

Research notes

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Town Design Statements: an evaluation of pilot projects

A carefully coordinated process is required to adapt the village design concept for larger settlements.

Summary

The Countryside Agency has enabled three towns to produce pilot Town Design Statements (TDS) to test the feasibility of adapting the Village Design Statement (VDS) concept to larger settlements. The three towns were Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, Selby in North Yorkshire and Maldon in Essex.

Research by Nick Wates for the Countryside Agency evaluated the pilot projects and developed good practice advice (the advice has been published separately by the Countryside Agency).

The main conclusion is that the VDS concept will adapt to larger settlements using a carefully coordinated process to manage the greater number of interests and issues involved.

Main findings

Adaptability

The Village Design Statement concept will adapt to larger settlements but significant changes are required to the process due to the scale and complexity of towns in comparison with villages. Village services tend to be used mainly by people who live there, whereas towns are often subject to the conflicts of interest caused by the diverse needs of many groups from within the town and elsewhere. In addition, there are likely to be more areas with very different characteristics, making the task of producing a statement more challenging.

The main changes to the process needed are:

- division of the town into distinctive neighbourhoods so that people can focus on what they know best;
- great care at the outset to ensure that the steering group is representative of the various interest groups;
- careful management of the overall process to coordinate the area-based work as well as looking at the town as a whole.

An important element is division of the town into areas based on distinctive character so that people focus on what they know best.

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Town Design Statements should be independent initiatives but integrated with other community planning activity.

Relationship to other initiatives

- A TDS should be carried out as an independent exercise, with a clear but limited focus, to avoid conflict with other initiatives.
- TDS projects should be integrated with other community planning initiatives to avoid duplication of effort or confusion. A TDS can provide a useful component of a local plan, a Community Strategy or the new proposed Local Development Documents.
- The need for a TDS may well be identified by a Market Towns Healthcheck, a community appraisal or other initiatives looking at broader issues.
- A TDS will probably be carried out by larger settlements than those covered by a Parish Plan where the design component may be provided by a Village Design Statement.
- The adoption of a TDS as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) is very important, and needs to be considered from the outset.

Organisation

Producing a Town Design Statement is a complex task requiring good management and coordination from start to finish:

Good management and coordination is needed and a wide range of expertise.

- A range of expertise is required at various stages and projects are unlikely to succeed if the right skills are not available at the right time. Skills required include: project management; facilitating community involvement; partnership working; publicity; townscape character analysis; architecture; planning; writing; editing; graphic design and website management.
- The process needs to be managed by a group which has the confidence of the towns people and also contains, or has access to, the skills noted above. This will normally require a partnership Steering Group comprising public, private and voluntary sectors, and a Secretariat provided by one of the partners or an independent local consultant.
- The full support of local authority planning officers is necessary, from the outset, to avoid wasted effort and help in securing SPG status.
- Dividing a town into neighbourhood areas will make townscape character analysis easier, allowing local people to relate to what they know and care about most. The division should relate to topography, land use or history rather than administrative or political boundaries. The town edge, as the likely focus of new development, should be included in the study.
- All areas of the town should be equally represented to avoid patchy coverage in the TDS.
- There may be some groups in the town that are based on interests or topics, rather than geographical area, (for example, a horticultural society or sports club that represents the whole town, or a group focusing on local transport issues) and these need to be integrated into the process. The design statement should bring together the different areas and interest groups to form a coherent statement for the town as a whole.

The process needs to be sharply focused on producing the end product; a Design Statement.

Key steps are:

1 Getting started

2 Gathering material

3 Production

4 Using the end product

Guidance is needed on the structure and content of the end product.

Key elements of the process will need funding

Process

- The process must sharply focus on achieving the end product, to prevent frustration and to avoid being side-tracked by issues which should be part of other initiatives (eg. the local plan review).
- Four key stages can be identified: Getting started; Gathering material; Production; and Using the end product.
- A range of approaches are required to involve people effectively. These can include: well facilitated workshops; interactive exhibitions; character and photo surveying; participatory editing; websites; ideas competitions.
- Young people have much to contribute, and targeted special methods can encourage them to participate (eg. competition for a project logo).
- The production of draft statements at an early stage helps focus people's attention on the main objective and what is needed to achieve it.

Product

- Almost all those involved in the pilot projects expressed the need for guidance on the nature of the end product, in particular the requirements of supplementary planning guidance.
- The final product can be in a printed report format or other formats including web-based reports. Websites have the advantage of being easier to update.
- To avoid massively long reports, information needs to be carefully structured and edited to provide transparent links from the analysis to the recommendations. The more information that can be conveyed with graphics and images the better.

Funding

Key elements of the process will need funding. The amount of money required will depend on what expertise and facilities are provided 'in kind' by partner organisations and volunteers, with funds needed to buy in any remaining skills and expertise not available locally. Some funding will be required right from the start of the project to avoid volunteers being out of pocket.

Key elements likely to require finance include:

- photography and production of publicity and exhibition materials;
- design and printing of the Statement and website construction.

The pilot TDS were helped by Countryside Agency grants because they were experimental projects, but they were also successful in attracting additional funding from various sources, including the local authorities. Information on sources of funding is available in the TDS Good Practice Advice.

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Training is needed on the 'why' and 'how' to produce a TDS, and on character assessment methods.

Training and support

The extent to which towns will need training and support will depend on the skills and expertise available locally. This may vary greatly from town to town and also within different areas of a town, with the possibility that disadvantaged areas may need more support than affluent areas.

Key training needs are likely to be:

- for the steering group on why and how to produce a TDS and on involvement methods;
- for all those undertaking townscape character analysis on how to do it;
- for those involved in production on information technology and participatory editing.

Information about the process in other towns, and the Design Statements they have produced, will be particularly useful. Visits to others will also be helpful. Contacts for the pilot TDS are available in the TDS Good Practice Advice. The Countryside Agency's market towns website and market town learning network are two promotional opportunities (www.countryside.gov.uk/market-towns).

Conclusions

Town Design Statements are a very exciting initiative which could have a huge impact on improving the quality of our towns and on the ability of people in towns to improve their own surroundings. A great deal has yet to be learnt on how best to do it but a good start has been made. The Good Practice Advice will help other towns to produce their own Town Design Statement.

References

Town Design Statements: why and how to produce them, good practice advice (CA 134) to be produced by the Countryside Agency early in 2003.

Market towns toolkit (CA 27)
Countryside Agency - available from the Agency website.

Parish Plan: guidance for parish and town councils - interim guidance, 2002 - available from the Agency website.

Landscape Character Assessment - Guidance for England and Scotland (CAX 84).
Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, 2002. (Available at www.countryside.gov.uk/ccl/guidance. See also the Countryside Character website at www.ccnetwork.org.uk)

Making sense of place: Landscape Character assessment - Summary guidance for England and Scotland (CAX 94). Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, 2002.

Further information on Countryside Agency work in market towns and villages is available from:
www.countryside.gov.uk/market-towns
www.countryside.gov.uk/vitalvillages

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