



# The closure of Vauxhall, Luton

## The role of regional development agencies in organisational restructuring in the UK

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### Executive summary

This case study considers the closure of the Vauxhall manufacturing plant in Luton, Bedfordshire and in particular the role played by the Regional Development Agency - the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) – who co-ordinated the response to the closure through the establishment of the Vauxhall Luton Partnership. Led by the EEDA, this Partnership consisted of company, trade union and regional public agency representatives. The closure took place within the context of major change in the structure of the UK motor industry, to the extent that all major motor vehicle assembly in the UK is now carried out by global companies based overseas. It involved the loss of 2000 jobs, although 1000 jobs were transferred to an adjoining site within the company.

The innovative nature of the case study lies in its comprehensive and holistic approach to organisational restructuring, characterised by the response at regional level. The Partnership was lead by the Regional Development Agency, responsible to central government, but engaging with key local actors including locally elected councils. The potential impact of the closure of Vauxhall on Luton was such that it provoked an extremely fast response, engaging public and private agencies in the region and working throughout the 18 months prior to closure. The Partnership provided a coordinated approach from government agencies, which enabled it to secure substantive funding for a range of initiatives, including reskilling and training, but also support for local business development. These were based upon an in-depth economic assessment of the impact of closure, which included a focus upon the supply chain and programmes to support these organisations. Unlike many UK responses to restructuring there were attempts to address the psycho-social effects and a number of health-related initiatives.

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**Monitoring Innovative Restructuring in Europe**

**The closure of Vauxhall, Luton – a case study of  
the role of regional agencies in organisational  
restructuring in the UK**

**UK Case Study Report – July 2006**

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## **Introduction**

This case study considers the closure of the Vauxhall car manufacturing plant in Luton, Bedfordshire. In particular it considers the role played by the Regional Development Agency - the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) – who co-ordinated the response to the closure through the establishment of the Vauxhall Luton Partnership. Led by EEDA, this Partnership consisted of company, trade union and regional public agency representatives. The Partnership's activities are discussed, focusing particularly on the education/training and health initiatives and the impact and implications for the local area and those affected by the closure, including the supply chain.

The case study is part of a European Social Fund project – Monitoring Innovative Restructuring in Europe. This is a comparative project covering France, Germany, Belgium, Sweden and the UK that aims to monitor and generalise best practice in relation to innovative internal and external company restructuring.

### Research methods

The case study draws on a range of material: including a presentation made by a representative of EEDA to the MIRE UK Project Workshop in May 2006; semi-structured telephone interviews with trade union representatives, including the TUC and local activists; and publicly available material relating to the closure of Vauxhall Luton and the Vauxhall Luton Partnership, including EEDA documents and evaluations, press reports and other published studies.

## **1. Background and Context**

### **The UK motor industry**

The UK motor industry represents around £8.4 billion added value to the UK economy. It accounts for 1.1% of GDP and is the UK's largest source of manufactured exports (9.5 per cent of total UK exports of goods). The motor industry is a key part of the UK manufacturing sector. Around 715,000 people are employed either in the design and manufacture of vehicles and components or the supply and distribution chain.

During 1999 vehicle production in the UK reached 1.78 million units – figures on a par with the record levels reached in the early 1970s. But these figures have apparently not translated into profits, and the industry, like other parts of the UK manufacturing sector, has been characterised by difficulties. It has undergone a major change in its structure in recent years, to the extent that all major motor vehicle assembly in the UK is now carried out by global companies based overseas. The announcement of the closure of Vauxhall Luton by General Motors, the U.S based parent company, in December 2000 followed the break up of the Rover Group, accounting for around 2,500 voluntary redundancies in its successor companies by the end of 2000, and Ford's announcement of the end of vehicle production in Dagenham in May of that year. Employers highlighted overcapacity within the European car market and increased pressure on new car prices. More generally, car manufacturers have highlighted the impact of the UK remaining outside of the 'eurozone' for the difficulties associated with car production in the UK.

