

Well-being Objective Setting Examination – Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| What we looked at – the scope of our work | 4 |
| What we looked for – our audit criteria | 5 |
| What we found | 6 |
| The Council can describe how it considered the sustainable development principle when setting its well-being objectives, but it could more clearly document this and the steps it will take to deliver them, as well as strengthening citizen involvement | 6 |
| Recommendations | 9 |
| Appendices | |
| Appendix 1: Key questions and what we looked for | 10 |

Background: Our examinations of the setting of well-being objectives

- 1 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (the Act) places a 'well-being duty' on 48 public bodies. The duty requires those bodies to set and publish 'well-being objectives' that are designed to maximise their contribution to achieving each of the Act's seven national well-being goals.¹ They must also take all reasonable steps, in exercising their functions, to meet those objectives.
- 2 The Auditor General must carry out examinations to assess the extent to which public bodies have acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when setting their well-being objectives.² We are carrying out a rolling programme of these examinations, up to early 2025.³
- 3 To do something in accordance with the sustainable development principle means acting 'in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. To achieve this, a public body must take account of the five ways of working: long term, integration, involvement, collaboration, and prevention.⁴
- 4 We designed an assessment framework to enable us to assess the extent to which public bodies have applied the sustainable development principle when setting their well-being objectives. **Appendix 1** sets out further information on our approach, including a set of 'positive indicators' that illustrate what good could look like.
- 5 In designing our approach, we considered what we could reasonably expect from public bodies at this point in time. Public bodies should now be familiar with the sustainable development principle and ways of working and be seeking to apply them in a meaningful way. At the same time, we appreciate that public bodies are still developing their experience in applying the sustainable development principle when setting well-being objectives. Therefore, the examinations include consideration of how public bodies are applying their learning and how they can improve in future.

¹ The seven national well-being goals are; a prosperous Wales, a resilient Wales, a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales, a Wales of cohesive communities, a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language, and a globally responsible Wales.

² Section 15 (1) (a) Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

³ The Auditor General must carry out examinations over the period set out in the Act, which begins one year before a Senedd election and ends one year and one day before the following Senedd election.

⁴ Section 5 Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

Carrying out our examination at Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

- 6 The aim of this examination was to:
 - explain how the Council applied the sustainable development principle at key points in the process of setting its well-being objectives;
 - provide assurance on the extent that the Council applied the sustainable development principle when setting its well-being objectives; and
 - identify opportunities for the Council to further embed the sustainable development principle when setting well-being objectives in future.
- 7 We set out to answer the question ‘to what extent has the Council acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when setting its new well-being objectives’. We did this by exploring the following questions:
 - Was the process the Council put in place to set its well-being objectives underpinned by the sustainable development principle?
 - Has the Council considered how it will make sure it can deliver its well-being objectives in line with the sustainable development principle?
 - Has the Council put in place arrangements to monitor progress and improve how it applies the sustainable development principle when setting its well-being objectives?
- 8 We discussed the timing of the examination with the Council and we tailored the delivery to reflect its specific circumstances.
- 9 We gathered our evidence in the following ways:
 - reviewing key documents; and
 - running a workshop with officers who were involved with setting the well-being objectives.

How and when the Council set its well-being objectives

- 10 The Council commenced work on setting new well-being objectives during 2022 then published its new objectives in October 2022. **Exhibit 1** sets out those well-being objectives.
- 11 The Council published its well-being objectives as part of its Corporate Plan, which included its well-being statement that is required under the Act. The [Corporate Plan](#) can be viewed on the Council’s website.

Exhibit 1: The Council's well-being objectives 2022-27

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

What we found

The Council can describe how it considered the sustainable development principle when setting its well-being objectives, but it could more clearly document this and the steps it will take to deliver them, as well as strengthening citizen involvement

Planning

- 12 The Council told us it drew on various data sources to inform its understanding of current and future challenges. These include: Data Cymru; legislative changes; its self-assessment against previous objectives; and intelligence from officers within service areas. It also drew on the Gwent Public Services Board's (PSB) well-being assessment. This contains a comprehensive range of data and intelligence from varying sources.
- 13 The Council did not consult on its draft well-being objectives. Though it did draw on information collected through existing activity to understand what is important to local people. It is not clear whether the Council considered if its engagement intelligence was representative of the population, and covered the breadth of areas necessary, as this isn't documented. But officers recognise the need to do more to involve the full diversity of the population, particularly given changing demographics in the county. It also told us it will continue to use ongoing engagement to inform the actions that support the objectives. We understand this will be reflected in the Council's new participation strategy.

