

25 February 2015

ITEM: 13 (i)

Council

Cabinet Member Report – Central Services

Report of: Councillor V. Holloway

This report is public.

Introduction

The central services portfolio includes all of the central functions, which provide corporate support across the council, in finance, legal, HR & Organisational Development. In addition corporate performance, the transformation programme and the Serco contract also fall under this current remit. In summary it is a wide ranging and varied portfolio.

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.

The report sets out some of the key issues from the past year and some of the issues for the future.

Sundry Debtors

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 £0.691m but as at the end of January the debt book is £254k less than the comparable period last year.

Council Tax

The service continues to perform very and it is expected the collection rates this year will achieve 98.7% which again places Thurrock amongst the top performing councils for collection. In conjunction with the Thurrock online agenda the service continues to develop its online offering. As a result Residents can now undertake the following transactions online:

Move In/ Move Out
Claim Discounts/ Exemptions
Set up or amend direct debit

Make a Payment
View their online statement

National Non Domestic Rates (Business Rates)

The collection of the Business Rates as at December 2014 stands at 83.91% compared to 88.66% as at December 2013. Whilst this appears to be a large variance to last year the reason for this is that for the first time this year businesses can opt to pay the bill over 12 monthly instalments rather than 10 in previous years. The team is on target to achieve a collection rate of approximately 99% by the year end which will again place Thurrock amongst the top performing Councils.

Bailiff Reforms

The new Bailiff Reform Regulations "Taking Control of Goods" came into force on 6th April 2014. Thurrock welcomed this change and proactively notified all charge payers with unpaid debts from early February 2014 of these changes to enable them to clear their debts prior to the new fees being imposed.

The Team has a member of staff specifically appointed to manage cases referred to them from support workers such as the CAB, Catch22, StepChange, Social Workers and Family Mosaic and a recent cross party meeting should see improvements in the Council's relationship with the CAB and the support given to vulnerable debtors

Housing Benefits

The service continues to build its online facilities to enable residents to transact online. Thurrock Benefits claimants are now able to complete the following activities via the internet:

Make a Claim for Housing Benefit and the Local Council Tax Scheme
Report a change in circumstances
View their details including date of next payment etc.

As Members will be aware Thurrock has been included in the next phase of Universal Credit rollout which will commence in Thurrock on March 16th. Initially the rollout will be for single people of working age submitting a new claim for Job Seekers Allowance. Whilst claims for Universal Credit will be administered by the DWP, even when fully rolled out the Thurrock benefits team will still be responsible for processing claims for Local Council Tax Support and Housing Benefit for pensioners and some other groups. Thurrock continues to work closely with the DWP to develop a support framework to assist claimants within this process.

Exchequer Services

BACS and Post

We currently pay 91% of our suppliers by BACS (electronically). The number of remittances and Purchase Orders sent via post as opposed to email has also

reduced by 85% in the last two years, with the vast majority of commercial suppliers receiving them via email.

This year to date Thurrock has paid 94.6% of invoices within 30 days and performance continues to improve. The improvement has been delivered through increased focus and development of a new dashboard that highlights performance by service and source and is reviewed by Directors' Board on a monthly basis.

Further improvement will be made through the implementation of iSupplier that allows our suppliers to 'self-serve' their own transactions eliminating the need for any data processing duplication. To date approximately 820 of our commercial suppliers have signed up, which is about half of our commercial supplier base. This is a reduction of approximately 30% of our paper invoices.

Corporate Finance

Counter Fraud & Investigation Service

The Counter Fraud and Investigation Service is currently working through a transition phase from investigating just benefit activity to a full corporate wide service that has attracted partnership working with Southend Council, the Ministry of Justice and the DWP.

The momentum gained by the service in combating fraud and corruption was recognised by the Department for Communities and Local Government with grant funding of £594k to create a central specialist hub, hosted at Thurrock Council, to share resources and best practice with other public authorities and this innovative counter fraud project seeks to implement robust policies and training across Thurrock Council and partner agencies to develop a strong anti-fraud culture.

