

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Annual Self- Assessment and Well-being Report 2023/24

October 2024



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

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Foreword

Blaenau Gwent is a place like no other. At the head of the Gwent Valleys – Blaenau Gwent provides a unique environment to live, work and play. Blaenau Gwent is a place of heritage and dramatic change, with a sense of its past but its eyes firmly on the future.

The Tech Valleys Vision, Valleys Regional Park and Cardiff Capital Regional Deal combined with new transport links through the soon to be completed Heads of the Valley Road and rail routes to Cardiff bring a bright future. Together with the amazing location and surrounding parkland our people and communities make Blaenau Gwent great. Our people have influence on the local, national and international stage in the arts, sport and politics for many generations – putting Blaenau Gwent on the map for all the right reasons.

The role of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council and its partners is to maximise on the assets we have, doing more with less and doing it better. It is right that we recognise the challenges we face. The historical decline of heavy industry continues to impact on employment prospects and intergenerational opportunities. We face issues with health and wealth inequality, the rise of online shopping and the impact on our town centres and social issues affecting our families and young people. As a Council we face increasing demand for some of our services putting more pressure on our available budgets. But we are tackling these issues head on with our partners, businesses and the local community. We are looking at how we spend our money to achieve the best outcomes for our residents, we are supporting new and existing businesses, we are looking at our assets to achieve new income streams and we are removing barriers to enable residents to access what they need. All in all, we are looking forward to a positive future.

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. 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. This will be at the centre of how we develop and deliver our services across early years, education and skills, transport, housing, places and spaces, and jobs and businesses. As an anti-poverty council, we will do everything within our power to raise expectations and tackle inequalities using a universal proportionality approach, whereby universal support is provided but resource is focused on where it is needed most. 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.



**Councillor Stephen
Thomas**
Leader of the Council

Stephen Vickers
**Joint Chief
Executive**



Introduction

Welcome to our Annual Self-Assessment and Well-Being report for 2023–2024. The report provides an assessment of service delivery throughout 2023/24, including what we have done well and, more importantly, where further improvements are required. The focus of the self-assessment is the Council's Corporate Plan priorities, known as Well-being Objectives, and providing an assessment of how well the Council feels it has achieved these and where further improvement is required.

The self-assessment has been written to consider:

- **How well are we doing? Narrative of the activity that has taken place;**
- **How do we know? Qualitative and quantitative evidence provided; and**
- **What and how can we do better? Actions to implement over the coming years.**

This self-assessment has been developed and includes the information available at a point in time. The Council's approach to self-assessment is an ongoing and fluid process of review, and the assessment will be updated as and when more information becomes available.

Like all public bodies across Wales, we are required to comply with certain statutory duties. This Self-Assessment and Well-Being Report, combines our statutory reporting requirements and statutory publishing duties, under both the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 and the Local Government and Elections Act 2021. Both Acts require:

- An annual report to be published to report of our progress against our Well-being objectives (WBFG Act 2015); and
- Publication of an annual Self-Assessment Report, setting out the extent to which we are meeting our performance requirements.

Local Government & Elections Act 2021

This is our third report, under the requirements of the Local Government and Elections Act 2021 and at the heart of this new performance regime, is the requirement for all councils to keep their performance arrangements under review. Councils need to do this through robust, continuous self-assessment of their findings, of which are reported through this annual report.

Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015

The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 (WBFG Act) puts into law seven priority well-being goals that all public bodies are required to work towards. It details the way in which public bodies must work and collaborate with each other to improve the well-being of Wales.

In working towards these goals, public bodies are required to consider the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change. This report demonstrates how we have linked our key priority well-being objective areas to this Act and our commitment towards it.



Working with Torfaen County Borough Council

Blaenau Gwent Council is in a process of change. In June 2024, both Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent Councils agreed to share a Chief Executive. This arrangement is the first of its kind in Wales and highlights both Council's ability to forward think and pioneer enhanced collaborative working. This arrangement aims to significantly enhance Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen's organisational resilience, efficiency and innovation.

During this process of change, a nine month 'discovery phase' will be in operation to explore opportunities, the potential for efficiencies, working at scale together and reducing any barriers and risks. Consideration will be given to where joint governance arrangements can be put in place across the two local authorities in order to place a greater emphasis on our performance, processes and, most importantly, culture.

We are at the beginning of a period of organisational change. The decision for two local authorities working more closely together, including sharing a Chief Executive, can offer several benefits that drive efficiency, innovation, and influence. Some of the key advantages include:

- **Cost Efficiency:** A shared CEX can reduce administrative costs with each authority contributing to sharing a single salary and related expenses. There will also be potential to consolidate wider administrative functions and staff in place to support the CEX function.
- **Improved Service Delivery Across Councils:** Collaboration across councils can lead to more coordinated service delivery. It opens greater opportunity to pool resources and expertise that enhances the quality of services provided to the public. This would include sharing best practices, technology, and systems that one organisation alone might not be able to afford or manage.
- **Increased Scale:** Bringing organisations together that share common responsibilities, objectives and challenges has the potential to spread costs, negotiate better terms and lower overall prices (commissioning and procurement for example), benefiting from economies of scale.
- **Enhanced Innovation and Knowledge Sharing:** Working more closely together on common challenges provides the opportunity for sharing innovative ideas and solutions. This can create the right environment to foster a culture of continuous improvement and creativity, leading to more effective and efficient public services.
- **Stronger Strategic Planning:** Unified leadership across councils creates an opportunity for more joined up strategic planning, the alignment of goals and the sharing of resources leading to more effective delivery of long-term outcomes.
- **Increased Resilience and Flexibility:** Joint operations can offer more resilience and flexibility in resource allocation and crisis management particularly during times of economic or environmental stress.
- **Public Perception and Trust:** By demonstrating fiscal responsibility and being increasingly innovative, the trust in local government can be enhanced.
- **Better Staff Development and Career Pathways:** Creating larger combined staff pools and more diverse functions, creates more opportunities for staff development and movement within the organisation. This can enhance job satisfaction, improve retention, and create a more enticing environment for recruitment to the organisations.
- **A Greater Influence Regionally and Nationally:** As two authorities working together with a combined population close to the size of Newport, we can increase our influence both regionally and nationally with a higher profile.

The 'discovery phase' of this proposal will seek to achieve the above and to set out a new long-term plan for Blaenau Gwent.

- Some key areas of development throughout the 'discovery' phase will be:
 - Establishing a set of Characteristics that the Council will follow in order for officers and members to work together to transform the way that we deliver services;
 - Aligning a number of governance processes across both Council's;
 - Developing a Marmot Masterplan for Blaenau Gwent; and
 - Developing a Communities Approach to enable greater resilience within our communities.



Our Understanding of Blaenau Gwent

The Blaenau Gwent Area

The Blaenau Gwent area is relatively small geographically. It is 42.09 sq. miles being, at most, 15 miles north to south and 8 miles east to west. Blaenau Gwent is defined physically by high hillsides dividing the three main valleys. These valleys are home to towns and villages which seem to merge into one. However, each community proudly maintains its own character and traditions. Although the towns give the area a busy, urban feel, Blaenau Gwent is actually a largely rural area. Wherever you are, beautiful countryside is never far away.



The Blaenau Gwent Population

Results of the Census 2021 show that the resident population of Blaenau Gwent is 66,900, which is a decrease of 4.2% from the 2011 Census when the population was 69,800. As of 2021, Blaenau Gwent was the sixth most densely populated of the 22 local authority areas, with 615 people per square kilometre, which equates to around four people living on each football pitch-sized area of land. The population change by age group in Blaenau Gwent shows that there has been an increase of 9.0% in people aged 65 years and over, a decrease of 7.5% of people aged 15 to 64 years, and a decrease of 5.4% of children aged under 15 years. If these figures continue, the population is projected to continue to decrease, including a 9.9% decrease in the number of children, a 6.1% decrease in the number of working age population and a 24.2% increase in the number of people aged 65 and over (Source: Stats Wales).

The percentage of residents aged 16 years and over who are economically active and in employment in Blaenau Gwent is 52.2% an increase of 2.7% since 2011. The 2021 Census showed that Blaenau Gwent had the highest proportion of residents aged 16 to 64 years who were economically inactive and long-term sick or disabled across the whole of England and Wales at 36.1%. 49% of women and 55.7% of men, aged 16 years and over were in employment. 2.7% of women and 4.1% of men in Blaenau Gwent were unemployed.

21% of Blaenau Gwent Adults with a disability were economically active and employed. However, in contrast, Neath Port Talbot and Blaenau Gwent have the joint-third highest proportion of economically inactive disabled residents (76.9%) across both England and Wales, and the highest in Wales.

The 2021 Census identified that there are 4,035 Welsh speakers living within Blaenau Gwent, which equates to 6.2% of the population. The aims of Blaenau Gwent's Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/27 are linked with the Welsh Government's vision to create a million Welsh speakers in Wales by 2050. To meet this aim, Blaenau Gwent would need a 46% increase in speakers which equates to 1,856 people.

Blaenau Gwent is made up of five towns: Abertillery; Blaina, Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale; and Tredegar. These towns are split into four valley areas: Lower Ebbw Fach; Upper Ebbw Fach; Ebbw Fawr; and Sirhowy. Further data and information on the Blaenau Gwent Valleys can be found using the following links:

- Lower Ebbw Fach Valley – [Lower Ebbw Fach well-being assessment \(gwentpsb.org\)](https://www.gwentpsb.org/)
- Upper Ebbw Fach Valley – [Upper Ebbw Fach well-being assessment \(gwentpsb.org\)](https://www.gwentpsb.org/)
- Ebbw Fawr Valley - [Ebbw Fawr well-being assessment \(gwentpsb.org\)](https://www.gwentpsb.org/)
- Sirhowy Valley - [Sirhowy well-being assessment \(gwentpsb.org\)](https://www.gwentpsb.org/)

Blaenau Gwent Council

The Council continues to be the largest employer within the borough, employing 1,731 people excluding school based staff or 3,030 when including school based staff. 73% of the Council's workforce are in permanent roles which provides a stability within the establishment, this is a reduction from last year when those in permanent



roles were at almost 80%. 12% of staff are in fixed term positions and 10% are relief positions. The majority of relief positions are in Catering & Cleaning and Social Services, which is consistent with what you would expect from the nature of the workforce in these areas. Vacancies remain consistent, with over 90% of roles filled in each directorate, other than Education where there is a 21% vacancy rate. Over half of the workforce remains 'service based' with the remaining staff split between home workers at 7%, and agile workers at 36%. More than half the workforce has more than 10 years' service.

The Council has a low level of diversity amongst the workforce, 67% (of those who have provided the information) have indicated that they identify as British, Welsh, English, Scottish, Northern Irish. (This is reflective of the community). Promoting diversity in the workforce will continue to be a key priority as part of the Council's Workforce Strategy. The Council has an ageing workforce where 55% of the workforce is over the age of 46, with 10% of the workforce aged 29 and under.

Political Structure

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council was established following local government reorganisation on 1st April 1996. In 2021, the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales reformed the ward boundaries of Blaenau Gwent. The changes meant that the number of Blaenau Gwent councillors reduced by 9, taking the council from 42 to 33 members. This equates to an average of 1,545 electors per councillor. The number of wards also reduced from 16 to 14, with each ward electing more than 1 councillor. 9 wards have 2 councillors, while 5 wards have 3 councillors, and 5 wards saw no change under the reform. These changes came into being from May 2022, as part of the local government election. Following the election there was a change to the political make up of Blaenau Gwent Council, moving from being Independent to Labour. The political make-up of the Council is currently:

- Labour 21;
- Independent 10;
- Minority Independent (Cwm Ward) 1; and
- Minority Independent (Ebbw Vale South) 1.

Democratic Process

Council committees are an essential part of the democratic process within the Authority. They enable elected members to exercise their decision-making powers, scrutinise the performance and policies of the Council, and represent the views and interests of their constituents. Council committees also provide a forum for public participation and engagement, where citizens and stakeholders can voice their opinions, concerns, and suggestions on matters impacting them and their communities.

Council committees aim to conduct their business in an open, transparent, and accountable manner, and to uphold the principles of good governance and public service.

The Cabinet is effectively the decision making body of the Council. It has responsibility for making decisions which are in line with the Council's overall policies and budget. If it wishes to make a decision which is outside the budget or policy framework, this must be referred to the Council as a whole. Members have the responsibility to ensure that the necessary business of the Council is carried out efficiently, effectively, and in a manner appropriate for the proper conduct of public business. The Cabinet carry out all of the Local Authority functions which are not the responsibility of any other part of the Authority, whether by law or under the Constitution.

The 33 Blaenau Gwent elected members are collectively the decision making body for the Authority. This is complemented by an officer structure of trained and experienced people. Most policy decisions are developed by the Cabinet, which comprises the Leader of the Council and four Cabinet Members with individual portfolio responsibilities:





Cllr Steve Thomas
Leader of the Council
Cabinet Member
Corporate and Performance



Cllr Helen Cunningham
Deputy Leader of the Council
Cabinet Member
Place and Environment



Cllr John C Morgan
Cabinet Member
Place and Regeneration



Cllr Sue Edmunds
Cabinet Member
People and Education

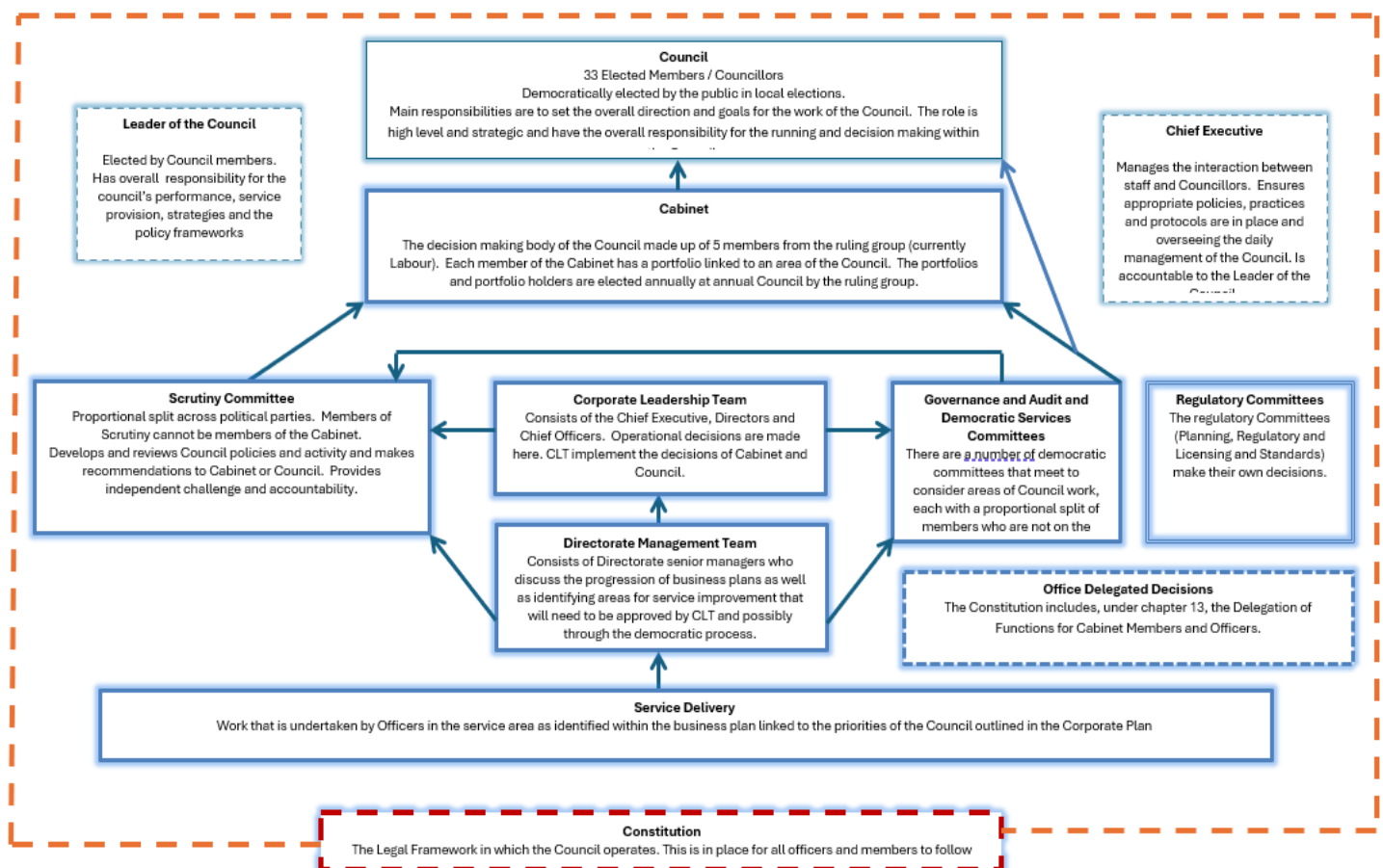


Cllr Hadyn Trollope
Cabinet Member
People and Social Services

In addition to the Cabinet, the Authority's Committee structure also comprises three decision making Committees: 1 x Planning and 2 x Licensing; four Scrutiny Committees; a Standards Committee; a Democratic Services Committee; and a Governance and Audit Committee.

