



**Resident Focus Groups on
Proposed Changes to
Recycling and Household
Waste Sites**

Leicestershire County Council

Final Report

February 2024

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Project details and acknowledgements

Title	Resident Focus Groups on Proposed Changes to Recycling and Household Waste Sites
Client	Leicestershire County Council
Project number	23276
Client reference	
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This project has been delivered to ISO 9001:2015, 20252:2019 and 27001:2013 standards.



Certificate No:340192020



Certificate No:340202020



Certificate No:374882021

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Introduction

Background

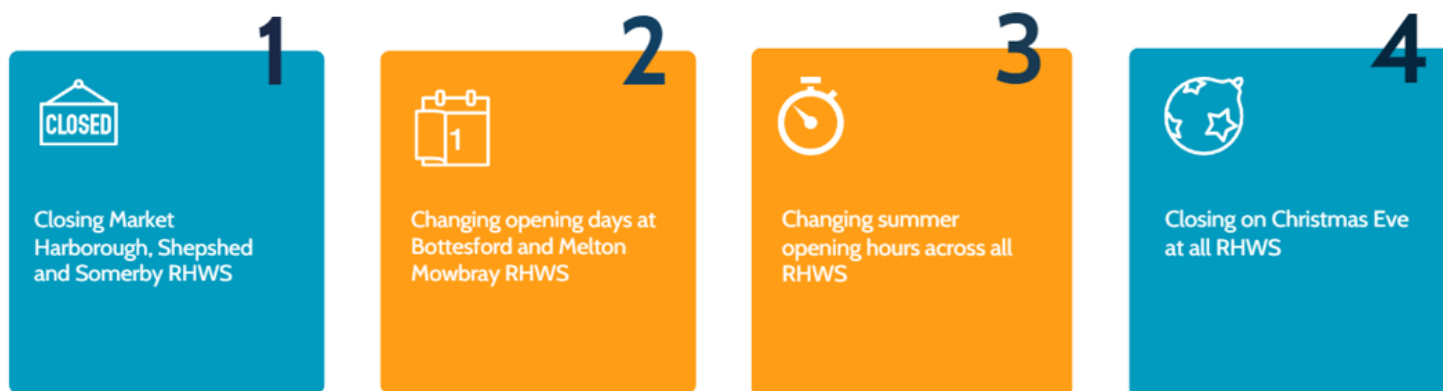
This research is contextualised within wider changes and budgetary constraints faced by Leicestershire County Council (LCC). LCC faces unprecedented financial challenge. The rising cost of service delivery fuelled by high inflation, growing demand for services and being the lowest funded county in England has resulted in significant financial pressures. LCC are not alone as all Local Authorities across the country are struggling. For example, nearby councils such as Nottingham and Birmingham have recently issued a section 114 notice, illustrating that they do not have adequate resources to deliver services. Whilst LCC is not in this immediate situation, significant budget gaps exist between the resources needed for services and income received. It is estimated that LCC will face an £85m budget shortfall by 2028. These circumstances are forcing efficiency savings changes across all LCC departments. This research focuses specifically on proposed changes to Leicestershire's Recycling and Household Waste Sites (RHWS).



Context

LCC's recently published budget proposal (2024-2028) includes a requirement to make savings from RHWS. On 13 February 2023 LCC appointed a Scrutiny Review Panel (SRP) to review proposed changes regarding RHWS closures (a total of five potential site closures were put forward). Whilst not all of the closures were approved, the proposed changes, and data which sits behind the options presented in a recent RHWS public consultation, were informed by the SRP report.

The current proposed changes are estimated to save LCC in the region of £420,000 per year. There are four key changes which LCC have sought residents' views on, and which form the basis for the current research:

