

Chapter 6

Crime



New low-rise or refurbished homes all have fencing providing an added sense of security.

For years ‘Castle Vale’ were bywords for crime and the breakdown of law and order. Local newspapers referred to it as a ‘troubled estate’, a place where ‘crime is committed as a way of life’. In 1978 one journalist wrote that the ‘corrosive effect of crime risks reducing Castle Vale to a slum’. The estate was barely a decade old.

Fifteen years later when the Housing Action Trust was established, it came as no surprise to find that crime and the fear of crime were among the community’s greatest concerns. The poor quality and layout of the physical environment, the perceived ineffectiveness of policing, and rampant levels of criminality and nuisance behaviour had turned Castle Vale into a no-go zone. It may have been car theft and burglary that made the headlines, but graffiti, abandoned rubbish, and abusive teenagers all played their part in eroding the quality of life.

Until very close to the end of the Housing Action Trust’s life, crime actually rose in Castle Vale¹. As late as 2000 vandals caused £84,000 of damage in two of the remaining tower blocks. Lift engineers called to repair the damage – caused in just one night – were set upon and refused to work without a security escort.

It is impossible to point to any single reason for the enduring high

rates of crime and anti-social behaviour, although the situation was certainly not helped by the competing demands for the Trust’s attention. In the early days the Development Department was focussed on finalising the masterplan, Economic and Community Development was trying to find its role within the organisation, and the Housing Department was battling to meet its responsibilities as landlord, notably tackling the repairs backlog (see chapter 2).

Part of the problem may also have been that separate departments were using different techniques to tackle similar issues. The Economic and Community Development department took a preventative and diversionary approach, introducing a drug arrest referral officer, victim support, a truancy officer, a zero tolerance campaign against domestic violence, and other measures to tackle crime at its source. Meanwhile, the Housing Department focussed on enforcement, targeting nuisance neighbours and anti-social tenants.

This all meant that the Trust’s approach to tackling crime was at best fragmented to start with.

The situation began to improve in 1997, with the creation of ValeWatch (see below). Sharon Gilligan, the Trust’s housing manager², describes the collaborative operation between the police, the school,

and the Housing Action Trust as: “The catalyst, the partnership that got the different departments and service providers sitting around the same table.”

In 2001 this co-operative approach was crystallised into a Community Safety Strategy that would take the Trust to the end of its life and beyond³. The strategy outlined a two-pronged approach to crime reduction: law enforcement to tackle short-term problems; and crime prevention, to ensure that improvements would last. The strategy bore immediate dividends – in 2001 crimes committed in Castle Vale began to fall⁴. By then the misery of the 1980s seemed a distant memory.

Crisis management – the 1980s

In 2003 ‘after 18 years away’ David Wallbank returned to Castle Vale as Sector Inspector. He’d previously worked on the estate between 1983 and 1985, during his probation period. “I remember being called out to a domestic incident on Valencia Croft. I’d been told not to go on the Vale alone, particularly not in a new Panda car, but I was naïve. When I got to the top of the road a crowd of about 20 kids came out and started throwing bricks at the car. All the windows were broken. I retreated as fast as I could. It was a false call. Today I drive down Valencia Croft every day to get to work.”



Launch of ValeWatch 1997 with Richard Temple Cox and Assistant Chief Constable Tim Brain.

²Sharon Gilligan worked in Castle Vale from 1991 to 2005. She was one of the original members of staff, transferred from Birmingham City Council. ³The Community Safety Strategy was developed by Crime Concern (a national charity), the Housing Action Trust and Castle Vale Community Housing Association. ⁴Between 2000/2001 and 2003/2004 motor vehicle crime fell by 53%, burglary fell by 48%, and instances of violence against the person fell by 34%. Source: West Midlands Police, 2004.



Extra police officers were brought in with financial support from the HAT.

In the 1980s the police force, like other service providers, operated in isolation. Crime was its responsibility. Day after day officers would deal with recurring problems, like groups of young people on the streets. But there was nobody to liaise with teachers to investigate why they were not at school, or the housing department to find out where they lived.

In this environment law enforcement was a question of crisis management. Action was taken in the almost certain knowledge that the problems had not been solved, and this bred fatalism. People thought that this was the way life was always going to be.

The bulk of criminal activity was, and remains, the work of a small number of individuals and families. Castle Vale is a relatively small area occupying a well-defined island site, so it does not take long for criminals to become notorious. Until the mid-1990s it was difficult to see a way of dealing with them. They operated outside the law, and they cast a long shadow.

