

Enhancing Local Distinctiveness: Evaluation of Village Design Statements (VDSs) in Ireland (2000 to date)

Final Report to the Heritage Council

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CCRI and BDOR Ltd

Stephen Owen
Jeff Bishop
Malcolm Moseley
Ros Boase
Fintan Coffey

Stephen Owen
Email: sowen@glos.ac.uk
Tel: 00 44 1242 714122

CCRI
University of Gloucestershire
Dunholme Villa
The Park
Cheltenham
GL50 2RH

Jeff Bishop
Email: jeff.bishop@bdor.co.uk
Tel: 00 44 117 910 5200

BDOR Ltd
The Wool Hall
12, St Thomas Street
Bristol
BS1 6JJ



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The remit for this study was to inform national policy on issues relating to the conservation, enhancement and sustainable development of villages in Ireland. The stated aim was: “to examine the ways in which Village Design Statements have progressed and developed in Ireland, with particular emphasis on the involvement of the Heritage Council, Local Authorities / Local Authority Heritage Officers in VDS and the adoption of VDS as Supplementary Planning Guidance”.

The reason for the study was concern about loss of local distinctiveness in Irish villages and the related loss of heritage - and the use of Village Design Statements (VDSs) in recent years to address this concern. VDSs were first proposed by the Heritage Council in 2000 and in the past eight years around 40 VDSs have been prepared. It is now an opportune time to evaluate the success of VDSs in achieving their stated objectives. To this end, the Heritage Council commissioned the Countryside and Community Research Unit¹ and BDOR Ltd² to undertake the evaluation study in May 2008. The Heritage Council also established a Steering Group to guide and oversee the national evaluation project. The Steering Group members are listed in Appendix A.

The method followed in the study involved building up a comprehensive, high level picture of VDS preparation in Ireland, undertaking an evaluation of all the VDSs prepared in each of three sample Counties, and conducting detailed case studies of four VDSs prepared in different parts of the country. This was a short and almost entirely qualitative study.

Key Results

Amongst the results of the study the following are highlighted as crucial in considering the future of the VDS initiative.

- *VDSs are not an end in themselves but a means to an end - that end being more distinctive design in villages and, in Ireland, more action on heritage issues and more community awareness of heritage.*
- *Virtually everybody consulted during the study agreed that there is a problem to solve concerning the loss of distinctiveness in Irish villages.*
- *By and large (with notable exceptions) VDSs have not really been fully used to date to influence design, so there is no real record of them being effective.*
- *There are very few examples of their use in helping to deliver practical heritage initiatives.*
- *There is some concern, and occasional anger, within local communities about the time they have put into VDSs to no, or little, effect.*
- *Despite these concerns, there have been some positive experiences in raising awareness of heritage and distinctiveness issues amongst local communities.*

¹ Countryside and Community Research Institute at the University of Gloucestershire and the University of the West of England

² BDOR Limited is a small private company responsible for the invention and development of VDSs in England.

- Most of those who have taken part in VDS preparation feel that, potentially, there are still benefits to be gained from some form of VDS approach.
- The Heritage Council is to be congratulated for advancing the VDS initiative.

The explanation for many of the concerns expressed about VDSs lies more in the general context in which they were prepared than in the detailed processes for preparing them. If further VDS work is to take place, some aspects of this general context need to be clarified and addressed as a priority; simply fine-tuning existing VDS procedures will not succeed. In fact quite a few changes to the context have occurred since the VDS initiative started and other opportunities also exist to move the approach forward positively. We believe that negotiating an appropriate place within that changed context, and also addressing some of the procedural weaknesses, can set the scene to produce successful VDSs in the future.

Summary Findings

Based on feedback from a wide range of interviewees and on our own judgement, there are two levels of explanation for what has happened in the VDS initiative so far:

1. *An appropriate context for advancing successful VDSs was not in place; and*
2. *Aspects of the process for preparing and using VDSs were not as good as they might have been.*

The study drew attention to aspects of several factors in the wider context that made it extremely difficult for most VDSs to succeed. The most significant were these:

- *the relationship between VDSs and statutory plans within the planning system;*
- *lack of experience of community development/involvement in planning issues;*
- *existing community structures and experience;*
- *limited resources and skills for VDS preparation;*
- *the role or lack of role of locally elected members in preparing VDSs; and*
- *little real 'ownership' of the VDS initiative and of the outcomes.*

In terms of VDS preparation the key factors to note were these:

- *VDSs were often seen as a heritage initiative only. In general, and for seemingly good reasons, planners were kept out of much of the preparation work, making it difficult to draw them in retrospectively.*
- *Planners were generally uncertain about whether to give VDSs any status in the statutory planning process – or what that status might be.*
- *In most cases a top-down process was adopted that worked against eventual community 'ownership' of the outcomes.*
- *Using consultants had merits in terms of their independence and expertise, but that expertise was not fully used and the timescales deployed often led to inappropriate similarities between many VDSs.*
- *As a result many VDSs did not draw out or assert the genuinely distinctive features of their village.*
- *Project work often (not always) missed out on potential links that might have added value, e.g. to parallel LEADER projects.*
- *Retaining a focus on design proved difficult and many VDSs extended, sometimes inappropriately, into a much wider range of issues and ideas.*

- *Community involvement in VDS preparation was generally appreciated but seen to be too little, too early and with no real continuity.*
- *Nevertheless, the spirit of the whole approach was appreciated, even in those communities where the resulting VDS was not used.*

Where Next for VDSs in Ireland?

Almost everybody surveyed in connection with the study agreed that the threat to local distinctiveness and local heritage in Irish villages remains significant and urgent and felt that an amended and updated approach to VDSs could be successful in addressing this concern. Several key agencies (not just governmental) would almost certainly formally support a new, or continuing, VDS initiative. That kind of shared backing would be essential to the success of future VDSs.

Some important changes in the context referred to above have either already taken place or offer opportunities that a continuing VDS initiative could tap into, for example:

- *changes in the planning system such as the preparation of Local Area Plans³;*
- *changes in general approaches towards greater community involvement;*
- *arrangements developing at the local level to bring communities together;*
- *more cross-cutting approaches to the deployment of resources and skills that can also properly value the ‘sweat equity’ provided by local communities; and*
- *the general development of Integrated Rural Development (IRD) work that VDSs could link into.*

There are a number of larger and smaller ways to improve the day-to-day practice of VDS preparation and content that could enhance their value and potential use, for example:

- *a clearer focus on what makes individual villages distinctive;*
- *a clearer focus on design issues;*
- *looking beyond just the historic core of villages;*
- *expressing the guidance that is offered through the VDS more as a challenge to a designer than a set of ‘do and don’ts’;*
- *shifting towards a genuinely community-led approach - but acknowledging that such an approach will still need external assistance;*
- *the whole community will need to feel, and be, genuinely engaged;*
- *supporting the vital role locally elected members should play as ‘community champions’ for VDSs;*
- *from the start it will be necessary to resolve how any VDS will be used, to consider the context in which it will be used, and to engage all those who will use it; and*
- *VDS use will need to be a continuous process involving all relevant parties.*

