

**28 November 2012**

**ITEM 18.1**

**Council**

## **CABINET PORTFOLIO HOLDER REPORT**

**Report of: Councillor P Smith**

### **Central Services**

#### **Introduction**

Within my portfolio are all of the functions grouped under Legal Services comprising Democratic, Electoral, Legal, Member and Registrars services. The department plays a pivotal role in supporting the delivery of many of the Council's statutory services and key projects. The larger part of the department provides essential support to other parts of the Council, however Electoral and Registrar Services interface directly with residents.

Corporate Finance includes the corporate accountancy function, management of the internal audit contract, and the client management of the revenues, benefits and exchequer services provided by the Council's Strategic Service Partner, Serco.

The accountancy function can be further divided as follows:

- Corporate Accountancy – support to services, financial accounts, systems, treasury and capital.
- Safeguarding – this team provides financial guidance to vulnerable assets in the management of their finances and assets.
- Schools – this team provides direct financial advice support to schools and effectively operates as a trading account.

Human Resources & Organisational Development incorporates the corporate strategy and policy team and the workforce planning and development team. Between them they are responsible for the delivery of the OD Strategy; the Children and Adult's workforce plans; clienting of the HR service, Comensura and DHS; the employment policy framework and the development and delivery of learning and training across the council.

The past year has been particularly challenging for local government, and Central Services have played a crucial role in supporting the work of the Council and in ensuring we continue to provide good value, sound financial management, proper governance and an employment environment that enables us to recruit and retain the workforce we need. My report sets out some of the key issues that I have dealt with over the past months.

## **Welfare Reform**

In the Spending review 2010, the Government announced that it would localise financial support for Council Tax from April 2013. This means that Council Tax Benefit (CTB), the current means of helping people on low incomes to meet their Council Tax obligations, will be replaced by new localised support schemes. In contrast with the present national CTB scheme, these local schemes have to be designed, implemented and managed by individual local authorities.

As part of the public consultation process the Council held its own consultation that lasted for a period of 7 weeks and concluded on the 30 September. The Council had also taken part in this process by engaging with the residents through various Community forums where I and relevant officers of the Council held briefing sessions to encourage participation and further engagement. The findings of this consultation have just been reported to Cabinet.

## **Exchequer Services**

Our Council Tax collection rate for 2011/12 was 98.6%. In 2008/09 it was 96.0%. If we had continued to perform at that level, we would have collected £1,512k less last year than we actually did, which would have meant that we would have had to find net savings of a similar value from services. For information, collection rates over the past few years are as follows:

- 2008/09 = 96.0%
- 2009/10 = 96.4%
- 2010/11 = 97.7%
- 2011/12 = 98.6%

The current figure for 2012/13 to date is 99.2%. This is a significant turnaround in performance, for which the Serco team were recently nominated for an IRRV award as most improved team of the year.

The Government issued a consultation paper in October 2011 entitled 'Technical Reforms for Council Tax' which essentially proposed that a range of discounts and exemptions to Council Tax currently directed by Government should in future be left to the discretion of individual local authorities. In May 2012 the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) issued a formal paper detailing the Government's response basically moving forward with its original proposals as per the original consultation. In addition, the DCLG has included proposals that Council Tax charge payers will have a legal right of paying by 12 monthly instalments, rather than the current 10, and that Council's can in future provide the 'Council Tax booklet' online rather than in hard copy.

Clearly the issues involved in deciding a local scheme of exemptions are complex and these issues have been examined by the Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

## **Benefits Service**

The Council's Benefits Service continues to perform well, with performance in line with agreed targets for the processing of new claims and amendments to existing claims: new claims 15.49 days turn round against a target of 18 days, change of circumstances 7.89 days turn round against a target of 8 days.

The service provides good access for customers through Council offices and its telephone contact centre. Phone lines are open 8.00am to 6.00pm Monday to Friday. This is helpful to people who may be working and wanting help or advice with their claim or to enquire about claiming benefit. Staff have a positive approach to customer care and is proactive in encouraging customers to claim benefit.

Over the past year the Council has increased its focus on investigating potential fraud:

- Sanctions to date 19 – value £252,144
- Cases at court 8 – value £204,460
- Cases with legal/DWP 3 – value £124,898

The Council has invested in client management processes to improve the working relationship with Serco and ensure the contract works better at all levels. The aim is to improve still further both outcomes for customers and value for money. Existing strengths in performance monitoring are being added to, so that the service will develop more ambitious but still realistic targets.

