In March 1994 responsibility for the management of 3,479 homes in Castle Vale passed from Birmingham City Council to Castle Vale Housing Action Trust. It was the first transfer of public housing stock in Birmingham’s history. It also meant that nearly three years after the idea was first raised the tenants of Castle Vale had a new landlord.

For obvious reasons, managing housing in the context of a large-scale clearance and rebuilding programme will always be a challenge. At Castle Vale this complexity of the task was exacerbated because the Housing Action Trust had no track record, and very few members of staff. Financial constraints were another problem. Until the end of 1996, with no guarantees about funding, housing had to pit against other departments for the available money. This contributed to internal tensions. “It was a hectic period, and it did take a while to establish lines of communication between departments,” says one member of staff from the era. On top of this, as a new organisation the Trust needed to write policies that both shaped its own identity and reflected the wishes of residents. It also had to start preparing the ground for its successors. These and other factors conspired to make the Trust’s experience as landlord a little different from the ground for its successors. These and other factors conspired to make the Trust’s experience as landlord a little different.

The role of landlord entails certain universal responsibilities. These include allocating and maintaining properties, collecting rents, enforcing the relationship with tenants, and, where necessary, enforcing tenancy conditions. The imminent redevelopment of Castle Vale made little difference to rents collection (they had been frozen as a condition of the 1993 ballot), but it did impact on allocations and maintenance. It also meant that the Trust had to communicate effectively on a wide range of issues, notably the schedule for demolition and re-housing. The years ahead would be fraught with upheaval. Patience and a good relationship with the community would be vital to success.

The Trust also had a number of advantages over Birmingham City Council, its predecessor landlord. Unlike local authorities, the Housing Action Trusts were not required to keep a housing revenue account, a means of ensuring that all expenditure on housing management can be funded from rents. The imperative to balance the books places severe limitations on the capacity of local authorities to invest large sums of money quickly, even in areas of severe deprivation. As a quango the Trust didn’t have this problem. “This put it in a position to provide a pretty Rolls Royce management service in terms of repairs, target times, and peripheral housing management support,” says Pat Niner, Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies (University of Birmingham), and long-term HAT board member.

With one exception (2002), the Trust was up to speed. As a demonstration of commitment the Trust revised completion times for repairs. From 1994 the targets were: 24 hours for emergencies (reduced to two hours in 2000), three days for ‘urgent’, and ten days for ‘standard’

It was not only the repairs backlog that was tackled. Grounds maintenance was prioritised. “We also began the process of changing tenancy conditions to be tougher on neighbour nuisance,” says Angus Kennedy. These actions were a direct response to requests from the community, and designed to provide early evidence that the Trust was responsive to its tenants.

Members of the Green Box Gang, a small but notorious group of teenage troublemakers, were the first to be evicted from the estate, in 1998. Some residents – oversimplifying the extent of the Trust’s role – saw the relatively high-quality services provided by the local authority as another advantage. It was not difficult for the Housing Action Trust to look good in comparison. Some residents had at last begun to hope for investment in the estate. There was a backlog of routine repairs going back at least 12 months, including gates, fencing, and plastering. From the Trust’s perspective this created the perfect conditions for a rapid and cost-effective means of gaining tenants’ trust.

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powers — had hoped for more immediate action. In truth, eviction
only became possible following the 1997 establishment of
ValeWatch, an operation that allowed the police and Housing Action
Trust to identify trouble spots and suspects (see chapter 6).

But while tackling the repairs backlog was important, particularly in
building relationships with residents, the benefits were temporary.
That’s why the Housing Action Trust’s first decisions on housing were
to stop letting in the Centre 8, and to start clearing properties for
demolition. It was the clearance and rebuilding programme that
would make the lasting difference.

Clearance

In 1994 it was anticipated that the clearance and demolition
programme would be much less extensive than turned out to be the
case. The masterplan — which outlined a development framework
across the estate (see chapter 6) — proposed the demolition of 17
of the estate’s 34 tower blocks, and 24 four-storey maisonette
blocks. By 2002 an additional 15 tower blocks, three maisonettes,
and 114 bungalows had also been cleared, almost doubling the
extent of clearance, demolition, and rebuilding. Castle Vale was
barely recognisable. The forgotten wasteland pockmarked by towers
had become a dignified low-rise housing estate.

