

Village Design Statements

Guidance for communities in Braintree District

The purpose of this guidance is to provide a template to help you structure your Village Design Statement (VDS) and make it as effective as possible. It complements Information Packs from:

- Rural Community Council of Essex
 - Village Design Statements, a step-by-step guide
 - Statutory Planning System
- The Countryside Agency
 - Town Design Statements CA134

CONTENTS	page
What is a VDS	2
Writing a well organised and well focused statement	3
Effective use of illustrations and maps	3
What you can and cannot say	4
Template for a VDS document	
• Introduction	5
• Background	6
• Character Assessment	7
• Summary / Conclusions	11
• Acknowledgements	11
• Advice to residents and property owners	12
Appendices not part of the approved document	13
Process for approval as material consideration	14

This guidance and template is adapted from that produced by Jamie Cole for parishes in Chelmsford Borough.

What is a VDS

The focus of a VDS is to describe the character of the local area and include guidance to influence change and improve the physical qualities of your area.

A VDS can give a clear statement of what is special, unique and distinctive about the character of your village.

But it is not a general community plan, such as a parish plan.

A VDS adds local detail to development plan policy and once approved by Braintree District Council it can be used as material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

However, it is not a statutory planning document and it is not a tool to generate or prevent development.

A VDS is a tool that can influence the people who live and work in the village, increase local pride and encourage care when making changes to the appearance of property.

It cannot take away people's rights to make alterations to their property.

A VDS can help improve physical change and is a positive opportunity to suggest environmental improvements to enhance your area.

Though it cannot make direct orders for action.

A VDS can observe how the qualities of the village have evolved and help to explain current conditions.

But it is not simply a history project.

A VDS can provide an understanding of how the land uses, employment and social make up have influenced the village and its physical qualities.

However it is not an appraisal of social or economic issues.

There is wide involvement in its production so that the finished VDS represents the views of the village as a whole.

Writing a well organised and well focused statement

Aim for a document that is simple to read, easy to navigate and to find information, short and snappy and visually interesting.

It also has to be effective as a tool, influencing and guiding people making changes in the village. It is important to be clear about the four types of text that you will be writing.

Background information

Character description

Identifying issues and objectives

Guidance

- village wide
- for specific character areas
- for specific sites

The background information and character description text is a result of desk top research and assessment of local character. The identification of issues, arises from community involvement in the VDS, and will provide the reasoning for the guidance.

The District Council will be most interested in the wording of the guidance points as these will be considered in the determination of planning applications. The lasting value of the VDS will depend on the quality of the statements of guidance. These should be realistic and focused.

Effective use of illustrations and maps

Carefully chosen images can convey information about the character of an area whilst avoiding the need for writing a mass of text. The images should relate to and support your guidance.

The advantage of producing freehand sketches is to illustrate what you consider to be good and bad examples of design, avoiding showing a photograph of a specific building. Include captions that spell out what message you want the reader to take from the picture or diagram.

Think about maps from an early stage; what you want them to show and who will provide them. You may need several maps to show different things. Maps can be hand drawn and stylised to represent your village. If using Ordnance Survey (OS) based maps you will need to consider licensing implications. You will be able to use maps produced under the Braintree District Council licence unless you are intending to sell your VDS, in which case you will need to purchase your own licence.

The template (contents of a VDS document pages) includes ideas for plans, maps, photographs and sketches. These are suggestions only and will not be appropriate or necessary for every VDS.

What you can and cannot say

The VDS cannot create new planning policy or conflict with existing planning policy. Guidance has to accord with District policies to be approved. It should refer to the relevant policy in a Braintree Development Plan Document and genuinely add a local level of detail to that policy.

Think about who the audience of your VDS will be and what influence they have in your village, for example:

local people
building designers
highways authority
parish council

householders
developers
utility company
planners

Your guidance has to be practical and realistic. When writing a particular guidance, think about who you are targeting – is it the householders, developers, the highway authority or utility companies that you want to comply with the guidance?

Make direct statements, for example 'householders should' rather than using looser terms such as 'the community welcomes ...' This will help make the VDS guidance more effective. Use terms such as 'should' and 'encourage'; avoid using terms such as 'must not'.

Each guidance statement should have clear justification; it should be derived from the issues and objectives highlighted by the community involvement in the process. Include this justification prior to the guidance.

