

<b>22 January 2014</b>	<b>ITEM: 14 (ii)</b>
<b>Council</b>	
<b>Cabinet Member Report – CENTRAL SERVICES</b>	
<b>Report of:</b> Councillor P. Smith	
This report is public.	

### **Introduction**

Within my portfolio are all of the functions grouped under Legal and Democratic 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 (this function is within the Leader's portfolio), the benefit fraud section, management of the internal audit contract, insurance and risk management and the client management of the revenues, benefits and exchequer services provided by the Council's Strategic Service Partner, Serco.

Commercial Services manages the running of the Civic Offices and Thameside as well as the commercial aspects of the Serco contract. The service is currently being restructured to take on more responsibility for procurement and to provide a stronger client function over ICT.

Human Resources & Organisational Development incorporates the corporate strategy and policy team, the workforce planning and development team and the Information Governance and GIS 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, the development and delivery of learning and training across the council and information governance.

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.

To improve economy this service strives to work with other local authorities to reduce overall cost to our Council tax payers. These authorities include Southend on sea, Essex, Basildon, Brentwood, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, Westminster and the Ministry of justice.

My report sets out some of the key issues that I have dealt with over the past months and some of the issues for the future.

### **Sundry Debtors team**

The Sundry Debt Team continues to perform strongly in achieving targets for timely accurate billing and continues to improve collection rates.

In comparison to the same period last year the value of invoices raised has increased by just over £0.812m, whilst outstanding debt over 6 months old has reduced by £0.45m. This clearly demonstrates the improved collection strategies that have been implemented by the Team.

### **Council Tax / Local Council Tax Support scheme**

You will all be aware that the national Council Tax Benefit scheme was abolished at the start of April 2013 leaving Local Authorities to design local schemes. As a result of this and other technical changes introduced, the Council Tax team billed for an additional £3.6m, with approximately 5,000 additional residents receiving a bill for the first time.

In order to limit the impact on these residents focus was placed on communication to ensure that residents impacted by the changes in legislation were both aware of the additional charges and how to access assistance when required.

I am pleased to report that as a result of the actions taken the Debt Management Team have collected over 80% of this additional amount with very few complaints being received. To further put things in perspective:-

Council Tax collections as at end December 2013, including the additional amounts billed for the new Local Council Tax Support scheme stands at 79.79% compared to 80.05% for the same time as at December 2012.

Total Council Tax arrears (across all years prior to 2013/14) are now just £1,199,056 compared to £1,315,851 for same as at December 2012.

### **National Non Domestic Rates (Business Rates)**

Despite additional challenges businesses face in this time of austerity, the service continues to perform well and improvements have been seen in both the billing and recovery of amounts due.

The introduction this year of the business rates retention scheme increases the impact of changes in the tax base on the Council's finances. Whilst the design of the retention scheme means that the Council will share the benefit of base increases, conversely however there is increased risk when the base decreases i.e. businesses cease trading. The one area where the Council keeps 100% of the New

Business Rates is where a company is set up to provide Green Renewable energy. As a result of Business rates retention additional focus has been placed on identifying businesses not currently on the rating list. This initiative so far has utilised additional interrogation of the internet and other media and to date has generated additional billings in excess of £1m relating to current and previous years liabilities. The collection of the Business Rates as at December 2013 stands at 88.66% compared to 85.66% as at December 2012. The team is on target to achieve a collection rate in excess of 99% by the year end.

## **Bailiff Activity**

It is pleasing to confirm both for Council Tax and Business Rates collection, summonses and liability orders have been decreasing whilst the collection rate continues to increase. As a result of this the Bailiff activity has also reduced as more of our residents are making contact with the Council sooner to resolve any difficulties they have in making payment arrangements. The service that is demanded from the Bailiff companies by Thurrock is pretty unique in that they continue to run various surgeries from the Civic Offices thus offering residents the opportunity to speak to them away from their residencies.

Whilst not yet fully finalised Bailiff reforms announced by the Ministry of Justice are due to be introduced from 6th April this year.

