**Are the governance arrangements of the** **Council** **effective for securing continuous improvement?**

**How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Evaluation Rating 4:**  **Good** | **Evaluation Narrative:**  The Council continues to have a clear Corporate Plan in place with four key objectives that have been developed to improve the lives of residents across the Borough. A new Gwent Public Services Board (PSB) has been established which has strengthened our partnership work with other local authorities and partner organisations in Gwent. This will provide a more joined up approach to delivering actions and to tackle the significant challenges faced by the region, such as climate change, poverty, and health inequalities. Strong links have been made between the objectives in the Corporate Plan and the priorities of the Gwent PSB. This approach will be strengthened in the year ahead through our local Well-being Partnership and a local Well-being Plan which is being developed to provide a local approach to meet these challenges**.** Work is currently being undertaken to ensure we are a commercially and digitally minded organisation and work will begin on a new Strategic Equality Plan which will continue to put fairness and equality at the heart of everything the Council does. |

**Blaenau Gwent Corporate Plan and Planning Arrangements**

The Corporate Plan acts as the Council’s business plan and sets out the vision, values, and priorities for 2022/27. It outlines not only what the people of Blaenau Gwent can expect from the Council, but equally, what the Council is asking from its citizens and partners.

The Plan has been developed at a time of significant financial turbulence and change within the public sector. The Council has had to take some tough decisions on where to prioritise spending, ensuring vital services are maintained for the most vulnerable in our communities.

Through focusing on delivering against the main priorities set out in the Corporate Plan we can begin to transform Blaenau Gwent into a more prosperous and welcoming area and that plays a part on a regional and national stage. It is about achieving real outcomes for the people of Blaenau Gwent and is underpinned by solid and sustainable business plans, ensuring the Council can be held to account for what it has promised to deliver.

The Corporate Plan is a requirement of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The primary aim of the Act is to improve the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of Wales. The Act sets out seven national well-being goals that we have a duty to contribute to. The Act intends to make the Council think more about the long term, work better with people and communities, look to prevent problems, and take a more joined-up approach.

The Corporate Plan identifies four priorities, known as Well-being Objectives, which set out the direction for action and agenda for change over the next five years. The Plan sets out an ambitious programme of activity for the Council over the next five years and beyond. The priorities have been developed in order to support our communities to thrive. The people of Blaenau Gwent are at the heart of all that we do and the Corporate Plan is our commitment to the communities of Blaenau Gwent to provide modern and high quality services which support economic growth and well-being. As part of the development of the new Plan, 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***

Our Corporate Plan 2022/27 Priorities are:

* **Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent**
* **Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities**
* **An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place**
* **Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent, and resilient**

The Gwent Public Service Board (PSB) and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, through its Corporate Plan, have agreed to become a Marmot Region, and to adopt the eight Marmot principles in order to reduce health inequalities across Gwent and to work in partnership with the Institute of Health Equity (IHE) to address the social determinants of health. Gwent is the first area in Wales to become a Marmot region. Alongside the Marmot Principles, the Corporate Plan has also been aligned to the priorities within the Gwent Well-being Plan, a Plan owned by the Gwent PSB.

The table below highlights the links between the Corporate Plan 2022/27, the Marmot Principles and the Gwent PSB’s Well-being Plan:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Corporate Plan 2022/27** | **Marmot Principle** | **Gwent Well-being Plan** |
| Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent | * Give every child the best start in life * Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives * Create fair employment and good work for all * Ensure a healthy standard of living for all | * We want to create a fair and equitable Gwent for all |
| Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities | * Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities * Strengthen the role and impact of ill-health prevention * ‘Pursue environmental sustainability and health equity together’. | * We want to create a Gwent where the natural environment is protected and enhanced |
| An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place | * Create fair employment and good work for all | * We want to create a fair and equitable Gwent for all |
| Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient | * Tackle racism, discrimination and their outcomes | * We want to create a Gwent that has friendly, safe and confident communities |

**Council Governance Framework**

A governance framework is in place which sets out the standards and processes to be adopted by both Members and Officers. Codes of Conduct, detailing Member and Officer relations, are contained within the Constitution and all are required to make declarations of any interests that impact on their positions or functions. 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.

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 and Competency Framework in place for Members.

The Authority’s Constitution includes a Scheme of Delegation which details subject areas, and identifies the bodies or individuals responsible for decision making.

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. This work will continue into 2023 and will be reported through the democratic process.

**Becoming a Commercially Minded Council**

As a Council we are working towards our ambition of becoming commercially minded. As part of this, a Commercial Strategy 2020/2025 has been developed which looks to identify commercial approaches, and highlight the conditions required for the Council to behave as a commercial organisation. This is written within the context of maintaining the Council’s core purpose to provide public services delivering social value. There are a number of related strategies and programmes that contribute to the delivery of our Commercial Strategy and ambitions. These are:

* A Communications Strategy, 2020 – 2025;
* A Digital and Customer transformation programme; and
* The Workforce Strategy.

