

BEDFORD INTELLIGENCE

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Independent business intelligence on the Universal United Kingdom Resort and related developments affecting Bedford and the surrounding region.

 BedfordIntelligence.co.uk

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THIS MONTH'S KEY QUESTION

What opportunities exist for Bedford businesses before the resort opens in 2031?

BEDFORD INTELLIGENCE DASHBOARD

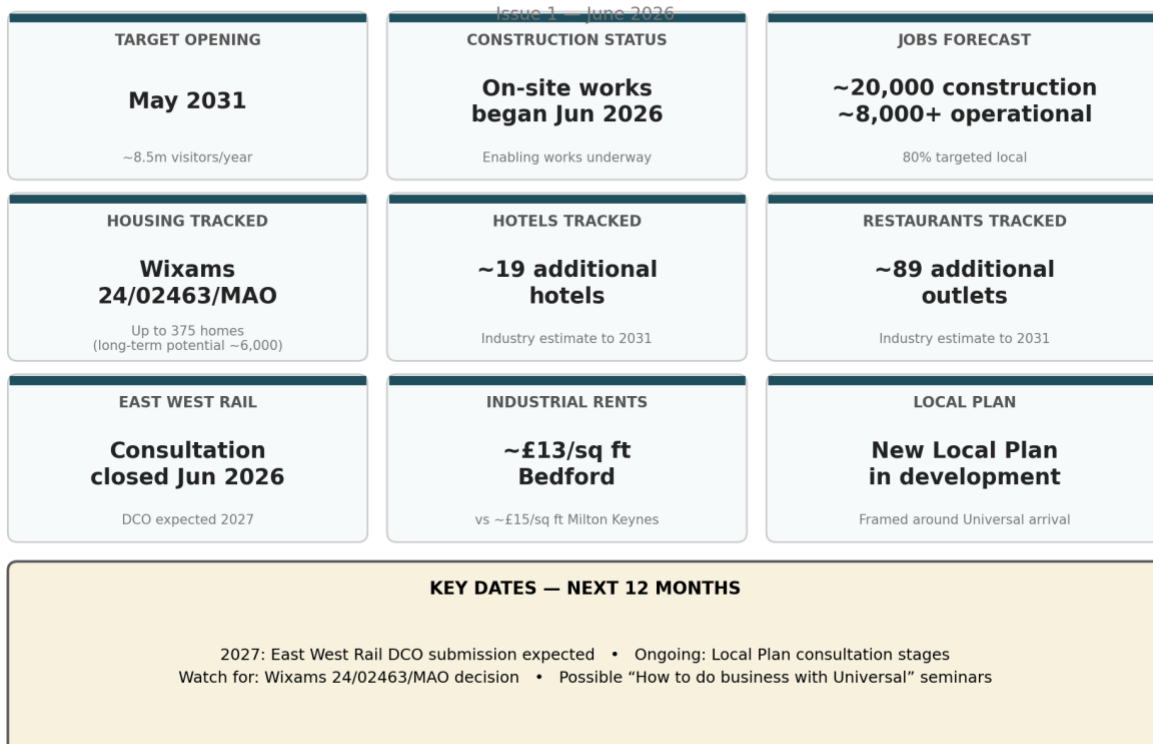


Figure 1: Bedford Intelligence Dashboard — Issue 1 snapshot.

Headline Summary

1. On-site construction has formally begun at Kempston Hardwick.

Bedford Borough Council confirmed on 3 June 2026 that enabling works are now underway, with Universal Destinations & Experiences (UDX) having established a permanent presence in Borough Hall. Businesses affected: construction and trades contractors, plant and equipment hire, site logistics and haulage, workforce accommodation and catering providers.

2. East West Rail's final route-wide consultation has closed, with an accelerated delivery plan for the Bedford area.

The April–June 2026 consultation confirmed the Oxford–Stewartby section (which includes Bedford) will be prioritised, with the Bedford station rebuild brought forward. Businesses affected: commercial property owners near the station, hospitality and retail in central Bedford, transport and logistics operators.

3. Bedford Borough Council is developing a new Local Plan explicitly framed around maximising the benefit of Universal's arrival.

A multi-year process that sets the long-term framework for housing, retail, hotel and commercial development. Businesses affected: property developers, commercial landlords, estate agents, and any business considering premises expansion or relocation in the next 3–5 years.

