



Cyngor Bwrdeisdref Sirol  
**Blaenau Gwent**  
County Borough Council

# Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's Self-assessment 2021/22



## Version Control

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## Introduction

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, requires councils to keep their performance under review through self-assessment, with the need to publish a report setting out the conclusions of the self-assessment once every financial year.

This is the first self-assessment report of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council covering the year 2021/22. The focus of the self-assessment is the Council's Corporate Plan and providing an assessment of how well the Council feels it has achieved its Well-being Objectives, as outlined in the Corporate Plan, and where further improvement is required. 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 our communities**

To align to the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the Council has also provided an assessment against the sustainable development principle, the 7 corporate areas of planning and the well-being goals.

Throughout all sections of the self-assessment the Council has considered:

- How well are we doing? Narrative of the activity that has taken place.
- How do we know? Qualitative and quantitative evidence provided.
- What and how can we do better? Actions to implement over the coming years.



This self-assessment has been developed at a point in time and includes the information available at that time. The Council's approach to self-assessment is an ongoing and fluid process of review and the assessment will be updated as and when more information becomes available. The Council also recognises that the self-assessment process will evolve over time to meet the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and the arrangements will be amended as appropriate moving forward so that there is an effective programme of review and evaluation in place to challenge the effectiveness of the services provided. As part of this process, the Council actively promotes and partakes in participation and engagement activities with various groups and the community. Evidence of this activity is seen throughout the document and further work will be undertaken throughout the year to enhance our reach and to promote transparency.

As a council we work to a 'One Council' approach and this is seen throughout the document with various examples and evidence of activity fitting under a number of the strategic priorities and themes. Progress and challenges are also identified throughout the document. Where a challenge has been identified, a corresponding action for implementation over the coming year has been identified.

The Council welcome any feedback you might have about the Self-assessment 2021/22. Your views are important to us, and we want to know what information you would like to see and how you would like to see it reported. Please contact the team on the details at the end of this document if you would like to give feedback on the Assessment or if you require this document in a different format e.g. large print, Braille, audio version, etc.

## Overall Council Self-assessment

The self-assessment process has identified areas in which the council is progressing well and areas for development. An overall statement of assessment has been provided and is to be considered alongside the evidence identified in the sections below.

An overall Council Self-assessment has been provided to consider:

- Is the Council exercising its functions effectively?
- Is the Council using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively?
- Are the governance arrangements of the Council effective for securing continuous improvement?

### Is the Council exercising its functions effectively?

The role of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council and its partners is to maximise on the assets we have, doing more with less and doing it better. It is right that we recognise the challenges we face. The historical decline of heavy industry has, over the years, had an impact on employment prospects. However, the Council is looking proactively at the opportunities in which it can provide and support in order to diversify businesses and employment opportunities to support communities now and in the future. The area faces issues with health and wealth inequality, alongside social issues affecting our families and young people.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been devastating globally and will have a significant detrimental impact on the economy and the way we live, work, learn and socialise for the foreseeable future. The Council has had to respond to this unprecedented situation and has done so at pace, bringing an innovative approach to problem solving and changes in service delivery, ensuring that the health and well-being of our residents and communities has been the driver for our decision making and actions.

As a Council we face increasing demand and costs for some of our services but we are tackling these issues head on with our partners, businesses and the local community. We are looking at how we spend our money to achieve the best outcomes for our residents, we are supporting new and existing businesses, we are looking at our assets to achieve new income streams and we are removing barriers to enable residents to access what they need. All in all, we are looking forward to a positive future.

The Council is embracing the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and is starting to adapt the way that it works. As part of this, we are working collectively to adapt the culture of the organisation and embed the ethos of the Act into all that we do. It is recognised however that we are still in the early years of implementing the Act and there is still more to do over the coming years.

In 2021 the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act came into force. This Act is a substantial piece of legislation covering electoral reform, public participation, governance and performance and regional working. It is designed to be a more streamlined, flexible, sector-led approach to performance, good governance and improvement. The intention is for councils to be proactive in considering how internal processes and procedures should change to enable more effective planning, delivery and decision-making to drive better outcomes. The Council is actively working to implement this Act which will also replace the current improvement duty for principal councils set out in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

The Corporate Plan is a very important strategic document for the Council which clearly sets out our priorities and how we will target our limited resources in order to support these objectives. The priorities in the plan align with what local people have told us is important to them during public engagement events, in particular that they want strong and clean communities and they want to see our economy grow for the wellbeing of our future generations. Education and Social Services continue to be priorities as we work to improve standards in our schools so that all children and young people reach their full potential and we continue to look after the most vulnerable people in our communities against increasing demand for these services.

## Is the Council using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively?

Budget monitoring and management is a key feature at the Council. Effective arrangements are in place whereby budget holders meet regularly with finance partners to consider expenditure and any areas of overspend, with appropriate actions identified early on to tackle any areas in deficit.

The governance arrangements of the Council have established effective and regular monitoring of budgets which is reported to Scrutiny Committee and then Executive Committee. Reports include detail on Capital and Revenue spend as well as the use of general and earmarked reserves. Monitoring of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and Bridging the Gap Programme is also reported to Members. Overspending portfolios or specific projects are pulled out for scrutiny and consideration. This transparent reporting enabled Members and the public to have an understanding of the financial management of the Council and what arrangements are in place to support any budget gaps.

As part of the Auditor General's Audit of Accounts, it was identified that significant improvements had been made in the quality, control, standard and timeliness of finances between 2016/17 to 2020/21. During 2020-21, Audit Wales examined the financial sustainability of each council in Wales. In Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, it was concluded that the Council has improved financial planning and better-than-expected Welsh Government settlements mean the Council is better placed to maintain its financial sustainability over the short term, but challenges remain to fully close budget gaps over the medium term.

The results of the 2021 Census may have an impact on the Local Government Settlements moving forward. The changes identified below may mean a reduction in the amount of monies the Council receives as well as having to undertake a review of service planning and provision moving forward following a reduction in the population. Services such as Education for school places, the LDP for housing and Social Services for social care will need to consider how this will impact service provision and funding in future years.

The results of the 2021 Census have identified that Blaenau Gwent has had a decrease in population by 4.2%, making Blaenau Gwent the second smallest population in Wales. Overall Wales has seen an increase of 1.4% in population. Although Blaenau Gwent has then second smallest population it is the sixth most densely populated of Wales 22 local authorities, with 615 residents per square kilometre. The population has continued to age. In Blaenau Gwent one in five people (20.3%) were aged 65 years and over on Census Day in 2021. Across Wales, this was 21.3%, a higher percentage than ever before. The chart shows the percentage change by age between 2011 and 2022 for Blaenau Gwent residents. Over the 10 years in Blaenau Gwent there has been an increase of 9.0% in people aged 65 years and over (17.7% for Wales), a decrease of 7.5% in people aged 15 to 64 years (2.5% for Wales), and a decrease of 5.4% in children aged under 15 years (1.0% for Wales). The Council is working collaboratively with the Office National Statistics to further understand and investigate the information from the 2021 census and what this means for Blaenau Gwent moving forward as more Census data is released.

Before the results of the Census 2021 were available it was already expected that funding will be a challenge over the next 5 years, while demand for services and demographic pressures continues to increase. Based upon the assumptions in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the cost pressures identified (before the 2021 Census), a budget gap of £21m over the next 5 years is forecast as follows:

<b>MTFS Budget Gap</b>					
2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025	2025/2026	2026/2027	Total
£m	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m
6.7	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	20.7

The Council's ability to progress a number of the Strategic Business Reviews has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. An update on the overall current financial assessment towards the budget gap is currently assessed as £6.8m over the period of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) as follows:

	Estimated Achievement			
	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025	2025/2026 & 2026/2027
	£m	£m	£m	£m
<b>Strategic Business Reviews</b>	2.69	1.18	1.26	0.8

Based on the current estimated achievement from the Strategic Business Reviews compared to the budget gap identified in the MTFs, there is a residual budget gap as follows:

	2022/2023 £m	2023/2024 £m	2024/2025 £m	2025/2026 & 2026/2027 £m
<b>Residual Budget Gap</b>	4.00	2.36	2.29	2.7

There is a potential risk that the current Strategic Business reviews do not identify sufficient financial benefits to 'Bridge the Gap' in the medium to long term. Additional or alternative proposals will therefore be required to mitigate the possible residual funding gaps in future years. Also, in 2022 the Council has seen price increases for fuel and energy which in turn have a 'knock on' impact on other goods and commodities purchased by the Council. This, alongside other cost pressures being seen by the Council will need to be planned and managed accordingly.

### Are the governance arrangements of the Council effective for securing continuous improvement?

The Audit Wales Annual Audit Summary of the Council 2021 did not identify any substantial issues and the report highlighted some strengths in the way the Council had utilised data to inform its response to the Covid 19 pandemic and support the recovery plan process. The report also mentioned the improved financial planning within the Council.

As a Council we are working towards our ambition of becoming commercially minded. As part of this a Commercial Strategy 2020/25 has been developed which looks to identify commercial approaches and highlight the conditions required for the Council to behave as a commercial organisation. This is written within the context of maintaining the Council's core purpose to provide public services delivering social value. There are a number of related strategies and programmes that contribute to the delivery of our Commercial Strategy and ambitions. These are:

- A Communications Strategy, 2020 – 2025;
- A Digital and Customer transformation programme; and
- The Workforce Strategy.

In addition to the supporting strategies and programmes highlighted above there are 5 specifically commercial ambitions:

- Commissioning and Procurement;
- Developing an investment Portfolio;
- Creating true commercial activities – profit and loss;
- Commercial and Entrepreneurial Culture;
- Contract and Supplier Management.

These will be driven by the Commercial Section but clearly involve all services, suppliers and partners. The building of knowledge, skills and capacity in the commercial approach will be key for us moving forward.

Another area of focus for the us is becoming digitally minded, providing a robust digital infrastructure and being innovative in our digital endeavours. An ICT Roadmap and Digital Solutions process has been established which looks

to create long term, sustainable and relevant ICT infrastructure throughout the Council and its services including Office 365 and a review of the current software. The delivery of these processes have been recognised externally.

Owing to the global supply issues with ICT, as well as significant price increases, this is a risk to the Council financially and also to some suppliers who are experiencing financial difficulties. This situation will be monitored moving forward to assess impact.

The Council is committed to equalities, and this is evidenced through its delivery of the Blaenau Gwent Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) 2020/24. The SEP aims to put fairness and equality at the heart of everything the Council does and this is central to maximising well-being outcomes for residents, local communities, staff and visitors, now and in the future. As public service providers it is recognised that there is a key role to play in making a real difference to people's lives. Therefore, the Council will continue to strive to be a 'fair and equitable' organisation as outlined in the Corporate Plan 2018-22.

Safeguarding the most vulnerable people in the community continues to be a top priority for the Council. Audit Wales are currently undertaking a review of the Council's safeguarding arrangements, with a particular focus on the activity being undertaken corporately. The review is still ongoing but a great deal of work has progressed within the Council with regards to safeguarding over the past few years. Safeguarding is recognised corporately as being everybody's responsibility. The Safeguarding Policy has recently been updated. As part of this the Council has identified a safeguarding lead officer from each directorate who meet regularly to review activity, data and processes with regards to safeguarding. Safeguarding is on the front page of the Council's website and online awareness training is provided to all Council staff. Volunteers and contractors are provided with a copy of the Council's corporate safeguarding policy and procedures. To show its strategic importance, safeguarding has been included within the leadership development model as well as being a key feature of all officer inductions.

Self evaluation is a key aspect of review and learning undertaken across the Council. As well as having an approach corporately, the Education Directorate also undertakes a self evaluation process. The Self Evaluation Report (SER) is developed to secure ongoing improvement in educational outcomes and effectiveness of provision. The findings from the SER are reflected as actions for improvement in the Directorate's Business Plans at Directorate, Service and Team levels. Effective self-evaluation means that the Directorate remains focussed on improving the right areas of work.

#### **Future Actions and Areas for Development:**

- Undertake a review of the governance and oversight arrangements of companies in which the Council has an interest (Gwent Crematorium, EAS, Aneurin Leisure Trust and Gwent Archives).
- Address the staffing needs including recruitment and retention in services across the Council.
- Implement the strategy devised to consider short, medium and longer-term solutions to the workforce including the consideration to collaborate on a regional basis.
- Continued financial monitoring and reporting through the Council's democratic process.
- To ensure the Council's financial resilience the Council intends to continue with its bridging the gap programme which will identify a number of strategic business reviews including the identification of additional or alternative business case proposals to mitigate the possible residual funding gaps in future years.
- The Council will need to consider the Census results when planning future budget settlements and service provision.
- Continue to monitor and implement the various Strategies and Plans identified throughout the self-assessment via the business planning process.
- Continue to monitor and implement the COVID 19 Recovery and Renewal Plans via the business planning process.



## Our Understanding of Blaenau Gwent

Blaenau Gwent is a place of heritage and dramatic change, with a sense of its past but its eyes firmly on the future. The Tech Valleys Vision, Valleys Regional Park and Cardiff Capital Regional Deal combined with new transport links including the soon to be completed Heads of the Valley Road and rail routes to Cardiff bring a bright future. Together with the amazing location and surrounding parkland our people and communities make Blaenau Gwent great. Our people have influenced the local, national and international stage in art, sport and politics for many generations – putting Blaenau Gwent on the map for all the right reasons.

The area is relatively small geographically. It is 42.09 sq. miles being, at most, 15 miles north to south and 8 miles east to west. Blaenau Gwent is defined physically by high hillsides dividing the three main valleys. These valleys are home to towns and villages which seem to merge together into one. However, each community proudly maintains its own character and traditions. Although the towns give the county borough a busy, urban feel, Blaenau Gwent is actually a largely rural area. Wherever you are, beautiful countryside is never far away.

Results of the Census 2021 show that the resident population of Blaenau Gwent is 66,900 which is a decrease of 4.2% from the 2011 Census when the population was 69,800. 2021 Census data for other pieces of information are still to be released so the following information is taken from the 2011 Census. When using a population of 69,800, the working age population is 62.1% with 24.7% being economically inactive. The population is projected to continue to decrease, including a 9.9% decrease in the number of children, a 6.1% decrease in the number of working age population and a 24.2% increase in the number of people aged 65 and over (Source: Stats Wales)

In 2021/22 the Council was made up of 42 councillors which equates to an average of 1,214 electors per councillor. The political make up of the Council was:

- Independent 25;
- Labour 12;
- Minority Independent 4; and
- Save Us Now 1.

This will change from 2022 onwards following changes by the boundary commission.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council employs 2,854 people. A total of £146.1 million was spent on providing services during 2020-21, the 2nd lowest spending of the 22 unitary councils in Wales. The area has 6 (13%) of its 47 areas deemed the most deprived 10% of areas in Wales, this is the 6th highest of the 22 unitary councils in Wales (Source: Stats Wales).

The Council has a structure in place to support the delivery of services and for effective decision making. The Council has a Corporate Leadership Team, whereby all Council Directors meet on a weekly basis to consider and make strategic and operational decisions.

The Council operates a democratic structure where effective decision making can take place. The Executive Committee is effectively the decision making body of the Council. It has responsibility for making decisions which are in line with the Council's overall policies and budget. If it wishes to make a decision which is outside the budget or policy framework, this must be referred to the Council as a whole. Members have the responsibility to ensure that the necessary business of the Council is carried out efficiently, effectively, and in a manner appropriate for the proper conduct of public business. The Executive will carry out all of the Local Authority's functions which are not the responsibility of any other part of the Local Authority, whether by law or under the Constitution.

In 2021/22 the Council had five Scrutiny Committees and two Joint Scrutiny Committees:

- Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee;
- Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee;
- Social Services Scrutiny Committee;
- Regeneration Scrutiny Committee;

- Community Services Scrutiny Committee;
- Joint Social Services and Education and Learning (Safeguarding) Scrutiny Committee; and
- Joint Budget Committee.

Scrutiny is made up of non-Executive Members who are appointed to sit on the Committees to support the work of the Executive and the Council as a whole. The Committees have no decision making powers; however, they act as a check and balance on the powers exercised and decisions taken by the Executive. They allow non-Executive Members to have a greater say in Council matters.

The Council is monitored by a number of regulatory bodies, the main of which are:

- Audit Wales;
- Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW); and
- Estyn.

The Council monitors all proposals for improvement it receives from both internal and external auditors via the relevant business plan and progress is reported on a quarterly basis through the Finance and Performance Report. Periodically, a review of the open proposals is undertaken and presented to Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) to consider which proposals can close as they have been completed or have moved to business as usual.

As at 31st March 2022 there were 21 'live' audit reports. Of those:

- 9 reports were still at the initial stage, either being newly received or due to be taken through the Democratic process; and
- 12 reports were being monitored via business plans, totalling 62 proposals for improvement being implemented.