³ The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG) announced at the Heritage Council’s National Village Design Conference at Slane Castle in October 2008 that Draft Guidelines for Local Authorities in relation to the preparation of Local Area Plans (LAPs) would be published in late 2009.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE EVALUATION STUDY

Enhancing Local Distinctiveness in Irish Villages

1.1. Irish small towns and villages have for a long time created a sense of regional, and sometimes very local, character based on natural, built and cultural heritage. A village in the West of Ireland such as Tulla is clearly different from one in the East, such as Slane. One village might be focused around a central green space, e.g. Tyrrellspass, while another will be clearly linear, e.g. Glassan. Our unique history and identity have provided us with villages whose street pattern today reflects the layout of early medieval monastic settlements, villages from the Plantation Period, ones that are planned estate villages dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, and others that are framed around long-established, if often now lost, industries. These settlements were also important market and social centres for the surrounding rural catchment areas. The sense of place resulting from a village's unique cultural heritage links directly to a community's sense of identity, which can ultimately enhance people's overall '*sense of being and belonging*' and '*quality of life*'.

1.2. However, the trend towards a proliferation of large-scale development in many of our villages over the last decade, and the use of urban road design standards in smaller settlements across Ireland, is seen by many to be eroding the fragile and important qualities of 'local character' and the 'historic integrity' of older villages. For example, the use of generic house types throughout the country can have an adverse effect on the overall distinctiveness of our villages. This begs the question – When we no longer know *where* we are, can we really know *who* we are?

Village Design Statements (VDSs)

1.3. Village Design Statements are a way of protecting, celebrating and enhancing local distinctiveness. A VDS is an expression and description of what a local community believes to be the factors and features that make their particular village or town unique. It uses those factors/features to outline a series of planning and design guidelines which can be used in early discussions with developers and designers to help them design in a way that responds to and enhances those valued features.

1.4. Though built from local community input, a successful VDS also draws on the skills of local planning and heritage officers to ensure that the analysis misses nothing important and that the guidelines can be genuinely useful. If appropriate the VDS can be 'adopted' and tied into formal planning controls. To achieve this, a useful VDS focuses not on whether or where a development might or should take place but specifically on how it might best happen, but strictly in design terms.

1.5. A good VDS can:

- raise community awareness about their surrounding landscape, environment and heritage assets;
- provide the community with a 'tool' to ensure that future developments and changes add to local distinctiveness and character;
- 'link into' the planning system so that planners can use it to raise the local distinctiveness of design proposals;

- assist developers, planners, architects and others by giving them local guidance up-front; and
- generate and develop overall community confidence and capacity-building.

The VDS Programme in Ireland – From 2000 to Date

1.6. VDSs were introduced across Ireland in 2000 by the Heritage Council with a particular emphasis on local heritage. Over the past eight years around 40 reports titled as VDSs have been produced as a result of the personal encouragement of Heritage Officers, most of them backed by part-funding enabling the appointment of specialist consultants. The Village Design Statement for Lucan⁴ won a Certificate of Merit for ‘Participatory Planning’ in 2008 from the Irish Planning Institute (IPI).

1.7. The background to the study was concern about loss of local distinctiveness in Irish villages and the related loss of heritage - and the use of Village Design Statements (VDSs) in recent years to address this concern. It is now an opportune time to evaluate the success of VDSs in achieving their stated purposes. To this end, the Heritage Council commissioned the CCRI (who had evaluated VDSs in England) and BDOR Ltd (who had invented VDSs also in England) to undertake the evaluation study in May 2008. The Heritage Council also established a Steering Group to guide and oversee the national evaluation project.

Project Methodology

1.8. The methodology adopted by the team for conducting the project comprised four main, overlapping stages. In outline, the four stages were as set out below.

Stage 1 – The Evaluation Framework (Process and Content)

1.9. An evaluation framework was devised to ensure rigour, consistency and continuity of focus throughout the project. This was agreed with the Steering Group at the outset of the project.

Stage 2 – The National Synoptic View

1.10. Stage 2 of the project built up a comprehensive and high-level picture of VDS preparation in Ireland. This was achieved, firstly, by reviewing all of the VDS documents prepared to date and, secondly, by an initial appraisal of Irish VDSs that drew on the opinions, experience and expectations of key stakeholders, mainly at the national level.

Stage 3 – Village Design Statements in Three Sample Counties

1.11. A survey of all the VDSs prepared in each of three sample counties provided deeper and broader understanding of the process of VDS preparation by reference to the ‘hands-on’ experience of participants. This stage involved interviews with local authority officers for each county and with local people who had been actively involved in the preparation of each VDS.

⁴ See

www.sdublincoco.ie/sdcc/departments/planning/publications/pdf/LucanVDS11090711092007.pdf

Stage 4 – Village Design Statements in Four Focused Case Studies

1.12. To achieve a richer and more robust understanding of the dynamics of individual VDS preparation the research team spent several days *in situ* examining the preparation and use of four individual VDSs. This included discussions with key people who had been involved in the preparation of the individual VDS.

1.13. It is important to note that this was a relatively short study of a limited number of examples. The approach taken was to examine practice in depth rather than breadth. The study was therefore predominantly qualitative and depended heavily of the researchers' experience of such work generally and of VDSs in particular.

2. SETTING THE FRAMEWORK

Background Principles and Experience

2.1. Village Design Statements (VDSs) were introduced in England from late 1993 in response to the widespread erosion of distinctiveness in English villages, particularly with regard to the design and setting of new buildings. The approach that underlay VDSs was that they should:

- focus mainly on how rather than whether or where development might best happen, i.e. on design in particular, but taking design in its broadest sense;
- set a local distinctiveness challenge open to locally appropriate and even contemporary, design solutions, yet robust enough at a national level to be sustained through planning's legal processes;
- be community-initiated and community-led, with extra skills always being available from others, thereby helping to build community capacity and skills;
- be able to secure support through grant aid programmes and access to some - deliberately minimised - time from planning officers and others;
- operate within a consistent framework yet celebrate true local distinctiveness;
- be valued equally by all professions, by communities and even by developers, notably (but not exclusively) through formal adoption as Supplementary Planning Guidance.

2.2. Since 1993 several hundred VDSs have been produced in England (and a few in Wales).

- In nearly all cases they have been produced mainly by communities themselves.
- National guidance was produced and has been used to varying extents by communities and by local planning authorities.
- Some authorities took a highly supportive and proactive approach but a few refused to offer support to any locally produced VDSs.
- Most VDSs have been formally adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance.
- VDSs have been used at appeals, almost always successfully.
- The less successful VDSs are those where:
 - the framework and guidance was not followed;
 - the guidance offered in the VDS was solely about traditional design and pastiche;
 - the guidance strayed into ideas about what development might happen where;
 - the VDS included ideas and wish lists for things well beyond design.

