

30 September 2020	ITEM: 11
Council	
Report of the Cabinet Member for Central Services and Communities	
Report of: Councillor Deborah Huelin, Cabinet Member for Central Services and Communities	
This report is public	

Introduction by Cabinet Member

I am delighted to present to Council my report which details many of the areas of work and achievements within my diverse portfolio. The core services covered include:

- Community Development and Equalities
- Libraries
- Corporate strategy and performance
- Customer Services
- Communications
- Transformation
- HR, OD and Payroll
- Information Management
- Arts, Culture and Heritage
- Internal Audit
- Legal, Democratic, Electoral and Member Services
- Information Technology

I have never been more proud of my portfolio teams as I have been over the past few months.

In March 2020, the Council had to grapple with how to protect our communities from the impact of Covid-19 and support those most at risk. No area had a blue print for what a local response might look like to this world wide pandemic.

It is no surprise to me that in Thurrock our approach relied on the resilience and co-operation of officers as well as the willingness and commitment of the voluntary sector led by Thurrock CVS to work in partnership with us. Thurrock Coronavirus Community Action (TCCA), a partnership led by Thurrock Council with Stronger Together Thurrock and Thurrock CVS, was set up immediately to respond to the Covid-19 outbreak and has been supporting Thurrock residents who were self-isolating or shielding and who do not have family and friends who can help, since March.

So much has been achieved in this time – we have delivered 596 essential food boxes and supported over 3,370 residents in the borough to access practical help such as shopping and collecting prescriptions. Over 1,900 volunteer tasks had been completed by the end of August.

TCCA has had a tremendous impact on the most vulnerable in our borough. Without the support of TCCA with the council and voluntary sector working side by side, the outcome for many of our residents could have been life-threatening. TCCA will continue to support people to self-isolate. Volunteers will be encouraged to stay active, helping informally with the support of OurRoad – a toolkit developed by Stronger Together Thurrock.

Alongside TCCA and the Community Development Team, many other services in my portfolio have really gone above and beyond to support these completely unprecedented times. This includes (but is by no means exclusive):

- Customer Services moving all their interactions to the telephone/online overnight in March and taking over the delivery of the TCCA contact centre from 1 June
- Procurement team sourcing and arranging for the TCCA emergency food parcel supplies to enable these to be ready faster than most other authorities
- Communications supporting Public Health colleagues to ensure the correct and latest advice was cascaded to staff, members, residents and businesses, including the very numerous changes as the pandemic and related guidance evolved
- IT department turning the whole organisation into an agile working operation within a few days, providing necessary equipment and bringing forward the roll out of Microsoft Teams
- HR interpreting and producing guidance for staff on new ways of working, including sickness policies, e-learning provision and on-boarding guidance for new or returning staff with whom managers could not meet up physically
- Legal and Democratic Services rewriting the constitution and developing a system with IT to allow hybrid physical and virtual committee meetings to take place

Plus many officers whose main role had quietened during the early stages of lock down, volunteering to be temporarily redeployed to support the Covid-19 response including to support the TCCA at High House Production Park food distribution hub deliveries or from libraries to support the call centre.

I am incredibly proud of all that has been – and continues to be achieved by officers in my portfolio to support our communities through lockdown and other restrictions.

It seems a very long time ago now, but in February I was delighted to be part of the Civic Awards 2020 event, and honoured to present the award for Business in the Community. This special black tie event is biannual and is always a pleasure to see and hear about the amazing work that goes on in our borough, often by volunteers. This year there was also special recognition for the four Thurrock organisations which were awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Services (QAVS) and for three residents who are part of the Windrush Generation who have made huge contributions to their communities.

Even further back in January, the Staff Awards saw individual staff and teams being recognised for excelling in their work, plus a special presentation made by the Chief Constable of Essex Police, BJ Harrington, to colleagues from emergency planning, communications, security, environment and community development, who led and supported the council response to the terrible incident in West Thurrock last October where 39 people lost their lives and were discovered in a lorry trailer.

It reminded me, as has the Covid-19 response, that we sometimes ask a lot of our officers – more than any job description could ever reasonably expect. And they, time and time again, deliver.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT and EQUALITIES

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

The Community Development Team supports people to come together to take positive action on what is important to them. The team provide support to all services and staff networks around equality, diversity and inclusion, ensuring our decisions and processes are both informed by our duties as a public body under the Equality Act 2010 and also representative of local issues. Building strong, resilient communities that enable integration and cohesion in a growing borough underpins the wide and varied work of the service.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

Understanding the needs and aspirations of communities – for their neighborhood and for specific groups across our borough – is a central requirement of all council services. We are committed to improving community engagement, provision of information, consultation and co-production.

With the introduction of a new consultation portal in April 2019, we now have over 3,000 users registered to 'have their say' online. A number of successful engagement exercises have been hosted on the portal, including those relating to a range of services for example, the development of the Council's Waste Strategy. Many current consultation exercises have been delayed due to Covid-19, however, as these restart, I am confident that new functions on the portal will help not just seek opinion on ideas put forward by council, but will also increase the opportunity for residents to bring their ideas forward too.

Progress on preparing the Collaborative Communities Framework was delayed due to the unprecedented need to respond to Covid-19. However, we learnt a great deal through this period, not least that our relationship with communities in Thurrock is stronger than in many other authorities. This has undoubtedly helped us to weather the Covid-19 storm. In doing so we shared a vision and did not let the complexities of organisational boundaries or red tape stop us from rallying to do the right thing. This commitment will be enshrined in the Collaborative Communities Framework which will set out how we intend to work alongside the citizens of Thurrock to help transform our borough with the communities we aim to serve. The aims of the framework include our equality objectives and provide a genuine opportunity to capitalise on the community spirit demonstrated through this recent period to really collaborate with our residents to both shape and reform how we work in the future.