4. Education and training infrastructure is being built ahead of demand.

The Bedford College Group is developing a new hospitality school and logistics academy, with Universal-confirmed partnerships involving Bedford College, Cranfield University, and Kimberley College. Businesses affected: hospitality operators, recruitment and training providers, construction and logistics firms competing for the same future labour pool.

5. Early signals of repricing in Bedford's industrial and commercial property market.

Strong investor interest around the sale of Bedford Commercial Park, with current industrial rents (~£13/sq ft) expected to rise as suppliers position near the resort. Businesses affected: commercial property owners and investors, logistics and distribution operators, manufacturers and suppliers considering a Bedford base.

BEDFORD INTELLIGENCE INSIGHT — “The 2026–2030 Opportunity Most Businesses Are Missing”

Most local commentary still treats 2031 as the date that matters. The headline items above point to a different reality: construction workforce demand, supply-chain registration, infrastructure-driven property repricing, and education partnerships are all live now.

Why this matters: businesses that treat 2026–2030 as a “waiting period” risk competing for the same opportunities — at higher cost and with more competition — once 2031 arrives. The businesses that benefit most from 2031 are likely to be the ones already embedded in the local economy by 2029.

OPPORTUNITY OF THE MONTH — Construction Workforce Accommodation

Of all the opportunities scored in this issue (see Section 2), construction workforce accommodation rates highest — 8/10 overall — because it is the largest identified gap between current supply and near-term demand,

and because it sits in a distinct niche from the tourist accommodation market that most local operators are watching for 2031. Demand for this is not speculative: enabling works began in June 2026, and peak construction workforce numbers are expected through 2028–2029, years before the resort itself opens.

Suggested First Action: If you operate a hotel, B&B, guesthouse or have suitable property, contact main contractors directly about block-booking or weekly/monthly-rate agreements for site staff — see the Actionable Registrations & Contacts in Section 5.

BEDFORD INTELLIGENCE VIEW

The greatest opportunities between 2026 and 2030 are likely to arise from construction activity, workforce demand and infrastructure investment rather than tourism itself. Businesses that position around the build phase — accommodation, supply, catering, trades and professional services — stand to benefit years before a single visitor arrives at the resort, and with less competition than they will face once 2031-focused operators enter the market.

Universal UK Resort Tracker

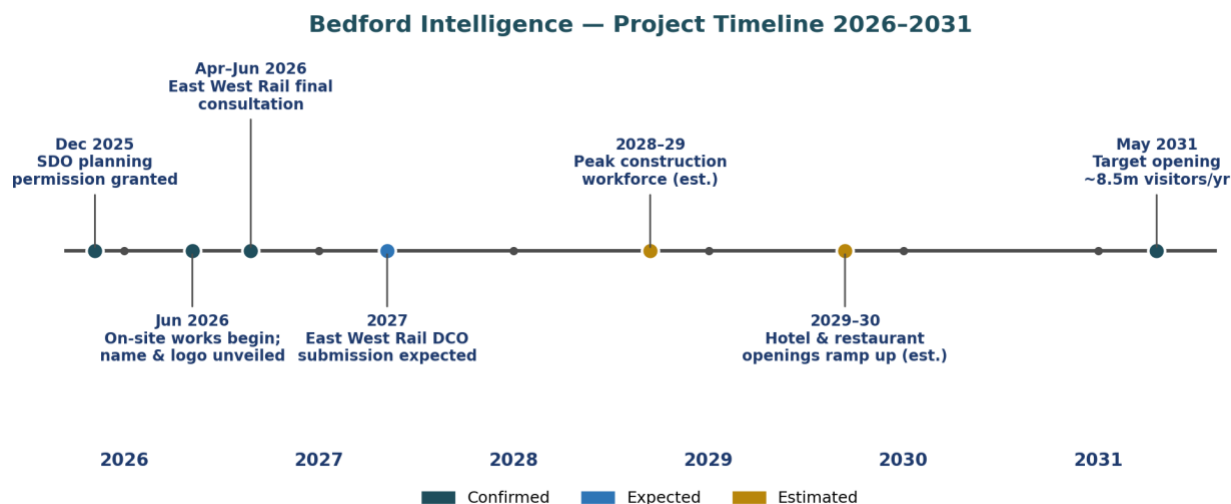


Figure 2: Project Timeline 2026–2031. Colour-coded by status — confirmed, expected, estimated.

