

Farms Estate Plan

Consultation results

By

Community Intelligence



Purpose of consultation

To get feedback on the proposed plan:

1. Increase the council's overall farms estate to at least 2,000 hectares (5,000 acres). This may include purchasing more farmland in the future.
2. Consolidate and merge farms to reduce the number of farms but increase the size of farms to make them more financially viable, when the current tenancies come up.
3. Ensure farms are available on modern tenancy agreements set at market rents.
4. Enable the farms to create increased income from farm diversification. Diversification means encouraging other rural businesses alongside traditional farming, such as income from horse livery yards, open farms, farm shops and rural retail, and leisure accommodation etc.
5. Ensure best environmental practice, in line with the government's new 25-year environmental policy. This could include permissive rights of ways on our farmland; creating or restoring wildlife habitats; and maintaining the traditional look of the countryside (with laid hedges etc.).
6. Maintain a network of farms in the area that enhance the environment; improve residents' enjoyment of the countryside, recreation, health and wellbeing; and encourages visitors
7. Sell, retain and acquire farmland that meets the council's objectives.

Feedback on proposal

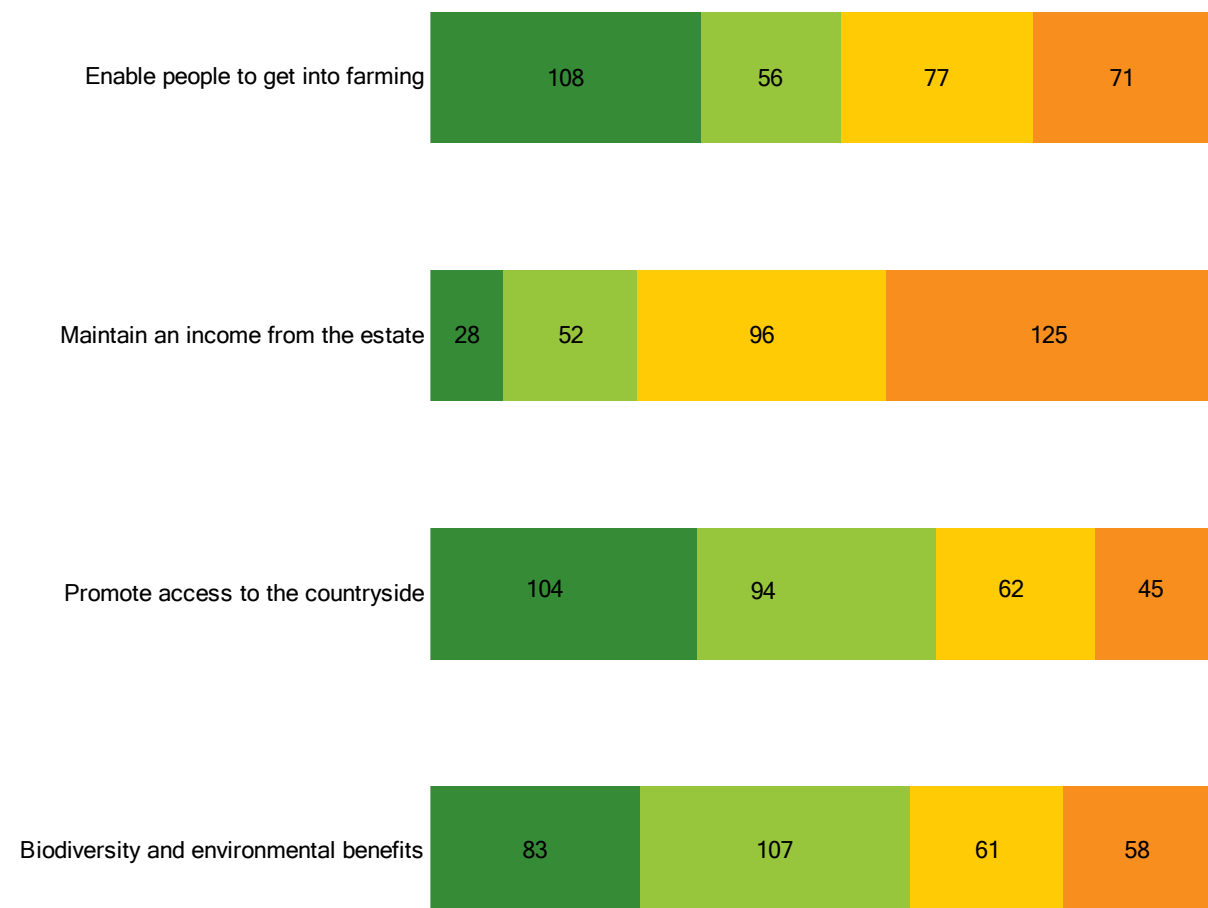
333 responses were received for the consultation via the questionnaire. The consultation questionnaire (online survey and pdf), as well as summary documents were available online and in libraries for 8 weeks.

