

# FUTURE OF THRIFT FARM

Consultation evaluation  
report May 2019



## Future of Thrift Farm: summary

The Council is delivering a significant adult social care transformation programme called Better Lives. It aims to promote independence and support service users to achieve identified outcomes. Better Lives also aims to use best practice and give value for money. In this context the Council is considering the future of Thrift Farm.

### About Thrift Farm

Thrift Farm is a day opportunity and supported employment service for adults with a learning disability. It is also a popular visitor attraction. It has been operating for over 40 years.

Currently 66 service users attend the farm. More than half of the service users (39) come from Buckinghamshire. At times, almost half come from other authorities; most of these are from Milton Keynes Council.

Current length of provision ranges from eight months to 40 years. Most services users (48%) have been coming to the farm for 10 years or more.

### Why we are consulting

Providing day opportunities and supported employment at Thrift Farm is more expensive than commissioning these services from other providers in the community. Even taking into account the cost of providing alternative provisions for Buckinghamshire service users currently using Thrift Farm (39), an annual saving of £270K could be expected.

The Council does not have the expertise and the level of capital investment that would be required to make Thrift Farm commercially viable. Other challenges for the Council include the location, the risks of working with machinery and animals and the risks of operating a visitor attraction within a farm environment.

Service users who could potentially move on and be more independent do not appear to be doing so. The Council wants to understand why this is.

## The consultation

The Cabinet agreed to an eight week consultation on 4 February 2019. The consultation ran from the 13 February to 9 April. Three options have been proposed as part of the consultation. These are:

- Continue under the council.
- Decommission adult social care services at the farm.
- Be run by another provider.

During the consultation we asked:

- Do you have a viable proposal for services to continue at Thrift Farm?
- How might closure of the service affect you personally?
- How can we lessen any negative affect on you?
- What else do you think we should consider when taking the decision about the future of Thrift Farm?

## Consultation responses

Engagement with the consultation was high in relation to the number of service users affected. The target number of responses for the questionnaire was exceeded. The number of people that took part is as follows:

- Questionnaire – 152
- Talkback service user focus groups – 37
- Engagement events – 37
- Correspondence – 62
- Video feedback – 17
- Petitions (signatures) – 10,111

A target was set that half of all questionnaire responses would be from service users and their families. This was not met, however was off-set by the high levels of engagement with Talkback focus groups and video feedback.

## Conclusion

Running a thriving farm and visitor attraction requires special knowledge the Council does not have. Capital investment would be required to maintain and develop the farm to be commercially viable. It costs the Council much more to provide services at Thrift Farm than it would to buy them from providers. This means money saved could be used in other services where it is needed. People are firmly opposed to decommissioning services at Thrift Farm. They value the services they receive and fear a future without it. They have strong emotional feelings about the farm. Losing the farm or moving on could trigger bereavement like feelings. People using other services as well as Thrift Farm and would cope better with change.

People would prefer for the Council to continue running services at the farm. However, they feel an alternative provider is better than closing the farm.

There is concern that there is not enough alternative provision. Some people feel that there are no suitable alternatives. This is given as a reason why service users who may be able to, have not moved on. Location is both a barrier to accessing the service and developing greater independence. It prevents some service users from using public transport.

The Council believes that other charitable or commercial providers would be better placed to access improvement funds. The Council has actively sought to seek an alternative provider. Business plans have been submitted via the Buckinghamshire Business Portal. A report detailing these will be provided for the Cabinet to consider.

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# Future of Thrift Farm consultation report

## 1.0 Purpose of this report



This report is a record of the Future of Thrift Farm consultation.

Its purpose is to:

- Describe the process used and what happened.
- Outline what people said and what this could mean.
- Reassure participants their views have been heard.
- Help with decision making\*.

***\*It will be attached to the Cabinet report summarising this consultation along with the outcome of the invitation for providers to submit business plans for the future operation of Thrift Farm.***

This report contains information gathered during the consultation. This includes:

- A summary of questionnaire responses.
- An overview of themes that emerged during engagement events.
- Talkback focus groups and video feedback from service users.

The report is also a chance to recognise the effort made by everyone who took part in the consultation. Their feedback has given us valuable insight into the importance Thrift Farm holds for them. Thank you.

## 2.0 Background

### 2.1 About Thrift Farm

Thrift Farm is a day opportunity and supported employment service for adults with a learning disability. Owned by the Council, it sits in 52 acres close to our border with Milton Keynes. The farm has been providing services since the early 1980s and is also a popular visitor attraction. There are three main areas:

- Horticulture.
- Farm park and gift shop.
- Café.

Thrift Farm offers work-based and day opportunities. Service users can work across all areas of the farm to build their skills and independence. They are supported by skilled and specialist staff, helping them to learn about their chosen areas.

### 2.2 Management

Between April 2013 and December 2016, Thrift Farm was managed by Buckinghamshire Care Ltd\* (BCL). During this time, work took place to improve its viability as a commercial visitor attraction. This involved considerable investment in the catering facilities and in marketing the farm.

The Council ended its contract with BCL and all BCL services, including Thrift Farm, were brought back into the Council in January 2017.

The budget for Thrift is £432,000 (2018/19). To be able to develop the farm into a viable commercial venture and



continue to support its service users, significant capital investment would be required. This would include:

- Further development to enable visitor growth e.g. indoor/bad weather spaces, larger car park and café.
- Increasing staff numbers to manage new ventures, as well as growth in service users and visitors.
- Capital improvements needed to maintain viability of the existing service e.g. additional handwashing facilities, maintenance of footbridges and walk ways.

