

**ANNUAL
GOVERNANCE
STATEMENT
2020/21**

Annual Governance Statement 2020 – 2021

Scope of Responsibility

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council ('the Authority') is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. The Authority also has a general duty under the Local Government Measure (Wales) 2009 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In discharging this overall responsibility, the Authority is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

The Authority has approved and adopted a Code of Governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework "Delivering Good Governance in Local Government". A copy of the code is available from the Governance and Partnerships Section.

This statement explains how the Authority has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 5 of the Accounts and Audit (Wales) Regulations 2014 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control to accompany the Statement of Accounts.

The Purpose of the Governance Framework

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, and culture and values, by which the Authority is directed and controlled and its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community. It enables the Authority to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate, cost-effective services.

The system of internal control is a significant part of the framework and is designed to manage risk at a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risk and can therefore only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to identify the key risks of the Authority, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically. These will include achievement or not of the Council's policies, aims and objectives.

The governance framework has been in place at the Authority for the year ended 31 March 2021 and up to the date of approval of the Annual Statement of Accounts.

In May 2020 Audit Wales published their Annual Audit Summary. The report included a synopsis of each review undertaken by Audit Wales over the year.

Details of the Proposals for Improvement issued by regulators during 2020/21 are available from the Corporate Performance Team, and progress against their achievement is included in the Joint Finance and Performance Report. These proposals are attached at Appendix A.

The Governance Framework

The governance framework includes the key elements of the systems and processes that comprise the Authority's governance arrangements, along with an assessment of their effectiveness. The ways in which the Authority demonstrates this are discussed below. Each core principle set out in the Authority's Code of Governance is identified, along with the self-assessment of how well it is applied and how we propose to improve in future. The review of effectiveness is informed by the work of the Senior Managers, who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Audit and Risk Manager's annual report, and by the commentary from the external auditors and other regulators.

Core Principle A
Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values,
and respecting the rule of law.

How we do this:

A Governance Framework exists that sets out the standards and processes to be adopted by both Members and Officers. Codes of Conduct, detailing Member / Officer relations, are contained within the Constitution and all are required to make declarations of any interests that impact on their positions / functions. These documents are periodically reviewed and updated, and are influenced by best practice and recommendations from both internal and external regulators.

Members' declarations are retained by the Monitoring Officer and Officers' declarations are held by Service Managers. All Council meetings are conducted in accordance with the agreed democratic process and have declarations of interest as part of the agenda, with any declarations noted in the minutes and Members withdrawing or not taking part in the debate as appropriate.

A Policy Framework exists to guide both Members and Officers in fulfilment of their roles. This includes a Whistle-Blowing policy enabling Members, Officers and the public to report any concerns regarding the integrity and operations of the Authority. In addition, policies such as

disciplinary or grievance procedures have been formulated for dealing with breaches to the codes.

Both Officers and Members are advised through the induction process of the standards of behaviour required by the Council throughout their term of office or employment. Continued adherence to the ethical values of the Authority is confirmed through a performance review protocol for all Officers and a Personal Development Review (PDR) / Competency Framework (CF) in place for Members. The PDR / CF is a mandatory process for senior salary holders, and non-senior salary holders are also offered the opportunity to undertake a PDR / CF.

The Authority's constitution has a published Scheme of Delegation of Functions, which is agreed and published annually. This scheme details subject areas, and identifies the bodies or individuals responsible for decision making. It sets out the terms of reference for the various committees in operation. In addition, both the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer have oversight of the decisions made by the Authority to ensure their lawfulness and financial probity.

Review of Effectiveness:

Each Committee conforms to legislative requirements including compliance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009, Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The decision making process is documented and the Authority's Scrutiny Committees can 'call in' a decision which has been made by the Executive Committee but not yet implemented. No decisions were called in during 2020/21.

Work has continued to strengthen Blaenau Gwent's Scrutiny and Democratic Committee arrangements. Throughout the response to the Covid 19 pandemic, all members were provided with laptops to assist them with remote access. Support arrangements and guidance were put in place to support members through this unprecedented time.

Mandatory sessions on the Constitution including roles and responsibilities are held for all new Members.

The Ombudsman received a number of complaints against members in 2020/21 in relation to Blaenau Gwent. None of these complaints were upheld. There were 2 whistle-blowing incidents reported to the Authority during the year and both currently being investigated.

Recommendations for Development:

- Continued adherence to the Authority's policies and procedures which exist to guide Members and Officers to comply with the Council's expectations in terms of acting with integrity.
- To evidence the robust application of the Authority's Code of Conduct, an Internal Audit review of the declarations of interest process will be concluded.
- In line with good practice, an Annual review (as a minimum) of the Constitution and Scheme of Delegation to ensure the Authority's governance and decision making processes remain fit for purpose.

- Continued application of the Members Performance Development Review Scheme and competency framework.
- Continued application of the Officers Performance Review Scheme.
- Audit plans for future years will include testing a range of policies and procedures.