1.1 On-site works commence

What happened: On 3 June 2026, Bedford Borough Council announced that physical works have started on-site at the former Kempston Hardwick brickworks site. UDX has opened a permanent office within Borough Hall, embedding its team alongside council staff. The council restated UDX’s own projections: approximately £50 billion contribution to the UK economy across the construction period and the first 20 years of operation, including an estimated £14 billion in net additional tax receipts to HM Treasury over the same period.

Why it matters: This is the clearest possible signal that the project has moved beyond planning risk into delivery. For businesses that have been waiting for “proof” before committing time or money to preparation, that point has now passed.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

Who Benefits? Construction subcontractors, plant/equipment hire firms, site security and welfare providers, workforce catering and accommodation businesses, haulage operators.

Who May Be Disadvantaged? Businesses near the site that may face access disruption, increased traffic, or noise during the construction phase (e.g., rural businesses on routes used by construction traffic).

Who Should Act? Any business that could plausibly supply goods or services to a major construction project — even indirectly (uniforms, catering supplies, vehicle maintenance, cleaning).

Suggested Next Step: Register on Universal’s supplier interest portal (see Section 5 for full details) and begin building a one-page capability statement that can be shared with main contractors as they are appointed.

Expected Time Horizon: Immediate (2026) through to 2031, with peak construction-phase demand likely 2027–2029.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Hospitality: Construction workforce accommodation and catering demand begins now — see Section 2 for scoring.

Retail: Limited direct impact yet; indirect benefit from increased footfall of construction workers in nearby towns/villages.

Property owners: Land and premises near the site and access routes may see early interest from contractors needing laydown areas, site offices, or workforce welfare facilities.

Construction firms: This is the priority opportunity in this issue — see Section 5 for registration details.

Professional services: Demand for site-related legal, accounting and HR support (for new contractor entities operating locally) likely to grow through 2026–2027.

Investors: Early-stage construction activity is a leading indicator for commercial property demand discussed in Section 3 — not yet directly investable, but worth monitoring.

1.2 Planning and government backing reconfirmed

What happened: The project received planning permission via a Special Development Order (SDO) in December 2025 — an unusual route reserved for nationally significant projects, reflecting central government’s direct involvement. The June 2026 announcement reiterated continued government backing.

Why it matters: The SDO route bypasses some of the normal local planning uncertainty and timeline risk. Combined with the on-site start, this substantially de-risks the “will it actually happen” question that has dominated local conversation since 2025.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

Who Benefits? Any business making multi-year investment decisions (premises, recruitment, training) that previously hesitated due to project uncertainty.

Who May Be Disadvantaged? None directly identified — this is a risk-reduction development rather than one that creates winners and losers.

Who Should Act? Business owners with 3–5 year strategic plans (expansion, relocation, major capital expenditure).

Suggested Next Step: Revisit any “wait and see” plans drafted before December 2025 — the planning risk that justified delay has materially reduced.

Expected Time Horizon: Immediate — this changes planning assumptions today, even though physical effects play out over years.

1.3 New Local Plan in development

What happened: Bedford Borough Council confirmed in June 2025 that it is likely to begin work on a new Local Plan specifically designed to ensure the borough captures maximum benefit from Universal’s arrival.

Why it matters: Local Plans determine where new housing, retail, hotel and commercial development can be built over the next 10–15 years. A plan explicitly oriented around Universal is likely to designate new commercial and hospitality zones, particularly around Wixams, the A421 corridor, and routes between Bedford town centre and the resort site.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

Who Benefits? Landowners and developers with sites near the resort corridor that could be designated for hotel, retail or commercial use.

Who May Be Disadvantaged? Businesses or residents in areas that may be designated for higher-density development who value the current character of their area.

Who Should Act? Property owners, developers, and estate agents with land or client interests in the Wixams–Kempston Hardwick–Bedford corridor.

Suggested Next Step: Identify the Local Plan consultation timetable on Bedford Borough Council’s planning policy pages and register for updates — early-stage “issues and options” consultations typically offer more influence than later draft-allocation stages.

Expected Time Horizon: Medium to long term (consultation likely 2026–2028; adoption likely 2028–2030), but early engagement should begin now.

1.4 University and Council Civic Agreement

What happened: In November 2025, the University of Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Council signed a Civic Agreement committing to joint work on education, culture, economic development and health outcomes.

