



Blake Stephenson MP speaking at the APC

## MP Expresses Full Support at Latest APC

The 2025 Annual Partnership Conference (APC) was held recently at Cranfield University with the theme “Water Where It’s Wanted”. This conference is where we engage with other organisations which can help with the project - the three local councils; Canal & River Trust (CRT); Forest of Marston Vale (FoMV) to name just a few. Amongst the speakers were Karina Csofik and Peter Robinson of AECOM (See ages 4 & 3), Fiona from Affinity Water (see Page 5) and Blake Stephenson, MP for Mid-Bedfordshire.

Blake told us how pleased he was to have become the MP for such a beautiful constituency, including the “wonderful place” that is the FoMV. He went on to talk about the Waterway Park: “Since I was elected ... last year I have been very conscious of the benefits of this project and the benefits it can bring to all of our communities”. He went on: “personally, it was the unprecedented flooding we suffered last autumn [on the A421] that brought into sharp focus the need for us locally, but also across the country, to take water management more seriously.

“If we are to improve our climate resilience and tackle flooding – ever more important in the context of significant development plans in and around Marston Vale – then we must deliver projects like the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Park and, I would say, at pace now. But ultimately, projects like [East West Rail], Universal’s theme park and the new housing developments do nothing for our area if they are ankle deep in water. This Waterway Park is not just a nice to have, as I know from conversations some might have us believe, it is increasingly essential to our future resilience and the sustainability of our local communities.

“As Mid-Bedfordshire’s member of Parliament I am here to help you get this project delivered. I cannot deliver it single-handedly ... I have made repeated references to it in debates and I will continue to do so.

“I will ... see what can be done to ensure that we get the funding locally to deliver this project. I will continue to lobby the Government and our local councils. I will do absolutely what I can do to help you unlock the things you need to deliver this project. You have my full support.” ●

*“I am here to help you get this project delivered”*

*Blake Stephenson MP*

## View from the Chair



Simon Clewlow  
Trust Chair

As I began writing this column the Trust received formal notification from Government that the consultation period for the proposed Universal Theme Park and Resort is starting in early July and finishing at the end of August. Unlike virtually every other proposal for development in this country, the Government will make the decision to grant consent directly. What we know is that Universal would not have committed to seeking permission without it knowing that Government would allow construction to begin in 2026 in line with its target opening year of 2031. A decision is therefore expected in the Autumn and so the role of consultation is going to be less about what Universal intend to build on its site and more about what provisions are or can be made around the site to complement such a massive investment.

The anticipated effect of the Universal Theme Park and Resort has been variously described as epic, unbelievable and, to my mind most appropriately, transformative. The changes that will need to be made to Bedford and Central Bedfordshire in particular and Milton Keynes as well along the whole route of the Waterway in order to accommodate the influx of workers and visitors will completely alter the perception of the area. The six years before the Theme Park opens are therefore critical for the preparation and delivery of a whole supporting tourism-related infrastructure in what has not generally been regarded as an area with a visitor economy.

Integrating Universal into the area and taking full advantage of its presence is therefore going to be key. The area is undoubtedly going to be a destination for visitors with a world-leading Theme Park on the doorstep, but with new road and rail connections readily linking it to the traditional tourist hotspots of Oxford and Cambridge it could be an attractive base for longer stays. And to meet demand for hotel beds and other forms of holiday accommodation, what better way of linking these facilities and what better way of making these facilities attractive for visitors could there be than using the Waterway. We all know that people like being close to water.

In our consultation responses to the Universal proposal the Trust will therefore be emphasising to the powers that be that getting people to and from Universal is important, but using other attractions which will help integrate Universal into the area, such as the Waterway, to get them to stay in the area and enjoy the local facilities is equally as important and vital to the local economy.

While the arrival of Universal gets lots of media attention, another topic which gets regular media attention nowadays is water – the lack

of it, the quality of it and also when there is too much of it. Adopting “Water Where It’s Wanted” to promote the Waterway seems ever more apposite and so a recent publication that caught my eye was the Environment Agency’s National Framework for Water Resources 2025: water for growth, nature and a resilient future, which explores England’s long term water needs, setting out the scale of action needed to ensure resilient supplies and an improved water environment.