The consultation was promoted across social media, email bulletin, press release, Member's Information Bulletin and Staff Central. There was also an interview on Look East with a tenant farmer and the Council. We saw spikes in responses when the email bulletin went out, and over the weekend after the Look East interview (which aired on a Friday).

Questionnaire Analysis

Question 1 asked respondents to rank the priorities, which were based around why keeping a farms estate is important for the council.

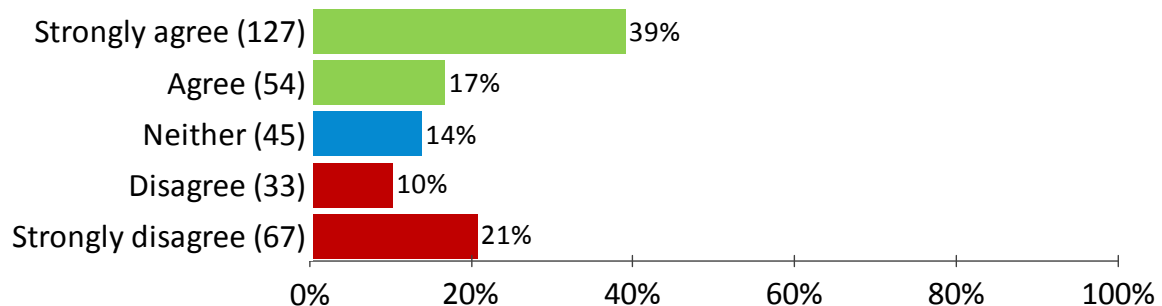
The council wants to continue to maintain a network of farms across Central Bedfordshire for the following reasons, please prioritise the below where 1 is most important and 4 is least important.



The main priorities identified (using the total of those who selected either 1 or 2 to demonstrate top priorities) were promoting access to the countryside (198) and biodiversity and environmental benefits (190). Comments about this were also identified at question 3 in the free text question. The least important aim was deemed to be maintaining an income from the estate.

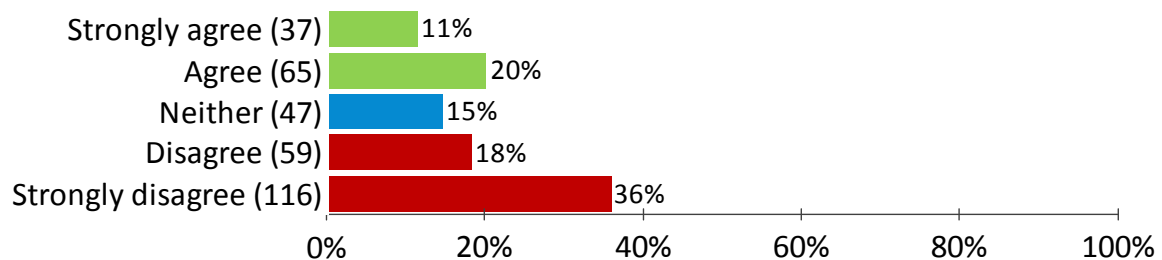
Question 2 asked respondents about the objectives within the proposed strategy and how far they agreed or disagreed with each.