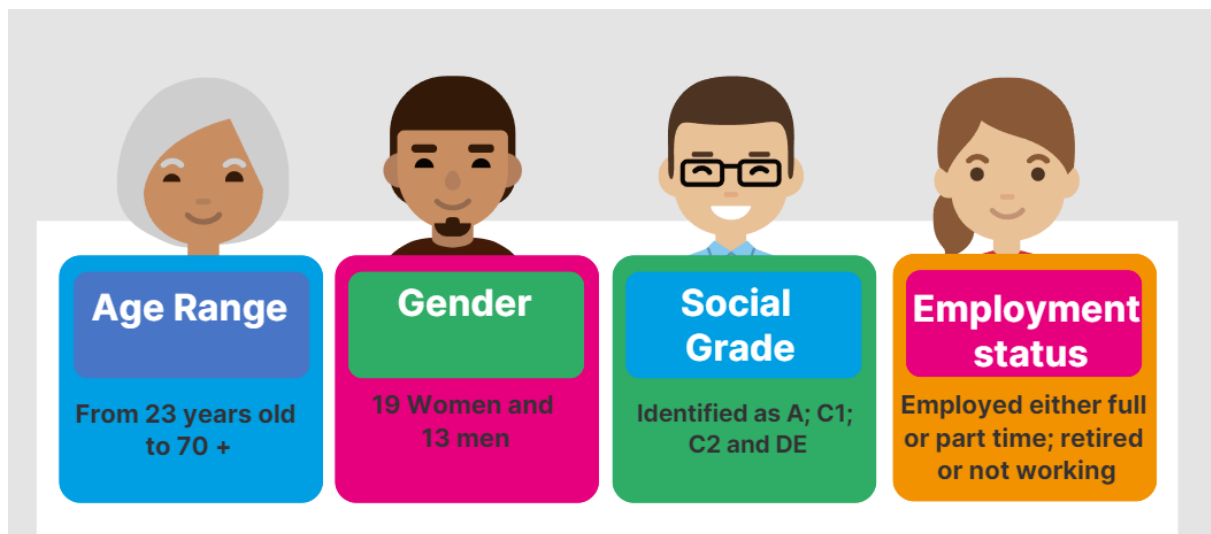
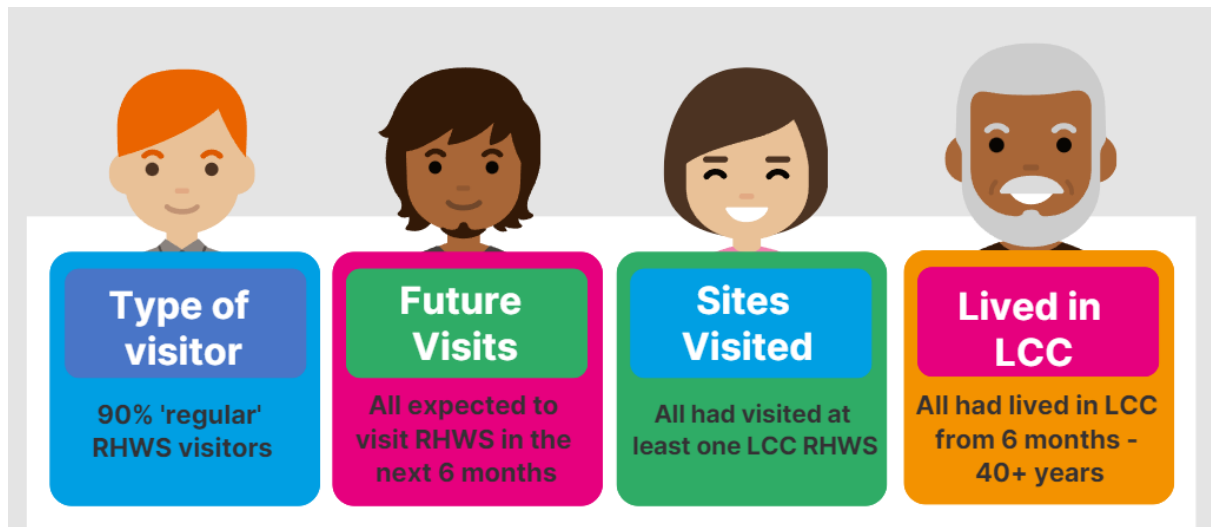


Methodology

We facilitated six remote, online video focus groups with residents across Leicestershire between 18 and 25 January 2024. All participants were recruited by our market research recruitment partner, Discovery Research, had used at least one RHWS in recent months, and the majority described themselves as regular visitors. RHWS visits were mainly used to dispose of items from home renovations, broken toys, excess cardboard, other recyclable products and bulky items (not collected at the kerbside).

