

KITCHENER'S STRATEGIC PLAN CHECK-IN:

Insights and Adjustments at the Midway Mark

Prepared by:

Helen Kerr

Co-President, KerrSmith Design

**Kerr
Smith**

Margaret Love

Director, Strategy and Corporate Performance, City of Kitchener



FINAL REPORT

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Executive Summary

This midway check-in confirms that Kitchener's current strategic plan remains a solid foundation for meeting evolving community needs. While a full-scale revision of the strategic plan is not necessary, a series of focused and deliberate updates will enhance responsiveness to pressing challenges such as housing affordability, economic resilience, and social wellbeing. Key themes identified through the check-in process include:

- **Economic growth, resiliency and prosperity**, with emphasis on supporting local enterprise, workforce development, downtown renewal, and cultural opportunities
- **Housing accessibility and affordability**, including tenant protections and diverse, inclusive housing options
- **Social resilience**, especially in support of youth, vulnerable groups, intergenerational and culturally inclusive communities
- **Public health and wellbeing**, spanning health access, senior services, and quality of life and wellbeing
- **Sustainable development**, balancing growth with climate action, green infrastructure, and economic/affordability considerations
- **Responsible innovation**, ensuring responsible adoption of emerging technologies while ensuring cost-effective service delivery

The table on the following page provides an overview of the strategic plan check-in process, including key insights and outcomes. These insights will be discussed further in this report.

The City is responding to the check-in themes through a pragmatic mix of continued investment in existing initiatives and new strategic additions. These include a scoped refresh of Make It Kitchener 2.0 to support economic resiliency, and the implementation of a Downtown Safety & Security Action Plan. While two existing initiatives are being removed, resources will be reallocated to higher-priority work. A refined approach to strategic plan indicators will improve transparency and outcome-based reporting. Additional actions will be taken outside of the plan to explore emerging themes and opportunities, including social resilience and operational effectiveness/efficiency. These adjustments reinforce the City's adaptive mindset and commitment to community-focused governance.

The insights gathered throughout the check-in process will inform a more streamlined and adaptive approach to developing the 2027–2030 Strategic Plan, building on our current direction rather than starting from scratch.

Table i. Snapshot of Strategic Plan Check-in Process – Insights and Outcomes

| | Connected city | Green city | Economically-thriving city | Caring city | Better city |
|--|--|---|---|---|--|
| Goal statements | We live in all kinds of neighbourhoods and types of housing. We work together to ensure that we each have secure and affordable homes. We get around easily, sustainably and safely to the places and spaces that matter most to us. | We follow a sustainable path to a greener, healthier city. We work together to enhance and protect our parks and natural environment while transitioning to a low-carbon future. We support businesses and residents to make more climate-positive choices. | We use our collective strengths to grow an agile and diverse local economy powered by talented entrepreneurs, workers and artists. We work together to create opportunities for everyone and a resilient future that propels our city forward. | We welcome residents of all ages, backgrounds and lived experiences. We work together on the decisions that matter to us and have a meaningful influence in our community. We're healthy and thriving as we easily access the diverse and inclusive programs and services we need to succeed. | We, the City's employees, are stewards of Kitchener's present and its future. We're responsive, innovative, diverse and accountable public servants who work together efficiently to serve residents. We remove barriers and champion residents' collective vision for a better city and a better world. |
| What we heard – challenges and opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affordable, secure housing Diverse, inclusive options Tenant rights, support Cooperative, multi-generational living | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balanced growth Climate resilience planning Green infrastructure action Prioritize existing environmental commitments Inclusive accessibility More parks and protection of natural areas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic resilience and growth Proactive policy adaptation Urban and cultural renewal Local business support and business attraction Workforce skills strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social inclusion efforts Civic trust building Support for vulnerable groups Culturally inclusive communities Faith-based supports/services Respond to aging population Prioritize wellbeing and quality of life | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsible tech adoption Ethical AI governance Equitable digital access |
| Existing strategic plan initiatives addressing challenges and opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing for All Strategy (next iteration) Kitchener 2051 - Official Plan Review | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parks and Tree Canopy (four initiatives) Clean Energy Strategy Corporate Climate Action Plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pitch Kitchener Accelerating Commercial Business Approvals Health Innovation Campus Creative Industries School Events, Festivals, Arts and Culture (3 initiatives) Municipal Newcomer Strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Municipal Newcomer Strategy Enhance city's engagement practices Community centre operating model Community grants review | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital Kitchener Strategy City-wide Data Strategy |
| Adjustments to existing strategic initiatives | None | None | None | Removal of: (1) Sport and Recreation Master Plan and (2) City-led Recreation & Leisure Program Review | The Innovation Lab will prioritize projects that drive cost-effective and efficient city service delivery as part of the Digital Kitchener Strategy. |
| New strategic plan initiatives | None | None | Addition of: (1) Make It Kitchener 2.0 Scoped Refresh – Supporting Economic Resiliency and (2) Downtown Safety & Security Action Plan | None | None |
| Actions being taken outside of the plan | None | None | Kitchener's 2026 Budget focuses on affordability, with no new funding for expanded services or staffing | Exploration of opportunities related to 'social resilience' in collaboration with academic partners | Expanding Lean program to drive efficiencies in the delivery of core services |
| Key indicator insights | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anticipate meeting housing target Close to intensification target Increase in transportation injuries 6 new indicators being added to enhance reporting on housing and trails | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corporate greenhouse gas emissions reduced from -4% in 2023 to -6% in 2024 (target by 2026 is -8%) Modest decrease in local park area/person 1 new indicator being added | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unemployment rate rose from 6.6% to 8.2% in 2024 Four other indicators showed modest gains (1-3%): business start-up and retention, event visitation rates, employment rate, and labour force participation 1 indicator removed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase in the number of older adult-focused programs Rate of diverse populations participating in programs approx. 20-23% 2 new indicators being added | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant increase in customer satisfaction with ease of accessing city services Positive movement in staff turnover, time to fill positions 1 new indicator being added |

