

24 November 2021	ITEM: 12
Council	
Report of the Cabinet Member for Central Services	
Report of: Councillor Jack Duffin, Cabinet Member for Central Services	
This report is public	

Introduction by Cabinet Member

I am delighted to present to Council my first portfolio holder report as the Cabinet Member for Central Services. I would first like to acknowledge and thank all those staff working in what is considered the 'back-office roles' of Thurrock Council who worked, and continue to work, tirelessly through the global pandemic to ensure our essential functions remained in place that were visible to both residents and other colleagues.

My portfolio covers a diverse range of areas that not only have their own exciting projects but also support those in other areas. The last few months has seen some key activities take place:

- a Scrutiny-Executive Protocol for managing scrutiny comments at Cabinet has been implemented;
- the Local and Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner elections were delivered in a COVID-19 safe environment;
- our customer contact centre not only gained Customer Contact Association (CCA) Global Standard version 7 but they have remained fully operational throughout the pandemic whilst also absorbing Thurrock Coronavirus Community Action (TCCA) telephone calls until very recently;
- we have successfully delivered Thurrock On-Line using a new platform that enables our residents to have a quicker and more efficient way to interact with us;
- commencing with the Civic Offices, good progress has been made with our Smarter Working programme: enabling staff to work in a more mobile and collaborative style using mobile technology combined with workplace re-configuration. This is to create a modern working environment whilst freeing up existing office space that can accommodate other service relocations and/or partner/commercial opportunities;
- we continue to implement Oracle Cloud so that we remain a modern business with the enhanced functionality to monitor budgets and establishments;
- and the new communications strategy 2021-24 has been agreed. This sets out the approach the council will take over the next three years to ensure that communications activity aligns with and supports the vision and priorities of the council.

VISION, STRATEGY and CORPORATE PERFORMANCE

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

This part of my portfolio is primarily concerned with the council's vision and priorities and ensuring the council is delivering against those priorities and objectives through the corporate performance framework.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The vision and corporate priorities were agreed by Council in January 2018 and remain highly relevant for Thurrock. Cabinet have agreed the main areas of focus and activity for 2021/22 that will help to deliver against the overall vision and priorities. These include the refresh of the Health and Well Being Strategy, delivering Backing Thurrock – Economic Growth Strategy, progressing the Local Plan, delivering Thames Freeport with partners, transforming service delivery and embedding the collaborative community's framework.

There is a lot of work going on across the council to ensure existing and emerging strategies interlink, for instance the refresh of the Health and Well Being Strategy and the Backing Thurrock Strategy both focus on addressing inequalities in the lives of residents both in terms of health but also the wider determinants of health and well-being, such as access to jobs, housing, skills, transport, open spaces, all of which contribute to the levelling up of opportunities within our borough.

The performance of the priority activities of the council is monitored through the Corporate KPI (Key Performance Indicator) framework. The indicators are reviewed every year and have been chosen to be as clear and simple to understand as possible, whilst balancing the need to ensure the council is monitoring those things which are of most importance, both operationally and strategically.

2020/21 was a challenging year. Of that there is no doubt - and many services and therefore performance indicators were directly or indirectly impacted by the pandemic and the enforced changes to council services in line with government guidance during this period. The end of year outturn for 2020/21 showed 63% of indicators achieved their target and 52% were better than or the same as the outturn for 2019/20. This is understandably lower than the 2019/20 outturns of 74% achieving target and 60% improved direction of travel.

During the first three months of 2021/22, the country was still experiencing a range of lockdown restrictions which has continued to impact some areas in different ways. It is difficult to predict accurately how long and to what extent service delivery in those areas which are still being impacted will continue. This is being further affected by the need to mitigate against the wider capacity and financial pressures which COVID-19 has brought about, including the need to hold vacant posts and the ongoing recruitment restrictions as well as transformational changes to the way services are delivered. I, along with my Cabinet and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee colleagues, will continue to keep this under close monitoring and I will continue to present performance reports on a quarterly basis.

