

This report is public	
Cherwell Futures Reserve Draw Down 2026/2027	
Committee	Executive
Date of Committee	5 October 2026
Portfolio Holder presenting the report	Leader – Strategic Leadership and Regeneration, Councillor Lesley McLean
Date Portfolio Holder agreed report	9 September 2026
Report of	Cherwell Futures Director, Ann Slavin

Purpose of report

This paper seeks approval and allocation of the draw down of £1.1million of Cherwell Futures Reserves approved by the Executive in October 2025. It sets out the full costs of the Cherwell Futures Programme and how additional requirements are being funded.

1. Recommendations

The Executive resolves to:

- 1.1 Approve the draw down and allocation of £1.1million of Reserves to be used as set out within this paper.
- 1.2 Approve the use of in year savings of £0.330million from the Customer Front Door Programme to fund additional investment required in new systems and capacity building as set out within this paper.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Cherwell District Council, like many local authorities across the country, continues to face significant financial and operational pressures to deliver within the funding and income that it receives. To respond in part to these pressures, a Transformation Programme, Cherwell Futures, was launched in 2025 to deliver efficiency savings and position the Council as a resilient and effective organisation for the future.
- 2.2 As such, the Cherwell Futures Transformation Programme is a strategic priority for the Council, bringing together a broad range of improvement activities across services, ways of working, and major projects. This includes service and process improvements, organisational change initiatives, as well as developing the operating principles that will shape how services are delivered in the future.

2.3. On 7 October 2025, the Executive approved:

- That Cherwell Futures would focus on three priority areas – Planning, Environmental Services and the Customer Front Door noting that the savings from these programmes plus that what was already built into the MTFS would deliver over £4million in savings (see 3.4.)
- The allocation of £0.4million from the Projects Reserve to fund initial support and preparatory work for Cherwell Futures.
- The transfer of £1.1million from the Projects Reserve to a new Cherwell Futures Reserve for implementation and resource costs.

2.4. Together, the Cherwell Futures programmes form the core of the strategic transformation and change activities and support the Council's wider ambitions for modern, responsive and sustainable services that meet the needs of its communities now and in the future. By strengthening how it works now, Cherwell will be better placed to respond to future opportunities, while building the capacity to shape, influence and lead during periods of change.

2.5 Each programme of work has been subject to detailed Full Business Cases with the Customer Front Door being approved on 13 July 2026, Environmental Services on 7 September 2026 and Planning due to be approved in January 2027.

2.6 The original request for Reserves in October 2025 was to fund targeted investment to cover the costs of essential interim roles and specialist expertise. This structure has been established and has led the detailed analysis and preparation of Full Business Cases. Through this, the new intelligence and analysis that has been undertaken has identified investment required in systems (both new and upgrades), external consultancy support (Route Optimisation, etc), and gaps in capability and capacity to deliver from within existing services. These additional requirements are in the region of £0.330m and can be satisfied by utilising in year savings from the Customer Front Door Programme.

2.7 Over the past 12 months, the Cherwell Futures programme has achieved a number of successes through discrete projects and activities. These are summarised in Appendix 1 and work is underway to map the benefits realised from these through the Benefits Realisation Board.

2.8 This paper therefore seeks:

- Approval to draw down the allocation of £1.1million of Reserves.
- Set out the full costs of the Cherwell Futures Programme and approval for how additional requirements (£0.330m) can be funded from in year savings from the Customer Front Door Programme.