“People felt extremely threatened and intimidated here,” says Inspector Wallbank. Even when a criminal was caught the police were unlikely to find witnesses prepared to give statements. There was no mechanism to give agencies or the community any

confidence that if they did put their heads above the parapet they would be supported.

During the 1980s, in recognition of the extreme levels of criminality in Castle Vale, West Midlands Police pioneered Community Policing on the estate, a policy that increased police numbers and focussed attention on established trouble-spots. For a while it earned a national reputation as an innovative way of tackling inner-city problems. Documentaries were made and politicians came to see how the police and communities could interact.

It was a brave attempt, but ultimately Community Policing was just another way of responding to crime. It was time for more drastic action.

Making a difference

By around 1997 it was clear that the Housing Action Trust was beginning to make a positive difference in Castle Vale. The redevelopment process was under way, and the Community Council and Tenants Representative Board had reached a reasonable level of dialogue with the Trust (see chapter 2). For the first time in decades, Castle Vale had a sense of direction. It was an estate with a future, as reflected in the 1995 masterplan (see chapters 3 and 4).

The process of preparing the masterplan did not just focus on the redevelopment of the estate. Residents were also encouraged to imagine living in a new Castle Vale. What would it be like if the fear of crime were reduced? In an ideal world, how would neighbours behave? ...

The picture painted was a place with schools that people aspired to attend, where rubbish was not left by the side of the road, where loud music did not blare out at all hours, and dogs were not allowed to roam free. It was an estate with well-maintained public areas, where children were members of organised clubs not street gangs.

Having encouraged people to imagine what life could be like, the Housing Action Trust now had to convince people that it could deliver these improvements.

“In the early 1990s evictions were almost unheard of in Birmingham, but it was clear that tenants were not prepared to tolerate anti-social behaviour,” says Gilligan. As a result, the Tenancy Agreement was reviewed to incorporate the Housing Act 1996, which gave landlords new grounds to evict tenants guilty of habitual nuisance, intimidation, and vandalism.

In 1997 the ringleaders of the Green Box Gang, became the first to be targeted (see chapter 3). It was the first in a sequence of high impact possession orders. The Housing Action Trust was making its presence felt. The trouble was that each case consumed a disproportionate amount of time and money.

To get round the problem the Housing Action Trust’s solicitors, Anthony Collins Associates convinced the courts that it would gain a greater understanding of the extent of the anti-social behaviour in Castle Vale if a number of similar cases were heard together. It would also minimise witness distress. In 2000 this approach led to a landmark case, which saw the eviction of five problem families (see page 70).

Many residents and Housing Action Trust staff regard the group evictions as a watershed in the regeneration of Castle Vale. Janet Putman⁵ head teacher at Castle Vale Comprehensive says: “Some problem families with problem children were removed. It was traumatic, but it made a big difference, and sent a powerful message that anti-social behaviour would not be tolerated,” (see chapter 7).

No less significant were the 112 witness statements from 42 residents secured as part of the process. It was evidence that people were prepared to stand up and be counted.



Abandoned or burnt out cars are now an infrequent occurrence (Picture by resident Serena Bailey).



A cyber cafe was set up in 2000 - a youth-led initiative providing a service for the community.

Two years later the police and Housing Action Trust combined forces to address drug crime, which had long been a significant problem in Castle Vale. The plan to break the cycle of drug crime received substantial support from the community, which allowed the police force to launch a major intelligence-led operation.

Operation Gosport was launched in February 2002. Over the next nine months under-cover teams were put in place to infiltrate drug gangs and glean as much intelligence as possible. The Housing Action Trust supported by promising to remove the tenancies of any individuals found guilty.

On 4 December 2002 the police staged 13 dawn raids on properties in Castle Vale, leading to a combined prison term of 27 years for seven tenants.

The drug bust, like the evictions, was a high profile statement of intent. But these 'big bang' events comprised only a proportion of the total investment in law enforcement and crime prevention over the Housing Action Trust's lifetime. Behind the scenes there was a network of resident groups and support services sharing information, assisting in the identification of criminals, and striving to make Castle Vale a safer place to live. The first was ValeWatch.

ValeWatch was set up in June 1997 as a partnership between the police and the Housing Action Trust⁶. It has subsequently been joined by CVCHA, Castle Vale Comprehensive School, and a representative from the youth offending service. At monthly meetings intelligence is shared and offenders identified. It is a well-established and productive partnership. But ValeWatch does not include representatives of the community. They contribute in a different way.

