

# LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

Royal Borough of Kingston upon  
Thames

2-5 June 2025

Feedback report



**Corporate Peer Challenge**



# Contents

- 1. Introduction ..... 3
- 2. Executive summary..... 3
- 3. Recommendations ..... 7
- 4. Summary of peer challenge approach ..... 8
- 5. Feedback ..... 11
- 6. Next steps..... 32

# 1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending 3.5 days at RB Kingston Council to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of Sector-led Improvement (SLI) put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: Responsible for their own performance, Accountable locally not nationally and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers remain at the heart of the peer challenge process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team and the recommendations that the council are required to action.

# 2. Executive summary

Kingston Council is recognised as a high-performing local authority, delivering strong outcomes for residents through its strategic priorities: Safer, Fairer, Greener, Together. The 'Together' theme stands out for its emphasis on community cohesion. These priorities are well-aligned with the council's financial strategy and transformation plan, providing a solid foundation for future delivery.

Leadership across Kingston Council is also a notable strength. The leader and chief

executive are seen as proactive and collaborative, engaging effectively with partners and staff. The chief executive's "residents first" approach and balanced leadership style have energised the organisation. Portfolio holders and the senior leadership team (SLT) are viewed as approachable and constructive, fostering a positive working culture. Staff report high satisfaction and pride in working for Kingston, with the recent launch of the internal Stronger Together strategy receiving positive feedback from staff. The Stronger Together approach aims to increase senior leadership visibility and their engagement with staff who are keen to see sustained planned activity to continue breaking down silos.

Although the council has a clear set of four priorities and is clearly ambitious, this has led to numerous plans and priorities, which while well-intentioned, risks diluting focus and straining limited resources. Staff and service leads told the peer team there is a need for clearer prioritisation, especially in the context of financial constraints saying the council needs to "do fewer things well," and ensure that the transformation plan is clearly aligned to individual service plans.

Inconsistent language and unclear connections between strategies have also contributed to some confusion, highlighting the need to strengthen the "golden thread" linking staff roles to the overarching Council Plan and the performance management framework.

Kingston also has 'Greener' as one of its key priorities. The peer team heard that climate policies are integrated across property and housing. However a whole system approach to climate change is needed across the council with wider policy creation and appropriate resource to achieve this. Although the council has successfully secured £3.7 million in external funding for pilot schemes, it is currently not on track to meet its climate targets. To address this, further enhancements in the financial resources, more skills development, and increased pace of delivery will be required.

#### 4

18 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ [www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk) Telephone 020 7664 3000 Email [info@local.gov.uk](mailto:info@local.gov.uk)

Local Government Association company number 11177145 Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government company number 03675577

**Chair:** Councillor Louise Gittins

**Chief Executive:** Joanna Killian

**President:** Baroness Grey-Thompson

It was consistently noted that partnership working has improved over the past few years, with statutory, commercial, and voluntary sector partners praising the council's collaborative and solution-focused approach. The voluntary sector understood the funding constraints for the council; however they are keen to explore multi-year funding and simplified funding pots to better support residents and align with council goals. Health partners also see opportunities for deeper collaboration, particularly through the creation of the new Neighbourhood Teams as part of the Integrated Care Board.

The Kingston Partnership presents a valuable opportunity to further harness the energy and resources of partners around a shared vision for place. While the Kingston Partnership is seen as a valuable platform for aligning efforts across the borough and relationships are good, the peer team heard that there is a need to harness its potential. Partners told the peer team there is an opportunity to reset the partnership and that they are keen to get more involved and drive key agendas. There is an opportunity for the council to galvanise its partners' enthusiasm and energy and strengthen the partnership even more.

The peer team heard that enabling shared services with neighbouring boroughs — such as finance, HR, legal, and internal audit are presenting challenges. Staff told the peer team they experience inconsistent quality and responsiveness from these services, with stretched capacity and over reliance on agency staff cited as reasons. There is a lack of clarity on how performance is tracked across these services, making it difficult to measure both the financial and efficiency benefits of the arrangements.

Internal processes and systems were frequently described by staff as “*cumbersome and inefficient*” often described as hindering rather than enabling service delivery. There is widespread recognition of the need for change, and a growing sense of urgency to accelerate and embed transformation across the organisation. A full-scale

review was launched shortly before the peer team were on site which aims to streamline processes and systems. Aligning and streamlining plans and programmes will be essential to maximising impact and reducing duplication.

Kingston Council's finances are generally well managed. The Annual Governance Statement and Local Code of Corporate Governance reflect a culture of transparency and accountability, with the council described as a "*safe space of check and challenge*." A recent update to the Corporate Risk Register has improved clarity through RAG ratings and direction indicators, though concerns remain about whether it fully captures the council's risk landscape—particularly with the exclusion of issues like temporary accommodation. The Audit Committee has requested more detailed reporting.

The council faces financial pressures, including a projected £31 million budget gap over the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) period, declining reserves, and the end of the Department for Education's Safety Valve Agreement in 2025/26. Rising debt and temporary accommodation costs place further strain on resources. It is therefore essential that the projected savings and efficiencies set out in the MTFS as part of the council's transformation programme are delivered, to avoid putting further pressure on the council's already declining reserves.

