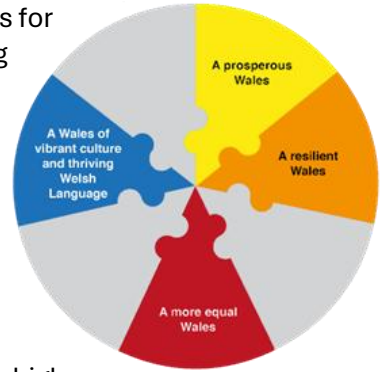


Well-being Objective 4

An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services at the right time and in the right place

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.



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 are we doing?

The following narrative provides an evaluative reflection of the activity, undertaken throughout 2024/25, across service areas that directly support this Well-being Objective. The narrative reflects what has gone well but also, and more importantly, where we are experiencing challenges. These challenges have then been collated together at the end of each section. These areas will be identified as areas of focus moving forward and will be reported as part of our next Self-Assessment, as well as performance monitoring throughout the year.

Finance and Resources

Our financial performance for 2023/24 is contained within our Statement of [Accounts](#). The Statement of Accounts for the 2023/2024 financial year have not been completed and did not meet statutory deadlines.

The Council experienced delays in finalising and completing the audit of the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts which have subsequently impacted upon both the 2023/24 and 2024/25 accounts. A significant issue identified during the external audit of the Council's 2022/23 Statement of Accounts related to the governance failings / lack of council oversight of the joint venture agreement between the Council and Welsh Government (WG) for the Lime Avenue development. The agreement imposed a significant liability on the Council as the arrangement had been entered into without due consideration by senior leaders of the council. In March 2025, with the agreement of Welsh Government, the terms of the Lime Avenue Joint Venture were amended. The changes removed the requirement for the Council to purchase the Welsh Government capital share at that end of the agreement and, as a result, with effect from the date of the agreement, this significant liability has been removed.

The Council's Constitution and Financial Procedure Rules are being enhanced to more clearly define delegated responsibilities, specifying that any contractual agreements imposing significant long-term liabilities on the Council must be reviewed and approved by the Section 151 officer or their representative before being entered into. The circumstances and the impact of this issue has also been highlighted to senior leaders across the organisation to raise awareness of future risks and impact.

The preparation and audit of the final 2023/24 accounts is nearing completion with the final accounts and accompanying Audit Wales report scheduled for presentation to Governance & Audit Committee on 28th July 2025. The target date for preparation of the draft accounts for 2024/25 is September 2025. Significant progress has been made in addressing the issues that have contributed to the delays, and it is expected that the



preparation of the 2025/26 and future years annual accounts will be achieved in line with statutory deadlines.

The Council's budget is continuously monitored to ensure resources are used economically and efficiently, while enabling effective medium- and long-term planning. Robust financial planning and management processes are in place, with regular updates on the Council's financial position provided to senior officers and through the democratic process.

The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is the Council's core financial planning tool. It is a rolling plan aligned with the priorities of the Corporate Plan and is regularly updated to reflect changing circumstances and policy decisions affecting the Council's finances. The MTFS forecasts the Council's expenditure and required savings over a five-year period to achieve a balanced budget. Key assumptions include AEF – 3% uplift 2026/27 onwards; Council Tax – 4% annual increase; Pay Awards – 3% annually; Inflation – 2% per annum

The baseline revenue funding the Council received in 2023/24 from Welsh Government, after allowing for transfers, was £139.7m, an increase of 6.5% (£8.5m). The all-Wales average increase in the Local Government Settlement was 7.9%.

For 2024/25, the Council received a 2.8% (£3.95m) uplift in funding from Welsh Government. While this increase is welcomed, the current economic climate and cost-of-living crisis present significant financial challenges. The Council must deliver £1.93m budget reductions for 2025/26 and £34m over the five-year MTFS period.

To address these challenges, the Council must reconsider how services are delivered to achieve savings and generate income. This may involve reducing, altering, or discontinuing some services, or exploring alternative delivery models. To support this, a financial planning meeting—based on Torfaen Council's approach—has been introduced under the name 'Apollo'. These sessions will inform service redesign and financial planning.

