

**ANNUAL
GOVERNANCE
STATEMENT
2022/23**

Annual Governance Statement 2022 – 2023

Scope of Responsibility

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council ('the Authority') is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. The Authority also has a general duty under the Local Government Measure (Wales) 2009 and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

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

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

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

The Purpose of the Governance Framework

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

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

The governance framework has been in place at the Authority for the year ended 31 March 2023 and up to the date of approval of the 2022/23 Annual Statement of Accounts.

The Annual Audit Summary for 2022 from Audit Wales was received in November 2023, following signoff of the Blaenau Gwent accounts 2021/22 (in October 2023). The report includes a synopsis of each review undertaken by Audit Wales over the year.

Details of the Proposals for Improvement issued by regulators during 2022/23 are available from the Corporate Performance Team, and progress against their achievement is reported within the relevant business plan and included in the Finance and Performance Report. These proposals are attached at Appendix A.

The Governance Framework

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

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

How we do this:

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

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

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

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

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

Review of Effectiveness:

Each Committee conforms to legislative requirements including compliance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 and 2011, 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.

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 Audit and Risk Manager, one of which was rejected as not eligible and three are ongoing investigations. One has recently been reported to CLT, one has been completed and will be taken to CLT soon and the other one has been paused due to police involvement.

In order to evidence the robust application of the Authority's Code of Conduct an Internal Audit review of the declarations of interest process was undertaken and findings escalated to departmental management teams to ensure appropriate actions were taken to address the weaknesses identified.

Recommendations for Development:

- Continued adherence to the Authority's policies and procedures which exist to guide Members and Officers to comply with the Council's expectations in terms of acting with integrity.
- In line with good practice, an annual review (as a minimum) of the Constitution and Scheme of Delegation to ensure the Authority's governance and decision making processes remain fit for purpose.

Core Principle B
Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

How we do this:

The Council is working with Town and Community Councils with regular interaction with the Clerks. Development has included a Clerks Forum and engagement plan developed for approval. Alongside this, the common agreement has been reviewed and agreed.

The Council has an Engagement Strategy 2018/22 which outlines the approach to engagement which includes: the community, stakeholders, staff, and members. This Strategy will be reviewed during 2022/23 to ensure that it captures the participation aspects of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The next Strategy will incorporate both engagement and participation and is under development for approval in 2024.

The Citizen's Panel is in operation alongside various other engagement groups such as the 50+ Forum, Youth Forum & Regional Youth Forum, and Children's Grand Council. The Council also engages with the business community through channels such as the 'Business Hub', the Enterprise Board and through various town centre business forums.

To understand the engagement activity across the Council, 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 requests post-event information such as the reach of engagement, result of engagement & feedback and whether an evaluation of the engagement activity was undertaken. This will also undertake a review alongside the review of the Engagement Strategy.

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
- Age Friendly Intergenerational Event
- Wood Environmental Permit Survey

With regards to Corporate organisational engagement, advice and guidance is provided to service areas in-line with National Principles for Public Engagement. Snap surveys have also been used across the Council to gain feedback and information. This included a survey

for OD, New Agile Working Model. Development and delivery of Active Travel Involvement Programme also took place.

Children and Young People's Participation work included supporting regular Youth Forum events, supporting members to deliver local and regional priorities; and coordination and facilitation of the Children's Grand Council.

Engagement activity was undertaken on the Council budget in 2023 and received the highest level of questionnaires received, with approx. 4,000 responses.

The 50+ Network has been established alongside community champions and the citizen voice.

The Gwent PSB has undertaken a regional wellbeing 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.

Engagement support was provided to the Gwent PSB's Well-being Plan Engagement Programme within Blaenau Gwent, including Gwent PSB summer promotional campaign (digital and in-person engagement activities) and statutory consultation phase of the Gwent Well-being Plan (digital and in-person engagement activities). Partners showcase good practice, engagement tools and learning (e.g., ABUHB - Community Choice, Community Voice Project Films; Linc Cymru – User Research toolkit; Aneurin Leisure – Corporate Engagement Plan).