## **Corporate Finance**

Corporate Finance is divided into two in-house teams; Accountancy and Benefit Fraud, and is also responsible for managing the outsourced Internal Audit Contract and the client function for the financial based activities of Serco including Revenues, Benefits, Exchequer Services and Cashiers. They also take responsibility for the development of the Oracle system that forms part of the Serco ICT service.

The accountancy service provides financial advice to the Council, its Members and officers. Their work supports the aims and visions of the Council by supporting all services to meet their objectives and ensuring that the Council maintains to a healthy financial position in terms of balances, spend against budget, borrowing and investments.

Members will recall the difficulties experienced in signing off the accounts for 2010/11. As a result, the Director of Finance & Corporate Governance agreed a nine-point plan with Audit Committee and Council to bring about the necessary changes in processes and the management of the preparation of the final accounts.

The plan comprised:

- The agreement of the Audit Commission's "Section 11" action plan to strengthen the Council's Finance Team and the role of Audit Committee in the accounts closure programme.
- Bringing regular update reports on progress to Audit Committee.
- A project to upgrade the Council's financial systems.
- Steps to improve the management of Council assets.
- Addressing capacity and capability issues in the Finance Team.
- The Director of Finance & Corporate Governance overseeing the annual audit as a corporate project.
- Developing better working relationships with external auditors both generally and specifically in advance of the annual audit.
- Improving understanding of roles and responsibilities in assisting with the production of the accounts across the Council and its partners.
- Developing the MTFS further and showing how it supports the Corporate Plan and helps deliver value for money.

The upgrade to the Council's financial systems went live on 30 March 2012. The new chart of accounts, which will simplify both year-end closure of accounts and the associated government returns, was also in place for the start of the financial year.

Officers carried out a deep analysis of the Council's balance sheet, effectively re-examining the accounts for previous years going back to 2008/09. It is clear from the work already completed that a number of the issues caused the delay in the finalising of the 2010/11 accounts had their roots in previous years accounts and working papers.

It must be stressed that sorting out these accountancy issues had no impact whatsoever on the overall financial standing of the Council as regards its reserves or reported outturn expenditure against budget.

As regards staff capability and capacity the following actions were taken:

- A new Chief Accountant was recruited in January 2012;
- The Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy carried out a bespoke 12-month training programme for Thurrock Council to improve the skills and capabilities of its finance and related staff.

- Staff and resources transferred from the Thurrock Thames Gateway Development Corporation in April 2010 to strengthen both the Accountancy and Asset Management Teams.

These actions have significantly improved performance in this area. Our auditors commented as follows in their report on the 2011/12 accounts:

### **Financial statements**

I was able to issue an unqualified opinion on the Council's 2011/12 accounts on 28 September. This was in advance of the statutory deadline of 30 September. This is a significant improvement on 2010/11, when I was not able to issue my opinion until 20 April 2012, over six months after the September deadline.

In 2011, as a result of the problems identified during the 2010/11 audit, I made formal recommendations to the Council under Section 11 of the Audit Commission Act 1998 regarding the Council's accounts production processes. The Council put in place an action plan to address the weaknesses identified and has monitored progress against these recommendations during 2012.

### **Value for money conclusion**

My assessment of the Council's arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources was made against two criteria specified by the Commission. These are:

- Whether the organisation has proper arrangements in place to secure financial resilience; and
- Whether the organisation has proper arrangements for challenging how it secures economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

I concluded that the Council made proper arrangements to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. I have qualified the Council's value for money conclusion in recent years, so this represents good progress.

Some of the main improvements noted as part of my conclusion for 2011/12 are that:

- The arrangements for the production and regular updating of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) have been strengthened;
- The General Fund balance has now increased to the level considered desirable by the Director of Finance and Corporate Governance;
- An asset management strategy is now in place and arrangements to get the best from the Council's assets are continuing to develop; and
- The Council has put in place appropriate arrangements in relation to its

new regeneration responsibilities, which were transferred to it from the Thurrock Thames Gateway Development Corporation on 30 March 2012.

