

BIG READ

Europe's biggest theme park planned for Bedfordshire – in first major test for Reeves

Insiders claim Government officials are in talks with Universal about a funding package



Universal Studios resorts feature rides linked to popular franchises such as Transformers, Nintendo and Harry Potter

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Britain's answer to [Disneyland Paris](#) is shaping up to be the first major test of Labour's ambitions to boost economic growth and foreign investment while repaying the shortfall in public finances left by the Tories.

[Universal Destinations and Experiences](#) has bought almost 500 acres of land in Bedfordshire to build Europe's largest [theme park](#), which it estimates will generate £35.1bn of economic value over two decades.

But insiders claim the Government will need to put up some of its own money to get the project over the line, and is in talks with the company about transport funding and potential tax breaks.

With the promise of jobs and a major boost to the local economy, officials and residents near the site in Kempston Hardwick want to see the Government and Universal, which is owned by US media conglomerate Comcast, seal the deal.

Chancellor Rachel Reeves is eyeing tax rises in next month's Autumn Statement but has pledged that Labour will be the "most pro-business government this country has ever seen" in an effort to make the UK the fastest-growing economy in the G7.

Marc Frost, a Conservative councillor for Wixams and Wilstead ward on Bedford Borough council, meets regularly with Universal. He said executives want the Government to agree to tax reliefs and improvements to public infrastructure. He told *i* that the tax breaks being discussed include concessions on the VAT paid on entrance tickets, corporation tax, and business rates.

Mr Frost called it a "no brainer", saying: "At the minute, the Government has got 100 per cent of nothing. Even if it gives away 50 per cent of the tax revenue, it is still better off than it would have been."



Councillor Marc Frost by the River Ouse, a key tourist attraction in nearby Bedford (Pic: Tom Pilston/i)

He said that Universal wanted the Government to fund improvements to public infrastructure that the company believes are essential if the plan is to move forward.

The Culture Secretary, Lisa Nandy, previously confirmed that the Government was working closely with Universal on the plans. Negotiations are understood to be taking place behind closed doors.

Blake Stephenson, the Tory MP for Mid Bedfordshire, urged the Government to "provide Universal with the backing and the confidence to invest". He said: "It

would be a huge missed opportunity by this Labour Government if it does not do what it needs to do to bring Universal here, because it shouldn't be party political. There are billions at stake in terms of inward investment to the UK."

Graeme Coombes, another councillor for Wixams and Wilstead, the ward in which the theme park would be located, said the Government must agree to a package "quickly" because "we do not want people put off by an excessively high tax regime".

"If you look at the rhetoric that we're getting from the Government already about taxes needing to rise, that's got to be a concern for business, and therefore there will need to be reassurance," he said.



Councillor Graeme Coombes urged Labour to move quickly to secure the resort (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

Industry concerns about 'preferential' treatment

A source at another large developer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, raised concerns about any decision to give "preferential" tax treatment to Universal, suggesting that this "could be seen as anti-competitive".

The insider also questioned the previous Tory government's plans to use a special development order – a type of fast-tracked planning process typically used for emergency projects – to approve the theme park.

The process involves the Housing Secretary approving a development instead of the relevant local authority, and is not typically used for theme parks.

Any decision for the Government to generously fund transport infrastructure that would typically be paid for by a developer going through a traditional

planning process could also lead to accusations of unfairness from other firms, the source indicated.

Mr Frost said that Universal wanted to see Labour commit to using a special development order to expedite the process, while Mr Coombes called for “clarity from the Government” on this.

Infrastructure improvements being discussed are for Wixhams railway station near the site, which is under construction, to be expanded from a two-platform station to a minimum of four, and for the service to run 24 hours a day. Work on the station began last month and is scheduled to be completed in 2026 – although this could be delayed if it is expanded.



The site of Wixhams railway station – the theme park would be behind the trees (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

A six-platform railway station with a name that relates to Universal has also been proposed by the company. The current budget for Wixhams station is £62.9m and comes from levies on property developers and £17m from the council’s capital budget.