Audit Wales Reports received during 2021/22 include:

Local Reports –

- BG Annual Audit Summary 2020
- Audit of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's assessment of 2020-21 performance
- Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Annual Audit Summary 2021
- Procurement related to Motor Resort Wales
- Deficiencies in Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's governance and oversight arrangements in respect of a Council-owned company, Silent Valley Waste Services Limited
- Follow-up review of Corporate Arrangements for Safeguarding of Children
- Data Driven Decision Making (Part 1)

Audit Wales Reports received for information -

- At Your Discretion - Local Government Discretionary Services
- Joint Working Between Emergency Services

National Audit Wales Reports –

- Locked Out: Liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales
- Poverty in Wales
- Springing Forward
- Building Social Resilience and Self-Reliance in Citizens and Communities
- Social Enterprises
- Equality Impact Assessments and their use in decision making
- Decarbonisation baseline review
- Auditor General's Work Programme Consultation

In July 2021, the Council received a letter from Estyn which provided an overview of the progress made in relation to recommendations from the overarching thematic report published in January 2021. The thematic report identified five recommendations for the Welsh Government and recognised that a whole system approach was needed to address these. The first three recommendations were more immediate and urgent in nature, whilst the last two recommendations would take longer to address. From discussions with the Directorate, feedback from learners and engagement work with schools, Estyn felt it was clear that, through collaboration, progress was made

across Wales in equipping schools and learners to provide better remote learning experiences during the second lockdown. Full detail can be found in the following attachment.



Blaenau Gwent Estyn  
Summer Letter.pdf

In November 2021, the Council received a performance evaluation and assurance check from CIW. The assurance check took place on 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> May 2021. The purpose of an assurance check is to review how well local authority social services continue to help adults, children and carers with a focus on safety and well-being. The key lines of enquiry covered four principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and judgements and findings are aligned to these:

- People - Voice and Control
- Prevention
- Partnerships and Integration
- Well-being.

The report identified strengths and areas for improvement and CIW expect the areas of improvement to be included in improvement plans. Full detail can be found in the following attachment.



CIW.pdf

## COVID 19 Pandemic – Our Response and Activity

On 23rd March 2020, the UK Government announced an unprecedented UK-wide 'lockdown' in order to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus. This resulted in the Council moving to the delivery of Critical Services only (as defined in the Emergency Management Plan), redeploying staff into these services, and ceasing all democratic meetings with immediate effect.

The declaration of a national health emergency led to the establishment of Emergency Planning arrangements in the region, under the Civil Contingencies Act 2005. The Gwent Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG) was convened for its first meeting on 14th March 2020. The SCG is chaired by Gwent Police and includes the Local Health Board, all five local authorities and Category One Responders.

In accordance with our Emergency Planning arrangements the GOLD Group was established in Blaenau Gwent and commenced meetings on 19th March 2020. This comprises of all members of the Corporate Leadership Team, supported by the Civil Contingency Manager and Communications Manager. The strategic aim of GOLD remains to delay and mitigate as far as practicable the spread and impact of Coronavirus within our community.

Heads of Service and Service Managers were convened as the Emergency Response Team, to support GOLD, with the Aneurin Leisure Trust, Tai Calon, GAVO and Joint Trade Unions also members of the Team. These Groups continue to meet to ensure the proper management of the emergency response in Blaenau Gwent.

When the lockdown began the Council shifted its sole focus to the emergency response. This resulted in delivery of only critical services with other available resources being redeployed to support the response. A particular focus was Adult Social Services, supporting some of the most vulnerable in the community, refuse collection and recycling and public protection, with all Councils taking on significant new enforcement responsibilities under the Coronavirus legislation.

The response involved:

- School closures and the creation of School Hubs to support key workers, by providing childcare for their children, and vulnerable learners.
- Supporting families eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) with over 2,000 supported.
- The creation of the locality response teams to provide an offer of support for the 3,521 shielding residents and 1,353 vulnerable residents (over 70 or living alone). This work included support to the delivery of weekly food boxes, arranging shopping, collection of prescriptions and befriending calls etc.
- Unprecedented support provided to local businesses, enabling them to access Government financial support schemes, with the aim of protecting our local economy from the worse impact of the Pandemic.
- Staff working from home with very low attendance in the office. This has been supported by the rapid deployment of Microsoft TEAMS which is enabling the Council to work in a totally different way based on running virtual teams and meetings.
- Suspending formal council and committee meetings at the end of March. The AGM was held, virtually, on 2nd April 2020.
- Elected Members undertaking their roles whilst working remotely.

The Welsh Government and local government have had a shared commitment to work in partnership. This shared leadership was demonstrated and strengthened throughout the crisis with an unprecedented level of dialogue and engagement and openness.

The medium to long term financial consequences of the pandemic for local business and the public sector is not yet fully known. Certainly the impact on the Council's finances in 2020/21 would have been significant without the additional support provided by the Welsh Government to fund the additional costs of dealing with the emergency and the loss of income experienced as a direct consequence of the pandemic (£11.9m). This financial support when combined with additional unbudgeted grants and reduced costs, due to closure of buildings and new ways of working, has meant that we are reporting a favourable financial position at the year-end which has enabled us to enhance our reserves to deal with unexpected issues / pressures in future.

## COVID 19 Recovery and Moving Forward

In an emergency the Council would normally deal with the response and then move into recovery phase to support the community back to normal. What is clear is that dealing with Covid-19 is very different. As a Council we will need to continue to respond to the pandemic, ensuring the safety of staff and the community as well as moving towards recovery. There is a Recovery Co-ordination Group (RCG) leading the recovery work in Gwent and also a local recovery group within the Council. As part of this the Council will need to take a community leadership role in understanding the impact of the pandemic on the community and identifying the interventions that need to be put in place to support recovery – this includes recovery for the local economy. Recognising that this is a task that will be delivered in partnership with other organisations across the Region. Locally the Council will look to focus on four priority areas:

- Learners;
- Community;
- Economy; and
- Workforce.

Blaenau Gwent also needs to continue to be part of the wider regional and national work to recover and create a stronger future.

The nature of the emergency has meant that the Council has had to support both response and recovery side by side, placing a further demand on resources.

It is also the case that so much about the way we live our lives has changed and we will not simply return to normal once Covid-19 is under control. There is now the opportunity for the Council to build on the positive work over the past 18 months with the expectation being that we do not seek to return to the way things were before but harness the positive aspects of the response to strengthen and modernise the Council, adopting new working practices and challenging how we did things before, in order to map out an ambitious future, create a stronger organisation and to sustain the strong relationships forged with our communities and partners. It will not be a case of delivering services as we have done before, service delivery will have to change to take into account the learning from the pandemic as well as continuing to work proactively to plan for any potential future 'peaks.'

Despite the impact that the pandemic has had, it is possible to identify positive experience and good practice from the way the Council and community has responded in Blaenau Gwent. It is clear there is a real opportunity to hold onto these positives and to not simply return to normal but to build on our work to create a stronger and more resilient organisation and community.

The areas where this can be demonstrated include:

- the way the Council has adopted new technology and modern working practices at pace, enabling it to continue operating with staff and Elected Members almost entirely working from home.
- The targeted support provided to the more vulnerable in our communities with services coming together into multi-functional teams and working very effectively with partners and community and voluntary groups.
- The strong use of data and information to build our business intelligence about our community and the increase in digital service delivery and contact to ensure we can continue to deliver services in a way that is safe for staff and residents.
- There has been strong support for local businesses – which will need to continue – and a step change in how we communicate with our residents about service changes and the decisions being made by the Council, resulting in a real sense of a better connection with the community and an appreciation of the work of key front-line staff.
- The next steps will be really important to ensure we use this experience to build that stronger organisation and Place in Blaenau Gwent, rather than simply reverting to normal.

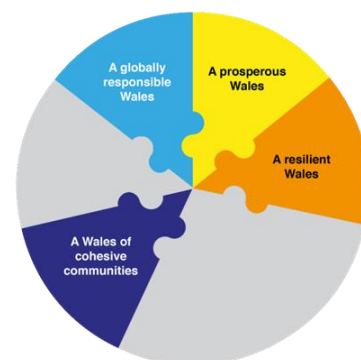
## Overall Progress of the Council's Well-being Objectives 2021/22

As part of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 all Public Bodies have a duty, under section 7 of the legislation, to publish a Well-being Statement at the same time that they publish their Well-being Objectives. As part of the review of the Corporate Plan in July 2020, each Well-being Objective has been written to contribute to the Well-being Goals and observe the requirements as outlined by the Sustainable Development Principles. Both of which is also observed through our Council Business Planning process. This Self-assessment of the Council 2021/22 provides detail of activity undertaken by the Council in meeting the Well-being Objectives.

## Protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure to benefit our communities

### Why This Is Important as An Area Of Focus:

Blaenau Gwent has a rich heritage, and its buildings and countryside are part of Blaenau Gwent's attractiveness as a place to live, work and visit. The local environment should be used to help improve the health and well-being of families and communities and be enhanced for future generations to continue to enjoy. There is a real desire to see the communities where people live kept clean, tidy and useable, creating areas that people can be proud of.



### How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

In July 2021, Audit Wales (AW) reported on the work of the Community Services section. The report was very positive with AW identifying that the Council's Waste Service have, '*...achieved substantial progress over the period since 2015 through strategic planning supported by the adoption of a learning culture to manage change effectively*'.

It was also identified that Community Services had in place robust corporate budget monitoring arrangements which had assisted in the management of overspends in the service, however, the scope and focus of the financial planning was seen to be overly short-term.

AW identified one proposal for improvement, '*To strengthen its resilience, Community Services should ensure that learning and good practice that exists within its different service areas is shared throughout the directorate. The Council should also consider whether it would benefit from sharing some examples more widely across the Council*'.

In order to respond to this proposal for improvement, Community Services identified a number of actions which were approved by Scrutiny Committee and the Governance and Audit Committee. Progress includes, implementing the Waste Strategy and undertaking a review to understand what has been achieved and what is still needed in order to meet the 70% target by 2024/25.

In both 2019/20 and 2020/21, Blaenau Gwent exceeded the Welsh Government statutory recycling target of 64%, achieving 65.31% and 64.29% respectively. For 2021/22, that success has been maintained and the target of 64% has again been exceeded, attaining 64.94%. It is imperative that the Council maintains and improves its recycling targets as there is a financial penalty from Welsh Government if these are not met. The current fine for not achieving the target is £200 per tonne below the recycling tonnage required. These figures show that the performance has plateaued. Achieving the 70% target is going to be a huge challenge; the aim being reducing the amount of residual [black bag] waste being collected, and increasing recycling participation across the Borough. Assuming the total municipal waste remains constant, to achieve 70%, the Council would need to reduce residual waste and increase recycling by 1562.44 tonnes. For every 1% increase there would be a need to divert 308.66 tonnes from the residual tonnages to recycling/composting tonnages. In order to achieve this, work will include enforcement, behaviour change campaigns and a review of kerbside collections.

A breakdown of the annual 2021/22 performance is provided in the table below:

Quarter	2020/21	2021/22
Quarter 1 (April – June)	62.17%	66.51%
Quarter 2 (July – Sept)	65.94%	67.01%
Quarter 3 (Oct – Dec)	63.06%	63.47%
Quarter 4 (Jan – March)	65.53%	62.55%
Annual (as at 31st March following validation)	64.29%	64.94%

When looking at the breakdown of recycling figures for 2021/22 compared to 2020/21, it shows a drop in residual waste and kerbside recycling. The thinking behind this is owing to there being less people being at home than last year (linked to lockdown and working from home etc.) and there being an increase in the tonnages at the HWRC site as these were closed at the beginning of 2020. The comparisons are as follows:

- Residual waste has decreased by 617.861 tonnes (4.93%)
- Food waste has decreased by 115.60 tonnes (3.27%)
- Kerbside Recycling has decreased by 705.724 tonnes (10.83%)
- Garden waste has decreased by 62.282 tonnes (4.39%)
- HWRC Recycling has increased by 1343.121 tonnes (29.96%)

The Roseheyworth Household Waste and Recycle Centre (HWRC) Abertillery opened to the public in April 2021 and provides a full range of recycling services. It is intended to support residents to recycle and re-use their rubbish safely and efficiently and to assist the Council in meeting national recycling targets. It is also designed to protect the environment for future generations via schemes such as a re-use shop known as 'The Den' which is operated by Wastesavers. Residents can donate items that are in good condition and free from defect so that they can be bought and re-used by others.

Household wood waste was previously collected by the Household Waste Recycling Centres and re-processed (i.e. recycled) at third party sites, operated by private contractors. In order to reduce the environmental impacts associated with waste wood management in the South Wales region, whilst contributing substantially to Wales's current resources and statutory recycling targets, discussions are taking place for the establishment of a new Regional Wood Recycling Facility located at Silent Valley. Additional benefits of this facility include significant savings for local authorities through reduced haulage mileage and costs as well as the environmental benefits; the reduction in CO2 and NO2 emissions associated with transporting and treating waste wood. This facility also supports recycling targets and a commitment to the Welsh Government's Low Carbon agenda to tackle climate change.

Side waste enforcement has been fully rolled out across the borough and now forms part of the daily standard operating procedures for Waste Services.

The trade waste service has been operational for one year and an annual review of this service has been undertaken to consider successes and where further improvements to the service can be made. Information has been presented to the Strategic Procurement Board requesting for the trade waste targets to be reassessed. This is owing to a change of circumstances and the addition of an overhead contribution required since the original targets were set. Previously the service was experiencing a deficit but is now able to pay for itself, achieving the aim of being self-sustainable.

The Highways Maintenance and Works Annual Plan has been completed for the year 2021/22 and funding has been identified to consider the future work programme for A, B and C roads as well as auxiliary works. Alongside this, funding has been received to undertake some specific work such as:

- £300k Resilient Road Funding to undertake a feasibility study of the condition of the A4047 between Aberbeeg and Cwm;
- Welsh Government (WG) Grant to improve A roads; and
- £990k received from the Local Transport Fund to improve the junction on the A4048 at Tredegar.

The Keep Wales Tidy programme has been proactively engaging with schools and community groups to offer advice, support and resources to provide communities that are clean and attractive for current and future generations. To support this, a Litter and Fly Tipping Strategy has also been developed and an action plan is being implemented.

**What Evidence is available:**

- Audit Wales Report on Community Services
- Waste Strategy Plan 2018-2025
- Waste and Recycling Data
- Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan 2019/22
- Agendas and Recordings:
  - Community Services Scrutiny Committee
  - Executive Committee; and
  - Council
- Highways Maintenance and Works Annual Plan
- Litter and Fly Tipping Strategy
- Keep Wales Tidy programme



**Future Actions and Areas for Development:**

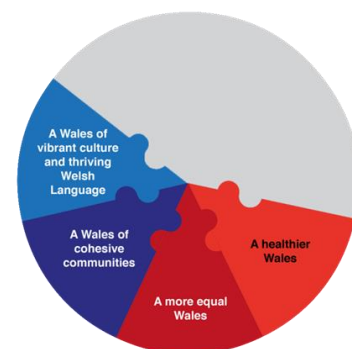
- Reflect longer term financial planning within Community Services
- Work to achieve the 70% recycling target by 2024/25
- Technical Services Income Generation Model to be presented to Wider CLT as an example of the professional services being delivered which support: Income generation; Creation of a learning environment; and Resilience and sustainability (retaining local jobs)
- Following the pandemic reinstate Community Services Performance Reports including PIs and both qualitative and quantitative comparative data.

### Why This Is Important as An Area Of Focus:

Improving the quality and provision of teaching and learning is vitally important to ensure the service is achieving ambitious outcomes for all. The Council will continue to invest in services in order to support economic development and regeneration in order to provide opportunities for local people and businesses.

### How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

Over the last academic session, school operations were negatively affected by the pandemic. However, the Council’s corporate response in supporting schools and learners during this period was largely effective. Schools adapted well to the challenges faced and, in order to reflect on learning throughout this period, and make adaptations to service provision moving forward, the directorate, along with the schools, undertook a detailed impact assessment and learning from this has been embedded into the Recovery Plan for Education.



As part of their review of the Education provision in Blaenau Gwent throughout the pandemic, Estyn noted that the collaborative working across the Council has been strengthened throughout the pandemic supporting a strong response with schools. The relationship between most schools and officers is strong and officers listen to and act upon the views of head teachers. This has been further enhanced by the establishment of head teacher working groups for ALN Reform, the development of the Self Evaluation Review (SER) and Curriculum for Wales Reform. The Thematic Review report on their findings has been positive overall and locally recognises the good work of the Council. It is pleasing that Estyn has recognised the hard work being undertaken and that they are supportive of the work the Council is carrying out with the Education Achievement Service (EAS) to support schools in planning for the next phase of recovery and renewal for children and young people.

There is an increasing number of pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM) in all areas of Gwent. These numbers have accelerated in the last year, showing increasing inequality in the region. There are noticeable variations in attainment and qualification levels between areas in Gwent. Similarly, there are differences in attainment between less and more disadvantaged groups of children. Lower attainment can affect well-being throughout the life course. Overall, the 2019 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation figures and high eFSM eligibility reflect very high levels of deprivation within Blaenau Gwent. They also indicate the significant consideration required to improve educational outcomes to levels similar to other Local Authorities and to consistently match the all-Wales averages.

During the period 2010 to 2016, the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM in Blaenau Gwent was almost 30%, the highest of all Local Authorities in Wales by a significant margin. The proportions declined during 2016 to 2019, but Blaenau Gwent remained the 2nd highest in Wales for all Local Authority schools and highest for secondary schools during 2018-19. During 2021-22, the eligibility for FSM has again increased to circa 30%. Given the evidential relationship between pupil performance and deprivation (using eFSM as a proxy indicator), pupil outcomes in Blaenau Gwent would be expected to be among the lowest in Wales. However, there is a high level of ambition for all learners and the socio-economic standing is a challenge that the Council is working to overcome in order to benefit of all children and young people.

