



King County

# KING COUNTY AUDITOR AND OMBUDS

MARCH 18, 2026

## Joint Recommendation from the Auditor and Ombuds

TO:

Metropolitan  
King County Council

**This letter recommends, based on our professional opinions and available information, the most effective way to enhance financial integrity in King County.** The attached study provides extensive information and provides a set of options that the County Council could choose to enhance oversight and serve the public interest. This letter outlines our three recommendations.

FROM:

KyMBER Waltmunson,  
County Auditor

Jeremy Bell,  
County Ombuds

**Fraud losses for governments the size of King County can range from fifty million to hundreds of millions of dollars per year,** according to the International Public Sector Fraud Forum. In addition to financial considerations, the total impact of public sector fraud can include programs failing to achieve goals, decreased trust in government, and higher staff turnover.

**Enhancing King County's ability to detect and respond to potential fraud is important to rebuild the public's trust.** In the wake of recent audits, both the County Auditor and County Ombuds have received direct contacts about potential fraud. However, gaps in county systems have made it difficult for us to address concerns promptly and effectively. Our review of King County systems found gaps in 1) internal fraud investigation capacity, 2) clear policy direction, 3) independent contract oversight, 4) a clear path to report fraud, 5) county employee fraud awareness, and 6) comprehensive data.

**Investment in new functions is likely to be offset by reduced county losses.** According to research by the Center for Effective Public Management at Brookings, most offices of inspector general are revenue-positive, with the median return on investment 6:1. The Association of Certified Fraud Examiners notes that hotlines can reduce fraud losses by half.

**Based on our analysis of leading practices, interviews with King County agencies and other local governments, and our evaluation of available information, we jointly recommend that the County Council:**

1. prioritize prevention by advising the County Executive to a) conduct fraud risk assessments countywide, b) develop and implement plans for fraud/integrity training and awareness, and c) report all information on fraud and improper acts to the County Auditor and County Ombuds
2. clarify policy direction by revising code to define key concepts, assign responsibilities, designate a central reporting system (hotline), and outline consequences for fraud and improper acts
3. strengthen detection and response efforts by creating three new functions within the Auditor’s Office and requiring an evaluation of the functions after three years:
  - a fraud/integrity reporting system (hotline)
  - a fraud investigation function
  - an inspection function for contract review.

For these new functions, staff will need to be added in the Auditor and Ombuds offices and sufficient resources provided for training and administrative needs. We estimate the initial annual cost at approximately \$1.2 million.

<b>Auditor’s Office</b>	<b>Staffing</b>
Fraud investigators for hotline and investigation	Authority for 4, initially fund 2
Inspectors for reviewing contracts	Authority for 3, initially fund 2
Administrative support	Authority for 1.5, initially fund 1
<b>Ombuds Office</b>	<b>Staffing</b>
Ombuds staff to respond to increased hotline reports	Authority for 3, initially fund 2

If the County Council decides to implement these functions in the legislative branch, it would be helpful to support the Auditor and Ombuds offices in administrative alignment. Each agency has expertise in implementing these recommendations. It would increase efficiency and effectiveness to align professional standards, create collaborative structures, and coordinate administrative functions and policies and procedures between the two agencies. After aligning the offices, the County Council could consider whether further charter changes are appropriate.

We include estimated costs, timing, and other implementation notes for our joint recommendation in Appendix 2 of the study. The County Auditor and County Ombuds could collaborate to implement these programs through 2027 with a formal program assessment in 2030.

**KyMBER Waltmunson, County Auditor**



**Jeremy Bell, County Ombuds**