## **Company background**

The closure of Vauxhall in Luton was part of a wider restructuring programme announced by GM involving 10,000 job losses in North America and Europe over a period of 18 months. The Vauxhall Car Plant in Luton, which had opened in 1905, and had been one of the areas major employers for almost a century. At the height of production, the plant employed around 25,000 people. Its loss was therefore very significant to the town and to the local area, not only in terms of immediate job losses but also in terms of the knock on effects to the supply chain. The government predicted that unemployment in Luton would rise from the all time low of 2.7% to around 5.2% within 18 months. The plant finally closed in March 2002 with the direct loss of just over 2000 employees, with an average length of service of 17 years. It was also calculated that there was an indirect loss of a further 563 jobs. The impact on the wider supply chain was estimated at £85 million.

The closure was complicated by the fact that there were two GM owned Plants at Luton. The largest plant – the one that closed - was the Vauxhall car plant. Next-door was a slightly smaller plant, also owned by G.M, IBC Motors, which produced vans. The IBC plant remained and around 1000 workers transferred to this site from the car plant.

The closure was discussed at the European Works Council. Trade unions reacted strongly to the closure of the plant and attributed the main cause of Vauxhall's decision to permissive UK labour laws, which they argued provide inadequate protection for UK workers compared to the rest of Europe. Amicus, the UK's largest private sector trade union which represented workers at the plant, claims that it would cost an employer around £130,000 to lay off a French car worker with 25 years of service, including redundancy pay and

social costs. In the UK, the same worker would cost only £5,000 in statutory redundancy pay.

At the time, Vauxhall said that its decision to close the Luton Car Plant had little to do with sterling's strength against the euro, the UK's failure to join the single European currency or poor factory or worker productivity. The GM chief executive is quoted as saying:

‘Basically we found ourselves facing too much capacity in Europe and, given the timing of models changes, the Luton plant was the one we felt was most logical to close.’

### **The Regional Development Agency**

Regional Development Agencies are public bodies, whose boards are appointed by government. Their key task is to draw up an economic strategy for the region. In theory, the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and local Learning and Skills Council work closely together to identify skill needs and to develop an effective strategy for targeting specific action in key sectors, particularly in areas where there have been problems with large-scale redundancy, retention and attracting inward investment. For example, in the case of 6000 jobs lost through the closure of Rover MG in 2005, the Government committed £150 million in order to help the transition of workers based at Longbridge, Birmingham, back into the labour market. Additional funding of up to £68 million was agreed from the existing European regional aid funds, much of which could be spent on training. This was channelled and administered through the local Regional Development Agency. More recently RDAs have been given responsibility for business support in their regions.

The East of England Development Agency (EEDA) is responsible for the six counties of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire,

Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk. It works with a variety of organisations in the region, including the East of England Regional Assembly, Government offices for the east of England, and sub-regional economic partnerships. All RDAs are accountable to and receive funding from central government. EEDA receives just under 200 million pounds and on top of that draws in regional development or European funds probably totalling another 50 million. It employs just under 200 staff. They report to the Department for Trade and Industry every six months, and also work with other central government departments. EEDA had the key operational role in the Vauxhall Luton Partnership in terms of the delivery of the project.

### **Jobcentre Plus**

Jobcentre Plus is a government agency, which comes under the government Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and was designed to help meet the UK government's aim of providing 'work for those who can, security for those who cannot'. Jobcentre Plus provides a network of local offices which combine job finding and benefit services. It also aims to play a role in the Government's Skills Strategy agenda, improving people's skills and opportunities, particularly those on 'inactive benefits' (e.g. those receiving Incapacity Benefit or Income Support).

Jobcentre Plus is also responsible for the Rapid Response Service (RRS) (formerly known as the Rapid Response Fund) a government intervention, intended for organisations facing 'significant' redundancies, when existing provision does not meet the circumstances. Its provision might include on-site advice surgeries, links and referrals to other agencies, and information and advice about job vacancies and training opportunities.

