

Chapter 8

Art, Environment and Image Improvement



Sentinel - the Spitfire sculpture, a new symbol for Castle Vale. Designed by Tim Tolkien following extensive resident consultation.

Perceptions of Castle Vale have come a long way. A decade ago taxi drivers would not go near the estate; in recent years, representatives of government and the Royal Family have beaten an increasingly well-worn path to it, eager to bask in the glow of a demonstrable success story. Rising property prices, reduced unemployment, countless regeneration awards, and positive media coverage represent further evidence of progress.

But despite the improvements, research conducted from the late 1990s indicated that Castle Vale's image lagged behind the realities of change. Well-informed residents of Birmingham and the West Midlands might have been aware that Castle Vale had undergone a substantial physical overhaul, but in the minds of the majority the estate was still associated with unemployment and high-rise towers, if it registered at all. Few recognised that they had an internationally revered example of area-based regeneration on their doorstep.

For many residents, the chasm between the estate's increasingly positive self-perception and its comparatively poor reputation within the wider area remains a source of frustration. The stigma associated with the B35 postcode may no longer be valid, but the tangled knot of notoriety cannot quickly be undone. Of greater concern is the potential for the lingering legacy of negativity to

impact on the estate's long-term social and economic viability. If Castle Vale is to make further progress it must continue to attract new residents and businesses. To do this it has to be recognised as a safe and productive environment, not a dead-end satellite community populated by problem people.

It was for these reasons that the Housing Action Trust placed a very high, if not unprecedented, emphasis on the importance of a positive image. For the first three years, a PR group led by resident Board member Joan Lawrie paved the way, but it wasn't until 1997 that public relations and image management touched every aspect of the organisation. This was far from standard practice. In the mid-1990s marketing and promotion were not concepts readily associated with municipal housing estates. It remains an emerging science.

Why image management was necessary

By 1993, when the Housing Action Trust was set up, 'Castle Vale' inspired fear and suspicion. Of course, the reality was nowhere near as bad. A large majority of residents from the era vouch for Castle Vale's 'sense of community', and social unity.

But the extent of the estate's negative reputation meant that it was difficult to entice people to judge for themselves. There was very

little that might lure them to visit. The shopping centre was partially boarded-up, the secondary school was half empty and the civic amenities were unremarkable – Castle Vale's swimming pool, and children's play-space were not sufficiently impressive to draw outsiders.

Geography was another problem. Castle Vale is an island five miles from Birmingham city centre. If managed effectively this might have become a virtue, helping to foster a sense of strength and identity. Instead it became an excuse for people to ignore Castle Vale, something that played into the hands of the negative elements within the estate, who thrived on the isolation.

As time passed, service providers found it increasingly difficult to penetrate Castle Vale, and offer the levels of support that they could elsewhere. Midwives felt physically threatened (chapter 5), and the police were fighting an un-winnable battle to control crime and anti-social behaviour (see chapter 6). This exacerbated a sense of abandonment, which found expression in the quality of the physical environment.

"I remember being told not to go near the sides of the tower blocks, because people would throw their rubbish out of the windows," says Richard Temple Cox, chairman of the Housing Action Trust. "People



Launch in October 2002 of *Knight of the Vale* with Sir Richard Knowles, former leader of Birmingham Council. The nine metre tall steel sculpture designed by artist John McKenna was based on residents' ideas and funded by Sainsbury's.



HRH Duke of Gloucester visited Castle Vale in 1996 to launch the start on the development of the Sanctuary.

don't throw rubbish around in a place that they are proud of, do they?" The landscape, naturally flat and windblown, became a litter-strewn urban desert, a place where stray dogs roamed, and truant children lurked.

The media didn't help. Castle Vale was constantly portrayed as a den of iniquity by local papers. "Much of the coverage wasn't accurate or fair. They only wanted to tell the bad stories, and they always chose pictures that showed the tower blocks in the background, they became the symbol of the estate," says Carole Rafferty lifelong resident and chair of the Tenants and Residents Alliance.

