



Annual Report 2007



Chief Executive's Annual Report

Merlin's ninth year was our best ever, with so many milestones achieved.

Financially all of our businesses made a contribution to our central costs, with the exception of Merlin Maintenance, which is the successor service to Fresh Start Decorators, and is now being absorbed into Merlin Training.

Major new funding streams were developed as we won several new contracts, the main ones being the Birmingham City Council co financed employment, training and enterprise support programmes and extensions to Buster Werkenbak, our employment transport service. Indeed at March 2007 our reserves and deferred grant income had increased from £1.33m to £1.34m

Our community engagement programmes are also bearing fruit, as the Community Advisory Group goes from strength to strength and we have also facilitated the development of community groups elsewhere, including the new Birches Green Neighbourhood Forum.

Despite reductions in subsidies from the endowment trust fund we are delighted to have continued delivering two of our most popular local services – CCTV and the Community Bus (route 696).

Both Tiggy Winkles and Valescapes have also enjoyed good years, breaking even after years of investment.

The Castle Vale Business Group supported by Merlin celebrates its 15th anniversary this year, and a number of exciting activities are planned.

The year ahead will also see a number of exciting new developments, as we are about to launch several new services under the Merlin Training brand. Look out for the new Training Shop in Swannies, Erdington, and the new Training Centre at the Royal Works in Sutton.

We are also in the process of setting up a special community group in each of the four Erdington wards to concentrate on jobs, training and education, subjects that we know the community is as passionate about as we are.

Finally, thanks are due to Merlin's staff, board and community advisory group members, funders and customers, but most of all to the community that Merlin serves, without whose support none of our activities would continue to thrive.

Robert Brown

Chief Executive



Tiggy Winkles

Our two Tiggy Winkles Nurseries enjoyed a good year, with all the children continuing to be cared for and educated to an extremely high standard, as evidenced by our excellent OFSTED reports. On average we cared for 59 children every day, representing 65% of our total capacity. Because we are generally able to staff according to the numbers of children on the register, and assisted by the receipt of grants from the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative, we managed to break even during the year despite not operating at full capacity.



During the year we ran a number of special events for the children, many of which included their parents, and at Christmas we also kept one of the Nurseries open late so that parents could take advantage of the free bus service we operated to the Fort Shopping Park.



Tiggy Winkles owes its reputation to its managers and staff, who are dedicated to the children they look after, and our staff retention rates are second to none. Nonetheless as we train all our staff to the highest level, it is inevitable that we will develop more fully qualified Nursing staff than we need, and we are proud of the fact that that we supply many of the qualified staff who go on to work in other Nurseries.

We aim to secure new long leases for both Nurseries this year, with BCC for Pegasus Tiggy Winkles (we are located in part of Pegasus School), and with CVCHA for Chivenor Tiggy Winkles (we are in the lower ground floor of the Chivenor House block of flats).

Valescapes



Our grounds maintenance and landscaping team enjoyed its best year yet, breaking even for the first time. During the year CVCHA decided to put its grounds maintenance work out to tender, and we were faced with the possible loss of our largest client. To offset this we increased our work with other clients, and so successful

were we in increasing the value of our contracts with Waterloo Housing, combined with new contracts with Focus Housing and Jaffray Care, that we decided not to tender for the CVCHA work.



Merlin Maintenance

The only service not to break even last year, we have now amalgamated it into Merlin Training, whereby we will provide young members of the community with practical inductions and tasters in painting and decorating, along with plumbing, electrics and carpentry. After the courses, planned to run for 13 weeks, our employment and training advisors will then help the students find additional training, apprenticeships or full time employment.

Employment and Training Support



We have called our co finance funded ward based Job, Enterprise and Training support programmes the Tyburn JET, and the speed with which we have achieved our targets and helped people into employment and training has justified this mnemonic. Although contracts for these programmes were not signed with Birmingham City Council until January 2007, by the end of March 2007 we had registered 169 people (target 102) and achieved 44 outcomes (target 28), of which 37 were jobs. Since the end of the year we have increased the number of Tyburn residents on these programmes to 375 (against a target of 237), and have achieved 112 outcomes (of which 85 were jobs) against a target of 87. We are working on four Tyburn JET programmes, and they are Engagement, Jobs Match, Intermediate Labour Market and Enterprise, with a combined lifetime value of over £1 million to run until June 2008. Enterprise is covered in the next section, and delivery of the other three programmes is the responsibility of Merlin's employment and training advisors (ETAs). We employ eight ETAs, supported by Merlin's recruitment consultancy and marketing team. We have so far signed up 37 Tyburn residents onto the intermediate labour market programme whereby we find them a work placement and pay them up to six months' wages.