The Council worked with the BG Local Well-being Partnership (local delivery group of the Gwent PSB) to deliver a second Participatory Budgeting 'Community Voice, Community Choice' programme. This resulted in £135,000 funding being awarded to 18 community groups delivering local projects chosen by community members at a public Voting Event.

The 5 PSBs in Gwent dissolved in September 2021, in favour of merging to form a regional Gwent PSB. Local Delivery Groups within each local authority were maintained in order to deliver the 2018/23 plans, and to deliver locally against regional well-being objectives going forward. Blaenau Gwent's Local Delivery Group is known as the BG Local Well-being Partnership.

The Gwent wellbeing plan was agreed by the Gwent PSB in July 2023.

In 2022, the Council agreed a new Corporate Plan 2022/27. The Council worked with the newly elected members to undertake a review of the priorities, using learning from the Council's Corporate Self-Assessment, to establish the new priorities for the next 5 years:

- 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 high quality services at the right time and in the right place; and
- Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient.

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

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

- Education Achievement Service (EAS)
- Aneurin Leisure Trust (ALT)
- Gwent Archives
- Gwent Crematoria
- Shared Resource Service (SRS)
- Gwent Public Service Board (PSB)
- BG Local Well-being Partnership
- Cardiff Capital Region City Deal
- Local Nature Partnership Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen
- Tech Valleys
- Valley Task Force
- Gwent Wide Adult Safeguarding Board (GWASB)
- South East Wales Safeguarding Children Board (SEWSCB)
- Greater Gwent Health, Social Care and Well-being Partnership

The Council has an established engagement framework for staff and the Council's Trade Unions and the Consultation Framework has been reviewed and updated. The Partnership and Engagement Team has developed an overarching Council Engagement Framework and Engagement Calendar which includes engagement with staff.

A Corporate Communications Strategy has been developed and an organisational review of the communications function was undertaken in March 2022 with an agreed programme of activity established. The intention moving forward is to align the new Participation and Engagement Strategy with the Communications Strategy.

Review of Effectiveness:

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

The Policy, Partnership and Engagement Team have supported several engagement and participation activities and events. The Council continues to hold several key engagement and participation activities and events including the Youth Forum, Children's School Grand Council, 50+ Forum and key corporate consultations on issues such as the Council Budget.

The Council, as a statutory member of the Gwent Public Services Board, also supports wider partnership engagement activities such as the consultation on the draft Well-being Plan for Gwent and delivery of the participatory budgeting programme, 'Community Voice, Community Choice'.

The Council also continues to develop its use of social media channels such as Facebook (including BG Family Information Service, BG Youth Services and General Offices pages), X (formally Twitter), Instagram and LinkedIn.

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

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

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.

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

The Regional Partnership Board (RPB) has agreed an Area Plan 2023/28 which sets out their response of the findings of the regional Population Needs Assessment, prepared to meet the requirements of the statutory guidance 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 Board Integrated Medium Term Plan and supporting Integrated Service Partnership Board Plans.

Recommendations for Development:

- Supporting the implementation of the Gwent Well-being Plan.
- Supporting the implementation of the Regional Partnership Board Area Plan.
- Development of Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership Plan and priorities.
- Review of the Engagement and Participation Strategy with alignment to the Communications Strategy and continued implementation of the Council's Engagement Programme.
- Continued implementation of the Council's Corporate Plan 2022 – 2027

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

How we do this:

The Authority has reviewed its priorities, vision and values and these are set out in the Council's Corporate Plan 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.

In October 2022 Council received the first annual Self-Assessment 2021/22, developed as a requirement of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. In October 2023, the second self-assessment was also agreed.

The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 established statutory Public Service Boards (PSBs) to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing across Wales by strengthening joint working across all public services. There is a statutory requirement for all PSBs to develop a Well-being Assessment and a Well-being Plan.

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. The Blaenau Gwent Partnership Scrutiny Committee will now only consider items that relate to Blaenau Gwent as identified as part of the BG Local Well-being Partnership.

The Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan came to an end in 2023. The Gwent PSB has undertaken a regional wellbeing 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 Authority has a Strategic Equality Plan 2020/24 that was subject to comprehensive engagement of people with different protected characteristics, including through the Access for all Forum and the Older Peoples Network, as well as holding a Member Equalities Task and Finish Group. As required on an annual basis, a monitoring report on the progress of the Strategic Equalities Plan was taken through the democratic process.

The Authority is committed to the principles of the Wales Procurement Policy that identifies Procurement as a strategic enabler, delivering key policy objectives to support the Council's economic, social and environmental priorities. Work has progressed significantly with regards to procurement and contract management. A new Strategic and Commercial Commissioning Board has been established as well as an Operational Officer Group. The Board has been put in place as a 'check and challenge' to all contracts over £75k, the Group reviews the contracts below this amount.

The Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) Monitoring form and delivery plan draft was shared with Welsh Government for approval. Preparation by Education Transformation and key stakeholders to complete the monitoring form is underway, significant progress has been made.

The Authority receives a capital allocation from Welsh Government that is used along with the capital receipt reserve to form a capital programme providing a range of sustainable benefits for the Authority. The funding is allocated based on alignment with corporate and national priorities.

A review of the Equality Impact Assessment process has been undertaken and approved by Cabinet. This process is now called an Integrated Impact Assessment and is for both new and existing policies and practices (when reviewed). The IIA now also includes the Socio Economic Duty and where there has been deemed to be a substantial (or likely) negative

impact the Council must report this accordingly, outlining any decisions taken with any mitigations considered/actioned.

Review of Effectiveness:

Integrated Impact Assessments are undertaken against all relevant proposals, and included within the Council's reporting template and strategic business reviews. 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 Council has in place a Welsh Language Promotion Strategy and on an annual basis, prepares an Annual Welsh Language Monitoring Report, which is produced in accordance with the requirements of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011.

It is a statutory responsibility for the Corporate Director of Social Services to assess the effectiveness of the delivery of Social Services and produce an Annual Report. The Annual Report contributes to and forms part of the Annual Council Reporting Framework (ACRF). The report of the Corporate Director of Social Services 2022/23 was presented to the People Scrutiny Committee in September 2023.

The Transformation Programme to support the continued development of a 'seamless system' of care, support and wellbeing in Gwent, in response to the Welsh Government's new long term plan for health and social care, 'A Healthier Wales', has seen progress 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.

Strong progress continues to be made on the Council's Welsh Education Strategic Plan 2022/32 (WESP), and as part of this Plan Blaenau Gwent is to open a 210 place Welsh Medium Seedling Primary School in Tredegar to be open by September 2024. In order to support seedling provision and develop increased capacity across childcare and early years' settings, a further two Welsh Medium Childcare settings are being established, one at the Glyncoed Primary new build site and one in the new Tredegar seedling school provision.

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 the Welsh Language Investigation 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.

Recommendations for Development:

- Implementation of the actions against the Welsh Language Compliance Investigation.
- Review of the business planning framework and priorities linked to the implementation of the Corporate Plan.
- Continue to support the collective and individual body duties under the Well-being of Future Generations Act.
- Implementation of requirements under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.
- To implement the new code of practice in relation to the performance and improvement framework of Social Services in Wales.

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

How we do this:

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

A Strategic Commercial and Commissioning Board, as well as an Operational Officer Group, has been established to provide oversight and scrutiny of the Council's commercial activities, primarily commissioning, procurement, investments and trading. The board provides challenge with regards to the merits of each spending proposal and contracts over £75k and ensures a consistent approach to spending in line with the objectives of the Authority. The Operational Group reviews contracts below £75k. The Board has an agreed Terms of Reference and has implemented a quarterly market intelligence report since April 2022.

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.

Review of Effectiveness:

The Authority presents the Finance and Performance Report to the Corporate Overview and Performance Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet on a six monthly basis. This report highlights key messages, performance information, workforce information, financial analysis, Strategic Business Reviews progress, Audit Wales proposals for improvement and directorate and corporate risks.