One of the challenges and, dare I say it, part of the enjoyment of taking on the role of Chair of this Trust is the awareness that you are going to have to fill gaps in your knowledge. Gaining an understanding of the way the water industry operates, both supplying it and disposing of it, is one such gap. However the old adage that the more one learns the more one realises how little they know definitely applies in this field.

In these circumstance it is a good idea therefore to listen to those who know a lot more than you think you do. To seek to understand more about the potential role of the Waterway in the context of the new National Framework, a trawl of responses to this on LinkedIn proved of interest. One highlighted a shortcoming that my experience of the transport planning industry has always proved to be a vital component – that of human behaviour and its response to change.

The EA’s Framework places greater emphasis on integrated water management, which the Waterway could contribute to significantly, but to meet future water needs there are assumed benefits from planned demand management measures which rely extensively on customer behaviour change. Each of us reducing our personal water consumption by some 30%, especially as the climate warms and more emphasis is placed on hand-washing to improve hygiene, seems to be a big ask. The risk of not achieving them is considered very real despite the efforts being made by the industry and accordingly it is suggested that some serious contingency planning should be taking place. To my mind, this is where the Waterway fits in by adding capacity, adding connections and still retaining a role after other schemes such as reservoirs become available.

There is so much happening around the Trust which you can read about elsewhere in this newsletter. The support from the volunteers makes the role of Chair much easier as does the support from others outside. This is truly an exciting project with an exciting future and so I will sign off with the comment from one of our local MPs, Blake Stephenson, who said after attending our Annual Conference that, “projects like the BMK Waterway Park will not just be a ‘nice to have’, they will be essential to our future”, adding, “I congratulate everybody who has been involved in this project so far.” ●

# Making Canals Help with Flooding



The final speaker at the APC was Peter Robinson CEng FICE, Technical Excellence Director, AECOM Water UK & I. He spoke on using waterways to improve the environment, and the advantages they can bring to development.

Peter is passionate about sustainability, and judges all his work against the 17 United Nations sustainability goals. He feels that anyone starting their career should check that their work ticks at least three of these boxes - if not perhaps they should consider doing something different.

His topic was the Glasgow Smart Canal, which ticks 6 of the boxes, so Peter was comfortable with that. This project, on the Forth & Clyde Canal, was built when Peter was Head of Engineering at Scottish Canals, though he has since returned to AECOM.

This was a project in a very deprived area. When it rained, the water flooded the area, and so further building was impossible. The Smart Canal project is a system using sophisticated software that considers the water levels in the canal, weather forecasts and other data. When rain is expected, the system automatically opens sluices to reduce the canal level by a few inches, so that the surface water can drain into the canal rather than running all over the area. This has allowed land that was unusable to now have 3,000 homes.

The benefit/cost ratio (BCR) of this project was 2.7 and Peter says "it was built and the value of it is huge. It unlocked an area, we built this blue/green infrastructure to underpin everything that took place and the canal was at the heart of it. If the canal didn't exist, it couldn't have worked". They are looking at managing the water level around the wider system, over 60km, longer than the length of the BMK, and the new system means that the engineers can see water levels and the state of the sluices anywhere, anytime on their phones.

Creating space for water from extreme rainfall events has been a DEFRA initiative for years. Saying "Water Where It's Wanted" is exactly the same message. "The Scottish project was done for peanuts because the canal already existed. We don't have a canal here, but the time for canals is now. People are talking about a perfect storm of opportunity: financial benefits, carbon benefits, making things happen, creating pieces of infrastructure that are inspirational."

Pulling all the pieces together is not easy. As part of the project, Scottish Canals (SC) created the Claypits nature reserve. It had 19 different funding contributions to make it

happen. Some from the water company, sustainable drainage for the development, funding from Sustrans, National Heritage Lottery funding. Peter points out that you need to be able to pull all this together.

How does this relate to our project? Peter thinks that "We were left with the legacy and a missing link. There's always been something that wasn't quite right in terms of the network. The opportunity is for CRT and wider society and all our infrastructure operators to be thinking about how we unlock the potential of this and what its going to give to us.

"A 21st Century Canal is more than just a navigation it is

- public space
- connectivity - cycling strategy
- recreation, physical and mental health
- destination
- utility corridor
- habitat (Biodiversity Net Gain)
- ecosystem services
- flood mitigation
- water transfer
- water resource
- low carbon transport"

During Covid, the towpaths were extremely busy as people wanted to be outside, by the water, getting some exercise. People like to live on boats, people like to see canal infrastructure.

