**Overall Council** **Self-assessment**

2021/22 was the first year that the Council undertook an annual self-assessment following the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. As stated at the time, the year one report has been used as a learning tool in order to further develop and enhance the self-assessment process in future years. Alongside this, Welsh Government also undertook a review of all 22 Local Authority self-assessments and, whist they do not have a role to ‘sign off’ the self-assessments, they did identify areas of good practice and learning points. For Blaenau Gwent, the following has been included for this year:

* A BRAG rating and scoring of our overall performance against each section of the report;
* More consideration of what has not gone so well to identify areas for improvement;
* More use of infographics and pictures; and
* Recognition that public engagement could be improved and identifying our commitment to strengthen these arrangements for future assessments.

The self-assessment process has identified areas in which the council is progressing well, areas of challenge and areas for further development. The Council’s assessment and conclusion of how it has performed is set out on pages 7- 19 and responds to the following areas of self-assessment:

* *Is the Council exercising its functions effectively?*
* *Is the Council using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively?*
* *Are the governance arrangements of the Council effective for securing continuous improvement?*

An assessment score has also been provided against the above three questions as well as the evaluation of the Corporate Plan Well-being Objectives using the following scale:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Score** | **Definition** | **Description** |
| **6** | **Excellent** | All areas of performance and activity are achieving, actions completed, and targets met. |
| **5** | **Very Good** | The majority of actions and measures are being achieved. |
| **4** | **Good** | Strengths with some areas of weakness, however, strengths outweigh the weaknesses. |
| **3** | **Adequate** | Strengths just outweigh weaknesses. Some actions and targets are behind schedule or falling short. |
| **2** | **Weak** | Weaknesses identified in the majority of actions and targets.  |
| **1** | **Unsatisfactory** | Weaknesses identified in the majority of actions and targets with performance moving in the wrong direction and delivery is unlikely. |

**Is the Council exercising its func****tions effectively?**

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

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Evaluation Rating 3:****Adequate** | **Evaluation Narrative:** The Council has implemented key changes throughout the year, including the development of our new Corporate Plan, aligning the priorities with the Gwent Well-being Plan and Marmot Principles. The Plan has also been embedded within our effective business planning arrangements which ensures that the work undertaken as an authority has a direct link to our key objectives and vision. Changes have been made across the organisation through the Local Government and Elections Wales Act and we continue to work differently to ensure we meet the needs of residents. Although good work has taken place, budget and finance continue to be a challenge for not only the Council but others Council’s across Wales. The number of data breaches has increased throughout the year which is an area that we will be actively working on to reduce. We will continue to work differently including working more closely in partnership to help meet challenges, as well as progressing to become a more commercially and digitally minded organisation. Actions to address these areas of work can be found on pages [34](#actionsident), [44](#act2), [57](#whatour), and [69](#Thestrat) and will be reported on as part of the 2023/24 Council Self-Assessment.  |

**Blaenau Gwent Council**

The role of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council and its partners is to maximise the assets we have, doing more with less and doing it better. The historical decline of heavy industry continues to impact on employment prospects and intergenerational opportunities across the borough. As a Council we face increasing demand for some of our services, putting pressure on budgets but we are tackling these issues with partners, businesses, and the local community. We are looking at how we spend our money to achieve the best outcomes for residents, supporting new and existing businesses, looking at our assets to achieve new income streams, and removing barriers to enable residents to access what they need.

Across Gwent, all councils, including Blaenau Gwent, will work towards becoming a region that aims to tackle and reduce inequalities, based on the Marmot principles (further detail on page 16). We will work across all public services in our area to ensure that our policies, approaches, and resources are geared towards creating a fairer, more equal society for today’s residents and future generations. As an anti-poverty council, we will do everything within our power to support people trapped in poverty and those who are most vulnerable. By valuing and promoting good health, education and learning we can help people to reach their full potential. This in turn will contribute to creating better informed and connected communities throughout Blaenau Gwent that are fair, open and welcoming to all; where everyone gets to play an active part.

**Legislation**

The Council is embracing the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. As part of this, we are working collectively to adapt the culture of the organisation and embed the ethos of the Act into all that we do. It is recognised however that we are still in the early years of implementing the Act and there is still more to do over the coming years. In late 2020, the Council underwent a review of its Well-being Objectives with Audit Wales, the outcome of which is expected in 2023.