Core Principle B
Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

How we do this:

The Council continues to develop the way in which it engages with the community and new processes for engagement with the Town and Community Council have been developed. Over the last 12 months the Council reduced its engagement activities relating to the Covid 19 pandemic but the following engagement activities have taken place:

- Youth Forum and Older Peoples network supporting Community Impact Assessments aligned to Covid 19;
- Budget Setting Engagement for 2021/22; and
- Blaenau Gwent Climate Assembly

CLT have recently agreed for the Council to have a Corporate Engagement Calendar in order to map out the breadth and types of engagement activities being delivered across the organisation to support better planning and co-ordination in the future.

The Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Plan 2018 to 2023 sets out the main priorities for strategic partnership working. To support the Plan for its implementation the PSB has developed a Strategic Work Programme which was signed off in January 2020. This Work Programme has identified five high level actions to be taken forward:

- First 1,000 days and Early Years Pathfinder;
- Building a healthier Gwent / Integrated Well-being Networks;
- Climate Change;
- Blaenau Gwent Sustainable Food Programme; and
- Foundational Economy.

Each of the high level actions has an identified PSB sponsor.

During 2018/19, the Council developed a Corporate Plan 2018/22 which included revised Well-being Objectives (which also act as Improvement Objectives). In summer 2020, the Council undertook a review of the Corporate Plan linked to the response and learning to date from Covid 19 and what the Council is aiming to achieve by the end of the Plan in 2022. This resulted in some amendments being made to the Well-being Objectives in order to better

demonstrate the contribution different areas across the Council will contribute to achieving them, enhancing our One Council approach. The overall emphasis of each Well-being Objective has not changed:

- **Protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure to benefit our communities**
- **Support a fairer sustainable economy and community**
- **To enable people to maximise their independence, develop solutions and take an active role in their communities**
- **An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services we know matter to communities**

Blaenau Gwent continues to work with a wide range of partners where partnership opportunities provide better outcomes for local residents than the Council could achieve if working on its own. We work in partnership with a variety of stakeholders including staff, residents and businesses. Examples of collaborations and partnerships include:

- Education Achievement Service (EAS)
- Shared Resource Service (SRS)
- Public Service Board (PSB)
- Cardiff Capital Region City Deal
- Local Nature Partnership Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen
- Tech Valleys
- Valley Task Force
- South east Wales Safeguarding Board (GWASB)
- Greater Gwent Health, Social Care and Well-being Partnership;

The Council has an established engagement framework for staff and the Council's Trade Union and Consultation Framework has been reviewed and updated this year. The Partnership and Engagement Team has developed an overarching Council Engagement Framework which includes engagement with staff. An example of this engagement is the consultation undertaken with staff in relation to the new operating model.

Review of Effectiveness:

To ensure relevant stakeholders are engaged throughout the Council's policy development and decision making processes, comprehensive engagement events have been held throughout the year.

The Policy, Partnership and Engagement Team have supported a number of engagement and participation activities and events. The Council continues to hold a number of key engagement and participation activities and events including: Youth Forums; School Grand Council; quarterly Over 50's Network and Forum; and equality focused Access for all Forums. The Council also continues to develop its use of social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook and Flickr.

Engagement with staff regarding the process for staff supervision has been undertaken which has led to improvements to the process in order to encourage discussion in identified areas.

Engagement arrangements with Audit Wales are in place with regular meetings with the Head of Governance and Partnerships, regular meetings with the Section 151 Officer and separate monthly meetings with the Managing Director. Quarterly meetings are also undertaken with the Leadership.

The Authority's Education Services have regular half-termly Local Authority Link Inspector (LALI) meetings convened with Estyn in line with inspectorate requirements. The Authority has update meetings between the Corporate Director Education, political leaders and the Welsh Government officials as and when required.

The Regional Partnership Board has submitted a 'Transformational Offer' to Welsh Government setting out proposals of how the Gwent region would support the continued development of a 'seamless system' of care, support and well-being, in response to the Welsh Government's new long term plan for health and social care, 'A Healthier Wales'. The offer in total for Gwent amounted to £13.4 million of new limited funding over a two-year period. Four areas were selected, derived from the priority areas within the Area Plan and the considered directions of the Regional Partnership Board. These include:

- The development of early intervention and prevention services;
- The development of primary and community care services;
- The redesign of child and adolescent emotional and mental health services;
- The development of an integrated 'Home First' discharge model.

Recommendations for Development:

- Monitor progress of the Local Well-being Plan.
- Continued implementation of the Council's Engagement Programme as part of the Engagement Strategy.

Core Principle C
Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.

How we do this:

The Authority has reviewed its priorities, vision and values and these are set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2018/22. The Corporate Plan acts as the Council's business plan and is directly linked to the priorities in the Well-being Plan. The Corporate Plan was approved

by Council on 26th April 2018 and covers the four-year period to 2022, in line with the remainder of the term of office until the next local elections. In 2020 a review of the plan was undertaken to consider the learning from the COVID 19 pandemic. This resulted in some amendments being made to the Outcome Statements in order to better demonstrate the contribution different areas across the Council will contribute to achieving them, enhancing our one Council approach. The overall emphasis of each Outcome Statement (Well-being Objective) has not changed.

The Corporate Plan 2020/22 Outcome Statements are:

- **Protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure to benefit our communities**
- **Support a fairer sustainable economy and community**
- **To enable people to maximise their independence, develop solutions and take an active role in their communities**
- **An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services we know matter to communities**

The priority areas also act as our Well-being Objectives as part of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act.