Mr Frost said that improvements to motorways would also be an essential requirement for Universal to go ahead with the project. These include upgrades to Junction 13 on the M1 and a new junction to take visitors off the A421 – which joins the A1 and the M1 – to the theme park.

Universal has suggested that some of the infrastructure could be delivered in a staggered way, which would spread out the impact on public finances.

Tom Wootton, the mayor of Bedford Borough, said the firm’s executives have told them they “don’t want any queues”.

He told **i**: “They make the money from repeat visits, and if you’re stuck in traffic, you’re not going to want to go back. Even as you come off the motorway, they reckon they’d be trimming the verges, it’s going to be litter-free, and it’s just going to be very, very calm.”



The land purchased by Universal for its proposed theme park (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

Parallels with Disneyland Paris

Dr Sabrina Mittermeier, a theme park history expert and professor at the University of Kassel, told **i** a “benchmark” the project can be compared with is Disneyland Paris.

Before it was built in 1992, she said Disney started a “bidding war” between countries even though it is believed the company had been set on having the resort in France.

She said suggestions that Universal could pull out if the Government does not agree to its terms are likely just negotiation tactics. An industry source told **i** companies that are unsure about a project and want to reduce their risks will not buy land outright the way Universal did.

In theme park deals involving big corporations such as Disney and Universal, Dr Mittermeier said it is typical for governments to put “an insane amount of money” towards supporting infrastructure, particularly transport.

Dr Mittermeier, the author of *A Cultural History of Disneyland Theme Parks*, said the deals usually work out “quite favourably” for private companies because governments want the jobs and tourism that will be generated.

In the case of Disneyland Paris, she said the infrastructure costs were entirely paid for by taxpayers.



Blake Stephenson, the local Conservative MP, urged the Labour Government to give Universal the tax incentives and infrastructure support required (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

To get the deal over the line, her research found that France spent more than \$400m on local infrastructure, which included a new station, expanded train tracks, and motorway improvements. Funds were also put towards upgrades of telephone lines, water supply and electricity.

French officials also agreed to a reduction in VAT on Disney ticket sales from 18.6 per cent to 7 per cent and a cheap \$960m Government loan.

Dr Mittermeier said Universal can make the case that, unlike other theme park operators in the UK, its resort has a “guaranteed visitor base” because it has access to a number of intellectual properties.

She said: “Universal can do things like build the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, or build Super Nintendo Land, which I’m pretty sure they’re planning on because they will use concepts that they’ve already built in the United States, Japan and China.”

Despite the costs to the public purse, she said the economic growth generated by such theme parks makes them a safe bet.





Some of the houses purchased by Universal on Manor Road, which cuts through the site (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

What the locals think

Lee Melville, chair of Stewartby and Kempston Hardwick parish council, said the local community are predominantly “very supportive” but have raised concerns about the impact on transport infrastructure, which is already “struggling”.

“There has to be a complete overhaul of that infrastructure, and that has already been looked at and planned quite carefully by Universal, but therefore [means] they would require government support,” he told **i**.

He said Wixhams station would “require Government investment to make that station fit for purpose” and the roads need upgrading.

Mr Melville said: “Once that’s agreed by government, then I think the main concerns of the local community are answered, and certainly from us as a council.”

i’s visit to the area found that the surrounding area was rural and there were few homes that backed directly on to the site.

Universal has bought more than 10 homes in the area surrounding the park’s proposed site.

On Manor Road, which cuts through the centre of the land, at least four residents sold their homes, but one refused an offer. Some homes already appear to be deserted. Smaller properties on the street were typically worth about £240,000, but Universal made offers of about £330,000.





'No trespassing' signs and fences were recently put up by the houses on Manor Road in Kempston Hardwick (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

One woman, who did not want to be identified, said she believed that the theme park was “going to wreck the area”, which she added was “nice and quiet” and offered views of open countryside.

She has lived in her home for nine years with her partner and daughter, and hopes that “sense prevails” and the project will not go ahead.

“It would just be hell,” she said.

In recent weeks, she said Universal has erected gates and barriers with “no trespassing” signs to mark the land opposite her home.