	2019	2020	2021	September 2022	
Entitlement to FSM/Transitionally Protected (%)	21.1	24.6	30.4	30.4	FSM numbers higher than pre-Covid levels. This may take some time to show recovery due to the FSM entitlement being protected.

The reporting of Council and School level performance data has been relaxed over the last two academic years in Wales by Welsh Government. However, Summer 2021 Key Stage 4 (KS4) results demonstrated progress in Capped 9 and Level 2 (L2) inclusive scores, and were in line with the targets set across the four secondary settings SDPs. It should be noted that the results in 2020-21 were provided through Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs) and not through external examinations, however, these Centre Determined Grades generated very few appeals.

Between 2010 to 2021 there was a significant reduction in the numbers of young people becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training) in Blaenau Gwent. This reduction was due to the work of the Youth Service's strategic multi-agency Raising Aspirations Group, and implementation of the Early Identification Tool. The early identification of those at risk of becoming NEET allows for timely intervention, by means of additional support, which has been proven to reduce the risk of, and in many cases prevent, young people becoming NEET. Continuing work has seen numbers remain low and reach an unverified level of 1.5% (9 young people) for 2021. This equals Blaenau Gwent's lowest level to date and is below the Welsh average of 1.7%.

A Strategic Post 16 Partnership has been established to ensure that learner pathways into Further Education are further strengthened. The Blaenau Gwent Learning Zone's performance at Key Stage 5 (KS5) continues to be good. A-level A\*-C and A\*-E grades continue to be strong and were in line with the all-Wales means at 99.1%.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a decrease in attendance at both primary and secondary schools. The table below shows an annual decrease in attendance since 2019. However, it should be noted that persistent absenteeism at Primary level reduced to below that of the all-Wales means.

	July 2019	July 2020	July 2021	December 2021*
Attendance – Primary	94.4	93.5	90.7	89.3
Attendance Secondary	93.3	91.7	84.8	85.2

*\*WG no longer report attendance data but collect weekly.*

The number of exclusions at both Primary and Secondary Schools has seen an increase and the levels are higher than they were pre Covid. A key action for the Education Directorate and Schools is to work together to reduce school exclusion levels.

	Apr 19 – Mar 20	Apr 20 - Mar 21	Apr 21 - Jul 21	Sept 21 – Dec 21
Exclusions Primary	108	25	17	24
Exclusions Secondary	459	135	183	232
Average Number of Primary exclusions per month (no. of months in brackets)	9.8	3.6	3.4	6 (4)
Average Number of Secondary exclusions per month (no. of months in brackets)	41.7	19.3	36.6	58 (4)

For 2021/22 the funding delegated to schools was 85.4%. This is above the all Wales average and ranked 1st when compared to the family of Councils (Local Authority Budgeted Expenditure on Schools 2021/22). The Council commissions the Education Achievement Service (EAS) to deliver the statutory functions of school improvement. The annual financial costs being circa £352,000 and a 2% decrease on the previous financial year. Schools' categorisation profile has improved over the last 5 years against a backdrop of decreasing financial contributions to the EAS, highlighting good value for money.

No Primary schools or non-maintained settings are currently in Estyn follow-up categories. However, one of the Local Authority's (LA) four Secondary and all-age schools is still in an Estyn statutory category of follow up. The River Centre is the School Causing Concern and the Governing Body's response to the Service Agreement, intended to provide clarity over process between the LA and school, has created difficulty resulting in significant involvement from senior leaders. The response to the pre-warning notice letter was unsatisfactory and a Statutory Warning Notice issued. The Education Directorate are considering the next steps with the school and the potential use of intervention powers. A new Chair of Governors has been appointed and the strengthening of the Governing Body's effectiveness will continue to be a focus.

School Categorisation between 2017 and 2020, in relation to Step 3 – Level of Support Required, demonstrated an improvement in the number of schools identified as being Green (needing the least amount of support). The number of schools in the Red category remained that same, as did that of Yellow, however there was an improvement in the number of Amber schools.

Step 3 – Level of Support Required		Numbers of Schools				Percentage of Schools			
		Red	Amber	Yellow	Green	Red	Amber	Yellow	Green
Primary	17-18	0	2	11	6	0%	11%	58%	32%
	18-19	0	2	8	9	0%	11%	42%	47%
	19-20	0	2	8	9	0%	11%	42%	47%
Secondary	17-18	1	0	0	1	50%	0%	0%	50%
	18-19	1	0	0	1	50%	0%	0%	50%
	19-20	1	0	0	1	50%	0%	0%	50%
Through Schools	17-18	1	1	0	0	50%	50%	0%	0%
	18-19	1	0	1	0	50%	0%	50%	0%
	19-20	1	0	1	0	50%	0%	50%	0%

School Categorisation between 2017 and 2020, in relation to Step 2 – Capacity to Improve, demonstrated a similar level of improvement in the number of schools identified as being Category A (showing the greatest capacity to improve). The number of schools in Category D saw a minor fluctuation, as did that of Category C, however there was a reduction in the number of schools in Category B, some of which was due to improvement into Category A. School categorisation was suspended during 2019-20 with new draft school improvement guidance being issued by Welsh Government in March 2021. The COVID 19 pandemic limited opportunities to see provision first-hand, but this resumed, to a limited degree, from summer term 2021. In this period, 4 schools made progress i.e. removed from School Causing Concern and or Estyn category. The number of Schools Causing Concern, in Estyn Categories, or subject to an LA Warning Notice reduced from 6 to 2 between 2017-18 and 2021-22 (subject to anticipated Estyn verification). While the overall number of schools in need of further support appears to have been relatively static, there has been much movement of schools in and out of the Schools Causing Concern and Statutory Warning Notice categories. 3 schools were identified as no longer needing support in 2018-19, 2 in 2019-20 and a further 2 in 2021-22, which demonstrates the effectiveness of the support that has been given to these schools when it was needed. In 2020-2021, 19 children looked after completed their statutory studies. All but one of the children in this cohort achieved recognised qualifications. The one learner who did not achieve recognised qualifications has since completed and submitted work with outcomes expected in Spring 2022.

The Council are well on track for implementing the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) reform. Where challenges for implementation have been identified, relevant training opportunities are being put in place for both senior leaders and ALNCoS. Further training will also be commissioned for Governors.

As part of the development of the Works site, Ebbw Vale, the Council has sought to provide an attractive range of business units to cater for demand within the County Borough itself and the wider south east Wales region. Within this context, a need was identified for a range of higher quality premises to appeal to a wider range of businesses. To deliver this, the Council entered into a Joint Venture with the Welsh Government to develop Hybrid Units at Lime Avenue, creating high quality business space, comprising 3 separate buildings housing 9 units. Thales has taken occupation of two buildings and the Council is nearing completion on a further lease for a business requiring space in the remaining building. This is an exciting development for Blaenau Gwent, continuing the regeneration of the strategic Works site and provides an excellent opportunity for businesses to establish, grow and develop within the area creating employment and helping to support local supply chains.

Like the Hybrid Units, the development of the Hwb Bocs provides attractive premises, complemented by on site-business support from the Council’s Regeneration staff and access to a range of other sources of support and inspiration. The project was delivered in partnership with Welsh Government and has transformed shipping containers into 21 separate office spaces alongside communal facilities and is located adjacent to the Coleg Gwent building. The Council is working closely to identify suitable tech-based businesses and entrepreneurs as part of its marketing programme with significant interest being expressed.

The Department for Work and Pensions approached the Council to act as a Gateway organisation to support applications from local businesses. As a Gateway the Employment and Skills team are required to liaise with partners within their networks to identify Kickstart job placements, submit bids directly online through the Kickstart portal and administer grant funding to companies. Several expressions of interest were received from a range of sectors including childcare, production/manufacturing, retail, hospitality and construction. To date the Blaenau Gwent Gateway has:

- supported 25 businesses;
- created 109 placements;
- 63 placements filled; and
- 48 placements in recruitment stage.

The Council's property portfolio is at:

- 92% occupancy rate;
- supporting 736 jobs;
- 17,115sq.ft. of the new 26,000 sq. ft. property development is now occupied; and
- 1,015 Covid-19 support grants awarded to businesses, totalling £2,064,000.00.

The STEM Facilitation Project, created as a result of Tech Valleys, is a co-ordinated programme of support, centred on "industry in schools STEM facilitation" within a cluster of Blaenau Gwent based schools, raising aspiration and preparing children for their journey into the world of work, whilst remaining complementary to the school curriculum. The project is also seeking to support and develop a sustainable relationship between local businesses and schools, via the industry liaison element of the role. In the Spring Term, the Blaenau Gwent STEM Project delivered two virtual events, facilitated 31 sessions with business partners and 44 sessions with providers. Of the businesses that have engaged, there is a wide range of industry sectors covered including manufacturing, Engineering, Environmental, Renewable Energy and Chemistry within Science. The Council is continuously looking to add STEM related businesses to its database in order to provide training to businesses regarding the new curriculum. The Cardiff Capital Region City Deal (CCRCD) investment panel received a proposal from Aspire BG to roll out the offer across the Region in order to provide support for Industries of the Future. Following a review of the existing apprenticeship landscape across South East Wales, specifically focussing on Shared Apprenticeship Programme aspect in relation to growing and priority sectors, a response was received: 'The CCRCD Investment panel approved the paper in October 2021 along with the sum of £500k for two years. It is understood that this funding will be for a Shared Apprenticeship pilot delivery model and further research'.

A funding proposal to Tech Valleys for the refurbishment of the Monwell Building into an Advanced Engineering Centre was approved. This project brings together Tech Valleys, Coleg Gwent and a number of partners to create a state of the art Centre of Excellence to train learners and equip them with the skills to meet the demands of the engineering industry of the future. The aim is to produce highly trained students who have a real passion for engineering and upskill the current engineering workforce, ready for the next industrial revolution. The partnership with the Aspire Shared Apprenticeship Programme will ensure local industry is provided with skilled young people for the jobs of the future.

The CCRCD Housing Viability Gap Fund is a targeted funding programme to bring forward new homes on key strategic housing sites across South East Wales. Blaenau Gwent made a successful submission to the fund as it was identified that there is a viability gap which requires a grant input to support the development to go ahead.

There continues to be an improvement in the number of affordable and private homes being delivered across Blaenau Gwent with high numbers of homes accessing funding for making them more energy efficient. Alongside this, the early intervention for homelessness means 75.2% of potentially homeless households were prevented from becoming homeless.

The Energy Prospectus has been completed enabling the Council to provide 'Energy Generation Opportunities' into the market place. Funding for electric charging points in Blaenau Gwent has been successful enabling 73 charge points across 35 sites for the community and visitors in addition to workplace, taxi and bus points. Work on the ReFIT programme of works continues – 6000 non-LED street lights have been replaced with LEDs and will generate

energy savings for the Council. Hydro and wind generation projects are being investigated in detail. The GovTech Catalyst project is in the last stages of development and final reporting will enable Blaenau Gwent to assess suitable tech for the area. The £20M National Digital Exploitation Centre (NDEC) is running and has started to assist Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and micro businesses with cyber security and digital design – the first Research and Development (R&D) facility of its kind in Wales.

Consideration is being given to the development of hydro generation. This would provide renewable energy to support local energy demands, however, the level of production is extremely low when compared to the level of investment required for its initial development and ongoing operations. The scheme at Cwm Cynw offers the best potential but even with this it is likely to only be able to accommodate a 17kW system. By way of comparison, a general domestic shower would be around 10kW. It was therefore decided to not proceed further with investigations into hydro generation within the Cwm and Llanhilleth wards. However, a feasibility study has been commissioned to look at opportunities at Silent Valley, building on previous work undertaken. The feedback was positive, and the Council is looking into the potential that the hydro scheme could provide power to electric pumps at the leachate lagoon. This would then enable the Council to replace the diesel pumps, which are currently hired, which is something Natural Resources Wales (NRW) are pushing for. The next steps will include identifying suitable electric pumps and creating a model to reflect how much of the hydro energy can be used by the pumps.

All placemaking plan processes are underway and the Council is now able to apply for Transforming Towns Funding from Welsh Government to support implementation. The placemaking plan embraces the digital and technological revolution trying to establish town centres with world-class connectivity which will support businesses and provides a means for retailers to trade online. The technical and digital measures include developing a digital presence for the town, strengthening the quality of WI-FI coverage, creating a favourable commercial environment for businesses to survive and grow, and establishing a regular series of events and initiatives that raise interest in the towns as a destination to increase visitors.

The digital interventions of the Ebbw Vale project, the first to be implemented, include:

- 5G connectivity throughout the town centre with 5G classroom at the Works site;
- Creating a digital high street through development of an app that allows interaction with Ebbw Vale and provides access to local businesses;
- Establishing a brand and marketing strategy for the town, that consistently promotes the leisure, tourism and retail offer that is available in the town and wider region; and
- Creating or linking to existing digital resources (online maps/council website/app) to aid way-finding for the cycle and walking opportunities through the town.

As part of this progression digital infrastructure is being embedded as well as the Gov tech catalyst which is a £20M fund to help the public sector to make use of innovative technologies and improve public services.

An approach is being sought within each town centre to support projects across each of the Towns supported by a wide range of stakeholders. Advisory Boards are being considered for the Town Centres of Abertillery, Brynmawr and Ebbw Vale based upon the Tredegar Advisory Board approach. The Tredegar Advisory Board has provided a platform for both discussion, development and delivery of projects. The Advisory Board shall act as a consultative body to oversee development and delivery of Town Centre Strategies and Plans.

Owing to the retirement of an Officer from the Regeneration Section, progression of the Local Development Plan (LDP) had to be put on hold. As recruitment into the position has taken time to progress, there will need to be a complete revision of the Delivery Agreement, and this will need to be agreed with Welsh Government.

#### **What Evidence is available:**

- Decarbonisation Plan 2020/2030
- Blaenau Gwent Net Zero Annual Report
- Cardiff Capital Region Energy Strategy
- Estyn Reports
- Director's Report
- Performance Data
- EAS Business Plan
- SER and Summary SER
- KS5 Information (Summer 2022)
- School Organisation Policy
- Inspire
- WESP

- Education Accessibility Strategy and Plan
- Agendas and Recordings:
  - Regeneration Scrutiny Committee
  - Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee
  - Executive Committee; and
  - Council

**Future Actions and Areas for Development**

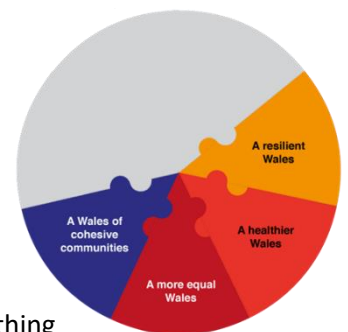
- Work to achieve higher levels of language acquisition and reading in our very young children in the early years as we ‘build back better’ in line with Curriculum for Wales Reform
- Improve attainment of eFSM pupils and particularly our more-able pupils in the early years and throughout education
- Improve school attendance in both primary and secondary sectors
- Improve progress between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, particularly in English, Maths and Science
- Continue the work with Schools Causing Concern (SCC), particularly the school in an Estyn category.
- Planning to undertake a revision of the Delivery Agreement

To enable people to maximise their independence, develop solutions and take an active role in their communities

**Why This Is Important as An Area Of Focus:**

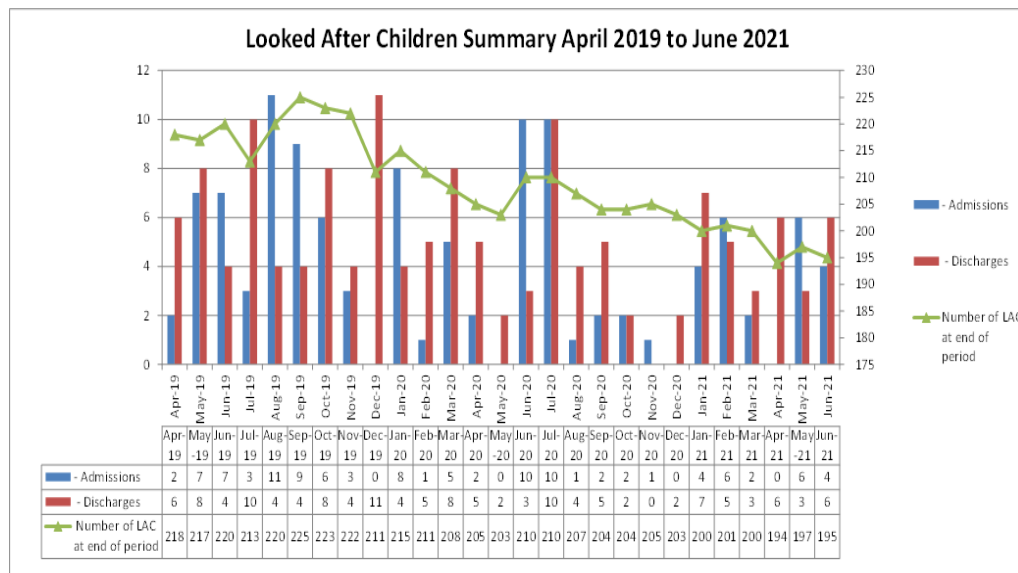
The Council wants to encourage and support people to make healthy lifestyle choices to enable children, young people and families to thrive. Research has proven people demonstrating positive health behaviours from birth through their life will lead to greater independence, and people being free from complicated health conditions later in life and reducing costs to public services. This in turn could reduce demand on services and ensure the services that are provided are high quality, efficient and responsive to local people’s needs.