In October 2020, the Council published its assessment of Performance for 2019/20, detailing progress made throughout the year against the priorities identified within the Plan. It also included an assessment of the work undertaken as part of the response to the global pandemic, Covid 19.

The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 established statutory Public Service Boards (PSBs) to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing across Wales by strengthening joint working across all public services. The Authority is one of five statutory members of the board.

The Blaenau Gwent PSB was established with an agreed Terms of Reference and a PSB Scrutiny Committee has also been set up through our agreed democratic processes. The Well-being Assessment and Well-being Plan have been developed and published with the Council leading on this work.

Audit Wales undertook a national review of PSBs in Wales which led to four proposals for improvement being received in October 2019 for consideration by PSBs across Wales.

The Authority has a Strategic Equality Plan that was subject to comprehensive engagement including through the Access for all Forum and the Older Peoples Network as part of its development. The Authority is committed to the principles of the Wales Procurement Policy that identifies Procurement as a strategic enabler, delivering key policy objectives to support the Council's economic, social and environmental priorities.

A consultation process was completed on the proposed approach for delivery of the Strategic Equalities Plan prior to the Member Equalities Task and Finish Group completing its work and the Strategic Equalities Plan presented for approval at Council in March 2020.

The Welsh Education Strategic Plan (WESP), is monitored via the Blaenau Gwent Education Forum (WEF) on a termly basis and presented to Scrutiny / Executive prior to the annual return to Welsh Government.

The Authority receives a capital allocation from Welsh Government that is used along with the capital receipt reserve to form a capital programme providing a range of sustainable benefits for the Authority. The funding is allocated based on departmental bids for projects. The bids are analysed and scored in line with a set of criteria that consider, amongst other things, the projects alignment with corporate and national priorities.

Review of Effectiveness:

Equality Impact Assessments are undertaken against all relevant proposals, and included within the business planning framework, reporting template and strategic business reviews. The Annual Report to the Equality and Human Rights Commission was published and submitted within the appropriate timescales.

On an annual basis the Council prepares an Annual Welsh Language Monitoring Report, which is produced in accordance with the requirements of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. The 2019/20 report was provided to the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee in December 2020. The statutory deadline for publishing the report is June each year. However, due to Covid 19 this needed to be delayed as resources to support Welsh Language reporting was used to support critical services during response. The following action was taken in-line with the Welsh Language Commissioner's Office advice:

- i) That a current copy of your annual report is made available on your website and the reason for delay is stated.

It is a statutory responsibility for the Corporate Director of Social Services to assess the effectiveness of the delivery of Social Services and produce an Annual Report. The Annual Report contributes to and forms part of the Annual Council Reporting Framework (ACRF). The report of the Corporate Director of Social Services was presented to the Social Services Scrutiny Committee in September 2019. As part of legislative amendments made as part of the response to the global pandemic and due to the unprecedented challenges facing everyone at this time there is no requirement to submit performance data by the Director of Social Services until September 2021.

The Transformation Programme to support the continued development of a 'seamless system' of care, support and wellbeing in Gwent, in response to the Welsh Government's new long term plan for health and social care 'A Healthier Wales' has seen progress. The SPACE well-being (Single Point of Access for Children's Emotional Well-being and Mental Health) Programme hosted by Families First have shown early indications that the mental health needs of children and young people are being assessed early with the right agency taking the lead on providing the most appropriate interventions.

Strong progress continues to be made on the Council's Welsh Education Strategic Plan (WESP), including approval to implement a proposal to establish a new 210 place Welsh medium primary school in the Tredegar area.

Compassionate Communities is also part of the Transformation Programme that aims to improve the well-being of people across Gwent. Work includes the development of IAA outreach across the Compassionate Communities within 11 GP practices and also at community and acute hospital sites, where initial positive outcomes have been reported. Compassionate Communities also include Community Connectors actively participating in Multi-Disciplinary Team Discussions and Hospital discharge follow up phone calls.

Recommendations for Development:

- Continued implementation and mainstreaming of the Welsh Language Standards across all areas of Blaenau Gwent.
- Continue to support the collective and individual body duties under the Well-being of Future Generations Act.
- To implement the new code of practice in relation to the performance and improvement framework of Social Services in Wales.
- Review the Independent Living Strategy (2005-2021) and to develop a new 10-year strategy integrated across health and social care.

Core Principle D
Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes.

How we do this:

The Authority has strengthened its Performance Management Framework to ensure a consistent approach and accountability for performance improvement. This process has been aligned to the Risk Management Framework to provide one approach for data collection and monitoring.

A Strategic Commercial and Commissioning Board has been established to provide oversight and scrutiny of the Council's commercial; activities, primarily commissioning, procurement, investments and trading. The board provides challenge with regards to the merits of each spending proposal and ensures a consistent approach to spending in line with the objectives of the Authority.

The corporate reporting format has been designed to guide officers and members to consider the key implications of any proposals put forward. The report has defined areas for considering options appraisal, risk, staffing and financial impact, along with the contribution to the Sustainable Development Principles. This assists in the process for making informed and transparent decisions and ensures the links between budget and planning are considered.