Maintain a farms estate of no less than 2,000ha



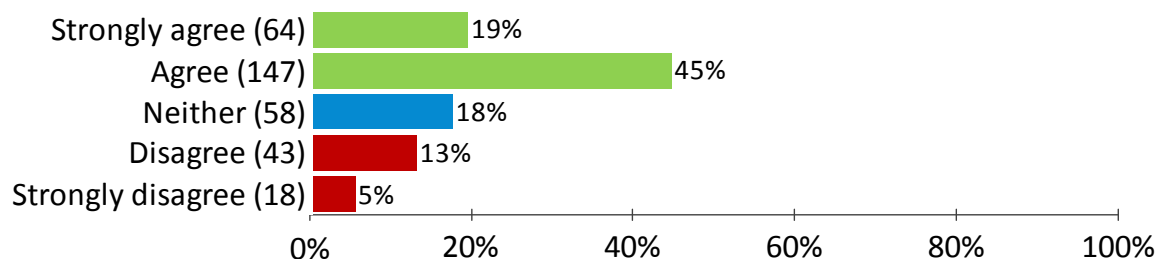
Just over half (56%) supported the objective to maintain a farms estate of no less than 2,000ha.

Consolidate and merge farms when tenancy arrangements end to approximately 30 well-equipped and financially attractive farms



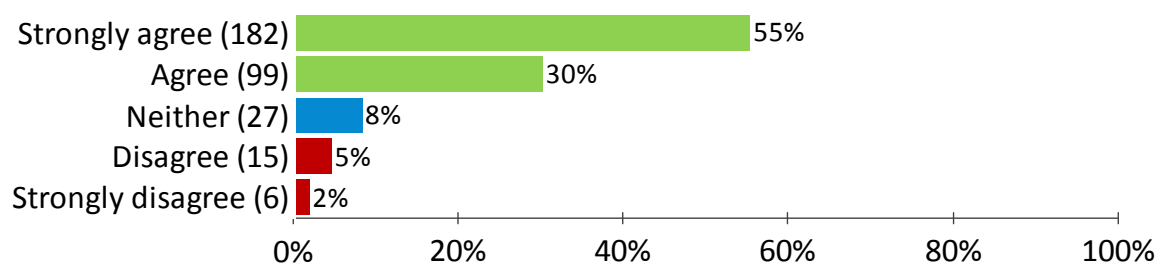
Only 31% supported the objective to consolidate and merge farms. This was identified in the free text comments with concerns around forcing off existing tenants, and the need for smaller farms (or at least, variations in the size of farms) being identified.

Encourage farm diversification (eg encouraging other rural businesses alongside traditional farming)



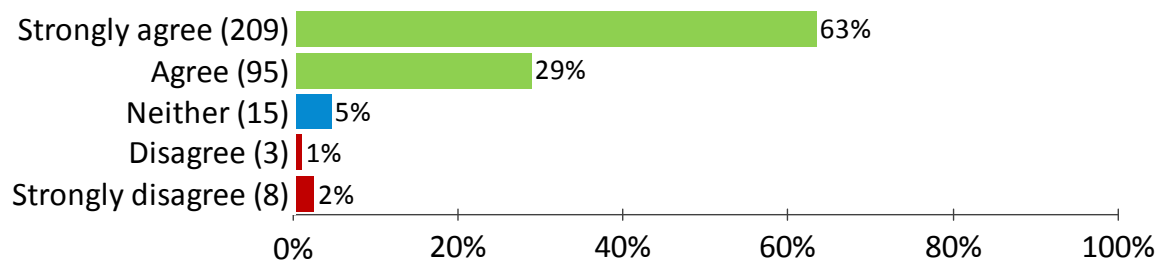
64% of respondents supported the objective to encourage farm diversification. This featured highly in the free text comments with suggestions around farm shops and other small enterprises. This was also picked up in the free text question with comments relating to small farms and the important role they play in the diversification of crops/animals.

Support farmers to promote biodiversity (to have a variety of wildlife and/or plant life on farms)



A total of 85% supported the objective to support farms to promote biodiversity. Again, this was linked to in the free text comments with small farms playing an important role in biodiversity with the use of hedgerows to separate farmland and the use of farmers knowledge to care for land in the wider context.

