

<b>8 December 2022</b>	<b>ITEM: 5</b>
<b>Corporate O&amp;S</b>	
<b>Report of the Cabinet Member for Central Services</b>	
<b>Report of:</b> Councillor Jack Duffin, Cabinet Member for Central Services	
<b>This report is public</b>	

### **Introduction by Cabinet Member**

I am delighted to present to Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee my portfolio holder report as the Cabinet Member for Central Services. I would first like to acknowledge and thank all those staff working across my Portfolio in what are in the main considered 'back-office functions'. This work is the backbone of the organisation and roles I know you tirelessly carry out to ensure not only the council continues to run but that our residents receive an excellent service in doing so.

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 new digital and customer experience strategy has been developed and approved (subject to Cabinet on 7 December) for implementation;
- phase 2 of the pay review has been successfully implemented. This focused on the modernisation of our allowances, reducing costs, and enabling us to apply a universal approach to reward;
- our Customer Services performance was again recognised externally with accreditation of the CCA (Customer Contact Association) Version 7 global standard;
- the Constitution Working Group reviewed the structure of the overview and scrutiny function and changes to the Constitution agreed;
- 183 unique good news stories have been shared through direct communications via the council's multiple channels
- and we have successfully delivered high-profile events including responding appropriately and sensitively to the sad death of Her Majesty The Queen and ensuring a public opportunity to hear the Proclamation of the new King.

#### **1. Recommendation:**

- 1.1 That Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee note the report and ask the Cabinet Member any related questions.**

# 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

The service has continued to rollout laptops so that staff can benefit from additional functionality from the M365 stack of application including channels, MSForms, Onenote and OneDrive. This has enabled staff to collaborate and use the additional functionality to make process efficiencies. We have also completed the rollout of hybrid meeting technology into meeting rooms throughout civic.

We have strengthened our cyber security and working in partnership with the Emergency Planning Team and Fraud teams we have run several cyber awareness workshops for staff to highlight the potential impact of such an attack and this has led to several departmental business continuity plans being amended.

In partnership with customer services, we have developed the new Digital and Customer experience strategy.

## Projects

In addition to the above the service has delivered several 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) Phase 2, funded from a £2.5m Getting Building Fund Grant, has rolled out 85 sites and an additional 75km of spine fibre to rural areas, plus point to point Backhaul connectivity across the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA).
- Wide Area Network (WAN) – We have implemented a new WAN provided by High-Speed Office. This provides 10 ten times the core bandwidth available across the WAN and all end sites will receive significant increases with the majority receiving a minimum of 200Mb
- We have upgraded our firewalls, which has now given us increased resiliency through additional hardware, increased throughput, enabled better management and integration of security features that were split across multiple appliances.
- Enhanced our Govservice platform to add building control and taxi licensing as part of our service offering.
- Rolled out further capability for M365 including the use of 9 specific applications to increase collaboration and efficiency across the council.
- Developed our robotic process automation capability to help the wider organisation to transform the way they work and make efficiency savings. To date we have more than 20 processes that have been automated using this technology and have saved more than 1 FTE in time.
- Integrated Medical Centres – along with NHS partners we have worked to provide an IT solution that enables multiple agencies to work from a single site.

## ▶ FUTURE

The next 12 months will be challenging as we continue to support the digital transformation of the council and provide the tools to make efficiency savings. 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:

- Relocate and enhance our disaster recovery capability
- Deployment of MS Sharepoint to further develop our collaboration capability
- Deployment of MS power automate technology to enable the council to gain real time information and reporting
- Replacement of Objective by utilising the functionality available in M365
- Delivery of the digital projects associated with corporate transformation plan including paperless office and providing support to the digital efficiency review
- Further development of our robotic process automation capability to help the wider organisation to transform the way they work and make efficiency savings
- Provision of omni-channel technology enabling residents to receive a more efficient and timely response to standard enquiries
- Development of a citizen app to simplify the way residents interact with the council
- Development of a data strategy
- Application rationalisation
- Wi-Fi - expand corporate and guest wi-fi to all council sites
- Smarter working - we will roll out the same capabilities to all council sites