Financial efficiencies totalling £6.48m were identified in setting the budget, with £1.5m in reserve funding earmarked to support a balanced budget.

The overall provisional outturn across all portfolios shows a favourable variance of £2.6m, after a net draw of £0.56m from specific reserves. As a result, the £1.5m reserve funding was not required to support the budget. Based on the provisional outturn, the Council's reserves will increase by £1.1m.

This positive financial position is primarily due to the effective use of specific grant funding and the late allocation of grants from Welsh Government, which helped offset existing cost pressures during the financial year.

The revenue budget financial statement provisional outturn as at 31st March 2025:

Portfolio/ Committee	2024/2025 Revised Revenue Budget	2024/2025 Provisional Outturn	Favourable/ (Adverse) Variance
	£m	£m	£m
Corporate Services	26.32	25.07	1.25
Social Services	53.55	53.45	0.10
Education & Leisure	74.27	74.85	(0.58)
Economy	1.57	0.52	1.05
Environment	33.30	32.6	0.70
Planning	1.15	1.03	0.12
Licensing	0.12	0.12	0



Total	190.28	187.64	2.64
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Our work continues in the context of increasing financial challenges. We must remain proactive in managing with limited resources by adopting more effective and efficient ways of working. It is essential that we adapt our operational practices and rethink service delivery to meet these challenges head-on.

Looking ahead, we will maintain our focus on delivering efficiencies and savings, and investing in new technologies to protect frontline services. However, we must also fundamentally rethink how all services are delivered.

Workforce

The Council has some difficulties with recruiting into some professional and technical roles. There is some reliance on agency workers to cover staff absence and hard to fill specialist roles and projects. As of Quarter 4 2024/25, our workforce information is as follows:

	Council (Including schools)	Corporate Services	Regeneration/ Community Services	Social Services	Education	Schools
Employee Headcount	3198	307	928	611	106	1246
Agency Worker Headcount (Matrix)	24	1	21	2	N/A	N/A
Employee FTE	2332.31	286.52	540.72	506.64	88.23	910.2
Employee FTE as a % of the Council FTE	100.00%	12.28%	23.18%	21.72%	3.78%	39.03%
% of permanent positions vacant (no directly employed cover)	4.93%	9.84%	6.84%	8.68%	6.67%	N/A
% Labour Turnover	3.28%	4.52%	2.89%	3.54%	0.95%	1.02%
Days lost to sickness per FTE (cumulative outturn)	13.85	6.02	13.13	17.93	10.70	14.80
% of days lost to short term sickness	30%	35%	29%	20%	36%	36%
% of days lost to long term sickness	70%	65%	71%	80%	64%	64%
% of staff with no sickness absence	74.00%	87.38%	78.07%	76.21%	77.17%	66.91%

Psychiatric or mental health issues are the leading cause of sickness absence across the Council, accounting for 25.29% of work-related days lost.

There are a series of actions in place to include regular monitoring of performance, target setting at service and Council level and case analysis. An in-depth review of sickness absence and well-being is undertaken on an annual basis, and this is scrutinised by Members.

As of March 25, there have been 2 cases of recorded capability in 2024/25 and 9 grievance cases, The UK gender pay gap for employees is 13.1% (2024). At the Council men and women are paid equally for doing equivalent jobs across the business. 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.



On an annual basis the Council is expected to report on its annual performance with regards to health, safety and welfare at work. The number of employee accidents/incidents has decreased from 304 in 2023/24 to 251 in 2024/2025. The number of non-employee accidents has decreased 299 in 2023/24 to 221 in 2024/25. The number of employee accidents/incidents reportable to the HSE has slightly decreased 19 in 2023/24 to 18 in 2024/25.

Corporate Safeguarding

Audit Wales undertook a follow up review of the Council's Corporate Safeguarding arrangements and reported their findings to the Council in February 2025. Publication of the report by Audit Wales was in June 2025, in line with Council reporting.