Implications & Impact Assessments

Implications	Commentary
Finance	£1.1m is available to support the Cherwell Futures project from an earmarked transformation reserve. In order to release the further £330k of funding required for the programme, in-year savings from the Customer Front Door project are required to be delivered – the assumption is that the associated changes from Customer Front Door would be in place from 1 January 2027. These savings are not budgeted for and if delivered, would generate a surplus that can be made available to the Cherwell Futures Programme. If the savings are not delivered in-year then the costs would still be incurred and the council will need to establish an alternative funding source in 2026/27. These savings are wholly dependent on the services identified implementing restructures in line with the proposals from the Customer Front Door Project. If the restructures are not designed to at least match those identified as part of the approved business case then the ongoing savings will also be less than anticipated whilst the council will incur the ongoing costs – i.e. the net anticipated benefit will be less. If there are any associated one-off staffing costs related to the implementation of these changes then the council has a separate reserve available to address these costs. If and when any costs are identified Executive will be made aware and asked to release reserves in line with the Council's Reserves Policy. Michael Furness, Assistant Director of Finance, 14 September 2026
Legal	This report focuses on the allocation of reserves and seeks approval in line with the Constitutional requirement. Shiraz Sheikh, Assistant Director Law & Governance, 15 September 2026
Risk Management	There is a risk that, without approval of the proposed reserve draw down, delivery of the Cherwell Futures Programme could be delayed, impacting the timely achievement of planned transformation outcomes, service improvements and associated financial benefits. This risk will be mitigated through established programme governance arrangements, regular performance monitoring and targeted deployment of specialist resources to support delivery. This and any further arising risks will be managed through the programmes' risk register and escalated to the Corporate Risk Register as and when deemed necessary. Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance & Insight Team Leader, 4 September 2026

Impact Assessments	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equality Impact				Not Applicable
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		✓		There is no impact on equality identified as part of this paper. Please note that separate Equality Impact Assessments will be undertaken for the three Cherwell Futures programmes of work.
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		✓		As above.
Climate & Environmental Impact		✓		There is no impact on the environment identified as part of this paper. Please note that separate Impact Assessments will be undertaken for the three Cherwell Futures programmes of work.
ICT & Digital Impact		✓		ICT and Digital impacts arising from the delivery of the Programme will be addressed and governed via the Design Authority Board and Transformation and Change Board. This paper in itself does not identify an impact to flag.
Data Impact		✓		As above.
Procurement & subsidy		✓		Internal processes relating to procurement will be undertaken by each Programme (where relevant) including seeking approval from the Procurement and Contracts Group and Design Authority Board.
Council Priorities	The Cherwell Futures Programme supports the Council's Vision to be ' <i>A modern council inspiring and enabling positive, lasting change</i> ' and the four strategic priorities of Economic Prosperity, Community Leadership, Environmental Stewardship and Quality Housing and Place Making.			
Human Resources	There is no anticipated impact on people in relation to the purpose of this paper. Each Cherwell Futures programme has a dedicated Business Partner within the Human Resources team to closely manage and mitigate any people related impacts from the respective scopes of work. This has been detailed within the Full Business Cases that have or are due to be approved.			
Property	There is no impact in relation to Property that has been identified.			

Consultation & Engagement	There is no public consultation in relation to this paper. Any consultation required with the public, unions, or other stakeholders will be identified and managed through specific programme plans.
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Supporting Information

3. Background

- 3.1. Cherwell Futures was launched in 2025 to deliver efficiency savings and position the Council as a resilient and effective organisation for the future.
- 3.2. At the centre of this approach is Cherwell Futures, the Council's agreed framework for delivering three priority transformation and change programmes:

Customer Front Door

- 3.3 The Customer Front Door Programme is the primary mechanism through which the Council will deliver the ambitions of its Customer Experience Strategy. It is designed to provide a simpler, clearer and more consistent experience for residents, ensuring they can easily understand how to access services, what actions they need to take, what to expect from the process, and how the Council will support them throughout their journey.
- 3.4 By creating a single, accessible and customer-centred route into Council services, the Programme removes the need for residents to understand the Council's internal structures, teams or responsibilities. Instead, it focuses on delivering seamless access to services through a consistent and intuitive experience, regardless of channel or service area.
- 3.5 At its core, the Programme is a customer experience transformation programme, translating the principles of the Customer Experience Strategy into practical improvements that reduce customer effort, improve accessibility and increase confidence in Council services.