1. Introduction

1.1 Why we're checking in on the Strategic Plan

As part of the adoption of the City’s 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, staff made a commitment to check-in at the midway mark to ensure that the plan remains responsive to a rapidly changing world around us and aligned with the needs of the Kitchener community. This process allowed staff to evaluate progress on the implementation the first 30 actions, identify emerging trends, opportunities, and challenges since approval of the plan, and determine if there are any gaps in our strategic plan that require additional adjustments. By proactively adapting to change and refining our priorities, we can strengthen our commitment to effective governance and ensure our strategic plan continues to drive positive outcomes for the city.

1.2 Description of the Check-In Process

1.2.1 Using a strategic foresight lens

Strategic foresight involves a systematic analysis of the driving forces of change, allowing us to anticipate and prepare for future challenges and opportunities. Continuing the approach that was supported during the development of the strategic plan, the City hired a strategic foresight consultant to ensure that our strategic plan remains adaptable and future-ready in the face of a rapidly evolving world. By incorporating this forward-thinking approach into our midway check-in process on the strategic plan, we aimed to assess whether adjustments are needed to keep our plan relevant and effective. Foresight activities generate explicit, contestable, and flexible interpretations of the future, enabling better preparedness and positioning us to find solutions and responses that lead to positive outcomes. Through new imagery of the future, we can reveal and test assumptions about our understanding of the world, ensuring our governance remains proactive rather than reactive. This consultant’s expertise helped us evaluate opportunities and refine our strategic plan and reinforce our commitment to sustainable, community-focused decision-making.

1.2.2 Check-in approach

The strategic plan midway check-in focused on validating the relevance of our goals and identifying any emerging trends or challenges that may not be adequately addressed. Staff prioritized a meaningful midway review through a focused engagement approach. Given that more extensive community consultation is planned for 2026 during the next iteration of the strategic plan, staff aimed to avoid engagement fatigue while still ensuring the plan remains responsive to evolving needs. As such, staff leveraged existing data through a variety of survey sources, listened through other strategic consultations, conducted councillor interviews and held four strategic foresight-focused workshops.

1.2.3 Central questions guiding the midway check-in process

The central questions that staff explored as part of the midway check-in were:

- How are we doing on our implementation of the first 30 actions?
- What has changed since the plan was adopted in August 2023?
- Are there any emerging community needs that aren’t addressed in the current set of strategic plan actions?

- Are there emerging issues or changes in the operating environment we should be anticipating, or preparing for?
- Should adjustments be made to any existing actions or are any new actions needed?

These questions ensured feedback was comprehensive, timely, and locally specific, while maintaining a longer-term outlook.