Audit Wales Findings

Having robust corporate safeguarding arrangements can provide a Council with assurance that all employees, elected members, volunteers, school governors and contractors have a role in safeguarding and promote the wellbeing of children and adults who may be at risk of harm.

- In 2014, Audit Wales undertook a review of the Council's arrangements to support the safeguarding of children and at that time made three proposals for improvement.
- In 2015, the Auditor General for Wales published a national report following a review of corporate safeguarding arrangements across Welsh councils. That report made eight recommendations, of which seven related directly to councils and one related to the Welsh Government.
- In 2019, Audit Wales assessed how the Council had addressed the proposals for improvements and recommendations from both the 2014 and 2015 reports. At that time, they found that the Council had made limited progress, and safeguarding arrangements were not consistent enough to provide assurance across all service areas. The Council had not fully addressed eight of the ten national recommendations and local proposals for improvement.
- In 2022, a further review was undertaken by Audit Wales to assess the Council's progress in addressing the outstanding recommendations and proposals for improvement. It was concluded that the pandemic further delayed the Council's progress in addressing the recommendations, although it had taken recent action to strengthen its corporate safeguarding arrangements. However, the Council had not fully addressed previous recommendations, and two further recommendations were issued.
- In November 2024, the most recent review was undertaken to assess whether the Council had made effective progress since 2022 in addressing the outstanding recommendations. As a result, the review only focussed on aspects of corporate safeguarding arrangements covered by those recommendations. The review did not cover the following areas, as these have been previously audited as being well established:
 - all aspects of the Council's corporate safeguarding arrangements;
 - specific safeguarding arrangements in Education or Social Services;
 - specific arrangements for safeguarding referrals; or
 - outcomes of safeguarding referrals.

Overall, Audit Wales found that the Council has not made sufficient progress to address the outstanding corporate safeguarding recommendations.

Since this time, the Council has been undertaking a full review of its arrangements in order to develop an action [plan](#) that fully addresses the outstanding recommendations.

The Council has put in place a Corporate Safeguarding Board of strategic officers as well as an operational Designated Safeguarding Persons Group who will work to implement the action plan and ensure that safeguarding remains high on the agenda across all Council services.



Some progress to date includes:

- Providing specific service area safeguarding reports so that proper scrutiny and analysis can be provided to this important Council priority. Moving forward the reports will be:
 - Children's Safeguarding – Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Committee;
 - Education Safeguarding - Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Committee;
 - Adult Safeguarding – Adult and Communities Scrutiny Committee; and
 - Corporate Safeguarding – Corporate Governance and Resources Scrutiny Committee.
- A review of the Safeguarding Strategy has been undertaken and is to go through the democratic process during 2025.
- Officers have been included on the Council's e-learning platform in order to undertake essential learning modules, including safeguarding.

Community Hubs

The Council's Community Hub model continues to be strengthened, delivery across the borough from Libraries with relevant and targeted support based around the four strands in the Councils Cost -of -living action plan which provides a focus on Housing, Food, Fuel and Benefit/ Grant support. Officers across all community hubs continue to provide advice on a range of issues including budgeting as well as signposting customers to third party organisations for specialised advice. Other support available via the Councils community hubs include advice and guidance on council tax and blue badge applications as well as support to improve residents' digital skills.

The table below provides a breakdown of the number of residents supported through the Community Hubs during the period based on venues:

	Abertillery	Blaina	Brynawr	Cwm	Ebbw Vale	Llanhilleth	Tredegar	JCP	Overall
May	142	10	108	19	144	0	131	0	572
June	122	14	109	17	156	0	142	3	600
July	112	17	101	12	148	0	112	7	525
August	103	10	111	15	157	3	100	1	515
September	3	19	109	15	141	4	98	3	413
October	50	30	120	21	169	2	132	4	558
November	93	24	89	32	139	21	107	0	543
December	58	11	59	18	106	7	97	0	406
January	108	18	87	14	97	0	90	0	470
February	128	17	109	16	171	0	86	0	558
March	88	23	96	13	144	3	103	0	490



Procurement

The 2024/25 Annual Procurement Plan was successfully delivered with over 100 contracts being awarded over the 12 month period.