2.3. VDSs in England were never intended as an end in themselves; they were a means to more locally distinctive, design. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there have been a number of very effective VDSs, usually those that have followed most closely the approach outlined originally and by local authorities in their own guidance. A number of communities and authorities have followed their own approaches, apparently with less success.

2.4. In summary, the most effective VDSs in England have succeeded in:

- building both general and design-specific community capacity and confidence at a local level;
- helping good projects to move quickly and easily through the planning process;
- assisting planners in filling a policy for which they had neither the skills nor the resources to fill on their own; and
- delivering designs and developments which are, if not substantially then certainly noticeably, more locally distinctive.

The Evaluation Frameworks - Process and Content

2.5. A **process framework** was devised and agreed to ensure rigour, consistency and continuity of focus throughout the evaluation. The framework was used as the 'anchor' of the methodology, and was drawn upon explicitly in framing questionnaires, analysing documents, writing reports and framing recommendations for the future of the VDS programme. It was structured around four sequential elements in the process of promoting, developing and using VDSs: **encourage, enable, engage and employ.**

A. Encourage: encouraging planners, communities, decision makers, etc. to ensure that more and better VDSs are developed.

1. Formal support from the Heritage Council
2. Formal support from the Planning Service
3. Availability of informal or other encouragement
4. Legal requirements for an acceptable/adoptable VDS
5. Promotion of VDSs

B. Enable: assuming people get enthused and wish to proceed, where do they go next?

1. Initiation of VDSs and whether this determines the end result
2. Nature, source and status of practical guidance available on preparing a VDS
3. Practical help available to a local authority and/or to a community
4. Funding available, to whom and how it is accessed, specifically for VDS work
5. Ways to communicate the availability of guidance and help

C. Engage: how is the actual preparation work managed?

1. Typical locations for a VDS - village, hamlet, area around a village, etc and what determines this choice
2. Leadership by planning authority, consultants, community, other or all
3. How collaborative is the resulting work?
4. Content coverage is used and whether generic or *ad hoc*
5. Coverage of sustainability issues
6. Sole focus on how changes might look, or straying onto other aspects?
7. How and when different sections of the local community are involved
8. Engagement of the ultimate decision makers
9. General programmes followed, methods used
10. Production timescales

Cont'd

D. Employ: what happens to each completed VDS and to VDSs as a whole?

1. Status of a completed VDS – SPG, informal adoption/endorsement, etc.
2. Explanation of the varying pattern in response to the above
3. Who uses them, when and how in relation to future development?
4. Their use in Architectural Conservation Areas
5. The difference that VDSs have made to design quality, heritage features etc.
6. Ways to ensure that developers and designers know about and use a VDS
7. Records kept of VDS uptake, progress and outcomes
8. Use of any evaluation experience to inform subsequent work

2.6. In addition to this process framework the overall approach was underpinned by a **content matrix** outlining the expected scope, coverage and content of both survey work for a VDS and final guidance. The content matrix, which is set out in Appendix B has been used and tested and proved remarkably robust in England.

2.7. The inclusion of four particular features of the matrix is worth emphasising here:

- The *Settlement* level that architects and landscape professionals tended to miss but which proved key to expressing and asserting local distinctiveness.
- Issues related to *Movement/circulation* are important because of the way in which changes, in particular to roads and especially the imposition of ‘modern’ and urban standards, are threatening rural qualities in local character.
- The section on *Change* is important because of the need to develop an understanding that much of a village’s historic character is only there because the previous one changed.
- The section on *Values* is important, especially the values of the community but also those of others such as landscape writers, poets, musicians and artists.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. The findings of the evaluation are presented here under three headings that correspond to Stages 2, 3 and 4 of the project:

Stage 2: The National Synoptic View;

Stage 3: Village Design Statements in Three Sample Counties; and

Stage 4: Village Design Statements in Four Focused Studies.

Stage 2: the National Synoptic View

3.2. The aim of Stage 2 of the project was to build up a comprehensive picture of VDSs in Ireland. This was achieved, firstly, by a review of all the available VDS documents and, secondly, by an initial appraisal of Irish VDSs that drew on the opinions, experience and expectations of key stakeholders, mainly national. These are reported separately below.

Overview of Village Design Statements prepared to date

3.3. We reviewed 35 documents that were described to us as Village Design Statements (VDS) or bore significant similarities to VDSs.⁵ The VDSs examined cover a range of villages of different sizes and situations, with the smallest villages having a population of 100 to 250 people and the largest having a population of around 1,800 people. A majority of the villages fall within the range 700 to 1,200 people. Lucan (South Dublin County) is an outlier in this respect; although the whole settlement has a population of some 37,000 people, the VDS concentrates on its historic core.

3.4. While most VDSs describe the location of the village in relation to the wider landscape, fewer than half give an account of the village's location in relation to strategic matters such as proximity to other main settlements, main roads, etc. Only a small minority give an indication of the nature and scale of development pressure faced by the village.

Scope, Content and Structure of VDSs

3.5. There is significant overall similarity in scope, content and structure across more than two-thirds of the VDSs. Where more than one VDS has been prepared in a county, these all tend to be identical in scope, content, structure and presentation. A majority of VDSs, while encompassing some aspects of the whole village, focus heavily on the 'historic' core and then use this analysis to describe the characteristics of the village that should serve as a model for new development elsewhere in the village. This inevitably leads to a conservation emphasis in most of the VDSs. Despite commonly expressed concerns about the proliferation of isolated single houses in the countryside, VDSs did not explicitly cover a wider area, hence potentially creating a design standards vacuum in terms of addressing this issue.

⁵ In the interim several further VDSs have been drawn to our attention.

A number of VDSs address non-design matters such as employment, services and traffic, but the vast bulk of appraisal and guidance material focuses on the built and natural environments.

Nature of the design guidance in VDSs

3.6. Guidelines for future development tend to be in the form of professional urban design proposals employing 'urban design speak', but most also have a concluding section entitled 'wish list' generated through community consultation. These are clearly dominated by concerns over services, facilities, traffic management, tourism and infrastructure, with the form of the physical environment rarely being seen as a priority. However, while the wish lists are often sourced back to specific community involvement events, the same is not true for the design guidelines; they appear in the main to be externally driven. Some VDSs identify future projects from the wish lists and an implementation process to be adopted to put the VDS into effect. While some VDSs embrace new development with enthusiasm, and only a few seem to be aimed at resisting development, there is a clear conservation emphasis on replicating past building and spatial forms in new development.

Process of VDS preparation and the roles of people involved

3.7. While the original intention was for VDSs to be initiated and produced by local communities themselves, if perhaps with some external support, few developed this way. Most seem to have been initiated by local authorities with the funding support and involvement of the Heritage Council, and in the majority of cases employing consultants to provide professional urban design and community involvement support. VDSs are commonly described as "produced by the local planning authority" or "by consultants on behalf of the local community". In one county the four VDSs were prepared jointly by the County Council and the county's Rural Partnership. Most VDSs contain a helpful description of the preparation process, with a brief account of the techniques employed to involve the local community. Meetings and workshops were commonly used across VDSs, with some employing questionnaires and SWOT analyses. About one-third explicitly involved children.

