In 1993, 20% of working age adults in Castle Vale were unemployed. The West Midlands average was closer to 14%. Low educational attainment, inadequacy of skills, postcode discrimination, and a lack of entrepreneurial spirit were all contributory factors.

By October 2004 unemployment in Castle Vale had dropped to 5.3%, against a Birmingham average of 7.6%. The Housing Action Trust was understandably proud of this achievement. The figure featured prominently in press releases, alongside the equally starting statistics about increased life expectancy (see chapter 5).

As well as rates of employment, the Trust’s life-span coincided with a substantial rise in standards of education and training. The cumulative effect was a dramatic improvement in economic conditions. In 1993 who would have believed that Castle Vale might soon be home to a thriving Enterprise Park?

Despite the improvements, it should not be forgotten that the estate has come a long way in a short time. The improvements have shallow roots. Plenty of work remains to be done – in 2004 Castle Vale was just outside the top 10% most deprived areas in England. The short-term challenge is to maintain the high standards; the longer-term ambition is to improve them.

Economic and Community Development

It was a battle to establish the Economic and Community Development department, the arm of the Housing Action Trust responsible for job creation, education, and business development. Rod Griffin, the Housing Action Trust’s inaugural director of Economic and Community Development, recalls that: “Tackling social issues was seen as a key function of the Housing Action Trust, but at the outset economic considerations were not recognised as related problems.” (See chapter 2).

Once the department’s funding and structural issues had been resolved, Griffin’s first job was to commission social and economic baseline studies. With an understanding of the conditions in Castle Vale, the Trust hoped to develop tailor-made solutions. The studies indicated that the Trust needed to build confidence, improve access to jobs, encourage all forms of dialogue, and train local people in skills appropriate to employment opportunities. It also exposed the paucity of adult education and training provision in Castle Vale, and described the difficulties faced by local people in accessing information about jobs and training. “Action was also required to clarify the expectation about the amount of direct employment that would be available from the Trust itself for residents,” says Donald McIntosh, the Trust’s last director of Economic and Community Development.

Nearly 40% of residents were not working, of whom 52% were registered as unemployed, 15.7% had never worked, and 36.6% had not worked in the previous four years. A high proportion of residents classified their occupation as ‘looking after the family or home’, and over 40% of residents aged 16-20 had never worked at all.

“It was also important for us to understand how people really lived. Without that we couldn’t expect to make progress economically,” says Griffin.

“For instance, I offered a work experience opportunity to a local girl. After a while she stopped coming in. Through counselling we found out that her father had died when she was three, her mother was an alcoholic, her brother was a drug addict, and she took her two sisters to school every morning.”

Any prospective employer would need to accommodate these circumstances if she was to have a chance of holding down a full-time job.

Castle Vale School holds Careers Days during which pupils visit local companies.

Chapter 7

Employment and Education

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Job creation & wealth circulation

The findings of the research also influenced the composition of the Economic and Community Development department. There was a clear need for a training manager, career development staff, and an officer to act as the liaison between local businesses and the Trust. ‘We also employed human resources staff, and people dedicated to matching jobs to applicants,’ says Griffin (see chapter 5). The health division was added in 1996.

It took a while for Economic and Community Development to find its place within the Housing Action Trust. Julie Haywood, the Trust’s Senior Economic Development Manager, remembers some conflict over jobs in the construction sector. ‘We worked with Development (The Development Department) to widen their selection criteria of contractors, to encourage a commitment to employing local people. However, this conflicted with their priorities and the need to start the build programme.’ The introduction of the Construction Training and Employment Programme and the adoption of partnering in 1997, helped to resolve the problem.

Over the years Housing Action Trust staff worked with a wide range of partners and agencies to improve and increase access to employment, and create an environment in which people could realise their economic potential. The idea was to create ‘stepping stones’ into employment. ‘Typically we would support residents on a confidence building programme, followed by literacy and numeracy training, and then a customised training programme with an employer. This would make them better prepared for work,’ says Haywood.