Corporate Procurement officers continue to support collaborative procurement opportunities across the Welsh public sector. As a proactive member of regional and national networks, we are working collectively to maximise commercial opportunities and develop best practice to support socially responsible procurement including social value, decarbonisation, fair work and safeguarding

February 2025 saw the most significant changes to procurement legislation in the last decade with both the Procurement Act 2023 and Procurement Regulations 2024 coming into effect. The introduction of the changes has required significant resourcing to ensure continued compliance and adoption into business as usual operations.

As system administrators, officers supported a major upgrade of the corporate E-purchasing system, which also included the expansion to Blaenau Gwent Schools. Also, the Corporate Purchase Card programme continued to see expansion with over 80 cards now in circulation across corporate services and schools.

The Procurement Service demonstrated strong performance in strategic planning, operational delivery, and compliance. Despite significant external challenges (e.g., legislative changes, contractor insolvency, system migrations), the team-maintained service continuity and supported a wide range of critical projects. Continued focus on system improvements, staff training, and collaborative commissioning will be key to sustaining performance into 2025/26

In 2024 Audit Wales conducted an audit focusing on the arrangements the Council has for commissioning [services](#). The findings and recommendations have been presented to Senior officers to action. The progress of recommendations has been reported through the Council's democratic process and can be found [here](#)

Welsh Language

The Council's Welsh Language Promotion [Strategy](#) has been developed in line with Welsh Governments target of reaching 1 million Welsh speakers across Wales by 2050.

Significant progress has been made in enhancing the Council's performance monitoring framework through the internal business planning process. Now, all directorates and service areas are required to submit quarterly updates detailing their compliance with Welsh Language Standards and the actions undertaken to support the objectives outlined in the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/27.

2024/25 Council data shows that the Council has identified 42 members of staff who are fluent Welsh speakers. The total number of staff who have Welsh language speaking skills ranging from 'fluently', 'quite well', 'moderately', 'foundation' to Courtesy/Entry Level, is 629. This is an increase of 24 members of staff from the 2023/24 reporting period (605 members of staff reported in 2023/24).

Staff are encouraged to participate in Welsh language training through Dysgu Cymraeg, with free tutor-led courses available. 629 staff have reported some level of Welsh-speaking ability, with improvements in reading and writing skills. Efforts continue to encourage staff to update their language skills and use Welsh in workplace interactions. Automated telephone messages and staff training have been updated to ensure bilingual service delivery and a Teams channel was created to connect Welsh-speaking staff for call handling.

Shared Prosperity Funding has been secured to support Welsh language visibility and activities. Events like Dydd Miwsig Cymru, Welsh Rarebit Day, and Diwrnod Shwmae have been celebrated to promote Welsh culture. Local businesses and schools actively participated in Welsh language initiatives.



Admissions to Welsh-medium schools have increased, and a feasibility study is planned for further provision. Ysgol Gymraeg Tredegar opened in a temporary location, with plans for a permanent building by Autumn 2025/26.

A review has been undertaken to consider recruitment processes and Welsh Language ability. Over the past 12 months only 1 role has gone out as Welsh Language essential and it is important for the Council to consider roles which should have some form of Welsh language ability this will be a focus for the year ahead.

In November 2021, the Welsh Language Commissioners Office (WLCO) opened an investigation with Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council following concerns whether the Council was compliant with the Welsh Language Standards in terms of providing a Welsh language telephone service.

- **April 2022**- the Council provided an initial response to the investigation, which, in turn, raised further compliance concerns with regards to promoting services, assessing the language skills of staff, providing training opportunities, and assessing the language needs of posts. This led to the terms of reference for the investigation being widened to include a number of additional operational standards.
- **September 2022** a final determination of the investigation was provided to the Council outlining the steps required to reach compliance and expected delivery timeframes. It also requested the Council take forward an organisational to develop an Action Plan.
- **January 2023** – action plan signed off by the Council's Leadership team
- **March 2023** - core group was formed to support the implementation of the Action Plan.
- **July 2024** a Confirmation was received from the WLCO on 1st July 2024 that the investigation had been successfully implemented and therefore closed.