Scrutiny is made up of non-Cabinet Members who are appointed to sit on the Committees to support the work of the Cabinet and the Council as a whole and to hold the Cabinet to account. The Committees have no decision making powers; however, they act as a check and balance on the powers exercised and decisions taken by Cabinet. Scrutiny enables non-Cabinet Members to have a greater say in Council matters.

Committee Meetings and papers can be found here: blaenau-gwentintranet.moderngov.co.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?Categories=



Corporate Joint Committees

Blaenau Gwent Council is one of ten local authorities across South East Wales who are part of the Cardiff Capital Region. The Cardiff Capital Region is one of four Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) across Wales that were established under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 to help regional collaboration



between authorities leading to a more streamlined way of working. The CJs were given several functions which included developing transport policies, preparing a strategic development plan and to consider what is likely to improve the economic wellbeing of its area.

In November 2023 Audit Wales produced a report providing a commentary of progress made on the establishment of regional Corporate Joint Committees, provided in the summary were five recommendations, full report can be found [here](#). Blaenau Gwent Council as part of the CJC will work towards the recommendations made in report with progress reported through Regional Cabinet meetings.

Gwent Public Service Board (GPSB) Joint Scrutiny Committee

Blaenau Gwent Council has been appointed as the host authority to undertake the administrative arrangements and provide dedicated support and advisers for the GPSB Joint Scrutiny Committee. The aim of the Committee is to scrutinise the effectiveness of the GPSB by reviewing the decisions made, or actions taken by the Board; scrutinising the Board's governance arrangements; and to make recommendations based on this to the Board. The Committee has met four times since it was established in March 2023, and have undertaken work such as reviewing Gwent's first Well-being Plan and providing feedback on the Gwent PSBs performance management framework. The Committee will continue to support the Gwent PSB as well as the work of the Blaenau Gwent Local Delivery Group.

Corporate Leadership Team

The Council has a structure in place to support the delivery of services and decision making via its Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). CLT has operated with interim arrangements for over a year including an interim Chief Executive, Corporate Director of Social Services and Corporate Director of Education. These arrangements will look to be made permanent during 2024/25 when arrangements will also be put in place for the operation of a Joint Chief Executive with Torfaen Council. Since April 2024, the Council has also created a new post of Director of Corporate Services, appointed to in September 2024 and secured permanency of the Corporate Director of Education position. The Council also has in place a Wider Corporate Leadership Team (WCLT) who support CLT in its role of providing strategic direction to the organisation. It is a forum to disseminate information and to communicate messages, ensuring a 'one council' approach.

Internal and External Audit

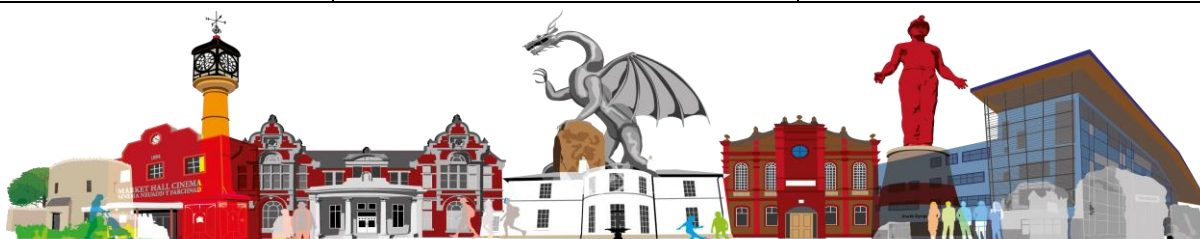
The Council is subject to numerous internal and external audits and regulatory reviews each year. These are undertaken to ensure the Council provides value for money, services are being run efficiently and effectively, and that improved services are being delivered. The Council is monitored by a number 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. Quarterly meetings are also undertaken with the Leadership.

Audit Wales Reporting during 2023/24 include:

Local Reports	National Audit Wales Reports	Audit Wales Reports still in Progress (with the outcome of each expected in 2023/24)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examination of the Setting of Well-being Objectives • Review of Planning Service • Digital Strategy Review • Use of Performance Information – Service User Perspective and Outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unscheduled Care Project • Brown Field Sites • False Fire Alarms • Corporate Joint Committees – commentary on their progress • National Park Authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unscheduled Care Project • Commissioning • Financial Sustainability • Safeguarding Review Follow Up • National Study Temporary Accommodation



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 Directorate 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

The Social Services Directorate 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, Blaenau Gwent received the following from CIW:

- Assurance Check Letter – Adult Community Team in Blaenau Gwent with a focus on adults with a learning disability.
- National review of:
 - The use of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) in Wales 2022-23 – received February 2024;
 - Rapid Review of Child Protection Arrangements;
 - Care Homes for Care Homes Operating Without Registration; and
 - The Public Law Outline in Wales.

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.

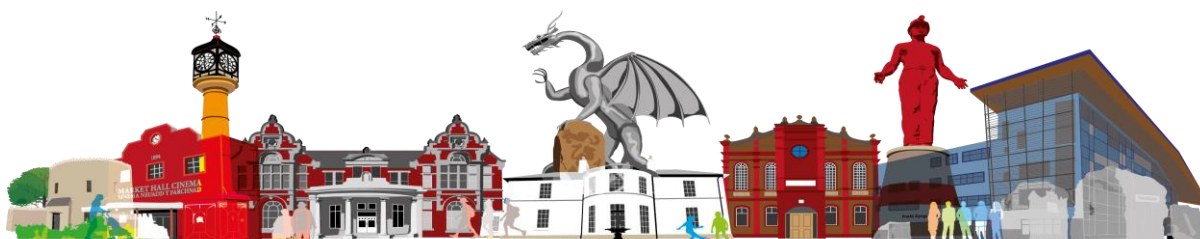
Internal Audit issued 33 final audit reports during the year:

Audit Grading	No of audits
Full Assurance	10
Reasonable Assurance	14
Limited Assurance	8
No Assurance	1

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's system of internal control during the financial year 2023/24 operates to a level which gives 'reasonable assurance' on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation's framework of governance, risk management and control. However, it is also acknowledged that increased coverage of contract related systems, and corporate systems is needed during 2024/25 to ensure the findings relating to these areas are not wider spread.

Peer Panel Assessment (PPA) 2024

In November 2024, Blaenau Gwent Council will hold their first Peer Panel Assessment as part of the requirements under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The Act's regard for effective self-assessment is fundamental to enabling the Council to understand how we are performing and where we could do better, and this is very much aligned to our beliefs which have underpinned the development of our new systems and processes.



Peer Review Focus

Blaenau Gwent is going into an innovative collaborative working agreement with Torfaen Council, with the first Joint CEX post in Wales. As part of the initial nine month discovery phase, we have commissioned the Peer Assessment Panel to help us inform future options and provide an honest, transparent and impartial assessment of the current corporate health of the organisation. This will help inform and provide valuable insight at a critical juncture in the discovery phase, is also a signal of our commitment to improvement and hopefully the outcome of the assessment will be complementary to the work being delivered. It will also help Blaenau Gwent put itself in the best position to tackle the challenges ahead for local government in terms of financial sustainability, capacity and capability, to help transform and improve service delivery and outcomes for our residents, and the ability to help inform and influence future structure of local government in Wales.

At the end of the discovery phase, will the Council continue with the joint arrangements and, if so, what should the areas of focus be?

We are looking for the Peer Assessment to consider:

- Delivery – how is the Council demonstrating that it is using its capacity and capability in an economical, efficient and effective way to deliver core and challenging policy commitments
- Transformation/Change – how is the Council enabling and supporting cultural and organisational change through the performance and governance framework that is in place
- Governance – are the governance arrangements effective and transparent of internal arrangements and plans and their robustness and ability to support change and delivery
- Leadership – what is the effectiveness of the relationship between the political leadership and senior officers in the organisation to challenge itself to continuously improve how it delivers better outcomes for residents
- A specific focus on the culture of the organisation and the decision making framework. Are our politicians able to make informed strategic decisions that support the long term sustainability of the Council.
- To test out and challenge workforce capability to develop a progressive and positive organisational design and associated culture - supported by the workforce policies and strategies in place.

PPA Engagement and Participation

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 outlines that a panel must consult the following about the extent to which the council is meeting its performance requirements:

- local people;
- other persons carrying on a business in the council's area;
- the staff of the council, and;
- every trade union which is recognised (within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 (c. 52)) by the council.

A full Engagement Plan has been prepared for the PPA. This includes:

- **National Resident Survey for Blaenau Gwent** – The Council will facilitate the Living in Blaenau Gwent process from Monday 23rd September 2024 for six weeks to Sunday 3rd November (national standard timeframe). This will allow for indicative results from the survey to be available to the PPA following Data Cymru Data Validation Exercises.
- **Citizen/Service User Focus Groups** - To gauge service user perspective, the Council will hold 3 focus groups to cover service users/citizens and those actively involved in participative processes operated by the Council.
 - **Focus Group 1:** Aimed at engaged service users actively participating in existing mechanisms, to bring a blend of people from different networks and communities of Blaenau Gwent.
 - **Focus Group 2:** Building on the Council's strategy for moving to digital approaches this focus group will involve a blend of service users that mainly interacting with the Council via digital channels.



- **Focus Group 3:** Aimed at children and young people (CYP), facilitated through the Blaenau Gwent Youth Forum to consider thematic priorities for the Council from the Corporate Plan. Consideration will also be given to representation of CYP from other relevant forums e.g. School Grand Council's and Youth Service Provision.
- **Local Businesses** - Aimed at engaging with a cross section of businesses and local companies operating in the area, with potential representatives from established mechanisms
- **Partnerships** – Engaging with Aneurin Leisure Trust, AWEN, Citizens Advice Bureau, SRS and representatives from the Local Delivery Partnership.
- **Council Staff** – to understand the views of Council staff.
 - **Focus Group 1:** General focus group with a cross section of staff from the organisation covering broad categories such as Gender, Grade and Directorate, with a focus on also having representatives that are involved in key programmes such as Equality Lived Experience Network, and the Digital Champions.
 - **Focus Group 2:** Front-line service provider staff.
- **Trade Unions** – At least one representative from each Council recognised Trade Union which will include Unison, Unite, GMB, and unions for those for teaching staff e.g. NAHT, NEU and NASUWT.

As outlined throughout this Self-Assessment, the Council actively engages and participates with staff and the local community in order to shape service delivery and understand need. This work will continue into 2024/25 and will be further enhanced by the agreement and implementation of the Council's Engagement and Participation Strategy. All of the activity outlined above will also be utilised moving forward for service delivery and will also inform our next Self-Assessment.

The Corporate Plan 2022/27

The Corporate Plan 2022/27 sets out an ambitious programme of activity for the Council over the next five years and beyond. The priorities, also referred to as Well-being Objectives, have been developed in order to support communities to thrive. The Corporate Plan is the Council's commitment to the communities of Blaenau Gwent, to provide modern and high quality services which support economic growth and well-being.

The Plan outlines four high level priorities, each of which are underpinned by solid and sustainable business plans, which describe the activity to be undertaken by each service area of the Council, ensuring the Council can be held to account for what it has promised to deliver. The Corporate Plan 2022/27 Well-being Objectives are:

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

The Council has a responsibility to the people of Blaenau Gwent to help improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of the area. By setting a small number of strategic priorities within the Corporate Plan it will allow efforts to be concentrated on delivery in these areas and ultimately, help to improve the quality of the lives of residents.

The Corporate Plan also outlines the Council Vision:

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

A core set of Council Values has also been included within the Plan for all staff and Members to follow:

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------|
| ● Respectful | ● Accountable |
| ● Inclusive | ● Supportive |
| ● Collaborative | |



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.

A full version of our Corporate Plan is available to download here corporate-plan-2022-2027.pdf (blaenau-gwent.gov.uk)

Sitting within our Corporate Plan is our statutory Well-being Statement which explains in more detail how we have derived our objectives and how they will contribute to the 7 national well-being goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Our Well-Being statement also acts as a key driver for improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Blaenau Gwent by seeking to ensure 'that the needs of the present are met, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

In March 2024, Council approved an implementation plan and set of key performance indicators to be used to inform progress against the Corporate Plan. An overview of progress against the implementation plan is found below, and progress of the indicators is found at the end of each Well-being Objective. The full implementation plan is found on page 70.

Corporate Plan Priorities 2023/24				
	Blue (action completed)	Green (action on target)	Amber (action off target with a route back to green)	Red (action off target significant concerns)
Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent	1	9	2	0
Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities	0	4	1	0
Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient	0	6	0	0
An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place	5	3	0	0
Total	6	22	3	0



As well as our Corporate Plan, there are a range of other key documents that provide a clear direction and vision for the future, based on the needs and aspirations of the local communities. These align with our Corporate Plan objectives and organisational vision to ensure that we can deliver services and make improvements. These include our Decarbonisation Plan and Welsh Language Promotion Strategy which have been incorporated into the Council's business plans, ensuring that monitoring of these documents are in one place. The Council's revised Strategic Equality Plan and Engagement and Participation Strategy 2024/28 are to be agreed in 2024 and will also be incorporated into business plans in the future.

- [Decarbonisation Plan 2020 - 2030 | Blaenau Gwent CBC \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)
- [welsh-language-promotion-strategy-2022-2027.pdf \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)
- [2-strategic-equality-plan-2428.pdf \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)
- [blaenau gwent Engagement and Participation Strategy - Search \(bing.com\)](#)

Gwent Public Service Board

The Gwent Public Service Board (PSB) is a statutory partnership that brings together public services from across Gwent to improve well-being, both now, and in the long term. PSB's are required to assess the well-being of the area they cover and form well-being plans on a five-year cycle. Membership of the Gwent PSB can be viewed [here](#).