The reforms are designed to standardise practice and ensure Bailiffs are controlled by one set of regulations. The main aims are to:

- a) Prohibit the use of force against a person with safeguards to protect children;
- b) Remodel and Clarify the Complaints process available to the debtor;
- c) Create minimum entry standards and certification processes to ensure Bailiffs are fit to operate – National Standards;
- d) Set out When and How a Bailiff can call and enter a property;
- e) Set out to whom and under what circumstances reasonable force to enter a premises will be available;
- f) Make clear which items an enforcement agent may not take from someone's home;
- g) Make clear and standard the fees that a Bailiff can charge for a range of debts that they collect for local Government/Courts and Businesses;
- h) Ensure that there are processes to address the Vulnerable; and
- i) Ultimately all actions taken by Bailiffs will be clear and under one set of regulations with consistency in charging across all Bailiffs.

As per above there will be significant changes to the charges Bailiffs are able to charge. The intention is to standardise and so the new fee structure is not discretionary or negotiable. High level charges for debts under £1,500 will be as follows:

- 1) Administration Fixed fee – Under the new legislation bailiffs will be able to charge a fixed administration fee of £75 on receipt of instruction to collect debt.
- 2) Enforcement – A fixed fee of £230 will be chargeable on the 1<sup>st</sup> visit, however subsequent visits will not incur further charges.

- 3) Sale of Goods – A fee of £105 will be chargeable to cover costs of selling goods.

The reforms are widely welcomed; however it is important we now take this opportunity to reconsider our approach to debt collection, thresholds and use of bailiffs in line with the changes. The Head of Corporate Finance will submit a report to Overview and Scrutiny for consideration.

### **Parking**

As previously reported, Thurrock has not been able to progress any PCNs beyond Charge Certificate stage. In order to improve this situation, responsibility for this area of activity has now been transferred to the Thurrock recovery team, and collection activities are due to commence within January 2014.

This activity will not just pursue future PCNs but also pursue current outstanding PCNs where commercially viable.

### **Housing Benefits**

The section has had to deal with a great deal of additional pressures this year as a result of the Welfare Benefit reforms. The service has experienced an unprecedented volume of Discretionary Housing Payment claims as a result of the Benefit Cap and Social Sector Size Criteria that the Government introduced. As a result of these changes the Government had increased the amounts of Discretionary Hardship funds available to Local Authorities to spend. Unlike in some authorities that will have large under spends and return funds back to the Government I can report that in Thurrock we are on Target to spend the allocated amount to assist some of our most vulnerable residents through these difficult times.

I must stress that these additional awards are not long term solutions for our residents and some of our residents will still be faced with tough decisions as to what happens long term with regards to their Housing concerns.

### **Essential Living Fund (ELF)**

Again, as part of the Welfare Reform changes, local authorities were tasked with providing schemes to replace the Community Care grants and Crises Loans that were administered by the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP). Officers from Thurrock Council worked closely together with Southend Council where a common scheme was agreed and eventually Southend Council administered the new ELF scheme for both Councils as well as for Essex County Council.

The scheme is a non cash scheme and is designed to assist people who have no other resources available to them. Thurrock Council is working closely with TRUP re-use Organisation based in Tilbury who provide re-used furniture.

The budget is closely monitored and a monthly Welfare Reform Group meeting takes place which is currently chaired by the Director of Adults, Health and Commissioning. In addition there is also Member participation (Cllr B Rice) within

the group as well as representatives from our third sector partners.

The current projection shows there will be an under spend against the amount available that will be carried forward to 2014/15. The DWP has announced that further funding will be stopped from 2015 adding pressure to Thurrock residents and the Council will have to consider this in future budget discussions. Overall the feedback that has been received has been positive in both how the scheme is being managed and application and criteria used to access this fund.

### **Exchequer Services**

Exchequer Services has supported the implementation of iProcurement that will support the Council in identifying savings opportunities and improve payment times for suppliers. For instance, a Payment Request E-Form has now gone live, workflow is used to authorise them via email, reducing paperflow and speeding up the payment process as well as reducing duplication and the risk of fraud as they have a unique identifier.

We currently pay 87.58% of our suppliers by BACS. The number of remittances sent via post as opposed to email has also reduced, with the vast majority of commercial suppliers receiving them via email.

The payment of invoices within 30 days is currently at 92.74%. Although this is an improvement on previous years, it is still not satisfactory and must be improved. Officers are improving the reporting and engaging with departments to reinforce the process, but this indicator continues to be a focus and initiatives such as Oracle I-Supplier and the re-implementation of I-Procurement will see this improve further over time.