It is best for the guidance to be clearly identifiable from the other types of text throughout the VDS e.g. in shaded or coloured boxes. You might also want to include a separate list of your guidance for ease of reference. If so, this could be placed at the end of your VDS.

The guidance is used by planning officers to help determine development proposals for which planning applications are submitted. It is important to remember that some alterations are known as 'Permitted Development' and do not require planning permission. The VDS can influence permitted development by encouraging property owners to assess the impact of their proposed changes in the light of local character described in the document (see page 12)

Contents of a VDS document

Introduction

The introduction will explain what the VDS is for, how it was written and will summarise your main objectives.

Scope of the VDS

State the area covered by the VDS i.e. the built environment of the village, the whole parish, a number of hamlets or parishes.

Purpose of the VDS

State your reasons for preparing a VDS and who it is aimed at.

This should focus on the community as a whole caring for the village and ensuring that change contributes positively to local character.

It should outline the purpose of the guidance statements which contain the key messages of the VDS.

The community involvement process

Explain that the VDS is led and produced by the community. Outline the timescale involved, the efforts made to be inclusive, the response and representation in the final document.

Status of the document

Outline how the VDS will be used by the Parish Council in commenting on planning applications.

State that the VDS once approved by Braintree District Council, will be used as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

Explain how the character descriptions and guidance can be used by property owners to help ensure that any changes they intend to make to their properties are in keeping with local character.

Planning Policy context

Provide a brief account of the planning system within which the VDS operates.

Explain that the VDS supplements existing policy.

Outline the relevant policies covering your area.

Plans and illustrations

Plan/map showing the location of the area covered by the VDS within the Braintree District, showing it's relation to the main towns.

Plan/map showing the area covered by the VDS showing place names and boundary of its coverage.

Photographs of local people taking part in design workshops or at exhibitions.

Pictures drawn by children showing elements of village character.

Contents of a VDS document

Background

This section of the VDS can help everyone understand the origins and current nature of the area. This section should be succinct as it is not the focus of the VDS.

History

Describe briefly the area's history; explain how economic influences, social changes, transport links e.g. the railway or major roads, have influenced the development of the area.

Settlement Pattern

Describe the overall shape and layout of the village. Is it linear, radial, dispersed? Are there clear edges? How has history influenced its shape? Describe also how the village location and shape have been influenced by topography, geology, local climate, availability of water and local materials.

The village today

Describe briefly the area as it is now; the types of housing, community activity, local services, economic activity. Is there any activity that is special or unique to the area? What are the key features of the village?

How does the design of the village influence cultural and social activity?

Plans and illustrations

Plan/map showing the key stages in the evolution of the village and surviving (historical) features of interest.

Plan/map showing the location of employment, shops, schools etc

Sketches/photographs of key features in the area

Contents of a VDS document

Character Assessment

This section defines the different 'character areas' of the parish/village based on their landscape or 'townscape' qualities. A 'character area' is an area with its own identity in terms of use and appearance. There may be several areas with distinct character, or just one for the built area of the village and one for the surrounding countryside. The strengths and weaknesses of each character area should be highlighted, based on its landscape or 'townscape' qualities.

Landscape character areas

'Landscape' is what you see and experience when you are in a particular part of countryside. Describe the shape of the land; ridges, valleys, plateau, coast. Describe and special features or habitats such as woodlands, watercourses, meadow, wetlands etc. Describe the use of the land and how rural buildings sit within the landscape. Describe views across the landscape and into the village.

Townscape character areas

'Townscape' is what you see and experience when you are in a particular built environment. It can be defined as the changing view of building groups that you experience when you walk along the street or through open spaces. Each character area will have broadly consistent townscape qualities.

For each character area, describe the qualities.

Describe the relationship between buildings and spaces; layout and density.

Describe the street scene. Are the roads straight, curved, narrow, wide? Are there pavements? Are buildings set back from the road? Standing back from the buildings, look for vertical and horizontal rhythms. What are the proportions of the windows, doors, rooflines? Describe the skyline and roofscape. Describe open spaces.

Plans and illustrations

Plan/map with each character area defined. You may also want to show protections and constraints that are included in development plan documents; for example, the village envelope, conservation area, flood plain, etc. However, avoid making the map too cluttered.

Sketches/photographs of landscape and townscape

The type of guidance

Suggest ways to respect, maintain or improve the landscape or townscape of the character area, based on the qualities highlighted.

Suggest ways to respect, maintain or improve the relationship between landscape and townscape; village edges, views in and out of the village.