Self-evaluation arrangements are in place and continue to be refined, requiring each service area to consider how its activities contributed to the achievement of its intended outcomes and support the Council to achieve its goals. The process enables us to gather and use good quality information to better understand how we are performing. Following the introduction of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, the Council has developed two Annual Self-Assessments which have been agreed by Council and included on the Council website.

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

Recommendations for Development:

- Undertake an annual Corporate Self-Assessment and consider arrangements for a Peer Panel Review as part of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.
- Review of the business planning process and review of business plans aligned to the new Corporate Plan.

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

How we do this:

Blaenau Gwent has 33 elected members who collectively make up the decision making body for the Authority. This is complemented by an officer structure of trained and experienced people.

Most policy decisions are developed by the Cabinet, which comprises the Leader and four Members with individual portfolio responsibilities. The portfolios were agreed at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Council in May 2022.

In addition to 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.

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

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

There are two further officer roles, namely, the Corporate Director of Education and the Corporate Director of Social Services who undertake statutory functions for Education and Social Services respectively. Two more officer roles are taken up by the position of Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services and the Chief Officer – Commercial and Customer. During 2022 there were changes to the CLT with the appointment of a new Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services. The Authority has a clear set of strategic outcomes, supporting actions and competencies which relate to service delivery. Both Members and Officers receive appropriate training to enable them to develop / enhance the necessary skills to fulfil their roles.

A Performance Coaching Scheme exists for Officers, and a Personal Development Review Scheme (PDRs) and Competency Framework for Members. For Members the scheme ensures an appropriate level of competency and aims to identify any further training needs or continuous professional development requirements that are required for the job. Most officer posts have a detailed job description and person specification, and selection is made through a robust recruitment process to meet the specific skills and competencies of the post. Role descriptions for Members are established and include specific role descriptions for senior member roles. These are included within the Constitution.

Review of Effectiveness:

A review of various member support and development documents has been undertaken and approved by Council in March 2023. These include the Member Development Strategy 2022/27, Mentoring Framework, and a reviewed PDR / Competency framework. The PDR / Competency Framework process is mandatory for all senior salary holders and offered to all members. A review of the Petitions Protocol has also been undertaken and now includes e-Petitions which has been approved by Council and included on the Council's website.

A Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) operates within the Authority. During 2022/23 the Corporate Leadership Team underwent a number of changes with the appointment of a new Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services. It has continued to operate with an interim Chief Executive and interim Corporate Director of Social Services throughout the year, and latterly (2023/24) an interim Corporate Director of Education has also been in place to cover periods of absence by the substantive post holder. CLT meetings are minuted and key information is disseminated to all officers through an established reporting structure.

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

The Council has an Engagement Strategy 2018/22 which outlines the approach to engagement which includes: the community, stakeholders, staff and members. This Strategy will be reviewed during 2022/23 to ensure that it captures the participation aspects of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The next Strategy will incorporate both engagement and participation and is under development for approval in 2024.

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

There have been no capability cases during the 2022/23 period.

Eleven grievance cases have been investigated across the Council during 2022/23. Eight of which have been resolved and three remain active. Two cases are collective grievances – one of which is now an Employment Tribunal claim and this has implications for 81 plus staff.

A plan to develop a Leadership development programme is underway but this will be dependent on corporate funding.

Recommendations for Development:

- Consider a review of the Leadership Development Programme.
- Implement the mentoring scheme for members.
- Embed the e-Petitions Protocol.
- Development of a new Engagement and Participation Strategy.

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

How we do this:

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

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

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.

A Governance and Audit Committee operates in line with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, receiving reports from internal and external regulators on the internal control environment, risk and governance. The Committee provides appropriate challenge and seeks assurance in line with its terms of reference that are laid in the constitution.

As a Local Authority it is 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. 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.

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.

A Digital and Service Design Board has been established with a corporate programme for digital projects. A Digital Strategy has been developed and approved by Council. 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.

