**Maximise learning and skill****s for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent**

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| --- | --- |
| **Evaluation Rating 4:**  **Good** | **Evaluation Narrative:**  The Council remains committed to supporting resilience in the community and this can be evidenced through the proactive work being undertaken to support those facing difficulties owing to the cost of living crisis. As an anti-poverty council, we are working to support people trapped in poverty and those who are most vulnerable. A Cost of Living Member Group, supported by an Operational Officer Group, has been established to prioritise this important agenda. To further support communities the Aspire Shared Apprenticeship Programme has continued to enhance skills development within the manufacturing and engineering sectors supporting business growth; whilst tackling unemployment and providing aspirational opportunities for young people across the local authority. Progress is continuing with improving the corporate commercial property portfolio through initiatives such as the Shared Prosperity Fund HiVE which will support the objectives of the Tech Valleys programme and support the manufacturing sector with a highly skilled and flexible workforce able to deliver the products, services, and technologies necessary for our future economy. The recent Estyn inspection of our educational services highlighted that good progress has taken place, although it is recognised that challenges remain including the education budget, attainment, and attendance in our schools. Destination of leaners post 16 is an important area for us and data is showing an increase in the number of females started engineering courses, supporting our ambition to becoming an advanced engineering location. |

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

Improving the quality and provision of teaching and learning is vitally important to ensure the service is achieving ambitious outcomes for all. The Council will continue to invest in services in order to support economic development and regeneration in order to provide opportunities for local people and businesses.

**Identified Need:**

* Tackling the cost of living and supporting residents and families
* Examining the potential for further economic improvement and growth for Blaenau Gwent:
  + A circular diagram of a puzzle

    Description automatically generated with medium confidenceMaximisation of opportunities and income levels
  + Children, young people and adults with the right qualifications and skills for life
  + Skills / employment
  + Job prospects
  + Growth
* Community:
  + Independent living
  + Thriving and Resilient
  + Aging population
  + Access to services

**What We Aim to Achieve –** An increase in the resilience of the community, providing high quality educational and skills opportunities to create a thriving economy from birth onwards, minimising dependence and maximising independence. The authority aims to ensure that all children and young people are given the best start in life, enabling them to grow into fruitful adults living a healthy and fulfilling life whilst contributing to society and forming a valuable part of their community.

How Well We Are Doing and How Do We Know:

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**Education and Schools**

Blaenau Gwent is a relatively small geographical area, with big ambitions for our schools and learners. We are determined to play our part in Wales being a first class education system with a clear ambition to increase the skills and standards of education across the borough. We fully support and are committed to the Welsh Government’s national mission for educational transformation, including Curriculum and ALN Reforms.

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Blaenau Gwent has 25 schools across 31 school sites and there are currently circa 9,000+ pupils on roll across all Blaenau Gwent schools. The Education Directorate provides services to support children and young people’s educational learning opportunities whilst working collaboratively with schools. The Education Directorate has developed a new purpose statement, which is to deliver ‘***Better Schools, Better Citizens and Better Communities’***.

The Education Workforce Plan 2021-26 contributes to the purpose statement by prioritising key strategic and operational activity to support the workforce at all levels. The plan covers the Directorate’s three main aspects of core service delivery, namely:

School Improvement and Inclusion; Education Transformation and Business Change; and Young People and Partnerships.

The Education Directorate aims to ensure that all children and young people are given the best start in life, enabling them to grow into fruitful adults living a healthy, fulfilling life whilst contributing to society and forming a valuable part of their community. We deliver this by ensuring higher levels of language acquisition and reading across the board, and overall enabling positive outcomes and attainment. We support children and young people to be in a good position to find skills and employment at the appropriate times and our NEET figures demonstrate our achievements in this area.

**Educational Outcomes**

Summer 2022 Key Stage 4 (KS4) results were positiveand in line with the School Development Plan targets set by the 4 secondary settings. There were improvements in 29 out of 32 key measures. Some examples are shown below:

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A graph of a number of students

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceA graph of a graph showing the number of schools and the number of schools

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*(Note: only 2019 and 2022 comparison data shown due to routine data collection suspended / 2022 data included for self-evaluation purposes only)*

A Strategic Post 16 Partnership has been established to ensure that learner pathways into further education are further strengthened. The Blaenau Gwent Learning Zone's performance at Key Stage 5 (KS5) continues to be good. A-level A\*-C and A\*-E grades continue to be strong and were in line with the all-Wales means at 98.4%, a small reduction from last year when the figure was 99.1%.

**Free School Meals**

There is an increasing number of pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM) in all areas of Gwent. These numbers have accelerated in the last year, showing increasing inequality in the region. There are noticeable variations in attainment and qualification levels between areas in Gwent. Similarly, there are differences in attainment between less and more disadvantaged groups of children. Lower attainment can affect well-being throughout the life course. Overall, the 2019 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation figures and high eFSM eligibility reflect very high levels of deprivation within Blaenau Gwent. They also indicate the significant consideration required to improve educational outcomes to levels similar to other Local Authorities and to consistently match the all-Wales averages.