Procurement and Contract Management

The Serco (previously Vertex) Partnership has been in place for eight years, in which 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 this year, the Surveying, Asset management and Highways service have been returned to the Council for internal management.

There is ongoing issues with this contract and more broadly the principle concern with this partnership is that there have not been enough savings made in these services to meet the council's financial targets. This is being addressed in a separate report.

Legal Services

Shared Services

- The shared legal service has now been established for just over 3 years;
- It continues to enhance its capacity, resilience and internal expertise resulting in both savings and the generation of traded income for the Council;
- The service was highly commended as a finalist in the Municipal Journal Achievement Awards for 2014;
- Alison Stuart, Principal Regeneration Solicitor was recognised as “Individual Lawyer of the Year” by Lawyers in Local Government for her outstanding and nationally recognised work in the field of regeneration;
- We continue to be in the top performing legal services for Lexcel Accreditation by The Law Society which recognises solicitors who meet the highest management and customer care standards and show excellence in areas such as client care, case management and risk management;
- This year’s annual monitoring inspection by the Lexcel Inspector noted that our active legal files had risen from 1,650 to 2214 legal files open across the shared service.

Traded Services

Towards the latter half of 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 has been undertaken on a fee traded basis. The team has also successfully provided legal services to Westminster, Havering and Newham Council’s and Lea Valley Regional Park on a fee traded basis over the last year and have been approached by a range of other authorities interested in learning lessons on shared working.

Our future Plans are to:

Continue to trade the service to (i) generate income and raise the reputation of the Council and (ii) to provide in house solicitors with greater opportunities for personal development and thereby further increase our staff retention rates.

To continue to seek to improve our client satisfaction from both our in-house and external clients and provide a value for money service.

Human Resources, Organisational Development & Transformation

Shaping the Council

To meet the increasing financial pressures and support the organisation through change the team have prioritised a comprehensive change programme. This has incorporated an organisational wide voluntary redundancy programme which has resulted in reductions of over 45 FTE and contributing over £1.5m in savings – mitigating the requirement for compulsory redundancies.

Staff Survey

In April 2014 we celebrated the most successful staff survey we have delivered to date with an exceptionally high response rate of 72%. This puts us comfortably above the Local Government benchmark, which currently stands at of 59% and on a par with some private sector organisations that reached between 70 – 77%. One key area of improvement evidenced by the survey and externally validated by our IIP Gold status is performance management.

Oracle My Dashboard

Oracle Performance Management (OPM) and Oracle Learning Management went live in April 2014. The online system allows managers and employees to use self-service, driving the internal transformation of the council.

Staff Recognition

One area of feedback from our IIP gold accreditation was the reintroduction of staff recognition - the council re-launched a staff recognition scheme that celebrated the successes of our employees across 7 different categories culminating in a fully sponsored awards evening held in November 2014 and attended by approximately 100 staff to recognise fantastic performance across the council.

Training and Development

In the last year we have provided 3000 training day across the workforce and this has included the provision of newly developed change and wellbeing programmes.

Making Change Happen (MCH)

Making Change Happen (MCH) is a process developed to support staff through changing working practices and policies and moving them into new spaces with their new IT kit

Digital Council Programme

The programme is now in full flight implementing digital solutions for document management, automating assessment and decision making for Adult Social Care and a Children's' safeguarding profiling model.

Since Thurrock Online 'Go Live' 1700 customers have registered for the council tax service, 900 for housing benefits and over 11,000 customers have registered for MyAccount. Marketing the Council's online services is now well underway and a leaflet is being included with daily council tax bills to promote online council tax services and additional functionality.

It is worth noting that Thurrock's website has recently been recognised by SOCITM as providing the fastest service to users in the UK.

IT Connects

75% of Civic Offices Staff have now been equipped with new computing devices and 100% have the new telephony system enabling them to work more productively and more flexibly.