Running a farm and visitor attraction requires specialist knowledge the Council does not have. There are no known bordering authorities with provisions combining adult social care services and Council owned farms locally.

***\*BCL was a Local Authority Trading Company***

## 2.3 Service user profile

Thrift Farm has 66 service users (February 2019). Of these:

- Nearly all (97%) are being supported because of a learning disability.
- 40% are from bordering local authority areas (see Figure 1).
- Most are male (74%).
- 52% are aged 18-35 14% are aged 55 or over.
- 86% are White British.

**Figure 1: Thrift Farm service users (Feb 2019)**

Local authority area	Number (%) of service users
Buckinghamshire	39 (60%)
Milton Keynes	24 (36%)
Bedfordshire	2 (3%)
Hertfordshire	1 (1%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>

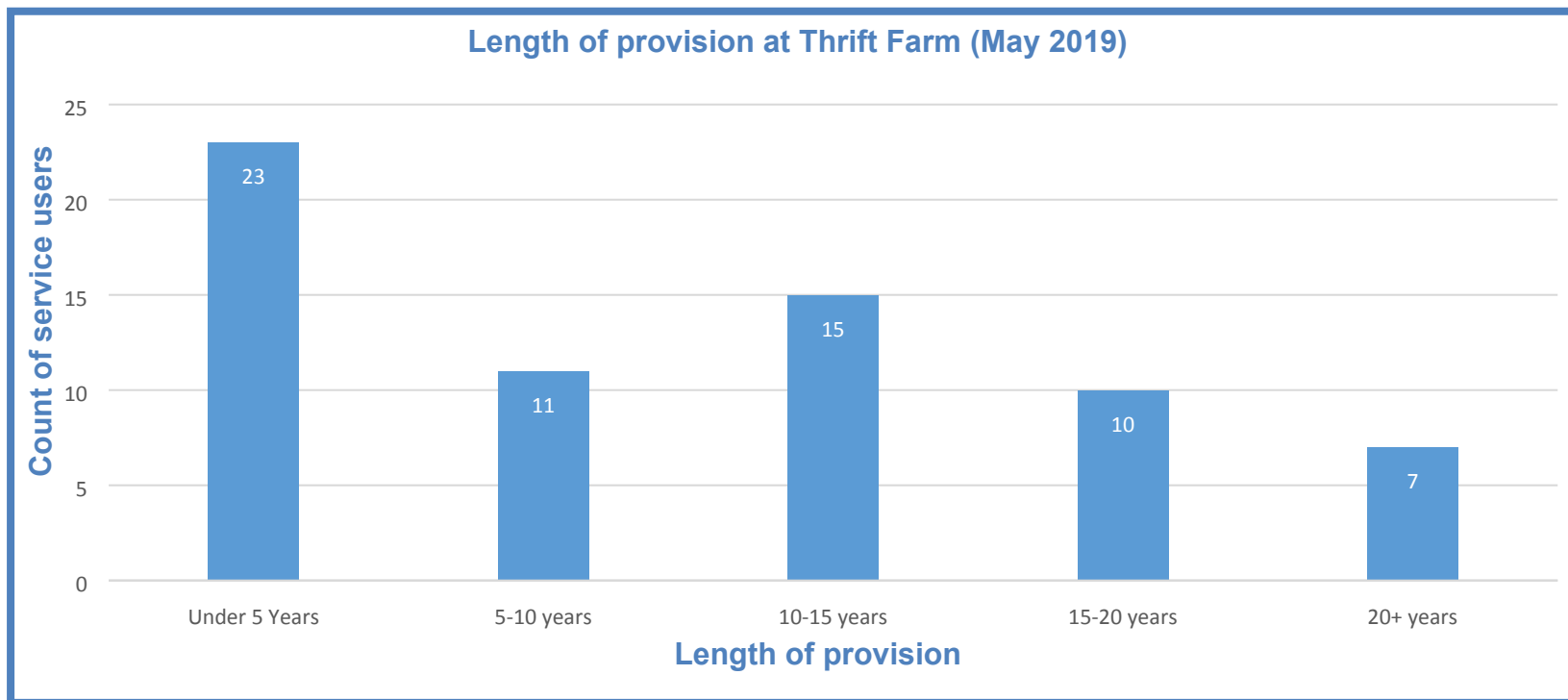
## 2.4 How long people stay at Thrift Farm



The current length of provision per service user ranges from eight months to 40 years. Figure 2 shows:

- Most (48%) service users have been attending for 10 years or more.
- 35% have been attending for less than 5 years.
- 10% have been attending for more than 20 years.
- The average current length of provision is 13 years.

**Figure 2: Current length of provision by number of service users**



## 2.5 Cost of provision

Providing day opportunities and supported employment at Thrift Farm is more expensive than the other day opportunities and supported employment the Council currently commissions. This is because the Council has to pay all of the costs associated with running the provision, rather than the individual cost of commissioning provision for each service user.

Even taking into account the cost of providing alternative provisions for all Buckinghamshire Council service users currently using Thrift Farm (39), an annual saving of £270K could be expected.

## 2.6 The proposal for Thrift Farm

The Council is delivering a significant transformation programme, Better Lives, in adult social care. This aims to promote independence and ensure that services support users to achieve their identified outcomes, uses best practice and demonstrate best value for money. In this context the Council is considering the future of Thrift farm.

There are a number of challenges in relation to Thrift Farm including location, the risks of working with machinery and animals and the risks of operating a visitor attraction within a farm environment and financial viability. As such the Council has proposed three options for the future of services at Thrift Farm. These are to:

- Continue under the council.
- Decommission adult social care services at the farm.
- Be run by another provider.



