

28 November 2012

ITEM 18.2

Council

CABINET PORTFOLIO HOLDER REPORT

Report of: Councillor Victoria Holloway

Environment

Introduction:

This Portfolio covers the services that are important and visible to residents: Waste Collection and Disposal, Street Cleansing, Parks and Open Spaces and the operational aspects of Highway Repair and Maintenance.

The service is business-like and continuously drives efficiency by reducing costs and targeting opportunities for income generation. This approach has enabled the Directorate to continue to operate within budget whilst maintaining the quality of services and contributing to the savings targets of the Council.

This report has been prepared to provide an overview of the service provided by the Environment Directorate. Details of each service area are provided below with an overview of current performance against key indicators and benchmark comparators provided where possible. Some of the challenges and opportunities for the services are explored.

Key Achievements 11/12:

Waste Collection and Disposal

2010 saw the end of the integrated waste contract and the introduction of a series of smaller recycling and waste contracts which has enabled the service to deliver annual savings of over £2million. The contract changes took place when the collection service was brought back in-house and coincided with the introduction of the three bin collection service.

The three bin system has provided residents with additional recycling capacity and the introduction of the system saw a peak of 45% of household waste being recycled in 2010/11. Recycling performance in the current year has dipped slightly, principally due to the poor weather in the first half year impacting on the garden waste stream.

Resources have been dedicated to reinvigorate recycling amongst residents through targeted education programmes and this is now reflecting in the latest results, although the year-end recycling performance, whilst better than most Unitary authorities, is still likely to be around 2% below target.

Efforts to reduce the level of contamination in recycling bins, which peaked at around 17% last year have been very successful, with the volume of contamination coming down to 8%. This has helped us avoid contract penalty payments and bring some stability to our spending patterns.

Over the past three years there has been a steady reduction in the proportion of municipal waste sent to landfill, which is the key objective of the Council's Waste Strategy. Landfilling of domestic waste has decreased from 62% in 2009-2010 to only 28% in 2011-2012. The target for the current year is set at a regional best level of 25% and despite a short blip due to the short-term decommissioning of our contractor's Energy From Waste plant, all indications are that this will be achieved or improved on, a signal achievement for the Council.

A project is currently underway to review the operation of the waste collection service with a view to ensuring that vehicles and staff are being deployed in the most efficient manner, and this is expected to deliver valuable savings to the Council.

Street Cleansing

The streets in Thurrock continue to get cleaner whilst the cost of the service continues to be amongst the lowest in comparison to other Unitary Authorities and statistical neighbours. The 2011-2012 APSE Street Cleansing performance indicator standings report has just been published and for the third year we have achieved a 1st quartile position with our cost of Street Cleansing per head at £11.31, being £4 less than the comparator group average.

However, whilst there is a confidence that current high performance standards will not diminish, the trend of continual improvement set over the past 3 years is likely to plateau as pressure on spending levels increases.

Parks and Open Spaces

The quality of the parks across the borough continues to be recognised with the re-awarding of Green Flags for Coalhouse Fort, Langdon Hills and Grays Beach. A Higher Stewardship Grant has been awarded to Coalhouse Fort for the outstanding work that has been done in conserving and creating habitats for rare mining bees and orchids. During 2012 fourteen Play Areas have had new equipment installed this includes skate ramps, play equipment for all ages and outdoor gym equipment.

This service is also responsible for maintaining green spaces on Housing Land. The Service Level Agreement that has now been in place for two years has delivered improved maintenance in housing areas.

An in-house team of Arborists has been recruited to not only ensure that the tree stock across the Borough is healthy and well-maintained, but to support the Directorate's efforts to reduce dependence on expensive external companies and provide potential to generate income for the Council.

Operational Highways Maintenance and Repair

Whilst the Highways portfolio is concerned with the strategic aspects of the Highways Network, the Environment portfolio includes the service that carries out the on-street works such as winter gritting and road and footpath repairs. The service continues to build capacity and to carry out more of these works directly, further improving efficiency and generating savings for the Council.

Financial Performance 11/12:

Final 2011/12 outturn was a small underspend against budget.