The focus groups were designed to explore participants' thoughts and views on the four proposed changes to RHWS. Each proposed change was discussed in turn after key data and statistics were shared with the groups (see **Appendix A**), which helped to contextualise LCC's decision making process and set the foundation for the proposed changes. Focus groups lasted between 75 and 90 minutes and all were recorded and later transcribed. We paid particular attention to personal reflections and any perceived impact (positive or negative) that might result from the proposed changes. In addition, participants were asked to make any further recommendations or suggestions they felt LCC might consider in refining their proposals and changes to RHWS.

Given that there are specific proposed changes which would affect users of Market Harborough and Shepshed RHWS, and that these are well populated areas, two focus groups were designed just for users of these two sites. The remaining four focus groups were made up of participants who use a mixture of the other RHWS across the county. In total we spoke to 32 participants; see below for sample breakdown.



Findings

Understanding the context

Initial discussions focused on what residents knew and understood about the current financial situation faced by LCC. There was little surprise that *'things were tough'* as people were aware of the crises in other Local Authorities (Birmingham and Nottingham) as this was on the mainstream news. There was a general understanding that inflation (cost of living), increased local population and Local Authority funding have and will result in a wave of cuts and council tax rises.



I'm aware of the other councils being in the news that are, you know, in dire financial situations. I hadn't actually looked into Leicestershire, but it's obviously not surprising."
Male, (aged 35-44), Market Harborough



I didn't know that, but I'm surprised either."

Female, (aged 23-35), Twyford

There was, however, little knowledge of the specific predicted budget deficit. In addition, there was minimal knowledge of LCC being the lowest funded county in the country, which surprised and shocked many. Participants were unsure why this is the case and were not aware of the associated fair funding campaign. Despite information being available on LCC's website, participants rarely visited the site and when they did, it was primarily for some specific task (e.g. paying council tax, reporting missed refuse collections etc.) rather than simply browsing for information. In addition, there is little distinguishing between LA departments amongst residents. For example, people would struggle to differentiate responsibilities between Waste Services and RHWS responsibilities. There were a few exceptions to this view from



I didn't realise [LCC] we are the lowest funded in the country. That's quite surprising. We're a big county!

Male, (age 23-34), Lutterworth

participants who worked in the voluntary and public sectors; these individuals had sought professional funding from LCC and had greater knowledge of resource constraints and departmental roles.

Data was then shared with the groups regarding the number of RHWS in Leicestershire in comparison to neighbouring council (see **Appendix A**). On the whole, residents did not know the number of RHWS available and felt fortunate that LCC had been providing this number of facilities. Some questioned whether residents in neighbouring councils felt they had a sufficient RHWS services given the number of sites per household.



So really it seems that, at the minute, we have a very healthy provision when you compare it to other counties as far as the number of sites, and the number of households each site is there to serve."