Support farmers to encourage access to the countryside for health and wellbeing (via rights of way, access to Green Wheels, etc)



92% supported with the objective to support farmers to encourage access to the countryside. This was also picked up in the free text comments with respondents highlighting the need for access, particularly for bridleways for the safety of horses and horse riders. There were also comments about the loss of countryside due to development, so continuing access to existing farmland is important.

Overall, respondents are supportive of all but one objective, with the least supported being consolidating and merging farms.

Question 3 asked respondent's views about the proposed strategy. Key themes from respondents included not selling land to build on it, and comments around selling/merging farms will make it harder for people to get into farming and the importance of keeping smaller farms in the estate.

Theme	No. of comments
Don't sell to develop	57
Keep/have more small farms	56
Selling/merging farms will make it harder to get into farming	20
Encourage diversification	17
Should maintain/increase amount of farmland owned	12
Leave things as they are	12
Ensure access to the land	9
Support farmers	8
The council don't own the land – the public do	8
Concern about forcing existing tenants off	7
Council shouldn't be involved in owning farmland	5
Build on brownfield instead	5
Support for larger farms	4
Other	75
Total comments	220

"I broadly agree with the Council's Farms Estate Plan, but would not want to see the current Tenants of small farm holdings being forced to leave their farm at the end of their tenancy just so that the Council can sell their farm for development. It will be difficult for people to get into farming if they have to take on a huge farm estate."

"Small family run farms should be the backbone of the plans not financially motivated multi-million pound concerns with not love for farming"

"I feel that it is irresponsible for the Council to be even considering selling off any of the publicly owned farm land that forms part of the estate. Getting into agriculture is almost impossible for anyone without large amounts of capital, regardless of their passion and knowledge, but Council farms offer a glimmer of hope to a specific lucky few. Further

decreasing opportunity to encourage people into agriculture, and maintain enthusiasm within the sector would be wrong, in my opinion."

"It's important to maintain farm estates to maintain access to countryside and promote farming!"

"Should also look to maintain the 'green belt' 'lungs of the county'"

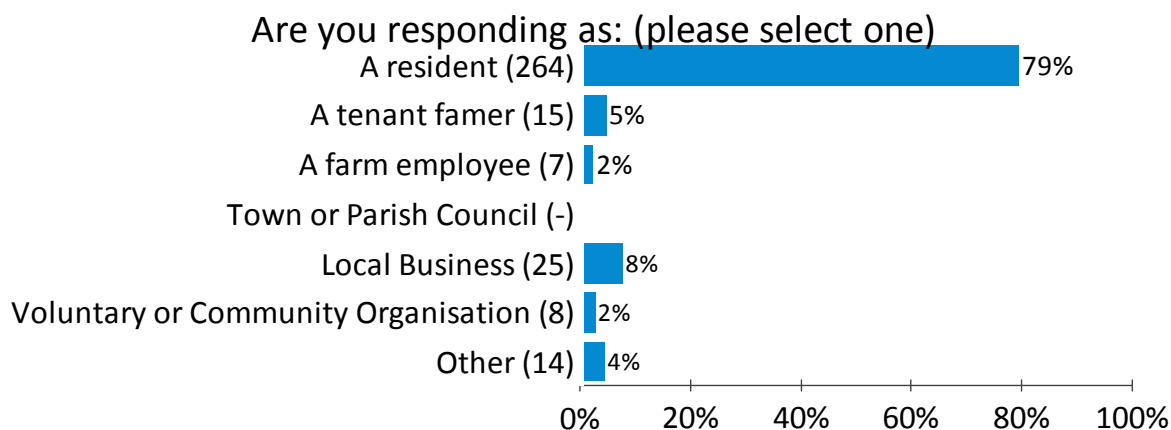
"Although I think it's a sensible plan to hold Estate Farms of an economic size I think farm land of a smaller acreage could also be of use for the proposed rural diversification and should be retained."

