

Blaenau Gwent Strategic Equality Plan

Annual Report 2023 – 2024



Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

Annual Strategic Equality Monitoring Report

April 2023 – March 2024

“Blaenau Gwent – a place that is fair, open, and welcoming to all by working with and for our communities”

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Contents	Pages
Foreword	1
Introduction	3
Equality Objective 1 – We will be an organisation who ensures fairness and equalities is in everything that we do	4
Equality Objective 2 - We will be an equal opportunity employer with a workforce that values equalities and diversity	11
Equality Objective 3 - We will support children and young people, particularly those with protected characteristics, to achieve their learning ambitions	18
Equality Objective 4 - We will promote and support safe, friendly, and cohesive communities	24
Equality Objective 5 - We will ensure there is meaningful involvement with people who have protected characteristics and key stakeholders that represent their interests.	29
Equality Objective 6 - We will strive to tackle inequality caused by poverty for people who have protected characteristics	34
Next Steps	39
Workforce Data Summary 2022/23	40

Foreword

I am pleased to present the final annual report on our progress towards the Strategic Equality Plan 2020-24 of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council. This report showcases some of the achievements and challenges we have faced in the past year.

Equality, diversity, and inclusion are at the heart of our vision and values as a council. We want to ensure that everyone who lives, works, or visits Blaenau Gwent can fulfil their potential and enjoy a good quality of life. We are and remain fully committed to being a 'place that is fair, open and welcoming to all by working with and for our communities' as outlined in our Corporate Plan 2022-27.

We recognise that there is still more work to do to address the persistent and emerging inequalities that affect our residents and staff. We are committed to learning from our experiences and evidence, engaging with our stakeholders and partners, and taking positive action to make a difference. Our work also contributes towards the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act and the seven National Well-being Goals, which are fundamental in realising change within our communities.

This report provides an overview of how we have delivered on our six strategic equality objectives in 2023-24, covering areas such as leadership and governance, workforce representation and development, community engagement and involvement, community cohesion and inequality caused by deprivation. It also highlights some of the good practice examples and case studies that demonstrate our progress and impact.

Within this report we have also considered national strategic plans and key action plans, that the Welsh Government have developed to address

the current inequalities faced by individuals and communities.

These plans include:

- LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales (2023)
- Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan (2022)
- Age Friendly Wales Strategy (2021)
- Children and Young People's Plan (2022)
- Violence Against Women and girls, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) strategy (2022)
- Socio Economic Duty (2021)

We would like to thank all our staff, councillors, partners, service users and communities who have contributed to our equality work in the past year. We value your feedback and suggestions on how we can improve our performance and outcomes. We look forward to working with you in the next year and beyond to achieve our vision of a fair, open and welcoming Blaenau Gwent for all.



Councillor Stephen Thomas

Leader, Portfolio for Equality & Diversity



Damien McCann

Interim Chief Executive

Introduction

Our annual report highlights how we are meeting the Public Sector Equality Duty (the “general duty”) or (PSED) by ensuring we are supporting a fairer society through advancing equality and fostering good relationships.

We do this this by delivering policies and services on a day-to-day basis that support and value diversity, in order to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

The Annual Report is presented into six sections. Each section corresponds each of the current equality objectives and provides the following:

- Overview of the Objective
- Examples of how we advanced the objective in 2023-24
- Identified next steps to inform the Strategic Equality Plan 2024-28

The annual report ends with the presentation of the Council’s Workforce data for 2022-23.

Progress against Equality Objectives

Equality Objective One *“We will be an organisation who ensures fairness and equalities in everything that we do”.*

Overview

We want to be an organisation that embeds fairness and equality throughout everything that we do. The Council is committed to being a ‘place that is fair, open, and welcoming to all by working with and for our communities’.

Recognising and valuing this work has helped us to see meaningful changes for our local community, citizens, stakeholders and key partners. We are fully committed to and want to continue to develop a supportive workforce and accessible services for all.

It is important that we continue to build and create a strong framework which is underpinned by a whole organisational approach with effective and strong political leadership in order to advance equality across Blaenau Gwent.

Over the last year the Corporate Leadership Team have regularly reviewed our Public Sector Equality Duties, as well as leading and helping to ensure equality outcomes across the organisation were met. We have kept on developing the “One Council Approach” in pursuing our equality objectives and have enhanced our equality programme through the School Management Team.

Championing equality throughout the organisation remains a key priority both politically and professionally. Throughout 2022-23 year we have continued to recognise and mark international campaigns, including,

International Women's Day, Holocaust Memorial Day and LGBTQ+ History Month.



Key Examples of Actions from 2022-23 Corporate Plan for 2022-27 – Our Corporate Plan was agreed by Council in October 2022 and reflects our vision and core values of being respectful, inclusive, collaborative, accountable and supportive. Furthermore, we have set four priorities that we feel will allow us to achieve the best outcomes for our communities which 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 Council continues to work in partnership across Gwent through our Public Services Board and has made progress towards becoming a region with the goal of addressing and lowering inequalities, by using the Marmot principles:

- 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

- 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
- Tackle racism, discrimination, and their outcomes

Our Strategic Equality Plan is recognised as a key policy driver in achieving our ambitions set out within our Corporate Plan 2022-2027.