## INFORMATION GOVERNANCE

### ▶ 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 2021/22:

- The council processed 98% of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests within the 20-working day legal timeframe. 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 148 Subject Access Requests (SAR's) under the Data Protection Legislation. 91% of these requests were processed within the legal timeframe. The volume of SAR's received this year has increased by 76% compared to 2020/21, however performance remains strong.
- The number of complaints received was 1,562. For the same period last year, the figure was 1,227. The main reason for this is attributed to a significant increase in waste related complaints due to industrial action. 39% of complaints were upheld.

- A total of 4,336 member enquiries were received, with 94% responded to within timeframe. Last year the council received 3,948 enquiries with 95% responded to within timeframe. The average time taken to respond to members enquiries across all directorates was 4 days.
- From 1 April 2021 the council moved to a two-stage complaints process. Prior to this a three-stage process was in place. The primary reason for this change was to improve the customer experience in relation to complaints, by improving the quality of Stage 1 complaint responses and therefore reducing the number of escalations (getting it right first time). This change in complaints process has resulted in fewer Stage 1 complaints escalating onto Stage 2.

## ▶ **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 seek opportunities to generate income from Traded Services work for Information Governance related work
- 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

# **TRANSFORMATION**

## ▶ **SERVICE OVERVIEW**

The Corporate Programme Team is responsible for the delivery and monitoring of the council's Strategic Transformation Programme. This ambitious programme has been re-reviewed and refreshed this year to re-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
- Access to Services
- Organisational Culture
- Service Transformation
- Assets and Property

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. A new reporting mechanism to Director's Board has also been established giving them regular oversight to the programme's progress.

## ▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

### **Smarter Working**

Building on the acceleration achieved as a result of the COVID 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 Civic office environment that provides collaborative space, supported by mobile equipment and a Digital Academy to enhance digital skills.

The programme has now started to focus on updating sites external to the Civic Offices to allow further utilisation of the new mobile technology issued over the previous year or so. For example, laptop docking stations and external screens, keyboards and mice are being deployed to sites.

### **Civic Offices**

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 is a technologically advanced, eco-friendly building that meets BREEAM Outstanding rating, replacing the outdated original Civic Office (C01).

Registrars were the first Service to operate from the new building with Weddings and Citzenships taking place from April 2022. Members were also able to access their Group offices on the second floor shortly after that along with the committee rooms.

In early June the ground floor opened to the public with a new meet and greet service introduced by the Customer Services team.

The Café opened in early September and is proving to be a popular meeting space both for staff and the public.

In October the Chamber opened to the public and the first of our democratic meetings took place.

### **Digital Efficiency**

DE is one of the key projects that sits under the 'Digital' portfolio of the Transformation programme and seeks to:

- Embed a digital by default, innovative workforce.
- Improve and rationalise processes
- Create efficiencies
- Remove duplication
- Paperless by default
- Rationalise business support across leadership and management tiers

The project started in September 2021 and has adopted an Agile approach to its delivery and adapted to different approaches based on various business drivers that have evolved as it progressed. Our business analysts and IT teams are continuing 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 to deliver the best possible services to the residents and businesses of Thurrock. Over the coming year we will continue to focus our Strategic Transformation Programme on the delivery of the transformational projects that will optimise efficiency and shape the council.

Improvement initiatives continue to 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
  - Developing a Citizen App.
- Data Platform integration & Business Intelligence, which includes:
  - Capturing information once
  - Optimising assessments
  - Data analysis
- Workforce optimisation, which includes:
  - Smarter Working
  - The Digital Efficiencies (DE)
  - 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.