The purpose of the consultation was to give people the opportunity to:

- Share their views on these options.
- Suggest others ideas the Council may not have considered.
- Help the Council to better understand what any changes could mean to those who use services at the farm.

It also provided the opportunity for people to put forward ideas about how the service can be sustainably shaped to meet the care and support needs of its service users. During the consultation we asked:

- If anyone has a viable proposal for services to continue at Thrift Farm. (These would be in the form of a business plan and submitted through the Buckinghamshire Business Portal).
- How might closure of the service affect you personally?
- How can we lessen any negative affect on you?
- What else do you think we should consider when taking the decision about the future of Thrift Farm?

### **3.0 Consultation process**

Officers followed the Council's consultation guidance. This outlines clear processes and follows the 'Gunning principles'. The process used in this consultation had four stages:

1. Pre-consultation engagement and research.
2. Planning.
3. Consultation period (this part had two distinct, but connected parts):
  - Consultation on future of the farm.
  - An invitation to the market for business plans.
4. Evaluation and reporting.

Each stage was managed by the lead Commissioning Officer. The Consultation & Engagement Lead and a Senior Communications Officer supported the consultation process.

Regular meetings took place to plan activities and monitor progress. The Service Director for Integrated Commissioning liaised with Executive Director for Communities Health & Adult Social Care and the Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing.

## 4.0 Methodology

### 4.1 Pre-consultation engagement and research

#### Request for Information (RFI)

After the transfer of BCL services to the Council, work began on looking at options for future operation of Thrift Farm. In late 2017 the County Council undertook a Request for Information (RFI) process. This asked the market for ideas and proposals on how Thrift Farm might be able to be run in the future. It was to see if there was a level of provider interest and what information or assurances they would require to submit a business plan.

#### Milton Keynes Council (MKC)

More than half of the service users come from Buckinghamshire but at times almost half come from other authorities with most coming from MKC. The County Council contacted MKC about the options for the future for Thrift Farm. Discussion took place with them between late 2017 and January 2019. This included emails, phone calls and meetings. MKC showed some initial interest in running the farm, but this did not develop into any substantive proposal.

#### Further invitation for business plans

Due to the nature of the services offered at Thrift Farm, it is critical that any future provider is able to operate a viable and sustainable model in the long term. The Council's previous approach to the market had not indicated a clear way forward. As a result, the recommendation was to advertise the opportunity on the Buckinghamshire Business Portal, ([www.supplybucksbusiness.org.uk](http://www.supplybucksbusiness.org.uk)) to try to identify potential providers.

- **July 2018** - providers interested in taking over the farm and services were asked to submit a business plan. Some providers submitted business plans, however the proposals were not considered viable.

- **October 2018** – the process was repeated. This included officers following up on leads received from members. This too failed to find a suitable provider.

### **Political stakeholders**

A briefing was sent to all members of Buckinghamshire County Council and other political stakeholder. Briefings included an invitation for further dialogue.

A letter was sent by the Cabinet Member for Communities Health and Adult Social Care to the Deputy Leader of Milton Keynes Council, who is also the Cabinet Member for Healthier and Stronger Communities. The purpose of the letter was to ensure MKC was aware of the proposal to consult on the future of Thrift Farm ahead of the publication of the Cabinet papers, and offer the opportunity for a dialogue.

### **Service users, parents, families, service users and staff**

Meetings took place with parents, carers and staff of Thrift Farm between 21 and 24 January 2019. This was to tell them that a proposal to consult on the Future of Thrift Farm was going to Cabinet. The aim was two-fold:

- To give them advanced notice of when the Cabinet papers would be published, as well as how to raise any concerns with the County Council's Democratic Services Team, ahead of the meeting, in line with County Council process.
- To broadly discuss the proposed process and options before going to consultation (if agreed). In this way the consultation (if agreed) could be fine-tuned in line with the feedback received. For example feedback around communications meant the website was active prior to the consultation decision/start and links added to the Thrift Farm website.

As a result of these meetings, a number of stakeholders raised concerns with officers and members. Members were aware of the anxiety being voiced by stakeholders about the future of the farm. Consequently the proposed

consultation period was increased to eight weeks and a clear position stated that the Council would prefer an alternative provider to decommissioning.

## 4.2 Planning

In line with Council guidance a Consultation and Engagement Plan for the Future of Thrift Farm was developed. The plan set out:

- What was required from the consultation.
- Who we needed to consult with.
- How we would consult.
- Officer's responsibilities.

The aim of the plan was to find out what people thought about the proposal for the future of Thrift Farm and understand how they may be affected. We did this by:

- Identifying and making timely, appropriate contact with key stakeholders.
- Providing clear accessible information on the proposed plans.
- Putting suitable mechanisms in place for people to give their views and ask questions.

## 4.3 Consultation period: consultation on Thrift Farm

The eight week consultation started on 13 February 2019 and ended on 9 April 2019.

A six week period was originally proposed. However, Cabinet extended this to eight weeks at the time the decision to consult was made, to make sure as many people as possible had a chance to express their views.

### What we asked

Throughout the consultation we asked people:

- Do you have a viable proposal for services to continue at Thrift Farm? (also see section 4.4)
- How might closure of the service affect you personally?
- How can we lessen any negative affect on you?
- What else do you think we should consider when taking the decision about the future of Thrift Farm?

## How people gave their views

People could formally give their views as follows:

- **Questionnaire**

People were invited to give their views using an online questionnaire. This was made available on the Council's consultation portal, on [www.buckscc.gov.uk/thriffarm](http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/thriffarm) and the link publicised in all communications. Hard copies were made available (including copies in the Thrift Farm cafe). This method was chosen because of the anticipated large volume of responses, geographical reach of interested parties and nature of the questions being asked.

