

Chapter 7

Employment and Education



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

In 1993, 26% of working age adults in Castle Vale were unemployed¹. The West Midlands average was closer to 14%². Low educational attainment, inadequate 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%³, against a Birmingham average of 7.6%⁴. The Housing Action Trust was understandably proud of this achievement. The figures featured prominently in press releases, alongside the equally startling 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 only just outside the top 10% most deprived areas in England⁵. 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.



Wherever possible construction training linked in with development schemes.

¹Source: Birmingham City Council Economic Information Centre. ²Source: Birmingham City Council Economic Information Centre. ³Source: Birmingham City Council Economic Information Centre. To compensate for boundary changes (June 2004), the Housing Action Trust created an approximate figure for unemployment in Castle Vale. ⁴Source: Birmingham City Council Economic Information Centre. ⁵Source: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Index of Deprivation 2004.



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.

Job creation & wealth circulation

The findings of the research also influenced the composition of the Economic and Community Development department. There was clearly a 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 applicants⁶”, 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 Manager⁷, 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 1997⁸, 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 multifarious approach to tackling unemployment in Castle Vale.

The Merlin Venture Ltd

Merlin Venture was set up to create jobs⁹. 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 evolved



Vale fm, Castle Vale Community Radio Station, offers broadcast training for unemployed people from Castle Vale and the surrounding areas. The station also works closely with local schools and oversees the production of Vale Mail, the local paper.



Launch of the Learning Centre in Reed Square in 2000. The event was organised by course participants.



A ‘Regenerating Communities’ degree course brought together students from Birmingham University’s Centre for Urban Regeneration Studies (CURS) and Castle Vale residents.

⁶Alongside the economic and social baseline studies the Trust also compiled a Skills Register, a database of individual resident’s career aims and aspirations. ⁷Julie Haywood joined the Housing Action Trust as training manager in 1994. ⁸Partnering is an approach to contract management based on mutual benefits between the client, contractor, and end users. See chapter 4. ⁹In July 2004 Merlin had 104 employees.



'Blakey' from the 1970s sitcom 'On the Buses' launched the Hopper Bus service in early 1995 and (below) the Busterwerkenback service, operated by Merlin Venture, provides a bus service for local employers.



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 existing service provision.

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 problem was that the Trust could not offer the level of financial assistance that this private business required for it to be viable. This

was worrying news for the 17 parents who relied on the nursery to get to work each day. The solution was to disband and regroup as a social enterprise, allowing the nursery to access public grants and business support from Merlin. Tiggy Winkles now provides 91 nursery places and is a viable going concern.

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.

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 all businesses to turn a profit, or suggest that they might do so soon. This will make life very difficult for some of the services, notably Valley Travel, which provides a bus service around Castle Vale and out to two nearby shopping centres. "It's very difficult to make a profit on local transport," says Vince Brennan, Merlin's Social Enterprise Manager.

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

Castle Vale Business Group

"When I applied for a job I'd leave 'Castle Vale' out of my address and hope that the employer wouldn't notice the B35 postcode," says one long-term resident of Castle Vale, now employed as a healthcare professional.

Her fears were well founded. For years local businesses would not employ residents of Castle Vale. The extent of the prejudice was exposed by the Housing Action Trust's social and economic baseline studies. Residents of Castle Vale were perceived as unreliable and undesirable.

In 1992, before the Trust was founded, Vince Brennan – regional director of Business in the Community – initiated measures to tackle the problem. "We set up a Business Group as a means of engaging with local businesses and promoting the benefits of corporate social responsibility," says Brennan, who is now Social Enterprise Manager with Merlin Venture. One of the Group's four core aims was to strengthen ties between businesses and the local community.

On one occasion local businesses were asked how many residents of Castle Vale they employed. Many employed none at all. This spurred one member, WH Smith & Sons (Tools) Ltd, to take on 12

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 never 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 wasn't all bad," says Brennan.

Castle Vale Enterprise Park

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



Launch of the Castle Vale Business Group at Jaguar Cars in 1996.