With reduced funding and increasing demand on services the Council can no longer do everything it has done in the past. The focus must be on those actions that will have the greatest impact. Safeguarding the most vulnerable people in the community continues to be a top priority for the Council alongside transforming the aspirations of residents and valuing fairness and equality in everything we do.



## How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

The Children Looked After (CLA) Reduction Strategy has been reviewed and actions put in place up until 2025. This has been aligned to the Prevention and Early Intervention Strategy. Through implementation of these, there has been a slow downward trend of CLA which can be seen on the graph below. The end of year figure for 2021/22 is showing a further decrease in the number of CLA moving from 200 to 198 children.



It is important to recognise that the success of the CLA Reduction Strategy is dependent on a whole service approach. The robust preventative interventions delivered by Families First and Flying Start prevent needs from escalating into statutory services. The Information Advice and Assistance Team provides robust screening and initial assessment of all referrals ensuring the appropriate action is taken to meet needs. All of the Social Work Teams work exceptionally hard to keep families together and work with families using a strengths based approach. One of the key elements of the Strategy is to promote workforce stability. However, operational teams are facing staffing shortages. It is accepted that this is a Wales wide position and there is no simple solution. The senior leadership team is addressing how best to respond to the staffing short-fall from multiple standpoints; a separate strategy has been devised to consider short, medium and longer-term solutions (and considering the opportunity to collaborate on a regional basis). In order to support this further, Blaenau Gwent has decided to establish its own My Support Team (MyST), rather than operating jointly with Monmouthshire County Council. The table below shows how the residential children budget has shifted from an overspend position to a significant underspend position over the last three years. This is a direct result of having a MyST and 14 plus team working hard to move children out of residential care and closer to Blaenau Gwent.

Year	Budget	Outturn	Underspend /overspend
18/19	2,592,000.00	3,070,474.00	Overspent - 478,474.00
19/20	2,678,430 .00	2,548,152.00	Underspend - 130,278.00
20/21	2,703,250.00	2,041,704.00	Underspend - 661,546.00

The establishment of a Blaenau Gwent MyST would continue this positive work and increase capacity within Blaenau Gwent to address the backlog of referrals. Based upon previous outcomes, it is anticipated that the work of the team would decrease the overall numbers of children in residential care by 2 children each year over the next 3 years. The current average weekly cost of a Blaenau Gwent child to be in a residential placement is £4,000 a week or £208,000 per year. If the goal is to bring 2 children in residential care back to Blaenau Gwent is achieved, this will save the authority £416,000 per year (and offset the additional cost of the team).

One of the primary aims of the programmes delivered under the Children and Communities Grant (CCG) is to prevent needs from escalating. This not only relates to preventing families requiring the interventions from Statutory Services, but also working with families to support them out of poverty via routes to employment. As with all grant funded projects, there is a risk of the grant stopping and services being withdrawn. If this occurred the early needs of children and families would not be met and inevitably escalate requiring statutory interventions. To mitigate against this, each of the programmes under the CCG are supporting families to become more self-determining, drawing on their own naturally occurring support networks. The programmes also work closely with the third sector who also offer preventative services. All staff delivering the programmes under the CCG are on 12 month fixed term contracts. These are renewed each year. However, many staff have been on fixed term contracts for many years and will have accrued employment rights. This will have a significant impact on the Council if the CCG grant ended.



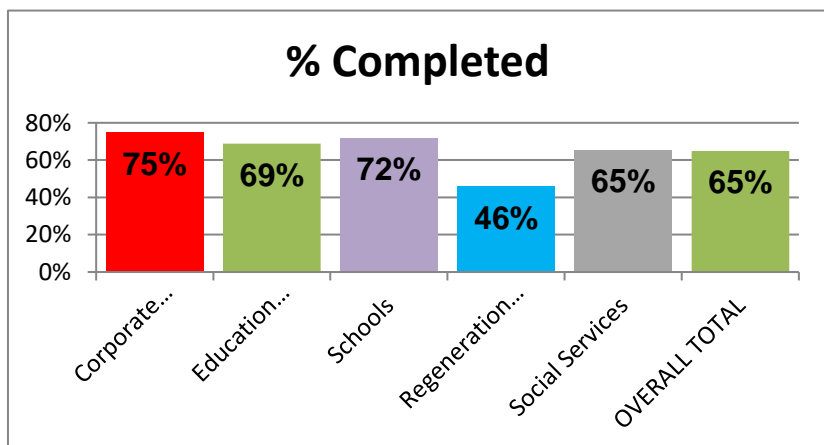
The Council has experienced a shortage of adopters available to meet the needs of the children referred to the service which has been the case for a number of years. The pandemic added to this pressure as, although there was an increase in enquiries in the region, they did not progress to applications. In addition, some adopters withdrew from process due to COVID related issues, for example being furloughed, being made redundant or losing close family members. To improve performance in this area, the South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) continues to invest in recruitment resulting in an increase in recruitment activity.

In July 2021, Foster Wales was launched at the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) Summer Festival, supported by the deputy minister Julie Morgan. This was a collaboration across all 22 local authorities in Wales working together to increase the number of local authority foster carers with the intention of ensuring all children who need to become looked after can remain within their local communities in high quality foster placements. This will allow children to remain in their schools and have easy access to spend good quality time with their families. As a result of the Foster Wales Campaign, Blaenau Gwent has seen an increase in the number of enquiries for new foster care applicants. At the end of 2021/22 Blaenau Gwent had:

- 49 Foster Carers which is an increase of 32.4% from last year; and
- 23 Kinship Carers (family members caring for children who would otherwise need to enter the care system) which is an increase of 57.5% from last year.

Assessment and care planning activity continues to promote the active voice, choice and control philosophy of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. Outcomes focused and strengths based approaches to practice continue to be modelled, and the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) remains an active partner in ensuring that children and their families engage in a meaningful way.

Audit Wales are currently undertaking a review of the Council’s safeguarding arrangements, with a particular focus



on the activity being undertaken corporately. The review is still ongoing but a great deal of work has progressed within the Council with regards to safeguarding over the past few years. Safeguarding is recognised corporately as being everybody’s responsibility. The Safeguarding Policy has recently been updated. As part of this the Council has identified a safeguarding lead officer from each directorate who meet regularly to review activity, data and processes with regards to safeguarding. Safeguarding is on the front page of the Council’s website and online awareness training is provided to all

Council staff. Volunteers and contractors are provided with a copy of the Council’s corporate safeguarding policy and procedures. To show its strategic importance, safeguarding has been included within the leadership development model as well as being a key feature of all officer inductions. To date, 464/2834 officers have completed the online safeguarding course.

The total number of adults suspected of being at risk of abuse or neglect reported during 2021/22 was 415, an increase from the previous year where the figure was 394. The number of children on the child protection register at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 was 64, an increase of 12 from the previous year.

Both Children and Adult Services have seen an increase in the number of referrals received by the Information Advice and Assistance (IAA) Team. Service users are being effectively supported at the ‘front door’ with the appropriate services identified to support their needs. As part of this, a review of capacity was undertaken and additional resource provided to the service to ensure that it complies fully with part 2 of the Social Care and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

Indicator	2020/21	2021/22
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The number of contacts for adults received during the year	4,572	5,302
The number of contacts for adults received during the year where advice or assistance was provided*	4,255	3,188
The number of contacts for children received during the year	4,512	5,781
The number of contacts for children received during the year where advice or assistance was provided*	517	623

\*Capacity in the IAA Team is increasing and the knowledge base is growing resulting in more enquiries being resolved at the point of contact without the need to complete an assessment.

Work has been undertaken to review the structures and processes in Adult Services. As part of this, an outreach model for Day Services has been put in place as well as a new model for Community Options. Both are showing to be effective with the co-location of team members and also service users having more voice and control in the services that they receive.

Over the past year, and with the easing of COVID restrictions, Adult Services has seen an increase in reablement packages being provided in terms of right sizing packages of care. Due to the commencement of the single handed care review, the bettercare project has seen an increase in the number of referrals it has received over the year. The total number of packages of reablement completed during 2021/22 was 539 up from 232 in 2020/21.

Capacity at Augusta House has been safely increased to support up to four guests. Work is continuing to develop new Augusta Promoting Independence Pods at the site. As part of these plans, the respite offer to young adults, as part of the transition planning from Children’s to Adult Services, will be increased. The development of the enhanced Day Activities / Community Options Team has progressed well despite the ongoing COVID 19 pressures.

Adult Services is continuing to look at funding options in order to increase capacity and enhance Technology Enabled Care (TEC) provision via the Gwent TEC group. A SMART flat is in development, within a sheltered housing scheme, to demonstrate the range of TEC available to support people to continue to live independently within the community. An increase of £828,401 has been received in our HSG allocation for 2021/22. These monies can now be used to commission services, as evidenced in the Commissioning Plan/Spend Plan, to meet the housing support needs of the citizens of Blaenau Gwent.

One of the biggest challenges faced during 2021/22 related to lack of workforce capacity, in particular, Provider Services and Domiciliary Care are experiencing acute pressures. Within Adult Social Services workforce concerns are in frontline registered care worker roles as well as our in-house and externally commissioned care and support services. In Children’s Services pressure was in the locality teams which manage the majority of children on the child protection register, children looked after and court work. The department as a whole has been working hard to look at innovative ways of managing the workload in these areas as well as developing recruitment and retention strategies to address workforce pressures. Despite these significant pressures the existing staff and providers of services have continued to ensure children and adults needs are met, risks are managed and safeguarding issues dealt with. Social Services are working closely with Organisational Development to establish a Strategic Workforce Plan to support capacity concerns. The workforce in Social Services has been identified as a critical risk and has therefore been included on the Council’s Corporate Risk Register.

The services are finding it difficult delivering existing packages owing to the staff shortages and this will continue with the delivery of new packages to new people coming into the system. The Gwent Strategic Co-ordination Group (GSCG) has been convened as a result these service concerns. A Tactical Co-ordination Group (TCG) has also been convened by the GSCG. The remit is to pull together representatives from all parts of the system to determine a set of interventions that will help (in the short term) to alleviate pressure and commence a more detailed piece of work to look at all system components and re-imagine / re-design how we can work more effectively so that this situation does not continue to re-present on a cyclical basis.

The outcomes approach has been embedded into service delivery with the ‘what matters’ question at the heart of the work being undertaken. All Social Services staff have been trained in the use of the approach and there is an ongoing learning and review process in place for staff in order to further strengthen the approach moving forward.

The Gwent Regional Partnership Board (RPB) is an advisory body, that takes oversight of and provides direction to any areas of integrated working across health and social care. The Council is an active partner on the Board.

The RPB was successful in utilising £8,313,131 transformation funding in 2021/22 to support a number of projects across Gwent, these include:

- The development of early intervention and prevention services (Integrated Wellbeing Networks);
- The development of primary and community care services (Compassionate Communities);
- The redesign of child and adolescent emotional and mental health services (Iceberg model); and
- The development of an integrated 'Home First' discharge model.

Sustainability will be the primary focus in the final year of implementation, bringing together successful elements alongside successful ICF programmes, to create a framework of services within a model of 'Place Based Care'. All four programmes, have embedded well and the evaluation reports demonstrate both financial efficiencies and improved wellbeing outcomes for citizens have been achieved.

The Transformation Programme, to support the continued development of a 'seamless system' of care, support and well-being in Gwent, in response to the Welsh Government's new long term plan for health and social care, 'A Healthier Wales', has seen progress across the four identified programmes with evaluation reports demonstrating both financial efficiencies and improved wellbeing outcomes for citizens have been achieved.

As part of the response to the COVID 19 pandemic, the Regional Partnership Board was key in overseeing a joint response with regular updates provided to reassure the Board that the hospital capacity and support in the community was able to cope with each wave of the virus locally and regionally, which has been very much due to the success of collaborative working by all partners and more lately due to the vaccination roll out.

#### What Evidence is available:

- ACRF 2021
- CLA Strategy
- Corporate Safeguarding Policy
- Prevention and Early Intervention Strategy
- Agendas and Recordings:
  - Social Services Scrutiny Committee
  - Executive Committee; and
  - Council
- CIW Reports
- Social Services Performance Indicators
- Corporate Parenting Plan

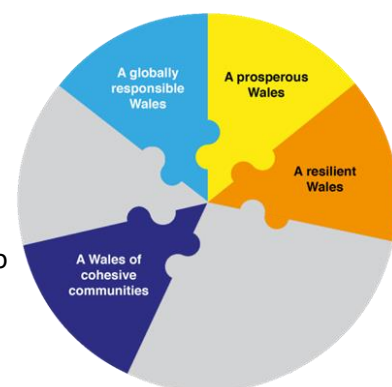
#### Future Actions and Areas for Development

- Work with the GSCG and TCG to alleviate pressures in both the short and long term.
- Work to establish the development of a Strategic Workforce Plan to support capacity issues across the Council.

**An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services we know matter to our communities**

#### Why This Is Important as An Area Of Focus:

The Corporate Plan provides the focus for delivering lasting change for the area. It also provides the platform for transforming Blaenau Gwent into a more confident and capable Council. The ambition is to deliver better outcomes for the people of Blaenau Gwent and that ambition is underpinned by solid and sustainable plans, ensuring the Council can be held to account for what it has promised to deliver. Maximising the impact of resources to deliver those outcomes sits at the heart of this priority, including; understanding costs, controlling expenditure, maximising income and aligning resources to the needs of residents, businesses and visitors to build a Blaenau Gwent for the future.



#### How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 the Council had £28.3M of usable financial reserves. This is the equivalent of 19.4% of the Council's annual spend, the 8<sup>th</sup> lowest of all 22 Welsh local authorities. The council's 'bridging the gap' programme of strategic business reviews continued throughout the year to create efficiencies and financial resilience for the future. The £2.58M delivered in the last year enabled the Council to balance the budget and provided the flexibility for the decision to freeze Council Tax for 2022/23. Building financial resilience for the future is important and the Council's reserves were at the same level as they were in 2012 at over £10.5M, an increase of £2.5M in the last 5 years. The increase in funding is welcome news, however, it does not reverse the significant budget reductions of the last 10 years which means that the Council must continue to be financially prudent and work hard to meet service demands whilst balancing the budget in future years.

Revenue Outturn Expenditure' interactive (PowerBI) dashboard - <https://www.data.cymru/dashboards/expenditure?q=ro22>

The revenue budget financial statement provisional outturn as at 31st March 2022 was as follows:

Item	Revised Estimate 2021/2022	Provisional Expenditure to 31 March 2022 (excluding Reserve Adjustments)	Provisional Expenditure to 31 March 2022	Variance Favourable / (Adverse)
	£	£	£	£
<b>Summary</b>				
<b>Corporate Services and Financial Management Strategy</b>				
Corporate Services	4,351,420	3,901,949	4,198,043	153,377
Financial Management & Strategy	13,428,490	11,941,563	11,941,840	1,486,650
Covid 19 Related Expenditure	0			0
	17,779,910	15,875,512	16,139,883	1,640,027
<b>Social Services</b>				
Children's Services	14,006,860	12,618,052	12,652,520	1,354,340
Adult Services	26,509,200	23,383,161	23,979,941	2,529,259
Business Management / Corporate Recharges	6,135,580	5,890,068	6,117,026	18,554
	46,651,640	41,891,281	42,749,487	3,902,153
<b>Education</b>	59,740,650	59,838,996	59,635,505	105,145
Aneurin Leisure Trust	4,159,100	4,135,975	4,182,529	(23,429)
Covid-19 Related Expenditure	0	-	-	0
	63,899,750	63,974,971	63,818,034	81,716

Item	Revised Estimate 2021/2022	Provisional Expenditure to 31 March 2022 (excluding Reserve Adjustments)	Provisional Expenditure to 31 March 2022	Variance Favourable / (Adverse)
	£	£	£	£
<b>Summary</b>				
<b>Economy</b>	1,574,150	1,491,087	1,518,161	55,989
Covid-19 Related Expenditure	0			0
	1,574,150	1,491,087	1,518,161	55,989
<b>Environment and Infrastructure</b>				
Environment	17,658,360	17,328,527	17,845,829	(187,469)
Infrastructure	9,069,580	8,976,650	8,852,941	216,639
Covid-19 Related Expenditure	0	12,302	12,302	(12,302)
	26,727,940	26,317,479	26,711,072	16,868

<b>Planning Committee and Licensing Committee</b>				
Planning	1,290,730	739,337	701,708	589,022
Licensing	109,050	94,838	94,838	14,212
Covid-19 Related Expenditure	0			0
	1,399,780	834,175	796,546	603,234
<b>Other – Transfer to Specific Reserves</b>	0	(897,428)	2,649,630	(2,649,630)
Total Expenditure	158,033,170	149,905,550	154,801,287	3,231,883

In March 2021, Council approved a new operating model and working arrangements for staff and buildings. Following the COVID 19 pandemic and the lockdowns that were put in place, staff and members worked remotely in the main moving to arrangements based on digital platforms. A review of the pandemic was undertaken with the realisation that Council business and services can be delivered in a very different way, be more in line with modern working practices, reduce costs and the impact on the environment. The Council looked to seize this opportunity and made step changes now so not to simply return to the same operation as before. A survey of staff conducted late in 2020 showed that staff responded positively to home working and felt that the Council has handled the change well. This shows support from staff to continue to working in a more agile and flexible way and the positive impact this has had on productivity. It is also notable that the Council has reduced its costs in relation to running buildings and business travel, with a subsequent decrease in carbon generated as a result of Council operations.