Over its lifetime, the Housing Action Trust and its housing association
partners built 1,486 new homes

A substantial redevelopment programme had been anticipated well
before the first clearance site was announced. So instead of re-letting
empty properties we began stockpiling them. This gave us a kick start
when clearance began in earnest,” says Bernadette Nolan, then
housing officer with the Trust, later performance manager for housing.

The Trust’s allocations strategy was similarly enlightened, partly because
it could be: with a relative wealth of stock the Trust did its best to match
homes to occupants’ needs and aspirations, not a luxury commonly
available to property-strapped local councils. And partly to build
foundations for the future: it is standard practice for a social landlord to
re-house tenants on a like-for-like basis, but the Housing Action Trust gave
tenants a choice of properties. The hope was that increased domestic
contentment would create a stable community. “We also tried to build
what people wanted,” says Sharon Gilligan, the Trust’s housing manager.

When complete the majority of these properties were managed by Castle Vale Community Housing Association (founded in 1997, see side panel), which would eventually become the dominant landlord in Castle Vale. By the
end of the programme in 2002, 1,237 of the original 2,262 properties remained under the management of Castle Vale Housing Trust. The development suggests that some properties were retained with a range of less
than one, two, and five tenant homes, suggesting a clearance of redundant costly properties that did not suit current and future needs.
The clearance programme also influenced the relationship between the Housing Action Trust and Birmingham City Council, which hadn’t always been strong – in some corners of the council a whiff of resentment at the imposition and relative wealth of the Trust still lingered. But the Trust needed the council to find homes for the large numbers of residents who took the opportunity to leave in the initial phase of the clearance programme. The council didn’t disappoint.

Until 2001, Birmingham City Council also agreed to release the Housing Action Trust from its nominations obligation. This assisted the Trust in two ways. First, there was no need to accommodate new tenants, which would have been an additional distraction during the clearance and rebuilding programmes. It also allowed the Trust full control over all the properties on the estate, which enabled it to mould communities with a desirable balance of ages and racial backgrounds.

Clearance got off to a good start. By early 1997, 1,015 properties were ready for demolition, including the estate’s symbolic heart, the Centre 8. Each of the 16-storey towers – Abingdon, Bovingdon, Cosford, Cranwell, Kemble, Lyneham, Northolt, and Shawbury – contained 92 apartments. During the clearance process the Trust found it necessary to employ security companies to patrol the Centre 8, 24 hours a day. The principal reason was to protect remaining tenants. They also guardian against looting.

By 1999 the majority of the unused maisonettes had also been cleared, as had Albert Shaw House, a 15-storey sheltered housing scheme that sat on top of the old shopping centre. Over the next two years the 14 towers along Farnborough Road and Concorde Tower – at 20 storeys the tallest on the estate – all came down.

The main reason for the growth of the clearance programme was that option appraisals indicated that refurbishment would be financially unviable for a large number of tower blocks, maisonettes and bungalows. In Castle Vale all developments were the subject of an option appraisal, which meant that the Housing Action Trust could assess the cost-effectiveness of the various routes available to achieving its ambition of improving living standards. High-rise towers were particularly expensive to refurbish. ‘Only too survived’.

The appraisals also enabled the Housing Action Trust to stagger the dissemination of information that might have worried or antagonised tenants. ‘Demolition can be quite an emotive subject, particularly for the elderly,’ says Bernadette Nolan.

Decommissioning of properties was particularly expensive to refurbish. ‘Déjà vu’ (rent) was recorded at 100%. It was all undeniable evidence of the Trust’s effectiveness as a landlord. Now it was time to fine-tune the service, and prepare for succession.

The Housing Action Trust’s handling of decommissioning properties was accepted by the tenants. ‘I loved it.’

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To keep an eye on the basics and compare its standards against similar-sized social landlords, the Housing Action Trust introduced benchmarking. Measuring itself against similar-sized organisations was a means of keeping the Trust on its toes. It also influenced policy.

