

Cabinet Members Report to Council

29th October 2026

Councillor Ring – Cabinet Member for Business and Deputy Leader

Report to Council for the period to October 2026

1 Progress on Portfolio Matters

Heritage, Regeneration and the Future of King's Lynn

Introduction

For this month's report, I have chosen to focus on heritage and the considerable progress being made in protecting, restoring and bringing new life to some of the most important historic buildings in King's Lynn.

We are fortunate to live in a borough with an extraordinary architectural, maritime and cultural history. King's Lynn was once one of England's most important ports, and the wealth and influence of that period remain visible in its streets, buildings and waterfront.

However, heritage cannot simply be about preserving the past. Our historic buildings must have a purpose and a sustainable future. They should contribute to the prosperity of our town, attract visitors, support local businesses, create employment and provide facilities that our communities can enjoy.

Over the past six months, we have seen significant progress on several major projects, secured substantial external funding and continued to develop a joined-up approach to heritage and regeneration. The scale of work now taking place demonstrates that we are moving beyond plans and aspirations to delivery.

1. St George's Guildhall and Creative Hub

The restoration and regeneration of St George's Guildhall continues to be one of the most significant heritage and cultural investments in King's Lynn for generations.

The Guildhall is recognised as the oldest working theatre in the country, with its extraordinary medieval structure and associations with William Shakespeare. It is a building of national and international significance.

Construction commenced in November 2025, with the project programmed towards reopening in late summer 2028. Work has included the protection and conservation of historic structures, roof works, structural alterations and archaeological investigation.

Our ambition is considerably greater than simply restoring a historic theatre. We are creating a cultural destination that will combine live performance, heritage interpretation, exhibitions, education, creative industries, hospitality and community use.

Importantly, we now have measurable targets demonstrating the economic and social benefits this investment is expected to deliver. The project's projected outcomes include:

- £30.8 million in economic benefit.
- Approximately 70,000 annual visitors and users.
- 117 jobs supported or created.
- 200 theatre performances each year.
- 175 additional events annually.
- 50 to 60 entrepreneurs and creative start-ups supported.

The wider programme of physical regeneration and social value targets also identifies:

- 34 permanent full-time equivalent jobs and 55 temporary full-time jobs supported during delivery.
- 10 heritage buildings renovated or restored and six derelict buildings brought back into use.
- Eight improved cultural facilities and enhanced education and training facilities.
- 50 enterprises supported.
- 825 square metres of new office accommodation, providing 11 to 14 creative business spaces.
- 1,572 square metres of parks, green spaces and outdoor areas improved.

These are projected outputs and targets, rather than benefits already realised, and they provide a basis for measuring the project's future success. The 34 permanent full-time equivalent posts and 117 jobs supported or created are different measures and should not be added together.

The Guildhall will offer multiple reasons for people to visit King's Lynn, return regularly and stay longer. That matters because visitors to cultural attractions also support our cafés, restaurants, shops, accommodation providers and other town centre businesses.

The scheme places considerable emphasis on accessibility and social inclusion. Step-free access, improved facilities, inclusive learning opportunities and provision for community organisations will help ensure that the benefits reach well beyond traditional theatre audiences.

The proposed King Street public realm improvements, including safer pedestrian arrangements, seating, cycle parking and additional planting, will also help improve the setting and accessibility of this important building.

Heritage is sometimes portrayed as something we preserve for sentimental reasons, but the Guildhall demonstrates just how misplaced that thinking can be. A project with a projected £30.8 million economic benefit, supporting employment, attracting visitors and creating opportunities for young people, community organisations and businesses, is an investment in our future.

The ultimate measure of success will not simply be the number of buildings restored, but the number of people who use them, the jobs and opportunities created, and the lasting contribution they make to the prosperity and wellbeing of West Norfolk.

2. King's Lynn Custom House

The Custom House is arguably the most recognisable building in King's Lynn and one of the finest examples of classical architecture in England. It has stood at the

heart of our historic waterfront for more than 300 years, symbolising the town's maritime wealth and commercial importance.

I was delighted that, following years of planning, funding negotiations and detailed conservation work, we were able to announce the appointment of Norfolk-based contractor King & Company to undertake its restoration.

