

Thurrock Council's Annual Report 2024/25



Our progress in delivering A fresh start for **Thurrock**



A fresh start for
Thurrock

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Foreword

I'm very proud, as the new Leader of Thurrock Council, to introduce our first annual report for many years, setting out our progress in 2024/25.

As you would expect for a council in Government intervention, we have a steep hill to climb in meeting our residents' expectations. I hope local people can see from this report that we are heading in the right direction in improving the things that went so wrong in the past – from tightening our finance and governance arrangements, to listening much more closely to residents.

There are also some really brilliant areas of work that we can all celebrate, that can get lost in the narrative of Thurrock Council as a failing council. Rather than failing, some of our services are leading the way nationally. Our children's services were rated as 'outstanding' in all areas by Ofsted this year, and our work to join up health and social care is recognised as national best practice. Our Thurrock Cares campaign gained national media coverage, with its focus on supporting vulnerable older residents through the cold winter months.

Other areas where we have struggled previously are also showing signs of improvement. The Planning Advisory Service has highlighted significant improvements in our planning service and our new Corporate Plan sets out a clear direction for the future, with transparent and measurable performance objectives, making it easier to hold us to account.

Whilst 2024/25 has seen significant improvements made in many parts of the council – of which we are rightly proud – there remains a long way to go. The Commissioners appointed by the government to support us through our intervention and improvement journey have worked closely with us and their latest report highlights specific areas which require renewed focus in 2025/26 and beyond.



**Councillor
Lynn Worrall**
Leader of the Council

Our joint priority for 2025/26 is to steer the organisation to achieve meaningful transformation: a council which delivers excellent, sustainable services and meets the budget challenges we face. This will help us as we seek to continue working positively with partners locally towards devolution and local government reorganisation for the benefit of our residents.

My top priority as Leader is engaging with residents. We need to listen to local people who know what matters most in their neighbourhoods, and often know the solutions too. One of the highlights of the last year for me as Deputy Leader was taking part in our Ask the Council public question time events which gave us an opportunity to speak directly with our residents and talk to them about the issues that matter most to them. We look forward to these events going from strength to strength in 2025/26 alongside other opportunities for residents to talk to us, share their thoughts and ideas for our borough, and listen to some of the work we're doing as a council and with our partners.

I look forward to working with everyone in the borough to continue our improvement. There is a lot to celebrate, but still a lot to do.

Best wishes,

Cllr Lynn Worrall
Leader of Thurrock Council

Introduction

Thurrock Council's Corporate Plan 2024-29: "A fresh start for Thurrock" was approved unanimously by Full Council in July 2024.

The plan is a significant step in the council's journey of improvement and sets out how the council will operate over the next five years as it recovers and rebuilds trust with residents and communities.

Setting a future direction for the council as it works with its partners and local communities to best serve the people of Thurrock, the plan establishes three priorities:

to be an enabling council by building strong and impactful partnerships to maximise the benefits for residents and our borough



to focus on people and to ensure Thurrock is a place where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential and access the support they need



to focus on place to achieve a strong and well-connected place that enables our borough, its diverse communities and businesses to thrive and grow



A fresh start is the council's first Corporate Plan for several years. The need for clear strategic direction was highlighted in the Best Value Inspection report, Commissioners' reports and through discussions amongst staff and members.

The Corporate Plan builds on the progress already made through the Improvement and Recovery Plans. It draws upon feedback from staff and members, particularly in relation to culture, behaviours and values, and reflects the commitments and determination of a new Leader and administration to rebuild trust.

The Corporate Plan sets out how the priorities will be delivered and the impact for local people, businesses and communities. As well as the regular monitoring and publication of performance information charting our progress against the plan, this annual report, makes it clear to residents, members and other stakeholders how well we are delivering against our objectives.

This is our first annual report – we hope you enjoy reading it.



A fresh start for
Thurrock

A Year of Community Highlights

APRIL 2024

Over 97% of children found out they had been offered one of their top 3 primary school places



MAY 2024

Thurrock libraries celebrate 25 years of Essex Book Festival



JUNE 2024

Thurrock's LGBTQ+ Community Network put on PRIDE events
Volunteers Week



AUGUST 2024

Purfleet-on-Thames launches its new community pantry
10 Community Big Lunches in parks and open spaces



SEPTEMBER 2024

Public Consultation ended on plans to rejuvenate Grays Riverside

2024/2025

OCTOBER 2024

Children's Social Care and Early Help Services celebrate "Outstanding" Ofsted result



NOVEMBER 2024

First Thurrock Cares Roadshow



DECEMBER 2024

Give a Gift gives hundreds of toys and presents to vulnerable children and families



JANUARY 2025

Interfaith event brings together faith leaders from across Thurrock



FEBRUARY 2025

500 attend 2025 Thurrock Apprenticeship and Jobs Fair at Thameside Theatre



MARCH 2025

International Women's Day is celebrated with a whole day of public events at the Town Hall

Priority: Enabling Council

What did we commit to do?

