

Village Design Statements: Questions and Answers

6 July 2018

1. Why might you create a VDS rather than a Neighbourhood Plan?

- Jeremy Potter (Chelmsford Council) emphasised the merits of VDS in terms of the length of preparation time and advantages in terms of their potential statutory (SPD) basis as a material consideration and thus helpfulness in winning appeals.
- Neighbourhood plans (NP) are a good tool if you want to actually make a plan for your area that covers what can be built where. It covers the full range of planning issues, not just design, forms part of the development plan sitting alongside Local Plan, it takes a long time, a large evidence base, extensive consultation, examination by an independent examiner and then a referendum – a lengthy process that takes on average 2 years.
- A VDS is also a planning tool but in this process we will get them created and adopted by this time next year, so they will be able to be used in practice much quicker.
- Both a NP and VDS are policy documents which hold weight in terms of determining the outcomes of planning applications and appeals. A NP once made (adopted) has equal weight to the Local Plan and becomes part of the statutory development plan for the district.
- VDS will be a quicker process which will still involve public consultation, is led and funded by SCDC collaboratively with the communities and does not require so much input from volunteers.

2. If a parish is not successful in applying for support from this programme, what help can they get with a VDS?

- SCDC wants this project to be a pilot and trailblazer. It will create a body of knowledge and best practice that can then be cascaded down to other villages, either so they can prepare their own VDS or to be implemented through further funding programmes. We would encourage sharing of experience and hope to hold further events to follow up on lessons learnt.
- SCDC are also considering how villages that may have already done a lot of good work on characterisation and design, perhaps as part of their NP process, could be helped. They may not need the full support package, but could be supported to crystallise and finalise a VDS that could then be adopted at the same time as the new VDS that are being developed through the funded programme.
- Later this year SCDC will be formulating a new strategy for delivering updated Conservation Area Appraisals in the district due to the large number of Conservation Areas 's we have. If you would like more information, contact Celia Wignall. If your village is not selected for the VDS project but heritage/conservation issues are clearly pressing, this may be an avenue for us to jointly explore.

3. What is the value of the funding for each village?

- The funding is approximately £10k for consultancy for each village, plus additional resources for support, materials and the process of getting VDS adopted as SPD

4. What is the role of the consultants that will be 'matched' to villages?

- The consultants are there to help villages articulate their priorities and wishes into a format that can be adopted as SPD. They are not there to ‘push’ communities in any particular direction
- The consultants have expertise in community facilitation, design and policy so they will also bring an outside perspective on what may and may not work in practice, or how best to shape guidance to achieve the aims of the community.

5. If we are already writing a Neighbourhood Plan should we stop and do the VDS instead?

- No, the two processes have some overlap and could be carried out simultaneously by one Parish.
- If you have already done some good characterisation work, this could be used for the VDS – speak to Hana Loftus if you think this applies to you.

6. Can a VDS provide evidence that could be used to shape a reserved matters planning application?

- Yes, VDSs can help establish parameters for plans. Developers will have difficulty in riding roughshod over a VDS (adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document). Jeremy Potter commented that a benefit of having a VDS in a parish is that without one, in some circumstances such as the absence of a 5 year land supply, all the parish is left with to defend itself from speculative applications is the National Planning Policy Framework as guidance and this document is dominated by housing growth themes and rather less is written in it about design standards!
- Jeremy Potter gave examples in his presentation where planning applications and appeals had been refused/dismissed due to VDS.
- As an Supplementary Planning Document a VDS will be linked to a policy in the Local Plan – it cannot create new policies but will add detail to the existing policy in the Local Plan and provide specific guidance related to the particular village and its context.

7. Does SCDC place emphasis on Supplementary Planning Documents or are they largely ignored?

- SPD are material considerations and SCDC place considerable importance on design guidance expressed through SPD.
- However in some cases, older SPD documents are not always suitably worded or structured to enable them to be quoted successfully in practice by SCDC planners or appeal inspectors. For this project, the team are going to be testing the draft VDS with SCDC planners, as well as developers, to make sure that they are fit for purpose and robust.

8. Where has this funding come from and why is it for VDS and not something else?

- This funding has come from central government (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) and their Design Quality Fund. SCDC was successful in bidding, at short notice, for this funding, on the basis of the design issues that are faced by our communities.
- This is not an initiative that is being imposed on parishes, but an offer of support to create an additional planning tool, for those parishes who feel it may be useful.

9. How can VDSs deal with issues around density, for example 3-storey ‘town’ development around a village of traditionally lower densities?

- A VDS cannot set a specific density but can be used to demonstrate the importance of design issues, such as landscape views or settlement form, that affect densities of built form.
- In an outline planning application, the approval is for 'up to' a certain number of dwellings, and this number does not represent a target that, from a planning perspective, must be achieved. VDS provides an opportunity to shape an approach to density that is more responsive to local context and design standards.

10. My parish is low on people who have the time and energy for community project. Is this right for us?

- We have designed the structure of this project to be as easy as possible for villages to participate in, recognising that volunteer time should be used wisely.
- This is why we are providing considerable consultancy support, so that villages will not have to actually write or draw up their own VDS. The community will provide the input and views, for the consultants to shape into a suitable format.

11. How will villages be selected?

- The selection process will consider the merits of a wide variety of villages with differing local issues. In the expression of interest document, Parish Councils should provide an explanation as to what special, unique qualities it possesses to deserve such selection. A VDS is not a short term 'elastoplast' response as in reality, the initiative is about enduring qualities of design that provide longevity and that can be adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document for the future.

12. Why are the timescales so short?

- This is due to the constraints of the government funding behind the project, which requires that funding be spent within this financial year.

13. What is the difference between a VDS and a Parish Plan?

- Parish Plan is not a statutory instrument so has no weight in planning terms (determination and appeals).
- Parish Plan covers all aspects of parish development not just design or planning.
- Parish Plan is wholly community led and reliant on volunteers, with limited SCDC input. There are no national regulations governing how such a plan is produced.

14. We are a small infill village. Is this the right project for us?

- This project is not about very small householder alterations (e.g. dormer windows, extensions) and if that is your major concern, perhaps you should look at the revised South Cambs Design Guide which can be a useful tool.
- However if you have a lot of potential infill sites in your village, then this may be the right project for you as we see infill development as a growth related issue, which also impacts on local distinctiveness and character.
- But you cannot allocate sites within the VDS process – just show examples of ideas for design of infill sites.