Review of Effectiveness:

The Authority's key governance systems continue to be risk assessed and included in the annual audit plan. One key governance system was subject to an internal audit during 2022/23, namely Information Management, the findings of this audit were reported to the Governance and Audit Committee during 2022/23. One follow-up audit on 'Notification of Terminations – Exit Interviews' concluded that, from the 7 weaknesses identified from the original audit, 5 were fully completed and 2 were partially complete. A review and update of the Anti-Bribery, Fraud and Corruption Policy is ongoing.

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. In October 2023, Council received an outline of progress to date and the future actions that will be put in place to ensure all future monitoring adheres to the report's requirements.

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

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

Risk Description	Potential Impact
Failure to deliver and sustain the changes required to ensure that vital services are prioritised within the financial constraints faced by the Council.	financial pressures and demand challenges will result in reductions to services, significant impacting their availability and quality.
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
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
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.
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
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.
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
(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.	Negative impact on communities Business closures Increased demand for services resulting in increased demand on services. Impact on staff

(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	
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
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
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

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

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

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

Recommendations for Development:

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

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

How we do this:

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

A Governance and Audit Committee is established that has the primary functions of reviewing financial reports and challenging governance arrangements. The Committee aims to seek assurance that the governance framework operating within the Authority is robust, effective and efficient. This is achieved in part through the Committee receiving this Annual Governance Statement. The role and scope of the Governance and Audit Committee are set out in the Constitution and align to the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

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.

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

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.

The Social Services Directorate is subject to audit, inspection and review by the Care Inspectorate for 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. The Directorate is scrutinised by the People Scrutiny Committee. Regular liaison meetings are held with the Directorate, the Cabinet Member and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Scrutiny Committee.

The Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014 places a statutory duty on all local authorities to produce an annual report on the discharge of its social services functions. The

Council's arrangements to meet their safeguarding responsibilities are scrutinised by the People Scrutiny Committee. 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.

Council meetings are held open to the public and are also recorded, Notes and meeting recordings are published on the Authority's website. Since the global pandemic, arrangements for holding democratic meetings have been considered to ensure that the arrangements remain fit for purpose. As part of this, the Council introduced Microsoft Teams to support virtual meetings. Each democratic meeting is recorded and then uploaded onto the website. In future, the livestreaming of Council meetings will be put in place, with consideration of other meetings also, in order to meet the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act. As part of this, a Multi Locations Meeting Policy has been produced. Following closure of the Civic Centre in Ebbw Vale, the General Offices have been identified as the new democratic hub for the Council which includes a hybrid meeting system. This system is functional with Microsoft Teams and provides a hybrid meeting function to adhere to the remote meeting requirements as part of the Local Government and Election (Wales) Act.

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

Review of Effectiveness:

The Council strives to ensure continuous improvement in the delivery of its services through its improvement planning process and the Performance Management Framework. It has strengthened these arrangements to align them with risk management and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 as well as identifying levels of accountability.

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

A performance management system, utilised by the whole Council is in place which incorporates the majority of the Councils business planning and performance arrangements, so that we have one place for information management and monitoring. The system works to avoid duplication and to provide a consistent approach across the Council. The system includes statutory monitoring as well as business plans, self-evaluations, risk, proposals for improvement from auditors, decarbonisation actions, Environment Act actions, performance indicators and sustainable development. A review of this system has been undertaken and both equalities and Welsh Language reporting is to be included as part of the system.

The Authority's assurance arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Head of Internal Audit.

An external peer review of the Internal Audit Service was undertaken in 2022/23 and the results reported to the Governance and Audit Committee. The review found that of the 274 applicable best practice requirements (Public Sector Internal Audit Standards) Blaenau Gwent conforms with 267, 6 have partial compliance and there is one area of non compliant. An Action plan has been developed to address the areas of partial compliance whilst the Council has determined to accept the risk associated with the area of non compliance.

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 / trends to the audit outcomes that indicated particular areas of concern and no individual findings of such significance to cause concern regarding the integrity of the Statement of Accounts. 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.