- **Engagement events**

Six drop-in sessions were held at Thrift Farm (see Figure 3). These were open to service users, their parents carers, family and friends, as well as customers (shop, café, farm park) and those who live close to the farm. These were held at various times of the day to maximise engagement. Officers from the Council were present at each engagement event to speak with the people attending the sessions. A printed fact sheet and hard copies of the questionnaire were available at drop-in sessions.

**Figure 3: Drop-in session dates and times**

Date	Time	Venue
Wednesday 20 February	6pm-8pm	Thrift Farm
Friday 1 March 2019	2pm-4pm	Thrift Farm
Wednesday 13 March 2019	5pm-7pm	Thrift Farm
Wednesday 20 March 2019	4pm-6pm	Thrift Farm
Tuesday 2 April 2019*	10am-12pm	Thrift Farm

*\*This session was added at a later date to reflect the extended consultation period from six weeks to eight.*

- **Talkback focus groups**

Talkback, a local charity that specialises in supporting individuals with learning disabilities to communicate, held a series of focus groups. These provided service users with the opportunity to fully participate in the consultation process and to gain a better understanding of the proposed changes. Staff members were present to support clients to take part. Talkback's overall objective was to ensure that the service user's perspective on the future of Thrift Farm was recorded and heard.

- **Video feedback**

This was not part of the original engagement plan. It was evident in the engagement events and speaking to the service users that they were very passionate about Thrift Farm. They wanted 'the Cabinet' to come and hear their views. As it was not possible to bring the Cabinet to every meeting we offered them the opportunity to give their personal views on video.



- **Other**

All service users attending Thrift Farm were encouraged and helped to give their views. Some were supported by their parents/carers and staff to participate in the consultation process and this included signing the petitions, attending the engagement events, completing the survey and many other avenues to enable them to give their views.

Everyone had the opportunity to give their views by email, phone message or letter directly to the Adult Social Care team.

#### **4.4 Consultation period: invitation to submit a business plan**

The consultation provided another chance to invite people to submit a business plan to secure the future of Thrift Farm. This was the third time invitations had been offered. The consultation process not only opened up the invitation to a wider audience, but increased awareness of the invitation to submit business plans.

Business plans and any related questions could be submitted via the Buckinghamshire Business Portal ([www.supplybucksbusiness.org.uk](http://www.supplybucksbusiness.org.uk)). Answers to non-confidential questions were visible to anyone who registered an interest in the invitation, regardless of whether they submitted a business plan.

The advert remained open from 13 February 2019 to 23 April 2019. The original closing date (12 April) was extended to allow time for a meeting with potential providers and any consequent clarification. The outcome of the invitation will be reported in the paper to be taken to Cabinet alongside this report.

#### **4.5 Evaluation and reporting**

##### **Analysis and evaluation**

When the consultation period ended (9 April 2019) all responses were reviewed and analysed. Analysis of survey responses was undertaken by the Council's Business Intelligence team. Feedback captured the feelings, views and thoughts of all the respondents and has enabled the Council to capture the recurring themes in this report.

## Reporting and decisions

This report and the business plan evaluation are currently scheduled to be taken to Cabinet in September 2019. Cabinet will make a decision on the future of Thrift Farm. The papers\* will be available on our website and the meeting is open to the public. When published the [papers will be available here](#).

*\*Please note some papers may be exempt from publication due to commercial or other sensitivity.*

## 5.0 Communications

The Council wanted to hear from farm service users, their parents, carers and families, as well as people who visit or live close to the farm. The aim was to ensure:

- Those affected were aware of the consultation
- People knew the process and how to give their views (or submit a business plan)
- People knew where to get further help and information

In order to reach as wide an audience as possible, a range of communications methods were used. Experienced officers were available to provide all stakeholders with the appropriate level of information. The key communication methods are outlined below:

- Direct mail – letters directly to parents and carers distributed.
- Dedicated web pages and url – [www.buckscc.gov.uk/thriftfarm](http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/thriftfarm) (with direct link from the home page)

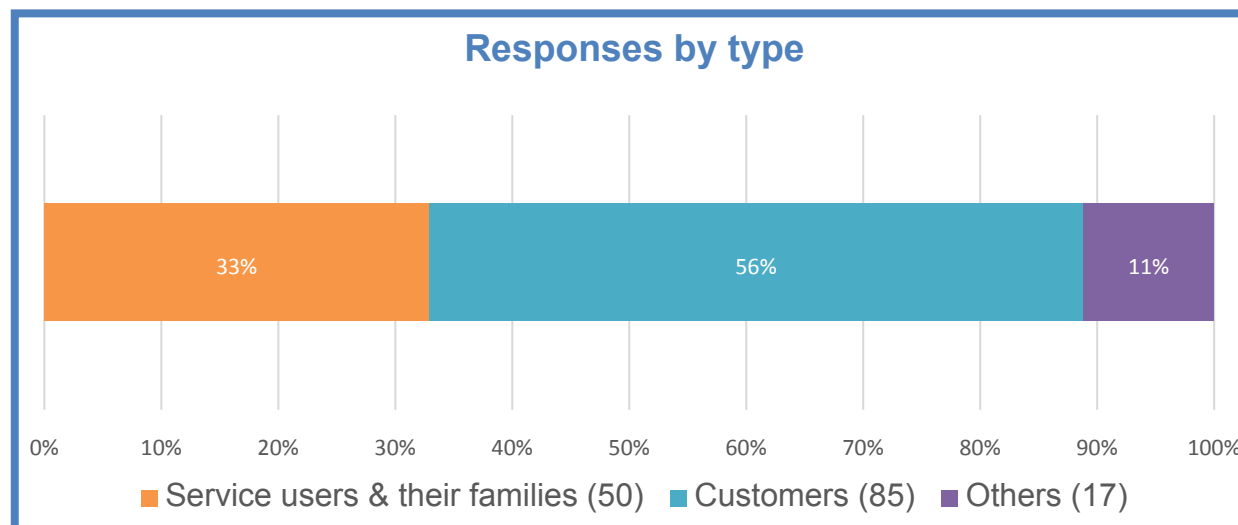
- Links from the Thrift Farm website to the consultation webpages
- Posters in Thrift Farm café.
- Press releases – distribution includes members, partners and Parish Councils.
- Social media – Facebook, Twitter (including posting on online communities and on ‘Save Thrift Farm’).
- MyBucks – newsletter
- MP and Member briefings