The SEND Futures Plan outlines steps to manage provision post-agreement, but continued financial control and resilience are essential.

Kingston's Confident in Kingston Economic Development Strategy is forward-looking and evidence-based, with a focus on inclusive growth. There is potential to better align local growth ambitions with the borough's culture and visitor economy. While bilateral partnerships are strong, partners told the peer team they would welcome more engagement so their resource and ingenuity can be harnessed in delivering the Confident in Kingston vision and strategy.

Housing delivery is progressing despite challenges. The council maintains a well-

managed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and is proactive in compliance and capital planning. However, annual housing targets are unmet due to a range of challenges including land constraints, green belt sensitivities, lack of developer activity and an incomplete Local Plan. Affordable housing delivery is particularly low, with only 15% of new homes meeting affordability criteria.

To address this, Kingston is delivering its own housing with Small Sites 1 complete, Cambridge Road Estate Regeneration underway and acquiring additional homes there and planning is underway for Small Sites 2 with Acre Road starting on site soon.

Concerns persist around the optimism of the HRA business plan though and the absence of a long-term housing strategy that goes beyond the current interim strategy that expires in 2025.

Rising temporary accommodation costs are also a concern and require urgent short and medium-term interventions. To address this the council is creating an arms-length company so that it can purchase accommodation and provide a stock of private homes directly and discharge its housing duty as part of the council's Temporary Accommodation Strategy.

### 3. Recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

1. **Prioritisation:** Prioritise the priorities – recognise the capacity restraints across the organisation.
2. **Collaboration:** Collaborative behaviours need to be modelled by SLT (Senior Leadership Team), WLT (Wider Leadership Team) and all managers, to break down silos. The council needs to foster greater strategic collaboration

7

across all departments.

3. **Shared Services:** Strengthen the enabling shared services –review, refresh, build in feedback on performance from customers (staff).
4. **Process and practice:** Accelerate the current review of processes and practice. Clearly communicate with staff how they can get involved and keep staff informed about the benefits of the changes made, as and when they are realised.
5. **Engagement:** Develop a mechanism which draws from the engagement already being done, so that Kingston has an overall sense of how the community feel about the council and its services.
6. **Partnership:** Strengthen the Kingston Partnership around the place agenda to capitalise on the energy of partners
7. **Climate Change:** Climate change needs a whole systems approach – wider policy creation and appropriate resource is needed to achieve this.
8. **Housing:** Given the corporate importance of housing, ensure the senior leadership of the council continues to focus on the oversight of the housing service, including the development of the new housing strategy beyond 2025 and compliance with regulatory requirements .

## 4. Summary of peer challenge approach

### The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were

selected by the LGA on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

- Chief Executive Peer: **Kim Wright**, Chief Executive, London Borough of Brent
- Lead Member Peer: Liberal Democrat: **Cllr Kevin Guy**, Leader of Bath and North East Somerset Council
- Opposition Peer: Independent Residents Association: **Cllr Gillian Ford**, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member of Adults and Wellbeing, London Borough of Havering
- Senior Officer Peer: **Sukvinder Kalsi**, Strategic Director of Finance, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham
- Senior Officer Peer: Place and Housing: **Ajman Ali**, Executive Director for Neighbourhood Services, Sheffield City Council
- Shadow Officer Peer: **Steven Heales**, Senior Advisor - Leadership, LGA
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager: **Sophie Poole**, Senior Regional Advisor for London and South East, Local Government Association

### Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes which form the core components of all Corporate Peer Challenges. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement.

1. **Local priorities and outcomes** - are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans?
2. **Organisational and place leadership** - does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local

communities?

3. **Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny?
4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like?
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve?

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every Corporate Peer Challenge includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance.

The council asked the peer team to also provide feedback on finance, housing and growth.

### **The peer challenge process**

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. This included a position statement prepared by the council in advance of the peer team's time on site. This provided a clear steer to the peer team on the local context at RB

Kingston and what the peer team should focus on. It also included a comprehensive LGA Finance briefing (prepared using public reports from the council's website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent 3.5 days onsite at RB Kingston, during which they:

- Gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 50 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 180 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

## 5. Feedback

### 5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

Kingston Council has clearly articulated its strategic priorities – *'Safer, Fairer, Greener, Together'* – within its overarching council plan. These priorities are rooted in the administration's manifesto and reflect an ambitious vision for the borough. It was clear to the peer team that 'Together' was the priority that the majority of staff, members and partners at every level, most identified with and could clearly articulate this. The peer team heard on a number of occasions about the 'Kingston Family' and the council's inclusive approach around community focus: *'We're one team, Kingston Family, we stick together.'*

The council's vision and priorities are well-aligned with its financial strategy, which is supported by a transformation plan, indicating a strong foundation for delivering on its

commitments. However while the council has a clear set of four priorities, there is a need to sharpen focus on the most critical objectives that will deliver these priorities for the next three years. This would improve strategic focus and enable more effective resource allocation and performance monitoring. The peer team heard on a number of occasions that the council is spreading itself too thinly and needs to do *“fewer things well.”* There was widespread concern that *“being so ambitious brings with it so many plans, strategies and action plans that everything becomes a priority at a time when resources are becoming ever more reduced.”*

Despite there being clarity around the four priorities at the strategic level, the peer team also heard a variety of other straplines in conversations with staff, members and partners such as ‘Cleaner, Fairer, Stronger’, ‘Celebrating our past, present and future’, ‘Confident Kingston’ as well as the recent internal programme ‘Stronger Together’. While straplines are a useful tool to galvanise energy and focus to the delivery of a priority or project, there is a risk that multiple straplines can dilute the council’s overall messaging and confuse stakeholders around priorities.