Review of Effectiveness:

The Authority presents the Joint Report to the Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee and Executive Committee on a quarterly basis. This report highlights key messages, performance information, workforce information, financial analysis, Strategic Business Reviews progress, Audit Wales proposals for improvement and directorate and corporate risks. Throughout the Covid 19 pandemic the reporting of the Joint Report was put on hold, although the Council did produce its annual assessment of performance within the required timescales. Corporate Leadership Team agreed for business plans to be completed to provide an end of year position statement so that an end of year Joint Report can be presented to the new committee cycle starting in June 2021.

Self-evaluation arrangements are in place and continue to be refined, requiring each service area to consider how its activities contributed to the achievement of its intended outcomes and support the Council to achieve its goals. The process enables us to gather and use good quality information to better understand how we are performing. As part of the Local Government and Elections Act, there is a requirement for Local Authorities to conduct robust self-assessments and reporting on the extent to which the Council is meeting the performance requirements in order to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of its local communities. As part of this the Council will be undertaking a review of its self-assessment processes to ensure they abide with the requirements of the Act. In preparation for this the Council has met with the WLGA.

The remit of the Strategic Commercial and Commission Board focuses on the strategic direction of the Council's commercial activities including the commissioning and procurement of the organisations third party spend.

Recommendations for Development:

- Review of the self-evaluation process.
- Reinstatement of business planning cycle

Core Principle E
Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.

How we do this:

Blaenau Gwent has 42 elected members who collectively make up the decision making body for the Authority. This is complemented by an officer structure of trained and experienced people.

Most policy decisions are developed by the Executive Committee, which for 2020/21 has comprised the Leader and four Members with individual portfolio responsibilities. The portfolios were agreed at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Council in April 2020.

In addition to the Executive Committee, the Authority's Committee structure also comprises three decision making Committees (1 x Planning and 2 x Licensing), five Scrutiny Committees, two Joint Scrutiny Committees, a Public Service Board Scrutiny Committee, a Standards Committee, a Democratic Services Committee and an Audit Committee.

Members are appointed to these Committees, each of which is supported by relevant officers. Payments to Members who are in positions which attract a senior salary are in line with the determinations of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales.

There are four statutory posts in place namely the Head of Paid Service, the Monitoring Officer, the Head of Democratic Services and the Section 151 Officer. These are satisfied by the appointments of the Managing Director, the Head of Legal and Compliance, the Head of Governance and Partnerships and the Chief Officer - Resources, respectively. These post holders are charged with ensuring elected Members receive appropriate advice

There are two further officer roles, namely, the Corporate Director of Education and the Corporate Director of Social Services who undertake statutory functions for Education and Social Services respectively. Two more officer roles are taken up by the position of Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services and the Chief Officer – Commercial. During 2021 there were changes to the CLT with the appointment of a new Corporate Director of Education and a new Chief Officer –Commercial.

The Authority has a clear set of strategic outcomes, supporting actions and competencies which relate to service delivery. Both Members and Officers receive appropriate training to enable them to develop / enhance the necessary skills to fulfil their roles.

A Performance Coaching Scheme exists for Officers and a Personal Development Review Scheme (PDRs) and Competency Framework for Members to ensure an appropriate level of competency and to identify any further training needs or continuous professional development requirements that are required for the job role, or to prepare them for future roles. Most officer posts have a detailed job description and person specification, and selection is made through a robust recruitment process to meet the specific skills and competencies of the post.

Role descriptions for Members are established and include specific role descriptions for senior member roles. These are included within the Constitution.

Review of Effectiveness:

In November 2018 the Council received its Level 1 Wales Charter for Member Support and Development awarded by the Welsh Local Government Association, recognising the Authority's good practice in this area. The Member Development Strategy was updated as part of this process. A Member Induction Programme has been implemented and was aligned to the forward work programmes following the local election on 4th May 2017. Procedures for Member Personal Development Reviews (PDR) are in place. The PDR process has been enhanced with the development of a Members Competency Framework which was considered and approved at the AGM in May 2018. This process is mandatory for all senior salary holders and offered to all members.

A revised mentoring scheme for Members has been agreed by Council. Three Members have undergone mentoring training and a further three requests from Members to become mentors

have been received as part of the Personal Development Review (PDR) process. Currently two Members have requested to be mentees.

A Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) operates within the Authority, consisting of the Managing Director, supported by departmental Directors and Chief Officers. These meetings are minuted and key information is disseminated to all officers through an established reporting structure.

The Authority monitors performance reviews through the management structure, feeding concerns up to CLT as appropriate. There is an established Engagement and Consultation Framework agreed with and in place for trade union involvement which has been reviewed and updated with them in 2019/20. An Engagement Strategy was introduced during 2018 which includes staff engagement.

In house, on the job training continues and essential external training is undertaken. Managers and staff have the ability to discuss capability and capacity issues as part of the performance review process.

One members of staff was the subject of the capability process during the period April 2019 – March 2020, this was commenced and resolved during the period.

Five internal grievance procedures were instigated between April 2019 and March 2020. All were closed by the end of the year.

A new Leadership Development Programme was planned for the end of 2020, but progress was delayed due to the pandemic.

Recommendations for Development:

- Develop and implement a new Leadership Development Programme.

Core Principle F
Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management.