Following the conclusion of the Welsh Language Compliance Investigation in 2024, our contact centre staff have been engaging in regular practice sessions led by our Welsh Language Support Officer. These sessions focus on telephone procedures, key words, and essential phrases, ensuring staff maintain accuracy in both process and pronunciation. They also provide a valuable opportunity for staff to refine their greetings and address any questions they may have. The initiative has been met with enthusiasm, leading to a noticeable boost in staff confidence when handling calls on the Welsh language telephone line.

In June 2024, the WLCO began investigating Aneurin Leisure Trust for limited Welsh language use online and at Parc Bryn Bach. The Council and Trust were required to develop an Action Plan, which was approved in September 2024 with a completion deadline of March 2025. Action leads met every six weeks to monitor progress and ensure compliance. In March 2025, the WLCO closed the investigation, requiring no further action. The Welsh Language Core Compliance Officer Group continues to oversee adherence to Welsh Language Standards with updated membership and terms of reference.

Complaints and Compliments

The Council has improved the reporting of complaints and compliments within the organisation by creating a Performance Information interactive dashboard. This tool enables the reader to examine the complaints and

compliments submitted to the organisation over the last four years as well as being able to identify the number of complaints per service area received. During the year there has been 213 cases of feedback recorded across the Council.

These 213 cases consisted of:

- 125 Corporate complaints;
- 19 Social Services complaints; and
- 69 compliments.

For the period 142 cases were closed (completed). For the Corporate Complaints, 78% (98) were completed within the timescale, 18% (22) were after the timescale, but within 20 working days and 4% (5) within 3 months. Of the Corporate



complaints received during the period, 50 were not upheld, 63 were upheld and 12 were cancelled. For the Social Services complaints, 6 complaints were closed within the timescale, 8 within 3 months and 3 within 6 months and none took longer than 6 months. Of the Social Services complaints closed during the period, 7 complaints were not upheld, 1 complaint was upheld and 9 of the complaints received were found that the investigation was not merited or the investigation was discontinued.

Information Governance

During the period the Council received a total of 959 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. This is down from the previous year where 1044 requests were received. Under legislation, the Council is expected to respond to FOIs within 20 working days. In the last two years Council has achieved a response rate within the permitted 20 working days of 88%. However, in the 2024/2025 improvements have been made to this and a response rate of 91.6% (878 out of 959) has been achieved.

Detail	Volume 2023/24	Volume 2024/25
Total FOIs received	1044	959
Success rate within 20 working days	918 (87.93%)	878 (91.6%)
Late but provided	90 (8.62%)*	78 (8.1%)
Still Outstanding	36 (3.45%)*	3 (0.3%)

*these figures were taken at approximately the same date last year but have subsequently improved

This year the Council received a total of 88 enquiries to make a Subject Access Request and receive copies of the information held about themselves in line with the Data Protection Legislation. This is a slight increase on the 83 received during the previous period and maintains the significant increase from 60 enquiries in the 2022/2023 period. The Council are not permitted under the legislation to ask for reasoning or justification as to why the requester is making the enquiry so understanding the reasoning behind this increase is difficult other than to assume that the public are more aware of their rights under the legislation and that staff are able to recognise such requests better to ensure that the correct process is followed.

Before releasing any information to a requestor, to maintain privacy and security, the legislation requires that it is firstly established that each requestor is entitled to receive the information, before the request can be considered valid. To do this, and to ensure consistency for all requests, the Council requires ID from each requestor to evidence their entitlement and prove identity. For a variety of reasons, a number of requestors fail to respond to the initial screening exercise. For the 2024/2025 period, of the 88 requests received for Subject Access, only 46 were deemed valid by providing the relevant ID. This is a reduction on last year where 54 achieved a status of being valid.