The latest round of the Community Environmental Development Fund closed on 30th August 2020. This year we have asked applicants to explain how proposals will help build resilience within communities, post-coronavirus (COVID-19), and maintain the longer-term sustainability of local projects. With almost 40 projects supported with a CEDF grant over the last 4 years, we expect a continuation of the growth in demand for funding a wide range of proposals this year.

The team continue to champion equality, diversity and inclusion and support learning and development associated with community equality impact assessments, raising awareness of protected characteristics, challenging barriers and unconscious bias. Events marked recently include marking the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica, Windrush

Day, International Women's Day and raising the rainbow flag for PRIDE. The debate prompted by the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent campaign for justice led by Black Lives Matter continues to be discussed in Thurrock amongst both staff and community organisations. I welcome the opportunity this brings to consider how we build on our commitment to promoting fairness and equality of opportunity, celebrating and valuing diversity as well as eliminating unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation in all forms. I am grateful to Thurrock CVS for their support in facilitating a much needed conversation about how we can confront and end racism. We will explore ways to convert conversation into change, and continue to celebrate the rich diversity that exists across our communities in Thurrock.

Supporting volunteering is also a key priority for the service. As well as working with communities to encourage volunteering, the service oversees the Council's volunteer programme. As we continue to monitor and streamline the process for involving volunteers, it is anticipated the programme will go from strength to strength. Although many traditional volunteer roles are paused due to Covid-19, we stay in touch with almost 200 volunteers and thanked them all for their support in Volunteers' Week in June.

► FUTURE

The community sector has been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. Ensuring we build resilience and enable the sector to thrive is incredibly important, especially local infrastructure to help sustainability. A survey by CVS has identified some of the challenges local organisations are experiencing including a loss of income and reducing reserves. We are working with the sector to explore how we can support future sustainability. Enabling communities to access the resources they need to deliver locally is a key aspect of the team's work with grants programmes. Given the disruption to the sector through Covid-19, we have postponed a review of the current voluntary sector grants programme until 2021/22 with a view to introducing any changes to the process from April 2022.

20 small grants were approved in March 2020 to help communities lead their own events to celebrate VE Day. Unfortunately these events, along with many others planned to commemorate World War Two, had to be postponed for the future. We are however looking at alternative ways to remember and educate about the impact of the Second World War, especially on our communities here in Thurrock.

I have mentioned the Collaborative Communities Framework and TCCA. Both will evolve in the coming months. We do not know what lies ahead, the extent of the economic threats we will face, or the physical and mental health challenges that releasing lockdown might uncover. But we can nurture what we know works well and embed this to enable a cultural shift where every member of staff and member of the council knows they have a role to play in enabling and empowering communities to flourish and strengthen as we look to support residents face a new future.

LIBRARIES

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

Thurrock's Library Service includes nine authority run libraries and one self-serve library within Purfleet Community Hub.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

During 2019-2020

- Residents made 684,437 visits to libraries and the hubs within them
- They borrowed 325,157 items
- They attended 2,670 events. The total number of attendees was 26,178
- They used the public access computers 66,649 times
- Library staff answered 66,418 enquiries

Five community hubs run alongside library services in South Ockendon, Chadwell, Tilbury and Aveley with staff and volunteers working closely together. At Purfleet a self-service library is hosted by the Hub, and in Stifford Clays the Hub operates from Headon Hall. The community hubs programme helps to complement the library offer in Thurrock by supporting people to resolve local issues with access to information and IT, providing opportunities to socialize and connect over important local issues. A number of milestones have been achieved recently including the opening of the new build Aveley Community Hub in February 2020, and in 2019/20, hubs arranged the largest number of events to date with over 10,000 attendees taking part in activities such as knit and natter, summer barbeques and other social groups.

All libraries and hubs closed on the 23rd March as a result of Covid-19. The majority of library staff were redeployed to the Thurrock Coronavirus Community Action response to support the Covid call centre and triage emergency calls. New procedures were quickly learnt and staff demonstrated their ability to relate sympathetically to vulnerable residents and problem solve to assist at this difficult time.

With the easing of lockdown a phased recovery plan is underway to reopen libraries and hubs safely. Three libraries reopened in mid-July with all safety mitigations in place and staff trained and confident to welcome back residents. Phase two is due to commence in September following the completion of risk assessments, and changes to the service to welcome residents back.

Supporting the digital agenda remains a priority for the service. Capital funding has meant that 128 public access computers have been replaced and new self-service machines are now available in all libraries. This has enabled staff to focus on providing individual assistance, signposting, giving advice on reading and supporting access to online services. Support online includes completing job applications, signing up for My Account and applying for Universal Credit. Use of our online services has grown with more residents aware that they can access 24/7 free learning courses etc. and borrow e-books and e-audio via their phones and tablets. A new library app was launched in July. Support for reading continues to evolve especially encouraging children and young people to read for pleasure and benefit from opportunities being able to read well can bring.

Provision of information and signposting to support agencies remains a core offer. Library staff receive on-going training and work with the hubs to ensure information is easy to access. A programme of regular staff training days has been arranged to ensure all staff are confident and knowledgeable to assist volunteers and residents.

▶ FUTURE

The Library Service will continue to develop alongside the Community Hubs programme. The digital offer developed during lockdown, which included online story/rhyme times and a virtual job club will be expanded. The service will continue to modernise with membership of The Libraries Consortium and the implementation of a new Library Management System providing an enhanced customer experience and access to a wider range of physical and e-resources. Thurrock library users will have access to over six million books (in addition to the current Essex and Thurrock joint stock of 1.4 million titles) including over 37,000 e-books. The enhanced app will enable customers to book events and manage their library account all in one place. The new marketing module with Thurrock's branding will allow the service to promote directly to library members and raise the profile of both the service and council.