"I think the established practice of having small tenant farms was and remains a great idea. I think it is very sad that a small tenant farm in Maulden has been sold off - I fear this will be used for yet more, excessive levels of new housing. I hope the Council will urgently reconsider this policy and put on hold plans to sell off other traditional tenant farms."

"I can see the need for this plan but do wonder how farms will be selected for enlargement or merger with neighbouring farms when tenancy agreements end. Also, offering opportunities for new entrants is a very positive initiative but it wouldn't necessarily encourage younger persons to 'come on board' without good financial support. Selling off land to related industries is acceptable but surely not to housing developers etc. to give in to the pressure on the council to provide a Luton overspill."

About You

We asked our standard demographic questions in the questionnaire, with the addition of asking about the context in which people were responding. This distinction was in order to determine participation from voluntary or community organisations, as well as ensuring the views of tenant farmers were being captured.



The voluntary or community organisations that responded and provided details were:

Voluntary/Community Organisations:

Potton Allotment association

Wildlife Trust BCN

Charity

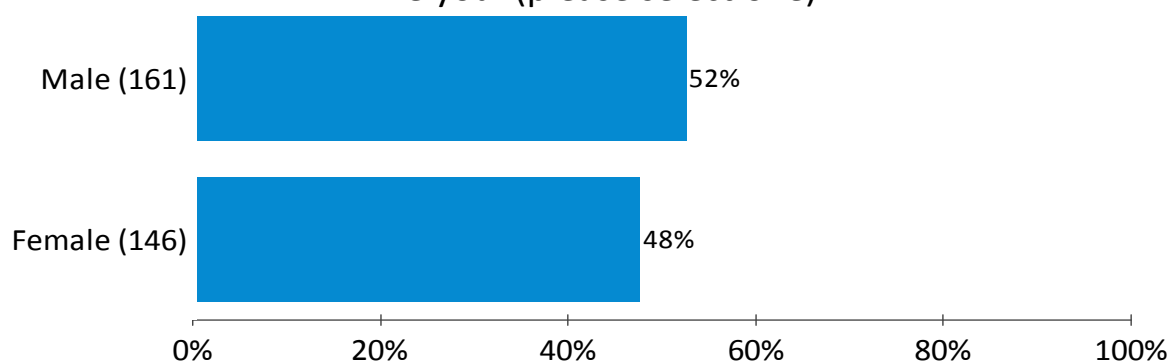
The Ramblers

The other responses that specified who they are were:

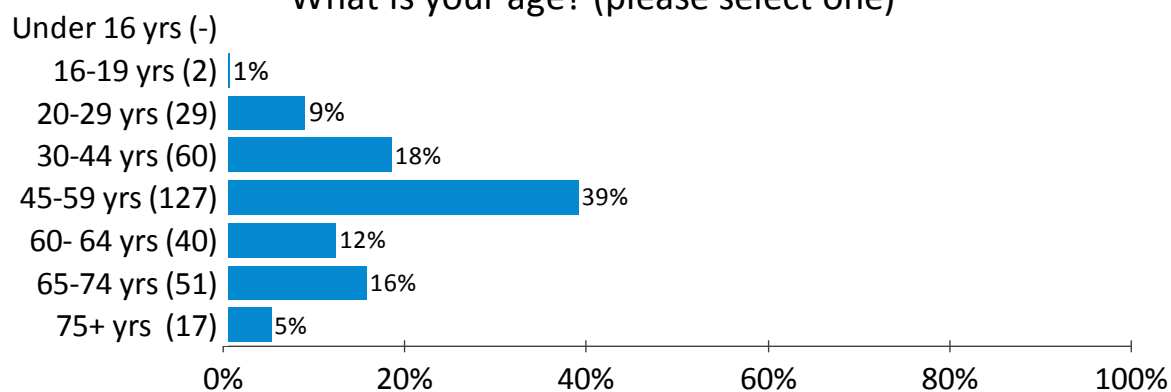
Other:

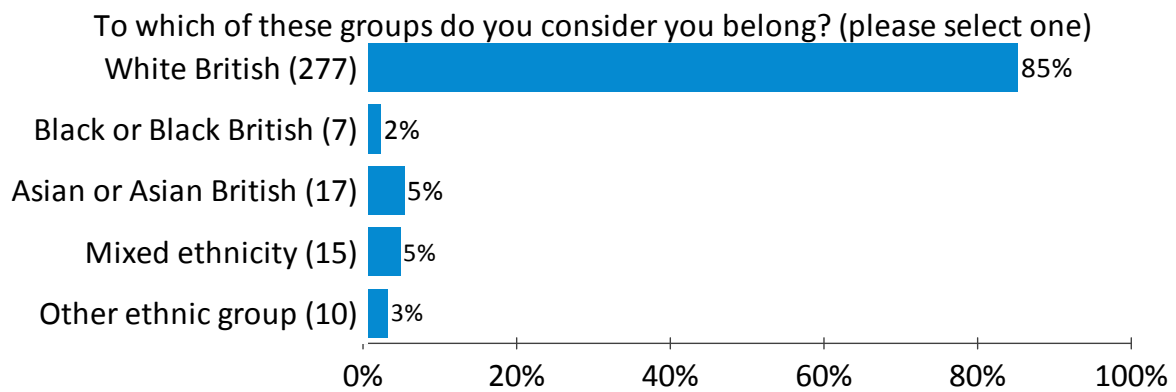
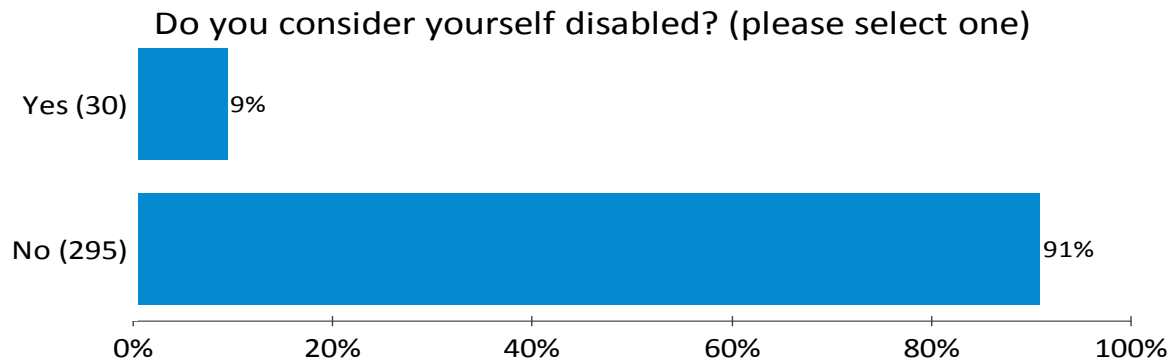
A resident and a volunteer with the Farming Community Network
employee in Central Bedfordshire
Just a woman from the countryside
Sustrans
Ex county councilor
I live in Ampthill surrounded by such farm land
Former resident
Bedford Borough Council
a local visitor
Retired tenant farmer
Concerned individual

Are you: (please select one)



What is your age? (please select one)