How we do this:

The Authority has in place a Risk Management Framework that includes a Risk Management Strategy and a Risk Management Handbook. The risk management arrangements are set out in the Performance Management Framework and are aligned to the corporate business planning process. These set out the risk appetite of the Council and provide a methodology to ensure the consistent assessment / prioritisation of the risks the Authority faces and any mitigating actions.

The Authority continues to produce the Joint Report which highlights progress in relation to finance, performance and risk.

The Council has an adopted corporate policy in place to deal with complaints. A review of monitoring the complaints has been undertaken and new processes and nominated officers have been identified.

A Governance and Audit Committee has been established in line with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure and the Local Government and Elections Act, receiving reports from internal and external regulators on the internal control environment, risk and governance. The Committee provides appropriate challenge and seeks assurance in line with its terms of reference that are laid in the constitution.

As a Local Authority it is necessary that we collect and use personal information to perform many of our day-to-day operations. The General Data Protection Act (GDPR) which came into force in May 2018 is the most comprehensive and significant change to Data Protection legislation in 20 years. The Council established a Corporate Project Group in April 2017 to manage the preparatory work for GDPR compliance. The Council's 'Information & Governance Officer' was assigned the statutory role of Data Protection Officer and the post retitled 'Data Protection and Governance Officer' to reflect this. The project group has since disbanded but reviews continue to be undertaken by the Information Governance Group (IGF) which is chaired by the Senior Information Risk Officer (SIRO). Following Brexit, the GDPR is now referred to as UK-GDPR as opposed to the EU-GDPR. There are currently no differences between the two.

The Council implemented an Information Asset Owner structure during the GDPR project to establish clear lines of responsibility for information management. Information Asset Registers are in place for each Department to provide corporate oversight of all key information systems and to risk assess in terms of confidentiality, integrity and availability. The Council also created a Record of Processing Activities to drill down into the necessary level of detail required under GDPR and identify the lawful basis for processing all the different types of personal data that it holds. The Council has a number of Information Governance policies and procedures to manage compliance with its statutory obligations.

Review of Effectiveness:

The Authority's key governance systems continue to be risk assessed and included in the annual audit plan. Two key governance systems were subject to an internal audit during 2019/20, namely Business Planning Improvement and Data, and Strategic Policy (Welsh Language), with the findings of these audits reported to the Governance and Audit Committee during 2020/21. Three follow-up audits were completed during 2020/21 with two showing good progress against recommendations and one requiring some further work by the department. A review and update of the Anti-Money Laundering Policy was also undertaken during the year, and a review of the Anti-Bribery, Fraud and Corruption Policy commenced.

The Risk Management Strategy and Handbook were reviewed and adopted by Council in February 2018. The Professional Lead – Risk and Insurance advises Departmental Management Teams and CLT to facilitate challenge / discussions on directorate risks. This has resulted in a more consistent approach to risk evaluation and reporting becoming embedded across the Council.

The highest level risks faced by the Authority are recorded on the Corporate Risk Register. The main risks facing the Authority during the period were:

Risk Description	Potential Impact
Failure to deliver and sustain the changes required to ensure that vital services are prioritised within the financial constraints faced by the Council.	Vital services will not be protected if the Council fails to find more efficient ways of working and improvements to social, economic and environmental well-being of the areas will not be achieved.
Failure to ensure adequate safeguarding arrangements are in place for vulnerable people in Blaenau Gwent.	Potential significant harm or loss of life. Long term reputational damage and confidence in the Council undermined.
Failure to deliver the Council's priorities within the agreed annual budget.	Increased use of emergency finance measures and the drawdown of reserves.
There are 3 schools in Blaenau Gwent currently in receipt of Council's Intervention arrangements as a result of being in an Estyn category and the risk relates to failing to make appropriate progress against the Statutory Warning Notices to improve and deliver against their Post Inspection Action Plans (PIAPs).	Potential impact is on the learning progress made by children at the 2 schools. Implementation of statutory interventions available under the provisions set out in the School Standards and Organisation Act Wales 2013 i.e. implementation of additional grounds.
Exiting the EU will have an adverse impact at a national and local level.	Impact on the community and on the Council funding and its ability to deliver public services.
Failure to improve staff attendance rates within the Council.	Unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively and financially support the cost of sickness absence.
Failure of the Council to manage its information assets in accordance with requirements set down within legislation	Financial penalties and possible sanctions that hinder service delivery.
Increasingly complex needs and demand for services provided by Social Services Education, in particular for Looked After Children.	Further significant pressure on the Council's budget.
The Financial resilience of the council could be at risk if the council does not ensure that financial planning and management decisions support long term stability and sustainability.	Inability to deliver effective services/ lower quality services provided. Unplanned reduction of services provided.
The on-going COVID 19 pandemic presents a continued risk to service delivery.	Potential for disruption to be on a medium / long term basis as a result of pandemic.

A copy of the full Corporate Risk Register can be obtained from the Risk Management and Insurance Section.

All Strategic Business Review projects are risk assessed using the Corporate Risk Management Framework. Decisions on managing those risks are agreed and monitored as part of the project management arrangements that are in place.