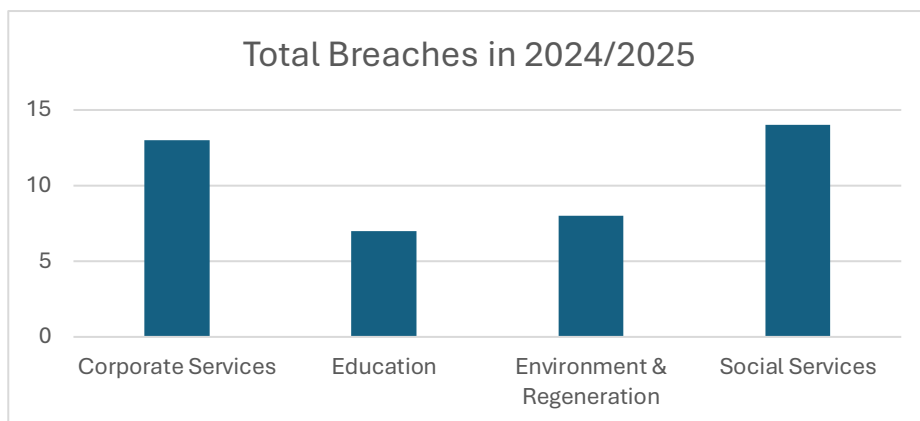
A standard Subject Access Request is permitted 30 calendar days from the time it becomes valid to provide the information to the requestor. In rare circumstances it is permitted to extend the time from the standard 30 days to 90 days where it can be demonstrated that a request is large or complex. In the 2024/2025 only 3 requests

had the time extension applied for Blaenau Gwent.

During the 2024/25 period a total of 37 out of 46 valid requests were provided with copies of their information within the permitted time. Of the 9 that exceeded the permitted time the average time to fulfil the request was 63 days compared to 16 days for requests completed within the permitted time period.



During the 2024/25 period the Council as a whole recorded a total of 42 data breaches but only a small number of these required reporting to the ICO. This is an increase from 34 in the 2023/2024 period but within the same bracket of between 30-45 per year that has been noted over the last 5 years. An increase in reported data breaches, whilst not a desirable trend, could also be viewed as positive as it could mean that staff are becoming more aware of their obligations and willing to report incidents through the appropriate channels, and this in turn enables the Council to handle the incidents correctly in line with the legislation.



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 variety of training materials, guidance and documentation is available to members and this is included within an online member library.

During 2024/25 the Council had in operation four Scrutiny Committees:

- Corporate and Performance Scrutiny Committee;
- Partnership Scrutiny Committee;
- People Scrutiny Committee; and
- Place Scrutiny Committee.

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 2024/25.

Evaluations are undertaken after every scrutiny meeting to review the processes in place and where further improvement can be sought. An annual evaluation questionnaire was also sent to all members in February 2025, and the response rate was 45% (15 Members).

Learning from this included:

- Work life balance and time management support – information included in the Members Library, and Member Well-being Champion identified
- Councillor security – information included in Members Library and a working group in place to look at member safety
- Member involvement in FWP – meeting with Chairs and Vice-Chairs and FWP an item for discussion at the first meeting of every committee



- Refresher training for members – Extensive Member Development programme in place, Members library available, WLGA have a variety of training materials available

Research is also undertaken from Scrutiny processes across Wales. 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”

A full review of the Constitution was agreed at Council on 21st September 2023 and in November 2023, a supplementary amendment was approved to reflect arrangements for the appointment of the Chief Executive.

For 2024/25, one complaint against a member was taken forward for formal investigation by the Ombudsman’s Office. No whistleblowing complaints were received for the same period.

Internal and External Audit

The Council is subject to numerous internal and external audits and regulatory reviews each year. These are undertaken to ensure the Council provides value for money, services are being run efficiently and effectively, and that improved services are being delivered. The Council is monitored by a number of external regulatory bodies, the main of which are: Audit Wales; Care Inspectorate Wales; and Estyn.