The Falkirk Wheel was designed on the expectation of all the boats that were going to come. They didn't, only a few boats came. The visitor centre was never really part of it but now 1.6M visitors a year come to the Falkirk Wheel. It generates a significant amount of revenue to maintain Scotland's canals. We have a similar opportunity at Brogborough Hill.

Peter concluded "An unintended consequence of the smart canal is reduced flooding on the railway line. Network Rail did not contribute, I'm a bit frustrated about that, because each time their railway flooded it was £800 per minute penalty to NR for closing the line. And we've stopped all the flooding on the line because we've taken all the water away from where it went. So they're quids in and didn't contribute. The NHS benefits and didn't contribute.

"It can be difficult to build the business case because the benefit can be a bit here, a bit over there.

"But the flooding can be the key." ●



Peter Robinson

Karina Csopik spoke to the APC to report on the work that AECOM has done for the Trust to update the business case in line with the latest government requirements, the “5 Case Business Case”. The role of the business case is to demonstrate that the Waterway presents a good use of public investment and that its benefits outweigh the costs

This work, which we were able to pay for using the money generated by the volunteers working so hard with our boats, will help us take the project forward and increase our chances of obtaining grants and funding.

To meet the requirements of the 2022 Green Book, the business case must lay out:

1. Strategic Case
2. Economic Case
3. Financial Case
4. Commercial Case
5. Management Case

First the strategic case - what is the rationale for investing in the Waterway, what is the case for change?

This is about presenting an evidence-based assessment of what the needs, issues and opportunities are. The route goes through an area of important opportunity - there is the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor, the arrival of East-West Rail and the Universal theme park. These present a lot of opportunity to not only extend the benefits of those schemes, but also deliver significant benefits of the Waterway itself and the symbiotic relationship and complementarity with those projects.

Also the flooding and water scarcity issue in the area can be a constraint on growth and development, so alleviating those conditions is an important consideration in the scheme and what it can deliver.

There are also the health benefits, improving physical and mental health and wellbeing outcomes of new and existing residents and visitors by increasing opportunities for water sports, recreation and active travel. This will also increase activity rates for children.

So considering the priorities of the area, and the local plans, but also national priorities, the DEFRA environmental plan and the emerging industrial strategy, there is an important role for the Waterway.

Karina moved on to “The Theory of Change”. She said: “As business case professionals, this is the logic chain which structures the case for investment. Based on the needs, what are the ultimate outputs and outcomes that we want

to achieve as a result of this investment. This shows the “golden thread” of how we think the scheme will produce the benefits. This is the framework on which the business case is structured and flows into the subsequent cases.”

This golden thread connects the **Rationale** (the case for change, above), through **Inputs** (cash and stakeholder engagement), **Activities** (construction of the Waterway and active travel route), **Outputs** (A blue/green infrastructure resource, walking and cycling route also suitable for horse riding and outdoor activity, link to the Minworth water transfer scheme (see p5) environmental enhancements and tourist amenities) to **Outcomes** (Improved infrastructure to complement and extend the benefits of wider investments, increased accessibility to open space and active travel opportunities, surface water run-off attenuation, reduced fluvial flood risk and reduced water scarcity through enhanced water transfer opportunities, net positive impact on biodiversity values compared to the existing environment and enhanced tourist experience and increased attractiveness of the area for residents and businesses).

## Economic / Financial Cases

Moving on the Economic Case - value for money - Karina reported that “We have identified and scoped what the potential benefits of the scheme might be and assessed what can be quantified and monetised, against the costs”.

Land value uplift is a really important one. This reflects the fact that along the route as a result of the Waterway people are prepared to pay for increased proximity to blue and green infrastructure. Also the Waterway will bring increased foot traffic for commercial ventures.

AECOM have also quantified the active travel benefits, the pedestrian and cycling path along the route of the Waterway represents a lot of potential around encouraging mode shift away from cars, improving health benefits and improving journey quality.

Natural Capital benefits are really important in terms of water supply

Biodiversity benefits: there is additional work to be done, but clearly canals provide great potential in this area.

In areas of low income benefits can be greater than in areas of higher income. So AECOM considered that effect - in areas

*(Continued on page 5)*

## Business Case Update (cont)



Karina Csopik addressing the APC

(Continued from page 4)

where average incomes are lower, that has been reflected in a greater weighting.