Budgets and Efficiency:

The Directorate is on course to achieve the targeted efficiency savings in 2012/13 and remain within the overall budget set for the year. Further efficiency savings of more than £400,000 have been proposed for 2013/14.

Corporate Working and Developing Strong Partnerships:

The partnership with Housing continues successfully with the implementation of a Service Level Agreement clarifying timing and standards for grounds maintenance and related activities on Housing land.

Representatives of the Directorate are active on the corporate team established to market services from across the Council to both LEA schools and academies. We are hopeful that this will increase our customer base and generate income that will have the effect of reducing unit costs.

Discussions with London Borough of Dagenham and Barking are continuing in order to explore opportunities for joint or shared working arrangements and other effectiveness and efficiency initiatives.

To demonstrate their partnership commitment, Impulse, the not-for-profit managing agent for the Council's three leisure centres, has offered to reduce their annual management fee by around 10%, providing the Council with a saving of £50,000.

Thurrock In Bloom - The Thurrock in Bloom Association is a voluntary organisation which works in partnership with the Environment Directorate and other Thurrock Council teams to promote, encourage and support environmental activity across the borough. The Mayor of Thurrock is the Association's Honorary President.

The main activity of TiB is the annual competition & presentation evening held at Thameside Theatre. 2012 saw 183 entries from Schools, Senior Citizen Complexes, Allotments & residents. The Council allows use of the Thameside venue at no charge and covers the approx £200 cost of the award trophies.

Planned Key Achievements 2012/13:

Challenging performance targets have been set for the three key performance indicators for the Directorates services. These are:

Indicator	Target	Current Performance
Waste		
Percentage of Municipal Waste sent to Land fill	25%	23% (year to date cumulative)
Percentage of Household waste recycled	47%	45% (projected year end figure)
Street Cleanliness		
Litter	5%	5% (after 2 inspection rounds)
Detritus	14%	5%
Graffiti	3%	1.8%
Fly-posting	1%	1%

Apprenticeships:

Following the conversion of three Waste apprentices in the team to regular agency employees, we now have a total of 13 apprentices operating well in the Directorate, 12 in the Street Services team (covering Grounds Maintenance and Street Cleansing) and one new long-term trade apprentice starter in our vehicle maintenance team.

Other Achievements:

- Significant work has been undertaken to improve facilities at Blackshots and Corringham Leisure Centres. This has been completed in the context of attendance at leisure centres having increased by 5% (representing an additional 33,000 more visit per annum).
- To improve the overall skill base within the Directorate and as a staff motivational approach, all Environment front line employees have now been trained to an NVQ 2 level.
- Impulse has continued to improve the quality of facilities provided at the Council's three leisure centres, achieving 'commended' (Belhus) and 'highly commended' accreditations (Blackshots and Corringham) from QUEST (a National Benchmarking body for the Leisure Industry).

Key Challenges 2012/13:

The exceptionally wet summer has proved to be a challenge for the Department, both in terms of the impact on grass cutting and the level of gardening waste collected by the Waste Service. This has had a direct adverse effect on the service's ability to achieve the target for recycling this year.

Whilst the Directorate has a solid history of working within budget, there is concern that the continued financial constraints face by the Council will have an impact on the standard of street cleansing and greening maintenance that can be undertaken by the Directorate. The Directorate is working to mitigate this by identifying additional income streams that will contribute to funding core services.

The internal waste collection service has now been operating for two years following the 'insourcing' of the function and the re-procurement of the other waste contracts in 2010. Overall this project is delivering annual savings of more than £2m.

Although still demonstrably effective, changes in recycling habits, property numbers and other operational factors mean that the routes and resource requirements of the internal collection teams are no longer optimally configured, and an exercise to review the operation is being carried out. The results of this project will not be clear until December/January, but early indications are that it will contribute significant efficiency savings to the Council.

Summary:

Overall the Environment Portfolio is operating both effectively and efficiently with no areas of significant weakness. The strategic and operational management within the Directorate is strong, demonstrating robust financial management and continuous improvement in the delivery of good quality services to residents and other internal and external customers.