

Using concept statements in a sensitive landscape

It is possible to protect countryside character and also meet the challenge of finding land for large scale development.

"It is far more satisfying than the traditional approach to local plans. It made us think about the quality of the end result. We need more critical analysis of WHAT the development should be, as well as WHERE it should be. It results in the team and the elected members thinking more widely, with more understanding and visualising the end result. The whole process has helped to give more robust and workable policies".
Graham Swiss, team leader, South Hams District Council.

Summary

Concept statements have been pioneered by South Hams District Council. They used the Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) approach to guide site evaluation in their local plan review. This adds a new dimension to the conventional map-based analysis. By identifying essential elements of landscape character, the LCA approach introduced greater flexibility in potential locations and provided the basis for site specific requirements.

Concept statements were prepared to identify environmental, social and economic objectives for every development site proposed in the local plan. These require developers to make the most of the intrinsic qualities of the site. The combination of written analysis, design principles and a layout diagram showing how sustainable development might be achieved, is proving to be a potent tool.

Main findings

Project objectives

The Countryside Agency joined South Hams District Council in this project to:

- explore the use of a countryside character approach to housing development land allocations in the local plan review;
- explore the possibility of a formal process that might provide a model of best practice for other rural areas facing significant development pressures;
- consider how such a model might engage with stakeholders and provide a mechanism for improved participation in relation to large scale development.

The District Council faced major housing growth targets. It was determined that this should have as little impact as possible on the character of the South Hams countryside. This would be achieved by using the LCA approach in site identification and concept statements to specify sustainability objectives and development principles for every site. Concept statements were prepared for all housing and employment sites. The housing proposals ranged from small groups of houses in villages to 3,500 houses in a mixed-use new community near Plymouth.

Landscape Character Assessment

The project adapted LCA to concentrate on how the landscape had influenced development and to identify fundamental principles to guide new development. It assessed landscape and settlement within a common framework to encourage analysis of the relationship between them.

This framework has three aspects, Form, Features and Feel.

- **Form** – the overall shape and type of landscape, and the morphology of villages and the way they sit within the landscape.
- **Features** – the main elements of human activity within the landscape, and the main defining characteristics within settlements, such as the spatial structure.
- **Feel** – human perceptions of the kinds of place created by form and features.

The purpose was to pick out the main aspects of the existing landscape, both natural and man-made, which could inform design principles so that new development might be absorbed into the existing character. A description of content or condition may help us to manage the landscape but does not tell us what it means or how it matters. Sustainable development that respects local distinctiveness starts with understanding the character of place and the reactions that the landscape provokes rather than in a schedule of physical attributes. It is this quality of landscape that development should respect.

From LCA to concept statements

The essential characteristics of the relationship between development and the countryside were identified. Then each of the search areas was examined for sites that could offer opportunities to replicate the general local landscape characteristics in new development. The process provided a simple and objective basis for site identification.

The overall objective of containing new development within its landscape setting meant that the boundaries of potential sites were defined by the landform and not field boundaries. The edge of settlement would be critically important in integrating new housing into the existing landscape structure. Rather than defining hard-edged boundaries, the site identification process went on to consider the need for structural planting that would extend beyond the development site and into the countryside. This could offer opportunities to enhance or restore the landscape structure and traditional boundary patterns.

As well as using the landscape character to identify suitable sites for development, sustainability criteria such as linking developments to public transport routes were also considered.

Concept statements then set out development principles to form a unifying context for subsequent decisions on every aspect of the scheme. Concept statements are a new stage in the development process. They establish objectives to be achieved and problems to be avoided before decisions are made about the detail of the scheme or the value of the land.

Involving the community

In South Hams, community representatives were involved in drafting a concept statement where they had the guidance of a facilitator and the principle of development was already established. Where potential sites were confidential, local stakeholders responded to the planning authority's draft concept statement after the site had been proposed for development. Members of the public found it much easier to relate to the concept statements than to the policies of the local plan.

Concept statement format

Concept statements comprise the following hierarchy of information and analysis:

1. Landscape Character Assessment and site description within it;
2. Quality of Life Assessment – what the site currently provides;
3. Sustainability indicators – what the development can provide;
4. Development principles and capacity – the basic design guidelines;
5. Conceptual layout – the shape of the built form in the landscape.

This detailed consideration of each site at the local plan stage allowed an opportunity to identify sustainability indicators that would translate the plan's general sustainability objectives into site specific targets.

The Quality of Life Assessment approach was used to value the environmental, visual, social, economic and historical attributes of each piece of land. This examines the benefits systematically using a series of questions:

- Who the benefits matter to, why and at what spatial scale?
- How important are they?
- Whether we have enough of them?
- What (if anything) could make up for any loss or damage to the benefit?

Through this evaluation process beneficial aspects of the site could be integrated into the development, enhanced by the development, or possibly replaced if their benefits could be replicated in another way.

Concept statements, as used in South Hams, are the vehicles for setting out the council's requirements in terms of community benefits. These include affordable housing, local services, employment opportunities, access to open/recreational space, nature conservation and provisions to safeguard the environment. The concept statement provides a clear and useable starting point for the developer.

All concept statements were included with the draft local plan and subject to the same public consultation. The final statements will be approved as Supplementary Planning Guidance before the plan goes to Inquiry.

Conclusions

The experience in South Hams indicates that concept statements can be beneficial in three areas of planning work:

- the selection of sites;
- the design and specification of schemes for those sites;
- the participation of the local community in the forward planning process.

Concept statements:

- provide the opportunity to capture environmental, social and economic benefits in every development, helping the planning system to promote sustainable development;
- give planners greater ability to test people's reactions and the chance to show they respond to public opinions;
- help to focus debate for elected members and the public;
- stimulate lay people's interest and help them to articulate their concerns;
- enable people to move beyond principle to consider appropriate development.

The close relationship between concept statements and local plan policies enables the plan to establish clear and meaningful ground rules for the quality of future development. The use of concept statements should also shorten the

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Local Plan Inquiry, saving time and money in the long term and recouping the cost of producing the concept statements. Concept statements are not expensive to produce. They are short, quick (it takes one or two days to produce a statement) and aspirational, focussing on setting objectives to achieve the very best from a site in a form that can be converted to a development brief later, if necessary.

What next?

Sustainable development will be an important aspect of the Local Development Document vision: concept statements are a valuable tool for helping local people and developers consider what this vision means for them.

The Countryside Agency has built on the South Hams work to develop practical guidance for local planning authorities on concept statements and Local Development Documents. The Countryside Agency will also promote concept statements through training, further demonstration projects (particularly in areas with different priorities such as regeneration) and disseminating good examples.

References/further reading

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**Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website:
www.countryside.gov.uk**