

Village Design Statements, Parish Plans, Community-Led Plans and Neighbourhood Plans

In recent years, local communities have often felt marginalised by the formal development planning process and consequently may have had limited influence on development in the towns and villages where they live. The planning system has been changed to enable communities to engage more effectively and earlier in the development process with communities being given the opportunity to prepare Neighbourhood Development Plans. Babergh and Mid Suffolk will provide support to communities who are preparing such plans but also understand that not all communities have the capacity to take forward such planning documents due to costs, time and technical expertise. Consequently the Council has prepared this note to identify the alternatives and explain the differences. Which is the right one to choose in order to achieve your community's aspirations for the future?

Local Planning Policy Position

Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils are reviewing their local planning policies through forthcoming joint Development Plan documents (existing documents include the Core Strategy). You should consider whether your concerns and aspirations for the future of your area are already being addressed by these Documents.

If you are happy with the policies in the District's Plans, you may decide that there is no need to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan.

If you feel that the policies do not fully address what you would like to happen in your community, perhaps you would like more development than is suggested or to encourage business or retail use, then you could consider preparing a Neighbourhood Plan.

Before you decide, it is a good idea for the Parish/Town Council to review existing parish plan/village design statements/village reviews that may have been developed in the past to see if the outcomes/objectives from those documents have been delivered. If they have not been delivered it could be useful to assess why not and what would help deliver them. The Parish/Town Council are encouraged to engage with their community on general need issues for example housing, the environment and services. This engagement can be undertaken via a bespoke questionnaire and/or consultation event. The higher the response rate the more likely the findings will reflect the views of the whole community so different techniques will be necessary to reach out. With this information the Parish/Town Council can then decide how best to proceed.

Different issues need different planning responses. The aim of Parish/Town Councils should be to use the most appropriate tool to achieve the desired results.

Neighbourhood Plans form a key part of the recent changes to the planning system and the Government is supporting their production, however they are not the only way to influence how a community develops, but it is important to understand that none of the options are about stopping development.

Other options include:

- 1) Village Design Statements (VDS)
- 2) Parish Plans

- 3) Community-Led Plans
- 4) Neighbourhood Development Plans

The table below provides a summary of the differences between the options. All of the options are led by the Parish Council, who must comprehensively engage with their community:

	Village Design Statement	Parish Plans	Community-Led Plans	Neighbourhood Development Plans
Aims	To encourage developers and householders to design new development so that they are in keeping with existing local character.	To take a “holistic” approach. To set out a vision for how the community wants to develop in the future and to identify the actions needed to achieve it.	Focus on planning issues and what development the community would like to see.	To enable development. To decide where and what type of development should happen in the neighbourhood. To promote more development than is set out in the Core Strategy
Scope	Should be about the design of new development. It should not be used to detail what type of development should take place in a village or to seek to protect local services/facilities.	They can include everything that is relevant to the people who live and work in the community, including socio-economic and environmental issues.	It can cover more than just planning issues, but it needs to deliver a scheme.	It must be primarily about the use and development of land and buildings.
Survey/evidence/consultation	Visual appraisal, photographs, drawings, maps etc. Walking observation tour. Consultation with the community, on issues, and at each significant draft document explaining what has changed in the document and the reason.	Questionnaire to parishioners to establish the issues to address. Consultation with the community, on issues, and at each significant draft document explaining what has changed in the document and the reason.	Proportionate evidence. Consideration of information already available (census, environmental, and heritage). Questionnaire to parishioners. Photographs, drawings, maps etc. Consultation with the community, on issues, and at each significant draft document explaining what has changed in the document and the	Requires robust evidence base to support policies and proposals. Can use existing evidence (eg Council evidence) or require own surveys. Viability assessment, Sustainability Appraisal, Habitat Regulations Assessment also highly likely to be required (subject to content).

