

25 July 2018	ITEM: 12
Council	
Report of the Cabinet Member for Finance	
Report of: Councillor Shane Hebb, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance	
This report is Public	

Introduction by Cabinet Member

I am pleased to report to Council, that the services to which residents use and depend on are safe for the next four years.

Our self-sufficiency objectives; our long-term economic plan, is working.

Members will be aware, that Revenue Support Grants across the United Kingdom have been reducing, as councils and public sector bodies took their share of repaying the national deficit, to save the national economy. Thurrock has been no exception in that.

From May 2016, we have embarked on a self-sufficiency objective – an objective where Thurrock would strive to become a council that lived within its means, and a council not reliant on national government for revenue funding.

The Council Spending Review replaced the Budget Review Panels; the primary effort is to look from the bottom-up, at building services up to the standard we are either expected to deliver, or the bar that we set ourselves. This was in contrast to a previous regime of top-down cuts, which failed to enable services to reform.

Fast forward to Summer 2018, and we are in the enviable position of being one – if not, the, first unitary council across the United Kingdom which has balanced its books for four years ahead.

We have increased the General Fund Balance – the so-called “reserves” – by 38%, from £8m to £11m.

We are projected to deliver a £10m surplus over those four years. A surplus that will be spent, penny-for-penny, on Thurrock as a place, on Thurrock’s people and on Thurrock’s future.

Furthermore, the Administration has overseen spending of so-called “ear-marked reserves” – which funds projects such as school building and other capital plans, or, money that the council held but then handed over when schools moved from council-maintained to academy schools. Taxpayers expect their institutions to have enough cash to fall back on in the event of a financial crisis, but conversely, not sit idly on their tax-levied funds. Thurrock Conservatives agree – thus our review of reserves to ensure the council doesn’t sit on council tax payers money for no reason. It is not right to set aside money for a purpose – classroom building, the new Integrated Medical Centres, as examples – and then not spend it as intended.

The Administration's approach to the council finances; a combination of the CSR and an investment approach, has also enabled the Cabinet to be able to increase some department budgets in the 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 municipal years. "Clean It, Cut It, Fill It" has been, and will remain funded, for all the while, a Conservative Cabinet leads this council. The Administration has announced its new "Stop It" campaign. This can only be achieved with sound finances; and we will be fighting the fight that residents of the borough want us to take on.

The municipal year 2017/18 was a successful year for the department, and I want to thank all members of the Finance and Commercial departments for their superb efforts in achieving what has been achieved.

As we move into the 2018/19 municipal year, our primary focus will be to continue our self-sufficiency economic plan.

We will build on the approach we constructed and successfully followed in the 2017/18 year, as we seek to make Thurrock not only a place to live of low-council tax, but also a council which aims to provide the highest-quality services through genuine reform and doing things differently, where it is necessary to do so.

The CSR is now in its third year, out of a three year cycle. That work will endure to ensure our services are best in class.

We will also begin key work streams through the 2018/19 municipal year, where we want to help all residents climb life's ladder – our #LifesLadder initiative. That work starts with the Fair Debt Summit in September 2018.

This portfolio report covers the following functions:

- Finance (including corporate finance, counter intelligence and fraud, insurance/risk management);
- Revenues and benefits teams;
- Digital;
- Procurement and Commercial Services; and
- The Vision and Priorities.

CORPORATE FINANCE

► SERVICE OVERVIEW

Corporate Finance lead on the promotion and delivery of good financial management to ensure that the council's financial position is managed appropriately and public money is safeguarded.

► REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS 12M / PERFORMANCE:

Thurrock Council, like most other councils, continues to have to be innovative to meet the financial demands upon it. Having taken a more commercial focus, introduced a Council Spending Review, and including an ambitious investment strategy, the council was presented with a forecasted four year balanced budget in February. This is unprecedented across the country and sets the council on the path to becoming financially self-sufficient whilst also providing security and growth in those services that are important to our residents.

