

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 work<sup>10</sup>.

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 15km-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.

<sup>10</sup>In 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).