## 6.0 Summary of consultation response

### 6.1 Questionnaire responses

Overall 152 people completed the questionnaire. This was against a minimum target of 100 responses, of which 50% would be from service users and their families.

**Figure47: Survey responders by type**



Of the 152 respondents:

- 85 (56%) were from the 'customer' respondent group
- 50 (33%) were from the 'service user and their families' group
- 17 (11%) were from the 'other' group of respondents.

The target of 50% of all responses to be from the 'service user and their families' group was not achieved. However there are potential explanations for this:

- There were 17 video diary responses given by farm service users. This was in addition to 37 service users taking part in sessions held by Talkback. Some may have taken part in both.
- It is also possible that as a high number of parents/carers attended drop-in sessions and/or wrote detailed responses to the council via email or letter, that they did not then complete the survey in addition.
- Response rates increased following social media bursts, these by definition had a much wider and general reach which could explain the higher number of 'customers' or 'other'.

## Where people live

Most respondents, 89 (59%), said that they lived in Buckinghamshire authority areas.

- 68 (45%) respondents lived within Aylesbury Vale
- 41 (27%) respondents lived in Milton Keynes.

## Options for the Future of Thrift Farm

Of the three options proposed most people 121 (80%) would prefer the Council to continue to run Thrift Farm.

- 26 (17%) would prefer the farm to be run by a new provider
- 4 (3%) would prefer for the farm to close.

Of the 85 'service users and their families' who responded feelings were slightly different:

- 65 (76%) would prefer for Thrift Farm to be run by the Council.
- 20 (24%) would prefer an alternate provider.

## Concerns about a new provider option

If Thrift Farm was run by a new provider, respondents were most concerned about:

- The future (82%)
- The farm changing or feeling different (81%)
- Changes to types of activities or work experience available (80%)

Nearly all (98%) of 'service users and their families' were concerned about changes to routine (98%), compared to all respondents (71%).

## Concerns about the closure option

If Thrift Farm was to close, respondents were most concerned about:

- Having nowhere else to go/'running out' of places (81%)
- Finding activities (work experience) like those at Thrift Farm (73%)
- Feeling unsure about the future (72%).

Respondents were also asked what's most important to them:

- Finding a good home for the animals (94%)
- The location of alternative services (86%)
- Finding similar service/types of day activities (82%)

### Free text comments

Respondents were invited to give additional comments in their own words on the future of Thrift Farm:

- 88 (58%) gave additional comments.
- 65 (74%) of these preferred not to see Thrift Farm close.

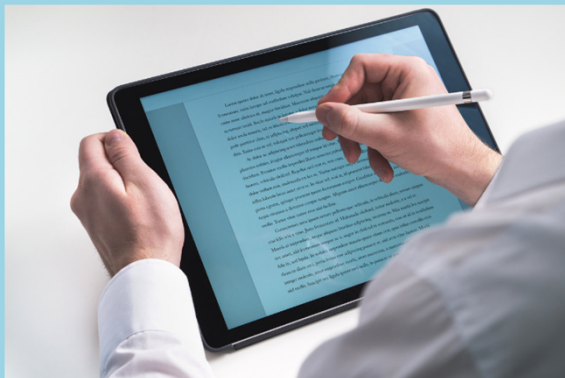
A common theme among respondents was that they felt Thrift Farm was unique with no comparable alternatives at this present time. This is reflected in the comments below:



"Thrift Farm has always been that rare thing, a place where people with a learning disability are genuinely usefully engaged in meaningful activities ... For it to close it feel like an insult to all those (staff and service users) who have been a part of it over the years."



"Thrift Farm is one of the few places I know that provides meaningful, real work, in a safe supported environment ... It is an important way of allowing the general public to appreciate just what people with learning difficulties can achieve."



"I cannot stress how beneficial Thrift farm has been for my nephew and what a good effect it has had on his sense of worth and wellbeing ... especially when he sees his siblings succeeding in their studying and working lives."



"Thrift Farm is a hugely valuable place where he gets real work experience that cannot currently be replicated anywhere else. Far from being old fashioned in its care model as the Councils report suggested - it is very forward thinking in the service it provides... Bucks should be proud of Thrift, cherish and maintain it."

## How the Council can help

We asked how the Council could help if Thrift Farm was to close or be run by a new provider. Of the 152 respondents, 89 (59%) gave an answer. Of these:

- 43 (48%) felt there was currently no comparable work opportunities in the county.
- 29 (33%) felt the council could help by ensuring that the farm continues to run as it is.
- 21 (24%) felt Thrift Farm is unique because it provides invaluable opportunities and educates people.
- 18 (20%) felt the Council should make sure any new provider will be able to continue to support service users with the current and diverse range of activities.