The project is deliberately sensitive to the historic significance of this Grade I listed building. The works include conservation and repair of the stonework, windows, roof and distinctive cupola, with almost all historic fabric being retained.

Crucially, the project is also about making the building accessible, usable and sustainable for the future. Improvements include an accessible toilet, a platform lift to allow visitors to reach the magnificent first-floor Long Room, improved facilities and a kitchenette serving the upper floors, allowing previously unused office accommodation to be brought back into use.

The intention is that the Custom House will once again become an active and welcoming part of King's Lynn rather than simply a beautiful building to admire from outside.

Complementary improvements are planned for Purfleet Quay in spring 2027, including upgraded lighting and electrical infrastructure to support events and greater public use of the waterfront.

Together with the Guildhall investment, the Custom House forms an important part of our ambition to create a connected cultural and heritage destination running through King Street and along the riverfront. I am particularly pleased that we are now progressing from years of discussion about the future of this iconic building to delivering the conservation programme necessary to secure that future.

3. Sommerfeld and Thomas Warehouse

One of the most encouraging developments of recent weeks has been the successful award of £902,227 from Historic England's Heritage at Risk Capital Fund towards the conservation of the Grade II listed Sommerfeld and Thomas Warehouse on South Quay.

Cabinet has agreed £250,000 of match funding, creating a programme of approximately £1.15 million for essential repairs, conservation and enabling works, subject to Listed Building Consent. This represents a significant vote of confidence from Historic England in our ambitions for King's Lynn and its historic riverfront.

The warehouse is a rare surviving example of the town's historic commercial and industrial activity, dating from the eighteenth century and associated with the grain trade and King's Lynn's role as a major port.

It is a building that has faced considerable challenges, and without intervention its long-term future would remain uncertain. The funding will allow us to address important conservation issues and undertake the work necessary to make future sustainable use possible.

It is important to recognise that this investment is not the completion of the warehouse's regeneration. Rather, it is an essential step towards securing the building and enabling a viable long-term future.

During Heritage Open Day in September, 762 visits were recorded to the warehouse, demonstrating the considerable public interest in this remarkable building and its history.

Our ambition is to see the warehouse brought back into meaningful use, contributing to the character, activity and economic potential of South Quay. The

award is also a testament to the work undertaken by council officers and our partnership with Historic England.

4. South Quay Dryside Facilities and the Historic Waterfront

The development of new dryside facilities on South Quay is another example of heritage-led regeneration being about practical improvements as well as the restoration of buildings.

The new facilities are designed to improve the experience of people visiting King's Lynn by water, including showers, toilets, laundry provision, visitor information and water refill facilities. These are important additions to the town's leisure boating infrastructure and support our wider ambitions to encourage greater use of the River Great Ouse and promote King's Lynn as a destination for visiting craft.

The facilities also support the Sail the Wash initiative and the wider potential of our waterways as a tourism asset. During September's Heritage Open Day, 179 visits were recorded to the new facilities, providing an early indication of public interest. King's Lynn owes much of its historic importance to the river, yet for many years we have arguably failed to make the most of that relationship.

The dryside facilities, Custom House and Sommerfeld and Thomas Warehouse projects should not be viewed in isolation. Together they are helping to reconnect the town with its waterfront and create a more attractive, accessible and active riverside. Our objective must be to encourage visitors to arrive, explore the town and spend time and money with our local businesses.

5. King's Lynn Heritage Open Day 2026

One of the most positive demonstrations of public enthusiasm for our heritage came on Sunday 13 September, when King's Lynn Civic Society organised another hugely successful Heritage Open Day.

The national theme this year was Everyday Histories, with activities celebrating not only our buildings but also the lives of the people who lived and worked in them.

Despite a damp start, the event attracted impressive numbers of residents and visitors, many of whom took the opportunity to explore buildings and places normally closed to the public.

The attendance figures recorded by participating venues are particularly encouraging:

Heritage venue	Recorded visits
Town Hall and Guildhall	1,876
Stories of Lynn	1,529
King's Lynn Minster	1,495
St George's Guildhall	1,059
Valiant Sailor	1,041
Hanse House	873
True's Yard Fisherfolk Museum	852
Red Mount Chapel	828
Woolmarket House	773
Sommerfeld and Thomas Warehouse	762
St Nicholas Chapel	713
South Gate	539

These figures represent recorded visits at individual sites rather than unique visitors, and not every venue was able to record attendance. Nevertheless, they

demonstrate both the remarkable breadth of our heritage attractions and the considerable appetite for opportunities to explore them.