Oracle I-Supplier is still on target to go live on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 2013. This module allows our suppliers to 'self serve' their own transactions and 'flip' orders directly to invoices. The latter process eliminates the need for any data rekeying and the preparation and submission of invoices by suppliers. Invoices are generated automatically within Oracle and are paid automatically within the suppliers preset terms assuming they pass certain accuracy tests.

The overarching goal should be that all our suppliers and providers use the Portal, as there is no value to either the Council or its creditors in rekeying and processing paper based transactions. With this in mind the aim is that the Council commits to eliminating all paper invoices where a purchase order exists by 31 March 2016.

### **Corporate Finance**

Corporate Finance is divided into two in-house teams; Accountancy (under the Leader's portfolio) and Benefit Fraud, and is also responsible for managing the outsourced Internal Audit Contract, insurance and risk management and the client management of the revenues, benefits and exchequer services provided by the Council's Strategic Service Partner, Serco.

## **Internal Audit Services**

The Internal Audit Service (IAS) is currently provided by Baker Tilly following a merger with RSM Tenon. The Accounts and Audit (England) Regulations 2011 require that a relevant body must undertake an adequate and effective internal audit of its accounting records and of its system of internal control in accordance with the proper practices in relation to internal control. The IAS carries out the work to satisfy this legislative requirement and part of this is reporting the outcome of its work to the Standards & Audit Committee.

During 2012/13, the IAS issued a total of 42 assurance reports. In addition, we also carried out advisory work around the National Fraud Initiative and were involved in providing independent review and investigation in respect of 2 formal complaints against the Council submitted through the complaints process and a Councillor enquiry. A total of 91% of final reports were issued with a positive level of assurance. However, 9% of final reports issued received a red (negative) level of assurance. The final reports issued with a red assurance level were:

- Re-charging Tenants
- Manor School
- Corporate Health & Safety
- ICT Vulnerability

Follow up work carried out during 2012 identified that 86% of recommendation had been implemented, compared to 87% in 2011/12. Recommendations contained within internal audit reports and their implementation by officers, have been given an increased level of scrutiny by the Standards & Audit Committee. Directors and Heads of Service are now required to attend and report on red assurance reports and to respond to questions from Members.

During the current year (2013/14), Internal Audit have finalised a total of 33 reports. Of these, 31 have received a positive assurance opinion. 1 red assurance report has been issued around the Housing Capital Programme (Kitchens & Bathrooms) and 1 advisory report has been issued.

## **Fraud Investigation Department**

Thurrock Council Fraud Investigation Department agreed to a Joint Working Arrangement with Southend Borough Council, where teams from both councils are being combined to tackle all fraud committed against them. This joint approach brings considerable benefits to Thurrock Council where the ability to resolve cases more efficiently and effectively can be realised. The department has also been engaged by the Ministry of Justice, Legal Aid Agency to lead on investigations into misappropriation of Legal Aid by claimants due to the specialist and experienced resources present at Thurrock Council.

The department has also been extremely successful in utilising the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 to recover losses incurred by the council in benefit fraud offences. In December alone the department was awarded Confiscation Orders against offenders by the Crown Court totalling over £140,383, which will come back to the

council. The department also received praise from the court on its professional and expedient investigation highlighting the criminality of the offenders and the benefit of their crimes.

## **Risk and Opportunity Management**

The risk management function was restructured and incorporated within the Insurance Team under Corporate Finance in August 2013. As part of the arrangements a shared service for risk management was established with LBBD. To enable risk management to be effective in and for both organisations a full review of the risk management policies, strategies and frameworks was undertaken.

The revised arrangements for ROM have been developed and are to be reported to DB 14/01/14, S&AC 06/02/14 and Cabinet in March 2014. As part of the arrangements a timetable for the review and reporting of the Strategic/Corporate Risk and Opportunity Register has been established and the 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter review is scheduled to commence in March 2013 and reported to S&AC May 2014, via Directors Board April 2014.

## **Insurance**

The current contract of Insurance with Zurich Municipal is due to expire on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014. Since the summer the Insurance Team have been working on a review of the policies and tender exercise with the assistance of an insurance broker. Tenders from the market were received in November 2013 and evaluations of the returns by the Insurance Team/Broker commenced in December 2013. The recommendation report and award notices are due to be released January 2014 and meetings with the successful insurer(s) to be undertaken from February 2014, in preparation for the commencement of the contract from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014.