Hub and library social and learning events to combat social isolation will be reintroduced as soon as it is safe to do so. This will ensure community hubs and libraries continue to provide a responsive service at the heart of the community. I encourage all members to ensure they visit their local library and take advantage of the services on offer.

CORPORATE STRATEGY and PERFORMANCE

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

This part of my portfolio is primarily concerned with the council's vision and priorities and ensuring the council is delivering against those priorities and objectives through the corporate performance framework.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The performance of the priority activities of the council is monitored through the Corporate KPI (Key Performance Indicator) framework. The indicators are reviewed every year and have been chosen to be as clear and simple to understand as possible, whilst balancing the need to ensure the council is monitoring those things which are of most importance, both operationally and strategically.

This is the fourth year that corporate performance indicators have been reported simply as having "Achieved" or "Failed". This has proved to be much clearer and more transparent than the previous system, as seen by the positive and continual improvement:

At end of 2016/17	59% Achieving
At end of 2017/18	66% Achieving
At end of 2018/19	68% Achieving
At end of 2019/20	74% Achieving

The first few months of 2020/21 have seen different challenges for us all, and the performance data has reflected the difficulties and pressures facing service delivery in some areas. I presented the Quarter 1 Corporate Performance Report to Cabinet earlier this month, which highlighted the effect so far on corporate key performance indicators. For as long as Covid-19 continues to impact service delivery, we will include a specific focus area in each of the corporate performance reports showing the affects and outlining mitigations and a clear route back to green. I would like to take this opportunity again to thank colleagues on the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their ongoing scrutiny, and for their suggestion of using “Route to Green” commentary, as part of the strong governance in place for key performance indicators.

The council does not just measure itself by statistics alone. And we continue to see many of the council’s services, projects and individuals recognised locally, regionally and nationally. A full list of the awards which the council has won or been shortlisted for can be found at www.thurrock.gov.uk/how-we-are-doing/awards.

And as if once was not accolade enough, the council has been shortlisted – for the second year running – as Local Authority of the Year 2019/20 in the Municipal Journal Awards. In shortlisting Thurrock Council the MJ says: "Thurrock Council is a previous finalist and has consistently demonstrated its ability to adapt, prosper and grasp socioeconomic opportunities. Its leadership of the place agenda is impressive and the council unapologetically aspires to delivering for both businesses and residents."

The winner will be announced via an online awards ceremony in October. Fingers crossed.

► FUTURE

The governance for the corporate performance framework is embedded and as such this approach will be continued throughout 2020/21. This governance is multi-layered – individual teams, lead officers, Directors, portfolio holders and member scrutiny through the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet work programme. Teamwork will ensure the “route to green” is achieved and improvements made.

CUSTOMER SERVICES

► SERVICE OVERVIEW

This part of the portfolio includes all front line customer contact including the Contact Centre, Careline, out-of-hours, cashiers, registrars and face to face customer services on the ground floor of the Civic Offices.

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

A major project within this part of my portfolio in 2019/20 was the continuation of delivery of the customer services strategy action plan for 2017-2020. Key highlights include the further cascade of the “Right First Time” Customer Excellence Training and the “Write First Time” letter and email writing training with over 1,000 employees having attended these courses since launch.

Our performance was recognised externally with accreditation of the CCA (Customer Contact Association) Version 7 new global standard in 2019 with our next assessment due again later this year. The Customer Services quality framework which was recognised by the CCA as leading practice in 2019, has now been completed successfully within the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) team and helped make significant improvements in call quality handling, reducing repeat calls and improving general service provision.

The Customer Services Team were also runners up and achieved silver award for the best public sector improvement strategy in the UKCCF awards in October 2019 and in the APSE awards for best efficiency and transformation initiative in September 2019.

The closure of Civic Offices during the Covid-19 outbreak resulted in customers not being able to visit for face to face customer service enquiries. However, the service has still managed to provide a full Contact Centre service throughout the period, providing support for our vulnerable customers by helping them to complete applications etc. over the telephone and providing reassurance for situations where they would have previously visited the offices. We have received lots of compliments from customers throughout this period. The Contact Centre have also taken responsibility for the TCCA call handling since 1 June 2019. This transition was very smooth and meant we were able to provide further support for our most vulnerable residents throughout this period.

The Contact Centre homeworking technology solution was scheduled for later in 2020 as part of our Phase 2 telephony project, however this was brought forward due to Covid-19 and we have now managed to enable Contact Centre advisors to work from home very successfully, with full Contact Centre technology, achieving excellent productivity.

The transition of the registry office to customer services has been very successful. The service not only registers and issues certificates for all births, deaths, marriages and civil partnerships which occur in the Thurrock district, but also conducts a number of ceremonies. Covid-19 resulted in closure of these service from March to July but service is now resumed in line with latest government guidance. The aim is to maintain our 100% good or excellent satisfaction rating previously achieved and hopefully identify some other excellent approved premises for weddings throughout the area.

All key performance indicators have been achieved throughout this period.

► FUTURE

We will develop a new customer services strategy for 2020-2023 to help us build further on our customer service success over the past few years. Following the successful implementation of Phase 1 Omni-channel Contact Centre project we are now planning Phase 2 of the project to implement future enhancements. These include generic mailbox integration for query handling, automation opportunities where high call volumes exist, exploring the use of chatbots or Artificial Intelligence (AI) where clear customer benefits can be identified, skillset routing for generic mail boxes and web chat along with further integration with existing platforms. We will continue to explore channel migration opportunities to maximise the use of our digital channels wherever possible. We will also build on the changes made during Covid-19 to review our face to face customer service delivery model.

Throughout 2020/21 the team is continuing to complete customer services quality assessments with others services utilising our customer services quality framework to help guide and implement actions to improve customer service delivery across all council departments. We are also continuing with work to support our most vulnerable residents to ensure that all services can be aware of when people are facing particular challenges so that they can be supported in the most appropriate way with early intervention wherever possible.