	Village Design Statement	Parish Plans	Community-Led Plans	Neighbourhood Development Plans
			reason.	
Status	Weight that can be attached as a material planning consideration is a matter of judgment for the decision-maker (the planning officer determining a specific planning application at the District Council). Depends on evidence, a robust programme of consultation, and relevance to future schemes. Likely to carry limited weight.	Weight that can be attached as a material planning consideration is a matter of judgment for the decision-maker (the planning officer determining a specific planning application at the District Council). Depends on evidence, a robust programme of consultation, and relevance to future schemes. Likely to carry limited weight.	Weight that can be attached as a material planning consideration is a matter of judgment for the decision-maker (the planning officer determining a specific planning application at the District Council). Depends on evidence, a robust programme of consultation, and relevance to future schemes. Likely to carry limited weight.	A formally adopted Neighbourhood Plan carries much greater weight in the decision making process. Once adopted (after independent examination and referendum), it becomes part of the 'Development Plan' for the District, and it is a material consideration when determining planning applications.
For use by	Developers: to guide their proposed designs. District Council planners to evaluate the designs (more use if adopted as Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). Parish Council/others: to guide any comment upon proposed designs.	Parish Council	Developers: to guide their proposals District Council planners to evaluate the proposals. Parish Council/others: to guide comments on future proposals.	For use by everyone: Forms part of the suite of legal planning policies that must be considered when determining planning applications in the area.

1. Village Design Statements

Village Design Statements are a form of planning guidance to inform the design of new development. Their aim is to encourage developers and householders to design new buildings or extensions (and other elements such as fences and outbuildings) so that they are in keeping with existing local character. The VDS should not be used to detail what type of development should take place in a village or to seek to protect local services/facilities.

Why choose to do a VDS

The VDS can contribute to retaining a sense of place by identifying, describing and analysing local distinctiveness and character and drawing guidance directly from this character.

What is the status of VDS?

The weight that can be attached to a VDS is a matter of judgement for the decision-maker (the planning officer at the District Council). Generally greater weight is attached to issues raised which are supported by evidence. Whilst the VDS is prepared by the local community, Planning Officers will need to assess how they interpret into the existing planning policies. They must be robust enough for them to be appropriate for active use in decisions on applications. On some occasions in the past, VDSs were adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document, but that required the District Council to follow strict regulation requirements (consultation etc). Since 2012 the National Planning Policy Framework advises that Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) should only be used where they can help applicants make successful applications. The Local Planning Authority (District Council) will therefore have to make a judgement and consider adopting future plans depending on their content, relevance to future planning applications, and whether a robust programme of consultation can be demonstrated.

Why choose to do a Village Design Statement?

The VDS can contribute to retaining a sense of place by identifying, describing and analysing local distinctiveness and character and drawing guidance directly from this character.

2. A Parish Plan

A Parish Plan is a statement of how a local community sees itself developing in the future and were popular in the early 2000s. They set out the needs and aspirations of the Parish based on the views and opinions of the people that actually live there.

The aim of a Parish Plan was to identify what actions the community would like to take, which would be the best group to take these forward and when they could realistically be achieved. This could be anything from ensuring building projects fit in with local character to supporting alternatives to private car use to improving the state of local parks. Many Parish Councils produced parish plans, often with the support of Suffolk Acre (now part of Community Action Suffolk). Parish Plans have been successful in identifying action plan outcomes with their deliverability assessed through regular monitoring to understand how they are progressing. More often the planning related elements within parish plans have been too subjective to be useful to a decision maker. In 2004 the planning system changed which made it harder for documents to be adopted for planning purposes. This affected their status in decision making and the way they were viewed by those producing them. Parish Plans are not redundant, but are documents that should be updated, and possibly tailored with specific planning focus, as and when actions are completed and the community's' needs and aspirations develop.

A Parish Plan is not just about things that people dislike and want to change in the community, it is an opportunity for the community to say what they want to achieve or improve in their area, especially when balanced against the realities of the national housing shortage.

Why choose to do a Parish Plan?

Parish Plans can be much broader than VDS, covering more than just planning issues... Working through the preparation of a Parish Plan bring benefit the community. It can:

- Bring the community closer together with a common goal
- Improve communications between the Parish Council and local people
- Address concerns about issues i.e. as transport, housing, environment, education etc.
- Seek residents' views about a particular project and support funding applications
- Provide an action plan to guide the actions taken to help them meet local needs
- Supports community cohesion as it requires the community to be involved and consulted.
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What is the status of a Parish Plan?