During the period 2010 to 2016, the proportion of pupils eligible for eFSM in Blaenau Gwent was almost 30%, the highest of all Local Authorities in Wales by a significant margin. The proportions declined during 2016 to 2019, but Blaenau Gwent remained the 2nd highest in Wales for all Local Authority schools and highest for secondary schools during 2018-19. During 2021-22, the eligibility for FSM has again increased to circa 30%. Given the evidential relationship between pupil performance and deprivation (using eFSM as a proxy indicator), pupil outcomes in Blaenau Gwent would be expected to be among the lowest in Wales. However, there is a high level of ambition for all learners and the socio-economic standing is a challenge that the Council is working to overcome in order to benefit all children and young people.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Indicator** | **2019** | **2020** | **2021** | **September 2022** | **Comments** |
| **Entitlement to FSM/Transitionally Protected (%)** | 21.1 | 24.6 | 30.4 | 30.4 | FSM numbers higher than pre-Covid levels. This may take some time to show recovery due to the FSM entitlement being protected. |

**Children Looked After**

A small proportion of children looked after experienced a change of school during the course of the year. This is an increase when compared with the previous year. Consistency of schooling continues to be considered as part of the matching process when a child looked after moves placement. Transport is provided where necessary to ensure the stability of schooling. When a child does have to move school, processes are in place to ensure that delays in admissions are avoided, wherever possible.

At the end of academic year 2021-2022:

* 142 children of statutory school age were looked after by Blaenau Gwent local authority, this is a decrease compared with the previous academic year when there were 154 children.
* The majority of children continue to be educated within Blaenau Gwent and attend mainstream schools with a small proportion attending more specialist education settings.
* Almost all learners achieved recognised qualifications at the end of their statutory school studies with the majority now engaged in post 16 educational and or training opportunities.
* 54% of Personal Education Plans for newly accommodated children were initiated within statutory timescales and a total of 11 plans were not initiated within 10 days:
  + Eight were as a result of delay in the Children Looked After education team being notified at the point that the children became looked after; and
  + Three were as a result of the learners being unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who were not in school at the point of becoming looked after.

**Safeguarding in Education**

The 2023 Estyn report of the Local Authority confirmed that ‘Officers and elected members are committed to safeguarding young people in their local authority and there is an appropriate safeguarding culture within the local authority where all officers and elected members receive suitable safeguarding training. The way in which education and children’s services work together has contributed well to improving multi-agency working and the support schools receive to manage the needs of pupils and their families more effectively’.

**School Categorisation**

Close monitoring of school and learner progress, and educational outcomes has continued and the number of schools that we have that are causing concern has reduced from 6 schools in 2019 to only 2 in 2022. School categorisation in relation to ‘Step 3 – Level of Support Required’, demonstrated an improvement in the number of schools identified as being Green (needing the least amount of support).

**Additional Learning Needs (ALN)**

The Council are well on track for implementing the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) reform. The Council is currently undergoing a proposal to increase the capacity of ALN Resource Bases across the County Borough, accommodating the demand for places in both Primary and Secondary settings. There are currently Resource Bases across Blaenau Gwent accommodating 61 learners in Primary settings and 62 at Secondary settings. There is an increasing need for Resource Base placements in mainstream settings for children and young people within the Borough both at Primary (aged 3-11) and Secondary settings (aged 11-16). All current resource bases in the County Borough are full to capacity. The recent Estyn inspection highlighted ‘In the planning of provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN), data is not always used effectively enough to inform long-term planning’. The Education Transformation and Inclusion teams have therefore undertaken a review of the current provision and have used this data to project the demand going forward, under this proposal Education are seeking to set up new Resource Bases in line with the projected demand, with the aim of also reducing Out of County placements in the medium term and having a more localised strategy for learners.

The Council is committed to providing all children and young people with high quality education and training tailored to meet their needs, which will develop their potential, extend aspirations, promote social inclusion and contribute to the economic regeneration of the area. Resource Bases are essential for pupils with identified ALN requirements to enable them to fulfil their potential.

The Council proposes to increase the capacity for Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Resource Bases across the County Borough in both Primary and Secondary settings for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Additional Learning Needs Resource Bases (ALNRB) pupils. The Council will work with the schools to develop a long-term plan to support sustained growth and development. It is proposed for this to be delivered in two phases:

* **Phase 1** - To increase resource base capacity in primary schools from 61 to 86 places (including 15 Welsh-medium places) and to increase secondary school capacity from 62 to 80 places.
* **Phase 2 -** The development of a Medium-term plan to secure additional capacity to facilitate sustained growth and development in Primary and Secondary settings.

**Surplus Places and Band B**

The local authority works to make sure that suitable education provision is provided in order to meet the needs of every child and young person. Over the past decade, the local authority has successfully reduced surplus places which are reducing to the targets as set out in the School Organisation Policy at 15%. The Local Authority does have some elements of sufficiency of school places emerging that will need to be monitored closely, especially in the secondary and special school sectors.

