

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

Engagement and Participation Strategy

2024-2027

DRAFT



Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol

Blaenau Gwent

County Borough Council

Foreword/Supporting Statement

As a Council we are committed towards everyone playing their part in delivering our vision and ambitious programme for action and change. Instrumental to this will be how we engage you - our people, communities, stakeholders, partners, staff members and elected representatives.

We recognise the importance of holding engaging events and programmes that help you find out the facts and ensure you have the opportunity to share your thoughts to shape future plans and service delivery.

You having these opportunities are really important as we have to take really difficult decisions during times of significant financial constraints and important changes in expectation in terms in public service improvement in Wales.

Our commitment to this approach to engage also presents us with a real opportunity to show you that as a Council we are actively taking you into account as part of our new duties set in law by our government in Wales, such as the Well-being of Future Generations Act. These laws fully expect us to involve you in our ways of working.

We recognise the importance of engaging with you, and want to continue to improve how we do it and we are committed to monitoring, reviewing and learning from our practices.

Why Engagement and Participation is important to us

At the heart of everything the Council does is the community of Blaenau Gwent. Engagement, participation and customer experience feature as a key theme which runs across the Council in order to shape services and make decisions.

The Council is committed to supporting communities in the long term and looks to achieve this through active engagement with the community, understanding data and need and by developing plans and strategies that will be implemented over a number of years to ensure the future investment and improvement of services in Blaenau Gwent. Effective engagement is crucial to ensure the Council runs effectively, the services delivered are appropriate and meet the needs of those that use them.

We are committed to engage effectively and this is underpinned by a range of legislation including the:

- The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015
- The Equality Act 2010, - The Welsh Language Measure 2011
- Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021

This will ensure that we will meet its' statutory duty to carry out effective engagement and participation to inform and improve effective decision making.

We will also follow best practice and national standards, for example the Children and Young People's National Participation Standards and the National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales. This policy sets out our corporate approach to engagement with the people of Blaenau Gwent.

This policy reflects the council's core values:

- Respectful
- Inclusive
- Collaborative
- Accountable
- Supportive

The council has an obligation and recognises the importance of participation. Participation is the involvement of the public in the council decision making process, before, during and after. Utilising public opinion is a vital part of designing policies and making decisions. This promotes transparency and allows residents to feel that decisions have been made together.

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 states that as a local authority we must address:

- a) ways of promoting awareness among local people of the principal council's functions;
- b) ways of promoting awareness among local people of how to become a member of the principal council, and what membership entails;
- c) ways of facilitating access for local people to information about decisions made, or to be made, by the principal council;
- d) ways of promoting and facilitating processes by which local people may make representations to the principal council about a decision before, and after, it is made;
- e) arrangements made, or to be made, for the purpose of the council's duty in section 62 of the 2011 Measure (bringing views of the public to attention of overview and scrutiny committees);
- f) ways of promoting awareness among members of the principal council of the benefits of using social media to communicate with local people.

It is hoped that by underpinning our commitment to our Engagement and Participation strategy, we will improve services, standards and experiences for all those who live in, work in or visit Blaenau Gwent. Our 4 key Objectives are set out below and in the Action Plan in Appendix 1.

Objective 1: To mainstream effective engagement and participation approaches across the Council

Objective 2: To ensure that we engage with the people of Blaenau Gwent in the most effective, collaborative way

Objective 3: To actively encourage our communities & future generations to participate in council decision-making activity

Objective 4: To maintain best practice in engagement & participation and keep up to date with the latest innovations to help support our communities

Who do we Engage with?

Community Engagement - Engaging with people that live, work and visit our area to help shape the way we run our Council. We recognise that a community may not be defined by 'a specific place' and welcome engagement from communities of interest or representation where groups or people come together collectively or are represented by an advocate or supporter.

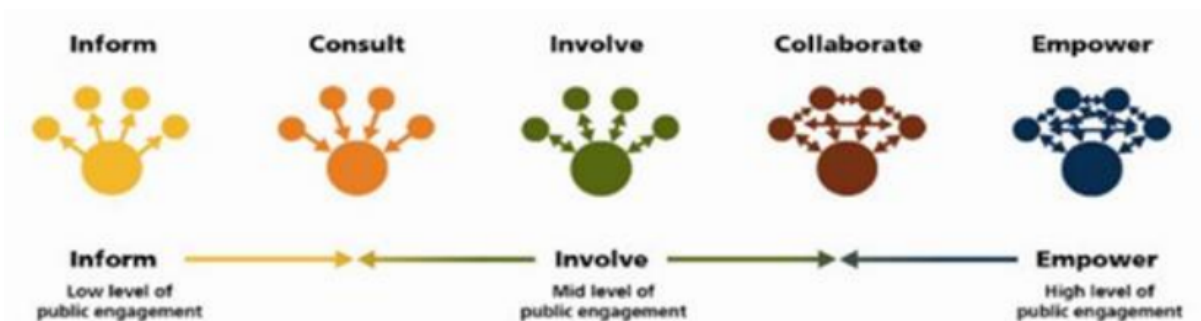
Stakeholder Engagement - Engaging with our stakeholders and partner organisations that have an interest or are actively involved in our area. Part of this will be working through our established partnership arrangements, but we are also keen to actively engage with our non-traditional stakeholders and break down barriers to aid involving everyone.