This project will link with several other improvement initiatives, such as DE for example, to ensure that we streamline, or ideally automate, back-end processes and 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 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 and Resourcing – 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 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
- Ensure the organisation has and retains the right skills and capabilities
- Protect our existing permanent workforce 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, Phase 2 has also been successfully implemented. This focused on the modernisation of our allowances, reducing costs, and enabling us to apply a universal approach to reward. This year we have:

- Fully implemented Phase 2 of the Pay Review, realising the savings of £800,000 required following the investment made in the pay structure as part of Phase 1.

### **Organisational Design**

Critical for transformation the team have supported the organisation in the development of new Operating Models. 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, early adopters, and staff networks
- 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 of learning activities to support staff development, professional 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
- 303 learning activities delivered through face to face, virtual and self-paced learning & development – 8057 attendances for the whole year
- 2251 completed at least one learning activity over the last 12 months

## **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
- Implementation of the Oracle Recruiting Cloud (ORC) module

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:

- Support the organisation in its Cultural Change programme
- Embed engagement activity across all levels of the organisation
- Improve Leadership and Management practice throughout organisation
- Support ongoing 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
- Refresh our 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)
  - 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

## **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 and engagement with staff.

Timely, open and honest communication and engagement with staff, Members, partners and residents has never been more important as we respond to intervention, develop and Improvement and Recovery Plan, and await the outcome of the Best Value inspection.

### **▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS**

#### **Campaigns**

The communications team have led on the development of campaigns that have supported both corporate and service priorities, which has included work on sustainable warmth, rent support and linking to council and government support around increasing cost of living pressures. They have promoted regeneration and growth across the borough including the new Civic Offices building and alternative heating in housing in Chadwell, and their support with the full programme of events across the inaugural Thurrock Enterprise Week in March 2022. The team have also helped foster and celebrate community spirit through their work promoting events such as the Queen's Jubilee, the Commonwealth Games Baton Relay, and initiatives such as the Shop Local campaign.

The team have used a wide range of communications channels and techniques to support public consultations on key council priorities such the Local Plan, Lower Thames Crossing and the Health and Wellbeing strategy.

Unfortunately, they have had to continue delivering awareness messages around COVID, which has included a focus on promoting the work of the Public Health Vaccine Champions – highlighting their work and regularly informing the public of tailored opportunities open to them to get their first, second or third COVID vaccination jabs.

#### **Digital communications**

The council's approach to digital communications continues to develop in line with public preferences for consuming news and information.

We have grown our number of registered users across all our social channels, and currently have:

14,758 followers – Facebook

14,000 followers – Twitter

6,000 followers - LinkedIn

2,000 followers – Instagram

Over 100 TikTok followers, with plans in place to focus on growing this in 2023

E-newsletters continue to be a valuable channel for reaching residents directly with key information and updates, and 98,000 Thurrock residents remain subscribed to our weekly newsletter.

We also continue to share a monthly business-focused newsletter with a subscribed list of over 4,000 businesses.

### **Internal Communications**

Our internal communication channels are vital to sharing the latest information and guidance with staff about the ongoing developments of the council and key updates, exciting campaigns, and projects for them to get involved in, positive stories and developments from across the workforce and news from around the borough.

The local government good benchmark open rate for internal communications is 33%. Our weekly internal e-newsletter #TeamThurrock has a week-on-week average open rate of 65%.

A new approach to communicating includes a weekly Leadership Group email, which receives a consistent average open rate of 88%. Manager-specific communications also help to target mid-managers with details on specific actions they must take and key updates from across our services.

We have supported a move toward face-to-face meetings, as part of a conscious effort led by the Acting Chief Executive and Directors' Board to nurture a more collaborative, cross-Directorate culture. Over the last few months, we have seen the introduction of monthly in-person Leadership Group meetings, a new series of bi-monthly in-person Manager's Conference meetings, which have included the Leader of the Council and the Leader of the Opposition, and fortnightly All Staff Briefings on Teams led by the Acting Chief Executive.

Other internal channels include the Intranet, Smarter working and weekly All Staff e-newsletters, Everybody Emails, All Staff briefings and targeted email communications. A large piece of work is currently being undertaken to further enhance internal communications channels and engagement across every level of the organisation.