COMMUNICATIONS

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

This portfolio covers the council's communications functions including media liaison (proactive and reactive), social media, marketing campaigns, design and the council's website as well as internal communication with staff.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The council's work to improve resident engagement with its digital channels including the monthly e-newsletter and social media channels - Facebook, Twitter and Instagram – meant that it was well prepared when the coronavirus pandemic resulted in new ways of working and living for many of our residents and the need to get information to them quickly and regularly. This includes the latest advice from the government and Public Health England as well as the changes to council services and support available through TCCA.

The council's e-newsletter was quickly adapted to reach over 100,000 email addresses across the borough initially twice then once a week with an average open rate of over 50%. The Business Buzz e-newsletter has also be used to share the changes and support available with over 2,000 local businesses each week ensuring they are aware of the financial support available to them.

For the first three months of 'lockdown' a daily update was also provided to all local media outlets so that they were aware of the latest changes to council services and as a vehicle to answer their enquiries wherever possible.

Prior to March, the team had created and delivered a number of high-profile campaigns which ran across multiple media channels. Campaigns carried out include recycling plastics, fostering and adoption and promotion of the award winning Give A Gift initiative for its most successful year yet.

Internal communications has also been critically important during the pandemic, ensuring all staff have the latest advice and guidance as well as support available. We have used the weekly #TeamThurrock email and the new intranet went fully live in November 2019 to share information. A comprehensive regular briefing has also been provided to all Members.

The communications team have also lead the development of a brand for the Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) with the creation of a South Essex 2050 logo, style guide and templates as well as launching a regular Member newsletter, LinkedIn account and new standalone website.

▶ FUTURE

The communications strategy refresh will be finalised in the next few months with another LGA communications health-check involving local government peers planned to inform its development. We will also be looking at ways to proactively respond to social media comments recognising that this kind of two way communication is becoming more normal these days. I would encourage all councillors to sign-up for our e-newsletters and follow our social media channels to keep updated on the huge amount of work the council is doing. Direct communication with Thurrock's residents and businesses through our own channels will continue to be a priority for 2020/21.

CORPORATE PROGRAMME TEAM (TRANSFORMATION)

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

The Corporate Programme Team is responsible for the delivery of the council's Corporate Transformation Programme. This ambitious programme ranges from enhancing the way residents interact digitally with the council, via Thurrock On-Line, to implementing new ways for employees to work and deliver services more efficiently through agile working and modern HR, Procurement and Finance systems.

To help us deliver the best possible services to the residents of Thurrock the Corporate Programme Team are actively engaged in the Council's Service Review Programme to look at how we can do things differently by driving continuous positive transformation throughout the whole organisation.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The focus over the last twelve months continued to be the delivery of the Digital Programme providing the key enablers for transformation:

Thurrock On-Line

Over 95% of households are registered with a MyAccount demonstrating that our residents are choosing to interact with us on-line. Reporting online is the most effective method for issues regarding graffiti, abandoned vehicles, fly-posting, fly-tipping, missed waste collections, litter, overgrown trees/vegetation, grass cutting, dog fouling, potholes, street lights, road markings, noise complaints and pollution, providing residents with a quicker service response and the ability to monitor status.

Since MyAccount was implemented we have seen:

- Over 363,500 online views of Council Tax
- Over 15,400 direct debits set up online
- Over 14,130 council tax details updated regarding moves*
- Over 47,500 'reports' online

* (people updating their own details when moving in to, moving out or moving within the borough)

This year, development of the current system has been paused whilst we focus our attention on developing the next generation of platform required to further enhance the resident's experience when digitally interacting with the council.

Oracle Cloud

Going live on 1 April 2019 Oracle Cloud provided the modern technology to support internal transformation. All staff immediately benefitted from having access to a mobile App to carry out Employee Self Service tasks such as booking absence/leave, pay slips and claiming expenses.

The past year saw further enhancements to the reporting capabilities of Oracle in parallel with the platform's functionality embedding wider throughout the organisation. As with most Cloud-based platforms, regularly released features and enhancements ensure we are continually able to embrace new functionality.

Single View of Debt

Using a modern, efficient approach to analyzing data, the Single View of Debt initiative has accelerated our ability to help our residents using the most appropriate methods that reflect their circumstances. Taking input from multiple systems we have now developed a dashboard with a single view of a resident's debt to the council and a link to vulnerability to ensure we offer the most appropriate support.

This groundbreaking approach to debt management has been nominated for a Public Finance 2020 award in the Solutions Partner category.

► FUTURE

Innovation and new ways of working are constantly on our radar in order to deliver the best possible services to the residents and businesses of Thurrock. Over the next year we will continue to focus the Transformation Programme on the delivery of three key principles:

- Getting it right first time, every time
- Excellent customer services
- Collaboration and co-production of services

Agile Working

Accelerated beyond anyone's wildest expectations as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic the Agile working project continues to be, even more so, at the very forefront of transforming the way we will work in the future. Building on the unprecedented successes of continuing to deliver excellent levels of service to the residents and business of Thurrock we will continue to embed agile working across the council to drive the benefits of technology, property and new embracing ways of working.

Thurrock On-Line

During Covid-19 lockdown restrictions our physical front doors may have had to remain closed to the public but our "digital front doors" were wide open for business. Never before has customer facing digital interaction with the council been so critical. We will continue to support channel shift and further enhance the customer service experience through modern digital interfaces as we develop the next generation of Thurrock on Line.

Data Analytics, Process Automation and Artificial Intelligence

Unsurprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic made organisations realise the true value of the data they have access to and how quickly they can react to what it's telling them. Fortunately, as a result of previous work we had achieved in various phases of our Digital Analytics projects, we were ahead of the curve and were very quickly able to start focusing help for our most

vulnerable residents. We will continue collaborating with our communities and partners to further exploit modern technologies that improve process efficiency, transform service delivery models and deliver better outcomes.

