



Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's Self-assessment 2022/2023



Blaenau Gwent- A place that is fair, open and welcoming to all by working with and for our communities

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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 second annual self-assessment report of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council covering the year 2022/23. The focus of the self-assessment is the Council's Corporate Plan priorities, known as Well-being Objectives, and providing an assessment of how well the Council feels it has achieved these and where further improvement is required. The Corporate Plan 2022/27 Well-being Objectives are:

- **Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent;**
- **Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities;**
- **An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place; and**
- **Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient.**

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;**
- **Seven corporate areas of planning; and**
- **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; and**
- **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, however, further work will be undertaken throughout the year to enhance our reach and to promote transparency aligned to our new Engagement and Participation Strategy due for approval in early 2024.

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.

The Council welcome any feedback you might have about the Self-assessment 2022/23. 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.

Our Understanding of Blaenau Gwent

Overview of Blaenau Gwent

Blaenau Gwent is a place like no other. It is a place of heritage and dramatic change, with a sense of its past but its eyes firmly on the future. At the head of the Gwent Valleys – Blaenau Gwent provides a unique environment to live and work. The Tech Valleys Vision, Valleys Regional Park and Cardiff Capital Region City Deal combined with new transport links through 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 influence on the local, national, and international stage in the arts, sport and politics for many generations – putting Blaenau Gwent on the map for all the right reasons.

The Blaenau Gwent Area

The Blaenau Gwent 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 into one. However, each community proudly maintains its own character and traditions. Although the towns give the area a busy, urban feel, Blaenau Gwent is actually a largely rural area. Wherever you are, beautiful countryside is never far away.



The Blaenau Gwent Population

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. As of 2021, Blaenau Gwent was the sixth most densely populated of the 22 local authority areas, with around four people living on each football pitch-sized area of land. The population change by age group in Blaenau Gwent shows that there has been an increase of 9.0% in people aged 65 years and over, a decrease of 7.5% of people aged 15 to 64 years, and a decrease of 5.4% of children aged under 15 years. 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).

The percentage of residents aged 16 years and over who are economically active and in employment in Blaenau Gwent is at 52.2% an increase of 2.7% since 2011. The 2021 Census showed that Blaenau Gwent had the highest proportion of residents aged 16 to 64 years who were economically inactive and long-term sick or disabled across the whole of England and Wales at 36.1%. 49% of women and 55.7% of men, aged 16 years and over were in employment. 2.7% of women and 4.1% of men in Blaenau Gwent were unemployed.

21% of Blaenau Gwent Adults with a disability were economically active and employed. However, in contrast, Neath Port Talbot and Blaenau Gwent have the joint-third highest proportion of economically inactive disabled residents (76.9%) across both England and Wales, and the highest in Wales.

The 2021 Census identified that there are 4,035 Welsh speakers living within Blaenau Gwent, which equates to 6.2% of the population. The aims of Blaenau Gwent's Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/27 are linked with the Welsh Government's vision to create a million Welsh speakers in Wales by 2050. To meet this aim, Blaenau Gwent would need a 46% increase in speakers which equates to 1,856 people.

As at 31st March 2023, the Council headcount was 2,892. A total of £188.7 million was spent on providing services during 2021-22, which is the 3rd lowest spending of the 22 unitary councils in Wales. (Data Cymru - Revenue Outturn Expenditure 2021/2022).

Blaenau Gwent Council

The Council continues to be the largest employer within the borough, employing 2,953 people (including school based staff). Almost 80% of the Council's workforce are in permanent roles which provides a stability within the establishment. Vacancies remain consistent with last year, however, there has been an improving position for Social

Services where there has been success with recruitment days. The Catering and Cleaning services have been asked to consider similar action to address recruitment and retention difficulties. There are recruitment and retention difficulties in pockets of professional and technical areas. Over half of the workforce remains 'service based' with the remaining staff split between home workers at 8%, and agile workers at 34%. The Council has a low level of diversity amongst its workforce with 69% identifying as 'British/Welsh/English/Scottish/Northern Irish', which is reflective of the community. Promoting diversity in the workforce will continue to be a key priority as part of the Council's Workforce Strategy. The Council has an ageing workforce where 58% of the workforce is over the age of 46, with 10% of the workforce aged 29 and under.

Democratic Arrangements in Blaenau Gwent

In 2021, the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales reformed the ward boundaries of Blaenau Gwent. The changes meant that the number of Blaenau Gwent councillors reduced by 9, taking the council from 42 to 33



Comisiwn Ffiniau a
Democratiaeth Leol
Cymru

Local Democracy and
Boundary Commission
For Wales

members. This equates to an average of 1,545 electors per councillor. The number of wards also reduced from 16 to 14, with each ward electing more than 1 councillor. 9 wards have 2 councillors, while 5 wards have 3 councillors and 5 wards saw no change under the reforms. These changes came into being from May 2022, as part of the local government election. Following the election there was a change to the political make up of Blaenau Gwent Council, moving from being Independent to Labour. The political make-up of the Council is currently:

- Labour 22; and
- Independent 11.

The Council operates a democratic structure where effective decision making can take place. The Cabinet 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 Cabinet carry out all of the Local Authority functions which are not the responsibility of any other part of the Authority, whether by law or under the Constitution.

The 33 Blaenau Gwent elected members are collectively the decision making body for the Authority. This is complemented by an officer structure of trained and experienced people. Most policy decisions are developed by the Cabinet, which comprises the Leader of the Council and four Cabinet Members with individual portfolio responsibilities. In addition to the Cabinet, the Authority's Committee structure also comprises three decision making Committees: 1 x Planning and 2 x Licensing; four Scrutiny Committees; a Standards Committee; a Democratic Services Committee; and a Governance and Audit Committee.

Scrutiny is made up of non-Cabinet Members who are appointed to sit on the Committees to support the work of the Cabinet 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 Cabinet. Scrutiny enables non-Cabinet Members to have a greater say in Council matters.

Corporate Leadership Team

The Council has a structure in place to support the delivery of services and decision making via its Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). During 2022/23, CLT underwent a number of changes with the appointment of a new Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services. It has operated with an interim Chief Executive and interim Corporate Director of Social Services throughout the year. The Council also has in place a Wider Corporate Leadership Team (WCLT) who support CLT in its role of providing strategic direction to the organisation. It is a forum to disseminate information and to communicate messages, ensuring a 'one council' approach.

External Audit

The Council is subject to numerous external audits and regulatory reviews each year. These are undertaken to ensure the Council provides value for money, services are being run efficiently and effectively, and that improved services are being delivered. The Council is monitored by a number of regulatory bodies, the main of which are: Audit Wales; Care Inspectorate Wales; and Estyn.

Audit Wales

Engagement arrangements with Audit Wales are in place with meetings held with the Head of Governance and Partnerships, with the Section 151 Officer and also the Chief Executive. Quarterly meetings are also undertaken with the Leadership.

Audit Wales Reporting during 2022/23 include:

Local Reports	National Audit Wales Reports	Audit Wales Reports still in Progress (with the outcome of each expected in 2023/24)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Springing Forward• Assurance and Risk Assessment Review• Corporate Safeguarding Follow up	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning from Cyber Attacks• Time for Change – Poverty in Wales• A Missed Opportunity – Social Enterprises• Together we can – Community Resilience and Self Reliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Examination of the Setting of Well-being Objectives• Unscheduled Care Project• Review of Planning Service• Building Safety• Brown Field Sites• False Fire Alarms• Digital Strategy Review• Use of Performance Information – Service User Perspective and Outcomes

The Annual Audit Summary for 2022 from Audit Wales is expected following the signoff of the Blaenau Gwent accounts in 2023. The report will include a synopsis of each review undertaken by Audit Wales over the year.

Estyn

The Authority's Education Services have regular Local Authority Link Inspector (LALI) meetings convened with Estyn in line with inspectorate requirements. The Education Directorate reports progress against the Local Government Education Services (LGES) framework to Scrutiny and Cabinet. The Authority has update meetings between the Corporate Director Education, Members, and the Welsh Government officials as and when required and the Education Achievement Service (EAS) also provides updates on the school improvement agenda to the Cabinet/CLT and Scrutiny Committee.

In late 2022, the Local Authority were subject to an Estyn inspection, in line with the Local Government Education Services (LGES) framework. The outcome of the Inspection was positive and there was no requirement for follow-up activity. Three recommendations were received and there will be regular reporting on progress against these to Members in 2023. You can read the Estyn report in full [here](#).

Care Inspectorate Wales

The Social Services Directorate is subject to audit, inspection and review by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). On a quarterly basis, the Corporate Director of Social Services and Heads of Adult and Children's Services meet with CIW to discuss achievements, performance and key challenges.

As Blaenau Gwent last received their performance evaluation and assurance check in November 2021, no further local reports were received throughout 2022/23. However, during the year, three national reports were received:

- National review of the use of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) in Wales 2021-22 – received February 2023;
- Updated Code of Practice for our local authority inspection activity – published May 2023; and
- How we inspect local authority social services and CAF/CASS Cymru.

Overall Council Self-assessment

2022/23 was the first year that the Council undertook an annual self-assessment following the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. As stated at the time, the year one report has been used as a learning tool in order to further develop and enhance the self-assessment process in future years. Alongside this, Welsh Government also undertook a review of all 22 Local Authority self-assessments and, whilst they do not have a role to 'sign off' the self-assessments, they did identify areas of good practice and learning points. For Blaenau Gwent, the following has been included for this year:

- A BRAG rating and scoring of our overall performance against each section of the report;
- More consideration of what has not gone so well to identify areas for improvement;
- More use of infographics and pictures; and
- Recognition that public engagement could be improved and identifying our commitment to strengthen these arrangements for future assessments.

The self-assessment process has identified areas in which the council is progressing well, areas of challenge and areas for further development. The Council's assessment and conclusion of how it has performed is set out on pages 7- 19 and responds to the following areas of self-assessment:

- *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?*

An assessment score has also been provided against the above three questions as well as the evaluation of the Corporate Plan Well-being Objectives using the following scale:

Score	Definition	Description
6	Excellent	All areas of performance and activity are achieving, actions completed, and targets met.
5	Very Good	The majority of actions and measures are being achieved.
4	Good	Strengths with some areas of weakness, however, strengths outweigh the weaknesses.
3	Adequate	Strengths just outweigh weaknesses. Some actions and targets are behind schedule or falling short.
2	Weak	Weaknesses identified in the majority of actions and targets.
1	Unsatisfactory	Weaknesses identified in the majority of actions and targets with performance moving in the wrong direction and delivery is unlikely.

Is the Council exercising its functions effectively?

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know

<p>Evaluation Rating 3: Adequate</p>	<p><u>Evaluation Narrative:</u></p> <p>The Council has implemented key changes throughout the year, including the development of our new Corporate Plan, aligning the priorities with the Gwent Well-being Plan and Marmot Principles. The Plan has also been embedded within our effective business planning arrangements which ensures that the work undertaken as an authority has a direct link to our key objectives and vision. Changes have been made across the organisation through the Local Government and Elections Wales Act and we continue to work differently to ensure we meet the needs of residents. Although good work has taken place, budget and finance continue to be a challenge for not only the Council but others Council's across Wales. The number of data breaches has increased throughout the year which is an area that we will be actively working on to reduce. We will continue to work differently including working more closely in partnership to help meet challenges, as well as progressing to become a more commercially and digitally minded organisation. Actions to address these areas of work can be found on pages 34, 44, 57, and 69 and will be reported on as part of the 2023/24 Council Self-Assessment.</p>
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Blaenau Gwent Council

The role of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council and its partners is to maximise the assets we have, doing more with less and doing it better. The historical decline of heavy industry continues to impact on employment prospects and intergenerational opportunities across the borough. As a Council we face increasing demand for some of our services, putting pressure on budgets but we are tackling these issues with partners, businesses, and the local community. We are looking at how we spend our money to achieve the best outcomes for residents, supporting new and existing businesses, looking at our assets to achieve new income streams, and removing barriers to enable residents to access what they need.

Across Gwent, all councils, including Blaenau Gwent, will work towards becoming a region that aims to tackle and reduce inequalities, based on the Marmot principles (further detail on page 16). We will work across all public services in our area to ensure that our policies, approaches, and resources are geared towards creating a fairer, more equal society for today's residents and future generations. As an anti-poverty council, we will do everything within our power to support people trapped in poverty and those who are most vulnerable. By valuing and promoting good health, education and learning we can help people to reach their full potential. This in turn will contribute to creating better informed and connected communities throughout Blaenau Gwent that are fair, open and welcoming to all; where everyone gets to play an active part.

Legislation

The Council is embracing the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. 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 late 2020, the Council underwent a review of its Well-being Objectives with Audit Wales, the outcome of which is expected in 2023.

The corporate reporting format has been designed to guide officers and members to consider the key implications of any proposals put forward. The report has defined areas for considering options appraisal, risk, staffing and financial impact, along with the contribution to the Sustainable Development Principles. A recent addition to the template is an integrated impact assessment section which combines the Equalities Impact Assessment with the Socio Economic Impact Duty. This assists in the process for making informed and transparent decisions and ensures the links between budget and planning are considered as well as legislative requirements.

The Sustainable Development Principles, Environment Act and Decarbonisation have also been included within the business planning template used across all service areas.

In 2021, the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act came into force. 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. As part of this, an action plan is in place to ensure that the Act is fully implemented by 2024.

A Governance and Audit Committee has been established as part of the Local Government Act that has the primary functions of reviewing financial reports and challenging governance arrangements. The Committee aims to seek assurance that the governance framework operating within the Authority is robust, effective and efficient.

Corporate Plan

The Corporate Plan is a very important strategic document for the Council which clearly sets out the priorities, known as Well-being Objectives, and how we will target our limited resources in order to support implementation of these. The Objectives have been developed using extensive research and understanding of local community need following various engagement activities. Owing to the timing of the development of the Gwent Well-being Plan and the development of the Council's Corporate Plan, evidence from the Well-being Needs Assessment and Public Consultation were used as evidence for the Council Plan. The main areas of priority emerged as:

- Reducing the inequalities that exist within our communities – this directly links to the Corporate Plan priority - Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent as well as the targeted work being undertaken by the Council's Cost of Living working group.
- Creating safe communities – this directly links to the Corporate Plan priority - Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient.
- Protecting and enhancing the natural environment - this directly links to the Corporate Plan priority - Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities.
- In order to work towards delivery of the priorities the Council needs to be able to do this effectively and within resources, therefore, a fourth priority has been developed specifically for the Council - An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place.

Finance and Resources

The governance arrangements of the Council have established effective and regular monitoring of budgets which is reported to Scrutiny Committee and then Cabinet. 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.

The Annual Audit Summary for 2022 from Audit Wales is expected following the signoff of the Blaenau Gwent accounts later in 2023. The report will include a synopsis of each review undertaken by Audit Wales over the year.

Commercial

Progress continues to be made with both internal and external partners to position and build digital innovation into how we plan and deliver services. The focus is to develop services around the user with explorations taking place on how digital solutions can support this moving forward.

Work is progressing to further embed the Council's commercial and business ambitions. Officers have undertaken a midterm review of the Commercial Strategy, which will be presented to the Strategic Commercial Commissioning Board in 2023. An officer group to progress commercial and business opportunities (BaCON) has been established. Terms of Reference have been agreed and an initial meeting was held on 1st March 2023. Officers have engaged with SOLACE & CIPFA to develop a commercial framework to support the development of project specific business cases.

A position statement against the objectives set out in the business case on the Shared Resource Service (SRS) Wales were shared with Governance and Audit Committee 8th March 2023. Key risks highlighted in the business case were global supply chain issues, cyber security awareness, and- the recruitment and retention of SRS staff. A risk register is in place to mitigate these risks.

Information Governance

Annual reviews of the Information Security and Acceptable Use Policies have been undertaken and accepted at the March 2023 Information Governance Forum.

During 2022, Audit Wales provided Councils with its findings from their national study on Cyber Resilience. To provide assurance, the Chief Information Security Officer provided an overview of the Council's arrangements to the Governance and Audit Committee. As part of a planned approach to raise awareness of the importance of Information Security and Data Protection, as well as highlighting individual responsibilities, a number of on line

events have taken place throughout the year led by the Data Protection Officer and the Chief Information Security Officer. These culminated in a Phishing exercise being undertaken with Blaenau Gwent's results being very pleasing. However, owing to the reliance that the Council has on ICT for service continuity, it has been recognised that the corporate risk, regarding ICT and cyber-attacks, be increased from a score of high to critical.

Challenges the Council have experienced throughout the year

Cost of Living

The area faces issues with health and wealth inequality, alongside social issues affecting our families and young people. The cost of living crises put significant pressure on budgets and services during 2022/23 which is expected to continue into further years. As a council we will need to support our communities and citizens to navigate and overcome the worst impacts of this crisis. It is anticipated that these increasing pressures are being felt by those households whose budgets have the least capacity to absorb financial pressures. We recognise however, that we do not control all the necessary levers to mitigate against the full impact of this crisis, but we will focus on the steps we can take. A Cost of Living Member Group, supported by an Operational Officer Group, has been established to prioritise this important agenda and implement actions to try and ease the impacts on the area. Officer meetings take place monthly, prior to Member Led Group, in order to update against the action plan and consider proposals for new actions moving forward.

The action plan has focussed on:

- Warm hubs and the maximisation of the Welsh Government grants to support these;
- Distribution of £100K to the Blaenau Gwent foodbank and other smaller food banks;
- £50K donation from the Council to the Citizens Advice Bureau;
- Development of an information booklet to provide information on what support is available in relation to food, housing, fuel and general support;
- Supporting local businesses via monies received from the shared prosperity fund; and
- Supporting the workforce by providing information and practical support in relation to the cost of living so managers and staff are clear on what support is available to staff.

Finance and Resources

As a Council we are facing a time of significant financial turbulence and change within the public sector. The Council has had to take some tough decisions on where to prioritise spending, ensuring vital services are maintained for the most vulnerable in our communities. If the Council does not utilise alternative methods of service delivery and other approaches to mitigate the impact of financial pressures and demand challenges, the result will be reductions to services which will significantly impact their availability and quality. Transformational change projects will be required reflecting the ambitions within the Corporate Plan as well as in addressing the financial pressures associated with increasing demands and expectations for services. There will be challenges associated with developing the new skills and capacity required to manage significant change at a time of diminishing resources and using approaches that are relatively new concepts to the Council. As part of this process, the Council has in place the, 'Bridging the Gap' programme which has identified a number of projects and service efficiencies that will support the overall Council budget. The Council has a good record of delivering but these are unprecedented times and, in facing these challenges, the Council needs to ensure that its governance arrangements for savings proposals are robust.

The 2023/24 Budget was approved on 23rd February 2023. As part of the budget, Members agreed Strategic Business Reviews of £3M and £4.26M use of reserves to fund the approved budget. Members were also presented with initial suggestions for commercial opportunities and investment proposals for progression into 2023/24 onwards. Business cases for these proposals will be developed and constructively challenged by multi-disciplinary teams from across

Blaenau Gwent Community Hubs

Blaenau Gwent Community Hubs offer residents easy access to services in local communities operating out of town centre libraries.

Services Available include:

- Council Tax and Non-Domestic rates information and advice.
- Benefits information and advice including Universal Credit, Council Tax reduction, free school meals, school clothing grants and benefit overpayments.
- Apply for a Blue Badge.
- Make bulky waste bookings, get waste/recycling timetables, make a booking at a HWRC site and order new recycling receptacles.
- Pick up waste bags - including dog waste, food waste and hygiene waste
- Requests for information on many other Council services.
- Offering help and guidance on many other organisations.

Opening Times:

Location	Opening Hours	Day
Aberbrymber Library	9am - 5pm Tuesday, Thursday & Friday Closed: 1pm - 2pm 10am - 5pm Wednesday Closed: 1pm - 2pm	Tuesday, Wednesday Thursday & Friday
Brynnaur Library	9am - 5pm Closed: 1pm - 2pm	Monday, Tuesday Thursday & Friday
Elbow Vale Library	9am - 5pm Closed: 1pm - 2pm	Monday, Tuesday Thursday & Friday
Tantrig Library	9am - 5pm Monday, Tuesday & Friday Closed: 1pm - 2pm 10am - 5pm Wednesday Closed: 1pm - 2pm	Monday, Tuesday Wednesday & Friday
Elbana Library	9:30am - 5pm Closed: 1pm - 2pm	Monday
Clawst Library	9:30am - 5pm Closed: 1pm - 2pm	Thursday
Llanidloes Institute	10am - 5pm Closed: 1pm - 2pm	Wednesday

For further information visit your local Community Hub or call 01495 311556. Website: www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk

the Council (external expertise may also be required in some cases). To develop capacity and capability in this area CIPFA delivered two bite size 'better business case' training sessions on 29th March 2023 attended by 36 staff members from across the Council.

Further work will be undertaken throughout 2023/24 and beyond to further consider where cost savings can be made as the Council. Alongside all other Council's across Wales, will be facing unprecedented budget pressures, therefore need to act now in order to mitigate the impact as much as possible.

Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)

As part of their 'Springing Forward' Review, covering the 2021/22 year, Audit Wales found that the Council made significant changes to its assets and the way that its workforce operates, but identified that further work was needed for the Council to understand its future asset and workforce needs and to ensure that future Council decisions are appropriately informed by Equality Impact Assessments and the sustainable development principle. As part of this, the Council received the following recommendation for implementation: *'Ensure that all decisions are informed by a timely equality impact assessment where required'*.

In July 2023, a retrospective IIA was approved by Council. The IIA set out the benefits and dis-benefits of the closure of the Civic Centre and the move to a Community Hub based model. There are a number of services that have benefited from being delivered closer to the customer within the Hubs, although, as the Civic Centre was a well know Council centre, it has taken some time for communities to use the Hubs as their main contact points. Overall, the changes have resulted in a positive approach to Customer Service delivery, with services moving closer to customers provided across six Hubs.

Transport is limited in Blaenau Gwent but as the Hubs are closer to the communities, and are based in the local towns, it is felt from the IIA evidence that overall, it is generally easier to travel to access services from Hubs than just from the Civic Centre. Lastly, the services being offered from the Hubs have encouraged other activities like children doing homework from the Hubs which wouldn't have happened if they had been delivered from the Civic Centre.

Information Governance

The council has a reliance on ICT for its service continuity, owing to this, and the potential increase of cyber-attacks, it has been recognised that a corporate risk needs to be established, raising the score from high to critical. As part of this, the corporate risk register is considered by CLT on a periodic basis.

If the Council does not manage its information assets in accordance with requirements set down within legislation, then it may be faced with financial penalties and possible sanctions that hinder service delivery. For quarter 4 there were 11 data breaches identified and the total for the year was 45. This is higher than the previous 12-month period where there were 37 data breaches in total. No pattern or single cause for this increase as been identified but this will continue to be monitored. No breaches during quarter 4 were reported to the ICO.

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

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know

<p>Evaluation Rating 3:</p> <p>Adequate</p>	<p>Evaluation Narrative:</p> <p>The Council, like all local authorities in Wales, is facing a wide range of financial pressures which will impact the way we deliver our services now and in the future. Areas outside of the Council's control, such as, energy costs, inflation and demand create a significant challenge for the organisation, and we will not be able to deliver services in the same way as we have in the past. The Council will continue to do what it can through engaging with residents when setting our budget, as undertaken during the 2022/23 budget setting process where more than 5.5% of the community contributed to and assisted in shaping the decisions made by Council. We will also continue to implement our bridging the gap programme, review the assets that the Council has and also identify commercial opportunities to generate income. As part of their audit of accounts for 2020/2021, Audit Wales identified errors within our Fixed Asset Register. Work is underway to remedy this, and the progress made in this area will be reported in our next self-assessment. Actions to address these areas of work can be found on pages 34, 44, 57, and 69 and will be reported on as part of the 2023/24 Council Self-Assessment.</p>
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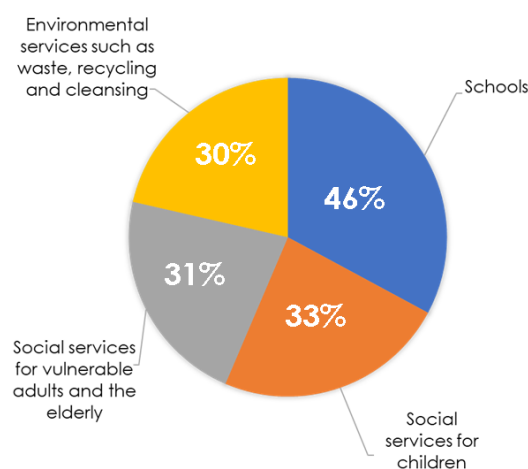
Finance and Resources

The Council will have to make some difficult decisions about services following its financial settlement from the Welsh Government, which, at 6.5%, is significantly below the all Wales increase of 7.9%. Like all organisations, the Council is facing some well-publicised financial pressures, despite increased funding from Welsh Government to almost £140 million. These pressures include the global pandemic, cost pressures, rising inflation, soaring energy and fuel costs and social care demands.

The Budget for 2023/24, was agreed by Council in early 2023 following widespread engagement with residents on savings ideas and spending priorities. Our engagement programme gave people the opportunity to share their views to help us plan our budget and services from April 2023 until March 2024 and beyond. The programme consisted of a number of public events, surveys and other ways to engage people to help shape the decision making process. A total of 3,736 questionnaires were returned which equates to over 5.5% of the area's population. This is by far the highest level of response witnessed for a budget engagement survey carried out by the council (previous response levels have never been above 600).

Councillors actively listened to and considered residents' concerns about savings proposals when preparing and setting the Council budget. A range of savings, efficiencies, and income-generating projects worth just over £3million was agreed upon at the meeting to close the budget gap, as well as a draw on reserves of £4.3 million. A number of proposals which would have affected frontline services valued by residents were rejected by councillors. Schools in the borough were provided with a 4.2% uplift in funding after councillors voted to increase this to take into account the cost pressures they face as they recover from the pandemic. A 3.45% increase in Council Tax was also agreed upon.

A set of Financial and Contract Procedural Rules have been adopted to ensure consistency, transparency and value for money in financial management and procurement. The Chief Officer Resources ensures the Authority's financial management arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2016). An annual Statement of Accounts is produced and presented to Members for scrutiny. A period of public consultation is held where members of the public can inspect the accounts.



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 overspends, with appropriate actions identified early on to tackle any areas in deficit.

The financial challenges facing Local Government are expected to continue into the medium to long term as the cost of living crisis continues with inflation at 7.9%, whilst reducing, remains well above the Bank of England target of 2%, higher than expected pay costs, increased energy and borrowing costs, all continuing to put pressure on budgets. Whilst the Revenue Settlement for 2023/2024 was positive with an increase in Aggregate External Finance of 6.5% (£8.5m), the impact of high inflation combined with soaring energy prices and increased pay costs was significant and based upon the assumptions in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and cost pressures identified, a budget gap of £23.2m is forecast over the next 5 years as follows:

MTFS Budget Gap					
2023/2024 £m	2024/2025 £m	2025/2026 £m	2026/2027 £m	2027/2028 £m	Total £m
6.7	2.1	4.7	5.2	4.5	23.2

The Council's Bridging the Gap programme remains as the Council's strategy for delivering financial efficiencies to ensure that the Council continues the journey of improving its financial stability and setting a balance budget year on year. An update on the overall current financial assessment towards the budget gap is currently assessed as £6.2m over the period of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) as follows:

	Estimated Achievement			
	2023/2024 £m	2024/2025 £m	2025/2026 £m	2026/2027 & 2027/2028 £m
Strategic Business Reviews	4.2	1.3	0.7	0

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 of £17m as follows:

	2023/2024 £m	2024/2025 £m	2025/2026 £m	2026/2027 & 2027/2028 £m
Residual Budget Gap	2.5	0.8	4	9.7

The strategic business reviews identified are insufficient to fund the budget gap included within the MTFS. As a result, a funding gap remained for 2023/2024 of £2.5m and £17m over 5 years. Proposals for the 2023/2024 budget setting process totalled £4.2m, of which £3m was approved for implementation.

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, 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.

Challenges the Council have experienced throughout the year:

Finance and Resources

Blaenau Gwent Council, like other Councils, faces extreme financial challenges as the Government continues to reduce the amount of money that is spent on our public services. The after effects of the Covid pandemic and the monetary crisis as a consequence of the war in Ukraine have caused a 'perfect storm' of soaring inflation, energy costs and material prices that have impacted how we deliver our services to the public. At the same time, the UK Government continues to make reducing the national debt a priority with strict spending policies in place. Its latest Spending Review for 2023-24 did not deliver for Wales. Also, there are significant cost increases for pay awards, and increased demands on service areas such as social care, homelessness, additional learning needs and home to school transport. To meet these challenges, we must think about the way we provide services to make

savings, and how we can generate income. This may mean us having to reduce, change or stop some services or look at alternative delivery models.

The results of the 2021 Census have had an impact on the Local Government Settlement received by the Welsh Government. The reduction in our population by 4.2% has meant a reduction in the amount of monies the Council receives. Services such as Education for school places, the Local Development Plan (LDP) for housing and Social Services for social care will also need to consider how this will impact service provision and funding in future years. Alongside this, the population is projected to further decrease. Not only is the Blaenau Gwent population decreasing, it is also aging and has the highest proportion of residents aged 16 to 64 years who are economically inactive and long-term sick or disabled across the whole of England and Wales at 36.1%. This is all likely to have an impact on services moving forward.

The Council is working collaboratively with the Office for 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.

The Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy was reviewed in December 2022 and a number of assumptions around future pay and inflationary uplifts were changed to reflect the expected financial environment for 2023/24 onwards. The Welsh Government provisional settlement for Blaenau Gwent is 6.5% (the lowest increase in Wales). Whilst this increase is above the 3% indicative increase announced in 2021 it is not sufficient to fund the forecast cost increases resulting in budget gaps increasing to in excess of £23m over a 5-year period.

Significant budget gaps remain to be addressed during the year in preparation for 2024/25 onwards. The Authority's reserves have improved over the last few years. However, in order to balance the 2023/2024 budget, a net draw from reserves of £4.26M was required. Reliance on the use of reserves to balance the budget in future years will impact on the financial sustainability of the Council. To mitigate this further, strategic business reviews will be developed and implemented to support a balanced budget moving forward. The use of reserves will be monitored and reviewed during the financial year in order to ensure that they are maintained as a sustainable level in the medium term. For 2023/24 as part of the agreed budget, assumptions around pay and inflation have increased and other specific cost pressures have been built in also, costs are expected to outstrip income such that £4.26m use of reserves will be required to fund the approved budget. This is not sustainable in the longer term and new / emergency pressures could exacerbate the position. The Cost Pressure sub group will be re-established for 2023/24 to monitor and challenge overspending areas.