“Benchmarking illustrated that lowest cost did not necessarily represent best value. One year our housing management service was commended as good value for money even though the cost was much higher than our peers. The reason was high legal costs, a result of responding to the tenants’ requests to be tough on neighbour nuisance,” says Angus Kennedy (see chapter 6).

The Trust also tried to find ways to reach out to homeowners, some of whom still felt that the regeneration of Castle Vale had not benefited them. One of its vehicles was ‘VIP Gold’, a rent collection tool that rewarded residents for prompt payment of rent and service charges. Tenants were awarded financial incentives and preferential services for paying their rent on time; lease holders were rewarded for paying service charges. “The idea was to encourage people of all tenures to make a commitment to the estate,” says Gilligan.

To encourage a greater diversity of tenure was one of the Housing Action Trust’s four statutory objectives (see chapter 2). In the early 1990s, 1,407 of Castle Vale’s 4,886 households lived in leasehold or freehold properties, 29% of the total. The Trust was obliged to increase that percentage.

There were strong arguments in favour of tenure diversification, including breaking down the distinction between ‘us’, homeowners in the Park Lane area, and ‘them’, everyone else. But there was also a suspicion that the statutory obligation was a legacy of the Housing Action Trust’s Thatcher-era origins. Was it there to encourage private ownership and erode the influence of local councils? “There’s not much doubt that the HAT was less concerned with tenure diversification than its other obligations,” says one former board member.

Increasing the diversity of tenure was achieved in a number of ways. Tenants had retained the right to buy their homes; a total of 86 took the opportunity. Leaseholders were also encouraged to buy the freehold of their properties; increasing the numbers by a further 97.

The self-build initiative (see chapter 4), and building homes for sale also helped. And in 1997 the Tenants Incentive Scheme was launched, which offered tenants a £10,000 grant towards the purchase of a property. By 2004, 39% of households in Castle Vale were either leasehold or freehold.

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13 The Housing Action Trust generated revenue of £3 million from Right to Buy and leaseholders acquiring freeholds. 
14 The Farnborough Road development (see chapter 4) included 26 homes for private sale; the self-build scheme produced 14 homes. 
15 A total of 331 tenants took up Tenants Incentive Scheme, of whom 245 bought for private sale, the self-build scheme produced 14 homes. 
16 Lord John Spellar, the then DOG minister overseeing HATs, hands over a Tenants Incentive Scheme cheque to a family who bought a new home in Castle Vale. Pictured left is Alison Hadden, the HAT’s first Housing Director.
Succession

Regardless of improvements in services and quality of life achieved between 1993 and 2005, the Trust’s housing strategy seems certain to be judged against the performance of its successor landlord.

At the outset it had been widely assumed that the tenants would return to the council when the Housing Action Trust expired—the “right to return” was one of the key changes to the original 1988 legislation, driven by tenant opposition. But by the time of the Landlord Choice Ballot in autumn of 2003, Birmingham City Council was a distant second. Castle Vale Community Housing Association (CVCHA) was the preferred option of the large majority of remaining Housing Action Trust tenants.

The Trust had been cultivating CVCHA, a new community-led housing association, since 1995. That was when the idea of working in partnership with housing associations first mooted. The concept is explained in detail on page 36, but in essence the funding relationship between the public (Castle Vale HAT) and private/public organisations (housing associations) allowed the Trust to build two new homes for the price of one. It was both good business, and inevitable. From early 1996 the Housing Action Trust knew that it was not going to receive sufficient government funding to cover the programme. The £200 million committed by the Department of the Environment was at least £20 million below its own estimate. The Trust used always going to have to find funds from private sources.

The difference at Castle Vale, the seed that grew into CVCHA, was that the two housing associations selected as key partners offered to set up a community association to manage the new homes. This idea, endorsed enthusiastically by the Trust, has become one of the great success stories of Castle Vale. Its success is even more remarkable in the context of early opposition.