Whilst there have been two significant IT outages during the past year the infrastructure is now more robust and resilient as a result of the IT upgrade and subsequent testing. The recent Good Technology failure was associated with the Exchange server. There were teething problems during the initial roll out of the new telephone system resulting in inability to contact officers, which have been addressed by the introduction of uni-logon (automatic registration when logging onto the IT system) and team hunt groups (which automatically divert calls to other team members).

Operational Estate

There has been substantial progress in transforming the workspace in Civic Offices. New flexible working arrangements have been introduced on three floors and work is progressing to complete by the summer. These changes have increased the capacity in Civic Offices from 700 staff to 1100 staff. The investment and benefits detailed in the business case are running to plan with £2.6m of capital investment which is offset over a five year period by revenue savings of £2.9m

Complaints

During 2013/14, 2549 complaints were received. The previous year (2012/13) 3505 complaints were logged. However this decrease (27%) is primarily due to a change in our complaints process with the introduction of a concerns stage which has resulted in 1026 concerns being recorded.

2013/14 also saw a reduction in housing repair complaints. During 2013/14, the combined total of complaints and concerns volumes recorded for housing repairs was 1109. The previous year 1370 housing repair complaints were received.

During 2013/14, 97% of complaints were responded to within timeframe. This is an improvement on the previous year's figure of 91%.

Members Enquiries

Members' enquiries performance has improved during 2013/14 despite an increase in volumes. During the reporting year, 2023 enquiries were received with 98% responded to within timeframe.

The correct process for logging Members Enquiries has been reinforced recently and Members are being asked to ensure that use membersenquiries@thurrock.gov.uk.

Future Plans

Pay and Reward Review

The pay review will progress over the next 12 months. This will include the introduction of a 'job families' approach, which many forward-looking Councils are starting to adopt; pay grades which will be compliant with equal pay legislation and an improved job evaluation scheme.

People Strategy and Staff Charter

A revised People Strategy will be developed aimed at equipping the Council with the workforce we need for the future. To support this, a new Staff Charter will also be created which will set out the relationship between staff and the Council and outline our mutual expectations.

Operational Estate

We are exploring the potential for a new customer service centre on the ground floor of Civic Offices, enhancing community areas and supporting channel shift. The Council's external operational estate is currently being evaluated to determine future use and infrastructure requirements and a paper is scheduled to go to Cabinet in June.

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.)

Service	Cost Centre	Total
Business Services	MFD Useage Charges	176,001
	E-Government Reserve Revenue Expenditure	347,956
	Central Complex	543,389
	Civic Offices 1	168,577
	Civic Offices 2	947,705
Business Services Total		2,183,628
HR. OD & Customer Strategy	Head Of Policy & Organisation Development	232,084
	EAP Counselling	12,900
	Information Management	369,895
	Occupational Health	8,197
	Trade Unions	43,594
	Developing Together	197,201
	Organisational Development	254,193
	Workforce Planning	632,839
HR. OD & Customer Strategy Total		1,750,903
Legal Services	Registration	45,301
	Electoral Administration	127,702
	Register of Electors	63,896

	Election Expenses	197,680
	Legal Management	262,658
	Legal Business Support	36,333
	Legal Social Service and Education	263,839
	Legal - Housing & Litigation	158,864
	Legal - Corporate & Contracts	166,923
	Legal – Regeneration	289,728
	Members Allowances	653,574
	Scrutiny	5,700
	Democratic Services	262,583
	Democrat Representation and Management	204,360
	Members Development	5,800
	Legal Services Total	2,744,941
Corporate Finance	Internal Audit	298,141
	Insurance Premiums	188,400
	Insurance Team	189,542
	Fraud Team	336,302
	Corporate Finance Total	1,012,385
Finance & Corporate Governance	Revenues & Benefits Finance Client	122,312
	Council Tax and NNDR	(460,973)
	Finance & Corporate Governance Total	(124,427)
SERCO	Contract Payments to Serco	16,823,957
Grand Total		24,391,387