Gwent PSB adopted its first [Well-being Plan](#) in July 2023, setting out how public services will collaborate to respond to some of Gwent's key well-being challenges. The plan runs from 2023-25 and sets out two interconnected well-being objectives and five underpinning steps to be delivered over a five-year delivery period. Gwent PSB well-being objectives:

1. *We want to create a fairer, more equitable and inclusive Gwent for all.*
2. *We want a climate-ready Gwent, where our environment is valued and protected, benefitting our well-being now and for future generations.*

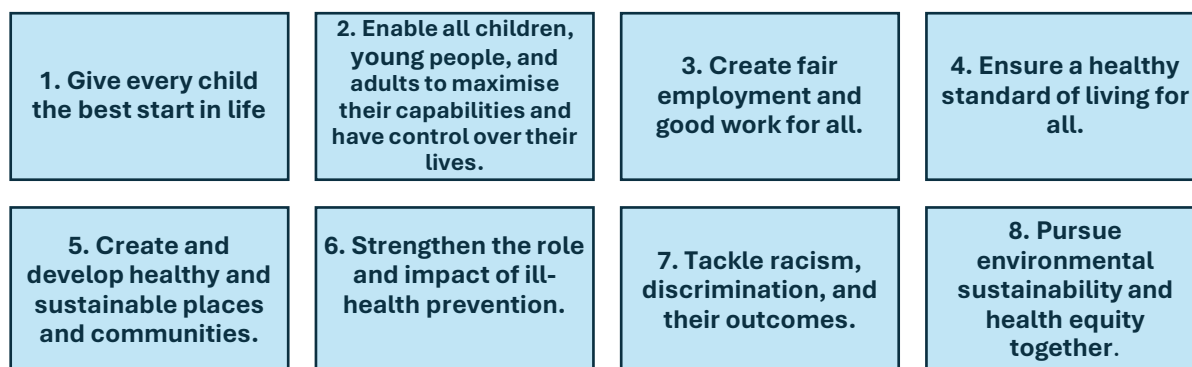
Five underpinning steps:

- *Take action to reduce the cost-of-living crisis in the longer term.*
- *Provide and enable the supply of good quality, affordable, appropriate homes.*
- *Taking action to reduce our carbon emissions, help Gwent adapt to climate change, and protect and restore our natural environment.*
- *Enable and support people, neighbourhoods, and communities to be resilient, connected, thriving and safe.*
- *Take action to address inequities, particularly in relation to health, through the framework of the Marmot Principles.*

To support the PSB to tackle the high levels of inequality across Gwent, it has begun working with the Institute of Health Equity, using guiding principles identified in Professor Marmot's review, [Fair Society, Healthy Lives](#), for achieving greater health equity. Since the original review, a further two principals have been identified, as important to improving health.



The 8 Marmot Principles:



Two facilitated stakeholder workshops were held during February and March to identify, and sense check the best approaches for enabling effecting change and to make the most of public resources, so that the well-being outcomes for Gwent's communities are optimised. Partner leads for collaborative steering groups have also been identified to oversee the PSBs work and lead specific areas of focus.

To support the objectives of the Gwent Public Services Board at a local level, Local Delivery groups have been formed within each of the five local authority areas. The Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership (LWP) comprises officers tasked with identifying local well-being priorities for Blaenau Gwent and addressing these issues through collaborative efforts, in alignment with the Gwent Well-being Plan. Besides holding quarterly meetings, subject-specific workshops and subgroups were organised throughout the year.

During 2023/24, the LWP held several stakeholder engagement workshops for local and sub-regional stakeholders to work in partnership to reflect on the success, barriers and challenges for existing local well-being projects and programmes. The evidence gathered through these workshops, in addition to a data-led outcomes approach, enabled the LWP to develop a local well-being action plan that aligns to the regional priorities coming out of the Gwent WBP development work, based around areas of local focus including travel and transport, climate and nature, food and reducing Inequalities, and volunteering.

Work is now ongoing to identify leads to oversee, monitor and coordinate local delivery against the local well-being priorities. This also includes continuing to identify opportunities for public engagement to shape local well-being and ensure areas of focus respond to what matters most to our communities.

This is a key area of work for Blaenau Gwent as our residents have one of the lowest levels of disposable income in the country (2022 figures from the Office of National Statistics show). Disposable income is the amount of money people have available for spending or saving after taxes and social contributions. The Office for National Statistics estimates Blaenau Gwent residents each had around £15,568 in disposable income as of 2022 – one of the lowest levels in the UK. Now more than ever there is a need to tackle the inequality seen across the region.



Blaenau Gwent Annual Self-Assessment 2023/24

Blaenau Gwent Council looks to operate as a self-improving organisation, whereby there is a recognition of what has gone well, but, and most importantly, it recognises where improvements are to be made. The Council works to respond to the following questions in the work that it undertakes:

- **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?**

Our Self-Assessment provides an overview of the work that has been undertaken throughout 2023/24 and has been written to consider:

- **How well are we doing? Narrative of the activity that has taken place;**
- **How do we know? Qualitative and quantitative evidence provided; and**
- **What and how can we do better? Actions to implement over the coming years.**

The focus of the Annual Self-Assessment is the Blaenau Gwent Council's Corporate Plan priorities, known as Well-being Objectives, and providing an assessment of how well the Council feels it has achieved against these during 2023/24 and the challenges to progressing these.

The Corporate Plan 2022/27 Well-being Objectives are:

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

These objectives are to be delivered by the Council in the medium to long term and therefore will not be fully implemented within this short timeframe. The Self-Assessment provides an assessment of service delivery throughout 2023/24 that contribute to these objectives. Detailed assessments of service delivery are included throughout the document on pages 20 to 68.

The Self-Assessment is published on an annual basis to provide an account of how the Council has operated over the year including what we have done well and, more importantly, where further progress is required.

Under each Well-being Objective is an annual delivery plan supported by operational business plans. Overall, for 2023/24, the majority of actions, contributing to the Well-being Objectives have been achieved, however, we fully recognise that we still have a number of challenges to address and further work is to be undertaken to fully achieve each of our long term aims.

Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent

This Well-being Objective looks to increase resilience within the community by providing high quality education and skills to support a thriving economy from birth onwards, minimising dependence and maximising independence.

Throughout 2023/24 the Council has achieved in a number of key areas with some areas of weakness, however, the Council feels the achievements outweigh the weaknesses.

The performance of our young people at Key Stage 4 clearly demonstrates the hard work of our pupils and the high quality of teaching and learning across schools. This was also reflected in the Estyn inspections of 6 of our



schools during the period, where no school was placed in a statutory category.

The very low numbers of NEETS demonstrates that nearly all of our learners have continued in higher education or training, or have gone on to secure employment after leaving school at the end of year 11.

It is very pleasing to see that Brynmawr Foundation School have continued to go from strength to strength and that they are no longer a school causing concern however, one school remains a school causing concern, the River Centre. The Local Authority will continue to provide enhanced support to the River Centre, in order to support it to be removed from an Estyn category.

There has been an increase in attendance this year, but figures are still not back to pre-pandemic figures, consequently continuing to improve attendance in schools will be a key priority for the Local Authority in the academic year 2024/25. We will be running a campaign #everydaymatters.

Schools have worked hard to put in place support for learners who are at risk of exclusion, fixed-term or permanent, and the youth service have also provided instrumental support. There has been a reduction in exclusions, but they still remain higher than pre-pandemic levels and further reducing exclusions continues to be a priority for the Local Authority.

The area has seen an expansion in the STEM initiative, providing support across a number of schools, raising aspiration and preparing children for their journey into the world of work.

The Council is actively working with the private sector to deliver opportunities to support more and well-paying jobs into the area. Attracting companies and industries into Blaenau Gwent is a key priority for the Council. During the period the Council opened an enterprise hub (Goldworks) and the inward investment by Ciner remains a target project for the area. There has also been an increase in our industrial portfolio income, all of which has contributed to improving Blaenau Gwent's position in the UK Competitive Index.

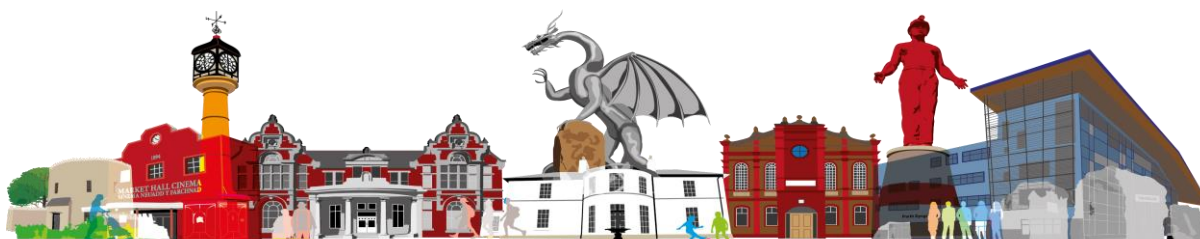
In 2023/24, construction began on the High Value Engineering (HiVE) Site to create a new multi-million hi-tech post 16 education facility in Ebbw Vale. The facility will provide state-of-the art training and education for young people and businesses in the fields of robotics, advanced materials, manufacturing and digital, and enabling technologies. However, in 2024/25 the company converting the facility went into administration resulting in the contract being terminated impacting the completion date of this, and other projects.

Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities

This Well-being Objective looks to reduce carbon emissions, and provide an environment which supports growth and well-being and connects communities.

Throughout 2023/24 the Council worked to address a number of areas but also has a number of challenges to address moving forward.

Since 2019 the Council have exceeded the Welsh Government target for recycling. This has been an improving picture over these years and this data shows that, when compared to other Councils in Wales, we are performing well. However, next year the target is set to increase to 70% and achieving this will be very difficult. Analysis has been undertaken on the amount of residual (black bag) waste collected and from what areas across the borough to support a targeted campaign across the borough to encourage higher levels of recycling. The Council will need support and buy in from the community and local businesses so that together the higher levels of recycling can be achieved. If the Welsh Government target is not met, financial penalties will be imposed which in turn will impact Council finances.



How the Borough looks, and the state of our environment is a key area of interest to our communities. Fly tipping has seen a decrease this year compared to last year and this can be attributed to our increased enforcement activity. However, we still have over 900 incidents of fly tipping being reported, all of which needs to be cleaned up and disposed of by the Council. This again has a huge impact on the Council budget.

The Council will continue to work with the community to make the environment an enjoyable and clean space by encouraging people to dispose and recycle correctly.

Decarbonisation and working towards low carbon emissions is a key area for the Council. The work around decarbonisation of Council property is an ongoing challenge owing to the current age and state of much of our property and the lack of resources to be able to fully address these areas. Changes in our directly measured carbon emissions shows there has been a 3% fall in these emissions compared to last year and a cumulative 19% fall over the four years since our 2019/20 baseline. The Council has developed a 10 year Decarbonisation Plan and there are a number of initiatives and actions to implement over the coming years to support this crucial agenda.

Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient

This Well-being Objective looks to increase the resilience of communities, where everyone is welcome and safe, and which minimises dependency and maximises independence.

Throughout 2023/24 this has been a key area for the Council and a lot of work has been undertaken to address this objective but there remain significant challenges in the longer term to address the predicted increase in demand for services, resulting from the forecast demographic changes

It is the council's aim to take a preventative approach and develop early intervention strategies to ensure needs of the community are met at the earliest opportunity, by providing the right services to prevent needs from escalating.

There has been an increase in demand and complexity across Social Services. The Information, Advice and Assistance (IAA) teams have seen increased numbers of contacts and referrals. Blaenau Gwent is also experiencing an increase in its ageing population alongside a reduction in the birth rate and the number of people of working age. These changing demographics are providing a difficult situation for the Council to manage potentially increasing need over the coming years. However, for 2023/24 the numbers of vulnerable adults supported by preventative services and not requiring longer term support, has remained relatively stable but it is recognised that there is more to do in this area as we strive to provide increased reablement and preventative solutions to proportionately meet needs of our vulnerable adults.

The Council is undertaking a review of its in house Provider services including residential and supported living provision. This has incorporated recommendations from CIW inspections during 2023/24 with an aim to provide more outcomes focussed and reablement provision that is integrated better into local communities. This work continues into 2024/25 as staffing structures, budgets, costs, and the potential to optimise digital solutions as part of care provision are reviewed.

The area has seen the number of children on the child protection register increase from last year, therefore this will be an area of focus moving forward. Work is to be undertaken during 2024/25 to better manage front door demand, and the outcomes achieved by our preventative services will be assessed.

Compared to last year we have improved on the number of affordable homes delivered, increasing from 4 in 2022/23 to 25 in 2023/24 as well as reducing the number on our social housing register, and significantly improved completions of our disabled facilities grant work. However, the area has seen an increase in the amount of homelessness compared to last year. This is a growing concern for the area as preventing



homelessness continues to be difficult owing to the continued lack of move on accommodation in the private and social housing sectors, combined with clients approaching the Council at crisis point. Bed and breakfast accommodation is having to be used which has increased and exceeds the Council target, this highlights the pressures and the lack of social / private housing available to support families. This will be a key area of work moving into 2024/25 and beyond.

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

This Well-being Objective provides a focus for the Council to work in partnership to provide high quality services to meet local need, and improve the quality of life and well-being within the community.

Throughout 2023/24 adequate progress has been made against this Well-being Objective with the achievements outweighing the challenges but noting that some of the actions are behind schedule or falling short.

Finance is a key and ongoing challenge for the Council. Over the years Blaenau Gwent has seen its budget reduce by around £40million, with a further £8.5m million required for 2024/25 and £6m for 2025/26, with potentially an additional £25m savings required to be found over the next 4 years. To meet these challenges, we must think about the way we provide services to reduce costs, and how we can generate income. This may mean us having to reduce, change or stop some services or look at alternative delivery models.

Alongside this there is a risk that school balances will be depleted by March 2025, and that many of our schools will be in a deficit. The Local Authority will work closely with schools to support them to produce deficit reduction plans and to identify financial efficiencies.

The Council will need to work more in partnership with more stakeholders (including our communities) moving forward as it is likely that we will be unable to deliver the amount and scale of current services, and we will need to work with partners for delivery to be undertaken outside of the Council.

As with all organisations, governance is key and ensures that the Council is working within legal requirements and in compliance with its own policies. We have a number of policies, strategies and arrangements in place that ensure we know what we are doing and why, conducting business in an open, transparent, and accountable manner, and upholding the principles of good governance and public service. The external audit reports we have received over the year have included some service based recommendations, but overall, most have recognised that we have made improvements, and we are aware of where changes need to be made.

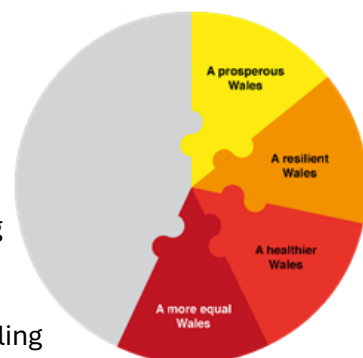


Well-being Objective 1

Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent

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.

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.



The following narrative provides an evaluative reflection of the activity, undertaken throughout 2023/24, 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.

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.

Primaries (of which 4 are voluntary aided / faith schools)	19
Maintained 3-16 SEBD Special School	1
Maintained 3-18 Special School	1
Maintained Comprehensive	1
Foundation Comprehensive	1
Maintained 3-16 Learning Communities	2

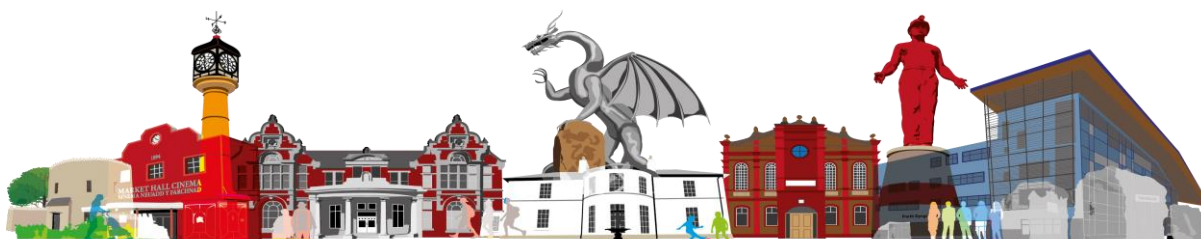
Blaenau Gwent has 25 schools across 31 school sites and there are currently circa 9,000+ pupils on roll across all Blaenau Gwent schools. The Education Directorate's vision is 'Empowering our communities'. The focus is on supporting our communities to be 'ambitious, ethically informed, life-long learners who lead full and healthy lives.

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.