In addition to the supporting strategies and programmes highlighted above, there are 5 specific commercial ambitions:

* Commissioning and Procurement;
* Developing an investment Portfolio;
* Creating true commercial activities – profit and loss;
* Commercial and Entrepreneurial Culture;
* Contract and Supplier Management.

These will be driven by the Commercial Section but clearly involve all services, suppliers and partners. The building of knowledge, skills and capacity in the commercial approach will be key for us moving forward.

**Digital**

Another area of focus for the us is becoming digitally minded, providing a robust digital infrastructure and being innovative in our digital endeavours. 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, including Office 365, and a review of the current software. The delivery of these processes has been recognised externally.

The Digital Strategy identifies where the Council is as an organisation now and what our future aspirations will be. Through internal and external collaboration, we will improve how we work, learn, adapt, and live to ensure our residents are not digitally excluded. Digital technologies and online services are transforming the way in which we interact, live and work. A digital Council will:

* make services easier to access,
* make services efficient and convenient,
* improve engagement with our customers,
* improve the skills and efficiency of our staff.

Whilst the emphasis of the strategy is not on large scale investment in infrastructure and development projects, there is however a need for some public funding. Bids to future Welsh Government programmes, such as the future Targeted Regeneration Investment (TRI) funding, and the future funding announced for an Automotive Technology Park in Blaenau Gwent. The Cardiff Capital Region City Deal programme should also establish a budget to support the evolution of digital technology that provides a direct contribution to well-being through digital activity.

**Equalities**

The Council is committed to implementing the Equality Act 2010 and is currently working on the development of a new Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) to cover the years 2024/2028. The current SEP will come to an end in 2024. The SEP aims to put fairness and equality at the heart of everything the Council does, and this is central to maximising well-being outcomes for residents, local communities, staff and visitors, now and in the future. As public service providers it is recognised that there is a key role to play in making a real difference to people’s lives.

**Corporate Safeguarding**

Safeguarding the most vulnerable people in the community continues to be a top priority for the Council. Safeguarding is recognised corporately as being everybody’s responsibility. Safeguarding our citizens is central to the work of the Council and good progress has been made to strengthen the corporate safeguarding arrangements in place. This includes the development of a corporate safeguarding training framework being implemented across the council and compliance monitored. The Blaenau Gwent website has been updated making it easy for the public to access safeguarding information and our corporate safeguarding report has been enhanced to provide a full council performance picture, as it is recognised that safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility. Audit Wales reviewed the safeguarding arrangements which found that the Council needs to take action to fully comply with previous recommendations and also to strengthen its monitoring arrangements of third parties, which will be tested by Internal Audit to evidence and strengthen monitoring and safeguarding arrangements.

**Self-Evaluation and Assessment**

Self-evaluation is a key aspect of review and learning undertaken across the Council. As well as having an approach corporately, the Education Directorate also undertakes a self-evaluation process. The Self-Evaluation Report (SER) is developed to secure ongoing improvement in educational outcomes and effectiveness of provision. The findings from the SER are reflected as actions for improvement in the Directorate’s Business Plans at Directorate, Service and Team levels. Effective self-evaluation means that the Directorate remains focussed on improving the right areas of work. As part of the Estyn inspection undertaken in late 2022, Estyn identified a recommendation for the Council to take forward, ‘Improve the quality of self-evaluation, strategic planning and performance management’. In order to respond, work is being undertaken by the education directorate with support from Corporate to review the business planning and self-evaluation arrangements.

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

A statue of a person on a pillar

Description automatically generated

**Recruitment and Retention**

The Council is experiencing the impact of recruitment and retention difficulties, owing to this, a corporate risk has been identified. All directorates have developed a workforce plan for 2022/23 with a detailed action plan to put in place measures to address these issues. In addition, the ongoing work corporately will support directorates to recruit and retain staff by further modernising the Councils approach and marketing the Council as an ‘Employer of Choice’.

Whilst the risk remains high with no significant changes, staffing pressures in some services have eased with successful recruitment to vacant roles. In addition, other measures that will support in the longer term include effective workforce and succession planning, the management of sickness absence and, where appropriate, working regionally/nationally.

Particular difficulties have been experienced in Children’s Services. Vacancies in the locality teams have been filled by a combination of staff seconded onto the Social Work degree course and newly qualified workers. The challenge will now be retaining these staff. Despite good progress being made, low vacancy rates will now need be sustained, and, in addition, there are savings targets attributed to the workforce which could impact of the departments safeguarding ability moving forward.