The council has a robust engagement framework, including a Transforming Communities Programme, as well as engagement with diverse groups: youth and Youth Council, people from abroad and faith groups. Community Plans are based on four neighbourhoods, with a second Community Engagement Strategy forthcoming. Feedback mechanisms include newsletters (e.g. “You Said”), social media, councillor bulletins, and neighbourhood manager updates. Residents the peer team spoke to said they do not receive feedback from the online engagement tool “Let’s Talk.” The Kingston Green Business Community and events like the Kingston Vision Homeshow are also used to foster community dialogue. Customer satisfaction surveys and complaint analysis are used to inform service improvements. A learning forum reviews complaints to extract lessons and improve future service delivery.

The council has adopted a co-production engagement approach to service design

using an engagement ladder to guide levels of participation. A dialogue tool helps validate resident feedback. Toolkits are also being developed to help staff engage with seldom-heard voices from consultation to co-production. Notable examples include the recent development of the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy and the Autism and ADHD Strategy, both shaped by lived experiences.

The council has made a conscious decision not to use traditional residents' surveys to establish a 'helicopter view' of residents perceptions, as they want to reflect the lived experience of their residents. However, a more joined-up approach to synthesising all of the rich engagement data would help the council to gauge the overall impact of council services on residents and draw out common issues and trends across a variety of sources. It is important to demonstrate how the council's engagement data can be used more efficiently to inform the council about its impact across the borough.

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) are well-integrated into the council's future plans. There is clear evidence of cross-organisational understanding of EDI policies, supported by a motivated workforce. One member of the team commenting on the good progress being made on EDI described the change as "*monumental*". The council's '*Together*' priority on the '*Kingston Family*' approach is driven by passionate leadership from the leader and senior leadership team (SLT) and led to regular engagement with underrepresented groups. However, again, the metrics for evaluating the impact of this engagement was unclear and requires further development. The council's workforce data reflects a strong commitment to EDI. The peer team saw that the council has a clear understanding of the demographics of the community and how this compares to the workforce (BME staff 29 per cent compared to borough residents at 34 per cent). There is also a particular focus on encouraging more staff with disabilities to work for the council (currently there is a 6 per cent gap). Kingston's supplier base is also diverse, effectively serving minority communities. The peer team saw evidence of the council's commitment to social value, particularly

through the Kingston Leisure Centre redevelopment, which reflects community-focused procurement practices. These efforts reinforce the council's dedication to fairness and inclusion and demonstrates how the council is delivering on its '*Fairer*' priority.

The council understands the need to take climate action locally with '*Greener*' as one of the council's key priorities. A dedicated climate change team has been established to embed skills and staff into its greener agenda. Strong community engagement was evident especially on housing developments, with the inclusion of air source heat pumps and electric vehicle points. The peer team heard that climate policies are integrated across property and housing. However a whole system approach is needed across the council with wider policy creation and appropriate resource to achieve this. The peer team recognised there is a clear ambition to embed the greener agenda into the new Local Plan but felt there was little evidence of thinking outside the box in planning and policy terms in the immediate future, choosing to stick with the London Plan for now. The peer team did recognise that the climate agenda was embedded into its major service contracts. These contracts, delivered on the council's behalf by external contractors, incorporate clear climate change outcomes as part of their delivery objectives.

The council has set ambitious internal and external climate targets—2030 as the internal climate target and 2038 as the external target supported by a comprehensive climate action plan and led by committed members and officers. Clearly external factors beyond the council's control will impact the feasibility of achieving the 2038 target. Although the council has successfully secured £3.7 million in external funding for pilot schemes, it is currently not on track to meet its climate targets. To address this, further enhancements in the financial resources, more skills development, and increased pace of delivery will be required.

## Performance

On the whole Kingston Council provides a good level of service to its residents and communities. Kingston's performance data is published on the LG Inform website [Headline Report for London Borough of Kingston upon Thames - Bar Chart View | LG Inform](#).

Children's Services which is managed by Achieving for Children, received an 'Outstanding' rating from Ofsted in December 2024 across all five assessment areas, highlighting effective leadership and comprehensive support for children and families.

The quality of education in Kingston is also one of the highest in London with 70.4 per cent of students achieving 9-5 in English and Maths at GCSE compared to the London mean average at 55.4 per cent. Kingston also has the highest percentage of students at Key Stage 4 with an average attainment 8 score, with 59.1 per cent of the population, compared to the mean average of 50.9 per cent.