Planning Service Improvement Programme (PSIP)

- 3.6 The Planning Service Improvement Programme (PSIP) is an integrated service transformation programme that will:
 - Modernise Cherwell's Planning Service through coordinated improvements to people, processes, governance, data and digital capability, with technology acting as a key enabler of wider service improvement.
 - Improve outcomes and experiences for residents, applicants, agents, Members and staff by delivering simpler, more consistent and transparent customer journeys, efficient digital workflows and effective cross-directorate working.
 - Establish reliable and accessible planning information, creating a single source of truth for planning case history and work in progress to support right-first-time decision-making, stronger performance management and improved accountability.

- Support sustainable operational performance recovery, statutory compliance and continuous improvement, contributing to the Council's wider ambition to exit Government designation and deliver measurable service and financial benefits.

Environmental Services Transformation Programme

- 3.7 Environmental Services deliver a broad range of functions that affect every resident in the District. These services shape how the Council is viewed, influence quality of life in Cherwell's communities, and generate many of the issues, enquiries and service requests raised by Members on behalf of local people. Effective delivery underpins wider strategic confidence in the Council and helps ensure that Members' concerns are properly addressed.
- 3.8 The Environmental Services Transformation Programme will:
- Further strengthen reliable, visible frontline services, making it more responsive to customer needs.
 - Improve customer understanding and self-service by providing clear information and simple routes to get help working collaboratively across the Council and its stakeholders in a more effective way.
 - Ensure services operate more effectively by simplifying processes, clarifying responsibilities and making best use of capacity and resources to allow for investment in services to improve customer outcomes.
- 3.9 Each programme of work has been subject to detailed Full Business Cases:
- Customer Front Door was approved by the Executive on 13th July 2026
 - Environmental Services was approved by the Executive on 7th September 2026
 - Planning Service Improvement Programme is due to be presented to the Executive in January 2027
- 3.10 Through the development of detailed Full Business Cases, the potential savings from the Programme have been refined and are summarised below:

Executive Paper (September 2025)

- Estimated £2.8m – £3.0m with the potential for a further £1.0m in other initiatives over 6 – 18 months

Full Business Case Position (September 2026)

Programme	Saving
Customer Front Door	£0.795m
Planning Service Improvement Programme	£0m ¹
Environmental Services Transformation Programme	£0.559m - £1.017m
Already built into the MTFS 2025/ 2026	£1.8m
Total	£3.154m - £3.612m

¹cashable savings, additional income, released capacity and cost avoidance will be validated after the DEF fit-gap assessment and process redesign (due Nov 2026)

3.11 The development of these Full Business Cases has identified a shortfall in available funding to deliver the scopes of work to the value of £0.330m. These can be attributed to two main areas:

- Systems and Tools: Investment in systems that has now been scoped and market tested with the main cost being the new telephony system and website to enable the Customer Front Door programme.
- Capability Building: Investment in staff to be able to sustain and maintain new systems and processes that are introduced. This will initially be delivered by interim resource whilst upskilling staff to take forward in the longer term. This includes skills in website development, data-driven decision making and leadership development.

3.12 In addition to savings and service improvements, the transformational outcomes delivered by Cherwell Futures will prepare the Council for the future by improving systems, processes and ways of working. From research undertaken the team has identified opportunities for additional savings that can be achieved and will be explored as part of any later phases of work.

4. Details

4.1 The available 2067/ 2027 funding for Cherwell Futures is as follows:

Budget/ Reserve	Total 2026/ 2027
Approved Budget	£0.567m
Approved Reserves	£1.100m
Total	£1.667m

4.2 Note that the Approved Budget above is comprised of £0.515m of Reserves carry forward from 2025/ 2026 and £0.052m internal transfer of budget to fund the Zero-Based Budgeting project within the Environmental Services Improvement Programme. To date, spend against the original budget (2025/ 2026) has, in part, been invested to support improvements and capability development in service areas outside of the core Cherwell Futures programmes. The benefits derived from these is currently being quantified and will likely increase the savings that can be attributed to the Programme.