## 6.2 Talkback focus groups

Talkback helps people with a learning disability and/or autism to speak up and have a voice. In total 37 (56%) of Thrift Farm service users took part in focus groups hosted by Talkback. One service user had an individual session. Views expressed included that the service users love working at Thrift Farm, that it provides them with emotional support and is a 'pillar' that supports their overall wellbeing. Service users were unhappy with the idea the farm might close. Key findings include:

- Half of the participants had been attending Thrift Farm for more than 10 years.
- All the service users said they loved working at the farm. Many said working at the farm boosts their self-esteem and happiness.
- A third of the clients stated that working at Thrift Farm is one of the 'pillars' that supports their overall wellbeing.
- 31 (85%) feel happy attending Thrift Farm, 14% excited, 11% in love with the farm and 3% are contented.
- Being at the farm is key to their overall happiness as the farm supports their needs, they take pride in the work they do and they feel safe at the farm.



The Talkback report shows that the idea of the loss of the farm triggered only negative feelings. Stating it would generate feelings akin to bereavement. Talkback felt that those attending at least one other day service will cope better, as they are more able to see a world beyond Thrift Farm. Findings include:

- Service users chose **'unhappy'** 21 (57%), **'angry'** 9 (24%), **'anxious'** 5 (14%), **'sad'** 5 (14%), **'disappointed'** 3 (8%), **'frightened'** 1 (3%) and **'bored'** 1 (3%) to describe their feelings about closure.
- Service users were concerned that they would lose contact with their Thrift Farm family. This included their social groups, staff and the animals. They felt the 'family' provides them with emotional support.
- They feared that if they can no longer attend Thrift Farm they will be bored, lonely and isolated. They felt they will have great difficulty in finding alternative work.

### 6.3 Video feedback



The idea for service users to make a video came from feedback during the consultation, and was to further enable the service user voice to be heard. Thrift Farm service users were given support and the opportunity to give their views on the closure of Thrift Farm by video.

Filming took place at the farm on 2 April 2019. In total 17 service users took part. The filming was informal and on a one-to-one basis. In addition to their name service users were asked:

- How long have you worked at Thrift Farm?
- What do you do at Thrift Farm?

- What would you like to say to the Council?

This feedback has been edited into a short video for Cabinet members to view. To protect the confidentiality of service users it was agreed this would not be made public. However, feedback reflects findings from the Talkback focus groups, expressed in their own words. For example:

- All 17 service users were against Thrift Farm closing. They expressed positive feelings for the farm and staff.
- Service users felt they did real and meaningful work. Some had paid jobs at the farm.
- They felt that they would not get work or the same type of support elsewhere.
- Working outdoors was very important to some service users.
- They described a wide range of skills and experiences.
- They were concerned about the impact on themselves, their families and farm staff.

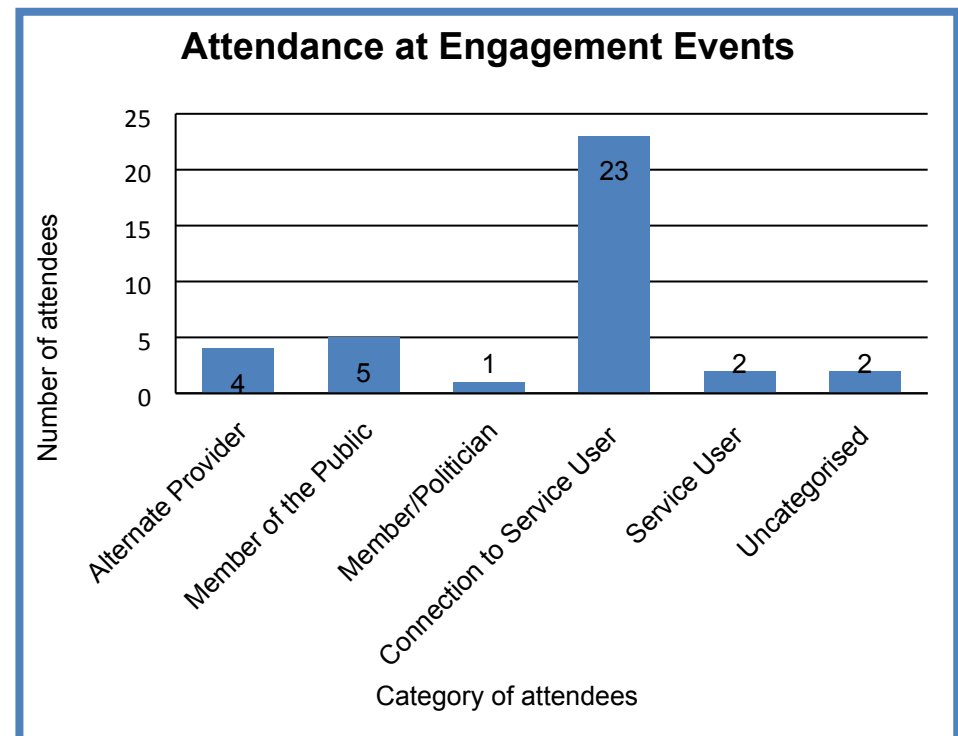
It is worth noting that although they may seem composed on screen, many became emotional during filming or afterwards. However no one wished to withdraw or stop filming. They felt pleased to have taken part.

## 6.4 Engagement events

**Figure 5: Attendance by type at engagement events**

Five drop-in sessions were held at Thrift Farm between 20 February 2019 and 2 April 2019. In total 37 people attended these sessions. Most, 23 (62%) were connected to the service user e.g. parent or other family member (see Figure 5). Some people attended more than one session.

