

Our Improvement Journey

This last 12 months has been an extremely successful period for the Council as we begin to see substantial improvements in our performance ensuring we are now much better placed to lead on delivering the aspirations of the citizens of Blaenau Gwent. It is a credit to everyone that such significant strides have been made in a relatively short time and this can be attributed to the positive and robust approach that has been adopted by the whole Council.

We are delighted that this improving picture of performance and service delivery has contributed to some significant developments over the past 12 months including;

Achievement of the Policy Agreement Targets

For the second year running the Council has achieved or exceeded the Welsh Assembly Government's Policy Agreement targets securing an additional £767,759 in funding.

Stepping down of the Advisory Board

The Advisory Board, established to support the Council in driving forward its improvement agenda, has stood down after receiving a promising closing report from the Board and endorsement from the Wales Audit Office. David Jenkins, Chair of the Advisory Board stated that the Council had delivered 'substantial improvements' in all areas and that the Board had seen clear evidence of a stronger customer focus, vastly improved budget setting and financial planning, a comprehensive People Strategy, good consultation and scrutiny procedures, and a willingness not only to participate in a partnership approach to working, but to lead in implementing these partnerships.

Removal of Social Services from Special Measures

Following the implementation of a robust improvement programme Social Services has turned the corner with improved management and political leadership resulting in the Social Services Inspectorate in Wales taking the Department out of special measures. The Assembly Health and Social Services Minister Dr Brian Gibbons stated "the Council and its officers have achieved a significant turnaround. Whilst the improvement journey is not yet complete, there is strong leadership and a much improved culture and services for vulnerable children are rapidly improving." Richard Tebboth, Acting Chief Inspector of Social Services in Wales, said "the morale of staff has been transformed and performance is improving. The Council now responds much more promptly to initial concerns about children and is much more reliable in planning for their welfare and reviewing progress."



Fastest Land Reclamation Project in Europe – Ebbw Vale Steelwork site

The Council are on schedule to meet their target of reclaiming and redeveloping the former steelworks site faster than comparative sites in the UK. The site is being re-developed in partnership with the Welsh Assembly Government, who are supporting the work through their Land Reclamation Scheme. The Regional Director for the South East (WAG) has acknowledged the benefits of the rapid progress being made. This view is also endorsed by Steel Action, a body representing steel communities in the UK.

In June 2005, SteelAction (representatives from 14 local authorities in steel areas across Britain) issued a statement to the press, which was covered in the South Wales Argus and the Gwent Gazette. SteelAction Chairman and Leader of Rotherham Council, Councillor Roger Stone said: “We have all seen problems in various parts of the country with the decommissioning and regeneration of steel plants. Sometimes months pass without anything much happening, sometimes years... In Ebbw Vale it is a different story. We send out heartiest congratulations from our 14 local authorities to the Blaenau Gwent Council and to Welsh Development Agency. They have been swift, imaginative and surefooted and they have received significant backing from the Welsh Assembly and from Corus, who are also to be congratulated. The proposed learning campus, the hospital, the new rail line, the new homes, the employment opportunities, the landscaping and the wetlands all add up to an exciting development which is well on its way. Ebbw Vale is a shining example to other declining industrial areas in the UK, a blueprint for regeneration”.

Development of the New Rail Network Connection

In November 2005, Andrew Davies, AM spoke to the South Wales Argus about work on the project beginning in the spring of this year. He said “it is a long-standing commitment to reintroduce passenger services on the Ebbw Vale link line. This is the jewel in the crown in the regeneration of Ebbw Vale. Along with the dualling of the Heads of the Valleys road it shows a commitment to improving transport services in the area”.

Blaenau Gwent Schools Improving

Recent Welsh Assembly Government statistics for value added scores from end of Key Stage 2 to the end of Key Stage 4 placed Blaenau Gwent as the second best performing Council in Wales. The impact of this can be seen in the rate of improvement at the end of Key Stage 2, which has improved by 8% over the last two years. This is the highest rate of improvement in Wales and nearly twice the national average for the same period.

Whilst acknowledging our successes it is vital that we remain focused on the future challenges, although we can do so with a justifiable sense of renewed confidence. The Council now has the capacity, commitment and strategic drive to turn policy into action and we are confident that the improvements made will be sustainable and play a vital role in delivering the vision for Blaenau Gwent as a better place to live and work.



Looking forward the Council recognises the challenges and potential opportunities that arise out of the Welsh Assembly Government's 'Making the Connections' Strategy and the subsequent Beecham Review of 'Local Service Delivery – Beyond the Boundaries'. Consequently we will be focusing on improving the following key strategic areas over the next 12 months and beyond:

- Enhanced Community Planning
- More effective partnership working
- Further development of performance and financial management
- Securing better Value for Money
- Continued improvements in service delivery



Councillor John Hopkins
Leader

Strong and Safe Communities



Robin Morrison
Chief Executive