In 1998, as a means of involving residents in policing the estate, the Housing Action Trust ran a series of Community Safety Forums. These public events, attended by around 200 people, were an opportunity for local people to voice their concerns to the police, the Trust, and staff from the secondary school. The forums led to the establishment of several 'working groups', small teams of residents, Trust staff, and representatives from other agencies set up to look into specific issues. One working group concerned closed circuit television cameras.

The residents wanted the cameras to improve levels of surveillance in known trouble spots. The Housing Action Trust submitted a bid of £450,000 to the government's Crime Reduction Programme. This money, with an additional contribution from the Housing Action



The Castle Vale residents conference 2003, organised by the 2005 Group, focused on community safety.



During his visit to Castle Vale in 2003, Lord Rooker met with the neighbourhood warden team.



The Castle Vale residents conference 2003.

⁶Since September 2004, the Housing Action Trust's role within ValeWatch has been performed by Castle Vale Community Housing Association.



The CATCH scheme is an initiative led by residents.

Trust, led to the installation of 29 cameras around the estate, monitored round the clock by Merlin Venture (see chapter 7). Every week police, housing officers, and a member of staff from Castle Vale Comprehensive School meet to review incidents of anti-social behaviour.

Another outcome of the Community Safety Forums was CATCH (Community Action Tackling Crime and Harassment), an initiative led by Housing Action Trust resident board member Joan Lawrie which helped to prevent resident intimidation and reduce crime. It was for the latter reason that Jean Downey, a resident of Castle Vale since 1970, got involved.

“It was 1998. I was exhausted with the level of crime. The breaking point was finding two thieves actually taking the door off our garage. We chased them away, but it still took two hours for the police to arrive,” says Downey.

The CATCH scheme uses local people as the eyes and ears of the community. If members see suspicious or criminal activity they report it to the police, neighbourhood wardens and the CCTV control room, via walkie-talkies – funded by the Housing Action Trust.

Preparing for succession

From 2000 the Housing Action Trust began to reassess its approach. The partnership approach to policing, allied to growing community confidence, had helped to change the atmosphere on the estate. The dramatic physical changes had also been a substantial boon – notably improved street lighting, the removal of insecure tower blocks, and the alleyways between them. But with the end of the Trust’s life on the horizon it was time to ensure that crime actually fell, and would continue to fall after March 2005.

In November 2001 the Housing Action Trust, Castle Vale Community Housing Association, and Crime Concern produced a three-year Community Safety Strategy. “Research had confirmed a lack of co-ordination between the various service providers on the estate,” says Richard Mytton, who was subsequently employed to ‘encourage and co-ordinate’ the process. The strategy brought everyone together, creating a united and increasingly prominent front⁷.

Youth crime was the new priority. “Outside Castle Vale the estate was perceived as a crime hotspot, but inside it’s the gangs of kids on the streets that are regarded as the major problem,” says Sharon Gilligan.

In 2002 Mytton, in his capacity as Community Safety Coordinator, helped to coordinate a partnership between youth workers from local faith groups, Birmingham City Council’s youth service, and CVCHA. The idea was to pool resources to maximise the effectiveness of all partners.

The following October a ‘multi-agency partnership’⁸ combined forces to set up a Youth Inclusion Support Panel, one of 11 pilot schemes around the country. The panel targets 8-17-year-olds on the cusp of criminal lifestyles. “They might be socially excluded or haven’t got anything else to do, so we put them on support programmes. We’ve found that most parents are supportive,” says Inspector Wallbank.

Not all policing measures are preventative. “Part of our approach in recent years has been based on targeting repeat criminals and taking them out of circulation. You might only be talking about ten people on an estate of 9,000, but it makes an amazing difference. It’s not easy, because most crime is committed by young people, and they don’t get custodial sentences.”

Since 2002 the police force has been assisted by a team of five neighbourhood wardens, who act as neutral intermediaries between the police and the community. They do not have powers of arrest or enforcement, but they do have a role to play in patrolling the estate⁹.

The future looks promising for continued progress in crime prevention¹⁰. A Community Safety Forum – not to be confused with the Community Safety Forums held in 1998, see above – has been meeting quarterly since 2003. The Forum reports directly to the Neighbourhood Partnership Board (see chapter 9)¹¹. This should ensure that residents’ concerns continue to shape crime prevention priorities in Castle Vale.

