

Staff Report

Chief Administrator's Office

REPORT TO: Special Council

DATE OF MEETING: May 4, 2026

SUBMITTED BY: Margaret Love, Director, Strategy and Corporate Performance
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WARD(S) INVOLVED: All

DATE OF REPORT: April 29, 2026

REPORT NO.: CAO-2026-202

SUBJECT: Shaping the 2027–2030 Strategic Plan: Process Overview and Identification of Key Themes for Further Exploration

RECOMMENDATION:

For discussion

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- This report communicates the 2027-2030 strategic planning process, timeline, key inputs, and early insights from the community survey and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Voluntary Local Review (VLR).
- Insights from the community survey and VLR will be used to inform the strategic plan and the next steps in the public engagement process.
- During the Council strategy session, staff will request Council's guidance on key areas that staff should explore further as part of the strategic planning process.
- Ahead of this meeting this report was posted on the City's website with the agenda.
- After this meeting, the report will be shared with the community on Engage Kitchener.
- This report supports the strategic planning process - the 2027-2030 strategic plan will be developed and brought forward to Council in 2027.
- There are no financial implications associated with this staff report.

BACKGROUND:

The City's Strategic Plan sets priorities, goals, and actions that guide progress over each four-year Council term. The current 2023-2026 Strategic Plan has provided a clear foundation for decision-making, business planning, and investment, while supporting an

adaptive approach to advance the community's priorities. This planning cycle represents an opportunity to validate what remains relevant and build on the current plan.

The 2027-2030 Strategic Plan will carry forward the City's 20-year community vision: *building a city for everyone where, together, we take care of the world around us – and each other*. The new plan will inform Council and organizational priorities for the next four-year term and will be shaped by community voices along with consultant, academic, and staff expertise. The Strategic Plan reflects the City's commitment to shaping municipal priorities and actions around the community's evolving experiences and aspirations.

REPORT:

Strategic Plan Inputs

A variety of strategic plan inputs will shape the development of the 2027–2030 Strategic Plan, reflecting both emerging trends, challenges, and community priorities. Two of the earliest inputs - the statistically significant community survey of 861 residents and the initial insights from the City's Voluntary Local Review on the Sustainable Development Goals - provide an early signal of what the City is doing well and where gaps may exist that warrant deeper exploration. Bringing these two inputs forward together offers a cohesive, evidence informed starting point for Council's input and direction for staff. Additional inputs will follow throughout the process, including – but not limited to – listening through other City-led projects, youth focused engagement led by Young Eye International, an academic partnership examining youth social resilience, deeper insights through the Resident Panel and committee engagement, and internal strategic foresight workshops facilitated by Abacus Data. Together, these inputs will create a comprehensive foundation for shaping a strategic plan that is forward-looking, data-driven, and grounded in community insight.

Overview of 2027-2030 Strategic Plan Engagement Approach

Engagement has always been a cornerstone of the City's strategic planning process, and this planning cycle strengthens that foundation by deliberately sequencing activities so that insights build cumulatively rather than independently. To support this integrated approach, and to ensure that recommendations are data informed, survey research and strategic foresight expertise are being provided by Abacus Data, ensuring community insights, survey findings, and foresight analysis are fully aligned within a cohesive, future- focused framework. As in previous cycles, Compass Kitchener will collaborate with staff throughout the entire strategic planning process to ensure emerging priorities remain closely aligned with community values.

By organizing engagement around clear pathways of influence (Attachment A) – from statistically significant community inputs, to this strategy session with Council, to the joint meeting of all Advisory Committees, to deep deliberation with the Resident Panel, and targeted sessions with staff – the process ensures that each method, group, and phase has a defined role and contributes meaningfully to narrowing, refining, and validating the City's strategic priorities, goals, and actions. This iterative design helps all stakeholders see how early insights evolve into draft priorities, which influence goals, and later into concrete actions, ensuring engagement remains purposeful and aligned with the City's long- term vision.

Strategic Planning Timeline

The strategic planning timeline is organized over a 10-month period in 2026, sequencing engagement, analysis, and Council touchpoints to build a coherent and evidence informed plan. Re-engagement with the newly elected Council will occur in late 2026 and early 2027, with a draft plan anticipated in the first quarter of 2027.