The council does not just measure itself by statistics alone. And we continue to see many of the council's services, projects and individuals recognised locally, regionally and nationally. In the last 12 months this has included the Micro-enterprise Programme, Head Start Housing, Purfleet-on-Thames Regeneration, Alma Court and Counter Fraud. A full list of the awards which the council has won or been shortlisted for can be found at www.thurrock.gov.uk/how-we-are-doing/awards.

▶ FUTURE

The governance for the corporate performance framework is embedded and as such this approach will be continued throughout 2021/22. This governance is multi-layered – individual teams, lead officers, Directors, portfolio holders and member scrutiny through the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet work programme.

CUSTOMER SERVICES

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

This part of the portfolio includes all front line customer contact including the contact centre, careline, out-of-hours, cashiers, registrars and face to face customer services on the ground floor of the Civic Offices (the face to face service has not been in operation since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020).

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The past 12 months has been very challenging but the Customer Services Department have really risen to the challenge, managing to keep the contact centre fully operational from 8am to 6pm throughout the entire COVID-19 period. In addition, the contact centre also took responsibility for the TCCA call handling from June 2020 until September 2021. This was a great success and meant we were able to provide further support for our most vulnerable residents throughout this period.

We have also managed to maintain a fully operational careline 24/7- 365 days, along with the out of hour's service for the council throughout the whole COVID-19 period. There has been no detrimental impact on service and additional calls have been made to vulnerable residents throughout the period to provide enhanced support during this difficult time.

Our performance was again recognised externally with accreditation of the CCA (Customer Contact Association) Global Standard version 7 in November 2020 with our next assessment due in January 2022. This standard was achieved again with no non conformances identified and an excellent audit report.

The service has still managed to provide a full contact centre service throughout the entire pandemic period, providing support for our vulnerable customers by helping them to complete benefit applications etc. over the telephone and providing reassurance for situations where they would have previously visited the offices.

The contact centre homeworking technology solution has been working extremely well and the majority of contact centre advisors now work from home very successfully.

The COVID-19 period has been challenging for the Registration Service. The service not only registers and issues certificates for all births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships which occur in the Thurrock district, but also conducts a number of ceremonies. COVID-19 resulted in closure and a reduction in these services for many months, in line with the government guidance, however bookings are back to normal and residents are comfortable now booking these major life events. The aim is to maintain our 100% good or excellent satisfaction rating previously achieved and hopefully identify some other excellent approved premises for weddings throughout the area. We also hope to attract additional business when the service moves into the new civic offices extension in the near future.

▶ FUTURE

We will develop a new customer services strategy for 2022-25. We aim to build on the success of working without a full face to face Customer Services offering in the Civic Offices and are reviewing our face to face service delivery model. We will of course ensure that we continue to support our most vulnerable residents. We are also working on further digital enhancements such as generic mailbox integration for query handling, automation opportunities where high call volumes exist, exploring the use of chat bots or Artificial Intelligence (AI) where clear customer benefits can be identified, along with further integration with existing platforms. We will continue to explore channel migration opportunities to maximise the use of our digital channels wherever possible and enabling residents to access council services online and when it is more convenient for them.

In addition we are planning a campaign to further promote our digital service so that our other channels can be used for those people that really need our support

Throughout 2021/22 the team is continuing to complete customer services quality assessments with other services utilising the framework to help guide and implement actions to improve customer service delivery across all council departments. We are also working on quality reviews across various channels such as generic email boxes, telephone calls and correspondence sent from various departments outside of the contact centre, to ensure a consistent level of customer service is being provided

COMMUNICATIONS

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

This portfolio covers the council's communications functions including media liaison (proactive and reactive), social media, digital communications, campaigns, design and the council's website as well as internal communication with staff.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to be a key focus of the work of the team throughout most of the past year. At the beginning of 2021, Thurrock had the highest rate of positive tests for COVID-19 in the country and a full range of communications activity was quickly rolled out to both combat this and communicate details of the latest national lockdown,

including increasing the frequency of the resident e-newsletter to twice weekly reaching over 100,000 at its peak. This was then followed by further crucial locally focused public health campaigns and information on various testing requirements as they progressed, the vaccination roll out and the Government's roadmap out of lockdown which is ongoing.