Partnership Work and Collaboration – As a council, we continue to support national equality campaigns to raise awareness and encourage solidarity, acceptance and understanding. We are fully committed to Welsh Government's vision of an [Anti-Racist Wales](#) by 2030 and the [LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales](#). Our Elected Member Equality Champion represents the Council on the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) Members Equality Network, and Blaenau Gwent Council is represented at the Regional Equality Network as well as other National/Regional Networks to share best practice, learning opportunities and to work collaboratively.

Being a part of the Proud Councils Network gives us the opportunity to collaborate with other councils to participate in Pride events and celebrate LGBTQ+ history month together. We think that by joining forces, we can show solidarity and make more positive changes and effects for our LGBTQ+ communities.

As we reported previously, we have developed a new Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) process to incorporate the Socio-Economic Duty and to facilitate and inform decision making processes. We followed the recommendations of the Audit Wales Report *Equality Impact Assessments: more than a tick box exercise?* As part of the

implementation, we consulted with departmental management teams which provided to opportunity for us to explain the approach and raise awareness. The newly developed IIA enables managers/teams to conduct effective assessments on any service or policy changes and provides a clear insight into the impact of the proposals. The assessment can be accessed on the intranet, along with associated guidance documents that support the process.

Key Strategy Development - Our Annual Workforce Equality data for 2022-23 is available via 'Open Source' on Blaenau Gwent Council's website under the "[Equality in Blaenau Gwent](#)" page. The data helps us to understand the diversity of our organisation, which has informed the development of the workforce strategy.

Training for Elected Member, Corporate Leadership Team and Senior Staff – During the last year, various training opportunities have been offered to Senior Officers and Elected Members in the Council. 'No Boundaries' delivered three sessions on "*Making the Uncomfortable Comfortable*", with the support of Unison and the WLGA. The training covered cultural diversity, language and unconscious bias, and personal 'lived experiences' from the trainers.

Working with the WLGA – We have promoted e-modules developed by the WLGA for Elected Members who are actively encouraged to complete.

The WLGA have trained Organisational Development and Policy Officers on Positive Recruitment, which is about how organisations can modify their process/principles to improve the recruitment experience.

Championing Key Equality Campaigns – As in previous years, the organisation continues to champion national and international equality

campaigns which have been supported both politically and professionally. As an example, in 2023/24 we supported and delivered organisational campaigns and events including Pride, LGBTQ+ History Month, Holocaust Memorial Day and International Women's Day.

LGBTQ+ - As part of Proud Councils we attended Cardiff Pride, Caerphilly Pride and launched the Gwent LGBTQ+ timeline.



Proud Councils and Councillor Diane Rowberry (Blaenau Gwent) march Cardiff PRIDE



Caerphilly Pride and launch of the Gwent LGBTQ+ timeline [GWENT LGBTQ+ timeline](#)



The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2024 was “Fragility of Freedom”. Deputy Leader, Councillor Helen Cunningham took part in the national ‘Light in the Darkness’ campaign by lighting a candle and as act of solidarity. The General Offices, Ebbw Vale was illuminated in purple on the 27th January 2024. The full press release can be found here [HMD 2024](#)



Deputy Leader Councillor Helen Cunningham HMD 2024

In our last report we highlighted that it had been agreed to award [Eva Clarke](#) the ***Freedom of the Borough***, the highest accolade the Council can bestow.

Eva Clarke was born in a concentration camp and was one of only three babies that survived. Eva has worked tirelessly over the years to ensure the stories of those survivors are shared, ensuring their memories live on and what they endured is never forgotten. Eva has strong links with South Wales, and Blaenau Gwent in particular. The award ceremony took place at the General Offices, Ebbw Vale 5th April 2024. The event was emotive

and provided real context and understanding of what took place during this time.



Eva Clarke-Freedom of the Borough Event April 2023

Equality Objective Two - *“We will be an equal opportunity employer with a workforce that values equalities and diversity”.*

Overview

Blaenau Gwent Council values and supports our staff as an equal opportunity employer and an employer of choice, to attract a workforce that is diverse. We recognise that our communities are evolving and we know that having a diverse workforce gives us various viewpoints and expertise, helping us both within the organisation and in the communities we work with.

Our workforce strategy is in place until 2026 and sets out priorities in order to create an effective, dynamic workforce which are as follows; -

- Health, culture, and effective leadership
- Excellence in management across the council
- Highly motivate engaged workforce
- Evidence based decision making, planning and delivery; and
- Modern employer of choice

We keep working on new policy development to help us grow as an employer. We also monitor our workforce data, which helps us improve our diversity as an organisation.

Key Examples of Actions from 2023/24



Key Workforce Data – We previously reported that we had worked on improving the quality of our workforce's data by collecting more equality information. The information is available on our I-Trent system and staff have been asked to update their personal information. We will keep encouraging this as it will aid better reporting in the future and give us a better insight into our workforce.