Audit Wales

The Draft Statement of Accounts for 2021/2022 were presented to the Governance & Audit Committee on 16th November 2022. The principal reason for the delay in submission of the accounts related to the resolution of a significant issue identified by Audit Wales. As part of their audit of accounts for 2020/2021, Audit Wales identified issues in relation to errors identified within the Fixed Asset Register which resulted in a misstatement of the Capital Adjustment Account and Revaluation Reserve. Given that, Audit Wales indicated that there is a high probability for the accounts to receive a qualified opinion. This would have an adverse reputational impact on the Council in demonstrating that appropriate governance arrangements are in place to manage the reporting of its strategic financial affairs. However, in order to conclude the audit of the 2021/2022 Accounts, the Council could accept the qualification of these accounts on the understanding that the causes of this qualification are remedied for the 2022/2023 financial year, i.e., a programme of asset revaluation and re-lifting is implemented.



As it is not possible to undertake and review the revaluation of assets internally in compliance with RICS requirements, external valuers will be required to provide this service. Valuations are also required for the procurement of insurance cover, the absence of which would be a material risk for high-value assets.

Over time it is possible that the value of assets may become materially misstated, for example during periods of rapidly changing prices. In order to reduce the potential for this type of misstatement, the Council’s rolling programme of revaluations will be actioned over a period of 3 years instead of 5 years.

A procurement exercise is being undertaken to commission external valuers to provide the required asset information, including revaluations for financial accounting and insurance purposes, alongside an annual review of asset lives.

The Council is awaiting confirmation from Audit Wales that qualification of the 2021/2022 Accounts with appropriate correction in 2022/2023 is an acceptable course of action. If this is agreed, the financial audit can recommence in order to conclude the work required in relation to Property Plant and Equipment.

The work by Audit Wales and the Council to conclude the 2021/2022 Accounts combined with the timescales required for the revaluation process may have a consequential impact on production of the Statement of Accounts for 2022/2023.

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

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know

<p>Evaluation Rating 4:</p> <p>Good</p>	<p>Evaluation Narrative:</p> <p>The Council continues to have a clear Corporate Plan in place with four key objectives that have been developed to improve the lives of residents across the Borough. A new Gwent Public Services Board (PSB) has been established which has strengthened our partnership work with other local authorities and partner organisations in Gwent. This will provide a more joined up approach to delivering actions and to tackle the significant challenges faced by the region, such as climate change, poverty, and health inequalities. Strong links have been made between the objectives in the Corporate Plan and the priorities of the Gwent PSB. This approach will be strengthened in the year ahead through our local Well-being Partnership and a local Well-being Plan which is being developed to provide a local approach to meet these challenges. Work is currently being undertaken to ensure we are a commercially and digitally minded organisation and work will begin on a new Strategic Equality Plan which will continue to put fairness and equality at the heart of everything the Council does. Actions to address these areas of work can be found on pages 34, 44, 57, and 69 and will be reported on as part of the 2023/24 Council Self-Assessment.</p>
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Blaenau Gwent Corporate Plan and Planning Arrangements

The Corporate Plan acts as the Council’s business plan and sets out the vision, values, and priorities for 2022/27. It outlines not only what the people of Blaenau Gwent can expect from the Council, but equally, what the Council is asking from its citizens and partners.

The Plan has been developed at a time of significant financial turbulence and change within the public sector. The Council has had to take some tough decisions on where to prioritise spending, ensuring vital services are maintained for the most vulnerable in our communities.

Through focusing on delivering against the main priorities set out in the Corporate Plan we can begin to transform Blaenau Gwent into a more prosperous and welcoming area and that plays a part on a regional and national stage. It is about achieving real outcomes for the people of Blaenau Gwent and is underpinned by solid and sustainable business plans, ensuring the Council can be held to account for what it has promised to deliver.

The Corporate Plan is a requirement of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The primary aim of the Act is to improve the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of Wales. The Act sets out seven

national well-being goals that we have a duty to contribute to. The Act intends to make the Council think more about the long term, work better with people and communities, look to prevent problems, and take a more joined-up approach.

The Corporate Plan identifies four priorities, known as Well-being Objectives, which set out the direction for action and agenda for change over the next five years. The Plan sets out an ambitious programme of activity for the Council over the next five years and beyond. The priorities have been developed in order to support our communities to thrive. The people of Blaenau Gwent are at the heart of all that we do and the Corporate Plan is our commitment to the communities of Blaenau Gwent to provide modern and high quality services which support economic growth and well-being. As part of the development of the new Plan, the Council also undertook a review of its Vision and Values:

Vision: Blaenau Gwent – a place that is fair open and welcoming to all by working with and for our communities

Values – respectful, inclusive, collaborative, accountable and supportive

Our Corporate Plan 2022/27 Priorities are:

- **Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent**
- **Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities**
- **An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place**
- **Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent, and resilient**

The Gwent Public Service Board (PSB) and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, through its Corporate Plan, have agreed to become a Marmot Region, and to adopt the eight Marmot principles in order to reduce health inequalities across Gwent and to work in partnership with the Institute of Health Equity (IHE) to address the social determinants of health. Gwent is the first area in Wales to become a Marmot region. Alongside the Marmot Principles, the Corporate Plan has also been aligned to the priorities within the Gwent Well-being Plan, a Plan owned by the Gwent PSB.

The table below highlights the links between the Corporate Plan 2022/27, the Marmot Principles and the Gwent PSB's Well-being Plan:

Corporate Plan 2022/27	Marmot Principle	Gwent Well-being Plan
Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give every child the best start in life • Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives • Create fair employment and good work for all • Ensure a healthy standard of living for all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We want to create a fair and equitable Gwent for all
Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities • Strengthen the role and impact of ill-health prevention • 'Pursue environmental sustainability and health equity together'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We want to create a Gwent where the natural environment is protected and enhanced

An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create fair employment and good work for all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We want to create a fair and equitable Gwent for all
Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tackle racism, discrimination and their outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We want to create a Gwent that has friendly, safe and confident communities

Council Governance Framework

A governance framework is in place which sets out the standards and processes to be adopted by both Members and Officers. Codes of Conduct, detailing Member and Officer relations, are contained within the Constitution and all are required to make declarations of any interests that impact on their positions or functions. Members' declarations are retained by the Monitoring Officer and Officers' declarations are held by Service Managers. All Council meetings are conducted in accordance with the agreed democratic process and have declarations of interest as part of the agenda.

A Policy Framework exists to guide both Members and Officers in fulfilment of their roles. This includes a Whistle-Blowing policy enabling Members, Officers, and the public to report any concerns regarding the integrity and operations of the Authority. In addition, policies such as disciplinary or grievance procedures have been formulated for dealing with breaches to the codes.

Both Officers and Members are advised through the induction process of the standards of behaviour required by the Council throughout their term of office or employment. Continued adherence to the ethical values of the Authority is confirmed through a performance review protocol for all Officers and a Personal Development Review and Competency Framework in place for Members.

The Authority's Constitution includes a Scheme of Delegation which details subject areas, and identifies the bodies or individuals responsible for decision making.

During 2022/23, the Council set up a group to review its governance and oversight arrangements in respect of other companies in which it has an interest to ensure the arrangements are adequate and effective. This work will continue into 2023 and will be reported through the democratic process.

Becoming a Commercially Minded Council

As a Council we are working towards our ambition of becoming commercially minded. As part of this, a Commercial Strategy 2020/2025 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 specific 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.

Digital

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 has been recognised externally.

The Digital Strategy identifies where the Council is as an organisation now and what our future aspirations will be. Through internal and external collaboration, we will improve how we work, learn, adapt, and live to ensure our residents are not digitally excluded. Digital technologies and online services are transforming the way in which we interact, live and work. A digital Council will:

- make services easier to access,
- make services efficient and convenient,
- improve engagement with our customers,
- improve the skills and efficiency of our staff.

Whilst the emphasis of the strategy is not on large scale investment in infrastructure and development projects, there is however a need for some public funding. Bids to future Welsh Government programmes, such as the future Targeted Regeneration Investment (TRI) funding, and the future funding announced for an Automotive Technology Park in Blaenau Gwent. The Cardiff Capital Region City Deal programme should also establish a budget to support the evolution of digital technology that provides a direct contribution to well-being through digital activity.



Equalities

The Council is committed to implementing the Equality Act 2010 and is currently working on the development of a new Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) to cover the years 2024/2028. The current SEP will come to an end in 2024. 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.

Corporate Safeguarding

Safeguarding the most vulnerable people in the community continues to be a top priority for the Council. Safeguarding is recognised corporately as being everybody's responsibility. Safeguarding our citizens is central to the work of the Council and good progress has been made to strengthen the corporate safeguarding arrangements in place. This includes the development of a corporate safeguarding training framework being implemented across the council and compliance monitored. The Blaenau Gwent website has been

updated making it easy for the public to access safeguarding information and our corporate safeguarding report has been enhanced to provide a full council performance picture, as it is recognised that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Audit Wales reviewed the safeguarding arrangements which found that the Council needs to take action to fully comply with previous recommendations and also to strengthen its monitoring arrangements of third parties, which will be tested by Internal Audit to evidence and strengthen monitoring and safeguarding arrangements.

Self-Evaluation and Assessment

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. As part of the Estyn inspection undertaken in late 2022, Estyn identified a recommendation for the Council to take forward, 'Improve the quality of self-evaluation, strategic planning and performance management'. In order to

respond, work is being undertaken by the education directorate with support from Corporate to review the business planning and self-evaluation arrangements.

Challenges the Council have experienced throughout the year

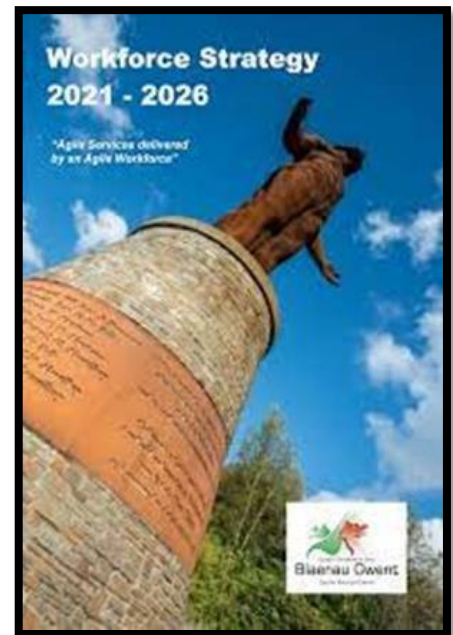
Recruitment and Retention

The Council is experiencing the impact of recruitment and retention difficulties, owing to this, a corporate risk has been identified. All directorates have developed a workforce plan for 2022/23 with a detailed action plan to put in place measures to address these issues. In addition, the ongoing work corporately will support directorates to recruit and retain staff by further modernising the Councils approach and marketing the Council as an 'Employer of Choice'.

Whilst the risk remains high with no significant changes, staffing pressures in some services have eased with successful recruitment to vacant roles. In addition, other measures that will support in the longer term include effective workforce and succession planning, the management of sickness absence and, where appropriate, working regionally/nationally.

Particular difficulties have been experienced in Children's Services.

Vacancies in the locality teams have been filled by a combination of staff seconded onto the Social Work degree course and newly qualified workers. The challenge will now be retaining these staff. Despite good progress being made, low vacancy rates will now need be sustained, and, in addition, there are savings targets attributed to the workforce which could impact of the departments safeguarding ability moving forward.



Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent

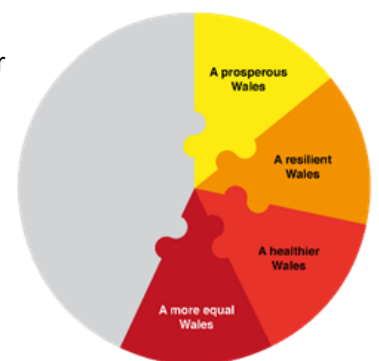
<p>Evaluation Rating 4:</p> <p>Good</p>	<p>Evaluation Narrative:</p> <p>The Council remains committed to supporting resilience in the community and this can be evidenced through the proactive work being undertaken to support those facing difficulties owing to the cost of living crisis. As an anti-poverty council, we are working to support people trapped in poverty and those who are most vulnerable. A Cost of Living Member Group, supported by an Operational Officer Group, has been established to prioritise this important agenda. To further support communities the Aspire Shared Apprenticeship Programme has continued to enhance skills development within the manufacturing and engineering sectors supporting business growth; whilst tackling unemployment and providing aspirational opportunities for young people across the local authority. Progress is continuing with improving the corporate commercial property portfolio through initiatives such as the Shared Prosperity Fund HiVE which will support the objectives of the Tech Valleys programme and support the manufacturing sector with a highly skilled and flexible workforce able to deliver the products, services, and technologies necessary for our future economy. The recent Estyn inspection of our educational services highlighted that good progress has taken place, although it is recognised that challenges remain including the education budget, attainment, and attendance in our schools. Destination of learners post 16 is an important area for us and data is showing an increase in the number of females started engineering courses, supporting our ambition to becoming an advanced engineering location. Actions to address these areas of work can be found on pages 34, 44, 57, and 69 and will be reported on as part of the 2023/24 Council Self-Assessment.</p>
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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.

Identified Need:

- Tackling the cost of living and supporting residents and families
- Examining the potential for further economic improvement and growth for Blaenau Gwent:
 - Maximisation of opportunities and income levels
 - Children, young people and adults with the right qualifications and skills for life
 - Skills / employment
 - Job prospects
 - Growth
- Community:
 - Independent living
 - Thriving and Resilient
 - Aging population
 - Access to services



What We Aim to Achieve – An increase in the resilience of the community, providing high quality educational and skills opportunities to create a thriving economy from birth onwards, minimising dependence and maximising independence. The authority aims to ensure that all children and young people are given the best start in life, enabling them to grow into fruitful adults living a healthy and fulfilling life whilst contributing to society and forming a valuable part of their community.

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

DID YOU KNOW ...

Blaenau Gwent saw Wales's largest percentage-point rise in the **proportion of people aged 16 years and over who were employed**

48.2% in 2011 to 51.1% in 2021.

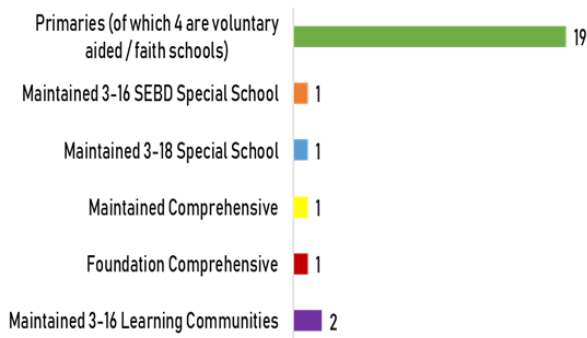
During this period (2011 to 2021) Blaenau Gwent saw an improvement in the percentage of people aged 16 years and over who were employed (excluding full-time students).



In 2021, Blaenau Gwent had the lowest **percentage of adults in employment working 15 hours or less** (out of all 22 Welsh local authority areas).

Education and Schools

Blaenau Gwent is a relatively small geographical area, with big ambitions for our schools and learners. We are determined to play our part in Wales being a first class education system with a clear ambition to increase the skills and standards of education across the borough. We fully support and are committed to the Welsh Government's national mission for educational transformation, including Curriculum and ALN Reforms.



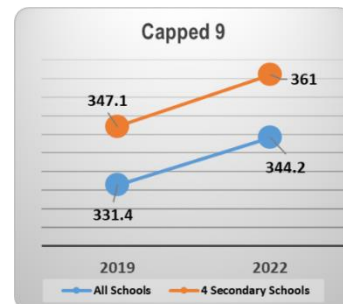
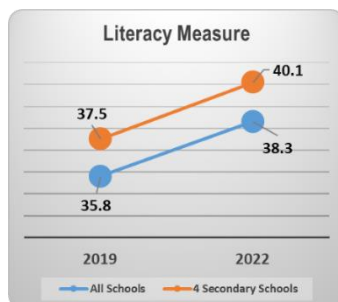
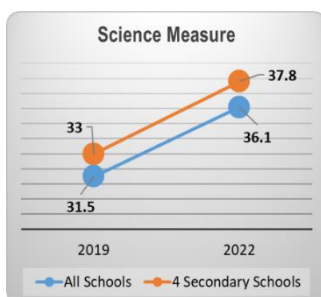
Blaenau Gwent has 25 schools across 31 school sites and there are currently circa 9,000+ pupils on roll across all Blaenau Gwent schools. The Education Directorate provides services to support children and young people's educational learning opportunities whilst working collaboratively with schools. The Education Directorate has developed a new purpose statement, which is to deliver '**Better Schools, Better Citizens and Better Communities**'. The Education Workforce Plan 2021-26 contributes to the purpose statement by prioritising key strategic and operational activity to support the workforce at all levels. The plan covers the Directorate's three main aspects of core service delivery, namely:

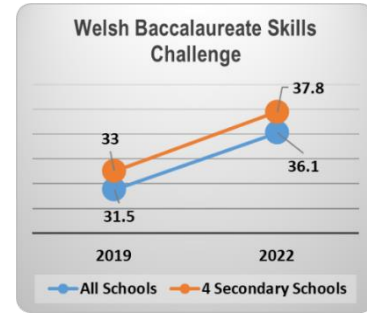
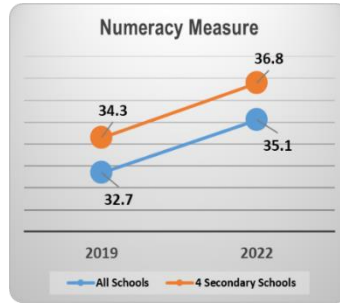
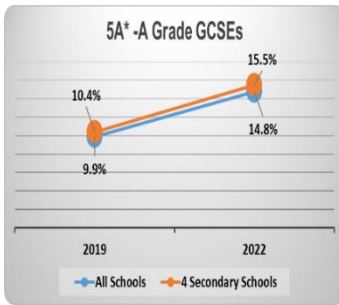
School Improvement and Inclusion; Education Transformation and Business Change; and Young People and Partnerships.

The Education Directorate aims to ensure that all children and young people are given the best start in life, enabling them to grow into fruitful adults living a healthy, fulfilling life whilst contributing to society and forming a valuable part of their community. We deliver this by ensuring higher levels of language acquisition and reading across the board, and overall enabling positive outcomes and attainment. We support children and young people to be in a good position to find skills and employment at the appropriate times and our NEET figures demonstrate our achievements in this area.

Educational Outcomes

Summer 2022 Key Stage 4 (KS4) results were positive and in line with the School Development Plan targets set by the 4 secondary settings. There were improvements in 29 out of 32 key measures. Some examples are shown below:





(Note: only 2019 and 2022 comparison data shown due to routine data collection suspended / 2022 data included for self-evaluation purposes only)

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 98.4%, a small reduction from last year when the figure was 99.1%.

Free School Meals

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 eFSM 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 all children and young people.

Indicator	2019	2020	2021	September 2022	Comments
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.

Children Looked After

A small proportion of children looked after experienced a change of school during the course of the year. This is an increase when compared with the previous year. Consistency of schooling continues to be considered as part of the matching process when a child looked after moves placement. Transport is provided where necessary to ensure the stability of schooling. When a child does have to move school, processes are in place to ensure that delays in admissions are avoided, wherever possible.

At the end of academic year 2021-2022:

- 142 children of statutory school age were looked after by Blaenau Gwent local authority, this is a decrease compared with the previous academic year when there were 154 children.

- The majority of children continue to be educated within Blaenau Gwent and attend mainstream schools with a small proportion attending more specialist education settings.
- Almost all learners achieved recognised qualifications at the end of their statutory school studies with the majority now engaged in post 16 educational and or training opportunities.
- 54% of Personal Education Plans for newly accommodated children were initiated within statutory timescales and a total of 11 plans were not initiated within 10 days:
 - Eight were as a result of delay in the Children Looked After education team being notified at the point that the children became looked after; and
 - Three were as a result of the learners being unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who were not in school at the point of becoming looked after.

Safeguarding in Education

The 2023 Estyn report of the Local Authority confirmed that ‘Officers and elected members are committed to safeguarding young people in their local authority and there is an appropriate safeguarding culture within the local authority where all officers and elected members receive suitable safeguarding training. The way in which education and children’s services work together has contributed well to improving multi-agency working and the support schools receive to manage the needs of pupils and their families more effectively’.



School Categorisation

Close monitoring of school and learner progress, and educational outcomes has continued and the number of schools that we have that are causing concern has reduced from 6 schools in 2019 to only 2 in 2022. School categorisation 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).

Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

The Council are well on track for implementing the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) reform. The Council is currently undergoing a proposal to increase the capacity of ALN Resource Bases across the County Borough, accommodating the demand for places in both Primary and Secondary settings. There are currently Resource Bases across Blaenau Gwent accommodating 61 learners in Primary settings and 62 at Secondary settings. There is an increasing need for Resource Base placements in mainstream settings for children and young people within the Borough both at Primary (aged 3-11) and Secondary settings (aged 11-16). All current resource bases in the County Borough are full to capacity. The recent Estyn inspection highlighted ‘In the planning of provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN), data is not always used effectively enough to inform long-term planning’. The Education Transformation and Inclusion teams have therefore undertaken a review of the current provision and have used this data to project the demand going forward, under this proposal Education are seeking to set up new Resource Bases in line with the projected demand, with the aim of also reducing Out of County placements in the medium term and having a more localised strategy for learners.

The Council is committed to providing all children and young people with high quality education and training tailored to meet their needs, which will develop their potential, extend aspirations, promote social inclusion and contribute to the economic regeneration of the area. Resource Bases are essential for pupils with identified ALN requirements to enable them to fulfil their potential.

The Council proposes to increase the capacity for Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Resource Bases across the County Borough in both Primary and Secondary settings for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Additional Learning Needs Resource Bases (ALNRB) pupils. The Council will work with the schools to develop a long-term plan to support sustained growth and development. It is proposed for this to be delivered in two phases:

- **Phase 1** - To increase resource base capacity in primary schools from 61 to 86 places (including 15 Welsh-medium places) and to increase secondary school capacity from 62 to 80 places.
- **Phase 2** - The development of a Medium-term plan to secure additional capacity to facilitate sustained growth and development in Primary and Secondary settings.

Surplus Places and Band B

The local authority works to make sure that suitable education provision is provided in order to meet the needs of every child and young person. Over the past decade, the local authority has successfully reduced surplus places which are reducing to the targets as set out in the School Organisation Policy at 15%. The Local Authority does have some elements of sufficiency of school places emerging that will need to be monitored closely, especially in the secondary and special school sectors.

The delivery of the Sustainable Communities for Learning Band B programme is well underway with an investment of circa £26m into the school estate. The suitability and condition of the school estate is improving with circa 61% categorised as A/B.

Digital and ICT in Education

The Educational Digital Standards are designed to assist schools to understand, manage and implement their digital environment. The Standards also provide guidance on how schools should future-proof their digital environment to meet the needs of a more digitally focused school curriculum. The standards suggest all infrastructure work undertaken to meet the standards should be carefully considered, planned and procured in compliance with national procurement regulations and installed by professional organisations.

In 2016 Blaenau Gwent invested approximately £650K in ICT infrastructure as part of the Infrastructure and Connectivity Project:

- In 2019/2020 Welsh Government launched the Hwb Ed Tech Programme which enabled the Authority to continue to further improve our network infrastructure and to replace all end of life devices within Schools
- Device sustainability- Schools are now using a 20% plan to refresh devices over 5-year period in order to maintain the standard of devices achieved through the Hwb Ed Tech Programme.
- In collaboration with the Shared Resource Service (SRS) Education have worked alongside all schools within the Service Level Agreement to standardise all infrastructure to ensure adherence to the Education Digital Standards. This includes broadband connectivity, data network cabinet standards, routers and switches, cabling standards, wireless network standards, device management standards and web filtering standards.

Education Finance

The Education Directorate aim to deliver effective and efficient services within financial constraints. The Local Authority has a track record of spending within its education budget in recent years, with relatively small underspends for the past three years against the overall education budget. Education were also provided with an 8.4% uplift in budgets via the Individual School Budget in 2022-23. The 2023-24 revenue budget included an overall increase for Education of which:

- Individual School Budget received an uplift of 4.2% (£2,02m) and awarded cost pressures totalling £0.115m
- Local Education Authority Budget received cost pressures totalling £0.923m mainly in relation to Home to School transport and ALN Reform

Collaborative Working with the EAS

The Education Directorate support children and young people's educational learning opportunities whilst working collaboratively with an aim to ensure that all children and young people's well-being and educational needs are catered for. As part of this, the Council commissions the Education Achievement Service (EAS) to deliver a wide range of school improvement services to all schools (all key stages, including all through schools and special schools), pupil referral units and funded non-maintained nursery settings on behalf of each local authority. This plan supports the council's role in delivering their statutory function, addressing their individual improvement priorities and promoting improved pupil outcomes.

Deprivation and Educational Outcomes

There are many strengths in the local authority's work to reduce the impact that deprivation has on educational outcomes by providing support to low-income families and households. This work includes providing free school meals, period equity, vulnerable learners support, Youth Service and youth support services, family engagement officers, school holiday provision and post 16 transport. There are also many strengths in the services to support the well-being of children and young people and to promote positive relationships. Support has been provided to schools to provide an environment where health and well-being is at the heart of the curriculum, ensuring support and appropriate interventions are accessible to all, with a specific emphasis on vulnerable and disadvantaged learner categories. A whole school approach self-evaluation tool pilot has been introduced which encourages schools to assess the key barriers to learning and to provide specific support relating to the emotional and mental well-being of the child. It encourages schools to question how inequality can impact on the learning and life outcomes of a child and fosters an inclusive and caring environment.

Estyn Inspection

In September 2022, Blaenau Gwent Council received a letter from Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, stating that the Local Authority will be subject to an Estyn inspection, in line with the Local Government Education Services (LGES) framework. The letter confirmed that the inspection would take place between 28th November to 2nd December 2022. The inspection was carried out in accordance with the inspection framework and the guidance 'for the inspection of Local Government Education Services'. The three inspection areas of the LGES inspection framework are:

- Inspection Area 1 – Outcomes
- Inspection Area 2 – Education Services and Provision
- Inspection Area 3 – Leadership and Management

In the lead-up to the inspection, Estyn identified Blaenau Gwent's 4 Local Questions for the Inspection, including:

- 1) How well does the local authority challenge and support non-maintained settings and schools to improve?
- 2) How well does the local authority tackle inequalities in education experiences and outcomes for children living in poverty?
- 3) How well does the local authority support schools to promote respectful relationships and address negative behaviour effectively?
- 4) How well does the local authority ensure that the interests of learners are above all others in its planning for schools and other education provision?

The report provides a high-level summary of the main findings and some of the key considerations, including:

- The local authority has made good progress with its education services since it was last inspected around ten years ago as important areas for improvement have largely been addressed. Senior officers and elected members have a strong commitment to education, and this is reflected in the funding given to schools and education services.
- The local authority generally plans well to make sure that it has suitable education provision to meet the needs of every child and young person. Over the past decade, the local authority has successfully reduced surplus places in schools and improved the conditions of its school buildings. The local authority is suitably developing its Welsh-medium education provision. Whilst there have been some positive developments in provision for pupils with additional learning needs, the quality of planning for future provision is variable.
- There are many strengths in the local authority's work to reduce the impact of deprivation on education outcomes and its support for families in low-income households. There are also many strengths in the services to support children and young people's well-being and promote positive relationships.
- The authority has worked with its regional school improvement service to strengthen the challenge and support it provides to schools. This work has greater impact for children in non-maintained and primary age settings than for young people in secondary age settings. Provision for young people was too slow to improve in two schools placed in statutory categories.
- Despite strengths in education services, corporate leaders have not ensured that their vision and strategic aims for education are fully understood by other officers, elected members, school staff and external partners. Also, corporate leaders have not ensured that the corporate plan is supported by coherent delivery plans for

education that include related actions and measurable success criteria. Overall, the quality of self-evaluation, planning for improvement, and performance management is not strong enough.

The inspectorate has identified 3 recommendations for improvement that the local authority will use to update its improvement plans:

- Improve the corporate leadership of education services;
- Improve the quality of self-evaluation, strategic planning, and performance management; and,
- Accelerate improvements in provision for secondary age pupils in schools causing concern.

The outcome of the Inspection is positive overall, progress since the last inspection has been made and there is no requirement for follow-up activity. The 3 recommendations identified can be used to facilitate leverage at a corporate level to deliver continued incremental change. However, it needs to be acknowledged that the LA's areas for improvement are of paramount importance in supporting our children and young people to improve their education, skills and life chances. There will be regular update reporting on progress to Members and the Education Directorate will work with Estyn through the Local Authority Link Inspector (LALI) termly meetings to provide assurances to the inspectorate that improvements continue to be made both corporately and operationally across the range of LGES services. You can read the Estyn report in full [here](#).

Youth Service

The number of 11-25 year olds supported by the Youth Service during 2021/22 is 1961 (Reach of 17%). This is lower than the 2019/20 pre Covid data, but shows that the reach has almost returned to pre-pandemic levels, despite still working within restrictions at the beginning of the year.

Out of the number of 11-25 year olds supported by the Youth Service above, the % that have gained nationally recognised qualifications has decreased:

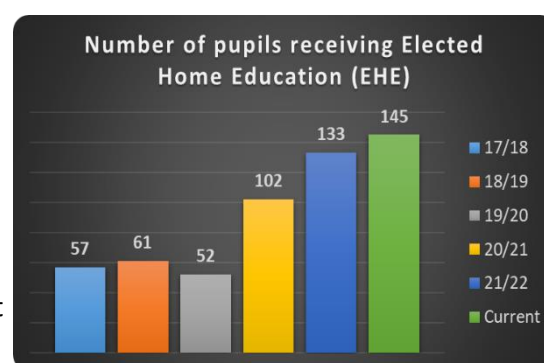
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2021/22
Number of young people supported (11-25) that gained accredited qualifications	306	301	847	86
Number of qualifications achieved	448	456	851	188

Numbers Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

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.