HUMAN RESOURCES & ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

The focus of HR & OD is to ensure the Council has the high performing, engaged and confident workforce it needs to deliver excellent services and positive outcomes to our residents. The service consists of:

- HR, Resourcing and Improvement – ensuring the council is effectively resourced with the right people to deliver services to residents and providing the employment framework for excellent people management.
- Pay & Operations – ensuring staff are paid appropriately and the council complies with appropriate legislation and statutory requirements.
- People & Organisational Development – ensuring our workforce is equipped with the skills, knowledge and behaviours needed to deliver the council's priorities and the organisation embraces change.

Activity and interventions are aligned to deliver the council's People Strategy which is focused on embedding the six core values and our ambition to create a high performing, open and inclusive culture where innovation and creativity is encouraged and nurtured.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

People Strategy

Reviewed and refreshed the People Strategy for the next three years; removed the three previous key themes of capacity, confidence and culture and focused on embedding our six core values:

- Ambitious
- Empowered
- Inclusive
- Compassionate
- Collaborative
- Proud

This will enable the council to attract and retain staff with appropriate attitudes and behaviours to deliver the collective services to residents.

Oracle Cloud

Oracle Cloud provides a modern system which will underpin business transformation and improvement across HR & OD. Oracle went live on 1 April 2019 and the team have consolidated processes to improve efficiency through automated transactions, improved employee and manager experience, whilst supporting change across the organisation. Once fully functional Oracle will provide:

- enhanced business intelligence to support workforce planning and talent management
- improved Employee Self Service through an App
- improved Manager Self Service and dashboards
- efficiency in internal processes supports improved customer service

By enhancing our internal digital transformation this supports the targeting of resourcing to resident facing services.

Capacity

In relation to resourcing, the council has:

- on boarded over 500 new starters in 2019/20
- significantly reduced agency numbers
- exceeded our target for recruiting apprentices
- continued to on board new starters remotely during Covid-19 into business critical roles

Confidence

In aiming to have the best workforce and the most exciting opportunities for staff we have:

- developed an online community as part of our response to Covid-19 to support staff and enable them to learn and develop during lockdown
- implemented a range of health & wellbeing, Leadership, communication, personal development and technology activities
- built confidence and capability by delivering a range of different learning and development events in the past 12 months
- face to face learning & development – 3,006 attendance for the whole year compared to 43 for the first quarter of 2020/21 which equated to 541 separate Face to face events
- 3,061 completed eLearning across 76 items in the first quarter
- 45 people attended Personal Best for staff
- 169 learners across Oracle learning communities in place to support Covid-19

Culture

Organisational culture is critical to our success, the way we do things is the ultimate determinate of how we treat our customers. This year we have:

- embedded our organisational values through our policies, practice and performance management
- conducted a Pulse Survey to better understand staff perceptions and take appropriate action. Another survey is currently being completed to determine the impact of Covid-19 and workforce engagement
- improved our Wellbeing offer, promoting health and wellbeing and ensuring staff are supported - reducing sickness absence, supporting mental health and supporting staff during Covid-19, including the development of a Covid-19 working arrangements policy to provide support, clarity and information to the workforce

► FUTURE

Key priorities for the year ahead include:

- Pay Review Phase 2 – a full review of our reward and benefits package to further modernise our approach and ensure an inclusive approach.
- build on the changed ways of working from Covid-19 to fully embed agile working, ensuring individuals are supported and outcomes managed.

- Oracle Cloud Phase 2 – embed Employee and Manager Self Service to realise benefits and efficiencies and underpin business transformation
- Talent Management – develop talent management and succession to support effective workforce and career planning
- Launch and embed our new People Strategy for the next three years
- Launch our new Digital Academy to develop the workforce to meet our Digital ambition

INFORMATION TEAM

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

This team is responsible for ensuring compliance with information governance regulations, including information security (policies and procedures), Data Protection, Freedom of Information (FOI), Records Management, Complaints and Geographical Information Systems (GIS) including Local Land & Property Gazetteer (LLPG) / Local Street Gazetteer (LSG).

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

During 2019/20:

- The council processed 97% of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests within the 20 working day legal timeframe. This is improved performance compared to the previous year. The Information Commissioner expect public authorities to answer at least 90% on time
- The council continue to ensure data is identified for routine publication online. This work forms part of the Transparency Agenda and aims to increase openness and accountability
- The council received 132 Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection Legislation. 97% of these requests were processed within the legal timeframe. Requests have increased significantly following changes to the Data Protection Act, however performance remains strong
- The volume of complaints reduced by 6% compared to last year. Upheld complaints also reduced by 3%. 86% of complaints were responded to within timeframe. A total of 3,580 member enquiries were received, with 96% responded to within timeframe. The average time taken to respond to members enquiries across all directorates was 3 days

▶ FUTURE

The focus for the team over the next year will be:

- to reduce complaints stages from a three staged process to two. This links in with our customer services strategy of getting it right first time
- driving a learning from complaints culture with robust learning action plans across council services
- to implement changes and to evidence accountability as part of the Data Protection Act requirements
- to reduce the number of physical records located at off-site storage locations

ARTS, CULTURE AND HERITAGE

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

A thriving Arts, Culture and Heritage scene has an important part to play in creating a vibrant, proud and optimistic community. Cultural services can be fun and enjoyable but also help us all to learn, to meet new people, to build our community and improve wellbeing. The council is responsible for Thurrock Museum, the Thameside Theatre and for supporting arts development in Thurrock. Alongside the council's services there are a number of professionals, community groups and volunteers delivering arts and heritage activity in the borough. I know Members will want to join me in thanking them for the work that they do.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

I updated Members on the work of the cultural services team last January. At that time I was pleased to report on the good work underway. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has had big implications on arts and heritage activity. As a result some activity has been put on hold and attention focused on work that can be delivered while complying with Government guidance on social distancing.

