



Rescuing an airport, and then lifting up a town

Reimagining an airport and its relationship to its
surrounding community

In early 2020, the Covid pandemic hit. It was devastating to aviation. As the newly-installed CEO of the owners of London Luton Airport, Graham had to deal with this existential threat to the airport's future. He worked with five different parties to agree a package which stabilised the finances, secured jobs and maintained the company's unparalleled support for community organisations.

Graham could then turn to the job he was hired for, which was get the airport's expansion application into shape. He initiated a re-design, cutting the £2.5bn projected cost to £1.5bn. He created a new sustainable framework: Green Controlled Growth. And he initiated a re-brand, to communicate the company's unique position as an agent of social impact.

The situation

Typically, Graham saw the bigger picture about the company's role. This wasn't just about an airport expansion, or even an airport. The company was 'more than an airport' with its vital role as the region's largest employer, and with its broad social impact, contributing 20x more per passenger to local community organisations than any other UK airport.

Graham led a major brand review, leading to a new name, Luton Rising, and a radically re-designed communications approach. This emphasised Luton Rising's role as a partner to all its stakeholders – the airport operator, Luton Council (its shareholder), Luton Rising's employees and the community it serves.

He also had a major turnaround task with the Luton DART, a transit system between the Luton Parkway train station, and the airport terminal. Completion of this project had been subject to a number of delays, but Graham made the necessary changes to ensure it was up and running. It was launched in March 2023.

The approach

Graham's role at Luton Rising exemplified his approach to creating integrated value. This approach is that you maximise value – the hard currency of financial valuation – by maximising softer, less tangible values: reputation, relationships, culture. This not only ensures shareholders and investors are appropriately rewarded for their risk capital, but that this financial performance has sustainable foundations.

“Graham's leadership was transformational at Luton Rising. He landed at a moment of deep challenge and crisis, and his energy, vision and strategic acuity were vital to London Luton Airport's recovery, the delivery of the new DART railway and Luton itself from the pandemic. Graham then led the transformation of the growth strategy, engaging all stakeholders to create a compelling planning application for the airport's expansion and sustainable future of the town and region.

It is exceptionally rare to find leaders who can integrate across disciplines and be both the strategic 'guiding mind' as well as deliver on the detail. Graham is clearly one of those leaders; he delivers results even under difficult conditions, and any infrastructure owner or operator is lucky to have him”

– Isabel Dedring, Global Transport Leader, Arup

The results

- The most immediate result was that the airport was still a going concern, following the pandemic. In fact, its recovery was the fastest of any major UK airport.
- The DCO application navigated a major public consultation, and was successfully steered through the planning process. It now awaits approval by the Secretary of State for Transport.
- The Luton DART has carried its 5 millionth passenger. It won the Outstanding Engineering Achievement Award at the Global Light Rail Awards 2024.
- Luton Rising has a strong relationship with the local community, and maintains its status as owner of the UK's most socially impactful airport.
- The valuation of Luton Rising has risen from £0.5bn to £1.5bn.

Luton Rising, under Graham's leadership, is a signature example of the value of values.



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