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 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.

Art, Environment and Image Improvement

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 been an increasingly well-norm 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 reality 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 renowned 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 lowness of rooty cannot quickly be undone. Of greater concern is the potential for the ingrown 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.

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“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
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.”

In principle, managing the image of an estate is no different to rebranding 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.

Tessa 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.”
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 there.

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
even recorded an address on Vale FM
Elizabeth II on 30 October 1998 was a notable landmark. It was
an approach that projected a very different message about
Castle Vale, and the people who lived there.

The report confirmed the Trust’s view 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 using 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 MORI.

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,
and in some cases they expanded the NTF 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
was firmly established on the radar of the Neighbourhood Management
Partnership. 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.
The most effective means of disseminating the message was
corresponding people to visit.
Live music at the Castle Vale artSite.

A programme of holiday activities offers 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).

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

A satellite version of Birmingham’s Artsfest runs each September out of Castle Vale providing the opportunity for local youngsters to show off their talent.
“Rethinking Sandymount [opened in July 2000] as the anchor tenant
at the shopping centre, we use a masterstroke,” says Father Damien
Miles, vicar at St Etheldreda church, near Regent Squares. “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 previous.”

Castle Vale was also part of the artSites Birmingham initiative
to attract cultural events to venues in neighbourhoods without existing
provision. 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.
The site of Castle Bromwich Aeroplane Factory is now occupied by a Jaguar manufacturing plant.

The 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.

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 there. 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 North, 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 people, develop skills and confidence, and made 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 the site in consultation with them. We decided to make the site our own," says Tolkien. The first of these works was a newspaper-shaped canvas on which residents painted their own stories.

The second project was a series of exhibitions on the history of Castle Vale, designed to encourage people to think about the estate's past.

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 outside the supermarket, and the Knight of the Vale near Chivenor Junior School. Their presence was evidence of progress, as was the success of the Funding for the Arts project. Private companies were prepared to demonstrate their commitment to Castle Vale.