Staff Engagement - Our staff are our big asset, and we recognise that a workforce that is engaged is crucial if we are to make our engagement approach effective. We know it is important for our staff to be informed, listened to, and involved in shaping decisions which lead to improved service delivery.

Member Engagement - Elected members play a crucial role for our Council in shaping and taking decisions for our area, but also in being a representative voice for the community that they have been elected to serve.

How will we Engage and encourage Participation?

We will employ a varied plan for engaging with the people of Blaenau Gwent and encouraging enhanced participation in decision-making, depending on the circumstances and audience. We will follow the spectrum of engagement as set out below and work towards our four Objectives in the Action Plan (Appendix 1).



	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Purpose	To provide the public with balanced information to allow understanding of concepts, issues, opportunities and potential options or solutions	To obtain feedback on proposals, decisions and strategies.	To work directly with the public throughout a process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision-making process including developing preferred solutions.	We will implement directly what you decide.
Promise	We will keep you informed, we will not withhold any relevant information.	We will consult, listen, consider and keep you informed via constructive feedback.	We will work with you to ensure your input is considered in the decision making process and feedback how it influenced the final outcome.	We will look to you for ideas and innovation in formatting solutions. We will incorporate your ideas and recommendations into the decision making process as far as practically possible.	We will work with you and support you through the process.
Examples	Details of provision and services.	Setting an annual budget.	Developing new policies.	Integrated impact assessments	Participatory Budgeting

We will embrace an approach to Engagement and Participation that follows the *National Principles for Public Engagement in Wales*:

1. Engagement is effectively designed to make a difference
2. Encourage and enable everyone affected to be involved, if they so choose
3. Engagement is planned and delivered in a timely and appropriate way
4. Work with relevant partner organisations
5. The information provided will be jargon free, appropriate and understandable
6. Make it easier for people to take part
7. Enable people to take part effectively
8. Engagement is given the right resources and support to be effective
9. People are told the impact of their contribution
10. Learn and share lessons to improve the process of engagement

We will employ a variety of **methods** to engage with individuals and groups within our communities, such as;

- **Consultations** – To consult on particular issues & provide outcomes
- **Surveys** – To gauge opinions and obtain feedback
- **Engagement Forums** – To involve & empower residents on specific issues
- **Committees & Decision-making** – To communicate & involve people in how decisions are made
- **Face-to-face Events** – To inform, involve & collaborate directly with communities via drop-in sessions, surgeries, town centre engagement etc.
- **Community Groups** – to empower & involve our existing community groups with place-based engagement activity
- **Partnerships & stakeholder networks** – To collaborate with stakeholders, partner organisations and community group representatives
- **Social media and Digital Platforms** – To inform of local provisions and services, gather & provide feedback
- **Community Hubs** – To inform, consider feedback & provide council services
- **Website** – To inform, provide feedback and collaborate with visitors to the website
- **Press Releases** – To inform on specific subjects

How will we facilitate participation in democracy?

Blaenau Gwent residents themselves can also play a key role in how they can participate in the Council decision-making process. The Council commits to facilitate the following methods of participation, addressing the duties as stated in the Local Government & Elections Act (Wales), by making it as simple as possible for residents to:

1) Understand how the Council Works

The Council comprises 33 Councillors representing 14 Electoral Wards. Further information may be found [here](#). The full Council normally meets every other month and has a list of functions including adopting and changing the Constitution, approving and adopting the Budget and Policy Framework, appointing the Leader of Council, determining and agreeing Committees and their terms of reference. The Council has a fluid work programme identifying the business to be addressed at each Committee, which is available [here](#).

The Cabinet is responsible for carrying out all the Local Authority functions which are not the responsibility of the Council. The Cabinet consists of the Leader (a Councillor appointed annually by the Council) and 4 other Councillors (also appointed annually by Council) to take forward 'Key Decisions.' Cabinet Members are responsible for decision making within specific areas, known as Cabinet Portfolios, which are echoed by a Scrutiny Committee comprising other Members of the Council. More information about Cabinet and Scrutiny is available [here](#).

2) Attend Council Meetings

Members of the public can attend meetings of Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny, Planning, Licensing, Audit, Democratic Services and Standards Committee, except where confidential or exempt information is likely to be disclosed.