- March: Statistically significant community survey launches
- April: Voluntary Local Review community and staff workshops
- May: Council Strategy Session & All Advisory Committees Meeting
- June: Launch of broad public and staff engagement (community partner sessions, Resident Panel, street team intercept interviews, youth workshop, etc.)
- June-August: Identification of strategic priorities and strategic goal validation
- August 24, 2026: Council strategy session (integration of survey, strategic foresight analysis, and other insights)
- September: Action identification
- October: Framework refinement
- November: Community re-engagement on draft plan
- November 30, 2026: Update at Standing Committee
- Q1/Q2 2027: Re-engagement with new Council and draft Strategic Plan presented

Survey Methodology

The City of Kitchener partnered with Abacus Data, a Canadian public opinion research firm headquartered in Ottawa, Ontario. Abacus Data has conducted polling and research for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), public sector organizations, advocacy groups, and some of North America's leading corporations. Abacus Data was retained to design a survey to help inform municipal priorities, survey a statistically significant sample of Kitchener residents, and present findings from the survey to the City's leadership team and Council.

A 15-minute statistically significant community survey was conducted between March 23 and April 2, 2026, engaging 861 Kitchener residents through a multi-mode approach (landline, cell phone, and online panel). This sample size provided a margin of error of $\pm 3.3\%$, 19 times out of 20, ensuring the results were reliable and representative of the community. The survey was intentionally designed to reach a diverse group of residents, by combining telephone interviews with online survey panels, which enabled participants to offer more detailed reflections on service satisfaction and priorities.

The 2026 survey instrument included three types of questions: screening questions, content questions, and demographic questions. Of the content questions, 8 were tracking questions, identical to questions asked in the 2022 survey, while 14 were unique to the 2026 survey instrument. New items focused on sustainability, public trust, Life in Kitchener, and the future. Many new questions asked multi-part rating scales which provided an enhanced dataset when compared to 2022. This allowed the City to maintain trend data while also exploring emerging priorities.

The 2022 survey was administered solely by telephone. The introduction of an online survey resulted in an increase in additional questions across the study. Many of these questions would not have been feasible within telephone time constraints. This dual

design added value by supporting several open-ended questions that generated more nuanced insights.

The survey results were benchmarked against findings from comparable municipalities and a national dataset to help contextualize resident sentiment within broader trends (see Attachment B). This comparative analysis provided an added layer of insight in 2026, allowing the City to understand how local experiences aligned with, or differed from, patterns observed elsewhere.

Overall, the 2026 survey instrument built on the foundation of the 2022 version. It added depth through an online component, an expanded number of questions, increased use of multi-part rating scales, and comparative benchmarking, enabling more nuanced insights while preserving continuity through tracking questions.

Highlights of Survey Results

- **Strong day-to-day satisfaction, weaker outlook:** Most residents report good access to daily activities (83%), programs (80%), and a supportive environment for raising a family (78%), but fewer feel the city is planning effectively for the future (53%).
- **Overall satisfaction with City services is strong relative to national benchmarks:** Seven in ten Kitchener residents (70%) report being satisfied with City services overall, based on the 2026 Abacus survey conducted in Kitchener. This is significantly higher than the results from a parallel 2026 Abacus Omni survey of Canadians nationally (54%) and residents of comparable large cities (52%), indicating that Kitchener performs well on core municipal service delivery.
- **Affordability shapes overall perception:** Cost of living (32%) and housing affordability (29%) dominate resident concerns, far outweighing other issues.
- **Uneven trust and satisfaction:** Satisfaction with municipal government is moderate (51%) but drops among ages 35–49 (32%) compared to those 60+ (63%). Trust is limited, with fewer than half believing the City listens (44%), is transparent (39%), or accountable (40%).
- **Economic priorities emphasize stability:** Residents prioritize attracting employers (44%) and supporting small businesses (40%) for economic development.
- **High service satisfaction, gaps in growth and core services:** While overall satisfaction with City services is strong (69%), driven by parks (80%), recreation (74%), and culture (72%), satisfaction is lower for affordable housing and road maintenance (24% each).
- **Community connection driven by access:** 59% report feeling connected. Residents prioritize reducing financial barriers (54%) and improving access to public spaces (53%) to increase connection.
- **Safety is a strength:** 79% feel somewhat or very safe in their neighbourhood signalling deep confidence in safety.
- **Tax value perceptions are mixed but comparatively strong:** In the 2026 Abacus survey conducted in Kitchener, residents were split on whether they receive good value for their tax dollars (47% very good/good value; 50% fair/poor value). Even so, these results are higher than those from the parallel 2026 Abacus Omni survey of Canadians nationally (42% very good/good) and residents of comparable large