## **The Trade Unions**

Overall the UK motor industry has been a stronghold of trade unionism with high levels of union density. Membership density at Vauxhall Luton at the time of the closure was around 90 per cent. The main unions at the site were TGWU and Amicus (TGWU was the larger union). Both unions were recognised for collective bargaining. Amicus is a multi-sector union with over a million members, it organises mainly technical and craft workers in the auto sector. TGWU is a general union, with around 750 000 members.

The trade unions were strongly opposed to the closure of Vauxhall Luton, which was recognised as an effective and efficient production site. The trade unions' campaign following the announcement was therefore focused on fighting the closure. The unions felt that it would have been difficult to publicly enter into the Vauxhall Luton Partnership without undermining their campaign to keep the plant open. This is recognised as a problem for the union movement: where unions are fighting to oppose a closure it can create tensions if at the same time, they are proactively engaging with work that aims to deal with the effects of redundancy. In the words of one activist:

'Personally, I didn't want to give anybody any reason to believe that the right decision had been made to close us. Nor did I intend ever to have the closure to be brought forward because they just couldn't manage any longer. And so we had eighteen months, if you will, on death row and I was determined, along with others, for that eighteen months to actually be eighteen months. Not twelve, not six. I mean frankly in the circumstances on day one it wouldn't have taken very much to have the place burnt to the ground. But



that wasn't going to change the decision and we were determined to get the maximum for the people that we could and try and balance all of the issues at the one time'.

(Union Representative).

However, the regional TUC (SERTUC), did work 'behind the scenes' with EEDA, particularly in relation to securing funds from the ESF, and at a later stage, once it was clear that the closure was going to go ahead and the campaign was lost, trade unions were actively involved in the Accreditation of Prior Learning Programme.

## **2. The Vauxhall Learning Partnership**

G.M announced its intention to close the Vauxhall Luton car plant on 12 December 2000, with the closure taking effect from March 2002 – an eighteen month lead-up period. On 13 December 2000, a number of concerned organisations, led by EEDA, were brought together to form the Luton Vauxhall Partnership. This was a partnership of the public and private sector encompassing the Vauxhall Company, trade unions, the Employment Service, regional supply network, the local authorities and local University. Its purpose was to address job losses and the effects of the closure on the local economy. The partnership was chaired by EEDA who was responsible for meeting the project's objectives and for finding funding. EEDA was also itself a funding partner. Luton Borough Council helped write the ESF bid, provided match funding and gave personal support to displaced workers. Jobcentre Plus assisted with giving advice and guidance and tracking beneficiaries. Vauxhall Motors provided office space and equipment and also funded the Learning for Life team, which was based on site.

Vauxhall Unions and the TUC at regional level (SERTUC) were also involved in the Partnership. Although unions did not initially

publicly support the project, for reasons which have been discussed above, they were instrumental in identifying a need for an accreditation of prior learning (APL) programme at the plant, and played an active role in delivering an NVQ (National Vocational Qualification<sup>1</sup>) programme. SERTUC also played a key role in terms of accessing ESF support. The Learning and Skills Council, which was in its infancy at the time, helped to identify training providers and supported the APL programme. A local Further Education College was the main provider of the re-training and re-skilling programme along with other private providers. The project was delivered by an ESF Project Management Team, whose remit was to 'tackle issues arising from the closure'.

**The Vauxhall Luton Partnership was concerned with the following four areas: employment education and skills; infrastructure and development; local business development and social, personal and community.**

### **Employment, education and skills**

The aim was to retrain and re-skill affected staff to ensure that they had the skills and opportunities to secure alternative employment and prevent the anticipated significant increase in local unemployment. The project provided access to basic careers advice and guidance as well as vocational and management training.

A key initial task was to identify skills shortages in the local area, to map the skills of the Vauxhall workforce and then to consider the retraining and re-skilling requirements, which would enable them to be redeployed in the UK labour market; particular reference was made to local labour shortages. This was undertaken by the local

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<sup>1</sup> Nationally recognised accreditation for vocational skills.