1.2.4 Methodology

Kitchener Strategic Plan Mid-Way Check In

Our Approach

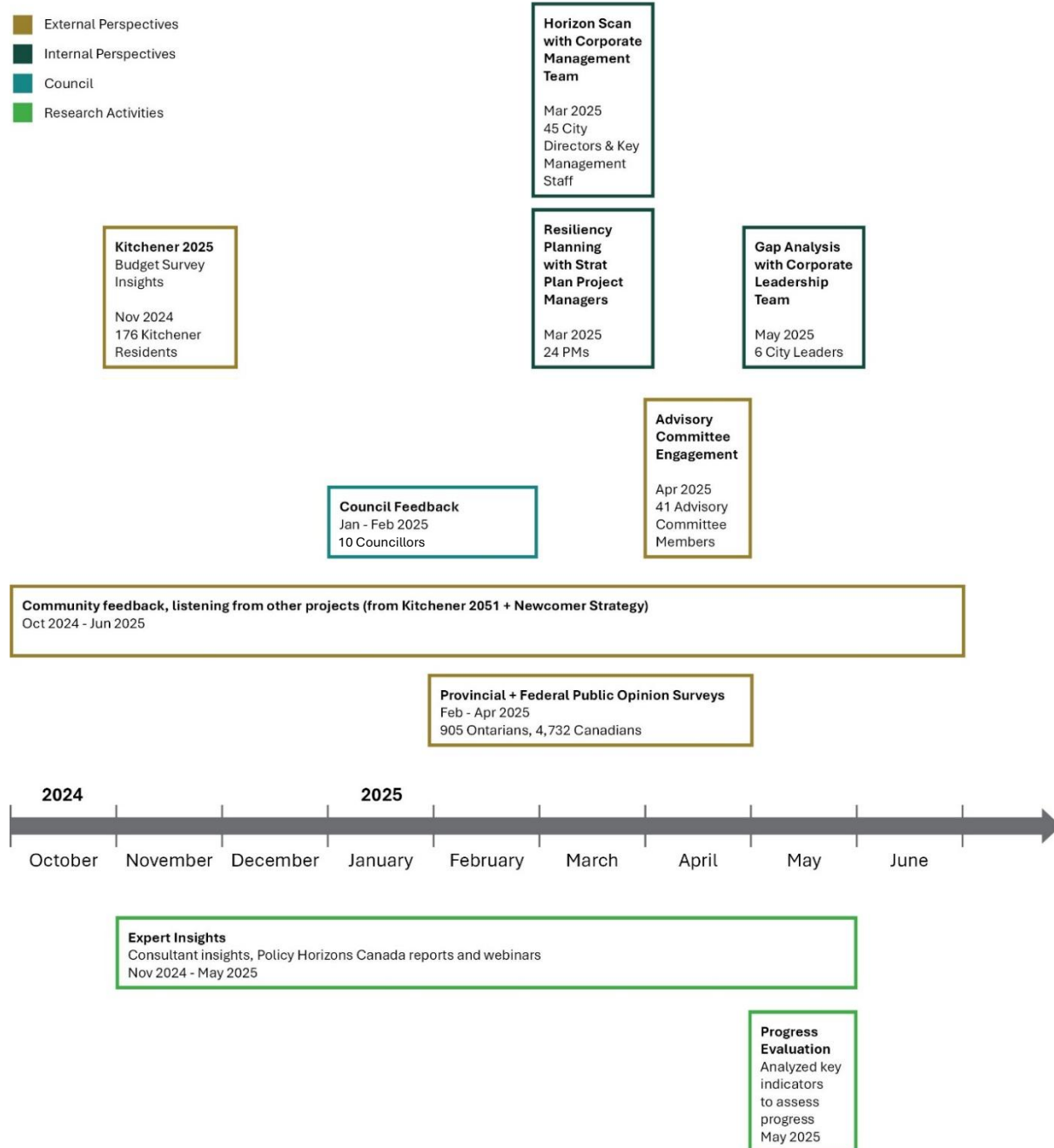


Figure 1. Strategic Plan Check-in Approach

To ensure a well-rounded and informed strategic plan check-in process, this approach integrated diverse perspectives from internal teams, external stakeholders, and expert insights. The methodology emphasizes engagement, data analysis, and foresight to guide decision-making and measure progress effectively.

2. Progress on the current strategic plan

2.1 Snapshot of Progress

A snapshot of the City’s strategic plan progress is shown in the table, below.

Table 1. Strategic Plan Progress Snapshot

| Year | Continuing Initiatives (Prev. Year) | New Initiatives (Original Plan) | New Initiatives (Midway Check-in) | Total In-Progress | Completed | Continuing (Next Year) | Delayed |
|------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 2023 | N/A | 13 | N/A | 13 | 0 | 13 | 0 |
| 2024 | 13 | 10 | N/A | 23 | 2 | 21 | 2 |
| 2025 | 21 | 6* | 2 | 29 | 1 to-date; 7 additional anticipated** | 21 | 0 as-of the completion of this report |
| 2026 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 21 | 21 anticipated | 0 | 0 anticipated |

Notes:

*Of the 7 remaining initiatives set to start in 2025, one is recommended for removal from the strategic plan before its start-date in Sept 2025.

**While 8 additional initiatives were anticipated to be completed by the end of 2025, one is being recommended for removal from the strategic plan.

The observations below illustrate how the City has maintained disciplined execution while remaining responsive to evolving priorities:

- Since the plan’s approval in August 2023, the City has demonstrated a disciplined and phased approach to implementation.
- The rollout of initiatives reflects a deliberate balance between workload and capacity.
- The initial years focused on building momentum, with the plan reaching operational maturity in 2025.
- Ongoing, multi-year initiatives underscore the plan’s deliberate and strategic design – over half of the initiatives are complex, long-term efforts intentionally structured to deliver phased outcomes over time.
- Delays have been minimal - only two.
- The addition of two new initiatives and the removal of two initiatives during the 2025 midway check-in – both of which are described further in this report - demonstrates the City’s ability to adapt and refine its strategy based on evolving opportunities and challenges —without disrupting overall progress of the remaining initiatives.

- The 2026 outlook is focused entirely on completing existing work, with no new initiatives planned to start in 2026. This signals a disciplined close-out phase and a commitment to delivering tangible results before embarking on a new strategic planning cycle.