Internal communications has continued to be critically important during the pandemic, ensuring all staff have the latest advice and guidance as well as support available. We have continued to use the weekly #TeamThurrock e-newsletter as well as introducing a new Smarter Working e-newsletter to inform staff of change taking place across the council through redesigning our workspace and introducing new technology.

Digital communications

The council's approach to digital communications continues to develop in line with public preferences for consuming news and information. E-newsletters continue to be a valuable channel for reaching residents directly with key information and updates. The council's engagement on social media continues to grow and responses on council posts are increasingly positive, particularly on posts which are of community interest. The communications team manage social media accounts for the council and specific council services on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. The LinkedIn account in particular has grown substantially in the past year with an increase in followers and engagement rates across all posts. Facebook continues to be the most popular social media channel in Thurrock and content is specifically tailored for sharing on different social media channels to maximise engagement with target audiences.

Media relations

The council continues to manage all media enquires as well as a schedule of pro-active activity including securing over a dozen interviews in broadcast media during the past year. In total, the communications team dealt with 364 media enquiries in the past 12 months and issued 284 proactive press-releases during this time.

Campaigns

The communications team have led on the development of many campaigns throughout the past year, all of which linked directly to achieving the council's and specific service priorities, including on topics such as major regeneration and infrastructure projects, fuel poverty, scams awareness, rent support, highways and recycling. All campaigns have specific and measurable objectives so they can be fully evaluated and their impact quantified.

The team have used a wide range of communications channels and techniques to support the successful bids for the Grays and Tilbury Towns fund and the Thames Freeport.

► FUTURE

A new three year communications strategy 2021-24 communications team has been agreed which focuses on three key areas: a strategic approach, brand recognition and direct digital communications. This strategy was informed by a Local Government Association (LGA) virtual peer review referred to as a 'communications health check' as well as an independently conducted research into how residents find out news and information about the council.

The work of the communications team in the coming 12 months will focus on achieving the objectives of this strategy and major new campaigns will be launching in the coming months on economic growth, recycling and fostering as well as further enhancements to digital communications including increased use of video content.

I encourage all Councillors to sign-up for our e-newsletters and follow our social media channels to keep up to date on the wide ranging work the council is doing.

CORPORATE PROGRAMME TEAM (TRANSFORMATION)

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

The Corporate Programme Team is responsible for the delivery of the council's Corporate Transformation Programme. This ambitious programme has been reviewed and refreshed this year to align and prioritise programmes and projects to support new operating models, deliver costs reductions and efficiencies and drive digital solutions.

The programme comprises of five Executive Portfolios:

- Digital
- People
- Data & Demand
- Community & Collaboration
- Assets

The programmes and projects range from enhancing the way residents interact digitally with the council through to rationalising our assets to help reduce the operational footprint of the organisation whilst supporting a more mobile workforce.

A new governance structure is supporting the delivery plan and ensuring interdependencies are managed appropriately.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

Thurrock On-Line

The new govService platform was implemented in January 2021, which replaced the old My Account service.

Since go-live back in January over 31,000 residents have signed up and over 12,000 reports or applications have been submitted using the new digital forms.

The initial go-live included services that allowed customers to:

- Manage their council tax account, from setting up a direct debit to reporting a change of address
- Apply for benefits or tell us about a change
- Report issues – for example, fly tipping or a missed bin collection

- Book a bulky waste collection

New online application forms have been developed for:

- Household waste and recycling centre permits
- Temporary event notices
- Taxi licensing – new driver, vehicle, operator, change of details, notice of transfer
- Street trading
- Business rates refund

During the various COVID-19 lockdown restrictions our physical front doors may have had to remain closed to the public but our “digital front doors” remained wide open for business – and will continue to do so.

Smarter Working

Building on the acceleration achieved as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown the Smarter Working Programme focused on three key areas of activity:

- Technology
- Workspace
- Culture

This approach to embracing new ways of working has enabled us to redesign and deliver a new office environment that provides collaborative space, supported by mobile equipment and a Digital Academy to enhance digital skills.