The Authority received and processed 978 Freedom of Information requests between 1st April 2022 and 31st March 2023 which is a 13% increase on the previous year. Services responded to 88% of requests within the 20 working day requirement. This is a 5% reduction on the response rate of the previous year and work is being undertaken to analyse the reasons behind this.

Recommendations for Development:

- Managers to implement the actions identified to address weaknesses highlighted by Internal Audit. Meetings are undertaken with members of the Wider Corporate Leadership Team, in addition to responsible Officers, and timescales are set for implementation. Managers to ensure systems for which they have responsibility have robust internal controls to further improve the integrity of the Authority's processes.
- Conclude the review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy to ensure it remains fit for purpose.
- Internal Audit continue to undergo an external peer review (every 5 years).
- Managers to implement the proposals for improvement from external auditors.

Significant Governance Issues

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

Issue	Action	Responsible Officer
<p>The uncertainty around the current and future economic impact of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of Living Crisis • Covid-19 • the exit from the European Union • WG future financial settlements <p>Ongoing uncertainty around the medium to long term impact of these may pose significant challenges for the Council and it will be critical for the Council to demonstrate that it has appropriate governance arrangements in place to manage its financial position.</p>	<p>Financial monitoring will continue to be undertaken and reported regularly into Scrutiny and Cabinet via the quarterly portfolio budget forecast reports.</p> <p>To ensure the Council's financial resilience the Council intends to continue with its bridging the gap programme which will identify a number of strategic business reviews. Within this framework the Authority will be looking at ways to achieve cuts / savings whilst mitigating the impact on services where possible.</p>	<p>Chief Officer Resources</p>
<p>The Statement of Accounts for the 2022/2023 financial year have not been completed and will not meet statutory deadlines.</p> <p>Delays experienced in finalising and completing the audit of the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts have impacted upon 2022/23.</p> <p>The implementation of a new asset register and Audit Wales review of assets highlighted that the Council has not undertaken a regular re-assessment of asset lives.</p> <p>As a consequence Audit Wales have issued a qualified opinion on the 2021/22 accounts due to the potential material misstatement of depreciation charges.</p>	<p>The Council has accepted the qualified audit opinion for 2021/22, to ensure this issue does not recur external valuers have been engaged to commence a systematic programme of asset values & lives.</p> <p>The draft outcomes of the 2023 work has now been received, reviewed and the asset records updated.</p> <p>Blaenau Gwent's draft 2022/23 Statement of Accounts will be presented to Governance & Audit Committee in November 2023 – the audit of these accounts is expected to be concluded by March 2024.</p>	<p>Chief Officer Resources</p>

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

(signed).....

(signed).....

Councillor Steve Thomas

Rhian Hayden

Leader of the Council

Chief Officer Resources

September 2023

September 2023

(signed).....

Damien McCann

Interim Chief Executive Officer

September 2023

Audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2022/23

Audit Wales Local Reports: -

Springing Forward (Local Report) (Issued November 2022)	
<i>Report findings and Recommendations for Improvement:</i>	
Ref 134	<p>During the pandemic, the Council made significant changes to its assets and the way that its workforce operates, but further work is needed for it 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.</p> <p>Equality impact assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that all decisions are informed by a timely equality impact assessment where required. • Develop a longer-term asset strategy • In developing its new strategic asset management strategy, the Council should apply the sustainable development principle and specifically ensure that it: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • builds on learning from its experience of the COVID-19 pandemic; • takes account of longer-term trends that may affect service provision and the efficient use of assets; • aligns with other strategic documents, including decarbonisation, commercial, workforce and digital strategies; • sets out the Council's intended outcomes over the short, medium and longer term; • takes account of the needs of staff, service users and partners; and • sets out SMART performance measures and appropriate monitoring and reporting arrangements. <p>Further develop workforce strategy and planning</p> <p>In delivering its workforce strategy, the Council should ensure that it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • incorporates learning from the COVID-19 pandemic; • takes a sufficiently long-term view, for example, taking into account upcoming reviews of service delivery and longer-term trends which may affect workforce planning; • provides service managers with the necessary skills and capacity to develop their workforce plans; • collates service workforce plans to understand what actions it needs to take at a corporate level to strengthen its workforce; • expands workforce information to include detail on: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. current skills and current and future skills gaps; ii. talent and succession planning; and

- iii. iii. critical posts and the risks associated with them becoming vacant;
- strengthens the underlying action plans by developing SMART objectives so progress can be monitored and scrutinised; and
- aligns with other strategic documents, including decarbonisation, commercial, asset management and digital strategies.