The corporate reporting format has been designed to guide officers and members to consider the key implications of any proposals put forward. The report has defined areas for considering options appraisal, risk, staffing and financial impact, along with the contribution to the Sustainable Development Principles. A recent addition to the template is an integrated impact assessment section which combines the Equalities Impact Assessment with the Socio Economic Impact Duty. This assists in the process for making informed and transparent decisions and ensures the links between budget and planning are considered as well as legislative requirements.

The Sustainable Development Principles, Environment Act and Decarbonisation have also been included within the business planning template used across all service areas.

In 2021, the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act came into force. The intention is for councils to be proactive in considering how internal processes and procedures should change to enable more effective planning, delivery and decision-making to drive better outcomes. The Council is actively working to implement this Act which will also replace the current improvement duty for principal councils set out in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009. As part of this, an action plan is in place to ensure that the Act is fully implemented by 2024.

A Governance and Audit Committee has been established as part of the Local Government Act that has the primary functions of reviewing financial reports and challenging governance arrangements. The Committee aims to seek assurance that the governance framework operating within the Authority is robust, effective and efficient.

**Corporate Plan**

The Corporate Plan is a very important strategic document for the Council which clearly sets out the priorities, known as Well-being Objectives, and how we will target our limited resources in order to support implementation of these. The Objectives have been developed using extensive research and understanding of local community need following various engagement activities. Owing to the timing of the development of the Gwent Well-being Plan and the development of the Council’s Corporate Plan, evidence from the Well-being Needs Assessment and Public Consultation were used as evidence for the Council Plan. The main areas of priority emerged as:

* Reducing the inequalities that exist within our communities – this directly links to the Corporate Plan priority - Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent as well as the targeted work being undertaken by the Council’s Cost of Living working group.
* Creating safe communities – this directly links to the Corporate Plan priority - Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient.
* Protecting and enhancing the natural environment - this directly links to the Corporate Plan priority - Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities.
* In order to work towards delivery of the priorities the Council needs to be able to do this effectively and within resources, therefore, a fourth priority has been developed specifically for the Council - An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place.

**Finance and Resources**

The governance arrangements of the Council have established effective and regular monitoring of budgets which is reported to Scrutiny Committee and then Cabinet. Reports include detail on Capital and Revenue spend as well as the use of general and earmarked reserves. Monitoring of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and Bridging the Gap Programme is also reported to Members. Overspending portfolios or specific projects are pulled out for scrutiny and consideration. This transparent reporting enabled Members and the public to have an understanding of the financial management of the Council and what arrangements are in place to support any budget gaps.

The Annual Audit Summary for 2022 from Audit Wales is expected following the signoff of the Blaenau Gwent accounts later in 2023. The report will include a synopsis of each review undertaken by Audit Wales over the year.

**Commercial**

Progress continues to be made with both internal and external partners to position and build digital innovation into how we plan and deliver services. The focus is to develop services around the user with explorations taking place on how digital solutions can support this moving forward.

Work is progressing to further embed the Council's commercial and business ambitions. Officers have undertaken a midterm review of the Commercial Strategy, which will be presented to the Strategic Commercial Commissioning Board in 2023. An officer group to progress commercial and business opportunities (BaCON) has been established. Terms of Reference have been agreed and an initial meeting was held on 1st March 2023. Officers have engaged with SOLACE & CIPFA to develop a commercial framework to support the development of project specific business cases.

A position statement against the objectives set out in the business case on the Shared Resource Service (SRS) Wales were shared with Governance and Audit Committee 8th March 2023. Key risks highlighted in the business case were global supply chain issues, cyber security awareness, and- the recruitment and retention of SRS staff. A risk register is in place to mitigate these risks.

**Information Governance**

Annual reviews of the Information Security and Acceptable Use Policies have been undertaken and accepted at the March 2023 Information Governance Forum.

During 2022, Audit Wales provided Councils with its findings from their national study on Cyber Resilience. To provide assurance, the Chief Information Security Officer provided an overview of the Council’s arrangements to the Governance and Audit Committee. As part of a planned approach to raise awareness of the importance of Information Security and Data Protection, as well as highlighting individual responsibilities, a number of on line events have taken place throughout the year led by the Data Protection Officer and the Chief Information Security Officer. These culminated in a Phishing exercise being undertaken with Blaenau Gwent’s results being very pleasing. However, owing to the reliance that the Council has on ICT for service continuity, it has been recognised that the corporate risk, regarding ICT and cyber-attacks, be increased from a score of high to critical.

