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Cherwell Futures Programme .

Committee	Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Date of Committee	27 January 2026
Portfolio Holder presenting the report	Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Strategic Leadership, Councillor David Hingley
Date Portfolio Holder agreed report	19 January 2026
Report of	Stephen Hinds, Executive Director, Resources

Purpose of report

To provide Overview & Scrutiny with a detailed update on the Council's Cherwell Futures Programme, focusing on governance improvements, standardisation, workforce development, and the agreement of priorities since the last report.

1.   Recommendations

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee resolves:

1.1   To note the progress made on governance, standardisation, and workforce development.

1.2   To comment on the contents of this report and make any recommendations.

2.   Executive Summary

2.1   Since the last update, the Council has made significant strides in strengthening its transformation approach. Key developments include:

- Implementation of a new governance framework, with clear decision rights and oversight.

- Standardisation of templates and processes for all transformation and change initiatives.

- Delivery of targeted workforce training, including PRINCE2, to build project management capability.

- Agreement of priorities via the Executive, with robust business cases and benefits tracking for each major project.

- Clarification of financial arrangements for key transformation projects, including the Customer Front Door integration.

Implications & Impact Assessments

Implications	Commentary
Finance	There are no financial implications arising directly from this report. £0.4m has been allocated to the Cherwell Futures Programme in 2026/27. A further £1.1m has been included in an earmarked reserve with the intention of releasing funding as business cases are agreed for future delivery of projects. Michael Furness, Assistant Director of Finance, 14 January 2026
Legal	No legal implications Shiraz Sheikh, Monitoring Officer, 14th January 2026
Risk Management	The Cherwell Futures Programme is progressing well. As with any major change, there are risks around timely delivery, financial control, and embedding new ways of working. These are being actively managed through strong governance, clear priorities, and investment in workforce capability, giving confidence that the programme remains on track to deliver its intended benefits. Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance & Insight Team Leader, 13 January 2026

Impact Assessments	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equality Impact		x		At this stage, no impacts have been identified; all major changes are subject to Equality Impact Assessments at the project level, in line with the Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Framework. Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance & Insight Team Leader, 13 January 2026
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could		x		

		x		
impact on inequality?				
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		x		
Climate & Environmental Impact				not applicable
ICT & Digital Impact				not applicable
Data Impact				not applicable
Procurement & subsidy				not applicable
Council Priorities	This update underpins the Cherwell Futures priority by strengthening governance, modernising key services, and delivering the transformation activity needed to ensure a financially sustainable, future-ready council.			
Human Resources	N/A			
Property	N/A			
Consultation & Engagement	Engaged with Senior Managers and front-line teams.			

Supporting Information

3.   Background

3.1   The Cherwell District Council Cherwell Futures Programme was launched in 2024 in response to significant financial and operational pressures facing the authority, including a projected funding gap of over £10 million by 2029/30 and the need to prepare for potential Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Following the announcement of the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, the funding gap is expected to reduce significantly, and the council's medium term financial strategy be adjusted accordingly. The programme's overarching aim is to deliver substantial efficiency savings, modernise service delivery, and ensure the Council is resilient and fit for the future. This will help the council to maintain its continuous improvement obligations and release resources to be reinvested into future transformation projects and enhancing the delivery of the priorities of the council.

3.2   **Initial Phases and Achievements:**

The early phases of the programme focused on a comprehensive review of the Council's operating model, financial resilience, and service delivery. This included:

- Development of a costed service catalogue to provide a clear view of current services and their delivery costs.

- Identification of opportunities for efficiency, effectiveness, and demand management across all service areas, resulting in over £1.8 million of recurring savings already secured and built into the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

- The adoption of a new Vision and Strategy, setting out the ambition to become a modern, high-performing authority delivering positive, lasting change for residents, communities, and places.

3.3   **Programme Evolution:**

Following initial success, the programme was thoroughly reviewed by the Executive in conjunction with the senior management team and was strategically refined to focus on three priority areas with the greatest potential for impact:

- Customer Engagement (Single Front Door): Streamlining and digitising access to council services to improve customer experience and drive efficiency.

- Planning Service Transformation & Improvement: Addressing root causes of inefficiency in planning, including process redesign, culture change, and system integration.

- Environmental Services Operational Improvement Programme: Tackling operational pressures and delivering savings through service redesign, digital integration, and performance management.

3.4   **Governance and Delivery:**

To support delivery, a new governance framework has been implemented:

- The Transformation Board, chaired by the Chief Executive, provides strategic oversight and ensures alignment with Council priorities.