cities (42% very good/good), indicating that Kitchener performs relatively well on perceived tax value.

- **Preferences are evenly split across tax approaches:** Four in ten residents (40%) favour holding taxes steady even if it means service reductions, while equal shares support tax increases - either at inflation to maintain services (21%) or above inflation to expand services (21%).
- **Perceptions of municipal government are more positive locally:** In the 2026 Abacus survey conducted in Kitchener, just over half of residents (51%) report satisfaction with their municipal government. This is higher than findings from the parallel 2026 Abacus Omni survey of Canadians nationally (45%) and residents of comparable large cities (39%), suggesting that Kitchener is viewed more favourably than peer jurisdictions.
- **Divided confidence in direction:** Just over half (52%) believe the city is on the right track while a growing share (22%) are unsure, pointing to an opportunity for clearer communication and public education.
- **Strong attachment despite concerns:** Most residents plan to stay in Kitchener over the next five years (70%), reflecting strong attachment to place.

Compass Kitchener Reflections on the Survey Results

Compass Kitchener will play a central role throughout the development of the 2027–2030 Strategic Plan. Compass Kitchener is responsible for providing input on the engagement plan, participating in engagement activities to have their voices heard, and collaborating with staff to co-facilitate a set of key public engagement processes (e.g., Resident Panel) to identify the community’s priorities and refine the City’s goals over the next four years. Once the strategic plan is developed, Compass Kitchener is also responsible for working with staff to develop evaluation criteria to monitor the City’s performance against Strategic Plan goals, and report annually to both Council and the community on the results.

On April 29, 2026, Compass Kitchener convened to review survey findings and shared the following reflections:

- The survey results align with the committee’s expectations around affordability and cost of living being the top issues facing the Kitchener community.
- Overall, Kitchener results are positive compared to national/large cities (2026 Abacus Omni survey).
- Compass Kitchener discussed the tension between taxes, user fees and service levels.
- Compass Kitchener is interested in learning more about how responses varied across age groups throughout the survey.

<p>Discussion Question #1: What clarifying questions does Council have about the presentation from Abacus Data on the community survey, and which areas/themes should staff explore further?</p>

City of Kitchener Commitment to Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals

The City of Kitchener is committed to advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by embedding their principles into long-term strategies and planning documents. Since the development of its 2019-2022 Strategic Plan, the City has used the SDGs as a guiding framework across numerous strategies to better understand community wellbeing, identify gaps and inequities, and align local priorities with global

sustainability objectives. This commitment ensures that the City's priorities not only respond to local needs but also contribute to broader social, environmental, and economic resilience.

Overview of Kitchener's Voluntary Local Review

Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs) are a reporting approach used by cities around the world to assess their progress, challenges, and opportunities towards achieving the SDGs. VLRs are considered an important tool for localizing the SDGs as they support cities in developing more holistic strategies, envisioning a bold and more sustainable future.

As of 2025, 249 VLRs have been submitted to the UN with only two coming from Canadian municipalities. Kitchener is one of five municipalities across Canada partnering with Local Futures at the University of Waterloo on a VLR. This review supports the City in assessing progress toward localizing the SDGs and identifying opportunities to strengthen the City's impact.