In terms of both costs and benefits, people prefer to have money now, rather than in the future, so in a stream of costs or incomes those further away are reduced in value in the model, and then the stream is added to produce a Net Present Value (NPV). This is the required method.

Using this technique, the ratio of NPV of benefits compared to costs is 2.4. This is a very good result, projects with a BCR of over 2 are usually acceptable. For comparison the BCR of the recently approved Lower Thames Crossing was reported in January as 1.46, but it was thought it could drop.

### Commercial Case

The commercial case looks at options for delivery and procurement, including establishment of a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), or delivery as a project by other bodies (e.g. EA, CRT, Anglian Water).

An initial risk register has been developed.

### Management Case

This explores governance options through the establishment of a SPV and an illustrative delivery programme is considered which could see operation of the B&MK Waterway by 2036 (subject to funding).

The business case will be published by the Trust when finalised. ●

## Water Transfer Scheme

Fiona Rowe from Affinity Water explained to the APC the scheme they are developing to move water from the outflow of the Minworth treatment plant in the West Midlands to the area they service, mostly to the north of London. We believe that the Waterway could provide a similar service to transfer water to East Anglia, an area famously short of water in the summer.

Fiona explained the steps that they had taken, and the timescale, suggesting that we need to consider these timescales and the need to involve our water company early as, she says, “things move *slowly*”.

For the Affinity project, construction is expected to begin in 2029 and run through to 2032/3. As it runs through the whole length of the Grand Union Canal, it runs through about 10 council areas. Being a large project it requires a Development Consent Order (DCO), so it goes through the Secretary of State, rather than local councils. This requires a lot of work before anything can be submitted – environmental surveys, flood risks etc.

To ease the path, they have undertaken a substantial non-statutory consultation with the public along the route, delivering thousands of postcards to local residents, issuing press releases and putting up posters, as well as contacting over 7,000 boating customers.

They have set up a canal user working group to talk to boaters and businesses. Boaters are concerned about the speed of flow, but even though Affinity want to put 150 megalitres a day through the system at peak they are restricted by CRT rules and regulations.

Also, they have created a Public Value Working Group. This has been harder for them to structure. It concerns social values, environmental, biodiversity net gain (BNG), but things are still up in the air with the regulators. So they are trying to move forward, but can't because they don't know what is required of them. For instance, how do you measure social value – if you build a children's park next to the canal, what credit do you get for that?

The project has been in the planning stages for years. The water industry works on 5-year plans, AMP's, (Asset Management Plan period) and they are in year 1 of AMP8 (2025-30). Each 5 years they have to prepare business plans, with the projects they want to look at, how do they fit with other projects and how are they going to fund them. There is also a Water Resources Plan, which is a 25-50 year plan. So the sooner we start, the better.

More news and their quarterly updates can be found at [www.guctransfer.co.uk](http://www.guctransfer.co.uk) ●



Fiona at question time

# Fenny landscaping completed

In the last issue we reported on the landscaping at Fenny Stratford, which has now been completed. This has been a mammoth project, involving co-operation between at least 40 volunteers from different organisations: *Electra*, Buckingham Canal Society, Milton Keynes Canals, Bletchley and Fenny Stratford Green Gym and local residents; they put in at least 500 person hours of work.



The finished raised beds, newly planted



New turf laid out & P-Y-O herb bed

Scrub & trees were cleared, new raised beds created, a pick your own (P-Y-O) herb bed planted and new turf laid. The project has been jointly funded by Bletchley and Fenny Stratford town council and the Canal and River Trust, and is managed by the Trust.

The official opening of the project was on May 22nd, when local dignitaries and managers from CRT unveiled an information board showing the history of the site and specifying it as an accessible and electric boarding point.

Attending this unveiling were (from left to right below) Ros Daniels, Director, CRT London and South East Region; Matthew Symonds, Head of Boating and Customer Service, CRT; Cllr Ethan Kelly-Wilson, Chair, Bletchley and Fenny Stratford Town Council; Cllr James Lancaster, Mayor, Milton Keynes City Council; Cllr Bridget Lewis, Mayor, Wolverton and Greenleys Town Council; Cllr Terry Stephens, Bletchley and Fenny Stratford Town Council ●



## AECOM Discovery Project

At the end of last year the Trust commissioned infrastructure consultants AECOM to start work on designing part of the Waterway through Bedford Commercial Park with the aim of being able to link the existing drainage ponds and create the first significant length of the new Waterway.

