

Research Notes Issue CRN2 April 1999

Design Initiatives in the countryside



Monitoring report

Summary

So far, 27 Countryside Design Summaries are complete or being prepared by local planning authorities to encourage a more regionally and locally broad approach to design and planning. A further 14 are envisaged for the near future. Shortage of resources is the main reason for not carrying out the work. Other authorities are unsure about the relationship with other initiatives such as Village Design Statements.

Village Design Statements are prepared by local communities, to encourage better understanding of the need for development in sympathy with the local countryside and village character. At the time of the research, 167 VDS were in process or completed. Local communities have been helped by outside bodies. Local Planning Authorities and Rural Community Councils can have a very positive effect in promoting VDS and as a source of help and encouragement.

It is too early to say how effective CDS and VDS will be in fulfilling design objectives, but early reports are encouraging. The scheme is helping people identify what is special about their locality, and to seek to influence new development to respect that. The indirect benefits of CDS and VDS are significant, especially for VDS in boosting community development.

Main findings

The Design in the Countryside programme

The Countryside Agency's Design in the Countryside programme is aimed at encouraging regional diversity, local distinctiveness and harmony of buildings, settlements and landscape.

The Agency has developed two mechanisms to promote good design in rural areas:

Countryside Design Summaries (CDS): Local Planning Authorities are encouraged to prepare Countryside Design Summaries for their area, to provide a descriptive analysis of the landscape, settlements and buildings. These should generally cover the whole local authority area, and be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance. Those making planning applications can then be asked how they intend to shape their development to respect the local countryside character.

Village Design Statements (VDS): Local communities prepare Village Design Statements, to provide a local-level descriptive analysis. This can complement any CDS for the area. The VDS gives advice on design for the village (or an entire parish or small town).

The two mechanisms have the support of Government and have been the subject of policy advice to all local planning authorities: see Box 1.

The initiatives were launched, with supporting material, a training programme and PR, to Local Planning Authorities and others in the mid-1990s.

Box 1:

Planning Policy Guidance issued to Local Planning Authorities

The Countryside Agency has developed two techniques to promote good design in rural areas.

Countryside Design Summaries are for local planning authorities to prepare. They can supplement the design policies in development plans and help to encourage a more regionally and locally based approach to design and planning. They are neither prescriptive nor expensive to produce.

Village Design Statements are prepared by local communities. They offer a framework for engaging local people in constructive debate about ensuring that new development in their area fits its surroundings and is in keeping with local character. They can help developers to understand local views and perceptions at the outset of the design and development process, and thus enable them to promote new buildings that are likely to gain local support rather than generate uninformed opposition. Village Design Statements provide a tool to help manage long-term change, not prevent it.

Extract from The Countryside Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development. Planning Policy Guidance 7, 1997

Countryside Design Summaries

A survey attracted responses from 181 Local Planning Authorities, and indicated that 27 Countryside Design Summaries had either been prepared or were in preparation. Some of these involve more than one Authority. A further 14 authorities intend to prepare one in future. Activity appeared to be greatest in the South East. This suggested that development pressure was a more important factor than the availability of training in persuading local authorities of the need for a Countryside Design Summary.

While the coverage might appear small, it takes time for new techniques to be applied in the planning system. Much depends on the stage reached in local plan preparation. Eighty three per cent of respondents in rural or semi-rural areas were aware of CDS.

The main reason given for not undertaking a Countryside Design Summary was shortage of resources to carry out the work. Most authorities indicated that the guidance under-estimated the difficulty of production, and the length of time for preparation.

A significant number of respondents appeared unconvinced of the merits of CDS and there was some confusion between CDS and VDS, and between CDS/VDS and other initiatives. Some authorities were unsure about the relationship between CDS and VDS believing that the preparation of one removed the need for the preparation of the other. There was also confusion between CDS/VDS and other design/countryside initiatives already underway around the country, such as village appraisals, conservation area appraisals and landscape assessments. Planners were uncertain about the benefits of each of these initiatives, whether or not they were alternatives to one another, or whether they should be produced in tandem to bring maximum benefits.

It is too early to say how effective Countryside Design Summaries are in fulfilling their objectives. Generally, the responses were encouraging. Local authorities expected CDS to have an important role to play in guiding design and supporting the policies in the local plan. Countryside Design Summaries could be an important tool in a planner's armoury, especially where it is complemented by Village Design Statements.

Village Design Statements

While CDS were promoted to Local Planning Authorities, VDS were promoted also to Parish Councils, Rural Community Councils and County Associations of Local Councils. Possibly the most successful method of promotion has been found to be the Countryside Agency working with local planning authorities in identifying villages which might wish to undertake a VDS and then making a joint approach.

Part of the training programme for VDS was intended to produce 'facilitators' to promote the idea and

assist community groups. Facilitators include a wide range of people including officers from Rural Community Councils, AONB officers, and people from community projects.

Each Countryside Agency region is promoting a number of exemplar VDS - 26 in total, covering a range of settlement types across England and these have received special support. The exemplar programme appears to be having some success in promoting the concept to neighbouring villages. It appears that villages with experience of preparing a VDS are important sources of advice and encouragement to those embarking on the process.

