

Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Briefing Note: Report of Cabinet Member for Overall Change and Improvement Agenda

Purpose of the briefing note: Provides a summary of the main activity and achievements relating to services within the portfolio.

- 1.1 Since taking on the important and exciting portfolio of overall change and improvement agenda, significant milestones have been achieved to put the council on the right footing. From agreeing the council's first Corporate Plan in a number of years, to agreeing and reporting on the intervention success criteria, we have shown that Thurrock Council is maturing and taking real action to improve how we operate and deliver for residents.

Corporate Plan and PMAF

- 1.2 Significant steps have been taken over the past year to steer the organisation towards delivering a shared set of objectives and priorities. The publication of the Council's new Corporate Plan, which was adopted unanimously by Full Council in July 2024, was a pivotal first stage to rebuild trust, increase transparency and better hold ourselves to account.
- 1.3 Externally, the Plan publicly communicates our commitment to deliver the ambitions and objectives set within it.
- 1.4 Internally, the publication of the Plan provides an overarching function to onward cascade our intentions and align all our activity to a shared set of goals. This is often referred to as 'the golden thread' and has involved:
- Key messages to staff via an aligned communications campaign (A Fresh Start for Thurrock),
 - Driving our activity and performance through Quarterly Corporate Performance Reports with metrics and milestones demonstrating progress towards the Corporate Plan's objectives, and
 - Through the development of a new Service Planning approach, ensuring teams will focus planning of resources towards our agreed shared objectives.

- 1.5 Whilst the Corporate Plan brings greater transparency to our vision and objectives, the development of the Performance Management and Assurance Framework (PMAF) ensures that we are accountable to those stated aims.
- 1.6 The PMAF was agreed by Cabinet and published in October 2024 and describes our approach and the principles for effective performance management. It sets out expectations for our respective roles and responsibilities as well as how we will raise accountability through regular public scrutiny and reporting of our performance data.
- 1.7 Services collaborated with the strategy, policy and performance team to design the milestones and metrics which would best demonstrate progress against the Corporate Plan objectives. This work was further informed by constructive reviews through Directorate Management Teams, the Senior Leadership Team, as well as Cabinet and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. However, throughout this time it was important to set an expectation that the process and data was an iterative process and would continue to be refined.
- 1.8 We have developed opportunities to continuously improve this process, work includes:
 - supporting services to improve data accuracy through the development of a Corporate Metric Library where we are recording and analysing how data is retrieved and monitored.
 - prioritising metrics where gaps in stated targets occur. This work will help provide the context required to assess performance, making us more transparent and accountable, and
 - the establishment of the Insight and Performance Board, which will see a group of specialist officers from the council, provide an internal scrutiny environment which will help to raise the robustness of our data and how it is reported.
- 1.9 Importantly, we are pleased to have seen how both the quarter 2 and quarter 3 reports have generated opportunities to better understand how resources are allocated and enable services to take decisions to adapt delivery to improve outcomes. In future months we will evolve the Insight and Performance Board to identify more of those opportunities.
- 1.10 The quarterly reports are an excellent starting point. However, we are aware of the ongoing need to continue to test whether the metrics and milestones are fit for purpose. We are also cognisant that the reports lack an outcome focus, and we don't want to miss the opportunity to capture the impact we have made this year. As a result, we are making plans to develop a more

narrative based Annual Report which will complement the quarter 4 and outturn report.

Improvement and Recovery

- 1.11 Members and officers are working hard to turn the organisation around and fix previous failings as set out in the Best Value Inspection report. We have engaged constructively and collaboratively with Commissioners since the beginning of the intervention and are making real progress.
- 1.12 Our Improvement and Recovery Plan, which was unanimously agreed by Full Council in October 2023, sets a clear path for our improvement journey and has been endorsed and supported by Commissioners.
- 1.13 In consultation with Commissioners, we have produced success criteria against each of our improvement outcomes and have started to report on them. The success criteria have come directly two sources:
 - The engagement of Members and officers in developing how we would measure our improvement from the Enhanced IRP
 - The statutory guidance on Best Value Duty which was published by government after the IRP was agreed by Full Council
- 1.14 The first report, which was considered by Cabinet in December and Full Council in January, puts outcomes front and centre to show government and commissioners what effect our work is having.
- 1.15 It gives an honest assessment of where we are against the Outcomes of the Improvement and Recovery Plan and their success criteria. There are strong improvements which we can evidence through the report – such as the new approach to Overview and Scrutiny. But doesn't shy away from the challenges we still face and must continue to work on.
- 1.16 This first report also set the baseline for how we compare ourselves going forward, showing where we have made good progress but also highlight if we slip back in any way. This is part of new a culture which does not hide or criticise where things are going off track, but shows we are honest and self-aware so that we can put things right.
- 1.17 The second report, which will illustrate those changes, will be considered by Cabinet on 19 March.
- 1.18 There remains a long way to go with lots to do, but this report demonstrates the concrete foundations the council has put in place to make a real difference for how we operate for our residents.