In planning the 2012/13 budget, the existing 'Star Chamber' process was further refined and the timetable advanced. In October 2011 a proposed balanced budget was considered by Cabinet before being sent to the relevant overview and scrutiny committees, some three months ahead of the timetable for the previous year.

As regards the Council's financial systems, there has been little development over the last five years and this has led to inefficient processes and poor financial reporting. A major overhaul of the system is currently being developed that, as well as finance, will include improvements to the procurement module and the implementation of the HR and payroll modules. The financial systems of the Council are being upgraded to improve reporting and strengthen the links between financial and other performance management. When completed, managers will be able to do self-serve bespoke reports that meet their requirements to manage services and make investment decisions, while the core financial suite will enable the Council's overall financial position to be managed more effectively. However, the project has not gone smoothly and there remain concerns about the completeness and timeliness of financial information. The resolution of these problems is a key objective for the Director of Finance & Corporate Governance.

At present the Council is not paying invoices within its target of at least 90% being settled within 30 days. I have instructed officers to work with all services of the Council to ensure that suppliers receive payments more promptly.

The Audit Committee has developed a more challenging stance towards outstanding recommendations and the Internal Audit service will need to ensure that managers have acted on their reports in a prompt manner.

### **Internal Audit Services**

During 2011/12, the Internal Audit Service (IAS) issued a total of 29 assurance reports. In addition, substantial advisory work was carried out due to the challenging circumstances surrounding the Council's partnership arrangements, the transfer of staff and assets from the Thames Gateway Development Corporation, the National Fraud Initiative and a number of formal complaints that required independent review and investigation. Changes to the plan to allow IAS to carry out this work were agreed at the Audit Committee meeting held in December 2011.

A total of 92% of final reports were issued with a positive level of assurance, compared to 87% in 2009/10. However, 8% of final reports issued received a red level of assurance. The final reports issued as red assurance were:

- Morrison Responsive Repairs Contract; and
- Payroll including HR

Follow up work carried out during 2011/12, identified that 87% of recommendation had been implemented, compared to 67.2% in 2010/11. Recommendations contained within internal audit reports, and their implementation by officers have been given an increased level of scrutiny by the Audit Committee, Directors and Heads of Service and the Council are making good progress in implementing Internal Audit recommendations. We welcome these developments.

## **Complaints**

There has been an 18% decrease in complaints compared to 2010/11.

The service areas that received the highest volume of complaints are shown below. In fairness, these services will always receive the highest volume of complaints, due to their nature and the number of residents they are provided to:

- Missed bin collections
- Housing repairs
- Council Tax

Performance in responding to complaints within timeframe has improved. During 2011/12, 97% of complaints were responded to within timeframe (compared to 89% for 2010/11).

Our Local Government Ombudsman performance in responding to enquiries has continued to improve. Our average response time has reduced to 15.4 days compared to 20.5 days during 2010/11. The LGO stated within their annual review letter that they were pleased to report that there are no concerns regarding Thurrock's response times and there are no issues arising from the complaints that require attention.

## **Information Governance and GIS**

During 2011/12 the Council processed 97% of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests within the legal timeframe and the Information Management Team continue to drive forward processes to reduce FOI requests. This includes routinely populating a number of completed FOI requests onto the Council's website, so that requestors asking for the same or similar information can be directed to the website (as opposed to being logged as another FOI request). Checks are also carried out by FOI co-ordinators on all new requests to see if the question has been requested recently. If it has, then the FOI Co-ordinator will aim to release the previous response instead of logging a new request.

The Council challenge and/or refuse requests when it is believed that the requestor has used a false name, where we have reasonable grounds to believe the applicant is acting as part of a campaign or in consort with others, or where their questions do not meet the other validity requirements for FOI.

The team have lead on a number of projects to ensure compliance with the Data

Protection Act and central government initiatives (Government Connect)

The GIS Team continues to support service areas and has played a key role in the Council's wider transformation agenda.

## **Business Services**

Business Services primary activity is to act as client for the Strategic Services Partnership with Serco (SSP), and to provide professional Technical, Commercial and Business advice to the wider organisation concerning outsourced and contracted central services.