Gender Pay Gap – As an employer we are required by law to carry out Gender Pay Reporting under the Equality Act 2010 (Gender Pay Gap Information) Regulations 2017. The UK gender pay gap is just over 15% (2021). We are confident as a Council that men and women are paid equally for doing equivalent jobs across the organisation. The gender pay gap shows that the workforce is predominantly female with women occupying a high percentage of jobs across all four pay quartiles. The pay gap in Blaenau Gwent continues to be significantly lower than the national average.

Pay policy statement 2023-2024- [Pay Policy Statement | Blaenau Gwent CBC \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)

Hourly Rate – Gender Pay Gap

Women's Hourly Rate is:	-0.69% Lower (mean)	-4.93% Lower (median)
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Pay Quartiles – Gender Pay Gap

How many men and women are in each of the quartiles:

	Men	Women
Upper Quartile:	29%	71%
Upper Middle Quartile:	32%	68%
Lower Middle Quartile:	36%	64%
Lower Quartile:	30%	70%

As you can see from the above there is significantly more women than men in all of the quartiles within the organisation.

Agile Working – An agile working policy was implemented across the organisation in 2021, this policy was implemented for staff to work at home, in the community or at an office base. Staff are continually asked about the policy to ensure its effectiveness and monitor the wellbeing of the workforce. Staff are also encouraged to liaise with their manager about any necessary adjustments they may need to carry out their duties.

Our Organisational Development Policies – The following policies have been reviewed and updated since April 2023:

Dignity at Work Policy	Oct-23
Grievance Policy for school based staff	Oct-23
In the Interests of Efficiency of the Service Policy	May-23
Induction - A Manager's Guide	Jun-23
IVF Policy	Jul-23
Pay Policy	Apr-23
Pay Policy for Schools	Apr-23
Redundancy Policy	Jul-23

Education policies reviewed and updated

Additional Learning Needs Policy	Sept-23
Exclusion guidance	Sept-23
Educated other than school	Sept-23
Elective home educated	Sept-23

Education new policy development

Additional Learning Needs-Early Years Guidance	Sept-23
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The Recruitment Policy has recently been approved and will be communicated to manager's March 2024. The IVF Policy and Neurodiversity Guidance have both been approved and are available to access on the intranet. We believe regularly monitoring, reviewing, and implementing policies allows us to maintain organisational effectiveness and strengthens equality of opportunity.

Training for council staff and school-based staff – Corporate Leadership Team and senior managers have received “Making the Uncomfortable Comfortable” through [No Boundaries](#).

The WLGA facilitated a session looking at an Introduction to Anti-Racism for equality officers across Wales. School staff and Policy Officer (Equality & Engagement) attended training around managing difficult conversations with Children & Young People facilitated by [Brook](#)

Over 50 staff members from across the organisation attended Cultural Awareness and Diversity training (55), the training talked about different cultures/beliefs/understandings with a particular focus on Nigerian

Culture. Staff reported that they found the training useful and insightful. Similarly, over 50 staff members from across the organisation completed an online e-module around Unconscious Bias (59).

Gwent Community Cohesion Team's Schools Programme



The West Gwent Cohesion Team have developed three training packages for schools, the workshops can be delivered to a maximum of 30 pupils at any one time. The workshops aim to raise awareness around similarities & differences, train & capacity build, mitigate tensions, be inclusive, prevent hate, exploitation & extremism.

To support the Council's [Neurodiversity-Guidance](#), an “**Introduction to Neurodiversity**” training package has been made available to managers in February and March 2024. The course has been delivered through AP Cymru and has been designed for organisations and individuals who want to become more neuro-inclusive and support neuro-divergent people.

We also work in partnership with Caerphilly County Borough Council, to offer tailored training for Health and Social Care workers. The training ensures that equality is a core theme in the training programme that staff have access to. In 2023-24, 628 Council and school staff took part in 89 training opportunities online and in person.

Further support around Training and Development – Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) have provided training to officers around the “Is Wales Fairer Report”, these sessions highlighted findings and provided key information for the development of the new Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2028.

A new training portal called “Thinqi” will host an Equality e-module that the West Community Cohesion Team have created. It will launch in April 2024 and be part of an induction programme for new employees. Current employees will also be required to complete the training to increase the organisation's awareness and participation in equality issues.



Communicating on Equality and Diversity –

Through 2023-2024 we have continued to deliver our staff Wellbeing Wednesday Newsletter, which offers key information about support, training opportunities as well as promoting equality days, Welsh, mental health support etc.

Communicating with Schools on Equality and Diversity –

Regular educational bulletins are prepared to provide schools with key equality and diversity information, resources, and training. Examples include LGBTQ+ History Month, Black History Month, Hate Crime Awareness Week, Holocaust Memorial Day etc. As an organisation we work effectively with our Gwent Cohesion Team to coordinate this work.

International Women’s Day –

In March 2024, staff across the council were encouraged to participate in International Women’s Day. This day looks to celebrate women’s achievements, celebrate gender equality and support action for gender parity. The theme for 2024 [Inspire Inclusion](#)

As part of the International Women's Day celebration, we ran a social media campaign where staff were encouraged to send in their picture using the 2024 International Women's Day pose.