Under its 'greener' priority, Kingston has one of the highest percentages of household waste sent to reuse, recycle or compost with 44.10 per cent compared to the London mean average of 32.76 per cent.

In terms of housing, according to the Annual Housing Landlord Complaints Report 2023/24, challenges remain in housing repairs with customer satisfaction for general repairs at 75 per cent against an 87 per cent target.

Finance metrics show that central services spend in Kingston is £104.93 per head of population compared to the mean London average of £294.32, making Kingston one of the lowest in terms of employee and running costs across London.

Kingston also has one of the lowest total revenue expenditures on Adult's services per head of population with £560.64 per head of population, compared to the mean average of £676.72, even though it has one of the highest older populations in London.

It also has the lowest non-council tax collection rate in London, with 1.41 per cent of council tax due, compared to the mean London average of 4.83 per cent.

In terms of managing performance, Kingston has recently launched a new performance management framework approach with the ambition to be a data driven organisation with an "explore and action" approach to driving improvement. This performance management approach has been piloted in adult social care which has been positively received, and the peer team saw evidence of how staff in that division relate performance data and metrics to their work. Contractors that the peer team spoke to perceive Kingston as managing performance well and *'holding people's feet to the fire.'* However, beyond senior management level, the peer team saw limited evidence of a performance management culture across the rest of the organisation and an understanding of how the council truly knows how well it is performing and making an impact. Members were sighted on performance mainly through portfolio holders' briefings by officers. Performance is also inconsistently reviewed by members at committees. There is an opportunity to embed the council's new performance management framework and data driven approach through the council's new internal 'Stronger Together' programme.

## 5.2 Organisational and place leadership

### Organisational Leadership

The leader is widely respected by both partners and staff, recognised for being approachable, collaborative, and genuinely invested in the wellbeing of the workforce. The chief executive has brought a refreshing energy to the organisation, driving a "residents first organisation" approach and offering a balance of high support and high challenge. Staff that the peer team spoke to said while *"residents being at the centre of everything is entirely laudable, it needs to be balanced by an equal focus on staff."* Both the leader and chief executive have demonstrated a

proactive, outward-facing approach, engaging effectively with partners across Kingston and the wider sub-region—an effort that has been warmly received.

Portfolio holders are collaborating effectively and respectfully with officers, contributing to a constructive working environment. Portfolio holders meet together every two weeks, with their group once a month and with their director of service every two weeks. The senior leadership team, some of whom have been in post for just over a year, are viewed as approachable and non-hierarchical, bringing a positive and energising presence to the organisation.

Staff consistently describe Kingston as a great place to work—ambitious, passionate, friendly, and welcoming. The *Stronger Together* strategy which was launched shortly before the peer team were on site in April 2025 has been positively received by all staff members the peer team engaged with. A member of staff told the peer team: *“Directors have previously focused on their own area staff teams and not the council as a whole. SLT did their first speaking to the whole organisation at the launch of the ‘Stronger Together’ strategy which was welcomed.”* Staff consistently told the peer team they would like this level of engagement to continue and for there to be greater visibility from the senior management team, the wider leadership team (WLT), and the corporate leadership group (CLG). The peer team heard: *“Stronger Together is positive, but what are the next steps? How do we develop this and stop the silos?”*

The organisation has a good working relationship with the trade unions who won the national award for Best Employer and Trade Union/Employee Partnership by the Public Services People Managers Association. Unions described senior management as open and transparent and regularly meet with the director of human resources. Issues are managed at an early stage and unions are briefed in advance of any staff changes such as restructures. Over the last three years, nearly 50 policies have been reviewed with engagement with staff and unions.

Recent staff survey results were positive, and the council has responded to feedback

with an action plan and rebranded its staff newsletter as “Stronger Together.” Staff values—transparency, respect, and feeling valued—are being embedded across the organisation.

## **Place Leadership**

Kingston Council demonstrates a strong understanding of the needs of its residents and communities, underpinned by a clear identity and voice at local, sub-regional, and regional levels. It is recognised for its commitment to co-designing services with people who have lived experience and for its effective engagement with community groups.

Statutory and commercial partners describe their collaboration with the council as highly positive. The council is seen as a constructive and solutions-focused partner that values diverse perspectives and works effectively to address shared challenges. Partners understand the financial limitations of the council and told the peer team they are keen to collaborate more.

The council has strong engagement with the voluntary sector and the Compact is close to completion, supported by visible senior officers who foster good working relationships with their voluntary sector counterparts. Collaborative work is also taking place through Strategic Area Groups (SAGs). The peer team heard there were concerns about the council’s expectation and dependency on the voluntary sector going forward. Voluntary sector partners are keen to explore multi-year funding from the voluntary sector grant and explore simplifying multiple small funding pots so they can plan better for the needs of residents long term and support the council. The voluntary sector were generally positive about the council's commitment and practices relating to co-design. The recent VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) strategy was cited as an example of good practice.

Health partners told the peer team that they see an opportunity to build on their good working relationship with the council, particularly with the development of the ICB’s

(Integrated Care Board) new Integrated Neighbourhood Teams which aim to focus on prevention and co-ordinated care at a local level.