Blaenau Gwent continues to deliver a number of services that offer support for young people aged 11-25 who at risk of becoming, or who are currently not in education, employment or training. The Youth Service exceeded that of the all-Wales means for reach and accredited learning outcomes. The levels of NEETs at 1.6% are at their lowest level with nine young people.

The Youth Service is established as an accreditation centre with Youth Workers also providing support for parents of Elected Home Education (EHE) young people wanting to deliver units. The service currently has contact with 18 EHE young people, to provide a link with the service. As demonstrated in the chart there has been an increase in the number of home educated children within Blaenau Gwent over the past few years. EHE pupils continue to be supported by the Education Welfare Service, however, this needs to be monitored closely going forward to ensure that the number of visits increase in line with the above. There are currently 145 pupils on the EHE database (16/02/23) compared to 137 for the same



period last year. This is an increase of 5.8%. Twenty-nine of these pupils are from the Gypsy Roma Traveller Community.

The Gypsy Roma Traveller Community Education Service

We continue to provide one to one and small group academic support for children and young people within schools and alternative settings. Through the literacy intervention, nearly all Gypsy Roma Traveller pupils made improvements in both reading and spelling in both primary and secondary education. Despite Covid-19 having an initial impact on learning, most pupils' have reached pre-pandemic attainment levels due to the additional support provided.

All pupils at secondary schools now have literacy levels within the normal range for age i.e., standard scores of 90 or above. The onsite Literacy Project provides support to those with low literacy levels. Also, literacy booklets have been created and distributed to parents to encourage reading at home.

During Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller History Month in June 2022 we encouraged all schools to participate to raise awareness and to celebrate the culture. Transition work continues to support pupils moving from primary school into secondary schools' settings (Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3). Gypsy, Roma, Traveller pupils and their families are fully supported throughout this phase to ensure any barriers and fears are overcome which typically stem from parents' own negative personal experiences from school. Leaflets for professionals, pupils and parents were distributed to help guide and encourage transition.

Tech Valleys

Ebbw Vale has one of Wales's eight Enterprise Zones, meaning it's a priority area for business support, skills, first-class infrastructure, financial incentives, and property and development opportunities. It's part of the wider Cardiff Capital Region, a project that's investing £1.2bn of public money to leverage another £4bn of private investment across South East Wales. The Welsh Government is investing £100m over 10 years to create 1,500-plus jobs and is working with the Council to achieve this under the banner, Tech Valleys.

The Welsh Government has worked with the global technology company Thales to establish a £20m cyber centre at the heart of the Tech Valleys. The National Digital Exploitation Centre (NDEC) was founded in 2019, in its new purpose-built home. It's the first Research and Development facility of its kind in Wales, and provides the perfect setting for Small Medium Enterprises and microbusinesses to test and develop their digital concepts.

The Tech Inward Investment continues to be championed through the Tech Valleys Initiative. This supports our vision for the South Wales Valleys to be a globally recognised centre for developing new technologies to support cutting-edge industry by 2027. Hybrid units have been completed and are fully occupied with tech firms and an immersive classroom has been developed for both education and skills development on the Works site, Ebbw Vale.

To assist with enhancing and stimulating economic development within Blaenau Gwent, we have progressed with improving the corporate commercial property portfolio as part of a Joint Venture with Welsh Government, under the Tech Valleys initiative. A facility called Regain II will enable us to house two Small Medium Enterprises on the Works site, one of the key inputs for the UK Competitive Index, and provide some managed workspace in the Thales Campus situated on Lime Avenue.

The council has worked with the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal to achieve two large investment deals for companies in Blaenau Gwent and, in turn, improve our competitiveness. The UK Competitive Index 2023 has shown that Blaenau Gwent is no longer ranked as the least competitive locality in Britain with the UKCI score increasing between 2019 and 2023. Blaenau Gwent is now ranked 361 out of 362 in the average of competitiveness across Britain.

The Council was successful with a bid to the Shared Prosperity Fund HiVE - the facility will cost in the region of £12M and will support the objectives of the Tech Valleys programme and the aims of the Welsh Government Manufacturing Action Plan (2021) which highlights steps needed to develop a resilient, high value manufacturing sector with a highly skilled and flexible workforce able to deliver the products, services and technologies necessary for our future economy. The facility is supported by the findings that manufacturing is the largest skills gap by sector in Wales (21%) and the need to improve higher vocational and technical education. There is currently no advanced engineering facility of this kind across the Heads of the Valley region. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 specifies two highly relevant challenges for places like ours, namely, equipping everyone with the right skills for a changing world and the need to build capacity for lifelong learning



The Tech Valleys programme has a vision; 'In 2027 the South Wales Valleys and Blaenau Gwent in particular, will be a globally recognised centre for the development of new technologies, to support cutting edge industry'. In support of this vision the Council and Coleg Gwent are developing an Advanced Engineering Centre which will create an environment that will attract hi-tech inward investors within the Advanced Manufacturing sector. Funding to deliver this project is broken down as follows:

- Welsh Government Pre Approval 1 (Money to develop scheme prior to Tender): £200K;
- Welsh Government Pre Approval 2 (Money to develop scheme prior to Tender): £160K;
- Welsh Government Tech Valleys: £2,989,082; and
- Levelling Up Funding: £9,360,000.

Progress of the project so far includes:

- Levelling Up Funding (LUF) has been awarded;
- Contracts with the preferred contractor ISG, are in the process of being signed with the aim of being on site towards the end of July 2023 and contract completed end of May 2024. The contract period is 42 weeks;
- The date the campus will be open and welcoming students is anticipated to be September 2024; and
- Contract sum £12,709,082.

The STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Facilitation Project, created as a result of Tech Valleys, is a co-ordinated programme of support, centred on 'industry in schools' within a cluster of Blaenau Gwent 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. Employers can provide a real-world context for a wide range of learning experiences across the curriculum, showcasing the very many employment opportunities and sign-posting young people to the types of skills that are both in demand now and will be more-so in the future. Key to securing the workforce of tomorrow are the links between businesses and education, in order to connect children to the full range of vocational and academic career paths.

This year Blaenau Gwent had two finalists at the Wales STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Awards 2022:

- The STEM Facilitation Project in the category of STEM Educational Programme of The Year (Public)
- Team Leader, in the STEM Woman of The Year category which recognises inspirational women and their work as ambassadors within the STEM industry.

Digital

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 (more detail below);
- 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.

5G Wales Unlocked is the innovation project behind the new immersive 360-degree immersive environment in Ebbw Vale – just one of several trials demonstrating how ultrafast technology like 5G could transform rural communities, from powering tech innovations in agriculture, to improving rural transport and education and bolstering the tourism industry. Using a localised 5G network by project partners BT, the classroom uses the high-speed connectivity to project inspiring and educational video content onto all four walls in a 360-degree format, providing an immersive experience.

Kick Start

Kick Start was a 2-year programme (2021 & 2022) which was aimed at supporting new businesses from 6 months up to 3 years old, to help them develop and expand. The implementation of the programme has been very successful with 21 Blaenau Gwent businesses receiving this funding to support work placements. This scheme will be replaced with the Quickstart Programme from April 2023.

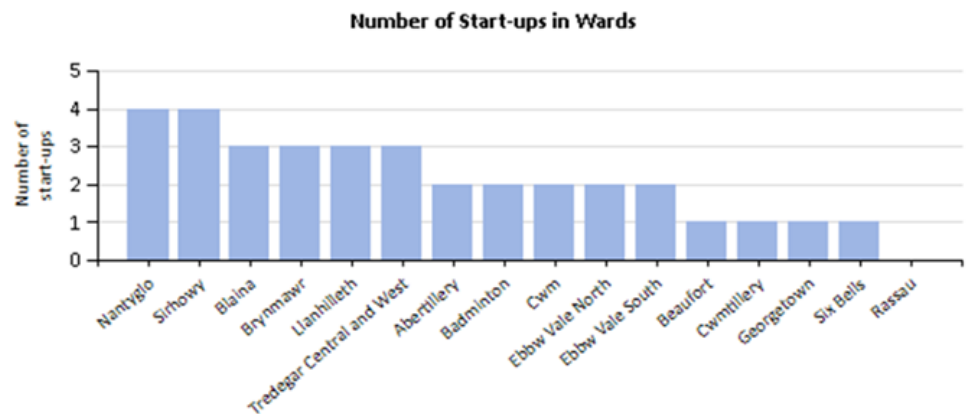
Business Start Ups

There were 25.8% more businesses start-ups in Blaenau Gwent during the first three months of this year compared with the corresponding period of last year, according to latest data from BankSearch. This growth rate ranks Blaenau Gwent at 2 out of the 22 Welsh districts. The makeup of start-ups is Limited Companies 67.6%, Sole Traders 29.4%, Other For Profit Start-ups (mainly Partnerships) 2.9% and Not For Profit 0.0%.

The top 3 industries account for 70.6% of start-ups. The types of areas that start-ups were established include; Hard-Pressed Living 67.6%, Constrained City Dwellers 23.5%, Suburbanites 5.9%, Rural Residents 2.9%, Cosmopolitans 0.0%, Ethnicity Central 0.0%, and Multicultural Metropolitans 0.0%. Growth in the number of start-ups across Wales has risen. So far this year, Merthyr Tydfil (67.4%), Blaenau Gwent (25.8%) and Swansea (21.3%) have seen the strongest growth compared to the corresponding period in 2022.

In Blaenau Gwent 34 new businesses started up in March 2023, 15 more than the previous month and 7 more than in March 2022. Nantyglo saw the most start-ups; Rassau saw the least. Blaenau Gwent accounted for 2.3% of all start-ups across the Wales.

In March 2023 there were 7.8 start-ups for every 10,000 working age in Blaenau Gwent and this compares with a business start-up rate of 7.6 for the whole of Wales



Shared Prosperity Fund

Following the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union in 2020, the Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) is the UK Government replacement for the European funding. The UKSPF is a key part of the UK's Levelling Up agenda, forming part of complementary funding, including the Levelling Up Fund and Community Ownership Fund. The primary aim of the fund is to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK. Underpinning this aim are three investment Priorities: communities and place; supporting local business and people and skills. As part of the People and Skills priority there is a dedicated and ring-fenced element of the UKSPF called 'Multiply' which seeks to improve adult numeracy skills.



The 10 Local Authorities in the City Deal Region have a combined conditional allocation of £230,432,573 and £48,100,003 for Multiply. Blaenau Gwent have £23M allocated for expenditure across three priorities and an additional £5M for Multiply. This amount is allocated over three years starting from April 2022, with a substantial amount in year three (2024/25). The funding has been broken down to yearly allocations; 12% in year 1 (22/23), 24% in year 2 (23/24) and 64% in year 3 (24/25). UK Government have advised that any funding not utilised in each year cannot be carried forward.

Emphasis is being placed on gathering local evidence to substantiate local (and regional) spend of the SPF. To access the local SPF funding allocations, each local authority has developed a

local Investment Plan which identifies a range of interventions that meet the 3 investment priorities and reflect local evidence, challenges and opportunities. Each local Investment Plan will contribute to one South East Wales Regional Investment Plan which will need to outline:

- Local context: showing evidence of opportunities and challenges using the three investment priorities for UKSPF.
- A selection of outcomes and interventions: identifying the outcomes based on local evidence and need, and the interventions to prioritise, under each priority.
- Delivery; detailing:
 - a. Approach to delivery and governance
 - b. Expenditure and deliverables
 - c. Capability and resource
- Engagement with wider local partners, stakeholders, local MP's and Members of the Senedd.

Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) Council will manage the regions allocation and will submit the Regional Investment Plan. As the lead authority they will also have responsibility for a single funding agreement with the UK government for the full South East Wales SPF allocation of £278.5M and will be accountable for all aspects of monitoring and claiming the allocation. There will be a requirement for Service Level Agreements between RCT and Blaenau Gwent Council to pass on accountability and the terms and conditions of the funding.

The Shared Prosperity People and Skills investment priority will help reduce the barriers some people face to employment and support them to move towards employment and education. Places can also target funding into skills for local areas to support employment and local growth. Blaenau Gwent's funding allocation over the 3-year delivery programme against this investment priority is £8,599,836.

CiNER Glass Property

CiNER Glass Property Limited will be building a bottle manufacturing facility in Ebbw Vale which aims to bring around 600 jobs to the area. The first part of the facility is expected to be operational late 2024. Once operational, the Ciner plant will help provide a range of long-term benefits to the local community, including:

- A £390m investment in a state-of-the-art glass recycling manufacturing plant;
- Up to 600 jobs when the plant is operational plus an additional 400 jobs during the construction phase;
- Create a centre of engineering excellence in glass technology in Wales competing with the best in the world;
- Provide thousands of new job opportunities for young people over several decades; and
- Contribute to both Blaenau Gwent and the Welsh Government's net-zero ambitions by drastically reducing the levels of glass imported.

Council Business Property Portfolio

The Council own and manage a portfolio of 15 estates and a population of 191 business units. The portfolio is largely made up of workshop and factory units, with a small offering of office units (sizes range from 160 Sq. Ft – 32,000 sq. ft.). High tech units have recently been added to the portfolio on The Works, Ebbw Vale. The table below provides an overview of the Portfolio by Estate:

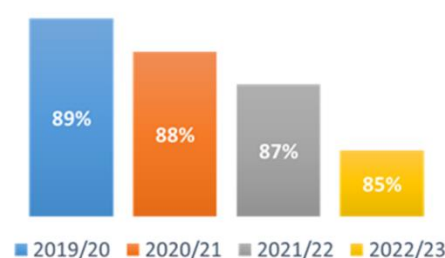
Business Park/Industrial Estate	Key	Units		
		Total number of units	Number of units occupied	% of total number of units occupied
Barleyfields	14	7	7	100%
Blaenant	13	15	14	93%
Blaenau Gwent Workshops	15	35	23	66%
Crown	2	16	15	94%
Cwmdraw	9	15	11	73%
Cwm SBC	21	25	17	68%
Cwmtillery	20	12	11	92%
Gwent Court	11	4	4	100%
Hybrid Units	10	9	9	100%
Llanhilleth	23	19	18	95%
Roseheyworth Business Park – North	19	8	8	100%
Roseheyworth Business Park – South	19	14	14	100%
Victoria	11	2	2	100%
REGAIN	10	8	8	100%
Waun-y-pound	5	2	2	100%
		191	163	85%

The Council's property portfolio is at:

- 93% occupancy rate and increase of 1% from last year;
- supporting 807 jobs, an increase from 736 jobs last year and 114 businesses accommodated;
- 320,543 sq. ft. total floorspace occupied; and
- £1,004,272 received in total rent over the year.

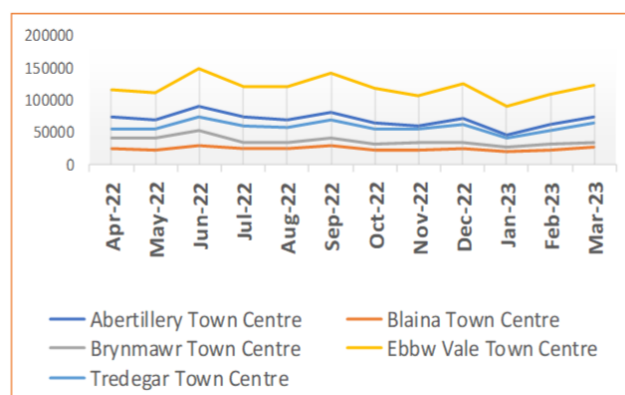
In order to enhance and stimulate economic development within the Borough it has been identified that it is a priority to support the Industrial portfolio management and development and in turn support inward investment, business start-up, retention and growth.

The percentage of occupied Blaenau Gwent Industrial units is shown in the graph -



Town Centres

Footfall is an important factor influencing our town centre vitality and viability. Sensors count the number of shoppers visiting our town centres and provide analytical data on how individual town centres are performing and how shoppers are using them. The data from footfall monitoring allows the Council to be better equipped to make evidenced based decisions on the popularity and effectiveness of current and future projects in Town Centres. During the year footfall has fluctuated each month with the busiest month in all towns being June. There was a total Blaenau Gwent town centre footfall of 3,648,028 people over the year.



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 provide 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.

- Work on Ebbw Vale Placemaking Plan has continued during 2022/23 and further stakeholder engagement has been held on potential projects to be taken forward for implementation. Some work on development options for key sites has commenced. Further engagement with Design Commission for Wales is to be undertaken.
- The Brynmawr Placemaking Plan has also been progressed and builds upon the Brynmawr and Nantyglo Masterplan that was approved in late 2020. The placemaking plan will seek to recognise the commercial developments that have taken place on the periphery of the town centre and consider how these developments can become better connected and support the long term viability of Brynmawr Town Centre. A draft of the placemaking plan has been prepared. Engagement took place with Elected Members in advance of it being submitted to Scrutiny for approval in March 2023.
- Funding was secured to undertake a Placemaking Plan for Abertillery and consultants have been appointed to help with its development. Initial stakeholder engagement has been undertaken to start to shape the placemaking plan and based on lessons learned for the other placemaking plans earlier stakeholder consultation has taken place along with work on the vision, ambition and strategy. Public consultation took place in January 2023.
- The Tredegar Placemaking Plan was approved in 2022. Work continues on development of a delivery plan that will list the projects that need to be done to achieve the overall vision for the town.
- A funding application has been prepared to cover costs of developing a Blaina Placemaking Plan.

Challenges the Council have experienced throughout the year

Elected Home Education (EHE) Pupils

There has been an increase in the number of home educated children within Blaenau Gwent over the past few years. Elected Home Education (EHE) pupils continue to be supported by the Education Welfare Service; however, this needs to be monitored closely going forward to ensure that the number of visits increase in line with the figures. There are currently 145 pupils on the EHE database (16/02/23) compared to 137 for the same period last year. This is an increase of 5.8%. Twenty-nine of these pupils are from the Gypsy Roma Traveller Community (GRT).

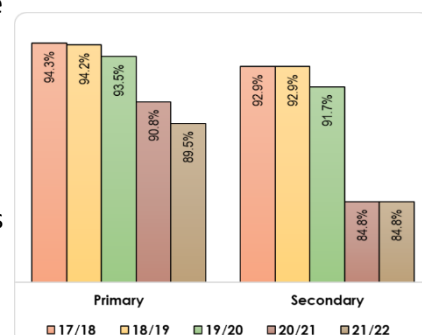
Attendance and Exclusions

On an annual basis school attendance is showing a decrease in both primary and secondary schools. Attendance figures in Blaenau Gwent are mirroring those of national trends. Incidents of exclusions and the number who received fixed term exclusions during the year, issued in respect of children looked after, increased compared with the previous year. The primary reason why exclusions are issued continues to be for persistent disruptive behaviour particularly in respect of secondary aged pupils.

The exclusion data is showing the increase and the levels are higher than they were pre Covid. However, similar patterns of increases are being experienced by areas across Wales post Covid. Positively, only 7 primary schools issued exclusions this year compared to 13 schools for the same period last year. However, the number of exclusions and the days lost are higher in 5 out of the 7 schools that are issuing exclusions. The Education Welfare Service are working closely with those schools in order to support early intervention to further reduce exclusions. One of the schools has developed a nurture base which has had a positive impact on the amount of exclusions.

This period has only seen exclusions from one of our special schools. There has been an increase in the number of exclusions in this school and days lost. The Education Welfare Service are working in partnership with the school to look at support that can be provided to address reasons behind exclusions. The 3 main reasons for exclusions across all settings are persistent disruptive behaviour (279), verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult (198) and physical assault against a pupil (98). When

Attendance Figures



analysing exclusion data, it would be important to take into account that it may involve a small number of learners who are excluded more than once.

A key action for the Education Directorate and Schools is to work together to reduce school exclusion levels.

Data analysis	Number of Exclusions (Increase)	Days of Exclusion (Increase)	Permanent Exclusion (Increase)
Secondary	221	196.5	4
Primary	8	36	0
Special Schools	2	20.5	0
Increase	231	253	4

Schools Causing Concern (SCC)

A priority will be to continue to work with Schools Causing Concern (SCC), particularly the two schools currently in an Estyn category.

- Brynmawr Foundation School (BFS) - continues to be subject to a Local Authority Warning Notice to improve and intervention is in place. The revisited Statutory Warning Notice was released to Brynmawr Foundation School on 8th March with a focus on the pace of improvement required. A further Estyn monitoring visit will take place in the last week of March 2023. The Education Directorate is working with the EAS and the school in relation to the pace of progress in improving teaching and learning and a review was undertaken in March 2023 with Cardiff High School (support school). Wellbeing support set up with BFS, first learner to start in January 2023. Agreed the school will receive support as a Team Around the School (TAS) in addition to the multi-agency approach, first TAS will be in April 2023.
- The River Centre (RC) - Governing Body of the school remains under statutory intervention because of the Statutory Warning Notice to improve following an Estyn inspection July 2022, where the school was placed in Special Measures. The Post Inspection Action Plan has been submitted to Estyn and an initial monitoring visit took place on 15th December 2022 which reviewed the PIAP and the LA Statement of Action. The outcome of this visit was that the PIAP was viewed as appropriate for addressing the setting's recommendations.

Estyn

The Council received the final report from the Estyn Local Government Education Services Inspection which identified 3 recommendations for improvement that the local authority will use to update its improvement plans. One of the areas being a recommendation to 'accelerate improvements in provision for secondary age pupils in schools causing concern'. The areas for development take account of shortcomings identified through the inspection process. The local authority's plans are to be updated during the Spring term and the revised Education Improvement Plan (EIP) and Self-Evaluation Report (SER) will be reported to the People Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet early in the summer term for both scrutinisation and to seek approval. Development work has already begun on addressing the recommendations.



Education Budget

Local Education Authority Budget received cost pressures totalling £0.923m mainly in relation to Home to School transport and ALN Reform. Home to School Transport budget is indicating an overspend of £1m, which can be attributed to an increase in pupil numbers utilising mainstream and ALN settings in both primary and secondary schools and pupils attending out of county placements.

Reliance on external funding is a risk for the Youth Service. However, securing European Social Funding until 2023 has provided some stability with the most vulnerable young people in the community having support for the past five years. SPF applications have been submitted which includes funding to continue the support for young people through the Inspire programmes. Welsh Government Youth Support Grant funding has

now been given as a 3-year indicative allocation. This has allowed better planning for the future, both internally and with external partners.

What Evidence is Available

- Performance Data
- Auditor Reports
- Tech Valleys and the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal
- Service Business Plans
- Agendas and Recordings of Democratic meetings all available on the Council Website - <https://democracy.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?Categories=>

Actions Identified to Support Future Improvement

As a council we are looking to 'Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent'. Alongside the many achievements detailed throughout this report we recognise that the following areas will require further development and improvement. In our next annual Self-Assessment, we will include detail of how we have progressed these actions throughout the 2023/24 year.

- Improve attendance and attainment rates and reduce school exclusions in both Primary and Secondary sectors;
- Focus on Higher levels of language acquisition and reading across the board, but particularly in our very young children in early years;
- Focus on improving the pace of change for Schools Causing Concern;
- Develop a vision and strategy for the future provision of ALN;
- Respond to the recommendations from the recent Estyn Inspection;
- Continue to monitor and improve on attainment levels;
- Focus on improving the pace of change for Schools Causing Concern (SCC);
- Increase capacity at Pen-Y-Cwm and River Centre and reduce out of county placements, in turn reducing annual financial loss;
- Monitor Home to school transport funding issues;
- Secure external funding for European Social Fund (ESF) programmes e.g. Inspire;
- Monitor closely school place and sufficiency of all schools, use data more effectively to inform long term planning;
- Continue to examine the opportunity for new industrial space across the borough;
- Supporting the community to gain the right skills for a changing world and build capacity for lifelong learning;
- Progress with the development of CiNER and Regain 2 to support growth and investment into the area; and
- Work to further improve our competitiveness across the UK.

What Our Data is Showing - A trend narrative has been provided to show the direction of travel of each indicator with colours provided to show: **Green – Improvement Made; Red – Performance had Reduced; Blue – Performance has been Maintained; and Grey – there is no trend identified or required.**

Performance Indicator – An indicator that is managed or collected by Blaenau Gwent Council	Data				Trend Narrative for 2022/23
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	
% of Pupils entitled to Free Schools Meals (eFSM) BG	25.5	31.4	33.3	24.6	Large reduction of 8.7% from last year
% of Pupils entitled to Free Schools Meals (eFSM) Wales	19.9	22.9	23.3	22.2	
% Attendance – Primary	N/A	89.9%	89.0%	90.4%	Improved
% Attendance – Secondary		84.8%	84.8%	85.8%	Improved
Number of Pupils being Electively Home Educated in BG <i>*Data available in Autumn</i>	70	89	132	*	Increase year on year
Number of Schools in the category of Causing Concern (out of a total of 25)	4	2	2	2	Maintained
Number of pupils in LA maintained schools (across 25 schools)	9378	9527	8828	9392	Increased this year from lower position last year
% of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN)	19.2	17.9	15.7	13.8	Reduction Year on year
Number and % of young people who are NEET <i>*Data gathered June and verification in October</i>	1.9%	1.5%	1.6%	*	2021/22 data showing performance maintained
Aspire Internal Apprentices - LA Apprenticeships	N/A	5	10	12	
Aspire External Apprentices- Apprenticeship offered in industry	13	9	8	17	
Average % of planning applications determined on time (cumulative average over a year)	-	96%	91%	93%	Improved
% Occupancy of Blaenau Gwent Industrial Units	89%	88%	87%	85%	Decreased
% Occupancy floorspace of Blaenau Gwent Industrial Units	81%	92%	93%	93%	Maintained

As well as the indicators above there are also a number of additional data development items that the Council will be looking to add to the data set in future years.

Population Indicator – An indicator of the population. The Council, as well as other partnership organisations can contribute to this but not one area is responsible for the outcome data.	Data			
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Percentage of working age people who are economically active	72.8	71.8	76.0	72.7
Male	75.5	73.3	80.0	78.8
Female	70.0	70.0	71.9	67.2
Percentage of adults 16-64 with no qualifications	16.3	11.1	14.6	
Working age population (16-64) with NVQ level 4 and above*	28.5	26.7	Sample Size too small	Not yet available
Number of children living in working families in absolute low income in Blaenau Gwent	1,601	1,850	Not yet available	
Average gross annual pay for people who live in the area and work full time (£)	23,549	26,204	27,756	28,040
Average gross annual pay for people who live and work full time in Wales (£)	27,858	28,530	28,886	30,821
Blaenau Gwent Business:				Not yet available
• Business birth rate	13.6	14.6	14.4	
• Business death rate	11.7	8.9	12.8	
• Active business enterprises	1,365	1,405	1,490	
UK Competitive Index Blaenau Gwent ranking	2021 – 362/362 (1.5 increase in competitiveness level (but not changed in ranking)) 2023 – 361/362			

Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities

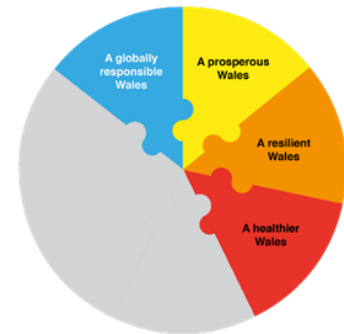
<p>Evaluation Rating 4:</p> <p>Good</p>	<p>Evaluation Narrative:</p> <p>The Council has made good progress to respond to the nature and climate crisis through the production and implementation of its Net Zero Report which is showing that our carbon footprint has further reduced this year. There are financial challenges associated with supporting the public sector to become net zero, as many of the changes required will be costly and, as outlined throughout the document, the Council is facing significant financial challenges. The authority is keen to take this important area forward, but it will require a joint effort across governments and partners to have a greater and a more sustainable impact. Our waste and recycling figures have exceeded the Welsh Government statutory recycling target of 64% with a recycling rate figure of 66.78% for 2022/2023. We continue to have good levels of air quality across the Borough and grants have been fully utilised to help implement the Greater Gwent Nature Recovery Action Plan. Wind, hydro, and solar generation initiatives are in progress and support this important agenda. The Council is also looking at innovative designs for our buildings and those of our partners such as our community housing provider Tai Calon. Actions to address these areas of work can be found on pages 34, 44, 57, and 69 and will be reported on as part of the 2023/24 Council Self-Assessment.</p>
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Why This Is Important as an Area of Focus:

Blaenau Gwent has a rich heritage, and its buildings and countryside are what make it an attractive 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.

Identified Need:

- Connectivity -
 - Digital Infrastructure
 - Digital Skills
 - Transport
 - Prioritising active and safe transport
- Community –
 - Natural and built environment
 - Attractive area to live
 - Minimising air pollution
 - Building energy efficient homes
- Decarbonisation –
 - Net zero by 2030
 - Building Adaptions (including schools)
 - Tackling climate change
 - Energy provision



What We Aim to Achieve – For Blaenau Gwent Council to greatly reduce its carbon emissions, and provides an environment which supports growth and well-being and connects communities

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

DID YOU KNOW ...

Of Blaenau Gwent households, in 2021 **16.0% were rented privately, up from 12.8% in 2011.**

Blaenau Gwent was ranked **11th-highest** out of the 22 Welsh local authority areas for the percentage of households **private renting.**

Latest Air Quality Exposure Data shows-

Average micrograms of NO2 at residential dwelling locations per m3:

2017/18	8
2018/19	7
2019/20	8
2020/21	6



Blaenau Gwent is **responsible for maintaining 416km of public highway.**

Waste and Recycling

Our recycling figures have improved again this year, moving closer to our target figure. Achieving the 70% target is going to be a huge challenge; the aim being to reduce 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. This is made more difficult by things like smaller gardens in the area overall so green waste figures are generally lower than other areas. This is the first full year of operation for the integrated front line service, and we have established the frontline enforcement service alongside; this has resulted in a decrease in the numbers of fly-tipping incidents.