## **Business Services**

### **Procurement and Contract Management**

The Commercial contract management of the Serco partnership is currently undertaken by Business Services. It has been identified that substantial financial benefits could be realised by managing all contract with third parties in a 'cradle to grave' process, not only deriving value by efficient initial tendering, but ensuring sustained improvement by pro-active management of contracts through their lifetime and through the retendering process, this would include the development of local contractors to improve their ability and alignment with the Councils commercial needs, and potentially improve their success in gaining Council contracts. The Business Services Section has been re-organised to address this challenge and the necessary procurement skills and expertise is in the process of being recruited to develop the initiative and realise the potential savings.

## **Partnership Management**

The Serco (nee Vertex) Partnership has been in place for approaching eight years, in that time the service requirements of the Council from its partner have changed, and the partnership arrangement has been developed through negotiation to continue to meet the needs of the Council. However in this year, the requirements of the Council for a substantially changed Surveying, Asset management and Highways service has necessitated a complete review as to how these services are provided by our partners sub- contractor. Through negotiation and review, it was agreed that the best solution to protect and deliver the required future services for these areas of activity was to return the services to the Council for internal future provision. The Council has negotiated a staff and resource transfer (TUPE) from our provider to ensure the continuance of service delivery, the Council negotiated reduced financial penalties to those specified in the Contractual agreement for the return of these services to the Council, this was achieved through mutual negotiation as the return of the services to the Council was in the interests of both the provider and the Council.

## **Democratic Services**

Whilst 2013 presented its various challenges, it also saw this part of Legal & Democratic Services strive to improve the service it delivers and look into different and more efficient ways of working.

During the course of the year, the team has:

- Worked hard to ensure that all meetings of the council, cabinet and committees were properly supported.
- Experienced difficulties due to a shortage of staff as a direct result of two long term vacant posts.
- Successfully recruited and inducted two new members of the team in June and July to fill the vacant posts.
- Introduced and provided initial training on MyCMIS to enable Members and officers to view and annotate agenda, reports and minutes on a tablet device. MyCMIS will be fully rolled out in 2014.
- Prepared new templates for agenda, reports and minutes together with revised report writing guidance for officers. These will be rolled out in early 2014.
- Offered a school appeals clerking service to academies and signed four service level agreements.
- Outsourced a proportion of the work to support school admission appeals. This has been done within current budgets, supplemented by income generated from academies, and enabled the team to work more strategically and focus on improving the service offered.
- Supported the 6 overview and scrutiny committees and any associate Task and Finish Groups established.
- Revised the content of 32 pages in the council and democracy section of the council's new website.
- Provided assistance to Brentwood Borough Council from September to December as part of the shared service arrangements of the wider Legal & Democratic Services department.



## Members Services

During the course of the year, the team has:

- Provided support to Members and a busy Mayor.
- Revised internal office procedures to improve ways of working.
- Successfully inducted a new Member into the Council.
- Supported the introduction of new IT to Members and helped to resolve a number of individual issues for a number of Members.
- Revised the Mayoral protocol.
- Recruited a new apprentice, who joined the team in the new year.
- Managed civic events to reduce costs whilst still delivering an excellent event.

## Electoral Services

During the course of the year, the team has undertaken preparation for Individual Elector Registration (IER) including:

- IER confirmation dry run which saw electoral register data matched to records held by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). 111,760 records were matched to DWP database with the following results:

Green	meaning that an elector's details exactly matched with DWP data	82.48%
Amber	meaning that there was a query with the DWP data but the reason for the query was not fed back to electoral services	1.41%
Red	meaning that an elector's details did not match with DWP records	16.11%

- Following this, subsequent manual and automatic data matching to council tax records increased the records matched with DWP data by 8,597. This meant that the revised figures for Green and Red were:

Green	meaning that an elector's details exactly matched with DWP data	90.17%
Red	meaning that an elector's details did not match with DWP records	8.42%

With regards to the details that do not match, we follow the published IER procedure. (If further information is required regarding this process, Electoral Services will be happy to provide a briefing note).

- Planning for implementation of IER in 2014 as Thurrock have now been given the provisional date of 8 July 2014 for the live data match. Staff training for this commenced in January 2014.
- Commenced statutory annual canvass in September 2013. On target for

publication of revised register on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2014.