The survey (of Rural Community Councils, County Associations of Local Councils and exemplar VDS villages) and consultations with Countryside Agency regional staff and others identified 167 VDS in process. This is probably an underestimate. Take-up has been good and has increased significantly in the last 12 months – probably a reflection of the promotional activity throughout the country, and of the ripple effect as VDS are undertaken. VDS are widely spread across the country, but with a number of clusters – see Table 1. 95% of local planning authorities in rural or semi-rural areas were aware of VDS.

Table 1:

VDS Progress

Stage of Preparation	North East	North West	Yorks/Humber	East Mids	West Mids	Eastern	South East	South West	Total
Getting started	3	3	3	13	16	2	13	8	61
Village character workshop	0	0	2	2	5	3	7	0	19
Pulling it together	0	0	1	1	3	1	1	9	16
Draft completed	1	0	3	2	5	5	4	3	19
Consultation	0	1	0	4	5	1	1	0	12
Completed VDS	0	0	1	1	4	3	6	5	20
Adopted*	0	1	1	0	2	1	2	4	11
No information	0	0	2	2	0	1	3	1	9
Total	4	5	13	25	40	13	37	30	167

* as Supplementary Planning Guidance

Local planning authorities can have a very positive effect in promoting VDS. A VDS officer has been appointed in Stratford, for example, and there are now 15 VDS in preparation there – nearly 10% of the national total. Similarly, the Rural Community Council can play an important role, as shown in Lincolnshire where the Agency has part-funded a post specialising in VDS-type work, and in Warwickshire where an enthusiastic officer has promoted the initiative.

The period required for the preparation of a VDS was found to be 17 months on average (longer than the 12 months estimated in the published guidance) - see Table 2.

Table 2:

Average VDS Preparation Time

Task	Average time taken

Getting started/Village Character Workshop	3 months
Pulling it together	6.5 months
Consultation	3.5 months
Completed VDS	2 months
Adopted*	2 months
TOTAL	17 months

* as Supplementary Planning Guidance

A crucial factor for success was found to be early contact with the Local Planning Authorities both as an important source of help and encouragement, and as the body which will decide whether to adopt a VDS as Supplementary Planning Guidance. Authorities, for their part, are generally conscious of the need to avoid taking over a community's work, and of the need to build bridges with local communities. Maintaining a good relationship with the parish council was also found to be important since they represent the village for which the VDS is being prepared, and need to be kept informed of progress if too many delays are to be avoided.

Conflicts sometimes arise within the group working on the VDS as a result of perceived partiality by some of its members. The survey showed that Agency regional staff, or the Local Planning Authority, could help to mediate disputes.

Fund-raising in the community was found to help bring its members closer together. Community groups need to pay careful attention to costs at the outset, and make sure that they can raise sufficient funds to produce a quality document.

The level of public funding via grants varied from £75 to several thousand pounds. The average level per VDS is £2,084. 56% of villages received funding through Rural Action, 24% from the Countryside Agency and 20% from other sources (mainly Local Authorities, parish councils, Training and Enterprise Councils, local amenity societies, CPRE, local charitable trusts, residents associations and Shell Better Britain Campaign). The cost of preparing a VDS ranged from £150 to £4,500. The average cost was £2,708.

Difficulties in generating sufficient support from local residents has occurred in some instances throughout the country, and has even led to community design groups abandoning the VDS in favour of an initiative requiring less support by local residents, for example, a parish map or village appraisal.

Conclusions

It is too early to say how effective CDS and VDS are going to be in fulfilling their design objectives, but early reports are encouraging. There are numerous individual examples where VDS has improved design, sometimes even before completion of the statement. Local Planning Authorities, in general, support the initiative as a useful technique for ensuring good design in villages.

The support given from national organisations is a pointer to success. These include the Civic Trust, Action with Communities in Rural England, the National Association of Local Councils and the Council for the Protection of Rural England. In particular, the House Builders Federation reported that the process has reduced the negative reaction by local residents towards development thus reducing conflicts, the need for appeals and builder's time and expense.

The indirect benefits of CDS and VDS should not be underestimated. These include:

- increased consciousness of design issues, by all involved from the Government through to local residents;
- greater understanding by local communities of the planning system;
- improved relationships between local communities, planning officers and planning committees;
- an opportunity for communities to demonstrate to local planners their concerns over the nature of development;
- greater awareness of organisations such as Rural Community Councils and County Associations of Local Councils;
- better communication between parish councils and villagers;
- improved relationships and communication between local residents;
- local residents being given a sense of ownership and the hope that they can influence the future of their village, beyond design issues.

Further reading

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions 1997. *The Countryside: Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development*. Planning Policy Guidance 7.

Countryside Commission 1995. *Design in the Countryside Experiments: Report of a programme to pilot Countryside Design Summaries and Village Design Statements* CCP 473.

Countryside Commission 1996. *Village Design: Making Local Character Count in New Development* CCP 501 Part 1&2.

Countryside Commission 1996. *Countryside Design Summaries: Achieving Quality in Countryside Design* CCP 502.

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