<https://www.internationalwomensday.com/>

We also provided schools with resources through the education bulletin to raise awareness and encourage participation.

Social Care Recruitment Drive – The recruitment drive for Social Care keeps promoting the benefits of working in the care sector by urging staff to apply for roles that help people with protected characteristics in our community.

Equality Objective Three - *“We will support children and young people, particularly those with protected characteristics, to achieve their learning ambitions”.*

Overview

Within our Corporate Plan 2022-27 we have identified education as a key priority *“Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent”*. We understand that improving outcomes, wellbeing and progress for children and young people is essential for their future development.

We want to make sure that children and young people have the same chances to learn and improve their skills and abilities, with a goal to work with children and young people who belong to one or more of the groups that are protected by law.

Key Examples of Actions from 2023-24

School Support & Guidance – We offer equality advice and guidance to schools, and we keep and develop good relationships with them. This is very important, so that schools can see and understand how their work helps achieve the overall vision of the Strategic Equality Plan. This is something we think is essential for advancing our work around equality.

We have continued to build relationships with schools in relation to equality. We have promoted a two paged equality template and provide schools with resources. Going forward, we will seek to enhance the existing template to align with the new Strategic Equality Plan 24/28.

We are still working on a framework for reporting incidents through the “My Concerns” system. The system, when fully implemented, aims to

provide information on school-based issues and will enable tailored training and interventions to be offered, if needed, to support outcomes for schools, staff, and pupils.

The Traveller Education Service - A Education Club has recently been established in Brynmawr Foundation school to promote equal access for our Gypsy Roma Traveller learners who are elective home educated. The Education Club focuses on literacy and numeracy as well as promoting secondary education. The outcome is to try and engage Gypsy Roma Traveller pupils to transition to secondary school and improve literacy and numeracy levels.

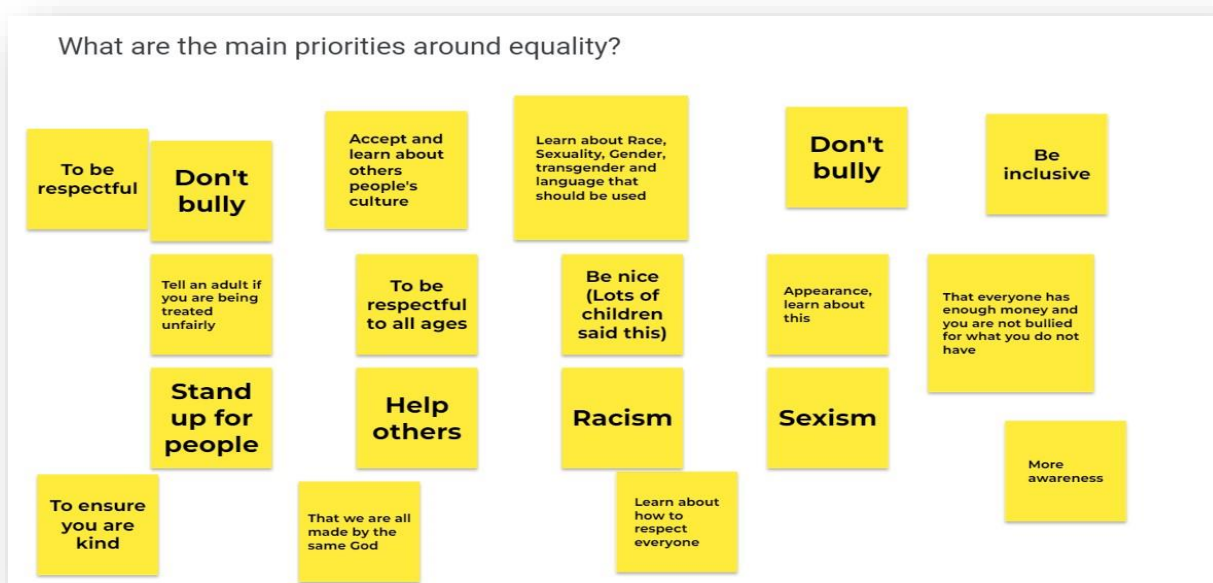
We have also been working on the new Welsh Government guidance- [Education guidance to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people | GOV.WALES](#) in order to support education practitioners in their efforts to provide inclusive and supportive education for Gypsy Roma Traveller pupils.

School Grand Council - There have been three Children's Grand Council sessions in the past year. Two pupils from year six of every primary school in the borough are invited to attend these sessions.

The sessions have focussed on:

- Children's Rights
- Why we have a Children's Grand Council
- How children and young people can get involved
- Healthy food relationships
- Gwent Well-being Plan consultation
- Equality
- Community Safety
- Period dignity

Examples of what the Children feedback from the sessions are included in the 'Think about one thing you have learned today' images below:



LGBTQ+ Support Groups - Groups across Blaenau Gwent offer support to Young People who identify as LGBTQ+. These are spaces where they feel accepted and have an opportunity to share and express their emotions, as well as a chance to celebrate and promote diversity.