The delivery of the Sustainable Communities for Learning Band B programme is well underway with an investment of circa £26m into the school estate. The suitability and condition of the school estate is improving with circa 61% categorised as A/B.

**Digital and ICT in Education**

The Educational Digital Standards are designed to assist schools to understand, manage and implement their digital environment. The Standards also provide guidance on how schools should future-proof their digital environment to meet the needs of a more digitally focused school curriculum. The standards suggest all infrastructure work undertaken to meet the standards should be carefully considered, planned and procured in compliance with national procurement regulations and installed by professional organisations.

In 2016 Blaenau Gwent invested approximately £650K in ICT infrastructure as part of the Infrastructure and Connectivity Project:

* In 2019/2020 Welsh Government launched the HwB Ed Tech Programme which enabled the Authority to continue to further improve our network infrastructure and to replace all end of life devices within Schools
* Device sustainability- Schools are now using a 20% plan to refresh devices over 5-year period in order to maintain the standard of devices achieved through the Hwb Ed Tech Programme.
* In collaboration with the Shared Resource Service (SRS) Education have worked alongside all schools within the Service Level Agreement to standardise all infrastructure to ensure adherence to the Education Digital Standards. This includes broadband connectivity, data network cabinet standards, routers and switches, cabling standards, wireless network standards, device management standards and web filtering standards.

**Education Finance**

The Education Directorate aim to deliver effective and efficient services within financial constraints. The Local Authority has a track record of spending within its education budget in recent years, with relatively small underspends for the past three years against the overall education budget. Education were also provided with an 8.4% uplift in budgets via the Individual School Budget in 2022-23. The 2023-24 revenue budget included an overall increase for Education of which:

* Individual School Budget received an uplift of 4.2% (£2,02m) and awarded cost pressures totalling £0.115m
* Local Education Authority Budget received cost pressures totalling £0.923m mainly in relation to Home to School transport and ALN Reform

**Collaborative Working with the EAS**

The Education Directorate support children and young people’s educational learning opportunities whilst working collaboratively with an aim to ensure that all children and young people’s well-being and educational needs are catered for. As part of this, the Council commissions the Education Achievement Service (EAS) to deliver a wide range of school improvement services to all schools (all key stages, including all through schools and special schools), pupil referral units and funded non-maintained nursery settings on behalf of each local authority. This plan supports the council’s role in delivering their statutory function, addressing their individual improvement priorities and promoting improved pupil outcomes.

**Deprivation and Educational Outcomes**

There are many strengths in the local authority’s work to reduce the impact that deprivation has on educational outcomes by providing support to low-income families and households. This work includes providing free school meals, period equity, vulnerable learners support, Youth Service and youth support services, family engagement officers, school holiday provision and post 16 transport. There are also many strengths in the services to support the well-being of children and young people and to promote positive relationships. Support has been provided to schools to provide an environment where health and well-being is at the heart of the curriculum, ensuring support and appropriate interventions are accessible to all, with a specific emphasis on vulnerable and disadvantaged learner categories. A whole school approach self-evaluation tool pilot has been introduced which encourages schools to assess the key barriers to learning and to provide specific support relating to the emotional and mental well-being of the child. It encourages schools to question how inequality can impact on the learning and life outcomes of a child and fosters an inclusive and caring environment.

**Estyn Inspection**

In September 2022, Blaenau Gwent Council received a letter from Estyn, His Majesty’s Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, stating that the Local Authority will be subject to an Estyn inspection, in line with the Local Government Education Services (LGES) framework. The letter confirmed that the inspection would take place between 28th November to 2nd December 2022. The inspection was carried out in accordance with the inspection framework and the guidance ‘for the inspection of Local Government Education Services’. The three inspection areas of the LGES inspection framework are:

* Inspection Area 1 – Outcomes
* Inspection Area 2 – Education Services and Provision
* Inspection Area 3 – Leadership and Management

In the lead-up to the inspection, Estyn identified Blaenau Gwent’s 4 Local Questions for the Inspection, including:

1. How well does the local authority challenge and support non-maintained settings and schools to improve?
2. How well does the local authority tackle inequalities in education experiences and outcomes for children living in poverty?
3. How well does the local authority support schools to promote respectful relationships and address negative behaviour effectively?
4. How well does the local authority ensure that the interests of learners are above all others in its planning for schools and other education provision?

