The State of the Borough Debate

Briefing paper

The Role of the Future Council

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present some decisions that have been taken and some ideas that are emerging for those participating in the State of the Borough Debate. The content is intended to be a catalyst for debate and dialogue and is not presented as a proposition which participants are asked to either support or reject. It is hoped with the benefit of this paper, participants will be able to shape their own thinking about these issues and participate more fully in the debate.

“Publicly organised and not publicly delivered”

Local Government is changing rapidly and we must find new ways to secure the best outcomes for everyone and create a sustainable council that can continue to do that in future. Kingston Council has already agreed that this means it will need to transform both what it does and how it operates in future.

In fact, as we enter our sixth consecutive year of a growing population, and face further and increasing growth in future, and operating with reduced resources, the Council is going to have to think differently about how it ensures Kingston is a place that is prosperous and where people thrive. It has captured its ambitions for Kingston in its community outcomes that are described later in this paper.

At the same time the Council is continuing to develop the way in which it operates, delivers services, and engages with all residents and partners to bring about change. Throughout the course of these changes, we have and will continue to ensure Kingston Council is a local authority that becomes easier to engage with, and easier to work with. But our ambition goes further than that, the Council has determined that its relationship with its communities needs to change and those who live, work and visit the borough need to have a greater say in what the Council does.

As the level of financial resource in the Council’s direct control reduces, the resources available for all public services are also under pressure. So our activities need to be targeted more intelligently and effectively, and aligned with the resources of others. This includes not only the spend of other public bodies, but also the inherent abilities and capacities that reside in the people who live and work in the borough.

To manage this, the Council, and the way it works, needs to match the needs of all residents to the services that can be provided by a greater than ever range of private, public and voluntary sector organisations. Combined with this, we are working towards a new relationship with residents, driving to be an enabling Council where a more human approach is taken to the needs of local residents and where we act as the facilitator of services - publicly organised but not publicly delivered. The budget situation means we cannot always do what we would like, but we will work with all communities enabling them to tell us what we need to focus on together.

Taking this approach means that by 2020 the Council will have fewer directly employed staff and possibly operate out of a single building. However, there will be a range of new organisations providing services to residents, operating under a new model Council of the future. It is through this that our vision is to have a future Council where services are publicly organised but not necessarily publicly delivered. How we will achieve this is set out below;
The role of the future Council

The Council has turned its focus directly towards Community Outcomes and the individual people who live and work in or visit Kingston. The Council believes that by focusing on these outcomes, working with communities and individuals in new ways, creating new relationships with citizens and partners, by enabling the right type of economic and housing growth to accommodate and make our growing population prosperous, it will also make itself financially sustainable in future.

So our work puts the emphasis on our ability to be a catalyst when working with communities, partners and individuals with a shared agenda. As such, we are putting collaboration with communities at the heart of what we do.

Having identified a series of Community Outcomes, the Council has adopted an outcomes based budgeting approach whereby funds are allocated according to these outcomes. This differs from more traditional models as it focuses on what we’re trying to achieve, rather than how we intend to deliver savings. In essence, we are asking ourselves whether our use of local resources is the best way of achieving these community outcomes.

Our Kingston Community Outcomes

In practical terms, this means that budgets aren’t set against specific teams or existing processes, but against activities that directly contribute to outcomes. It enables the Council to focus on a manageable and meaningful number of outcomes, rather than budgeting against a range of disconnected functions and activities with little sense of prioritisation. This means that the Council’s
work will be more based on needs, allowing us to focus on what matters most to local residents, businesses and communities.

It is through this approach that the Council is adopting a different role, influencing and leveraging collective effort rather than seeking to solve problems unilaterally through the direct application of our resources. However, key to these changes is the underlying notion that our response to reducing resources will not be proportionate to a reduction in ambition. By changing our relationships and the way we work with others (what we are calling the Kingston family), we can help draw together resources from across the borough and continue to strive to get the best for Kingston and its residents.

**Engagement and participation**

To meet the challenges facing Kingston Council, we need a new, more open and honest relationship between residents and those charged with providing local services. Kingston has therefore undertaken several activities to begin working together and more effectively with the residents of our great borough. In fact, this State of the Borough debate about the Kingston Council of the future is one such opportunity for people within and beyond the Council to have a dialogue about these issues. This builds on many other ways we have been trying to engage and involve others in this journey.