Jobcentre Plus, who also provided initial advice and guidance to workers. The Vauxhall Luton Partnership submitted a bid to the Job Centre's Rapid Response Force (RRF) in December 2001 – six days after GM's closure announcement. However, the Partnership was advised by the DTI that a RRF application could not be considered because GM had not issued redundancy notices. For the unions, the delay in triggering the RRF and accessing government support for Vauxhall workers was a serious issue. The argument was that Vauxhall would not formally issue redundancy notices because the date they had posted for closure was more than six months away and formal notice would have an adverse impact on staff moral, absenteeism, and production/productivity. TUC evidence to the Government's Work and Pensions Select Committee in May 2002 highlights the contradiction of having a rapid reaction service, which can then be withheld for essentially bureaucratic reasons:

*'The Rapid Response Fund money was eventually very useful, but would have been most useful at the very beginning, enabling other funding sources to be assembled. The training courses provided with RRF money have necessarily overrun the closure, which means that some participants have dropped out, probably for good material reasons. Hence the Rapid Response Fund was not Rapid (taking nearly a year) and widely agreed objectives of assisting individual workers and local businesses were frustrated through what was a technicality – a clear example of process obstructing performance'* (SERTUC statement to the Work and Pensions Select Committee)

Eight months after the closure announcement, ESF funding was secured to organise a comprehensive training and re-skilling programme. In response to demands from the workforce, a

supplementary bid was submitted and approved four months later. Matched funding was provided by EEDA, Vauxhall Motors, the Government's Rapid Response Fund and Luton Borough Council. Total funding for the project was £1.6 million.

All interested workers were invited to attend impartial advice and guidance interviews to discuss their training needs and appropriate training/re-training courses. Approved public and private training providers were identified and invited to submit estimates for the training activities selected by workers. Further support and guidance was provided by a 'Learning for Life Team' which was based at the plant to help workers identify potential 'life opportunities'. Advice was also offered in interview techniques, CV writing and Basic Skills.

Some union representatives raised concerns over the quality of advice and guidance that was provided through the project and felt that it would have been preferable for union representatives, through TUC Bargaining for Skills/Learning Services to play a more direct role.

Vauxhall Motors in discussion with the partnership rearranged shift patterns to enable staff to take part in training activities on Fridays of each week. Training sessions were organised by the local college and private training providers on this day, with some training taking place on Saturday morning. The company had announced its intention to continue production until March 2002, and the aim was to minimise, as far as possible, disruption to production (also a union objective).

The training provided included computer networking, teacher training, LGV and forklift truck training, construction trades, PC

maintenance, management studies and data cable installation. An Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) assessment scheme was initiated with extra funding from the LSC, Vauxhall and EEDA. Trade unions played an active role in this scheme:

'We persuaded the company to facilitate NVQ accreditation, so they provided the facilities etc, for the external people to work within the plant on the provision of NVQs. A large number of shop stewards played an active part, becoming assessors and so on. It was all about trying to give people more strings to their bow. At the end of the day if it appears on a Curriculum Vitae and makes people much more saleable or viable then we were determined that that was the case. We actually at the end of the day didn't want people to miss out on any opportunity that we could possibly create for them.'

(Union representative).

Job Fairs were organised by Jobcentre Plus to help employees identify career options and liaise with potential employers. Counselling services were offered also offered at the plant to provide access to welfare and financial advice.

### **Infrastructure and development**

Under this theme the Partnership aimed to replace jobs lost to the local economy and attract high quality employment and private sector investment to the region.

This included the expansion of the Spires Innovation Centre in Luton (which provides business support and accommodation for small businesses and start-up companies), Luton Image improvement and the Butterfield Technology Park (providing accommodation for start up companies in the high-tech sector).

Every person on this programme was offered the chance to start-up their own business, since they received substantial redundancy package payouts. This was linked to the Innovation Centre, providing a 'supported pathway'. The innovation centre was linked to the local university, and because it was on the partnership, it was easy to get them to expand their services.

### **Local business development**

This focused on addressing the competitiveness of local companies and assisting with the modernisation and diversification of existing industrial stock. This was tackled through a supply chain support programme, business support programme, incubation space, and the Luton Venture loan fund.