We want to be a council that supports and enables our residents to thrive and stand on their own two feet, but is also there to help when times are tough. We know many local people hold the solutions to the problems they face, and the council can play a more effective role in listening to those solutions and empowering local people to implement them. To do that well, and to ensure we offer local people value for money, we said we would:

- Make it easier for residents to find the information or support they need easily and whenever is convenient for them. This means we need to work differently and use technology more effectively to improve residents' experience of contacting or engaging with the council.
- Engage with residents better, increasing their opportunities to talk to us, and be involved in designing the services they use.
- Transform the way we work and improve our corporate culture to deliver the savings we need to make but also ensure that our thinking and plans are driven by data and insight, and the lived experience of the people who live in Thurrock. To help with this, we will build stronger relationships as officers with the elected members who represent our residents.

What did we achieve?

Empowering residents to access information

The new customer relations system, which brings together the handling of enquiries into one team, supports improved enquiry responses, including complaints resolution.

We launched our first Artificial Intelligence (AI) digital assistant, Aimee, to handle council tax transactions and enquiries, reducing manual process time and a new payment platform making bills easier to pay for residents.

It is estimated, approximately 120,000 tasks are already more efficient due to Robotic Process Automation

Our Thurrock Cares campaign, launched in Autumn 2024, brought together all the information and support that residents needed to help them with the cost of living through the winter months. A new area of our website was created, and we promoted this through council and partner channels, as well as at our Thurrock Cares roadshows delivered in partnership with the voluntary and community sector. This resulted in nearly 10,000 visits to our Thurrock Cares web area, where almost 4,600 residents came to find information and support about the cost of living. Thanks to our campaign, we were able to distribute three quarters of a million pounds to 4,270 households struggling with the cost of living.



Public engagement and involvement

The Cabinet approved a Communications and Engagement Strategy that reinforces our commitment to the "One Council" ethos.



This strategy emphasises an open and engaging approach with the community, fostering dialogue with residents and working to rebuild trust. The improvements made have been positively received by residents, featuring more community-focused content and more accessible language. Additionally, a new hard copy magazine has been introduced for all residents living in council housing.

In the winter, we launched “Ask the Council” public question times which give residents opportunity to discuss the council’s plans with cabinet members and senior officers and ask questions about the issues and concerns that matter most to them. The Communities in Action pilot in Chadwell St Mary has provided a clear insight into the priorities, concerns, ambitions and frustrations of the people living there and will lead to the co-creation of a community plan for the area. This approach can then be rolled out to other areas.

Collaboration between members and officers

Governance was an issue highlighted by the Best Value Inspection as an area of real concern. This has been a major focus area for 2024/25 with improvements in scrutiny, consistency, compliance, evidence, transparency and legal, finance, equalities and risk implications in all reports to support all levels of decision making. This inclusion has helped to raise awareness about the wider implications of our decisions and to ensure those decisions are well-informed and right.

A new member development programme has been co-designed and introduces member training records and analysis of training and work continues to encourage good attendance at these sessions. Training has also taken place to improve officers’ political awareness and reporting writing.

Staff and corporate culture

Creating a positive culture for our staff to thrive is a key thread to every aspect of the improvement journey. We launched our fresh start for Thurrock campaign in September, using new, engaging branding to indicate a step change in who we are as a council, and setting out clearly for staff the

key elements of our change programme. In October, we held an internal celebration that recognised and rewarded colleagues who went the extra mile including 46 colleagues who were recognised for their long service. A new training programme included the Multiverse AI Academy giving staff the opportunity to learn the skills needed to harness the power of data, artificial intelligence and business transformation.

The monthly online All Staff Briefings are very popular, regularly attracting 400-500 staff, which has helped to ensure key messages are consistently shared across the workforce.

Finance

One of the main reasons for the council being placed in intervention was the poor state of our financial management. There is no denying the council faces significant financial challenges in the coming years and will require extra support from central government to set a balanced budget.