Role of VDS in the planning system

3.8. Links between VDSs and the statutory planning system are not addressed consistently across VDSs; a few make no mention of these links at all. Most make a statement that VDSs are not able to influence *whether* development should take place but rather what form that development should take. About one-third of local authorities state their intention to adopt the VDS as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG). Four VDSs prepared in one county are said to be linked directly to the Local Plan; these were prepared for villages that the County had identified as having the potential capacity to accommodate new development. In a similar vein, four villages in another county were selected for VDSs because they were due to receive funding under the Urban and Village Renewal Scheme.

Analysis of Interviews with Key Stakeholders

3.9. An appraisal of VDSs was undertaken by telephone interviews with representatives of key stakeholder organisations; these included civil servants, local government elected members, local authority officers, private consultants, national interest organisations, national and regional agencies and universities. Respondents ranged from those people who had been actively engaged in preparing individual VDSs, through those who had a strategic interest in the concept of VDSs, to a small minority who had not even heard of VDSs before they were invited to take part in the interview. The appraisal below follows the sequence of the Evaluation Framework, encompassing in order: encourage, enable, engage and employ.

Encouraging VDSs

3.10. The Heritage Council was seen as the key agency in driving the overall VDS programme to date. While there was a mix of views as to whether the Council was the appropriate body in this regard, with some people feeling that it gave VDSs too strong a heritage label, it was emphasised that the remit of the Council is wide, encompassing social, economic and biodiversity elements.

3.11. Some people believed that VDSs would benefit from the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DoEHLG) taking a more active role though others worried about the difficulties that would be experienced by hard-pressed local authority planning staff if the initiative came from that Department without the appropriate transfer of resources. Some felt that the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (CRAGA) might play a role in that it might encourage more community involvement and lead to VDSs raising more community issues. Other national organisations mentioned in this connection included An Taisce (The National Trust), Tidy Towns and the Gaelic Athletic Association.

3.12. There was an spectrum of views about whether or not VDSs should be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance. References were made to the gap at the time between highly strategic Development Plans and very specific VDSs and the value that would come from the greater use of Local Area Plans as the level in-between. It was emphasised, however, that SPG is not a formal part of the planning system and that any attempt to use detailed guidance that has not gone through a formal statutory process might well be open to challenge. Reference was also made to the need to relate the timing of VDSs to the preparation and approval of Development Plans; if the Development Plan is not well advanced, there is not much to be supplementary to.

3.13. There seemed to be little widespread awareness of VDSs amongst the general public, although some respondents felt that awareness was beginning to grow as more people were engaged in preparing VDSs. It was considered crucial to get wider support if VDSs were to be implemented and not just produced. Most types of stakeholder were mentioned as desirable for promoting VDSs: the Local Authorities Members Association, the Irish Planning Institute, the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland, Directors of Planning Service, local planners and heritage officers, local communities, developers, local elected members and the engineers and surveyors who make many of the planning applications in rural areas.

Backing from the Irish House Builders' Association and the Construction Industry Federation was thought to be potentially valuable.

Enabling VDSs

3.14. Individual VDSs have been initiated mainly by County Council planning departments, with general encouragement from the Heritage Council. A clear majority of respondents would welcome national guidelines on VDS preparation, with support expressed for a short, good practice guide. It was suggested that setting out a VDS methodology would help local people take control of the process, albeit some felt that guidance was better produced at County or even a more local level.

3.15. Although there was widespread agreement that the local community itself should be actively involved in preparing VDSs, everyone thought that access to professional design skills was also essential. While some communities might be able to draw on these skills from within, in most villages it was necessary to bring in external expertise. The other main skill referred to was facilitation of the local community, and it was thought that Community Liaison Officers employed by some local authorities have a lot to offer in this respect. Several people emphasised the need to have local authority planners involved from the outset.

3.16. The most common funding arrangement for VDSs to date has been for the Heritage Council to fund 50% of the costs (usually the cost of employing consultants) at a rate of 25,000 Euro including VAT (2008 prices) per VDS, with the funding going directly to the individual community project. There are then significant 'hidden' costs to the local planning authority in the form of staff time when planning officers are already heavily overstretched. There was little agreement about who *should* fund VDSs. One suggestion was that VDSs would be best funded by a partnership between central government, county councils, developers, 'sweat equity' from the local community, and possibly the LEADER programme and the Rural Development Programme.

Engaging with VDSs

3.17. In selecting villages for VDSs, a variety of approaches had been adopted, focusing on: villages experiencing poor quality fringe development; villages subject to urban and village renewal initiatives, or a cross-section of villages in the county. However, there was a general feeling that priority should be given to villages experiencing development pressures, particularly in sensitive locations. Most villages to date have been very small but even there, the tendency is for the VDS to describe and analyse mainly the historic centre of the village. While some people thought that VDSs should extend beyond this core to embrace the whole parish and its community, others advised that parishes might be too large and have relatively meaningless boundaries.

3.18. In terms of providing leadership for preparing VDSs, mistrust of local government in general and planners in particular was widely reported. Consultants were thought to offer a more independent perspective and to be effective in engaging communities and providing professional design advice.

There was some support for the local community taking the lead but it was stressed that there was no established tradition in Ireland of community-led initiatives. Some communities are strong, but it was suggested that these tend to be well-heeled and anti-development.

3.19. VDSs, understandably, tend to concentrate on design aspects of the physical environment, but it was emphasised that the concerns of local communities were usually about services and facilities rather than the narrower issue of design. While several people thought that VDSs might engage with the wider concept of sustainability there was an apprehension that if VDS scope was widened too far, it would detract from the sharp focus needed to produce usable outputs.

3.20. Everyone considered community involvement essential to the overall success of VDSs in Ireland. Local communities can identify issues that would never be identified by local authorities. However, a number of people pointed out that there were few structures to support bottom-up approaches and community engagement must be undertaken carefully otherwise there was a danger that it would be dominated by powerful interests such as landowners, the property industry and small builders. There were differing views about how effective community involvement had been in VDSs to date, from places where it had been very effective, with full engagement by the community, to other places where it had been limited to an initial workshop followed by a questionnaire. Some problems were attributed to the process being led by consultants whose time and resources were limited. Reference was made to the value of having models of good practice in VDS preparation; this would be particularly useful for disadvantaged communities who might learn from the more prosperous communities who tended to be 'first out of the blocks'.

Employing VDSs

3.21. Respondents thought that the main user of the VDS would be the local planning authority - particularly development control officers. Local people could use VDSs when objecting to development proposals but interviewees were not able to offer much evidence that this had happened. Some felt that developers would not take notice of a VDS but it was suggested that if VDSs indicate clearly what is required this can help cut down uncertainty and speed up development.

