Guide
Department of Planning and Local Government

Desired Character Statements

February 2010
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Purpose

This document is one of a suite of Guides written by the Department of Planning and Local Government to assist councils, planning professionals and consultants to interpret and improve planning policy in Development Plans, and to implement South Australia’s current Planning Strategy.

The guide provides specific advice on the preparation of Desired Character Statements in the context of adopting the Better Development Plans (BDP) Planning Policy Library. It is primarily aimed at planning practitioners who are responsible for preparing and overseeing the Development Plan Amendment (DPA) process.

The guide assumes prior knowledge of the BDP Project, particularly two Planning Guides—Introduction to the Better Development Plans Project and Producing Better Development Plans.

It generally assumes that the structure of a Development Plan is appropriate and that the state’s and the council’s strategic intentions are properly reflected in the boundaries of Zones, Policy Areas or Precincts.
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Under the *Development Act 1993*, Development Plans are compiled by every council in South Australia to guide the orderly and economical development of land and enable the assessment of development applications.

Where growth and change should occur, how areas could perform, and what forms of housing and neighbourhoods could be created (for example), are questions that place considerable expectations on planning policy to provide clear direction about the future ‘look and feel’ of areas.

Desired Character Statements are vital in establishing a vision for specific areas; how their future characters will distinguish one area from another; and how present character and desired character can be contrasted. These then inform the nature and extent of changes envisaged.

Specifically, Desired Character Statements inform the intensity and performance of activities, and the appearance of changes sought in particular areas—both metropolitan and rural. In this way, Desired Character Statements will play a critical role in managing and responding to growing pressures for development in Greater Adelaide and several regional areas by providing clarity in the strategic intentions for these areas.

The notion of desired character is not new and several Development Plans feature Desired Future Character Statements, as they were previously called. The present need for Desired Character Statements to be diligently drafted results from increased emphasis on their role and importance, as well as their interpretation, to more effectively set expectations of development.

Through the Better Development Plans (BDP) Project, and in response to the Government’s planning reforms, the State Government has established a timeframe for updating the policy content of Development Plans. The BDP Library of leading-practice planning policy and a new set of structural and formatting conventions for Development Plans have been created. The rationale behind Desired Character Statements is part of the drive to ensure the consistency and integrity of the state’s planning system and assist in delivering the state’s strategic directions. They will be important tools for councils to use in achieving their strategic objectives.
This Guide assists in updating all Development Plans to the consistent structure and policy content advocated by the Better Development Plans (BDP) approach. The preparation of Desired Character Statements is an important part of this.

The approach to, and structure of, these statements take account of South Australia’s Strategic Plan; the Planning Reforms 2008 and the current State Planning Strategy, as well as relevant legislative provisions.

South Australia’s Strategic Plan 2007

South Australia’s Strategic Plan (www.stateplan.sa.gov.au) is the Government’s overarching plan to improve the prosperity and wellbeing of South Australians.

The plan contains six objectives to capitalise on the strengths of the state; they are intended to foster new abilities and opportunities through high-level targets for improvement:

- Growing Prosperity
- Improving Wellbeing
- Attaining Sustainability
- Fostering Creativity and Innovation
- Building Communities
- Expanding Opportunity

South Australia’s Strategic Plan sets ambitious targets for key issues such as community progress and infrastructure renewal, population growth, protection of biodiversity, food security and tackling climate change.

The planning system has a key role in achieving these targets and Desired Character Statements will assist the targets’ strategic, policy and administrative effectiveness. The importance of this was recognised in the Planning Reforms announced in June 2008, which address many objectives of the Strategic Plan.

Planning Reforms 2008

Through these reforms the Government has moved to accelerate the community, environmental and economic benefits of a strengthened planning system, including:

- incorporating The 30-Year Plan for Greater Adelaide (February 2010) and additional emphasis on the five country regions into the current Planning Strategy
- focusing on growth and development, as described in the objectives of South Australia’s Strategic Plan and the Plan for Greater Adelaide
- streamlining development assessment processes
- overhauling land supply management for commercial and residential purposes
- introducing stronger institutional arrangements and partnerships with local government.
This guide seeks to emphasise the relevance of Desired Character Statements to areas across South Australia, including townships and regional centres, not just the residential suburbs or metropolitan Adelaide.