The 2017/18 financial outturn position was reported to Cabinet in June 2018, whereby we demonstrated that not only had Thurrock lived within its means for our second Administrative year, but also identified a surplus of £2.3m that was allocated to priority areas such as the environment, funds to tackle anti-social behaviour and support for the council's work in opposing a second Thames crossing in the borough.

Whilst the Housing Revenue Account balance has been maintained at £2.175m, the General Fund balance has been increased to £11m, a 38% uplift, honouring the Administration's commitment to increase this balance against economic and demand led risks.

► FUTURE: COUNCIL SPENDING REVIEW

In 2016, the Administration launched a different approach to setting the Council's budget, the Council Spending Review (CSR). This was to move away from the historic approach of top-slicing service budgets but, instead, concentrates on: reviewing bottom-up a service; a commercial approach; more or same for less; and reducing the level of growth on demand led services. This is underpinned by a comprehensive review of all services and an ambitious investment strategy.

The East of England Local Government Association's Finance Peer Review in June 2017, looking at the council's financial position and the CSR process, endorsed the CSR as good practice and so has been continued throughout 2017/18 with meetings scheduled throughout this current year as well.

The work carried out and planned under the CSR was presented to the Council in February of this year and showed a balanced budget for this and a further three years. As last year, surpluses are forecast and the use of these will be subject to future reports.

► FUTURE: CAPITAL PROGRAMME

The capital programme has certainly changed under this Administration. The Environment Fleet has been replaced, an exciting concept for Integrated Medical Centres is being developed, new schools and school expansions, the widening of the A13, to name but a few, whilst further investing in our highways infrastructure and council homes.

► FUTURE: NNDR REFORM

The full scale of NNDR reform will not take place during this parliament although some progress towards change is likely to be implanted within the next three years. Council officers continue to work closely with the MHCLG and the LGA on this reform.

COUNTER-FRAUD & INVESTIGATION

► SERVICE OVERVIEW

The service delivers the council's annual counter-fraud strategy, working across the different directorates to improve business processes and better educate staff on the fraud risks the council faces. The service operates a trading model selling specialist crime fighting services to other public bodies.

► REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The Standards and Audit Committee received the annual report last week that sets out the many successes and partnerships that the counter fraud service has delivered whilst also receiving international recognition.

Key successes include:

- £3.1m of detected fraud last year, £24.5m since 2014;
- 2.04:1 ratio of detected fraud to cost;
- The safeguarding of 81 adults and children from harm;
- The use of the Proceeds of Crime Act and civil law to recover monies from fraudsters, over £3.4m has been recovered so far; and
- Launching the UK's first Cyber Resilience Service in local government, protecting Thurrock and other councils from cyber-crime.

► PERFORMANCE DATA

Reports of fraud received and under investigation:

- Housing fraud 104, under investigation 79;
- Blue Badge 11, under investigation 5;
- Social Care 14, under investigation 8;
- Council Tax 88, under investigation 22;
- Other 26, under investigation 10;
- The unit have recovered 26 properties that were being fraudulently used; these have now been re-let to those in genuine need. The value of this fraud is £598,000; and
- Three right to buy applications have also been stopped, meaning that valuable social housing stock remains available and under the control of Thurrock Council

► FUTURE: FOCUSES, PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

The council received central government funding to expand its centre of excellence in fighting complex crime in local government and other agencies. This model has been further pursued since 2014, with over 25 public bodies accessing the specialist capabilities held in the Counter Fraud & Investigation team.

This support includes providing expertise to tackle the most serious crime including online child abuse, organised money laundering and fraud.

The team has developed a Cyber Resilience Service using its expertise in the investigation of cyber-crime to help other councils in that area too. Last year 76% of councils were affected by cyber-crime. This essential service will again strengthen Thurrock's defences further but also ensure other councils are protected too.