During 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22, Blaenau Gwent exceeded the Welsh Government statutory recycling target of 64%, achieving 65.31%, 64.29% and 64.94% respectively. For 2022/23, that success has been maintained and the target of 64% has again been exceeded, attaining 66.78%. It is imperative that the council maintains and improves its recycling targets as there is a financial penalty imposed by Welsh Government if these are not met. The current fine for not achieving the target is £200 per tonne for every tonne below the required amount to achieve the target. A breakdown of the annual 2022/23 performance is provided in the table below:

Quarter	2021/22	2022/23
Quarter 1 (April – June)	66.51%	67.76%
Quarter 2 (July – Sept)	67.01%	68.29%
Quarter 3 (Oct – Dec)	63.47%	64.66%
Quarter 4 (Jan – March)	62.55%	66.32%
Annual (as at 31st March not yet verified by Natural Resources Wales)	64.94%	66.78%

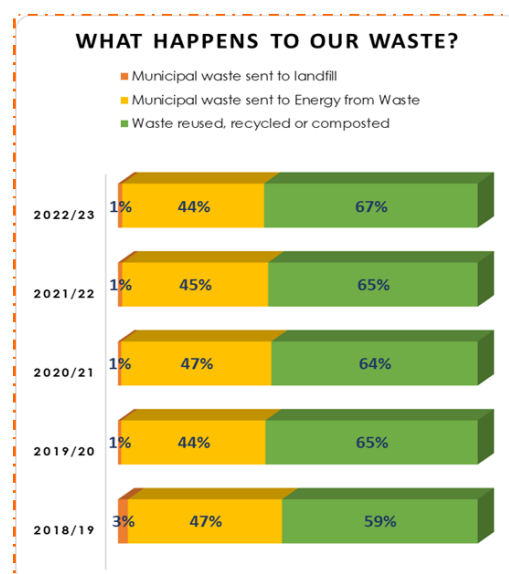
When looking at the breakdown of tonnage figures for 2022/23 compared to 2021/22, it shows a drop in residual, recycling, food and a slight increase in green waste. The thinking behind this is owing to there being less people being at home compared to last year (linked to Covid-19 and working from home etc) and there being an increase in the tonnages at the HWRC.

- Residual waste has decreased by 579.63 tonnes (4.85%);
- Food waste has decreased by 100.91 tonnes (2.82%);
- Kerbside Recycling has decreased by 522.19 tonnes (8.72%);
- Garden waste has increased by 11.728 tonnes (0.70%); and
- HWRC Recycling has increased by 223.822 tonnes (4.88%).

Side Waste Enforcement – By utilising in cab devices, refuse and recycling crews are now electronically recording excess side waste and recycling contamination issues for referral to the Authority’s Enforcement Wardens, who are following up these referrals with enforcement action or advice visits as appropriate. This is freeing up officer time to allow more proactive initiatives to be conducted such as the current Food Campaign.

Keeping Up with The Joneses (KUWTJ) – The campaign, which looks to reduce the amount of recyclable material placed out by householders in their residual waste, has been completed in two of the Authority’s four refuse rounds, with a third partially completed. The campaign has been suspended while officers progress the current engagement and education Food Campaign.

The data in the table shows what happens to our waste which does not calculate to 100% as energy from our Waste indicator is based on collected waste and we claim a % back from the Incinerator Bottom Ash which also contributes to our recycling rate.



Food Campaign - Following a recent waste analysis exercise, which identified that 23% of the contents of black refuse bags during the sampling period was food waste, the Authority is conducting a monitoring and engagement exercise across the 14 recycling rounds to identify those households which don't currently place food waste out for recycling in order to encourage participation in future.

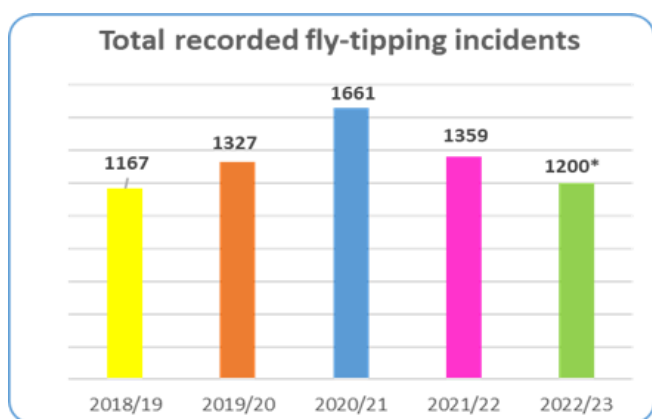
Unfortunately Keep Wales Tidy (KWT's) "Caru Cymru" scheme came to an end on 31st March 2023. Although KWT continue to provide resource support, the funding for the proactive officer engagement ceased. However, a successful application for SPF (Shared Prosperity Funding) has meant the council can employ a dedicated full time LEQ Officer. The role of the LEQ Officer is to increase the engagement programme within Schools, the community and businesses. As engagement forms only one element of the Strategy objectives, the officer will also deliver the other objectives of the Strategy being: raising awareness; community empowerment; and education. As part of the education programme the officer also works closely with the Waste Strategy team to support the delivery of the Waste Strategy to promote and encourage recycling behaviours within schools, workplaces and communities. The officer continues to work in collaboration with KWT along with other internal and external agencies to create an environment that is clean and attractive for current and future generations.

Commercial Waste - Having been compliant with the new Welsh Government (WG) regulations for non-domestic waste since May 2021 (separated collection at the kerbside section), the service has struggled to retain customers as the four-year delay in implementation of the regulations has allowed the private sector to continue to offer a cheaper commingled recycling option. After a number of consultations by WG in the latter part of 2022, a new implementation date of April 2024 has been announced and after that date, commingling of non-domestic recycling will be outlawed in Wales. Despite concessions to the private sector where they are not required to offer all the specified streams, if the new regulations are robustly enforced (NRW), Local Authorities should have a better chance to compete. The Council service continues to cover its costs despite the challenging economic landscape.

Regional Wood Facility - Work continues on the Regional Wood Facility project at Silent Valley with support from WG. The project has been through a second health check with Local Partnerships so the project Team is working to develop a financially viable facility which will provide value for money for public funds.

Education Centre - A new Educational Suite has been built at Roseheyworth Recycling Centre utilising WG Circular Economy Funding. A bid has been made to KWT for a Wildlife pack to develop the grounds outside the centre with help from local community groups. The Centre will be used from September to accommodate visits from school children and is a potential venue for future Repair Cafes in the area.

Fly Tipping and Street Cleansing



942 fly tipping incidents were reported during the year, the average number of days taken to clear was 4.3 days. There has been a 28% reduction in fly tipping since 2020/21 which is the lowest level recorded in 4 years. During the year (April 22 to March 2023) there were 79 fixed penalty notices issued for fly tipping and there has been over 400% increase in fly tipping fixed penalty notices issued since 2021/22 to 2022/23.

During the period April to March 2023, 180 streets were inspected by the Council and Keep Wales Tidy. Of these, 98% were rated at a high or acceptable standard on cleanliness.

Energy Provision

We are at the start of our energy journey, building upon the successful heritage of our former steel and coal mining industry. With Welsh Government support, collaborative partnership ventures including the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal of £1.25Bn and Tech Valleys investment we are in a strong position to support future energy growth. We want to create an environmentally friendly and sustainable retail and business environment, diversifying the evening and night time economy, creating improved transport connectivity through the Borough and energy is central to our ambitious programme. We have experience in low carbon heat and power networks, improving energy efficiency of

homes, public and commercial buildings and highways infrastructure. In Blaenau Gwent, we recognise that increasing the choice of energy provision and security of renewable energy supply is integral to our wider social and economic regeneration plans. Having a strong environmental programme not only meets Welsh Government carbon reduction targets but is essential to creating sustainable and vibrant communities for the future.

The Council is actively seeking to reduce both energy costs and carbon emissions across our property portfolio. We have considered a range of alternative delivery models to improve our buildings. Adopting the RE:FIT model offers the Council a commercial model to achieve financial savings, improve energy performance of buildings, and importantly, reduce their CO2 footprint. By using the RE:FIT model, the Council will place an obligation on the contractor installing energy conservation measures to guarantee potential energy savings the specific technologies will bring through robust monitoring, measurement and verification measures to assess savings. A portfolio of buildings across the Council portfolio have been selected as having the potential to benefit from the RE:FIT model. These include Council Buildings, Leisure Trust Locations and Schools.



Gwent Local Authorities have also recently commissioned a carbon reduction fleet review, and this included collecting data about mileage driven, fuel used by the directly operated fleets (owned, leased and rented), along with the business mileage driven by the staff owned grey fleet. Each of the Authorities received a report for their area alongside a Gwent wide report. Alongside current targets in Wales for us all to reduce carbon emissions by 95% by 2050, there is also a target whereby Welsh Public Sector Fleets should transition to Ultra Low Emissions Vehicles (ULEV) by 2025 for cars and small vans, 2030 for all other vehicles and 2040 is the target date for ending

the sale of new petrol or diesel vehicles. Next steps following the review are to develop a plan for the transition of our current fleet to ULEV when making decisions around the purchase of new or replacement fleet.

Wind Generation Projects are ongoing. A planning application has been submitted for the installation of a wind turbine at Silent Valley former landfill site. The application is being considered by Planning Officers and will go through the normal determination process. Work will be undertaken on a business case for investment alongside the planning process. If planning consent is achieved the Council will be asked to consider a business case for investment.

Hydro Generation - Initial investigation and feasibility studies for small scale hydro generation opportunities within the wards of Cwm and Llanhilleth presented two sites with some potential for hydro generation. These were presented to Scrutiny and Cabinet for consideration, and it was determined that the potential returns and payback were not sufficiently positive for the projects to be developed further at this time. Funding is being sought to further develop the feasibility of a hydro generation scheme at Silent Valley. If the funding is secured work will be undertaken to investigate the option to utilise hydro generation to power electric pumps. 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 Council is also 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.

Initial scoping study has started for a potential solar scheme at Bryn Bach Park. A Grid application has been submitted jointly with Caerphilly County Borough Council before taking the work on the project any further. This is being delivered by Welsh Government Energy Service.

Further funding has been secured for a phase 2 rollout of Electric Vehicle charge points at an additional 10 sites across Blaenau Gwent. This is in addition to the 11 sites delivered under phase 1 which are now live and available

for public use. A further regional funding bid is due to be submitted to the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles and, if approved, will provide charge points at a further 11 sites across Blaenau Gwent.

Cardiff Capital Region City Deal secured funding from Welsh Government to install rapid charge points for taxi ranks and to purchase 44 wheelchair accessible electric taxis for trials to take place across the region. The taxis were to be offered under a 30-day free trial for taxi drivers. Two of the 44 taxis have been made available for Blaenau Gwent and the trial will run until 30th November 2023.

Air Quality

The Environmental Health Section is responsible for monitoring air quality within Blaenau Gwent. Air quality is the term used to describe and classify the concentration of certain pollutants in the air. These pollutants have the potential to adversely affect human health at elevated concentrations. The Air Quality Assessment 2022 has been completed and submitted to Welsh Government. We currently carry out air quality monitoring at 28 locations within the borough at residential properties and schools. These locations are selected by officers due to them being in close proximity to busy roads, industrial estates and specifically at schools due to the school run effect. An air quality management is declared when there is an exceedance of air quality standards and the local authority must take legal steps to improve the situation. In Blaenau Gwent we have good levels of air quality, so we have not declared any air quality management areas.

Housing

The Council works to improve homes across Blaenau Gwent with the aim of increasing energy efficiency and reducing fuel poverty. Schemes are in place to make improvements to social rented homes, bringing together home improvements and clever technologies to make these homes as easy and cheap to heat as possible. Making homes more energy efficient helps to tackle the climate emergency and also helps people living in poverty save money on energy bills.

The Optimised Retrofit Programme, funded by Welsh Government, was introduced this year as part of the Innovative Housing Programme Funding to improve the energy efficiency and reduction of fuel poverty of social rented homes in Blaenau Gwent. All 4 partner Registered Social Landlords in Blaenau Gwent are taking part (Tai Calon, Linc Cymru, United Welsh and Melin).

The regeneration team have worked together with Tai Calon to bid for funding to assist with a grant for a property modification at Solis One to enable a start-up heat pump business to move into the rear of the Registered Social Landlords offices. This will help to build the local decarbonisation economy in the area and offer new skills to the local community. Alongside this, initiatives like ECO4 are being delivered; the primary goal of this grant is to support low-income households who are unable to upgrade their homes and heating systems.

Bio Diversity

Resilient Greater Gwent, a Gwent wide collaborative project supporting Ecology, Invasive Species and Sustainable Communities, which was led Blaenau Gwent, concluded in July 2022. The final full month of the Welsh Government ENRAW funded Resilient Greater Gwent project saw actions associated with the Nature Recovery Action Plan being implemented in addition to the coordination of Gwent wide activities on urban biodiversity, sustainable communities, rivers, and invasive non-native species.

Our Local Places for Nature grant have been fully spent, delivering the following strands of work:

- Nature on your Doorstep – funding value of £90,809;
- Greening the public service estate – funding value £52,691; and
- Revenue funding of additional £62,400

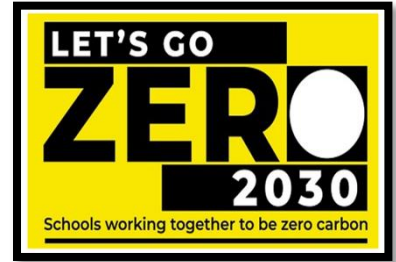
Woodland management plans have been completed for Trevor Rowsen, Six Bells and a number of other sites and work to implement those management plans has been completed, including tree thinning and Ash removal. Work completed on all sites, with the exception of ongoing works at Six Bells Local Nature Reserve.

To celebrate the 3 year Resilient Greater Gwent programme, a 'Go Wild' event was held in Bryn Bach Parc in May 2022. Some of the key projects that have been implemented as part of the programme include:

- The production of the Greater Gwent State of Nature Report; and
- Gwent Nature Recovery Action Plan.

Education

We aim to ensure that decarbonisation measures are at the forefront of our future planning, and this includes educating our young ‘future adults’ in order for them to lead the way to a bright net zero future. Environment and biodiversity considerations form the basis of all new school buildings and existing school upgrades and we encourage nature friendly management on school grounds. Effective partnership working enables us to provide advice and guidance to support our children and young people around biodiversity, decarbonisation, equalities, diversity and inclusion. These partnerships with schools and the Children’s Grand Council are very effective and not only inform but support our children and young people to have a voice. We are and will continue to deliver effective sustainable communities for learning which are environmentally friendly and support the delivery of our educated young people who will in the future form our connected communities.



Highways

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.

Significant progress has been made over the past 10 years on improving the highway network however the absence of Welsh Government funding for 2023/24 and the end of Blaenau Gwent Prudential Borrowing Programme has curtailed Capital investments in the highway network. The Highways Asset Management Plan 2023 – 2028 has been developed in order to drive the Authority's approach to maintenance over the next 5 years. To support this fully, Council deferred the report so that Officers could identify appropriate funding sources to implement the Plan.

Public Transport

A £70M transformation of the Ebbw Vale railway line by contractors Amco Giffen and Siemens is nearing completion as the railway reopens to passenger train services. This investment will allow a new hourly passenger service between Ebbw Vale Town and Newport.

The Department for Transport (DfT) and Network Rail are also providing a further £17M to deliver signalling upgrade and renewal work. This work, still to be conducted, includes the continuation of upgrading the signalling in the Gaer and Rogerstone areas of Newport, closing the Park Junction signal box and moving control of the signalling to the Wales Route Operating Centre in Cardiff.

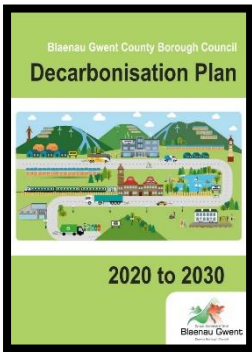
Work that has been completed by the contractors includes the construction of new platforms at both Newbridge and Llanhilleth stations, one at each station, and the installation of new signal posts. Engineers have also regraded and stabilised an embankment and made headway replacing more than 3km of track between Aberbeeg and Crosskeys to create an 11km passing loop which will be brought into use later in the year. Part of a new access ramp and waiting shelter was also constructed at Newbridge station while a lift mechanism and motor rooms were installed at Llanhilleth station.

The fflecsi bus service has been running since June 2021 operated by Stagecoach and Transport for Wales (TFW) on behalf of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council. The fflecsi bus service offers a more convenient bus service across a wider area from early in the morning through to late in the evening. Booking for the bus can be made through an app, over the phone, or visiting the website.

This pilot project trialled a new approach to bus services to enable residents to get to work, education, attend appointments, connect with other public transport, socialise and shop from early in the morning until late in the evening. Following feedback from customers and residents after the pilot, changes were made to the service in July to ensure that the service was based around needs of the customer.

Challenges the Council have experienced throughout the year

Decarbonisation



Most of our activity is based on external funding, as a result, reflects the priorities of a number of programmes supporting the decarbonisation agenda. Some funders have negative reactions to the higher costs associated with zero carbon needs. Tight deadlines significantly constrain innovation. Both short lead in times and tight spend profiles mean that we are often condensing design processes more than we would like at moment.

Partnership working will need to take place in order to effectively and efficiently deliver this agenda, the Blaenau Gwent Nature Recovery Action Plan, currently being developed, may help to address this. The role of collaborative procurement services will also be important in order to support a reduction in our regional carbon footprint. In many cases we are already doing things in procurement that reduce carbon but we need to make sure that we promote awareness of decarb principles and ensure these are having meaningful impact on decisions. It

also needs to be understood that not all decarbonisation options will lead to immediate savings, the challenge of higher up-front costs for longer lasting products is a familiar one.

The Council will need to identify low carbon alternatives for their vehicle fleet. At present, the required large vehicle types are not available to deliver services, particularly with the topography of the area. There are examples of Local Authorities procuring vehicles that were not able to deliver the service and we aim to not be in this position. Significant decisions about the replacement of the refuse fleet will need to be taken soon as all refuse vehicles are coming to the end of their working life at the same time.

There are concerns that there is currently not the capability within the overall regional workforce in order to support the required work to support a reduction in carbon emissions. Alternatively, if large number of organisations start to carry out similar decarbonisation work at the same time, then costs will rise and capacity may not meet demand.

Digital Inclusion

Progress continues to be made with both internal and external partners to position and build digital innovation into how we plan and deliver services. The focus remains building services around the user, the organisation is now exploring how digital solutions can form part of that, for the benefit of residents and the organisation. This work supports the commitment to decarbonisation as well as the potential for avoiding costs or realising efficiencies. External partners and projects include the WLGA digital transformation fund, where Blaenau Gwent are leading on a project looking at how people access our services and how we can improve, as well as being involved in a number of projects on the programme. A key focus of this area of work is understanding barriers to digital participation within our communities and developing support for those who wish to improve their digital skills.

With Blaenau Gwent being one of the most highly deprived areas in Wales and with a high proportion of its residents on benefits, becoming digitally active is extremely important, working in conjunction with the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP), with regards to applying for benefits online (Universal Credit, Universal Job Match). Blaenau Gwent has the lowest levels of access to the internet compared to other areas across Wales and the UK, therefore, there is a high number of people who are digitally excluded. The Council's Benefit Section has participated in the 'Get Blaenau Gwent Online' project over the last 5 years to promote Digital Support Services. The project has steadily gained support and assisted individuals on a one to one basis over the years with the help of support providers.

The importance of supporting people who are still struggling with internet access and lack of digital technology is a key priority for the PSB, 50+ partners and stakeholders, to promote existing and introduce new digital inclusion programmes in order to help older people, or anyone unfamiliar with I.T., to stay involved with their hobbies and

interests. Promoting volunteering by working with partners could also develop more opportunities for people to volunteer as befrienders and/or digital inclusion trainers. Our vision for an Age-Friendly Blaenau Gwent is, 'Developing digital skills amongst our communities can lead to greater economic opportunities, a more equal society and improved socio-economic development, whilst reducing the impact of loneliness and isolation by enabling people to stay more connected with one another online'.

What Evidence is Available

- Waste Strategy Plan 2018-2025
- Performance Data
- Environment Act Actions
- Highways Maintenance and Works Annual Plan
- Litter and Fly Tipping Strategy and Data
- Keep Wales Tidy programme
- Decarbonisation Plan 2020/2030 and Blaenau Gwent Net Zero Annual Report
- Energy Prospectus
- Auditor Reports
- Service Business Plans
- Agendas and Recordings of Democratic meetings all available on the Council Website - <https://democracy.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?Categories=>

Actions Identified to Support Future Improvement

As a council we are looking to 'Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities'. Alongside the many achievements detailed throughout this report we recognise that the following areas will require further development and improvement. In our next annual Self-Assessment, we will include detail of how we have progressed these actions throughout the 2023/24 year.

- Our Climate group will work to prioritise key actions from the Decarbonisation plan in order to work towards achieving the Welsh Government Net Zero Targets of reaching a 63% reduction by 2030, an 89% reduction by 2050 and a 100% reduction by 2050;
- Continue to work towards the recommendations made by our climate assembly;
- Continue to support the national campaign to tackle Fly- Tipping (not up my street);
- Continue with the delivery of the Energy Prospectus to interest in energy development across the borough to facilitate a supply of renewable energy to meet the future energy needs of the area including consideration of wind and hydro generation projects; and
- Continue to work towards meeting the Welsh Government statutory recycling target 70% by 2024-25.



What Our Data is Showing - A trend narrative has been provided to show the direction of travel of each indicator with colours provided to show: **Green – Improvement Made; Red – Performance had Reduced; Blue – Performance has been Maintained; and Grey – there is no trend identified or required.**

Performance Indicator – An indicator that is managed or collected by Blaenau Gwent Council	Data				Trend Narrative for 2022/23
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	
Carbon Footprint Total tones CO2e/year <i>*Provisional Figure</i>	14,750	11,793	13,087	12,332*	Improved*
Number of Fly-tipping £400 fixed penalty notices issued	2	0	18	79	Increased
Number of household duty of care £300 fixed penalty notices issued	7	0	5	6	Increased
Number of commercial duty of care £300 fixed penalty notices issued	1	0	1	1	Maintained
Number of fly-tipping incidents on private land investigated	7	44	77	54	Reduced
Number of Enforcement Warden enquiries received	900	464	471	717	Increased
Number of first stage warning letters issued for misplacing domestic waste at unofficial waste collection points.	0	0	13	237	Increased
Total number of recorded fly tipping incidents in Blaenau Gwent	1,327	1,661	1,395	1,200	Decreased
Clearance costs of fly tipping per incident (£)	64.35	66.45	64.29	57.09	Decreased
% of municipal waste reused, recycled or composted (statutory WG target 70% by 2025)	65.31%	64.29%	65%	66.74%	Improved
Average amount of waste produced per resident during a financial year	447kg	449kg	443kg	443kg	Maintained
Average amount of waste disposed of through residual waste disposal streams during the financial year	155kg	160kg	155kg	147kg	Reduced
The percentage of municipal waste collected by local authorities sent to landfill	0.3	0.6	1.3	0.31	Improved
The percentage of municipal waste incinerated with energy recovery	34	34.8	33.5	44.30	Improved
Amount invested into active travel routes (£)		234,000	295,000	766,154.73	Improved

Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient

<p>Evaluation Rating 4:</p> <p>Good</p>	<p>Evaluation Narrative:</p> <p>The Council continues to strengthen its approach to empower communities supporting them to becoming more resilient and independent. 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. 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 for those requiring resettlement. The Council has supported this approach whilst maintaining positive community cohesion across the borough. Preventative service delivery continues to be a priority for the authority and our Social Services Directorate in particular works preventatively to support independence and safeguarding to our communities. Recruitment and retention in social services continues to be a challenge which is similar to the national picture. Workforce strategies have been developed to address these challenges and an officer has been recruited to promote career development opportunities to our social work staff. In Children's Services two residential properties have been purchased to provide residential care for children with more complex needs so they can be looked after closer to home as opposed to outside of Blaenau Gwent and even Wales. Although our safeguarding performance is good, due to the pandemic, there has been a delay in fully addressing recommendations made by Audit Wales. Directorates across the authority will undertake the implementation of the recommendations which will be reported in the next self-assessment. Actions to address these areas of work can be found on pages 34, 44, 57, and 69 and will be reported on as part of the 2023/24 Council Self-Assessment.</p>
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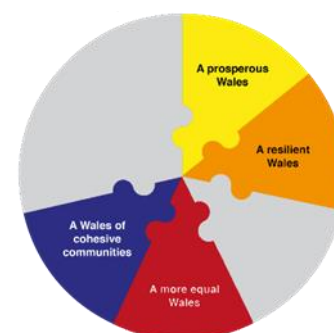
Why This Is Important as an Area of Focus:

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 throughout their life will lead to greater independence, and people being free from complicated health conditions later in life. 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.

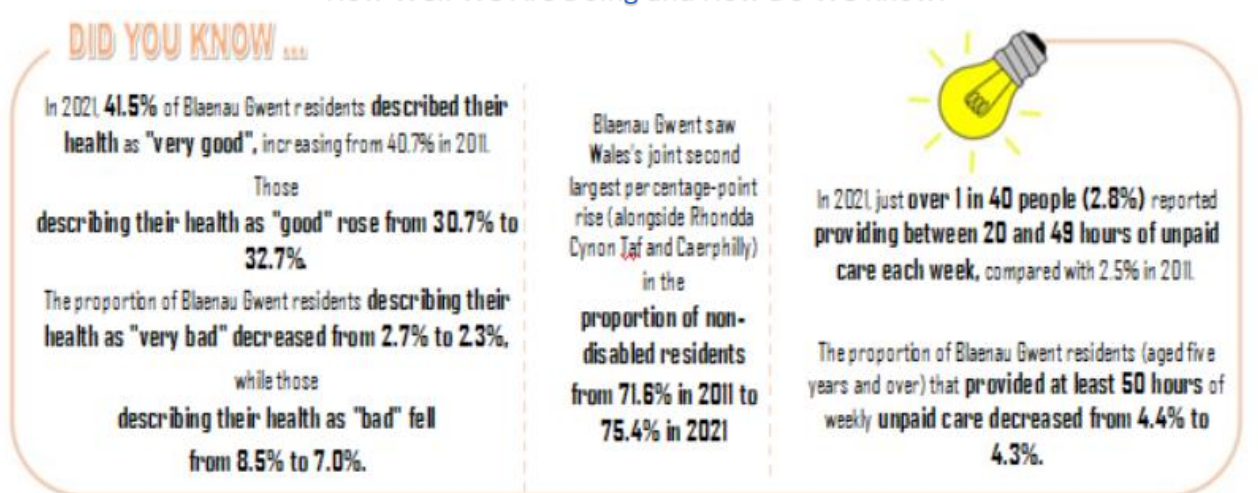
Identified Need:

- Promote awareness and understanding and encourage and celebrate diversity;
- Strengthen community spirit and resilience;
- Community Safety;
- Blaenau Gwent: Is a welcoming, diverse and thriving place to live and visit; and
- Creating volunteering opportunities to empower residents to have control over their own communities.

What We Aim to Achieve - An increase in the resilience of communities, where everyone is welcome and safe and which minimises dependency and maximises independence.



How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:



Information Advice and Assistance

The Social Services Directorate continues to have dedicated Information Advice and Assistance (IAA) Teams for both Children and Adult Social Services. These teams are the first point of contact for the public who wish to access advice and support and for professionals making referrals. The teams take a preventative approach to ensure needs are met at the earliest opportunity, by providing the right services to prevent needs from escalating. In relation to Adult Services this also includes contacts for some health functions. A range of other professional's work within these teams.

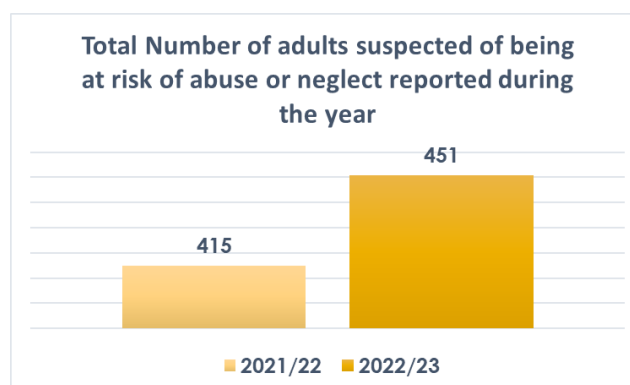
The Children's IAA Team is funded by a mixture of core and grant funding which is a risk if future grant funding is removed. However, the new Adult Services IAA structure went live in April 2022 and is no longer reliant on grant funding creating a more sustainable service.

Preventative service delivery continues to be a priority across all services. Children's Service's IAA teams have seen a significant rise in referrals, but, despite this, all referrals have been dealt with within statutory timescales. All contacts across both Adult and Children's Services take an outcome based approach by establishing 'what matters' to the customer and the number of referrals being allocated continues to be stable, evidencing that the preventative work, undertaken at the 'front door', continues to be successful.

Adults Services IAA received 4,610 enquires at the 'front door'. The number of referrals resolved at IAA was 2,767 (made up of those enquiries signposted, closed down before progressing to assessment, and those that led to an IAA). The remainder 1,843 went to the Safeguarding Team, Community Resource Team or the Unpaid Carers Team. Children's Services IAA received 6,755 referrals with 772 of them being referred to preventative services (Families First).

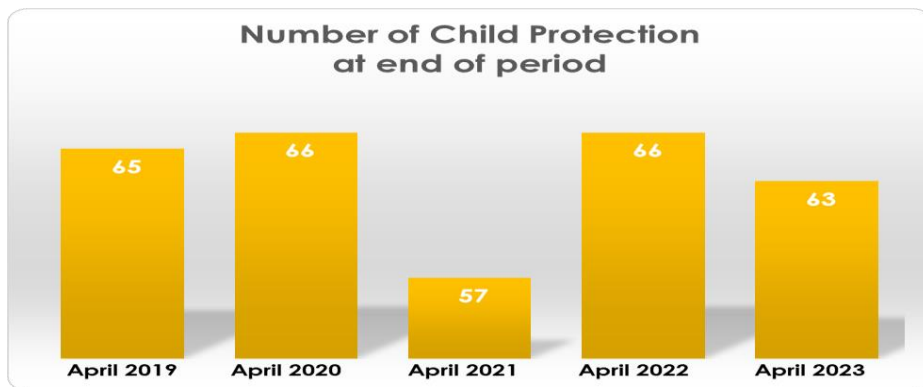
Safeguarding

The Department recognises the importance of having a robust and sustainable Safeguarding Teams across both Adult and Children's Services to ensure we not only meet our legislative requirements, but that we are also able to protect our most vulnerable citizens. All safeguarding referrals continue to be managed in line with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures and statutory requirements. Adult Services has implemented a new adult safeguarding staffing structure which is now operational and working effectively. An additional senior practitioner for safeguarding has been created to create additional capacity and also provide decision making resilience. The service has seen an increase in numbers of referrals of safeguarding during 2022/23 compared to 2021/22.