Engagement

- As part of the review of the new operating model, seek the views of residents on the community hubs to provide assurance around the Council’s decision and to inform the future development of hubs.
- Consider how the Council might adapt its public engagement methods so it can continue to engage with the public in the event of future lockdowns or other restrictions.
- Work with local businesses to monitor and understand the impact of the closure of the Civic Centre and how the Council can support those businesses whilst the site remains vacant.

Resources

- Identify the costs of delivering the assets and workforce strategies and incorporate these into the medium-term financial strategy.
- Collaborate with public sector partners across Gwent to evaluate the potential benefits of developing a strategic long-term approach to a single public estate.
- Build on existing examples of collaborative working by developing a more systematic approach to collaboration.

Sustainable development principle

- The Council should seek to fully embed the sustainable development principle in its decision making.

Assurance and Risk Assessment Review (Local Report) (Issued November 2022)

Report findings and Recommendations for Improvement:

Ref 134	<p>Review focused on the following areas of the Council:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial Position • Implications of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 • Carbon Reduction Plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council needs to take further action to fully comply with the recommendations in our October 2019 follow up report on corporate arrangements for safeguarding of children. • The Council needs to strengthen its monitoring arrangements of third parties so it can assure itself that they comply with the Council’s safeguarding policies. It should consider whether a self-assessment tool like that recently used by Council directorates can be used with third parties to better understand compliance.
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Corporate Safeguarding Follow up (Local Report) (Issued November 2022)

Report findings and Recommendations for Improvement:

We found that the pandemic further delayed the Council's response to our 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. As such, it was difficult for us to assess the impact of these actions as many were still underway. For example, the safeguarding self-assessments being completed by each directorate should give the Council improved understanding and oversight and enable it to target improvement actions where needed

- The Council needs to take further action to fully comply with the recommendations in our October 2019 follow up report on corporate arrangements for safeguarding of children
- The Council needs to strengthen its monitoring arrangements of third parties so it can assure itself that they comply with the Council's safeguarding policies. It should consider whether a self-assessment tool like that recently used by Council directorates can be used with third parties to better understand compliance.

National Reports: -

Learning from Cyber Attacks (National Report) (Issued October 2022)	
Ref 140	Report Exempt By virtue of paragraph(s) 14,18 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act
Time for Change – Poverty in Wales (National Report) (Issued November 2022)	
Report findings:	
Ref 136	Overall conclusion is that the scale of the challenge and weaknesses in current work make it difficult for Welsh and local government to deliver the systemic change required to tackle and alleviate poverty
A Missed Opportunity – Social Enterprises (National Report) (Issued December 2022)	
Report findings:	
Ref 138	Our overall conclusion is that local authorities are not effectively working with Social Enterprises to maximise their impact, make better use of resources and improve services for people and communities
Together we can – Community Resilience and Self Reliance (National Report) (Issued January 2023)	
Report findings:	
Ref 140	Overall, we conclude that local authorities face a challenging and uncertain financial future but find it difficult to empower people and communities to be more self-reliant and less dependent on services.