2.2 Progress Indicators/Measures of Success

In September 2024, the City introduced its first set of strategic plan indicators to enhance transparency and communicate progress toward achieving the five strategic goals outlined in the plan. These indicators are available at kitchener.ca/ourplanprogress. The following summarizes the most notable highlights from implementation to date:

- Of the 27 strategic indicators, 7 cannot currently be measured or reported due to various limitations—such as lack of historical data, infrequent data collection cycles, tracking not yet initiated, or the need for more time to gather and analyze results. Of the remaining indicators, 8 are trending in a negative direction, 11 are showing positive movement, and 1 has remained unchanged but continues to reflect a positive outcome.
- While data is being tracked for the majority of indicators, assessing progress remains challenging as targets are still under development for approximately 50% of them.
- The City anticipates meeting its annual housing target, though final counts are still pending.
- Although there has been a decline in residential development within built-up areas between 2023 and 2024, the City is just 3% below its 60% intensification target.
- While the unemployment rate rose from 6.6% in 2023 to 8.2% in 2024, four other economic indicators showed modest gains (1–3%): business start-up and retention activity, event visitation rates, employment rate, and labour force participation.
- The number of older adult-focused programs offered across City neighbourhoods increased by approximately 26% between winter/spring 2024 and winter/spring 2025.
- Customer satisfaction with ease of accessing City services rose significantly - from 59% in 2023 to 82% in 2024.
- The permanent staff turnover rate decreased by approximately 22.5%, and the time to fill full-time permanent positions dropped by 15.5% between 2023 and 2024.

3. What was heard/learned through the check-in process

3.1 Expert Insights

Resilient preparation for the future requires consideration of emerging issues that may impact the governance and operations of cities like Kitchener. Exposure to concurrent risks have the potential to disrupt city management. By regularly monitoring these transitions and considering their potential significance for city wide responsibilities, Kitchener will position itself to be more economically tenacious and socially adaptable. Some key issues to consider over the remainder of the strategic plan period include the following:



Localized impacts of global geopolitical unrest

- Conflicts between rival states are erupting worldwide and increasingly are carried into the Canadian context.
- Protests regarding gov't involvement
- Fears of war, border protection escalate, immigration support shifts.

Relevance for Kitchener:

- Increased public safety measures and costs
- Increased demand for law and order
- Impact on public mental health
- Tensions over freedom of speech



Agentic AI and the spread of advanced technology

- Cities are using automated digital service delivery and improving systems such as traffic, water use, energy management and crime prediction. Concentration of foreign tech influence is a risk.

Relevance for Kitchener:

- Reduced costs for many services
- Exposure to cyber crime, more secure digital infrastructure required
- User data privacy and protection
- Adaptation of City resourcing/roles



Increase in severe weather events and climate impacts

- Storms, flooding, extreme heat will affect populations and infrastructure.
- Higher insurance costs, road closures, building repairs.
- Staff may not be performing well or have more absences due to strain

Relevance for Kitchener:

- More structural maintenance costs
- Procurement of knowledgeable and affordable contractors is difficult
- Canopy at risk and public health benefits of nature affected



Perception of Over-governance

- Erosion of public trust
- Demand for streamlined and efficient gov't services globally
- Budgetary alignment with reduced taxes

Relevance for Kitchener:

- Potential workforce reductions while specialized requirements for tech expertise rise
- Human resources will be strained
- Transparent reporting is critical



Affordability and supply chain disruptions

- Tariffs, global trade shifts
- Job losses in affected industries
- Income growth not keeping pace with cost-of-living increases

Relevance for Kitchener:

- Increased costs for supplies, delays in repairs and new builds
- Buy Canadian approach may complicate procurement and impact timing



Public Health strain, more infectious disease outbreaks

- Less provincial monitoring and increased vaccine hesitancy impacts disease management
- Addiction and mental health requires attention. Workforce burnout is high

Relevance for Kitchener:

- Public health issues intersect with provincial health stresses.
- Vulnerable populations especially at risk. Threat to social fabric requires attention.

3.2 Top 5 themes from midway check-in feedback

The key themes identified through interviews, surveys, workshops, and insights from related projects are summarized below. Notably, the economy and housing consistently ranked among the top five themes across all engagement methods, while other themes appeared prominently in several, but not all, sources.

The top 5 themes should not be read as a set of new strategic priorities for the City - there is strong alignment between the top themes and the City's current strategic plan, reinforcing the relevance and responsiveness of the current plan. While most challenges and opportunities align with ongoing priorities, a few emerging or evolving areas – particularly new economic pressures and the growing importance of social resilience – have surfaced as key considerations for deeper exploration.

Table 2. Top 5 themes from check-in process in order of priority

| Top 5 Themes | Key insights | |
|--|--|--|
| <p>1</p> <p>Economic Growth, Resiliency and Prosperity</p> | <p>Goal Alignment: Creating an economically thriving city together</p> | <p>Overview: Reinforce strategic focus on business development and business outreach and supports for local enterprise, especially small businesses</p> |
| <p>2</p> <p>Housing Accessibility and Affordability</p> | <p>Goal Alignment: Building a connected city together</p> | <p>Overview: Improvements made but more required</p> |
| | <p>Challenges and Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening economic resilience through cost control, job creation, and diversified industry growth • Adapting to shifting political and global landscapes with proactive policies and education • Revitalizing urban life by investing in downtown development and city-wide cultural opportunities • Supporting local businesses and attracting new businesses via improved infrastructure, supply chain solutions, and tailored support • Future-proofing the workforce through skills development and talent retention | |
| | <p>Challenges and Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving housing affordability and access to address homelessness and insecurity • Creating diverse and inclusive housing options that reflect evolving community needs • Enhancing tenant protections and supportive housing services • Fostering community through multi-generational and cooperative living | |