The programme has resulted in a 50% reduction in the council’s existing Civic Offices ‘office space’, enabled staff to work more flexibly and freed up CO1 for disposal. In addition the ‘hybrid’ technology that has been implemented enables the new ways of working to be sustained and the efficiencies embedded.

Civic Offices

Despite industry-wide constraints as a result of the pandemic and Brexit, works are well established regarding the construction of a new Civic Office building in Grays. The new building forms part of the Grays regeneration programme and its west facing entrance will link perfectly with the planned north/south underpass. It will be a modern, technologically advanced, eco-friendly building that meets BREEAM Outstanding rating and one that, not only replaces the outdated original Civic Office (C01), but sets a benchmark for quality as other developments come forward in the Town Centre.

When completed, in early 2022, it will host a new Registrar’s area, including a ceremonial garden, together with vibrant and modern democratic facilities. Plus a new café area and a section of the building that is dedicated to supporting our most vulnerable residents.

Digital Efficiency Review (DER)

DER is one of the key projects that sits under the ‘people’ portfolio of the Transformation programme and seeks to:

- Reduce administrative / transactional workforce headcount
- Achieve £2million salary saving over two years
- Embed generic job descriptions associated with job families
- Embed a digital by default, innovative workforce
- Improve and rationalise processes
- Be digital by default
- Create efficiencies
- Remove duplication
- Paperless by default
- Rationalise business support across leadership and management tiers

The project started in September 2021 and to date good progress has been made identifying all transactional activity across the organisation. Our business analysts and IT teams are working to re-engineer processes and identify digital solutions for implementation that will create efficiencies and savings.

► FUTURE

Innovation and new ways of working are constantly on our radar in order to deliver the best possible services to the residents and businesses of Thurrock. Over the coming year we will continue to focus our Corporate Transformation Programme on the delivery of the transformational projects that will optimise efficiency and shape the council.

Improvement initiatives include:

- Business Process Improvement, which includes:
 - Business process re-engineering
 - Process Automation A/I
- Citizen Channels, which includes:
 - Thurrock On Line
 - Simplifying access to services
- Data Platform integration & Business Intelligence, which includes:
 - Capturing information once
 - Optimizing assessments
 - Data analysis
- Workforce optimisation, which includes:
 - Smarter Working
 - The Digital Efficiency Review (DER)
 - Digital collaboration using MS 365
- Asset rationalisation, which includes:
 - Comprehensive Asset Review
 - Civic Offices reconfiguration
 - Library/Hubs review

Thurrock On-Line

The new platform will be used to digitise more of our services, thereby increasing our self-service offer to our residents. It will also be used to migrate some of our existing e-forms, thus creating a consistent user experience when making applications or reporting issues to the council.

Work that is currently in progress includes:

- Premises licensing
- Various licensing applications which fall under the Licensing Act
- Skip permits
- Building control applications

This project will link with a number of other improvement initiatives, such as DER for example, to ensure that we streamline, or ideally automate, back-end processes to ensure that customers receive an effective outcome in the timeliest manner.

Data Analytics, Process Automation and Artificial Intelligence

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic made organisations across many sectors realise the true value of the data they have access to and how quickly they can react to what it's telling them.

Learning from previous successes with regards to data visioning we will primarily focus on further developing an integrated data platform that will ultimately give us to access to data that resides across disconnected business applications. Delivering:

- Greater insight into trends to help forecast demand on services
- The ability to understand better, and react more effectively, to our resident's needs
- The capability to gain Business Intelligence across the whole organisation and to speed up assessment overheads

Recent research confirms that data's role in transformation is very much seen as a key enabler among councils: yet many continue to grapple with joining the dots up across multiple, disparate data sources. So we are not alone in this ambition – and certainly further ahead than may other organisations.

HUMAN RESOURCES & ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

The focus of HR & OD is to ensure the council has the high performing, engaged and confident workforce it needs to deliver excellent services and positive outcomes to our residents. The service consists of:

- HR, Resourcing and Improvement – ensuring the council is effectively resourced with the right people to deliver services to residents and providing the employment framework for excellent people management.
- Pay & Operations – ensuring staff are paid appropriately and the council complies with appropriate legislation and statutory requirements.
- People & Organisational Development – ensuring our workforce is equipped with the skills, knowledge and behaviours needed to deliver the council's priorities and the organisation embraces change.