Depending on their content, relevance to future planning applications and whether a robust programme of consultation can be demonstrated, the decision-maker (the planning officer at the District Council) will make a judgement on how much weight should be attached as a [material planning consideration](#). Whilst the Plan is led by the local community, Planning Officers and any other agencies that have been identified in a proposal in the plan will need to assess how any proposals fit in with the existing policies. This is to ensure the plan's objectives are feasible and can be delivered. However this doesn't mean that the plan cannot include aspirations for future actions which are not possible at present.

3. Community-Led Plan

Similar to a parish Plan, but more related to 'planning issues'. There will be no one size fits all approach to Community-Led Plans. It will be dependent on the local circumstance in the parish. The plans can be as simple or complex as considered necessary. It could focus on delivering a single housing scheme to meet an identified need, such as a scheme for the elderly, or it could provide a long term vision and take a holistic view of village life exploring what are the qualities that make the village special. The plan should identify areas for improvement and how considering options on how development could deliver this. As such Community-Led Plans provide an opportunity for the community to articulate views on how they feel about where they live and how their area can integrate change in the future. The end result should be a plan that reflects the views of local people, setting out a framework to facilitate change and development.

Why choose to do a Community-Led Plan?

A Community-Led Plan could include consideration to some and or all the following matters:

- Setting the context by considering how the community views the village, what is valued about it and what you would like to improve or address?
- Setting the vision by considering what people wish to have and how they wish to view their area in the next 5, 10 and 15 years' time. Consideration towards the community's views towards amounts of future growth, development and change in general.
- The local view on new developments, the type of development needed (more bungalows, more small family homes), new facilities / services or local amenities.
- What land might be available for development and what are the site constraints which would need to be addressed.
- Identify distinctive design features, such as local vernacular, which developers will be encouraged to have regard towards.
- Identify heritage assets that could be enhanced and or protected.
- If there is a specific need identified by the community, how will this best be addressed?
- What infrastructure and services should be maintained or are required and how should they be prioritised and secured.
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4. Neighbourhood Development Plans

Neighbourhood Development Plans are about enabling development, not stopping it. It is important that there is a clear understanding of what neighbourhood planning is able to achieve.

A Neighbourhood Plan can...

- Decide where and what type of development should happen in the neighbourhood area;
- Promote more development than is set out in the Core Strategy;
- Include policies, for example regarding design standards that take precedence over existing policies in the Local Plan for the neighbourhood – provided the NP policies do not conflict with the strategic policies in the Core Strategy.

A Neighbourhood Plan cannot...

- Conflict with the strategic policies in the Core Strategy
- Be used to prevent development that is in the Core Strategy

The plan must comply with the above and it must be primarily about the use and development of land and buildings.

A Neighbourhood Plan could include:

- The development of housing, including affordable housing and bringing vacant or derelict housing back into use.
- Provision for businesses to set up or expand their premises.
- Issues around roads, cycling, walking and access for disabled people.
- The development of schools, places of worship, health, leisure and entertainment facilities, community and youth centres and village halls.
- The restriction of certain types of development and change of use.
- The design of buildings.
- Protection and creation of open space, nature reserves, allotments, sports pitches, play areas, parks and gardens, and the planting of trees.
- Protection of important buildings and historic assets.
- Safeguard cherished landscapes.
- Promotion of renewable energy projects, such as solar energy and wind turbines.

What is the status of a Neighbourhood Plan?

A formally adopted Neighbourhood Plan carries much greater weight in the decision making process than a VDS and Parish Plan. Once adopted (after independent examination and

referendum), it becomes part of the 'Development Plan' for the District, and it is a material consideration when determining planning applications.

5. And lastly;

Local Housing Needs Study. These are studies that provide vital background information when seeking planning permission for the provision of Affordable Housing and the mix of future Market Housing (for example bedroom numbers, type of tenure (rent or buy) and type (bungalows, small family homes etc). Local Housing Needs Studies more often or not are carried out by a third party such as Community Action Suffolk, to enable independent analysis. They are useful on their own, or supporting one of the plans above.