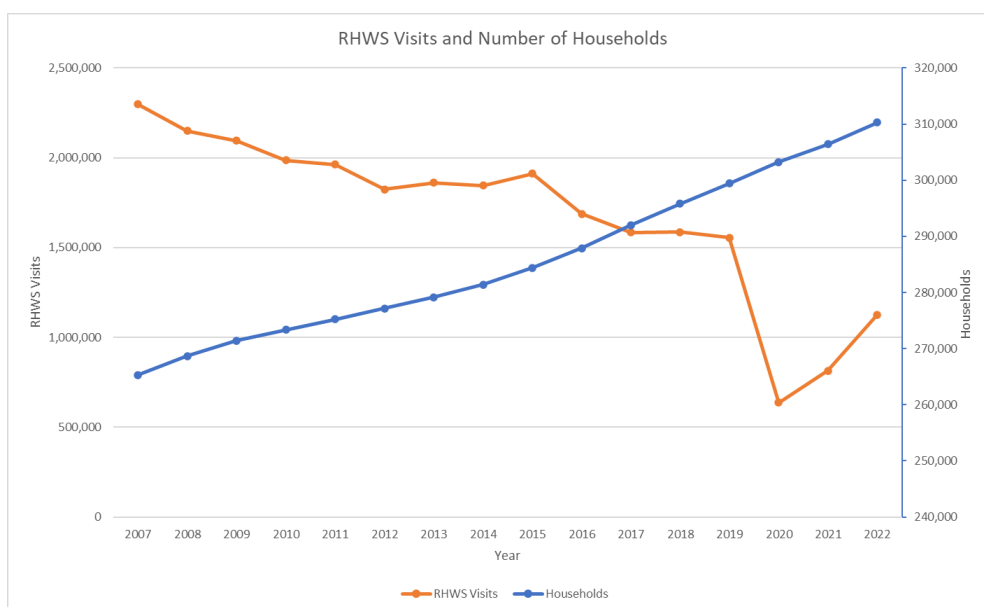
Female, (age 35-44), Bottesford



If you look at the data then it's obvious that other councils have got away with providing less tips, but it doesn't tell you the wait time and that kind of thing. Obviously if there's a one-hour or two-hour queue all the way outside then that's not good."

Male, (age 45-54), Market Harborough

A graph (see below) was then shared with the group which illustrates LCC site visits (across all RHWS) plotted against the growing number of households within the LA area. This graph raised questions and prompted several discussions amongst participants.



Participants were unaware that RHWS visits were down in comparison to pre-Covid levels. A few suggestions were put forward as to why this might be. This included people fly-tipping, which was raised as an increasing concern for many residents. In addition, people felt families might be looking for alternatives to disposal and perhaps selling or taking unwanted goods to charities or reusing and upcycling items themselves. Residents also noted that there had been an improvement in kerbside collections, especially around bulky cardboard, potentially explaining a reduction in RHWS visits. Others questioned interpretations and assumptions regarding the data. For example, people cited that in the current cost of living crisis residents are waiting longer and doing 'bigger trips' to reduce fuel cost or delaying household renovations, meaning fewer trips are needed. A small number of participants also expressed that they felt the upward trajectory of visits indicated that residents are becoming more aware of post-Covid opening days and times and that household visits will increase over time.

““

From my perspective, our local tip has restricted opening hours. So, because it's only open three days out of seven in the week, we don't visit as much as we would have before. So, I think having restricted opening hours is probably affecting [the number of site visits] as well." Male, (age 45-54), Bottesford

““

I suppose people's vehicles are bigger, so they haven't got to come as many times."

Female, (age 35-44), Shepshed

““

There could be a whole range of things going on with the cost of living. People might be a bit more cautious about when they do a trip."

Female, (age 45-54), Melton Mowbray

““

Well, that's what the graph would indicate to me; it's not flattening out, is it? It's on a steady increase and certainly not dropping; it's increasing rather than decreasing."

Male, (age 55-64), Market Harborough

Proposed change 1

Closing Market Harborough, Shepshed and Somerby RHWS

Information was shared regarding the proposed closures of the three RHWS. Residents were not surprised that site closures were an option given the financial constraints presented earlier. Participants who used the three sites were obviously more vocal and personally impacted by these changes than those living further from these locations. Emotions ranged from being angry, aggrieved, disappointed and a feeling of 'reluctant acceptance' given the context presented earlier.

Users of the Market Harborough site raised specific issues and expressed concerns regarding why this site was selected for closure rather than the nearby site of Kibworth, which was considered more difficult to access with congested roads. In addition, the recent funding at the Kibworth site created an overt cynicism regarding the decision-making process. Participants felt that as this site had received funding it could not be closed and therefore the decision to close Market

Harborough was not based on usage and convenience to residents. Compounding this, residents felt the choice of closing Market Harborough was 'short sighted' and whilst it may help the financial situation in the short term, given the population growth in the town, would create more long-term problems.



That route to the tip [Kibworth] is notoriously congested as well."

Female, (age 35-54), Market Harborough



It [closure of RHWS] will mean increased and longer journeys. What's the carbon footprint of people now having to drive from Market Harborough to Kibworth? It doesn't make sense."

Male, (age 55-64), Shepshed



It doesn't make sense to close Market Harborough 'cause we've got a population of about 25,000 people. So why would you close a tip that, that serves that amount of people? The only reason I can think of is because they've just refurbished Kibworth and they can't close that one."