3.22. Most people thought it was too early to know whether VDSs have yet had effect. There were second-hand anecdotes about VDSs being used in planning appeals and inquiries and elsewhere small scale projects have been 'tweaked' in response to the VDS, but examples were cited where VDSs, even those adopted as SPG, have been ignored and one that was amended retrospectively to fit in with an appeal decision. Too often VDSs had been enjoyable processes with high profile launches, but then just got left on the shelf resulting in people's raised expectations being frustrated.

And finally

3.23. An overall observation that cuts across all the foregoing comments should be stressed – despite the cautions about existing work and the challenges ahead, these are all resolvable and there seemed to be universal enthusiasm for the concept of Village Design Statements and their use in Ireland.

Stage 3: Village Design Statements in Three Sample Counties

3.24. The overall aim of Stage 3 was to provide a deeper and broader understanding of VDSs in operation by tapping into the 'hands-on' experience of participants in VDS preparation. For this purpose, three counties were selected for particular scrutiny. For each county, extended telephone interviews were conducted with local authority officers, with at least one community representative involved in the preparation of each VDS, and with other significant actors such as the staff of county LEADER projects. Three senior researchers conducted the interviews, one for each county but using the same template drawn from the process framework to ensure consistency of approach. The identity of individual counties is not disclosed here. This anonymity has permitted a frankness of exchange that has been extremely valuable in getting a clear picture of VDSs in operation. The key findings from the review are set out below under the headings: *overall approach*, the *processes of preparing VDSs*, and *outcomes*.

Key Findings from Stage 3

Overall approach

3.25. There were significant *similarities* in the overall approach to VDSs across the three counties.

- Most villages selected for VDSs were subject to, or anticipated, development pressures, but a wider range of motivations included villages already chosen for Urban and Village Renewal funding and the desire for geographical coverage.
- The County Council initiated the VDS process - except in one village where the Community Council was the client. In two of the counties LEADER organisations influenced the progress and content of the VDSs.
- The County Heritage Officer was actively involved in VDS preparation, but there was a failure to engage local authority planners at the outset of the process.
- County Councils felt that they had neither the resources nor the skills in design or community engagement to undertake VDSs.
- Consultants were employed to appraise the distinctiveness of each village and they prepared each VDS.
- None of the VDSs was adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance.

Processes of preparing VDSs

3.26. The preparation of VDSs across the three counties had many consistent features.

- The processes of community engagement adopted were broadly consistent, including leadership by consultants and the enthusiasm displayed by communities at the beginning of the process.
- Community involvement on the whole was rather minimal and tended to drop away after an enthusiastic start.
- There was little sense of ownership of the VDS amongst the local community; they felt that the consultants had done it for them.
- While attempts were made to stress that VDSs could only be used for guidance, there was misunderstanding about their overall purpose and scope.

- There remained a feeling in the community that decisions would still be taken elsewhere.
- The expectations of communities were raised and then dashed, leaving them disillusioned.

Outcomes

3.27. The following observations on the outcomes – or lack of outcomes – from VDSs are drawn from the responses of the interviewees.

- There has been slow progress in delivering the outcomes of the VDSs, or they have not happened at all, because priorities and therefore resources have been focused elsewhere. This has caused significant frustration amongst local communities. The outcome is often a brochure that has very little use.
- VDSs were seen to have some value in pre-application discussions.
- Local communities were very disappointed by the similarities in the design guidelines for different villages; there was little specific to individual villages.
- The VDS has not affected the actual design of new development.
- There is scepticism whether VDS will ever be used by County Councils; there remains general community support for the idea in principle, although none of the communities seemed to have used ‘their’ VDS.
- None of the counties intends to undertake any further VDSs until an evaluation has been conducted. The value of VDSs is not yet seen as significant enough to warrant further resources.
- The VDSs were not seen as a waste of time; they had educational value in stimulating community awareness of design and heritage matters.

Reflections on Stage 3

3.28. The review revealed the following issues that should be addressed in attempting to improve the relevance and effectiveness of VDSs both in terms of their preparation processes and their consequent use.

- Greater care is needed in the selection of villages for VDS. Selection preparation did not necessarily reflect the needs or concerns of the local community or the issues facing the particular locality. In only a minority of the villages did the VDS seem to have been the most appropriate instrument to deploy.
- There was widespread confusion over the scope of the VDSs, with communities wishing to broaden that scope beyond design and heritage concerns and wishing to address matters to do with facilities and services as a higher priority.
- After a good start, the process of community engagement tended to weaken, with an erosion of enthusiasm and involvement part way through the process - and the residual feeling that involving the community in the VDS had been a gesture on the part of the local authority.
- There were reservations about the role of consultants in the process, with significant worries about the replication of the same design guidelines for all the VDS villages across a county.
- Virtually no examples were offered of the use of VDSs by the local authority, by the local community or by developers/designers, or that VDSs had had any influence on new development, on other kinds of physical change, or on the implementation of projects identified by the local community as desirable.
- There had been little or no follow-up to the VDSs by any of the participants since the completion of the VDS documents.

Stage 4: Village Design Statements in Four Focused Case Studies

3.29. The aim of Stage 4 was to achieve a richer and example-specific understanding of the development of VDSs that could then be used to identify the conditions for good practice in VDS preparation. To fulfil this purpose, detailed case studies of four individual VDSs in four different counties were undertaken. Each case study was conducted by a senior researcher who reviewed the relevant VDS document and any other relevant contextual policies, engaged in preliminary telephone calls with participants and then visited the case study village and authority. During the visit, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with community groups, local authority officers and staff of other organisations. Telephone discussions with the consultants for all of the four VDS case studies had been held in earlier stages of the project. For two of the case studies this was followed up with a short telephone call or face-to-face interview about the specific case.

3.30. As in Stage 3, the identity of individual villages – and therefore individual interviewees – is not disclosed here; they are referred to as **Village 1, 2, 3** and **4**. Once again this anonymity has permitted a frankness of exchange that has been valuable in getting a clear picture of VDSs in operation. This is especially important at the village level because so much that was generated in interviews was distinctly personal experiences and comments. The four VDS villages were neither at the very large nor the very small end of the population range. All were subject to some development pressure, but to differing degrees. All have some, but (in their view) not enough, facilities. All have lively communities with a history of community activity in the form of projects and initiatives.

3.31. Consistent with the process framework, the review of the four case studies is reported under the headings: encourage, enable, engage and employ. Because of the richness of the material revealed by the individual case studies they are reported on here more fully than the county studies.

Encourage

3.32. All four villages were part of the Heritage Council's VDS support programme. Local authority offices, and heritage officers in particular recognised the value of this backing in helping to initiate the work. At the time, it appears that the VDS idea arrived completely afresh from the Heritage Council; none of the professionals involved at local level had heard of them or were already interested in addressing design at a village level. Different approaches were used in the four case studies about the preferred or intended eventual legal status of the VDSs within the planning system. In the absence of what was thought to be clear guidance from national level, decisions ended up being made locally.

Enable

3.33. The original motivation for the VDSs and the reasons for subsequent selection varied, although concerns for heritage were a common theme, linked directly to the likely impacts of large numbers of new houses. In no case was design *per se* given as a motivating factor.