Respect for and an understanding of the past helps us to shape our future. Our heritage service continues to share the story of the borough and to act as our guardians of the local history collection and archive. Since my last report, work has continued to update and digitise the collection; education activity supporting the Thurrock Trailblazer cultural education programme has continued and a new education session was developed using funding won from the Royal Opera House Bridge Development Fund; the museum volunteers also continued to support the World War II Committee work programme. Again I'd like to thank the volunteers for their dedication and good work.

Since lockdown the service has focused on continuing to support volunteers, responding to enquiries and, most importantly, on improving the educational materials available for teachers to help with online history lessons. Since March, 47 online teaching resources have been published for teachers to use. Now restrictions are easing the service has been able to reopen the research areas and volunteers are able to return safely. Work continues to re-open the gallery and to enable educational visits at Coalhouse Fort again.

Before the lockdown the theatre was busier than ever, hosting more shows and supporting the local community through relaxed performances, Liam's nightclub, the Beautiful Minds Cinema Club, comedy nights, foreign language films and other events and activities. The theatre team have worked with volunteers to support the service including the Thameside Young Producers - a group of young people with an interest in the performing arts.

Since March the theatre has had to close its doors. All shows were cancelled or rebooked for next year. Where possible staff have been deployed to help elsewhere including the TCCA food distribution centre. The annual maintenance programme has also started so the theatre is ready to open when it can. Members of the team have kept in contact with vulnerable customers and helped other aspects of the council response to Covid-19 while preparing to reopen safely as soon as they can.

As Members will know we have a world-class centre for creative production at High House Production Park. The site has raised our profile as a centre for the creative industries – a growing sector in the UK and, working with the Royal Opera House team, the council has been able to deliver the Trailblazer programme – enabling young people in Thurrock to benefit from high quality cultural activities.

There have been some changes at High House this year and the council has taken over day to day management responsibilities for the site alongside our work to support the development of the site. The costs of day to day management are recharged to High House Production Park so there is no cost to Thurrock residents.

In my last report I highlighted the work we have been doing to support the development of community-driven arts activity in the borough. I firmly believe our work to support the arts should be co-designed with the community to make sure we are supporting what our residents want to see and contributing to the delivery of other priorities in Thurrock including learning and developing skills, improving health and wellbeing and building pride in Thurrock.

I reported that we were working with the Thurrock CVS to combine our arts development funding with some underspend in the Voluntary Sector Development Fund to distribute around £25,000 in grants to deliver community based arts projects that contribute to developing strong and well connected communities. I'm pleased to confirm that the funds were allocated to nine different artists and groups.

When lockdown started many of the projects supported decided to defer delivery for a year and we were able to work with Thurrock CVS to launch a second small grants programme aimed at artists, historians and community organisations to use arts and heritage to deliver cultural activities for residents safely during the lockdown. I'm pleased to say we had a very good response to the call for proposals and were able to support 14 projects that are now underway, as diverse as *Smiles 4 All*, a project connecting isolated and vulnerable residents across the borough who would benefit from receiving and making artwork with kind strangers; as well as projects like *A Salvaged Thurrock 2020* from performance trio 5, in which residents learn dance, design, puppetry, song-writing and script-writing from the safety of home via free Zoom workshops.

► FUTURE

Through the focus on community-driven arts and cultural activity we have been able to work with local stakeholders like the CVS, Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions, Tilbury on Thames Trusts and local artists, historians and community groups to develop a shared vision for community driven arts in Thurrock.

The shared vision for community based arts closely relates to the aims of the Arts Council England Creative People and Places (CPP) programme, which focuses on more people choosing, creating and taking part in brilliant arts experiences in their area. The bidding process for CPP funding is incredibly competitive and we just missed out the first time we applied - reaching the final 3 bids in the Arts Council Eastern Region. We bid again in a bidding round held earlier this year but unfortunately the programme was suspended as the Arts Council focused attention on the COVID pandemic. The programme should reopen again towards the end of 2020 and I know we will all want to support the partnership as they develop a new application for funding in the next few months. If

successful the programme could bring a multi-million pound investment in cultural activity that local people want to see, create and deliver.

In the next few months officers will be working hard to return to 'business as usual' as soon as they can. The team will continue work to reopen the museum gallery, to begin education activity again at Coalhouse Fort, look at the use of the theatre foyer and the potential to offer traded services such as PAT testing and hiring out theatre staff and equipment to third parties. We also hope to reopen the theatre in time for Christmas but of course progress will depend on the public health guidelines. We will continue to work with the HHPP Board to maintain High House and to promote Thurrock as a location for inward investment from the cultural sector. Most importantly we will continue to work with our partners to deliver community driven arts and heritage activity across the borough.

COMMUNITY LED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

▶ SERVICE OVERVIEW

The Tilbury Community Led Local Development (CLLD) programme is part-funded by the EU and covers Tilbury St Chads and Tilbury Riverside & Thurrock Park wards. The delivery element of the programme is expected to run until December 2022. A Local Action Group (LAG) comprised of voluntary and community sector, resident, Member and business representatives agreed the priorities for the area and make key funding decisions.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The CLLD Programme offers grants of £1,000-£4,000 to small and medium-sized businesses to improve their business frontage or to support new businesses with start-up costs. Businesses need to match the grant pound for pound. By the end of July, five grant applications had been approved, with five further businesses having had their eligibility confirmed and invited to submit a full application. The aim is to support at least 68 businesses by the time the project concludes.

