

Chapter 3

Housing

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 the 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 1995, with no guarantees about funding, housing had to pitch 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 different¹.

The role of landlord entails certain universal responsibilities. These

include allocating and maintaining properties, collecting rents, managing 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.

The relatively low quality of services provided by the local authority was another advantage. It was not difficult for the Housing Action Trust to look good in comparison. Some residents had all but given up hope of 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.

Alison Hadden, the Housing Action Trust's director of housing from 1994-1998 recalls that: "It actually increased our workload. As people began to realise that work was being done, more and more came forward."

It was not only the repairs backlog that was tackled². 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 – overestimating the extent of the Trust's



A team of caretakers looked after Castle Vale's 34 tower blocks. They are pictured here with HAT Housing Manager Sharon Gilligan (centre) at an event held in 1995.



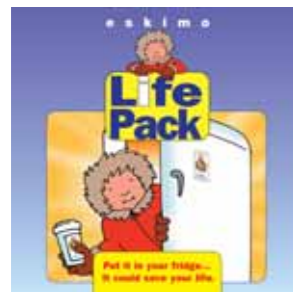
Over 60 new homes replaced the former Trees Public House in 1996.

¹Castle Vale was also the only one of the six Housing Action Trusts to retain its housing management function. All the others outsourced it under Compulsory Competitive Tendering, a government policy intended to achieve 'best value' in public services by inviting private organisations to bid for the various functions of local authorities and Registered Social Landlords. Sharon Gilligan, Castle Vale Housing Action Trust's housing manager, recalls: "We fought hard [with the Department of the Environment] to keep housing management, because we wanted all our services to be as integrated as possible. It was important for our holistic approach."

²As 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'. With one exception (2002), the Trust was up to speed.



The Eskimo Life pack scheme was introduced in 1996. This enables vulnerable people to keep medical information in a container that is kept in the fridge and is therefore easy to find in case of emergencies.



powers – had hoped for more immediate action. In truth, evictions 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 4) – 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 homes³. In the eight years to 2002 it also rehoused the equivalent of one household per working day. Over that period, the vast majority of the 2,262 displaced households were installed in new-build homes or one of the Housing Action Trust's refurbished properties. It was a mammoth challenge. A firm organisational hand and forward planning were essential.

“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.⁴



In 1995, 24 homes were built on the site of the former Albatross Pub.



Chivenor House was completely refurbished and launched in 1999 to house elderly residents. It is one of only two tower blocks out of the original 34 that remain in Castle Vale.



³When 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 only 1,327 of the original 3,479 properties remained under the management of Castle Vale Housing Action Trust. ⁴The homogenous two-bed high-rise apartments were replaced with a range of two, three, four, and five-bedroom homes, increasing the chances of residents finding properties that met their current and future needs.



Social events and coffee mornings are held regularly at Chivenor House and (bottom) Phoenix Court extra care scheme.



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 programme⁵. The council didn't disappoint.

Until 2001, Birmingham City Council also agreed to release the Housing Action Trust from its nominations obligation⁶. 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 programme. 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, 1,016 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, Northholt, 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 guarded against looting.

By 1999 the majority of the unloved maisonettes had also been cleared, as had Albert Shaw House, a 15-storey sheltered housing scheme that sat on top of the old shopping centre⁷. 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 standards⁸. High-rise towers were particularly expensive to refurbish. Only two survived⁹.

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.

Decants & refurb

A key feature of the clearance and demolition programme was 'decanting', the process of placing residents in temporary accommodation until their new home is ready. For instance, the 800 residents of the Centre 8 towers were moved out before any new-build properties were complete. Some left Castle Vale, some were prepared to move to other parts of the estate, and a small minority were decanted¹⁰.

For all decants the Trust organised removals, arranged utilities connections and disconnections, and forwarded mail. Help was offered on the day of the move, and a disturbance payment of £800 was made to households being re-housed permanently. Unusually, these cash payments were made upfront, to reduce administrative work, and cover the tenants' costs. A little cash in hand may also have helped cushion the inconvenience.

The Housing Action Trust's handling of decants was adopted by the refurbishment programme, which had been ticking along in the background since 1994. There were two types of refurb'. Some properties were temporarily tarted up and used as 'decant accommodation' until new homes became ready. Others were refurbished for the long-term¹¹.

The refurb started poorly, with contractors paying insufficient attention to the needs and wishes of tenants (see chapter 2). The Housing Action Trust learned lessons from these problems which had a significant bearing on its future approach. From 1995 contractors were obliged to meet conditions relating to behaviour and performance. It also led to the Tenants Expenses Package (see chapter 2).