The report provides a high-level summary of the main findings and some of the key considerations, including:

* The local authority has made good progress with its education services since it was last inspected around ten years ago as important areas for improvement have largely been addressed. Senior officers and elected members have a strong commitment to education, and this is reflected in the funding given to schools and education services.
* The local authority generally plans well to make sure that it has suitable education provision to meet the needs of every child and young person. Over the past decade, the local authority has successfully reduced surplus places in schools and improved the conditions of its school buildings. The local authority is suitably developing its Welsh-medium education provision. Whilst there have been some positive developments in provision for pupils with additional learning needs, the quality of planning for future provision is variable.
* There are many strengths in the local authority’s work to reduce the impact of deprivation on education outcomes and its support for families in low-income households. There are also many strengths in the services to support children and young people’s well-being and promote positive relationships.
* The authority has worked with its regional school improvement service to strengthen the challenge and support it provides to schools. This work has greater impact for children in non-maintained and primary age settings than for young people in secondary age settings. Provision for young people was too slow to improve in two schools placed in statutory categories.
* Despite strengths in education services, corporate leaders have not ensured that their vision and strategic aims for education are fully understood by other officers, elected members, school staff and external partners. Also, corporate leaders have not ensured that the corporate plan is supported by coherent delivery plans for education that include related actions and measurable success criteria. Overall, the quality of self-evaluation, planning for improvement, and performance management is not strong enough.

The inspectorate has identified 3 recommendations for improvement that the local authority will use to update its improvement plans:

* Improve the corporate leadership of education services;
* Improve the quality of self-evaluation, strategic planning, and performance management; and,
* Accelerate improvements in provision for secondary age pupils in schools causing concern.

The outcome of the Inspection is positive overall, progress since the last inspection has been made and there is no requirement for follow-up activity. The 3 recommendations identified can be used to facilitate leverage at a corporate level to deliver continued incremental change. However, it needs to be acknowledged that the LA’s areas for improvement are of paramount importance in supporting our children and young people to improve their education, skills and life chances. There will be regular update reporting on progress to Members and the Education Directorate will work with Estyn through the Local Authority Link Inspector (LALI) termly meetings to provide assurances to the inspectorate that improvements continue to be made both corporately and operationally across the range of LGES services. You can read the Estyn report in full [here.](https://www.estyn.gov.wales/provider/6779999)

**Youth Service**

The number of 11-25 year olds supported by the Youth Serviceduring 2021/22 is 1961 (Reach of 17%). This is lower than the 2019/20 pre Covid data, but shows that the reach has almost returned to pre-pandemic levels, despite still working within restrictions at the beginning of the year.

Out of the number of 11-25 year olds supported by the Youth Service above, the % that have gained nationally recognised qualifications has decreased:

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**Numbers Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)**

Between 2010 to 2021 there was a significant reduction in the numbers of young people becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training) in Blaenau Gwent. This reduction was due to the work of the Youth Service’s strategic multi-agency Raising Aspirations Group, and implementation of the Early Identification Tool. The early identification of those at risk of becoming NEET allows for timely intervention, by means of additional support, which has been proven to reduce the risk of, and in many cases prevent, young people becoming NEET.

Blaenau Gwent continues to deliver a number of services that offer support for young people aged 11-25 who at risk of becoming, or who are currently not in education, employment or training. The Youth Service exceeded that of the all-Wales means for reach and accredited learning outcomes. The levels of NEETs at 1.6% are at their lowest level with nine young people.

A graph of numbers and colors

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The Youth Service is established as an accreditation centre with Youth Workers also providing support for parents of Elected Home Education (EHE) young people wanting to deliver units. The service currently has contact with 18 EHE young people, to provide a link with the service.  As demonstrated in the chart there has been an increase in the number of home educated children within Blaenau Gwent over the past few years. EHE pupils continue to be supported by the Education Welfare Service, however, this needs to be monitored closely going forward to ensure that the number of visits increase in line with the above. There are currently 145 pupils on the EHE database (16/02/23) compared to 137 for the same period last year.  This is an increase of 5.8%. Twenty-nine of these pupils are from the Gypsy Roma Traveller Community.

**The Gypsy Roma Traveller Community Education Service**

We continue to provide one to one and small group academic support for children and young people within schools and alternative settings. Through the literacy intervention, nearly all Gypsy Roma Traveller pupils made improvements in both reading and spelling in both primary and secondary education. Despite Covid-19 having an initial impact on learning, most pupils’ have reached pre-pandemic attainment levels due to the additional support provided.

All pupils at secondary schools now have literacy levels within the normal range for age i.e., standard scores of 90 or above. The onsite Literacy Project provides support to those with low literacy levels. Also, literacy booklets have been created and distributed to parents to encourage reading at home.

During Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller History Month in June 2022 we encouraged all schools to participate to raise awareness and to celebrate the culture. Transition work continues to support pupils moving from primary school into secondary schools’ settings (Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3). Gypsy, Roma, Traveller pupils and their families are fully supported throughout this phase to ensure any barriers and fears are overcome which typically stem from parents’ own negative personal experiences from school. Leaflets for professionals, pupils and parents were distributed to help guide and encourage transition.

**Tech Valleys**

Ebbw Vale has one of Wales’s eight Enterprise Zones, meaning it’s a priority area for business support, skills, first-class infrastructure, financial incentives, and property and development opportunities. It’s part of the wider Cardiff Capital Region, a project that’s investing £1.2bn of public money to leverage another £4bn of private investment across South East Wales. The Welsh Government is investing £100m over 10 years to create 1,500-plus jobs and is working with the Council to achieve this under the banner, Tech Valleys.