- 14 Officers drew together this intelligence and used it to inform discussions at facilitated workshops with the Corporate Leadership Team and Cabinet. Outputs from the sessions show a series of common priorities which form the basis for the well-being objectives.
- 15 The well-being objectives seek to make long-term improvements that extend beyond the 5-year Corporate Plan. The Council recognises that the actions it takes over the next 5 years will be important in achieving some of its longer-term objectives, even if it's unable to evidence the impact of those actions for several years.
- 16 The new well-being objectives are more cross-cutting in nature than previous Council priorities. The Council intends this integrated approach to encourage shared ownership of the objectives and will require directorates to work together to deliver them. But although the well-being objectives are cross-cutting, business planning takes place on a service / directorate basis. The Council will therefore need to ensure that these arrangements do not hinder the development of cross-cutting actions and measures.
- 17 There is a high-level understanding of how the well-being objectives relate to what other public bodies are seeking to achieve. For example, the Council has developed its objectives so they align with the PSB draft objectives. Once the PSB's well-being plan is agreed, the Council will work with other members of the local delivery group to develop an area plan. This should help align actions that will contribute to delivering the region's collective aims.
- 18 The Council has also considered how its well-being objectives align with the national well-being goals and the 'Marmot Principles'. The latter are a set of guiding principles, adopted by the Gwent PSB and its member bodies, designed to tackle the root causes of health inequalities.

Resourcing and delivery

- 19 The Corporate Plan does not clearly set out the steps, or actions, the Council will take to deliver the well-being objectives. Steps help clarify what a body plans to do to deliver each objective. When accompanied by clear measures, they can also help citizens understand what difference the well-being objectives will make to them. Whilst actions relating to well-being objectives feature in service and directorate business plans, these plans are not published. So, it is not currently clear to the public what actions the Council plans to take against each objective, over what timescale and what progress it anticipates making. The Council should therefore consider how it can make some of the detail that sits below the well-being objectives more transparent.
- 20 The Council recognises the need to work with others to deliver its well-being objectives. We are aware of existing collaborative arrangements and ongoing consideration of further opportunities for joint working. The Corporate Plan lists the partners the Council will work with but doesn't include any detail on how this will work in practice or the actions / projects the partnership working relates to.

- 21 The Council has set out its intention to ensure that its Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and Corporate Plan are aligned. It told us it will continue to review and update the MTFS regularly to reflect the costs of the actions it will take to deliver the wellbeing objectives. The 2023-24 budget provides examples of the Council prioritising spending on the Plan's priorities, such as education. It also demonstrates investment in preventative services which aim to reduce cost and demand for statutory services over the medium to long-term. But the Council also recognises the challenges of funding the Plan and balancing short and longer-term needs when allocating resources, particularly in the context of the current economic climate. It told us that some actions may take longer to deliver as result. This underlines the importance of aligning the Corporate Plan and well-being objectives with the MTFS, annual budget and business planning arrangements.

Monitoring and review

- 22 Although the Corporate Plan lists the measures the Council will use to assess progress against the well-being objectives, it contains no baseline data, targets or timescales. As a result, it's not clear from the Plan what progress the Council aims to achieve over the next 5 years.
- 23 The Council's business planning arrangements provide the main mechanism for delivering and measuring progress against the Corporate Plan. Each directorate and service should have a business plan that sets out actions and performance targets linked to the priorities and well-being objectives set out in the Corporate Plan. Business plans should be updated quarterly to inform regular monitoring and reporting. They also feed into the Council's annual self-assessment process.
- 24 But we found inconsistencies in the quality of business plans and will undertake a review later this year to assess the effectiveness of the council's business planning and performance management arrangements. The review will seek to establish the extent to which these arrangements will help the Council to deliver its well-being objectives in accordance with the sustainable development principle.

Recommendations

R1 The Council should strengthen its application of the sustainable development principle when it next develops its well-being objectives by drawing on the views of the full diversity of the population to inform the objectives.

R2 The Council should demonstrate more clearly in future corporate plans:

- how it has applied the sustainable development principle in the setting of its well-being objectives; and
- the steps it intends to take to deliver its well-being objectives.