The coverage had a debilitating effect on resident's morale and sense of self-worth. It also impacted on property prices – the idea that a house in Castle Vale might have a meaningful monetary value was anathema to estate agents until around 2000/2001. "Since then people with no previous connection to the estate have wanted to move there. Castle Vale has risen along with the rest of Erdington. There are now estates with worse reputations," said one local estate agent in November 2004.

The estate's poor image even had the potential to erode family bonds. "My husband is from Castle Bromwich, down the road," says

a 30-something mother of two, who preferred to remain anonymous. "His parents didn't approve of Castle Vale, so when we got married we moved off the estate, to Hodge Hill. I hated it. I didn't know anybody. Nobody talked to me. In 1990, after two years away, I moved back to Castle Vale, but we didn't tell my husband's parents until the day we moved. I missed the community spirit. Castle Vale has been very badly misrepresented."

The growing role of PR

In principle, managing the image of an estate is no different to re-branding a chocolate bar. The idea is to improve people's views using all available tools and techniques. It is also vital that what people are told equates to what they see, and how they feel about the outcome.

Surveys carried out in 1993 revealed that there was plenty of room to improve opinions of Castle Vale. But for the first few years it was assumed that perceptions would alter automatically, a natural by-product of the regeneration process.

Tess Randles, the Trust's head of public relations and communications, recalls that: "The estate's image was recognised as a problem very early, but it wasn't until 1997 that we had a formalised approach to tackling it."



New walkways surround and bisect Castle Vale. They were developed as part of Project Wagtail.



Around 20 pieces of public art have been introduced across Castle Vale including the Standing Stones designed by Angelo Bardonari.



Flowers in bloom in the new Centre Park.



HM The Queen's visit in October 1998 drew out the crowds and included the recording of a short message on Vale FM to mark the occasion.

The first stage focussed on raising awareness of public relations within the organisation. Press cuttings were circulated, and everyone was kept informed about events and progress. “Staff began to see the relevance of promoting what we did, which helped to establish a PR-friendly culture within the organisation. It also boosted morale and stimulated pride,” says Randles. With the foundations laid, it was time to take the message to the people.

Promoting the Housing Action Trust and its activities to the community was a means of generating dialogue, which in turn helped to create a well-informed community. This would be crucial if the estate was to be capable of representing itself beyond 2005.

“We also challenged people to think about themselves differently, and encouraged a greater number to play a positive role in society,” says Randles. By 1997, the Trust identified individuals with strong ties to the community who would be prepared to stand up for Castle Vale. “We thought of them as ambassadors. They were particularly useful in the struggle to build the new shopping centre,” says Randles.

Between 1996 and 1998 the Housing Action Trust was locked in a dispute with a group of the remaining shop owners – they were holding out for greater compensation (see chapter 4). Their actions

led the Trust to purchase the site compulsorily, a decision that attracted a good deal of negative press coverage, including regional television and local newspapers. But rather than asking Angus Kennedy or Richard Temple Cox to refute allegations of heavy-handed tactics, the Trust invited ambassadors to talk to the media. It was an approach that projected a very different message about Castle Vale, and the people who lived there¹.

The Housing Action Trust also began to build relationships with local and national journalists. “We promoted stories about the physical changes, but also stories of human successes. It was important to start the process of making ‘Castle Vale’ mean something different,” says Randles.

Every positive story was exploited. The visit by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on 30 October 1998 was a notable landmark. It was covered extensively in the local and national media. Her Majesty even recorded an address on Vale FM². Since then countless politicians and members of the Royal Family have paid a visit, something that would have been unthinkable in the 1980s.

Wake up call

As the Housing Action Trust began to gather momentum, and evidence of change accumulated, the public relations strategy

moved into a new phase. The increasing prominence of public relations was also influenced by two external reports.

During 1999 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation³, researched perceptions of housing estates where efforts were already under way to improve their image. Three, including Castle Vale, were selected for detailed analysis⁴. ‘Challenging Images – Housing Estates, Stigma and Regeneration’ was published in 2000.

The report confirmed the Trust’s fears that perceptions were not keeping pace with changes on the ground. An improved image was clearly not an automatic by-product of the regeneration process. It was a wake up call.