The Kingston Partnership presents a valuable opportunity to further harness the energy and resources of partners around a shared vision for place. The council is also viewed as “*punching above its weight*,” successfully advancing its priorities for residents beyond its administrative boundaries.

However, there is a perception among some stakeholders that there is an over emphasis on Kingston town centre, potentially at the expense of other parts of the borough. Addressing this concern could help ensure a more balanced and inclusive approach to place-based development.

## **Growth**

The Confident in Kingston Economic Development Strategy outlines a clear set of local growth priorities, with a strong commitment to ensuring that all communities benefit. These priorities are supported by a robust and comprehensive evidence base.

There is an opportunity to strengthen the connection between local growth ambitions and Kingston’s culture and visitor economy, aligning these areas to maximise impact and reach. While bilateral partnerships are strong, partners told the peer team they would welcome more engagement so their resource and ingenuity can be harnessed in delivering the Confident in Kingston vision and strategy.

The recent launch of the Large Employers Forum has generated positive momentum. Building on this, there is potential to further mobilise the energy and commitment of partners to support the delivery of shared economic goals. Kingston has a large micro-business economy (92 per cent) and large employers, e.g. Unilever headquarters in Kingston town centre, Chessington World of Adventures in Chessington and Lidl’s European headquarters in Tolworth. The council is growing its

engagement having just set up a large employers group, but mid-sized business growth is a gap. Despite Kingston's strong tourism assets, the peer team did not see evidence of a visitor economy strategy.

Connecting local residents to local jobs remains a priority, especially in areas like the Cambridge Road Estate. With micro businesses being dominant, only about a quarter of the jobs are provided by large employers with 100 plus employees. The council's focus is to target entry level jobs to those with limited access to training opportunities.

There is untapped potential to further strengthen economic linkages, through the University of Kingston and large employers particularly with communities from Hong Kong and Korea. A person the peer team spoke to commented: *"Is Kingston Council making the most of having a university on their patch, especially when thinking about their international reach/inward investment opportunities?"* Examples of economic linkages could include but are not limited to student-to-student exchange, collaboration between academics and businesses, and inward investment & exporting.

Both the Confident Kingston initiative and Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) commissioning model were well received by partners who told the peer team that the council acts as an effective intermediary and that there are high levels of respect and trust in co-designing funding priorities and schemes.

Kingston plays a leadership role in regional partnerships like the South London Partnership (SLP) and has influenced the London Growth Plan. Partners and the business community have highlighted that improved transport infrastructure—particularly orbital connectivity across South London—would significantly enhance and accelerate Kingston's growth ambitions.

Housing and transport are recognised as key barriers to inclusive growth. Limited inter-borough connectivity and a lack of affordable housing means access to

employment and skills opportunities are reduced. Partners raised concerns with the peer team about the clarity of the council's growth narrative and ambition for place-making, suggesting there is a need for stronger articulation and engagement.

## **Housing**

Housing remains a shared strategic priority for the council and its partners, as reflected in the Council Plan and the Kingston Partnership's focus. The council demonstrates strong commitment through a well-managed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and proactive efforts in compliance, regulatory readiness, and capital planning.

Despite good outcomes—particularly on the Cambridge Road Estate—annual housing delivery targets are not being met. Constraints such as green belt sensitivities, limited land supply, and an incomplete Local Plan continue to hinder progress. The council is exploring densification and repurposing public assets to address these challenges.

Affordable housing delivery is significantly below target, with only 15% of new homes meeting affordability criteria. Most private developments occur on small sites, exempt from affordable housing obligations.

There is strong awareness of compliance and demand pressures and officers are working collaboratively across the council. However in the absence of an up-to-date housing strategy, the peer team question if the HRA will have all the resources necessary to meet local ambitions as well as maintain homes that comply with regulatory standards. Delivery risks persist, and continued focus on strategic alignment, resource prioritisation, and risk mitigation is essential. Peers support the councils plan to improve internal capacity and expertise to develop the HRA Business Plan which is currently contracted out to a third party.

Public satisfaction is currently monitored within the housing directorate through

tenant surveys, audits, and consultations. The peer team heard there is an intention to roll out a similar approach across the council in due course. A new data system is being introduced to replace spreadsheets, with dashboards and datasets now in place to support better decision-making.

The challenge of homelessness is also acknowledged and seen as a priority by the council that needs to be addressed urgently. Evictions are not always well-coordinated across services, creating knock-on effects for early help and children's services. While there is strong collaboration with adult services, communication and engagement on evictions could be improved.

Rising temporary accommodation costs remain a significant pressure. While the construction of new homes is a long-term solution, it is essential there is a clear and time-bound roadmap for implementing short- and medium-term interventions which focus on prevention and cost reduction strategies to address the issue more immediately. The peer team had assurance that the council's transformation programme is focusing on addressing the housing pressures. This includes creating an arms-length company so that it can purchase accommodation and provide a stock of private homes directly and discharge its housing duty as part of the council's Temporary Accommodation Strategy. The scale of demand remains high, with over 1,000 households in temporary accommodation and 30 in hotels, with some households with children staying in hotels in excess of the six-week statutory limit. Prevention is a key focus, but market pressures—such as landlords exiting the sector—are reducing available stock. The council plans to purchase 200 homes using Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) funding, guided by an external consultancy, though the rationale for using a company structure requires clearer articulation. Additionally, recent regulatory changes have led to a rise in complaints, highlighting the need for robust complaint management processes to continue to be maintained.