R3 The Council should ensure there is an effective framework for assessing progress against the well-being objectives over the short, medium and long term and that measures reflect the strategic and cross-cutting nature of the objectives.

Appendix 1

Key questions and what we looked for

The table below sets out the question we sought to answer in carrying out this examination, along with some sub-questions to guide our evidence gathering. It also includes some 'positive indicators' that have been tailored to this examination, adapted from those we have previously used to inform our sustainable development principle examinations. This list is not a checklist, but rather an illustrative set of characteristics that describe what good could look like.

| | |
|---|----------------------------|
| To what extent has the body acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when setting its new well-being objectives? | |
| Planning: Was the process the body put in place to set its well-being objectives underpinned by the sustainable development principle? | |
| | Positive indicators |

To what extent has the body acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when setting its new well-being objectives?

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Has the body used data and other intelligence to understand need, risks and opportunities and how they might change over time?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The body has a clear and balanced assessment of progress against previous well-being objectives that has been used to inform the body's understanding of the 'as is'/ short-term need. • The body has set well-being objectives based on a good understanding of current and future need, risk and opportunities, including analysis of future trends. This is likely to be drawn from a range of local and national sources, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Public Services Boards' well-being assessments – Regional Partnership Boards' population assessments – The results of local involvement/ consultation exercises – Service monitoring and complaints – Future Trends report – Natural Resources Wales' State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR) for Wales and Area Based Assessments • The body has sought to understand the root causes of problems so that it can address negative cycles and intergenerational challenges through its well-being objectives. |
| <p>Has the body involved others in developing its well-being objectives?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The body uses the results of involvement to help select its well-being objectives. That involvement – whether primary, secondary or a combination – reflects the full diversity of the population. • Involvement reflects good practice and advice from the Future Generations Commissioner. |

To what extent has the body acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when setting its new well-being objectives?

Has the body considered how the objectives can improve well-being and have a broad impact?

- The well-being objectives have been designed to improve well-being in the broadest sense and make a contribution across the seven national well-being goals.
- The well-being objectives have been designed to reflect and capitalise on the connections between different areas of work.
- There is a well-developed understanding of how the well-being objectives impact on/ relate to what other public bodies are trying to achieve and opportunities to work together.

Has the body designed the objectives to deliver longer-term benefits, balanced with meeting short-term needs?

- The body has set objectives that are sufficiently ambitious and have been designed to drive activity across the organisation.
- The objectives are designed to meet short and longer-term need. Where objectives are set over a short to medium timeframe, they are set in the context of longer-term considerations or ambitions.

Resourcing and delivery: Has the body considered how it will make sure it can deliver its well-being objectives in line with the sustainable development principle?

Has the body considered how it can resource the well-being objectives?

- Resources have been allocated to ensure the objectives can be delivered over the short and medium-term, but the body has also considered longer-term resources, risks and/or how it can resource longer-term objectives.

To what extent has the body acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when setting its new well-being objectives?

| | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The body has allocated resources to deliver preventative benefits, where these are described in its well-being objectives. |
| Has the body considered how it can work with others to deliver their objectives? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The body is drawing on its knowledge of partners objectives/ activity, its relationships and collaborative arrangements to make sure it can deliver on cross-cutting ambitions. |
| Monitor and review: Has the body put in place arrangements to monitor progress and improve how it applies the sustainable development principle when setting its well-being objectives? | |
| Has the body developed appropriate measures and monitoring arrangements? | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Performance measures are designed to reflect the sustainable development principle, e.g., by focusing on outcomes that cut across departmental/ organisational boundaries and deliver multiple (including preventative) benefits over the longer term.• There is a 'golden thread' that will allow the body to clearly and transparently report on progress to meeting the objectives. |
| Is the body seeking to learn from and improve how it has applied the sustainable | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The body shows self-awareness and a commitment to improving how it applies the sustainable development principle so that it can do so in a meaningful and impactful way. |

To what extent has the body acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when setting its new well-being objectives?

development principle to setting its well-being objectives?

- The body has learnt from setting previous well-being objectives and from applying the sustainable development principle more generally and has improved the process for setting its new well-being objectives.
- The body has or plans to reflect on how it has applied the sustainable development principle in this round of setting well-being objectives.



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