All Data Protection Impact Assessments are approved by the Data Protection & Governance Officer to ensure that there are effective controls in place to mitigate the risk of a Data Protection Breach. Where a Data Protection Incident is reported, the Data Protection & Governance Officer will investigate the cause and review the responsible service area controls to ensure they are effective. The Data Protection & Governance Officer, Information Governance Forum and the Council's Senior Information Risk Officer (SIRO) review the Council's information governance arrangements to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Recommendations for Development:

- To assess and demonstrate its compliance with the Local Government Measure and the aims and objectives of the Council, the annual report of the Governance & Audit Committee will be produced summarising the year's activity and evidencing their responsibilities as part of the governance arrangements.
- Regular review of Risk Management arrangements to ensure they remain fit for purpose and are implemented consistently.
- Conclude the review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy and update as appropriate
- Continued inclusion of key governance systems in the internal audit plan to ensure key elements of the governance framework are prioritised and examined annually.

Core Principle G
Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit, to deliver effective accountability.

How we do this:

Decision making processes for both Officers and Members are set out in the Constitution. Boundaries are clearly defined and the Committee structure includes decision making, scrutiny and regulatory functions. A set of Financial Procedure Rules and Contract Procedure Rules have been adopted to ensure consistency, transparency and value for money in financial management and procurement. The Chief Officer Resources ensures the Authority's financial management arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2016). An annual Statement of Accounts is produced and presented to Members for scrutiny. A period of public consultation is held where members of the public can inspect the accounts.

A Governance and Audit Committee is established that has the primary functions of reviewing financial reports and challenging governance arrangements. The Committee aims to seek assurance that the governance framework operating within the Authority is robust, effective and efficient. This is achieved in part through the Committee receiving this Annual

Governance Statement. The role and scope of the Audit Committee are set out in the Constitution.

The Internal Audit Service works on a risk based approach, to an annual audit plan, in order to assess the internal control environment of the Authority. The work of the section is prioritised in line with the Authority's objectives. The results of all audit work are reported to the Governance & Audit Committee who can, if necessary, call Officers to account where weak control is identified. Policies are maintained for Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery, and Anti-Money-Laundering. Adherence to these is considered as part of the work of the Internal Audit function.

The Social Services Directorate is subject to audit, inspection and review by the Care Inspectorate for Wales (CIW). On a quarterly basis the Director of Social Services and Heads of Adult and Children's Services meet with CIW to discuss achievements, performance and key challenges. The Directorate is scrutinised by the Social Services Scrutiny Committee. Regular liaison meetings are held with the Directorate, the Executive Member and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Scrutiny Committee.

The Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014 places a statutory duty on all local authorities to produce an annual report on the discharge of its social services functions. The Council's arrangements to meet their safeguarding responsibilities are scrutinised by the Joint Education & Learning and Social Services (Safeguarding) Scrutiny Committee. The Committee exists to monitor and challenge, in order to make improvements and ensure the Council's safeguarding processes are effective.

Council meetings are held open to the public and minutes are published on the Authority's website. A number of meetings have previously been webcast. Since the global pandemic, arrangements for holding democratic meetings have been considered to ensure that the arrangements remain fit for purpose. As part of this, the Council introduced Microsoft Teams to support virtual meetings. All Elected Members were issued with laptops, enabling virtual meetings to be held. Each democratic meeting is recorded live and then uploaded onto the website. In future, 'Teams Live' is being considered whereby meetings will be streamed live. As part of the closure of the Civic Centre in Ebbw Vale, the General Offices have been identified as the new democratic hub for the Council. As part of this a new Chamber has been identified and a new delegate system set up. This system is functional with Microsoft Teams and will provide a hybrid meeting function moving forward to adhere to the remote meeting requirements as part of the Local Government and Election Act. It is planned for the full cycle to be run as hybrid meetings from September 2021 onwards.

The Council continues to fulfil its obligations under the Freedom of Information Act and provide information to requestors wherever possible in the interests of transparency. In addition, requests under GDPR legislation for access to information held on a person are also fulfilled in line with the legislation. Response rates for fulfilling the requirements here are reported regularly to CLT.

Review of Effectiveness:

The Council strives to ensure continuous improvement in the delivery of its services through its improvement planning process and the Performance Management Framework. It has

strengthened these arrangements to align them with risk management and project management as well as identifying levels of accountability.

The remit of the WCLT is to effectively support the CLT in its role of providing strategic direction to the organisation. It is a forum to disseminate information and communicate messages ensuring a one council approach as well as networking with colleagues and peers and providing personal development opportunities.

A performance management system, utilised by the whole Council is in place which incorporates the majority of the Councils business planning and performance arrangements, so that we have one place for information management and monitoring. The system works to avoid duplication and to provide a consistent approach across the Council. The system includes statutory monitoring as well as business plans, self-evaluations, risk, business continuity, performance indicators and sustainable development.

The Authority's assurance arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Head of Internal Audit. The service underwent an external quality assessment during 2016/17 that found the service to conform to the Public Sector Internal Audit Standards. The next external assessment is due in 2021/22.

Internal Audit Services issued 33 audit opinions during the year.