There were two large bones of contention. First, tenants displaced by the clearance programme expected to be housed in Housing Action Trust accommodation. The fact that they might now be re-housed in a property run by a housing association meant that they would forfeit their right to return to the council. That’s not what they had voted for in 1993. Second, some residents suspected backdoor privatisation. They felt bad enough that they’d been cheated, but to badge a housing association as ‘community led’, that was too much.

Attitudes gradually softened. The main drivers were the quality of the housing associations’ products and services, and the effectiveness of its management team – during the research for this book it was clear that CVCHA commanded a very high level of respect across the estate.

“When we were told that Concorde Tower would be demolished we were all refused to move,” says Beatrice Lunn. “But as soon as they started building the new houses we were there every night seeing how they were coming on. We were like, ‘bloody hell, six months ago we weren’t going to move, now we can’t wait.’ We were impressed.”

Ian Bingham, a former opponent, now employed as resident involvement and marketing co-ordinator for CVCHA, remembers: “The housing associations were imposed on us. Like many on the estate I thought that they were private landlords who charged high rents and had the right to evict you. But once I realised that the community really would be in control I did start to change my mind.”

This was all encouraging, but the ultimate endorsement for CVCHA was the Landlord Choice Ballot in October 2003. John Slawson, director of Birmingham Cooperative Housing Services, was invited to work as an independent tenant’s advisor, to oversee the ballot. “In the six years since we’d worked at Castle Vale [see chapter 1], CVCHA had overcome opposition, and built a good track record. When it came to the ballot they had all the aces. They were locally-based, and clearly the more attractive option.”

The 1,327 households still managed by the Housing Action Trust were given the choice of returning to the council, or transferring to

HAT Staff and residents visit a new block of flats off Farnborough Road.

HAT Field survey team in a discussion with a resident at Farnborough Road.
CVCHA. This resulted in 98% of stock going to CVCHA, and only 18 tenants returning to the council.

The transfer took place the following autumn. When that happened the Trust had delivered on its ambition of establishing a local organisation to manage housing on the estate after March 2005. Its handling of housing management could be deemed a success.

Mercian later joined Focus and Sanctuary, in recognition of the expanded construction programme.

Carole Wildman was appointed Director of Housing in 1998.

In 1995, before it was known how much money there would be to spend, it was recommended to the HAT’s Board that housing association partners should be brought in to support the development programme.

Housing associations are funded partly by government and partly from rents, so a £100,000 house could be funded by a £50,000 mortgage managed by the housing association and a £50,000 social housing grant given by the Housing Action Trust. The housing association would manage the property and cover its mortgage through rental streams. The system meant the Trust was able to build high quality houses quickly and efficiently.

In September 1995 the Housing Action Trust invited consortia of housing associations to bid for majority of the new build programme outlined in the masterplan. Focus and Sanctuary won 17. The deciding factor in their selection was an offer to set up a community association to manage the new homes.

Carole Wildman, then Planning Policy Manager, was responsible for the Trust’s succession strategy. “In discussion with the two housing associations, we decided that the HAT would sponsor a tenant-led housing association to manage the new housing. To do this we had to secure support from the Housing Corporation and the Department of the Environment, and get an agreement to register a new housing association.” This was unusual, and still is - government policy states that new housing associations can only be registered in the context of stock transfers. In addition the Housing Action Trust, together with Focus and Sanctuary, had to influence the Registrar of Friendly Societies to overcome the rule that tenants could only hold more than 25% of the board of a new association. The Trust met with the Registrar and explained that the board would consist of 16 tenants or residents, the majority of whom were tenants, and in addition had to include two other residents - the head of the Housing Action Trust and the area manager of Focus.

The new association was tied into the clearance programme by writing to all the tenants in the soon-to-be-demolished blocks and asking them if they’d like to help shape the new landlord. Many did. At the time of writing, several of the original residents remain in positions of influence within CVCHA.

In 1996 Peter Richmond was the area manager for Sanctuary. The following year he was appointed as the first employee of the new organisation. He became chief executive in 2003. “The funding relationship with the partner associations is one of the most interesting things about CVCHA. They built the properties for us, leased them to us, and waited until we were on a sound financial footing before selling them to us. Now we’re completely independent, but without them and the support of the Housing Action Trust, we couldn’t have got established.”