Communications

- 1.19 The Communications and Engagement Strategy 2024/25 was agreed by Cabinet in November, having twice been discussed at Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Responsibility for the strategy is shared between the Deputy Leader, and the Cabinet Member for Community Partnerships.
- 1.20 The strategy recognises the need for the council to be more open and transparent with residents; improve our business as usual communications across the council; tailor our approach to reach residents in the ways they want; and rebuild our communities' trust in the council. It also sets out three priority campaign areas for the council; Thurrock Cares cost of living campaign; A Fresh Start for Thurrock corporate campaign; and our Communities in Action engagement pilot.
- 1.21 Progress against the strategy is as follows:
- All three campaigns launched with two (Thurrock Cares and Communities in Action) nearing completion and the other ongoing.
 - Our Thurrock Cares campaign, and its dedicated support for older residents, received positive media coverage including in the Daily Telegraph.
 - Initial evaluation shows our communications contributed to our cost of living support reaching thousands of residents, with 4,600 visitors to our dedicated web area, and £750,000 of financial support claimed by residents in need.
 - Improvements made to our approach and messaging across all our channels have received positive feedback from residents, with more community content, and more accessible language.
 - We created, published and delivered a hard copy magazine to all residents living in council housing, sharing crucial information about fire safety and damp and mould alongside resident stories and other relevant news. We are planning a second edition this spring.
 - A communications training programme for staff across the council has been devised, and will roll out this spring with support from the OD team, looking at things like plain English in letter writing; newsletter best practice; and how to consult meaningfully with residents.
 - We have also supported the council and our residents by communicating clearly and appropriately about priority projects like the Towns Funds; the two elections in 2024; the emergency response to the national civil unrest last summer; changes to waste services; and the budget.

Governance and Democratic Services

- 1.22 As illustrated above and set out in detail in the Improvement and Recovery Plan report which was considered by Full Council in January, significant improvements have been made in governance and democratic services, including. Commissioners also recognise the improvements in their first and second reports that have taken place to strengthen and embed good governance into the authority. The impact of the improvements are cumulative, e.g. improved scrutiny in turn improves cabinet decision making.
- Improvements in the quality and process of Cabinet decision making based on forward planning, effective corporate input and review on all reports, transparency and scrutiny by both officers and councillors. This is supported by the use of mod.gov software which provides for a mandatory workflow for report preparation ensuring consistency and compliance in all reports before finalisation, including mandatory requirements for legal, finance, equalities and risk implications in all decision making.
 - The forward plan, decision making and the development of reports are now overseen by SLT and Cabinet through regular meetings. This mechanism also ensures that decision making is focussed on the priorities set out in the Council's Corporate Plan.
 - To further support improvements in quality and compliance, face to face training has been provided on report writing and the report preparation workflow. In addition, training has been provided for officers on working in a political environment and overview and scrutiny.
 - A new model of overview and scrutiny based on the "critical friend" approach and annual work planning developed in consultation with Cabinet members and officers. The first year of operation of the model has demonstrated how it can work well, especially in corporate scrutiny, with a review to take place at the end of the municipal year.
 - The Constitution review has updated key parts of the council's governance, such as scrutiny, conduct, transparency, as well as key procedure relating to finance and procurement but also is seeking to ask the Council to review the purpose and role of key bodies, such as full council, scrutiny and cabinet so that they provide effective governance as a whole and also focus public scrutiny on where major decisions are made. This picks up on a key criticism from the Best Value Inspection Report.
 - The Council's self-assessment of its governance has been improved through the agreement by the Audit Committee and Full Council of a Local

Code of Corporate Governance but as importantly the preparation of statutory annual governance statements. When working well, an AGS provides for an honest “health check” of the Council’s governance based on CIPFA / SOLACE best practice guidance and is subject to scrutiny and challenge by the Audit Committee and published as part of the accounts. Significant gaps and areas of risk will be included in an action plan to be reviewed and progressed annually. In the current year, the CFO and MO have been preparing AGS’s that have been “missing” from previous years from 2019-20 onwards allowing the council to now focus on its current AGS for the year 2023-24.