The partnership offered an enhanced business support package and a number of people within the plant wanted to patent ideas, and to go forward with manufacturing on a smaller scale. The Partnership found that there was a core of very skilled people to whom it could offer a service. It identified them, and worked with them on a special programme, offering incubation space to build and grow businesses, on the basis that these could be the sort of businesses that might provide replacement jobs. The Partnership also had a venture loan fund, offering people funding to start their own businesses, which was taken advantage of.

### **Social, personal and community**

This final strand focused on the health and wellbeing of workers affected by the closure. The aim was to minimise the additional burden on existing government services. This included the setting up of a Luton community health observatory and gateway to multi-agency services.

Three initiatives dealt specifically with health-related issues as part of the Vauxhall support package. The Gateway Multi-Media Agency Intervention aimed to support a reduction in the negative social impacts of the plant closure and plant losses. It set up a multi-agency service to assist those made redundant which sought to monitor the health and economic effects of the closure and provide workers with a new 'gateway' to access new and existing services on offer to help them to re-shape their lifestyle and skills-base. Access to the Gateway was provided at the Vauxhall plant, up until its closure. Information about the Gateway was also made available in the local community; in community centres, job centres, libraries, gyms, religious centres, social clubs and pubs and through outreach workers. Information about the service was sent to all workers through mailshots to their homes. In total 1080 people accessed the service and were provided with advice, support or training in health issues. The cost of this project was £545, 000.

The Luton Community Information Observatory aimed to support greater cohesion in the local community through local economic development and regeneration. The project cost £392, 000. It has now been incorporated into the Luton Borough Council website [http://www.luton.gov.uk/internet/community\\_and\\_living/Local%20community](http://www.luton.gov.uk/internet/community_and_living/Local%20community)

In addition, money advice surgeries were provided in local areas. Over 100 people accessed advice through these surgeries. The cost of this aspect of the project was £105,000. This has now closed but has partly been incorporated in the local Citizens Advice Bureau service.

### 3. Outcomes

The project tracked the activities of each beneficiary through the various stages of support. 1,540 beneficiaries took part in the programme (27% more than had been expected at the start of the project). Vocational training was accessed by 1,214 workers with 105 workers attending Business Start-Up Courses organised by the Chamber of Commerce.

In a number of cases, workers made radical changes to their vocational skills, for example from Production Line Operative to Wedding Caterer and from Petrol Tank Fitter to Therapeutic Counsellor. According to EEDA, these changes reflect the Partnership's emphasis on Job Transition rather than just Job Replacement. However, it is not clear whether these changes translated into the job market, as, although Jobcentre Plus was responsible for tracking beneficiaries, there does not appear to be evidence (publicly available) of what has happened to workers in the four or five years since the plant closed. This was an issue of concern to trade unions. In the words of one activist:

*'I think (the EEDA project) was a good thing but there wasn't any mechanism put in place that I'm aware of to gauge how successful it was after the event... If you invest a lot of money in retraining people which is meant to be kick starting them into a new life, so to speak, you might want some kind of mechanism to understand whether what you provided actually worked, if for no other reason than to fine tune it for the next time round somewhere else' (Trade Union Representative).*

One of the key concerns for trade unions was to ensure the long-term sustainability of manufacturing by keeping manufacturing employees working as skilled workers in the manufacturing sector.



There does not appear to be any evidence as to whether or not people did go on to find other jobs in manufacturing with skills and wage levels on a par with the jobs that they had lost. This is a concern for unions given that research evidence, not necessarily relating to Vauxhall, suggests that people suffer a substantial reduction in their income when they lose a manufacturing job.

Evaluations of the project show that feedback gathered from beneficiaries was 'generally positive'. However, there were problems caused by the lack of external funding in the initial stages (partly caused by the delays in accessing the DTI's Rapid Response Fund), which 'created feelings of frustration and anxiety among workers who had seen reports in the media that high levels of funding were to be provided for training yet were being told that no money was available. The raised expectations and created some ambivalence amongst the workforce which persisted during the life of the project' (Renewal.net).