### **Emergency Communications**

The team continues to deliver strategic and operational support to the council and partners during times of emergency, including managing our public narrative and reputation.

This has been called into play several times this year, namely but not limited to:

Operation London Bridge - managing the communications protocol surrounding the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Just Stop Oil – offering advice and operational support not just to the council, but to a wide range of key partners including for one instance which occurred over a 12-day period, but in also in other subsequent incidents.

War in Ukraine – shaping and supporting our corporate response with Housing and other colleagues and drafting several ongoing communications both to Homes for Ukraine sponsors but also their Ukrainian guests to support their transition to life in Thurrock. We communicate with sponsors directly offering advice, government updates and signposting to local events or initiatives.

## **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 185 media enquiries in the past 12 months and issued 184 proactive press-releases during this time.

The Communications team are actively supporting the Leader and Acting Chief Executive's drive to forge stronger and more mutually beneficial relationships with our local media, having invited media colleagues in for face-to-face discussions which are now continuing on a regular basis. This is in stark contrast to previous decisions taken to disengage with individual members of the local media and demonstrates the commitment to be more open and transparent in our approach.

## **Good news**

In February this year I made a commitment that our Communications team would share at least one good news story a day for the rest of the municipal year. In the time from me making that commitment to compiling this report, 188 days have passed. In those 188 days, the team have shared 183 unique good news stories across our social media and digital newsletter channels. This is with the consideration of a temporary and appropriate reduction in proactive communication activity due to the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

## **► FUTURE**

We will continue to deliver to the 2021 – 2024 communications strategy and it's three key areas of focus:

A strategic approach – working closer with senior leadership, the Leader, and Portfolio Holders to further align our work collectively, and into a more recognisable shared narrative.

Brand recognition – we will showcase our frontline staff, creating case studies to show the humans behind the jobs and the work they do for and with residents, to help nurture

stronger recognition of the breadth of services we deliver as a council. We will involve the local media and work with them to help act as advocates for the work of the council.

Direct digital communications – we will continue to monitor grow our online engagement, putting an emphasis on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to appeal to broader audiences, including capturing the voice of young people in Thurrock. In 2023 will focus strongly on video content and animation as new methods of communicating and engaging.

The work of the communications team in the coming 12 months will focus on improving the reputation of the council by helping craft and manage our intervention, improvement and recovery narrative, both internally and externally. We will be working closely with Directors' Board, Members, Commissioners and our local media following the outcome of the Best Value Inspection, agreeing our public position and external messaging. Internally, we will be working with colleagues to help our staff engage with and deliver to our Improvement and Recovery Plan.

We are committed to improving our relationships with our local media and becoming a more trusted source of information both internally and externally.

We will also help devise and deliver key communications and engagement activity around some of the key council priorities, including supporting the Backing Thurrock strategy and Local Plan to help shape our 'place' narrative, engaging with residents around our Waste strategy and showcasing the work of our frontline staff.

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 as well as share the good news.

## **CORPORATE WIDE PERFORMANCE and VISION and STRATEGY**

### **▶ 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. Further to discussions at Cabinet in July 2022, whilst the vision and priorities did not need to be reviewed immediately, the wider performance framework is being reviewed to reflect the changing and future landscape of Thurrock. This will now move forward in line with the wider review and inspection of governance being undertaken by the Commissioners and any recommendations made by the Best Value Inspectors. In the meantime there is a lot of work going on across the council to ensure existing and emerging key strategies are delivered and interlink, for instance the new Health and Well Being Strategy and the Backing Thurrock Economic Growth 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 Local Plan is also progressing and has interlinking themes with the other two key strategies.

Despite the varying longer-term impact of COVID, the end of year corporate performance report for 2021/22 showed that 67.5% of indicators achieved target. This compares with 63% in 2020/21 at the height of the COVID pandemic and 74% in 2019/20.