Residents continued to be supported by Trust staff during the settling in period of their new jobs. Haywood acknowledges that: ‘We were fortunate that the Trust’s programmes could look further than the typical mainstream government initiatives.’ The comparative availability of funds also allowed the Trust to tailor training to both individual and community needs. It was even able to fund clothes and travel expenses for residents going to interviews, an approach that has subsequently been adopted by other government initiatives.

What follows are examples of the Housing Action Trust’s multi-agency and multi-faceted approach to tackling unemployment in Castle Vale.

Merlin Venture Ltd

Merlin Venture was set up to create jobs. It was also the successor body to the economic development function of the Housing Action Trust. Since its foundation in February 1998 Merlin has also excelled in other respects.

Alongside the economic and social baseline studies the Trust also compiled a Skills Register, a database of individual resident’s career aims and aspirations. Julie Haywood joined the Housing Action Trust as training manager in 1994.

Partnering is an approach to contract management based on mutual benefits between the client, contractor, and end users. See chapter 4. In July 2000 Merlin had 102 employees.

Almost 20 pupils from Castle Vale School benefited from a customised training programme run in 1995 by WH Smith Tools Ltd, resulting in the majority being employed by the company.

In July 2004 Merlin had 104 employees.
as an example of how a not-for-profit organisation can play an active role in rejuvenating a local economy and its neighbourhood services.

Merlin is a social enterprise that offers training and supports local businesses from premises on Castle Vale Enterprise Park (see below). It also coordinates a variety of subsidiary social enterprises. These include Fresh Start Decorators; Valescapes, a gardening and landscaping business; Tiggy Winkles Day Nurseries; and, Valley Travel and Buster Werkenbak, community transport schemes. Merlin also employs staff to monitor Castle Vale’s network of 29 CCTV cameras.

All of the Merlin enterprises provide local employment opportunities and affordable, accessible services for residents of Castle Vale. A further common denominator is that all the businesses enhance and affordable, accessible services for residents of Castle Vale. A further common denominator is that all the businesses enhance and desirable.

Merlin has been striving to be self-sufficient since 2003, when the Trust granted it a £2 million endowment fund, to assist with business development and cash-flow. Since then it has been imperative for Merlin to make a profit on local transport,” says Vince Brennan, Merlin’s Social Enterprise Manager.

Although Merlin remains a not-for-profit enterprise, in the post-Trust era it must be financially viable. The same applies to the businesses that it has incubated.

Tiggy Winkles Day Nurseries started life as a private nursery, run by three local women. It provided 20 places in one classroom for pre-school-age children. Money was tight so Tiggy Winkles approached the Housing Action Trust to assist with plans for expansion. The Trust granted it a £2 million endowment fund, to assist with business development and cash-flow. Since then it has been imperative for Merlin to make a profit on local transport," says Vince Brennan, Merlin’s Social Enterprise Manager.

Robert Brown, chief executive of Merlin Ventures, is optimistic: “But we’ve got to nurture new businesses. We might need to look beyond the boundaries of Castle Vale for new opportunities.”

With the exception of the shopping centre, the Enterprise Park is Castle Vale’s principal engine of economic activity. The business park occupies a 1.5-hectare brownfield site on the far east of the estate. The facilities comprise 3,900 square metres of industrial and commercial space divided between 39 units, ranging in size from 22.3 square metres to 163 square metres. Since

young people from the estate without any training. Some years later the majority were still there, in full employment. But this was a rare example of success. In truth, with only ten members, it was taking time for the Business Group to build momentum.

In 1996, with the support of the Housing Action Trust, the Business Group was relaunched, this time with 40 member businesses. Today there are over 150, all within a two-kilometre radius.

Job creation was not the sole objective of the Business Group. It also raised awareness of the changes in Castle Vale. If the estate could re-assess itself, should local businesses not do the same? “I think that just getting in contact helped to reassure businesses that Castle Vale isn’t all bad,” says Brennan.