► NATIONAL INVESTIGATION SERVICE

Thurrock has taken an innovative approach to protecting the public funds entrusted to us. Our priority has always been to ensure that the council can provide the best possible services to our residents, visitors and businesses taking a strong stance against those who seek to abuse those services for criminal gain. Our development of our Counter Fraud & Investigation function has ensured that it is at the forefront identifying and pursuing those

who do attempt to commit crime. Our national capability has supported other likeminded councils all over the UK from here in Essex to Blackpool, London, Manchester and Dorset.

Our expertise was also called upon to assist the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Malawi requiring tactical advice to economic crime casework. This remote support has seen support being given in the complex digital forensics and cyber-crime world that Thurrock has successfully operated in across the UK.

As Cabinet Member for this department, I am keen to enhance relations with other local authorities and public sector bodies where there is a benefit of doing so.

This team work hard, and effectively, to successfully recover monies deceptively taken from the taxpayer, and ensure accountability is levied with the support of evidence etc. We are doing this, for the hard-working taxpayers who get up in the dark, get home in the dark, work shifts, pay their dues – and deserve for their hard earned taxes to not be illegally taken from the services that they pay for. My stance on fraud is clear – and my view, which I articulated last year, hasn't changed at all.

The team continue to get world-wide recognition and calls for their services – that in itself is superb recognition, and I hope they are proud of the team that they have become.

RISK & INSURANCE

► SERVICE OVERVIEW

The Risk and Insurance team aim to maintain appropriate risk management, insurance and risk financing arrangements for the council.

► REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The Strategic/Corporate Risk and Opportunity Register is refreshed annually and has been regularly reviewed/reported to Standards & Audit Committee, Directors Board and Performance Board in line with the Risk and Opportunity Management Framework.

► PERFORMANCE

The council uses the ALARM/CIPFA Risk Management framework to test the council's performance against good practice. For the 2017/18 review the Council attained Level 4 out of 5 (where 5 is best).

Internal Audit reviews of the Risk Management and Insurance functions were undertaken in the last year. The audit report on Risk Management Maturity was issued January 2018 and the Council judged at level 4 out of 5 (where 5 is best). The Insurance audit was completed March 2018 and a Green report issued.

These reviews provide assurance to the council that both the Risk Management and Insurance functions are adequate, effective and performing well.

► FUTURE

The service will look to further embed risk management into decision making and continue work on the insurance tender during 2018.

REVENUES & BENEFITS/COLLECTIONS

► HOUSING BENEFITS & COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT- REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12M

The rollout of Universal Credit which commenced in Thurrock in March 2015 for single people progressed to full service in October last year. Under full service new applicants who are working age people with 2 children or less, are now required to claim support for housing costs through Universal Credit rather than Housing Benefits. Within Thurrock there are currently circa. 1,000 claimants who now receive support with housing costs under the Universal Credit system and 9,000 who continue to receive support through Housing Benefit.

The Governments latest estimate suggests that full migration to Universal Credit will not complete until 2023. Whilst Universal Credit is administered by the DWP, even once fully rolled out, the council will still play a key role in providing assisted digital support and budgeting support for Universal Credit. The Council will also maintain responsibility administration of Housing Benefit for people of pensionable age, those in temporary homeless accommodation, all claimants for Local Council Tax support and Discretionary Housing Payments for those in receipt of Housing Benefit or Universal Credit, who require additional short term assistance to meet their Housing Costs.

► PERFORMANCE DATA

Despite the additional workload the time taken to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support remains good with New Claims being processed in an average of 3 weeks and changes of circumstance in less than a week. This compares favourably to the current processing times for Universal Credit.

Complaints regarding the service have fallen with only 27 received in 2017/18 of which 33% were upheld. This is an improving result considering the service processed circa 3,000 new claims last year and in excess of 20,000 changes in circumstance.

► HOUSING BENEFITS - FUTURE

The service will continue to monitor developments and adjust service provision where possible to mitigate the impact of the roll out of Universal Credit and the wider benefit reform agenda.

