

## Gatwick Airport: community involvement

# Grow trust, keep it simple

*BAA's enforced sale of London's second airport was used as an opportunity to reach out to its local community and communicate its social, environmental and operational vision for a Decade of Change*

Other than, perhaps, nuclear power stations and government arms depots, there can be few more regulated places to work than an airport. Everything from aircraft parking charges to incentives on capital planning boasts a weighty rulebook all of its own. Airports' social and environmental impacts are far from exempt. Take noise pollution. Airport operators are subject to strict norms covering departing aircraft, night flying and – in the case of Gatwick and Heathrow – even housing noise insulation schemes. Exceed these by the tiniest fraction of a decibel and fines start being meted out.

Like Heathrow, Stansted, Glasgow and Edinburgh, Gatwick used to shelter under the BAA umbrella. That was until December 2009, when the London-based airport was spun off on its own after orders from the Competition Commission. The UK's second busiest airport was snapped up by private investment fund Global Infrastructure Partners for £1.5bn.

"Previously, under BAA we relied heavily on a centralised, Heathrow-focused strategy for social and environmental performance," says Tom Denton, head of corporate responsibility at the airport. "We saw it [the sell-off] as a clear opportunity to start almost with a blank sheet of paper and assess what would be a realistic approach for Gatwick specifically."

Gatwick's new strategy had to account for a change in the political winds. The UK's coalition

government, elected last year, has indefinitely parked all airport expansion plans in London and the South East of England. At the same time, Gatwick's new owners have ambitions to grow passenger numbers by one fifth by 2020. (In 2010, 33 million passengers passed through the airport's doors).

That left Denton and Gatwick's corporate responsibility manager Tom Hall with a taxing challenge: to do more with less. The dilemma was not all bad as it put sustainability centre stage. By prioritising social and environmental management, the airport operators could theoretically reduce resource use and cut costs without compromising their growth-without-expansion plans.

A responsible business approach promises to serve the airport's strategic interests in another respect too. As a heavily regulated industry, airport operators need the ear of regulators. More

importantly still, they need their trust. Although there are no prospects for a second runway, Gatwick is rolling out a £1bn capital investment programme. Enacting it requires the authorities' goodwill, particularly the planning authorities. "If they don't trust us and don't feel we have our social and environmental impacts covered, it's far more difficult to get things approved," observes Denton.

What emerged in August 2010, therefore, was a step-by-step strategy to spell out the airport's corporate responsibility vision through to 2020.

Its Decade of Change is structured around ten priority areas. The majority have an environmental angle, ranging from carbon emissions and waste to noise levels and water management. Social and economic issues are included too, appearing in Gatwick's commitment to be a "trusted and valued neighbour" as well as a driver of local economic activity – its economic footprint is already in the region of £2bn.

Right down to the strategy's straightforward name, Hall and Denton had one abiding principle: "Keep it simple." The document is just that. It communicates the airport's sustainability challenges, its strategic approach, its current performance and – most importantly – its future targets.

If special-interest stakeholders need more information, then it's there too, Denton insists. They can drill down into Gatwick's website for specific performance metrics, such as on air quality and noise, as well as peruse Gatwick's latest corporate responsibility report (released in October) or download detailed policy response documents.

"We are still reporting in the same detail, we're just doing it in a more engaging way," Denton adds.

The approach appears to be working. Jeremy Taylor, chief executive of the Gatwick Diamond

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## the company

Gatwick Airport is the UK's second largest airport and the busiest single-runway airport in the world. It serves more than 200 destinations – more than any other UK airport – in 90 countries for around 33 million passengers a year on short- and long-haul point-to-point services, and aims to increase this to 40 million by 2020. It is also a major economic driver for the south-east region of England, generating around 23,000 on-airport jobs and 13,000 jobs through related activities.

- The airport's approach to carbon management received accreditation last year through both the Carbon Trust Standard and the Airport Council International's Airport Accreditation Award.
- The airport last year donated £170,000 to the Gatwick Airport Community Trust.



Business Association, a network of local businesses, says the document communicates “very clearly” what the airport is setting out to achieve. “Something that is 15 pages long coming out of an airport is really remarkable,” he adds.

Many of the 200-plus businesses operating on the site echo the sentiment. Denton maintains that the new strategy document is helping to “open doors for discussion” with airlines, retailers and other companies operating out of Gatwick. “To gain that buy-in, we needed to demonstrate that we have a robust and transparent sustainability strategy,” he stresses. The same is true for Gatwick’s own internal stakeholders. Engaging the airport operator’s management and its employees was paramount for the corporate responsibility team. As Hall puts it, they didn’t want “another report ... that looks good on paper and then just sits on a shelf”.

The Decade of Change strategy, therefore, began life as a collaborative process. All Gatwick’s key teams were widely consulted, with their feedback informing the thinking of a cross-functional strategy group tasked with developing specific target areas and goals. For senior management, Hall and Denton then ran a series of workshops to explain the strategy. To press home their case, they stressed the bottom-line benefits derived from resource efficiency. Not content to leave it there, they worked with the heads of each of Gatwick’s dozen or so business units to break the strategy into “tangible and achievable” targets.

To help in taking the strategy from paper into practice, the corporate responsibility team also drafted in individual employees. A volunteer ‘Airport Environment Partner’ was appointed to each business unit. Their task is twofold: to spread the word to their colleagues, and to feedback advice and insights to management. “To be effective, they must be someone who is senior enough to recommend a decision, but close enough to the ground to know about operational efficiencies,” says Hall.

As an additional step, Gatwick also hired human resource specialist firm Reed to take each partner through its ‘Green Manager’ training programme.

Denton admits that it’s early days. Gatwick’s Decade of Change is only a little over a year old. The airport operator, he says, finds itself in a “transition stage” from corporate responsibility being a “bolt on” to being “business as usual”.

Not that the strategy is without some early wins. Gatwick’s recent corporate responsibility report notes a 10% reduction in water use, for example. Waste to landfill is also down almost 5%.

Other targets will take longer to meet. A cold winter, for instance, pushed up gas consumption and set back advances towards Gatwick’s ambitious target of a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2020 (against a 1990 baseline). Gatwick are still on track to achieve this target.

Looking back at the last 12 months, Hall and Denton come back to the buy-in that the new strategy has engendered. Relationships are being strengthened. Key stakeholders are being engaged. Trust is being built. None are especially easy to quantify, but all are integral to achieving the Decade of Change’s goals. A newly independent Gatwick has established a clear flight path and a firm base from which to take off. Ahead, an interesting flight awaits.

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Passengers using one of Gatwick’s many travelators. The airport hopes to increase passenger numbers to 40 million a year by 2020

## comment GATWICK AIRPORT



Emphasising corporate responsibility in all relations with its stakeholders and at the same time, improving the bottom line even over a 10 year period, is ambitious. Gatwick Airport’s leadership is determined to see that it happens and the programme for achieving this has been underway for a year.

It has had a good start. Critical to this has been the cooperation of staff at all levels as well as an open relationship with its stakeholders. This has meant the conscious generation of trust with those both within and outside the operation.

### Points to note:

- The widespread consultation process to launch the programme.
- Measurable targets.
- Volunteer environment partners in each business unit.
- Reporting non achievements as well as successes.

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