| Top 5 Themes | Key insights | |
|--|--|---|
| <p>3</p> <p>Social Resilience</p> | <p>Goal Alignment: Fostering a caring city together</p> | <p>Overview: Incorporate enablers of belonging, wellbeing and cohesion, and leverage partnerships to build connections and support for social good</p> |
| <p>4a</p> <p>Public health and wellbeing (tied with 4b)</p> | <p>Goal Alignment: Fostering a caring city</p> | <p>Overview: Large multi-layered concern (Federal, Provincial, Regional, Local)</p> |
| <p>Challenges and Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening social cohesion and inclusion to counter isolation, racism, and polarization • Building trust in government institutions and civic life through participation and transparency • Supporting vulnerable groups, especially disengaged youth and socially isolated individuals • Promoting intergenerational and culturally inclusive communities • Leveraging existing faith-based supports and services to foster connection, belonging and well-being | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responding to an aging population with increased senior support • Prioritizing quality of life and wellbeing for a healthier, more productive community • Expanding access to inclusive healthcare and mental health services* • Addressing healthcare workforce shortages and improving system capacity* <p><i>*While these were identified as important challenges in the Region, they fall outside of the scope of the City's direct service delivery mandate and are not within the City's span of control.</i></p> | | |

| Top 5 Themes | Key insights | |
|---|--|---|
| <p>4b</p> <p>Sustainable Development</p> <p>(tied with 4a)</p> | <p>Goal Alignment: Cultivating a green city together</p> | <p>Overview: Urgent need for continued environmental improvements BUT awareness of affordability remains</p> |
| <p>5</p> <p>Responsible Innovation</p> | <p>Goal Alignment: Stewarding a better city together</p> | <p>Overview: Careful integration of new tech required</p> |
| | <p>Challenges and Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advancing sustainable urban development that balances growth, ecological responsibility and economic constraints • Enhancing climate resilience through adaptation, green infrastructure, and clean energy • Prioritizing environmental commitments and expanding parks and biodiversity • Improving citywide accessibility for inclusive, livable communities • Navigating resource and energy instability while integrating environmental stewardship into economic planning | |
| | <p>Challenges and Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging and responsibly integrating emerging technologies like AI and cybersecurity, while keeping pace with rapid digital advancements • Ensuring ethical use and governance of technologies like AI and cybersecurity • Boosting digital literacy for equitable access and community inclusion • Balancing innovation with cost-effective service delivery | |

While already reflected in the themes above, several specific examples of how staff listened and learned throughout the check-in process are highlighted in more detail below.

3.3 Listening through other community engagement initiatives

As part of the midway check-in, staff have also been listening through two related strategic initiatives – Kitchener 2051 and the Municipal Newcomer Strategy - both of which are actively exploring residents’ vision for the city. While both projects are ongoing, preliminary findings indicate strong alignment with the goals outlined in the City’s strategic plan.

Table 3. What we heard through other projects

| Initiative | Engagement Level | Focus | Key Insights |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|---|---|
| Municipal Newcomer Strategy | 450+ participants | Newcomer experiences and needs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong alignment with broader feedback on employment, small business support, housing, and belonging • Other themes are newcomer-specific and will be addressed in the strategy |
| Kitchener 2051 | 1,600+ participants | Long-term vision for city growth and resilience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified 5 shared community values that had strong alignment with broader feedback: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Affordability ○ Access and Inclusion ○ Thoughtful and Resilient Growth ○ Safe and Sustainable Mobility ○ Mutual Care and Belonging |

3.4 City of Kitchener 2025 Budget Survey

In fall 2024, the City launched a public budget survey to gauge satisfaction with investments in its five strategic goal areas and identify priorities for future funding. Key findings follow.

Table 4. City of Kitchener 2025 Budget Survey

| Insight Area | Key Findings |
|----------------------|---|
| Goal areas | Relatively equal importance across all goal areas in terms of new investments |
| Satisfaction Levels | Satisfaction with current investments across four goal areas ranged from 42% to 55%; lowest for “Stewarding a Better City Together” (34%) |
| Strategic Priorities | Housing & homelessness, the economy, and accessibility were identified as top priorities |

Public Feedback

Mixed views on bike infrastructure; calls for better transit, tax restraint, and focus on core services and finding efficiencies

4. Existing strategic plan initiatives addressing feedback from the midway check-in

The feedback gathered through the strategic plan check-in affirms that the city is on the right track – there is strong alignment between the community’s current priorities, as articulated in the City’s current strategic plan, and the initiatives already underway. Notably, the economy emerged as the top priority, reflecting both its importance to residents and the broader uncertainty driven by global and geopolitical factors. Housing accessibility and affordability followed closely, underscoring the urgency of addressing local needs in a rapidly changing environment.

The existing strategic plan includes a robust set of initiatives that directly support these priorities. The table below highlights key initiatives already in motion that are well-positioned to address many of the community’s most pressing concerns and continue to guide our work moving forward.