Then, for each townscape character area consider in more detail the buildings and spaces as shown on pages 8 and 9.

Contents of a VDS document

Character Assessment

Buildings and design features

Which are the key buildings and building groups? Are there buildings that act as landmarks?

What are the different types of buildings – housing, retail, community buildings? What are the distinctive styles of buildings? Which period?

Building form. What is the shape, size and height of the buildings; number of storeys, terraced or detached, with flat, hipped or pitched roofs, gable ends, dormer windows, chimneys, extensions, porches?

Layout and Orientation. Are building frontages on the road or set back? Are they at an angle? What are the plot sizes – are there front and back gardens, and provision for car parking?

Materials. Are certain materials characteristic such as timber framing, red brick, flint walls, thatch, clay tiles? How are modern materials used and could they be used more effectively?

Distinctive features. Are there particular door and window designs, sash windows, lead works, stained glass, specific shapes and styles? Are there distinctive details such as pargetting, stone carvings, and so on? Do the rooflines have particular characteristics or detailing? Are there noticeable features such as water pumps, railings, walls etc?

Plans and illustrations

Plan/map showing key buildings and listed buildings (possibly included on the character area map provided it does not become too cluttered).

Photographs of important buildings and characteristic features.

Diagrams and sketches of building design, features, materials, detailing – show what is considered bad and what is considered good.

The type of guidance

Consider what design issues developers and applicants should pay special attention to when drawing up proposals to ensure development contributes to the character of your village. This could be design guidance for specific building types, new buildings, infill, extensions or alterations.

Identify design guidance that could improve the street scene. Some small changes to building exteriors might not require planning permission but the VDS is a way to give local people some guidance.

Contents of a VDS document

Character Assessment

Spaces and signage

Spaces in the village are as important as its buildings. Not all spaces are immediately obvious as they can be green soft spaces or hard surface spaces. Spaces include greens, allotments, parks and recreation grounds, ponds, riverbank, the churchyard, gardens to the front, rear and side, streets and lanes, car parks, footpaths and bridleways. Assess the quantity, quality and accessibility of the green and open spaces.

Public Open Space. Is there a village green; one main public space or are there lots of separate or connecting spaces? Are they green spaces? Do they have ponds, rivers, vegetation, distinctive wildlife?

Public Highway. How do roads and lanes contribute to character? What materials have been used for surfacing? Do they have footways, cyclepaths, kerbs, soft verges, drainage ditches, hedges? Are there painted lines, traffic calming and signage – how do these impact on visual qualities? Are there particular streets with a strong character?

Street furniture. Are there bus shelters, public seating, waste bins, overhead cables or other utility structures? What designs have been used? Are there light columns – is there any light pollution?

Private Space. How do private gardens contribute to village character? What is the size of front and side gardens (and back if easily visible).

Boundaries. What are the characteristic boundaries of different spaces? Are there distinctive walls, fences, ironwork, hedges?

Are there any unique structures or other characteristic features within any space – memorials, sculpture, village sign? Are there particular tree groups or individual trees that are prominent or act as an important focal point?

Plans and illustrations

Plan/map showing key spaces and trees with preservation orders (possibly included on the character area map provided it does not become too cluttered).

Photographs of important spaces and characteristic features.

Sketches/photos of distinctive street furniture, highway and other infrastructure.
Sketches of other features that are considered appropriate for your area.

The type of guidance

Identify green spaces and open spaces of great importance and encourage their protection (quality and quantity).

Identify appropriate boundary treatment and encourage its use.

Identify places where street furniture and signage could be improved.

Recommend use of specified styles of furniture design and surface treatment (hard and soft landscaping) appropriate to your area.

Contents of a VDS document

Character Assessment

Certain activities in a village can have an impact on its design and character

Social and economic activity

Buildings and spaces are designed to accommodate industry, agriculture, shops, schools, places of worship, health, community meeting halls, recreation. Are these buildings and spaces located at the centre or core of the village, or on the edge of the village? Are important community spaces at separate ends of the village? How do these buildings and spaces contribute to the character of your village. How important is the retention of these activities and their associated buildings and spaces?

Movement within, to and from the village

Lanes, roads, car parks, footways, cyclepaths, bridleways and footpaths and designed to meet the need for movement within, to and from the village to accommodate residents, visitors and those employed by local businesses. How do these routes impact on the character of the village and surrounding area? Is traffic and parking a significant issue? Do traffic calming measures exist? Are there sufficient 'safe' routes as an alternative to the car?