Male, (age 65+), Market Harborough

Similar concerns were raised by Shepshed RHWS users especially regarding expected increases to the population. They also felt aggrieved that additional costs and inconvenience associated with the proposed closure would be placed on households. This issue is particularly heightened given residents' wider views on the cost-of-living crisis and the perception that people are 'paying more and getting less'. One participant expressed confusion about Shepshed being earmarked for closure given the recent installation of a new incinerator in the area. This point also illustrates a general lack of understanding amongst residents about what the council funds and what is installed or funded by private enterprises and LCC contractors. From the group discussions, there was a view that the council are responsible and thus funding 'everything'.

“

You look at the difference. The ten-minute round trip is now a forty-minute round trip. What's the benefit to the Council saving the money when everyone else living in these areas is wasting a lot more on fuel? It seems out of touch.”

Female, (age 35-44), Shepshed

“

I think it's quite shortsighted because, actually, there's a lot of development. There's always planning applications going in for more houses and it's just going to increase the load on those other sites outside of Shepshed. So, closing the site seems a bit ridiculous to myself.”

Male, (age 55-64), Shepshed

Both Shepshed and Market Harborough groups were also concerned the nearby sites which they would need to access would be busier post-closure. The added road congestion and wait times at sites would also add to households' inconvenience. Across all groups there were fears that this would inevitably lead to an increase in fly-tipping across the county. Some residents cited specific areas where this is already problematic and feared the situation would only get worse. For some, this anticipated negative impact and the associated cost of cleaning up fly tipping, countered the cost saving that might be realised by closing sites.

“

The saving will be lost to clear up the fly-tipping, which could be more expensive than keeping the tip open!

Female, (age 45-54), Melton Mowbray

Proposed change 2

Changing opening days at Bottesford and Melton Mowbray

RHWS

These proposed changes were less controversial across all groups, including residents who use the Bottesford and Melton Mowbray RHWS themselves. It should be noted, however, that the proposed changes were presented in the same order to all groups, so there was perhaps relief amongst users of these sites that their local facility was not getting closed altogether. This also sparked discussions in the Market Harborough and Shepshed groups as to why those sites could not have reduced opening hours introduced, rather than being closed entirely. Participants in other groups also questioned whether savings could still be made by reducing opening days/hours across all sites instead of closing sites.

Newer residents to Bottesford and Melton Mowbray were largely unaware of pre-Covid opening times and individuals who had used the RHWS prior to 2020 assumed restricted days would stay. The main points of discussion were largely around how the opening days had been decided and whether it was based on usage and site visit data. For Bottesford RHWS users, weekend access was considered crucial especially for people working Monday to Friday. There were some calls to change the proposed opening days to include Saturday and Sunday (for example to be open Friday, Saturday and Sunday or Saturday, Sunday, and Monday). Overall, the specific impact of these proposed changes to households was considered minimal. Whilst it may require residents to check opening



So, are the savings just in terms of manpower? It might be fairer to have alternate closing days so that all sites stay open, but on fewer days, and the personnel can be moved around.”

Male, (age 45-54), Melton Mowbray



But I think people will just get used to those hours as they are made aware; we'll just get used to it. And to be honest, I always forget when it's open and always Google it before I go.”

Male, (age 23-34), Barwell



I don't think I would have anything that pressing that couldn't wait a couple of days.”

Female, (age 35-44), Whetstone

days prior to visiting and may create some initial confusion, proposed changes to opening days were not regarded as unreasonable.

Proposed change 3

Changing summer opening hours across all RHWS

Conversations regarding changing summer opening hours raised similar points to above. Generally, people understood the rationale behind this and felt the proposed changes were very reasonable. The main impact on residents was seen as being needing to check opening times and days prior to a visit.

Some participants did, however, make suggestions regarding alternative times. For example, discussions took place regarding whether having sites open less in the winter to allow for more summertime openings was possible. People expressed that evening opening times in the summer would be invaluable (especially for people who work '9 to 5') and therefore asked whether sites could remain open an hour later in the evening. Moreover, given that many sites will have reduced opening days, participants felt it would be a good idea to ensure that RHWS were open later the night before any consecutive day closures. Some participants also felt that having late opening hours in the summer on weekends specifically would be helpful for residents.



I don't think they've [LCC] been unreasonable. They're giving people different options".

Female, (age 35-44), Bottesford



I think it should be open later on the weekend days more so than 2 random days in the week."