- Undertaken the planned statutory Absent Vote Refresh in January 2013, with the statutory obligation being met and the signatures of absent voters being refreshed.
- Undertaken a second statutory Absent Vote Refresh between 1 and 19 August 2013 due to the Elections (Fresh Signatures for Absent Voters) Regulations 2013 (revised date brought forward from 2014). Again, the statutory obligation has been met.
- Commenced planning for European and Local Elections to be held on the 22 May 2014.
- Provided assistance to Democratic Services with cover for committee work.
- Polling station review commenced in October 2013 and report scheduled for Council on 22 January 2014.
- Successful management of Stifford Clays election in October 2013.
- Revised the content in the election section of the council's new website.

## **Legal Services**

The shared legal team supports the council in a range of statutory functions from child protection, adult social care, education, criminal prosecutions, licensing, anti-social behaviour, housing, employment, debt recovery, planning, landlord and tenant, highways, commercial property, environmental law, conveyancing, contract/procurement and governance. It has been a challenging year with an increase in the volume of legal instructions across the council.

## **Achievements in the last year include**

- Legal and governance support to the Council's key growth and regeneration projects: London Gateway, Local Development Order, Gloriana Thurrock Ltd, housing capital projects, Purfleet regeneration, the Royal Opera House costume store, NNDR Pooling Programme. Legal support on the Serco Strategic Service Partnership and the housing responsive repairs contract. Support to the Academies programme and the Primary Capital Programme.
- The shared legal service was established in 2011. The last year has seen the sharing of all roles within the service including business support. In September 2013 legal services underwent a joint Law Society Inspection carried out by an independent inspector in order to achieve the Lexcel Accreditation which is awarded to solicitors who meet the highest management and customer care standards and show excellence in areas such as client care, case management and risk management. The inspection was carried out over three days and the shared service was awarded the accreditation. The inspectors assessment summary noted: 'high levels of compliance across the legal service with decisive

leadership and direction, a clear willingness by all to embrace new methods of working and sharing good practice, resulting in the uniformly high standard of service delivery noted across both offices'. The accreditation is valid for three years with an annual monitoring visit. The Inspector noted there were over 1,650 active legal files open across the shared service.

- A Regulatory Investigatory Powers Inspection was undertaken by the surveillance commissioner's office and the report received in November 2013. The report praised the progress made by Thurrock council since its last inspection in 2011 (full details are due to be presented to the Standards and Audit Committee in February).
- In August 2013 the legal team were appointed as legal providers to Brentwood District Council providing both the Monitoring Officer and Head of Legal role along with legal support across the full range of a District council's responsibilities. This work is undertaken on a fee traded basis. This arrangement has been approved by Brentwood until September 2014 and work is underway at exploring relocating the Brentwood legal team to Thurrock's offices during this period so that Brentwood can gain efficiencies from shared management, time recording, case management and the development of their legal staff.
- The team has also provided legal services to Westminster City Council over the last year and continues to play an active part in the management of the Essex Public Law Partnership which is now made up of 32 authorities.
- Monthly legal and governance briefings are provided to three authorities and circulated to Members and Chief Officers.
- Development of self funding courses with city solicitors Bevan Brittain and Cornerstone Chambers run from Thurrock Civic Offices and offered throughout Essex and London.
- Working with children's services clients on the introduction of the Public Law Outline in children's safeguarding. Legal has seen an increase in the number of cases in this area. We have worked with clients to reduce costs and looked for innovative solutions such as employing our own advocate to undertake the council's advocacy and thereby reduce external spend. We have also worked closely with the court service to reduce delay by being a member of the Essex Family Justice Group. We have also arranged with the Court for the use of a Court room for the purposes of Court training for social workers.
- Reduction in the number of locum solicitors across the service with an increase in permanent recruitment in previous hard to fill posts such as children's safeguarding.
- Our successful internship programme was extended this year to give a greater number of young people from the borough the opportunity to obtain training in a legal environment and to equip them to find employment or to gain a legal training contract in order to qualify as a solicitor. One local person worked with the team for six months and secured a training contract with Clifford Chance

Solicitors (a firm with offices worldwide) while another was successful in obtaining employment with the Barclays legal team in Canary Wharf. Both applicants secured these roles whilst working with the council and were able to use their experience in legal under a training programme.

## **Future Plans**

Extend the successful intern scheme and take part in the Legal Apprenticeship scheme run by the Law Society to offer an opportunity to young people from the borough to gain a legal qualification.