As part of the new operating model, Council also agreed for a Democratic Hub to be established at the General Offices, Ebbw Vale, to vacate and demolish the Civic Centre and to develop Community Hubs from libraries across the Borough. As part of the new operating model, the Council also embedded an Agile Working Policy. This included a review of the working and contractual arrangements for staff and identified all posts as either home worker, agile worker or service / community based worker. All staff were consulted on as part of this process with allowances for home and agile staff put in place as well as support for staff to ensure they had appropriate workstations at home, taking into account the health, safety and wellbeing of staff. Agile working has also further reduced the use of paper, there is less commuting and overall less business travel. As part of their review, Audit Wales identified that no engagement was undertaken on the closure of civic centre due to challenges of engaging during pandemic.

Throughout the COVID 19 pandemic, the Council's workforce showed great strength and resilience when delivering services. This included a number of Officers having to be re-deployed and working outside of their 'traditional' roles. During the pandemic there was an increased sense of pace with services having to react to unpredictable situations with national advice being changed frequently and at short notice. Some services are still very much working to address the pandemic and are having to undertake a dual role of working in both response and recovery. Officers are showing immense flexibility in the delivery of services and this learning has been harnessed by making changes to processes so that they operate more efficiently under existing circumstances.

The Council has identified a number of priorities for recovery and renewal, as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are five recovery themes each with an action plan and monitoring methods in place:

- Community (overarching theme);
- Social Services (Children and Adults);
- Economy;
- Education; and
- Workforce.

The recovery and renewal plans will act as working documents, outlining how the Council will continue to support schools, the economy, the community, service users and the workforce during, and beyond the pandemic. It is, however, highly likely that there will be a need to continue to move between alert levels and thus working to response and recovery at the same time. Therefore, an effective approach to business continuity at each level is required.

In Autumn, the Council undertook a Community Impact Assessment pilot which considered a range of qualitative and quantitative research to consider how pre-existing inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic for key groups such as young people, families with young children and people with learning disabilities. The work identified several key impacts, such as mental health and the digital divide, and the intention is to build on this approach and maximise the use of intelligence to inform future recovery work and ensure decision-making is evidence based.

For 2021/22 the Council's sickness outturn was 16.74 days on average per full time employee. This is an increase of 5.07 days per employee in comparison to 11.67 days the year before. If the COVID related absence is removed from the 16.74 days, the sickness outturn reduces to 14.20 days – which is still an increase in comparison to last year's 9.98 days (excluding COVID).

The total number of complaints received by the Council in 2021/22 was 105. The Waste Service received the most complaints with 40 in total. 96% of complaints were closed within the reporting period (20 working days) with the outstanding 4% responded to after 20 working days. A total of 34 compliments were received for the financial year 2021/22.

Two members of staff were the subject of the capability process during the period April 2021 – March 2022, both cases were resolved during the period.

Six internal grievance procedures were instigated between April 2021 and March 2022. Five of these were closed by the end of the year, with one case ongoing. A collective grievance was raised concerning 55 employees, this remained open as at 31 March 2022.

In 2021/22 4 complaints against Members were made to the ombudsman but none were investigated due to no evidence of a breach or too minor to pursue.

The Authority received and processed 863 Freedom of Information requests between 1st April 2021 and 31st March 2022. The service responded to 93.9% within the 20 working day requirement. This is an improvement on the level attained the previous year increasing from 86.59%.

There were no whistle-blowing incidents reported to the Authority during the year, however two whistle-blowing complaints were ongoing from the previous year.

Ongoing communication is a must within Blaenau Gwent and the communication process is pre-planned and monitored throughout the year to include regular and reactive updates both internally to the council and externally. The Council's Communication function has been reviewed externally and a number of recommendations provided in order to improve communication to staff and customers. A working group with representation across the Council is to be set up to understand the range of communication methods and needs across the Council to ensure a joined up approach and a reduction in duplication.

The Council has taken a focussed and proactive organisational approach to the reviewing and redesigning of services by introducing a user design approach to ensure the customer is at the centre of all service planning, these have included: Planning; Insurance; Street Cleansing; Waste; and Starters, Leavers and Movers with Organisational Development. This forward thinking approach has been shared with partners such as the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Tech Valleys. Maintaining momentum in this key area will be a challenge with support being required across the whole organisation.

The Council has set out minimum standards of behaviour and has provided guidelines to help maintain and improve standards. The Council's Constitution is a key document which sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are made and the procedures followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. It also includes a code of conduct for both officers and members.

The Council has in place comprehensive arrangements for Elected Members. As part of this, there is an extensive Member Development Programme in place, aligned to the forward work programmes of the Committees and Council priorities as well as from the Personal Development Review (PDR) process in place

for members. A particular focus has been on the development of an induction programme to support members as part of their role following the 2022 local elections. A variety of training materials, guidance and documentation is available to members and this is included within an online member library.

Evaluations are undertaken after every scrutiny meeting to review the processes in place and where further improvement can be sought. Learning is also undertaken annually and research from other areas considered. This learning has led to an extensive review and change of the current democratic processes including; a reduction in minutes, the live recording of meetings, significantly reduced agendas which only include key items and reducing the size of committees. Regular evaluation of these processes and considerations for further changes will be undertaken throughout the year.

A PDR Scheme and Competency Framework is in place 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. Role descriptions for Members are established and are included within the Constitution.

As a Local Authority it is vital in the work that we undertake that we collect and process personal information in order to fulfil our obligations and perform many of our day-to-day operations. In May 2018 the GDPR came into force and made significant changes to how the Authority handles personal information and placed many additional obligations on organisations. A project team was created at the time to manage the work needed to ensure the Authority was compliant with this new legislation which has since been disbanded but the work to ensure continued compliance is ongoing through the work of the Information Governance Forum (IGF) that is chaired by the Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO) and supported by the Authority’s Data Protection and Governance Officer which is a mandatory role within the legislation. Following Brexit the GDPR legislation has since become known as UK GDPR and currently remains identical to the EU GDPR although some changes are currently proposed and out for consultation.

Whilst implementing GDPR in 2018 the Council implemented an Information Asset Owner structure in order to be compliant with the legislation and ensure that there are clear defined lines of responsibility towards information assets owned by the Council. Information Asset Registers are in place for each area of the Council and regularly reviewed to ensure that there is corporate oversight of all key information systems and to risk assess these in terms of the confidentiality, integrity and availability.

In addition to the Information Asset Registers the Council also adhered to an addition obligation under GDPR to create a Record of Processing Activities for all departments. This document provides the ability to drill down to the necessary level of detail required under GDPR to identify when the Council collects and processes personal information, why it is doing this, what legally permits it to do this etc. The Council also has a suite of Information Governance and Security policies and procedures that are regularly reviewed to manage and ensure compliance with its statutory duties.

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.

Internal Audit Services issued 45 audit opinions during the year.

<b>Audit Grading</b>	<b>No of audits</b>
Full Assurance	12
Reasonable Assurance	13
Limited Assurance	6
No Assurance	1
Non-graded	13

The number of audits undertaken and the proportions of grades for the period aligned to pre-pandemic trends. For 2021/22 there were no patterns / trends to the audit outcomes that indicated particular areas of concern and no individual findings of such significance to cause concern regarding the integrity of the Statement of Accounts. The overall audit opinion on the adequacy of the internal control environment continued to reflect Reasonable Assurance across the council. Members of Wider Corporate Leadership Team continue to receive periodic reviews of Internal Audit findings to ensure appropriate corrective action is taken to maintain and / or improve internal controls.

#### **What Evidence is available:**

- Internal Audit Reports
- Management Statements
- Statement of Accounts
- Annual Governance Statement
- Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy.
- Code of Governance
- Internal Audit Plan
- Risk Management Strategy and a Risk Management Handbook
- Risk Registers
- Budget Survey – January 2022
- Out turn expenditure report from Data Cymru
- Central Contracts Register
- Staff Survey
- Commercial Strategy
- Communications Strategy
- Locality Data and Evidence
- Community Hub Data and Evidence
- External Communications
- Internal Communications
- MD Messages
- Agile Working Policy
- Future Operating Model
- Sickness Absence figures
- Workforce Strategy and Action Plan
- Thinki Learner Management System (at alpha phase).
- OD Policies
- The Annual Report to the Equality and Human Rights Commission
- Agendas and Recordings:
  - Joint Budget Scrutiny Committee;
  - Governance and Audit Committee;
  - Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee;
  - Executive Committee; and
  - Council
- Older People’s Commissioner for Wales Report
- Age Friendly Blaenau Gwent Action Plan
- Workforce Strategy
- Council’s Pay Policy Statement
- Strategic Equalities Plan 2020/2024
- Strategic Equalities Plan Annual Report 2021
- Corporate Complaints Policy
- Complaints and Compliments
- Constitution
- Assessment of Performance 2021
- Assurance and Risk Assessment Information from Auditors
- Audit Wales Reports
- Engagement Strategy, Calendar and Tracker
- Finance and Performance Report
- Participatory Budgeting
- PSB Papers
- TCC Clerks Terms of Reference
- Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2017/22 and Action Plan
- Diversity in Democracy Action Plan
- Digital Democracy Presentation
- Local Government and Elections Act Action Plan
- Recovery Plans
- Annual Scrutiny Report
- Business Plans (for all Directorates)
- Dashboard for poverty (Data Cymru)
- Blaenau Gwent Lifestyles – Acorn Segmentation 2022
- Audit Wales Reports

#### **Future Actions and Areas for Development:**

- Embed the recommendations via the Communications Working Group
- The Council to consider where the user design approach is required and to ensure staff are available to support the process.



- Identify actions/measures to further address the gender pay differences as part of existing Equality plans.

## Overall Progress of the Well-being Goals 2021

### A Prosperous Wales

#### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The organisation, End Child Poverty, released new data in October 2020 with findings showing that the highest rates of child poverty in Wales are in Pembrokeshire and Blaenau Gwent. Blaenau Gwent is one of 5 counties in Wales to have seen a rise in the proportion of children living in poverty since 2015. The impact of poverty on children is well documented, with children from low-income families more likely to experience worse physical and mental health; do less well in school; and have fewer opportunities in the future. The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) captures the extent of deprivation as a proportion of residents living in each lower super output area (LSOA). The eight considerations of the WIMD are: income; employment; health; education, skills and training; geographical access to services; housing; physical

environment; and community safety. Blaenau Gwent has the highest percentage of LSOAs in the most deprived areas across Wales at 10%, for income (19.1%), education (27.7%), and community safety (23.4%). <https://www.data.cymru/dashboards/viewofpoverty>

The private housing market in Blaenau Gwent is growing and has seen a significant increase over the last 12 months. The Council has received a significant increase in Social Housing Grants but is finding it difficult to spend the full amount on active housing developments due to the fact that there is limited land availability to build.

The Ebbw Valley Railway (EVR), a branch line of the Great Western Main Line, has had a significant regeneration impact in Blaenau Gwent, increasing connectivity and accessibility since its re-opening to passengers more than a decade ago. EVR's success was demonstrated with passenger usage numbers far exceeding initial estimates, and the planned new line extension to Abertillery, including a park-and-ride facility for 100 vehicles, will further increase accessibility and connectivity for the Abertillery region. The success of the EVR is supported with evidence from local employers who altered shift patterns for employees travelling by train and has opened up new options for local residents in terms of employment opportunities and access to services and facilities, both within Blaenau Gwent and the region. The extension to Abertillery will increase these benefits further and has the potential to increase footfall in the town centre and create retail growth.

## A Resilient Wales

### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The Council has approved for the Ciner Glass Factory to be developed on the industrial site in the Rassau. This is a positive position for Blaenau Gwent and it is hoped that the factory will create 650 jobs and provide economic benefits to future generations. The intention is for the site to act as a catalyst to provide further innovation and investment into the area.

The UK Government has announced funding as part of the Shared Prosperity Scheme. Blaenau Gwent is working both regionally and locally to ensure that the area is able to access as much money as possible in order to provide funding to the areas that require the most support. Some of the work to date includes working with the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal (CCRC) and northern valleys to support transport projects at a regional level.

Circa £2M has been utilised to provide ICT facilities across all schools in Blaenau Gwent as part of the hwb tech initiative. This Welsh Government initiative is looking to provide suitable infrastructure, services and resources across school estates to support the needs of schools in accessing and using digital services. The approach looks to enable maintained schools in Wales to consistently exploit the transformational benefits which digital technology can have on education. The initiative provides a range of digital services to inspire teachers and learners to confidently embed digital practices, whilst developing a digital culture, competencies, skills and knowledge.

Blaenau Gwent Council is working with the CCRC and the nine other local authorities in the region to offer opportunities to businesses and new graduates. The Venture Graduate Scheme aims to enhance productivity, innovation and economic growth by linking talented graduates with ambitious businesses in the CCRC. The scheme offers businesses a range of free services to overcome barriers to recruitment, while graduates on the scheme get to participate in a coherent scheme and complete a fully funded internationally recognised ILM qualification. More information can be found here: <https://www.venturewales.org>

## A More Equal Wales

### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The Council is committed to implementing the Equality Act 2010 and this is evidenced by the Blaenau Gwent Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) 2020/24. The Plan was developed using research and engagement of people with different protected characteristics as well as developing a Member's Task and Finish Group.

The plan contains the Council's Equality Objectives:

- We will be an organisation who ensures fairness and equality is in everything that we do;

- We will be an equal opportunity employer with a workforce that values equality and diversity;
- We will support children and young people, particularly those with protected characteristics, to achieve their learning ambitions;
- We will promote and support safe, friendly and cohesive communities;
- We will ensure there is meaningful involvement with people who have protected characteristics and key stakeholders that represent their interests; and
- We will strive to tackle inequality caused by poverty for people who have protected characteristics.

The plan and supporting documents can be found at <http://cc-mgov-01/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=1134&Mid=2172&Ver=4&LLL=0>

The Equalities Plan aims to put fairness and equality at the heart of everything the Council does and this is central to maximising well-being outcomes for residents, local communities, staff and visitors, now and in the future. As public service providers it is recognised that there is a key role to play in making a real difference to people's lives. Therefore, the Council will continue to strive to be a 'fair and equitable' organisation as outlined in the Corporate Plan 2018-22. Monitoring the plan through the corporate business planning arrangements will be an important step to ensure equality is mainstreamed and embedded across working practices and service delivery and that the objectives remain fit for purpose.

Fundamental to the development of the SEP was the involvement of people with different protected characteristics. The involvement plan, guided by the National Principles for Public Participation in Wales and the Children and Young People's National Participation Standards, consisted of two phases and went beyond the 4 weeks' statutory consultation period:

- Phase 1: 'Talk to us about Fairness and Equalities' (July – September 2019) (120 participants); and
- Phase 2: 'Tell us what you think about equalities' (December – January 2020) (96 formal survey responses).

During each phase proactive promotion and encouragement was undertaken with people with protected characteristics to get involved and participate in a way that was meaningful to them to help shape the Council's equality objectives. This aspect was predominately supported by working with key equality organisations and agencies which are part of existing equality networks. This subsequently led to the delivery of a number of bespoke engagement sessions, outside of traditional consultation arrangements, for people with learning disabilities, people with physical impairments and complex needs, and also included work with the 50+ Forum, Youth Forum and Children's Grand Council. Formal consultation responses, received from key organisations who advocate on behalf of underrepresented groups, were also considered as part of the design process. The involvement plan culminated with the delivery of a successful celebratory event in January 2021 which brought together people with different characteristics to discuss what's really important to them and, through the delivery of the Council's Equality Plan, a real difference can be made.

Following the completion of a proforma developed by the Older People's Commissioner for Wales, the Commissioner has responded to the Council that she was pleased to read about the success of the Community hubs across the borough in both enabling access to information and in providing digital support for those older people wanting to get online. The information by the Council demonstrated a commitment to ensuring that older people can access information and services in an increasingly digital world. The response also made a commitment to continue to develop the work around access to information and digital support referenced in the Age Friendly Blaenau Gwent Action Plan which commits to becoming even more age-friendly as we recover from the Covid19 pandemic and establishing age-friendly communities across the borough.

The Council has provided support to a number of National equality campaigns, such as preparation for 'Proud Council' and contribution to Welsh Government National consultations such as the LGBTQ+ Action Plan.