As the development programme gathered pace, the Housing Action Trust also created a five-strong 'decant team', to assess tenants' needs and offer assistance where possible. Beatrice Lunn, manager of Phoenix Court, joined in 1997. "It meant that I got to know the people on my patch, Watton Green, and how to talk to them. I worked with the contractor and found out when people would need to move out, arranged all the repairs, made sure it was clean. I hit the ground running, I loved it."

2000 and beyond

In terms of housing management the Millennium was a turning point for the Trust. It was the year that the number of empty properties began to fall and waiting lists started to grow¹². Also in 2000 'collectable debit' (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.



Housing staff regularly visited tenants to help them settle into refurbished homes.



A tenant moves into a newly built home on Farnborough Road.

⁵Figures were not kept, but Castle Vale Housing Action Trust records indicate that between 1994 and 1997, 20% of tenants returned to Birmingham City Council. ⁶Every Registered Social Landlord is obliged to hand over at least 50% of its lettings to the local authority, to allow it to nominate new tenants from its housing list. ⁷Albert Shaw House was replaced on a nearby site by Phoenix Court, extra care sheltered accommodation for the elderly. ⁸All developments over £3 million were the subject of government defined appraisals. ⁹Chivenor House and Topcliffe House, the only two high-rise towers still standing, survived because they are built on top of schools. The integrated construction meant that the schools would have been demolished as part of the process.

¹⁰Some households were decanted more than once before reaching their final destination, an unfortunate feature of housing management in the context of a large-scale development programme. ¹¹A total of 1,333 properties were refurbished over the Trust's lifetime. ¹²During the early years of the clearance programme many tenants took the opportunity to leave the estate. There was no waiting list for Castle Vale. By 2000 the haemorrhaging had stopped, and by 2004 there were 1,157 new requests for housing in Castle Vale.



Housing needs surveys were held prior to refurbishments taking place.



View of traditionally built homes on Farnborough Road, by Castle Vale swimming bath.



Self-builders take a rest from the construction of 14 new mock-Tudor style homes.

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 home owners, 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.

Encouraging 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 97¹³. The self-build initiative (see chapter 4), and building homes for sale also helped¹⁴. And in 1997 the Tenants Incentive Scheme was launched, which offered tenants a £10,000 grant towards the purchase of a property¹⁵. By 2004, 39% of households in Castle Vale were either leasehold or freehold.



Sir Paul Beresford, the then DOE 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.



52 homes were built for sale by Barratt.

¹³The Housing Action Trust generated revenue of £3 million from Right to Buy and leaseholders acquiring freeholds. ¹⁴The Farnborough Road development (see chapter 4) included 26 homes for private sale; the self-build scheme produced 14 homes. ¹⁵A total of 331 tenants took up Tenants Incentive Scheme, of whom 41% stayed in Castle Vale.



A HAT staff member demonstrates the use of the video-controlled access to a new flat.



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

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 opposition¹⁶. 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 was first mooted.

The concept is explained in detail on page 36, but in essence the nature of the funding relationship between the public (Castle Vale HAT) and public/private 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 £205 million committed by the Department of the Environment was at least £20 million below its own estimate. The Trust was 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. The 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 re-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.

Stan Austin, a Trust board member and ex-chair of the council's housing committee, was among the more vocal opponents. His view was that the Department of the Environment had committed to a

100% government-funded regeneration programme, and that there should be no need for housing associations to be involved.

Peter Richmond, chief executive of CVCHA recalls his early exchanges with the Tenants Representative Board (see chapter 2), through which the bulk of resident opposition to housing associations was channelled. "The TRB was operated by some very effective community activists, including Bill Cosgrove, Diane Carter and Ian Bingham. Most had political or trade union connections. And they hated CVCHA. They believed the estate was being handed over to faceless, profit-making, Jag-driving organisations. 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 all refused to move," says Beatrice Lunn. "But as soon as they started building the new houses we were over 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 Stevens, 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 great track record. When it came to the ballot they held 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



The annual Democracy Day organised by the Tenants & Residents Alliance is a chance for residents to vote for resident representatives. It is also a family fun day (bottom).





Landlord Ballot campaign information drop-in.



Launch of CVCHA in 1997 by local radio celebrity Ed Doolan. Also pictured left to right are Sue Spicer, Wendy Walsh and Karen Mahon.

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.

Castle Vale Community Housing Association

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 publicly and partly through rents. Working in partnership meant that 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 homes 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 won¹⁷. 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 Manager¹⁸, 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 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, sought to influence the Registrar of Friendly Societies to maximise the number of tenants and residents on the 16-strong board. Rules state that tenants should constitute no more than a third, but by allocating two spaces for other residents – in effect this meant private home owners – the level of local influence was increased.

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 remained 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."