Male, (age 23-34), Lutterworth

Proposed change 4

Closing on Christmas Eve at all RHWS

All groups were of a unanimous opinion that closing RHWS on Christmas Eve was unproblematic. For many, there was an assumption that the sites were closed on Christmas Eve in any case. Other participants felt it was not unreasonable to ask people to wait a few days over the Christmas period to visit. Participants did not expect any opposition to this. There was very little discussion on this point as there was a consensus this was a good cost saving proposal.



I don't think there'll be many people that will be bothered by it being closed on Christmas Eve. Generally, the rubbish is generated at Christmas, so yeah, I don't see any problem with that proposal."

Female, (age 35-44), Twyford



I would have thought most people have other things on their mind rather than going to a tip on Christmas Eve. I don't think the impact of that would be too great."

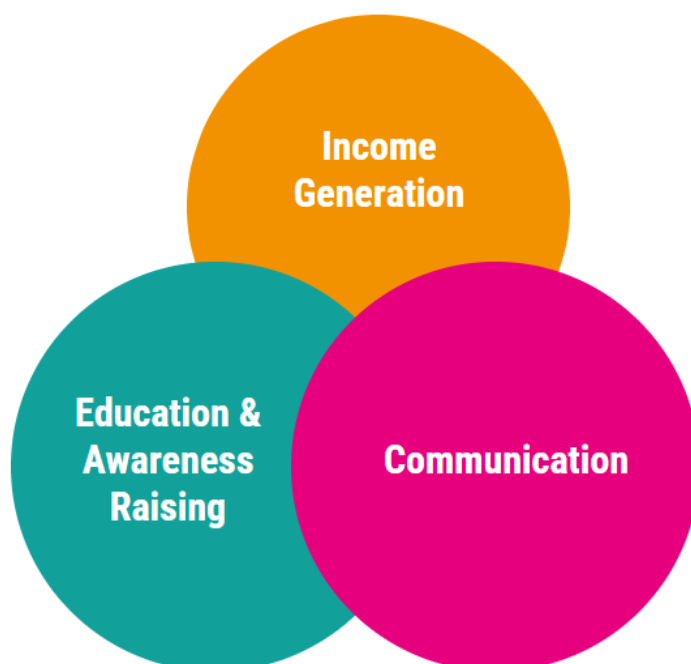
Male, (age 55-64), Melton Mowbray

Conclusions and recommendations

The most controversial of the four proposed changes was the closure of RHWS, especially Market Harborough and Shepshed given the population in these areas. The users of these sites are likely to provide the most vocal opposition. Rationales for these closures will need to be clearly articulated and disseminated to residents. The data provided during these focus group was considered too general and thus, on its own, an insufficient justification for closure. For example, the use of statistics on site visits did not satisfy participants and was seen as a simplistic benchmark. Sharing additional information regarding the decision-making process may help how these proposals land. We would also recommend providing reassurance that fly-tipping is addressed and that these proposed changes will not exacerbate this issue thanks to proactive management on the part of LCC.

In contrast, proposed changes two, three and four were considered very reasonable by most, especially given RHWS provisions by neighbouring councils and LCC's budget deficit. Ultimately, people would rather have reduced opening hours than site closures. There was a sense of reassurance that LCC had carefully considered these three proposed changes.

Based on the findings from this research, there are three key areas in which we would recommend further thought and reflection:



Income generation

A notable gap in the proposals that participants noted was a lack of income generation activities at RHWS. Across numerous groups, people expressed that more could be done to make money rather than solely looking at cutting costs. Residents spoke of initiatives they've seen or heard about at other RHWS in other areas, including:

- Ability to buy goods including unwanted/broken furniture, slate, bricks, wood – for the growing upcycling and recycling market.
- Investing in technology to turn green and garden waste into compost for resale.
- Developing partnerships with local businesses or charities to buy broken furniture to recycle/upcycle goods for profit.



They [LCC] can actually generate some money, rather than just making cuts."

Male, (age 65+), Somerby

Education & awareness raising

In addition, residents talked about the need for more local education, not just on the use of RHWS but also wider issues such as household waste, landfill and recycling. This is partly due to a perceived lack of understanding and awareness about how people use RHWS, what can and can't go in general waste bins and what can be recycled.