The Gender Pay Gap information, required under the statutory requirements of the Equality Act 2010 (Gender Pay Gap Information) Regulations 2017, is presented and published through the Council's Pay Policy Statement 2020/2021. In comparison with the UK gender pay gap (17%, 2019) the Council is confident that men and women are paid equally for doing equivalent jobs across the Council. Data shows that the workforce is predominantly female with women occupying a high percentage of jobs across all four of the pay quartiles. Also, the pay gap in Blaenau Gwent is significantly lower than the national average and has further improved, reducing from 2.94% at the lower

mean to 2.78% mean. In seeking to address gender pay there is a suite of policies in place that promote equalities throughout the workforce and data for this year is also being reviewed. As a result of this work, actions/measures required to further address gender pay differences will be incorporated into existing Equality plans.

Providing opportunities to become a more diverse Council can lead to better engagement with individuals and communities, in turn leading to greater levels of confidence, trust and better decision which is informed by a wider range of perspectives and lived experiences. On 29th July 2021, Council signed up to becoming a 'Diverse Council'. There are a number of expectations on Councils, as part of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, to support diversity in the democratic process and also for political parties to support the process of becoming a councillor and support once elected. As part of this, a Diverse Council Action Plan has been approved by Council and is in the process of being implemented. The action plan sets out intended activity ahead of the 2022 local elections and the work to be progressed in the longer term. To support the development of the action plan and ambitions moving forward, the Council was successful in receiving digital democracy funding from Welsh Government. These monies were used to commission an external company, Perago, to support the Council in identifying the barriers to engaging in the democratic process. This work was targeted to 16-18 year olds but provided a great insight into the potential barriers and solutions for Blaenau Gwent as a whole moving forward.

## A Wales of Cohesive Communities

### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

A main objective of the Strategic Equality Plan is to promote and support safe, friendly and cohesive communities. Working in partnership with the West Gwent Community Cohesion Programme and local Community Safety Partnership, the Council continues to deliver a range of projects and initiatives which promote increased awareness and understanding; encourages and celebrates diversity; and brings people and local communities together to strengthen community spirit and resilience.

The Council has successfully raised awareness and understanding of numerous International and National Equality and Cohesion Campaigns via social media, as well as delivering on specific initiatives with staff, communities and stakeholders (for example, the Youth Forum, Citizen Panel etc.). Examples of the campaigns supported includes Holocaust Memorial Day, Show Racism the Red Card, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer +) History Month, Pride, White Ribbon Day (campaign to end domestic violence), Black History Month and International Children's Day.

Since 2016, Blaenau Gwent Council has supported the UK's Resettlement Scheme Programme, working in partnership with a wide range of public, third sector and private sector organisations, to deliver a holistic package of support. This initial work resulted in four Syrian families (20 individuals) who fled Syria being assisted. In May 2021, the decision was taken to continue the support by participating in the Afghan Resettlement Programme and Wider Asylum Seeker Dispersal Scheme as a pilot. Therefore, offering to prepare a further two properties for accommodation. Participation in the Wider Dispersal Scheme demonstrates the Council's commitment towards supporting the Welsh Government's ambition of Wales being a 'Nation of Sanctuary'. The Council is also supporting two Government schemes to help those fleeing the war in Ukraine. The Council continues to support arrivals under the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme and, to date, 15 people have arrived in the borough so far. Support is being provided as well as help to integrate with the community. It is likely that many more people will arrive through the Welsh Government's visa route. Work has been undertaken to establish a Welcome Centre in Ebbw Vale and this was opened from 11<sup>th</sup> July onwards. Further work is being undertaken to potentially identify further locations for Welcome Centres. [Welcomecentre@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk](mailto:Welcomecentre@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk)

Based on the findings of the Community Impact Assessment undertaken by the Council, work has been undertaken with a range of local community groups to promote inclusion, as well as providing an increased awareness of what further support and funding opportunities are available to recover from Covid-19. For example, working with Public Service Board (PSB) partners support was provided to deliver a participatory budgeting Community Choice, Community Voice programme. This resulted in £252,393 funding being awarded to 40 community groups delivering local projects. Work also continues with Registered Social Landlords, GAVO and Public Health Wales to maximise funds to address the impacts of loneliness and isolation. The Loneliness and Isolation Fund was launched in

December 2021, enabling local community groups to reconvene following the pandemic and support the wider community.

Home and fire safety services have been provided to victims of crime, anti-social behaviour and domestic violence in the area. Initiatives have also been provided in order to protect, support and empower those who are vulnerable to exploitation, violent extremism or terrorism, as well as human trafficking and modern slavery.

The Gwent PSB has undertaken a comprehensive review of Community Safety across the region. The work has included:

- The need for a comprehensive governance review of Community Safety and violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) in Gwent;
- Confirm the Gwent Community Safety Board (Safer Gwent) as the existing forum to take forward this work; and
- Nominate a strategic advocate to lead the development of a future scoping paper to come back to PSB.

A Safer Gwent group has been established in order to work with key Community Safety Partners and provide strategic direction and a structured approach to Community Safety across the five local authority areas of Gwent. Safer Gwent is made up of representatives from the local authorities, the local health board, registered social landlords, voluntary sector, youth offending services and the probation and rehabilitation services. The group aims to develop a collective community engagement approach to enhance partnership working with a view to achieving better outcomes in tackling anti-social behaviour, preventing re-offending and supporting victims. Safer Gwent will meet quarterly and enable information sharing to facilitate enhanced partnership working; influence existing funding opportunities to support the Commissioner's Police and Crime Plan priorities; map existing community safety services to identify duplication and gaps in service provision; and provide information to support commissioning of community safety services.

The Gwent Community Cohesion Team has worked in collaboration with Dragons Rugby to engage the community and spread the national campaign message #HatehurtsWales. Blaenau Gwent Council, together with its fellow local authorities across Gwent, have worked with schools, not only to challenge racism and hate crime, but to also promote inclusion and celebrate the region's diversity. Last year schools were involved in producing an anti-racism poster competition which was organised by Race Equality First. Schools across the region produced some powerful art work which displayed messages that promoted equality and showed that hate has no place in rugby or the community.

## A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language

### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The aims of the Blaenau Gwent's Welsh Language Strategy are linked with the Welsh Government's vision to create a million Welsh speakers in Wales by 2050. In order to meet a target of a 44% increase of Welsh speakers by 2050, Blaenau Gwent would need to gain an additional 2,324 Welsh speakers against the 2011 Census where the Blaenau Gwent baseline is 5,284 (data from the 2021 Census in relation to Welsh language is yet to be released). Therefore, this represents an average annual increase of 70 additional Welsh speakers, i.e. 3% of the target figure of an additional 2,324 in Blaenau Gwent for the next 33 years.

The council has in place a Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2021/22 and has identified the following three Welsh Language Promotion objectives:

- To promote and encourage the use of the Welsh language within families and the community;
- To increase the provision of Welsh language education and informal activities for children and young people and to increase their awareness of the value of the language; and
- To increase opportunities for people to use Welsh in the workplace.

The outcomes of the Strategy are:

- More people engage with the Welsh language;
- More people attain fluency in the Welsh language;
- More Council employees are able to use Welsh Language Monitoring Arrangements;

- Welsh Language Promotion Strategy Action Plan in place;
- Blaenau Gwent Welsh in Education Strategic Plan in place; and
- Welsh Language Annual Monitoring Report undertaken.

There is currently an open Welsh Language Investigation with the Welsh Language Commissioner linked to potential breach in the delivery of services in Welsh from the Contact Centre. It has been noted that no agent in the Contact Centre dealing with public calls was fluent in Welsh. The Council has 12 staff who volunteer to assist the Council in providing a Welsh language service as part of the Corporate Welsh Language Speakers List. The Council is working fully to respond to the investigation.

Extensive engagement was undertaken on the development of the 10-year Blaenau Gwent Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). There has been strong progress to date with the progression of the Welsh Medium School. Work is ongoing to create a new 210 place Welsh-medium primary school and associated childcare facility in the Tredegar/ Sirhowy valley.

## A Globally Responsible Wales

### How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

Blaenau Gwent Council’s Decarbonisation Plan was adopted in September 2020 at the same time we declared a Climate Emergency. The plan addresses our organisational emissions with the aim of making our full contribution to the ambition of a Net Zero Public Sector in Wales by 2030.

To give an accurate view of the year to year changes in our carbon footprint we need to exclude purchased goods and services, which are not suitable for monitoring performance, and sequestration where the figures are based on the same data for each year. These more directly measured carbon emissions are shown in the table below:

Blaenau Gwent Carbon Emissions	tonnes CO <sub>2</sub> e/year		
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Direct Carbon Emissions	14,597	11,274	13,087

Following a substantial COVID influenced fall of 23% in these emissions last year the figures show an increase this year. However, nearly all of this increase is due to changes in the methodology used to calculate the emissions from staff commute and the onwards transportation of waste from last year. For the onward transportation in waste the underlying distance travelled and vehicles used have not changed. Although the carbon figure for the staff commute this year is only slightly lower than the base line year, there has been a substantial drop of around 23% in the total miles travelled due to new home and agile working arrangements. Overall the figures show that the large majority of the reductions due to COVID last year have been maintained, with bounce back in some areas balanced by continued reductions in others.

Although we were already taking action in a number of areas before declaring a Climate Emergency, we did not have a clear picture of the total impact of our actions or our overall position in relation to Net Zero. We decided to focus on understanding our organisational emissions first, on the basis that we had the greatest control over these emissions and that developing a strong plan to reduce our own impact would be the best way to demonstrate public leadership.

Our Decarbonisation Board was formed in March 2021, initially chaired by our Managing Director and now by our Interim Chief Executive. Senior officers from across the organisation and from Aneurin Leisure Trust, who deliver services on our behalf, sit on the board. Last year the Board oversaw the completion of Readiness Assessments covering all of our transitions. As a result, we feel that we now have a good understanding of where we are and what we need to do to reach Net Zero 2030.

Blaenau Gwent was responsible for the establishment of the first Climate Assembly in Wales, which took place online in March 2021. 44 demographically representative Blaenau Gwent residents heard from over 20 expert speakers and deliberated for 23 hours about the question ‘*what should we do in Blaenau Gwent to*

*tackle the climate crisis in a way that is fair and improves living standards for everyone?'. The Assembly produced five official recommendations, drafted by Assembly participants, that received 80% support. The recommendations will help to inform the development of a Plan to address territorial emissions in Blaenau Gwent. Continuing this public engagement is a priority for both the Council and the Public Service Board (PSB).*

The Council is working closely with partners at both a local Blaenau Gwent level, through the newly formed Well-being Partnership Group, the Regional Gwent PSB and Climate Ready Gwent in order to work together to tackle climate change. Regional projects have included:

- Electrical Vehicle Charging Project where 62 new dual electric vehicle 22kw fast charging units have been installed at 34 sites across Gwent;
- Gwent Green Grid Partnership, where funding has been secured by Gwent partners for a three-year programme of work in support of woodland creation and management, green space cycle ways and the enhancement of vital habitats. Involving communities in the management of their local parks and woodlands has been shown to improve community cohesion and reduce antisocial behaviour; and
- Contributing to the development of Cardiff Capital Region Energy Strategy.

The Council has received £146k from the Resilient Greater Gwent Grant to support biodiversity projects across the borough. Contributing to the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity and ecosystem resilience will help to mitigate and adapt to climate change and provide positive opportunities to maintain and build mental and physical health and well-being.

#### **Future Actions and Areas for Development:**

- Undertake a baseline analysis on data ranges that act as markers for a healthy society, comparing them with national averages for Wales, other UK countries, Europe and other developed countries.
- The Gwent Well-being Plan 2023 to 2028 to be informed by the data and develop appropriate actions for implementation to tackle health inequalities.
- Identify the cause of the incorrect values in the fixed asset register and correct any values affected by the issue.

## Overall Progress of the 7 Corporate Planning Areas

### Corporate planning

#### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The Council has established a robust governance framework which looks to provide a transparent approach to how the Council delivers its services, manages its budget and works with the community.

The Council has fully aligned all of its planning to the Corporate Plan, which includes the Well-being Objectives, via a 'golden thread'. The alignment ensures that all effort and resources are linked into the delivery of the Corporate Plan.

The Council operates a single performance management system which includes the majority of Council planning and holds information in one place in order to avoid duplication including business planning, reporting and self-evaluation. As part of this, a well-structured performance management framework is in operation to monitor implementation of the Corporate Plan and Well-being Objectives.

The Council's business planning framework is strategically aligned with the Corporate Plan throughout the organisation so that all staff can understand their contribution to its implementation. The corporate requirement is for all business plans to be updated at least quarterly. Achievements, challenges, PIs and progress against any internal or external regulatory proposals for improvement are then included within the Finance and Performance Report which is reported to Scrutiny Committee and Executive Committee.

The Sustainable Development Principles, Environment Act and Decarbonisation have been included within the business planning template used across all service areas. The five ways of working are also captured within the Corporate Reporting Template, this is supported by guidance which is reviewed and shared periodically.

## Financial planning

### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), is a key element within the Council's strategic planning framework. It is this financial framework which will support the Council's financial resilience and ensure it operates sustainably. The MTFS outlines the approach that the Council will take to respond to the financial challenges faced over the next five-year period. This will be an iterative process and one that will develop and be refined as the funding position from Wales Government becomes clearer and strategic business reviews are further developed and implemented. Bridging the Gap remains the Council's medium/long term strategy to address identified budget gaps. Additional proposals will be developed to mitigate the possible residual funding gaps in future years.

During 2020-21, Audit Wales examined the financial sustainability of each council in Wales. In Blaenau Gwent, it was concluded that the Council had improved its financial planning and the better-than-expected Welsh Government settlements meant that the Council is now better placed to maintain its financial sustainability over the short term, but challenges remain to fully close budget gaps over the medium term. Findings included:

- The immediate impact of COVID-19 on the Council's financial sustainability has been mitigated by additional Welsh Government funding but the Council continues to develop a more sustainable approach to financial planning and recognises the need to understand the ongoing financial impact of the pandemic.
- The Council is also increasing its useable reserves and remains committed to doing so over the medium term.
- The Council's overall performance against budget is improving and, whilst some service areas continue to overspend, the Council is taking steps to help address some of these budget pressures.
- The Council has developed a more sustainable approach to savings planning but further challenges remain to identify sufficient savings to fully close the estimated medium-term funding gap.
- The Council's liquidity position remains the lowest in Wales.

In January 2022, a budget survey was undertaken with members of the public. There were 231 responses received with the following information:

- The majority of respondents were white female, aged between 35-44 with English being their main language;
- Schools were identified as a top service priority and it was felt should receive a Council budget uplift of 8.4%; and
- The percentage increase in council tax is seen as totally unacceptable.

Additional information was also received from the survey and this information is being used to shape the services moving forward.

During February / March 2021, the Council engaged Treasury Advisors, Link Asset Services, to conduct a review of the current Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy. The review identified the opportunity to change two elements of



the current Policy which would provide positive benefits to the Council by reducing the annual MRP charge until 2031/32 for unsupported borrowing and 2057/58 for supported borrowing.

The Authority has complied with the CIPFA Treasury Management in the Public Services: Code of Practice 2017 and, in doing so, has strived for effective risk management and control, whilst at the same time pursuing best value as far as possible. The Authority has effectively managed credit risk throughout the period, so ensuring that it has not been subjected to any financial loss as a result of the pandemic.

As part of their Annual Audit of Accounts in April 2022, Audit Wales found that some assets were held at the incorrect historic cost value within the fixed asset register. The recommendation to the Council is to identify the cause of the incorrect values in the fixed asset register and correct any values affected by the issue. This will ensure the Council maintains accurate records of all assets.

## Workforce Planning (people)

### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The new Workforce Strategy will be a key enabler in delivering the Council's ambition, the New Council Operating Model and key priorities. It is a five-year strategy focussed on the future, integrating the Council's vision, objectives and financial planning arrangements. It links service outcomes with the workforce required to deliver them, and an on-going understanding of how the workforce should look in the future through continual review, re-alignment, and measurement of how outcomes are achieved. It will support the workforce to transition from responding to the emergency situation in relation to COVID-19 and act as a key lever to facilitate culture change, capacity and skills, the continuation of transformational change and performance improvement. The Strategy will aim to ensure the Council has the right people, with the right skills, in the right place, at the right level, and at the right cost. The Strategy will also have an action plan covering the following areas:

- Healthy Culture and Effective Leadership;
- Excellence in management across the Council;
- Modern employer of choice;
- A highly motivated and engaged workforce; and
- Evidence based decision making, planning and delivery.

Reporting against the first year activity of the workforce strategy will take place during 2022. The Strategy aims to build on existing good practice and to promote the Council as a safe, healthy and supportive environment in which to work and will have a strategic focus on well-being which will play a significant role in supporting attendance at work. Research has also been undertaken to understand initiatives to support an aging workforce and to increase diversity. As part of this a Council Policy will be developed.

The Council Operating Model was agreed at Council in March 2021 and included the move to agile working and the development of a supporting policy. The Model introduces modern working practices, seeks to enhance employees' working experience, maximise performance and productivity and deliver the greatest value to the organisation, in terms of improving service delivery, as well as realising financial gains. The Model also includes the establishment of Community Hubs across the Borough, improving customer access to Council services. As part of the review of the agile working policy, a staff survey will be undertaken in September 2022 to consider the arrangements, what is working well and where further improvements can be made.

Integrated workforce operations in a number of service areas has been successful allowing far more flexibility to react to resource requirements across the whole range of services (Social Services and Neighbourhood Services).

## Procurement

### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

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.

