

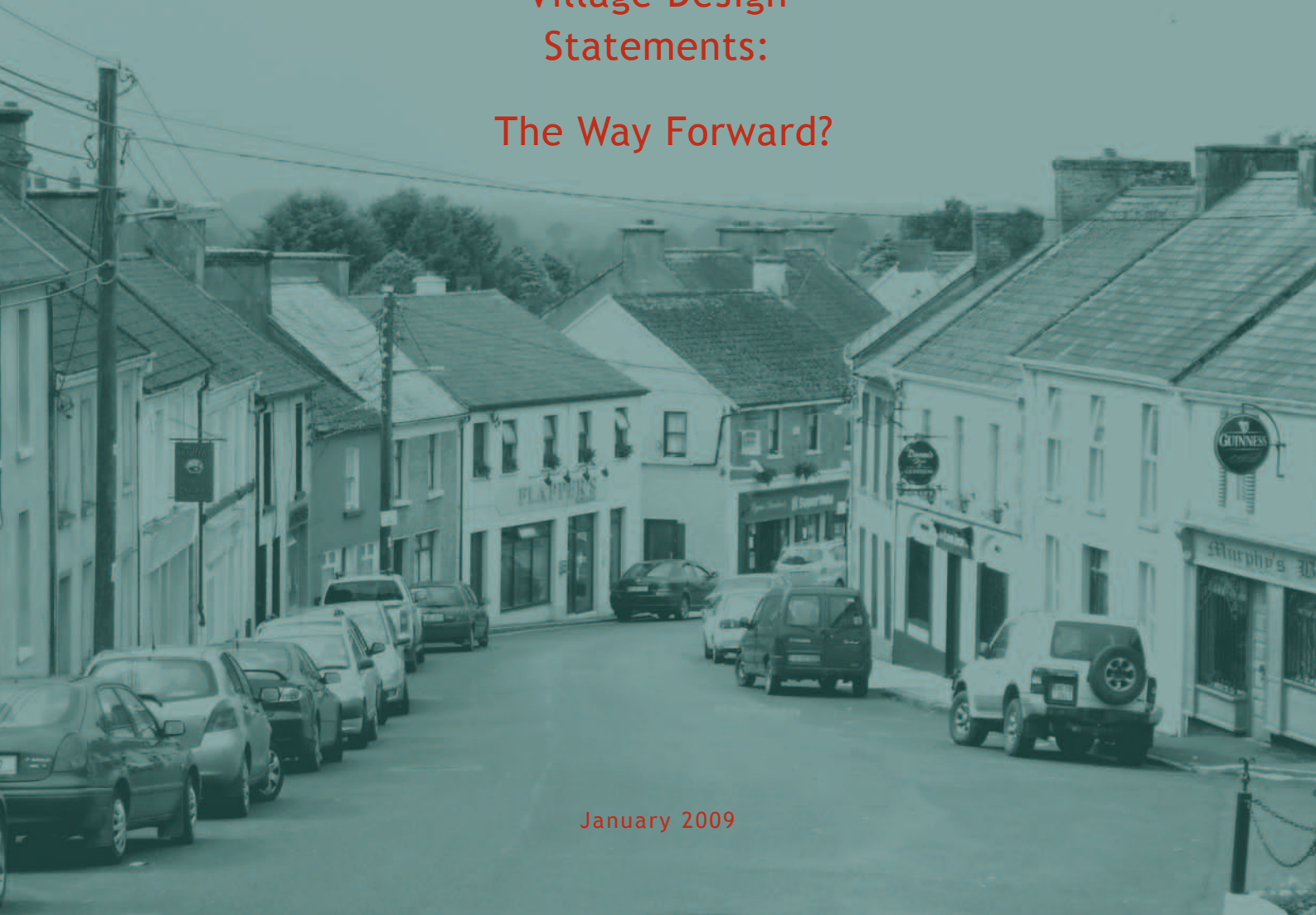


Enhancing Local Distinctiveness in Irish Villages



Village Design Statements:

The Way Forward?