Plans and illustrations

Plan/map showing the location of employment, shops, schools etc (may already have been included as part of 'the village today')

Sketches/photographs of social and economic activity buildings and spaces.

Sketches/photographs showing the effect on street character of traffic calming measures and parking.

The type of guidance

Suggest ways to respect, maintain or improve the distinctive appearance of local business activity. Aim specific guidance towards shop owners, businesses, the school etc as appropriate.

Suggest ways to respect, maintain or improve the design of spaces and buildings where social events and activities take place.

Suggest appropriate designs for traffic calming measures. Suggest appropriate designs and surface treatments for footways, footpaths, car parks etc

Contents of a VDS document

Summary / Overview

Put together a character overview.

Stipulate what is special, distinctive and unique about the area and what sort of place it is to live and work in.

Also set out its weaknesses, threats and challenges for the future; the hopes and aspirations of local people

Plans and illustrations

Sketches/photographs of unique features.

The type of guidance

Make general recommendations covering the unique, special, distinctive qualities of the VDS area that everyone undertaking physical change should respect and care for.

Acknowledgements

This is a section to thank everyone who has contributed to the VDS. You may want to mention particular individuals (take care not to leave anyone out!)

Acknowledge organisations that provided grant funding or help in kind. You may be required to include logos.

Provide details of how to acquire further hard copies of the VDS and also state whether the VDS is available on a web site.

Contents of a VDS document

Advice to residents

This section is to make residents aware that they each have a role to play in safe guarding local character. Small scale alterations may be 'permitted development', not requiring planning permission but will still have an impact on village design.

The advice is to help residents to frame proposals for their own properties by drawing their attention to design details so their alterations will harmonise with their surroundings and the character of the village. Some residents may even be inclined to initiate changes to their property to make it blend better with its surroundings.

An example of the advice is as follows (taken from Great Bardfield VDS):

If you are considering alterations to the exterior of your own property, anywhere in the village, there are a number of aspects you should consider. These may be significant changes such a replacement windows or doors or seemingly less important items such as paintwork, signs, boundary walls, gates, hedges or removal of a tree.

However all alterations affect the building and its surroundings as well as the overall look of the village so please make your own assessment by studying each visible elevation of your property, including the rear elevation where visible, prior to alteration and ask yourself:

- What are the distinctive features of the property and area?
- Are any of these features out of character with the property or with adjacent properties or with the guidelines in this VDS?
- Think about the alterations you are considering. How do they affect the positive distinctive features of your property? Do they complement the character of the local area? If not, how could you change them so that they do? Alternatively, is there any opportunity to remove any uncharacteristic features?
- Contact Braintree District Council to establish if planning permission or building regulations permissions are required for your proposals.
- Check also if there are any other restrictions on the development of your property. Is it a listed building which is subject to much stricter control or in the conservation area? If so, amongst other restrictions, this means you will need permission to cut down or significantly reduce the size of trees. Please note that most works to listed buildings will require listed building consent. Permission is also required for demolition within conservation areas.
- If you are in doubt, employ an architect or seek professional advice on your proposals. The local planning authority is also happy to provide advice prior to the submission of an application

(Provide a list of useful contacts)

Appendices not part of the VDS

As outlined on page 2, a Village Design Statement is a tightly focused document. During its preparation a number of issues not relevant to the VDS, but important to the community, may well be raised that the group wishes to record. These may be included in separate Appendices but will not be part of the approved VDS.

Issues outside the scope of the VDS

Matters not related to physical design e.g. the delivery of services such as bus frequency, street sweeping, policing etc. These may link to other local authority strategies e.g. Community Strategy, Transport Strategy. Such issues can be included in a Parish Plan and actions taken forward by the local community and other organisations working in partnership.

Action plans for maintenance/improvement of buildings or spaces. These actions may link to other local authority strategies e.g. Cultural Strategy, Housing Strategy, Green Space Strategy. Land owners can be involved and projects taken forward in partnership.

Guidance that conflicts with, or does not complement existing policy. Such comments and opinions can be submitted the next time the development plan policy is under review.

Suggestions that make land allocation or specific site proposals. Such suggestions can be submitted when the Allocations Document or Proposals Map is being reviewed.

Detailed information not appropriate in the main text.

Lists of buildings
Detailed description of the economy
Wildlife surveys
Lists of native species
etc

Process for approval as material consideration