- The Transformation & Change Office (TCO) has been established to standardise project management, provide assurance, and build organisational capability.

- All transformation and change projects are now required to follow a consistent lifecycle, with defined stage gates, mandatory documentation, and regular reporting.

- Executive Leadership oversight has been strengthened through regular progress reviews, clear escalation routes, and collective accountability for benefits realisation. Executive Directors are responsible for championing transformation within their services and ensuring that projects receive the leadership support needed to overcome barriers and maintain progress.

3.5   **Workforce and Culture:**

Recognising that successful transformation depends on people, the Council has invested in workforce development, including PRINCE2 and Agile training, and is embedding a culture of continuous improvement and accountability.

3.6   **Financial Strategy:**

The programme is underpinned by a robust financial strategy, with funding drawn from earmarked Transformation Reserves. All major investments are subject to detailed business cases and Executive approval, ensuring value for money and alignment with strategic objectives.

3.7   **Ongoing Monitoring and Scrutiny:**

Progress is regularly reported to the Executive and Overview & Scrutiny Committee, with a focus on transparency, benefits realisation, and risk management. The programme remains agile, with priorities and approaches regularly reviewed in consideration of emerging challenges and opportunities.

4.   Details

The Council's Cherwell Futures Programme has undergone significant development over the past year, with a strong emphasis on improving governance, standardising delivery, building workforce capability, and focusing on priority areas that will deliver the most significant impact. This section outlines the key changes and progress made since the last report.

4.1   **New Governance Framework**

To ensure that transformation and change projects are delivered effectively and consistently, the Council has introduced a single, proportionate governance model. This new framework provides clarity on decision-making, accountability, and oversight, and is designed to support both large-scale transformation initiatives and smaller service improvements.

At the heart of the governance structure is the Transformation Board, chaired by the Chief Executive, which provides strategic oversight and formal approval for all significant projects. The Board meets regularly to review progress, resolve escalated issues, and ensure alignment with the Council's strategic objectives. Executive oversight is reinforced through regular review cycles with the Corporate Leadership Team, ensuring that Executive Directors maintain clear accountability

for delivery, unblock issues that require senior intervention, and provide visible leadership across the organisation.

Supporting the Transformation Board are the Directorate Portfolio Boards, which oversee programmes within individual directorates. These boards are responsible for monitoring delivery, managing risks, and escalating matters that require wider consideration. All transformation and change projects are now required to follow a defined lifecycle, with mandatory stage gates, standard templates, and regular reporting. This approach ensures that every project is subject to appropriate scrutiny and that benefits are tracked and realised.

4.2 Standardisation of Templates and Structures

A key element of the transformation journey has been the move towards standardisation. All projects now use consistent documentation, including:

- Business Cases: Clearly setting out the rationale, objectives, and expected benefits of each project.

- Project Initiation Documents (PIDs): Providing a detailed plan for delivery, resources, and risk management.

- RAID Logs: Systematically capturing Risks, Assumptions, Issues, and Dependencies.

- Benefits Maps and Profiles: Enabling robust tracking of outcomes and savings.

- Reporting Packs: Ensuring transparency and accountability throughout the project lifecycle.

Templates and guidance are published on the Council's SharePoint site, and staff involved in transformation projects receive training and support to ensure these standards are consistently applied. This standardisation has improved the quality of project documentation, facilitated better decision-making, and enabled more effective monitoring of progress.

4.3 Workforce Training and Capability

Recognising that successful transformation depends on the skills and engagement of staff, the Council has invested in a comprehensive workforce development programme. This includes targeted training in recognised project management methodologies such as PRINCE2.

The Transformation & Change Office (TCO) plays a central role in building capability, offering ongoing coaching, lessons-learned reviews, and tailored support for teams. These initiatives have helped to establish a culture of continuous improvement, equipping staff with the necessary tools and confidence to deliver change effectively.

The Transformation & Change Office (TCO) maintains a focus on embedding and continuously improving the new governance structure to support robust decision-making and visibility of the progress of the programme, along with improved accountability, ownership, and clarity of roles and responsibilities in the management of transformation projects.

4.4   **Agreement of Priorities by Executive**

To maximise impact and ensure resources are focused where they are needed most, the Executive has initiated a set of transformation priorities for the coming period. These include:

- Customer Front Door: Streamlining and digitising access to council services to improve customer experience and drive efficiency.

- Planning Transformation: Addressing root causes of inefficiency in planning, including process redesign, culture change, and system integration.