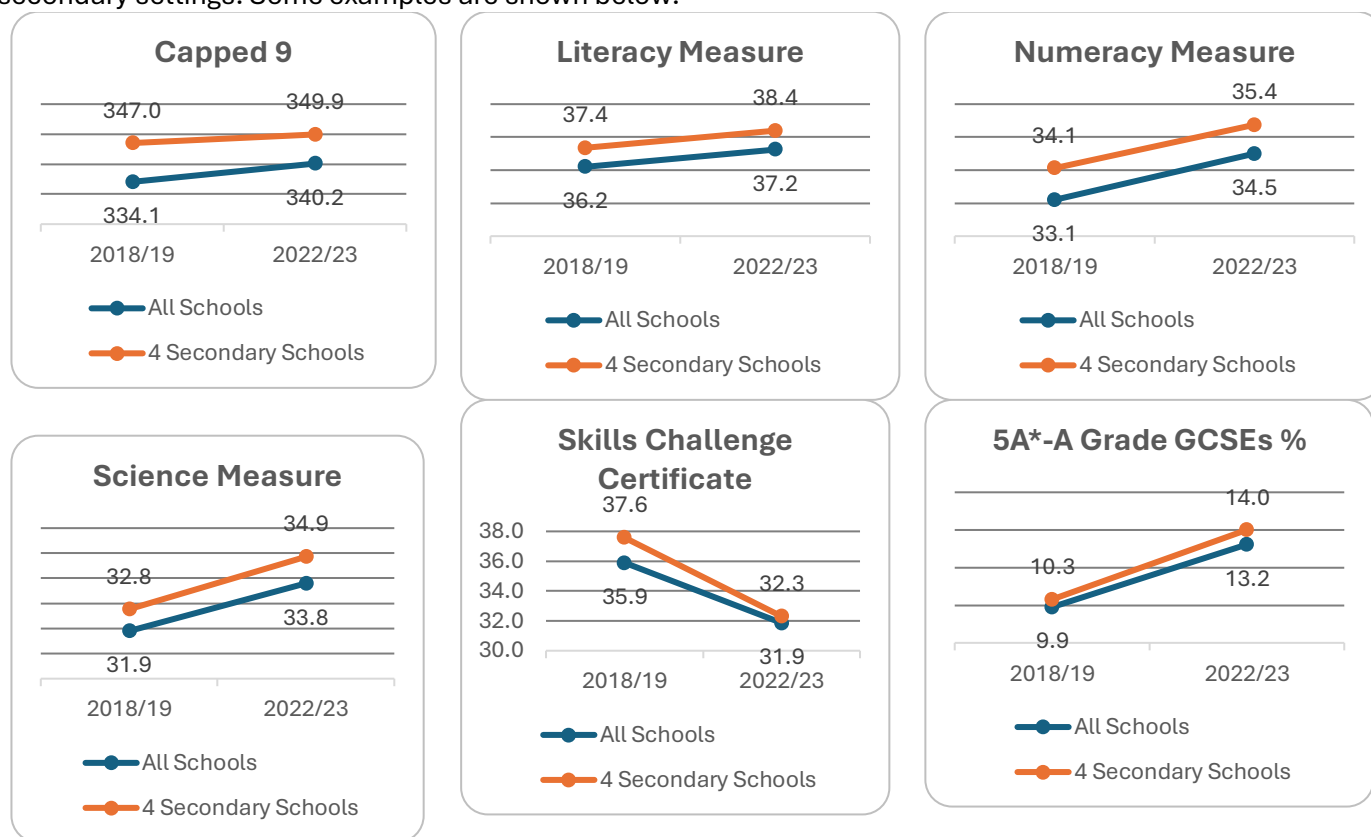
We support children and young people to be in a good position to find skills and employment at the appropriate times and our NEET figures demonstrate our achievements in this area.

Educational Outcomes

Summer 2023 Key Stage 4 (KS4) results were positive and in line with the School Development Plan targets



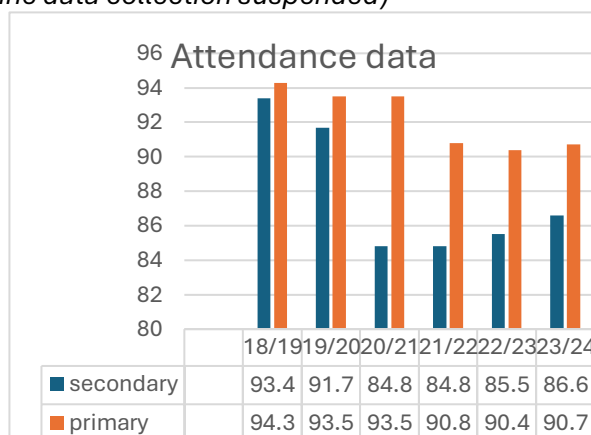
set by the 4 secondary settings. There were improvements in 23 out of 24 key measures across the 4 secondary settings. Some examples are shown below:



(Note: only 2019 and 2023 comparison data shown due to routine data collection suspended)

Attendance and Exclusions

On an annual basis school attendance is showing an increase 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, decreased 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. The exclusion data is showing a decrease, but the levels are higher than they were pre Covid. 16 primary schools issued exclusions this year compared to 14 schools for the same period last year. Whilst the number of exclusions is higher in primary schools this year, there has been a reduction in the number of days lost, meaning that schools are issuing exclusions for shorter periods. The Education Welfare Service are working closely with those schools to support early intervention to further reduce exclusions.



Data analysis	Number of Exclusions (decrease)	Days of Exclusion (decrease)	Permanent Exclusion's (increase)
Secondary	-320	-564	0
Primary	24	-65.5	1
Special Schools	0	-21.5	0
Increase/Decrease	-296	-651	1



There has been an increase in the number of exclusions in one Special School but a reduction in the days lost. The Education Welfare Service are working 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 (454), verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult (244), and physical assault against a pupil (128). When analysing exclusion data, it would be important to consider that it may involve a small number of learners who are excluded more than once.

Working with our schools and communities to improve attendance is a core priority for the Education Directorate. The Council are running a media campaign this year #everydaymatters to highlight the importance of good attendance and to direct families to support. The Council introduced an attendance pathway in September 2023 and those schools that have implemented all aspects of the pathway have seen an increase to their attendance rates. The Education Welfare Team will continue to support all schools to use the Attendance Pathway this academic year. The Education Welfare Team will also continue to work closely with schools this year, undertaking planned activities such as visiting families to support them where there are attendance concerns.

Schools causing concern

At the start of the academic year 2023/24, two schools were in a category, namely Brynmawr Foundation School and The River Centre. Following a successful monitoring visit, Brynmawr Foundation School was removed from a category in December 2023. The River Centre remains in a category and is in receipt of enhanced support from the Local Authority and the Education Achievement Service (EAS).

Following an inspection in the summer term, Bryn Bach Primary requires Estyn follow up. This does not place the school in an Estyn category. Instead, Estyn will re-visit the school approximately one year after the initial inspection in order for the school to provide evidence and reassurance to Estyn that the school continues to develop in accordance with their school improvement priorities.

Entitlement to Free School Meals (eFSM)

Blaenau Gwent has consistently had amongst the highest numbers of pupils entitled to Free School Meals, when compared to other Local Authorities in Wales. The numbers appeared to increase significantly during Covid, which resulted from an anomaly in the process by which statuses were being recorded. Numbers have returned to pre-Covid levels.

Indicator	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Entitlement to FSM	25.5%	31.4%	33.3%	24.6%	24.1%

Current levels of pupils entitled to FSM rank Blaenau Gwent as having the 6th highest levels of authorities in Wales. This would appear to conflict with other measures of deprivation, which has led to discussions with Welsh Government as to the value of eFSM as an accurate measure of deprivation.

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. 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 158 pupils on the EHE database (31/08/24) compared to 143 for the same period last year. This is an increase of 10.5%. 27 of these pupils are from the Gypsy Roma Traveller Community (GRT).

Children Looked After (CLA)

At the end of March 2024, 203 children were being looked after by the Local Authority. Although there has been a small decrease over the year, the number still remains high. A total of 17 (13%) children looked after (CLA) experienced at least one or more non-transitional school move during 2022-2023. This is an increase when compared with the previous academic year when the figure was 8 children. 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 2022/23:

- 136 children of statutory school age were looked after by Blaenau Gwent local authority, this is a further decrease compared with the previous academic year when there were 142 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;
- There has been an increase in the number of CLA accessing local authority maintained special school placements; a total of 11 in 2022/23, compared with 9 in 2021/22;
- There has been a reduction in the number of CLA attending independent school settings outside of Blaenau Gwent; a total of 3 in 2022/23, compared with 7 in 2021/22;
- 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; and
- 88% of Personal Education Plans for newly accommodated children were initiated within statutory timescales. This is an improvement when compared with the previous year when the figure was 54%. A total of 3 plans were not initiated within 10 days. This was as a result of the learners being Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children who were not in school at the point of becoming looked after. The 3 learners have since been admitted to schools and have education plans in place.

Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

The Council are well on track for completing the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) reform; the end date is August 2025, which includes the extended year awarded by the Minister. The additional duties placed on Local Authorities include Early Years and Post 16 ALN. There has been a new ALN Policy implemented for Blaenau Gwent for 23/24, which includes an Early Years Guidance and Process Document. The Early Years Officer works collaboratively and cross directorate with Social Services and externally with Health and Early Years settings to ensure that needs are identified in a timely manner and support is provided at the earliest opportunity.

All current ALN resource bases, except for two, are full to capacity and have waiting lists. The recent Estyn inspection (2022) 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 are therefore undertaking regular reviews of the current provision and are using up to date data to project demand going forward.

Following a public consultation, and in order to accommodate demand, the Council has increased the capacity of ALN Resource Bases across Blaenau Gwent, accommodating 83 learners in Primary settings and 73 in Secondary settings. This includes a new base, which was opened in September 2023 at Tredegar Comprehensive School and an increase in capacity at Ebbw Fawr Learning Community, Secondary setting. Planning and development has taken place during 23/24 for two additional, 10 place, Resource Bases in Primary Schools, one of which is Welsh Medium in response to the Welsh Education Strategic Plan. Both bases are on track to open September 2024. The aim of increasing capacity locally aligns with the ALN Code of Practice and will also seek to reduce the number of out of county education placements.

The vision for inclusion, which aligns with the ALN Code of Practice, in our mainstream schools, is supported by the ALN Implementation Lead Officer. In addition, the Inclusion Team has commissioned the Inclusive Practice Service to continue supporting schools on a systemic basis and individual pupils where required.



Training, development and review is ongoing in terms of ALN implementation and the support available from the Local Authority to the schools is comprehensive and increasingly responsive to monitoring and evaluation conducted by Officers.

Improving Schools Programme

From February to November 2023, many of our headteachers and senior leaders engaged with Action Short of Strike (ASOS). This led to the majority of our primary headteachers not engaging with Professional Discussions with the LA during this time. Professional Discussions are an important way for the LA to engage with schools on their priorities for improvement, progress with implementing national reform, and to offer appropriate support where relevant. Since the end of ASOS in November 2023 the Local Authority has worked closely with the EAS to arrange and undertake Professional Discussions, prioritising those schools identified in most need initially, according to agreed factors discussed during our partnership meetings. Full detail on the Improving Schools Programme can be found here - [Report.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](https://www.moderngov.co.uk)

Digital and ICT in Education

A new Digital Transformation Strategy has been developed for schools highlighting schools' aspirations regarding the digital learner journey. The Strategy has been aligned with the Blaenau Gwent Council Digital Transformation Strategy 2023/27 and supports the delivery of the priorities set out in the Corporate Plan 2022/2027. The Strategy outlines the key aims, objectives, and priorities to achieve the Councils vision for digital services in schools. It will serve as a roadmap for schools to navigate continuous integration of Digital in Education by identifying the resources required to facilitate effective infrastructure, connectivity, and approaches to learning via the use of digital technologies and ultimately shaping a future-ready generation. Our priorities will enable us to improve our customers' experience.

Education Finance

The Council aims to deliver effective and efficient services within the 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.

The Council allocated £52.562 million to schools in 2023/24 via the Individual Schools Budget (ISB) to provide high quality education and to improve pupil outcomes. In addition, Blaenau Gwent continues to make a financial contribution to the regional EAS arrangements which was £326,668 for the financial year. Processes such as monthly LA/EAS Partnership meetings are in place to ensure the LA can hold the EAS to account for the support and challenge they provide to schools and ensure value for money for the Local Authority.

The ISB in 2024/25 is £1.42m higher than it was in the previous year. This is a 2.17% increase. It is made up of £864k cost pressure funding and £278k transferred into the ISB from other Education Budgets. This increase was used to fund increased pupil numbers and the development of new resource bases. Due to the Council receiving a low settlement from Welsh Government, no additional funding was delegated to schools to fund inflationary increases such as pay rises. Cost pressures were also awarded totalling £406k for Home to School transport in respect of increased demand and contract prices. In September 2024, the majority of contracts will be required to be retendered and it is anticipated that these will increase substantially from their current rates.

School balances dropped from £4.821 million at the end of the 2022/23 to £1.348 million at the end of the 2023/24. The overall level has reduced by nearly £3.5 million, with four schools in a deficit position.

- Primary school balances have dropped from £2.993million to £1.668 million.
- Secondary school balances have fallen from, £675,000 to £37,000.
- All through schools balances have dropped from £664,000 to a deficit of £451,000



- Special schools have dropped from £489,000 to £94,000.

There is a risk that school balances will be depleted by March 2025 due to the increased costs schools are facing including teachers' pay awards and utility costs. Schools may be unable to produce a balanced budget for 2024/2025 without impacting on class sizes, learner outcomes etc. Schools are being supported to produce deficit reduction plans which identify financial efficiencies and the impact of those efficiencies. These plans will be considered by the Corporate Director of Education and the Chief Officer Resources. School cost pressures will be reported within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

Collaborative Working with the EAS

The Education Directorate supports 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), 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, 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.

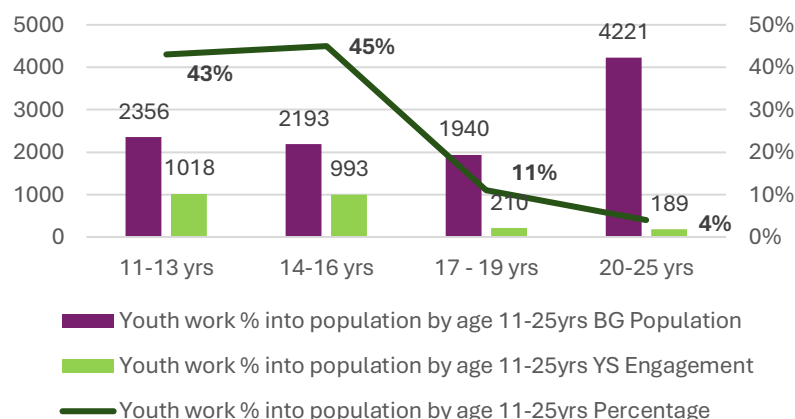
Estyn

6 schools were inspected in the academic year 2023 - 2024. None of these schools were placed in a category and none received a follow up health and safety or safeguarding letter from Estyn. The schools that were inspected were; All Saints Primary, St Marys RC Primary School, Ebbw Fawr Learning Community (3-16), Pen Y Cwm School (3-18), Deighton Primary School and Beaufort Hill Primary School.

Youth Service

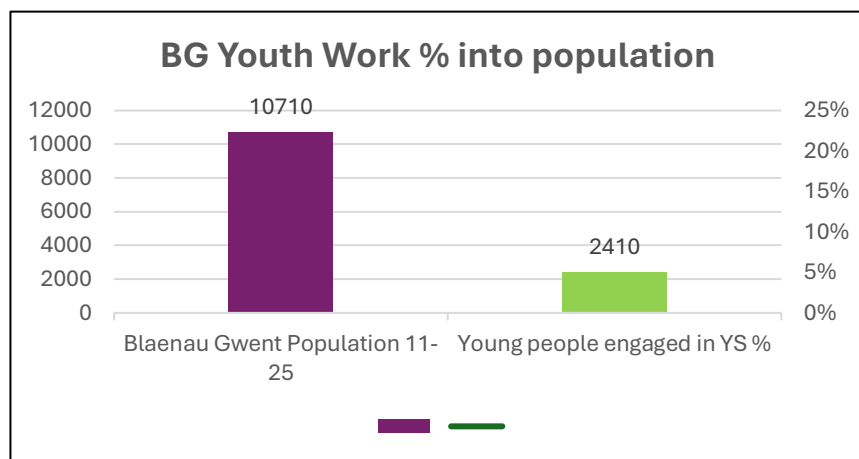
Blaenau Gwent Youth Service offers a comprehensive range of services for young people aged 11-25 years, centred upon voluntary engagement and the provision of informal learning. This approach promotes personal, social and emotional development whilst raising aspirations through the achievement of positive outcomes.