However, during 2024/25 Commissioners have publicly welcomed the substantial progress we have made in improving our financial position, recovering hundreds of millions of pounds of funds and achieving ambitious savings targets of £19m including £2m in workforce and agency spending and efficiency savings of £1m in children’s services, £2.5m in adult social care and £3m in waste services.

In order to reduce the debt, the council has two key levers: asset disposal (selling its property or land) and divestment (selling its investments). These programmes have been successful and up to 2024/25 had returned values of £49.5m in asset disposals and £704m receipts from divestments.

Difficult decisions remain on service transformation and there is an ongoing need for savings to make the council sustainable, but we will build on the solid foundations of work completed to date and the achievements made in 2024/25.

Over 1,800 staff attended 116 training sessions plus 171 online courses. 31 staff started an apprenticeship to upskill.

Priority: People

What did we commit to do?

Change the way we work so that we focus on reducing inequality and supporting residents to help prevent the problems that can have damaging impacts on children, adults and families.

Put people at the heart of our service delivery and bring the right services together to focus on achieving positive outcomes, including reducing inequality. Help local people reach their potential and support themselves and their families through support to find the right route to economic prosperity, whether that is through gaining new skills and qualifications; staying in and progressing at work; or succeeding as an entrepreneur.

What did we achieve?

Ofsted Outstanding

One of our biggest successes this year was the Outstanding rating of our children's services by Ofsted. This is a great example of how our excellent services are improving the lives of children, young people and families in Thurrock.

Adoption recruitment has continued to be positive during 2024/25 and aligns well with Thurrock's needs for adoptive parents, and this has helped to reduce the average time for the adoption process by 100 days, compared to last year.



We are proud of the amazing achievements of our looked after children and the support they receive, as recognised in our annual Children in Care awards in June and the Foster Carers Awards in February.

Giving something back

We received incredible support once again from residents, local businesses and council staff in our annual Give a Gift campaign. As a result, our collective efforts generated hundreds of donated toys and gifts, as well as money for gift cards and food vouchers, which were then distributed to those most in need.

Give a Gift gave out 211 gift cards, 444 Christmas presents and 46 supermarket vouchers

Innovative practice in children's services

Our 'Think Family' approach and the work of the prevention and support service (PASS) workers were praised by Ofsted for making a tangible difference to children's lives. As a result of "Think Family" work, fewer children need statutory intervention and the number of children being subject to protection plans and coming into care is reducing.

Education

2024/25 has seen one brand new and one newly federated academy in the borough (Orsett Heath and Mossbourne) and education staff have worked hard alongside the academies and partners to manage parental expectations and concerns during the time of transfer.

25 holiday, activity and food clubs were held over every school holiday period for children eligible for free school meals



Of the 15 schools that have had a graded Ofsted inspection since January 2024, 13 were judged to be good or outstanding. 93% of all early year providers had a good or outstanding grading from Ofsted. Council teams are working closely with the remaining academies and providers to support them in their improvement journeys.

In July, pupils from our primary schools were joined by singers from the Royal Ballet and Opera House, and treated to a special collection of performances for the 25th anniversary of Thurrock Junior Music Festival.

In the community

Thurrock's libraries and community hubs have had a busy year including Fun Palace events in May with

In the summer, 2,315 children joined the Summer Reading Challenge, 1,448 of them read six books or more

over 200 attendees, Summer Reading Challenges and a variety of book, social and activity clubs aimed at both children and adults. Most of our libraries were also dedicated Warm Spaces during

the winter months offering residents a safe and supportive environment where they could keep warm and meet other people.

In support of the fabulous work done out in the communities, we celebrated the contributions of lots of special people during the year including Volunteers Week and Carers Week both in June.

In August, the council and volunteers launched a new pantry and cafe in Purfleet-on-Thames to give residents better access to affordable, healthy food and everyday essentials. Over the summer we supported 10 community Big Lunches in parks and open spaces which were mini festivals, with lots of entertainment and opportunities to enjoy Thurrock without having to spend lots of money. These events were created in partnership with the borough's voluntary and community sector.

Integrating our health and care support

Part of our service transformation has been making them more accessible, underpinned by our information and advice service, our Talking Shops, our integrated health and care front door team 'Thurrock First' and our community partnerships.

Our new Adult Health and Care Integrated Commissioning Strategy was endorsed by Health and Wellbeing Board and focusses on working with partners to develop localised and person-centred provision that is bespoke to the resident.