Members will remember that during the first three months of 2021/22 (April to June), the country was preparing to open up slowly in line with the government's roadmap, but there were still a number of restrictions in place. In quarter 2 (July to September), some indicators were still being directly or indirectly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic although national restrictions had significantly reduced. During quarter 3 (October to December), rates of infection and restrictions increased again. In the final quarter (January to March) restrictions were lifted, however there were still some residual knock-on impacts to some services. Recovery was further affected by the need to mitigate against the wider capacity and financial pressures which COVID-19 had 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.

We continue to see excellent individual council services and projects recognised locally, regionally, and nationally. In the last 12 months this has included shortlisting for several housing awards, plus recognition for regulatory services and the counter fraud team. 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](http://www.thurrock.gov.uk/how-we-are-doing/awards).

## ► FUTURE

The immediate future focus is on developing and delivering the Improvement and Recovery Plan (IRP) which is required as part of the intervention process. The IRP will, in time, develop and evolve into a new Corporate Plan which will also inform the review of the wider performance framework to reflect the changing and future landscape of Thurrock including recommendations by the Commissioners and government.

In the meantime, monitoring of performance of key strategies within the council continues to be multi-layered – individual teams, lead officers, Boards, Directors, portfolio holders and member scrutiny through the Overview and Scrutiny Committees 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, and meet and greet customer services on the ground floor of the new CO3 building.

## **REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS**

Our Customer Services performance was again recognised externally with accreditation of the CCA (Customer Contact Association) Version 7 global standard in December 2021 with our next assessment due in January 2023. This standard was achieved again with no non conformances identified, and an excellent audit report. We also received an award to recognise our achievement of 10 years successful accreditation.

The new meet and greet facility for the new building has been working well and we have been able to cover all customer and visitor scenarios, ensuring that those residents that really need our support, receive this. The volume of customers visiting the town hall/civic offices has been manageable and demonstrates that customers have taken advantage of our digital and telephone solutions rather than feel the need to start to visit in person again following the doors opening in June 2022. We have noticed an increase in handling times for Contact Centre calls and this is due to Customer Services Advisors assisting vulnerable customers with online applications etc. and providing reassurance for situations where customers may have previously visited civic offices.

We have also managed to maintain a fully operational Careline 24/7- 365 days, along with the out of hours service for the council throughout the year ensuring there is always support for our most vulnerable residents and in an emergency.

Working closely with our ICT department, we have developed our first combined Digital and Customer Experience Strategy which covers four main themes, Digital Foundation, Digital Office, Digital Customer and Digital Thurrock. The strategy sets out how the technology will underpin the Council's future needs to drive efficiencies and deliver services.

### **► FUTURE**

We will of course ensure that we continue to support our most vulnerable residents. We are also working on further digital enhancements as part of our Digital and Customer Experience Strategy action plan, looking at any further automation opportunities where high call volumes exist, exploring the use of 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.

We will continue 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 will also continue to work 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.

## **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. This includes the delivery of training.

Strong working relationships have been developed with external partners including the courts and other stakeholders as well as internal teams. Representatives of the service have attended regular meetings with with the designated family judge, CAFCASS etc.

The relationship with the shared service at London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD) has been reviewed and formalized to ensure value for money and that client needs are met.

Work has been started to develop and stabilize the inhouse service to reduce dependency on locum appointments and external lawyers.

The service has continued to adapt to the move to electronic working by the court service including moving to using HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) online court application portal.

The service has been involved in some high-profile matters and succeeded in securing an innovative urgent injunction to assist in controlling some of the recent protests in the borough.

### **▶ FUTURE**

The team moved its case management systems to a locally hosted service improving resilience. This will continue to be developed to ensure maximum use which will facilitate greater efficiency in the delivery of the service. 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 with a core 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.

The team will look to develop relationships with clients and seek feedback on performance and continue to support client training and development needs

We will build on our partnership with LBB legal services to ensure that continues to support the Council's priorities. Work will be undertaken to review external legal support to ensure it delivers value for money and where better value for money can be obtained without loss of quality alternative options will be examined including considering insourcing where appropriate.