The feedback at each session was broadly similar. Many people used this opportunity to express the impact the



proposed options offered as part of the consultation were having on them. They were anxious about what the outcome of the consultation would be. Although they understood the financial challenges for the Council they were strongly against the closure of Thrift Farm.

Service users explained how they had been attending the farm for a long time. Many service users, carers and family members wanted assurance that Cabinet Members would learn about the level of distress and angst that they were experiencing at the possible closure of Thrift Farm.

Parents and carers expressed doubt that similar provision could be found. This was in terms of:

- **Availability** – would there be enough places.
- **Accessibility** – in terms of location and transport.
- **Market** – disbelief that the market actually contained similar supported work opportunities e.g. outdoor physical work.

## 6.5 Email, phone and letter responses

In total there were 62 individual responses via email, phone or letter (see Figure 6). The most frequently used method was email. A significant amount (74%) of communication was received before the start of the consultation. This can be attributed to pre-consultation engagement activity and related media coverage. Of these 18 (29%) from people were connected to a service user, while 14 (23%) came from potential providers. Once live, they were signposted to the Buckinghamshire Business Portal to formally register and submit a business plan if they wished.

Figure 7 shows how correspondents are connected to Thrift Farm. The low number of responses received during the actual consultation period can be explained by the correlating higher number of people using the methods detailed above.

**Figure 6: Consultation correspondence by type.**

Correspondence type	Pre-consultation (15 Jan – 12 Feb)	Consultation (13 Feb – 9 April)	Total
Email	37	12	49
Letter	4	4	8
Phone	5	0	5
Total	46	16	62

**Figure 7: Consultation feedback by responder type.**

Category of Response	Pre-consultation (15 Jan - 12 Feb)	Consultation (13 Feb – 9 April)	Total (62)
Connection to Service User	18	7	25
Alternate Provider	14	3	17
Uncategorised	6	3	9
Non-Service User	3	1	4
Internal	1	1	2

Other Council	1	1	2
Member/Politician	1	0	1
Press	1	0	1
Service User	1	0	1

## 6.6 Other responses

### Petitions

Overall 10,111 signatures were received from three petitions – all were against any proposal to close Thrift Farm.

- The first was entitled **‘Save Thrift Farm’** was hosted on Avaaz. It was formally presented to the council on 21 February 2019 with 6,789 signatures. As the petition was presented prior to the closure of the consultation, signatures added after this date have been included. This petition raised 6,889 signatures (15 May 2019).
- A hard copy version of the above petition entitled **‘Thrift farm petition against closure: Thrift Farm at Whaddon needs your help’** was made available at Thrift Farm. In total 545 signatures were received, 344 from Thrift Farm, and the remainder from other community locations. This captured postcodes and most of the 545 signatures were from people living in Milton Keynes.
- A third petition hosted on Change.org asked people to sign up to: **“Save Thrift Farm – a vital community that helps so many people with additional needs.”** This collected a total of 2,677 signatures.

### Letter from Buckinghamshire Disability Service (BuDS)

The Council received an official response to the consultation from BuDs, a user-led pan-disability charity. The

excerpt below is their own and summarises the views and perceptions expressed in the letter:

*“BuDS feels it is premature and unambitious for the Council to be considering closure of Thrift Farm. There are many positive opportunities to both develop the service and diversify its funding which have not been explored. BuDS feels it would be a terrible disservice to learning-disabled people and their families and a catastrophic failure of service-provision to allow this service to disappear. More needs to be done to see how the Farm can be developed and changed, and we urge BCC to postpone any talk of closure until this has been tested.”*

A formal response was issued, reiterating the purpose of consultation and that no decisions had yet been taken.

## 7.0 Common points

### 7.1 Overview

Regardless of their connection to Thrift Farm, people who responded to the consultation are mostly opposed to the closure of Thrift Farm. However, the consultation is not a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ vote, but about getting views or ideas on proposed options. Response show that there are strong, positive and often emotional views associated with the Thrift Farm. The reasons for this are varied. Several common themes have emerged from feedback which may help us to better understand why people feel this way.

### 7.2 Impact on wellbeing

Service users felt that Thrift Farm was critical to supporting their overall wellbeing. They linked this to feelings of happiness, sense of belonging and self-worth.

Carers saw many practical benefits that contributed to wellbeing, these were:

- Routine, stability and purpose.

- Learning new skills and sense of achievement
- Interaction with others
- Opportunity to be independent.

Some carers reported a marked improvement in their loved ones since attending Thrift Farm. They specifically mentioned improvements in mental health and confidence after getting a place at the farm.

Some carers fear regression in the skills that their loved ones have gained if Thrift Farm is closed and no comparable provision made available.

There are concerns that if no alternative service is provided service users will become bored, lonely and isolated.

Uncertainty about the future of their loved ones impacts on the wellbeing of carers and other family members.

### **7.3 Finding alternative provision**

Carers and service users were concerned about what alternative provision was available. They felt the alternative services listed in the report have not been sufficiently investigated. They were concerned that alternative provision would mean 'going back' to traditional day centre services. Other concerns included finding provision where people could still work in the open air. For most people it is very important that any alternatives offer real work experience and opportunities to build support networks.

There was also some anxiety about the number of places that would be available and 'running' out of these.

If the farm was decommissioned, transition to alternative provision would need careful and sensitive handling.

### **7.4 Service model**

Carers and services users and other stakeholders did not agree that Thrift Farm was operating an 'outdated' model as stated in the Cabinet report. They felt Thrift Farm was 'leading edge' and forward looking.

They felt that that the alternatives mentioned in the Cabinet report were 'outdated care models', making service users the passive recipients of 'leisure programmes'. They felt these had nothing to do with the world of work, improving employability skills or the integration of people with a learning disability with the wider community.