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

Appendix B

Recommendation for Improvement made in the 2021/22 Annual Governance Statement	Action Undertaken during 2022/23	Further Action Required
Core Principle A – Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law.		
Continued adherence to the Authority's policies and procedures which exist to guide Members and Officers to comply with the Council's expectations in terms of acting with integrity.	A risk based audit plan was operated for 2022/23 which included examination of the Authority's policies and procedures.	Future audit plans will continue to include a range of policy and procedure audits
To evidence robust application of the Authority's Code of Conduct, an Internal Audit review of the declarations of interest process will be concluded	An audit of compliance with Declarations of Interest was conducted and found to be Limited Assurance.	A follow-up Audit of Declarations will be conducted to evidence whether improve has been made.
In line with good practice, an annual review (as a minimum) of the Constitution and Scheme of delegation to ensure the Authority's governance and decision making processes remain fit for purpose	Minor amendments made to the Constitution in line with local changes.	Further local changes to be made as necessary moving forward.
Continued application of the Members Performance Development Review scheme and competency framework	The Members PDR/CF scheme has been reviewed and agreed by Council.	Undertake members PDR/CF with senior salary holders and offer to all other members during 2023.
Continued application of the Officers Performance Review Scheme.	The Officer Performance Review Scheme has been applied throughout 2022/23	
Audit plans for future years will include testing a range of policies and procedures.	The 2022/23 audit plan included a range of policy and procedure audits.	The Audit Plan for 2022/23 includes testing a range of policies and procedures
Core Principle B – Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.		
Monitor progress of the Local Well-being Plan	The progress of the local Well-being plan has continued until its end in 2023. Contributed to the development of the Gwent Well-being Plan.	Establish local priorities for the BG Local Well-being Partnership.
Continued implementation of the Council's Engagement Programme as part of the Engagement Strategy.	The engagement programme has been reviewed to consider the impacts of the pandemic. Arrangements moving	Review and development of a new Engagement and Participation Strategy.

	forward have been agreed by CLT.	
Core Principle C – Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.		
Continued implementation and mainstreaming of the Welsh Language standards across all areas of Blaenau Gwent.	This is ongoing and updates included within the annual report.	Ongoing
Continue to support the collective and individual body duties under the Well-being of Future Generations Act.	Ongoing including work to embed the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021	Ongoing
Implement the new code of practice in relation to the performance and improvement framework of social services in Wales.	This was delayed due to the pandemic however progress has been made throughout 2020/21 and a performance return has been made to WG.	Continued implementation of the new code of practice in relation to the performance and improvement framework of Social Services in Wales
Core Principle D – Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of intended outcomes.		
Review of the self-evaluation process.	Corporate Self-Assessment undertaken and approved in 2022 aligned to the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.	Undertake a review of the self assessment template in readiness for future reporting. Consider arrangements for the Peer Panel Assessment
Reinstatement of business planning cycle.	The Business Planning cycle has been implemented throughout 2022/23.	Business as Usual
Core Principle E – Developing the entity’s capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.		
Develop and implement a new Leadership Development Programme	This was delayed due to the pandemic.	Consider arrangements for a new Leadership Development Programme
Core Principle F – Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management		
Regular review of Risk Management arrangements to ensure they remain fit for purpose and are implemented consistently.	The review of the Risk Management arrangements has been delayed due to staffing changes. Members of the Governance and Audit Committee have undertaken a training session on risk management	The Risk Management Handbook and Strategy to be updated.
Conclude the review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy and update as appropriate.	The review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti Bribery Policy has been	Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti Bribery Policy is under review. This exercise

	delayed due to staffing changes.	will be concluded by March 2024.
Continued inclusion of key governance systems in the internal audit plan to ensure key elements of the governance framework are prioritised and examined annually	The risk based audit plan for 2022/23 has prioritised a number of key governance systems for audit during the year.	Business as Usual
Core Principle G – Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit, to deliver effective accountability		
Managers to implement the actions identified to address weaknesses highlighted by Internal Audit. Meetings are undertaken with the Wider Corporate Leadership Team, in addition to responsible Officers, and timescales are set for implementation. Managers to ensure systems for which they have responsibility have robust internal controls to further improve the integrity of the Authority's processes.	Internal audit reports have been subject to follow up review where they are graded Limited Assurance or No Assurance	Business as Usual
Conclude the review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy to ensure it remains fit for purpose.	The review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti Bribery Policy has been delayed due to staffing changes.	Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti Bribery Policy is under review. This exercise will be concluded by March 2024.