Audit Grading	No of audits
Full Assurance	16
Reasonable Assurance	8
Limited Assurance	1
No Assurance	0
Non-graded	8

The level of audit coverage for the year 20/21 was curtailed as a consequence of the redirection of audit resources to assist with the Authority's response to the Covid 19 pandemic. There was 1 Limited Assurance audit grading issued during the financial year in relation to Business Planning Improvement and Data. The numbers of audits conducted using the Control Risk Self-Assessment (CRSA) methodology continued to increase and focused predominantly on schools and the fundamental financial systems., The overall audit opinion on the adequacy of the internal control environment continued to reflect Reasonable Assurance across the council. Members of WCLT continue to receive periodic reviews of Internal Audit findings to ensure appropriate corrective action is taken to maintain and / or improve internal controls.

The Authority received and processed 1200 Freedom of Information requests between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021. The service responded to 86.5% (1039) within the 20 working day requirement. This falls below the required level, and below the level attained the previous year, despite additional resource being put into the team in February 2020 to address this. However, despite implementing additional resource into the team, this was quickly reduced in March 2020 due to redeployment to support the covid response and track and trace. During the height of the pandemic the ICO issued advice that whilst the legislation could not be changed they were understanding of the strains on local authorities and would not be seeking to put enforcement action on authorities during this time for FOI

response rates. Anecdotally we have determined that the rates of FOI response for Blaenau Gwent compare favourably to some neighbouring authorities whose response rates are lower in the 70% region.

Recommendations for Development:

- Managers to implement the actions identified to address weaknesses highlighted by Internal Audit. Meetings are undertaken with members of the Wider Corporate Leadership Team, in addition to responsible Officers, and timescales are set for implementation. Managers to ensure systems for which they have responsibility have robust internal controls to further improve the integrity of the Authority's processes.
- Conclude the review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy to ensure it remains fit for purpose.
- Internal Audit to undergo an external peer review

Significant Governance Issues

We have been advised on the implications of the results of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework, and that the arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose subject to the significant governance issues to be specifically addressed as outlined below:

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Responsible Officer</i>
<p>The uncertainty around the current and future economic impact of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid-19 • the exit from the European Union • WG future financial settlements <p>Ongoing uncertainty around the medium to long term impact of these may pose significant challenges for the Council and it will be critical for the Council to demonstrate that it has appropriate governance arrangements in place to manage its financial position.</p>	<p>Financial monitoring will continue to be undertaken and reported regularly into Scrutiny and Executive Committee via the quarterly portfolio budget forecast reports.</p> <p>For 2020/21 WG has provided additional financial support for local authorities of £300m. They have committed to continuing this support until at least sept 2021, and longer for some specific service areas.</p> <p>To ensure the Council's financial resilience the Council intends to continue with its bridging the gap programme which will</p>	Chief Officer Resources

	<p>identify a number of strategic business reviews which will focus on its core functions including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maximising income • Maximising resources • Demand management • Maximising technology and data <p>Within this framework the Authority will be looking at ways to achieve savings whilst mitigating the impact on services.</p>	
<p>Audit Wales received correspondence towards the end of its 2016/17 audit which resulted in an investigation into the Council's historic relationship with its wholly owned company Silent Valley Waste Services Ltd (SVWS).</p> <p>As the investigation by Audit Wales into the issues raised has not been finalised there has been a delay in receiving an audit opinion on previous years' accounts.</p>	<p>Audit Wales review is coming to conclusion and the outcome will be reported in due course.</p> <p>The outstanding open accounts have now been concluded and signed off.</p>	<p>Chief Officer Resources</p>

Certification of the Annual Governance Statement

In conclusion the Authority’s Governance Framework during 2020/21 has remained consistent and the progress made against the areas for improvement identified in the 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement are shown in Appendix B.

Whilst there remain some areas that require development or further improvement, in considering the governance framework and its application as detailed in this statement, we are of the opinion that the governance arrangements in place for Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council are effective and remain fit for purpose, providing an adequate level of assurance for the Council.

(signed).....

(signed).....

Councillor Nigel Daniels

Rhian Hayden

Leader of the Council

Chief Officer Resources

September 2021

September 2021

(signed).....

Michelle Morris

Managing Director

September 2021

Audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2020/21

Audit Wales Rough Sleeping in Wales – Everyone’s Problem, No One’s Responsibility (National Study) (issued July 2020)	
<i>Recommendations for Improvement</i>	
	<p>R1 Public bodies and third sector partners should ensure they use data to plan the right future services, and to put in place effective data sharing protocols to ensure they respond effectively and safely to people sleeping rough. We recommend that councils and their partners</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in data analytical skills to better understand the current situation and predict future demand to prevent future homelessness; • Review and update data sharing protocols to ensure they support services to deliver their data sharing responsibilities effectively; and • Introduce a single data capture and risk assessment process for to help support safe decision making in dealing with people sleeping rough • Integrated services to tackle complex needs <p>R2 Because public bodies are responding to people in crisis, they often deal with acute issues in isolation and rarely address the fundamental cause of the crisis. To do this requires public bodies to design and create service delivery models that are responsive. We recommend that public bodies use our complex needs self-reflection tool to improve how they can jointly address complex needs in the future.</p>
Audit Wales Supporting Financial Resilience Follow-up Review – Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (issued August 2020)	
<i>Report findings:</i>	
	<p>The Council has responded positively to the findings of our report: it is making progress against the proposals for improvement and has future work planned to fully address them.</p>

Details of progress against these proposals can be obtained from the Governance and Partnerships Department.