Table 5: Existing Strategic Initiatives Supporting Feedback from the Midway Check-in

| Focus Area | Current Initiative(s) | Description |
|--|---|---|
| Economic Growth, Resilience and Prosperity | <i>Pitch Kitchener</i> | Supports innovative procurement with local start-ups. |
| | <i>Accelerating Commercial Business Approvals</i> | Implementation of 55 improvements to streamline approvals and help businesses open faster is underway. |
| | <i>Health Innovation Campus (UW) & Creative Industries School (Conestoga)</i> | Two strategic collaborations to support innovation, education, and economic development. |
| | <i>Events, Festivals, Arts & Culture Initiatives</i> | Three strategic initiatives underway as part of the city’s strategic plan to enhance vibrancy, tourism, and investment. |
| | <i>Municipal Newcomer Strategy</i> | Includes a strategic focus on economic prosperity for newcomers, including employment and small business support. |
| Housing Accessibility and Affordability | <i>Housing for All Strategy</i> | 44 objectives have been achieved or substantially achieved. A new Housing Needs Assessment is underway to inform Kitchener 2051 (Official Plan). A refreshed Housing for All work plan is in development. |

| Focus Area | Current Initiative(s) | Description |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| | <i>Official Plan Review (Kitchener 2051)</i> | Explores how the city should grow, move, adapt, and thrive over the coming decades, and provides insights to guide future housing policies. |
| Social Resilience | <i>Municipal Newcomer Strategy</i> | Focuses on welcoming newcomers to Canada, including identifying needed supports related to economic prosperity, cultural inclusion, and active community participation |
| | <i>Enhance the City's engagement practices</i> | Explores ways to enhance engagement practices to increase diverse representation, with a focus on more deliberate and collaboration approaches as well as ongoing relationship-building with equity deserving communities |
| | <i>Community centre operating model</i> | Streamline community centre operations to expand and diversify programs and other supports —especially in under-served neighbourhoods. |
| | <i>Community grants review</i> | Explore how the City utilizes its community grant program to better support community groups working on priorities that are aligned with the City's Strategic Plan. |
| Sustainable Development | <i>Parks & Tree Canopy Initiatives</i> | There are currently four strategic plan initiatives focused on enhancing green space and urban canopy across the city. |
| | <i>Clean Energy Transition Strategy</i> | Supports the shift to renewable energy and low-carbon systems. |
| | <i>Corporate Climate Action Plan 2.0</i> | Guiding the City's internal climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. |
| Responsible Innovation | <i>Digital Kitchener Strategy</i> | Aims to enhance digital service delivery, improve connectivity, and support digital equity across the community. |
| | <i>City-wide Data Strategy</i> | Focuses on improving data governance, accessibility, and analytics to support evidence-based decision-making and transparency. |
| | <i>Procurement Innovation</i> | Supports innovative procurement with local start-ups. |

Note: Public Health and Wellbeing is not explicitly listed as a theme aligning with the current strategic plan in the table above, as it is a cross-cutting priority supported by multiple strategic plan

goal areas. The majority of feedback related to this theme centred on issues such as healthcare workforce shortages and inclusive access to primary and mental healthcare – areas that fall outside of the City’s direct service mandate. However, the strategic plan is expected to contribute positively to community health and wellbeing through numerous initiatives that enhance inclusion, social connection, sustainable development, and housing.

5. Opportunities to respond to the midway check-in feedback

Building on insights gathered throughout the internal and external midway check-in engagement, potential areas for improvement to the plan were noted. As a follow-up, a more focused and detailed gap analysis was undertaken. Through this process, several strategic opportunities were identified to respond to the most pressing challenges facing the city, to ensure the current plan remains responsive and results-driven.

SHARPENING ECONOMIC FOCUS

- Renewed focus on core priorities of business attraction and providing business outreach and support to local enterprises.
- Support revitalization of the downtown.

SOCIAL RESILIENCE

- Explore additional areas within the theme of social resilience that are within the City’s service mandate, including the valuable contributions of faith-based organizations and identifying opportunities to collaborate or complement rather than duplicate.

MEASURING AND COMMUNICATING PROGRESS

- Make improvements to how progress on the strategic plan is tracked and shared with the community to increase transparency, accountability and trust.

OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCIES

- Identify ways to reduce municipal spending through innovation and operational efficiencies.

Section 6 of this report outlines a series of recommended actions based on these opportunities, including adjustments to the strategic plan as well as complementary initiatives that may be pursued outside of it.

6. Recommendations

While no major overhaul is required, several targeted adjustments will help us leverage the identified opportunities in section 5 of this report and deepen our impact.

6.1 Proposed changes to existing strategic plan initiatives

Remove the Sport and Recreation Master Plan (formerly Leisure Facilities Master Plan) and City-led Recreation & Leisure Program Review

The recommendation to remove the Sport and Recreation Master Plan and City-led Recreation and Leisure Program Review from the current strategic plan emerged as a need during the Corporate Leadership Team workshop in May and reflects a pragmatic response to shifting priorities, resource constraints, and external pressures. While the intent behind these bodies of work remains important, competing priorities and a high degree of financial uncertainty make their timely development and implementation unfeasible.