Castle Vale Community Housing Association may also have an increasingly important role to play, particularly in bidding for funds. Speaking in late 2004, Richard Mytton suggested that it could become a ‘commissioning agent’, fulfilling the funding and coordination role played by the Housing Action Trust.

Although total crime fell by 36% between 2000 and 2004¹², fear of crime remains a concern to many¹³. This makes it a fundamental element of Phase II in the regeneration of Castle Vale (the post-Housing Action Trust era), when the ‘soft issues’ of health, education, and crime prevention will no longer be in competition with the redevelopment programme.



Community Safety co-ordinator Richard Mytton in conversation with residents.



29 CCTV cameras have been installed across Castle Vale as part of the community safety strategy.

⁷In 2001, the Housing Action Trust agreed to support the police force’s Crime Fighting Team by funding two additional police officers until 2005. The Trust also funded motorbikes and bicycles. ⁸The Youth Inclusion Support Panel included: CVCHA, the Youth Offending Team, Castle Vale’s five schools, social services, the Primary Care Trust, the police and the Housing Action Trust. ⁹Until March 2005 the wardens were co-funded by the Housing Action Trust and the Crime Reduction Unit of the Home Office. Since then responsibility has passed to Castle Vale Community Housing Association. Funding for the Neighbourhood Wardens has been secured until 2014 through the Tenant Market Value, the money paid by CVCHA for the Housing Action Trust’s remaining housing stock at the time of the stock transfer in October 2004.

¹⁰In 2002 Birmingham City Council’s Audit of Crime and Safety found that there were only two areas of Birmingham where the fear of crime was falling: Castle Vale and Balsall Heath. Both areas operate systems of neighbourhood management, and have high rates of active community involvement. ¹¹The Community Safety Forum is composed of CVCHA’s housing team, the police, the Community & Environmental Trust, secondary school, and voluntary agencies. It is chaired by a local resident. housing stock at the time of the stock transfer in October 2004. ¹²Source: West Midland Police, 2004. ¹³A 2004 MORI survey revealed that 55% of Castle Vale residents felt safe enough to go out alone after dark.



HRH Princess Anne visited Castle Vale in January 2004 in her capacity as patron of Crime Concern.

Group evictions – a landmark case

Over four weeks during the autumn of 2000, cases against five families accused by Castle Vale Housing Action Trust of persistent breach of tenancy conditions were heard by Birmingham County Court. It was alleged that all defendants were guilty of nuisance and annoyance to neighbours. The offences were caused almost entirely by their children.

The innovative multi-trial approach was proposed by the Trust's solicitors, Birmingham-based Anthony Collins Solicitors. As well as saving the Housing Action Trust substantial time and money, solicitors at Anthony Collins claimed that witness distress would be minimised – several witnesses were common to more than one case. The court was also convinced that it would gain a greater understanding of the extent of the anti-social behaviour in Castle Vale through a group trial.

Notices of Seeking Possession were served to 20 families during 2000. Over subsequent months proceedings were drafted and cases built. Over the same period some families moderated their behaviour, and others left the estate, meaning that charges were dropped.

The evidence put to the court included 112 witness statements, from 42 residents, 12 police officers, contractors, teachers, and Housing Action Trust staff. The statements were supported by video evidence from covert cameras.

During the trial the judge, Recorder Mr Cleary limited the evidence to convictions – all the youths had criminal records – admissions, and 20 contested cases for the five remaining families. The outcome saw the Housing Action Trust gain four outright possession orders and one two-year suspended possession order.

A subsequent attempt by the families to invoke the Human Rights Act to challenge the eviction orders was dismissed. Recorder Mr Cleary found that it was 'perverse' for families causing anti-social behaviour to claim the act's protection.

The Financial Times reported the case on 27 December 2000. "Mr Cleary said the right to the peaceful enjoyment of possessions was a 'two-way street' and it was the peaceful enjoyment of the other families on the estate that was being breached by the tenants in question." The judge went on to say that he found it "shocking" that the families saw themselves as the victims, rather than other residents of the estate.

It was a landmark ruling, and persuasive evidence of the Housing Action Trust's commitment to tackling anti-social behaviour. Perhaps the only frustration for the Trust was a loop-hole in the law that allows evicted tenants to return as private home owners, giving them a chance to maintain their influence on the estate.