“The Joseph Rowntree Foundation concluded that efforts to address the problem should be made through an approach that would target the attitudes of people with real local influence,” says Randles. This meant trying to influence taxi drivers, estate agents, local businesses, restaurants, and take-aways. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation described this approach as Image Management.

In 2001 the Housing Action Trust began to develop its own image management strategy. As ever this was driven by a baseline study, conducted by MORI⁵. “The key shift in PR terms was from managing

the reputation of the organisation, to marketing the area as a neighbourhood that had changed and where people are happy to live,” says Randles.

The following year, Randles helped to set up an Image Management Group, which brought the successor organisations together (see chapter nine). “They had a vital role to play in image management, a role that would expand once the HAT had ended. I spent time with each of them, to explain the importance of promoting Castle Vale in a positive light.”

The Image Management Group also helped to cement the place of public relations within the Trust’s succession strategy – the issue is firmly established on the radar of the Neighbourhood Management Partnership⁶. If all goes to plan, this will ensure that efforts to cast Castle Vale in a positive light continue well beyond 2005.

The Housing Action Trust also set up a Business Group, to engage local businesses and break down their suspicions about residents of Castle Vale (see also chapter 7). As well as assisting with job creation, this helped to spread the word about events at Castle Vale. But the most effective means of disseminating the message was convincing people to visit.



Aerial view of the award-winning Centre Park opened in 2003 and (below) a view of the park from the ground.



¹Ambassadors, residents who publicly endorsed Castle Vale included, Joan Lawrie, a Housing Action Trust board member, Barry Meah, who runs a local cleaning company, and Carole Rafferty, chair of the Tenants and Residents Alliance. ²Vale FM, Castle Vale’s community radio, provides broadcasting, training, education, and volunteering opportunities for anyone from the West Midlands area. It also broadcasts to the estate for two periods each year, helping to communicate what’s going on, and offering students some broadcast experience. See also chapter 9.

³The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent social policy research and development charity headquartered in York. It supports a programme of research and development projects in housing, social care and social policy (www.jrf.org.uk). ⁴The other two estates were Greater Pilton, Edinburgh, and Meadow Well, South Shields. ⁵MORI’s findings, ‘Seeing is Believing – Survey of Local Perceptions of Castle Vale’, were published in 2003. ⁶The Image Management Group met only twice before it was adopted by the Neighbourhood Partnership Board, which has representatives of all successor organisations on its board.



Live music at the Castle Vale artSite.



A programme of holiday activities offer children the opportunity to test their creative skills.



Rehearsal of the first annual Castle Vale pantomime written and directed by resident Norma Clarke (front, left).



A satellite version of Birmingham's Artsfest runs each September out of Caste Vale providing the opportunity for local youngsters to show off their talent.



Birmingham Touring Opera's performance at the Castle Vale artSite and (below) an example of the positive media coverage generated.



Media coverage relating to Castle Vale increased from around 70% negative in the early 1990s to 97% positive in 2004.

Estate in 100 new jobs joy
£35m store boost

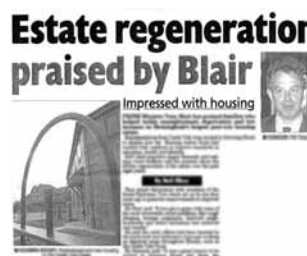
Shining examples materialise from two major leaps of faith

FROM THIS - TO THIS!

New park 'icing on our cake'

Estate regeneration praised by Blair

Impressed with housing



“Attracting Sainsbury’s [opened in July 2000] as the anchor tenant at the shopping centre was a masterstroke,” says Father Darren Miller, vicar at St Cuthberts church, near Reed Square. “It improved the quality of shopping for residents, and also created a reason for people to drive on to the estate. The quality of produce was also an improvement on Kwiksave.”

Castle Vale was also part of the artSites Birmingham initiative to attract cultural events to venues in neighbourhoods without existing provision⁷. In April 1999, Castle Vale hosted a production of Bedrich Smetana’s ‘The Two Widows’ by the City of Birmingham Touring Opera. The media was attracted by the novelty of the event – one well-heeled couple from Sutton Coldfield appeared on a Central TV news bulletin extolling the virtues of both the performance and the estate.