The Council also broadcasts some Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny and Regulatory meetings on the internet. You can watch live meetings and download relevant documents such as reports, plans or presentations. Recordings are available to watch free of charge. You can view them live or alternatively you can catch up on past meetings using the [library of archived recordings](#).

3) Speak at some Council meetings

Members of the public may attend meetings of the Planning Committee and speak if they have objected in writing to a planning application that is being considered. Members of the public may speak at Licensing Panel Hearings if they have objected in writing to a Licensing application that is being considered. Members of the public may also speak at Scrutiny meetings, but only by invitation of the Chair.

4) View Council documents

Members of the public can see the agendas to meetings and background papers for all of the meetings mentioned above and, where appropriate, see any records of decisions made, except where confidential or exempt information is likely to be disclosed. All available documents can be seen in the [Committee Directory](#).

5) View Committee Work Programmes

Members of the public can inspect the forward work programmes of Committees. Scrutiny Committees may invite people and organisations to comment on the way things are currently done and how things can be improved. One of the biggest challenges for scrutiny committees is to obtain more interest in the process, by demonstrating that effective scrutiny can make a difference.

6) Ask questions at Council meetings

Members of the public may ask questions of Members of the Council at ordinary meetings of the Council. A question may only be asked if notice has been given by delivering it in writing or by electronic mail to the Chief Executive no later than midday, three working days before the day of the meeting. Each question must give the name and address of the questioner. At any one meeting no person may submit more than one question and no more than one such question may be asked on behalf of one organisation.

Any question which cannot be dealt with during the meeting will be dealt with by a written answer. For further information about public involvement in meetings in Blaenau Gwent please contact the Head of Democratic Services on committee.services@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk

7) Submit petitions at Council meetings

The Council has a [Petitions Protocol](#) that can be used when there are circumstances where the public feel strongly about an issue and they wish to directly communicate their views to the Council through a petition.

8) Vote in Local Government Elections

You can also participate in the Council decision-making process by exercising your right to vote. Young people aged 14 and 15 are now able to register to vote and 16 and 17 year olds can now vote in Welsh Parliament (Senedd) elections and Local Government elections.* More information on how to vote is available [here](#).

*Young people's new voting powers do not extend to UK general elections, as you still have to be 18 to vote in general elections.

9) Become a Councillor

A candidate for election must complete a set of nomination papers that must be signed by the candidate in the presence of a witness who must attest the signature. You then need to win a majority of the votes cast at the ballot box (if there is a contest for the seat). Electoral wards have up to two or three Councillors, depending on the Ward's population size, therefore the top three would be elected.

Nomination packs for the next elections will be available early in 2027. If you would like to register your interest, please contact electoral.services@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk

If you are thinking of standing as a candidate for a particular political party, then you should first contact that party's local organisation. If you plan to stand for election as an independent Councillor, contact the Council and Electoral Services will be pleased to give you more information.

In summary, we will continue to deliver our services by underpinning them with effective engagement and participation principles. We will ensure our staff are using engagement in a clear, consistent manner to best support the people in Blaenau Gwent, that feedback is provided to communities about the outcomes from any engagement activity, and ensure residents feel empowered to participate in local democracy.

Welsh Language

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council works in accordance with the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. This measure sets out standards the Council must comply with to ensure that the Welsh language is treated no less favourably than English. All documents, promotional materials, forms and surveys made available to the public are produced bilingually.

The Council's intranet has a link to the Welsh language guidance section on its homepage that includes the written and verbal translation procedure. The Council strives to provide all services available through the medium of Welsh, encouraging staff to attend training to strengthen their ability to engage with residents and colleagues in Welsh; supported by a number of resources to aid Welsh language engagement created and promoted internally to staff.

Equality

The principles and objectives outlined throughout this document and its appendices aim to deliver a positive impact on any people or groups of people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act (Wales) 2010. The purpose of the Equality Act is to

- Put fairness at heart of society.
- Bring 116 pieces of legislation together.
- Level up protection.
- Clarify the law.
- Protect everyone in society.
- Strengthen & advance equality.

As part of the Public Sector Equality Duty we **must** demonstrate due regard to:

1. Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation.
2. Advance equality of opportunity.
3. Foster good relations.

The Act outlines that as a Local Authority we **must** involve people covered by the protected characteristics within council functions and decision making. By engaging people, it will help to

- Deliver/design better outcomes and services meeting the needs of the community.
- Allow people in our community to feel heard and considered.
- Provide a clear picture of the disadvantages, reasons for low participation and poor relationships.
- Determine next steps and priorities.
- Understand the impact of initiatives/services have on those with protected characteristics.
- Monitor delivery effectively by gaining person centred insight.