- Environmental Services Improvement: Tackling operational pressures and delivering savings through service redesign, digital integration, and performance management.

Each priority area is supported by a robust business case, clear benefits tracking, and regular reporting to the Transformation Board. This focused approach ensures that transformation efforts are aligned with the Council's strategic objectives and that progress is monitored closely.

4.5   **Progress Since Last Report**

Since the previous update to Overview & Scrutiny, the following progress has been made across the priority areas:

- **Customer Front Door:** The initial review of how residents currently access services has been completed, with a draft Options Appraisal prepared for Executive consideration. Workshops have been held with staff and Members to develop the customer vision and strategy. The initiative aims to deliver approximately £1 million in savings by improving access to services and enabling greater self-service for residents.

- **Planning Transformation:** Work has begun on assessing the improvements needed to upgrade or replace the current planning system. This includes reviewing processes, technology, and performance management arrangements. This project is expected to deliver savings of £550,000 to £800,000 through simpler process, better system integration, and stronger performance management.

- **Environmental Services:** An operational improvement plan has been developed, with a business case for the introduction of 3-weekly waste collections currently in development, to facilitate decision-making and consultation. The programme targets savings of £1 million and is focused on

addressing structural budget pressures, improving service delivery, and preparing for future organisational changes.

In addition to the three priority areas, further work is being undertaken to consolidate key outputs into a single, centralised Transformation and Change portfolio. This includes bringing together annual delivery plans, current budgeted savings, the costed service catalogue, and recommendations from PA Consulting. The goal is to create a more joined-up and consistent approach to transformation that supports the priority programmes while helping to simplify and standardise how change is delivered across the organisation.

Automation: The Council is advancing its automation plans using Robotic Process Automation (RPA) through Blue Prism to streamline service delivery with initial development in Revenues and Benefits. Several automation processes have already been put in place, improving efficiency and allowing staff to focus on more complex casework. These improvements reduce manual tasks, improve accuracy, support digital innovation. and free staff for complex casework. These improvements reduce manual processing, enhance accuracy, and embed digital innovation. The introduction of Copilot further supports staff by providing intelligent assistance across the organisation.

5.   Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

5.1   The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: Do Nothing

This option would leave existing gaps in governance, inconsistent ways of delivering change, and limited oversight of progress. As a result, the Council would be at increased risk of not achieving the savings and service improvements required within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

Option 2: Delivery the Programme through existing approaches only

This option would rely on individual services continuing to lead and manage transformation activities in isolation. While familiar, this approach would not provide the level of coordination, consistency, or prioritisation needed to deliver the Cherwell Futures programme at pace. It would also reduce visibility of risks, limit cross-council learning, and make it harder to track benefits.

Option 3: Prioritise different areas or adjust the method of delivery

Alternative combinations of priority areas and delivery methods were considered. However, reprioritising at this stage would disrupt work already underway and delay progress in areas with the greatest savings potential and operational need. Adjusting the delivery model—for example, adopting a lighter-touch approach— would risk losing structure, clarity, and shared accountability.
Option 4: Adopted the proposed governance Programme Governance approach and delivery model (Recommended)

This approach provides a balanced and proportionate way of managing the Cherwell Futures programme. It ensures that all projects follow a consistent framework, decisions are clear and transparent, and benefits are measurable. It also supports services to deliver change effectively without creating unnecessary centralisation or removing local ownership of delivery.
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6   Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

6.1   The Council has made meaningful progress in strengthening its transformation governance, standardising delivery approaches, and building the capability needed to deliver change well. The introduction of a single, proportionate governance framework, supported by clearer roles, consistent project standards, and improved reporting, has created a more transparent and disciplined approach to managing transformation activity.

Executive leadership is visible and has an active role in overseeing the programme, with the Transformation Board and Corporate Leadership Team providing strategic direction, resolving escalated issues, and ensuring accountability for delivery. This enhanced oversight helps maintain organisational focus, supports stronger decision-making, and ensures that transformation activity continues to align with the Council's priorities.

Together, these improvements are essential for achieving required savings, improving service outcomes, and preparing the organisation for future challenges.

Overview & Scrutiny is invited to note the progress made, consider the strengthened governance and leadership arrangements, and provide feedback to support ongoing improvement.

Decision Information

Key Decision	N/A
Subject to Call in	N/A
If not, why not subject to call in	N/A
Ward(s) Affected	N/A

Document Information

Appendices	
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Corporate Director Approval (unless Corporate Director or Statutory Officer report)	Stephen Hinds, Executive Director, Resources. 13th January 2026