Throughout its lifetime the Housing Action Trust was also anxious to attract sports clubs to the estate. It assisted in the relocation of Paget Rangers FC, a local amateur football club, to new facilities off Famborough Road⁸. “We also tried to develop a ‘sports village’, as an asset for the wider community, but we ran out of time,” explains Randles⁹.

Of course, once outsiders had been enticed to the estate it was vital to create a good impression beyond the confines of the shopping

centre. All the good work risked being undone if rubbish and stray dogs had lined Tangmere Drive on the drive home from Sainsbury’s. As a consequence, improving the appearance of the estate and investing in public art were long-term priorities, and underpinned the Housing Action Trust’s approach to changing perceptions of the estate (see side panels 1 and 2).

The future

It doesn’t matter whether you’re promoting washing-up liquid or a car, public perception will only change if improvements are rooted in reality. In this respect Castle Vale was clearly well placed. The enhanced physical environment and improved quality of housing lifted the spirits of local people. Very few area-based regeneration schemes include comparable levels of redevelopment - in truth questions would have been asked if the self-image of the estate had not improved as a consequence.

“But unfortunately public opinion across the wider area has been more resistant to change,” says Randles. There are reasons to be positive, including the growing confidence of the business community, and a MORI survey in autumn 2004 which found that 61% of residents believe that Castle Vale had a better image than other areas of Birmingham.

The survey also revealed that between 2001 and 2004 there had been a significant softening of external perceptions towards Castle Vale. “It appears that Castle Vale was now seen as just another area of Birmingham, it was no longer a ‘notorious estate’.”

Furthermore, property prices have risen, a good indication of the success of any regeneration programme. No one is living in negative equity anymore. And taxi drivers have long since removed Castle Vale from their black list.

It isn’t clear how long it will take for opinions about Castle Vale to reach a critical mass, or what it will take for that to happen because it’s rarely been attempted before, at least not on the same scale or within such an intense timeframe. But all the indications are that the process may take a generation to complete, which makes the role of the successor organisations extremely important in continuing the good work¹⁰.

Image management in the context of a regeneration programme remains a relatively unknown quantity. Perhaps as the process is honed, it will become quicker, and easier to manipulate? But at least the importance of image management is now widely acknowledged. And for that Castle Vale Housing Action Trust deserves at least some of the credit.

Environmental improvements - Project Wagtail

From the outset it was recognised that people would only think differently about Castle Vale if they had reasons to change their minds. Alongside the demolition of the high-rise towers, the on-going drive to improve the quality of public areas and green spaces offered powerful evidence of a new identity. It suggested a community on the up.

Over the years, the Housing Action Trust supported a range of initiatives to reduce waste, and maintain the appearance of the estate. These included an annual litter pick with schools, bulb planting, and the provision of ‘poop scoops’ to dog owners. The Trust also assisted local people to develop their own ideas.

In 1986 newly-married Jez Lilley moved to Castle Vale, where his wife had been brought up. “I lived like a hermit for the first two years. I’d just left the army, who really care about you. By comparison this place seemed so unfriendly. I hated it. The only good thing was the amount of green space.”

Realising that he would be in Castle Vale for a while Lilley, a nature enthusiast, looked for ways to make improvements. He found some wasteland in the south of the estate and envisaged a wildlife reserve. In 1988 he was awarded a £15,000 grant by Birmingham City Council.

“I needed volunteers, so I went to speak to the local schools. They were thrilled to be asked. Nobody really paid much attention to the schools or the children. In the end about 500 helped with the tree and shrub planting,” says Lilley.

As time went by Lilley set up a gardening club, and was given an office in the Fort Centre, a short walk away. The Fort quickly became a drop-in centre for unwanted pets. Lilley, who had recently completed a falconry course, also ran a bird of prey centre – he looked after 14 large birds, including owls, falcons, and kestrels. But he found that very few people would make the effort to walk from the conservation area to the Fort Centre.

“I’d been thinking about a footpath for a while. One day, while sitting on the bridge, a wagtail came and sat down next to me. I decided to call it Project Wagtail,” says Lilley.

