

Report to Cabinet

Title:	Direct Care and Support - Future of Thrift Farm
Date:	4 February 2019
Date can be implemented:	12 February 2019
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Local members affected:	All
Portfolio areas affected:	Health & Wellbeing

For press enquiries concerning this report, please contact the media office on 01296 382444

Executive Summary

Thrift Farm is a 52-acre Council owned farm in North Buckinghamshire, close to the border with Milton Keynes. It has functioned as a rural supported employment service for adults with learning difficulties since the early 1980s.

Thrift Farm has operated as a traditional social care service which does not readily support people to move on from the service to increased independence. A large number of service users have remained at the Farm for a considerable period of time.

There are a number of challenges in relation to Thrift Farm including accessibility of the location; health and safety risks; and financial viability.

On 23rd April 2018 Cabinet approved a programme of work to transform Direct Care and Support services. This included the requirements that:

- Plans for individual services will be subject to particularised consultation so projected future models are based on officer proposals following their consideration of options and could be revised through due process.
- Plans for Direct Care and Support services are designed to achieve the best solution and the greatest value for service users.

This Cabinet meeting provided the direction for the service to explore and consult on future options for the adult social care and support offer at Thrift Farm and for the users of the service.

The County Council has explored a number of possibilities for the future of Thrift Farm and has concluded that there are three options:

1. Do nothing
2. Identify an alternative provider or providers to take over the adult social care operations and functions of the farm in a financially viable and sustainable way.
3. Decommission the adult social care service

The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) identifies Transformation Programme savings of £2,487 for 2019/20, of which £124,000 is linked to Thrift Farm, either through transfer to another service provider or through decommissioning.

Recommendation

Cabinet is asked to approve the six-week consultation on the future of Thrift Farm, and note approval of final decision by the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing.

A. Narrative setting out the reasons for the decision

Thrift Farm is a 52 acre Council owned farm in North Buckinghamshire, close to the border with Milton Keynes. It has functioned as a rural supported employment service for Adults with Learning Difficulties since the early 1980s. It is also a popular visitor attraction, split into three main areas:

- Horticulture
- Animal farm park and picnic area
- Café

The site contains a house, a number of outbuildings, animal paddocks and meadow.

Between April 2013 and December 2016, Thrift Farm was managed by Buckinghamshire Care Local Authority Trading Company. During this time, significant investment was made in order to improve the Farm as a commercial visitor attraction e.g. building a new café. When the Council took the decision to close Buckinghamshire Care, staff and services at Thrift Farm were transferred back in house in order to continue operating.

Like other ex-Buckinghamshire Care Services, Thrift Farm has operated as a traditional type of social care service which does not readily support people to move on from the service to increased independence. A large number of service users have remained at Thrift Farm for a considerable period of time, some having attended for over 30 years. There are currently 69 service users(November 2018) at Thrift Farm, 36 are Buckinghamshire County Council service users, with the

majority of the remainder from Milton Keynes and others from other local authorities or privately funded.

The location of Thrift farm creates transport difficulties for many Buckinghamshire service users, as it is really only accessible by car. Most service users are taken by Client Transport and being located in the far north east of the county proves to be an issue for service users from the south who may wish to access it.

The 2018-19 budget for Thrift is £432,000. Despite considerable investment between 2013 and 2016 in the catering facilities, the commercial income and out-of-county placement income are such that Thrift Farm had an operating overspend in 2017-18 of £304,000. To develop Thrift Farm into a viable commercial venture the Council would need to invest further significant capital.

In addition, there are always risks associated with health and safety elements of the farm including hygiene risks around biological contamination for vulnerable adults and visitors, and around use of heavy machinery. This is currently managed with suitable staff numbers, but any growth in visitors or client numbers to increase income would again require significant capital investment.

On 23rd April 2018 Cabinet asked commissioners to explore opportunities for alternative providers to take over the running of Thrift Farm, whilst remaining mindful of savings requirements in the Medium Term Financial Plan, prior to commencing any consultation on the future of the Farm.

In the difficult financial climate it is not viable to continue to operate services with overspends. There are substantial financial pressures on the Council with overall Medium Term Financial Plan saving requirements of £14.457m for 2019-20 and on adult social care with savings requirements of £2.470m for 2019-20. The Council's Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) identifies savings of £2,487 for 2019-20, of which £124,000 is linked to Thrift Farm, either through transfer to another service provider or through decommissioning.

Buckinghamshire County Council has kept Milton Keynes Council appraised of possible plans for Thrift Farm, as the authority has 19 service users at the Farm. Buckinghamshire County Council officers met with counterparts from Milton Keynes Council and held a number of discussions with them during the period of market-testing to see if they would be able to offer any solutions. No proposal was received from Milton Keynes Council. The Council had expressed interest in operating the service but with the purchase of the site and minimal restrictions on any future sale. Given the savings requirements for 2019-20 and the County Council's interest in securing best value from any negotiation, this idea has not been pursued. Officers will continue to brief Milton Keynes Council on developments.