The Partnership appears to have been successful in terms of minimising the increase in local unemployment. EEDA highlight the fact that unemployment in Luton increased by only 0.5% in the period from the announcement, to four months following the closure. And unemployment levels in the area have not risen above 3.5 per cent since the closure, and have now settled at around three percent - slightly higher than the regional average of 2.7 per cent.

A key aspect was the focus on the supply chain and to support companies in the regional supply chain to Vauxhall, with Vauxhall providing details of their supply chain to the Partnership. Here 66 companies and 452 individuals received support. Support was in terms of marketing, lean production, health & safety, upskilling,

management training, ICT training. The Partnership concluded that the intervention meant that the supply chain left in better shape, more able to cope with change and seek new opportunities

In terms of the car plant, closure left a 55 acre site for redevelopment and the local Council was determined that this should provide quality employment and resisted GM's attempt to conclude an agreement with an organisation in the leisure sector.

For EEDA, key factors in the Partnership's success are that it was a locally run partnership, which had support and buy-in from all the agencies involved, particularly from the company. Vauxhall agreed to change their shift patterns so that Fridays were designated purely for training. EEDA also had access to the workforce 18 months before the plant actually shut down. All the training was provided on site and this was important in terms of promoting access and encouraging people who may not have had any experience of training for many years to take part.

In terms of the project's longer-term legacy, a learning and development centre has been established at the IBC plant where transferable skills such as ICT form part of the core training offer. The learning centre provides on site training up to level four, or graduate level. The project has also put in place a Bedfordshire redundancy support group to help and provide training to smaller companies suffering the knock-on effects of the Vauxhall car plant closure. This group still successfully operates today having sought local funding from the County Council and the Learning and Skills Council. The Partnership has created networks which allow the model to be generalised across the region and now has a particular focus on SMEs.

#### **4. Transversal Themes**

This section locates the case study of Vauxhall within the context of the five transversal themes of the MIRE project, identifying how each theme was or was not reflected in this case of organisational restructuring.

##### The Health Impact

The Partnership took specific measures to address the health and psycho-social impact of restructuring and this was an integral part of the response.

##### Organisational Impact

The restructuring process involved the closure of the plant and loss of 2000 jobs, although 1000 jobs were transferred to the IBC van plant.

##### Public Employment Service and Active Labour Market Policies

The public employment agencies were fully engaged with the Partnership, although there was criticism by the trade unions over the speed of their response. In terms of training and re-skilling the Partnership was proactive in terms of local labour market policies. Training was undertaken by the local further education college and by local private providers and there was a tendering process. The Partnership felt that the public service, Jobcentre Plus, did not provide the level of guidance and advice it was looking for, in particular the analyses of individual training needs.

##### Territory

The case study is characterised by the response at regional level. The Partnership was lead by the Regional Development Agency, responsible to central government, but engaging with key local

actors including locally elected councils. The latter was key in leveraging ESF funding.

#### Trade unions

Vauxhall was characterised by high union density and collective bargaining; the closure was discussed at the European Works Council and this facilitated the transfer of staff to IBC. Unions were opposed to the closure of the plant and reluctant to publicly engage in a Partnership dealing with the effects of job loss. However, the regional TUC (SERTUC) played a role in promoting learning and skills within the Partnership and, once the campaign against closure was lost, the local representatives played a key role in the accreditation of existing skills.

## **5. Conclusions**

The innovative nature of the case study lies in its comprehensive and holistic approach to organisational restructuring. The potential impact of the closure of Vauxhall on Luton was such that it provoked an extremely fast response, engaging public and private agencies in the region and working throughout the 18 months prior to closure. The Partnership provided a coordinated approach from government agencies, which enabled it to secure substantive funding for a range of initiatives, including reskilling and training, but also local business development. These were based upon an in-depth economic assessment of the impact of closure, which included a focus upon the supply chain and programmes to support these organisations. Unlike many UK responses to restructuring there were attempts to address the psycho-social effects and a number of health-related initiatives.

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