Work will continue to reduce dependency on locum appointments.

## **DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

Democratic Services has continued to deliver committee meetings in a variety of venues following the easing of COVID measures and the unavailability of the old Council Chamber. The Team utilised partner facilities at South Essex College and the Beehive in early 2022 and with the opening of the new civic office space the Team has begun to bed in the Public-1 technology into the new committee rooms and the Council Chamber.

In addition to the annual cycle of committee meetings, the team has provided support to the Constitution Working Group to review aspects of the Constitution in line with statutory requirements but also the wishes of a cross party group of Members. This has included a move to review the structure of the overview and scrutiny function. The Democratic Service Manager, since December 2021, has taken on enhanced duties as the interim Monitoring Officer.

## **ELECTORAL SERVICES**

The Electoral Services team delivered the local elections in May 2022 with minimal impact due to COVID. Staffing was difficult as COVID did still impact staff working on polling day, with many last-minute changes and a lack of staff willing and/or available to work.

The statutory annual canvass commenced in July 2022 and the revised register is on target for publication on 1 December 2022.

Rolling registration continues each month to meet the statutory duty of the Electoral Registration officer.

### **► FUTURE**

Implementing and planning for the Elections Act. On 28 April 2022, the Elections Act 2022 received Royal Assent.

This Act seeks to:

- require voters to show photo ID at polling stations before a ballot paper is issued;
- require Electoral Registration Officers based in local authorities to issue free electoral identification documents –'Voter Authority Certificates' to eligible electors who apply for one;
- require postal voters to reapply for a postal vote every three years, replacing current rules of refreshing their signature every five years;
- restrict the handling of postal votes, including limiting the number of postal votes an individual can hand in at a polling station or council office;
- further limit the number of people someone may act as proxy for;

- extend accessibility to elections including requiring Returning Officers to take all reasonable steps to provide support for those with a disability in polling stations;
- simplify and clarify the offence of undue influence;
- change the voting and candidacy arrangements for EU voters;
- and allow all British citizens living overseas to vote in UK Parliamentary elections, regardless of when they left the UK.

Two of the changes above are planned for implementation for polls held in May 2023 1) Voter ID and 2) increased accessibility at polling stations. The others will follow later in 2023. This is subject to secondary legislation in late 2022/early 2023.

- Planning for May 2023 local elections.
- Planning for the annual canvass plus rolling registration
- Boundary Commission Review 2023 – implementation of any changes

## **MEMBERS SERVICES**

The Member Services team continue to support all elected members including managing the Leader and Mayor's offices.

The team have successfully supported the previous Mayor's COVID Community Stars which saw a Certificate of Recognition given to those in the borough who had gone above and beyond to help their community during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are currently ensuring the new Mayor's Roll of Honour runs smoothly celebrating charities, businesses, individuals and community groups who have gone above and beyond for the borough.

There is a vital role for the team in responding to significant national events that have a civic role such as the Platinum Jubilee, sad death of Her Majesty the Queen and proclamation of the King, as well as supporting the Mayor with business engagement, meeting with community groups and promoting his charities.

### **► FUTURE**

Work is underway to more closely align support for the Leader and Mayor's offices to the Chief Executive's office and work of Directors' Board to effectively enable the leadership of the organisation. The team will continue to provide business support to all Members as well as organising civic and celebratory events such as the Mayor's Civic Dinner.

## FINANCIAL INFORMATION

<b>Service</b>	<b>Last year outturn</b>	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Q1 Forecast</b>	<b>Q1 Variance</b>
	£000	£000	£000	£000
Strategy	333	330	330	0
Communications	567	492	492	0
Customer Services	702	1,094	965	(131)
Legal Services	2,013	1,890	1,939	49
Democratic Services	219	243	273	30
Electoral Services	317	444	447	3
Member Services	751	823	823	0
Corporate Programme Team	385	898	757	(141)
Information Team	621	660	686	26
Information Technology	3,385	4,010	4,010	0