Young Carers - Families First in Blaenau Gwent has been the pioneer for Young Carers since February 2020. The programme aims to support by providing respite, direct support, training opportunities, Young Carers assessments and the Young Carer ID card scheme. The programme actively promotes the rights of Young Carers and raises awareness so that professionals can recognise a Young Carer and refer them to the service for support. Families First supports Young Carers aged 5-25 who live in Blaenau Gwent ensuring their voices are listened to so that they have the same rights regarding their choices and control, quality of life and aspirations as individuals.

The Young Carers Project passed the first stage of the Social Care Wales accolades in recognition of the good work that has been done in Blaenau Gwent. The team have set up a steering group which consists of internal and external partners to share information and work together to make the best use of the resources for children and young people living in Blaenau Gwent.

South Wales Fire Service have offered free home safety visits to all Young Carers. Going forward training will be offered to Young Carers to carry out home safety checks as well as an accredited training programme for all Young Carers in partnership with the Phoenix Project in Blaenau Gwent. The Young Carers project is also working in collaboration with the Unpaid Carers Respite which enables young carers and families to receive a £30 food voucher before the Christmas period.

Inclusive Youth Club – The Youth Club meet on a weekly basis with 15-20 regular participants. The club provides support children and young people with disabilities and additional needs. It aims to provide peer

support to the individual and their families. Many parents and carers have said that the group has helped them make more connections and feel more confident in taking care of their child's complex needs.

Art Club for young adults with a disability who are 16-25 years old - offers weekly sessions that give parents two hours of relief and help those who join to develop useful life skills. A professional artist is working with the group, and they have been able to sell their creations in a local Christmas Market which helps to support the group financially and gives those who participate a feeling of accomplishment for what they have created.

Parenting programme - Early Bird (0-5), Early Bird Plus (6- 10) and Teen life (10-18) is available to any parent caring for a child with diagnoses of Autism. The programme has been successful receiving referrals from Children's Services teams. Families First are also relaunching the parent support group 'Small Steps'. 'Small Steps' group will aim to support parents whose children are in the process of assessment for a Neuro Diverse diagnosis or have a diagnosed disability.

LEGOLAND adventure - The Families First programme helped 35 families with a disability enjoy a night at LEGOLAND theme park. The families who participated in the trip gave positive feedback and reinforced that these trips are often too expensive for them to access, so they rarely get opportunities to have these kinds of experiences.

Children and Young People Staff and Partnership Network – The network keeps communicating and collaborating with each other to ensure a coordinated way of offering support, services for children and young people, preventing overlap as well as creating more opportunities.

Regional approach to tackling racism in schools - We fully support the Welsh Government's Action plan to make Wales an Anti-Racist country by 2030. To help with this, Education leads from the across the Southeast Wales Consortium have developed a draft Education Action Plan to tackle racism in schools.

Equality Objective Four- “We will promote and support safe, friendly and cohesive communities”

Overview

Our aim is to learn about the local problems and disputes that impact people. By learning about the problems, we can help to increase awareness and improve community ties and appreciation for diversity. This aligns with our continuous commitment to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, National Goals of ‘A more Equal Wales and a ‘Wales of Cohesive Communities’.

Key Examples of Actions from 2023/24

National & International Campaigns – As an organisation we continue to work together with partners to deliver key cohesion and national campaigns through social media as well as in person events.

Examples include:

- Holocaust Memorial Day
- Show Racism the Red Card
- LGBTQ+ History Month
- Pride month
- White Ribbon Day (campaign to end domestic violence)
- Black History Month
- International Children’s Day

Gwent Community Cohesion Team – work to promote and facilitate Inclusive and Cohesive Communities, to advocate community diversity and work with services and partners to celebrate equality of difference.

- In this report period, the Cohesion Team identified local Ukrainian and European communities to help leadership teams get ready for arrivals related to wider migration.
- The team has worked with communication teams across the region to communicate the Homes for Ukraine Scheme to ensure the dissemination of accurate information.
- Three 'Homes for Ukraine' regional meetings with hosts and their guests have been held. The sessions aided the necessary checks that are part of hosting families. The third session was co-facilitated by a clinical psychologist and focused on well-being and addressing the emotional difficulties faced by those who have suffered trauma.
- The team continue to engage minority communities, sharing their lived experiences via our Valleys Voice Podcast: [Valleys Voices - Podcasts | Blaenau Gwent CBC \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/valleys-voices-podcasts)

Campaign Work- We have worked closely with other Local Authority areas to increase awareness around the following campaigns:

Ramadan– A social media campaign that teaches about other religions to foster understanding and create a culture that prevents intolerance, hate speech and bullying. We used some of our earlier work that is still a valuable resource to learn about Ramadan. (47 Ramadan 1st Session – YouTube.

We have also provided useful resources to all schools which explored; the origins of Ramadan, the importance of observing Ramadan in the UK and dispelling myths and promoting understanding.

LGBTQ+ history month - We launched an awareness campaign, 'did you know' to help people learn more about topics such as the history of the rainbow flag and the meanings of words like bi, non-binary, pan sexual etc. and what they involve, along with key messages of acceptance. We have provided more training on hate crime in schools and have conducted several classroom workshops and assemblies to reinforce the wider themes of acceptance.