We are also working across the entire Erdington constituency on other co-financing projects, and at the end of March 2007 we had registered in excess of 600 people (target 404) with 213 job and training outcomes (target 152).

We work on one other BCC funded programme, helping Stockland Green youngsters find jobs and training, and this has been renewed for another year.

All advisors are based at the Castle Vale Campus, although much of their work is carried out on an outreach basis at places like Erdington Fire Station, Erdington Job Centre and various community centres. We also work from our Jobs Bus, which was partially funded by the North East Birmingham Access to Employment Group, and it has regular parking slots at Castle Vale Retail Park, the Fort Shopping Park and the Co-op in Erdington High Street.

We have undergone an initial assessment for the Matrix standard, which we aim to achieve by the end of the current year. We are also developing a commercial recruitment business to provide additional income to reinvest in our grant funded activities to help unemployed people find jobs and training.



Enterprise

During the year we continued to provide an enterprise service, offering advice and guidance to members of the community interested in starting their own business. A total of four different staff have helped to deliver the service during the year, and between them they have delivered an excellent service to the community. In all we advised over 50 people on business start up, and we helped 10 of them start their own business.

This service is largely funded by co financing, but with funding from the Endowment Trust Fund we have supported a number of youngsters from local schools in the development of business plans as part of their business studies course, as well as continuing to facilitate the Castle Vale Business Group. The Group is about to celebrate its 15th anniversary, and a number of high profile events were held during the year, regularly attended by over 30 local business people. During the year we also mentored a number of Year Six students, and we offered work placements to two others, whereby they spent two weeks working alongside the Merlin team.



With funding from Josiah Mason College we have also offered assistance to local small businesses, enabling several of them to expand, including two who are now working from offices within the Community Campus. We also established a new North Solihull Business Forum, as well as undertaking a research project for Solihull Chamber of Commerce.

We always work closely with schools, businesses and other agencies, including Business in the Community and Young Enterprise, and we are planning a number of joint initiatives with them during the months ahead.

Merlin Training

Merlin Training started life as an IT lab situated at the Community campus with funding provided via the East Birmingham Development Agency. The lab comprises four computers with a selection of software including Microsoft Office, Adobe Creative Suite 2, Sage accounting, Typing tutors and 3D computer graphics. As part of the co financed programmes we are also launching two new training initiatives, a new training shop at Swannies Centre in Erdington, where shoppers and other local residents can access information on all the local training courses being offered, and a new training centre at the Royal Works in Sutton, where we will provide basic inductions to trades such as plumbing, electrics, carpentry and painting and decorating.



Buster Werkenbak



With the three year pilot project now completed, having achieved its major objectives, Buster Werkenbak started the year having evolved into a number of new services. With funding from Centro, we launched the new Airport Night Bus from Shard End and North Solihull, and with additional funding from Warwickshire County Council we extended the North Warwickshire service eastwards towards Nuneaton. We also managed to secure additional funding from Advantage West Midlands to continue the popular Hams Hall service from North Solihull. The service's fourth year saw us continuing to take people to and from work at times of the day and in places where conventional public transport was unavailable, justifying the initial investment from the funders.

As the year came to an end, with the Airport service continuing to achieve low passenger numbers, we developed plans for a new registered route to Hams Hall that would take its place at the end of the contract with Centro, and this is now running.

We also bid successfully for funding from WRASP, the Warwickshire Rural Access to Services Partnership, so that we could extend the North Warwickshire service through Stockingford and towards Nuneaton, and this service is also now being provided. Although we will continue to need new sources of funding for this service, we are proud that it continues to develop well into its fifth year, and the necessary downsizing at the end of last year required only two redundancies, which were both voluntary, while we have added one new marketing post to help the service to grow.



Valley Travel

We have continued to provide the much needed Community Bus (route 696) for the residents of Castle Vale, and passenger journeys remain around 1,400 per week, showing how important the service remains to this day. However the subsidy we have been receiving, first from Castle Vale Housing Action Trust and latterly from Castle Vale Endowment Trust Fund, has been reducing, leading to an increasing funding deficit. In order to minimise this deficit, we have had to cut costs by reducing the operational hours and increasing fares, but there are limits to how far this can be done without damaging the service.

The 696 is a very popular service, with the elderly members of the community relying on it to get around Castle Vale. Whilst a combination of increasing fares and reduced operational times has led to a slight falling away of fare paying passengers, the use made by elderly passengers has been remarkably constant, a function of their free travel and their willingness to modify travel times in line with the timetable.

The route is never likely to be self sufficient, and there is little room for manoeuvre in generating additional



income. Furthermore as the service is not generating any funds for investment in the business, there is no possibility of upgrading or replacing the vehicles, so they get older and, obviously, more expensive to maintain. This increases costs, so while economies are made wherever possible the underlying cost pressure is driving the deficit upwards. The long term future of this service therefore remains in doubt, as it will cost more and more to keep the ageing buses on the road, and yet the level of available subsidy is reducing.