Several factors contribute to this recommendation:

1. Limited funding to implement recommendations of these two reviews in the short and medium-term: The new Kitchener Indoor Recreation Complex (KIRC) is the single largest capital project ever undertaken by the City (\$174M). The City's portion of that budget is funded through debt that will be repaid through development charge revenue collected over the next 10-15 years. The City will not have sufficient funding to implement any new growth-related indoor recreation projects in the short or medium-term as a result of limited development charge funding. For this reason, staff do not believe it would be prudent to conduct these reviews and raise stakeholder expectations.
2. Staff resources re-allocated to preparing to open and operate KIRC next year: Substantial staff resources have been reallocated to support the planning and operational readiness of KIRC over the next 18 months. This includes the two project managers that had previously been assigned to lead the Sport and Recreation Master Plan and the City-led Recreation and Leisure Program Review. In addition, all the senior staff that would be involved in helping to move these two reviews forward are heavily involved in preparing to open KIRC.
3. KIRC will have a significant impact on the City's provision of sport, recreation and leisure programming at many of its other facilities: As the second-largest recreation facility operated by the City, KIRC will introduce a substantial volume of new community programming, which will influence participation patterns and program delivery at other facilities. Given this anticipated shift, it is important to allow time for the City to operate KIRC and assess its broader impacts before undertaking comprehensive reviews. Deferring the Sport and Recreation Master Plan and the City-led Recreation and Leisure Program Review will enable a more informed and strategic approach, grounded in a clearer understanding of evolving user needs and trends.

It is therefore recommended that these two strategic plan initiatives be removed from the current plan and reconsidered as part of the next strategic planning cycle for the next iteration of the plan (2027-2030).

Scope Adjustment: Digital Kitchener Strategy

To reflect current fiscal realities and community priorities, a scope adjustment is recommended for the Digital Kitchener Strategy. As part of the development of the strategy, the Innovation Lab will prioritize initiatives that enhance the cost effectiveness and efficiency of city service delivery. This shift ensures that the City continues to deliver high-quality, accessible services while responding to cost-of-living concerns and maintaining prudent use of public funds.

This adjustment also aligns with the broader goals of the Digital Kitchener Strategy, which is focused on co-creating a digital future with the community. As the City explores emerging technologies—such as AI—to improve equity, sustainability, and service innovation, this refined focus will help ensure that digital investments are both impactful and aligned with what matters most to residents.

Remaining strategic plan initiatives

All remaining strategic plan initiatives will continue as planned and are expected to proceed according to the timelines presented to Council in May 2025. Any future adjustments will be communicated through the regular strategic plan reporting cycle, which occurs three times per year.

6.2 New initiatives to be added to the Strategic Plan

To further strengthen economic vitality in Kitchener, two new strategic initiatives are being recommended. These projects reflect a return to core priorities - supporting local businesses and revitalizing the downtown - by addressing the foundational elements that drive a thriving urban economy. In response to ongoing economic challenges and community feedback, the City is sharpening its focus on practical, high-impact actions that reinforce business development and create a safe, vibrant downtown environment.

Table 6: Make it Kitchener 2.1 Scoped Refresh

| Category | Details |
|---------------------|--|
| Project Title | Make It Kitchener 2.0 Scoped Refresh – Supporting Economic Resiliency |
| Project Description | Approaching the mid-way mark of the 10-year Make It Kitchener 2.0 economic development strategy, and given the significant economic factors currently at play, it is essential that the areas of focus be evaluated to determine if they are still relevant and to determine if any new initiatives are required to respond to the current economic climate. |

| Category | Details |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Project Lead | Lauren Chlumsky, Economic Development Analyst |
| Timeline | Start: July 2025 End: March 2026 |
| 2025 Objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage a consultant to understand the macro-economic challenges and opportunities for Kitchener’s economy Engage key local business leaders and industry experts to gain their perspective on the current state of the economy Engage Council in a strategic discussion on the current areas of focus and any new emerging priorities |
| 2026 Objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and present to Council a Make It Kitchener 2.1 document for approval |
| Key Considerations of the Refresh | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation of the following economic impacts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trade and tariff war High commercial interest rates Predicted recession ‘Hybrid work’ on the Downtown office market Declining enrollment in international students Slowing development/construction Prioritization of short- and medium-term actions to respond to the economic impacts Anticipated immediate focus on economic resiliency through business outreach and supports for local enterprises |

Table 7: Downtown Safety & Security Action Plan

| Category | Details |
|---------------------|---|
| Project Title | Implementation of the Downtown Safety & Security Action Plan |
| Project Description | A multi-year, collaborative initiative to enhance business vitality in Downtown Kitchener. The plan aims to create a welcoming, vibrant downtown through targeted business support, strengthened enforcement, improved coordination, and proactive promotion. |

| Category | Details |
|--------------------|--|
| Project Lead | Aaron McCrimmon-Jones, Manager, Corporate Projects (Interim) |
| Timeline | Start: February 2025 End: December 2026 |
| 2025 Objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop the action plan with partners and initiate quick wins (Winter/Spring 2025) • Initiate short-term actions (Summer/Fall 2025) • Develop resource and mobilization plan for longer-term actions (Fall 2025 - onward) |
| 2026 Objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement and evaluate initiatives • Maintain accountability with strategic partners • Monitor progress and impact |
| Key Considerations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support downtown businesses to help them thrive • Enhanced enforcement to address disturbances • Improve safety through collaboration, data, and maintenance efforts • Appropriate spaces and support for the vulnerable population • Marketing and promotion to amplify the positive and authentic narrative of DTK • Enhance vibrancy through public realm improvements |

6.3 Emerging themes for further exploration

Engagement feedback highlighted two important themes that extended beyond the current scope of the City’s strategic plan initiatives. These themes present an opportunity for further research and exploration.