What is Local Character and Distinctiveness and why focus on it?

Irish small towns and villages *"are a central component of the history of this island"*¹ and have for a long time created a sense of regional, and sometimes very local, 'character' based on the natural, built and cultural heritage. Put simply, each Irish village is 'distinctive' in its own way. A village in the West of Ireland such as Tulla is clearly different from a village in the East, such as Slane. One village may be focused around a central green space e.g. Tyrrellspass, while another will be clearly linear in pattern and layout 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'.

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?

¹ Source: Atlas of the Rural Irish Landscape, Cork University Press, 1997.



What are Village Design Statements?

Village Design Statements (VDSs) are a way of enhancing, celebrating and managing local character and distinctiveness in a village. A VDS is an expression and description of what a local community believes to be the key factors and local features that make their particular village or town 'unique'. VDSs use this cultural base/asset to outline a series of planning and design guidelines, that can be used in early discussions with planners, developers and designers in order to help them plan and design in a way that responds to, and enhances identified 'valued features'.



Based mainly on local community input (involving all age groups), a successful VDS also draws upon the skills of local planning and heritage officers, to ensure that the assessment and analysis includes all assets and that the guidelines can be genuinely beneficial to all end users. If appropriate, the VDS can be adopted and tied into the formal planning system. To achieve this, a useful VDS focuses not on whether or where a development might or should take place (i.e. not on land-use planning), but specifically on how development might best happen in terms of design.

A Good Village Design Statement can therefore ...

- raise community awareness about their surrounding landscape, environment and heritage assets.
- provide the community with a useful '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, local authority planners, architects and others by giving them local guidance up-front.
- generate and develop overall community confidence and capacity-building.



The Initiative and the VDS Evaluation

Village Design Statements (VDSs) were introduced into Ireland in 2000 by the Heritage Council, with a particular emphasis placed on 'local heritage'. Over the past 8 years approximately 40 VDSs have been produced, many as a result of the efforts by many Local Authority Heritage Officers with most of the VDSs supported by part-funding from the Heritage Council. This in turn has enabled the appointment of specialist VDS consultants to undertake the work. More recently, the Village Design Statement for Lucan² (*Leamhcáin*), which introduced a more participative process that was designed by the Heritage Council, was awarded a Certificate of Merit for 'Participatory Planning' in 2008 from the Irish Planning Institute (IPI).


2008 was an appropriate time to take stock and to evaluate the usefulness and effectiveness of the VDS programme to date. A National Evaluation was commissioned by the Heritage Council to "examine the ways in which Village Design Statements (VDSs) have progressed and developed in Ireland" (Source: Heritage Council Project Brief for Consultants, April 2008). The evaluation team appointed by the Heritage Council was led by Prof. Stephen Owen of the University of Gloucestershire (who had already evaluated the VDS Programme in England and Wales) and Jeff Bishop of BDOR Limited (who, with a colleague, invented the concept of VDS). The team constructed a high-level overview of VDS work across the Republic of Ireland, studied the various approaches and methodologies used for VDSs in three specific counties. They also undertook detailed Case Studies of four Village Design Statements, including in-depth consultation with the local community and heritage groups, following their preparation from the start through to their end use/implementation.

Positive Messages from the VDS Evaluation:

- The Heritage Council should be congratulated for their commitment to the VDS initiative.
- 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 in Ireland, most respondents 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, along with the distinctive features of their village(s) and the design of new development.
- Local communities, local authority heritage officers, planning officers and councillors along with consultants benefited from working creatively together.
- Some examples were offered of VDSs being used in a way that made a genuine and positive difference, in terms of ensuring more locally distinctive design. and enhancement of the local heritage.