Why it matters: While not Universal-specific, this agreement is part of the broader institutional alignment happening across Bedford’s public bodies in anticipation of the resort. It signals that workforce development, research partnerships, and potentially graduate retention schemes are being structured now.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

Who Benefits? Businesses with graduate recruitment needs (digital, marketing, engineering, hospitality management) and those that could host placements or internships.

Who May Be Disadvantaged? None directly identified.

Who Should Act? SMEs that have historically struggled to compete with larger employers for graduate talent.

Suggested Next Step: Contact the University of Bedfordshire’s employer engagement / careers team to ask about emerging placement or internship schemes connected to the Civic Agreement.

Expected Time Horizon: Medium term — schemes are likely to take 12–24 months to become operational.

Business Opportunity Watch

Sector	Opportunity	Timeframe	Priority
Hospitality (accommodation)	Construction workforce accommodation demand begins immediately (2026 onward), well ahead of tourist demand (2031+). Independent analysis suggests the wider area may need ~19 additional hotels to meet 2031 visitor demand.	Now – ongoing	High
Hospitality (food & beverage)	Same independent analysis suggests demand for roughly 89 additional restaurants/F&B outlets across the catchment area by 2031. Near-term opportunity from construction workforce catering.	Now (workforce); 2028+ (visitor)	High
Construction & trades	Direct subcontracting opportunities now active as enabling works begin; supplier registration portal already open for UK businesses.	Now – 2031	High
Property & land	Industrial/distribution space demand rising due to Bedford's M1 access and supplier positioning; housing demand pressure expected as workforce relocates to the area.	Now – ongoing	High
Recruitment & training	Universal has committed to apprenticeships and training partnerships; 80% of operational jobs expected to be filled locally.	Now – 2031	Medium
Retail	Visitor-facing retail opportunity is real but distant (post-2029). Near-term opportunity is limited to serving the growing construction and professional workforce.	2029+	Medium
Professional services	Commercial finance providers are already positioning around hospitality/hotel investment lending. Marketing, digital and tech providers can build credibility now.	Now – ongoing	Medium
Transport & logistics	East West Rail acceleration and A421/Manor Road upgrades will reshape commuting and freight patterns over the next 5 years.	Now – 2031	Medium

Opportunity Scorecard

Scores are out of 10, where higher = more attractive on that dimension. *For Competition and Capital Requirement, a higher score means more favourable (i.e. lower competition / lower capital needed).

Sector	Market Size	Competition*	Ease of Entry	Time Horizon	Capital Req.*	Overall (1-10)
Hospitality – accommodation (workforce)	8	7	6	Now – 2030	5	8
Construction subcontracting & supply	8	4	5	Now – 2031	6	7
Hospitality – F&B (workforce catering)	7	6	7	Now – 2031	6	7
Industrial / distribution property	7	5	4	1–3 years	2	6
Recruitment & training	6	6	7	2028 – 2031	8	6
Professional services	6	4	7	Now – ongoing	8	6

Sector	Market Size	Competition*	Ease of Entry	Time Horizon	Capital Req.*	Overall (1-10)
Visitor-facing retail	6	4	5	2029+	4	5