Activity and interventions are aligned to deliver the council's People Strategy which is focused on embedding the council's six core values:

- Ambitious
- Compassionate
- Empowered
- Collaborative
- Inclusive
- Proud

and our ambition to create a high performing, open and inclusive culture where innovation and creativity is encouraged and nurtured.

► REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

Workforce Strategy

The financial challenges facing the council have required a focus on the optimum use of resources, including our workforce. Our Smarter Working programme along with our drive for new operating models through transformation require a clear workforce plan to ensure we retain the people and skills we need, rationalise where we can automate and protect front line services and reskill our staff for the future. The initial phase of our Workforce Strategy has enabled us to:

- Reduce FTE by restricting recruitment to business critical roles
- Deliver cashable savings through vacancies and reduction in agency spend
- Ensure the organisation has and retains the right skills and capabilities
- Protect our current staff as much as possible

Pay Review

Following on from the successful delivery of Phase 1 of the Pay Review, which saw significant investment in our pay structure and salaries, we have made progress with Phase 2. This is focused on the modernisation of our allowances, reducing costs and enabling us to apply a universal approach to reward. This year we have:

- Undertaken an eligibility review of Business User Allowance and shift allowance payments
- Run a comprehensive collective consultation process with Trade Unions and staff which has resulted in Unison and Unite the Union members agreeing the final proposals
- Worked with the service to bring a conclusion to the industrial action in Waste.

Organisational Design

Critical for Transformation the team have supported the organisation in the development of new Target Operating Models (TOMs). These have embedded principles that enable services to challenge and consider options for service delivery, including management structures, digital solutions and spans of control.

Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is critical to our success, the way we do things is the ultimate determinate of how we treat our customers. This year we have:

- Continue to embed new working practices to support Smarter Working
- Embedded change management processes to support organisational change and transformation including an active network of change champions
- Maintained our Wellbeing offer, promoting health and wellbeing and ensuring staff are supported - effectively managing sickness absence and supporting mental health

Confidence & Capacity

In aiming to have the best workforce and the most exciting opportunities for staff we have:

- Continued to develop online communities covering a range learning activities to support staff development
- Delivered a range of health & wellbeing, Leadership, communication, personal development and technology activities
- Increased skills and capability by delivering a range of different learning and development events in the past 12 months
- 449 learning activities delivered through face to face, virtual and self-paced learning & development – 7517 attendances for the whole year
- 2834 completed at least one learning activity over the last 12 months
- 138 learners across Oracle learning communities in place to support COVID-19

Oracle Cloud

Oracle Cloud provides a modern system which will underpin business transformation and improvement across HR & OD and the wider Council. Oracle went live on 1 April 2019 and the team have consolidated processes to improve efficiency through automated transactions, improved employee and manager experience, whilst supporting change across the organisation. The Oracle Improvement Project has continued to resource test and implement enhanced functionality through new modules, upgrades and fixes.

- Fully integrated HMRC Real Time Information (RTI) automation for submissions and returns
- Enhances to HR Helpdesk including better reporting and customer experience
- Fixes to annual leave giving greater flexibility to book leave and multi assignment
- A new Elections payroll allowing this payroll to move “in-house” from Rochford Council
- Review Employee Positions to enhance budget and establishment control

Once fully functional Oracle will provide:

- Enhanced business intelligence to support workforce planning and talent management
- Improved Employee Self Service through an app
- Improved Manager Self Service and dashboards
- Efficiency in internal processes supports improved customer service

By enhancing our internal digital transformation this supports the targeting of resourcing to resident facing services.