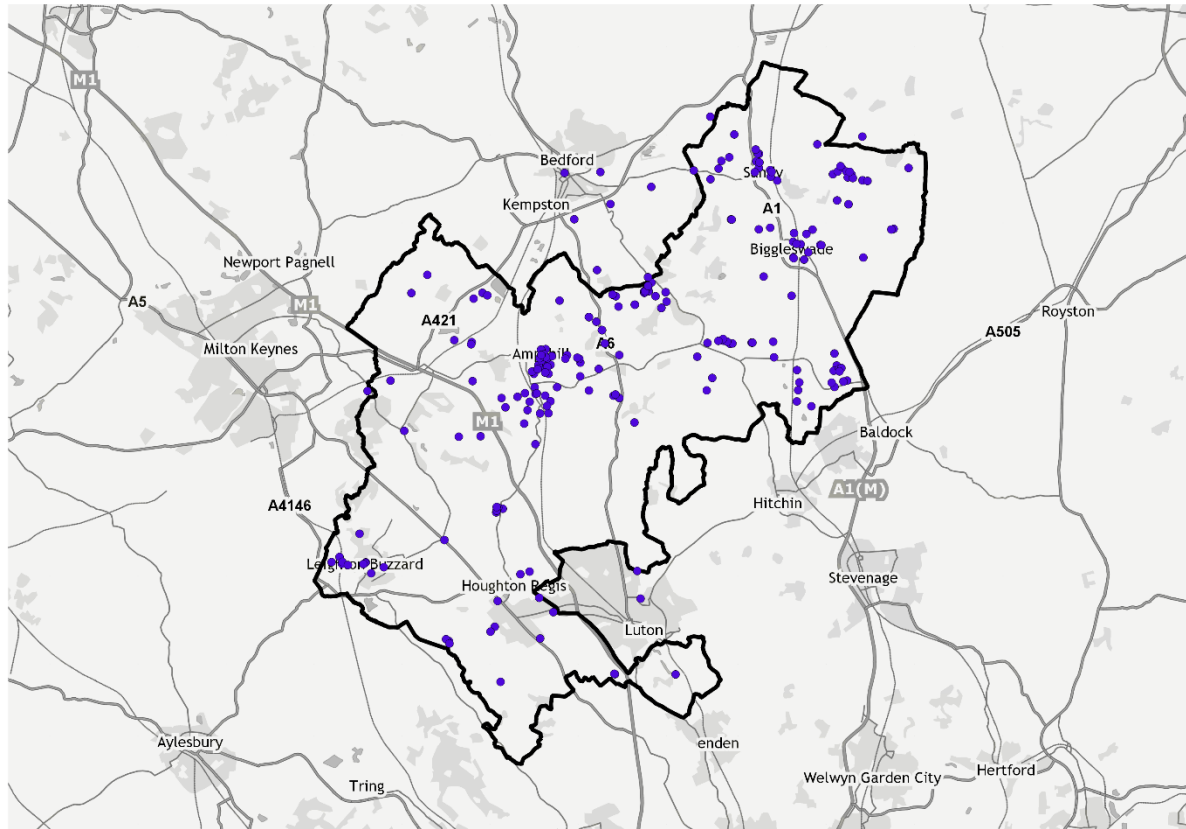




Demographics of responses are broadly representative of the population of CBC (aside from age).

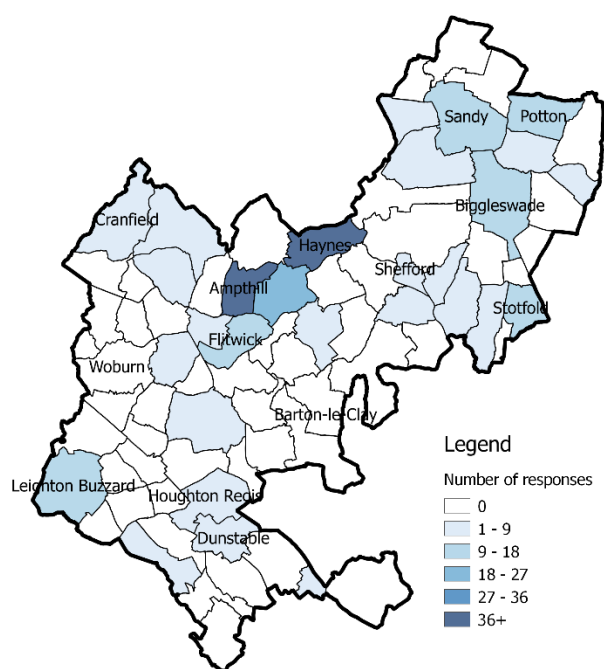
Postcode analysis

This map identifies each dot as a response, showing a spread of responses across the area, although focused in Ivel Valley. This was also identified in the free text comments, with Maulden specified in responses.