- Continue to trade the service to (i) generate income and (ii) to provide in house solicitors with greater opportunities for personal development and thereby increase our staff retention.
- Continue to seek to improve our client satisfaction from both our in-house and external clients.

## **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 and taking notices of marriage and civil partnerships from all people who reside in the district of Thurrock.

## **Achievements**

- Statutory duties have been covered with 6 full time staff (4 Registrars and two Admin (Serco)) 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, currently £130 are becoming more popular. Increasing income by over £9,000 from April 2013 to January 2014 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 £2,500 (April 2013 to January 2014) so far this financial year.
- Non-refundable deposits of £100 for ceremonies in our Hawthorn Suite and

- Approved Premises or £45 for the Register Office are now taken for any ceremony booked thereby reducing the amount of subsidy that the council provides. 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 additional Electronic Diary System features to include emailing confirmation of appointments and automatic reminders to customers thereby minimising missed appointments.
- Implementation of the ceremony calendar on the Electronic Diary System and all its features to reduce current manual records and paper-based administration.
- Implementation of Nationality Checking service to check essential documentation assisting the applicant to complete their application for citizenship. The provision of NCS has generated over £5,000 income since June 2013 to the Council in addition to contributing to building cohesive communities through the promotion of citizenship.
- Implementation of new RAFTS system (Record Asset File Tracking System) which produces certificates for births, marriages and deaths, has replaced the previous archived records system RSS.
- The Registration Service is delighted to announce the promotion of the 2.5yr serving Apprentice to a unique opportunity, that of 'Trainee Registrar'. To specialise and train in a worthwhile and respected career, whilst also promoting the Council as an Investor in People.

### **Future Plans**

- Thurrock Register Office will aim to continue exceeding standards required in the Good Practice Guide in line with New Governance and the General Register Office (GRO).
- Support Thurrock Online Programme – Transformation by a phased integration of booking appointments online.

### **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**

- **IIP**

Following an extensive assessment the Council achieved Investors In People Gold standard in July 2013. This is an outstanding success and demonstrates the clear improvements that have taken place over the past three years; Overall staff demonstrated high levels of enthusiasm about their work, they feel valued and there is a growing level of trust and confidence in managers.

The award provides evidence of the impact of the Council's Organisational Development Strategy as a platform for further development

- **Management Handbook/ Induction**

The Management Handbook was launched in January 2013 and imbedded through induction sessions and regular communications. The handbook provides single reference for the standards and expectations of a 'Thurrock Manager' and is driving improved practice and performance.

### **Oracle- My Dashboard**

Oracle HR and Payroll was implemented, transforming the way we manage our personal information and employment by introducing 'online' processes. This included:

- E-payslips – from February staff and members could access their payslips online
- iExpenses – claims for expenses are processed and approved online and paid through payroll
- Employee self service – staff can 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.

- **Local Living Wage**

Following a Council motion in 2012 the Local Living Wage was implemented from April 2013. With over 70% of our workforce living within the borough this provides a standard to support economic regeneration.

### **Future Plans**

- **Staff Survey**

The bi-annual staff survey will be conducted in March/April 2014. This will provide detailed feedback on a wide range of issues and inform the next phase of the Organisational Development Strategy.

### **Information Governance and GIS**

During 2012/13 the Council processed 93% of FOI requests within the legal timeframe.

There has been a significant reduction in the number of FOI requests logged during the reporting year. During 2012/13, 104 fewer requests (compared to 2011/12) have been logged.

Thurrock has implemented processes in order to reduce the volume of requests that are logged and processed as FOI requests. This has seen a significant reduction in requests (180) being diverted away from FOI during 2012/13. 120 requests were diverted away and processed as routine enquiries by services areas, and 60 requests for information were sign posted to our website where information requested is already publically available (either via a previous FOI request that is published on-line, or general information available on the web).

Based on data captured within the FOI database, it has been estimated that the average FOI request takes at least 4.25 hours to process.

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 council now refuse requests where it is estimated that the time taken to process the request exceeds 18 hours. This was a policy change during 2012.

If the Council receives two or more related requests within a period of 60 consecutive working days (on the same/similar topic), from a person or different persons who appear to be acting in concert or in pursuance of a campaign, the costs of complying with the individual requests will be aggregated (for the purpose of refusing).