²<http://www.sdublincoco.ie/sdcc/departments/planning/publications/pdf/LucanVDS11090711092007.pdf>



Consultant: *"They were looking at their street in a way they had never looked at it before"*

Planning Officer: The VDS is *"good survey work"*

Community representative: We had *"three great meetings"*

Community representative: At the start we *"felt very empowered by the whole thing"*

Consultant: At the workshop we got *"some lovely quotes; very gentle things about what they wanted to have kept"*.

Cautionary Messages from the VDS Evaluation:

The general messages coming with remarkable consistency from officers, councillors, consultants and community representatives, were far less positive about most aspects of the current VDS programme:

- Few of the VDSs that exist (approx. 40) have made noticeable difference to local design on the ground.
- Many developers, architects and some Local Authority Planning Officers were unaware that the VDSs existed.
- VDSs were often deemed inappropriate for development control/management settings because they:
 - had no clear place within the overall planning system;
 - did not highlight genuine factors in local distinctiveness (some were almost identical in their proposals from village to village);
 - went into too much design detail, and
 - strayed into issues unrelated to design.
- The general perception was that there was little or no feeling of 'ownership' of the outcome/end product.
- A parallel view was that community involvement work was generally seen as "too little" and "too one-off".


Community representative: All the new housing *"could still be anywhere"*

Community representative: *"What community involvement?"*

Council officer: A VDS is just *"a poor man's Local Area Plan"*

Planning officer: *"Nobody could point to the main four or five things that came out of it"*

Community representative: The consultants *"were in and out as quickly as possible"*.



Overall Assessment

The key conclusion from the evaluation was that several aspects of the context for Village Design Statements (VDSs) at the time made real progress difficult. This included the pace of progress within the Irish Planning System, the relative novelty of community involvement in design matters, the general lack of skills in, for example, village design and community facilitation and, to some extent, a feeling that this was a 'just a heritage initiative'. While there is clearly more work to do to improve the detailed processes of VDS preparation along with their use and implementation, the delivery of these improvements alone would have been difficult, given the context that existed at the time.

Most importantly, 8 years on, that context has now changed for the better and it is still changing in ways that bode well for local distinctiveness in design and a more positive 'fit' for well prepared Village Design Statements, for example, with the recent surge of work by local authority planners on Local Area Plans (LAPs) throughout the country. All of the evaluation results, whether positive or less positive, lead to recommendations for the future management and delivery of the VDS Programme.



Village Design Statements - The Way Forward?

Key Lessons Learnt from Village Design Statements prepared in Ireland to Date...

- Urgent action is needed to reverse the erosion of 'local distinctiveness' in small towns and villages in Ireland.
- This action is best achieved by bringing together the knowledge, skills and commitment of local communities, planners, heritage officers and councillors.
- In principle, Village Design Statements (VDSs) are a useful 'tool' to enable and facilitate this creative joint initiative and to have a positive effect on subsequent changes and developments.
- Whether in association with Local Area Plans (LAPs) or via other links, any VDS needs to 'fit or link into' the formal planning system and processes.
- Landowners, developers and designers all need to play their part, so they will need to be involved in the process and also be made aware of emerging VDSs and how they are intended to be used.
- The basic approach of any VDS needs to be carefully tailored to its specific context.
- All parties involved need to have an understanding and awareness of the concept of 'Design literacy', i.e. what makes good design.

Future Village Design Statements could be valuable if...

- There is a genuine understanding and shared commitment to undertake a VDS among a community and its local authority.
- Towns and villages subject to major change are seen as the main, but not the only, appropriate locations for VDSs.