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

**Cost of Living**

The area faces issues with health and wealth inequality, alongside social issues affecting our families and young people. The cost of living crises put significant pressure on budgets and services during 2022/23 which is expected to continue into further years. As a council we will need to support our communities and citizens to navigate and overcome the worst impacts of this crisis. It is anticipated that these increasing pressures are being felt by those households whose budgets have the least capacity to absorb financial pressures. We recognise however, that we do not control all the necessary levers to mitigate against the full impact of this crisis, but we will focus on the steps we can take. A Cost of Living Member Group, supported by an Operational Officer Group, has been established to prioritise this important agenda and implement actions to try and ease the impacts on the area. Officer meetings take place monthly, prior to Member Led Group, in order to update against the action plan and consider proposals for new actions moving forward.

The action plan has focussed on:

* Warm hubs and the maximisation of the Welsh Government grants to support these;
* Distribution of £100K to the Blaenau Gwent foodbank and other smaller food banks;
* £50K donation from the Council to the Citizens Advice Bureau;
* Development of an information booklet to provide information on what support is available in relation to food, housing, fuel and general support;
* Supporting local businesses via monies received from the shared prosperity fund; and
* Supporting the workforce by providing information and practical support in relation to the cost of living so managers and staff are clear on what support is available to staff.

**Finance and Resources**

As a Council we are facing 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. If the Council does not utilise alternative methods of service delivery and other approaches to mitigate the impact of financial pressures and demand challenges, the result will be reductions to services which will significantly impact their availability and quality. Transformational change projects will be required reflecting the ambitions within the Corporate Plan as well as in addressing the financial pressures associated with increasing demands and expectations for services. There will be challenges associated with developing the new skills and capacity required to manage significant change at a time of diminishing resources and using approaches that are relatively new concepts to the Council. As part of this process, the Council has in place the, ‘Bridging the Gap’ programme which has identified a number of projects and service efficiencies that will support the overall Council budget. The Council has a good record of delivering but these are unprecedented times and, in facing these challenges, the Council needs to ensure that its governance arrangements for savings proposals are robust.

The 2023/24 Budget was approved on 23rd February 2023. As part of the budget, Members agreed Strategic Business Reviews of £3M and £4.26M use of reserves to fund the approved budget. Members were also presented with initial suggestions for commercial opportunities and investment proposals for progression into 2023/24 onwards. Business cases for these proposals will be developed and constructively challenged by multi-disciplinary teams from across the Council (external expertise may also be required in some cases). To develop capacity and capability in this area CIPFA delivered two bite size ‘better business case’ training sessions on 29th March 2023 attended by 36 staff members from across the Council.

Further work will be undertaken throughout 2023/24 and beyond to further consider where cost savings can be made as the Council. Alongside all other Council’s across Wales, will be facing unprecedented budget pressures, therefore need to act now in order to mitigate the impact as much as possible.

**Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)**

As part of their ‘Springing Forward’ Review, covering the 2021/22 year, Audit Wales found that the Council made significant changes to its assets and the way that its workforce operates, but identified that further work was needed for the Council to understand its future asset and workforce needs and to ensure that future Council decisions are appropriately informed by Equality Impact Assessments and the sustainable development principle. As part of this, the Council received the following recommendation for implementation: *‘Ensure that all decisions are informed by a timely equality impact assessment where required’.*

In July 2023, a retrospective IIA was approved by Council. The IIA set out the benefits and dis-benefits of the closure of the Civic Centre and the move to a Community Hub based model. There are a number of services that have benefited from being delivered closer to the customer within the Hubs, although, as the Civic Centre was a well know Council centre, it has taken some time for communities to use the Hubs as their main contact points. Overall, the changes have resulted in a positive approach to Customer Service delivery, with services moving closer to customers provided across six Hubs.

Transport is limited in Blaenau Gwent but as the Hubs are closer to the communities, and are based in the local towns, it is felt from the IIA evidence that overall, it is generally easier to travel to access services from Hubs than just from the Civic Centre. Lastly, the services being offered from the Hubs have encouraged other activities like children doing homework from the Hubs which wouldn’t have happened if they had been delivered from the Civic Centre.

**Information Governance**

The council has a reliance on ICT for its service continuity, owing to this, and the potential increase of cyber-attacks, it has been recognised that a corporate risk needs to be established, raising the score from high to critical. As part of this, the corporate risk register is considered by CLT on a periodic basis.

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