Much more significant in terms of funding are the monies available to support unemployed and economically inactive residents to move into learning or work. Again, these need to be matched pound for pound meaning that they only attract interest from providers with project activity already funded in the area. The second half of 2019 saw six projects approved across three funding rounds with a total of £2m in projected spend. The six projects are led by Council services (Careers, Leisure and Thurrock Adult Community College), Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions, South Essex College and Creative Blast. A number of voluntary and community sector groups are also involved in delivery. Delivery has been hit significantly to date by COVID-19, reliant as projects are on the provision of face to face advice and support.

▶ FUTURE

The programme has been hit by the pandemic but projects have tried to continue to offer services to residents where they can. As restrictions ease projects will be able to deliver more services to residents to help them develop skills and find work.

There is a particular focus on the business grants element of the programme and new businesses established in the area are being contacted to make them aware of the financial support available and to help them apply. Around £1.5m remains unallocated and further funding rounds will be launched this year.

INTERNAL AUDIT

Internal Audit is an independent assurance function that primarily operates in accordance with best practice professional standards and guidelines. It reviews on a continuous basis, the extent to which the internal control environment supports and promotes the achievement of the council's objectives, and contributes to the proper, economic, efficient and effective use of resources.

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The Chief Internal Auditor's Annual Report, which was presented to members of the Standards & Audit Committee in July 2020, confirmed the council's frameworks for governance, risk management and internal control were all positive. The Internal Audit team has provided regular progress reports to the Standards and Audit Committee on the work carried out and highlighted any key findings throughout the year.

▶ FUTURE

The Internal Audit 3 year Strategy 2020/21 to 2022/23 and Annual Plan 2020/21 was developed in early 2020 following a comprehensive audit needs assessment which was undertaken with senior managers across the council. In addition, a separate audit needs assessment was carried out to develop a specialist IT audit programme. The strategy and plan also takes into account the key risks identified within the council's Corporate Risk Register, External Auditor's Annual Audit and the Annual Governance Statement and was agreed at Standards & Audit Committee.

The plan is dynamic which allows the service to react as issues arise and priorities change, which has been crucial during the pandemic.

LEGAL SERVICES

The Legal Services directorate includes the legal services team, democratic services, Members' services and electoral services.

LEGAL SERVICES

▶ REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

The Legal Services team has built on its previous restructuring embedding its approach with clear expertise and close working with client departments. The significant alignment in safeguarding has built significant collaboration and improvement to the working relationships.

The team continues to develop its services for the Council and is working to recruit for key posts which are currently filled by agency Locums, this will solidify the team, as well as making savings.

► FUTURE

The team is currently working on a project which will move its existing case management systems to a locally hosted service improving resilience and is seeking its annual reaccreditation with Lexcel the legal practice management standard. Robust practice management is a key factor in delivering excellence in legal services, retaining good legal talent and consequently giving reassurance to our residents.

Thurrock Legal Services will continue as an in-house team addressing principally the needs of Thurrock Council but will continue to collaborate within the wider local authorities' networks particularly those of South Essex authorities where this supports the development of the service and the wider Councils priorities. This will be beneficial to the community as will give continuity in service provision and stability for the specialist teams such as children in care. We are building a stronger, more robust legal team to protect vulnerable residents, to prosecute planning violations and environmental enforcement including against fly tippers.

DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

The service continues to support all of the council's public committees as well as give advice on the governance of decision making as well as to a range of officer bodies and working groups.

In 2019-20 the Orsett Hospital Task and Finish Group agreed that its terms of reference was largely fulfilled and made recommendations for its work to be brought back into the Health and Well-being Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Waste Management Working Group was also created across parties to review the council's current approach to waste and recycling.

This year also saw a new webcasting system installed in the chamber to allow the public to view Full Council meetings live online. At the end of the municipal year the COVID-19 outbreak saw the team introduce a range of measures to facilitate virtual and hybrid meetings ensuring the safety of staff, Members and the public.

By way of update from the previous report two members of staff are due to complete their certificate in Democratic Services by November 2020.

ELECTORAL AND MEMBER SERVICES

It was a very busy year last year for Electoral Services. Firstly, the team delivered four elections:

- scheduled local election in May 2019
- a by-election for Chadwell St Mary in May 2019
- European Parliamentary Election in May 2019
- General (UK Parliamentary) Election in December 2019

Following on from the elections in 2019, the electoral team were planning for the combined May 2020 polls (Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner election and local elections). In March 2020, the polls were postponed due to Covid-19 and are now

scheduled to be held on 6 May 2021. 2021 would ordinarily have been a fallow year (ie. no local elections were due to be held).

The statutory Polling District and Polling Place review concluded with the report to council 29 January 2020

During the pandemic the team developed processes for working remotely and maintaining the register of electors to meet the statutory duties of the Electoral Registration Officer. Plans were developed and resources put in place to deliver the annual canvass and maintain safety of the team and any canvassing staff.

The statutory annual canvass commenced in July 2020. As a result of Canvass Reform the canvass process is more streamlined and now utilises a matching process with both data from the Department of Work and Pensions and local council tax and housing data. This means those householders (82%) whose details matched do not need to respond if their details are correct, as printed on the form. The revised register is due for publication on 1 December 2020, subject to further legislation.

The Member Services team have worked to support elected members remotely during recent months. The team supported the recruitment of volunteers and redeployed a team member to the contact centre during the pandemic. The team have co-ordinated events and worked with the Communications team to ensure the Mayor has attended and publicised civic events where practical and safe to do so.

▶ **FUTURE**

Planning for the May 2021 local elections and Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner (PFCC) election will commence when guidance is received about polls in 2021. The PFCC poll will be led regionally by Colchester.

The team is currently reviewing procedures for scheduled events in light of Covid-19. This includes planning for Remembrance Day, the Mayor's Civic Dinner in April 2020 to commemorate the end of the Mayor's term in office and thinking ahead to ways in which Annual Council may be facilitated. They are also reviewing the induction process for new members (post election in May 2021) to ensure they can facilitate this safely. The team continue to work both remotely and in the office to support members meet the needs of residents.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The IT department deals with 2,500 calls per month and is responsible for providing the council with the back end IT services to enable systems to work effectively.