The service consists of 5 individuals who cover specialist areas of Client and Strategic management including ICT, Facilities Management, Customer Services, Administration and Commercial negotiation. The unit also undertakes the management and maintenance of the governance integrity of the SSP and acts as the point of commercial escalation. Major initiatives and outcomes over the past year supported and delivered by the unit are outlined below:

### *SSP*

- Novation (transfer) of the partnership agreement from Vertex to Serco, and the regularisation of the commercial and contractual arrangements associated with this process.
- Negotiation and agreement of a Parent Company Guarantee (in association with Legal Services) to protect the Councils interests associated with the novation.
- Negotiate and agree service development and improvement plans to ensure that the partnered services going forward better meet the Councils needs.
- Negotiate and agree the delivery of £1m of savings annually on average from the Serco Partnership.
- Develop opportunities with Serco to deliver £2m of savings through smarter and collaborative procurement processes.
- Develop a shared technical support initiative with Serco to deliver an ICT platform that supports the Councils Transformation vision and programme.

### *Business Developments (Contract Management)*

- Market testing and re-tendering (including ongoing management) of the Council premises cleaning contract - this provided substantial savings and wider inclusion of remote Council sites under one contract.
- Market testing and re-tendering (including ongoing management) of the Council window cleaning service - this provided savings through reduced costs and better market challenge.
- Development and implementation of a corporate stationary contract leading to cross organisational savings and improved procurement governance.
- Management of the Councils "Multi Functional Device" (MFD) Contract - this has substantially reduced the use and cost of the Councils computer printer usage, and continues to be rolled out across the Councils business estate



improving efficiency as it progresses.

#### *Initiative and wider corporate support*

- Development of the "Right to Challenge" policy (in development)
- Technical advice to the corporate transformation programme
- Commercial support to Housing concerning the Morrison's contract
- Engagement and support to the corporate accommodation initiative.

### **Democratic Services**

Democratic Services are the Secretariat of the Council. The team ensure that all meetings of the Council, Cabinet and Committees are scheduled and supported throughout the municipal year. The team prepares and distributes all paperwork for these meetings, provides advice in respect of the provisions of the Constitution to both officers and Members, and records all decisions taken through the production of Minutes.

#### *Achievements*

- Through a combination of factors, the team have worked with a reduced number of staff since the turn of 2012 and have continued to support meetings of the Council, Cabinet and Committees, together with administering school admission appeals. This has been a very challenging year and has seen a great effort made to maintain the level of service provided to the Council.
- Democratic Services continue to play a significant role in the annual review of the Council's Constitution, through identifying and drafting proposed changes for consideration by the Constitution Working Group (CWG), as well as supporting the Working Group itself. This year, the process has culminated in the recommendations made at the CWG being put before the Council for consideration and agreement, as was the case at the meeting in March and September 2012.
- From September 2011, Democratic Services took responsibility for the management of Members Services and since this time, the two teams have begun to work more closely than in recent years, sharing expertise and resources. Some key projects undertaken in this time have been:
  - Member Development Programme for 2012-13
  - Member Induction in May 2012 and production of the Members' Handbook for newly elected Councillors
  - Production of the 2012-13 Municipal Diary, including the calendar of meetings, and administration of Outside Bodies
  - Procurement exercise for the Mayor's Chauffeur
  - Instigated a number of changes in working practices to improve ways of working and compliance with policies.
- Since 11 June 2012, a small number of specially trained staff from the Democratic Services team has undertaken both the arrangement and

administration of 80 school admission appeals. A further 21 appeals are scheduled to be held before the end of October 2012.

- In the last year, the team has sought to maintain its existing Service Level Agreements with independent local schools for the administration of School Admission Appeals and has been requested to enter into one such further agreement with a new Academy. Whilst this has enabled some income generation in the past, the level of income generated is dependent upon the call on services and this can be highly variable and as such, no income has been generated in the current financial year as no appeals have been required to be heard from the schools with whom the team has such an agreement.
- The team has continued to work with Electoral Services in the run up to elections and has contributed to improved service delivery during this time through answering telephone calls and resolving enquiries.
- Successful implementation of those requirements set out in the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012, introduced on 10 September 2012.
- Commenced the pilot project for recording meetings open to the public and publishing the subsequent recordings to the Internet on 16 October 2012, with the recordings of the first three meetings held being available to download from 19 October 2012.

