

Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust

Business Plan Summary 2026 - 2031



The Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust

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Steve Ashley

A Waterway Park for all



Foreword from the Chair

Waterways are important for all of us. They define our landscape and connect our communities. Our Vision is to create a new stretch of navigable waterway linking the Grand Union Canal in Milton Keynes with the River Great Ouse in Bedford, which will provide opportunities for all who live in, or visit this area, to enjoy the benefits of activities on and by water. It will also enable the transfer of water to drier parts of the country supporting new developments and a growing economy.

This Business Plan is not merely an operational document; it is a commitment to excellence in stewardship and inclusivity in impact. It aligns our environmental and economic goals with the needs of our local communities.

We are at a pivotal point in the work of the Trust with the Government's focus on supporting growth and innovation in this 'Oxford to Cambridge Corridor'; the need for sufficient water to underpin that growth; and new developments already underway such as the Universal Theme Park. Now is the time for us to work together collaboratively to enable this new waterway to be funded and created.

As a Trust we are committed to fostering partnerships, supporting volunteerism and maintaining the highest standards of governance. To achieve our Vision, we require collective effort. I am most grateful to all our supporters, especially our volunteers without whom we would not have been able to achieve what we have thus far.

Hilary Chipping
Chair of Trustees

1.0 Executive Summary

1.1 Business Summary

The Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust (BMKWT) acts as the advocate for a new 16-mile navigable stretch of waterway linking the Grand Union Canal in Milton Keynes to the River Great Ouse in Bedford.

The proposed route crosses three local authority areas – Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes City and is protected in local plans. It is at the heart of the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor and runs alongside a section of East West rail between Bletchley and Bedford.

The Waterway will provide a wide range of leisure and tourism and economic benefits to local communities and the whole region. As well as providing a waterway for boats, canoes and paddle boards, there will be opportunities for towpath walking, wheeling, running and cycling with the associated benefit to physical and mental health and wellbeing.

It will also provide opportunities for water management and water transfer that is critical to enable the planned growth in the region including Universal Theme Park near Bedford and the new town at Tempsford.

Volunteering is at the heart of everything the Trust does.

Board members are all volunteers with a variety of skills and experience, and the two boats are crewed and managed by experienced volunteers. The Trust is always looking for more volunteers and is keen to encourage more diversity amongst the volunteers.

The Business Plan sets out the aims, objectives and KPIs for the Trust together with a five-year financial plan. It also sets out the management of the two community boats and considers the key risks. The Board (consisting of 12 volunteers) oversees five Groups, each chaired by a Board member. These are: Route Development (including projects); Strategy; Communications; Operational Management and Finance and General Purposes Group.

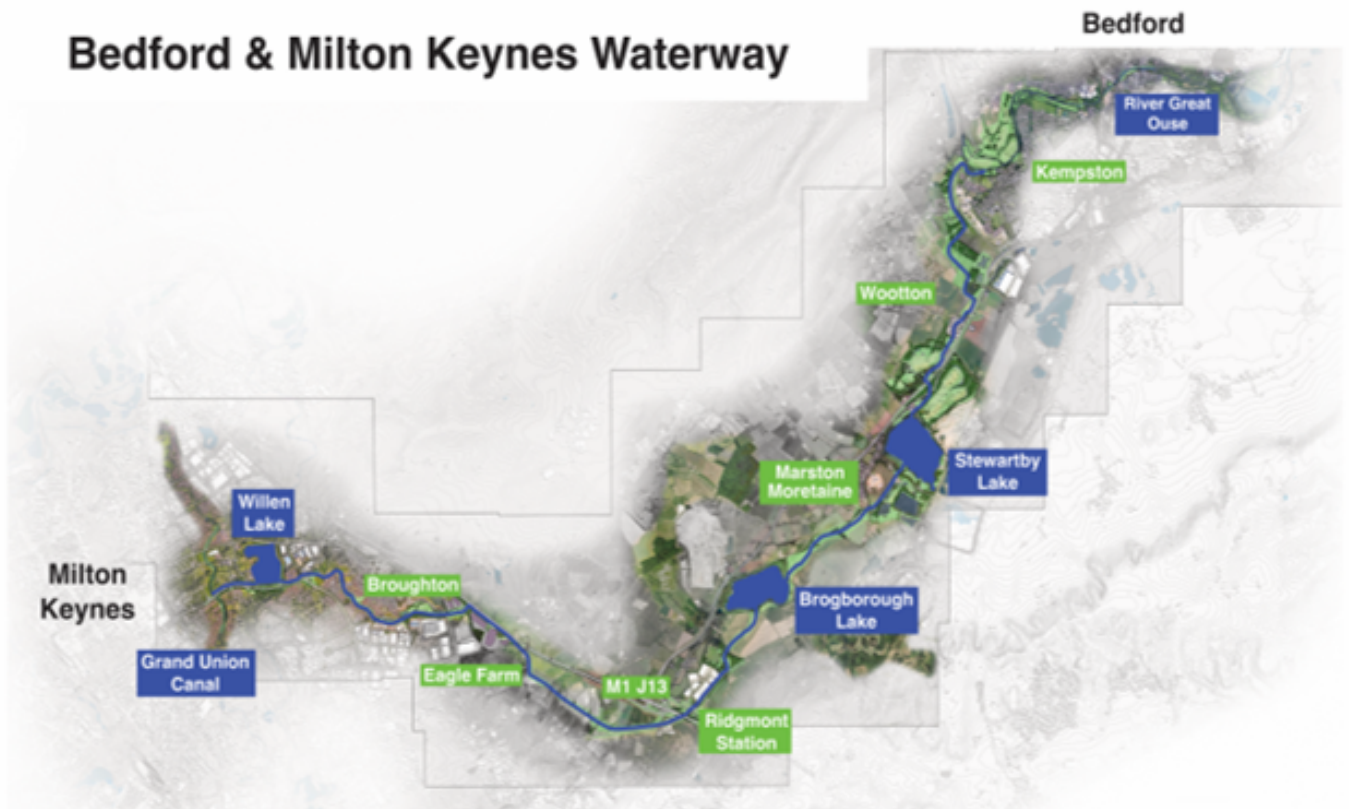
The Trust undertakes smaller projects, when funding is available, to contribute to the longer-term delivery of the waterway. For example, it is proposed to deliver a 1.5 km demonstration section of waterway at Fields Road near Wootton using funding from a Section 106 agreement.

The Business Plan will be reviewed annually with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) monitored by the Trust Board on a quarterly basis.

1.2 Vision

'To create a nationally recognised navigable Waterway Park linking Bedford and Milton Keynes for the social, economic and environmental benefit of our communities.'

Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway



The focus of the Trust is on raising the profile of the waterway. Its construction will need a suitable delivery vehicle and funding. An outline Business Case produced by consultants AECOM for the Trust in 2025 showed that there is a strong case for investing in the waterway.

1.3 Financial Summary

The cost of the whole waterway together with locks, bridges, an active travel corridor and other structures is estimated to be around £475m at 2025 prices with associated benefits of around 2.4 times this sum. It is likely that the waterway would take at least 10 years to design, procure and construct.

The Trust operates two boats through its operational arm. The John Bunyan is a wide beam boat which provides trips on the River Great Ouse at Bedford and the Electra, a narrowboat, which runs on batteries and provides trips on the Grand Union Canal in and around Milton Keynes.