- Training in a range of areas from conduct to scrutiny and planning has been provided to councillors.
- A refreshed member development programme is in preparation focussed on key needs and reflecting different skills and knowledge base of councillors in consultation with group whips. The programme is being redesigned following the cancellation of the elections in May 2025 away from an induction programme to broader development. Further, it is intended to introduce member training records, analysis of training regularly reported to Standards, looking forward and designing a training and development strategy for 2025/26. The key challenge currently is sufficient councillor engagement beyond of a small core of attendee and the timing of a development day (i.e. weekday or weekend) that will provide for attendance by the majority of councillors.
- Work has taken place to improve relationships between councillors, groups and councillors and officers, which is a key concern for commissioners, the majority of councillors, officers and the public. At a “soft” level, this has included group leaders meeting before Full Council to discuss and resolve procedural issues to improve the running of the meeting, regular meetings with scrutiny chairs and support of work planning, and the establishment of a group whips meeting to seek to progress issues of mutual interest such as member training.
- On a more formal level, significant effort has been put into improving poor relationships and conduct that is exhibited by a small minority of councillors. This has included increasing the role and visibility of the Standards Committee so that it has oversight of the progress of complaints and it has reviewed the council’s code of conduct and complaints process, recommending the appointment of an independent chair for complaints hearings. The Chief Executive, monitoring officer and commissioners have also directly addressed individual issues of poor conduct with a view to improving standards

- The improvements in governance also dovetail with the increased focus on risk and risk management in council decision making. The risk function is based in Finance but as set out above risk is now embedded into decision making (verified by the risk team) and corporate risk has oversight at SLT, Cabinet and Audit.

Elections

- 1.23 The elections team successfully delivered two elections over the past 12 months local elections May 2024, and then the general election on 6 weeks' notice in July 2024.
- 1.24 Other key achievements in Elections include:
- Completion of electoral review of EU Citizens
 - Canvass completed and register published
 - Boundary Commission review and subsequent polling district review completed and approved by General Services Committee in February 2025 for implementation by May 2026.
- 1.25 The team has also been providing advice on emerging issues relating to elections, devolution and local government reform e.g. changes to by-election process, as well as, working to prepare for mayoral elections for new combined authority and local elections scheduled for May 2026.

Legal Services

- 1.26 Following termination of the agreement with London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, work is ongoing to bring some of that work back in house. This has included a restructure of service to provide fit for purpose, robust Legal Services team to meet the needs of the authority within budget envelope. The service now provides a comprehensive service and is recruiting to new key posts and is working within its budget. Some areas will remain supported by external resources but the service is considering a range of options to ensure this delivers best value.
- 1.27 A key focus of the restructure is on career development to recruit and retain skilled professionals in hard to fill specialisms. The restructure included three solicitor training opportunities and this has led to three internal candidates being successful allowing them to develop their careers and qualify with Thurrock, which in turn will benefit the council.