### *Challenges*

- With an increasing workload, through the creation of additional committees and with the need for extra meetings to be arranged, the main challenge is to ensure that Democratic Services are adequately resourced and have appropriately trained staff to meet the requirements placed upon it.

### *Future plans*

- To implement a further upgrade of the Committee Management Information System (CMIS) which will see efficiencies in streamlining those processes currently used in the preparation and publication of Agenda documents for meetings.
- To introduce a cross-platform system whereby Members and Officers are able to view complete Agenda documents, make annotations on these and view other committee-related information on a variety of tablet devices, such as the iPad. It is hoped that this will reduce the need for printed copies of such documents and thus see a reduction in expenditure in this area.
- To work with colleagues within Legal & Democratic Services, both at Thurrock and the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham, to share best practice, ensure the development of the Democratic Services function in response to changing legislative requirements and enhance its role across both authorities.
- To enhance the levels of service delivery and reputation of Democratic Services.

## **Electoral Services**

### *Achievements*

- Completion of a statutory refresh of Absent Voter identifiers for 2012.
- Internet and telephone registration on annual canvass continues to be well perceived amongst the borough. This is an easy system to use that reduces the cost of postage to the service and automates a service for the elector and reduces the paperwork handled in the office.
- Further improvements in the conduct of the local elections in May 2012 that was recognised by the candidates involved.
- Further recognition of the election as a council-wide event with corporate buy-in, meaning colleagues from outside the team have an important role to play in the success of the management of an election.
- Recognised improved communication process during the election period and at the election count.
- Completion of annual canvass and publication of Register of Electors by the revised statutory date of 16 October 2012.
- Continued joint working with Democratic Services. Improved service delivery with the assistance of Democratic staff during the election period, answering telephone calls. Improved capacity to service Committees with assistance from the Electoral Services Manager.
- Review of polling stations and polling places which has given electors and members the opportunity to comment on the quality of polling places with the aim to increase voter turnout. The review was approved by the Council at its meetings in November and December 2011 and the resolutions of the Council were put into place for the local elections in 2012.

### *Challenges*

- Prepare for and successfully administer the Police and Crime Commissioner election on 15 November 2012.
- To influence and respond to the changing requirements of the government in respect of elections and electoral registration.
- To work within the remit of the efficiency savings whilst fulfilling the statutory functions of monthly Electoral Registration (rolling registration), the annual canvass and publication of the revised electoral register, Elections and Referendums and the Review of polling districts, places and polling stations.
- Scope the implications of the planned Individual Registration and the impact on the service and funding required.
- Decreasing voter turnout since 2008 (comparing a non combined election in 2008 with non combined election in 2012)

### *Future Plans*

- Scope and implement Individual Registration and assess and deal with the impact on the service and funding required.
- Administer the annual canvass, in preparation for the publication of the revised register of electors in 2014.

- Review of polling districts, polling places and polling stations during 2013, as requested by Council in December 2011.
- Statutory Refresh of Absent Vote identifiers for Electors in 2013, where necessary.
- Prepare for local elections and European parliamentary elections that are scheduled to be held in 2014.
- Work with the Youth Cabinet and the 14-19 Service to implement a process of youth elections in schools, in order to encourage awareness of the voting process and electoral participation.

## **Legal Services**

Legal Services supports the Council by providing legal advice by professionally qualified solicitors with specialist knowledge in areas such as, Child Protection, Adult Social Care, Education, Litigation, Criminal Prosecutions, Licensing, Anti-Social Behaviour, Housing, Employment, Debt Recovery, Planning, Landlord & Tenant, Highways, Commercial Property, Environmental law, Conveyancing, Procurement and Contract Advice amongst others.

The Council is a key player in the regeneration of the Thames Gateway and by its geographical position which includes major installations such as the Thames crossing, DP World and Petro-plus requires legal support on planning matters and robust and effective decision making. It supports effective governance, protects the Council against adverse risk particularly in the areas of child protection, employment litigation, procurement and planning and judicial review.