Youth work % into population by age 11-25yrs



In 2022/23 Blaenau Gwent Youth Service reached 19% of the 11-25 youth population and, positively, 2023/24 indicates an increase to 23%, reflecting a 4% growth. This comprises of 2,410 individual young people, with the highest engagement coming from the 11-16 age brackets, where we are attracting almost 45% of the youth population within this age grouping, which is significant.

In the reporting period, Blaenau Gwent is placed 2nd (best) across the region and joint 10th across Wales, above the Welsh national average (15%) for population reach. The increase in reach is likely to



be attributed to a focused effort to expand open access universal youth provision across the Authority. Prior to 2023, the service operated four universal youth clubs. However, following a restructure that required full-time staff to work two evenings, the number of youth clubs increased to nine, improving engagement with the youth population.

The Youth Service leads on implementing the Welsh Government's Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) and this is supported by the strategic multi-agency Raising Aspirations Group and implementation of the Early Identification Tool, providing prevention and support for young people at risk of becoming or currently NEET and or homeless.

In 2022, Blaenau Gwent faced a higher-than-expected NEET rate of 5% (31 young people) reflecting a 3.4% increase. A comprehensive evaluation with key partners was conducted to identify contributing factors and develop strategies to reduce this figure. This evaluation proved effective and has facilitated improved outcomes, reducing the NEET figure down to 2.5% (14 young people) in 2023/24. The Youth Service continues to be an established accreditation centre, however, there is a decline in the number of young people (aged 11-25) achieving accredited qualifications in 2023/24. This shift reflects a strategic realignment towards supporting marginalised groups and enhancing the connection between the Youth Service and broader inclusion and well-being agendas. Efforts have been made to assess the needs of young people in the area, particularly those who may not currently engage with the local authority or partner organisations.

The Youth Service supports various groups, including young people at risk of exclusion, those with disabilities, those from Gypsy Roma Traveller Community, and electively home-educated young people. The 11-25 YEPF team have continued to target the most at-risk Year 11 pupils leaving school. Many of the individuals targeted and supported have been previously identified by the services and partners as historically these individuals have not been accessing the same level of support, information or advice as those in mainstream education. In 2023/24, there were 114 referrals for the year, 36 of which were identified as electively home educated.

Two social groups specifically cater to marginalised young people, offering non-formal activities, designed to reduce social isolation and promote well-being. For many participants, these sessions serve as their only opportunity for social interaction with peers.

The Gypsy Roma Traveller Community Education Service

The Gypsy Roma Traveller Service comprises of a family liaison officer and a commissioned education support teacher. The service continues to provide one to one, and small group support. The service supports children and young people academically both within lessons and through withdrawal, and this support is suitably targeted for each individual pupil. These specific lessons are reviewed within



meetings between the schools designated staff and the GRT Team. During meetings, assessment data and other areas of the child/young person's education, such as attendance and exclusions is reviewed.

In collaboration with schools, children and their families, targeted specific lessons are based on the level of support needed. Through effective support, results over 2023/24 indicate that the majority (76%) of children and young people have improved in areas of reading ability and 65% improved in spelling.

During the Spring term of 2023/24 the Education Club sessions successfully transferred to Brynmawr Foundation school from the Gypsy and Traveller site. These sessions are for GRT learners who are electively home educated (EHE). The Education Club focuses on literacy and numeracy, and also promotes secondary education by providing the opportunity to spend time at a school setting. 14 pupils attended during the academic year 2023/24 with the intention to increase numbers next year with the support from families. The Education Club has raised the importance of secondary education to families and enabled learners and parents to feel confident in a formal secondary school. Positively, 4 of our EHE learners have chosen to adopt the flexi school model at Brynmawr Foundation School in September 2024, which has been fully supported and approved by the Headteacher. This evidences the impact the club has had from moving to a school site with an increase in GRT learners attending secondary education, increasing their chances of securing future achievements.

During November 2023, secondary aged GRT learners took part in developing the new strategic equality plan in Blaenau Gwent by sharing their lived experiences of being part of the GRT community. They were given the opportunity to share their feelings regarding their own perceptions of how they are treated and highlight the barriers faced in school and within the community.

During September 2023, the GRT Service and the Elective Home Education Officer met with families of GRT learners, and this provided the opportunity to discuss the new Welsh Government Guidance on Elective Home Education, particularly the revised expectations. GRT Service also included school nurses in this discussion and the uptake of vaccinations, and any concerns parents had in relation to this and attendance at school. There was a particular focus on EHE secondary pupils missing vaccinations as they were not attending a school. This led to an increase in vaccinations and parents are providing a suitable education, in line with Welsh Government Legislation.

Average attendance for the GRT pupils, during the 23/24 academic year was 73.15%, compared to 71.1% last year. The GRT Service will continue to work with Education Welfare Service to monitor half termly attendance of GRT learners, followed by first response visits and a plan in place to support individual attendance, with a view to improving overall attendance and engagement.

Tech Valleys

Ebbw Vale has one of Wales's eight Enterprise Zones, with fast track planning and Development Bank financial incentives. Blaenau Gwent is part of the wider Cardiff Capital Region, investing £1.2bn of public money to leverage another £4bn of private investment across South East Wales. The Welsh Government is investing £100m in Blaenau Gwent and Heads of the Valleys over 10 years to create 1,500-plus jobs and is working with the Council to achieve this under the banner, Tech Valleys.

In 2023 the Tech Valleys Initiative undertook the following programmes:

- the Welsh Valleys Engineering Project and the Tech Valleys Blaenau Gwent Stem Facilitation Project was given additional support to increase the range of activities in schools;
- Construction began on the High Value Engineering (HiVE) Site to create a new multi-million hi-tech post 16 education facility in Ebbw Vale. The new 21,808 sq ft HiVE site will provide a state-of-the art training and education for young people and businesses in the fields of robotics, advanced materials, manufacturing



and digital, and enabling technologies. In partnership with Coleg Gwent, and industry partners, the Council secured over £12 million from the Welsh Government's Tech Valleys programme and the UK Government to bring the redundant factory, the site of the former Monwel Hankinson Building, back in to use. Close to Ebbw Vale town centre and the Coleg Gwent, Blaenau Gwent Learning Zone, there will be a high-quality teaching space with the capacity for up to 600 students, complete with classrooms, study areas and a range of workshop spaces. The space will be kitted out with state-of-the-art robotics and manufacturing equipment available for use by both post 16 students and businesses taking on new technologies; Pupils in Blaenau Gwent were provided with a 'HeadStart' University experience taster event in order to consider future educational options;

- The Chief Scientific Officer visited Tredegar Comprehensive School and the HiVE Hub. Tredegar Comprehensive School is one of several schools in the county running HiVE workshops for pupils;
- To assist with enhancing and stimulating more entrepreneurship within Blaenau Gwent, a facility called Goldworks was successfully completed providing a 10,000 sq. ft. Business Enterprise Centre for new tech start-ups; and high growth start-ups. The launch is planned for Global Entrepreneurship Week in November 2024.
- Work continues with the Internet of Things and LoRaWaN demonstrator, including:
 - Gwent Archives Temperature and Humidity Monitoring;
 - Ebbw Vale Leisure Centre Energy Monitoring & Efficiencies; and
 - Abertillery Park Active Travel Monitoring.

The Council continues to work closely with WG and CCR to maximise opportunities for our indigenous businesses and inward investment projects. This includes funding packages where appropriate and other support, like Tech Valleys and through more strategic funding schemes like Shared Prosperity Funding (SPF).

Welsh Government's Business Productivity Enhancement Project (BPEP)

Since its launch, the Tech Valleys Business Productivity Enhancement Project has supported 12 companies across Blaenau Gwent. As a result, the project has been extended across Bridgend, Caerphilly, Torfaen and Rhondda Cynon Taf and, to-date, 53 companies have received a productivity and design diagnostic and decided to implement recommendations with the aid of a BPEP grant.

Blaenau Gwent Council – STEM Facilitation Project

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 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.

The Blaenau Gwent STEM Facilitation Project pilot phase was initially launched early 2021 until March 2023 for the Ebbw Fawr school cluster only. Due to the success of the pilot phase, Tech Valleys awarded additional funding to extend the project to March 2025, and to expand the offer to all schools across Blaenau Gwent. The BG STEM Facilitation Project team work with schools, providers and industry to raise the profile of STEM in the wider community and with schools to engage learners in order to prepare young people with the future skills that will be required in this area for high value, highly skilled jobs. For more information and up to date news, please see our BG STEM Project Padlet which can be accessed via this link

- <https://padlet.com/BGSTEMPROJECT/stem-facilitation-project-jjw368i31d79ypnh>



The Blaenau Gwent Council – STEM Facilitation Project reached the final of the Wales STEM Awards 2023 and was named as one of the 55 companies and individuals shortlisted in the Awards, which is sponsored by Cardiff Metropolitan University. Blaenau Gwent was recognised as a result of its commitment to making a difference to the STEM agenda in Wales and was shortlisted in the STEM Educational Programme of the Year (Public Sector) category alongside Companies House, University of South Wales and Wrexham University.

Thales

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. Since its launch in 2019, Thales Ebbw Vale has grown from a single project to a cyber campus including the establishment of the Global Operational Technology Competence Centre. This state of the art facility houses the Thales UK Cyber range, test & reference rigs, autonomous vehicle workshops & test track, an immersive customer experience centre and first class conference facilities.

UK Competitive Index

The council is working to improve its overall competitive status and is closely monitoring economic data with Cardiff University. The Council has worked with the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal to achieve two large investment for companies in Blaenau Gwent as part of our aim to 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, and although we would not be aiming to compare ourselves with e.g. Central London Boroughs there are former industrial areas around the UK that we should be able to compare ourselves with. Blaenau Gwent continues to improve and monitor our UKCI inputs like new business start-ups and new tech companies, and given the upward trajectory of competitiveness in Blaenau Gwent this would not appear to be purely a reflection of any short-term distortions in the data after the COVID-19 Pandemic and other areas.

Quickstart

The Quickstart Programme was established in April 2023 and replaced the former Kick Start programme. Quickstart offers 6 month supported paid work placements within Blaenau Gwent to anyone aged 16 + who are unemployed or economically inactive, to gain valuable experience and enhance employability skills to increase their chances of finding full time work once the placement has ended. A host of employers in Blaenau Gwent are offering meaningful Quickstart placements in a variety of sectors to suit individual interests. Participants will be supported throughout their placement to develop transferrable skills, undertake relevant training and increase confidence to secure future long term employment.

BG Effect Business Fund

The BG Effect business fund has been set up to help Blaenau Gwent business start-ups with potential growth aspirations. This includes providing advice and expert support to develop a business idea, providing the necessary equipment resources to start a business and helping to fund business location costs or professional fees etc. The purpose of the fund is to promote conditions to assist those who wish to start up their own business or enterprise. This can include providing advice and expert support to develop a business idea, providing the necessary equipment or resources to start a business, helping with business location costs, etc.

CiNER Glass Property

In 2022, Planning Committee approved for the development of a glass bottle manufacturing facility in Ebbw Vale, which aims to bring around 600 jobs to the local area when it opens. CiNER Glass Property Ltd, which already operates a facility in Turkey, was formally granted permission for the construction and operation of a purpose-built glass manufacturing facility, and associated development at Rassau Industrial Estate. This



project promises to be one of the largest investments in South Wales for decades, and one of the top 25 UK investments for the next year, bringing thousands of direct and indirect jobs to the local area. Since the planning application was approved, work has been undertaken to implement the Section 106 agreement conditions laid out by the Council. CiNER Glass Property Ltd have also refined and simplified the design of the facility including a re-evaluation to make the plant more environmentally and operationally efficient, whilst also reducing the cost of the overall build. The company is currently speaking to Welsh and UK Government about the assistance package that can be agreed. CiNER Glass Property Ltd are looking to work with and engage local schools and training centres, to help inform local people, young school graduates, and those looking for a new career, of some of the job and training opportunities that will be brought to the area in order to help foster skills and expertise in Blaenau Gwent, supporting the sector as a long-term employer in the area. Work has already taken place with local colleges, universities and training providers so that suitable education and training opportunities can be provided in the area over the next year. The 360° classroom in Ebbw Vale, is able to show people what it is like to work in the existing factory in Turkey. Discussions have also taken place with local and regional companies to provide plant essentials from across the supply chain process.

Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF)

The SPF Funding programme is being used to support the delivery of a number of key projects across the Council. These include support for communities, towns, community groups (through GAVO), business and SME support and the Employment and Skills Programme, working with both internal departments and partner organisations to deliver projects which were previously supported through ESF and other EU funding programmes. Blaenau Gwent's Shared Prosperity Funding allocation over the 3 year programme (2022 to 2025) against each priority is:

- Community and Place - £7,837,618
- Supporting Local Businesses - £6,682,246
- People and Skills - £8,599,836
- Multiply - £3,874,171

Total - £26,993,871

SPF monies have been utilised to support a large number of posts across the Council. These posts support non statutory areas and are working to support local businesses and community groups, as well as providing grant funds to support local SMEs and organisations. As SPF monies are due to end in March 2025, the Council is vulnerable in how it will continue to offer the same level of services with reduced capacity. Work will need to be undertaken to assess the importance of each role and if there is any other way to support the continuation of these roles. Grant funded posts, including SPF, has been highlighted by the Council as a risk to be considered as a priority area moving forward.

Local Development Plan (LDP)

A range of collaborative activities and engagement have been undertaken including the consultation on our Local Development Plan and Placemaking Plans. The review of the existing LDP is ongoing. Approval of a planned delivery agreement to form the updated LDP was obtained from Welsh Government along with a revised timetable for delivery due to unforeseen delays. The LDP continues to provide a long term framework for sustainable development across Blaenau Gwent, supported by key documents such as the Placemaking Plans, which, when complete, will support future planning decisions within the towns. It is the intention that Placemaking Plans will all be complete or substantially complete in advance of the finalisation of the LDP.

Town Centres

Over the course of the 'Year of Smart Towns', the Council attended a number of workshops, developed a digital action plan and implemented pilot projects. These have been developed into case studies that have been shared within the Smart Towns Community. The programme supports businesses, councils and communities in using digital technology and data to regenerate high streets, in line with the Transforming Towns agenda. This means helping businesses to use data to work smarter and not harder, and to identify opportunities for growth;



using data to justify and inform investment, and to measure the success of any intervention. The Welsh

Government's Smart Towns Programme runs until 2025. Progress of the Placemaking Plans includes:

- Ebbw Vale - work continues on the placemaking delivery plan. Some work on development options for key sites have commenced. Further engagement with Design Commission for Wales to be undertaken;
- Brynmawr - the placemaking plan has been approved by Scrutiny and Cabinet. Work is underway on the development of the delivery plan;
- Tredegar - the placemaking plan was approved in 2022. Draft delivery plan received and currently being reviewed. The delivery plan will contain the list of projects that need to be done to achieve the overall vision for the town;
- Abertillery - placemaking plan has gone through the democratic process and has highlighted the strategic vision for redevelopment of Abertillery town centre; and
- A funding application has been prepared for the development of a Blaina Placemaking Plan.

Town Centre Footfall

Footfall is an important factor influencing 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.

Footfall counters are used across the towns within Blaenau Gwent to measure the number of people entering an area, shop or building. The technology monitors pedestrians and vehicles in any type of environment, continuously 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. Visitor numbers are analysed using the very latest counting specific tracking, which is based on movement across a predefined area.

The Town Centre Business Development Officer has been working with businesses and other stakeholders to organise events that will help draw visitors and footfall. An events programme will be developed, alongside applications for funding such as Shared Prosperity Funding and Transforming Towns. Additional resources have also been identified to support implementation on the ground, as well as collaboration and co-delivery with a range of partners in particular within the People & Skills and Community & Place pillars.

