

Village and Town Design Statement Protocol

November 2010

Introduction

Village Design Statements (VDS) and Town Design Statements (TDS) are practical tools to help decisions on design and development. Prepared correctly, a VDS or TDS will provide a clear statement of the character of a particular village or town against which planning applications may be assessed.

The Countryside Commission (now Natural England) originally devised the concept of VDS (1996) and TDS (2003). As well as being a tool for the Planning Service, they also provide a framework for local people to collectively determine how their community might develop and grow and how development can be in keeping with their local surroundings. They also help developers to understand local views and perceptions, enabling them to proposed new development that will gain local support, rather than generate conflict and opposition.

Village and Town Design Statements are not about whether development should take place (this is the purpose of the Local Development Framework), but assess how development should be undertaken so as to respect the local identity.

The Countryside Commission published three useful documents to help groups produce a Village Design Statement (VDS) or Town Design Statement (TDS). [The Village Design \(Making local character count in new development\) Part 1 and Part 2](#) are useful for Village Design Statements. Town Design Statements (Why and how to produce them) is an added layer specifically written for larger towns. These documents go through all the relevant stages from preparation, to research and finally publication.

Village and Town Design Statements are produced by people living in the area to which the Statement relates. The process of drawing up the document is led by local people and not by the Planning Service. Local people are best placed to identify local character and distinctiveness which could help to improve the general quality of design. They are also able to describe the setting, pattern and shape of a settlement, the nature of buildings and spaces, local materials, landmarks, unique qualities and special features.

Village and Town Design Statements are tools to help Local planning Authority's make decisions on design and development. They make a clear statement of the character of a particular village or town against which planning applications may be assessed.

When submitting a planning application in an area covered by a VDS or TDS, it is strongly suggested that the document is referred to in the accompanying

Design and Access Statement. This should clearly explain how the VDS or TDS has been considered when developing the proposal.

The purpose of this protocol is to provide initial advice and guidance to those thinking of preparing a VDS/TDS and some background to those who wish to use an adopted VDS/TDS.

Objectives of a VDS & TDS

The principal objectives of a VDS or TDS as defined by the Countryside Commission are outlined below:

- to describe the distinctive character of the village or town and the surrounding countryside;
- to show how character can be identified at three levels:
 - o the landscape setting of the village,
 - o the shape of the settlement,
 - o the nature of the buildings themselves;
- to draw up design principles based on the distinctive local character;
- to work in partnership with the Planning Service in the context of existing local planning policy, and to influence future policies.

The Countryside Commission (now Natural England), believe that the objectives above are applicable to rural settlements of all sizes (as opposed to larger urban areas), but can be adapted to suite the particular needs of the village or town.

What is an effective VDS/TDS?

An effective VDS or TDS as defined by the Countryside Commission:

- is developed, researched, written and edited by local people;
- is representative of the views of the village or town as a whole;
- has involved a wide section of the village or town community in its production;
- describes the visual character of the village or town;
- demonstrates how local character and distinctiveness can be integrated into new developments;
- is compatible with the statutory planning system (both local and national policy);
- is suitable for approval as a material consideration when determining planning applications;
- is applicable to all forms and scale of development; and
- is about managing change in the village or town, not preventing it.

Planning and VDS/TDS

The Planning Service may endorse a Village or Town Design Statement as a material planning consideration in determining planning application as long as the statement complies with national and local planning policy.

Both [Planning Policy Statement 3](#) (PPS3, paragraph 18) and [Planning Policy Statement 7](#) (PPS7, paragraph 13) encourage the use of VDS/TDS in the planning system, this is also supported at the local level through Saved Policy D4 - Design and Layout (of the Waverley Borough Local Plan 2002). The policy framework gives the basis for the document to be adopted as a material consideration and to be used in the determination of planning applications.

In addition to conforming to the existing development plan, it is also expected that a period of public consultation be undertaken (by the VDS/TDS group) during the preparation of the document, to ensure that it is robust document. This is important, for example to ensure that it will withstand scrutiny if tested by the Planning Inspector (when defending a planning appeal).

Preparing a VDS/TDS

Every village and town should consider the benefits of preparing a VDS/TDS and any group may promote a VDS/TDS. The Town or Parish Council need not necessarily take the lead role, but they are often best placed to do so.

The Countryside Commission published three useful documents to help groups produce a VDS/TDS. The Village Design (Making local character count in new development) Part 1 and Part 2 are useful for Village Design Statements. Town Design Statements (Why and how to produce them) is an added layer specifically written for towns. These documents go through all the relevant stages from preparation, to research and finally publication.

