**An amb****itious and innovative council delive****ring the quality services at the right time and in the right place**

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

**Why This Is Important as an Area of Focus:**

The Corporate Plan provides the focus for delivering lasting change for the area. It also provides the platform for transforming Blaenau Gwent into a more confident and capable Council. The ambition is to deliver better outcomes for the people of Blaenau Gwent and that ambition is underpinned by solid and sustainable plans, ensuring the Council can be held to account for what it has promised to deliver. Maximising the impact of resources to deliver those outcomes sits at the heart of this priority, including; understanding costs, controlling expenditure, maximising income and aligning resources to the needs of residents, businesses and visitors to build a Blaenau Gwent for the future.

A circular puzzle with different colors

Description automatically generated

**Identified Need:**

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

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

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

A screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated

**Finance and Resources**

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

The council’s ‘bridging the gap’ programme of strategic business reviews continued throughout the year to create efficiencies and financial resilience for the future. The £2.58M delivered in the last year enabled the Council to balance the budget and provided the flexibility for the decision to freeze Council Tax for 2022/23. Building financial resilience for the future is important and the Council’s reserves were at the same level as they were in 2012 at over £10.5M, an increase of £2.5M in the last 5 years. The increase in funding is welcome news, however, it does not reverse the significant budget reductions of the last 10 years which means that the Council must continue to be financially prudent and work hard to meet service demands whilst balancing the budget in future years.

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

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

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

**New Operating Model and Agile Working**

A brick building with a clock tower

Description automatically generatedIn March 2021, Council approved a new operating model and working arrangements for staff and buildings. Following the Covid 19 pandemic and the lockdowns that were put in place, staff and members worked remotely in the main moving to arrangements based on digital platforms. A review of the pandemic was undertaken with the realisation that Council business and services can be delivered in a very different way, be more in line with modern working practices, reduce costs and the impact on the environment. The Council looked to seize this opportunity and made step changes now so not to simply return to the same operation as before. As part of the new operating model, Council also agreed for a Democratic Hub to be established at the General Offices, Ebbw Vale, to vacate and demolish the Civic Centre and to develop Community Hubs from libraries across the Borough. As part of the new operating model, the Council also embedded an Agile Working Policy. This included a review of the working and contractual arrangements for staff and identified all posts as either home worker, agile worker or service / community based worker. All staff were consulted on as part of this process with allowances for home and agile staff put in place as well as support for staff to ensure they had appropriate workstations at home, taking into account the health, safety and wellbeing of staff. Agile working has also further reduced the use of paper, there is less commuting and overall less business travel. As part of their review, Audit Wales identified that no engagement was undertaken on the closure of civic centre due to challenges of engaging during pandemic.

**Attendance Management**

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

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

**Complaints and Compliments**

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

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

* 133 complaints; and
* 28 compliments.

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

**Information Governance**

As a Local Authority it is vital in the work that we undertake that we collect and process personal information in order to fulfil our obligations and perform many of our day-to-day operations. In May 2018 the GDPR came into force and made significant changes to how the Authority handles personal information and placed many additional obligations on organisations. A project team was created at the time to manage the work needed to ensure the Authority was compliant with this new legislation which has since been disbanded but the work to ensure continued compliance is ongoing through the work of the Information Governance Forum (IGF) that is chaired by the Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO) and supported by the Authority’s Data Protection and Governance Officer which is a mandatory role within the legislation. Following Brexit the GDPR legislation has since become known as UK GDPR and currently remains identical to the EU GDPR although some changes are currently proposed and out for consultation.

Whilst implementing GDPR in 2018 the Council implemented an Information Asset Owner structure in order to be compliant with the legislation and ensure that there are clear defined lines of responsibility towards information assets owned by the Council. Information Asset Registers are in place for each area of the Council and regularly reviewed to ensure that there is corporate oversight of all key information systems and to risk assess these in terms of the confidentiality, integrity and availability.

In addition to the Information Asset Registers the Council also adhered to an additional obligation under GDPR to create a Record of Processing Activities for all departments. This document provides the ability to drill down to the necessary level of detail required under GDPR to identify when the Council collects and processes personal information, why it is doing this, what legally permits it to do this etc.

The Council also has a suite of Information Governance and Security policies and procedures that are regularly reviewed to manage and ensure compliance with its statutory duties.

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

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

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

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

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

**Corporate Communications**

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

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

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

**Service User Design**

The Council has taken a focussed and proactive organisational approach to the reviewing and redesigning of services by introducing a user design approach to ensure the customer is at the centre of all service planning, these have included: Planning; Insurance; Street Cleansing; Waste; and Starters, Leavers and Movers with Organisational Development. This forward thinking approach has been shared with partners such as the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Tech Valleys. Maintaining momentum in this key area will be a challenge with support being required across the whole organisation.

**Elected Members and the Constitution**

The Council has set out minimum standards of behaviour and has provided guidelines to help maintain and improve standards. The Council’s Constitution is a key document which sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are made and the procedures followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. It also includes a code of conduct for both officers and members.

The Council has in place comprehensive arrangements for Elected Members. As part of this, there is an extensive Member Development Programme in place, aligned to the forward work programmes of the Committees and Council priorities as well as from the Personal Development Review (PDR) process in place for members. A particular focus has been on the development of an induction programme to support members as part of their role following the 2022 local elections. A variety of training materials, guidance and documentation is available to members and this is included within an online member library. Further work has been undertaken over the year to review and enhance a number of member development policies and processes including:

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

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

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

* Mandatory;
* Recommended;
* Beneficial; and
* Useful.

Mandatory sessions for all members include:

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

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

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

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

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

The Monitoring Officer and Head of Democratic Services meet regularly with Interim Chief Executive to discuss any political, governance or conduct issues, with a view to addressing issues early on in order to resolve quickly.

The Constitution was updated and approved by Full Council on 26th October 2022 and training for Members was held on 17th November 2022 and received good feedback.

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

Evaluations are undertaken after every scrutiny meeting to review the processes in place and where further improvement can be sought. Learning is also undertaken annually and research from other areas considered. This learning has led to an extensive review and change of the current democratic processes including; a reduction in minutes, the live recording of meetings, significantly reduced agendas which only include key items and reducing the size of committees. Regular evaluation of these processes and considerations for further changes will be undertaken throughout the year.

**Internal Audit**

Internal Audit Services issued 45 audit opinions during the year:

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

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

**Challenges the Council have experienced throughout the year**

**Attendance Management**

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

**Information Governance**

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

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

**What Evidence is Available**

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