Social Resilience

Social resilience refers to an individual’s and community’s ability to withstand, adapt to, and recover from challenges, disruptions, or changes – e.g., economic shifts, public health crises, climate events, or social tensions – while maintaining and strengthening social cohesion, inclusion/belonging, and overall well-being.

While this was a recurring theme, further exploration is required to identify meaningful actions that align with the City’s role and scope of influence. To support this work, staff are actively exploring opportunities for academic partnerships to conduct research and develop a deeper understanding

of this theme. Potential areas of focus, as identified during the midway check-in engagement, include:

- Explore potential areas within the theme of social resilience within the City’s mandate.
- Explore best practices and success stories in other jurisdictions.
- Explore the role of faith-based organizations in supporting social resilience and how the City might collaborate or complement rather than duplicate efforts.

Operational Efficiencies

In addition to enhancing efficiencies through the City’s Digital Kitchener Innovation Lab, the City is also undertaking the following initiatives in 2025/2026:

- Exploring collaborations with academic institutions to conduct research on community organizations operating in areas aligned with the City’s strategic priorities. This initiative may help identify new partnership and knowledge-sharing opportunities as well as highlight areas where efforts could be streamlined to avoid duplication.
- Expanding LEAN training across city management teams to foster continuous improvement and operational excellence (50 staff to be trained in 2026).

These exploratory efforts will help inform potential future recommendations – and the next iteration of the strategic plan – and ensure that any proposed actions are grounded in evidence and aligned with the City’s capacity to influence outcomes.

It is important to emphasize that Kitchener continues to face affordability challenges as a tariff-impacted community, with residents and businesses affected by ongoing trade-related financial pressures. For this reason, the 2026 Budget will prioritize maintaining affordability, aligning with Council’s approach of delivering reasonable tax rate increases for Kitchener residents. While key corporate growth pressures have been accounted for, no additional funding will be available for new growth initiatives, program expansions, or staffing.

6.4 Check-in and adjustments to strategic plan indicators

As part of our ongoing commitment to transparency and continuous improvement, staff are conducting a focused review of the City’s strategic plan indicators. This work responds to feedback from the strategic plan’s midway check-in, which highlighted a need to better understand the impacts and outcomes associated with each goal area.

Key highlights

- **Targeted adjustments**
Strategic adjustments are being made to improve clarity and better communicate outcomes.
- **Updated indicators**
Existing indicators were refreshed with available data from 2024 and published in July.

- **Removal of indicators**
The strategic plan indicator **Density Near Major Transit Station Areas** has been removed from kitchener.ca/ourplanprogress as the volume of data required to clearly communicate this metric makes it better suited for detailed reporting in the City’s Annual Growth Monitoring Report.
- **Staff engagement is underway to support the identification of additional outcome-based indicators** that the City can influence, including:
 1. City-wide density
 2. Rental vacancies
 3. Housing pledge data
 4. Housing suitability
 5. Total connected kilometres on all ages and abilities (AAA) cycling route
 6. # users at major connections on the downtown cycling grid
 7. Employee engagement index
 8. # people who access inclusion support services
 9. # Leisure Access Program users
 10. Average age of playgrounds in city parks
- **Strengthening indicator reporting through:**
 1. Finalization of 13 indicators that still require defined targets
 2. Improved public transparency through clear data sources
- **Benefits of indicator updates**
These updates and refinements will help staff:
 - Improve progress tracking
 - Enhance decision-making
 - Better demonstrate impact
 - Proactively address gaps and build on successes
 - Improve overall efficiency and effectiveness

Indicator data will continue to be updated on an annual basis, with the next update in Spring 2026.

7. Concluding remarks & key takeaways

Through this midway check-in, Kitchener remains focused on what matters most: delivering tangible outcomes today while building resilience for the future.

The check-in confirms that Kitchener’s current strategic direction remains a strong foundation for addressing the evolving needs of our community. Rather than pivoting from our current trajectory, we are choosing to deepen our impact and responsiveness through targeted refinements, recognizing the importance of staying flexible and responsive to rapid external changes.

The themes that surfaced – economic growth, resiliency and prosperity, housing accessibility and affordability, social resilience, public health and wellbeing, sustainable development, and responsible innovation – are pillars of a thriving, future-ready city. Through measured adjustments,

such as refining initiatives, adding new actions, and updating performance indicators, we are taking thoughtful steps to deepen our impact in each of these areas without diverting from the core direction we've already established.

Looking ahead, this check-in also lays the groundwork for our 2027-2030 plan. It reinforces a shift in mindset - from viewing strategic plans as fixed roadmaps to embracing them as adaptive frameworks. The insights gathered through this process will help inform our broader engagement strategy in 2026, enabling a more streamlined and focused planning approach. The insights gathered as part of this check-in process provide momentum and direction for the 2027–2030 strategic planning cycle, reinforcing that refinement of the current plan – not reinvention – is likely an appropriate path forward.