Work has progressed significantly with regards to procurement and contract management. A new Strategic and Commercial Commissioning Board has been established as well as an Operational Officer Group. The Board has been put in place as a ‘check and challenge’ to all contracts over £75k, the Group reviews the contracts below this amount. As part of this, a central contracts register has been established to support the Council with its commercial developments. There are to be changes to the legislation for Procurement Services over the coming year and these may impact some of the work undertaken to date with some amendments required to processes moving forward.

Officers from both Procurement and Economic Regeneration are actively engaged in a collaborative procurement project which is sponsored by Welsh Government and facilitated by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). The project outcome is to maximise procurement spend in Wales to support local wealth building and to create a more resilient Welsh economy.

The Council needs to undertake a review of its Commercial function and what it feels needs to be prioritised in this area moving forward. To support this, external support is being sought that will look to establish the risk appetite of the Council, with regards to undertaking commercial activity, moving forward.

## Assets

### How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

An ICT Roadmap and Digital Solutions process has been established which looks to create long term, sustainable and relevant ICT infrastructure throughout the Council and its services including Office 365 and a review of the current software. The delivery of these processes have been recognised externally.

Owing to the global supply issues with ICT, as well as significant price increases, this is a risk to the Council financially and also to some suppliers who are experiencing financial difficulties. This situation will be monitored moving forward to assess impact.

There were some delays to the delivery of Community Asset Transfers (CATs) caused by capacity issues within the Estates Section but those have now been resolved and there is a renewed focus on completing longer term leases, where this is possible, and addressing any issues which stop the Council entering into longer term arrangements. Progress on the CATs include:

Completed CATs (in the last two years)	Close to Completion	New CATs Being Processed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Met Theatre</li> <li>• Tredegar Recreation Ground</li> <li>• Sirhowy Woodland</li> <li>• Llanhilleth Playing Field and Changing Rooms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Millennium Gardens Brynmawr – to Growing Spaces from original Trustees.</li> <li>• Brynmawr Welfare pitch to Brynmawr FC</li> <li>• Cwm Welfare – fields and pavilion to Cwm Community Sports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Queen Street school – CAT process complete, applicant has not completed planning</li> <li>• Trinity Chapel / Abertillery Library – CAT process complete, legal agreements still to be completed</li> <li>• Community Growing Space – Cwm – awaiting business plan</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Growing Space – Cwmtillery – awaiting expression of interest / Business Plan</li> <li>• RTB (Ebbw Vale) RFC – Beer Garden – CAT process (excluding advert under 1972 Local government Act 1972) complete, awaiting outcome of planning application.</li> </ul>
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Occupation of CATs needs to be regularised on some sites where groups are in occupation but formal / revised paperwork need to be concluded. Progress of these CATs include:

<b>Community Asset Transfer</b>	<b>Progress</b>
<b>Eugene Cross Park – Eugene Cross Park Sports Limited</b>	This is part of the Ebbw Vale Recreation Grounds and Institute Charity. Specialist external legal advice has indicated that the Council needs to consider its approach to the areas where it is the charitable body. Until this has been completed, community occupants of charitable sites have been placed on tenancy at will (TAW) to grant them occupation rights. Eugene Cross Park Sports Ltd. completed their tenancy on the 22/10/21.
<b>Orchard Street former Community Centre</b>	Storm Kickboxing took on this location in 2016 alongside Brynmawr Town Council who occupied the upper floor of the building. Storm were replaced by AB Boxing and Fitness CIC (Community Interest Company). A draft lease was prepared but not issued as AB Boxing indicated they would not sign until issues with the building were resolved. In late 2021 it became apparent that AB Boxing had carried out a number of unauthorised alterations which meant the building had to be closed on safety grounds. Discussions on the future of the building and a location for the Brynmawr Town Council are being discussed.
<b>Blaina Institute</b>	Blaina Community Institute Limited have been in occupation of the building since 1/6/17 but have yet to agree an occupation agreement. A draft lease is being prepared and will shortly be offered to the group. The Council is responsible for payments for the occupation of Nantyglo and Blaina Town Council and Brynmawr Museum under separate agreements. Aneurin Leisure Trust have a separate agreement for the occupation of the Library.
<b>Brynithel Recreation Ground</b>	Occupied by St. Illtyds Sports CIC (comprising Brynithel RFC and Llanhilleth FC) who signed a TAW on the 9/3/22.
<b>Llanhilleth Institute</b>	Occupied and managed by Llanhilleth Miners Institute Ltd for some time but discussions on the obligations for the group have been ongoing. It has now been agreed that the Council will retain responsibility for the external fabric of the building and some major plant. Head of Estates is close to agreeing Heads of Terms with the group after which a lease will be drawn up.
<b>Market Hall Cinema</b>	After being run by the Market Hall Cinema and Arts Trust for several years the freehold transfer of the building was completed on the 8/4/22.

## Risk Management

### How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

The Authority has in place a Risk Management Framework that includes a Risk Management Strategy and Handbook with the ultimate aim of embedding a consistent and effective approach to Risk Management throughout the whole Council. The risk management arrangements are aligned to the Performance Management Framework and 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 Framework identifies the roles and responsibilities of Members and Officers, guidance on how to describe risk,

and guidance on how to evaluate and assess risk. It also requires for risk registers to be maintained at Service, Department and Project levels and these support the Corporate Risk Register which holds the most significant risks faced by the Council.

Effective Risk Management allows the Authority to deliver services in pursuance of its obligations. Monitoring Arrangements are in place whereby the Corporate Risk Register is reviewed and updated by Corporate Leadership Team on a quarterly basis and are also included within the Finance and Performance Report.

At the end of the 2022 financial year, the Council had identified ten corporate risks, one of which was classed as critical and the remaining nine classed as high.

The Council's critical risk is: *There is a significant risk that exiting the EU will have an adverse impact at a national and local level which could impact on the community and on the Council and its ability to deliver public services.*

In order to address this risk a number of actions have been identified including a review of the Business Continuity Plans, continued joint working with Gwent Local Resilience Forum and support to local businesses.

## Performance Management

### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The Council has a well-established performance management framework in place which supports all aspects of service planning, delivery and improvement. As part of this, the Council's Well-being Objectives, as identified within the Corporate Plan, have been used to shape all service planning throughout the Council. A 'golden thread' has been developed from the Corporate Plan throughout the organisation. As part of the business planning arrangements, progression of the sustainable development principles has been included and is reported on against each Well-being Objective. On a quarterly basis, the Council receives performance monitoring of the Corporate Plan as part of the Finance and Performance Report. Alongside this, there are a number of other performance reports provided internally and through the democratic process.

The business planning process has become more streamlined with the incorporation of Performance Indicators, Risk Registers, Business Continuity, Equality Impact Assessments (EQIA), the Environment Act, Low Carbon Actions as well as proposals for improvement from auditors. This information is contained on a central monitoring system used across the organisation. The self-evaluation process directly links to the business planning process. There will be a review undertaken on the business planning process alongside the development of the new Corporate Plan so that it reflects the needs of the area and Council from 2022 to 2027.

In 2021 Audit Wales reported to the Council on their review, 'Data-driven decision making'. This review considered the way the Council is using data to inform the response to and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as looking at the wider vision and arrangements for using data to inform decision making. Audit Wales identified several strengths, including the way the Council used data to inform its response to the pandemic and to support its recovery planning. Audit Wales also highlighted some areas for consideration, such as developing a delivery plan to help implement the Council's vision for using data effectively and better understand the resources needed. The Council has improved a number of performance areas but there is an inconsistency across areas of the Council and some performance reports lack sufficient detail.

### **Future Actions and Areas for Development:**

- Development of a Council Policy to support an aging workforce.
- Undertake a review of the agile working policy, including the establishment of a staff survey.
- The Council needs to undertake a review of its Commercial function and what it feels needs to be prioritised in this area moving forward.
- Develop an Investment Framework, in partnership with CIPFA, for approval at Council.
- Consider the development of a delivery plan for using data effectively.
- Improve the consistency of performance reporting across the Council.
- Monitor the impact of Universal Credit on residents and identifying what other support is available.

- Develop a Customer Services Strategy to continue the support provided to the customer and doing this in the right way.

## Overall Progress of the Sustainable Development Principles

Long term: the importance of balancing short-term needs with the need to safeguard the ability to also meet long term needs

**How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The development of the Blaenau Gwent My Support Team (MyST) is aimed at enhancing and improving services for children looked after and young people in the longer term. Bringing children closer to home will enable them to form local support networks in their communities which will no doubt benefit them into the future.

The Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) has aimed to work in the long term by forecasting the financial position for the Council over 5 years in which to plan.

The Council actively supports the Asylum Dispersal Scheme to provide future families, who have experienced considerable hardship, with the route to a long-term safe haven. It is recognised that there are long-term implications of participation in the Asylum Dispersal Scheme and considerations on services such as education, mental health provision, housing and homelessness. The Scheme helps to prevent vulnerable children and their families from further trauma and suffering in areas of significant conflict and, further, discharging both moral and humanitarian obligations.

Analysis of individual school performance data is a key element in ensuring that schools are known well by the Council so that appropriate support and intervention can be directed towards areas of greatest need.

The Energy Prospectus has been designed to stimulate interest in energy development across the borough that will facilitate a supply of renewable energy to meet the future energy needs of Blaenau Gwent. It will also contribute towards the target of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

## Prevention: how acting to prevent problems occurring or getting worse may help public bodies meet their objectives

### How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

The Council's Community Hub model continues to be strengthened with relevant and focussed support provided to the community in the community. The Hubs proactively look to support those in the community experiencing poverty and the options available to them. Support has included: Universal Credit; discretionary housing payments; Free School Meal and Clothing Grant Applications; and the Winter Support Fund. Work is being undertaken to monitor the impact of the changes to Universal Credit as approximately 7,000 people in Blaenau Gwent have been impacted by the reduction. The activity of the hubs to date is shown below:

- A total of 3732 residents have been supported by the hubs throughout the period with a wide range of assistance given such as aspects of blue badge applications, benefits enquiries (housing benefit applications, DHP applications, uploading documents to support claims), Referrals (CAB, supporting people, age concern), Waste/recycling enquires, Council tax enquires (moving house, exemptions, discounts, arrangements), and we cover outside agency applications such as bus passes and COVID passes;
- 29 residents supported by Localities to enable self-isolation;
- 84 residents supported by Localities who received financial benefit gains, i.e. Discretionary Assistance Fund applications; and
- 79 food vouchers allocated to residents.

Since Community Hubs launched on the 21st June 2021, 6 people have presented as Homeless to the Team. They have all been supported in finding accommodation, a support worker and as much financial support as possible. The table below provides a breakdown of the number of residents supported through the Community Hubs during the period:

	Ebbw Vale	Tredegar	Brynmawr	Abertillery	Cwm	Blaina	Llanhilleth	Overall
June	10	4	7	4	7	4	4	40
July	39	39	17	20	23	19	8	165
August	133	110	54	89	15	13	5	419
September	110	112	55	87	12	14	0	390

<b>October</b>	135	94	82	57	30	36	12	<b>446</b>
<b>November</b>	149	114	80	64	23	41	10	<b>481</b>
<b>December</b>	105	112	45	35	13	20	3	<b>333</b>
<b>January</b>	95	101	23	30	7	6	2	<b>264</b>
<b>February</b>	101	84	20	42	10	7	5	<b>269</b>
<b>March</b>	154	127	36	52	6	1	4	<b>380</b>
<b>April</b>	205	132	82	76	19	26	5	<b>545</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1236</b>	<b>1029</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>556</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>3732</b>

Social Services have continued to develop a Hospital Hub at Ysbyty Aneurin Bevan to expedite the safe discharge of service users from hospital sites. Working across Gwent local authorities support has been provided to reduce unnecessary hospital admissions to acute sites by enhancing the support provided by the Gwent Home First Service. The Hospital Hub is focussing on a model of 'Discharge to Recover and Assess' whereby a patient undertakes an assessment at home as opposed to being assessed in hospital when it is deemed appropriate. Meetings are held daily with Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) to discuss the escalating crisis across hospital sites. Where possible, to avoid lengthy in patient stays and owing to availability in care homes, assessments at hospital are being prioritised for social work assessments and the availability of domiciliary care packages.

Contributing to the maintenance and enhancement of biodiversity and ecosystem resilience will help to mitigate and adapt to climate change and provide positive opportunities to maintain and build mental and physical health and well-being.

By working to reduce the exclusion rates in schools the likelihood of a pupils becoming Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) reduces and in turn increases the likelihood of a pupil achieving well supporting them to reach their potential.

By establishing Town Centre Advisory Boards, it is hoped that this will prevent the further deterioration of Town Centres. They all face significant challenges to survive but bringing groups of stakeholders together, who want to support and help, could prevent them from facing even bigger challenges in the future.

**Integration: considering how public bodies' well-being objectives may impact upon each of the well-being goals, on their other objectives, or on the objectives of other public bodies**

#### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

There continues to be ongoing strengthening links between the Community Resource Team (Gwent Frailty) and Information, Advice and Assistance (IAA) Team. This new structure is resilient and sustainable and not reliant on grant funding. The good work includes close working with GP colleagues to support pressures across the Health and Social Care sectors. Close work is also ongoing with other professionals such as Welsh Ambulance Service Trust (WAST), Primary and Secondary care colleagues to deliver proportionate assessments at the front door.

The Council will continue to work with partners across the Council, for example, Children's Services, Regeneration, Legal, Finance and Organisational Development to focus the work on improving pupil outcomes and supporting school leaders.

The Blaenau Gwent My Support Team (MyST) engages with the whole support network around the child. This includes school, youth workers and any community activities/clubs. The work undertaken to date by MyST has evidenced very close working relationships with schools both inside and outside of Blaenau Gwent.

**Collaboration: acting in collaboration with any other person (or different parts of the body itself) that could help the body meet its well-being objectives**

### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The Council has established a Charter of Common Agreement with the Town and Community Councils (TCC) since 2019. The Charter is designed to build on existing best practice and embrace the shared principles of openness, respect, honesty and common priority of putting citizens at the centre. It sets out how the Council and each TCC aim to work together towards collective long-term goals in a collaborative, preventative and integrated way, particularly in relation to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act as well as:

- Ethics;
- Local governance and information;
- Consultation;
- Land use planning;
- Budget setting;
- Practical support; and
- Monitoring and reviewing the Charter.

Blaenau Gwent plays an active role in the wider region through the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal (CCRC) partnership. The Council is a member of the Regional Cabinet and Investment Panel. There are a number of new projects that have benefitted from the CCRC funding over the last few years including design and acquisition work at Abertillery in preparation for the rail line extension; funding for Ebbw Vale (EV) charging and EV taxi trials which strongly links to decarbonisation aims; Housing Catalyst fund to unlock a difficult housing site in the area and funding to roll out Blaenau Gwent's award winning ASPIRE apprenticeship scheme.

Throughout the response to COVID 19, the Council has worked closely with partner organisations to deliver a joined up emergency response for the community. Civil Contingencies multi-agency response structures were established alongside a health specific structure to ensure there was a joint understanding of the current situation and risks, make joint decisions and coordinate the partner response. Specific areas of focus included, coordinated public communication, health and social care impact, ensuring partners were able to continue with high priority services, requests for support between partner organisations, mitigating impacts of COVID 19 as far as possible and developing a resilient test, trace and protect service.

Powys County Council has worked successfully across the Authority. Most recently, Powys Officers have provided expert advice and support to the new Front Line Service, Estates and Community Safety Service areas, in relation to the ongoing problems relating to straying animals/fly-grazing horses.

The South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) continues to form relationships with other councils in the region to improve outcomes for children who are placed for adoption. An example of this is working with communication teams to promote adoption within the region to attract adopters. Training is also provided for local authority social workers on a quarterly basis.

The current Well-being Plan will remain in place until 2023, when a new plan will be developed, linked to the findings of the Well-being Assessment. Arrangements have been made to establish a Joint Public Service Board merging, under Section 47 (1) of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the former five local Public Service Boards (PSBs). This will replace the individual PSBs in each of the five Local Authority areas of Gwent. As part of this, a Joint PSB Scrutiny Committee is to be established for operation in Autumn 2022. Local PSB Scrutiny Committees will remain in place in each local authority and will run alongside the Joint Committee until the end of the local Well-being Plans in 2023.

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.

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)
- Regional Public Service Board (PSB)
- Cardiff Capital Region City Deal
- Local Nature Partnership Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen
- Tech Valleys
- Valley Task Force
- Gwent Wide Adult Safeguarding Board (GWASB)
- South East Wales Safeguarding Children Board (SEWSCB)
- Greater Gwent Health, Social Care and Well-being Partnership

### Involvement: the importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the well-being goals, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the area which the body serves

#### **How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:**

The Council has developed an Engagement Strategy 2018/22 which outlines the approach to engagement for the community, stakeholders, staff and members. This plan will be updated to reflect the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. Effective engagement is crucial to ensure we run effectively, the services that we deliver are appropriate, and to meet the needs of those that use them. We want to engage effectively to:

- Help to shape better decision-making and problem-solving;
- Take transparent decisions based on strong evidence;
- Support greater involvement in the democratic process; and
- Lead efficient and effective services that reflect need.

We want those that engage with us to:

- Become better informed about why we do what we do and how we do it;
- Have a greater say in shaping local services;
- Know that views and opinions are important to us;
- Have great confidence and trust in us; and
- Take an interest and ownership of things that matter.