The Welsh Government has worked with the global technology company Thales to establish a £20m cyber centre at the heart of the Tech Valleys. The National Digital Exploitation Centre (NDEC) was founded in 2019, in its new purpose-built home. It's the first Research and Development facility of its kind in Wales, and provides the perfect setting for Small Medium Enterprises and microbusinesses to test and develop their digital concepts.

The Tech Inward Investment continues to be championed through the Tech Valleys Initiative. This supports our vision for the South Wales Valleys to be a globally recognised centre for developing new technologies to support cutting-edge industry by 2027. Hybrid units have been completed and are fully occupied with tech firms and an immersive classroom has been developed for both education and skills development on the Works site, Ebbw Vale.

To assist with enhancing and stimulating economic development within Blaenau Gwent, we have progressed with improving the corporate commercial property portfolio as part of a Joint Venture with Welsh Government, under the Tech Valleys initiative. A facility called Regain II will enable us to house two Small Medium Enterprises on the Works site, one of the key inputs for the UK Competitive Index, and provide some managed workspace in the Thales Campus situated on Lime Avenue.

The council has worked with the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal to achieve two large investment deals for companies in Blaenau Gwent and, in turn, improve our competitiveness. The UK Competitive Index 2023 has shown that Blaenau Gwent is no longer ranked as the least competitive locality in Britain with the UKCI score increasing between 2019 and 2023. Blaenau Gwent is now ranked 361 out of 362 in the average of competitiveness across Britain.

The Council was successful with a bid to the Shared Prosperity Fund HiVE - the facility will cost in the region of £12M and will support the objectives of the Tech Valleys programme and the aims of the Welsh Government Manufacturing Action Plan (2021) which highlights steps needed to develop a resilient, high value manufacturing sector with a highly skilled and flexible workforce able to deliver the products, services and technologies necessary for our future economy. The facility is supported by the findings that manufacturing is the largest skills gap by sector in Wales (21%) and the need to improve higher vocational and technical education. There is currently no advanced engineering facility of this kind across the Heads of the Valley region. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 specifies two highly relevant challenges for places like ours, namely, equipping everyone with the right skills for a changing world and the need to build capacity for lifelong learning

The Tech Valleys programme has a vision; ‘In 2027 the South Wales Valleys and Blaenau Gwent in particular, will be a globally recognised centre for the development of new technologies, to support cutting edge industry’. In support of this vision the Council and Coleg Gwent are developing an Advanced Engineering Centre which will create an environment that will attract hi-tech inward investors within the Advanced Manufacturing sector. Funding to deliver this project is broken down as follows:

* Welsh Government Pre Approval 1 (Money to develop scheme prior to Tender): £200K;
* Welsh Government Pre Approval 2 (Money to develop scheme prior to Tender): £160K;
* Welsh Government Tech Valleys: £2,989,082; and
* Levelling Up Funding: £9,360,000.

Progress of the project so far includes:

* Levelling Up Funding (LUF) has been awarded;
* Contracts with the preferred contractor ISG, are in the process of being signed with the aim of being on site towards the end of July 2023 and contract completed end of May 2024. The contract period is 42 weeks;
* The date the campus will be open and welcoming students is anticipated to be September 2024; and
* Contract sum £12,709,082.

The STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Facilitation Project, created as a result of Tech Valleys, is a co-ordinated programme of support, centred on ‘industry in schools’ within a cluster of Blaenau Gwent schools, raising aspiration and preparing children for their journey into the world of work, whilst remaining complementary to the school curriculum. The project is also seeking to support and develop a sustainable relationship between local businesses and schools, via the industry liaison element of the role. Employers can provide a real-world context for a wide range of learning experiences across the curriculum, showcasing the very many employment opportunities and sign-posting young people to the types of skills that are both in demand now and will be more-so in the future. Key to securing the workforce of tomorrow are the links between businesses and education, in order to connect children to the full range of vocational and academic career paths.

This year Blaenau Gwent had two finalists at the Wales STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Awards 2022:

* The STEM Facilitation Project in the category of STEM Educational Programme of The Year (Public)
* Team Leader, in the STEM Woman of The Year category which recognises inspirational women and their work as ambassadors within the STEM industry.

**Digital**

The digital interventions of the Ebbw Vale project, the first to be implemented, include:

* 5G connectivity throughout the town centre with 5G classroom at the Works site (more detail below);
* Creating a digital high street through development of an app that allows interaction with Ebbw Vale and provides access to local businesses;
* Establishing a brand and marketing strategy for the town, that consistently promotes the leisure, tourism and retail offer that is available in the town and wider region; and
* Creating or linking to existing digital resources (online maps/council website/app) to aid way-finding for the cycle and walking opportunities through the town.