▶ **REVIEW OF PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS**

The past 12 months has been extremely busy and challenging for the IT department and we have delivered a wide range of technology projects for all parts of the council. ITs delivery portfolio included large scale projects that contributed to the delivery of community outcomes such as the ones set out in the 2017 Digital Strategy which also included some smaller scale projects such as application upgrades.

The single biggest project achievement for the IT department over the last year has been its contribution to enable mass remote working as part of the council's response to Covid-19. This involved bringing forward and contracting down the mass roll out of the Microsoft Teams, part of the Microsoft 365 platform, into one month rather than the originally planned four months. As a result of the new ways of working that have arisen in response to Covid-19, IT has had to respond by rapidly engineering solutions to enable wide scale video conferencing, an online public meeting capability, creating a virtual telephone contact centre and issuing over 550 mobile devices (laptops and phones) to staff.

In addition to the above the service has delivered a number of other key projects over the last year, many aimed directly at providing more effective, efficient services for residents, some of which are highlighted below:

- Creation of remote virtual contact centre at beginning of Covid-19 pandemic to enable the council to continue to provide this essential service to residents and businesses
- Replacement of out of date data centre which will future proof the council's IT infrastructure to enable delivery of new more efficient digital ways of working
- Upgrade of the wi-fi at Civic Offices to support agile working and to enable visitors to be able to access guest internet via their own devices
- All the council's libraries were equipped with new technology including computers and tablets resulting in a better computing experience for library users Creation of a technology which was applied across multiple council data systems to enable staff to have a fuller, single view of the customer to enable more appropriate and coordinated approach to working with the resident
- Early delivery of Connected Workspace and Microsoft 365 Phase 1 to enable staff to be able to access all the work systems including files, emails and video-conferencing using a virtual desktop during Covid-19 from home. This agile working capabilities enabled seamless responses to residents issues and urgent needs during Covid-19

FUTURE

The next 12 months will be equally challenging as we continue to support the council's drive for agile working. Outlined below are some of the key projects that are planned for delivery over the coming year, which will have a direct, positive impact on residents and businesses:

- Local Full Fibre Network across Thurrock using £4m of government grant funding, which will improve and speed up internet connectivity across the borough for residents and businesses and support economic growth
- Further upgrading and interconnectivity of networks and systems to enable more resilient and enhanced agile working capability for staff
- Provision of an online payments platform to give residents a better and modern experience of using the council by paying for services online
- Roll out of the wi-fi upgrade at all other council sites (ie. not Civic Offices) to support agile working and to enable visitors to be able to access guest internet via their own devices and other services so residents do not have to come into Civic Offices
- Continued support to Public Health colleagues for the Track and Trace system
- Provision of Omni-channel technology (as per Customer Services above) enabling residents to receive a more efficient and timely response to standard enquiries
- Migration from the out of date "My Account" portal to a new platform which will allow more services to be accessed online and will facilitate residents and other service users receiving a more efficient and transparent service/response

PERFORMANCE – Corporate Performance Indicators

Service Area	KPI Title	2019/20 Outturn	Qtr 1 2020/21	Qtr 1 Target 2020/21	Year End Target 2020/21	Qtr 1 2020/21 Status
HROD	No of new apprenticeships started (incl current staff undertaking new standards)	69	2	1	67	ACHIEVING
Customer Services	Contact Centre - Face to Face average waiting times	00:59 mins	n/a	Under 3 mins	Under 3 mins	N/A – Face to Face is currently closed
Customer Services	Contact Centre - Face to Face - no of visitors	58,504	n/a	n/a	n/a	
Community Development	No of placements available within council for volunteers	225	205	190	210	ACHIEVING
Community Development	% of volunteer placements filled within council	96%	100%	90%	96%	ACHIEVING
Community Development	Number of new Micro Enterprises started this year	44	5	0	20	ACHIEVING
Community Development	Number of engagement events in a range of opportunities to support well-being and strengthen community connections	New KPI	0	0	600 (<i>target under review in light of Covid-19</i>)	ACHIEVING

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

Service Area	£K Variance at year end (2019/20)	£K Full Year Budget (2020/21)	£K Forecast at Month 3 (2020/21)	£K Forecast Variance (2020/21)
Internal Audit	(60)	303	266	(37)
Legal Services	(48)	1,899	1,864	(34)
Democratic Services	(40)	234	207	(27)
Electoral Services	(50)	506	330	(175)
Member Services	(75)	753	799	46
Strategy Team	(35)	320	315	(5)
Communications	2	514	515	1
*Customer Services	(153)	1,132	1,036	(96)
Procurement/contract management	9	1,027	840	(187)
Corporate Programme Team	(212)	973	878	(95)
Information Team	54	581	613	32
HR, OD and Payroll	(404)	3,590	3,653	63
Arts Development	0	13	13	0
*Theatre	61	(10)	189	199
Museum	(1)	106	106	0
Community Development Projects	331	797	797	0
Libraries	261	1,292	1,213	(78)
Information Technology	359	3,575	3,645	70

*At period 3, the theatre was forecast to overspend by £199k. This was a direct result of being closed during the pandemic and, as at Month 3, assumed that the theatre would re-open in time for the pantomime season. Forecasts have been reviewed following the decision that the pantomime will not take place this year and the estimated deficit is now £260k - entirely due to Covid-19. Similarly, there is also anticipated loss of income to the value of £91K in customer services due to the impact of Covid-19 on marriage ceremonies. This has led to a total loss of income for the first quarter and an 80% forecast of expected income for the rest of the year. The forecast will continue to be reviewed and revised in line with government advice on Covid-19/lockdown easing and customer behaviour.