She said some Bedfordshire residents are very enthusiastic about the plans because they believed they would get cheap tickets for their families, which has made for an uncomfortable situation for those opposed. Universal and rivals such as Disney have previously offered discounted tickets to residents in the areas in which their theme parks are located.

‘I’m disabled and have sensitive hearing’

To the south of the site in Stewartby, some residents also voiced concerns about noise, increased traffic and a loss of countryside fields – and were sceptical of reassurances from Universal.

Sharon Davis, 62, moved in 2019 with her partner into a new-build home that is one field away from the resort’s planned car park. She chose the house because it was in an area surrounded by open fields.

She said: “I’m disabled and I have super-sensitive hearing, so I am really concerned about [noise].”

Speaking to **i** from her colourfully decorated home, she said she also worries about the impact of construction work and tourists driving through the area at night.



Sharon Davis in her front yard. Behind her will be the proposed theme park (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

“I’m quite confined to the village,” said Ms Davis, who has spinal problems. “I can’t go too far because of my stamina, my pain levels, and the charge on my wheelchair.

“If there’s traffic jams, people are going to try and find their way around it, which means going through villages,” she said.

But opposite her lives Glen Zira, 39, who has lived in his home for five years and said he “can’t wait” for the resort to be built.

“It’s going to be crap to live here, but apparently the house price might go up, so I’m just going to move and rent out the house,” added Mr Zira.

“Center Parcs is nearby; Woburn Safari Park is here. It’s good. It’s good for the economy.”

Mr Zira, a plumber who has worked on the Centre Parcs site in Bedfordshire, said he visits a lot of theme parks with his children and “you hardly notice” any noise because of the way they are designed. Universal told councillors most of the rides will be indoors because of the weather, and they build their theme parks so that someone visiting one ride cannot hear the one next to it.



Glen Zira plans to rent out his home on Airbnb (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

Universal has launched a charm offensive since the plans were confirmed at the end of last year. It has been going to schools and talking to young people about the well-paid tech jobs they could do on the site. Partnerships with universities in the wider area could also be developed.

The company estimates that the project will generate 20,000 construction jobs and employ another 8,000 people when the park is open. Another 20,000 jobs could be created by knock-on effects.

There are very few big local employers, and most people living there commute to other places, councillors said. There are some warehouses near the theme park but most of the work is automated, and the jobs do not pay well so staff are bussed in from other areas where housing is cheaper.

Universal has told residents that pubs and restaurants will be built in front of the park, which would be open to those without tickets. It is hoped that visitors will visit the nearby market town of Bedford as part of their stay.

“It is a vote of confidence for Bedfordshire, for Bedford, and for our region,” said Mr Stephenson.





It is hoped that visitors will visit Bedford and the River Ouse as part of their stay (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

‘It was between us and Milton Keynes’

At the same time, Mr Wootton said the council has gone out of its way to make Universal feel welcome.

Universal chose the site near Bedford because of its transport links – more than half of the UK’s population is two hours away – but they considered other options.

“They had a choice between us and Milton Keynes,” Mr Wootton said.

“You cannot believe how much we’ve rolled out the red carpet. They’ve got



THE **i** PAPER

IMPARTIAL NEWS + INTELLIGENT DEBATE

just on the side of the road from the war memorials left from when the bombers were here.





Mayor Tom Wootton said he has 'rolled out the red carpet' (Photo: Tom Pilston/i)

“There’s great history of [American musician] Glenn Miller being on the site of our Corn Exchange – a huge statue of him – all this sort of stuff in Bedford.

“Twenty-seven places in America are called Bedford. So you’ve just got this history of Bedford and America and this link. They went to Milton Keynes and got none of that. They came here, and they just couldn’t have been more welcome.”

A spokesman for Universal Destinations and Experiences said: “We have been delighted by the significant enthusiasm shown for our potential project, which could be transformative for Bedford and deliver significant economic benefits for the UK economy should it come to fruition.

“We continue to have constructive conversations with local and national government to ensure all the elements to support a project of this scale are in place.”

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport did not respond to a request for comment.





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