In 2014, the Council undertook a comprehensive borough wide survey to understand its residents to a greater extent. A number of key metrics in the Council’s *All in One* survey demonstrated clearly that the Council needed to communicate better with, and win the trust of local people. The Council set about delivering a community engagement campaign to deepen people’s understanding of survey results, explain how the Council is planning to respond and begin the conversation over future service provision. So far, three series of Kingston Conversations have taken place, addressing topics such as the budget, growth and regeneration in the borough. The next conversations will orientate around what the future model of the Council will look like, including working in collaboration with partners and residents to achieve the same outcomes.

Alongside the Kingston Conversations, the neighbourhood conversations provide the chance to discuss resident priorities and develop solutions together with residents, local Councillors, senior council Officers and partners. All feedback gathered is used to develop the Neighbourhood Community Plans.

Whilst researching different models of engagement, the published work of Steve Hilton, former Director of Strategy for No. 10, struck a chord. He argues that the frustrations people have with government, politics and their economic circumstances are caused by deep structural problems in the systems that dominate our modern world. We can change these systems by putting people and our community first. Hilton’s book is a call to action for a more local, more accountable and more human way of living that will make us more productive, more fulfilled and ultimately happier.

So this debate is intended to be one further step to having a dialogue within and beyond the Council about what all this might mean and to share our thinking and develop our ideas.

**What does that mean for Councillors and Council employees?**

The role of Councillors and Council employees has evolved over time. Essentially, Councillors are elected to set objectives, develop strategies and create policies which will deliver for local people what they have promised them. Council employees then develop the operational strategies, the organisational capacity, the plans and delivery arrangements for services to make those things happen. Fundamentally, this will continue to be the case but for the reasons already explained, with much reduced resources, and growing demands on public services, we are having to rethink how we function as a Council in future.

Traditionally Councils have employed people with the professional and technical skills to do the job and managers who are able to organise those people and other resources effectively. That professional and managerial capacity, coupled with political leadership from Councillors, is in
essence what we call “local government” and if done effectively can ensure the best or at least improved outcomes for local people and communities.

If in future the Council’s role is going to change, it is going to publicly organise but not necessarily publicly deliver local services, and is going to facilitate and support others within the Kingston family, how are the roles of Councillors and the workforce going to change?

Of course, somewhere in the Kingston family, we will still need people with the skills that keep us safe and ensure the Borough is clean but they may not in future be employed by the Council.

Similarly, we will always have Councillors - those who are elected, have a democratic mandate, can decide the future direction of the Borough and the Council and are who the public can hold to account.

So part of our debate about the Kingston Council of the Future will hopefully start a dialogue about the future role of both Councillors and the Council workforce.

To help us start to explore these issues, we have engaged the Institute of Local Government Studies (Inlogov) at Birmingham University, to work with us. Inlogov use academic research and their work with other Councils facing similar challenges to inform their thinking and share that within and beyond the sector to promote change and improvement. Their work within Kingston is being led by Professor Catherine Staite, Director of Inlogov, who is the keynote speaker for the State of the Borough Debate.

What about the Kingston Citizen and their view of the Council?

If the Council, its Councillors, its employees and the way it engages with local people is changing, then it follows that the role of the local Kingston citizen may need to change. So our ambition in having a debate and dialogue with local people is to help us all understand how that change in our citizens and communities may manifest itself. How can we create a more cohesive community that takes more care of itself rather than expecting the Council to do all it currently does - something that its budget will no longer allow to happen?

Equally, as public behaviour changes, so will what the public sees of the Council change. Kingston has embraced the view that sharing services with other Councils is a positive direction of travel. But sharing services only goes so far and does not bring about the deep shift in customer contact that local people desire - sharing services can actually make services more remote from residents unless handled well. So, instead of the vertical integration of services with other Councils we also need to see our Borough work horizontally, so that what the citizen sees is a single point of contact for all the public services across our Borough; Health, Police, Job Centre, Housing, Benefits, parks, waste etc.

This is why we have been working with partners on plans to begin to merge these services and create a single Kingston Public Service body. For example, we are currently in discussion with the Government over our proposal for merging the Council with the Clinical Commissioning Group so that we can create a clinically led, Local Health Service, that does not merely collaborate with the Council and its social care responsibilities, but is actually legally and financially joined. These changes not only make financial sense, but they are a step towards creating a better, resident focused set of services with a more human approach.

Conclusion

It is clear that to be sustainable in a time of turbulent change, Kingston Council, alongside the whole public sector, needs to adapt to current economic and social circumstances. Against the backdrop of a growing population and reducing public sector budgets, to adopt a response through which the Council seeks to do what it has always done without adapting, or to do and deliver fewer of the same sorts of things, a poor result is pre-determined. The path we are favouring may be a difficult one, it contains many risks and requires significant changes to make it work, but it is one that is intended to deliver a positive outcome for the residents of Kingston.