Appendix B

Recommendation for Improvement made in the 2019/20 Annual Governance Statement	Action Undertaken during 2020/21	Further Action Required
Core Principle A – Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law.		
Continued adherence to the Authority's policies and procedures which exist to guide Members and Officers to comply with the Council's expectations in terms of acting with integrity.	A risk based audit plan was operated for 2020/21 which included examination of the Authority's policies and procedures.	
To evidence robust application of the Authority's Code of Conduct, an Internal Audit review of the declarations of interest process will be undertaken	An audit of the Code of Conduct was not conducted during 2019/20. The item was deferred.	Code of Conduct audit to be included on future audit plans.
In line with good practice, an annual review (as a minimum) of the Constitution and Scheme of delegation to ensure the Authority's governance and decision making processes remain fit for purpose	Annual review resumed	
Continued application of the Members Performance Development Review scheme and competency framework	The Members PDR scheme continues to be applied.	
Continued application of the Officers Performance Review Scheme.	The Officer Performance Review Scheme has been applied throughout 2020/21.	
Audit plans for future years will include testing a range of policies and procedures.	The 2020/21 audit plan included a range of policy and procedure audits.	Future audit plans will continue to include a range of policy and procedure audits.
Core Principle B – Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.		
Implement the high level actions identified from the findings of the staff survey conducted during Jan.	The results of the staff survey have been analysed and a set of high level actions were agreed.	Implementation of the actions arising from the staff survey.
Monitor progress of the Local Well-Being Plan.	In early 2020 a performance management framework was approved for SSG and PSB to formalise reporting and monitoring	

	arrangements of the Well-being Plan.	
Continued implementation of the Council's Engagement Programme as part of the Engagement Strategy.	The engagement programme has been reviewed to consider the impacts of the pandemic. Arrangements moving forward have been agreed by CLT.	
Core Principle C – Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.		
Continued implementation and mainstreaming of the Welsh Language standards across all areas of Blaenau Gwent.	This is ongoing and updates included within the annual report.	
Continue to support the collective and individual body duties under the Well-being of Future Generations Act.	This is ongoing for the Council and PSB. Progress is included in the Assessment of Performance and work of the PSB.	
Annual review of the Corporate Plan	This has been undertaken this year and resulted in a change to the well-being objectives.	The plan is due to end 2022 therefore a full review of the Corporate Plan is to be undertaken.
Implement the new code of practice in relation to the performance and improvement framework of social services in Wales.	This was delayed due to the pandemic.	Implement the new code of practice in relation to the performance and improvement framework of Social Services in Wales
Core Principle D – Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of intended outcomes.		
Review of the Performance Management Framework to ensure alignment with the Corporate Plan.	The framework has been reviewed but needs to be agreed through CLT – delay owing to priorities regarding the pandemic.	Review to be concluded and agreed by CLT
Review of the self-evaluation process.	The Council has decided to adopt the self-assessment process from the Well-being of Future Generations Commissioner.	This will be further enhanced to adhere to the requirements of the Local Government and Elections Act.
Core Principle E – Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.		
Develop and implement a new Leadership Development Programme	This was delayed due to the pandemic.	Develop and implement a new Leadership Development Programme
Analyse the findings of the staff survey and implement required actions.	The results of the staff survey have been analysed and a set of high level actions were agreed.	Implementation of the high level actions arising from the staff survey.

Core Principle F – Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management		
To assess and demonstrate its compliance with the Local Government Measure and the aims and objectives of the Council, the annual report of the audit committee will be produced summarising the year's activity and evidencing their responsibilities as part of the governance arrangements.	Information was gathered for this report, but was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.	The report for 2020/21 will be produced during 2021/22.
Regular review of Risk Management arrangements to ensure they remain fit for purpose and are implemented consistently.	Review of the Risk Management Strategy was planned for March 2020, but was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Corporate Risk Register has continued to be monitored by CLT.	Risk Management Strategy to be reviewed in 2021/22
As part of the Authority's ongoing commitment to managing its risks, the anti-fraud, anti-corruption and anti-bribery policy will be reviewed and updated as appropriate	Review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy commenced during 2020/21.	Conclude the review of the policy for approval by CLT and the Governance and Audit Committee.
Continued inclusion of key governance systems in the internal audit plan to ensure key elements of the governance framework are prioritised and examined annually	The risk based audit plan for 2020/21 has prioritised a number of key governance systems for audit during the year.	
Core Principle G – Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit, to deliver effective accountability		
Managers to implement the actions identified to address weaknesses highlighted by Internal Audit. Meetings are undertaken with the Wider Corporate Leadership Team, in addition to responsible Officers, and timescales are set for implementation. Managers to ensure systems for which they have responsibility have robust internal controls to further improve the integrity of the Authority's processes.	Internal audit reports have been subject to follow up review where they are graded Limited Assurance or No Assurance	

<p>The Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy will be reviewed to ensure it remains fit for purpose.</p>	<p>Review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy commenced during 2020/21.</p>	<p>Conclude the review of the policy for approval by CLT and the Governance and Audit Committee.</p>
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