Castle Vale Enterprise Park

On one occasion local businesses were asked how many residents of Castle Vale they employed. Many employed none at all. This spumed one member, WH Smith & Sons (Tools) Ltd, to take on 12
Castle Vale Enterprise Park is the product of a joint venture between the Housing Action Trust and developer Ashtenne Plc. The park cost £3.364 million to complete. It received support from Advantage West Midlands, the Housing Action Trust, English Partnerships, Ashtenne Plc, and the European Regional Development Fund (see also chapter 4).

Castle Vale Enterprise Park offers work space for 39 small to medium sized businesses. It also contained office space for 20 small or micro-enterprise businesses supported over 200 jobs.

One of the Learning Centre’s greatest successes was the retail park. In 2004, 384 of the 607 full-time jobs at the shopping centre were taken by residents of Castle Vale. “The Learning Centre was a key factor in these successes through hand holding residents during the recruitment and selection process,” says Julie Haywood.

In the broader context of the Trust’s job creation achievements this is relatively small fry. By the end of 2004 it had placed 1,461 residents in jobs, and put 3,415 through training programmes. In 1994 social and economic baseline studies revealed that residents of Castle Vale found it difficult to access information about opportunities. By extension, they were unaware of training programmes that would enable them to apply for these jobs. The Learning Centre, formerly known as the One Stop Centre, was the Housing Action Trust’s response to the problem.

The Centre provided guidance to people seeking training and employment. It also offers a jobs match service to local employers. In 2002 a new facility was developed, managed by a local further education college, which provides access to a wide range of courses for all residents at all levels. Services are provided by a range of partners, including Job Centre Plus, the Connors care service, the local college, and adult education providers.

Resident was given a choice of training programmes. Pictured above is a resident working at the local Betterware factory. In 2002 a new facility was developed, managed by a local further education college, which provides access to a wide range of courses for all residents at all levels. Services are provided by a range of partners, including Job Centre Plus, the Connors care service, the local college, and adult education providers.

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The future

As the vastly reduced levels of unemployment suggest, awareness of jobs, career development plans, and the value of a good education have never been better in Castle Vale. Of course, there remain room for improvement. Among the immediate challenges are finding ways to reduce the number of students leaving full-time education at 16, and an increased emphasis on youth empowerment. Anyone born since 1983 will not remember how bad things were in Castle Vale, a breeding ground for complacency.

Barriers to employment have been eased, the schools are in demand, and relations between residents of Castle Vale and local Government are much improved. Further reason for optimism are evident in the revamped Reed Square, home to a community college, adult learning centre, and public library. All of this would have been difficult to envisage before 1993.

The Housing Action Trust has helped to normalise employment and attainment of young people who might be prepared to raise pupil awareness of the environment. Such as tree and bulb planting to help with the mothers and fathers. They supported by the HAT and Birmingham City Council.

The schools have also played their part in developing an awareness of estate-wide issues. For instance, by taking the initiative for the school’s master builders improved provision of the school in relation to children, who received them. In education, the future. Putman was selected as a resident member of the School's resident board members. Her task was not made any easier by the spinal corridor suited the structure of the spinal column, it was a powerful message that antisocial behaviour was something, too.

Although the Trust was not able to make a lasting contribution to urban–rural issues, it did bring much-needed improvements in the local public services. This process was cut short by the school’s master builders. The revamped Reed Square, home to a community college, adult learning centre, and public library. All of this would have been difficult to envisage before 1993.

The Housing Action Trust had helped to normalise employment and education in Castle Vale. People born and brought up in the estate are no longer at an economic disadvantage.

Schools in Castle Vale

In early 2002, when the nascent Housing Action Trust was looking for premises for the Castle Vale Comprehensive, it was a logical choice. The school building was in need of renovation, the sewage system was leaky, and the area was prone to flooding. The worst school was not an option.

Prior to 1993, educational attainment in Castle Vale was very low. In 1993, 31% of students left with no GCSEs at grade D or above. The four junior schools and one infant school had struggled to attract half of students. Although the Trust were not able to make a lasting contribution to urban–rural issues, it did bring much-needed improvements in the local public services. This process was cut short by the school’s master builders. The revamped Reed Square, home to a community college, adult learning centre, and public library. All of this would have been difficult to envisage before 1993.

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