► DEBT RECOVERY

Thurrock's collection results are now amongst the best in the country, however debt recovery can, by its nature, sometimes be a difficult and emotive subject. As with other councils Thurrock has to balance the duty to collect to ensure delivery of the services it provides whilst ensuring those in difficulties receive the support they require.

In line with these requirements I am committed to ensuring that whilst this council must take a firm approach to those that can pay but won't, residents that can't pay, but want to pay, are treated in a fair and appropriate way and are provided with the opportunity to access the support they need – including helping to educate young people emerging into adulthood from education and other pathways on the short-term, and long-term adversity, of getting into debt.

In order to support our service planning to maintain this direction of travel in 2017 the council commissioned a full and independent Service Review of Debt Management. The

service review consisted of 2 initial phases, commencing with an internal review followed by an independent external review by the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation (IRRV).

Both reviews were wide ranging, incorporating scrutiny of our current debt procedures and systems, use of enforcement agents, support of potentially vulnerable, collection performance, complaints and service provision. Within the review, members, senior officers, staff and support organisations were interviewed. Accounts were randomly selected to ensure compliance with Policy, Legislation and good practice. Call recordings were also randomly sampled to review the way people owing money were treated.

The external review found that the council's debt team and processes were well managed and compliant in all areas with current policy and legislation. The IRRV noted that performance had significantly improved over the last few years and that the team operates a clear distinction between those that can't and won't pay.

With regards to recommendations the review supported the internal reviews findings to investigate technology to resolve issues created by the fragmentation of IT systems to create a single view of the debtor. Additional recommendations were made including that the council consider revising the fair debt policy, improve staff retention and invest in further training for staff in matters such as conflict resolution.

► PERFORMANCE DATA

Collection performance is included in each relevant service element below.

► RECOVERY – FUTURE

In order to progress this to the next stage I am in the final stages of organising a fair debt summit with cross party and multi-agency attendance to focus on 3 areas:

- (1) Firstly, we will look at our multi-agency approach to support those who want to pay, but can't;
- (2) Secondly, helping to provide resources and education to those emerging from education and the wider government system, into parenthood where access and over-use of credit can have a short-term and long-term detriment to quality of life; and
- (3) Finally we will look at the small segment of people who could pay, but won't pay.

► COUNCIL TAX - REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

Within Thurrock we currently send a Council Tax bill to over 67,000 properties for a net value of £78m. This income stream is critical to fund the services the Council provides and therefore it is vital that to support effective collection and customer service we maintain timeliness, accuracy of billing, processing and assessment of applications and query resolution.

I am pleased to report that whilst work volumes continue to increase in line with property numbers, operational costs have not been impacted. Timeliness of processing and accuracy levels also remain strong with most queries or applications resolved within the week they are received.

Of course combined with our duty to maximise income we also need to ensure that we are supporting those individuals or groups that need assistance with the amount they are charged.

In line with this, this year the Council introduced a Care Leavers Discount. This discount means that young people leaving care who have liability for Council Tax in Thurrock are now disregarded for Council Tax up to their 21st birthday and in exceptional cases until they are 25.

► **PERFORMANCE DATA**

For 2017/18 Thurrock maintained excellent collection rates for Council Tax to achieve an in year collection rate of 98.82%. Whilst we await publication of national results, it is envisaged these results will again place Thurrock among the top performing councils.

Complaints regarding council tax and business rates billing and collection have continued to reduce with 94 being received last year compared to 116 in the preceding year. Of the 94 received in 2017/18 35% were upheld. This is a low ratio when considering the 67,000 properties billed.

► **COUNCIL TAX – FUTURE**

The service continues to focus on encouraging residents to transact with the service through cheaper more efficient online channels.

► **NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATES (NNDR) - REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS**

For business rates we bill in excess of 4,000 properties for a net value of £118m. Under current funding arrangements Thurrock keeps circa £36m of this amount.