Safeguarding performance is good. Child Protection conferences have been held within statutory timescales as have all Child Protection statutory visits for children on the register.

The graph shows the number of children on the Child Protection Register at the end of each year since 2019.



Having a suitably qualified and skilled workforce is paramount when ensuring that vulnerable people are safeguarded.

The department has developed a workforce strategy to ensure that we recruit and retain staff across Adult, Children and Provider Services and also support their development, progression and well-being. To assist in the delivery of the workforce strategy the department has successfully recruited a lead officer to support managers in progressing and promoting the opportunities that we can offer staff in Blaenau Gwent.

Staff safeguarding training is ongoing with different models of learning offered to different staff groups. Refresher training has been provided to Provider Services which has included commissioned sessions from the Workforce Development Team and also bespoke learning sessions provided by our Safeguarding Team.

The Early Years Child Protection Training programme is created annually and checked monthly to ensure that it is up to date. Safeguarding is always a standing item in the Network Meetings and six monthly meetings are held with the Safeguarding Lead and the Early Years Child Protection Manager.

All new Council staff are informed of the Council's safeguarding arrangements as part of their induction programme. All staff within teams have completed the relevant level of safeguarding training. Within the Children's IAA team all Safeguarding referrals must be responded to within 24 hours and we are continuing to respond accordingly. All safeguarding concerns are responded to with appropriate decision making and all strategy discussions are usually held within 24 hours. The issue with Police meeting this timescale remains an issue when they deem it 'non-urgent' they will arrange for this to be held out of this timescale.

We continue to be a key partner of the Gwent Safeguarding Strategic Board and relevant operational sub groups. As a partner of the Gwent Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) Board we continue to prepare for the implementation of the Liberty Protection Safeguards legislation (LPS) and, during the year, have contributed to the consultation on the long-awaited codes of practice. As a partnership, we have submitted a Welsh Government Regional (Gwent) bid to support capacity for the development of LPS in order to provide important rights and protections for people who lack the mental capacity to agree to care, support, or treatment arrangements, where these arrangements amount to a deprivation of liberty. In addition to this, a new Social Work senior practitioner with responsibility for Mental Capacity Act support and DoLS has been recruited and due to start in July 2023. The number of people waiting for a DoLS assessment within Blaenau Gwent has reduced considerably during 2022/23 as a direct result of the local monitoring and as a result of coordinated resource to address the back log via both the Gwent DoLS team and externally commissioned assessments.

In 2022 Audit Wales undertook a follow up review of the Council's Safeguarding Arrangements, following reviews undertaken in 2014 and 2019. In November 2022 the Council received the outcome of the report. Audit Wales found that, *'the pandemic further delayed the Council's response to the 2019 report. Although it has taken recent action to strengthen its corporate safeguarding arrangements, the Council has not yet fully addressed our previous recommendations. The Council recognises the need to strengthen corporate safeguarding arrangements beyond the Social Services and Education directorates. The Council developed an action plan to address the outstanding recommendations but, due to the pandemic, most of the planned work did not begin until early 2022'*. From this, a further two recommendations were received for implementation.

The Audit Wales Safeguarding report was presented to Governance and Audit Committee on 8th March 2023. The Strategic Safeguarding Leads Group, chaired by the Interim Head of Children's Services, with representation from

each directorate across the Council, will undertake implementation of the recommendations identified by Audit Wales. An internal audit has also taken place in relation to safeguarding processes across the directorate and reasonable assurance was given.

Working in Partnership

The council ensures that it provides a varied range and level of preventative services. To ensure that the correct services are in place, a population needs assessment was completed for 2022/23. Extensive consultation took place when undertaking this assessment, and based on the data, priorities were set for each part of the population including children and young people, older people, including those with Dementia, people with physical disabilities and sensory impairment, people with learning difficulties, people with Autism, people with mental health issues and carers in need of support. A regional action plan has now been developed to meet the needs identified for each population group. The RPB has agreed an Area Plan 2023/28 which sets out the response of the RPB to the findings of the regional Population Needs Assessment and has been prepared to meet the requirements of the statutory guidance in relation to Area Plans under section 14A of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. The Plan will align to other strategic drivers such as the Gwent Public Service Board Well-being Plan, Aneurin Bevan University Health Boards Integrated Medium Term Plan and supporting Integrated Service Partnership Board plans.

The Supporting Change Team has been working collaboratively with the Youth Service to run a small trauma informed, activity based group for some of the hardest to reach young people open to the team. This includes the establishment of a sports session and the continuation of the Carers Support Group. The team has also concluded a group work project working in partnership and alongside a targeted group of young girls looking at raising aspirations, self-esteem, and self-worth. The project has been very well evaluated and the team are looking into how they can run further projects.

Workforce

Staff are supported with access to training on 'what matters'. New staff have also attended training sessions on Collaborative Communication and accessed other learning opportunities available in order to support outcome focused practice, and deliver interventions based on an outcomes/strengths based approach. Monthly reflective practice sessions continue in each of the service areas and refresher training is available to all staff through Workforce Development.

Adult Service staff have been undertaking learning and development opportunities in collaboration with colleagues from Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) as part of a project facilitated by Social Care Wales (SCW) and there has been a strong emphasis on focussing on changing the conversation with patients during assessments within our acute and community settings. This work was evaluated by Social Care Wales in the Autumn of 2022, the outcome of which will be presented to the Gwent Adult Strategic Partnership Board as part of showcasing across the RPB.

Having a skilled and motivated workforce is essential in order to provide high quality services. As part of this, the Council has a Joint Workforce Development Team with Caerphilly County Borough Council with responsibility for delivering a training and development strategy that supports development opportunities for staff at all levels in Social Services.

A full programme of learning is provided for the whole social care sector. All statutory, legislative, and registration linked requirements are planned and accounted for. The offer includes developmental opportunities for the workforce and support for resilience and well-being.

The challenges for the workforce to fully embrace learning opportunities remain high. The current recruitment environment has a major impact on the sector and forces harsh choices that without doubt impact on the capacity available to fully embrace development opportunities beyond the essentials.

The first half of the year continued its support for the registration of residential workers ahead of October. The Social Work Strategy continues to deliver qualified professionals, and at a rate above the national norm.

The way the workforce wants to learn has changed, they expect choice and flexibility. Various initiatives within the

organisation are in place to support improving digital confidence and access to digital learning. The authority underpins its approach with the recognition of barriers that exist for parts of the social care workforce, so the offer includes the traditional classroom route.

Classroom activities use digital devices to provide safe space learning with facilitator and peer support:

- The authority has co led the All-Wales project on securing an organisational level, fit for purpose, future proof, digital learning platform that will meet the needs of the whole sector, communities and volunteers. The authority, one of four in the first phase, are demonstrating nationally to others the benefits to the workforce of sharing across boundaries
- The power of social media is used to engage and communicate with the sector
- The learning delivery model, currently blended learning approaches and a choice of digital or face to face, will shortly include hybrid delivery – the required investment in technology having been funded by a successful bid to Social Care Wales

The engagement from the workforce with new ways of learning is exceptional and they continue to reward the community with their ongoing resilience and determination.

Disability Services

A Worcester University Evaluation of the 0 -25 Disability Service has been undertaken. The Evaluation evidences good use of the disability index and the disability Facebook page and these services continue to be offered within the team.

This year, Augusta House requested registration from our regulator CIW to provide respite support to young children in addition to adults which was agreed. This has now enabled the Disability Team to have access to a residential respite provision which is proving successful for children with a disability and supporting the needs of their parents and carers, as well as outcomes for the young people.

Work-based services within our Community Options and Day Activities teams have continued throughout the year with students returning to placements within our catering enterprise in partnership with Vison 21. As part of our employment and training opportunities for people with a Learning Disability or living with poor mental health, we continue to scope new opportunities for development including the development of additional catering enterprises including a new community café.

Adult Services

There have been ongoing reviews of the care management waiting lists due to capacity demands and reduced availability of domiciliary care to support people safely at home. We have proactively utilised the DASH emergency domiciliary care service to cover unplaced packages of care and this has ensured that no citizens have been without their domiciliary care packages and that they are safely supported at home.

The council has contributed to a regional Winter Plan with the aim of preventing people entering hospital, and when in hospital, facilitating discharge as soon as possible. Work has also taken place with providers of residential care to enable early discharge from hospital for those with short term nursing needs.

A Gwent Dementia Action Plan has been developed and aligns to the 20 All Wales Dementia Pathway of Standards which will also include performance measures. Work stream subgroups have been developed to take forward this programme of work. Discussions continue with the Alzheimer's society regarding dementia advisors for the dementia reablement programme in line with the Dementia action plan and this new service is due to commence in April 2023.

We have continued to see increasing demands placed on the Health and Social Care system including at our community and acute hospital sites. We have been working with our Gwent Local Authority colleagues and ABUHB to revise current models of support to enable patients who are ready for discharge to either safely return back to their own homes or to utilise alternative accommodation, on a temporary basis, whilst waiting for support to enable them to return home. We are using current partnership Regional Integrated Fund (RIF) grant funding to develop a menu of support services including, increasing the use of Step Closer to Home beds to reduce the dependency on

hospital stays and reduce length of stays, providing additional care home capacity as well as additional capacity within our assessment teams in order to address both the current and future demand. Alongside this, a review of the Hospital Social work team has created additional capacity to support patients to avoid unnecessary lengthy stays in hospital. This team works closely with the hospital ward staff, discharge assistants and therapists to ensure that patients can return home as quickly as possible. The team also supports family unpaid carers through the discharge process and provides statutory carers assessments to enable carers to maintain their caring role alongside their work, health, leisure and family commitments.

The reduction in Covid restrictions has enabled our residential care homes, supported living services, and Augusta Respite Centre to re-engage with wider community activities and welcome visitors back to support our residents. Cwrt Mytton has welcomed learners from a number of our schools as part of our intergenerational work streams.

Respite is an important part of maintaining caring responsibilities. The department is currently working with our neighbouring authorities to develop enhanced respite offers alongside the more traditional offers of care home placements, Augusta House Respite Centre and Day Opportunities. The new scheme is due to be launched in Summer 2023 and is a partnership arrangement with NEWCIS, a large North Wales provider of carer services. The Augusta PODS were completed in March 2023 and will give people with learning difficulties the opportunity to develop their independence skills in a purpose built supported environment.

We continue to aim for the delivery of modern flexible and responsive services that enable older people to maximise their independence and live with appropriate support within their communities. The development of our SMART flat will assist this by further promoting assistive technology to professionals, individuals, and their families/carers. The Service Manager for Preventative Services and the Supporting People Team Manager have delivered presentations on the SMART flat to a number of organisations. We are continuing to add to the TEC equipment at the Smart Flat to ensure we continue to broaden awareness and knowledge of TEC services.

The Local Authority has utilised equipment purchased as part of the Welsh Government Promoting Independence Grant to provide the latest equipment (beds / hoists/ standing aids) to support the ethos of single handed care. The CARIAD (Collaborative Assessment Reducing Interventions, Admissions and Delayed transfers of care) bariatric flat was completed in September 2022 and now forms part of the Blaenau Gwent CARIAD offer. The coordination and monitoring will be facilitated by our Community Resource Team as part of the review of the functions and to ensure that we have a reablement and promote independence for our most vulnerable people.



Our Better Care / Single Handed care project continues to promote people’s independence and reduce their reliance on staff for manual handling and personal care tasks. The Better Care Team have developed a comprehensive training and support package for all staff across the Blaenau Gwent Health and Social Care community who provide frontline care.

Children’s Services

The South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) is supporting the review and implementation of the National Adoption Service 2025 plan in respect of building capacity for access to records, and ensuring that Welsh

Government investment monies promote multi agency work. 'Understanding the Child' Days are taking place for all children referred to the service from 18 months old, and transitions continue to follow the good practice guides to ensure all care plans are outcome based. Support workers are in the process of being recruited to support delivery of the objective in respect of trauma nurture timelines and adoption support check ins. The SEWAS Contact Worker continues to promote sibling contact which involves speaking to child care social workers at an earlier date with regards to sibling contact arrangements and reviewing existing arrangements. One off birth parent meetings are increasing.

SEWAS are working with the National Adoption service central team and other regions to ensure marketing is targeted to increase the number of adopters for more complex children. We have been able to provide in house adopters for a number of siblings in a timelier manner. At present, the number of children waiting for placements is decreasing as is the rate of referrals from prospective adopters. This could be linked to the cost of living crisis and will need to be monitored more closely moving forward.

The Life Journey Work Coordinator is rolling out training to childcare social workers. Improvements have also been made to the quality of materials provided to adoptive parents. The understanding of child days and trauma nurture timelines are completed for children aged 18 months + and this provides adoptive families with enhanced analysis of the impact a child's early years.

A special guardianship order (SGO) is a way of providing stability for a child who cannot return to live with their birth parent and for whom adoption is not appropriate. It is a legal way of giving the person caring for the child, clear, long-term responsibilities for the child's upbringing. As at 31st March 2023, there were 145 children subject of SGO living in 107 families open to the service.

In April 2022, Blaenau Gwent established its own MyST (My Support Team) to provide greater capacity within the service. Since this time, staff from MyST have been attending News and Networking events and meeting mentors in order to embed the service fully within Blaenau Gwent. Positively, the service is now working with children, under each of the operational teams, suggesting that the service is being utilised by all. MyST are operating at full capacity providing support to 15 children and young people as well some additional bespoke pieces of work. The MyST service also continue to work with a number of young people in residential care on a 'step-down' basis as well as working with a number of young people who are at risk of entering residential care on a preventative basis. In order to improve the service, offer discussions have taken place between the MyST and Placement Team in order to work collaboratively and have joint marketing going forward.

A formal consultation process for foster carers has been implemented with the deadline for submission of the survey 31st March 2023, the outcome of the consultation will be processed and reported going forward. Teams continue to practice in an outcome focused way where we identify family options early in the intervention process, which we prioritise if children have to be admitted into the care of the Local Authority. However, there are situations when appropriate placements are not available locally leading us to access Independent Fostering Agency placements and residential care for young children. Supervision is used consistently to review the plans of Children Looked After (CLA) and consider opportunities for discharging the Care Orders. Regular review of care planning for these children is a priority and for those with a high level of needs referrals to the MyST are considered and prioritised.

Work has taken place to ensure that mandatory safeguarding training for foster carers is being delivered on a face-to-face basis rather than virtually. The training needs of foster carers continue to be monitored and promoted during annual reviews, appraisals and supervision sessions, a programme of training/reflective sessions for foster carers commenced in January 2023 and is being delivered by the MyST.

A Circle of Security Parenting Programme has been delivered to a small number of parents with young children, in collaboration with the Psychologist and Support Worker. Additionally, Circle of Security has been delivered to a cohort of foster carers, helping to stabilise children in care and preventing a risk of breakdown in placement. Feedback is that they have found the parenting programme to be very beneficial and are adapting their parenting styles accordingly.

There continues to be a slow but steady reduction in the number of CLA. New children are still coming into care, but

we are also progressing with discharging Care Orders for children living at home or with kinship carers.

We are now part of the National Transfer Scheme and responsible for a cohort of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who are CLA. We currently have 8 children placed, mostly in England. The team is learning to develop their skills in working with this group as this is very new to Blaenau Gwent.

The Welsh Government has continued to provide funding for a set number of children to participate in the Letterbox Club each year. The Letterbox Club encourages reading for pleasure and learning at home. It helps to improve the educational outlook for children who are looked after. Parcels have continued to be distributed to our children on a monthly basis between October and May, with an additional festive parcel provided in December.



This year, two residential properties have been purchased to provide residential care for children with more complex needs so they can be looked after closer to home as opposed to outside of Blaenau Gwent and even Wales.

Support to our unpaid carers including our Young Carers, have benefited from the development of a new scheme that supports them with the impact of the cost of living crisis. The department has implemented a series of information opportunities, along with a carers grant scheme, with funding provided by Welsh Government and the Carers Trust for 2022/23 and 2023/24. The coordination of this project has been collaboratively led by officers from both Children and Adult Services to ensure that we provide equitable opportunities to both our young and adult carers.

The service continually monitors and reviews the way in which services operate and to decide if a change is necessary in order to manage demand and workload. As a result of this, as of January 2023, a new pilot commenced with the Children Services Locality Teams which will run over a 12-month period. Within this pilot, three new operational care planning teams were established with the 4th becoming the Statutory Assessment Team. Early indications are that the change is impacting positively on capacity and outcomes for the child and family. The Statutory Assessment Team has also eased the work pressure on the Locality Teams. The pilot is reviewed regularly to ensure that the staff complement is appropriate and that the new model is working well. Caseloads continue to be monitored and all staff and team managers are ensuring caseloads are accurate to ensure they are manageable.

Flying Start services were involved in the Estyn inspection that was undertaken in November 2022 on Blaenau Gwent Education Services and came out as an area of excellence in verbal feedback.

Families First continue to work intensively to prevent cases escalation into statutory services with:

- 330 cases active at the end of March 2023;
- 237 cases being discussed at Wellbeing panels in the last quarter; and
- A variety of group, community work and events being delivered throughout the year.

A pathway for Antenatal support supported by Families First has been developed, which will mean every pregnant woman in Blaenau Gwent will be able to access the appropriate Antenatal support until the child is 1-year-old.

Housing

A review has recently been undertaken to understand the number of empty properties across the borough. There are approximately 761 privately owned empty properties in Blaenau Gwent, with 33 empty properties (46 units) brought back into use 2022-2023 via direct action.

Work continues to identify and prioritise future housing opportunities (mix of tenure) working with Tai Calon and partners to identify schemes. Tai Calon now have one new residential development under construction, with another about to be submitted for planning, with the aim to formulate an ongoing future programme of

development. Constant review with all Registered Social Landlord partners is undertaken to ensure a pipeline of residential development is identified and brought forward.

61 Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) have been delivered this year. This work provides major home adaptations for disabled people for the purpose of providing access into and around their homes. The average number of calendar days taken to deliver a DFG in private homes to support independent living this year was 334 days.

A Local Housing Market Assessment is underway in order to inform a revised Housing Strategy and Local Development Plan. A cross cutting Housing Strategy Group has recently been set up to take forward the revised Housing Strategy.

The City Deal 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 required grant input to support development to go ahead. £1.7M has recently been secured in order to remediate a site in Ashvale, Tredegar. The site will bring much needed homes, to the area, comprising of 54 open market and 6 affordable homes.

Homelessness

During the reporting period, 288 households met the threshold for being threatened with homelessness. Of these, 183 were successfully prevented from losing their accommodation - 64%. This high prevention rate has been achieved by targeting early intervention initiatives to prevent homelessness at a very early stage.

The likelihood for homelessness presentations is likely to increase which will put pressure on temporary accommodation, this situation is likely to be further impacted by the cost of living crisis. Therefore, the service is looking at the following in order to plan ahead and prepare:

- Move to Rapid Re-Housing Approach – Changing the Culture;
- Work with social and private rented sector landlords to develop schemes and to sustain tenancies and increase access to housing;
- Increase prevention work to maximise successful outcomes;
- Reduce the number of 'repeat presenters' and rough sleeping;
- Maximise access to a range of support;
- Utilise Welsh Government Funding Streams (Homelessness Prevention Grant);
- More Affordable Housing (Including 1 property per new housing development specifically for Housing First Scheme);
- Staff Training – Technologies opened up new opportunities that were previously impracticable / unaffordable; and
- Raise awareness of homelessness and services, encouraging self-help and resilience.

A change in legislation has led to a high number of new homelessness presentations in Blaenau Gwent and this is further impacted a lack of available temporary accommodation. The current data shows:

Current Placements:

- Bed & Breakfast - 29
- Ty Parc (Homeless Hostel) - 19

Total Placements since April 2020 – Present:

- Bed & Breakfast accommodation - 322
- Homelessness Hostel - 81

Total 'Live' Homelessness Applications– Present:

- 278

Total Cost of Temporary Accommodation (Funded by WG)

- Bed and Breakfasts - £800,000+
- Security (due to number of incidents) - £570,000+

The current number placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation is – 29

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 63.5% of potentially homeless households were prevented from becoming homeless.

Our Transitional Capital Funding Programme involves working with Registered Social Landlords to identify properties for homelessness/resettlement schemes. During the year, 8 additional properties have been included and a further 3 properties have been identified in partnership with Tai Calon for inclusion in the scheme for which a bid was submitted to Welsh Government for funding.

The Youth and Community Team continue to support young people to prevent youth homelessness and to support mental health and well-being. The team has continued to support individuals on a one to one basis, along with groups and community projects. These young people are often in precarious housing situations, and support is based around navigating appropriate information, advice and guidance from other services to help provide some stability and to enable them to improve their housing situation. This has continued to develop, with ongoing relationships with partners growing and becoming more efficient and effective. During the last academic year, 34 young people were supported on a one to one basis.

Environmental Health

Blaenau Gwent’s Food Hygiene Service continues to deliver interventions at food businesses within the Borough. During 2022/23, a total of 218 interventions were completed at high risk premises meeting one of the challenging targets that was set in the Food Standards Agency recovery plan. This work has been completed alongside our other continuing programmed and reactive workload. We still have a significant backlog of food hygiene interventions to deliver which are a legacy of the impact of the Covid pandemic. At present, we have a backlog of 225 D and E rated premises that are overdue an inspection. We are currently considering options to address this backlog. This figure does not include new businesses. During 2022/23, 98 new food businesses opened across the Borough. We continue to prioritise for inspection those that are likely to present a higher risk in terms of food safety in-line with guidance from the Food Standards Agency. Of those that opened during and prior to the 31st March 2023, we still have 46 new businesses which require inspection.

At the close of the reporting year 2022/23, 92.6% of food premises were broadly compliant with food hygiene standards with an increase in the number of re-rating requests.



Challenges the Council have experienced throughout the year

Workforce

Workforce stability is a key consideration within Social Services as some teams are facing staffing shortages, however, it is acknowledged that this is a Wales wide position and there is no simple solution. The department as a whole has been working hard to look at innovative ways of managing the workload within teams 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 in the short, medium and longer-term as well as considering the opportunity to

collaborate on a regional basis. The workforce in Social Services has been identified as a critical risk and has therefore been included on the Council's Corporate Risk Register.

Child Protection Conferences

Safeguarding performance is good although child protection conferences are still slow to bring back to face to face arrangements. This is an area that will require further development. The rise in residential placements for older children is also a concern.

Foster Care

It has proven to be extremely difficult to recruit foster carers and interest in fostering at this current time is very low, despite efforts to increase awareness via social media and recruitment activity. Close working relationships with the Foster Wales Manager and the promotion of the Foster Wales brand continues. Demand for foster placements has increased and there has been a greater reliance on Independent Fostering Agency placements (IFA).

Challenges remain regarding the availability of 'step down' accommodation from residential care into foster care which is largely dependent on the availability of 'step-down' foster placements. With the demand on placements, and the difficulties with recruitment of foster carers, it has not been possible to reduce the population of young people in residential care further.

Budget

During 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22, the Council incurred costs of around £2m per annum (£2.5M, £2M & £1.8M) respectively) on residential placements for Children Looked After. Costs have been reducing as a result of lower numbers of children requiring residential provision, however, the local authority will always need to provide residential care for some children. To address these high costs, in September 2022, it was agreed to proceed with the development of a business case to deliver local authority residential placements for children looked after.

What Evidence is Available

- Children Looked After Strategy
- Corporate Safeguarding Policy
- Prevention and Early Intervention Strategy
- Performance Data
- Auditor Reports
- Service Business Plans
- Agendas and Recordings of Democratic meetings all available on the Council Website - <https://democracy.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?Categories=>

Actions Identified to Support Future Improvement

As a council we are looking to 'Empower and support communities to be safe, independent and resilient'. Alongside the many achievements detailed throughout this report we recognise that the following areas will require further development and improvement. In our next annual Self-Assessment, we will include detail of how we have progressed these actions throughout the 2023/24 year.

- Re-establish and strengthen existing engagement networks as well as establish new opportunities for people to get involved;
- Ensure the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2020 – 2025 actions are regularly monitored, implemented and reviewed;
- Continue to implement the regional action plan to meet the needs identified within the population needs assessment;
- Take forward any learning from the outcome report requested by Care Inspectorate Wales on Public Law process;
- Ensure that preventative support is available for adults and their unpaid carers, that promote and maintain personal independence; and
- Provide support to those impacted by the cost of living crisis via actions identified by the Cost of Living Member and Officer Groups.

What Our Data is Showing - A trend narrative has been provided to show the direction of travel of each indicator with colours provided to show: **Green – Improvement Made; Red – Performance had Reduced; Blue – Performance has been Maintained; and Grey – there is no trend identified or required.**

Performance Indicator – An indicator that is managed or collected by Blaenau Gwent Council	Data				Trend Narrative for 2022/23
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	
% households successfully prevented from homelessness (section 66)	72	59	75.2	63.5	Decreased
Number of additional affordable housing units delivered	12	90	43	Figure to be calculated	Declined between 2020/21 and 2021/22
Numbers waiting on the social housing register: Total	2,151	1,218	4,191	4,688	Numbers have increased each year
Single Applicants	1,051	592	1,742	2,592	
Number of disabled facilities grants completed	N/A	30	31	61	Improved
Number of visitors Blaenau Gwent received	743,710	259,010	299,710	Data not yet available	Improved
Number of day visitors to Blaenau Gwent	574,320	231,060	233,990		Improved
Day Visits amount generated (£) to the local economy	£22.82M	£8.439M	£9.3M		Improved
Amount (£) visitors to Blaenau Gwent contribute to the local economy	£63.37M	£28.37M	£28.37M		Maintained
The number of adults provided with electronic assistive technology during the year	245	169	216	210	Declined
The total number of adult clients currently in receipt of electronic assistive technology.	1264	1353	1527	1639	Increased
Number of children on Child Protection Register	61	52	64	62	Reduced
Number of Children becoming Looked After (During the Year)	62	38	47	63	Increased
Total number of CLA who are placed within Wales, but outside of the responsible LA (excluding those in adoption placements) (as at 31st March)	Not available	65	51	52	Slight increase
The total number of CLA at the end of the collection year who are placed outside of Wales (as at 31st March)	Not available	5	6	12	Increased
Homes for Ukraine Scheme: Guests	-	-	-	57	New indicator for 2022/23
Population Share				74%	
Population Indicator – An indicator of the population. The Council, as well as other partnership organisations can contribute to this but not one area is responsible for the outcome data					
% Blaenau Gwent households privately rented (Census data available every 10 years)	2011 - 12.8		2021 - 16		

An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services at the right time and in the right place

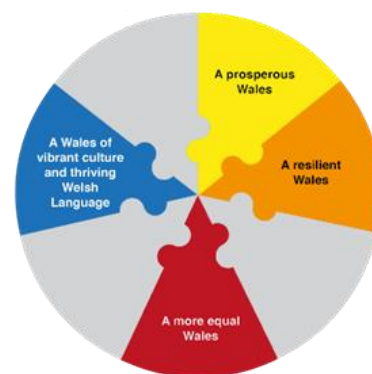
<p>Evaluation Rating 3:</p> <p>Adequate</p>	<p>Evaluation Narrative:</p> <p>The Council has robust financial planning arrangements to ensure that quality services are delivered across the Borough. Although our bridging the gap programme, use of reserves, and new operating model are in place, due to the ongoing financial challenges we will not be able to deliver services in the same way as we have in the past. Our Community Hub model has helped to provide support across our communities, and this has also strengthened our accessibility and partnership working with partners being present in the Hubs to provide advice and support. A community booklet was also developed to provide detail on what support is available. Digital services are a key area of development for us and by improving our web presence we are improving our customer services and streamlining processes, and this can be evidenced through the implementation of the new Idox system in our Planning Services which will enable us to have a web presence where the public can view and comment on planning applications online. In total, the Council suffered 45 recorded data breaches during the 2022/2023 period an increase from 37 data breaches in the 2021/2022 period. The sickness outturn for the workforce remains high at 15.45 days on average per full time employee, which is below the Councils annual target of 10 days. A series of initiatives have taken place throughout the year to promote ways to be healthy and maintain a good well-being to our staff. Actions to address these areas of work can be found on pages 34, 44, 57, and 69 and will be reported on as part of the 2023/24 Council Self-Assessment.</p>
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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.

Identified Need:

- Digital infrastructure
- Commercially minded Council
- Strong Resilient Council
- Financially Resilient
- Recruitment and retention
- Adapting (Exit from the EU and post COVID)
- Partnership Working / Regionalisation
- Focus on the future
- Building Blaenau Gwent’s reputation
- Data and intelligence



What We Aim to Achieve – Blaenau Gwent Council works in partnership to provide high quality services to meet local need, and improve the quality of life and well-being within the community.

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

DID YOU KNOW ...

Blaenau Gwent is the most densely populated area out of all authorities across Wales.

Approx **615 people live per square kilometre**

Blaenau Gwent saw Wales's second-largest percentage-point **fall in the proportion of people who identified as "Welsh only"** (from 72.4% in 2011 to 68.0% in 2021). During this period (2011 to 2021), Blaenau Gwent went from having the third-highest to the fifth-highest percentage of people who identified as "Welsh only" (out of all 22 Welsh local authority areas).



During 2022/23 around **3,000 training opportunities** (online and face to face), were **taken up** by approximately **2,000 Council and school based staff**.

Finance and Resources

The 2022/2023 financial year was challenging for the Council, with emerging cost pressures arising due to high inflation impacting on the cost of goods and services, increasing fuel prices and above expected pay awards, despite this, the Council delivered services to its residents within the approved budget of £169m, reporting a favourable variance of £0.18m, before net transfers from specific reserves, and £1.2m favourable variance after net transfers from specific reserves.

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.