Black History Month - Schools received resources for a poetry contest. The resources had lesson plans, posters, and assembly presentation, and they also had; television and book resources related to Black history and information about the Windrush exhibition.

A monument was unveiled in Brynmawr in October 2023, to honour Roy Francis a rugby league pioneer. He was the first black man to play for Great Britain, as well as the first black head coach of a British top tier professional team. The event was publicised in the National press.



Councillor Chris Smith at the Roy Francis memorial unveiling

Hate Crime Awareness Week - Local schools took part in various activities to raise awareness of the importance of cohesion/inclusivity and to make a Canvas that reflected the theme of cohesion/inclusivity. A social media pack was shared throughout the week - working with Victims Support to ensure a unified message. Hate Crime Road shows took place in, Ebbw Vale.

Small Grants Scheme - endorsed several community initiatives that fostered a sense of unity and belonging; The small grants fund, facilitated the implementation of community-oriented projects which involved;

- Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council – Youth Service Calendar of community-based activities

Project centred on facilitating a calendar of cohesion events such as sports, disco and cooking, bringing young people from the 5 Youth Centres within Blaenau Gwent (Abertillery, Brynmawr, Cwm, Ebbw Vale & Tredegar) together.

- Ebbw Fawr Learning Community, School and community mural

The core values mural deliver messages of acceptance, ambition, going the extra mile, respect, kindness, positivity and trust.

- TLC Café, Community Café

The TLC Café to work with Salvage Creations Wales to provide wood working classes on a regular basis. This is a Social Enterprise that works with communities.

Connected Communities: Loneliness and Social Isolation Fund 2023/24 - The Partnerships Team have administered the third and final

year of the Connected Communities: Loneliness and Social Isolation Fund. The fund is designed to help grass root organisations bring people together to help them build social connections in the post COVID environment.

A steering group was established, made up of representatives from GAVO, ABUHB, the customer experience team and the partnerships team, to consider the applications for the grant. The total available to share amongst the successful applications was £22,727.

35 applications were received, with a total request of £63,675. The steering group considered each application individually, for suitability against the funding criteria, the impact on isolated individuals and whether the application would be better seeking assistance from another funding source. For example, there were several applications for food related projects which did not necessarily combat loneliness and isolation, but we were able to re-direct them to the Direct Food Support Fund, via the council website.

Funding was allocated to 24 organisations throughout the borough, covering Swffryd, Six Bells, Aberbeeg, Llanhilleth, Cwm, Ebbw Vale, Tredegar, Beaufort, Brynmawr and Blaina. The individual funding allocation ranged from £400 to £1250. The funds have been paid to all organisations and spending is due to be completed by the end of March 2024. The financial support will enable these organisations to continue to deliver a vital service to the residents of Blaenau Gwent in combating loneliness.

Over the three years of the available funding, support has been provided to 47 different groups, and some organisations have been successful more than once in securing support from the fund.

Equality Objective Five - “We will ensure there is meaningful involvement with people who have protected characteristics and key stakeholders that represent their interests”.

Overview

We value hearing from our communities and their perspectives. We want to establish good methods to make sure that we provide opportunities for people to engage and participate in a way that is meaningful and can influence the council's decisions. The Council has produced a Participation and Engagement Strategy which will be published April 2024.

We continue to follow the National Principles of Public Engagement and the Principles for Children and Young People’s participation.

Key Examples of Actions from 2023/24

Engagement Highlights – Over this period we have delivered and planned effective engagement across Blaenau Gwent with groups that represent protected characteristics to develop the new Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2028. Those engagement activities have helped to inform our objectives and develop our key actions going forward.

Through surveys, user research, interviews, focus groups we continue to support local people with a chance to get involved and share their views on local matters. Key examples of consultations include:

- Council Budget 2024-25
- Strategic Equality Plan Consultation for 2024-2028
- Participation and Engagement Strategy

Gwent Public Services Board, Gwent Well-being Plan – We as a Council are a committed member of the Gwent Public Services Board and

Page | 29

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This document is available in Welsh*

have continued our commitment to supporting the Well-being of Future Generation's Act's five ways of working, which includes "involvement", both locally and regionally.

Blaenau Gwent Youth Forum – Blaenau Gwent Youth Forum is a forum that comes together to give Children and Young People living in Blaenau Gwent a chance to have their say, feel heard and be involved in things that matter to them. Over the past year the forum has continued to grow and as a result has brought different perspectives and opinions, representing Children & Young People across Blaenau Gwent.

The forum continues to represent Children & Young People of Blaenau Gwent through National / Local Campaign Work (for example Climate Change, Anti-Bullying, Holocaust Memorial Day etc.). Examples of their work are outlined below.

- Winning the prestigious "Blue Balloon" award for their anti-bullying film "Stamp it Out"
- Attendance at House of Commons Debate November 2023
- Welsh Youth Parliament Debate November 2023
- Consultations to support policy development- Strategic Equality Plan
- Armistice Day of Remembrance
- Police Crime Commissioner Question Time Event
- Young person Adopted-Member role on scrutiny committees

The Youth Forum received their third award in three years for their Anti Bullying Film "Stamp it out" which is a film developed to encourage Children and Young People to talk and raise awareness about bullying issues.