▶ FUTURE

Key priorities for the year ahead include:

- Pay Review Phase 2 – finalise the review of our reward and benefits package to further modernise our approach and ensure an inclusive approach.
- Support organisational change and transformation through effective workforce planning – ensuring we have the right people to deliver the council's priorities
- Continue to embed new ways of working, ensuring individuals are supported and outcomes managed.
- Talent management – embed talent management and succession to support effective workforce and career planning
- Deliver the second year priorities within the People Strategy
- Continue to build a culture of utilising digital solutions to support the organisational transformation.
- Continue with the Oracle Improvement Project including:
 - Overtime Self Service (OTL)
 - New Recruitment Module (ORC)
 - Integration between Matrix SCM and Oracle
 - Implementation of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) and Teacher's pension functionality to meet new pension legislation
 - Improved Employee Helpdesk with seeded Robotic Process Automation (RPA)
 - Embed Employee and Manager Self Service to realise benefits and efficiencies and underpin business transformation

INFORMATION TEAM

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

This team is responsible for ensuring compliance with information governance regulations, including information security (policies and procedures), Data Protection, Freedom of Information (FOI), Records Management, Complaints and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) including Local Land & Property Gazetteer (LLPG) / Local Street Gazetteer (LSG).

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

During 2020/21:

- The council processed 99% of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests within the 20 working day legal timeframe. This is improved performance compared to the previous year. The Information Commissioner expect public authorities to answer at least 90% on time

- The council continue to ensure data is identified for routine publication online. This work forms part of the Transparency Agenda and aims to increase openness and accountability
- The council received 84 Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection Legislation. 99% of these requests were processed within the legal timeframe. Requests have increased significantly following changes to the Data Protection Act, however performance remains strong
- The volume of complaints reduced by 14% compared to last year. Upheld complaints also reduced by 7%. 88% of complaints were responded to within timeframe. A total of 3,948 member enquiries were received, with 95% responded to within timeframe. The average time taken to respond to members enquiries across all directorates was 4 days
- Member enquiries continue to require significant capacity and resources, therefore we need to continue to drive the use of the appropriate digital methods for reporting issues. Member enquiries should operate as an escalation where normal processes have failed
- The number of complaints stages was reduced from a three staged process to two. This links in with our customer services strategy of getting it right first time

▶ FUTURE

The focus for the team over the next year will be:

- Driving a learning from complaints culture with robust learning action plans across council services
- To implement changes and to evidence accountability as part of the Data Protection Act requirements
- To reduce the number of physical records located at off-site storage locations
- To introduce a range of smarter/digital working initiatives to improve service delivery

INTERNAL AUDIT

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 Chief Internal Auditor's Annual Report, which was presented to members of the Standards & Audit Committee in July 2021, confirmed the council's frameworks for governance, risk management and internal control were all positive. 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 throughout the year.

▶ FUTURE

The Internal Audit 3 year Strategy 2020/21 to 2022/23 and Annual Plan 2020/21 was developed in early 2020 following a comprehensive audit needs assessment which was undertaken with senior managers across the council. In addition, a separate audit needs assessment was carried out to develop a specialist IT audit programme.

The strategy and plan take into account the key risks identified within the council's Corporate Risk Register, External Auditor's Annual Audit and the Annual Governance Statement and was agreed at Standards & Audit Committee in March 2021. As part of this process, it was agreed that a six month plan would be developed to provide additional flexibility, which would assist the service in reacting to changing priorities and working arrangements brought about by the pandemic.

New audit working papers software is being implemented during 2021/22 which is more user-friendly and will standardise the audit approach when undertaking reviews. This will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the team and lead to increased outputs.

LEGAL SERVICES

The Legal Services directorate includes the legal services team, democratic services, Members' services and electoral services.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The Legal Services team has continued to work across the council supporting the delivery of legal advice and support to all teams. There are strong working relationships with a range of key teams where high volumes of core work are handled.

The team continues to evolve its services working with other services across the council to support the delivery of corporate projects and programs.

▶ FUTURE

The team moved its case management systems to a locally hosted service improving resilience and has maintained its annual reaccreditation with Lexcel the legal practice management standard. Robust practice management is a key factor in delivering excellence in legal services, retaining good legal talent and consequently giving reassurance to our residents.