5G Wales Unlocked is the innovation project behind the new immersive 360-degree immersive environment in Ebbw Vale – just one of several trials demonstrating how ultrafast technology like 5G could transform rural communities, from powering tech innovations in agriculture, to improving rural transport and education and bolstering the tourism industry.  Using a localised 5G network by project partners BT, the classroom uses the high-speed connectivity to project inspiring and educational video content onto all four walls in a 360-degree format, providing an immersive experience.

**Kick Start**

Kick Start was a 2-year programme (2021 & 2022) which was aimed at supporting new businesses from 6 months up to 3 years old, to help them develop and expand. The implementation of the programme has been very successful with 21 Blaenau Gwent businesses receiving this funding to support work placements. This scheme will be replaced with the Quickstart Programme from April 2023.

**Business Start Ups**

There were 25.8% more businesses start-ups in Blaenau Gwent during the first three months of this year compared with the corresponding period of last year, according to latest data from BankSearch. This growth rate ranks Blaenau Gwent at 2 out of the 22 Welsh districts. The makeup of start-ups is Limited Companies 67.6%, Sole Traders 29.4%, Other For Profit Start-ups (mainly Partnerships) 2.9% and Not For Profit 0.0%.

A graph of a number of start-ups

Description automatically generatedThe top 3 industries account for 70.6% of start-ups. The types of areas that start-ups were established include; Hard-Pressed Living 67.6%, Constrained City Dwellers 23.5%, Suburbanites 5.9%, Rural Residents 2.9%, Cosmopolitans 0.0%, Ethnicity Central 0.0%, and Multicultural Metropolitans 0.0%. Growth in the number of start-ups across Wales has risen. So far this year, Merthyr Tydfil (67.4%), Blaenau Gwent (25.8%) and Swansea (21.3%) have seen the strongest growth compared to the corresponding period in 2022.

In Blaenau Gwent 34 new businesses started up in March 2023, 15 more than the previous month and 7 more than in March 2022. Nantyglo saw the most start-ups; Rassau saw the least. Blaenau Gwent accounted for 2.3% of all start-ups across the Wales. In March 2023 there were 7.8 start-ups for every 10,000 working age in Blaenau Gwent and this compares with a business start-up rate of 7.6 for the whole of Wales

**Shared Prosperity Fund**

Following the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union in 2020, the Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) is the UK Government replacement for the European funding. The UKSPF is a key part of the UK’s Levelling Up agenda, forming part of complementary funding, including the Levelling Up Fund and Community Ownership Fund. The primary aim of the fund is to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK. Underpinning this aim are three investment Priorities: communities and place; supporting local business and people and skills. As part of the People and Skills priority there is a dedicated and ring-fenced element of the UKSPF called ‘Multiply’ which seeks to improve adult numeracy skills.

The 10 Local Authorities in the City Deal Region have a combined conditional allocation of £230,432,573 and £48,100,003 for Multiply. Blaenau Gwent have £23M allocated for expenditure across three priorities and an additional £5M for Multiply. This amount is allocated over three years starting from April 2022, with a substantial amount in year three (2024/25). The funding has been broken down to yearly allocations; 12% in year 1 (22/23), 24% in year 2 (23/24) and 64% in year 3 (24/25). UK Government have advised that any funding not utilised in each year cannot be carried forward.

Emphasis is being placed on gathering local evidence to substantiate local (and regional) spend of the SPF. To access the local SPF funding allocations, each local authority has developed a local Investment Plan which identifies a range of interventions that meet the 3 investment priorities and reflect local evidence, challenges and opportunities. Each local Investment Plan will contribute to one South East Wales Regional Investment Plan which will need to outline:

* Local context: showing evidence of opportunities and challenges using the three investment priorities for UKSPF.
* A selection of outcomes and interventions: identifying the outcomes based on local evidence and need, and the interventions to prioritise, under each priority.
* Delivery; detailing:

a. Approach to delivery and governance

b. Expenditure and deliverables

c. Capability and resource

* Engagement with wider local partners, stakeholders, local MP’s and Members of the Senedd.

Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) Council will manage the regions allocation and will submit the Regional Investment Plan. As the lead authority they will also have responsibility for a single funding agreement with the UK government for the full South East Wales SPF allocation of £278.5M and will be accountable for all aspects of monitoring and claiming the allocation. There will be a requirement for Service Level Agreements between RCT and Blaenau Gwent Council to pass on accountability and the terms and conditions of the funding.

The Shared Prosperity People and Skills investment priority will help reduce the barriers some people face to employment and support them to move towards employment and education. Places can also target funding into skills for local areas to support employment and local growth. Blaenau Gwent’s funding allocation over the 3-year delivery programme against this investment priority is £8,599,836.

**CiNER Glass Property**

CiNER Glass Property Limited will be building a bottle manufacturing facility in Ebbw Vale which aims to bring around 600 jobs to the area. The first part of the facility is expected to be operational late 2024. Once operational, the Ciner plant will help provide a range of long-term benefits to the local community, including:

* A £390m investment in a state-of-the-art glass recycling manufacturing plant;
* Up to 600 jobs when the plant is operational plus an additional 400 jobs during the construction phase;
* Create a centre of engineering excellence in glass technology in Wales competing with the best in the world;
* Provide thousands of new job opportunities for young people over several decades; and
* Contribute to both Blaenau Gwent and the Welsh Government’s net-zero ambitions by drastically reducing the levels of glass imported.