3.34. The pressure to undertake VDSs came most commonly from local authority Heritage Officers; this related to certain assumptions that VDSs were to deal with what the community were concerned about and this was heritage issues. Most of the Heritage Officers, Planning Officers and consultants said they had studied or at least dipped into the guidance on VDSs produced in England. All consultants and several professionals commented on the general lack of appropriate technical skills upon which to draw at a local level for actually undertaking a VDS.

3.35. Around 50% of the funding for all four VDSs came from the Heritage Council, topped up at County Council level. This was then passed directly to the appointed consultants. The work also placed demands on the time of county officers, notably from Heritage and Planning. All four VDSs also required a large amount of time from small groups within each community.

Engage

3.36. The approach taken by all the consultants tended to focus on the historic core of each village rather than either the existing built areas or the areas around that were likely to be subject to development. Coverage of the surrounding landscape and wider settlement form was minimal; the greatest concentration in the appraisal and guidance was on detailed building design. No attempt was made to engage those from the isolated dwellings in the VDS work, with one minor exception in **Village 3**.

3.37. In all villages, and very much as a matter of policy, VDS work was led largely by consultants appointed by the County Council. The main reasons for involving consultants were: to bring in independent outsiders patently not from the local authority; to bring in planning, design and community involvement skills seen to be lacking at the local level, and lack of time and resource within the local authority. In **Village 4**, though, the local authority team of Heritage Officer, Conservation Officer and Chief Architect, who had experience of running 'Planning for Real', managed the overall programme more directly and actually ran some of the initial work before the consultants were brought in.

3.38. In the main, Councillors did not appear to have any significant involvement in the VDS process. In all cases and from nearly all interviewees, cautionary comments were raised about Councillors to the effect that many are judged to be linked strongly to local development interests.

3.39. The approach, common to three of the case studies, of keeping out (or perhaps not directly encouraging) potentially key people for the ultimate use of any VDS – notably planners and elected members - resulted in the work not being genuinely collaborative and contributed in part to the lack of use of VDSs. There was no real feeling of 'ownership' amongst those who would ultimately have to use the VDSs once completed.

3.40. There was a consistent pattern of community involvement across all four VDSs. Typically the process, which was led by the appointed consultants, started with community workshops that were well attended and very much enjoyed by the community. These were supplemented by other activities such as a walkabout, questionnaires and the use of disposable cameras for people to record what they liked and disliked about their village. The work was then taken away by the consultants who turned it into a draft version of the VDS; many members of the community were never involved in the process again. Community representatives in **Village 2** thought that while the consultants were very highly qualified professionals, they did not provide added value. The community had expected to get some examples of specific design possibilities for their village; instead they got bland guidelines duplicated across all four VDSs. **Village 3** representatives did not feel that the VDS had brought their community together but did feel that the early part of the community involvement work was very good and had helped people see their village in a clearer light.

Employ

3.41. The four VDSs were taken forward into the planning system in different ways. For **Village 1**, the VDS has been treated as supporting evidence only, but mainly because it was felt inappropriate to move further until all the area plans had been completed. The VDSs for **Villages 2** and **3** have not been formally adopted; in **Village 3** the VDS is mentioned in the Development Plan as something to “have regard” to and the area planner regards it as only “good survey work” but not guidance to be used in development control. For **Village 4** the VDS has been ‘adopted’ but its status is felt to be uncertain because of its detailed design guidelines and also because there is already an Architectural Conservation Area in place.

3.42. The only real use of any of the VDSs took place in **Village 4**. People applying for planning permission are said to use the VDS all the time and planners use it in judging applications. The Conservation Officer uses it to assist in applying stringent development control. However, little new development has taken place since the VDS was prepared, and little is expected in the foreseeable future as a result of the current financial climate. Community representatives thought that major developments that took place before the VDS would not have been allowed in that form had the VDS been in place and that the small amount of development undertaken since the VDS has conformed to it.

3.43. Experience in **Villages 1** and **2** was more negative. In **Village 1**, some people said that the VDS had been used by development control officers in pre-application discussions but, with some exceptions, the view from all parties was that it made almost no difference to the end result. There had been a recent example of some proposals to which the community responded very negatively which were then changed in line with community views and VDS principles but then recommended for refusal by the planners.

3.44. The situation in **Village 3** was, at the time of the research visit to the local community, extremely volatile and, in relation to the VDS, extremely negative. There was considerable anger in the community meeting that the village’s Fair Green had been dug up by contractors working on behalf of the County Council and that foundations were already going in for new houses.

Nobody had been aware of this except the local Councillor chairing the meeting, and it soon became clear that he had not told anybody locally. This was despite the fact that the Fair Green was one of the key distinctive features of the village identified in the VDS and that the Councillor had played a central role in the VDS preparation process. In that context it is not surprising that people at the meeting described the VDS as “rubbish”, a “waste of time”, a “confidence trick” and another example of what was seen as the County Council’s “big brother attitude”. Nobody in the community was aware of any positive examples of VDS use; the view was that all the new housing “could be anywhere” and “doesn’t fit in”.

3.45. Looking ahead, the County Council officers for **Villages 1** and **2** have no intention to commission or promote further VDSs. Officers for the **Village 4** County reported continued pressure from elected members to undertake more VDSs but not to use consultants, relying instead on local authority officers. Officers involved in **Village 2** would be willing to use the VDS model in the future, but only if the problems identified in the previous process were resolved and adequate resources within the Council were made available. Perhaps VDSs would be beneficial if they could fit properly within the hierarchy of Development Plans, possibly as precursors to Local Area Plans.

3.46. Community thoughts about next stages for VDSs varied only a little between **Villages 1, 2** and **3**. In **Village 1**, where there has been considerable community disappointment about the VDS and its use, they felt that a VDS alone would not be appropriate when large scale development is proposed and a strong feeling that positive examples are more a matter of luck than judgement. Despite this, there was an overwhelmingly positive view expressed that the whole VDS process had been worthwhile as a community endeavour and in terms of raising local awareness about the village, design and heritage.

3.47. Community representatives in **Village 2** suggested that a VDS might be linked more closely with Tidy Towns work for VDS preparation. They felt it essential that there should be a follow-up process after the production of a VDS. Ideally they wanted some type of Local Area Plan with considerable community participation to ensure action on the issues that the local community considers to be most important.

3.48. In **Village 3** the few people who had been involved in the VDS remain generally positive about what is actually contained in their VDS, if not about its use. However, any early confidence that there might have been about the VDS appears to have now been completely destroyed by the Fair Green situation, reinforcing long established cynicism about what is seen as the top-down approach of the County and lack of general or genuine community involvement.

3.49. Specifically, community representatives in **Village 4** felt that communities should never accept 100% funding because they should always have a stake of their own in a VDS (or any other community-led initiative).