A great example of this whole system approach is our complex housing intervention programme (CHIP) which has already, in its first two years, saved £1m by taking a more joined-up approach to homeless people with a dual diagnosis of mental ill-health and addiction.

83% of adult service users said they find it easy to find information about support

Another great example is our Local Area Co-ordinators, introduced into neighbourhoods 10 years ago, practicing and highlighting the strength and value of community led support on a daily basis. Through this type of locality engagement including community hubs, libraries and community forums, people's aspirations or concerns can be captured and shared with services and partners to take proactive action to resolve local issues more effectively and efficiently.

We also launched a Thurrock Healthy Lifestyle service to support adults to stop smoking and take part in a national scheme to "swap to stop".



Priority: Place

What did we commit to do?

Bring together local people, businesses and others with an interest in Thurrock to develop a clear vision and plan for a borough that is open to opportunity.

Bring in investment to help improve housing, transport and education locally and make sure economic growth truly benefits local people.

Keep our borough clean and well looked after and a nice place to live.

What did we achieve?

Preparing for devolution and local government reorganisation

Since the announcement by the government that Thurrock would be part of the Greater Essex Devolution Priority Programme, a key focus has been on ensuring we have robust information about our needs and strengths to inform discussions and planning to ensure we make the best decisions in the emerging new-look local government sector. Thurrock is of huge strategic and economic importance to the wider county but we need to make sure that devolution also delivers good outcomes for Thurrock's residents and businesses.

Business engagement and support

In the meantime we have continued to engage with local businesses in a multitude of ways. We have reviewed our policies to improve and streamline the way procurement is done in line with the new legislation to benefit small businesses, start-ups, and social enterprises. We have also launched the workplace health tool kit which provides local businesses with advice and support on looking after the health and wellbeing of their staff. Business Buzz, our e-newsletter, now has over 50,000 subscribers.

Since October 2023 we have awarded over £87,000 in Thurrock Green Business Grants to help local businesses improve their energy efficiency and reduce their energy bills. Funding comes from Thurrock's UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) allocation.

Culture

It has been a busy cultural year, with 1,000 people attending a re-opening of Coalhouse Fort in October, the Museum being awarded a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant in December and a new Thurrock Plan for Culture agreed in January. The plan was developed with local cultural partners with a shared commitment to developing opportunities for co-creating more vibrant, enriched and inclusive places for all.



Improving our planning service

Shortcomings previously identified in a planning review prompted a full service restructure during 2024/25 and a new customer focused performance driven culture. The improvements made were externally assessed as good progress adding several improvements have gone 'above and beyond' their recommendations.



Key highlights from the past planning year include the creation of the Local Development Order for Thames Gateway, which will ultimately support delivery of 1,500 new jobs, and progressing towards a new Local Plan including, crucially, adopting the Local Development Scheme. The team have also been shortlisted for a national award for ground-breaking use of data and digital tools to drive faster, more efficient decision making around planning applications.

Waste and recycling

This year we have seen considerable changes in our waste collection service implementing a fortnightly refuse and recycling service, a weekly food waste service and a fortnightly subscription collection for garden waste. These were important changes to ensure the sustainability of the service, and whilst

95% of items collected via the Doorstep Recycling Scheme are reused with only 5% going to be recycled

some changes were initially met with challenge, the outcome has been a more reliable service, with fewer missed bins and fewer complaints than in previous years. We have also introduced a doorstep recycling scheme.

Transport

As part of the new Thurrock Bus Service Improvement Plan and with government funding, the new 375 bus route, connecting the rural areas of the borough with the town centres, started in September 2024.

A number of road improvements have been made during the year including the creation of a roundabout to replace the A1089 "Marshfoot" slip-road junction, funded by an award from the Department for Transport's Safer Roads Funding scheme.

Our Transport Safety Officers were recognised at the Community Safety awards in October for their role in combatting anti-social behaviour and crime in our communities.

We have also installed 70 new Electric Vehicle (EV) charge points in the borough.

Housing and regeneration

In October we were awarded £700,000 new funding towards an Aveley housing development (Teviot Avenue) which will provide 48 affordable, modern council homes made up of a mixture of flats and houses. We also agreed plans to build 46 high quality council homes on the sites of run-down garages in Chadwell St Mary, South Ockendon and Stanford-le-Hope. By rejuvenating this council-owned developed land which hasn't been used to its full potential, we are unlocking a new generation of social housing that meets the requirements of modern living. We have also increased our temporary accommodation availability to over 200 furnished lets.