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

Item	Revised Estimate 2022/2023	Provisional Expenditure to 31 March 2023 (excluding Reserve Adjustments)	Provisional Expenditure to 31 March 2023	Variance Favourable / (Adverse)
	£	£	£	£
Summary				
Corporate Services and Financial Management Strategy				
Corporate Services	4,522,990	4,414,850	4,326,420	196,570
Financial Management & Strategy	13,394,890	12,554,550	11,882,228	1,512,662
	17,971,880	16,969,400	16,208,648	1,709,232
Social Services				
Children's Services	14,288,800	15,834,527	15,327,638	(1,038,838)
Adult Services	29,231,440	28,466,451	28,464,957	766,483
Business Management / Corporate Recharges	6,421,310	6,524,289	6,389,563	31,747
	49,941,550	50,825,267	50,182,158	(240,608)
Education				
Aneurin Leisure Trust	64,128,010	63,713,010	64,099,025	28,985
	4,176,620	4,126,323	4,163,887	12,733
	68,304,630	67,839,332	68,262,912	41,718

Item	Revised Estimate 2021/2022	Provisional Expenditure to 31 March 2022 (excluding Reserve Adjustments)	Provisional Expenditure to 31 March 2022	Variance Favourable / (Adverse)
Summary	£	£	£	£
Economy	1,815,060	1,663,266	1,628,554	186,506
	1,815,060	1,663,266	1,628,554	186,506
Environment	29,632,090	30,440,717	30,359,629	(727,539)
Environment	29,632,090	30,440,717	30,359,629	(727,539)
Planning Committee and Licensing Committee				
Planning	1,441,220	1,132,990	1,189,260	251,960
Licensing	134,790	128,420	128,420	6,340
	1,575,980	1,261,410	1,317,680	258,300
Other – Transfer to Specific Reserves	0	0	0	0
Total Expenditure	169,187,190	168,999,393	167,959,580	1,227,610

New Operating Model and Agile Working

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. 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.

Attendance Management

For 2022/23, the Council's sickness outturn was 15.45 days on average per full time employee. When excluding sickness absence related to Covid 19, the outturn figure reduces to 13.71 days, with Covid accounting for 1.7 days of absence. Despite the removal of Covid related absences, the total outturn remains higher than the Council's year-end target. For 2023/24 we will be returning to pre pandemic reporting of one outturn figure rather than providing two figures for including and excluding covid absence.

The figure of 15.45 days is an improvement from the previous year when the figure was 16.74 days, although this is higher than 2021/22 when the figure was 11.67 days. The Council's annual target is 10 days, therefore, is being exceeded each year. Short term versus long term absence has remained consistent throughout the years averaging 30% for short term and 70% for long term absences.

Complaints and Compliments

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

Feedback gained through the Councils Complaints and Compliments procedure helps the authority to understand what has gone wrong and put mechanisms in place to make improvements and preventing issues arising again. During the year there has been 161 cases of feedback recorded across the Council. These 161 cases consisted of:

- 133 complaints; and
- 28 compliments.

130 cases were closed (completed) during the reported period. Of those, just under half (60) were within timescale. 65 were after timescale but within 3 months. Only 5 were after 3 months but within 6 months. None took longer than 6 months.

Information Governance

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 additional 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.

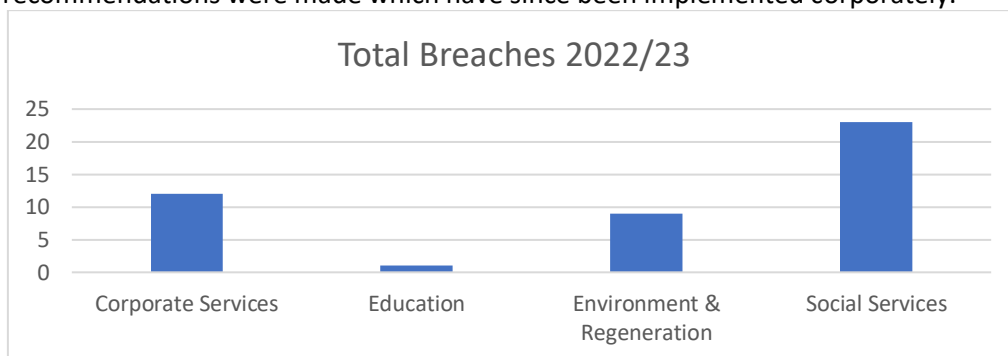
All Data Protection Impact Assessments are approved by the Data Protection and Governance Officer to ensure that there are effective controls in place to mitigate the risk of a Data Protection Breach. Where a Data Protection Incident is reported, the Officer will investigate the cause and review the responsible service area controls to ensure they are effective. The 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.

The Authority received and processed 978 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests between 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023 which is a 13% increase on the previous year where 863 requests were received. Services responded to 88% of requests within the 20 working day requirement. Of the 12% that did not meet the requirement, 6.4% (62 requests) were provided late and 5.6% (55 requests) remain un-responded to as of 31st July 2023.

During 2022/2023 Blaenau Gwent received a total of 60 Subject Access Requests over the course of the year in comparison to 54 the previous year. This represents a 10% increase in requests. We are required to ensure that each request is entitled to receive the information before we can consider it a valid request. To do this we normally ask to see ID from a requestor but not all requests provide this, and we do not hear back. Of the 60 Subject Access Requests received during 2022/2023 only 29 provided the necessary ID in order to be considered a valid request. Whilst 29 appears to be a low number on the surface, these requests are typically for a person’s entire file within a service or across multiple services totalling hundreds of pages. As it is necessary to check each page and ensure no breaches of information occur the checking work can take a lot of time.

In total, the Council suffered 45 recorded Data Breaches during the 2022/2023 period which are split between directorates as illustrated below. This has increased from 37 Data Breaches in the 2021/2022 period.

Of the 45 Data Breaches suffered it was decided by the Data Breach Panel that one exceeded the threshold to the report to the ICO. It was later decided by the ICO that no enforcement action was required regarding this breach although some recommendations were made which have since been implemented corporately.



Corporate Communications

In 2022, the Council undertook a strategic review of its overall approach to Corporate Communications, with a focus on strategy and planning, people and resources, and implementation. The recommendation from the review was for the Council to develop a ‘campaign based’ communications approach. From this, communication campaigns will be in place to support each priority of the Corporate Plan using the OASIS Framework:

- Objectives
- Audience Insight
- Strategy / Idea
- Implementation
- Scoring / Evaluation

The Communications Team will work with Cabinet, CLT and representatives from each directorate to develop and deliver campaign based communications. The intention moving forward is to align the new Participation and Engagement Strategy with the Communications Strategy.

Service User Design

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 (WLGGA) and Tech Valleys. Maintaining momentum in this key area will be a challenge with support being required across the whole organisation.

Elected Members and the Constitution

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. Further work has been undertaken over the year to review and enhance a number of member development policies and processes including:

- A PDR Scheme and Competency Framework;
- A Member Development Strategy;
- A Mentoring Framework; and
- An e-petitions protocol.

Each Committee conforms to legislative requirements including compliance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009, Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The decision making process is documented and the Authority's Scrutiny Committees can 'call in' a decision which has been made by the Cabinet but not yet implemented. No decisions were called in during 2022/23.

Work has continued to strengthen Blaenau Gwent's Scrutiny and Democratic Committee arrangements. Following the Local Elections in May 2022 a comprehensive induction and refresher programme was put in place. The Blaenau Gwent programme is supplemented with the All Wales Academy E-Learning Modules as well as a dedicated member's online resource library. All member sessions were identified as:

- Mandatory;
- Recommended;
- Beneficial; and
- Useful.

Mandatory sessions for all members include:

- the Constitution including roles and responsibilities;
- Code of Conduct;
- Corporate Parenting / Safeguarding Responsibilities; and
- Safeguarding Online Course.

There are also mandatory sessions for members sitting on certain committees, such as:

- Town and Country Planning;
- Licensing Committee; and
- Appeals Committee.

Each member has also been provided with a laptop and mobile phone to support them to undertake their roles.

Newly Elected Members have settled in well to the new Council and are gaining valuable experience in the operation of the Council. As part of the Member Development Programme some new and less experienced members have received coaching and mentoring, on a joint basis, from within their political groups, and with the Monitoring Officer and Head of Democratic Services, with this showing to be an effective approach. The Code of Conduct training was undertaken at the end of May 2022 and as the Democratic cycle got underway more support was provided to ensure that decision making was effective and that adherence to the Members' Code of Conduct was observed.

The Monitoring Officer and Head of Democratic Services meet regularly with Interim Chief Executive to discuss any political, governance or conduct issues, with a view to addressing issues early on in order to resolve quickly. The Constitution was updated and approved by Full Council on 26th October 2022 and training for Members was held on 17th November 2022 and received good feedback.

In 2022/23, no complaints against Members were taken forward for formal investigation by the Ombudsman's Office. Over the year four whistleblowing complaints were received. One by the Monitoring Officer and three by the Head of Internal Audit, one of which was rejected as not eligible and two are ongoing investigations.

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.

Internal Audit

Internal Audit Services issued 45 audit opinions during the year:

Audit Grading	No of audits
Full Assurance	9
Reasonable Assurance	14
Limited Assurance	6
No Assurance	1
Non-graded	0

The number of audits undertaken and the proportions of grades for the period align to pre-pandemic trends. For 2022/23 there were no patterns or trends that indicated particular areas of concern and no individual findings of such significance to cause concern regarding the integrity of the Statement of Accounts. Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's system of internal control during the financial year 2022/23 operates to a level which gives Reasonable Assurance on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's framework of governance, risk management and control. Members of WCLT continue to receive periodic reviews of Internal Audit findings to ensure appropriate corrective action is taken to maintain and / or improve internal controls.

Challenges the Council have experienced throughout the year

Attendance Management

Improving attendance remains a key priority and is identified as a corporate risk for the Council acknowledging that high levels of sickness absence have a detrimental impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services. Staff health and wellbeing is critical in order to effectively deliver Council priorities and services.

Information Governance

The average FOI received is responded to within 12.67 working days. This comprises of 0.78 days for Legal to send the request to the department, 8.57 working days for the department to compile and respond and then 3.32 working days for Legal to check and send. However, these figures do not take into account the 55 outstanding requests due to the restrictions in the reporting functionality and therefore only consider a concluded FOI. With some of the un-concluded requests dating back 6 months, the response times recorded would change significantly on a negative basis if the outstanding requests were to be included in the calculations. With the recent ICO ruling leading to enforcement action for an English Council (with over 143 outstanding FOI requests) this is obviously a significant concern. Where requests have been received but no response has been provided by the department a reminder is sent on approximately the 15th working day leaving around a week for the department to respond.

If the Council does not manage its information assets in accordance with requirements set down within legislation then it may be faced with financial penalties and possible sanctions that hinder service delivery. For Quarter 4 there were 11 data breaches identified and the total for the year stands at 45. This is higher than the previous 12 month period which was 37 data breaches in total. No pattern or single cause for this increase as been identified but this will continue to be monitored. No breaches during Q4 were reported to the ICO.

What Evidence is Available

- Statement of Accounts
- Annual Governance Statement and Code of Governance
- Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy
- Risk Registers
- Budget Survey
- Various Corporate Strategies
- Agendas and Recordings of Democratic meetings all available on the Council Website - <https://democracy.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?Categories=>
- Performance Data
- Agile Working Policy and Future Operating Model
- Council's Pay Policy Statement
- Strategic Equalities Plan 2020/2024
- Complaints and Compliments
- Auditor Reports
- Service Business Plans

Actions Identified to Support Future Improvement

As a council we are looking to be 'An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place'. Alongside the many achievements detailed throughout this report we recognise that the following areas will require further development and improvement. In our next annual Self-Assessment, we will include detail of how we have progressed these actions throughout the 2023/24 year.

- Gain a greater understanding of the barriers to access digital solutions within our communities and develop support for those who wish to improve their digital skills;
- Engage effectively across the organisation, with partners and key groups to develop the new Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2028;
- Progress the Engagement and Participation Strategy to ensure the voice of the community is considered when planning and decision making;
- Responding to the recommendations from the Welsh Language Commissioner;
- Further embed safeguarding arrangements across the whole Council;
- Progress the Workforce Strategy including consideration of recruitment and retention across the Directorates; and
- Work to reduce the sickness levels across the Council.

What Our Data is Showing - A trend narrative has been provided to show the direction of travel of each indicator with colours provided to show: **Green – Improvement Made; Red – Performance had Reduced; Blue – Performance has been Maintained; and Grey – there is no trend identified or required.**

Performance Indicator – An indicator that is managed or collected by Blaenau Gwent Council	Data				Trend Narrative for 2022/23
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	
Council attendance and sickness (Council target of 10 days per full-time member of staff)	13.9	11.67	16.74	15.5	Improved
Number of complaints received by Blaenau Gwent Council	-	-	105	133	Increased
Number of Complaints Closed at Stage 1 during the period	-	-	100	123	Increased
Number of Complaints Closed at Stage 2 during the period	-	-	1	7	Increased
Total Number of Complaints Closed during the period	-	-	101	130	Increased
Number of Compliments received by Blaenau Gwent Council	-	-	29	28	Reduced
% of external expenditure placed with Local and Regional Suppliers (i.e. Registered within Blaenau Gwent) and SME	-	-	-	60.9	New Indicator for 2022/23
% of procurements that consider Social and Well-being objectives (including Decarbonisation and Foundation Economy etc.)	-	-	-	70	
Carbon Footprint associated with the Council’s Commissioning and Procurement activities	-	-	-	0	
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	
Revenue outturn expenditure					Increased
£ per thousand	177,300	178,616	193,776	199,583	Increased
£ per head	2,543	2,557	2,767	2,850	Increased

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

The Authority has reviewed its priorities, vision and values and these are set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 2022/27. The Corporate Plan acts as the Council's business plan and is directly linked to the priorities in the Gwent Well-being Plan. The Corporate Plan was approved by Council on 26th October 2022. The priority areas identified in the Corporate Plan also act as our Well-being Objectives as part of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act.

A new Gwent Public Service Board has been established, under Section 47 (1) of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. This arrangement has replaced the individual Public Service Boards in each of the five Local Authority areas of Gwent. As part of this, a Joint Public Service Board Scrutiny Committee has been established and is operated by Blaenau Gwent Council. Local Partnership / Public Service Board Scrutiny Committees will now only consider items that related to their specific areas and that are to be identified as part of the Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership.

The current Well-being Plan came to an end in 2023. The Gwent PSB has undertaken a regional well-being assessment. This used a wide range of qualitative and quantitative information including data, academic research, evidence, and people's views (engagement) to help understand Wellbeing across Gwent communities. This assessment formed the basis of the development of the Gwent Wellbeing 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 Cabinet.

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.

Self-evaluation arrangements are in place and continue to be refined, requiring each service area to consider how its activities have contributed to the achievement of the Council priorities. The process enables us to gather and use good quality information to better understand how we are performing. Following the introduction of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, the Council completed an assessment of the 2021/22 year and this was presented to Council for approval in October 2022. The Council has used its current business planning process to gather evidence as well as identifying a number of key documents to reference. This was the first iteration of the new self-assessment process and it is expected that amendments to the process will be made following the first year of completion.

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; and
- 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.

Workforce Planning

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

The Council's Workforce Strategy 2021-26 was endorsed at Council on the 29th July 2021. The Strategy is a key enabler in delivering the Council's ambition, the New Council Operating Model and key priorities. It has a focus 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. The Strategy aims to ensure we have the right people, with the right skills, in the right place, at the right level, and at the right cost.

The Strategy sets out five priority outcomes for the workforce:

- 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.

The delivery plan for 2021/22 focused on the transition from responding to the Covid-19 pandemic to a new future working model, 'Agile Services delivered by an Agile Workforce', and set out the key actions under each of the priority outcomes. There has been good progress over the last year in achieving the priorities within the delivery plan.

The second-year delivery plan has been developed and builds on the progress of the previous year and takes account of the key national, regional and local drivers, workforce trends and financial challenges that will be facing the Council. In addition, during 2021/22 a new framework for workforce planning was rolled out at a directorate level, key themes and actions from this process have been aligned to the Strategy priority outcomes. These include recruitment and retention, succession and workforce planning and wellbeing.

As a major employer in Blaenau Gwent, the council are aware that any action which impacts on the workforce will also directly impact the community and levels of aspiration, income and employment. We provide and commission some of the most important services to the community, working with a range of other public, private and voluntary organisations in ensuring that public services are delivered to high standards. Our Workforce Strategy demonstrates the Council's commitment and investment in its workforce and wants staff to feel engaged and motivated so that the best services can be delivered to the residents of Blaenau Gwent. There are clear drivers for change focussed on agility and sustainability by reducing environmental impact as well as property related costs that can be reinvested into front line services, improve resilience, organisational and individual outcomes, customer focus, and create a better work life and corporate social responsibility.

The performance of all directorates depends on the effectiveness of the department culture. This is a difficult ask when the teams and sections are working hard to deliver priorities amongst continual rounds of savings and non-competitive public sector salaries. However, a healthy culture is a major attractor and is important to those looking for a job in the public sector. With staff retention as a key aim for the authority, creating the right culture is key. The aim of the council is to set standards that assist with the positive nature of the culture including; embracing a change mind-set – this is central to growth and innovation, and puts people outside their comfort zone to enable change and growth; working as a team – working together, discussing problems together and backing each other up; empowering people to make decisions; embedding a sense of responsibility including holding everyone accountable; and lastly, continuous improvement.

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 included the establishment of Community Hubs across the Borough, improving customer access to Council services.

Of Blaenau Gwent Council workers:

- 34% are agile workers;
- 8% are permanent homeworkers; and
- 58% are service based workers.

In late 2022, a survey was undertaken with staff to understand the feelings towards agile working with 433 responses returned, 26% of the workforce. The results were analysed and a series of focus groups with staff and the Trade Unions were held to gain further insight. Feedback from these sessions tended to mirror that of the survey. Overall, the workforce is mainly positive about the agile working arrangements. Moving forward, actions include:

- Reviewing the facilities across the five agile working hubs of: ViTecc, General Offices, Anvil Court, Energy Centre and the LAC in Blaina; and
- A further review of the agile working policy and the flexible working policy.

The Organisational Development (OD) Service are responsible for the development and review of all of the Council's HR related policies. In line with OD's Policy Schedule, the Disciplinary and Capability Policies (Corporate Staff) were due for review. In addition, following a number of complex disciplinary cases, the Council procured an external consultant, to review a particular disciplinary case and associated processes. The review set out a number of recommendations for the Council in relation to the management of disciplinary processes. These recommendations have been taken on board in the review and development of the policies including:

Policy / Procedure	Covers	Who it applies to
Disciplinary Policy & Procedure	Conduct	Corporate employees
Capability Policy	Performance	Corporate Employees
Disciplinary Procedure for the Chief Executive	Conduct and performance	Chief Executive
Disciplinary Procedure for Specific Statutory Officers	Conduct and performance	Monitoring Officer, Section 151 Officer & Head of Democratic Services
Disciplinary Procedure for Chief Officers and Deputy Chief Officers	Conduct and performance	A Chief Officer reports directly to the Chief Executive. A Deputy Chief Officer reports directly to one or more of the statutory or non-statutory chief officers.

The Council had no capability cases during the 2022/23 period. Eleven grievance cases were investigated across the Council, eight of which have been resolved and three remain active. Two cases are collective grievances, one of which is now an Employment Tribunal claim, with implications for 81 plus staff.

On an annual basis the Council is expected to report on its annual performance with regards to health, safety and welfare at work. A summary of this performance includes:

- The number of employee accidents/incidents decreased from 171 in 2021/2022 to 162 in 2022/2023;
- The number of non-employee accidents also decreased from 326 in 2021/2022 to 325 in 2022/2023;
- The number of employee accidents/incidents and diseases reportable to the HSE has decreased from 24 in 2021/2022 to 9 in 2022/2023;
- The number of non-employee accidents/incidents reportable to HSE has increased marginally from 8 in 2021/22 to 9 in 2022/2023;
- There were 4 interventions by the Fire Authority and 0 interventions by the HSE;
- The Health and Safety Advisors investigated 59 accidents/incidents;
- One referral from the Occupational Health Department was made to the Health and Safety Advisors. Recommendations were provided to the managers of the referred persons by the Health and Safety Advisors on reasonable adjustments for the affected individuals;
- There were 5 cases investigated following insurance claims being made; and
- The departmental referrals to the Occupational Health service fell from 656 to 456.

Procurement

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

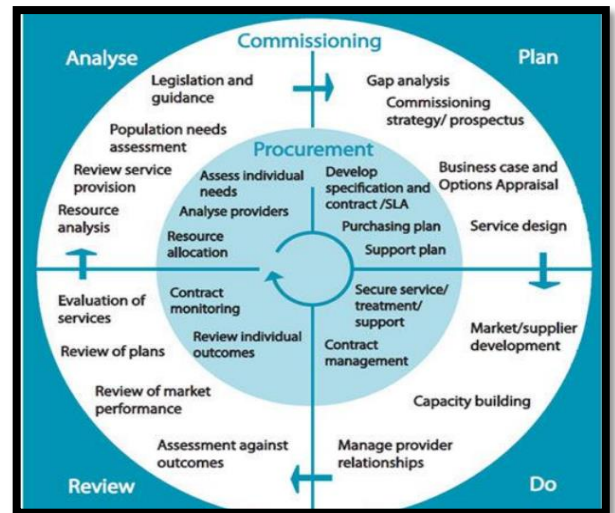
The Authority is committed to the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act and the Wales Procurement Policy that identifies Procurement as a strategic enabler, delivering key policy objectives to support the Council's economic, social, and environmental priorities.

Council approved its revised Commissioning and Procurement Strategy in March 2023, ‘Maximising the Socially Responsible Blaenau Gwent Pound £’. The strategy sets out how our commissioning and procurement activities will support the Council’s corporate priorities:

- Objective 1: Ensuring legal compliance and robust and transparent governance;
- Objective 2: Promoting socially responsible procurement activities and processes;
 - 2.1 Increasing community and social value benefits delivered by suppliers;
 - 2.2 Contributing to the Council’s aim to be a Net Zero Council by 2030;
 - 2.3 Improving Fair Work and Safeguarding practices within our supply chain;
- Objective 3: Securing value for money and managing demand through effective and robust contract management arrangements; and
- Objective 4: Promoting innovative and best practice solutions.

A Strategic Commercial Commissioning Board (SCCB) has been established to provide oversight and scrutiny of the Council’s commercial activities, primarily commissioning, procurement, investments, and trading. The SCCB is supported by an operational group Business and Commercial Opportunities Network (BACON).

SCCB is an officer board, chaired by the Chief Executive and attended by Corporate Leadership Team. The Board provides strategic guidance to the Commissioning and Procurement community and assesses major commercial and procurement projects. The goal of the SCCB is to ensure shared ownership for the realisation of desired outcomes and efficiencies across the Council and to ensure that commercial activities become an enabling function and that fully supports Council priorities. The SCCB also oversees the delivery of the Socially Responsible Procurement Strategy.



The Board has been put in place as a ‘check and challenge’ with regards to the merits of each spending proposal and contracts over £75k and ensures a consistent approach to spending in line with the objectives of the Authority. The Board has an agreed Terms of Reference and has implemented a quarterly market intelligence report since April 2022. As part of this, central contracts register, and annual departmental procurement plans have been established to support the Council’s social and commercial aspirations as well as informing its Medium Term Financial Strategy.

BACON is an officer group, chaired by the Service Manager Business and Commercial Opportunities and has representation from all service areas. BACON has been established to support the development of an entrepreneurial culture and mind-set in both officers and elected members, including working with the senior leadership to identify more business minded and commercially focused opportunities within existing and future service delivery. BACON has an agreed Terms of Reference and a business case framework which is used to consider commercial opportunities.

Assets

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

The current gross replacement value of the Highway Network is estimated at £1.093 billion and is the Authority’s most valuable material asset.

The Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMP) sets out how the Council manages and treats its property and land, ensuring that it is well placed to manage expectations, budgets and services going forward.

Audit Wales has recently carried out a ‘Springing Forward’ review which included the Council’s arrangements for managing its assets and resulted in recommendations being identified covering a few areas including developing a longer-term asset strategy.

It was agreed at the Corporate Asset Management Working Group (CAMWG) that a revised SAMP would commence with recommendations coming back to CAMWG for review. Corporate Leadership Team is leading on a review of accommodation and the demand for buildings. The findings of which will be incorporated into the SAMP. Meetings have been arranged with Service Heads to discuss accommodation needs and corporate Asset & Property Meetings are convened on a monthly basis to review property needs.

Many Community Asset Transfers (CATs) are on short term leases or tenancies, so the focus on completing longer term leases continues, 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"> • Millennium Gardens (Terence Gardens) Brynmawr –lease to Growing Spaces November 2021 • Sirhowy Woodland – licence completed June 2021 (common land). • Market Hall Cinema Brynmawr - freehold transfer April 2022 • Rassau Community Centre – handover to new trustees completed at the end of the reporting year so is the most recent entry in this category. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hilltop Fields Pavilion (shared with Flying Start), changing rooms and pitches – lease issued to Beaufort Colts AFC and awaiting signature • Rassau Resource Centre – lease to Rassau Resource Community Centre CIC agreed. Awaiting completion • Beaufort Welfare - upper Changing Room and Rugby Pitch. Completion anticipated in coming months. • Beaufort Welfare – lower Changing Room & Football Pitch. Completion anticipated in coming months. • Roseheyworth Field – changing rooms and pitches. Completion anticipated in coming months. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Area at Jim Owen Pavilion, Cwmtillery - Application for wetland area by Pentref Tyleri CBC (occupy part of pavilion/ Garden held by Abertillery Excelsiors). • Coedcae Scout Hut - Older Community Building which Scouts want to surrender. Growing Spaces looking to take on and are completing application. • Cwm Community Allotments – Application by Barefoot Farm. Solicitors instructed • Windsor Road Field - Abertillery Bluebirds’ proposal to take on playing field for junior football use. • Six Bells Tennis - Proposed CAT of kiosk (previously Friends) and area alongside for new cabin/ changing facility. • Brynithel Recreation Ground - shared pavilion (Flying Start) and pitches. Awaiting clarity over Group’s (St. Illtyds Sport & C.I.C.) ability to proceed.

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:

Community Asset Transfer	Progress
Bedwellty Park Bowling Green & Pavilion	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
Cwm Welfare – fields and pavilion	Cwm Community Sports are currently on a tenancy at will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted. The pavilion is already occupied by boxing. The Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations (GAVO) is assisting in these matters.

Blaina Institute	Blaina Community Institute Limited have been in occupation of the building since 1/6/17. A draft lease has been issued - negotiating.
Metropole Theatre Abertillery	Occupied by Awen Cultural Trust under terms of a Licence from 09/04/2021. Lease negotiations are progressing. A list of works was agreed at the point of transfer and the Council are looking to source funding contributions from the Welsh Governments 'Transforming Towns' program. A portion of the building is occupied by Abertillery Museum under a separate Lease agreement.
Llanhilleth Institute	Draft lease issued to Llanhilleth Miners Institute - negotiating
Tredegar Sports Ground pavilion, stand & pitches	Occupied under Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
EV Welfare rugby stand, pitches, terrace	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
Cricket Pavilion – EV Welfare	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
EV Welfare – bowls pavilion & 2 greens	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.

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 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 a 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, evaluate and assess risk. It also requires for risk registers to be maintained at Service and Directorate levels to 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 2023 financial year, the Council had identified 11 corporate risks, four of which were classed as critical and the remaining classed as high. This is an increase from 2022 when there were ten corporate risks with only one being rated as critical. The main risks facing the Authority during the period were:

Risk Description	Potential Impact	Residual Score
Failure to deliver and sustain the changes required to ensure that vital services are prioritised within the financial constraints faced by the Council.	financial pressures and demand challenges will result in reductions to services, significant impacting their availability and quality.	Critical
Failure to ensure that the Councils ICT arrangements provide assurance in terms of operational functionality and data security and enable the required digital transformational change	Service continuity impacted, transformation of services cannot take place and the potential for cyber attacks	High
Failure to ensure adequate safeguarding arrangements are in place for vulnerable people in Blaenau Gwent	Vulnerable people at risk of harm and abuse Negative reputation for the Council	High

Failure to improve staff attendance rates within the Council will lead to an unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively and financially	Unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively and financially support the cost of sickness absence.	Critical
If the Council does not manage its information assets in accordance with requirements set down within legislation then it may be faced with financial penalties and possible sanctions that hinder service delivery.	Financial penalties and possible sanctions that hinder service delivery	High
The Financial resilience of the Council could be at risk if the Council does not ensure that financial planning and management decisions support long term stability and sustainability.	Inability to deliver effective services/ lower quality services provided. Unplanned reduction of services provided.	High
Failure to deliver the Council's priorities within the agreed annual budget resulting in the increased use of emergency finance measures and the drawdown of reserves	Adverse impacts on the community Lack of service provision Not meeting statutory requirements	Critical
(a) Impact of cost of living (inflationary) increase driven by a number of crosscutting forces on our communities have created significant challenges for those already in need. (b) Impact of cost of living (inflationary) increases on businesses in Blaenau Gwent (c) Impact of cost of living (inflationary) increases on the Council (and staff) resulting in increased levels of service demand	Negative impact on communities Business closures Increased demand for services resulting in increased demand on services. Impact on staff	Critical
The 2 schools in an Estyn category and currently in receipt of Council Intervention fail to make appropriate progress against the Statutory Warning Notice to Improve and their Post Inspection Action Plans.	Poor reputation of the Council Statutory intervention Standards of education are not improvement	High
There is a risk that the Council's Business Continuity processes are not robust enough to enable the provision of critical services in an emergency	Essential services not delivered to an acceptable standard during disruptive incidents Poor reputation for the Council	High
Failure to maintain appropriately skilled, adequate staffing resources will lead to an unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively	Vital services will not be protected if the Council fails to find more efficient ways of working and improvements to social, economic and environmental well-being of the areas will not be achieved	High

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

The Gwent Local Resilience Forum covers the Gwent Police area and is a partnership made up of representatives from the emergency services, local authorities, Natural Resources Wales, health agencies, Maritime and Coastguard Agency, utilities, military, and Welsh Government along with voluntary organisations and other private agencies. Although the LRF is not a statutory body, it is a statutory process. Set up as a requirement of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, Local Resilience Forums (LRF) are the principal mechanism for multi-agency collaboration to ensure the effective delivery of the duties identified in the act.

The Community Risk Register highlights the main risks that have the largest potential to have significant impact on residents and businesses in the Gwent area, including:

- Human Infectious Diseases

- Severe Weather
- Flooding
- Loss of Critical Infrastructure
- Industrial Accidents
- Animal Disease
- Transport Incidents
- Malicious Threats

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. Twice a year 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 including:

- The ACRF (Annual Report of the Director of Social Services);
- Education Director Report; and
- Community Services and Regeneration Directorate Report.