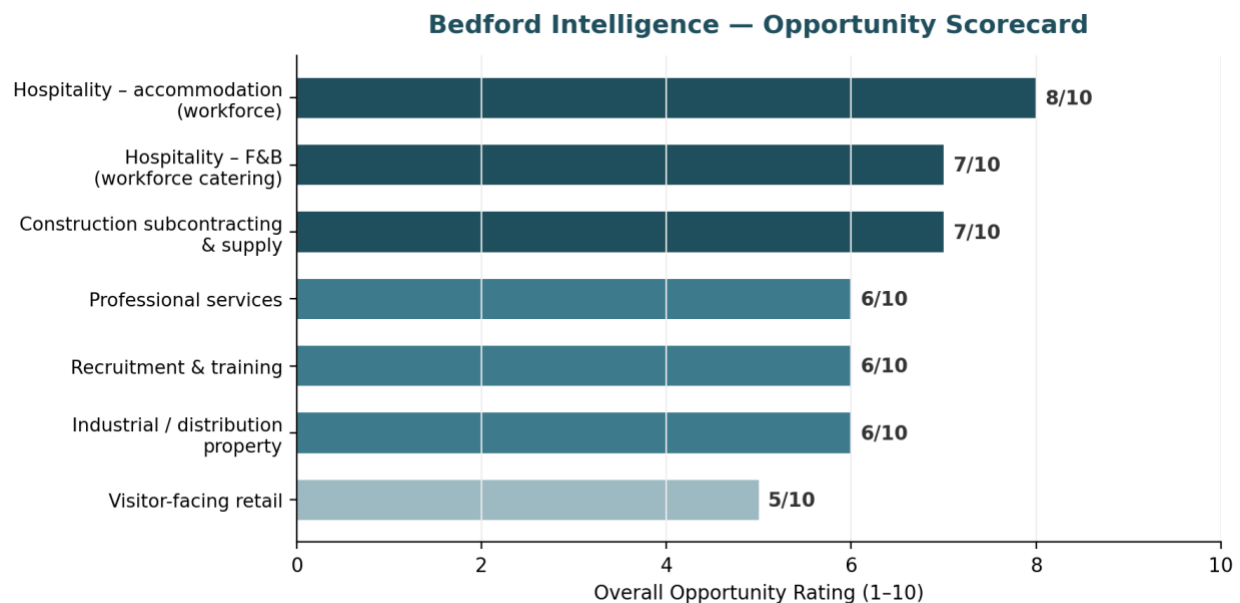


Figure 3: Opportunity Scorecard — Overall Rating by sector (1–10).

Reasoning highlights

- Hospitality accommodation (8/10): Largest near-term gap between supply and demand identified so far, with relatively few established players competing for construction workforce (as opposed to tourist) accommodation — a distinct, less-contested niche.
- Construction subcontracting (7/10): Very large market, but competition from established regional contractors is significant; ease of entry depends on accreditation (e.g., Constructionline, CHAS) which takes time to obtain.
- Industrial/distribution property (6/10): Strong fundamentals but capital-intensive, and timing is sensitive — entering too early ties up capital before demand materialises, too late means paying inflated prices.

Planning & Development Watch

Bedford Area — Schematic Property & Infrastructure Map (not to scale)

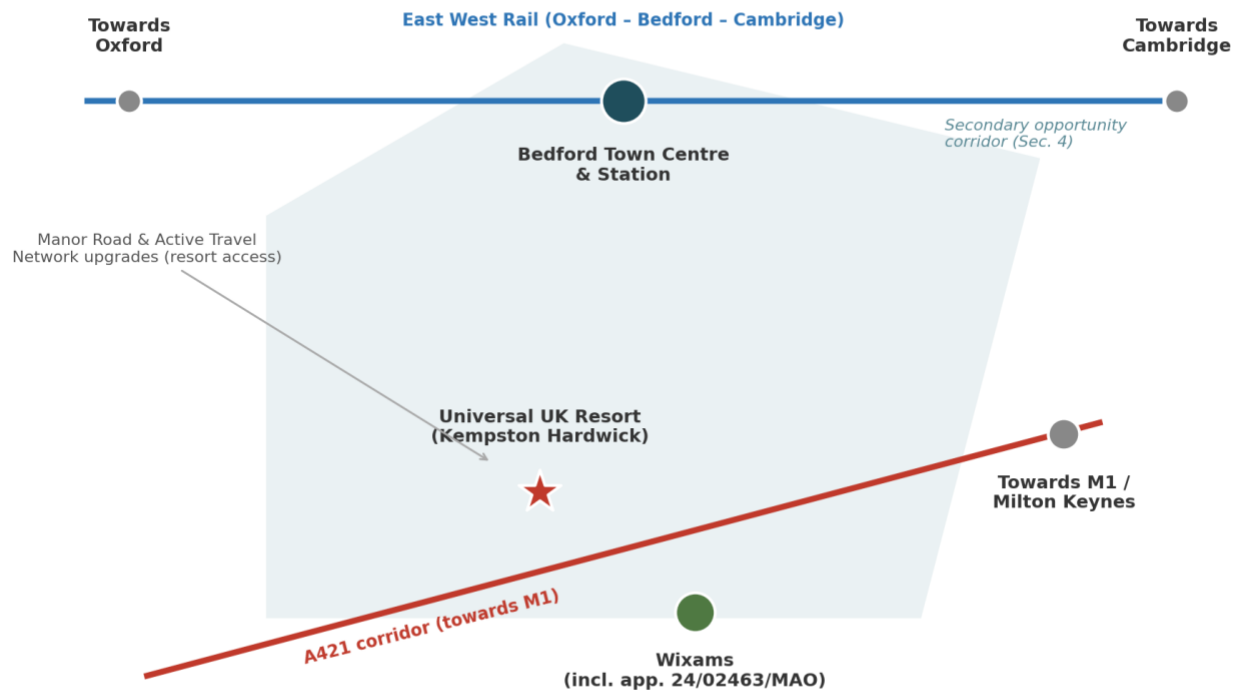


Figure 4: Bedford Area — Schematic Property & Infrastructure Map (not to scale).