## **7.5 Moving on**

Respondents felt that the Cabinet report was wrong in suggesting that Thrift Farm does not support service users to move on to increased independence. They also felt that this did not recognise that some service users would be unable to do so.

Service users and carers stated that they had gained skills and experience as a key part of moving into employment. However, they believe the problem of not moving on stems from a lack of suitable opportunities available from local employers.

A contributing factor is the degree of apprehension and distrust regarding services provided in the sector, particularly following events with BCL. This presents a barrier to service users moving on to other provision.

Some people accept that the Council does not have the expertise to run such a facility like Thrift Farm. Some people were also accepting that an organisation specialised in this may bring about long term security for the farm.

## **7.6 Location and transport**

People felt that the other suitable alternatives are too far away for them or not on public transport routes.

Service users and carers felt that closing the farm would have little impact on transport costs as these would most likely be incurred accessing alternative provisions.



Until the individual's choice of alternative provision is known, savings on travel costs are unknown. However, because of its location, using Thrift Farm does not offer any opportunity to reduce travel costs. It also does not offer the opportunity for service users to travel independently. Moreover Thrift Farm is not reasonably accessible to Buckinghamshire County Council's service users living in areas south of Aylesbury Vale.

## 7.7 Sustainable future at Thrift Farm

One reason people were opposed to the option of closing Thrift Farm was because they feel a sustainable future could be secured. Some felt that the Council should be investing in it as a 'state of the art facility' that is copied across the country, rather than considering closure. Others discussed setting up a new entity to run Thrift Farm.

A number of potential providers advised that they would be willing to explore submitting business case proposals to take over the running of Thrift Farm.

Potential providers requested further information which included; health and safety of the farm, financial information and any other business related information. This would be used to make an informed decision about submitting a business plan.

## 8.0 Lessons learned

### Timings

People felt that the invitation to the pre-consultation meeting was too short notice. The timing of this was linked to the Cabinet decision making process. The intention was to give people advance notice of when Cabinet papers would be published. As well as start a dialogue about the future of Thrift Farm. From the questions asked at the meeting and language used it was clear that many did not understand that:

- A decision to consult had not yet been taken.

- Options put forward were subject to consultation (if agreed).
- Officers genuinely wanted to engage with them.

This was vocalised by expressions of mistrust and that it was already a 'done deal'. This was also evidence through the number of enquires received before the decision to consult had been taken and the setting up of petitions to 'Save Thrift Farm'.

Pre-consultation engagement is an important part of the consultation process. It allows time for people to be involved in the full process, shaping the actual consultation. More work needs to be done in terms of ensuring stakeholders fully understand this and what to expect at each stage of the process.

Service users and their families are eager to know the outcome. A letter was sent to service users and their families on 17 May 2019, explaining the next steps. However, it is accepted this could have been sent closer to the end of the consultation period.

### **Milton Keynes Council (MKC)**

Although there were several conversations held between the two Councils it would have been helpful to have worked more collaboratively on the consultation. A joint approach would have been reassuring for service users and their families, as well as potentially providing greater insight. In future steps will be taken to encourage more collaborative working.

### **Language used**

Feedback from the consultation highlighted stakeholders felt the way Thrift Farm was represented within the Cabinet report did not reflect their understanding. This was particularly in relation to saying that service users do not 'move on' from the service. The report did not recognise clearly enough that the ability to 'move on' may be limited for some service users. It also did not explore other the reasons why people service users may not move on. This was

raised during pre-consultation and explored as part of the consultation and forms. It forms a significant part of this report and is evidence of the value of consultation.

## **9.0 Conclusions**

### **9.1 Consultation process**

The consultation process and methods used have been successful in reaching a wide range of different stakeholders. This is evidenced by the number and type of responses received in each category (see Section 6).

Likewise the consultation process and methods used have been successful in engaging with the market and encouraging submission of business plans to run services at Thrift Farm.

The consultation process and methods used were flexible enough to respond to stakeholder needs, acknowledging where things could be improved in the future (see Section 8).

### **9.2 Preferred option**

The consultation process has highlighted the strength of feeling against the potential decommissioning of day services at Thrift Farm. Responses via questionnaire, petition and events as well as correspondence received, shows high levels of support for retaining Thrift Farm.

The majority of respondents to the consultation would prefer that Thrift Farm continues to be operated by Buckinghamshire County Council. They feel that it is a unique facility that could be developed further. They also feel that it can play a role in encouraging local businesses to employ people with a learning disability.

### **9.3 New provider**

There is recognition that if an alternative provider can be sought, this would be preferable to decommissioning services. If Thrift Farm is operated by a new provider, the main concerns are around ensuring that the service

continues to meet the needs of the current service users.

The Council has received responses to its invitation for business plans from providers wishing to run services at Thrift Farm. A separate report detailing this will go to Cabinet alongside this report.

## **9.4 Decommissioning**

Feedback from the consultation demonstrates there is no support for the option to decommission day opportunity and supported employment services at Thrift Farm. Focus groups with service users concluded that the impact of this would elicit feelings akin to bereavement in them. Findings showed that those attending at least one other day service will cope better, as they are more able to see a world beyond Thrift Farm. If services were decommissioned service users would require time and support to transition to alternatives.

## **9.5 Alternative provision**

There is a level of scepticism around the availability and suitability of alternative provision. This is compounded by previous experiences and the belief that 'alternative' means going back to traditional day centres. Some people believe that if alternatives were widely available, those able to do so, would have already been able to access services other than Thrift Farm.

There is a belief that not enough local employers are willing or able to support people with a learning disability or autism.