Reflections on Stage 4

3.50. In terms of delivering the key aim of VDSs – to improve local distinctiveness or heritage sensitivity in the design of new development - three of the four case studies offer little, if anything, that is positive. **Village 4** is more positive, although as yet only concerning developments within the protected areas of the town rather than in relation to new development. In three cases, the VDS process appears to have contributed to aspects of community development and capacity and it is heartening to see that people have not been put off community involvement in general by an otherwise poor VDS process experience.

3.51. On reflection a number of factors help to explain the poor outcomes in **Villages 1, 2 and 3** as follows:

- VDSs were used in the absence of Local Area Plan (LAP). In such a context, people probably have other more basic concerns than design quality.
- A VDS was thought to be valuable in the context of a considerable scale of planned development. In such a context a VDS alone is probably not appropriate.
- In at least two cases there seemed to many local people to be nothing very obviously distinctive about their villages and no preparatory work was undertaken to raise awareness of what is distinctive.
- In all villages there was a strong and positive tradition of community involvement and action on social and economic issues, but none on planning or design.
- It proved difficult to ensure a clear, strong focus on design issues in the resulting VDSs, except where aspects of heritage were already important to local people.
- Community involvement work was regarded by most communities to have been valuable and positive in the first stages but all communities expressed disappointment that, in effect, one set of events was all they were offered.
- All consultants found it difficult to engage a genuinely wider community beyond the Community Council or Steering Group through whom they initiated the work.
- The decision by planning officers to stay back from the whole process resulted in a lack of genuine ownership of VDSs, which ‘rubbed off’ on local people.
- Despite great commitment and enthusiasm from Heritage Officers, it is unclear whether there was any genuine higher level or corporate commitment by the County Councils to the VDS work and then to the use of completed VDSs; indeed departmentalism was mentioned in all three cases.
- This was complemented by a lack of a genuinely clear and positive role for Councillors.
- There was concern in two cases that the standardised format and generalised content failed to highlight the specific and distinctive features of each village.
- The VDSs probably went into too much detail, exacerbating the gap between that level of information and the broad policies operating even when a Local Area Plan had been produced (and more so in the absence of an LAP).
- Once complete, there was no apparent or strong mechanism, procedure or person/people to ensure that the VDSs were used.
- As a result, few people even knew that the VDSs had been completed and it appeared to be a matter of luck as to whether they got into the hands of a development control officer, developer or local architect.

3.52. The far more positive experience in Village 4 was, to a large extent, a result of different approaches to many of the above issues. For example, the town has a strong and distinctive character and heritage understood and valued by many in the community, the authority officers had previous experience of good involvement methods and, perhaps by default, the officers ended up taking on a greater role (thereby generating greater shared ownership). There was, however, an additional factor that made a significant difference. The whole initiative had a vigorous 'champion' within the County Council - a project champion can be critical to success and does not have to be from a local authority; that person could be from the community, perhaps even a Councillor.

And finally

3.53. It is important to record that one of the most remarkable features of the evaluation is the consistency in the assessments derived from all three of the main elements of the research method, the national synoptic view, the three county studies and the four individual VDS case studies.

4. CONCLUSIONS FROM THE VDS EVALUATION

4.1. The evaluation addressed two key questions:

1. Whether the completed VDSs have actually been used and have, either directly or indirectly, helped to generate more locally distinctive design; and
2. Whether the process of preparing VDSs has raised general community awareness of design and heritage issues and generated projects or practical rehabilitation schemes around existing, historically significant local features.

4.2. With reference to the first of these two questions the overall conclusion is that, with some informative exceptions, *VDSs in the main have not generated more distinctive design*. It is clear that the final Statements, regardless of their planning status, have not been used to any real extent by planners, designers or developers; indeed it appears that some in these groups did not even know that the VDS for a particular village existed.

4.3. With reference to the second question, *the VDS initiative has had some genuine success in raising people's awareness*, but there are few if any signs that this has directly affected action on minor heritage features or on the re-use of important old buildings. It was nevertheless heartening to hear from people in local communities, and from planners and Heritage Officers, that the process of community involvement in VDS preparation had almost always opened people's eyes to what is special and distinctive about their villages or towns.

4.4. Behind these overall conclusions are more detailed assessments, some examples of which are set out below, as firstly positive messages and secondly cautionary messages.

4.5. Positive Messages from the VDS Evaluation

- Virtually everybody contacted recognised and expressed concern about the erosion of local distinctiveness in the design of new developments and the threat to 'features' that celebrate local heritage.
- Though queries were raised about VDSs as prepared and used to date, most people felt that some variation on the current approach is needed in order to make VDSs more effective.
- The process of working on their own VDSs nearly always led local people to say that they are now more aware of, and concerned with, protecting and improving, their local heritage, together with the distinctive features of their villages and the design of new development.
- Local Communities, Heritage Officers, Planning Officers and Councillors along with consultants benefited from working creatively together.
- Some, albeit isolated, examples were offered of VDSs being used in a way that made a genuine and positive difference to the end result in terms of more locally distinctive design and enhancement of the local heritage.

4.6. The general messages coming with remarkable consistency from officers, Councillors, consultants and community representatives alike were, however, far less positive about most aspects of the current VDS programme.

4.7. Cautionary Messages from the VDS Evaluation

- Of the 40 or so VDSs (or similar) prepared to date in Ireland, few have made noticeable difference to local design on the ground.
- This was in part because developers and architects and certainly some Local Authority Planning Officers were unaware that they existed.
- It was also, in part, because it was not deemed appropriate that the VDSs be used in development control/management settings because:
 - they had no clear place within the overall planning system;
 - they did not highlight genuine factors in local distinctiveness (some were almost identical in their proposals from village to village);
 - they went into too much design detail, and
 - they strayed into issues unrelated to design.
- This was then related back to the general perception that there was little or no feeling of 'ownership' of the outcome.
- In turn, this was paralleled by a view that the community involvement work was generally seen as "too little" and "too one-off".
- Much of the above was connected with the limited time available to VDS consultants.

4.8. On reflection the principal explanation for the lack of positive progress was that several aspects of the *context* for VDSs at the time made that progress difficult. Those aspects of the context included: the stage of evolution of the planning system, the relative novelty of community involvement in design, the general lack of skills in village design and facilitation and, to some extent, a feeling that this was a 'just' a heritage initiative. While there is clearly work to do to improve the detailed *processes of VDS preparation* – and especially their use – that alone would have made little significant difference given the context at the time.

4.9. More importantly, however, eight years on that context has begun to change, and continues to change, in ways that promise well for local distinctiveness in design and a more positive 'fit' for well prepared Village Design Statements – not least the recent surge of work on Local Area Plans (LAPs) and proposed national guidelines on LAPs in 2009.

Summary

4.10. The key evaluation conclusion, therefore, is that, in general, the VDSs produced to date through the Heritage Council initiative have not succeeded in the core ambition of delivering more distinctive local design and re-use of old buildings - although there has been some success in raising local awareness and generating community involvement - but that the contextual factors have had far greater influence on this generally negative conclusion than VDS processes and content themselves.