### 5.3 Governance and culture

A positive organisational culture is evident, marked by respect, transparency, and constructive challenge. The recently launched *Stronger Together* strategy has been positively received by staff and is widely seen as a symbol of renewal and a 'new chapter' for Kingston. It has had a motivational impact across the organisation, and there is now a critical window to harness this momentum and embed the strategy into day-to-day practice.

Kingston Council operates under a committee system of governance. Relationships between members and officers are generally positive, with members reporting that they feel well supported. The council operates a member development programme, which currently focuses primarily on induction training for newly elected members. All councillors receive planning and audit training when they are first elected due to all members participating in Neighbourhood Committees. However, a broader and more sustained development programme is recommended, particularly for members on the Audit Committee. The peer team were told that the Audit Committee do not make recommendations or requests, and the framework had not been updated for a period of time. Regular audit training would empower members to take a more proactive approach. Sustained and regular finance training for all members would also be beneficial given the collective nature of decision-making. This would ensure all members come from a position of being informed around council finance and can engage in meaningful annual budget setting discussions for instance, as well as robustly appraise finance around any major projects. Over the past five years, five councillors have attended the LGA's Leadership Academy and eight have attended additional leadership training on areas such as transformation, finance, health, and audit.

While officers effectively communicate with the administration, engagement with opposition political groups could be improved. Opposition group members are crucial to a healthy local democracy and can make a significant contribution to ensuring

effective local accountability, good governance, sound policies and finances, and have been elected to represent the residents in their local ward. Opposition members told the peer team they were frustrated with the lack of responsiveness and transparency, in particular the way they receive support through formal channels such as the Councillor Enquiry Service as well as updates. The peer team heard:

*“You cannot ask for advice as to what is possible, you have to submit a petition only to be told nothing can/will happen which wastes time and energy. We have the Councillor Enquiry Service to report through, but you do not get any information back as to works complete. When I report a case to officers I get no response, so turn to the lead member who does not reply to emails.”*

The peer team also heard that the constitution currently states that nine elected members or residents of the borough can call in any decision from the strategic committee or neighbourhood committee, although there are only six opposition councillors. The peer team would suggest the council review this.

Neighbourhood committees have evolved since their inception, yet it may be timely to review their current purpose and effectiveness to ensure they continue to meet community and organisational needs. Residents that the peer team spoke to say the neighbourhood committee model was not well known in communities and was perceived as too formal and structured for meaningful community engagement.

Internal Audit is delivered through a shared service arrangement, though the peer team heard that there was some uncertainty about whether this model provides sufficient assurance around audit controls and risk management.

The council has reasonable governance and risk management arrangements, as evidenced by the Annual Governance Statement and Local Code of Corporate Governance making the organisation. The peer team were told the council is “*a safe space of check and challenge.*” A recent overhaul of the Corporate Risk Register has improved clarity through RAG ratings and direction of travel indicators. However, the

reduction in listed risks from 20 to 10 has prompted mixed views about whether the register fully reflects the council's risk landscape, particularly with the exclusion of issues such as temporary accommodation. The Audit Committee has expressed concern that they may not be seeing enough detail. A procurement dashboard has been developed and shows potential to evolve into a comprehensive corporate contract performance tool, including for shared services. Customers are actively involved in procurement processes.

The “golden thread” linking corporate to team plans was clearly evident when the peer team spoke to staff in adult services. However when the peer team spoke to officers in other teams across the council, there was uncertainty. While a recent staff survey found that 85 per cent of council officers stated they understand how their role contributes, the peer team did not get a sense that all the officers they spoke to, were clear about the linkages. The council has robust governance structures for performance and risk, including a Corporate Performance/Risk Board and the use of benchmarking tools such as LG Inform. There are currently 57 KPIs aligned with sector benchmarks, and a consolidated Corporate Risk Register supported by departmental registers.

The external audit for the year ending 31 March 2025 identified no significant weaknesses in the council's arrangements for ensuring value for money. While governance, internal control, and risk management arrangements are generally sound, areas for improvement include property valuation and the sustainability of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), both of which are critical to long-term financial viability and effective service delivery.

Residents that the peer team spoke to raised that it is not always clear to them how to access council services. While there is an ambition to move all customer contact online, this raises issues around digital exclusion. Particular attention is needed to ensure accessibility for residents who are not digitally connected or who have

disabilities, such as visual impairments, which hinder their ability to use online forms.

#### **5.4 Financial planning and management**

The council demonstrates a strong foundation of integrated strategic and financial planning, with the Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) aligned to ensure delivery of corporate priorities within a sustainable financial framework. The portfolio holder for finance is well respected with ‘strong financial acumen’ and established a wide range of engagement with members to agree the annual budget.

The council maintains robust financial governance arrangements. The council has a strong discharge of statutory obligations and financial reporting to committee with effective oversight provided by statutory officers. The peer team saw there was a constructive working relationship between the statutory officers: the chief finance officer (section 151), monitoring officer, and head of paid service (chief executive and who was previously the section 151 at Kingston).