To date, the VLR work has included a comprehensive analysis of key documents – including the 2023-2026 Strategic Plan, master plans, and other guiding documents – to understand how the SDGs are currently reflected in City work and where there may be gaps. On April 16, the University of Waterloo co-hosted a community workshop with local changemakers to surface lived experiences, identify gaps and explore where collective action is most needed. A complementary staff workshop was held on April 24 where 20 strategic thinkers from across the organization came together to understand community challenges related to the SDGs and identify municipal levers for action. Later this year, two graduate student teams will review corporate strategies to ensure SDG alignment and coherence, and advance indicator development.

These activities create a strong evidence base that highlights where the City is already aligned with the SDGs, where gaps and opportunities exist, and which areas require deeper exploration. The insights emerging from the VLR will directly inform the development of the 2027–2030 Strategic Plan by shaping priority areas, identifying potential actions, and supporting the development of meaningful indicators that advance Kitchener's long-term sustainability objectives.

Initial Project Findings from Kitchener's VLR

The initial project findings from the City of Kitchener's VLR, which are subject to change in future drafts of the VLR, are summarized in Attachment C. Key highlights include:

- The City of Kitchener's SDGs alignment score is 66.9%, reflecting the alignment between municipal strategies and plans and the targets outlined in the global SDGs framework.
- Kitchener demonstrates strongest alignment in core operational areas, scoring 100% on:
 - Water and wastewater services
 - Infrastructure and capital investment
 - Land-use planning and sustainable cities
 - Climate action and emissions reduction
 - Natural heritage and forestry
- Performance gaps are primarily concentrated in equity, inclusion, and governance-related SDGs. While meaningful work exists in these areas, gaps largely reflect the

absence of formal policy frameworks that link initiatives to measurable outcomes. In several cases, lower alignment scores may also reflect that certain SDGs fall outside the City's direct mandate, limiting the extent to which municipal actions can fully address them. The lowest alignment scores include:

- Peace, justice, and strong institutions: 53%
- Poverty reduction: 50%
- Zero hunger: 50%
- Affordable and clean energy: 50%
- Gender equality: 33%
- Education (municipal role): 29%
- City staff are generally aware of the SDGs and recognize that their work contributes to the 17 goals. Key challenges in applying the SDGs framework include:
 - The breadth of the framework limiting its usefulness for day-to-day decision-making
 - The complexity of the SDGs making them difficult to use in the community
 - Shifting priorities among external partners and stakeholders away from the SDGs

Discussion Question #2: What clarifying questions does Council have about the presentation from Local Futures on the VLR, and which areas/themes should staff explore further?

Next Steps

The insights from the statistically significant community survey and early insights from the VLR, along with early reflections from Compass Kitchener and direction from Council, will guide the next phase of engagement for the 2027–2030 Strategic Plan. These insights will support the transition from broad issue - identification to more focused priority setting, helping staff understand where deeper exploration is required and where the community is already demonstrating strong alignment.

As engagement deepens, Compass Kitchener will collaborate with staff to validate themes, assess priorities, and ensure the evolving direction of the Strategic Plan remains grounded in the community's long- term vision. Their input will continue to inform key decision points as the project moves toward goal setting, action development, and framework design later in 2026.

In the fall, the community will be engaged to review and refine draft actions. The process will culminate in 2027 with final approval of the Strategic Plan, supported by an implementation plan outlining timelines, sequencing, and organizational responsibilities.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This report supports the development of the 2027-2030 Strategic Plan.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

This report has no impact on Capital Budget or on the Operating Budget.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

INFORM – This report has been posted to the City’s website with the agenda in advance of the council/committee meeting.

COLLABORATE – Compass Kitchener was engaged on March 4, April 1, and April 29, 2026, to review and provide insights on: (i) the draft resident survey instrument, (ii) the draft engagement plan for the strategic plan, and (iii) the resident survey results, respectively.

PREVIOUS REPORTS/AUTHORITIES:

- CAO-2025-312: Strategic Plan Check-In Report: Insights & Adjustments at the Midway Mark
- Council Policy GOV-BOA-077 (Compass Kitchener Terms of Reference)

APPROVED BY: Dan Chapman, CAO

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A: Engagement pathways for the 2027-2030 Strategic Plan

Attachment B: Community survey results

Attachment C: Early insights on Kitchener’s VLR