We continue to grow youth participation and promote the Youth Forum to encourage more Young People to join. Previously, we reported that the forum only had female members, but now we are pleased to report that there have been three new members who all identify as male.

The Youth Forum developed a Climate Change Film for primary schools which has been shared on social media and with the primary schools across Blaenau Gwent



The Children's International Film Festival Awards October 2023



House of Commons Debate 2023



Welsh Youth Parliament Debate 2023

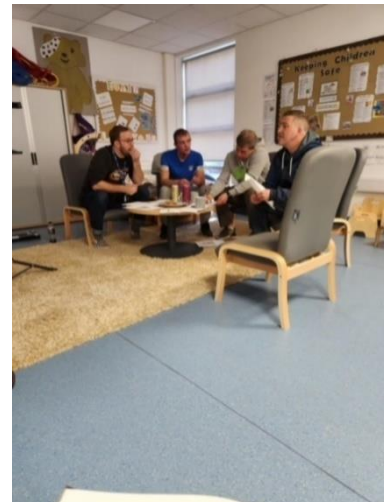
Blaenau Gwent Dad Support Worker Project - The Dad's Support Worker project began in July 2018 as part of the Flying Start Programme. The project aimed to provide fathers/male carers in the borough with an inclusive service that ensured equality with the support that was offered to mothers as part of Flying Start. It was noticed that the support was open to fathers, but because most of the workforce was female, there was low engagement from men with the service.

After talking to fathers, it was clear that they felt that many services were aimed and created for mums and that fathers felt 'invisible'. There are now three Dad Support Workers in the team who are trained to help fathers/male carers with issues such as parenting, ante-natal support, mental health support, sleep and behaviour and reducing the effect of poverty on families etc. The project makes more equal opportunities for males to access the service to help improve their children's lives, and also improve their own skills and aspirations.

The project has done very well in reaching out to fathers and ongoing

support has shown common themes that fathers in Blaenau Gwent were having difficulties with. This included mental health, debt and financial pressure, unemployment, managing relationships with their partners and fear of accessing wider services such as GP's, Social Services, or other support agencies. The Dad Support Workers offer advice, guidance and support, and also act as an advocate for them, especially during difficult/complex meetings such as Social Services meetings, mental health support services or GP visits.

Fathers are supported on a one-to-one basis in the home/community hubs and peer support is promoted through groups in community settings. These exclusive programmes give an opportunity for fathers to meet, support each other, and spend quality time with their children. Groups include, coffee mornings, walking and swimming groups, parenting groups such as the Aces Toolkit or Circle of Security and antenatal programmes.



Equality Objective Six *“We will strive to tackle inequality caused by poverty for people who have protected characteristics”*

Overview

We are committed to fulfilling our responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duty 2011. We strive to tackle inequality caused by poverty, and to ensure that those affected are fully engaged in decision making processes.

In the past year, we have continued to work with the Welsh Local Government Association and the Equality and Human Rights Commission to learn from recent research presented as part of the "Is Wales Fairer?" report, so that we can comprehend the equality situation and the socio-economic conditions of our communities in Blaenau Gwent. This work will also help us to prepare and create our new Strategic Equality Plan Objectives 2024-2028.

Blaenau Gwent together with the rest of the UK is feeling the pressure of the "Cost of Living Crisis". As a Council, we also face the consequences and will have to make tough choices in the future that will impact the people living and working in the area. However, we remain committed to provide the best services to our communities by assisting and supporting those who are most vulnerable.

Key Examples of Actions from 2023/24

Revised Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) – We have kept reviewing our Integrated Impact Assessment process this year, and we have made it accessible across the organisation, making it the main tool to help and guide decision making processes. The form has been changed to include:

- Well-being of Future Generation Act Goals

- New Corporate Objectives
- Armed forces (new national duties)
- Community Safety considerations

The requirement to carry out and report on impact assessing continues to be expected as part of the corporate reporting and decision-making process. It is to be used for any proposed service or policy change. To assist the process, we have created associated guidance, which include; key reports, statistics, and example assessments. Corporately, we continue to offer on-going support, advice, and guidance to the organisation.



Community Hubs - People who are facing financial difficulties can get various kinds of help and guidance from the community hubs. The hubs can provide support to people by giving them discretionary payments for living expenses and rent assistance for older people and those with disability. Also, the hubs can assist with eligibility checks for council tax reductions which can especially benefit those with mental or physical disabilities, carers or those on low income. There is also help for families with children, such as school uniform grants.

The hubs are places where people can get help in local libraries that are in each valley. From April 2023 to January 2024, the hubs served 5373 people. The main reasons why people visited the hubs were for benefit support, blue badges, council tax and food banks. The hubs are considered vital for residents to receive the help they need in places that are easy to reach.

Blaenau Gwent Food Partnership

Direct Food Support Fund Grants



There was funding for local authorities to help more people who struggle to afford food by improving existing community food initiatives in each authority, including a focus on activity that helps to tackle the reasons why people are food poor.