The council’s MTFS, Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan, and Treasury Management Strategy, all incorporate risk recognition and mitigation. These frameworks are supported by external audit assurance. Financial performance is monitored and reported to members on a regular and timely basis, with formal reporting at key intervals (months 4, 6, 9, and 12). This enables early identification of variances and supports effective in-year financial management.

The council is actively managing significant revenue budget pressures, with a forecast overspend of £3.2 million in 2023/24 and £2 million in 2024/25. Further financial risks are anticipated in 2025/26, requiring continued vigilance and responsive financial planning. The council’s financial statements for 2023/24 were signed off two weeks after backstop date of 28 February but this was not considered significant.

Kingston’s recognises that it has a low level of reserves that are declining, in the

context of a projected £31 million budget gap over the MTFS period. The impact of the Department for Education's (DfE) Safety Valve Agreement ending in the 2025/26, increasing levels of debt and an increase in temporary accommodation costs will put further pressure on Kingston's finances.

It is therefore essential that the projected savings and efficiencies set out in the MTFS as part of the council's transformation programme are delivered with careful and close performance management, to avoid putting further pressure on the council's already declining reserves.

Kingston's SEND Futures Plan sets out how the council will manage SEND provision after the Safety Valve Agreement concludes. There is a need for the council to have continued grip and control over expenditure and a focus on financial resilience.

The peer team supports the council's intention to improve the in-house financial capacity, particularly in relation to the HRA Business Plan, to ensure long-term sustainability and responsiveness.

The peer team observed that the shared service arrangement was having an impact on financial services delivery with the use of interims to provide stability where there were vacancies. There is an opportunity to review the shared financial services arrangement to evaluate its ongoing value for money and effectiveness.

The council should continue to ensure that financial planning is embedded across all service areas and governance structures, with a particular focus on aligning financial and operational planning to deliver value for money and improved outcomes for residents.

## **5.5 Capacity for improvement**

The council's transformation plan is well-structured and benefits from strong senior leadership sponsorship. However, wider staff awareness and engagement remain limited. The 'Stronger Together' approach presents a valuable opportunity to

enhance internal communication and involvement in the council's transformation.

While the transformation plan is evidence-based and outlines cost-reduction strategies, its alignment with the Corporate Plan requires further strengthening. Currently, there is insufficient clarity on how corporate priorities have shaped transformation objectives.

Targets and milestones within the plan lack specificity, which may hinder effective tracking and accountability. Further strengthening the connection between the transformation plan, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), and the budget-setting process would improve transparency and impact.

All transformation initiatives are underpinned by business cases, with progress monitored and reported to senior leadership. An annual review process is in place, which goes through all relevant committees and to full council as part of the annual budget setting process, but it was not clear to the peer team whether this is fully understood across the council.

The Change and Transformation Team demonstrate strong motivation and a collaborative, customer-focused approach. Resident engagement is a clear strength, as seen in the development of the new repairs and maintenance contract.

Recruitment challenges persist in some service areas, and many teams are operating with minimal capacity. This limits their ability to engage in efficiency improvements, as operational demands take precedence. Addressing workforce capacity is critical to enabling transformation at scale. Staff told the peer team they are already using the "travel time" they save by working from home to work longer hours.

The use of data to inform transformation is increasing. A positive example includes the use of customer service data, indicating a shift from basic data collection to more sophisticated, insight-driven decision-making. This evolution supports more targeted

and effective interventions. The council is looking at ways to adopt artificial intelligence (AI) to support day to day activities and the peer team heard from a number of staff about tools like Magic Notes, which was described as a '*game changer*' for social workers. The council has also introduced "Capturi in our Puzzel" a customer case management system, which uses AI to analyse transcriptions of calls. However apart from Magic Notes, the peer team heard limited examples about how these tools are working in practice and are having an impact on service delivery.

There are positive examples of the staff networks making a valid contribution in areas of the council e.g. the multi-ethnic network helped design unconscious bias training, the carers network connected with other staff in similar caring positions to share issues and provide support. However, there are untapped opportunities to engage staff more deeply in the transformation journey through existing staff networks. The peer team were told: "*SLT Members and elected members engage and positively support staff networks. However, there is a lack of middle-manager buy in and understanding of the networks. Team managers could be encouraged to support their staff to more consistently engage. Staff attendance at networks is inconsistently applied as middle managers have different views on allowing the time off to attend meaning full potential of staff engaging in the networks isn't optimised.*" Staff networks told the peer team they are keen to be engaged with co-designing more policies at an early stage and with more notice to ensure a better outcome.