Last year the Government introduced new measures and funding to assist businesses who had been worst affected by the revaluation.

Where the Council had discretion the scheme was designed to ensure that the maximum level of funding available was distributed to local businesses. For this scheme and for schemes where the criteria was set by the government the service undertook analysis to identify businesses that would potentially qualify and contacted each to encourage each business to apply.

► **PERFORMANCE DATA**

Regarding collection, Thurrock achieved an excellent in year collection rate 99.74% which again is expected to place Thurrock amongst the top performing Councils in the country.

► **NATIONAL NON-DOMESTIC RATES (NNDR) - FUTURE**

The service is focused on maintaining this excellent performance whilst continuing to monitor the Government's plans to introduce 75% Business Rates Retention in 2020.

► **SUNDRY DEBTORS - REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12M**

The team have continued to focus on streamlining processes and using the current functionality and existing reports in Oracle to increase efficiency and reduce manual workload.

► **PERFORMANCE DATA**

Income received through Sundry debt increased by £6m to £68.9m in 2017/18, with the net aged debt position improving by circa. £200k.

► SUNDRY DEBTORS – FUTURE

Future focus remains on reducing the manual input and administration required when processing invoices.

INTERNAL AUDIT

► SERVICE OVERVIEW

Internal Audit is an independent assurance function that primarily operates in accordance with best practice professional standards and guidelines. It reviews on a continuous basis, the extent to which the internal control environment supports and promotes the achievement of the council's objectives, and contributes to the proper, economic, efficient and effective use of resources

► REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The previous twelve months saw an increase in outputs due to the introduction of 2 new staff members in early 2017. This has resulted in reduced use of external contractors to support the completion of the annual plan. Whilst outputs have increased, there has been a requirement to provide training and additional supervisory support to these staff and it is anticipated that 2018/19 will see a significant further increase in outputs.

The Internal Audit team has provided regular progress reports to the Standards and Audit Committee on the work carried out and highlighted any key findings.

► PERFORMANCE DATA

Internal Audit issued 28 Final Reports in 2017/18 and undertook a significant number of pieces of ad hoc work across the directorates. In addition, we worked closely with the counter fraud and investigation function and supported services through attendance at a number of project meetings to discuss internal controls.

► FUTURE

The 2018/19 plan was developed following meetings with Directors, Assistant Directors and other relevant senior staff and covers operations across all the Council's directorates. It takes into account the key risks identified within the council's Corporate Risk Register as well as the External Auditor's Annual Audit and Inspection Letter, the Annual Governance Statement and the Annual Governance Report. New issues and potential emerging risks were also identified and discussed with senior management. The 2018/19 annual plan and 3 year strategy was discussed and agreed with members of the Standards & Audit Committee on 6th March 2018.

During 2018/19, the service is introducing automated internal audit software to provide a more efficient, effective reporting and follow-up process. Whilst there will be an initial period where staff familiarise themselves with the software, the benefits of the new system will result in reduction in time spent per audit, increased coverage and better reporting of performance indicators in the medium term.

FINANCE DIRECTORATE BUDGET CONTROL

► FINANCIAL INFORMATION – 2018/19

Service Area	Full Year Budget £	Full Year Forecast £	Variance £
Finance	3,875,124	3,794,163	80,961
Total	3,875,124	3,794,163	80,961

► TREASURY – 2018/19

	Full Year Budget £000	Full Year Forecast £000	Variance £000
Interest & Fees Payable on External Debt	7,707	7,707	0
Interest Receivable on Investments	(19,183)	(19,183)	(0)
Net Interest	(11,476)	(11,476)	(0)
MRP	7,285	7,285	0
Total	4,191	4,191	(0)

COMMERCIAL & PROCUREMENT SERVICES

► SERVICE OVERVIEW

The Commercial Services team leads on the promotion and delivery of best practice in business development and procurement practices across the Council, continuing to build on the cultural shift within Thurrock Council whereby all departments are expected to cost-recover where possible, and where department external income is routinely forecasted; and delivered on by said departments

The service leads on all procurement processes across the Council providing a structure to support all areas in adopting a fair, consistent, transparent and robust approach to procurement, stretching every pound we spend to continue to deliver great value for money while at the same time delivering best possible outcomes for residents. Furthermore, I have asked the team for this municipal year to consider further the performance of all procured services, ensuring measurement is consistent, fair and value is being delivered on behalf of the taxpayer.