## *Achievements*

- In 2012/13 the service appointed a Joint Head of Legal & Democratic Services working across Thurrock and Barking and Dagenham. A Joint Deputy Head is also working across both councils. Shared working with Barking and Dagenham has reduced the costs of the legal management team and allowed both teams to develop into a more resilient cost effective service.
- With a particular emphasis on client needs across both councils the new legal structure under a joint head is focused on supporting the council through a period of rapid change. The legal service has the capacity to generate income and with a joint team can deal with peaks and flows in work.
- The sharing arrangements allow the council to retain high level expertise in house and avoid costly external legal support. This can be seen in the legal support to the DP World logistics park in Stanford Le Hope. Approval to promote a Local Development Order was agreed by Full Council on 21 December 2011. This is a unique and legally challenging project and will raise the profile of the legal team nationally and Thurrock Council as a whole. The legal costs of the project are to be met by DP World and the legal support to the project is largely in-house.
- Implementation of the Iken case management system which has allowed the service to streamline processes and implement a time recording

system which will allow the service to be benchmarked across other authorities.

- Lexcel accreditation from the Law Society.
- Although formal sharing arrangements are in place with Barking & Dagenham, Thurrock legal services remains a leading member of the Essex Legal Services Partnership. Thurrock Legal Services was a founder member of the Public Law Partnership of 27 local authority Legal teams. PLP provides shared training for the whole partnership allowing the authority to access free training from a wide range of acknowledged national experts due to the market leverage of the partnership. The service also resells spare delegate places turning a budget cost into an income stream for the authority. Likewise the market leverage of 27 authorities allows the service to secure significant discounts on products such as PLC and Lexis Nexus – online legal reference resources.
- The increased capacity of Legal Services achieved through the sharing arrangement with Barking and Dagenham the shared service is now positioned to generate traded income from the many smaller district and town Councils in the partnership whose size prohibit in-house specialist teams.

### *Challenges*

- Delivering savings with increasing workloads.
- The council continues to see high levels of children coming into care. Legal services are working closely with Children's services and the Court Service to try to reduce delay and meet demand.
- Recruitment and retention of specialists in areas such as childcare and reducing locum support and recruiting permanent staff. It is hoped the shared arrangement with Barking & Dagenham will improve this position.
- Generating income from other local authorities or public sector bodies.

### *Future plans*

- Improved client satisfaction.
- Lean high quality service.
- Greater partnership working and generation of traded income.

### **The Registrars Service**

The team is responsible for providing a service to the public to carry out their legal duties to register all births, deaths and still births that occur within the district of Thurrock. We are responsible for taking notices of marriage and civil partnerships from all people who reside in the district of Thurrock.

## *Achievements*

- Statutory duties have been covered with 5 full time staff (3 Registrars and two Admin (Serco)) 1 full time apprentice and casual staff, (now employed by Thurrock Council)) which are only used when required to cover registration of marriages and are therefore self-funded or emergency cover within the service.
- Group Citizenship Ceremonies are continuing to be held approximately every two /three weeks to welcome new British Citizens to our local community. The Service also offers private ceremonies Monday-Saturday which incurs an additional fee. These private ceremonies are becoming more popular.increasing revenue and giving greater choices.
- Records of births, deaths and marriages that have taken place in district of Thurrock from 1837 are held in the Register Office. Certified copies of these records can now be purchased either within 2 hours, 24 hrs or the standard 5 days. The recent introduction of discretionary fees for a faster service has been received well and is proving very popular for those who do not wish to wait the statutory period of 5 days.
- Discretionary Fees being charged for certificates have increased income by over £2000 (April to October 2012) so far this financial year.
- Non-refundable deposits of £40 are now taken for any ceremony booked thereby reducing the amount of subsidy that the council provides
- Thameside Theatre was added to Thameside Complex Marriage Licence on renewal date in July 2011. First ceremony was successfully held there and other ceremonies already booked for the future.
- An EVENT booklet promoting holding marriage ceremonies at Thameside Theatre and Hawthorn Suite at the Thameside Complex was published to give further customer choice, increase income and inform contact details etc.
- The Registration Service encourage customer payments by Credit and Debit Card wherever possible, saving staff time counting cash and cheque payments daily and offers easier and safer method of payment for residents.
- Implementation of the Tell Us Once service. 'Tell us Once' is a major programme, being led by DWP on behalf of Government as a whole, to transform the way in which people can tell Government (central and local) about changes to their circumstances. Thurrock has offered the service for both Births and Deaths registrations.
- Introduction of an Electronic Diary system to replace the old manual diaries creating an efficient, modern, internet-based system. The service can now offer more appointments saving time and enabling more than one appointment to be offered at any one time by multiple administrators.