Wixams expansion

What happened: An outline planning application (ref. 24/02463/MAO) for up to 375 new homes on land south of Wixams is currently with Bedford Borough Council. Wixams — the new town adjacent to the resort site, originally begun in 2007 — has long-term potential to grow toward approximately 6,000 homes.

RUMOUR VS REALITY

Rumour: “Wixams is about to become a town of 6,000 new homes overnight because of the theme park.”

Reality: The current live application covers up to 375 homes. The figure of ~6,000 homes refers to Wixams’ long-term masterplan potential over many years, not a single imminent development. No evidence currently links the 375-home application directly to Universal-driven demand — it should be treated as part of Wixams’ pre-existing planned growth, which the resort may accelerate.

Business Impact: Businesses should plan for steady, multi-year residential growth in Wixams rather than a sudden population surge. This supports gradual, sustained demand for local services (schools, retail, trades) rather than an immediate spike.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

Who Benefits? Estate agents, letting agents, trades businesses (fitting, landscaping, removals), and local schools/childcare providers.

Who May Be Disadvantaged? Existing Wixams residents may experience increased construction traffic and added pressure on school places and on GP capacity in Flitwick, Ampthill and Bedford — Wixams does not yet have its own GP surgery (one has planning approval but is not yet built), so all current residents already travel out of the area for primary care.

Who Should Act? Estate and letting agents operating in the Wixams/south Bedford area; trades businesses serving new-build properties.

Suggested Next Step: Monitor the application via Bedford Borough Council’s planning portal (see Key Sources below) for the committee decision date.

Expected Time Horizon: Decision timeline not yet published; if approved, construction and occupation likely to begin within 12–24 months of approval.

East West Rail — Bedford station rebuild brought forward

What happened: The Spring 2026 consultation confirmed an accelerated programme for the Oxford–Bletchley–Bedford section, including bringing the Bedford station rebuild forward relative to the original schedule, alongside commitments to upgrade the Wixams station and line. A Development Consent Order (DCO) is expected to be submitted in 2027, with construction on the Bedford-area sections not yet formally commenced pending that approval.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

Who Benefits? Hospitality, retail and office occupiers near the existing Bedford station; commercial landlords in the station quarter.

Who May Be Disadvantaged? Businesses directly adjacent to the station that may face construction disruption (access, noise, footfall loss) once works begin, likely 2027–2029.

Who Should Act? Businesses with leases up for renewal near Bedford station; property owners considering redevelopment in the station quarter.

Suggested Next Step: Sign up for East West Rail project updates (see Key Sources below) to receive notice of DCO submission and construction timelines as they firm up.

Expected Time Horizon: DCO submission expected 2027; construction disruption (if applicable) most likely 2027–2029; medium-term commercial uplift from 2029 onward.

A421, Manor Road and Active Travel Network

What happened: Alongside the resort itself, government and UDX have committed to direct slip roads from the A421, improvements to Manor Road, and upgrades to the Active Travel Network (walking/cycling infrastructure).

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

Who Benefits? Roadside hospitality, fuel/EV charging, and convenience retail along the A421/Kempston/Wixams corridors.

Who May Be Disadvantaged? Businesses on routes that may face temporary access restrictions during roadworks.

Who Should Act? Any business located along the A421 corridor between Bedford and the M1, or along Manor Road.

Suggested Next Step: Review your premises' visibility and accessibility from these routes — businesses with poor roadside signage or limited parking should address this before traffic volumes increase.

Expected Time Horizon: Construction traffic increases likely from 2026–2027; visitor traffic increases from 2031.