The funding helped organisations get, store and give out more food, including good food that would otherwise be wasted, increasing their ability to provide good quality, nutritious food to their customers.

In this round of DFSF grant funding, we aimed to promote a more long-lasting 'Pantry model', where organisations ask for a small membership fee from customers to support the organisations long-term activities and reduce dependence on uncertain funding sources.

Also, we lowered the maximum award available this year to increase the number of individual grants available. This was done to ensure a wide

range of support, especially within some of the poorer areas of the borough.

The grant scheme offered up to £2000 for each organisation to help with their existing activities and/or increase their capacity through: buying storage and cooking equipment, paying for volunteer expenses, training volunteers, and buying more food to distribute.

The total amount awarded was £44,143 to 23 organisations.

The recipients of the grants were required to provide information about their activities, as well as stories from their communities, photographs, and videos. The BGCBC Food resilience team hope to use these personal accounts to learn more about the main reasons for food poverty in Blaenau Gwent and improve our strategy for dealing with these problems.



“I like the food pantry because we can get food to make us healthy and strong”

“I find the pantry helpful for me and my children. I come every week and would sometimes struggle without it, I am so Happy the school has it”

Page | 37

*Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg
This document is available in Welsh*

Participatory budgeting Programme- The programme was delivered in 2022, however project delivery covered a period within 2023/24. **16 projects** in total were funded through the programme, there were 7 projects within Tredegar, 3 projects within Ebbw Vale, 2 projects in Abertillery and 4 projects that covered the whole of the Blaenau Gwent area. In total **£137, 527.50** of funding was provided to support the project delivery.

Blaenau Gwent Cost of Living Support for residents – over the last year a task group has worked together to ensure a coordinated approach to supporting people, focusing around five main areas: Housing, Food, Fuel, Financial Support and General Support.

Helping Blaenau Gwent through the Cost of Living Crisis

Tredegar Cost of Living Event

After the success of the Ebbw Vale Cost of Living drop-in session in April, The Council organised an afternoon/evening event in Tredegar Leisure Centre on 28 November. This was equally successful with over 90 residents attending to get advice on topics such as energy bills, grants, housing, education, council tax and health and wellbeing. A huge thank you to all the staff and our partners who made this happen.

Cost of Living support for residents.

Blaenau Gwent Council is again preparing to provide advice and support to residents struggling with the Cost-of-Living this winter.

A task group has been working together for over a year to ensure a coordinated approach with our partners to support people, focussing around five main areas: Housing, Food; Fuel; Financial Support & General Support.

This has included:

- Producing a comprehensive information booklet and webpage packed with information on support schemes available. This was regularly updated to offer the latest advice.
- Working to administer Welsh Government support schemes locally such as the Winter Fuel Support Scheme & the Cost-of-Living Scheme. The Council also used discretionary funding to offer households up to Council Tax band H a payment and an extra payment for household in receipt of Free School Meals.
- Voting to use Welsh Government discretionary funding to make significant contributions to the Blaenau Gwent Foodbank (£30,000), Citizens Advice Bureau (£50,000) and other local food distribution groups (£70,000)
- Issuing payments to households without a direct relationship to an energy supplier
- Helped to organise and distribute funding to Warm Hubs
- Issuing fuel bank vouchers through Community Hubs
- Organising a well-attended Cost of Living event where there was a range of advice and support available for residents.

Supporting Blaenau Gwent residents with the Cost of Living

Event Support and Assistance
In 2022/23 we:

- Administered over 9,000 Winter Fuel payments
- Supported the Energy Bills Support Scheme Alternative Funding
- Issued over 1,000 Fuel Bank Vouchers through Community Hubs

Financial Support
In 2022/23 we:

- Made £155,000 of Living payments to households in bands A to H
- Made a £100 payment to households in receipt of Free School Meals
- Provided weekly payments to families receiving Free School Meals over the summer holidays

Food support
In 2022/23 we:

- Made a £25,000 contribution to the main Blaenau Gwent Foodbank
- Made a £7,100 to other local food distribution groups and organisations

General Support
In 2022/23 we:

- Administered over £20,000 funding to set up Warm Hubs
- Provided £50,000 to the CAB to continue supporting food people
- Organised a Cost of Living event with our partners offering advice and support

Next steps and action planning 2024-2028

Our annual report has shown the ongoing advancement towards fulfilling our Public Sector Equality Duty as well as showing key examples to illustrate our progress towards our Strategic Equality Plan Objectives 2020-2024, which continues to increase the awareness of equality throughout the organisation.

We acknowledge that although we have made progress, we realise that there is still work to do. We have tried to demonstrate in this report that we recognise that there are many aspects of our work to date that we will need to carry over into the development of our new Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2028.

Over the next year we plan to build on the work outlined in this document to inform the development of new Action Plan that will underpin the first year of Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2028. The Action Plan will include the commitments to deliver against the Welsh Governments Strategic Action Plans for Equality, including the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan and LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales.

Workforce Summary Data April 2022-March 2023