Customer and Digital Strategy

- 1.28 Thurrock Council has made major progress in digital transformation to improve efficiency, customer service, and cost savings.
- **New Digital Strategy:** In 2022, we launched a Digital and Customer Experience Strategy to guide improvements through 2025. A new Contact Management model was introduced in 2023, leading to a strategy review to ensure better service delivery.
 - **Customer Service Improvements:** In May 2024, a workshop with key stakeholders helped refine our approach to managing customer interactions. We reviewed processes for applications, payments, and information requests to create a smoother experience for residents.
 - **Resident & Staff Engagement:** Input from 3,000 residents, staff, and elected members shaped our digital transformation plans, ensuring services meet real needs.
 - **Digital Transformation Business Case:** A proposal outlining the investment, savings, and future roadmap will be finalised by April. Meanwhile, IT has continued delivering digital projects that improve efficiency.
 - **AI & Automation:** We launched our first Digital Assistant, Aimee, to handle Council Tax transactions, reducing manual workload. More automation is planned over the next two years. AI has also been introduced in Social Care to cut admin tasks and improve services.
 - **Modern Payment System:** A new platform (Adelante) and a Direct Debit option have made payments easier for residents and improved financial management.
 - **Centralising Customer Contact:** Work is underway to streamline customer service, including reviewing outsourced services and creating a new operating model, with a focus on supporting vulnerable residents.
 - **IT Upgrades & Cost Savings:** We have:
 - Reduced BT landlines from 570 to 200, cutting costs.
 - Migrated to SharePoint for better collaboration.
 - Upgraded Microsoft licenses at no extra cost, unlocking better security and tools.
 - Delivered £1.2 million in savings through system reductions, contract renegotiations, and digital transformation.
- 1.29 The IT team remains focused on innovation, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness to improve services for both residents and staff.

Information Governance

- 1.30 The information governance service helps to ensure transparency and compliance with information governance legislation but also protecting personal data held by the council, e.g. in respect of vulnerable residents.
- 1.31 The team's performance exceeds the expectations of the Information Commissioner's Service but to assess the work of the service overall, a peer review was undertaken by Islington Council. The findings identified areas for improvement and long standing concerns around records management and cyber security that are now recognised as areas for improvement, and are being addressed through the IT review. Furthermore, the processes for managing information requests and complaints remain highly manual and time-consuming, adding unnecessary administrative strain to the IG team. To enhance efficiency, the council introduced 'Infreemation', new software for managing Freedom of Information (FOI) and Subject Access Requests (SARs) which has improved efficiency. Further work needs to take place to enhance the team's focus onto proactive publication of data rather than a reactive service focussed on responding to requests.
- 1.32 Work is also underway to more clearly define the corporate governance of information, including clear assignment of the responsibilities for information risk (the Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO)) and also responsibilities within directorates and cyber security. Interim measures have been put in place to ensure cyber security is addressed within ICT but it is a corporate wide issue and risk.
- 1.33 The review also highlights the need to streamline policies and procedures by merging overlapping policies, transferring IT-related policies to the IT department, and improving training approaches to better equip staff with the necessary knowledge and skills.
- 1.34 By taking these steps, Thurrock Council can strengthen its information governance framework, improve operational efficiency, and ensure greater compliance with regulatory requirements while reducing risks associated with data management and cybersecurity.

Thurrock Register Office

- 1.35 The Register Office provides the statutory service of registering births deaths and marriages, alongside the non-statutory service of citizenship ceremonies on both a group and individual basis.

- 1.36 The Register office provides a welcoming, private and compassionate service to those users registering births, deaths and marriages with over 1600 being booked over the past year.
- 1.37 As the Registrar for weddings within Thurrock, the service has attended 584 ceremonies over the past year. 68% of those took place in a Council venue, where families and guests were welcomed to the offices for the joyous occasion.
- 1.38 Citizenship ceremonies both private and group are carried out by the Register Office team. 134 ceremonies have taken place over the past year, 19 of these have been group sessions which are held in the Council Chamber and attended by the Mayor, welcoming approximately 35 new citizens and their guests.
- 1.39 The Team has been able to provide a consistent service this year, with all aspects of the work being completed efficiently, within a timely manner and in line with the General Register Office KPIs.
- 1.40 Customer feedback continues to be collected via satisfaction surveys which are made available both in the office and online, this allows the Local Authority to take on board the feedback and continue to improve the service. 98% of customers are satisfied with the service provided.
- 1.41 The team successfully implemented the significant changes to the Death registration process following the Death Certificate Reform in September 2024.
- 1.42 Changes to the ceremony packages that we offer have been made to encourage more bookings. Including the option to borrow a bouquet and use our complimentary wedding stationery packages.
- 1.43 Going forward, the priorities and actions for the service include:
- Ongoing promotion of the services that the Register Office provides.
 - Continue to review the website with a view to make the Wedding and Venue pages more attractive.
 - Continue to benchmark against other local authorities to ensure that the Council's fees and charges are in line.
 - Further review of the service to ensure that it is delivered efficiently and meets the needs of users.
 - Continue to provide all aspects of the service in line with the requirements of the General Registrar's Office.