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Trevor Holden: How we are using our airport to transform our town

27 APRIL 2018 BY [TREVOR HOLDEN](#)

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- **Project:** Levering the potential of London Luton Airport to transform lives in Luton
- **Objectives:** Deliver sustainable growth of London Luton Airport significantly beyond its current permitted capacity
- **Timescale:** 2017-21
- **Number of staff working on project:** Six core staff
- **Outcomes:** Economic and employment growth for Luton and the sub-region with improved opportunity, prosperity, health and wellbeing for our residents
- **Officer contact details:** [Robin Porter](#)

If you visit Luton today you can't help but recognise a town going through remarkable transformation. Major regeneration schemes are underway which are changing the face of a place once voted the UK's worst place to live.

The latest Centre for Cities report showed Luton as having the fastest private sector job growth, largest increase in real wages and highest number of new enterprises of anywhere in the country.

A major reason for this success is our strategy for growing our biggest asset – London Luton Airport – to improve the lives of local people.

The airport has been owned by the council since it opened in 1938. While it has always generated a bit of cash for the town, we traditionally were too passive, missing the real potential to use our major asset to change our town's fortunes.

As austerity hit hard, Luton, like all councils, had to find other ways to deliver for the people of the town. We either trod water or we fought back. So a couple of years ago we decided to fundamentally change the strategy of our airport company, London Luton Airport Limited (LLAL). We wanted to become more actively engaged in shaping the future of the asset, so as to maximise the benefits flowing to the town as a result of its public ownership.

With each additional million passengers travelling through the airport translating into up to 800 new jobs and a £76m uplift for the regional economy, we set our sights on ambitious targets to transform our airport.

Its proximity to London, its catchment area, its low cost for airlines and its professional management meant it was perfectly placed for growth and we have set a target of being the airport of choice for north London and England's economic heartland.

Growing our airport asset is part of a much wider change in strategic direction the council has taken to transform the town and make life better for the people that live here. Through the Luton Investment Framework (LIF), we and our partners are delivering more than £1.5bn inward investment to transform the town and creating 18,500 quality jobs for local people.

The step change in ambition has already seen the annual return from our company triple in the last four years. In that time we have delivered 50% growth, with 48 months of consecutive growth. At present the airport contributes £2,000 to the UK economy every minute.

Luton is now the fifth largest and fastest growing major airport in the UK and the third largest in Europe for private jets. The new business strategy has added £179m of value to the publicly-owned company, which of course means the people of Luton are the ones who benefit.

It is also helping fund our vital community projects and services: over the last five years our airport company has contributed more than £50m in community funding.

The challenge is to keep delivering success, but if the airport continues growing at its current rate (around one million passengers a year) it will reach capacity by 2020-21. That's why, in December 2017, we announced our vision to grow the airport over the next 30 years. Our long-term ambition is for 36-38 million passengers to use the airport every year by 2050, up from 15.8 million in 2017.

We have also submitted planning applications through our airport company for two development projects – New Century Park and Bartlett Square – which total over one million square feet of commercial space in our enterprise zone, bringing thousands of new jobs to the town.

We have also invested £225m to deliver the state-of-the-art Luton DART fast transit system, linking London Luton Airport with Luton Airport Parkway railway station.

The Luton DART's seamless journey time from Luton Airport Parkway to the airport terminal will be well under four minutes – enabling fast, easy access from central London to the departure terminal in under 30 minutes.

Investing in a ground-breaking scheme such as this will help reduce the number of cars on the road, making a significant contribution to the problems of traffic and pollution and making Luton a much more appealing option for people heading abroad.

When talking about Luton's success, people have told me that we are lucky to own an airport. While that might be true, we have actually owned it for 80 years. We have just changed the way we manage it.

It's the same with the other investments we have secured across the town as part of the LIF. We have been driving our unique selling points hard – location and connectivity – and convinced people that Luton is an ideal place to do business. But again, as far as I am aware, Luton has always been in the same place on a map – it's just what we did with it that changed.

So my advice to other councils is to take a look at all your assets and differentiators and ask yourself if you are using them to maximum effect. You need to drive them hard. Think outside the box ... are you doing things because you have always done them? We certainly were.

And don't be afraid to take risks. In the current climate councils need to be brave – we owe it to our residents. Sometimes we can be too risk-averse to the detriment of the people we are here to serve.

We are fortunate to have had the infrastructure and space to effect some serious change. But we have learnt that you need to have backing from every corner. Having a strategic and forward-thinking officer core is not enough. Our success is through a 'Team Luton' ethos – passionate council leaders, members, business partners and residents all side by side, wanting to make the town a better place. We are all in it together.

Naturally, power comes with responsibility and there are risks associated with any investment or venture. The work that we are doing around the airport will constitute a huge single investment, there is no escaping that. That's why the huge amount of work going into understanding, assessing and mitigating the risks is so crucial.

But as we have said all along, Luton was sinking under the weight of austerity. The biggest risk by far was doing nothing.

Trevor Holden, chief executive, Luton BC