The service continues to be the key enabler for ensuring the delivery of existing income generating commitments, identifying income streams that are in line with agreed commercial principles.

The Commercial Services team consists of eleven officers at a cost £488k (17/18.) The team has generated income growth and procurement savings of £2.5m in the last 12 months. In view of the significant returns delivered by the team in both income generation and contract saving accrued, the team represents a positive annual return on investment (5.1 ROI.)

► REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

► External Income Monitoring

The Commercial Board, chaired by the Director of Commercial Services, monitor the performance of external income across all Council areas. This level of scrutiny and discipline has generated significant returns for the Council. In financial year 17/18, gross external income from fees & charges exceeded budget expectations. In addition, during year the Commercial Services team undertook a deep dive on all discretionary fees and charges to ensure alignment with Thurrock's commercial principles. The outcome of which has resulted in an external income target for 18/19 of £7.1m, a 6.7% growth.

► Gross External Income from fees & charges

Directorate £000's	Budget 17/18	Actual 17/18	Budget 18/19
Adults	335.7	320.9	337.5
Children's	1,181.6	958.6	1,173.6
Environment & Highways	1,898.7	1,997.8	2,309.5
Housing (GF)	378.5	264.6	413.2
Place	2,695.5	3,110.1	2,845.2
Corporate			25.0
TOTAL	6,490.0	6,652.0	7,104.0

► Procurement & Contract Management

Key outcomes for the year were:

- Creation of a Procurement Scrutiny Board
- Delivery of Thurrock's procurement principles
- Appointment of Category Managers for each Service Directorate
- Implementation of a full end to end e-tendering system (Intend)
- Appointment of a Contract Manager
- Better engagement with Children & Adult Commissioning Services

Strategic Procurement was a key theme for 2017, providing a framework to optimise value for money for every pound spent. The delivery of the procurement principles during the year ensure that:

- Contracts are procured to deliver the best economic value for the Council and, by direct extension, sound social return for our residents and communities
- Procurement activities are enhanced using proactive and collaborative planning to optimise the return on investment for the Council; and
- Opportunities are identified (and realised) for rationalisation, negotiation, lifecycle management, substitution, aggregation of demand and more to drive savings and efficiencies

The number of procurement exercises across the council is rising.

	2016	2017	2018 Forecast
PS Numbers issued	256	330	435

In the first four months of this year 145 PS numbers were issued, this is largely due to greater compliance across the Council of procurement procedures with the newly appointed Category Managers actively involved with Service Directorates.

The estimated whole life cost of procurement exercises has remained at £200m. The Category Managers now take considerably more responsibility for the planning and design element of the tender exercise, and the creation of a Procurement Scrutiny Board has ensured a forward plan is in place for large contract items

The team have worked actively with the Thurrock Business Board outlining the framework agreement opportunities that are in place for local businesses. To further support our engagement with local business the team will be launching a series of training programmes the 'what makes a winning bid' programme has been designed with local businesses in mind. The council's Procurement Principles has introduced a desire to see at least one local provider being part of the tender process.

At a forthcoming CSR meeting, officers will present an analysis on all services (including procured services outside of the council), for debate and discussion and input.

► Council Spending Review (Service Transformation)

The aim of the Service Review Programme is to transform and improve services across the Council supporting and contributing to the wider MTFS programme.