4.3 It should be noted that when the original request of a total of £1.5m of Reserves was made in 2025 it was to fund specialist interim resource only and based on very limited planning of what was required in the fullness of time once Full Business Cases had been developed. Since approval of the allocation of Reserves, interim teams have been established in line with this model as follows:

Customer Front Door	Environmental Services	Planning
1 x Programme Manager	1 x Programme Manager	1 x Programme Manager
2 x Project Managers	1 x Project Manager	1 x Project Manager
1 x Business Analyst	2 x Business Analysts	1 x Business Analyst

4.4 The 2026/ 2027 full year costs for this resourcing structure fits within the available Reserves budget. However, new intelligence and a full analysis that has been

undertaken within the business cases has identified a number of additional requirements identified in the region of £0.330m and are summarised as follows:

Reason	Additional Cost
Capability development	£0.067m
Unknown requirement in October 2025	£0.263m
Total	£0.330m

4.5 Forecasted in-year savings from the Customer Front Door Programme of £0.330m are proposed to be utilised to fund the additional costs identified.

4.6 The split of the draw down of Reserves is summarised below and mainly relates to interim resource. The one-off costs associated with the website and telephony upgrades for Customer Front Door programme are also included:

Programme	Total 2026/ 2027
Cherwell Futures (overall)	£0.195m
Customer Front Door	£0.862m
Planning Service Improvement Programme	£0.370m
Environmental Services Transformation Programme	£0.570m
Total Programme 2026/ 2027	£1.997m

4.7 The split of the draw down of Reserves is broken down as follows by Programme:

Cherwell Futures (overall)

Item	Total 2026/ 2027
Interim Resource:	£0.151m
• Transformation Director	
Consultancy Support:	£0.034m
• Service support for the Project Management Tool	
Products and Services:	£0.010m
• Project Management Tool licences	
Total	£0.195m

Customer Front Door

Item	Total 2026/ 2027
Interim Resource:	£0.519m
• Programme and Project Management	
• Business Analyst	
• Web expertise	
Consultancy	£0.0m
• None	
Products and Services:	£0.343m
• Netcall and Jadu one off costs	
• Revenue and Benefits system upgrades	
Total	£0.862m

Note that some costs for Netcall are offset by existing service budget provision.

Planning Service Improvement Programme

Item	Total 2026/ 2027
Interim Resource: • Programme and Project Management • Business Analyst	£0.370m
Consultancy: • None	£0.0m
Products and Services: • None	£0.0m
Total	£0.370m

Environmental Services Transformation Programme

Item	Total 2026/ 2027
Interim Resource: • Programme and Project Management • Business Analysts	£0.434m
Consultancy: • Zero-Based Budgeting • Route Optimisation	£0.126m
Products and Services: • Weighbridge data module	£0.010m
Total	£0.570m

- 4.8 Note that consultancy support for the Zero-Based Budgeting project has been funded from a different budget and does not form part of this draw down. It is listed above for completeness.
- 4.9. In developing the resourcing model and therefore split of Reserves draw down, a number of options have been considered and are summarised in Section 5.

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

The Full Business Cases for the Cherwell Futures Programme cannot be delivered in house with existing capabilities and the outcomes set in terms of benefits and savings could therefore not be realised without the allocation of Reserves funding. This option is therefore not recommended.

Option 2: Alternative Resourcing Model

Alternative resourcing options through the use of internal capability through secondment, fixed term contracts and outsourcing to consultancies have been considered.

Internal secondments in particular for project management have been advertised within the Council with only one successful appointment.

Equally the use of fixed term contracts has been explored but discounted due to the appetite in the market for short term contracts for high demand expertise. The potential lead time associated with this model was also considered to be an issue.

The longer-term adoption of the transformation being delivered is a critical success factor for the Programme and outsourcing packages of work to consultancies limits the opportunity for integrating with the impacted services teams to take ownership of the changes longer term.

Note that the options appraisal for IT solutions to be adopted have been documented within the respective Full Business Cases which included consideration of alternative options and the rationale for the approach to be taken.