AECOM assembled a very knowledgeable and enthusiastic team of engineers headed up by Peter Robinson (Technical Excellence Director, Water and previously Head of Engineering at Scottish Canals). Before any design work could be started there was an awful lot of background work that needed to be done to pull together existing and historical information about the route. As a result they proposed carrying out a Discovery Phase project as the first step before moving on to Design Concept. This Discovery work started in the New Year and has pulled together all the existing information held by the trust and other organisations including previous design work, utility information, land ownership, biodiversity and environmental studies, flooding, water transfer, planning policies and more.

This initial piece of work has just finished and has been really useful to bring the AECOM team up to speed with what the Trust has been working on over the past 20 years and to highlight the opportunities and challenges in creating a brand new Waterway.

Using the knowledge gained from this work the next stage is to start on a Concept Design for a demonstration section of the Waterway running through Bedford Commercial Park. We expect this work to commence over the summer and will be able to provide an update in the next issue. ●



## Hilary Fett

The *John Bunyan* team were saddened to receive news of the death of Hilary Fett in May (Janet Goodland writes). Along with her many other interests, Hilary had been a volunteer with the *John Bunyan* since 2018 and was a Purser and a Deck crew member. She was always willing to help and do whatever was needed on the boat, and was a friendly and capable member of the team. We will all miss Hilary's friendly smiling face. ●

## Notice of AGM

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT  
THE 19th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF  
THE BEDFORD & MILTON KEYNES  
WATERWAY TRUST WILL BE HELD AT:

Box End Park, Box End, Bedford

At 19:30

On 14th October 2025

By order of the Board

[Signed] Simon Clewlow, Company Secretary,  
Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust

Annual report and papers will be available on the website nearer the time.

This year the date of the AGM has been delayed from previous years to allow the annual report to be prepared in good time.

## May 8th 2025

May 8th this year was a day of celebrations and commemorations. As well as being the 80th anniversary of VE-Day, and your editor's wedding anniversary, *Electra* was celebrating too.

*Electra* ran her 1,000th cruise on the day, from Campbell Wharf to Fenny Stratford as part of the walk and glide programme, when she celebrated 4 years on the water and also ran 2 celebrations cruises for volunteers who've been with *Electra* from the start, partying on board with balloons, bubbles and a cake. ●



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# Signposting the Waterway Park through Bedford Borough

Working in collaboration with Bedford Borough Council, Trust volunteers have installed a series of signposts identifying the route of the Waterway Park (James Barbour writes). The aim is to highlight the route of the Waterway Park throughout Bedford Borough and increase the awareness of the project. The new signs are mounted on existing street furniture where the route of the Waterway crosses various roads through the borough. The Signs are located at the following points:



- The Branston Way Viaduct over the River Great Ouse
- Cemetery Road, Kempston
- Ridge Road, Kempston
- Fields Road, Wootton
- Woburn Road (Old A421)
- Green Lane, Stewartby

This is a fantastic step to increase the visibility of the project on the ground and Steve Waring who led the project for the Trust is now looking to continue the project through Central Bedfordshire. ●

New Signs at Green Lane (left) and Ridge Road (Right).



## In the press

In the May 29 edition of Bedford Bulletin, Blake Stephenson MP used his regular column to talk about our project, rather than the usual political theme.

Under the heading “Bedford-MK Waterway can transform our environment”, Blake described the Waterway as an “even more exciting” opportunity than the Universal proposal. He also wrote that “we need to make sure the project gets finished. It’s not simply a case of a ‘nice to have’, it’s essential for the future of water management here in Bedfordshire and neighbouring MK”.

Blake also mentions that had the Waterway been in place when the A421 flooded, “it might have been less significant and less long-lasting”, and what a “beautiful new tourism offer” the project offers.

We appreciate Blake’s support and hope other local MPs will join him in promoting the project in Parliament. ●



## Join the Trust

Although this newsletter is primarily designed for members of the Trust, many copies go to interested non-members. If you are one of those, we should be very pleased if you would join us in the Trust. Membership is inexpensive, and each member adds weight to our argument when bidding for influence or money. Individual, family and organisation members are all welcome.

See: <https://www.bmkwaterway.org/join-us/>

The membership year runs until 31 May. Anyone joining before now will receive membership until May 2026.

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