



Fixing the big issues for disabled people in Buckinghamshire  
Charity No 1102511

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## BuDS Response to the Planned Closure of Thrift Farm

1. **BuDS is saddened and dismayed by Bucks County Council's plan to close Thrift Farm, which we feel is premature and unambitious. 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.**

### Developing the Service

2. We accept that Thrift Farm has become an end in itself for many of its users, rather than being a service which moves disabled people closer to independence. The responsibility for this, of course, lies ultimately with the County Council, who have managed it inappropriately. But this is an argument for changing the service, not closing it.
3. We do not accept that Thrift Farm is necessarily an 'outdated model' for services. On the contrary, there are many similar services in Bucks and around the country. These 'Green Care Schemes' have expanded in recent years from 180 in 2012 to 250 in 2017, with 100 more farms planned in the near future.
4. There is no doubt that services like Thrift Farm could be evolved into a form that is fit for the future. Research by Rotherham (2017) indicates that working in the green environment can help physical and mental wellbeing in individuals with a learning disability and suggests that such types of service should be developed to take up spaces lost to traditional day centre placements. There are several similar charity or social-enterprise services in Bucks, such as Lindengate and Missenden Walled Garden, which are thriving and successful.
5. It is unacceptable that the Council cannot find a way to evolve and adapt Thrift Farm so that it offers modern, tailored services which move disabled people towards independence. The council needs to be more ambitious and forward-thinking.
6. Much of the Council's social care strategy relies on encouraging disabled people to live independently and to use mainstream public ('universal') services in the community rather than discrete disability-specific services. While this is a welcome trajectory for change, its success relies on an inclusive and accepting community for disabled people, which does not yet exist. Thrift Farm contributes to community awareness and acceptance of disability, as a service used by the public and attracting a large number of school children. This aspect of Thrift Farm's work could be significantly expanded at a very low cost.

### Collaborative Working

7. There are over 35 organisations in Bucks offering funded services supporting disabled people closer to work. Much of this funding is from statutory sources through the DWP or EU. These services are now collaborating through the BucksWorkability Forum, which is supported by BuDS. It would be very easy for Thrift Farm to enter into collaborations with these organisations to develop and modernise their services, opening up new funding sources and opportunities. It is shocking that this has not already been done.
8. Thrift Farm already provides opportunities for learning-disabled people to develop both agricultural and gardening skills and front-of-house/catering skills, as the farm also has a small café. There are ample opportunities through collaborative to expand the skills training opportunities, for example to retail, warehousing, post room, office admin and other areas more relevant to the Bucks & MK workplace.

9. Such a modernising approach would enable much larger numbers of disabled people to use the service, increasing efficiency and reducing the cost-per-user.

## Funding the Service

10. In addition to the new sources of funding which could be accessed through collaborative working, there is also the possibility of co-working with Milton Keynes Council, which is keen to see Thrift Farm stay open. Additionally, some of the land value inherent in a 52-acre site could be realised through sale for development to create an endowment fund which could be used to sustain the Farm for the future. All of these options should be fully explored before the site is considered for closure.
11. Counterbalancing savings also need to be taken into account. Learning-disabled people can be frequent users of healthcare services. Services like Green Care which improve mental and physical wellbeing represent an investment in prevention as well as being a positive outcome in their own right. There is no sign as yet that these sorts of counter-balancing saving have been taken into account.
12. Finally, it cannot be right that the potential capital value of the site drives policy for its use. The council is a service-provider, not a land asset speculator.

## Consequences of Closure

13. Learning disabled people in Bucks have over the last few months seen repeated attacks on their services. First with short breaks, then the closure of Seeleys house, now the proposed closure of Thrift Farm. It is hard to avoid the conclusion, unpalatable as it may be, that BCC are targeting the most vulnerable and least visible members of society in an attempt to balance their books.
14. Thrift Farm currently employs 69 individuals. While we accept that the council has committed to re-examining options for these people, it is hard to see what other services might be available for them, in light of closures of other day centres and LD services. Learning disabled people need slow transitions when making life changes – an abrupt closure without a planned transition into new services will simply result in families and carers once again picking up the responsibility for their care.

## Conclusion

15. 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.

### **Buckinghamshire Disability Service**

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*Rotherham, S. (2017) Care Farms as a space of wellbeing for people with a learning disability in the United Kingdom, Health & Place, Vol 48 November 2017, Pages 123-131*