The original idea was to build a footpath around the perimeter of the estate, but in 1994 Richard Temple Cox, chairman of the Housing

Action Trust, got wind of Lilley’s plans. “I was invited to the office, and offered a job as Community Development Officer with an environmental remit. I couldn’t believe it,” he says. Project Wagtail was his top priority.

Over the next two years the scheme funded by the Trust, Groundwork Birmingham, and Birmingham City Council – grew into a 1.5km-long network of pathways that surrounds and bisects Castle Vale, offering pedestrian access to shops and amenities. The pathways also help to maintain previously neglected land.

Lilley’s experience, like so many other residents, shows that there is no shortage of ambition in Castle Vale, but there has not always been the support to realise the visions.



A BBC Radio WM presenter interviews local environmentalist Jez Lilley in 1995.

⁷For further information about artSites Birmingham visit www.artsites.org.uk. ⁸Paget Rangers FC disbanded in 2002, leaving Castle Vale with a venue, but no tenant. ⁹At the time of writing (November 2004), the Housing Action Trust planned to hand the lease for the football club to Birmingham City Council, in the hope that improved sports facilities would one day be built in Castle Vale.

¹⁰In the absence of the Housing Action Trust, Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership will take the lead in the co-ordination of an Image Management strategy (see chapter 9).



Artist Tim Tolkien works up designs with young residents.



Launch of the Spitfire sculpture in November 2000 showing Spitfire test pilot Alex Henshaw MBE unveiling a nose cone plaque.

Public art

Not many post-war housing estates have a history. As a consequence very few benefit from a sense of identity. Castle Vale is an exception. During the Second World War the estate was an RAF air base, known as Castle Bromwich Aerodrome. Spitfires and Lancaster Bombers manufactured at Castle Bromwich Aeroplane Factory were tested there¹¹.

This proud legacy is celebrated in the Sentinel, a large steel structure depicting three half-size Spitfires peeling off in different directions. It is located on the Chester Road roundabout, the main gateway to the estate.

The Sentinel, in spirit a miniature Angel of the North¹², was designed by sculptor and community artist Tim Tolkien. It opened to great fanfare on 14 November 2000, and remains a landmark of Castle Vale's commitment to using public art to change perceptions.

Over the years the Housing Action Trust used its community arts programme to inspire local people, stimulate skills and confidence, and make the estate more attractive. From April 1996 this strategy was delivered principally by the artist in residence scheme, run by Tolkien with support from the Collective Art Noise.