During the year we have also consulted on a number of regeneration and housing development improvements including providing better housing for residents on the Blackshots Estate and the rejuvenation of Grays Riverside to enable more people to access the riverfront.

54,000m² of the Highways Network resurfaced, 19,599m² of concrete carriageways micro-surfaced, 903 Jetpatch repairs over 45 roads, 3,295 potholes repaired



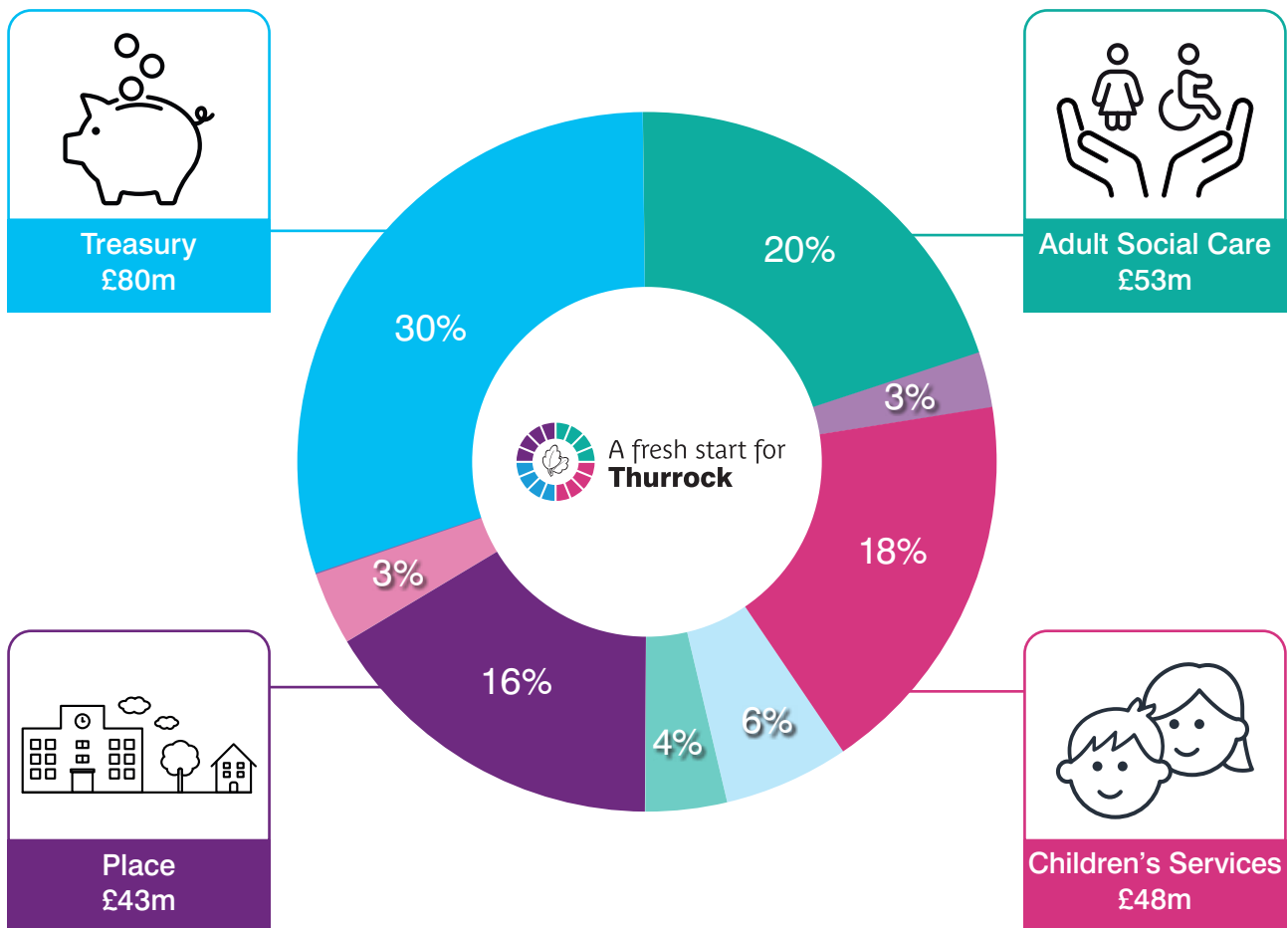
How we spent public money

Our approach to balancing the budget continues to be focussed on:

- protecting frontline services wherever possible
- working more effectively, efficiently, economically and innovatively
- trying to limit any increases that affect residents

In 2024/25 the council spent £263m, not including housing revenue account and education which have dedicated funding streams. Below is how we spent each pound:

● Adult Social Care	20%
● Intervention, engagement and improvement	3%
● Children's Services	18%
● Corporate Services	6%
● Finance	4%
● Place	16%
● Corporate Costs	3%
● Treasury Costs	30%







Looking forward to 2025/26

Enabling Council: opportunities and challenges for 2025/26

We have made positive progress in relation to our communications and engagement approach which we must continue into 2025/26. We will build on the success of the Ask the Council events and will be undertaking a resident's survey.