## *Challenges*

- To achieve both savings of 20% and also to increase income with future services.
- Registration staff to attend training qualify and register a new service for Nationality Checking (NCS) which aims to be in operation before end of

this financial year 2012-2013.

### *Future Plans*

- Thurrock Register Office now work with New Governance status with the General Register Office (GRO) standards often exceeding those required in the Good Practice Guide so will be aiming to continue this excellent work.
- Implementation of additional Electronic Diary System features to include emailing confirmation of appointments and automatic reminders to customers thereby minimising missed appointments.
- Introduction / implementation of the ceremony calendar on the Electronic Diary System and all its features to reduce current manual records and paper-based administration.
- Introduction of Nationality Checking service. We currently perform Citizenship ceremonies to celebrate becoming a British Citizen. We propose to extend the service to include the checking of essential documentation assisting the applicant to complete their application for citizenship. The provision of a NCS has the potential to generate income to the Council in addition to contributing to building cohesive communities through the promotion of citizenship.
- Introduction /implementation of new RAFTS system to replace current archived records system RSS (that is no longer supported through IT

### **Human Resources & Organisational Development**

The main aim of the HR & OD team is to ensure the council has a high performing, motivated workforce supporting the delivery of the agreed priorities. This aim is delivered through the implementation of our OD and workforce strategies.

#### *Achievements*

- **Healthy Workforce**

The past year has seen a concerted effort to reduce sickness absence and improve the health & wellbeing of staff. We have introduced a nurse contact centre for reporting absence and providing medical advice; appointed an Occupational Health nurse to support the management of long term sickness and stress related absence; introduced a mandatory absence management training programme; held free 'health checks' events and smoking cessation clinics.

To date the interventions have had a significant impact on sickness absence, the first quarter of this financial year saw a 30% reduction in absence compared to the previous year and saved the council over £100K – more than covering the cost of our investment. Although the last quarter has seen levels similar to the previous year we are currently still on target for an overall improved performance for 12/13.

The table below shows the average sickness absence days per FTE for the first 6 months of this year, with the data for the same time last year for comparison.

	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept
2011-12 In month	0.62	0.68	0.57	0.80	0.80	0.79
2011-12 Cumulative	0.62	1.30	1.86	2.67	3.47	4.26
2011-12 Target (YTD)	0.75	1.53	2.37	3.05	3.73	4.49
<i>Comparison : 2010-11</i>	<i>0.86</i>	<i>0.90</i>	<i>0.96</i>	<i>0.79</i>	<i>0.78</i>	<i>0.87</i>
<i>Comparison: 2010-11 Cumulative</i>	<i>0.86</i>	<i>1.76</i>	<i>2.72</i>	<i>3.51</i>	<i>4.29</i>	<i>5.16</i>

- Comensura – Agency staff

This managed service agreement, implemented in December 2011, delivered actual savings of over £300K in the first 6 months and is on target to deliver savings of over £600K for the calendar year at current usage levels. To put this in context if the Council had continued to use agency staff as previous levels the contract would have delivered savings of over £900K.

In addition to the savings delivered the agreement has enabled the Council to appropriately manage the implementation of the Agency Worker Regulations.

- Policy Review

Following the review of our employment policy framework, April saw the implementation of new policies including absence management, redundancy, buying annual leave.

The review incorporated all non-pay related policies and resulted in a modernised employment framework that reflects the latest legislation and best practice.

### *Future plans*

- My Dashboard – Oracle

The next few months will see the implementation of Oracle HR and Payroll. This will modernise and transform the way we manage our personal information and employment by introducing 'online' processes. This includes:

- E-payslips – from February staff and members will access their payslips online
- iExpenses – claims for expenses will be processed and approved online and paid through payroll
- Employee self service – staff will be able to manage their personal information, bank details and submit overtime claims online
- Manager self service – managers can approve claims and leave online; process changes to contracts, resignations; view information about their staff.



- Management Handbook

Following extensive research and development we will be implementing a comprehensive online 'management handbook'. This provides a single resource capturing all standards and accountabilities for managers and providing basis for induction, training and development.