Thurrock Legal Services will continue as an in-house team addressing principally the needs of Thurrock Council. This will be beneficial to the community as will give continuity in service provision and stability for the specialist teams such as children in care. We are supporting a robust legal team to protect vulnerable residents, to prosecute planning violations and environmental enforcement including against fly tippers.

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

Democratic Services has faced a challenging year ensuring that committee meetings and their decisions continued under the lockdown restrictions. The COVID-19 Bill allowed meetings to continue in a virtual space and the team were able to use MS Teams to hold all virtual meetings for committees. It is testament to the team's hard work that the committee function of the council continued throughout the period with little disruption to decision making outcomes. In tandem with this the team has worked with the external company, Public-i, to enhance the technology already installed in the Council Chamber to offer a hybrid meeting service whereby meetings can be held using both a physical and virtual space.

Outside of the immediate needs created by the COVID-19 outbreak, the team has managed the recent review of the Overview and Scrutiny function, led by the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to make a number of recommendations which were agreed at Cabinet. The team is now working to embed these recommendations into the day to day practices of overview and scrutiny committees. These changes include a Scrutiny-Executive Protocol for managing scrutiny comments at Cabinet, the use of briefing notes to manage business and the revival of portfolio holder sessions at scrutiny committees.

ELECTORAL AND MEMBER SERVICES

It was a busy year this year for Electoral Services. The team delivered Local and Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner Elections in a COVID-19 safe environment.

2021 would ordinarily have been a fallow year (i.e. no local elections were due to be held) but the team ran the rescheduled elections from 2020. PPE was rolled out to all the polling stations, count and postal vote opening to ensure everyone was kept safe. Processes were changed accordingly to ensure all the current government guidelines were being met with weekly meetings with public health and health and safety taking place to ensure nothing was missed. Staffing was a challenge with people needing to isolate at short notice but all polling stations had the required staff to operate according to legislation and in COVID-19 safe environment. The count had reduced staff due to the need of social distancing but everything ran smoothly and results were announced for the Local election in the early hours on the 7 May 2021. The count for the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner took place on the Saturday once again with reduced staff to allow for social distancing.

The statutory annual canvass commenced in July 2021. As a result of Canvass Reform the canvass process is more streamlined and now utilises a matching process with both data from the Department of Work and Pensions and local council tax and housing data. This means those householders (82%) whose details matched do not need to respond if their details are correct, as printed on the form. Canvassers were employed to deliver the initial forms to properties and are out now door knocking to encourage the outstanding non responding properties to respond. The revised register is due for publication on 1 December 2021, subject to further legislation.

The Member Services team continue to support elected members remotely, ensuring that any office-based work is undertaken in a timely manner.

The team have recently successfully delivered a Freedom of the Borough Ceremony and a celebratory Mayor Making event, which saw three long-standing clergyman from Thurrock receive this prestigious award and welcomed Cllr Shinnick as Mayor and Cllr Halden as Deputy Mayor.

Preparations are underway for the forthcoming Civic Dinner in April 2022 and the Mayor recently hosted an Afternoon Tea and raised hundreds of pounds for her chosen charities. A further charity event evening at Puttshack is being finalised.

► FUTURE

Planning for the May 2022 local elections. The team is currently reviewing procedures for scheduled events in light of Covid-19. This includes planning for Remembrance Day, the Mayor's Civic Dinner in April 2021 to commemorate the end of the Mayor's term in office and thinking ahead to ways in which Annual Council may be facilitated.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The IT department provides the technical infrastructure, functionality, governance and support to enable the council to work effectively.

Dealing with 3,000 requests per month the service is responsible for providing the council with IT Services that enable people and systems to work effectively.

► REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

New ways of working

The service have continued to adapt the way we work as a team to enable new models of support for remote working. We have invested in more resilience of our infrastructure to enable staff to use the Always on Virtual Private Network (AOVPN) technology that is more reliable and enables staff to take advantage of the MS Teams technology we have made available to support new ways of working.