The Council's Engagement Team has provided advice and guidance to a range of service areas over the period to develop and deliver a number of key consultation exercises, including statutory, as well as promote the opportunities via internal and external partnership networks. For example, Pen-y-cwm School Capacity Consultation, Social Services Department Survey and Section 19 Flood Investigation Survey.

The Council has developed a Corporate Engagement Calendar in order to map the type and level of activity being delivered across the organisation. This is then used to maximise the use of resources and value of engagements and to promote the 'One Council' approach.

Owing to the restrictions of the pandemic, the Youth Forum was being delivered online. This has now resumed to offering young people the option of participation in person or online. Work is being undertaken on the development

of a wider Youth Forum Network and Children's Grand Council sessions with schools. A review has also been undertaken on the Blaenau Gwent Citizen Panel. The Panel will be used to promote Blaenau Gwent and partner information as well as specific engagement opportunities. E.g. Social Services, Adult Services user research project.

The Council engages with the business community through a number of channels, including the 'Business Hub', the Enterprise Board and through various town centre business forums. This engagement has allowed us to refine and shape support programmes, for example those which were provided through the Covid-19 pandemic and in informing future programmes, for example, those provided through the UK Government's Shared Prosperity Fund. Blaenau Gwent Council will continue to work with local business parks and carry out further engagement with building owners and tenants. The project will seek to bring together a range of partners to work collaboratively to assist Blaenau Gwent to meet its aspirations of Net Zero Business Parks.

The Council has in place a Trade Union Facilities Agreement which was reviewed and updated in 2020. The review included the granting of more temporary facilities time to the Trade Union as part of the Council's commitment to work in social partnership with them. We also have a calendar set annually for formal engagement of the Trade Unions with Directorates, Corporate Management Team and the Executive. There is also a Corporate Health and Safety group held with the Trade Unions.

Wider Corporate Leadership Team and Elected Members have been involved in the development of the Council's Workforce Strategy. There has also been a workforce survey and a pulse survey (2020) which supported the direction of the Strategy. There has been formal consultation with the Trade Unions on the Workforce Strategy and suggestions and amendments have influenced the Strategy moving forward.

The Localities, set up as an active response to supporting those most in need throughout COVID, have continued and provide services such as befriending and prescription and food pickups in order to support the most vulnerable in society. The Council has been able to identify the most vulnerable through extensive data analysis undertaken at the beginning of the pandemic. This intelligence has been vital in gaining an understanding of the needs of the community and where the most vulnerable live throughout the Borough. A particular focus for the localities is the planning for unpaid carers scheme and cost of living scheme.

In order to help the community of Blaenau Gwent emerge from COVID-19, it was decided that a public budget of £250,000 would be used to generate ideas and help the community develop local projects. The projects should focus on helping the community emerge from the pandemic. Blaenau Gwent Council commissioned MutualGain to develop and deliver an online Participatory Budgeting programme. The programme would provide an opportunity to empower local groups to develop sustainable projects that support vulnerable groups and individuals as they emerge from the challenges COVID 19 has presented.

The Education Directorate is committed to providing high quality services to its citizens and uses various engagement methodologies in order to understand if the service is making the intended outcomes or if amendments to service delivery need to be considered. Throughout April to September 2021 a variety of engagement events have taken place including:

- Wavehill Evaluation;
- County Lines (consultation);
- Young People's Participation (focus group);
- Young People's Safe Areas (consultation);
- Aspire / Lego secondary school engagement with Year 8 Pupils (undertaken by the Regeneration Department);
- Establishing a new Welsh Medium Primary School in the Tredegar / Sirhowy Primary (consultation with Members) and the Proposal to Extend the Capacity at Penycwm Special School (consultation with Members);
- and
- Stakeholders and end-user needs and engagement are of paramount importance to the Education Accessibility Strategy and associated action plan. An Education Accessibility Forum has been developed to secure inter-departmental working across the Council, aligned to effective delivery of both the strategy and plan. In addition, all relevant stakeholders will be consulted in line with the review process.

An important aspect of providing Social Services to service users is that their voice is heard and they are able to shape the services they receive. Consultation with children and families occurs on a case by case basis and is captured in the care planning documents of each child. A recent example of this was when some of the Children Looked After, which the Council supports, challenged some of the language used and subsequently this encouraged amendments to be made to working practices. The 'Contact Team' is now called the 'Family Time Team'.

Consultation with Blaenau Gwent Civil Contingencies, Neighbourhood Services, Dwr Cymru Welsh Water and Natural Resources Wales was undertaken when preparing the Section 19 Flood Investigation Report, Llanhilleth.

Support to local community groups is continuing with local litter champions being provided with materials, equipment, staff support and the collection of waste following clean up and clearance.

**Future Actions and Areas for Development:**

- Implementation of the Energy Prospectus
- Continue to review and further develop the Community Hub model across Blaenau Gwent
- Establish Town Centre advisory Boards across all Blaenau Gwent towns.
- The Council will continue to work with partners across the Council
- Continue to work collaboratively with partners.
- Identify further partnership opportunities for effective future working.
- Continued engagement with various groups including the community, businesses, staff and Trade Unions.
- Update the Engagement Strategy to reflect areas of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

## Future Actions and Areas for Development

The self-assessment report must set out conclusions as to the extent to which the council met the performance requirements during that financial year, and any actions it will take, or has already taken, to increase the extent to which it will meet the performance requirements.

*Note – Except in the case of the first self-assessment report, the report must also include a review of actions emerging from the previous year's report, with consideration on the progress made on those, and how they increased the extent to which the council met the performance requirements.*

Through the self-assessment, the Council has identified how well it is performing and what can be done to do better. In order to achieve this, the Council has developed an action plan which highlights the areas from the self-assessment where the Council has identified that improvements or further work is needed.

The actions will be monitored through the year as part of the council's performance management arrangements. The next self-assessment report will also include an assessment of the progress made on these actions.

Section	Theme	Improvement Required	Action	Lead	Timescale
Overall Corporate Self-assessment Conclusion	<b>Governance</b>	Audit Wales completed a Public Interest Report on 27 <sup>th</sup> January with regards to Silent Valley Waste Services Ltd. The report included a recommendation for the Council to implement.	Develop a business case for the future of Silent Valley to be brought back under the remit of the Local Authority.  Undertake a review of the governance and oversight arrangements of companies in which the Council has an interest.	Bernadette Elias  Sarah King	
	<b>Workforce</b>	Many service areas are reporting issues with capacity. Some services have experienced difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff which has impacted service delivery, requiring for some priorities to be 'paused' until staffing resources are met.	Address the staffing needs including recruitment and retention in services across the Council  Implement the strategy devised to consider short, medium and longer-term solutions to the workforce including the consideration to collaborate on a regional basis.		
	<b>Financial</b>	Uncertainty of the economic impact of: Covid-19; the exit from the European Union; and WG future financial settlements. Uncertainty around the medium to long term impact of these may pose significant challenges for the Council.	Continued financial monitoring and reporting through the Council's democratic process.  To ensure the Council's financial resilience the Council to identify strategic business reviews including the identification of additional or alternative proposals to mitigate the possible residual funding gaps in future years.		

Section	Theme	Improvement Required	Action	Lead	Timescale
Overall Corporate Self-assessment Conclusion Continued	<b>Finance</b>	The results of the 2021 Census may have an impact on the Local Government Settlements moving forward.	The Council will need to consider the Census results when planning future budget settlements and service provision.		
	<b>Governance</b>	Various Strategies and Plans have been	Continue to monitor and implement the various	All relevant leads	Ongoing

		identified throughout the self-assessment for implementation	Strategies and Plans identified throughout the self-assessment via the business planning process		
	<b>COVID 19</b>	Audit Wales have identified that the most significant risk and issue facing councils and the wider public sector during 2021-22 continues to be the COVID-19 pandemic and its recovery planning and processes	Continue to monitor and implement the COVID 19 Recovery and Renewal Plans via the business planning process.		
Protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure to benefit our communities	<b>Finance</b>	The budget monitoring in Community Services is robust but needs to reflect longer term planning.	Community Services to work closely with Resources to consider how medium term financial resilience can be strengthened.	Community Services and Resources	
	<b>Performance</b>	Achievement of the 70% recycling target by 2024/25.	What arrangements are in place or planned to achieve this?	Community Services	
	<b>Governance</b>	To strengthen its resilience, Community Services should ensure that learning and good practice that exists within its different service areas is shared throughout the directorate. The Council should also consider whether it would benefit from sharing some examples more widely across the Council.	Technical Services Income Generation Model to be presented to Wider CLT as an example of the professional services being delivered  Following the pandemic reinstate Community Services Performance Reports including PIs and both qualitative and quantitative comparative data.	Mike Price / Jim Allen  Community Services and Corporate Performance Team	Identified within the 2022 FWP of the Place Scrutiny Committee

Section	Theme	Improvement Required	Action	Lead	Timescale
Support a fairer sustainable economy and community	<b>Education</b>	Higher levels of language acquisition and reading in our very young children in the early years is required.	This will feature in the recovery programme from COVID as we 'build back better' in line with Curriculum for Wales Reform		
	<b>Education</b>	Improve attainment of eFSM pupils and particularly our more-			

		able pupils in the early years and throughout education			
	<b>Education</b>	Improve school attendance in both primary and secondary sectors			
	<b>Education</b>	Improve progress between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, particularly in English, Maths and Science			
	<b>Education</b>	Continue the work with Schools Causing Concern (SCC), particularly the school in an Estyn category. BFS 'One Plan' monitoring			
	<b>Planning</b>	Welsh Government require for a revision to the Delivery Agreement to be undertaken and approved by them.	Undertake a revision of the Delivery Agreement		
To enable people to maximise their independence develop solutions and take an active role in their communities	<b>Workforce</b>	Address the workforce pressures being seen locally and nationally. There is a risk that identified staffing pressures in social services will result in an inability to deliver services particularly in provider services and domiciliary care.	Work with the GSCG and TCG to alleviate pressures in both the short and long term.  Work to establish the development of a Strategic Workforce Plan to support capacity issues across the Council.	Social Services Senior Leadership Team  Social Services Organisational Development, Corporate Leadership Team	
An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services we know matter to our communities	<b>Communications</b>	The Council's Communication function has been reviewed externally and a number of recommendations provided to implement	Embed the recommendations via the Communications Working Group		
<b>Section</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Improvement Required</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Timescale</b>
An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services we know matter to our	<b>Commercial</b>	Identifying capacity across the organisation to support the user design approach.	The Council to consider where the user design approach is required and to ensure staff are available to support the process.		
	<b>Workforce Also links to the Corporate</b>	Gender Pay Gap – a review of the current data is to be undertaken	Identify actions/measures to further address the gender pay differences as	Policy, Engagement and	??

<b>communities Continued</b>	<b>Planning area, Workforce Planning (People)</b>	in conjunction with the Workforce Strategy.	part of existing Equality plans.	Partnership Team OD	
<b>Well-being Goals</b>	<b>Health</b>	An in depth data analysis exercise is to be undertaken to identify the key health inequalities across Gwent, including the impacts of COVID 19.	Undertake a baseline analysis on data ranges that act as markers for a healthy society, comparing them with national averages for Wales, other UK countries, Europe and other developed countries.  The Gwent Well-being Plan 2023 to 2028 to be informed by the data and develop appropriate actions for implementation to tackle health inequalities.	PSB Partners Policy, Engagement and Partnership Team	
	<b>Financial</b>	As part of their Annual Audit of Accounts in April 2022, Audit Wales found that some assets were held at the incorrect historic cost value within the fixed asset register. The recommendation to the Council is to identify the cause of the incorrect values in the fixed asset register and correct any values affected by the issue. This will ensure the Council maintains accurate records of all assets.	Identify the cause of the incorrect values in the fixed asset register and correct any values affected by the issue.	Finance	??

<b>Section</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Improvement Required</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Timescale</b>
<b>7 Corporate Planning Areas</b>	<b>Workforce</b>	Research has been undertaken to understand initiatives to support an aging workforce and to increase diversity.  Agile working embedded	Development of a Council Policy to support an aging workforce.  Undertake a review of the agile working policy and council property, including the establishment of a staff survey.	OD	?

	<b>Commercial</b>	Supporting the Council with its commercial developments	The Council needs to undertake a review of its Commercial function and what it feels needs to be prioritised in this area moving forward.  Develop an Investment Framework, in partnership with CIPFA, for approval at Council.	CLT Commercial Team	?
	<b>Governance</b>	Audit Wales, as part of their Data Review, highlighted the need to consider the development of a delivery plan to help implement the Council's vision for using data effectively and better understand the resources needed.  Audit Wales identified that there is an inconsistency across areas with regards to performance and some performance reports lack sufficient detail.	Consider the development of a delivery plan for using data effectively.  Improve the consistency of performance reporting across the Council.	CLT All Service Areas Governance and Partnership Section	?
	<b>Customer</b>	The Council's Community Hub model continues to strengthen with relevant and focussed support provided to the community in the community. It proactively looks to support options available to those experiencing poverty.	Monitor the impact of Universal Credit on residents and identifying what other support is available.  Develop a Customer Services Strategy to continue the support provided to the customer and doing this in the right way.	Commercial Section	?

Section	Theme	Improvement Required	Action	Lead	Timescale
Sustainable Development Principles	Long Term	The Energy Prospectus has been designed to stimulate interest in energy development across the borough that will facilitate a supply of renewable energy to meet the future energy	Implementation of the Energy Prospectus		



		needs of Blaenau Gwent. It will also contribute towards the target of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2030.			
	<b>Prevention</b>	The activity of the Community Hubs to date is shown in the narrative.	Continue to review and further develop the Community Hub model across Blaenau Gwent		
	<b>Prevention</b>	By establishing Town Centre Advisory Boards, it is hoped that this will prevent the further deterioration of Town Centres.	Establish Town Centre advisory Boards across all Blaenau Gwent towns.		
	<b>Integration</b>	Examples of integrated working provided as part of narrative.	The Council will continue to work with partners across the Council		
	<b>Collaboration</b>	Examples of collaborative working provided as part of narrative.	Continue to work collaboratively with partners.  Identify further partnership opportunities for effective future working.		
	<b>Involvement</b>	The Council has developed an Engagement Strategy 2018/22 which outlines the approach to engagement for the community, stakeholders, staff and members. This plan will be updated to reflect the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.	Continued engagement with various groups including the community, businesses, staff and Trade Unions.  Update the Engagement Strategy to reflect areas of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.		

## The Well-being of Wales Performance Indicators

### A Prosperous Wales

Indicator	Blaenau Gwent	South East Wales*	Wales
Percentage of working age people who are employed (01/09/21)	67	72.5	72.8
Percentage of adults 16-64 with no qualifications (01/01/20)	11.1	7.5	7.3

Percentage of people living in households in material deprivation (01/04/19)	20	13.9	13
Rate of households for whom homelessness was successfully prevented for at least 6 months per 10,000 households (01/04/20)	29.4	40.1	34.8
Average micrograms of nitrogen dioxide (NO2) at residential dwelling locations per m3 (01/01/19)	8	11.4	9
Pounds difference in the average (median) full time hourly pay between males and females (01/01/21)	2.1	1.6	0.7

\*Bridgend, Blaenau Gwent, Cardiff, Caerphilly, Vale of Glamorgan, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Merthyr Tydfil, Torfaen, Newport and Monmouthshire

## A Resilient Wales

Indicator	Blaenau Gwent	South East Wales*	Wales
Number of properties with a high risk of flooding (01/01/19)	183	2,929	9,652

## A More Equal Wales

Indicator	Blaenau Gwent	South East Wales*	Wales
Percentage of low birth rate live single births (01/01/20)	7	6.2	6.1
Percentage of people agreeing that they belong to the area; that people from different backgrounds get on well together; and that people treat each other with respect (01/04/20)	64	67.5	69

## A Healthier Wales

Indicator	Blaenau Gwent	South East Wales*	Wales
Mean mental well-being score for people aged 16 or over (01/04/18)	48.9	51.2	51.4
Percentage of people attending or participating in arts, culture or heritage activities at least 3 times per year (01/04/19)	64	73.3	71
Percentage of people participating in sporting activities 3 or more times a week (01/04/19)	23	32.2	32
Percentage of people who are lonely (01/04/20)	11	12.2	13

## A Wales of Cohesive Communities

Indicator	Blaenau Gwent	South East Wales*	Wales
Percentage of people satisfied with local area as a place to live (01/04/20)	74	85.9	87

Percentage of people who volunteer (01/04/19)	19	12.2	26
Percentage of people satisfied with their ability to get to / access the facilities and services they need (01/04/20)	77	86.3	87

## A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language

Indicator	Blaenau Gwent	South East Wales*	Wales
Data only available at a Wales level or included as part of other Well-being Goals	-	-	-

## A Globally Responsible Wales

Indicator	Blaenau Gwent	South East Wales*	Wales
Data only available at a Wales level or included as part of other Well-being Goals	-	-	-

## Feedback

The Council welcome any feedback you might have about the Self-assessment 2021/22. Your views are important to us, and we want to know what information you would like to see and how you would like to see it reported. Please contact the team on the details at the end of this document if you would like to give feedback on the Assessment

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