Aspire Shared Apprenticeship Programme

The Aspire Shared Apprenticeship Programme within Blaenau Gwent is a strategic project with a number of partners; Ebbw Vale Enterprise Zone, Education, Industries and Blaenau Gwent County. The programme is set to enhance skills development within the manufacturing and engineering companies to develop business growth; whilst tackling unemployment and providing aspirational opportunities for young people across the local authority. Next year will be the 10th year that the prizewinning program has successfully run.

External Aspire Apprentices -

- Total Apprentices external 102 (16-24 year olds)
- Currently 20 Apprentices on programme Utilised Over 22 host companies within Blaenau Gwent
- Apprentices that live in BG at 44 %
- Percentage of 90% male 10% female
- Varying Apprenticeship Pathways – within an Advanced manufacturing setting

Internal Apprentices -

- Facilitated 29 Internal apprentices – Age profile 17-42 because we could host any age apprenticeships.
- 18 Apprentices currently on programme.
- 60% Male 40% Female
- 63% live in Blaenau Gwent



- over 10 different departments including Business support, transport, social services, education etc.
- 8 apprentices have moved into employment

Aspire Children Looked After -

- 43 referrals from 14+
- Met 31- supported with:
 - Career options
 - CV workshops
 - Job applications/ DBS
- 18 work placements/traineeships facilitated. 7 of these now in employment

Key Challenges Identified for Action in 2024/25

- Implement plans to improve attendance and reduce exclusions to pre Covid levels, including addressing the reasons for exclusions
- Work with the River Centre to support its removal from an Estyn Category
- Work with Bryn Bach Primary School as part of its Estyn Follow Up
- Use ALN Data more effectively to inform long term planning
- Work to reduce the number of EHEs
- Work with Coleg Gwent to support pupils to perform at Key Stage 5
- Address the financial pressures within the education budget such as home to school transport and schools in deficit
- To develop one key project in each town placemaking plan with limited resources
- Work with the UK Competitiveness Index data to improve BGs standing for a second year.
- Continue to ensure the industrial portfolio is fit to let to local businesses
- Open Goldworks and begin to build entrepreneurship capabilities in BG
- Celebrate 10 years of the ASPIRE apprenticeship scheme
- Work to get the Hybrid Units on Lime Avenue operational
- Ensure the Local Development Plan delivery agreement is progressed,
- Address the current staffing capacity and projects that are reliant on grant funding, specifically SPF that ends in March 2025 with no foreseeable replacement
- Increase the number of apprenticeships, including Local Authority Apprenticeships



Performance Indicator	Data					Comment and RAG Rating
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	
% of Pupils entitled to Free Schools Meals (eFSM) BG	25.5	31.4	33.3	24.6	24.1	Small decline
% of Pupils entitled to Free Schools Meals (eFSM) Wales	19.9	22.9	23.3	22.2	21.3	
% Attendance – Primary	N/A	89.9%	89.0%	90.4%	90.7%	Small increase in attendance, higher figure is better
% Attendance – Secondary		84.8%	84.8%	85.8%	86.6% (unverified)	
Number of Pupils being Electively Home Educated (EHE)	70	89	132	143	158	Increase in number of EHE, lower figure is better
Number of Schools in the category of Causing Concern	4	2	2	2	1	1 (out of a total of 25)
Number of pupils in LA maintained schools (across 25 schools)	9,378	9,527	8,828	9,392	9,485	Increased figure, higher figure is Better
% of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN)	19.2	17.9	15.7	13.8	10.1	% has decreased, lower figure is better
% Attainment at Key Stage 5:	98	99	97.8	97.8	94.7	Decline in KS5 results, higher figure is better
• Overall pass rate						
• A* to C grades						
• A* to A grades						
Number and % of young people who are NEET	1.9%	1.5%	1.6%	5%	2.5%	NEET numbers have reduced, lower figure is better
<i>*Data gathered June and verification in October</i>		9	9	31	14 (unverified)	
Aspire Internal Apprentices - LA Apprenticeships	N/A	5	10	12	8	Decline in number of LA Apprenticeships higher figure is better
Aspire External Apprentices- Apprenticeship offered in industry	13	9	8	17	16	Small decline, higher figure is better
% Occupancy of Blaenau Gwent Industrial Units	89%	88%	87%	85%	89%	Target of 70% exceeded higher figure is better
% Occupancy floorspace of Blaenau Gwent Industrial Units	81%	92%	93%	93%	93%	Target of 70% exceeded higher figure is better

Note – 2023/24 Education data unvalidated until December 2024

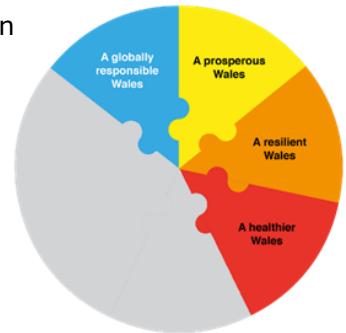


Well-being Objective 2

Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities

Why This Is Important as an Area of Focus:

Blaenau Gwent has a rich heritage, and its buildings and countryside are what make it an attractive place to live, work and visit. The local environment should be used to help improve the health and well-being of families and communities and be enhanced for future generations to continue to enjoy. There is a real desire to see the communities where people live kept clean, tidy and useable, creating areas that people can be proud of.



What We Aim to Achieve – For Blaenau Gwent Council to greatly reduce its carbon emissions, and provides an environment which supports growth and well-being and connects communities.

The following narrative provides an evaluative reflection of the activity, undertaken throughout 2023/24, 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.

Waste and Recycling

Between 2019/20 to 2022/23, Blaenau Gwent exceeded the Welsh Government statutory recycling target of 64%, achieving

- 2019/20 – 65.31%
- 2020/21 – 64.29%
- 2021/22 – 64.94%
- 2022/23 – 66.78%.

For 2023/24, that success has been maintained and the target of 64% has again been exceeded, attaining 66.18%. Achieving the Welsh Government target of 70% by the end of 2024/25 is going to be a huge challenge; the aim being to reduce the amount of residual [black bag] waste being collected, and increasing recycling participation across the Borough. Assuming the total municipal waste remains constant, to achieve 70%, the Council would need to reduce residual waste and increase recycling by 1,218.56 tonnes. For every 1% increase there would be a need to divert 319.01 tonnes from the residual tonnages to recycling/composting tonnages. This is made more difficult by things like smaller gardens in the area overall so green waste figures are generally lower than other areas. It is imperative that the Council maintains and improves its recycling targets as there is a financial penalty imposed by Welsh Government if these are not met. The current fine for not achieving the target is £200 per tonne for every tonne below the required amount to achieve the target. Therefore, if the current recycling rate of 66.18% remains the same in 2024/25 there are potential fines of £243,712 to be incurred by Blaenau Gwent.

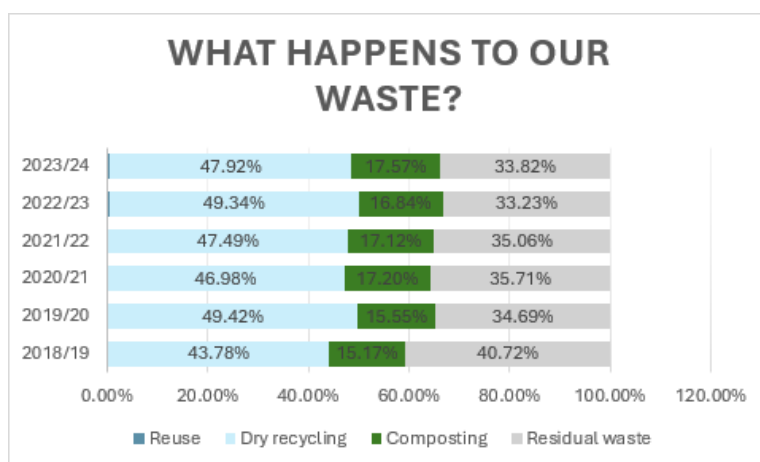
We are currently working with Welsh Government, through Local Partnerships and Wrap, to develop a new Waste Strategy which will set out the challenges we face and the strategic actions we will need to take to increase our recycling rate to 70% and beyond and reduce our overall waste.



Breakdown of 2023/24 Performance		
Quarter	2022/23	2023/24
Quarter 1 (April – June)	67.76%	70.11%
Quarter 2 (July – Sept)	68.29%	66.99%
Quarter 3 (Oct – Dec)	64.66%	61.91%
Quarter 4 (Jan – March)	66.32%	65.42%
Annual (as at 31st March not yet verified by Natural Resources Wales)	66.78%	66.18%

When looking at the breakdown of tonnage figures for 2023/24, compared to 2022/23, it shows residual waste, food waste and HWRC waste has increased, while Garden waste and kerbside recycling has decreased.

- Residual waste has increased by 300.91 tonnes (2.52%)
- Food waste has increased by 26.24 tonnes (0.73%)
- Kerbside recycling has decreased by 389.27 tonnes (7.24%)
- Garden waste has decreased by 198.54 tonnes (11.79%)
- HWRC recycling has increased by 1103.79 tonnes (24.06%)



Side Waste Enforcement – By utilising ‘in cab’ devices, refuse and recycling crews are now electronically recording excess side waste and recycling contamination issues for referral to the Authority’s Enforcement Wardens, who are following up these referrals with enforcement action or advice visits as appropriate. This is freeing up officer time to allow for more proactive initiatives to be conducted such as the current ‘Keeping Up With The Joneses’, and the Food Campaign.

Keeping Up With The Joneses (KUWTJ) – The campaign, which looks to reduce the amount of recyclable material placed out by householders in their residual waste, has been completed in 2023/24 meaning that all domestic properties in the County Borough, over 30,000 homes, have been visited since the campaigns inception. The Frontline Enforcement Team are now programmed to complete revisits in 2024/25, using the KUWTJ campaign, to over 6000 homes that have shown historical non-compliance with the recycling rules of the Authority.

Food Campaign - Following a recent waste analysis exercise, which identified that 23% of the contents of black refuse bags during the sampling period was food waste, the Authority is conducting a monitoring and engagement exercise across the 14 recycling rounds to identify those households which don’t currently place food waste out for recycling. Those households are receiving a visit by an officer to ensure they have the appropriate recycling receptacles and understand the service offered by the Authority to encourage increased participation. During 2023/24 this pre-monitoring, engagement and post monitoring exercise has been completed across 12 rounds, a total of 28,824 properties, and has seen a 15.4% increase in those homes that are participating in food waste recycling. The campaign is programmed to be completed in early 2024/25.

Repair Café – Due to the success of the first repair café in Ebbw Vale, which launched in February 2023, a further repair café opened in January 2024 at the Rassau resource centre. Both centres combined have repaired over 200 items for residents and continue to offer a repair service once a month.

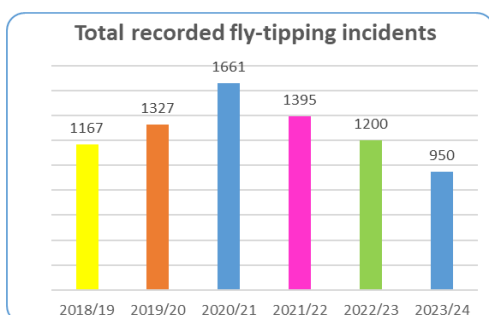


Reuse Shop - Wastesavers manage the reuse shop that is based at Roseheyworth HWRC and, to date, have reused 106 tonnes of various items. To promote and encourage reuse, regular social media posts have been created in order to incentivise donations and purchases. In addition, school uniform reuse and Christmas toy donations were available free to families.



Reusable Nappies – Wastesavers have placed reusable nappies in all libraries throughout the Borough, and they are available free of charge. They all come with printed washing instructions and a QR code for more information. Initially, approximately 30 reusable nappies were distributed to libraries and the uptake was successful, which has resulted in further cloth reusable nappies being distributed to the libraries. Once a month at the Education Centre at Roseheyworth, drop-in sessions have been arranged to show individuals how to use the reusable nappies correctly.

Fly Tipping and Street Cleansing



Deployment of CCTV units across Blaenau Gwent continues to target highway lay-bys and rural locations subject to prolific fly tipping. Blaenau Gwent issued the third highest numbers of fly tipping fixed penalty notices (FPN) in Wales during 2022/23, with 79 FPN's issued and have exceeded this number this year, with 110 FPN issued between April 2023 to March 2024.

2023/2024	Number recorded
Number of Fly tipping incidents	950
No of Litter Fixed penalty notices issued	316
No of Dog Control fixed penalty notices issued	65
Commercial Duty of care	50

During the year, a total of 50 £300 Commercial duty of care FPNs were issued to businesses who did not have appropriate waste disposal arrangements in place and 9 individuals were prosecuted for a total of 43 waste offences which resulted in £25,639 issued in fines and costs by the Courts. Compared to last year, there has been a 21% reduction in fly tipping incidents for 2023/2024.

Decarbonisation

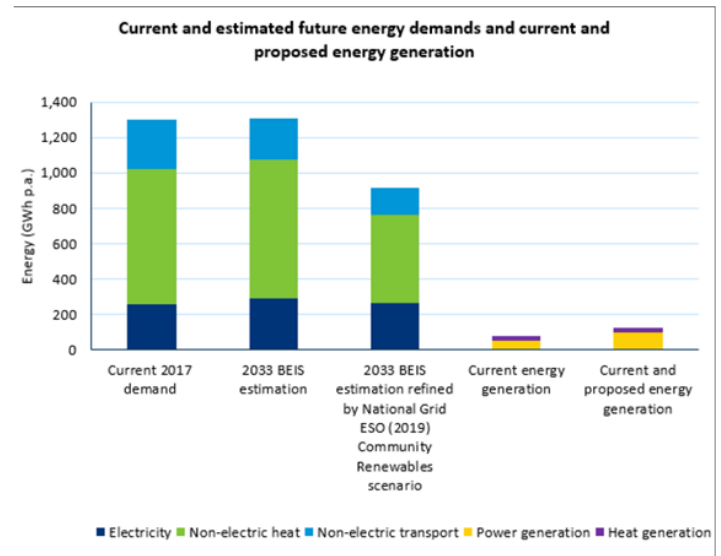
The Council is dedicated to driving decarbonisation efforts throughout Blaenau Gwent and is actively working to contribute to the Welsh Government's goal of making the Welsh Public Sector Net Zero by 2030, as well as achieving Net Zero for all of Wales by 2050. To support these objectives, the Council has developed a 10-year Decarbonisation plan. The Council's journey towards these Net Zero targets are overseen by our Climate Group, who's core membership includes the Cabinet Member and Climate Champion, three members of our senior leadership team and a trade union representative. The group meets every six weeks with an alternating focus on Net Zero 2030 at one meeting and Net Zero 2050 at the next.

We have made some progress to achieving Net Zero 2030 during the year, including a 3% fall in our direct emissions last year, and a cumulative 19% fall over the last four years from our 2019/20 baseline.

tonnes CO2e/year	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	Change from Base Year	Change from Last Year
Direct Carbon Emissions	14,783	11,818	13,100	12,353	11,949	-19%	-3%



During the year, the Council was awarded specific funding to help overcome non-technical systemic barriers to the scaling and adoption of net zero solutions, some of this funding was utilised to work with residents on a small-scale street charging trial. An event was held that invited solution providers to evidence what solutions they had to overcome these barriers. Two of these solutions were used in the trial which saw thirteen properties across the Borough take part. We have strengthened our efforts towards Net Zero 2050 through our Net Zero 2050 Framework and Local Area Energy Plan, which sets out what Blaenau Gwent needs to do to reach Net Zero. Although small scale projects help to make a small difference for reaching targets, Blaenau Gwent cannot reach Net Zero solely through local initiatives; we also rely on broader efforts, additional resources, and external support to meet these goals.