Such an initiative would ensure residents are disposing of items correctly. This could also fit into wider environmental and net zero campaigns and ambitions. Targeting younger people, possibly through school visits, could also help encourage better waste management amongst younger generations and in future years.

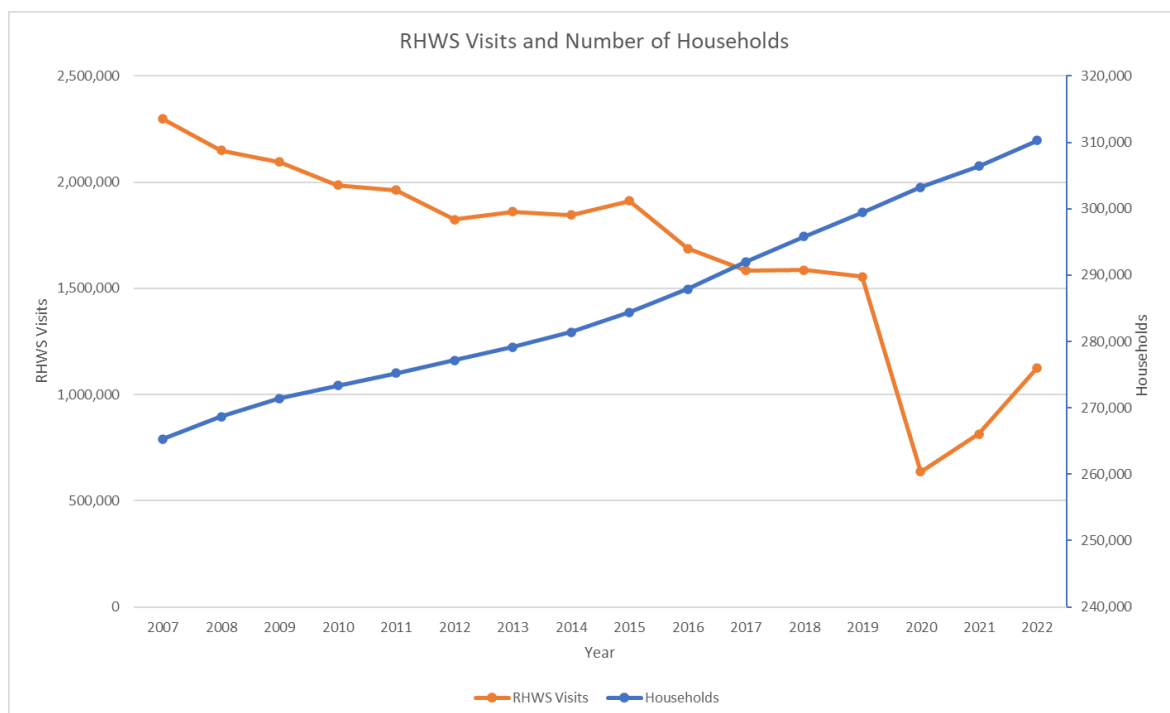
Communication

Moreover, whilst participants were pleased to learn that there was an ongoing public consultation on this issue, few were aware of it prior to the focus groups. This raises several questions regarding how residents are accessing key information which impact upon them and how LCC is communicating changes, or proposed changes, to services. We recommend the development of a wider communications strategy, targeting the platforms that resident's access for news and information, potentially broadening your preferred channels as dictated by a 'digital by default' approach. This will help people feel more informed and included when it comes to changes. It was clear that the residents we spoke to were interested in understanding more about the future of services and LCC's financial situation; they were keen to be involved but had little awareness or understanding of how to do so.

Appendix A: Data shared during focus groups.

The following data tables were shared with the participants during the focus group discussions.

Authority	Number of Waste Sites	Geographical Area Served (km ²)	Households per Site	Hours per Week (averaged across sites)	
				Summer	Winter
Leicestershire County Council	14	154	22,000	50	35
Warwickshire County Council	9	219	29,000	40	37
Staffordshire County Council	14	187	28,000	48	45
Nottinghamshire County Council	12	174	31,000	81	66
Derbyshire County Council	9	283	41,000	66	66
Lincolnshire County Council	11	538	32,000	37	37
Former Northamptonshire County Council	10	236	33,000	40	40







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