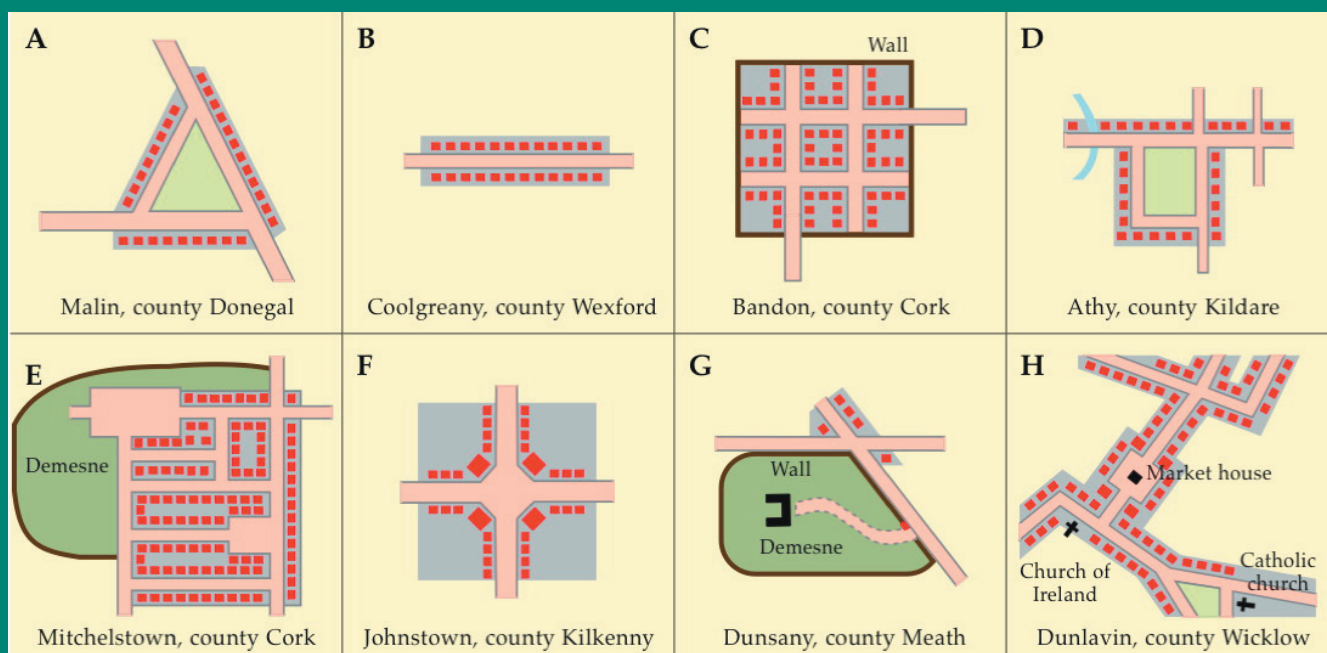
- The process is mainly community-led and, if required, with additional input and support from professionals.
- Involvement is widely inclusive, engaging all age groups, and continuing throughout the VDS preparation and implementation.
- Some form of 'VDS Champion' (or Champions) drives the VDS throughout – preparation and delivery.
- There is a clear focus on what makes each village 'distinctive'.
- The nature and form of a VDS is well-fitted to the current planning context, mainly but not only Local Area Plans (LAPs).
- Awareness and familiarity of the completed VDS is raised amongst all key parties and used positively to guide the design of future developments.

To Make this Happen in the Future the VDS Programme Needs...

- A multi-agency, partnership-oriented approach, bringing together relevant government departments, local government, local development organisations, professions (e.g. the IPI, RIAI and the ILI) and voluntary organisations;
- Clearer guidance about how a VDS might link into the evolving planning system (especially Local Area Plans) but also to the many programmes of wider social and economic development in rural areas, and
- A training programme for professionals, communities and elected representatives focusing on rural design, character and local distinctiveness, community engagement and the preparation, use and wide-ranging benefits of VDSs.

All of this might best be taken forward through a carefully planned and evaluated programme of well-targeted Village Design Statements (VDSs), chosen to demonstrate suitable approaches in varied settings, from which a mainstream VDS programme could then be developed.

Sample of town and village morphology



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Images courtesy of Jeff Bishop, Philip Geoghegan, Laurence Manogue, Steve Owen, Brian Redmond and Cork University Press.

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