The business planning process has become more streamlined with the incorporation of Performance Indicators, Risk Registers, the Environment Act, Low Carbon Actions as well as proposals for improvement from auditors. Future developments will include the Welsh Language and Equalities. This information is contained on a central monitoring system used across the organisation. The self-evaluation process directly links to the business planning process.

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.

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:

In order to support future Town Centre Regeneration, Placemaking Plans have been produced and progressed, as requested by Welsh Government, enabling the authority to access Placemaking Grant monies in order to provide flexible support for a wide range of projects aimed at rejuvenating town centres.

The Council has a long term aim of developing alternatives for power generation and as part of this Dulas Consultants have carried out a feasibility study to utilise hydro generation to power electric pumps at Silent Valley. The delivery of wind generation projects and hydro generation projects supports long term thinking with regards to fuel consumption.

It is a priority for us to raise the profile of play by improving the quality and equity of play provision throughout the Borough for all our children and young people. To achieve this, we are refurbishing and maintaining existing play

provision to acceptable levels and developing new initiatives based on identified need within the Borough. Chartist way play area has been confirmed as needing to be relocated and the contract for this work has been let, meeting with contractor will be held shortly to develop programme of installation.

Significant progress has been made over the past 10 years on improving the Highway network, however, the absence of Welsh Government funding for 2023/24 and the end of Blaenau Gwent Prudential Borrowing Programme has curtailed Capital investments in the highway network. The completion and formal adoption of the Highways Asset Management Plan 2023 - 2028 will support and drive the Authority's approach to maintenance over the next 5 years.

Although it is recognised that evidence to show long term improvement will take time, we know that the work undertaken now to ensure that all children and young people are given the best start in life, will enable them to grow into fruitful adults living a healthy, fulfilling life whilst contributing to society and forming a valuable part of their community. Work demonstrates that we are delivering higher levels of language acquisition and reading across the board, and overall enabling positive outcomes and attainment.

Recruitment and retention difficulties have impacted on services. All directorates have developed a workforce plan for 2022/23 with a detailed action plan to address these issues. In addition, the ongoing work corporately will support directorates to recruit and retain staff by further modernising the Councils approach and marketing the Council as an 'Employer of Choice'. Whilst the risk remains high, staffing pressures in some services have eased with successful recruitment to vacant roles. In addition, other measures that will support in the longer term include effective workforce and succession planning, the management of sickness absence, and where appropriate working regionally/nationally.

Long term succession planning in respect of sustainability of our services and staff is ongoing and in respect of our social care staff an Induction Programme was developed and advertised for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWS). The first sessions started in June 2022 and continued on a weekly basis. Feedback from the sessions revealed that the cohort of newly qualified social workers found the sessions extremely beneficial and that they felt much more prepared to carry out their roles confidently.

The Strategic Commercial and Commissioning Board has been strengthened to include a clearer focus on how it supports achievement of the ambitions set out in the commercial strategy. Commercial activity is far more evident in the bridging the gap proposals to support the Medium Term Financial Strategy, ranging from third party spend, cost shift for transactions, and more efficient channels. A review of the commercial strategy is planned for the end of the year which will assist in how we target our efforts on areas that need progressing.

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 support those in the community experiencing poverty. Support includes: Universal Credit; discretionary housing payments; Free School Meals and Clothing Grant Applications; and the Winter Support Fund. The table below provides a breakdown of the number of residents supported through the Community Hubs during the period:

	Ebbw Vale	Tredegar	Brynawr	Abertillery	Cwm	Blaina	Llanhilleth	Overall
May	430	230	129	198	46	63	53	1149
June	186	147	87	116	23	23	17	599
July	205	131	76	80	21	20	19	552
August	158	129	77	70	7	20	5	466
September	178	77	53	94	12	17	7	438
October	161 (approx. 127 unlogged)	268	85	133	23	32	15	717
November	159	118	77	82	14	21	6	477
December	95	67	49	58	20	6	3	298
January	168	192	109	98	16	17	9	609
February	177	208	120	139	11	20	8	683 (759 inc. unlogged fuel)
March	273	190	204	179	14	23	15	898
April	162	147	110	124	16	24	12	595
Total	2352	1904	1176	1299	223	286	169	7481 (exc. unlogged fuel)

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.

Environmental Health responded to 316 Housing Safety/Standards service requests relating to sub-standard Privately Rented Sector accommodation, damp nuisance, Warm Home Nest Inspections, including the approval of 4 New Landlord loans. (total £160k). In addition, Housing Solutions dealt with 9 owner occupier loans (£61,500) and 20 empty property grants (£600,000).

We continue to manage Sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) to deal with stormwater locally (as close its source as possible), to mimic natural drainage and encourage its infiltration, attenuation and passive treatment. All SuDS applications, enquiry responses and inspections are ongoing throughout the borough. Various meetings with developers take place to discuss regulations and options available to developers.

Work to provide good quality education services and local employment opportunities such as Vulnerable Learners Support, Youth Service and Youth Support Services prevent the impacts of poverty and material deprivation from getting worse. The Aspire Shared Apprenticeship Programme has continued to enhance skills development within the manufacturing and engineering companies to develop business growth; whilst tackling unemployment and providing aspirational opportunities for young people across the local authority.

LGBTQ+ support groups for children and young people are still in operation across Blaenau Gwent. The support groups provide appropriate information and the opportunity to speak about feelings, empowering young people to ensure their voice is heard within a safe space.

We always work with a preventative approach, preventing problems from getting worse and continually aiming to improve services. This approach has led to numerous improvements ranging from maintaining our corporate assets such as buildings, roads, bridges etc. to preventing safeguarding issues developing by encouraging everyone with a concern about themselves, a child or adult at risk of abuse or neglect, to report it. Our website has recently been updated making this process as easy as possible.

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:

The authority has worked with its regional school improvement service to strengthen the challenge and support it provides to schools. Education is also working closely with Regeneration and achieving a reduction in the percentage of adults aged 16-24 with no qualifications. Integrated work between Education, Regeneration and the SRS is ensuring that effective digital communication methods and systems are in place for our community to grow. Digital development will provide children and young people with opportunities to learn in these fast advancing digital times that we live in. Internal systems are being updated to move towards more online communication and ICT methods for both new school and existing school settings delivered through our Sustainable Communities for learning / Progress in skills.

We deliver council wide integrated services in respect of safeguarding and have made it everybody's business by identifying a lead officer from each Council service to ensure that all service areas are working towards the safeguarding agenda.

Integrated work is taking place across the council to develop and monitor the delivery of the Decarbonisation Strategy and the Environment and Biodiversity Strategy, both of which outline responsibilities to support these agendas across all Council services. Through a joined up approach to service delivery the Council will be able to achieve more using less resource. This year saw a refresh of our Climate Group, which is now chaired by our Interim Chief Executive, its core membership also includes our first elected Climate Champion, three members of our senior leadership team and a trade union representative. The group meets every six weeks with an alternating focus on Net Zero 2030 at one meeting and Net Zero 2050 at the next.

Integrated work throughout directorates has continued to ensure effective delivery of all services and projects such as work undertaken with Coleg Gwent and the refurbishment of the Monwell Building into a high value engineering centre (HIVE). The £12.5m investment will deliver an Advanced Engineering Centre close to our Blaenau Gwent Learning Zone campus, which will offer high-quality engineering education to equip young people with skills for the future.

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 is currently in the process of developing new liaison arrangements with each of the four Town and Community Councils (TCCs) from 2023/24. The current Charter of Common Agreement between the Council and each of the four TCCs was last reviewed during 2019. It was refreshed in line with the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015, and The Independent Review on TCCs in Wales published in October 2018, to ensure it remained fit for purpose.

The Charter is designed to build on existing best practice and embrace the shared principles of openness, respect, honesty and the 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:

- Ethics;
- Local governance and information;

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

The Charter contains expectations around the facilitation of quarterly Liaison Committee meetings. These committee meetings help to foster good communication, working relationships, and better joint working for the benefit of local people. In addition to the member Liaison Committee, a regular quarterly officer meeting comprising the four TCC Clerks and Corporate Policy staff also exists to support the partnership working arrangements. Going forward, this meeting will seek to strengthen arrangements for advice and interaction with TCCs and will look to seek support from the Council's Wider Corporate Leadership Team to ensure all local issues are considered appropriately.

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.

A Gwent Public Service Board (PSB) has been established, replacing the individual PSBs across Gwent. As part of this, a Joint PSB Scrutiny Committee has been established and is operated by Blaenau Gwent Council. The Gwent PSB has undertaken a regional well-being assessment. This used a wide range of qualitative and quantitative information including data, academic research, evidence, and people's views to help understand well-being across Gwent communities in order to inform the Gwent Well-being Plan.

A Service Level Agreement is in place between the Council and Rhondda Cynon Taff Council as the Lead Authority for the Shared Prosperity Funding (SPF) within the Cardiff Capital Region. SPF is now available to support projects under the Support for Local Business, People and Skills, and Community and Place themes. Our SPF aim is to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK.

The Employment and Skills Strategy has been produced and will provide opportunities to raise aspirations and support economic growth through partnership working. It outlines a range of priorities to ensure individuals and businesses have access to the right support in terms of skills and employment.

The Regional Partnership Board (RPB) is in place to manage and develop services to secure strategic planning and partnership working between local authorities and Local Health Boards and to ensure effective services, care and support are in place to best meet the needs of their respective population.

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:

To gain a wider understanding of how the Council is performing it is important to understand the views of businesses, staff, Trade unions and the local community. This also helps the authority to develop, design and amend services for the future.

Throughout the year there has been a wide range of engagement activity across the Council, this has involved face to face engagement with residents, online surveys, and specific targeted events. To understand the engagement activity across the Local Authority, and to map the type and level of activity being delivered across the organisation, an Engagement Calendar has been developed and is updated and shared across the organisation quarterly.

The calendar also includes the reach of engagement, the result of engagement, any feedback and whether an evaluation was undertaken. The following participation and engagement activities have taken place:

- Public Space Protection Order Survey
- Continuity of Learning Plan Survey

- Childcare and School Hub Survey
- Public Services Board Climate Change Survey
- Universal Free School Meals Survey
- Rights Respect Equalities Survey (x3)
- Operating Model & Agile Working Survey
- Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/27 Survey & Workshop
- Council Budget 2023/24 Survey; online engagement session; in-person community hub events
- Ebbw Vale Sustainable Link Survey; in-person event
- Gwent Well-being Plan Consultation Survey
- A range of Early Years, Parents & Wider Community events and consultations
- Young People Democracy & Voting Registration Events (x4)
- Taxi Licensing Policy Survey
- School Inclusion & Improvement, Partnership Agreement Survey & Visioning Event
- 50+ Resident Group Engagement Event
- Wood Environmental Permit Survey

Engagement Activity with Citizens

Throughout the year service areas across the authority hold specific engagement activity to obtain feedback from partners, including members of the community, to help review and develop changes to service delivery. Some of the areas we have involved the community this year include:

Budget Engagement Programme - The programme began in early 2023 following the announcement of the Local Government Settlement by Welsh Government and included indoor events across our four well-being areas held at different times throughout the day, including the evening, to help maximise attendance. The events provided an opportunity for people to find out more information and to speak to Members and Officers. An evening session was also held online via the Microsoft Teams platform. All those attending events were encouraged to participate in a survey which was also shared on social media. The intention of this was to get as many people as possible participating and sharing their views on prioritising council services, setting council tax, and potential saving proposals for now and the future. A total of 3,736 questionnaires 5.5% of the area's population were completed and returned to the council via the questionnaire portal (Snap). This is the highest level of response received by the Council for a budget engagement survey.

Blaenau Gwent Youth Forum - The youth forum provides opportunities for young people living in Blaenau Gwent to have a voice on issues that impact them, and to become actively involved in local decision making. The forum also helps to develop the skills and experience of young people in the community in a variety of ways, helping to build their confidence, and develop their communication and social skills.

Members of the youth forum are involved in a range of activities including being involved in several pieces of work which has represented Blaenau Gwent at a national level. In 2022, the Blaenau Gwent youth parliament representative attended a 3-day annual conference which included over 200 young people from across the country. The event provided an opportunity for young people to develop their debating skills by researching specific topics and using persuasive arguments to share their views. In November, the youth parliament representative attended the House of Commons in order to debate on a number of topics. The House of Commons visit involved young people from across the UK and Overseas Territories coming together. Our youth parliament representative provided their views on the cost of living crisis and the impact that it will have on health now and in the future.



Participatory Budgeting - This is a democratic process that enables local people to have direct decision-making power over how public budgets are spent. The overarching aim of Participatory Budgeting is to increase community participation in decisions affecting their lives, and to enable spending decisions that better reflect local needs and address inequity. The community were actively involved in the planning and development of the participatory budgeting event. Members of the group were given training and took part in a series of supported delivery sessions to shape the programme, invite bidders to apply for funding, judge whether applications fit the set criteria, and plan the

event. In November 2022, the Council supported the Gwent PSB the programme, 'Community Voice, Community Choice'. 16 community groups were successfully voted by the public to receive monies to deliver local well-being projects, totalling £127,527.

Complaints and Compliments - Members of the public can have their say through the Councils Complaints and Compliments procedure. Feedback gained through this process helps the authority to understand what has gone wrong, put mechanisms in place to make improvements in order to prevent issues arising again. During the year there has been 161 cases of feedback recorded across the Council. These 161 cases consisted of:

- 133 complaints; and
- 28 compliments.

Of the 133 complaints received 63% were via email and 29% were via phone. The initial response for when a complaint is received is within 3 working days and an outcome with 10 working days. If the complaint is not resolved and progresses to Stage 2, the aim is for resolution within 20 working days but maybe longer if a case is complex. Complainants receive regular updates on the status of their complaint if, for any reason, we are unable to respond to a complaint within the timescales.

130 cases were closed (completed) during the reported period. Of those, just under half (60) were within timescale. 65 were after the timescale but within 3 months and 5 were after 3 months but within 6 months. None took longer than 6 months.

Engagement Activity with Businesses - The Council continues to engage with the business community through channels such as the 'Business Hub', the Enterprise Board and through various town centre business forums. Businesses have had an active role in the development of Town Centre Placemaking Delivery Plans which aim to establish a sustainable future for town centres across the borough. Feedback was provided on key challenges being faced, potential opportunities, and what they would like to see happen to town centres in the future. Progress will continue in the implementation and development of these plans throughout the upcoming year and the Council will continue to engage with businesses through this process.

The Council will also relaunch the Enterprise Facilitation Project which will be a free, informal, and confidential service for aspiring entrepreneurs and business owners within Blaenau Gwent. The Enterprise team will support an effective business networking forum for start-up, new and small businesses in Blaenau Gwent.

Engagement with Staff - The Council recognises the critical need to communicate and engage staff in service delivery, transformation, change, new commercial thinking and financial efficiency. This is currently undertaken through a number of methods: regular one to one performance coaching; annual performance reviews; team, staff and management meetings; a regular newsletter from the Chief Executive; a staff newsletter; managers brief; engagement in financial planning; a dedicated engagement and consultation framework with the Trade Unions; and bi-annual staff surveys. A recent example of this is through the engagement activity with staff to gain their views on a new operating model and agile working.

Trade Unions - The Council has in place a Trade Union Facilities Agreement which has recently been reviewed and updated. 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 Cabinet. There is also a Corporate Health and Safety group held with the Trade Unions.

Council Committee Meetings - All Council meetings can be accessed through the Council website. The Council website also provides an opportunity to view Council documents including view past meetings, past agenda items and Committee work programmes. Through the revised Engagement and Participation Strategy systems will be enhanced and improved to make it easier for communities to be involved in the democratic process of the Council. Improvements will also be made to promote awareness amongst local people of how to become an Elected Member.

Engagement and Participation Strategy - Although the Council provides a variety of opportunities for people to get involved, we know that we can do better, and this will be a priority for the organisation for the year ahead through the development of our revised Engagement and Participation Strategy. The revised Engagement and Participation strategy will provide a more coordinated approach to engagement and will align with other strategic documents that are currently being developed including our customer services and digital strategy. It will also look at methods to improve engagement with partners including businesses, communities, staff and Trade Unions. The Engagement and Participation Strategy will be completed in 2024 with an action plan and monitoring framework to ensure that outcome focussed change is being delivered.

Overall Progress of the Well-being Goals

A Prosperous Wales

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

Data shows that the highest rates of child poverty in Wales are seen in Blaenau Gwent at 30.3% in 2021/22 which equates to 4,124 children. Blaenau Gwent has 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. 74% of children in poverty in Blaenau Gwent were living in working families, this equates to 2,872 children. 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 authority established a cost of living cross party group in September 2022 which is supported by an operation group responsible for implementation of an action plan. The action plan focuses on support for residents, local businesses and promotes partnership working. Providing more joined-up working and holistic interventions are required to ensure those who are socio-economically disadvantaged are provided the right support at the right time now, and in the future. The work on the cost of living crisis is inextricably linked with the poverty agenda.

Our Community Hubs, which operate across seven accessible locations across the borough, work with the Citizens Advice Bureau to offer support and to provide advice regarding schemes such as discretionary payments for cost of living, and housing payments. Specific support is also available for pensioners and those with a disability. Assistance with council tax discounts or reductions is also provided for those with mental or physical disabilities, carers or those on low income. Support for families with children is also offered with a specific focus on free school meals and uniform grants. Furthermore, advice and support for utility bills continues to be offered as people suffer as a consequence of the energy crisis, with opportunities for support and schemes provided for fuel support, winter fuel payments for older people, and warm home discounts.

The Council plays a crucial role with its partners in supporting the Blaenau Gwent Food Partnership, which aims to build a local food system that is healthy, affordable, resilient, and fair. It has supported communities in the borough with community growing projects, food organisations and a shop local network. In supporting people through the cost of living crisis, there is currently a focus on providing opportunities for people who are struggling to get access to food through a number of food bank or food support providers. In 2022/23 the Council provided support through overseeing the Food Distribution Support Grant with over £80,000 being available to groups.

Some specific support provided by the Council to support those impacted by the cost of living crisis includes:

Warm Hubs - The Council received £28,566 funding from Welsh Government to support Warm Hubs as safe and warm places within the local community. Via an application process, Blaenau Gwent supported 30 warm hubs and in late March 2023, additional funding became available from the Discretionary Cost of Living Scheme that resulted in all warm hubs receiving further funding to extend their provision for a further three months.

Food Distribution - As part of the Discretionary Cost of Living Scheme £70,000 was allocated enabling existing and new organisations to apply for funding to support residents with supplying emergency food provision for those in need. The application process opened in December 2022 and organisations could apply for a grant up to £5,000. Additional funding became available in late March 2023, resulting in a further £89,850 being awarded to original applicants to extend their provision.

Trussel Trust Support provided:

- 191 deliveries to families comprising 309 adults and 186 children in December 2022;
- 188 deliveries to families comprising 304 adults and 152 children in January 2023; and
- 174 deliveries to families comprising 273 adults and 146 children in February 2023.

Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) – Funding was allocated through Discretionary Cost of Living Scheme to enhance service provision. From December 2022, a member of staff from CAB worked within the Community Hubs to provide support to residents with the following outreach:

- 22 people supported in December 2022;
- 91 people supported in January 2023; and
- 79 people supported in February 2023.

Stability and sustainability of our domiciliary care and care home market is a significant priority for our teams due to the impact of Covid, early indications of the impact of the rise in fuel and utility costs, and severe staffing pressures. Many providers, including our own in house services, have, during 2022/23, reported high levels of staff vacancies which impact on their ability to provide support. Our commissioning team has continued to work with providers in relation to the introduction to the real living wage and also by scoping the potential support that can be given to our domiciliary care workers to increase wages to compensate them for the increased costs of fuel. The rapidly increasing fuel prices caused concern amongst the domiciliary care market. To address this, the Council acted swiftly and provided additional funding to staff to support the increase in fuel costs during the early part of the year.

Due to the cost of Living Crisis the Supporting People Team were able to fund additional Home Sustainment Packs to support people when moving into their own accommodation to assist with the cost of living.

Work continues to support a reduction in the impact of poverty and homelessness by providing innovative and effective Housing Support Grant (HSG) services, and a new hybrid model of support is now fully embedded across Provider Services. However, the future of the HSG funding remains a significant concern. Support Providers are indicating their costs are rising considerably and their current contractual value no longer covers the costs of providing the service. This will impact not only on current services but also the future commissioning of services. This is being closely monitored by the Supporting People Team.

A Local Housing Market Assessment is underway in order to inform a revised Housing Strategy and Local Development Plan. A cross cutting Housing Strategy Group has recently been set up to take forward the revised Housing Strategy.

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. Further work on the train lines will be the increasing in frequency of the train to two trains per hour from Ebbw Vale and improvements to the infrastructure and signalling along the Ebbw Vale line.

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 (CCRCD) 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 CCRCD 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 CCRCD. 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 is currently working on the development of a new Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) to cover the years 2024/28, with the current plan due to end in 2024. The key activity that will take place to develop the new plan includes:

- Undertaking research to understand strategic equality position;
- The mapping of existing service delivery contributions;
- Undertaking briefings on strategic equality policy development provided for service areas, senior management teams and elected members;
- Organisation-wide quarterly corporate Policy & Performance workshops to be established to raise awareness and support the implementation of key statutory policy areas (e.g., Equality, Welsh, Climate Change etc.);
- The setting up of an Equality Stakeholder Reference Group as a mechanism for capturing the lived experiences of people protected by the Act to support policy development and performance monitor implementation, with opportunity to include elected member and specialist agencies / organisation representation;
- The on-going involvement / consultation via established engagement networks, key groups and staff with protected characteristics covered by the Act; and
- Considering training requirements for staff, senior management, and Members on key statutory areas such as Equality, Welsh, and Participation & Engagement* etc.

* *Development of the Council's Participation and Engagement Strategy 2023/26 (as per Local Government (Wales) Act 2010) is aligned to this work to maximise use of resources.*

The new Plan will also include a number of new Welsh Government Policy areas including:

- [Anti-racist Wales Action Plan](#)
- [Public commemoration in Wales](#)
- [LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales](#)

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.

The Council has identified an Elected Member Equality Champion who represents the organisation on the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) Members Equality Network, and the Council is also represented at various National and Regional Equality Network meetings to collaborate and share good practice and learning. As an organisation we continue to pledge our support towards national equality campaigns and emerging policies, such as Zero Racism Wales; Welsh Government's vision of an Anti-Racist Wales by 2030 and LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales.

A particularly good example of supporting national equality campaigns was the recognition given to International Holocaust Memorial Day via an event held on Friday 27th January 2023. It was a chance to honour the survivors of regimes of hatred and take the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which we live our lives today and bring our communities together to create a safer, better future. On 26th January 2023, Council agreed to award Eva Clarke the Freedom of the Borough, the highest accolade the Council can bestow. Eva Clarke was born in a concentration camp and was one of only three babies that survived. Eva has worked hard over the years to ensure the stories of those survivors have been told, ensuring their memories live on and what they endured is never forgotten. Eva has strong links with South Wales, and Blaenau Gwent particularly. The award ceremony took place in March 2023.



We continue to be part of the Proud Council's network which has currently expanded over the last year to include a further two local authorities in Wales. Being part of the network allows us to work collaboratively to attend Pride events and work together on LGBTQ+ history month. By uniting and working together we can achieve a greater impact.

A review of the Equality Impact Assessment process has been undertaken and approved by Cabinet. This process is now called an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) and is for both new and existing policies and practices (when reviewed). The IIA also includes the Socio Economic Duty which is to be considered when a decision may have a substantial negative impact on the socio economic outlook of the area. IIAs are undertaken against all relevant proposals, and included within the Council's reporting template and strategic business reviews. As part of the IIA review work, we are looking to develop a research library to provide accessible data and intelligence to support anyone carrying out an IIA and the delivery of actions associated to our Strategic Equality Plan. The research library includes case studies, census data, other local data, regional and national evidence and reports relating to equality and diversity, as well as examples of lived experiences from peoples covered by protected characteristics.

The Annual Report to the Equality and Human Rights Commission was published and submitted within the appropriate timescales. The Report was included on the Council website in March 2023.

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 2022/2023. We annually consider the issue of gender pay in order to help us understand the difference in average earnings between women and men. The Council is confident that men and women are paid equally for doing equivalent jobs across the Council. Our assessment shows that women and men are paid equally for doing equivalent jobs across the Council, with a predominantly female workforce (77.3% female, 22.7% male), occupying a high percentage of jobs across all four pay quartiles. In comparison, the UK gender pay gap was 12.1%, in 2022. Men earned 10.9% more on average than women in Wales in 2022. This indicates that in 2022, the average gross weekly earnings in pounds for male and female full-time employees excluding overtime were £603.50 and £537.50 respectively so men earned £66.00 per week more. However, the pay gap in Blaenau Gwent is significantly lower

than the national average and has further improved. 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 and measures required to further address gender pay differences will be incorporated into existing Equality plans.

In 2022/23 Organisational Development reviewed and updated a series of workforce policies which supports equality and diversity within the workplace. A few examples are highlighted below:

Pay Policy	Mar-22
Adverse Weather Guidance	Jun-22
Adoption/Surrogacy Leave	Oct-22
Maternity Leave	Oct-22
Paternity/Maternity Support Leave	Oct-22
Parental Leave	Oct-22

We believe regularly monitoring, reviewing, and implementing these policies allows us to maintain policy effectiveness and strengthens equality of opportunity. A good example of where policy development for our staff has made a difference is when the Council agreed to sign up to the Trade Union Congress (TUC) policy “Dying to Work Charter” in December 2022. Our Critical Illness and Working Guidelines and the Attendance Management Policy have also been updated.

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 which includes 30 actions, of which, 19 are completed and 11 are in progress with full implementation scheduled by March 2024.

A Wales of Cohesive Communities

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

A main objective of the current Strategic Equality Plan 2020/24 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.

Resettlement Scheme	LA Involvement	Where are we?
UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS)	Voluntary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blaenau Gwent Council agreed to participate in the UKRS in 2019. However, due to the disruption in global resettlement, as a result of the pandemic, refugee resettlement was largely paused until 2021.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Blaenau Gwent has yet to receive any cases via the UKRS (due in part to the local focus centering on the Ukraine response) but we remain an active participant in the scheme.
Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS)	Voluntary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In June 2021, Blaenau Gwent Council consulted elected members on the potential role the authority could play in supporting Afghan nationals via ARAP and later ACRS. It was agreed that because the authority's commitment to the UK Resettlement Scheme was in place Blaenau Gwent would pledge to resettle up to 4 cases from Afghanistan. To date, we have resettled 2 families into the borough – (9 individuals). We have also supported a spontaneous Afghan arrival (a family of 3). We continue to engage with housing partners with the intension of supporting 2 additional cases via the ACRS/ARAP scheme in during the remainder of 2023, honoring the existing pledge BGCBC made in 2021.
Homes for Ukraine Scheme	Expected (WG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In May 2022, all local authorities and the Welsh Government agreed the Homes for Ukraine Accommodation Framework. This set out how Ukrainians, who arrive via the Welsh Government Super Sponsor route, and who are accommodated at Welcome Centres, would be dispersed across Wales. As part of this, every local authority agreed a population share of Ukrainian arrivals (under the Super Sponsor route) that they would support into longer term accommodation as part of a <i>Team Wales approach</i>. The population share for Blaenau Gwent is 77 refugees to be resettled into the borough. To date, 57 guests (74% of expected population share) have been resettled into the borough. As an aside to arrivals relocated under our population share, all LAs are continuing to support Ukrainian arrivals who have been sponsored by an individual (i.e. community member) those arrivals are hosted and are supported alongside those who have been relocated under the population share.
Asylum Dispersal	Mandatory (UKG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In June 2022, the UKG introduced a full Dispersal model for Asylum Dispersal – the rationale of this policy is to provide a more equitable distribution of asylum dispersal across the UK, a full Dispersal model means all local authority areas in England, Scotland and Wales will be expected to participate in the scheme and will be welcoming asylum seekers into their area. For Blaenau Gwent, the target figure is 55 newly bedspaces (to be established in 2023). To date, 33 bedspaces have now been established/occupied (60% of 'target' for 2023)

The Council is also supporting two Government schemes to help those fleeing the war in Ukraine. The Homes for Ukraine Scheme was launched on 14th March 2022 by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The scheme was established to support Ukrainian nationals who lived in Ukraine before 1st January 2022, and to their immediate family members who may be other nationalities. The scheme allowed them to be sponsored to come to the UK for at least a six-month period. The Welsh Government issued approximately 4,600 visas issued through the scheme whereby applicants were initially placed into Welcome Centres across Wales before medium to longer term accommodation could be sought.

In Blaenau Gwent, the Level Inn was initially identified as the Welcome Centre with the Llanhilleth Hotel added in August 2022. Each applicant was supported by a dedicated team which could include the Council, ABUHB, DWP, Education, Adult Education, Aneurin Leisure, GAVO and Remploy. Both Welcome Centres have now been closed owing to the successful move on rates with the Blaenau Gwent process being identified as good practice.

To date, almost 100 Ukrainians have been supported with initial accommodation. Several residents have secured employment locally and all school aged children are now enrolled into local schools. A number of residents are exploring private rental options, particularly the larger families where there are no hosting options available.

Since October 2022, 11 community groups received monies from the Household Support Fund / Cost of Living Food Distribution Support Grant to provide direct help to local communities in need, and 21 community groups received monies from the Loneliness and Isolation Grant.

In December 2021, the Gwent PSB agreed to commission a comprehensive governance review of community safety arrangements across Gwent who mandated that the regional Safer Gwent Partnership group would lead the governance review; and further mandated the re-establishment of the five local authority-area statutory Community Safety Partnerships. In March 2023, Safer Blaenau Gwent Community Safety Partnership was re-established.

The Home Office introduced the new Serious Violence Duty with the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. Whilst the duty is upon the local Safer Blaenau Gwent Community Safety Partnership, regionally it has been agreed to implement the requirements of the duty through a Gwent Serious Violence Partnership, led by the Gwent Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner. A Serious Violence Strategic Needs Assessment will need to be developed, which will be used to inform the agreed Partnership Strategy and Delivery Plan expected January 2024.

There are well-established Gwent regional strategic governance arrangements in place to deliver the local statutory duties relating to VAWDASV. The second VAWDASV Strategy (2023-2026) was published for public consultation in early April 2023 [here](#). The draft Strategy noted a proposal to align the Wales National Strategy, and therefore adopt objectives, mapped to the three aims of the Act: Prevention, Protection and Provision of Support.