MS365

Originally providing the foundation and technology to support remote working in lockdown the MS365 project will be a core component of the council's transformation programme. We have been developing the next phase of the M365 rollout which will include OneDrive, MS Planner, Sharepoint, MSForms and Office 2019. There have been a number of engagement sessions with the wider business and technical experts and there are two pilots currently underway that will complete in October. As part of the implementation the council will move its document management system away from Objective. Procurement of technology to integrate our telephony system will facilitate increased smarter working.

Projects

In addition to the above the service has delivered a number of other key projects over the last year, many aimed directly at providing more effective, efficient services for residents, some of which are highlighted below:

- Local Full Fibre Network (LFFN), the team have been responsible for procuring a pan Essex LFFN solution. Phase 1 funded from £4.4m DCMS LFFN Grant completed on time, budget and scope, with connection of 129 Public Sector Sites across Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA), and rollout of Circa 130Km of spine fibre.
- Upgrades to the contact centre software platform to latest version, providing new reporting features and bug fixes. In addition we have added a new channel so that tickets can be logged via email functionality
- Added resilience to our backup solution with offline/immutable backups in the cloud that enhances our protection against ransomware attacks
- Put in place hybrid meeting rooms to take advantage of the MS Teams solution the council are using
- Provision of council laptops for all members
- IT have contributed to the technology work stream of the Smarter Working project by ensuring that staff have the right tools to do their job effectively. We now have in excess of 1,900 users who have work supplied laptops and mobile phones. In addition to this we have supplied equipment such as monitors, keyboards and mice to make staff home working conditions more comfortable
- Using remote tools we have successfully upgraded the operating system on all laptops
- We have delivered our first robotic process automation process into Revenues and Benefits which will save 800 hours per year
- Assisted with the technology side of the move of Thurrock Adult Community College from bridge road

► FUTURE

The next 12 months will be equally challenging as we continue to support the council's drive for smarter working and continue to support the council's corporate transformation programme by delivering a number of digital projects. Outlined below are some of the key projects that are planned for delivery over the coming year, which will have a direct, positive impact on residents and businesses:

- LFFN Phase 2 funded from a £2.5m Getting Building Fund Grant to extend Phase 1 rollout specifically to more rural areas, will roll out to Circa 85 sites, and additional Circa 75Km of spine fibre, plus point to point Backhaul connectivity across ASELA. Delivery has started and will be completed by March 2022
- Wide Area Network (WAN) - Implement and migrate all sites to the new WAN provided by High Speed Office. This will provide 10 ten times the core bandwidth available across the WAN and all end sites will receive significant increases with the majority receiving 200Mb
- Upgrading the interface between the Mitel telephony system and MSTeams to add additional voice functionality that will enable calls to be made through laptops.

- Upgrade our firewalls to increased throughput, better management and integration of security features that are currently split across multiple appliances
- Enhance our Govservice platform to add building control and Taxi licensing as part of our service offering
- Upgrade our disaster recovery solution currently hosted in Southend
- Further rollout of M365 capability to the wider council
- Delivery of the digital projects associated with corporate transformation plan including paperless office and providing support to the Digital Efficiency Review
- Development of our robotic process automation capability to help the wider organisation to transform the way they work and make efficiency savings
- Rollout of the M365 collaboration and communication tools including
- Provision of omni-channel technology (as per Customer Services above) enabling residents to receive a more efficient and timely response to standard enquiries

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

Service	Last year outturn	Budget	Q1 Forecast	Q1 Variance
	£000	£000	£000	£000
Community Development and Equalities	721	778	730	(48)
Libraries	1,203	1,322	1,179	(144)
Strategy	297	325	325	0
Communications	456	527	538	11
Customer Services	853	1,177	909	(268)
Arts Development	18	14	14	0
Theatre	86	(7)	8	15
Museum	52	109	93	(16)
Internal Audit	189	310	216	(94)
Legal Services	1,915	1,934	1,936	2
Democratic Services	219	235	230	(5)
Electoral Services	287	486	403	(83)
Member Services	755	804	793	(11)
Procurement/contract management	863	1,006	995	(10)
Corporate Programme Team	676	988	749	(238)
Information Team	590	601	623	23
HR, OD and Payroll	2,840	3,654	3,556	(98)
Information Technology	3,390	3,664	3,628	(36)