Residents were given a choice of training programmes. Pictured above is a resident working at the local Betterware factory.



Castle Vale Enterprise Park offers work space for 39 small to medium sized businesses.

opening, occupancy rates have been over 90%. In mid-2004 the businesses supported over 200 jobs.

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 Learning Centre

The 1994 social and economic baseline studies revealed that residents of Castle Vale found it difficult to access information about jobs. By extension, they were unaware of training programmes that would enable them to apply for those 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 Connexions careers service, the local college, and adult education providers.

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.

Training programmes

The Housing Action Trust developed a range of training programmes to re-skill and 'up-skill' residents. Many were linked to opportunities created by the revival of the estate. Among the first was the construction training programme, which tied in with the Trust's development plans. This enabled residents, many keen amateurs, to plug gaps in their experience, and sample new crafts, whether bricklaying, carpentry, painting or decorating. "It took a while to build resident's confidence. In the early days consultants and partner organisations were engaged to provide dedicated support," says McIntosh.

Other programmes were developed in consultation with residents to identify a local work placement where hands-on experience could be gained through 'supported employment' with a contractor. In these instances residents would complete a college course, while simultaneously working on site gaining experience and confidence. Until trainees had reached a certain level of productivity the contractors received financial support from the Housing Action Trust towards wages. The average was 26 weeks.

The self-build programme was another instance of turning resident's existing skills into revenue-generating careers. "In 1997 I was considering leaving the estate when a leaflet about self-build came through the door," says Pat McGinn, one of 14 residents who committed to the scheme. The idea was that residents would work cooperatively, with the support of Accord Housing Association and the Trust, to design and build themselves new homes. The time they invested in the programme would be off-set against the cost of the property, and when complete the participants would be equipped with a new or enhanced range of skills. "After we finished, a charity head-hunted me to work on another self-build scheme. McGinn has since set up his own company, Arcadian Contracts Ltd, building on his experience and his qualification as an architectural draughtsman. He never did leave Castle Vale.

The Trust also developed customised training programmes in collaboration with local employers, including Jaguar Cars Ltd, Betterware, and TDG Harris Logistics. The model provides an allowance towards such costs as child care, travel and protective clothing for those training with a company. Jobs are not guaranteed. The only commitment from employers is that they are required to give participants an interview at the end of the short training – typically four weeks, long enough for the employers and trainees to take a good look at each other. Even if a position doesn't materialise, the experience of being in a professional environment and picking up generic skills such as customer care and health and safety, is a positive step towards a career elsewhere.

In 1998 Jaguar was looking for 600 staff to work on its new X200 series. The company launched a city-wide customised training programme in collaboration with the employment service, local colleges and Castle Vale HAT, among others. This led to a 16-week 'Jaguar Best Practice Model', giving participants an NVQ level 2 in manufacturing. During the course it emerged that the majority of jobs were available in the paint shop. So at the end of the course the Trust negotiated and paid for a further two weeks of paint shop training for residents of Castle Vale. At the end of the programme 22, including nine women, secured full-time jobs at average salaries of £22,000.



Retail training programmes run with Sainsbury's led to a third of staff employed coming from Castle Vale.



A successful customised training programme run with Jaguar cars in anticipation of production of the x200 series led to 22 residents being employed at the car plant.

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 remains 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 1993 will not remember how bad things were in Castle Vale, a breeding ground for complacency.

Barriers to employment have been eroded, the schools are in demand, and relations between residents of Castle Vale and local businesses are much improved. Further reasons 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 imagine before 1993.

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

Schools in Castle Vale

In early 1994, when the nascent Housing Action Trust was looking for premises, Castle Vale Comprehensive was a logical candidate. The large building was in the centre of the estate, and the arrangement of classrooms and offices connected by a spinal corridor suited the structure of the new organisation. It was also half empty. Eleven years later, as the Trust neared the end of its life-cycle, the revived school needed the space back. The school, now renamed Castle Vale School and Specialist Performing Arts College, had reclaimed its rightful status as the heart of the community.