**Application in metropolitan areas**

The network of centres within the metropolitan area combined with the extension or upgrading of public transport will provide opportunities for developments that offer a mix of high density quality housing co-located with employment opportunities, mass transit connections, services and recreational activities. The vision for such Transit Oriented Developments (TODs) will rely on ‘structure and precinct planning’ to determine their urban footprint and Desired Character Statements to establish a vision for their futures and guide expectations of their development.

As well as TODs, Growth Precincts are also being investigated, which may include older industrial and lesser-value commercial areas or areas with deteriorating housing stock. Whatever the opportunity for regeneration, such areas will benefit from a confident appraisal of what forms of development are likely to be preferred, where they should be located, and on what basis.

The vision for these areas will, in most cases, be very different from their present character. In other cases, in recognised areas of valued heritage and character, their future character may be quite similar to the present.

**The Planning Strategy**

The recently released 30-Year Plan for Greater Adelaide (February, 2010) refers to the usefulness of desired character statements in Structure Plans.

**Application in rural areas**

In rural areas, Desired Character Statements are also likely to be vitally important, as they will guide the sustainable management of regional centres and townships; protect our most valuable environmental, agricultural and tourism assets; and conserve heritage areas.

**Development Act 1993**

Desired Character Statements are legally recognised by the state in section 23(3a) of the Development Act 1993:

“A Development Plan may, in setting out objectives or principles under subsection (3)(a), describe the characteristics and other aspects of the natural or constructed environment that are desired within the community in order to provide clear directions with respect to development in the relevant area.”

Desired character has also been recognised in other legislation, for example, section 106 of the Liquor Licensing Act 1997 states that Court Commissioners must take into account the Desired Character Statement of the relevant area when complaints are made in court about a licensed premise.

The role and use of Desired Character Statements is further underscored in the Planning Policy Library. In each zone module, core policy includes an Objective and a Principle of Development Control that refers to the need for development to be consistent with the desired character of the zone.

Although the legal recognition of Desired Character Statements has been noted, their use in Development Plans is not mandated. The emphasis is on quality (i.e. concise, clear, and direct statements) not quantity (i.e. not every zone must have a Desired Character Statement in the first instance). Several court cases have commented that some Desired Character Statements (and policies) are of little assistance to the application at hand; **above all, relevance to development assessment is the key to drafting the statements.**
The Environment, Resources and Development (ERD) Court has had regard to the content of Desired Character Statements in determining numerous judgments. In some cases, reliance on a statement has been considerable and the legal significance of Desired Character Statements is well established. Notable examples include:

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What are Desired Character Statements?

Desired Character Statements are a form of local policy in Development Plans that adds area-specific guidance to core BDP policy. They are deliberately descriptive and aim to provide clear directions for development. Their diligent preparation and interpretation is vital in ensuring that developments align with the strategic intentions of particular areas so that, over time, their desired character will be realised. Desired Character Statements, while not mandatory:
- are a succinct description of expectations of development, outlining a vision for the future of a discrete zone, policy area or precinct
- are not a re-statement of present character, but contain the strategic intent and desires for future character (unless the current character is the desired character).
- capture defining features to express desired character, its relationship with present character, and the stated intentions for one area as compared with another
- provide ‘word pictures’ about the intensity and performance of uses, and the general characteristics of appearance, that will be sought from development
- are snap-shots of the ‘future-state’ of an area, thereby guiding developers, planners and the community in ways that quantitative provisions cannot
- may herald a council’s intentions for public realm improvements and infrastructure renewal to assist in the achievement of the desired character
- provide the ‘glue’ to bind strategic intentions with more local policy provisions for a discrete area
- seek to avoid inconsistencies with, or duplication of, policies elsewhere
- are even more important when there is a significant difference between the present character and the desired character of an area.

Writing Desired Character Statements requires considerable skill to succinctly describe the future of an area and select key characteristics to emphasise. To assist in this, a structure for the expression of desired character is provided in this guide. Notably, precise writing styles and the use of plain English are essential to convey clear directions for the character sought and to avoid unintended interpretations.
'Character' and 'Desired Character' in the Planning Context

'Character' has been defined as the interrelationship of various aspects of built form, topography, vegetation, density, subdivision pattern, and activity, both in the public realm and private domain.

The word 'character' has often been mistakenly associated with issues of amenity, style and taste, and personal responses to these. Some areas have been also described as having 'little or no character', while others are said to display 'lots of character'. In fact, all areas have present characters that can be analysed and described.

It is vital that character not be confused with heritage.

Heritage is determined through tests for heritage significance against legislated criteria and is best known for the conservation of 'fabric' required to retain that significance. Character is derived from the visual qualities or attributes, patterns and spatial definition that presently 'characterise' an area.

The key question in a planning context is whether the present character is the same as that desired in the future. The need to distinguish clearly between the present and desired characters (and thereby foreshadow the extent of change required) is critical to effective planning. This distinction will enable more confident decision-making by users of Development Plans (e.g. council assessment officers, applicants and the public) by informing the future directions sought in specific areas.

(A future guide will more fully address the distinction between heritage and character and the creation of effective controls for each, as well as their application during development assessment.)

The Desired Character Statement is therefore a tool of change management. It is not invested with a 'value' as such, nor is it a matter of personal opinion.

The Desired Character Statement outlines what should characterise the future of discrete areas. It is an extension of carefully considered strategic intentions, complements the Objectives and helps to deliver the Principles of Development Control. Rather than describing areas as having 'lots of' or 'little' character, Desired Character Statements envisage the results of 'lots of' or 'little' change.

Some change is inevitable in all areas. In the continuum of change from a little to a lot, for example, heritage areas may be expected to change far less than areas targeted for urban regeneration. The management of growth (either little or a lot) will more confidently occur if the 'vision' for that growth and change is clearly articulated.
Whether a lot of change or a little; whether in urban or rural settings, Desired Character Statements have an instructive role that extends beyond their descriptive content. They are aimed at giving the planning authority, applicants and the community real guidance about the development outcomes envisaged for an area, clarifying the future of areas for investors and their communities. The statements also reinforce the role of the Development Plan as a strong determinant of an area’s physical appearance and performance.

While all Development Plans will ultimately share a consistent structure, the area’s unique local qualities or ambitions for change should be captured by Desired Character Statements to complement the policy modules in the BDP Library as ‘local additions’.

In summary, distinctions in planning policy between the present character of an area and the future distinction of that area will be crystallised in the Desired Character Statement.
Introduction

Desired Character Statements will generally be written by local councils using their knowledge and understanding of an area, coupled with a clear understanding of their strategic intent.

In cases where the concept of desired character has never been part of a council’s deliberations, ‘first generation’ Desired Character Statements could be prepared by these councils, based on existing information. Subsequent analysis and consultation can then add guidance and sophistication to later versions of the statements. Valuable existing information may be found in ‘Background’ sections in some Development Plans, or in commentary that follows individual Principles of Development Control. Such content can be relevant to Desired Character Statements. However, such information should not be included without being tested against the advice in this guide to ensure that it addresses relevant matters.

Elements Influencing a Desired Character Statement

The Desired Character Statement is an opportunity to indicate how various aspects of character link with each other to shape the future. It is not a substitute for existing policy; rather it amplifies intentions for specific areas.
Step 1  Review the strategic intentions for the area

Desired Character Statements should first be shaped by the broader strategic intentions for the region and council area, followed by the more specific local planning and zoning directions.

Review of the current State Planning Strategy to determine the relevant state or regional strategic goals for the area under consideration is the primary consideration. Topics of particular relevance at this stage may include the location of the urban boundary; associated strategies such as housing choice and diversity; the preservation of land for industrial development and primary production; and the containment of rural townships.

It will also be necessary for councils to review their current Strategic Plan, Strategic Directions Report and/or ‘section 30’ Development Plan Review. These documents contain key information about the council’s strategic goals and the opportunities and constraints on development within particular areas. Issues such as the supply of land for different land uses; the availability of water; the spatial implications of stormwater and power capacity; transport infrastructure; areas of land contamination; areas of deteriorating housing stock or run-down community facilities; and areas of valued heritage and character could be critical to providing the clear direction sought from Desired Character Statements.

In some areas, further research or analysis may be needed. For example, a council may wish to explore the likely demand for new ‘downstream’ industrial growth in an area following the establishment of a major manufacturer. In residential settings, a housing needs study may be required to determine whether the available choice and types of housing within the area adequately provide for both existing and future communities. Other studies could include for example, an examination of community aspirations and values in relation to the character of specific areas.

Additional research is also likely to be important to how much emphasis is given to the intensity of use, performance, and appearance, of development envisaged for the future of an area. Such research may support changes in emphasis or direction in the strategic intentions for an area and therefore need to be reflected in the Desired Character Statement. Several iterations of Desired Character Statements may be necessary.

Delivery on the strategic intent for an area is the paramount objective.

Step 2  Gain a good understanding of the existing character of the area

It is vital that the council gains a thorough understanding of the present character of an area before it is able to express its expectations for the future. Identifying opportunities and constraints for desired character that could be influenced by present characters is an important influence at this stage.

Councils will need to decide which elements and patterns prevailing in a neighbourhood will be important in the future and then explain how these should interact to contribute to the desired character of the area. The headings in the section ‘Checklists’ should be used as prompts to achieve this.

It is important to break character into separate elements for analysis, but without emphasising any one or two elements, since the importance of their interrelationships could be overlooked. Understanding how these interrelationships and patterns appear on the ground is most important when analysing the present character of an area.
Step 3  Reconcile strategic goals with knowledge of existing character

The next step is to remember that the existing character of an area is only one of a number of issues that need to be integrated in planning policy. In other words, character is important to zoning and policy but only in the context of the area’s broader strategic goals and community needs.

The situation may arise for example, where areas identified as having a valued character are also appropriate for regeneration or increased residential densities. This may mean that undue emphasis on the present character discourages a council from focusing on that area for these purposes. In other cases, a council may choose to regenerate or increase the density of an area as this may be the only way to prevent the area’s decline. Clearly competing objectives for an area should be identified as early as possible and reconciled so that a Desired Character Statement can be confidently developed.

The most important outcome of this step is to determine how similar or dissimilar present and desired characters should be and why? The strategic intentions for an area will determine whether or not minor changes are required or, perhaps, a completely new and different character is desired.

Step 4  Draft the statements

When preparing a statement of desired character of an area, the statement should:

- look at least 5 to 20 years ahead
- be relatively concise: approximately 250 to 500 words for each area
- be written in plain English, using flowing and interconnected paragraphs
- refer to the relevant zone, policy area or precinct
- provide a ‘word picture’ or overall vision for the zone, imagining the zone or policy area into the future, including key visual elements
- focus on possibilities not limitations, using positive language wherever possible
- identify the degree and type of change desired, as well as key characteristics
- use visionary phrasing, such as:
  - ‘It is envisaged that …’
  - ‘It is expected that …’
  - ‘It will be important for…’
  - ‘It is essential that…’
  - ‘A key priority for this area’s character will be…’
  - ‘…will be a key consideration in the context of future developments…’
  - ‘There is capacity for…’
  - ‘The area will be characterised by…’
  - ‘This location needs to be…’
  - ‘In terms of built form…’
  - ‘Linkages with…will be maintained (or strengthened)’
  - ‘The locality lends itself well to…’
  - ‘The existing [applicable variable] of the zone is unsatisfactory and in need of improvement. This can be achieved through…’
• note present, or the future provision of, landmarks or landscape ‘accents’
• amplify the Objectives and Principles of Development Control
• complement the more quantitative provisions with qualitative guidance
• be drafted in appropriate detail depending on the impacts of change desired and the extent of the area being addressed
• use confident and clear expression (that delivers the desired character) rather than being compromising, hesitant or vague (which suggests possible character)
• include a short description of the current character to set the context for future change (only when relevant).

The statements should not:
• repeat any Objectives or Principles of Development Control
• adopt phrasing that is reserved for Principles of Development Control (e.g. ‘development should…’)
• rely on quantitative figures or measurements (these belong in Principles of Development Control)
• be expressed in terms of absolutes
• be written in a segmented fashion (through the use of subclauses, dot points or tables)
• include jargon
• use overly broad or informal expressions (with inverted quotes), or terms more commonly found in marketing literature e.g. “high town feel”, “village lifestyle” or “maritime theme”; it is more appropriate to remove the inverted quotes and explain clearly what is meant by the high town feel, village lifestyle or maritime theme.
• focus on types of land use: these are incorporated within the Principles of Development Control and the envisaged use list of each zone
• include reference to process matters (e.g. applications for…will not be considered)
• incorporate purely historical information that lends no assistance in decision making or setting the vision for the locality (e.g. “in 1851, John Smith purchased 25 acres of land from the State Government…”)
• specify access arrangements onto private property.

When written clearly and concisely, Desired Character Statements fulfil their intended purpose of providing greater clarity to the intent of a zone, policy area or precinct. When the Development Plan is read as a whole, the policies should build on each other in a cascade from the general to the specific and not appear in isolation.

Where a zone contains policy areas (and precincts), the Desired Character Statements should reinforce this cascade from the general to the specific in terms of levels of description. The zone statement in such cases should simply frame at a higher level the aspirations for that zone as a whole. Policy area statements should clearly indicate what differentiates the desired character for one policy area from others in the zone.

Should difficulty be experienced when writing a Desired Character Statement owing to a diversity of characters being foreshadowed, then perhaps the strategic intent and development expectations of the area are too broad to be captured in the one zone or policy area. They may need to be split into more than one area, each being cohesive and appropriate to the intensity of uses envisaged.

Preparation of Desired Character Statements can act to further validate (or otherwise) the Zoning and structure of Development Plans for more effective guidance.
A Development Plan’s importance is in its guidance, rather than its descriptions, as valuable as these may be. Desired Character Statements can certainly describe existing attributes, but only to the extent that they identify the development-related ‘characteristics’ (and public realm matters) considered critical to establishing the vision for the area (i.e. how much or how little is to be changed).

As a result, the preferred approach is to:

- use a single Desired Character heading (with subheadings only to distinguish geographical areas covered by the same zoning, such as towns or Precincts)
- make no reference to heritage significance unless it drives the desired character
- identify any valued character attributes for retention
- include directions on the degree of change sought for the area (i.e. look to the future and explain its characteristics) rather than include descriptions of a past or historical context.

The headings below can be used as a checklist for preparing Desired Character Statements. They move from the broad to the more detailed examination of an area. Statements relating to the headings should reflect this, i.e. by providing a general overview down to specific goals at local or street level.

Not all of these elements will be relevant in every area. Statements will usually have a heavier focus on the higher-level elements. Elements should be included only if they contribute to the assessment of development proposals and are relevant to the character desired in a particular area.

### Zone/Policy Area Level

#### Function
- role within council area (context)
- preferred land uses/mix/dwelling types (only if required to expand on the Objectives and Principles of Development Control)
- development intensity
- major movement elements/linkages within the area and adjoining other areas
- hours of operation (particularly for non-residential uses).

#### Pattern of Development
- ‘type’ of area (including layout and structure, subdivision patterns of note, spaciousness versus intimacy of the area etc)
- Topography, landscape and natural features
- pattern of buildings and surrounding garden spaces
- pattern and size of allotments
- site amalgamation
- street layout/hierarchy/width
**Public Realm**
- type/quality/extent of streetscaping
- footpaths, street furniture and pedestrian facilities
- open spaces and plazas
- climatic protection
- community facilities
- infrastructure such as utilities and services
- active frontages.

**Scenic Prominence**
- views within the area
- views to and from the area
- landmarks/features/vistas/key buildings/axes.

**Local/Street Level**

**Built Form/Character**
- siting and setbacks
- building height, scale and form
- roof form/pitch
- site coverage/rhythm and spacing
- play of light and shade
- materials/colours/textures
- verandahs/porches/balconies (i.e. elements beyond the main building envelope)
- simplicity/complexity of detailing
- advertising.

**Landscaping**
- public/private landscaping
- type/extent of landscaping
- driveways and car access
- fencing
- interface between the public realm and private domain.
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