**Council Business Property Portfolio**

The Council own and manage a portfolio of 15 estates and a population of 191 business units. The portfolio is largely made up of workshop and factory units, with a small offering of office units (sizes range from 160 Sq. Ft – 32,000 sq. ft.). High tech units have recently been added to the portfolio on The Works, Ebbw Vale. The table below provides an overview of the Portfolio by Estate:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Business Park/Industrial Estate** | **Key** | **Units** | | | | | |
| **Total number of units** | | **Number of units occupied** | | **% of total number of units occupied** | |
| Barleyfields | 14 | 7 | | 7 | | 100% | |
| Blaenant | 13 | 15 | | 14 | | 93% | |
| Blaenau Gwent Workshops | 15 | 35 | | 23 | | 66% | |
| Crown | 2 | 16 | | 15 | | 94% | |
| Cwmdraw | 9 | 15 | | 11 | | 73% | |
| Cwm SBC | 21 | 25 | | 17 | | 68% | |
| Cwmtillery | 20 | 12 | | 11 | | 92% | |
| Gwent Court | 11 | 4 | | 4 | | 100% | |
| Hybrid Units | 10 | 9 | | 9 | | 100% | |
| Llanhilleth | 23 | 19 | | 18 | | 95% | |
| Roseheyworth Business Park – North | 19 | 8 | | 8 | | 100% | |
| Roseheyworth Business Park – South | 19 | 14 | | 14 | | 100% | |
| Victoria | 11 | 2 | | 2 | | 100% | |
| REGAIN | 10 | 8 | | 8 | | 100% | |
| Waun-y-pound | 5 | 2 | | 2 | | 100% | |
|  | | | **191** | | **163** | | **85%** | |

The Council’s property portfolio is at:

* 93% occupancy rate and increase of 1% from last year;
* supporting 807 jobs, an increase from 736 jobs last year and 114 businesses accommodated;
* A graph of numbers and a number of people

  Description automatically generated with medium confidence320,543 sq. ft. total floorspace occupied; and
* £1,004,272 received in total rent over the year.

In order to enhance and stimulate economic development within the Borough it has been identified that it is a priority to support the Industrial portfolio management and development and in turn support inward investment, business start-up, retention and growth. **The percentage of occupied Blaenau Gwent Industrial units is shown is the graph -**

**Town Centres**

A graph of different colored lines

Description automatically generatedFootfall is an important factor influencing our town centre vitality and viability.  Sensors count the number of shoppers visiting our town centres and provide analytical data on how individual town centres are performing and how shoppers are using them. The data from footfall monitoring allows the Council to be better equipped to make evidenced based decisions on the popularity and effectiveness of current and future projects in Town Centres. During the year footfall has fluctuated each month with the busiest month in all towns being June. There was a total Blaenau Gwent town centre footfall of 3,648,028 people over the year.

All placemaking plan processes are underway and the Council is now able to apply for Transforming Towns Funding from Welsh Government to support implementation. The placemaking plan embraces the digital and technological revolution trying to establish town centres with world-class connectivity which will support businesses and provide a means for retailers to trade online. The technical and digital measures include developing a digital presence for the town, strengthening the quality of WI-FI coverage, creating a favourable commercial environment for businesses to survive and grow, and establishing a regular series of events and initiatives that raise interest in the towns as a destination to increase visitors.

* Work on Ebbw Vale Placemaking Plan has continued during 2022/23 and further stakeholder engagement has been held on potential projects to be taken forward for implementation. Some work on development options for key sites has commenced. Further engagement with Design Commission for Wales is to be undertaken.
* The Brynmawr Placemaking Plan has also been progressed and builds upon the Brynmawr and Nantyglo Masterplan that was approved in late 2020. The placemaking plan will seek to recognise the commercial developments that have taken place on the periphery of the town centre and consider how these developments can become better connected and support the long term viability of Brynmawr Town Centre. A draft of the placemaking plan has been prepared. Engagement took place with Elected Members in advance of it being submitted to Scrutiny for approval in March 2023.
* Funding was secured to undertake a Placemaking Plan for Abertillery and consultants have been appointed to help with its development. Initial stakeholder engagement has been undertaken to start to shape the placemaking plan and based on lessons learned for the other placemaking plans earlier stakeholder consultation has taken place along with work on the vision, ambition and strategy. Public consultation took place in January 2023.
* The Tredegar Placemaking Plan was approved in 2022. Work continues on development of a delivery plan that will list the projects that need to be done to achieve the overall vision for the town.
* A funding application has been prepared to cover costs of developing a Blaina Placemaking Plan.

