly not the case.

#### *Choosing the appropriate kind of initiative*

There is little doubt that VDSs can be effective instruments for involving local communities in shaping some aspects that concern the future of their own villages and especially the celebration of local distinctiveness in design. However, that begs

the question of what kinds of planning processes do VDSs fit into most appropriately. In this regard the term 'planning' is bedevilled by its eclectic usage. Discounting the broadest interpretation – the normal capacity of humans to organise their everyday lives – we focus here on three kinds of planning decision germane to the present discussion:

- holistic planning, encompassing a broad range of social, economic and environmental matters, conducted at both strategic and very local scales;
- statutory development planning, focusing mainly on land use and development and again conducted at strategic and local scales;<sup>9</sup>
- the design of physical change at the scale of a locality, including individual features of a locality, within the statutory framework provided by development planning.

The proven value of VDSs, and their original intention, is the opportunity they provide for local communities to contribute to decisions in the third category – the design of physical change. One of the crucial problems experienced in Ireland, though, has resulted from a misapprehension that VDSs can be used as vehicles for involving local communities directly in holistic planning or in statutory development planning decisions – which they were never intended to do.

In perhaps a majority of villages that formed the focus of the evaluation of the VDS programme in Ireland, the physical character of the locality was not the most important concern for the local community. In many cases, that concern registered fairly low on the list of priorities if at all. Too frequently the VDS was initiated because someone outside the local community thought that it would be a good idea. The overwhelming concerns of many local communities invariably were social and economic issues such as community facilities, availability of services and infrastructure – as it would be for many communities throughout Europe. In those cases it was clear that a VDS was *not* the appropriate instrument to have used, at least in the first instance. It would have been more appropriate to have used a community-led planning instrument designed to embrace a broad range of social, economic and environmental matters. In England, this might be a Parish Plan or a Sustainable Local Community Strategy (BDOR, 2006).

In Ireland, such an instrument might develop from the experience of the LEADER programme. The mainstreaming of LEADER represents an important step in cementing a structure with the capacity to facilitate and co-ordinate a bottom-up approach to area-based development. LEADER Partnerships have the potential to build on their linkages with local government so as to lever agency support for within-community efforts, thereby giving effect to their role as a link between the community and the top-down agencies. At the same time, LEADER Partnerships are challenged to retain their bottom-up orientation and capacity for innovation in the context of the rather 'straight-jacketed' governance structure currently advocated by central government.

In summary, a VDS is likely to be the most appropriate form of community-led planning, whether in Ireland, England or elsewhere in Europe, where:

- the village - or its immediate locality - has some elements of distinctive physical character that contribute to its identity;
- the local community recognises and values that identity as a priority;

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<sup>9</sup> In the UK the recent introduction of 'spatial planning' attempts, with seemingly limited success so far, to broaden the scope of development planning in the direction of holistic planning.

- there are existing, or imminent, development pressures such that there is an expectation of change to the physical fabric of the village in the foreseeable future;
- there is extant, or in preparation, a local plan that provides a statutory framework for the preparation and implementation of the VDS;
- the local community is willing to engage in issues and decisions to do with design.

Potentially, there are significant benefits in effectiveness and efficiency to be gained from transferring the use of one proven, effective planning instrument such as VDSs from one country to another – or indeed to a number of other countries. However, to ensure the advantages from such a transfer without unexpected difficulties – or unintended consequences – it is essential to undertake appropriate preparatory work to ensure that the planning instrument fits comfortably into the prevailing contexts in those other countries. Added to this, it should be recognised that one particular planning instrument, no matter how effective it might have proven in addressing one set of concerns in one country, will not necessarily provide the solutions to a wider range of problems in a different country – problems that the instrument was never meant to resolve. Nevertheless, if those two important provisos were to be addressed explicitly, the study of VDSs in Ireland indicates that there is every reason to believe that VDSs can be applied successfully in redressing the loss of distinctive character in Irish villages and that their effectiveness need not be ‘lost in translation’.

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