As the above documents are now relatively old, the information relating to planning policy and adoption by the Local Planning Authority is likely to be out of date. It is important that those proposing to produce a VDS/TDS involve the Planning Service early in the process so that we are able to help and guide you with regard to the relevant consultation process, timetable, and the adoption process.

A VDS/TDS will involve a lot of work, organisation and commitment. Experience with earlier VDS's suggests that it will take at least 10 months to complete a design statement, but on average it takes between 12 to 24 months from the initial meeting to adoption at Waverley's Full Council.

The following list gives a basic overview of the process that a VDS/TDS needs to go through:

- Decide to undertake a Design Statement.

- Consider the Countryside Commission (now Natural England) guidance.
- Set up a Design Statement team.
- Have a preliminary meeting with Waverley Borough Council (Planning Projects Team – see contact details at the bottom of the page) to discuss Design Statement and timetable.
- Carry out the relevant surveys (character appraisal, photographic studies, historical maps, Conservation Areas etc.).
- Produce a draft document and discuss with Waverley Borough Council (Planning Projects Team).
- Carry out robust consultation with the village and other relevant organisations (including relevant departments within Waverley Borough Council).
- Review draft and feed in comments from consultation process. Discuss with Waverley Borough Council (if necessary).
- Complete a consultation statement or audit to clearly show how the consultation responses have influenced the document.
- Parish or Town Council formally adopt the document for their own use.
- Formally submit (hard copies and electronic copy) to Waverley Borough Council to be adopted as a material planning consideration.
- Waverley Borough Council lead the adoption process through Executive and Full Council (for final adoption). Feedback will be given to the Design Statement team at appropriate stages.
- Once adopted the publication will be made available on Waverley Borough Council's website (within one month of adoption).

What can Waverley do to help?

Waverley, and particularly the Planning Service will be able to help the VDS/TDS team at various points throughout the process. Because of the current workload associated with the Local Development Framework, it is critical to contact us at the earliest opportunity to discuss the timetable for the preparation of the VDS/TDS. This will ensure that delays are minimised, especially toward the end of the process.

At the start of the process we will be able to signpost you to relevant documents that will help in the preparation of the VDS/TDS including examples of existing VDS. We will also be able to provide a number of OS maps (and possibly historic maps) that can be useful in defining character areas and sites of particular importance. However, the VDS/TDS team will need to sign a licence agreement in advance of these maps being made available.

In order to achieve the status of a material planning consideration, the consultation process is critical. Whilst we are unable to run this process for you, we will be able to give advice on whom to consult, when and how. Again, it is important to talk to us at an early stage to ensure that the scale of consultation is sufficient for the purposes of planning (generally a six week

process). This need not be an onerous task, but one that really engages the community and relevant stakeholders to support the document.

Alongside the public consultation (including relevant stakeholders), Waverley will need to undertake an internal consultation process with relevant officers to ensure that the document accords with relevant policies. This process will normally take between four to six weeks and should run at the same time as the formal public consultation. This internal consultation must be undertaken on a draft document prior to it being formally submitted to the Council for adoption. A nominated officer will co-ordinate the internal consultation on your behalf and feed back all the relevant responses at the end of the process. These responses (as with the public and stakeholder consultation) should then be used to amend the document as necessary.

The final draft document, alongside a detailed account of the consultation process (in the form of a consultation statement or audit) can then be submitted to the Council (by prior agreement) to proceed through the adoption process. This includes a report being submitted (with the VDS/TDS) to the Executive and Full Council. This process will normally take two months, depending upon the committee dates.

Are there any limitations to a VDS/TDS?

A VDS/TDS cannot determine whether or not development takes place, this is the job of the Local Development Framework. Nor can the VDS/TDS address matters such as the ongoing management or maintenance of buildings or spaces.

If there are issues that arise during the consultation process about which there is strong local consensus, but that are outside the scope of the VDS/TDS, it may be worth using this information through another channel such as a Parish Plan or to lobby the relevant organisation/authority.

Some useful advice and FAQ's

Don't reinvent the wheel...

At the start of the process it is worthwhile taking some time out to look at other examples of VDS/TDS. This will help the team visualise the final document and give a steer as to what it should include. As well as Waverley's adopted documents, Newbury and Alton have been highlighted as good examples of Town Design Statements. Don't feel that you must replicate these approaches, as they may not be right for your town or village.

A picture is worth a thousand words...

Don't underestimate the value of including photographs in your document. It is often the photographs that underpin the text of the document and help

readers to understand the points that you are trying to make. The Thursley VDS utilised a two-page spread (pages 8 and 9) to identify the various materials used within the village – this has been a useful tool for planning officers, councillors and developers when considering the design of new developments.

Consultation...