Industrial and commercial property

What happened: Strong reported interest in Goodman's sale of Bedford Commercial Park (a prime distribution asset) suggests investor confidence in Bedford's logistics positioning is already rising. Current prime industrial rents in Bedford are estimated around £13 per sq ft, compared to approximately £15 per sq ft in nearby Milton Keynes.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

Who Benefits? Existing owners of Bedford industrial/warehouse property (asset value likely to rise); investors able to acquire space before rents converge with Milton Keynes levels.

Who May Be Disadvantaged? Businesses currently leasing industrial space approaching lease renewal — likely to face higher costs.

Who Should Act? Any business leasing or considering leasing industrial/warehouse space in Bedford.

Suggested Next Step: If your lease renewal falls within the next 24 months, begin negotiations early and consider locking in a longer term at current rates.

Expected Time Horizon: Rent growth likely over 2–3 years (2026–2029).

Lessons from Other Theme Park Markets: Orlando's Epic Universe (2025)

What happened there?

In June 2025, Universal opened Epic Universe — its fourth Orlando theme park and the largest single investment in the resort's history. The expansion was projected to create approximately 17,000 new jobs and to draw millions of additional visitors to Central Florida. Reporting around the opening noted that the broader benefit extended well beyond Universal's own gates: hotels, restaurants, retail and transportation providers across the wider Orlando area — not just those immediately adjacent to the new park — reported preparing for and experiencing increased demand. Analysts specifically flagged areas such as Sand Lake Road and the corridor near the Orange County Convention Center — both several miles from Universal's core campus — as likely sites of new hotel, restaurant and retail development, due to their existing transport connectivity and visitor accommodation base.

What can Bedford businesses learn?

BEDFORD INTELLIGENCE INSIGHT — “Proximity Is Not Destiny”

The Orlando pattern shows that proximity to the resort gates is not the only factor that determines which businesses benefit. Existing transport corridors, established hospitality clusters, and areas with good connectivity to the wider region often capture significant secondary spend — sometimes more reliably than businesses immediately adjacent to the attraction itself, which may face higher rents, more direct competition, and slower lease/development cycles tied to the resort's own timeline.

Why this matters: Bedford businesses several miles from Kempston Hardwick — including in central Bedford and along the A421 — should not assume they are “too far away” to benefit.

For Bedford, the equivalent pattern is likely to favour: central Bedford (with its existing hospitality base and the East West Rail-driven station regeneration), the A421/Wixams corridor (the primary access route), and potentially Milton Keynes (an established hospitality and retail hub with strong transport links via the A421/M1).

What should local businesses do now?

Businesses in established commercial areas with good transport connectivity to the resort — even several miles away — are well placed to capture visitor and workforce spend, provided they position themselves (digitally and physically) as accessible and relevant to that audience well before 2031. Central Bedford hospitality and retail businesses, in particular, should view the East West Rail station rebuild as a complementary opportunity to the resort itself, not a separate development.

Bedford Business Readiness Checklist

If You Are A...

Restaurant Owner

What should you do? Approach main contractors and site management about workforce catering contracts (packed lunches, canteen supply, evening meal deliveries to workforce accommodation) — this demand starts now, not in 2031. Review your menu and pricing for a potential shift-work customer base (early breakfasts, late dinners).

Hotel Owner / B&B Operator

What should you do? Contact contractors directly about block-booking agreements for site management and skilled tradespeople who will need weekday accommodation from 2026 onward. Review your booking platform presence for “long-stay” and “weekly rate” options, which construction-sector bookers often search for specifically.

Builder or Contractor

What should you do? Register on Universal’s supplier interest form now (details below). If you do not already hold Constructionline or CHAS accreditation, begin the application process — main contractors typically require this before subcontracting work.

Estate Agent

What should you do? Track the Wixams planning application (24/02463/MAO) for its decision date, and begin building a database of landlords with property near the A421/Wixams corridor who may want to let to incoming construction workforce on medium-term lets.

Retail Business Owner

What should you do? Don’t wait for 2031. Audit your Google Business Profile and online presence now (see action below) so that it is in good shape well before search demand increases. In the near term, consider whether your product range could appeal to a construction workforce (workwear, tools, convenience items, packed-lunch supplies).

Professional Services Firm

What should you do? Position your firm as the “go-to” local adviser for businesses navigating growth — lease negotiations, planning applications, recruitment law, and business structuring for new contractor entities setting up locally. Early visibility (e.g., via Chamber of Commerce events) builds the relationships that convert into instructions later.