Prior to 1993 educational attainment in Castle Vale was very low – in 1993 only 11% achieved A-C grades at GCSE. For years the four junior schools and one comprehensive had struggled to attract staff and students. There was constant talk of closures.

Although the Trust was not able to make financial contributions to schools – they are funded by the Local Education Authority – it did develop close relationships with them, to ensure that they were integrated into the regeneration of the estate. This process was vital in preventing future generations leaving school without the skills or confidence to secure work. It also cultivated a generation of young people who might be prepared to take up the mantle of civic responsibility and self-governance from their parents.

“We only had 362 students in 1993,” says Janet Putman, head teacher of the comprehensive from 1993 to 2004. “The school was built to accommodate over twice that number, so there was plenty of space.” During the 1970s and 1980s the school had earned a terrible reputation for delinquency and youth crime. It was a threatening place to be, reflecting the general sense of unease on the estate. And it wasn’t unique.

In such a climate it was difficult to attract good quality, committed teachers. The task was not made any easier by the attitude of the parents. “To many, we were just a child-minding service,” says Steve Holloway, head teacher at Chivenor Junior School. The levels of disaffection in Castle Vale made it difficult to envisage improvements in the quality of education on the estate.

“When the HAT arrived I met with Angus [Kennedy] to discuss how the school and the Trust could help each other,” says Janet Putman. “We agreed that we needed to work together to provide a better ‘quality of place’.”

“There are now many more educational and life opportunities available to children,” says Putman. Adults have also benefited. Chivenor, like all the schools on the estate, opens for evening classes throughout the year. “We run courses in parenting and computer literacy, among others,” says Holloway.

The growing recognition that a good education is something worth striving for has resulted in increased levels of parent interest, as evidenced by the Career Days, where families meet with professional advisors to consider long-term options. “My kids are so much more positive than I was at their age,” says Tracey Barrington, a mother of two who has spent most of her life in Castle Vale.

The schools have also sought to develop an awareness of estate-wide issues. For instance, by talking about the elections for the Trust’s resident board members in class, children became aware of what was going on, and went home to talk about it in the evenings. This encouraged some parents to vote, many of them for the first time. “This was how Trevor Evans was elected in 2002,” says Putman.

Evans, in his early 20s, is a teacher of performing arts at Castle Vale School and Specialist Performing Arts College. On Wednesday evenings he also coordinates ‘Got What It Takes’, a youth arts organisation that gives children an opportunity to socialise out of the school environment, and nurtures their interest in drama and music. Evans was selected as a resident member of the Housing Action Trust Board in 2002. He was by far the youngest member.

The schools have also played a valuable social role in the revitalisation of Castle

Vale. “One of the turning points for the school were the evictions [see chapter 6]. Some problem families with problem children were removed. It was traumatic, but it made a big difference, and sent a powerful message that antisocial behaviour would not be tolerated,” says Putman.

Confirmation that the Castle Vale School had been turned around came when Putman told a prospective parent that the school was full for the forthcoming year. “I was thrilled. I know that sounds terrible. In 1986 when I joined, that would have been unthinkable.” Today there’s a waiting list, the school’s reputation has never been better, and 25% of students are from outside the estate, a further indication of how far the school’s stock has risen.

Of course there’s still room for improvement, and the challenge of maintaining the improved standards, both educational and behavioural, will not be easy. “But the HAT has instilled a different ethos in Castle Vale and the school. It introduced a culture of respect, pride. I liken its influence to the effect of rain on a desert. Flowers that haven’t bloomed for years suddenly come to life. They’d been forgotten, but all they needed was a little support and sustenance,” say Putman.



Victorian Days (above) held in 2000 and 2001 raised school children’s awareness of local history. The events were held at Castle Bromwich Gardens and were supported by the HAT and Birmingham City Council.

(Left) Campaigns were organised with schools to raise awareness of the dangers of playing on building sites.

(Below) The HAT supported schemes such as tree and bulb planting to help raise pupil awareness of the environment.