Blaenau Gwent Council's commitment to increasing the number of Electric Vehicle (EV) charge points throughout the Borough is well underway. We are seeing a steady increase in ultra-low emission vehicles licensed across Blaenau Gwent and funding has been confirmed for the second phase of the delivery plan. The full list of Electric Vehicle charging points across Blaenau Gwent can be found [here](#)

Effective integrated working has enabled the Social Services Community Meals service to become more sustainable, supporting the council's strategy to reduce carbon emissions, during the reporting period, the launch of the rebranded Community Meals Service took place. This included the unveiling of their new electric vehicles which were funded in part through Welsh Government grant funding. [Greenhouse gas emissions in Blaenau Gwent fall – as new Government ramps up action towards net zero \(msn.com\)](#)

Commissioning and Procurement

We are working with Wales Government and the WLGA via the National Procurement Network in developing a common approach to using Carbon Reduction Plans within our procurement processes. This approach has been developed by 10 Councils across the Southeast Wales Procurement Network, to ensure that a consistent approach for requesting Carbon Reduction Plans across the region, and to support the achievement of our respective 2030 Net Zero targets.

Carbon reduction is considered in all individual sourcing strategies. Depending upon the nature and scope of each requirement, this may relate to product specifications, operating methodologies and/or supplier carbon footprints, whereby companies provide organisational Carbon Reduction Plans as part of their tender submissions.

The performance of our Carbon Footprint, associated with the Council's Commissioning and Procurement activities, is circa 75% - 80%, which is consistent across other Welsh local authorities.

Air Quality

An air quality management is declared when there is an exceedance of air quality standards, and the local authority must take legal steps to improve the situation. In Blaenau Gwent we have good levels of air quality, so we have not declared any air quality management areas.

Housing and Energy

All four partner registered social landlords in Blaenau Gwent (Tai Calon, Linc Cymru, United Welsh and Melin)



continue to deliver housing schemes supported by the funding award allocation from Welsh Government to deliver phased activity of the Optimised Retrofit Programme. The main theme of the programme is affordable warmth and decarbonisation achieved through the best path for each individual home.

90% of the current Welsh housing stock is predicted to remain in use by 2050. The main challenge will be retrofitting our existing housing stock, which is particularly old; one third of Welsh homes were built before 1919 while just 6% were built in the last 30 years. A whole fabric approach to retrofit is devised with the aim of ensuring that a property operates in as energy-efficient a manner as possible, with all aspects of the building complementing each other. Retrofit largely has to take place locally. This is both a significant challenge and opportunity for Blaenau Gwent. The skills and supply chain requirements of retrofit at the scale required by Net Zero 2050 are far beyond current capacities both locally and nationally. However, they also present large-scale opportunities for jobs and businesses that have to be located in Blaenau Gwent, and there is significant potential for these benefits to be retained in local businesses and communities. Cabinet has endorsed its participation in a regional scheme aimed at improving energy efficiency in the homes of the most fuel poor residents in the borough.

The Council will work in partnership with the Cardiff Capital Region (CCR) and energy supplier EDF, as part of the Energy Company Obligation Scheme (ECO4 Flex), to identify domestic properties in need of energy improvement measures. Qualifying homes will be retrofitted with a range of insulation and energy improving measures as part of a 'whole house' approach. A previous scheme saw 134 households in Blaenau Gwent benefit from measures including replacement of boilers, cavity wall, internal wall and loft insulation, first time central heating, upgrading electrical heaters and solar panel installation. A flexible element of the new scheme enables councils to tailor energy efficiency schemes to their area. Under ECO4 Flex, councils can refer private tenure households that it considers to be living in fuel poverty or on a low income and vulnerable to the effects of living in a cold home.

Decarbonisation of the electricity system has made strong progress, emissions from electricity have fallen by 50% since 2013 and 64% since 1990, and the UK Government has a good chance of meeting its commitment to decarbonise the electricity supply by 2035. But this was largely achieved by a small number of national organisations. Emissions reductions in other areas are going to require action by far wider range of organisations, including at the local level.

Local Area Energy Plan (LEAP)

Local Area Energy Planning (LAEP) is a whole energy system, looking at energy from the Domestic, Industrial, Commercial, Public, Agriculture and Transport Sector across the whole local authority area. It is data driven and focuses on local energy assets and energy demand trends across Blaenau Gwent. Scenario modelling is also undertaken, mapping out expected energy demand, up until 2050, focusing on local energy assets and energy demand trends, considering local, regional and national targets and conditions to achieve Net Zero. The LAEP is led by the Council but involves stakeholders and Council's across boundaries to gain buy in and commitment in order to bring success. The LAEP will be funded by the Welsh Government and will contain:

- Route Map - Will identify the most effective route for the local area to contribute to energy net zero by 2050 considering future energy demand;
- Action Plan – describes the actions required over the next five years – to meet future energy demand by the different renewable energy sources and technologies; and
- Outcome: A costed, spatial plan that identifies the change needed to the local energy system and built environment, detailing what, where, when and by whom. It provides the level of detail for an area that is equivalent to an outline design or master plan, additional detailed design work is required for identified projects to progress to implementation.

We are continuing to investigate opportunities around zero carbon within the Corporate Landlord portfolio and supporting others in development of energy schemes. Work around developing Energy Projects continue with



progress being made on the Silent Valley Wind Turbine. This now has planning permission and will be progressed to procurement when the case for investment is re-determined. Work is continuing on development of infrastructure for Blaenau Gwent fleet, schools and Council buildings.

Biodiversity

Section 6 of the Environment Act places a duty on the Local Authority to 'seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity' so far as it is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions. In so doing, the Local Authority must also seek to 'promote the resilience of ecosystems'. To help meet this duty the Council has a Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2022-2025). The plan has six aims that will help to maintain and enhance biodiversity and promote the resilience of ecosystems in Blaenau Gwent by 2025. These aims include reducing overall resource use, and increasing the biodiversity and ecosystems understanding amongst staff and Elected Members.

During the year, the Local Places for Nature Capital Grant continued to be utilised to help enhance green spaces across the Borough, including enhancements to allotments, community orchards and Wildflower Meadow creation. Several workshops and events have also been held to engage with the local community and provide advice, guidance and help the local community to discover nature.

To help promote the creation of pollinator friendly habitats on land owned by the Council, a new Pollinator Policy has been developed and sets out a range of actions. The relationship between biodiversity and decarbonisation is one of mutual reinforcement, where the success of one often advances the success of the other. When planning individual projects, considering the decarbonisation and biodiversity agenda ensures that the benefits to the environment are maximized. Some of these projects for 2023/ 2024 include:

- Refurbishment of old steps leading to Rhiw Wen Car Park in with new installation of new cycle wheeling channel and signage to assist cyclists to transport their bikes up and down the steps to promote active travel;
- Access routes and entrances to the site at Garden City enhancement opening up the reserve to local people and groups; and
- Supporting partners of Pentref Tyleri, to deliver a Wetland Creation Project.

This holistic approach not only addresses immediate environmental concerns but also builds a sustainable framework for future resilience.

Public Transport

Following a £70 million investment through the Council and Welsh Government, Transport for Wales and Network Work Wales are now delivering direct services between Ebbw Vale and Newport, with 2 trains per hour from Ebbw Vale. A total of 60 train services are running per day. The project has also seen a fully accessible footbridge built at Llanhilleth and new platforms at Llanhilleth and Newbridge, meaning there is now step-free access to all platforms on the line.

To allow the services to run, a new 7-mile passing loop has been built between Crosskeys and Aberbeeg alongside new earthworks and drainage, constructed to accommodate the new track. Alongside this work, The Department for Transport and Network Rail have provided a further £17m of funding to deliver the signalling upgrade at the south end of the line.

Highways

Significant progress has been made over the past 10 years on improving the highway network, however, the absence of Welsh Governance funding for 2023/24, and the end of the Prudential Borrowing Programme has curtailed Capital investments in the highway network. The completion and formal adoption of the Highway Asset Management Plan (HAMP) 2023/28 will support and drive the Authority's approach to maintenance over



the next 5 years. The HAMP, approved by Council on 21st September 2023, describes how the Council will maintain the road network under its control. It details the procedures used to plan and execute all works and functions associated with the management, operation and maintenance of the highway asset including how the activities are monitored to ensure compliance with council policies.

The HAMP will guide the Council, acting as the Highway Authority, in the management of the adopted highway network to ensure that:

- All assets continue to deliver a service to the community and highway users at an agreed level;
- There is clear direction for Elected members and Council staff to make informed decisions regarding the adopted highway network;
- Legislative requirements are satisfied;
- Exposure to safety risk is mitigated to agreed and acceptable levels;
- Asset purchases, increases or construction are only approved after whole life costs and benefits are assessed and agreed; and
- Clear and transparent allocation of responsibilities for the management of individual assets is recorded.

The council has been undergoing a trial for an alternative method of repairs to the highway network including materials to fill potholes. A new banding method for sealing patches / potholes has been used with the aim of making the finish look more aesthetically pleasing, but more importantly, prolong the life of the repaired highway and prevent multiple visits. As the product is currently uncertified it cannot currently be used on the classified highway but is being tested on unclassified roads to consider its longevity moving forward.

A copy of the Blaenau Gwent Highway Asset Management Plan 2023/28 can be found here - [CO2309D8 Appendix 1 - Highway Asset Management Plan.pdf \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)

Key Challenges Identified for Action in 2024/25

- Implement actions to reduce the amount of residual [black bag] waste being collected and increase kerbside recycling with the aim of meeting the Welsh Government target of 70%. At quarter 1 in 2024/25 we are at 69.4%
- Work to address the number of fly tipping incidents across the borough and target 'hot spot' areas
- Work to identify how partners can support us in reaching Net Zero by 2030
- The carbon footprint associated with the Council's Commissioning and Procurement activities (Tonnes CO2) increased in 2023/24. Continue to work on this area by implementing the Greener Framework to support the Council to reach Net Zero.



Performance Indicator	Data					Comment and RAG Rating
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	
The percentage of municipal waste collected by local authorities sent to landfill	0.3	0.6	1.3	0.31	0.17	The Council has reduced the % of municipal waste sent to landfill lower figure is better
The percentage of municipal waste incinerated with energy recovery	44.3	46.7	45.2	44.20	44.0	Small reduction lower figure is better
Amount invested into active travel routes (£)	-	234,000	295,000	766,154.73	756,296.62	Decrease in the amount invested from Welsh Government from the previous year higher figure is better
Average % of planning applications determined on time (cumulative average over a year)	-	96%	91%	93%	95%	Improved figure higher figure is better
% of above tender threshold procurements that consider Social and Well-being objectives (including Decarbonisation and Foundation Economy)	-	-	-	70	100	Increased % higher figure is better
Carbon Footprint associated with the Council's Commissioning and Procurement activities (Tonnes CO2)	-	-	-	33548	39701	Increased figure lower figure is better

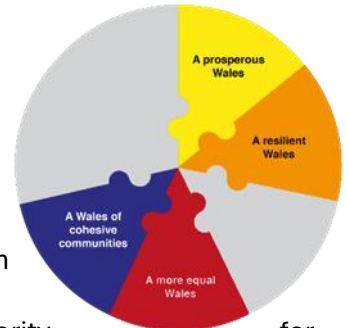


Well-being Objective 3

Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient

Why This Is Important as an Area of Focus - The Council wants to encourage and support people to make healthy lifestyle choices to enable children, young people and families to thrive. Research has proven people demonstrating positive health behaviours from birth throughout their life will lead to greater independence, and people being free from complicated health conditions later in life. This in turn could reduce demand on services and ensure the services that are provided are high quality, efficient and responsive to local people's needs. With reduced funding and increasing demand on services the Council can no longer do everything it has done in the past. The focus must be on those actions that will have the greatest impact.

Safeguarding the most vulnerable people in the community continues to be a top priority for the Council alongside transforming the aspirations of residents and valuing fairness and equality in everything we do.



What We Aim to Achieve - An increase in the resilience of communities, where everyone is welcome and safe and which minimises dependency and maximises independence.

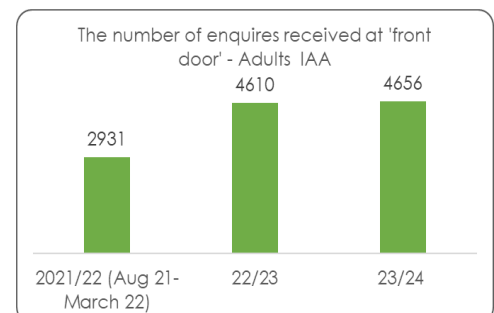
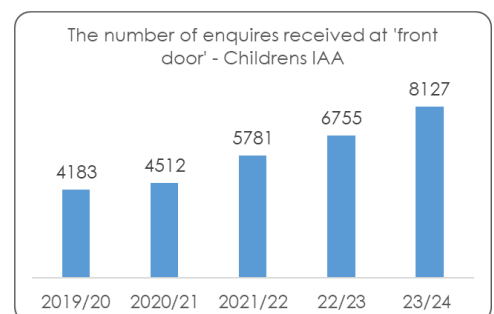
The following narrative provides an evaluative reflection of the activity, undertaken throughout 2023/24, across service areas that directly support this Well-being Objective. The narrative reflects what has gone well but also, and more importantly, where we are experiencing challenges. These challenges 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.

Information Advice and Assistance

The Social Services Directorate continues to have dedicated Information Advice and Assistance (IAA) Teams for both Children and Adult Social Services working as the first point of contact for the public who wish to access advice and support. The teams take a preventative and strength based approach to ensure needs are met at the earliest opportunity, by providing the right services to prevent needs from escalating.

Referrals into Children's Services IAA continues to increase. The numbers during 2023/24 are significantly higher with an increase of 1,372 compared to 2022/23. Of the 8,127 referrals during 2023/24, 711 (8.7%) were referred to preventative services (Families First), compared to 6,755 referrals in 2022/23, with 772 (11%) of referrals to Families First.

Referrals into Adults Services IAA data collation was revised in August 2021; therefore, data is only comparable to one previous year and demonstrates a slight increase in contacts. Of the 4,656 enquiries during the year, 2,506 (54%) were resolved at referral and did not require a comprehensive assessment by the long-term teams. In comparison, 60% were resolved within the IAA team during 2022/23.



A review has been undertaken by relevant service managers of preventative services considering how we can better support our children and families in Blaenau Gwent at a preventive level; this included



recommendations about the way the Family Information Service, Flying Start and Families First work together, including the development of one front door / early help hub. This will ensure families are easily able to access the information they need.

Police and Cyfannol (Domestic Abuse Support) remain part of the IAA hubs to ensure that referrals are supported correctly to avoid the need to escalate for statutory assessment. The service manager for IAA and Youth Offending Services (YOS) regularly correspond to ensure referrals are made to REACH where support can be offered for prevention support to young people who offend.

Safeguarding

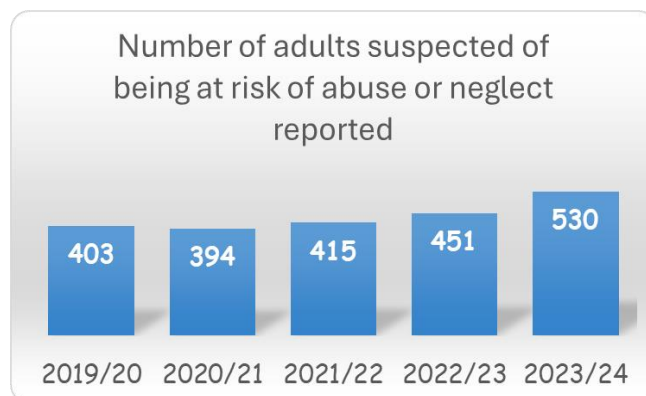
The Council's corporate safeguarding arrangements are continually being strengthened with it being recognised that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. We recognise our duties in protecting and promoting the welfare of children, young people, and at-risk adults. This includes collaborating with other organisations to help all children and young people achieve their full potential while continuing to care for the most vulnerable individuals in our communities. An annual safeguarding report is produced and presented to Senior Managers and Elected members. The latest safeguarding report can be found [here](#)

The Safeguarding Education Team continue to work closely with educational establishments to meet the educational needs of Children Looked After (CLA). The team have appointed two Education Support Workers, via the Virtual Schools Grant, to further enhance the support available to CLA. The way in which the Council works 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. We support children and young people's educational learning opportunities whilst working collaboratively with Aneurin Leisure Trust with an aim to ensure that all children and young people's well-being and educational needs are catered for.