B. Other options available, and their pros and cons

Option 1: Do Nothing

Thrift Farm was operating at an overspend of £351,000 at the start of 2018-19. The model at Thrift Farm is outdated and would require considerable investment and

development to offer best practice support and to help service users to move through the service. The potential Health and Safety risks would also require significant capital investment.

The Do Nothing option is therefore not a viable option for the Council.

Option 2: Alternative Provider

The service has undertaken significant work to identify an alternative provider to take over the adult social care operations and functions of the farm in a financially viable and sustainable way.

Two rounds of invitation were held: a Request for Information and two subsequent formal opportunities advertised via the South East Business Portal.

The Request for Information attracted interest from two providers, neither of which submitted sufficiently robust business plans to result in an award. One of these (provider A) subsequently put forward their amended business plan and was the only respondent to the second invitation. This second business plan again failed to reach the tender thresholds on both quality and finance.

An evaluation was undertaken of the responses provided during the two requests for business plan submission, with a view to taking over the operations at Thrift Farm. An evaluation report highlighted areas of concern within the proposed business plans.

Careful consideration has been given as to whether commissioners could work with provider A over the next 3 – 6 months to resolve the issues identified and reach a position where provider A could take on and run Thrift Farm as a sustainable service. However, even with this additional support, there remains a significant risk that the service would not be sustainable over a 12-month period and would incur significant officer time and capital costs.

Adult social care has not been able to identify any alternative providers that could run the Farm sustainably, efficiently and effectively.

Option 3: Decommission Thrift Farm

Commissioners have explored and been unsuccessful in identifying an alternative organisation to sustainably run Thrift Farm. Given the out-dated care model and the significant investment needed detailed in Option 1, together with the savings required for the service, commissioners are of the view that the only viable option is to decommission adult social care services at Thrift Farm.

If Thrift Farm is decommissioned, Buckinghamshire service users will receive a comprehensive assessment of their needs and suitable alternative placements will be identified as part of a new care package. Where these needs are currently funded by Buckinghamshire County Council, it is likely their future needs will be funded by the County Council in line with our Choice and Top Up Policy.

The recommended option considered in this paper is to consult on the future of Thrift Farm, including the decommissioning of the service and to seek views on any other viable and sustainable proposals.

C. Resource implications

In the event that the service requires decommissioning, a redundancy consultation would be undertaken and all opportunities for redeploying staff be explored.

Part year savings for 2019-20 based on 5 month operation of the current service are anticipated to be in the region of £141,000 after redundancy liabilities, pension strain, costs to vacate site, and termination of leases. In addition, there will continue to be a cost per client for their alternative service provision.

Full year effect savings for 2020-21 are estimated to be £270,000, including assumptions of costs of reprovision for service users.

D. Value for Money (VfM) Self-Assessment

Buckinghamshire County Council has a duty to ensure that it delivers services that are sustainable and value for money. This will not be achieved if the Council continues to support the ongoing underlying overspend required to operate the current provision at Thrift Farm. Similar services are operating within the county which could provide suitable alternative day opportunities and supported employment for service users which should present better value for money.

E. Legal implications including Equality Impact

A local authority must make provision to meet eligible needs identified under the Care Act 2014, and where a service is no longer available must find an alternative way of meeting those needs.

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed which identifies that the needs of services users could be met by other similar services within the County. The Council would continue to meet its statutory duty in relation to the clients affected, reviewing and assessing clients' needs and developing suitable care plans with alternative care providers in relation to individual needs.

F. Property implications

In the event that the service requires decommissioning, the site would be cleared and returned to the management of the Council.

G. Other implications/issues

Unitary Council

There are no particular implications or future commitments for the new Unitary Council and there are no opportunities to develop a solution with District Councils.

H. Feedback from consultation, Local Area Forums and Local Member views

Both the Cabinet Member and Local Member have been involved in discussions about potential outcomes and options for Thrift Farm. The Local Member has been central particularly in discussions about use of assets associated with the service and has been briefed on responses and evaluations from both expressions of interest to the market.

The Local Member does not support the recommendation to Cabinet.

I. Communication issues

Communication will be managed using a robust Consultation Plan, prepared in partnership with the Council and CCG Communications Team.

A draft Consultation Plan has been developed and sets out how stakeholders will be engaged and will be able to give their views during the relevant consultation period. A variety of consultation methods will be used to ensure that all stakeholder groups are able to respond, including adult service users.

J. Progress Monitoring and Review

The delivery of this programme will be reported and monitored through internal governance routes within both Buckinghamshire County Council and as part of the wider Adult Social Care Transformation Programmes.

Appendix 1: Equalities Impact Assessment

Your questions and views

If you have any questions about the matters contained in this paper please get in touch with the Contact Officer whose telephone number is given at the head of the paper.

If you have any views on this paper that you would like the Cabinet Member to consider, or if you wish to object to the proposed decision, please inform the Democratic Services Team by 5.00pm on 1 February 2019. This can be done by telephone to 01296 381343 or e-mail to democracy@buckscc.gov.uk