	Actual 17/18	Budget 18/19	MTFS 19/20	MTFS 20/21
MTFS Target	£577k	£930k	£920k	£800k

The change in Chair for the Board resulted in a shift in emphasis, rather than just service-by-service reviews, the CSR has evolved to also include strategic interventions on areas where support is needed to address concerns such as high costs or budget pressures, low level performance or customer dissatisfaction, high or increasing levels of demand, high levels of sickness or high agency spending. Reviews continue to follow the seven service design principles with the focus for 2018/19 being children's social care, business resource, transport and ICT.

► Digital Inclusion

During 2017, the team liaised with Orsett & East Tilbury Community Forums to close the gap on the last 5% of residents without Superfast Broadband.

The Hyperoptic partnership has performed well this year with 662 premises now rolled out and 26% (173) of residents taking up the product offer. The aim is to continue to roll out across other housing sites throughout the year.

Both initiatives are key in ensuring that our commitment to digital inclusion is a reality for all residents in our borough. Thurrock Council is not the responsible agency for delivery Superfast Broadband across the borough, but it has volunteered to do its bit to enable communities without Superfast capability.

► FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

	Budget 17/18	Actual 17/18	Variance
Commercial Services	£ 560,557	£ 488,033	£72,524

► THE FUTURE

► Contract & Supplier Relationship Management

Thurrock will continue to develop a Contract Management and Supplier Relationship Strategy to compliment the Procurement Strategy; the primary aim is to ensure that once a contract is awarded it continues to deliver value for money and the right outcomes. The strategy will establish and implement a standardised contract management process, ensure the proper level of focus to monitor and manage supplier performance and go beyond simply reviewing KPI's, working with suppliers to extract the most value from contracts by fostering relationships with suppliers based on innovation and continuous improvement. I have asked for a framework for Service Level Agreement to be introduced into our processes at council, and that future tenders would review aggregate contract performance as a consideration in any future awarding of contracts.

► Council Service Review (Service Transformation)

There will be an increased emphasis on service reviews to reform services not just bring them into budget balance.

► #LifesLadder

Officers have been tasked to investigate a number of initiatives aimed at helping residents climb life's ladder. Such interventions could help address initiatives such as the costs of home fuelling, or signpost and help people build up the savings to enable purchase of their own home. These initiatives are being investigated, and if viable, more detail will emerge throughout the municipal year.

► Discretionary Services Fees & Charges

Work will continue on future year fees and charges, ensuring that all commercial principles become a reality and ensure that all discretionary services are cost neutral. This includes looking at introducing some tiered fees and charges, where residents have more choice in the type and quality of service they may wish to pay for, outside of the traditional services funded by council tax.

STRATEGY – VISION AND PRIORITIES

► SERVICE OVERVIEW

This portfolio covers the council's vision and priorities and branding.

► REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

In February 2018, Full Council approved a new vision and priorities. This was the culmination of a wide-ranging piece of work, including feedback from many council, partners, community and resident groups and individuals. It was finalised through a dedicated, cross-party member working group.

The new vision is “an ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future”. The new three priority headings are “People, Place and Prosperity”.

The new vision and priorities better reflect the ambition for the council and Thurrock the place, to be more succinct and easy to communicate, and to articulate the new focus and priorities.

The new vision and priorities were developed alongside the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). This is in parallel to the work on the Council Spending Review (CSR) and, as such, they align with the move towards commercialism, transformation and an investment approach.

The vision and priorities will be delivered through key strategy action plans, service plans, objective setting and performance management tools.

The vision and “People, Place, Prosperity” will also be used to further enhance the council's branding and promotion of the place. All villages and towns had new signage installed earlier this year with boundary welcome signs to be rolled out shortly alongside a Transforming Thurrock campaign highlighting where the council is driving regeneration for the benefit of the whole community.

► FUTURE

The new vision and priorities have a stronger narrative around where the council is now, the direction of travel and ambition. This allows us to move forward with stronger messaging about Thurrock the place and celebrate and capitalise on the wonderful opportunities our borough has to offer.