Audit Wales

Engagement arrangements with Audit Wales are in place with meetings held with the Head of Governance and Partnerships, with the Section 151 Officer and also the Chief Executive.

Audit Wales Reporting during 2024/25 include:

Local Reports	National Audit Wales Reports	Audit Wales Reports still in Progress
• Use of performance information: Service User perspective and Outcomes • Digital Strategy Review • Financial Sustainability Review • Arrangements for Commissioning Services • Corporate Safeguarding Arrangements Follow Up Report	• Use of Performance Information – Service User Perspective and Outcomes • Digital by design? Lessons from our digital strategy review across councils in Wales • Governance of National Park Authorities • Affordable Housing National Report • Active Travel • Financial Management and Governance – Lessons from Audit for Community and Town Councils in Wales	• Temporary Accommodation – National Study • Counter Fraud Arrangements – local study

The Annual Audit Summary for 2023 from Audit Wales is expected following the signoff of the Blaenau Gwent accounts in 2023. The report will include a synopsis of each review undertaken by Audit Wales over the year.

Estyn

The Authority’s Education Services have regular Local Authority Link Inspector (LALI) meetings convened with Estyn in line with inspectorate requirements. The Education Leadership Team reports progress against the Local Government Education Services (LGES) framework to Scrutiny and Cabinet. The Authority has update meetings between the



Corporate Director Education, Members, and the Welsh Government officials as and when required and the Education Achievement Service (EAS) also provides updates on the school improvement agenda to the Cabinet and Scrutiny Committee.

Care Inspectorate Wales

Social Services is subject to audit, inspection and review by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). On a quarterly basis, the Corporate Director of Social Services and Heads of Adult and Children's Services meet with CIW to discuss achievements, performance and key challenges.

During the year, the Council received the following local reports from CIW:

- Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Fostering Services
- Cwrt Mytton Home For The Elderly
- Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Homecare

The Council also received the following national report from the Public Services Ombudsman:

- Are we caring for our carers?

Progress following recommendations from these inspections continued to be monitored in the Council's business plans and reported through the democratic process.

Internal Audit

An annual report, outlining areas that have undergone an assessment via Internal Audit, is provided to the Council's Governance and Audit Committee and also included in the Audit and Risk Manager's objective review of the Authority's system of internal control.

Internal Audit issued 25 final audit reports during the year:

Audit Grading	No of audits
Full Assurance	5
Reasonable Assurance	17
Limited Assurance	1
No Assurance	2

Key Challenges Identified for Action in 2025/26

- The Council needs to accelerate its response to implementing the outstanding recommendations from the Audit Wales review of Corporate Safeguarding. This will be monitored throughout the year and will be included in the self-assessment 2025/26.
- The Council need to ensure it responds to all outstanding Audit recommendations. This will be achieved via monitoring of the Council's business plans and reporting of risk and assurance tracker.
- The Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) process remains a crucial tool for facilitating and informing our decision-making processes. Recognising the need for improvement, we have identified better monitoring of the IIA's usage as a key action for the 2025/26 period. This will be a primary focus as part of the SEP Year 2 action plan to ensure the process is effectively utilised and continuously improved.
- Significant progress has been made in addressing the issues that have contributed to the delay in reporting the final accounts for 2023/24, however, it is expected that the preparation of the 2025/26 and future years annual accounts will be achieved in line with statutory deadlines.
- A review has been undertaken to consider recruitment processes and Welsh Language ability. Over the past 12 months only 1 role has gone out as Welsh Language essential and it is important for the Council to consider roles which should have some form of Welsh language ability. Work to be undertaken with OD to address this challenge.
- The Council must deliver budget reductions of £34m over the five-year MTFs. Financial planning meetings are in place to inform service redesign and financial planning for the future.



- The number of days lost to sickness has increased during the year from 11.82 days per full time equivalent for 2023/24 to 13.85 days for 2024/25. Our workforce sickness continues to be regularly monitored, and sickness targets continue to be set at a service and Council wide level.