The peer team consistently heard from staff at all levels that Kingston's enabling shared services shared with neighbouring councils such as finance, human resources, internal audit and legal were not consistently meeting the quality or responsiveness required to support the pace and scale of transformation expected. Staff who work for the 'host' council described how their capacity is often stretched across a number of boroughs. The shared arrangements have resulted in "*less staff but more work*" and that they have to '*juggle expectations of the shared partners authority - it is always a balancing act to deliver change versus operational delivery.*'

29

Filling vacancies in shared services can also be a challenge often resulting in using more costly agency staff. On the other side, staff who are 'customers' of the internal enabling services told the peer team about long response times from legal (hosted by a neighbouring authority) impacting on timescale for delivery in their services. It was unclear to the peer team how the council tracks performance and sources feedback from staff who are users across all of the shared services, both for those services that the council hosts, and those it receives as a shared partner. This presents a barrier to effective service delivery and fully understanding the benefits to the organisations both in terms of cashable savings and non-cashable efficiency savings.

It was clear to the peer team that the council is ambitious, and that both officers and members are keen to make transformation change: *"There's a change towards a language of collaboration and exploring what the art of the possible is and giving things a try"*. Another said: *"There is a renewed energy about trying new things and seeing how they land"*. As a result, the council has developed a large number of strategies and plans, each with multiple priorities and actions. While this reflects the council's ambition, the peer team heard limited shared understanding among staff of how these strategies interconnect or how individual roles contribute to delivering them. Staff have expressed the need for greater clarity around which priorities should be considered "prioritised" in the context of constrained resources, while maintaining the council's ambition. The peer team heard: *"Our financial constraints mean we need to be more concise about what our key priorities are."* Heads of service also told the peer team they were unclear how the transformation plan fits in with individual service transformation plans and what milestones link with the MTFs. One member of staff told the peer team: *"We are big on ambition but not so good on delivering."* Inconsistent language and a lack of alignment have contributed to confusion. While the majority of staff members are highly engaged and clear on how their role contributes to the council's priorities, there is a clear opportunity to engage staff in developing a stronger understanding of the "golden thread" that links their

### 30

18 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ [www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk) Telephone 020 7664 3000 Email [info@local.gov.uk](mailto:info@local.gov.uk)

Local Government Association company number 11177145 Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government company number 03675577

**Chair:** Councillor Louise Gittins

**Chief Executive:** Joanna Killian

**President:** Baroness Grey-Thompson

work to the overarching Council Plan.

A positive culture of learning from good practice outside of Kingston is emerging, and there is scope to expand the use of an “test and learn” approach, particularly in the area of prevention. The council has adopted an “explore and action” approach to making improvements in the contact centre, a model which could be rolled out to address other complex challenges across the council.

The council’s 2023–2027 People Strategy is well-regarded, with notable achievements in apprenticeships, mentoring, and learning and development. This strong performance was recognised nationally with an Excellence in People Management Award in April 2025, awarded by the Public Services People Managers Association (PPMA). New staff also praised the council for their induction programme. Governance and workforce metrics are robust, with quarterly KPI reporting, low sickness absence (averaging 9 days per employee), a staff turnover rate of 12 per cent, and effective equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) monitoring. The staff survey achieved a 54 per cent response rate which is above the average local government employee survey which typically falls between 30 and 50 per cent. Internal processes and systems were frequently described by staff as “*cumbersome and inefficient*” often hindering rather than enabling service delivery. There is widespread recognition of the need for change, and a growing sense of urgency to accelerate and embed transformation across the organisation. A full-scale review was launched shortly before the peer team were on site which aims to streamline processes and systems. Aligning and streamlining plans and programmes will be essential to maximising impact and reducing duplication.

Staff across all levels shared mixed views on the council’s approach to flexible and hybrid working. The council does not set a requirement to work a specific number of days in the office. Staff can work from various locations, including home, supported by Google technology. While many staff appreciate this flexibility, some managers

find it difficult to encourage staff to come into the office. One member of staff told the peer team: *“I’ve worked here for 1.5 years and haven’t met some team members in person because our office days don’t align.”* There were also concerns about inconsistent application of the flexible working policy with some teams using it regularly and with ease, while others feel restricted or discouraged from doing so.

The council plans to relocate to the Grade II listed Guildhall, which will be extended and refurbished—an initiative expected to save £1.5 million. Until the refurbishment is complete, staff will continue working from Guildhall2. Once the move is finalised, both Guildhall1 (already vacated) and Guildhall2 will be sold. This transition presents an opportunity to rethink how office space and technology are used to foster collaboration, improve efficiency, and break down silos across services. However, during the interim, it is important to ensure Guildhall2 remains a suitable and adequately maintained work environment to maintain staff morale and productivity.

Resilience and emergency planning must be embedded as a shared responsibility across all levels of the organisation, ensuring preparedness is not siloed but integrated into everyday operations and is part of everyone’s business.

## 6. Next steps

It is recognised that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council. Following publication of CPC report you need to produce and publish an Action Plan within 5 months of the time on site, no later than 5 November 2025. As part of the CPC, the council are also required to have a progress review and publish the findings from this within twelve months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on their website.

The progress review will provide space for a council’s senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC’s recommendations, discuss



early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day.

The date for the progress review at RB Kingston is to be confirmed. The LGA recognises that London elections are taking place in May 2026 and therefore this will need to be taken into account when agreeing appropriate timing.

In the meantime, Mona Sehgal, Principal Adviser for London, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. As outlined above, Mona is available to discuss any further support the council requires.

[mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk](mailto:mona.sehgal@local.gov.uk).