The UK Counter Terrorism Strategy CONTEST aims to reduce the risk to the UK and its interests overseas from terrorism. In Gwent, strategic governance for counter terrorism is provided by the Gwent CONTEST Board, which oversees related regional and local structural delivery arrangements.

The Home Office introduced a new Protect Duty (Martyn's Law), which is yet to come into effect. Blaenau Gwent has a well-established Protective Security and Preparedness Group that ensures the Council, and its partners are aware of the impending duty, and will support its implementation in due course. Following self-assessment of compliance (2022-23) with Prevent and Channel Statutory Guidance requirements, Blaenau Gwent was marked as having the highest compliance rate across the region.

The Home Office provided grant funding aimed at tackling neighbourhood crime, anti-social behaviour and violence against women and girls. Two areas in Blaenau Gwent were prioritised given the crime evidence-base, that of Tredegar and Brynmawr. There were a range of initiatives funded which included a Youth Shelter, home safety and fire security measures for repeat vulnerable victims. The most vulnerable victims were also offered residential CCTV (doorbells) and indoor lighting-timers and dusk to dawn external security lighting. Some local commercial, retail and other Businesses, also benefitted from target hardening support. A local Neighbourhood Watch Officer was supported to encourage volunteering and co-production opportunities.

Blaenau Gwent has been selected to participate in the national Home Office funded pilot 'Project Clean Streets' which will work with people on probation who are serving Community Payback sentence to rapidly clean up high-profile instances of anti-social behaviour, such as graffiti and litter, within 48 hours of notification.

A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language

Welsh Language Strategy

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.

Welsh Language Investigation

In November 2021, the Welsh Language Commissioners Office (WLCO) opened an investigation with Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council following concerns raised during a direct verification assessment of whether the Council was compliant with the Welsh Language Standards in terms of providing a Welsh language telephone service.

In April 2022, the Council provided an initial response to the investigation, which, in turn, raised further compliance concerns with regards to promoting services, assessing the language skills of staff, providing training opportunities and assessing the language needs of posts. This led to the terms of reference for the investigation being widened to include a number of additional operational standards.

In September 2022, a final determination of the investigation, in accordance with Section 77 of the Welsh Language (Wales) 2011 Measure was provided to the Council. The determination outlined the steps required to reach compliance and expected delivery timeframes. It also requested the Council take forward an organisational approach (including clear accountability and governance framework) to develop an Action Plan, with a deadline 31 January 2023.

A decision was made by the Council's Leadership Team to establish an organisation wide Core Officer Group (CS092) with responsibility for preparing and implementing an Action Plan. This Action Plan is currently being embedded with the intention for all actions to be fully embedded by March 2024. The Action Plan is being monitored by the Core Officer Group, which is Chaired by the Head of Democratic Services, Governance & Partnerships.

The Blaenau Gwent Welsh Network, an external partnership group facilitated by Menter Iaith BGTm, was re-established in the past 12 months. The network is made up of local Welsh language organisations and agencies along with the Blaenau Gwent Council service areas whose work directly centres on promoting the use of the Welsh language across the Authority. The purpose of this group is to work collectively to help support the delivery and monitoring of the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/27 our Welsh Language Compliance Notice and to share resources, learning, and good practice. The group will also work alongside the Council's Corporate Equality Welsh Network.

Partnership working is key to the delivery of Objective 1. Below is an example of what our local Welsh language partners have delivered during the reporting period to support it.

Established in 1971, Mudiad Meithrin is a voluntary organisation passionate about celebrating and encouraging the use of the Welsh language. The organisation offers numerous Welsh-medium play and learning experiences for children from birth to school-age. Cylch Meithrin Brynithel has held a series of activities with families this year to generate interest in Welsh and Welsh Education including

Welsh courses for parents; a Martyn Geraint Show at Abertillery's Metropole Theatre and a free trip to the Dewin and Doti Festival. In July 2022 working with Blaenau Gwent Welsh-medium primary Ysgol Bro Helyg, Mudiad Meithrin published a video regarding transport to the school. The video 'My journey to School' shows the journey for local children on a bus to school, which aims to reassure parents who have been worried about sending their young children on a bus to travel to school. The video was promoted on the Council's social media pages and website and is used to encourage families who send their children to Cylch Meithrin in Brynithel to continue their Welsh-medium education by sending them to this local Welsh School after they leave the cylch.



Opportunities to learn Welsh across the Council have been extensively promoted during the past 12 months. Blaenau Gwent staff are actively encouraged to engage in the Welsh language. Training opportunities are regularly advertised through newsletters. One example is the collection of online taster courses, run by Dysgu Cymraeg (Learn Welsh), that are tailored for the workplace. 18 members of staff enrolled on a total of 28 courses with 7 of those members enrolling on more than one course. This compares favourably to the previous year which had 11 staff enrolled on a total of 15 courses. More training has been undertaken during 2022-23, with an average of 4.7 modules completed per learner this year compared to 3.2 last year.

The Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) 2022-2032 is a 10-year plan. Blaenau Gwent has an ambitious target of increasing the Year 1 cohort (750 pupils) taught via the medium of Welsh to 75 pupils -10% by 2032 (baseline as per plasc 2021 data 29 pupils - 4%).

As part of this plan, Blaenau Gwent will open a 210 place Welsh Medium Seedling Primary School on the Chartist Way Site, in the Tredegar/Sirhowy Valley. The school will be developed via a seedling growth model from September 2023. The Council are currently in the process of letting the contract for the new build and it is anticipated that the contractor will be appointed Spring 2023. It is anticipated, the new school building will be completed for occupation by September 2024. The school will open initially in its temporary location of Bedwellty House, Tredegar for nursery and reception pupils, with a new year group being added each year. Initial governance arrangements will be under Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg with a view to reviewing this after an initial 2/3-year period. Education Transformation are currently working with the Welsh in Education Forum (WEF) and Rhag in order to promote the new provision.

In order to support the seedling provision and develop increased capacity across childcare and early years' settings, a further 2 Welsh medium childcare settings are being established – at the Glyncoed Primary new build site, and in the new Tredegar seedling school provision. Currently there are 2 well established childcare provisions located in Brynithel and at Ysgol Gymraeg Bro Helyg.

The Social Services department continues to monitor compliance with our responsibilities within More Than Just Words and the Active Offer. We continue to ensure that when citizens contact both our Adult and Children Services Departments, that they are offered the opportunity to communicate in the language of their choice. Our assessment tools within our social care system, WCCIS, specifically asks the question "Do you require this conversation / assessment to be carried out in Welsh?" The form is then attached to the person's referral. The More Than Just Words action plan has progressed, there is liaison with the local Welsh language champions and promoting the wide resources and opportunities available is now standard. Our commissioned providers work in partnership with us to promote the Welsh Language and this is reflected in our contracts and service level agreements.

A Globally Responsible Wales

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

Our Decarbonisation approach is based on Welsh Government's two Net Zero targets: Net Zero 2030 for the Welsh Public Sector (organisational emissions), and Net Zero 2050 for all of Wales (territorial emissions). Our organisational emissions are the carbon emissions produced by delivering our services, while Blaenau Gwent's territorial emissions include all the carbon emissions released within the borough, from homes, transport and businesses etc.

Our Decarbonisation Plan was adopted in September 2020, and 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.

We have adopted a data driven approach, based on identifying from our carbon footprint, eight transitions we have to undertake to reach Net Zero. Each of these transitions represents a coherent area of action with its own distinct low carbon technologies, business models and infrastructure. Each of these transitions has its own detailed actions to deliver it. Our approach is based on mainstreaming decarbonisation into our operations, rather than establishing separate decarbonisation projects and budgets. With a cross-organisation climate group providing corporate overview.

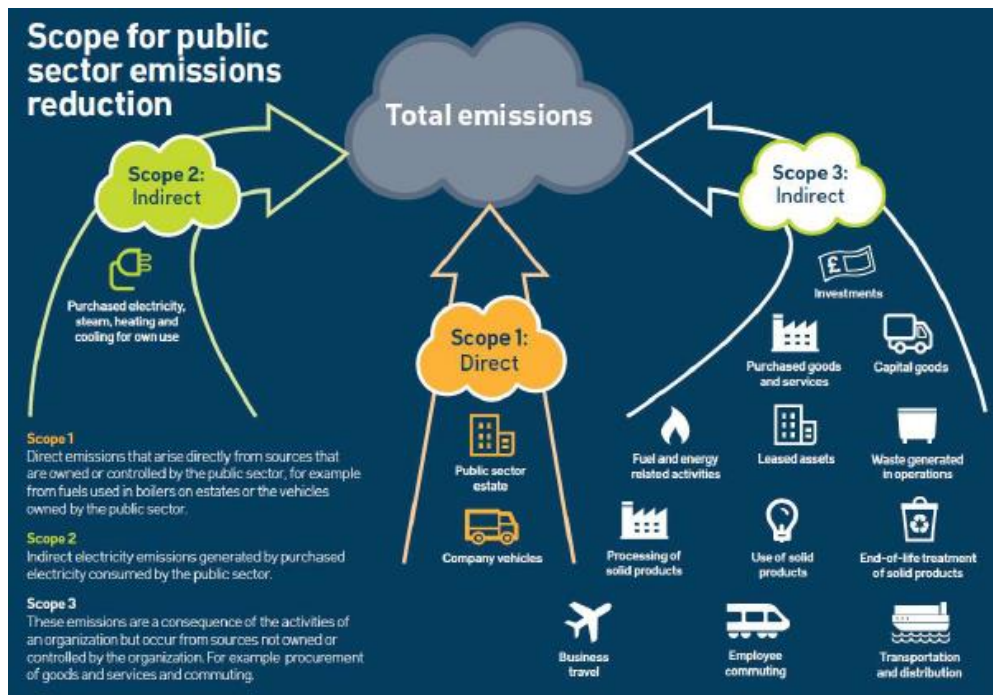
Overview of our Transitions

- Transport:** Travel by our staff in corporate or their own vehicles, includes fleet, commuting and staff travel within work.
- Nature Based Solutions:** Absorption of carbon on land we own and manage, largely associated with woodland, urban trees and peatland.
- Procurement: Goods** which covers what we purchase as an organisation and includes key items such as clothing, food, IT, machinery, equipment and furniture.
- Procurement: Services** which covers the services we procure to deliver our functions such as schools and social services. This also includes investments such as pension schemes.
- Procurement: Works** which includes all construction and maintenance of our buildings and infrastructure.
- Electricity:** Covers the electricity we purchase to run all our services. It includes key things such as street lighting, running our corporate buildings and schools. It also includes our use of renewable technologies.
- Heat:** Includes our heating (and cooling) of our buildings.
- Waste:** Covers the carbon impacts of our treatment of municipal waste, whether recycling, landfill or waste to power.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council: Transitions Summary 2019/20



Our carbon footprint is divided in to three scopes (see diagram to the right). Our footprint includes all emissions from assets, such as buildings and vehicles, that we have day-to day operational control of, whether we own or lease them (Scope 1 and 2 emissions) and emissions which are the result of our procurement and other organisations delivering services on our behalf (Scope 3 emissions).



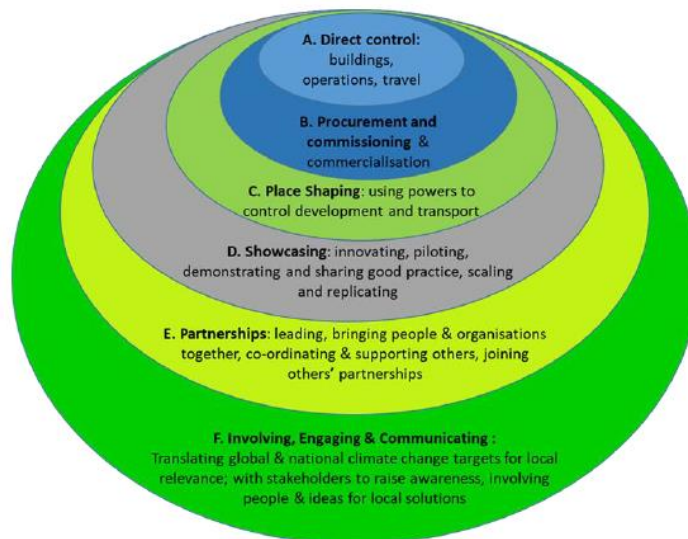
2022/23 Carbon Emissions

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	Change from Base Year	Change from Last Year
Direct Carbon Emissions tonnes CO₂e/year	14,750	11,793	13,087	12,332	-16%*	-6%*

*Provisional Figures

Net Zero 2050 relates to production based territorial emissions, these include all the carbon emissions released in Blaenau Gwent, and released to produce energy that is used within Blaenau Gwent. It does not include consumption based territorial emissions, which are the emissions associated with making products that were made elsewhere and consumed in Blaenau Gwent.

We have much less direct control of territorial emissions, actions to reduce these emissions mainly sit in areas C through F of the diagram to the right, and actions to reduce organisational emissions, which largely sit in areas A and B. As a result, partnership working, regional and national strategies have a far greater role to play in Net Zero 2050 than Net Zero 2030 and will also require much more public action. The local authority cannot deliver territorial Net Zero 2050 alone, but we are the organisation that is best positioned to produce a local overview, particularly due to our role in place shaping.



Territorial emissions in Blaenau Gwent have fallen 33% between 2005 and a 2019 baseline, compared to 29% for Wales as a whole. 71% of these reductions in emissions are associated with electricity consumption, while some of these reductions will be due to actions taken locally to improve energy efficiency, a majority will be due to decarbonisation of the National Grid.

In March 2021, 44 residents of Blaenau Gwent came together online to discuss the question 'how can we tackle climate change in Blaenau Gwent in a way that is fair and improves living standards for everyone?' The 44 Assembly Members were chosen at random to be representative of people in Blaenau Gwent (in terms of age, gender, where they live, type of housing etc.) The [Climate Assembly](#) met for a total of 23 hours online, hearing evidence from over 20 experts (from academics to local residents), and voted on recommendations they created themselves, five of which received the 80% support needed to become official recommendations. Through the Blaenau Gwent Mitigation Steering Group partners developed a set of proposed actions that we could take in response to the Climate Assembly at the Blaenau Gwent level (recognising that some elements of recommendations will take action at regional or national scale). We agreed to lead for four of these priorities.



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 63 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 prepared a 10 - 15-year Ultra Low Emission Vehicle (ULEV) Fleet Transition Plan. In November 2020 the Council completed a Low Emission Vehicle Fleet Review with Consultants Cenex. The fleet review considered our current fleet, low emission vehicle technology options, performance reviews and infrastructure review. At the time of the review our fleet consisted of 97 vehicles and included passenger cars, light commercial vehicles, large minibuses and a range of trucks. Our fleet contributed 800 tonnes of CO2 annually and 63% of these emissions come from rigid trucks (12- 18t). The review found that battery electric vehicles within the light commercial segment represent the best opportunity for Blaenau Gwent CBC to introduce low emission vehicles into the fleet in the short term. Ultra-low emission vehicles are being trialled with frontline services to enable the team to consider the pilot in the fleet replacement programme. Options to progress the decarbonisation of the Council's fleet still need to be developed. A long term programme of works to reduce the annual carbon emissions and energy costs of our buildings continues to make progress

Blaenau Gwent Council are exploring opportunities to launch Community Energy Bonds as a way for the local community to play a part in raising the funds to support the development of low carbon energy generation infrastructure and technology. As one of a number of UK pilot areas, the Council has the opportunity to use Community Municipal Investment (CMI) to fund low carbon infrastructure for the Council. The Council have signed the Local Climate Bond pledge with the UK Government Green Finance Institute to support us in raising the funds to make investment in low carbon infrastructure and help us on our journey to become net zero by 2030.

We are working closely with businesses and housing providers across Blaenau Gwent to assist with SAB (drainage

applications) at planning stage. Last year saw the completion of the Brynmawr food retail park where the team worked closely with the developer and investor to bring the development forward as it had been caught between Welsh Government legislation and needed a retrospective SAB permission.

The Council takes part in regional initiatives like Resilient Greater Gwent which collaborates to support ecology, deal with invasive species, and grow sustainable communities which brings together all the components of environmental resilience. As part of this, the Council 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.

The Education Directorate aim to ensure that decarbonisation measures are at the forefront of our future planning and teaching. The environment and biodiversity considerations form the basis of all new school buildings and existing school upgrades, and we encourage nature friendly management on school grounds. Effective partnership working enables us to provide advice and guidance to support our children and young people around biodiversity, decarbonisation, equalities, diversity and inclusion. These partnerships with schools and the Children's Grand Council are very effective and not only inform but support our children and young people to have a voice. We are and will continue to deliver effective sustainable communities for learning which are environmentally friendly and support the delivery of our educated young people who will in the future form our connected communities.

A Healthier Wales

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

Within Gwent, the average life expectancy is below the Welsh average except in Monmouthshire. Between 2017 and 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, average life expectancy in all four of the other local authorities in Gwent fell, including Blaenau Gwent. Life expectancy for women peaked in 2015-17 and for men rose slightly in 2018-20.

Average healthy life expectancy (how long one can expect to live in good health) is also below the Wales average in Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Newport and Torfaen. Average healthy life expectancy for women in Torfaen is 55 years compared to 69 years for women in Monmouthshire. Men in Blaenau Gwent have the worst healthy life expectancy in Gwent, living for 56 years on average, compared to 69 years for men in Monmouthshire. In 2021, the poorest children in Wales started school 10 months behind children from families with more money. Blaenau Gwent is below the Welsh average in the number of seven-year-olds achieving the expected level at the end of the Foundation Phase in 2017.

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. Following on from this, the Blaenau Gwent Integrated Services Partnership Board (ISPB) has been established to act as an enabler for embedding a whole system approach that integrates health, local authority and voluntary sector services, and is facilitated by collaboration and consultation.

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

Self-Assessment – Progress Made Against 2021/22 Actions

Through our previous self-assessment process, we identified how well we were performing and what we could do better. In order to achieve this, we developed an action plan which highlights the areas where improvement was needed. The below table has been updated to show the progress made to achieve these actions throughout the year, with a summary of the work undertaken, any challenges that have arisen and our focus for the future. From evaluating our progress, we have set ourselves against Red, Amber, Green, Blue status which is aimed to give a clear snapshot of the progress we have made:

BLUE – Action has been completed
RED – Action is significantly behind target
AMBER – Action is behind target but is manageable
GREEN – Action is on target

31 Actions were identified as part of the 2021/22 Self-Assessment. Of these for 2022/23: 8 are blue (completed) ; 21 are green; 2 are amber 12 will continue to be monitored into 2022/23 and 21 will move to business as usual.

Improvement Identified from 2021/22 Self-Assessment	Action	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Implement the Audit Wales recommendation with regards to Silent Valley Waste Services Ltd.	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.	In March 2023, Silent Valley limited company was brought back under the remit of Blaenau Gwent Council.	Blue	Complete
Capacity concerns across service areas	Address the staffing needs including recruitment and retention in services across the Council and implement the strategy devised to consider short, medium and longer-term solutions to the workforce including the consideration to collaborate on a regional basis	The Workforce strategy and action plan continues to be implemented to help address staffing needs across the authority. The Council has undertaken a review of recruitment and retention data to understand the challenges faced which has helped to inform and develop workforce plans which have been developed by directorates and reported to senior officers.	Green	Continue 2022/23

Improvement Identified from 2021/22 Self-Assessment	Action	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Uncertainty of the economic impact of: Covid-19; the exit from the European Union; and WG future financial settlements	Continued financial monitoring and reporting through the Council's democratic process. Identify strategic business reviews to mitigate the possible residual funding gaps in future years.	<p>The Council's budget and financial position continues to be closely monitored and regularly reported through the democratic process, this includes updates through Mid-term financial strategy, 6 monthly reports through performance and finance report and member briefings.</p> <p>Service areas monitor their individual budgets, any progress, change or impact on budgets are reported through directorate business plans. Any risk or impact on budgets are reported through the Corporate Risk register.</p> <p>Our engagement programme in 2023 gave people in Blaenau Gwent the opportunity to share their views to help us plan our budget and services from April 2023 onwards. This year we had the highest level of response witnessed for a budget engagement survey carried out by the council with 3,376 valid questionnaires being completed.</p> <p>We have been working with Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council to access the Shared Prosperity Fund. This fund is the UK Government replacement to the European Structural Investment Fund following the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union.</p>	Green	Continue 2022/23
The results of the 2021 Census may impact Local Government Settlements moving forward.	Consider the Census results when planning future budget settlements and service provision	The results of the census were challenged by the Council. The ONS have confirmed that they feel the information is correct. Further analysis of localised data is to take place to assess the impact that this may have on future service delivery and budgets.	Green	Move to business as usual

Improvement Identified from 2021/22 Self-Assessment	Action	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Implementation of Strategies and Plans	Continue to monitor and implement Strategies and Plans identified throughout the self-assessment via the business planning process	<p>The Council published the first self-assessment report in October 2022 which set out how strategic plans have been implemented throughout the year.</p> <p>Our new Corporate Plan has been developed which sets out our vision, values and priorities for 2022- 2027.</p>	Green	Move to business as usual
Audit Wales have identified that the most significant risk facing councils during 2021-22 continues to be the COVID-19 pandemic and its recovery	Continue to monitor and implement the COVID 19 Recovery and Renewal Plans via the business planning process	<p>As part of the Springing Forward Audit completed by Audit Wales – several recommendations were identified- these recommendations have been included in business plans and progress of these are reported quarterly. Any risks identified have been recorded on our Corporate Risk register and updates to manage these risks are reported regularly.</p> <p>Following the COVID 19 pandemic the authority moved from the emergency response to a recovery phase in March 2022. Recovery plans were established and have now been embedded within the business plans.</p>	Blue	Complete
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	Regular meetings between finance and Regeneration and Community Services continue to take place to ensure that income generation and spending targets are monitored.	Green	Move to business as usual
Achievement of the 70% recycling target by 2024/25	Actions within Business Plan	The service continues to monitor residual side waste as well as promoting the ‘keeping up with the Jones’s’ campaign which is now fully rolled out across the borough. Monitoring is currently in place to identify the streets with low performance regarding food waste recycling. To support this, a food waste campaign has been rolled out across the borough. An education centre, currently in the build phase, is to be situated at Roseheyworth HWRC. This action will remain until the recycling figures for 2024/25 are known.	Green	Continue for 2022/23

Improvement Identified from 2021/22 Self-Assessment	Action	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Community Services to share good practice throughout the directorate and across the Council.	Technical Services Income Generation Model to be presented to Wider CLT Reinstate Community Services Performance Reports	Community Services Performance Reports have been reinstated and presented through the democratic process.	Blue	Complete
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	The focus on Higher levels of language acquisition and reading continues to be a priority and area of focus for our Education department.	Amber	Continue for 2022/23
Improve attainment of eFSM pupils and particularly our more-able pupils in the early years and throughout education	Identified within the business plan	Learner outcomes for those eligible for free school meals (eFSM) has improved and the achievement gap has been reduced, despite the number of eFSM levels increasing.	Green	Move to business as usual
Improve school attendance in both primary and secondary sectors	Identified within the business plan	<p>2021/22 Attendance Secondary School - 84.8% Attendance Primary School 89.5%.</p> <p>2022/23 Attendance Secondary School - 85.8% Attendance Primary School 90.4%.</p> <p>Joint meetings have been held across educational departments to support with secondary schools to improve attendance and reducing exclusions. Further analysis will take place in order to identify the reason for decline and put mitigating actions in place.</p> <p>Targeted work has taken place to help reduce exclusions.</p>	Green	Continue for 2022/23

Improvement Identified from 2021/22 Self-Assessment	Action	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Improve progress between Key Stage 3 and 4, particularly in English, Maths and Science	Identified within the business plan	<p>Key Stage 4 results for 2022 demonstrated progress and were in line with the school development plan targets set by the four secondary settings. There were improvements in 29 out of 32 key measures. GCSE A*/A and A*-C grades improved in English, Science and Maths.</p> <p>A-level A*-C and A*-E grades continue to be strong and were in line with the all-Wales mean at 98.4% for BG learners at Coleg Gwent settings.</p>	Green	Continue for 2022/23
Continue the work with Schools Causing Concern	Identified within the business plan	There has been an incremental reduction in Schools Causing Concern from 6 schools in 2019 to 2 schools in 2022. We continue to work with schools causing concern.	Green	Continue for 2022/23
Welsh Government require for a revision to the Delivery Agreement to be undertaken and approved by them.	Undertake a revision of the Delivery Agreement	Since approval of the revised Delivery Agreement there have been a number of unforeseen delays meaning an updated Delivery Agreement timetable was required. The Welsh Government Agreed a revised Delivery Agreement in February 2023. Submission of the plan is now due to Welsh Government May/ June 2024	Green	Continue for 2022/23
Address the workforce pressures being seen locally and nationally, 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	<p>Pressures on workforce in Social Services continues to be a national issue. The recruitment and retention strategy has been reviewed with the introduction of a new Workforce Recruitment lead who is focussing on supporting Managers on recruiting to vacant Provider and Social Work posts.</p> <p>Social Services are working closely with Organisational Development to establish a Strategic Workforce Plan to support capacity concerns in the short, medium and longer-term as well as considering the opportunity to collaborate on a regional basis. The workforce in Social Services has been identified as a critical risk and has therefore been included on the Council's Corporate Risk Register.</p>	Green	Move to business as usual

Improvement Identified from 2021/22 Self-Assessment	Action	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Implement the findings of the Council's Communication function	Embed the recommendations	We have developed a campaign based approach to our corporate communication function to increase focus and impact. One of our main communication campaigns for the year was the cost of living support work.	Green	Move to business as usual
Identifying capacity across the organisation to support the user design approach	The Council to consider where the user design approach is required and ensure staff support the process	We recognise that digital progression is the future and, as a council, we aim to develop effective digital infrastructure and improve connectivity within the borough by promoting digital participation. We are leading on a project that looks at how our communities are accessing our services and how we can make improvements. We are working to understand the barriers to our communities using digital services and developing support for those who wish to develop their digital skills.	Green	Continue for 2022/23
Gender Pay Gap – a review of the current data is to be undertaken in conjunction with the Workforce Strategy	Identify actions/measures to further address the gender pays differences as part of existing Equality plans.	Our assessment, published as part of our Pay Policy Statement for 2022/23, shows women and men are paid equally for doing equivalent jobs across the Council.	Blue	complete
Undertake data analysis identify key health inequalities across Gwent, including the impacts of COVID 19.	The Gwent Well-being Plan to be informed by the data and develop appropriate actions for implementation to tackle health inequalities.	The Gwent PSB have agreed to become a Marmot Region and to adopt the eight Marmot principles to reduce health inequalities across Gwent and to work in partnership with the Institute of Health Equity (IHE).	Blue	Complete`
Maintain 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	Council approved its revised commissioning and procurement strategy in March 2023 – 'Maximising the Socially Responsible Blaenau Gwent Pound £' The strategy sets out how our commissioning and procurement activities will support the Council's corporate priorities	Green	Move to business as usual

Improvement Identified from 2021/22 Self-Assessment	Action	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Embed agile working	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	We have reviewed our Agile working arrangements through engagement with our staff and trade unions. Workforce plans are in place for each directorate.	Green	Continue for 2022/23
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.	We have made good progress to be more commercially minded as an organisation, and have reviewed our commercial strategy to further embed the Council's commercial and business ambitions. We have worked with our partners in SOLACE & CIPFA to develop a commercial framework to develop project specific business cases, which will support a consistent one council approach to future commercial and business opportunities.	Green	Move to business as usual
Develop a data delivery plan to help implement the Council's vision for using data effectively and address inconsistencies across areas with regards to performance and reporting	Consider the development of a delivery plan for using data effectively and improve the consistency of performance reporting across the Council.	The development of a data strategy will be a key development in 2023/24. The strategy is to be aligned to a number of other council strategies to avoid duplication.	Amber	Continue for 2022/23
Further strengthen the Community Hub model.	Monitor the impact of Universal Credit on residents and identify 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.	The customer services strategy, informed by the recent external review on customer experience is being progressed which will set out our vision for customer support for the future.	Green	Move to business as usual
The Energy Prospectus will contribute towards the target of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2030.	Implementation of the Energy Prospectus	The work and projects carried out as part of the Energy Prospectus support the implementation of the Council's Decarbonisation Plan and to contribute to becoming net zero by 2030 alongside the declaration of a climate emergency.	Green	Move to business as usual

Improvement Identified from 2021/22 Self-Assessment	Action	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
The activity of the Community Hubs to date	Continue to review and further develop the Community Hub	Community Hub figures are monitored and reported on.	Blue	Complete
Establish Town Centre Advisory Boards	Establish Town Centre advisory Boards across all towns.	Advisory Boards are in place across the Town Centres of Abertillery, Brynmawr and Ebbw Vale to support a partnership delivery approach for future project delivery.	Blue	Complete
Examples of integrated working provided as part of narrative.	The Council will continue to work with partners across the Council	<p>The Sustainable Development principles are included within the standard report template presented to our Committees. These are to be completed for every report for the members to consider as part of their decision making.</p> <p>In our Corporate Performance reports we continue to evidence how the work we have undertaken as an authority contributes to the 5 ways of working under the Well-being of Future Generations Act.</p>	Blue	Complete
Examples of collaborative working provided as part of narrative	Continue to work collaboratively with partners and identify further partnership opportunities	<p>We work in collaboration with a range of local partners which includes working with other public sector organisations, the third sector, businesses and members of the public to develop and deliver our services.</p> <p>Recently a Gwent Public Services Board has been established to bring together other Gwent local authorities and partners to work in collaboration to implement a well-being plan. This plan brings partners together to work towards creating a climate ready Gwent that is fairer more equitable inclusive for all.</p>	Green	Move to business as usual
Update and embed the Engagement Strategy.	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	A refreshed Engagement and Participation Strategy is being developed which will strengthen our approach to engage local communities, businesses, staff and trade unions.	Green	Continue for 2022/23

Feedback

The Council welcome any feedback you might have about the Self-assessment 2022/23. 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 below 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.

Corporate Performance Team

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
General Offices
Steel Works Road
Ebbw Vale
NP23 6AA

Email: pps@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk

Mae'r ddogfen hon ar goel yn Gymraeg
This document is available in Welsh.