The service now operates from Monday to Friday from 08.20 to 16.40 (with an hour's break between 12.20 and 13.20). Regular passenger surveys have shown how much the service is valued by its users. For example, when funding was reduced by the endowment trust fund last year we decided that the only way we could retain the service during the week was to eliminate the Saturday service. When passengers were informed of this they were horrified, and in less than three days a petition circulated on the bus itself attracted over 240 signatures in favour of keeping the Saturday service. Sadly our application for additional funding was subsequently turned down.

We therefore feel that it is a major achievement to be continuing to provide the service, retaining the majority of our passengers, and keeping their goodwill. We have also retained our drivers, a committed team of highly skilled and experienced people who love their job and the community they have served for many years now. We are also pleased with the success of the free service we operated for Castle Vale residents for three late night shopping visits to the Fort Shopping Park last Christmas.

CCTV

Merlin's CCTV operations are amongst the most professional around, having been one of the first in the country to achieve British Standard BS7958 in CCTV Operations. Since the scheme started in 2003 we have recorded and logged 10,380 incidents. These include 110 incidences of burglary, 128 assaults, 314 incidents of drug activity, 410 thefts, 70 observations of missing persons and 383 incidents of vehicle crime, all of which is made available to the police. Furthermore we have observed 1,978 instances of anti social behaviour, details of which are passed on to our partners CVCHA as well as the police. These incidents would have happened anyway, with or without CCTV (indeed there is little doubt that there would have been many more of them without the deterrent of being recorded on CCTV), but they have been acted on, enabling the police to increase their detection and conviction rates to the benefit of the vast majority of Castle Vale citizens who are law abiding and

community spirited. CVCHA have also been able to take more effective action against anti social behaviour. Furthermore any resident is able to telephone the CCTV unit at any time of the day or night if they observe or become aware of an incident, and we immediately monitor the situation from the nearest camera(s). If there are no cameras near the scene we contact the police immediately, and for instances of anti social behaviour we also involve the wardens whenever possible.

As we are the hub for the CATCH radio scheme, we are able to provide a communications network between police, CVCHA enforcement officers, wardens, security personnel at Castle Vale Retail Park, the School, and CATCH radio resident users. This provides real time communications which has led to a co-ordinated approach on many of the incidents that have occurred.

Castle Vale is now one of the safest places in Birmingham, a far cry from the old days before CCTV was introduced. Indeed, over the last 12 months there has been a substantial reduction in the number of crimes recorded by our cameras in Castle Vale, particularly in assault, criminal damage, burglaries and theft.

But the continuation of the service requires continued funding, currently provided by the Endowment Trust Fund, and if funding is reduced, we could be forced to cut back on the service, which would inevitably lead to an increase in both crime and the fear of crime.

With the support of the police, CVCHA, the schools, businesses and residents themselves, we believe that the CCTV unit should be retained in its present form for the benefit of the community.

This combined approach to prevention and detection has served Castle Vale well for the last few years, and must continue for the foreseeable future so that residents can enjoy the quality of life that they deserve.



Community Engagement

Our Community Advisory Group (CAG) comprising local residents has met with us every month since May 2002, and they continue to hold us to account on all matters pertaining to our businesses. To this end the chief executive submits his monthly board report to the CAG prior to every board meeting so that the community's input is taken full account of. CAG meetings also include lively discussion on other local issues, and Merlin is proud of the partnership that we have developed with the local community.

As part of our co financed activities we have now employed a full time community engagement officer, whose remit is to support the community throughout the whole Erdington constituency, and in addition to the existing CAG we will be setting up community groups whose remit will be to work with Merlin on the furtherance of local employment and training initiatives. We support a number of community led groups, and during the year we facilitated the development of a new, community led Neighbourhood Forum in Birches Green. Other groups we have supported include Birmingham Community Empowerment Network (B:cen), Birmingham Association of Neighbourhood Forums (BANF) and Erdington CAN.



We regularly attend and participate in ward committee meetings and the Erdington Strategic Partnership, as well as a number of other local and constituency based groups, including Castle Vale Neighbourhood Partnership and the new Erdington Hall Neighbourhood Forum.

Our staff also raised money for a number of good causes during the year, including The Norman Laud Association, The Lennox Childrens Cancer Fund, Comic Relief, Macmillan Cancer Support, Cancer Research UK and The Stroke Association.

Supported By

Many of our services are reliant on funding from other organisations whom we would like to take this opportunity to thank including:

Castle Vale
Endowment Trust Fund



Neighbourhood
Renewal Fund



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