The fifth report from Commissioners is a reassuring read, setting out the progress the council made last year both in terms of getting our finances back onto a more sustainable footing, and in creating the strong foundations for ongoing improvements to the way the council is run. However, we can't take our foot off the pedal. We must make meaningful and deep-rooted changes that set us on the right path for years to come.

Devolution and local government reorganisation offer Thurrock opportunities as part of something stronger, more resilient and better able to deliver for residents. However, it is important that this does not distract from the day job to ensure we remain focussed on good service delivery. It remains as important that we get our house in order and continue to make savings and transform the way we work.

Delivering the scale and breadth of the change requires a coordinated, one council, multi-programme approach.

This annual report highlights some great work and achievements, but also reflects that there is much still to do. 2024/25 was the first year of the new Corporate Plan. For 2025/26 we are refining the Plan to take account of the progress made and the changing local government environment.

Devolution - the transfer of specific powers and funding from central government to a locally elected Mayor for the whole of Greater Essex – and local government reorganisation – simplifying the structure of councils in a geographical area to improve efficiency and streamline service delivery – will both be transformational in their impact on how services are provided.

This means we need to embed the progress that has been made so far and continue to improve those areas which are still a challenge as quickly as possible.

This will ensure we are in the best possible position to make those changes. We will use data and evidence from our corporate needs assessment and other sources of information to make sure we achieve the best possible outcomes for Thurrock residents.

And crucially, as highlighted throughout this report, we need to communicate, engage and collaborate with our staff, partners, residents and other stakeholders in order to rebuild the trust and confidence that has been lost over the last few years.



Looking forward to 2025/26

People: opportunities and challenges for 2025/26

The challenges for our social care services in Thurrock are largely the same as those for councils across the country. The cost, demand, complexity and availability of support and placements and the recruitment and retention of qualified social work staff remain areas of significant concern.

We will continue to deliver our strategies based on recommendations from the Ofsted inspection and develop plans following the CQC inspection of our adults services, continuing to work closely across the whole system of Thurrock partners to achieve the best outcomes possible for those who need our support.

A big focus for 2025/26 will be the refreshing of the Health and Well-Being strategy which is a collaboration of health, social care and voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise partners across the whole of Thurrock, including consultation with residents on their health priorities.





A fresh start for
Thurrock

Looking forward to 2025/26

Place: opportunities and challenges for 2025/26

Whilst there has been significant improvement in the last 12 months, there are still challenges for planning.

This includes increasing the supply of local housing, progressing the borough's Local Plan and ensuring it is aligned to housing, infrastructure and sustainability plans and continuing to build on the successes already made to improve the confidence of stakeholders we work with. This will be a key focus for 2025/26.

We are aware that we need to work across the borough to improve recycling rates. The new Waste and Recycling Collection Policy sets out to improve service reliability for residents, and support residents to recycle properly and ensure we do everything we can to get our recycling rate to 50% by 2030 and reduce landfill.

Regeneration activity in both Grays and Tilbury as part of the Towns Fund Deals will continue through 2025/26 including improvements to Tilbury Civic Square and the station.

Local economic partnerships are evolving in Thurrock and south Essex. It will be important for that the council continues to build upon good governance and assurance arrangements for Thames Freeport to make the most of the opportunities this partnership can bring for local businesses, residents and communities.

We are engaged in conversation and negotiations about both Greater Essex devolution and local government reorganisation. Both these programmes require the whole council, our partners and our residents to be engaged and informed. A focus of 2025/26 will be to ensure we have robust data and intelligence to help understand and take advantage of the opportunities devolution and local government reorganisation may bring.



Where to find out more

We are committed to our improvement journey and rebuilding trust with our residents. Reporting on our performance and assessing our impact is part of a wider suite of activity we constantly undertake to maintain progress.

You can find out more about how we monitor our performance throughout the year by visiting:
thurrock.gov.uk/how-we-are-doing/council-performance