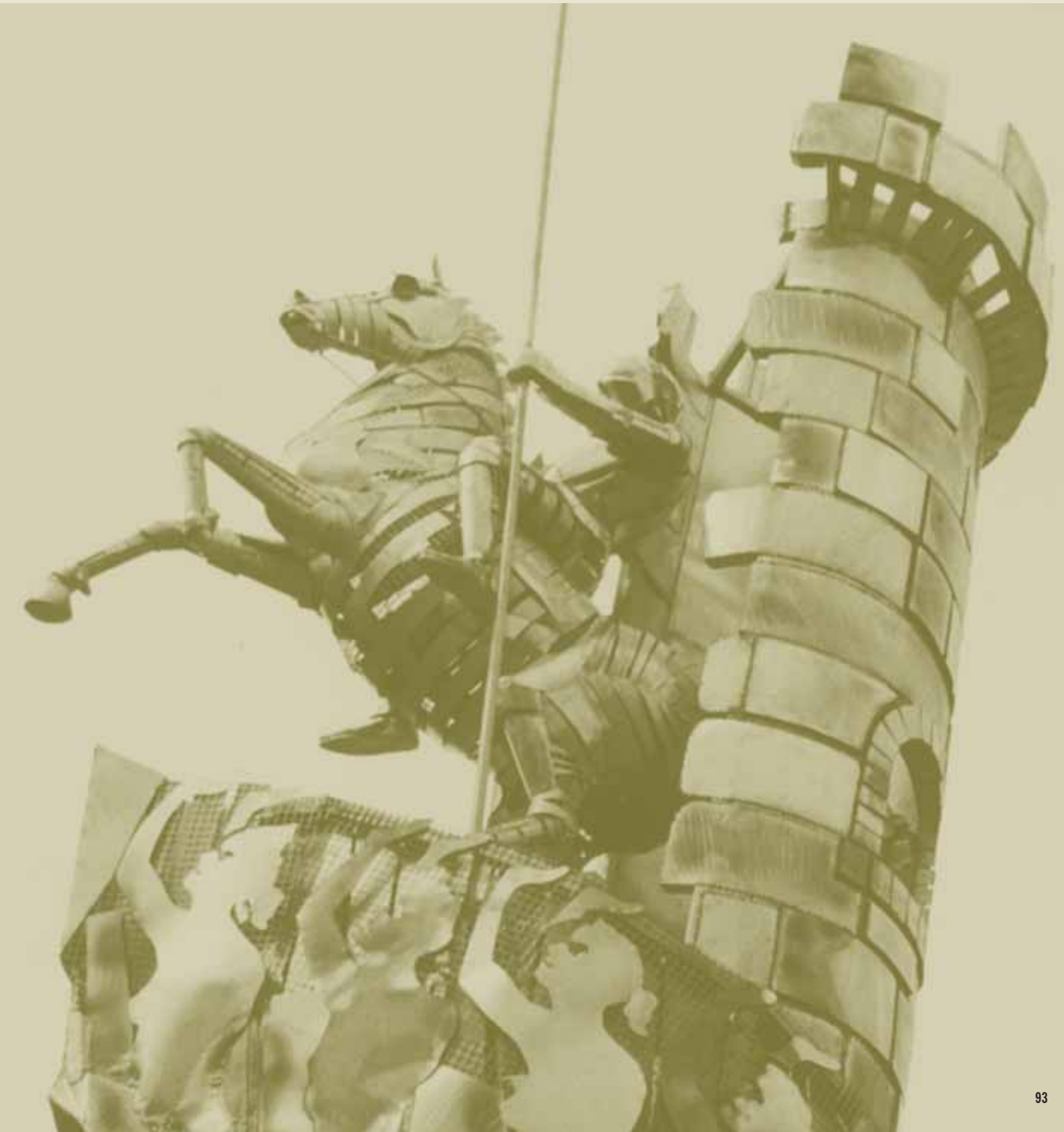
"We were commissioned to work with residents on the design and implementation of five pieces of public art," says Tolkien. The first of these were the 'Dream Seats'. Tolkien designed a simple metal bench that could have images and motifs cut into the back and seat. To promote a sense of ownership the designs were dreamed up by different resident groups and placed around the estate. Another idea was for colourful wing-shaped banners – another reference to the Spitfire – to mark the boundaries of the estate.

In 1998 the Housing Action Trust's arts strategy gathered momentum, with the appointment of a Community Arts Development Officer. This broadened the reach of the arts programme, to incorporate theatre, music, and creative writing. Resident workshops were set up to encourage reluctant residents to get involved. The Community Arts Development Officer also improved relationships with the five schools on the estate.

When the site of Concorde Tower was being transformed into low-rise homes, GCSE art students painted Roy Lichtenstein-inspired murals on the temporary site hoardings. For the duration of the build, dramatic colours and cartoon figures brightened the

Chester Road entrance to the estate. "It was noticeable that the hoardings were not defaced. Over the years it became clear that children would respect things that they had contributed to," says Tess Randles.

Towards the end of the Housing Action Trust's lifetime, Sainsbury's contributed to two prominent works of public art, the Baby in the Hand sculpture near the supermarket, and the Knight of the Vale near Chivenor Junior School. Their presence was evidence of progress, as was the source of their funding. Even private companies were prepared to demonstrate their commitment to Castle Vale.



¹¹The site of Castle Bromwich Aeroplane Factory is now occupied by a Jaguar manufacturing plant. ¹²The Angel of the North is a 20-metre high human figure designed by sculptor Antony Gormley. It sits on top of a former coal pithead on the edge of Gateshead. Since 1998 it has become a national symbol of post-industrial regeneration.