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

**Elected Home Education (EHE) Pupils**

There has been an increase in the number of home educated children within Blaenau Gwent over the past few years. Elected Home Education (EHE) pupils continue to be supported by the Education Welfare Service; however, this needs to be monitored closely going forward to ensure that the number of visits increase in line with the figures. There are currently 145 pupils on the EHE database (16/02/23) compared to 137 for the same period last year.  This is an increase of 5.8%. Twenty-nine of these pupils are from the Gypsy Roma Traveller Community (GRT).

**Attendance and Exclusions**

On an annual basis school attendance is showing a decrease in both primary and secondary schools. Attendance figures in Blaenau Gwent are mirroring those of national trends. Incidents of exclusions and the number who received fixed term exclusions during the year, issued in respect of children looked after, increased compared with the previous year. The primary reason why exclusions are issued continues to be for persistent disruptive behaviour particularly in respect of secondary aged pupils.

**Attendance Figures**

A graph of different colored bars

Description automatically generatedThe exclusion data is showing the increase and the levels are higher than they were pre Covid. However, similar patterns of increases are being experienced by areas across Wales post Covid. Positively, only 7 primary schools issued exclusions this year compared to 13 schools for the same period last year.  However, the number of exclusions and the days lost are higher in 5 out of the 7 schools that are issuing exclusions. The Education Welfare Service are working closely with those schools in order to support early intervention to further reduce exclusions. One of the schools has developed a nurture base which has had a positive impact on the amount of exclusions.

This period has only seen exclusions from one of our special schools. There has been an increase in the number of exclusions in this school and days lost. The Education Welfare Service are working in partnership with the school to look at support that can be provided to address reasons behind exclusions.  The 3 main reasons for exclusions across all settings are persistent disruptive behaviour (279), verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult (198) and physical assault against a pupil (98). When analysing exclusion data, it would be important to take into account that it may involve a small number of learners who are excluded more than once.

A key action for the Education Directorate and Schools is to work together to reduce school exclusion levels.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Data analysis** | **Number of Exclusions (Increase)** | **Days of Exclusion (Increase)** | **Permanent Exclusion (Increase)** |
| Secondary | 221 | 196.5 | 4 |
| Primary | 8 | 36 | 0 |
| Special Schools | 2 | 20.5 | 0 |
| Increase | 231 | 253 | 4 |

**Schools Causing Concern (SCC)**

A priority will be to continue to work with Schools Causing Concern (SCC), particularly the two schools currently in an Estyn category.

* Brynmawr Foundation School (BFS) - continues to be subject to a Local Authority Warning Notice to improve and intervention is in place. The revisited Statutory Warning Notice was released to Brynmawr Foundation School on 8th March with a focus on the pace of improvement required. A further Estyn monitoring visit will take place in the last week of March 2023. The Education Directorate is working with the EAS and the school in relation to the pace of progress in improving teaching and learning and a review was undertaken in March 2023 with Cardiff High School (support school). Wellbeing support set up with BFS, first learner to start in January 2023. Agreed the school will receive support as a Team Around the School (TAS) in addition to the multi-agency approach, first TAS will be in April 2023.
* The River Centre (RC) - Governing Body of the school remains under statutory intervention because of the Statutory Warning Notice to improve following an Estyn inspection July 2022, where the school was placed in Special Measures. The Post Inspection Action Plan has been submitted to Estyn and an initial monitoring visit took place on 15th December 2022 which reviewed the PIAP and the LA Statement of Action. The outcome of this visit was that the PIAP was viewed as appropriate for addressing the setting’s recommendations.

**Estyn**

The Council received the final report from the Estyn Local Government Education Services Inspection which identified 3 recommendations for improvement that the local authority will use to update its improvement plans. One of the areas being a recommendation to ‘accelerate improvements in provision for secondary age pupils in schools causing concern’. The areas for development take account of shortcomings identified through the inspection process. The local authority’s plans are to be updated during the Spring term and the revised Education Improvement Plan (EIP) and Self-Evaluation Report (SER) will be reported to the People Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet early in the summer term for both scrutinisation and to seek approval. Development work has already begun on addressing the recommendations.

**Education Budget**

Local Education Authority Budget received cost pressures totalling £0.923m mainly in relation to Home to School transport and ALN Reform. Home to School Transport budget is indicating an overspend of £1m, which can be attributed to an increase in pupil numbers utilising mainstream and ALN settings in both primary and secondary schools and pupils attending out of county placements.

Reliance on external funding is a risk for the Youth Service. However, securing European Social Funding until 2023 has provided some stability with the most vulnerable young people in the community having support for the past five years. SPF applications have been submitted which includes funding to continue the support for young people through the Inspire programmes. Welsh Government Youth Support Grant funding has now been given as a 3-year indicative allocation. This has allowed better planning for the future, both internally and with external partners.

**What Evidence is Available**

* Performance Data
* Auditor Reports
* Tech Valleys and the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal
* Service Business Plans
* Agendas and Recordings of Democratic meetings all available on the Council Website - <https://democracy.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?Categories=>