For the reasons above, this option is not recommended to be taken forward.

Option 3: Proposed Model

The use of interim resource provides the:

- Required skills and expertise that is not currently available within the Council.
- Flexibility to bring in when it is required within the Programme and drop off when no longer needed.
- Ability to integrate delivery teams within the respective services on a day-to-day basis to aid ownership, adoption and knowledge transfer.

As noted above, the options appraisal and justification for non-resource related investment have been provided within the respective Full Business Cases.

Option 4: Rescope Programme

In the event that the request for additional Reserves cannot be approved, a number of scenarios have been modelled to be able to deliver as much as the Cherwell Futures programme as possible within the available budget. These scenarios all relate to resource as non-resource related spend has been committed:

- Reducing the level of interim resource, sharing wherever possible across the Programmes with the likely impact of a delay in deliver as available time will need to be prioritised.
- Accelerating the recruitment of in-house capability in areas that it is required noting that there would be no interim resource to begin this and upskill. This would have a likely impact on the time to deliver some elements of the Programme particularly in Environmental Services.
- Descoping entire elements of the Programme which would enable delivery of part of the Programme in line with the respective Full Business Cases rather than trying to deliver all three in part.

All of the possible scenarios have pro's and con's associated with them and related impacts to timing and realisation of savings/ benefits. Should this be the determined Option by the Executive, a detailed paper will be provided to inform how this prioritisation should be made.

For the reasons set out, it is recommended that Option 3 is approved.

- 5.2. In recommending the above option, the following programme level risks and issues have been considered, and Option 3 presents the best mitigation for them:

Risk/ Issue	Mitigation
The Council does not have the skills and expertise in house to deliver the Programme.	Internal skills and capability have been reviewed with limited opportunities being identified in house. Bringing in external resource is therefore the only option to deliver the Programme with interim appointments being favoured for the flexibility it provides compared to fixed term contracts, etc. This also provides opportunity for knowledge transfer to incumbent teams as part of their assignments.
Where skills and expertise are available, there is no capacity to deliver.	Secondment opportunities have been offered with one successful appointment. Specialist skills in Power BI for example were originally identified to support the delivery of the Programme but capacity to deliver in house alongside other commitments has since materialised as an issue. The appointment of interim resource is therefore the best mitigation strategy to enable delivery of the Programmes within the timeframes set.
Services do not take ownership for the transformation which inhibits adoption and realisation of the benefits and savings set out.	Dedicated delivery teams utilising the skills and expertise of contributing service areas allows for buy in from members of staff who are part of the transformation as it happens. It provides the balance of utilising subject matter expertise when it is needed supported by dedicated resource to drive delivery. Alternative resourcing models such as outsourcing packages of work do not enable this collaboration and contribution.

6 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 6.1 For the reasons set out within Section 5, it is recommended that Option 3: Proposed Model is approved by the Executive.
- 6.2 The Model proposed provides the Cherwell Futures Programme with the required skills and expertise to deliver the programmes of work set out within the respective Full Business Cases. The utilisation of interim resource allows for targeted support when it is required and appropriate knowledge handover to the respective services to embed as 'business as usual' beyond the life of the Programme.
- 6.3 In proposing this model, internal capability has been explored with secondment opportunities being offered where possible. In most cases, the skills and expertise required is not available in house which has informed the model/ approach

proposed. This will need to be considered for the longer term whereby capability in web design and Power BI reporting for example will be an ongoing requirement for the Council.

Decision Information

Key Decision	No
Subject to Call in	Yes
If not, why not subject to call in	Not Applicable
Ward(s) Affected	All

Document Information

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Projects Delivered Summary
Background Papers	None
Reference Papers	Cherwell Futures Programme Executive Paper 7/10/25
Report Author	Ann Slavin, Cherwell Futures Director
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Executive Director Approval (unless Executive Director or Statutory Officer report)	Stephen Hinds, Executive Director - Resources