The event included guided walks, historic exhibitions, music, performances, re-enactments, talks, the popular vintage bus service and a market showcasing Norfolk producers.

The Borough Council was pleased to be the principal sponsor, to open buildings including the Town Hall, South Gates and Red Mount Chapel, and to provide staff support and facilities.

I want particularly to congratulate King's Lynn Civic Society. This major annual event is organised by a small team of volunteers, supported by many other volunteers, organisations, businesses and property owners. Their commitment is extraordinary, and they deserve our sincere thanks.

Heritage Open Day demonstrates something that is sometimes overlooked. The value of heritage is not limited to its architecture. It brings communities together, encourages volunteering, supports businesses, attracts visitors and helps people develop a stronger connection with the place in which they live.

Next year's event is scheduled for Sunday 12 September 2027, and I hope we can continue to support its success.

6. True's Yard Fisherfolk Museum

Another welcome development has been the Borough Council's £6,000 grant supporting further work at True's Yard Fisherfolk Museum.

True's Yard plays a vital role in preserving and explaining the history of North End and the generations of fishing families who helped shape King's Lynn. The grant is supporting the next phase of work following the discovery of important remains associated with the town's historic fishing community.

Projects such as this are important because they preserve the history of ordinary working people as well as the grander buildings associated with the town's wealth and commercial importance. Our heritage is not simply the history of merchants and wealthy families. It is also the history of fishermen, dock workers, tradespeople and the communities that built our town.

True's Yard is an outstanding example of how those stories can be preserved and shared with future generations.

7. The Carnegie Building and The Workshop

The regeneration of the former Carnegie Library building represents another important investment in King's Lynn's architectural and community heritage.

This historic building is being given a new future following the relocation of library services to the new town centre library. The programme of work is intended to conserve and improve the building while enabling The Workshop to develop its activities in a more accessible and inclusive environment.

Importantly, the former Workshop premises remain in existence, and the opportunity to relocate to the Carnegie building arose because the old library became available.

This is a welcome example of an important heritage asset being adapted for continued community use. The objective is not merely to save an old building. It is to create a place where people can learn, participate, develop skills and enjoy creative and inclusive activities.

8. Wider Heritage, Culture and Partnership Working

Alongside these major capital projects, we continue to work with organisations responsible for protecting, promoting and making use of West Norfolk's heritage. These include Historic England, King's Lynn Civic Society, King's Lynn Preservation Trust, Norfolk Museums Service, King's Lynn Town Guides and the many community organisations and volunteers who maintain and interpret historic places throughout the borough.

We have also continued to strengthen relationships within the cultural sector, including through Create King's Lynn and our work with Creative Arts East.

These partnerships are essential. Historic buildings require specialist knowledge, careful conservation and sustainable management. Equally, their future success depends on creative programming, community participation and an ability to attract new audiences.

The council cannot and should not attempt to do everything itself. Our role includes bringing partners together, helping unlock funding, supporting community organisations and providing the leadership necessary to ensure that individual projects contribute to wider ambitions.

9. Heritage and the King's Lynn Masterplan

The projects outlined in this report are important individually, but their real significance becomes clearer when considered as part of the wider King's Lynn Masterplan.

The future of our town centre cannot depend upon recreating the retail environment of twenty or thirty years ago. Shopping habits have changed, online retail has become firmly established, and town centres increasingly need to provide a broader range of reasons for people to visit, spend time and choose to live there.

Our long-term ambition is therefore for King's Lynn to develop as a mixed-use town centre, combining homes, shops, hospitality, leisure, culture, education and employment. Heritage is central to that vision.

St George's Guildhall will create a major cultural attraction. The Custom House will bring new activity to our waterfront. Sommerfeld and Thomas offers the prospect of another important historic building returning to use. Improved visitor facilities will strengthen our river-based tourism offer.

These investments will complement our ambitions for the Southgates area, public realm improvements and the wider regeneration opportunities identified through the Masterplan.