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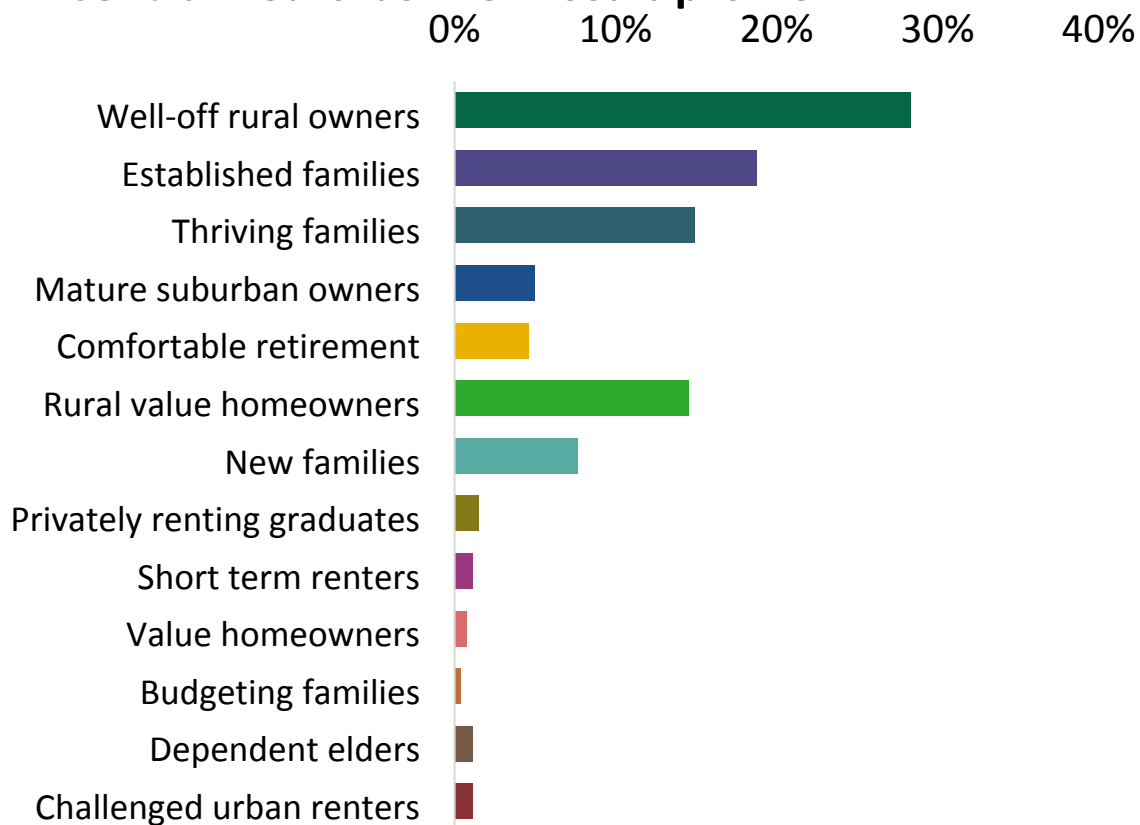
The second map shows the number of responses per parish, with a concentration of responses in the Ampthill and Haynes area, with another group of responses in the Biggleswade area. Again, this has been identified in the free text comments.



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Mosaic analysis

Central Bedfordshire Mosaic profile



Responses were mainly from the more affluent groups, with the biggest number from 'well-off rural owners' (74). This is the biggest 'rural' group in Central Bedfordshire. There was also a sizeable response from 'Rural value homeowners' (38) who are the less well-off rural households. Through this analysis, we can see that we have received responses from those located in the more rural areas who are most likely to be affected by any changes, and access to the farms estate.

The number of responses from more deprived household groups was very low, this is unsurprising as the more deprived households tend to be in urban locations, so may feel that the Farms Estate does not directly affect them.

Conclusions

Respondents were generally supportive of the proposed Farms Estate plan, with the main concerns around development of farm land when sold off and reducing the access to affordable farms for farmers. Over 25% of responses to the open-ended question included a comment about not selling land for development. This is a particularly hot topic for the Central Bedfordshire area so perhaps unsurprising that it featured so highly.

The Farms estate is definitely seen as a positive for most respondents and as a valuable asset for the area.

Central Bedfordshire in contact

Find us online: www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/consultations

Email: consultations@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk