

# Mini case study

## Countesswells, Aberdeen City Council



This case study shows a local authority-led masterplanning approach to housing. The Local Development Plans (LDP) named key sites in its strategy for housing growth. Here, the authority's leadership shaped the quality and expectations of the developments. This approach allowed public and private sector parties to work collaboratively on design, development and delivery.

### Project & approach

Countesswells is a development roughly 7km west of Aberdeen city centre that will accommodate a new community of around 7,000 people. The development will include 3,000 residential homes across all markets, two primary schools, an academy built to meet Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) standards, a medical centre with both GP and a dental practice, and a town centre with retail and commercial services.

The Countesswells Development Ltd. (CDL) funding model allowed for significant up-front infrastructure delivery and major landscaping works. Open space resources were created prior to the first residents moving in. The built environment is arranged around a series of green spaces and connected by a network of paths and cycle routes.

Early IT connectivity was crucial. CDL arranged a partnership with a service provider to deliver a completely open network with speeds of over 1Gbps, the fastest in the UK at the time.

Aberdeen City Council developed the masterplanning process with the Local Development Plan 2012 and became the first local authority to adopt an LDP under Scotland's 2010 planning reforms.

The Countesswells Development Framework and Masterplan guides the planning and delivery of the site. Stewart Milne Homes assembled a multi-disciplinary design team on behalf of the landowners in the area (the Countesswells Consortium). Following Aberdeen City Council's masterplanning guidance, the design team (led by OPEN) prepared the Framework and Masterplan in collaboration with the City Council's Strategic Place Planning service. Extensive public engagement took place during the preparation of the Framework, involving residents and neighbouring community councils.

### Process and Practice

"Previously many developments in Aberdeen had been opportunistic and reactive to the oil industry," Sandy Beattie explains. Beattie led the team responsible for co-ordinating the briefing and delivery of this relatively atypical, but highly effective, model.

"Our Masterplan, Design and Conservation Team sits between the Development Management and Policy Teams in Planning... The masterplan team effectively features senior planners for masterplanning, urban design and conservation disciplines supported by planners and technicians. With finite resources and



**Top:** View of the bike lanes and pedestrian walkways in Countesswells. **Bottom:** Aerial illustration of the Countesswells neighbourhood (Credit: Optimized-Environments).

*“Continuity of involvement is important as each masterplan remains a live document with potentially many changing circumstances. This continual evolution of place needs to be carefully managed and the Masterplan team is well placed to address this”*

Sandy Beattie, Team Leader (Masterplanning, Design and Conservation) Aberdeen City Council

eleven masterplan zones across the City, rather than prepare masterplans, our role is to set the guidance and agree the brief with developers.”

Sandy Beattie points out the key elements of what a masterplan team can provide: “Leadership, in terms of design and placemaking,” and “Structure, to give certainty in delivering.”

### **The Masterplanning approach**

- “The Masterplan has allowed us to influence each of the phases to connect them together. It’s a real step change in how we deliver Place.
- “Being involved in every aspect of the planning allows oversight that avoids duplication and offers constancy.”
- “It makes economic sense to adopt this masterplanning approach as it would cost us a six-figure sum every time we wanted to do a masterplan; this is unsustainable as the public purse is restricted.
- “The success of our approach is in working with the market to explore what can be effectively delivered, rather than dictating to the market.”

### **What worked well**

The Countesswells Masterplan identifies four key themes: context, identity, connectivity and communication. The development has released its first homes to market and will finish with the new town centre development in the next few years, which requires a critical mass of people.

**Homes:** “25% of affordable homes will be built in-line with the Local Development Plan policy. These homes are integrated within the phasing of the development and designed as part of each relevant character area.”

**Community:** “The fundamental idea of the whole area is to create this idea of a ‘walkable neighbourhood’ where everything’s connected and allows kids to walk to school, getting away from the practice of a drop-off at the front door. The benefits of this will be seen in years to come in terms of health and wellbeing.”

### **What were the Challenges**

**Education:** “The first Primary School is consented to and currently underway. We’re working to create a secondary school with the public areas at street level, facing a major urban park. This campus approach would be a first for Aberdeen and Scotland, in contrast to school buildings that have fences around them and that don’t interact very well. (In retrospect) we would have liked to have pushed the education side much quicker by placing a pop-up school earlier in the development.”

**Infrastructure:** “We would have preferred to put all the infrastructure in first, but housing has to be delivered and sold there initially in order to support the infrastructure.”

### **Conclusion**

“The main lessons learned is to be engaging, open minded, firm once you’ve agreed to a framework, but also have the confidence to know when to be flexible.”

*“We are involved from the beginning and we control the process all the way through. We agree the parameters of the brief and are presented with a draft. We manage that draft process internally with all the different functions in the council. This ensures that all the different services understand the implications of any design or planning decision. We work with the appointed design team to ensure that the draft masterplan incorporates any advice, views and appropriate amendments. It then goes out to formal consultation both physically and online, the results of which are reported to committee to inform elected members prior to adoption of the masterplan. When the masterplan is finalised and the various planning applications come in, the masterplan team has a directorial role, ensuring compliance.”*



Sandy Beattie

*Team Leader (Masterplanning, Design and Conservation) Aberdeen City Council*