Actionable Registrations & Contacts

1. Universal UK Project — Supplier Registration

Website: universalukproject.co.uk and universal-bedford.co.uk

Relevant Link: Supplier interest form, accessible via the “Suppliers” section of universalukproject.co.uk (Microsoft Forms-hosted registration)

Contact: No direct phone/email for supplier enquiries has been publicly published; the registration form is the primary channel.

Suggested First Action: Complete the supplier interest form, specifying your sector (e.g., catering, accommodation, construction trades, professional services) and the geographic area you can serve. Keep a copy of your submission for reference.

2. Bedford College Group — Hospitality School & Logistics Academy Partnerships

Organisation: The Bedford College Group

Website: bedfordcollegigroup.ac.uk

Contact: General enquiries via bedfordcollegigroup.ac.uk/contact/ (named contact for employer partnerships not currently published)

Suggested Approach: Use the general enquiries form to ask specifically to be connected with the employer engagement or work-placement team regarding the new hospitality school and logistics academy, and request information on apprenticeship and placement opportunities for your sector.

3. East West Rail — Project Updates

Website: eastwestrail.co.uk

Email: contact@eastwestrail.co.uk

Telephone: 0330 134 0067

Suggested First Action: The Spring 2026 consultation closed on 9 June 2026, but you can still contact the project team to register for updates ahead of the expected 2027 DCO submission, particularly if your business is near the Bedford station or Wixams line.

4. Bedford Borough Council — Planning Application Tracking

Website: bedford.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning-applications/search-plans

Suggested First Action: Search for reference 24/02463/MAO to view the Wixams housing application documents, consultation comments, and (once published) the committee decision date. Use the same portal to set up alerts for new applications in your area of interest (e.g., land near Kempston Hardwick or the A421 corridor).

5. Digital Presence Audit (Self-Directed)

Suggested First Action: Search for your business on Google as a customer would (e.g., “[your service] near Bedford”). Check that your Google Business Profile is claimed, your opening hours and contact details are

correct, and you have at least 10 recent reviews. If any of this is missing, this is a same-week task with no cost beyond time.

Looking Ahead (Next 30–90 Days)

- East West Rail — Feedback from the April–June 2026 consultation will be processed, with designs to be finalised ahead of a DCO submission expected in 2027.

Confidence Level: High. *Based on official East West Rail consultation documentation and published programme commitments.*

- On-site construction activity — Following the formal start announced in June 2026, expect increased visible activity at the Kempston Hardwick site, including site clearance, access road works, and contractor mobilisation.

Confidence Level: High. *Directly confirmed by Bedford Borough Council’s announcement of works commencing.*

- Wixams housing application (24/02463/MAO) — A committee decision or further consultation stage may emerge in this window.

Confidence Level: Medium. *The application is active and progressing through the normal planning process, but no decision date has been published, so timing is an estimate based on typical determination periods.*

- Universal supplier/business engagement seminars — Universal has indicated that “how to do business with Universal” seminars will be introduced as the project progresses; the next quarter is a plausible window for an initial announcement.

Confidence Level: Low. *This is based on general statements of intent rather than a published date — readers should treat this as something to watch for, not something to plan around yet.*

- New Local Plan — Early-stage consultation activity may begin or be announced.

Confidence Level: Medium. *The council has confirmed its intention to develop a new Local Plan, but multi-year planning processes of this kind frequently start later than initially indicated.*

Key Sources Monitored This Month

Official / Project sources

- Universal UK Project — universalukproject.co.uk

Council sources

- Bedford Borough Council — construction start announcement, Local Plan commentary, Civic Agreement (bedford.gov.uk)

Infrastructure sources

- East West Rail — Spring 2026 consultation materials and route programme (eastwestrail.co.uk)

Industry sources

- Park World / Approved Finance Group — hospitality demand estimates (19 hotels, 89 restaurants, £240m–£1.1bn investment range)
- Theme park industry reporting on Universal Orlando's Epic Universe (June 2025 opening)

Property sources

- UK Property Forums / Savills commentary on Bedford industrial rents and Bedford Commercial Park investor interest (ukpropertyforums.com)

Note: Where figures originate from third-party industry estimates rather than official project sources, this is indicated in the text and should be treated as directional rather than definitive.

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Bedford Intelligence tracks the opportunities, developments and business implications arising from the Universal United Kingdom Resort and wider Bedford growth corridor.

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