It is important to get residents involved in the process and take ownership of the final document at an early stage. Farnham set up a number of workshops with residents to identify key issues before they wrote a word.

In addition, remember to record all aspects of your consultation process as you go along (including workshops, meetings, questionnaires etc.). This reduces the amount of work you have to do at the end of the process. The consultation statement/audit is an important document that will show that you have undertaken a robust consultation and will support the VDS/TDS once it is adopted as a material consideration.

Editing the document...

Depending on the approach the team decides to take, you may find that a number of different people or groups will write different sections of the document. It is therefore important to appoint an editor early within the process. This will ensure that the document is both consistent and cohesive. It is also suggested that you have someone not too closely attached to the project to read the document to ensure that it is written in plain English and is easy to understand.

Planning speak...

During discussions with Waverley Borough Council, you may find that we ask you to amend some of the wording in your document to align it with planning policy. There is no intention to undermine the messages you seek to make in the document, but in order for Waverley to adopt the document it must not conflict with planning policy. For example, we often require that the word 'must' be replaced with 'should' as this suggests a stronger position than planning policy allows.

Printing...

Once the document is adopted, Waverley will require that a .pdf version is provided so that it can be uploaded onto the Waverley website. In addition to this, we would normally require an additional 10-15 hard copies for Planning Officers use. However, we will not stock a supply of the VDS/TDS and we are not in a position to get further copies printed for the public. It is advisable that the Town or Parish Council holds a supply of the document for this purpose (although it will be available for download from the Waverley website).

Not just about planning...

Whilst VDS/TDS has a strong role to play in the planning process, it can also be used in other meaningful ways. For example, some parish councils give a copy of the VDS to new residents so that they get a feel of the area they have moved into. Thursley have recently used their VDS to support the process of appointing a new Vicar. However, don't forget that the primary purpose of the document is to highlight the distinctive character of the parish or town.

Why can't a VDS/TDS be adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)?

Waverley's current approach is to adopt VDS/TDS as material planning considerations to be used in the determination of planning applications. By taking this route the document will always be owned by the town or parish that undertakes the work. If Waverley were to adopt these documents as SPD, then Waverley become responsible for the document and also the consultation process, which is at odds with the aims and objectives of VDS/TDS. There is very little difference in terms of the weight given to material planning considerations and SPD's if the consultation process is robust.

When should the VDS/TDS be reviewed?

It is down to the Town or Parish Council to determine when a VDS/TDS should be reviewed. Normally this would occur soon after a period of significant change. However, it is good practice to plan to review the document on a regular basis, even if no changes are made. In the case of Thursley they have suggested that the document be reviewed every five years.

Alternatives to the VDS/TDS...

An alternative to VDS/TDS is the Parish Plan. The Countryside Agency (now Natural England) explains that:

"Parish Plans are "holistic" or comprehensive in scope. They should set out a vision for how the community wants to develop, and identify the action needed to achieve it. They can include everything that is relevant to the people who live and work in the community, from employment and playgrounds to the design of new buildings and protection of hedges and ponds. They can include any social, environmental or economic issues. It is up to you, the community to decide, what is important to you."

In essence, Parish Plans have a wider scope than VDS/TDS as they do not focus on the character of the area.

A number of Parishes have undertaken Parish Plans including Hambledon (2003) Chiddingfold (2004) Ewhurst Village Appraisal (2004), Wonersh (2005), Witley (2006), Alfold and Bramley (reviewed 2010). In addition Cranleigh, Haslemere, Godalming and Farnham produced Health Checks.

These documents have not been adopted by Waverley as material planning consideration.

Further information about Parish Plans can be found in The Countryside Agency's document Parish Plans. In addition Surrey Community Action can assist in the preparation of Parish Plans, they also have information on their [website](#).

Existing VDS/TDS in Waverley

Waverley Borough Council has adopted a number of VDSTDS as material considerations for determining planning applications. These are listed below and can be [downloaded from this website](#).

- Haslemere Design Statement - currently being produced.
- Churt Village Design Statement - adopted as a **material consideration** on 14 December 2010.
- Farnham Design Statement - adopted as a **material consideration** on 20 July 2010.
- Thursley Village Design Statement - adopted as a **material consideration** on 21 July 2009.
- Cranleigh Design Statement - adopted as a **material consideration** on 22 July 2008.
- Frensham Village Design Statement - adopted as a **material consideration** on 22 July 2008.
- Womersley Village Design Statement - adopted as a **supplementary=planning document** on 20 February 2007.
- Dunsfold Village Design Statement - adopted as **supplementary=planning guidance** on 24 April 2001.
- Elstead Village Design Statement - adopted as a **material consideration** on 4 July 1995.