During 2012/2013 the Council received 25 Subject Access Requests under the data protection legislation. 80% of these requests were processed within timeframe.

The Information Governance Team is continuing to ensure an increased amount of data is identified for routine publication online. This work forms part of the Transparency Agenda and aims to increase openness and accountability; whilst reducing unnecessary processing of FOI requests.

## **Financial Information:**

(A Motion agreed by the Council on 23 January 2013 requires the Cabinet Member to cover all finance and budget issues of

their portfolio that they consider relevant, including (but not limited to): fiscal management; budget responsibility of the cabinet member; receipts and actual spend vs. predicted spend; the levels of virements; and value for money.)

<b>Service</b>	<b>Cost Centre</b>	<b>Total</b>
Business Services	E-Government Reserve Revenue	
	Expenditure	156,937
	Security & Cashiers - SERCO	2,700
	Central Complex	486,631
	Civic Offices 1	190,356
	Civic Offices 2	1,075,135
	Building Cleaning	35,254
	Window Cleaning	(1)
	Client Management SSP	392,653
<b>Business Services Total</b>		<b>2,339,665</b>
HR, OD & Customer Strategy	Head Of Policy & Organisation	
	Development	224,382
	EAP Counselling	21,800
	Freedom Of Info & GIS/LLPG	322,984
	Occupational Health	166,645
	Trade Unions	42,174
	Developing Together	227,050
	Organisational Development	317,476
	Workforce Planning	957,232
<b>HR, OD &amp; Customer Strategy Total</b>		<b>2,279,743</b>
Legal Services	Registration	(20,533)
	Electoral Administration	125,573
	Register of Electors	63,896
	Election Expenses	8,000
	Legal Management	(20,107)
	Legal Business Support	234,294
	Legal Social Service and Education	201,302
	Legal - Housing & Litigation	251,212
	Legal - Corporate & Contracts	166,676
	Legal - Regeneration	271,799
	Members Allowances	641,652
	Scrutiny	5,700
	Democratic Services	256,346
	Democrat Representation and Management	191,113
	Members Development	5,800
<b>Legal Services Total</b>		<b>2,382,723</b>
Corporate Finance	Internal Audit	309,681
	Insurance Premiums	331,400
	Insurance Team	139,830
	Fraud Team	330,429
<b>Corporate Finance Total</b>		<b>1,111,340</b>



Benefits	Revenues & Benefits Finance Client	120,731
	Housing Benefits	(8,500)
	Council Tax and NNDR	(459,000)
	Social Fund Administration	123,074
	HB CTB Specific Grants	100,000
<b>Benefits Total</b>		<b>(123,695)</b>
SERCO	Contract Payments to Serco	17,923,984
<b>SERCO Total</b>		<b>17,923,984</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>25,913,760</b>

**The Serco contract provides the following services:**

**Group A**

Administration Services  
Customer Services  
ICT & E-Government

**Group B**

Finance Benefits  
Finance Council Tax  
Finance NNDR  
Finance Exchequer Services  
Human Resources  
Payroll  
Procurement

**Group C**

Facilities Management

Period	Number of Invoices raised	Value of debtors invoices raised £
April - Dec 2012	19,522	41,690,769

Period	Number of Invoices raised	Value of debtors invoices raised £
April - Dec 2013	20,831	42,503,454

**Historic volumes and performance for FOI**

Year	Number of Requests	% responded to in time
2004/2005	53	98%
2005/2006	275	99%
2006/2007	252	98%
2007/2008	225	97%
2008/2009	366	96%
2009/2010	512	99%
2010/2011	547	99%
2011/2012	599	97%
2012/2013	495	93% (would have been 98% if we exclude mailbox error)

Cost of FOI - An exercise has been carried out based on 2010/11 FOI volumes (on a sample of 65 FOI requests). At the time this estimated that the average FOI request took departments 2.5 hours to gather the information requested at a cost of £19k per annum. However more recent analysis which has been shown in the annual report indicates that the average time taken is now 4.25 hours so a crude calculation would show a cost of approx £38k (however this still seems low and would be more when reflecting senior management time involved to review and sign off requests). The Council have previously sent a letter to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, raising concerns that the legislation is being misused and proposing that the current 18 hour charging threshold is reduced (that would allow us to charge or refuse requests that take less than 18 hours to process).