Public investment can help address some of the more difficult conservation challenges, create momentum and encourage businesses and property owners to invest in surrounding areas. Our approach must be to use heritage as an asset for economic growth rather than regarding historic buildings as obstacles to development.

The town's distinctive character is something that competing destinations cannot easily replicate. Making the most of those assets is fundamental to building a stronger and more successful town.

10. External Funding and Value for Money

Our responsibility is not simply to secure money for historic buildings, but to show what each pound of public investment achieves. This means being clear about the council's contribution, the external funding it unlocks, the future costs of operating each asset and the tangible benefits for residents and businesses.

The Sommerfeld and Thomas Warehouse is a useful illustration. Historic England's award of £902,227 is being supported by £250,000 of council match funding. On those stated figures, every £1 of council match funding is accompanied by approximately £3.61 of external grant, helping assemble a conservation programme of approximately £1.15 million. Put another way, around 78% of this stated funding package comes from Historic England and around 22% from the council. Those proportions describe the identified funding package, not a calculation of the scheme's ultimate financial return.

The value for money lies partly in using a relatively smaller local contribution to tackle essential repairs to a nationally important building before further deterioration increases the scale and cost of intervention. It also lies in making future sustainable use possible. But this initial conservation work should not be confused with a completed regeneration scheme: the next stages must still demonstrate a credible long-term use and affordable maintenance arrangements.

The Guildhall gives us another, broader test. Its projected £30.8 million economic benefit, approximately 70,000 annual visitors and users, and 117 jobs supported or created are substantial ambitions. They are not, however, cash receipts to the council, nor are they proof of a financial return on the capital investment. The economic benefit is a forecast that must be tested against delivery, and should not be presented as a saving to the council's revenue budget.

For the Guildhall and our other major schemes, value for money needs to be demonstrated through four connected measures:

- Funding leverage: how much external investment we secure for the local funding committed.
- Financial sustainability: realistic operating costs, maintenance liabilities, income opportunities and future demands on council resources.
- Economic return: actual jobs, local contracts, business activity, visitor numbers and spending generated beyond the project itself.
- Community return: access, educational participation, cultural activity, volunteering and the extent to which residents from across West Norfolk benefit.

This also means considering what would happen if we did nothing. Leaving historic buildings vacant or deteriorating is not a cost-free option: it can lead to escalating repairs, lost income opportunities, continued risk to important assets and missed regeneration benefits. Equally, the existence of a grant does not by itself make a project good value; the full costs and long-term commitments must still be scrutinised.

As each project progresses, I want clear and proportionate reporting against approved budgets, grant conditions, delivery milestones and the agreed social and economic outputs. Where targets change, we should explain why. Where an investment creates an ongoing operating cost, we should identify how that cost will be met. Where economic impact is claimed, we should distinguish forecasts from results.

At a time of pressure on public finances, and as we prepare for Local Government Reorganisation, this discipline is essential. Our aim should be to leave the successor authority with better-used historic buildings, clearer asset responsibilities, sustainable operating plans and measurable benefits rather than simply a portfolio of completed capital works.

That is the strongest value-for-money case for heritage-led regeneration: leveraging national funding, preventing avoidable deterioration and turning important buildings into active, useful assets, while being transparent about what has been spent and what has actually been delivered.

Conclusion

The past six months have demonstrated real progress in our approach to heritage and regeneration.

We have continued work on the internationally significant St George's Guildhall, advanced the restoration of our iconic Custom House, secured more than £900,000 of national investment for Sommerfeld and Thomas Warehouse, improved facilities on our historic waterfront and supported the work of organisations that preserve and celebrate our local history.

We have also seen, through Heritage Open Day, the extraordinary public enthusiasm for the history and character of King's Lynn.

I would like to thank our officers, external partners, community groups, funding organisations, contractors and volunteers for their commitment and contribution.

There is much still to do, and major conservation projects inevitably bring challenges, but the direction of travel is encouraging.

We should be proud of our heritage, but pride alone is not enough. We have a responsibility to ensure these extraordinary buildings survive, remain relevant and continue to benefit future generations.

Our heritage is not simply a reminder of what King's Lynn once was. It is one of the greatest assets we have in determining what King's Lynn can become.

The challenge, and the opportunity, is to use that heritage to create a town where people want to live, businesses want to invest and visitors want to return. That is what this programme of work is intended to achieve.