5. THE WAY FORWARD FOR VDSS IN IRELAND

5.1. Key Lessons from Village Design Statements in Ireland to Date:

- Urgent action is needed to reverse the erosion of local distinctiveness in towns and villages; this remains a matter of almost universal concern amongst the people taking part in the project.
- This is best achieved by bringing together the knowledge, skills and commitment of local communities, Planning Officers, Heritage Officers and Councillors.
- In principle, VDSs are a key way to enable this creative joint work to happen and be effective with regard to subsequent changes and developments.
- Whether in association with Local Area Plans or via other links, any VDS needs to fit well into the formal planning system.
- Landowners, developers and designers need to play their part, so they need to be involved and to be aware of how Statements will be used.
- The basic approach of any VDS needs to be tailored carefully to its specific setting.
- 'Design' generally needs to become something to which all parties feel they can contribute.

5.2. Future Village Design Statements are likely to be valuable if they fulfil the following conditions:

- There is a genuine commitment amongst the local community to engage actively with decisions that affect the future of their village - notably its character - and a shared commitment to proceeding with the VDS between a community and its local authority.
- Towns and villages subject to major change, mainly as a result of development pressure, are the main (but not only) appropriate locations for VDSs.
- The process is community-led, but not necessarily community-determined, with significant input and support from planners, Heritage Officers, councillors and consultants (focusing on their core skills) as a collaborative venture.
- VDS preparation is based on a process that genuinely involves the whole community, engaging all age groups, and continuing throughout the VDS process.
- Some form of 'champion' drives it forward throughout. That person can be from any group but needs the 'clout' and ability to work with all people and needs access to all areas.
- There is a clear focus on what makes each place distinctive. Though villages and towns can vary dramatically, there is something distinctive about every place, and a local community will know it best.
- This should be reflected in more emphasis on guidance concerned with reinforcing really local distinctiveness as a challenge to a designer, rather than just generic 'good design' guidance.
- VDS content is focused on design, even if in its broadest sense, and avoids a drift into wider and other issues.
- The VDS looks beyond the historic core of the village, finding ways to value more recent developments.

- The nature and form of a VDS is well-fitted to the current planning context, mainly but not only Local Area Plans. From the outset it should be clear what mechanisms there are for ensuring proper status for the VDS and that systems (notably development control) are supportive.
- The completed VDS is known about by all key parties and used positively to guide, but not determine, the design of future developments.
- Once a VDS is finished, its use is not! It is there to be used in a continuing process that continues to engage local people.

5.3. Making this Happen:

- A multi-agency approach is needed that brings together various government departments, professions (e.g. the IPI and RIAI) and voluntary organisations. A fundamental change in the whole way in which design, planning, community involvement and heritage (and their inter-connectedness) are perceived nationally, at a county level and then locally, can only be achieved if a number of different agencies come together and jointly 'sign up' to any next phase of action. Delivering the required shifts in the context referred to above depends upon all sectors being involved.
- Clearer guidance is needed about how a VDS might link in to the evolving planning system (especially Local Area Plans) but also to the many programmes of wider social and economic development in rural areas, including for example, well-established LEADER or other forms of Integrated Rural Development (IRD) initiatives.
- A programme of training is needed for professionals, communities and elected representatives, about rural design and distinctiveness, community engagement and the preparation and use of VDSs.

5.4. Given the changed context since the start of the VDS programme, and taking advantage of some of the lessons highlighted so far, another wave of VDS work can begin to deliver more distinctive local design in Ireland, but in order for a second wave of VDS work to be more successful, two things are necessary:

- 1. taking advantage of the changes in some aspects of the context since the early VDS work, and tackling remaining challenges on other aspects of that context;**
- 2. sharpening practice in both the preparation of Village Design Statements and in their content.**

5.5. The order in which these two points are listed is fundamental. It would be very easy to focus entirely on making small improvements to the preparation and content of VDSs, but this will make almost no difference at all until the issues related to the context are tackled. Without addressing the challenges of the broader context, any further investment in VDSs is almost certain not to pay off.

5.6. Despite these cautionary comments, the Heritage Council should be congratulated for launching the VDS initiative; the learning from this stage should be used to trigger further action on VDSs. This might best be taken forward through a carefully planned and evaluated programme of well-targeted Village Design Statements, chosen to demonstrate varied approaches in varied settings, from which a mainstream programme could then be developed.

APPENDIX A: PROJECT STEERING GROUP

List of Members

Name	Organisation
Deirdre Burns	Heritage Officer, Wicklow County Council
Caroline Creamer	NUI Maynooth
Niall Cussen	Senior Advisor, Spatial Planning Unit, DoEHLG
Alison Harvey	Planning and Development Officer, Heritage Council (Chair)
Dara Larkin	Senior Planner, South Dublin County Council
Ciaran Lynch	Rural Planning Unit, Tipperary Institute
Dr Brendan O'Keefe	Limerick University

APPENDIX B: LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS MATRIX

EXAMPLES USED ARE ILLUSTRATIVE ONLY

	<i>Physical Influences</i>	<i>Spaces and Enclosure</i>	<i>Forms and Patterns</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Circulation</i>	<i>Change</i>	<i>Values</i>
Landscape Assessment	Geology, overall form, hydrology, slope, climate, natural and semi-natural vegetation, ecology	Openness, distance or enclosure, vistas and views, horizons, skylines, sub-divisions, change over seasons	Managed vegetation, effects of trees, hedges, boundaries, agriculture, buildings, distinctive areas, legibility, impact on the landform, proportion of cover, features	Tone, colour, light and shade, variations over time, seasonal change, texture, contrast, variety, consistency, management, strategic landmarks	Orientation, general pattern of roads, rail, paths and watercourses visual effects of moving through, views opened, and closed, density of traffic, permeability	Deforestation, plantation, intensified, agriculture, minerals extraction, trunk roads, reservoirs, landfill, strategic planning	Meanings, attitudes, perceptions and symbols at: national, regional, local and personal levels
Settlement Pattern	Settlement location, re: landform, water table and supply, shelter/exposure, aspect, habitats	Scale, topography, enclosure, openness, boundaries, sequences, consistency, connections, public and private space	Pattern of field and farm development, legibility, tree and boundary patterns	Tone, colour, light and shade, variation over time, seasonal change, texture, contrast, variety, consistency, management, local landmarks	Pattern of roads and paths through and across settlement, signage, lighting, verges, condition, surveillance, safety, density of traffic	New villages, agglomeration, infilling, suburbanisation, bypasses, infrastructure, public utilities, local plans	in terms of: environmental, historic, social and cultural factors
Building Design	Materials, micro-climatic response, ground conditions, habitats	Public and private spaces, division, enclosure, constriction	Volumes and massing, consistency and variety, orientation, number of storeys, height, boundaries	Tone, colour, light and shade, shelter, security, boundary details, roofs, walls, openings, eaves, verges, ridges, planting, condition, distinctive features	Circulation in and around buildings, through, between and across spaces, access to buildings, condition, surveillance, safety, public and private access	Redundancy and reuse, design guidance, 'extensions', coach lamps and gnomes, signage, standardisation, development control	