The Policy & Partnerships Team oversee the Integrated Impact Assessment process across Blaenau Gwent Council which ensures that those with protected characteristics are considered during service change, service implementation, policy change and policy implementation to fully understand the impact of such decisions the council may take. The team also provides advice and guidance in regard to Integrated Impact Assessments and any engagement across Blaenau Gwent County Council.

Stakeholders & Partners

There are four **Town and Community Councils** in Blaenau Gwent which play an important part in reaching and representing people within their own community. More information is available here: [Borough, Town & Community Councils | Blaenau Gwent CBC \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/About-us/Our-structure/Borough-Town-Community-Councils)

The council will continue to engage with the relevant **Trade Unions** on employment and other matters as appropriate. Engagement with **Businesses** and partners will be key to support economic growth and job creation / opportunities.

The **Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership** is a local delivery group of the statutory Gwent Public Services Board established by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. The Partnership should ensure that citizen voice is taken into account during decision-making processes. This will take the form of community and stakeholder engagement with community groups, the wider Partnership network and citizens, sharing relevant survey and consultation data wherever possible to avoid duplication and over-consultation.

APPENDIX 1

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Engagement & Participation Strategy – Action Plan

Objective 1	Action	Outcome	Timeframe	Responsibility
To mainstream effective engagement and participation approaches across the Council	To maintain a coordinated approach to Engagement across the Council, using this engagement framework, and ensure staff are kept informed on how to engage and consult through an agreed approach.	A better corporate understanding and management of engagement. Better & more opportunities for members of the public to have their say in their community/place.		
	To maintain a timetable of consultation and engagement exercises carried out by Council Services.	Effective co-ordination of engagement across all Services. Reduced 'consultation fatigue.'		
	Ensure that staff surveys are designed effectively to capture appropriate information to influence change.	Increased staff satisfaction A better corporate understanding and management of engagement.		

Objective 2	Action	Outcome	Timeframe	Responsibility
<p>To ensure that we engage with the people of Blaenau Gwent in the most effective, collaborative way</p>	<p>To maintain and further develop our collaboration with schools, forums and community groups.</p>	<p>Improved engagement with a broad spectrum of representative groups</p>		
	<p>Commit to engaging on proposals for taking difficult financial decisions.</p>	<p>Setting an informed balanced budget</p>		
	<p>To develop the use of online engagement platforms and maintain the use of non-digital, face to face engagement methods in our communities.</p>	<p>Improved levels of engagement with all Blaenau Gwent residents. Increased engagement forum membership and website & social media engagement numbers.</p>		
	<p>To improve the way that we feedback to participants in our engagement exercises via a variety of communication channels, using simple and easy language.</p>	<p>Increased satisfaction from residents and better understanding of how their views are taken into consideration and impact decision-making across the Council</p>		
	<p>To provide mechanisms that allow effective feedback from the people of Blaenau Gwent to ensure the issues that matter are addressed.</p>	<p>Increased satisfaction from residents that issues that affect them are being considered. Improved insight gathering based on Councillors' experiences engaging with constituents.</p>		

Objective 3	Action	Outcome	Timeframe	Responsibility
<p>To actively encourage our communities & future generations to participate in council and decision-making activity, meeting our statutory duties and responsibilities under legislation</p>	<p>To build on existing mechanisms in place that enable the public to participate in Council meetings in person or remotely, making the process as accessible and easy to understand as possible.</p>	<p>To facilitate better access for local people to decisions made by the council.</p> <p>Increased participation at Council committee meetings</p>		
	<p>To use our Integrated Impact Assessment procedure and approaches from the Strategic Equalities Plan to ensure people with protected characteristics are effectively engaged with.</p>	<p>Appropriate engagement is carried out across all parts of our community that can influence strategic decisions and policy changes.</p>		
	<p>To establish an e-petition system and publish a protocol that sets out how the Council intends to handle and respond to petitions.</p>	<p>Blaenau Gwent residents who take the time to submit petitions to the Council have a positive experience.</p>		
	<p>To ensure communities are informed about the role of the Council, what it means to be a Councillor and how to become one.</p>	<p>Making it easier and more attractive for future generations to get involved in local government.</p> <p>Increased voter turnout at local government elections.</p>		

Objective 4	Action	Outcome	Timeframe	Responsibility
To maintain best practice in engagement & participation and keep up to date with the latest innovations to help support our communities	To review the Engagement & Participation Policy regularly e.g. every four years in line with each Administration.	Ensures the Policy is kept up to date and in line with the corporate plan.		
	To ensure the engagement framework is embedded within all Council departments and available for all staff to use.	Consistent approach across all departments.		
	To liaise with Engagement and Equalities networks regionally and across Wales.	Best practise is shared across Wales.		
	To utilise a data led approach to ensure effective targeting of those who are unwilling or unable to engage.	Effective targeting of hard-to-reach residents		
	To develop a strategy for ensuring those approaching voting age have an understanding of the election process.	Increased voter turnout at local government elections.		