Audit Wales have confirmed that they will be returning to Blaenau Gwent at the end of 2024, to undertake a follow up review of our corporate safeguarding arrangements.

We recognise the importance of having a robust and sustainable Safeguarding Teams across both Adult and Children's Services to ensure we not only meet our legislative requirements, but that we are also able to protect our most vulnerable citizens.

All safeguarding referrals continue to be managed in line with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures and statutory requirements. The well-being of people needing our care and support, and carers needing support is paramount to service delivery and this includes respecting their culture, beliefs and other personal characteristics, and respecting their wishes and feelings



The Council has seen an increase in adult safeguarding referrals compared to the previous year, as shown in the graph above. This increase may be reflective of there being more adults at risk due to increased poverty with regards to the cost-of-living crisis affecting all local communities. The Safeguarding network event delivered by Gwent Wide

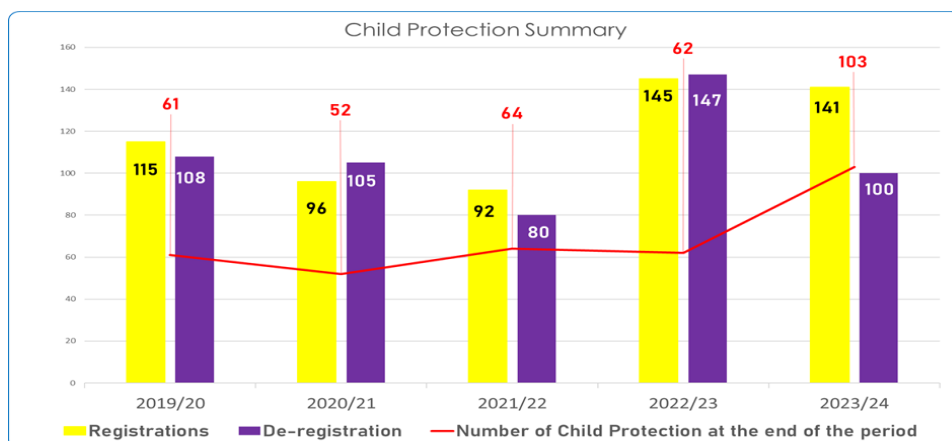
The Safeguarding Board earlier this year focused on the impact of poverty on the most vulnerable. The increase could also be due to awareness raising through the regular Safeguarding training that we deliver jointly with Caerphilly safeguarding team. Child Protection reports identified that 100% of Initial Child Protection Conferences were held in timescales. As at end of 2024 there were 103 children on the Child Protection register in comparison to 62 children as at the end of 2023.



Safeguarding performance shows a decline in the total number of visits to children on the child protection register that were completed within statutory timescales:

- 2023/24 – 1,270 (66.2%)
- 2022/23 – 1,516 (87.5%)

100 children were removed from the child protection register during the year. Of those the average number of days they were registered is 209.7 days.



All newly appointed Council staff are informed of the Council's safeguarding arrangements as part of their induction programme and are required to undertake the relevant level of safeguarding training.

There are 203 Children Looked After (CLA) which is the same number as at the end of previous year. The rate of admissions into care has dropped this year with 63 children in 2022/23 and 55 this year.

The mediation service has proven invaluable as a preventative service, preventing family breakdowns and reducing the number of children requiring out of home placements, either via the CLA route or those experiencing homelessness. Both mediation posts are fixed term via Supporting People Housing Support Grant funding and Regional Innovation Fund grant money, and it has now been confirmed that this service will continue to be funded for another year.

An audit framework for the Safeguarding Team has been established in order to assess practice across Children's Services. The Safeguarding Manager has developed an Independent Review Officer (IRO) good practice standards action plan during this period to act as a framework to benchmark the IRO roles and responsibilities against. Progress against the action plan will be reported on with the annual IRO report.

The Council continues to work in partnership with Cyfannol to support people experiencing domestic abuse. We have commissioned a dedicated Cyfannol Support Worker to be based within the Adults Safeguarding Team providing information, advice and support to people who are experiencing domestic abuse.

Safeguarding processes are well established in the Youth Service and are fit for purpose. Appropriate policies and procedures are in place, with robust records kept on all safeguarding matters including Duty to Report (DTRs) referrals to Social Services, feedback and staff training. Termly meetings are held between the Youth Service and the Safeguarding in Education Officer, and any areas of concern outside of child protection are escalated through this process. All Youth Service staff have received training in Prevent and actively use this understanding to identify any concerns in youth settings. Staff are giving regular opportunities to attend other training to identify, support and report safeguarding issues which include child exploitation, domestic abuse, emotional wellbeing support. Youth workers continue to effectively contribute to care and support plans and attend various multi-agency meetings in relation to safeguarding issues including Section 115 meetings and Community Safety Meetings.

Working in Partnership

Effective collaboration and partnership working assists us in identifying existing needs and shape and commission future sustainable services.



Both Commissioning and Housing Support Grant teams are continuing the joint working with attendance and participation in Gwent wide Regional Commissioners meetings; Care Home Webinars; Domiciliary Care Forums; DEWIS advocacy meetings and national webinars /meetings with Care Inspectorate Wales and Social Care Wales.

Better care joint working with Torfaen Council is proving successful, with a Single Handed Care Occupational Therapist specialist working equally between Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen, allowing for a greater emphasis on the better care ways of working with shared knowledge, discussions and decisions. This in turn should reduce the reliance on double handed domiciliary care packages and promote better outcomes for people receiving care and support

Adult Services social workers and support workers have undertaken a comprehensive training programme which focusses on collaborative conversations and balancing rights and responsibilities. In addition, we have created a staff mentor partnership with colleagues from Caerphilly Council as a part of embedding this approach within our communities.

The work of the Regional Partnership Board (RPB) supports the delivery of integrated responsive care and support across the region. However, there is still a great deal of work to do to ensure the Area Action Plan, developed by the RPB, translates into meeting the needs of local citizens. The vehicle for Blaenau Gwent to make this happen is the Integrated Services Partnership Board (ISPB). This board has set a small number of priorities based on the those outlined in the Area Plan. A number of task and finish groups have been set up to progress these priorities. An example is the campaign to increase breast feeding rates in Blaenau Gwent and improve the oral hygiene of children. Both areas have seen significant activity early in 2024, with the expectation that evidence will follow after 12 months of the difference that has been made.

Benefits continue to be realised for and by the workforce through the scale of opportunity possible due to the joint workforce development service model hosted by Blaenau Gwent in partnership with Caerphilly. When comparing the performance of the collaborative approach to other workforce development services in Gwent some key headlines from 2023/24 include:

- Supported 56% of the internally sponsored Social Work students in Gwent (44);
- Delivered 64% of all the Newly Qualified Social Workers in Gwent (29); and
- The social care workforce in the area had access to the largest training offer provided across Gwent, 85% of the total offer.

A Gwent Dementia Action Plan has been developed and aligns to the 20 All Wales Dementia Pathway of Standards which will also include performance measures. Workstream subgroups have been developed to take forward this programme of work which includes the following workstreams:

- Engagement;
- Memory Assessment Service/Dementia Connector role;
- Dementia Friendly Hospital Charter; and
- Education/Workforce and Measurement/Performance.

Workforce

Our workforce continues to be our greatest asset to ensure we deliver the best care and support available. During the year, a Social Services staff survey was undertaken with responses painting a positive picture for staff working within the social services directorate, particularly about the way in which staff were supported in their jobs. An action plan has been developed to work towards making the required improvements identified within the survey. This survey will be repeated next year to measure the progress that has been made.

Having a skilled and motivated workforce is essential in order to provide high quality services. As part of this, the Council has a Joint Workforce Development Team with Caerphilly County Borough Council with



responsibility for delivering a training and development strategy that supports development opportunities for staff at all levels in Social Services.

Workforce stability is a key consideration within Social Services as some teams are facing staffing shortages, however, it is acknowledged that this is a Wales wide position and there is no simple solution. The department continues to look at innovative ways of managing the workload within teams as well as developing recruitment and retention strategies to address workforce pressures. Despite these significant pressures the existing staff and providers of services have continued to ensure children and adults needs are met, risks are managed, and safeguarding issues dealt with.

During 2023/24 we saw a stabilisation of our workforce within Childcare Social Work teams. Turnover of staff still occurs; however, we have been able to fill these vacancies. Staffing levels in our provider services have also seen workforce stabilisation and a reduction in the use of agency staff. This has resulted in a reduction in staff sickness which no doubt has led to an improved consistency of care.

The way the workforce wants to learn has changed, they expect choice and flexibility. Various initiatives within the organisation are in place to support improving digital confidence and access to digital learning. The authority underpins its approach with the recognition of barriers that exist for parts of the social care workforce, so the offer includes the traditional classroom route.

A number of posts within Social Services are supported via grant funding. There is a significant risk that this funding will come to an end in March 2025. With referrals into Social Services increasing, there is a risk that this will impact service delivery and sustainability moving forward. Workforce and capacity is a key risk area for Blaenau Gwent and is featured on the Corporate Risk Register which is monitored regularly by Corporate Leadership Team.

Budget

Going forward, the Social Services Directorate are exploring opportunities to generate income as opposed to proposing further budget/service cuts. In addition, we are in the process of looking at alternative ways of managing demand by harnessing the existing strength within our communities and in doing so minimising dependence on statutory services. We are also exploring and promoting assisted technology to support the workforce and meet the future demand of our citizens.

Disability Services

We aim to deliver Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) in private homes to support independent living within a target of 330 days, and this was achieved delivering within an average of 329 days. This represents a significant reduction in the average number of calendar days taken to deliver a DFG. Social Services have recently launched the opening of a Community Café based at the Blaina Institute. The café will support adults with disabilities to have placements as part of their day activity offer providing catering students with the opportunity to develop invaluable life, social and future work skills within the world of catering and hospitality.

Children's Services

Through the Welsh Government Radical Reform Grant, the Council was provided with money to purchase two detached 5-bedroom houses, at a cost of approximately £900,000, along with a further £700,000 for refurbishment costs. These will be providing safe, high-quality care for our local children to remain within the Borough. Blaenau Gwent had 5 children matched for adoption in the reporting period and 100% had their life journey material available within timescale. Recruitment of adopters is an area of improvement needed for the service, along with further work to meet our target of all children having a trauma nurture timeline prior to adoption.



Generic My Support Team (MyST) foster carers are to be recruited to act as realistic options for step down placements for complex children or as avoidant placements for those children who may escalate to residential placements. Our rate of disruption is low for Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) placements with 5 placement (children) breakdowns during the last financial year (2.8%) and even for these cases, due to the work undertaken by the SGO support team, all children were accommodated with other family members or returned to their birth parents with none of them coming back into the care of the Local Authority.

Earlier conversations at matching stage for children with adopters are taking place regarding potential post adoption contact with an emphasis on promoting contact with siblings. Contact agreements now reflect this. The South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) continues to utilise in house psychology support provision for any additional needs outside those that the team can meet. This, along with referrals to Pathways provision, run by adoption UK and funded by Welsh Government Investment Grant, enables families to access specialised support, avoiding a need to source external provision wherever possible.

A formal review of Families First services has been finalised. The review included consultation with stakeholders in education and incorporated feed-back from staff. Recommendations of the review will be taken forward early next year but one main priority is the action needed to improve the internal forms within Families First to align them to the outcome focused practice embedded in Blaenau Gwent.

A report covering the annual activity across Social Services is developed and reported through the democratic process. The 2023/24 report can be found here: [C:\Users\morga_p2\AppData\Local\Temp\msoB597.tmp\(moderngov.co.uk\)](C:\Users\morga_p2\AppData\Local\Temp\msoB597.tmp(moderngov.co.uk))

Homelessness

During the reporting period, 76 households met the threshold for being threatened with homelessness. Of these, 41 (54%) were successfully prevented from losing their accommodation. Preventing homelessness continues to be difficult due to the continued lack of move on accommodation in the private and social housing sectors, combined with clients approaching the Council at crisis point, it continues to be difficult for the team to prevent homelessness and meet the target set.

We continue to work with Registered Social Landlords to identify properties for homelessness/resettlement schemes. During the year, 8 additional properties have been included, and a further 3 properties have been identified in partnership with Tai Calon, for inclusion in the scheme for which a funding bid has been submitted.

15 families were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation in 2023/24, which has exceeded the target of 12. This highlights the pressures on the homelessness services and the lack of social / private housing to move these families into and which leads to placing in unsuitable accommodation to meet the family's needs. Ongoing work is being carried out by the team to reduce this in 2024/25.

Through a partnership approach the Youth Engagement and Progression Team continue to support young people to prevent youth homelessness and to support emotional wellbeing. Support has also been provided for the local response relating to the resettlement scheme for Ukrainian people.

Housing Benefit

The Department of Work and Pensions provides Discretionary Housing Payment monies to the Council to support residents on housing benefit or universal benefit to 'top up' any shortfall that they have with paying rent and housing related expenses. Rents across the Borough have been increasing, a similar position to across Wales and the UK, and the reduction in funding since Covid are impacting these payments. These monies are used to prevent residents from becoming homeless and the increased number requiring support is putting pressure on the service. As there is a shortage of housing across the borough, many of those becoming



homeless may require B&B accommodation which is costly and not an appropriate long term solution.

Food Resilience programme

The Council was awarded UK Shared Prosperity Fund Communities & Place funding for 2023/24 to 2024/25 to build Food Resilience across the Borough. The Blaenau Gwent food resilience programme was formed in consultation with Torfaen Council to build a co-ordinated approach to food resilience with the aim in the short term to support the impact of the current cost of living crisis, providing opportunities to tackle food poverty and engage with food producers to increase local and regional supply chains.

Working in partnership together with the BG Food Partnership, the food resilience priorities can be identified as taking action against the following issues:

1. Addressing the root causes of Food Poverty and barriers to accessing good food;
2. Encouraging Healthy, local & sustainable food consumption;
3. Improving the local food environment, community and culture, increasing skills, knowledge, and resources;
4. Encourage green spaces for local food growing initiatives; and
5. Supporting food businesses & the sustainable food economy.

During the year food resilience officers have been recruited to work in partnership with the BG Food Partnership coordinator to build relationships with various partners and stakeholders across the borough, to demonstrate a visible and accessible platform for change within our local food system. Engagement with businesses and community food providers has been a vital tool for both understanding the challenges residents face within a local context and identifying the key levers for change already present in the borough. A wide range of activity has taken place during 2023/24 through the food resilience programme. Some of these activities include:

- **Winter 2023-24 Emergency Food Support grants** - a total of 23 grants funded by the Welsh Government Direct Food Support Fund were awarded to providers including community groups, early years hubs, schools, and institutions. Providers offer food banks, crisis intervention support, community cafes, community growing projects and Food Pantries.
- **School Holiday Food Activities- interactive accessible information developed to signpost** parents to the support, including holiday activities for children across BG where food provision was included to help parents deal with the rising cost of living during school holidays.
- **Taste of Nature** - an 18 week pilot partnership project between the BG Food Partnership and Head4Arts, funded by Arts Council Wales. This innovative project tested creative arts and nature-based activities to promote healthier food choices among children and families. The program was successfully implemented at St Illtyd's Primary School, Flying Start Hubs, and as part of Clwb Llan's summer program.

The Focus of the food resilience programme for 2024/ 25 will be to engage more closely with local business to encourage sustainable practices within local food businesses through shortening supply chains, improving the healthy food offer, reducing environmental impact, diversifying business models, and the development of a local community food strategy.

Environmental Health

During 2023/24, 100% compliance with delivery of high-risk food hygiene interventions were achieved. We continue to see a reduction in the overall percentage of premises that are classed as broadly compliant with food hygiene requirements. This is a concern as a reduction in standards could potentially result in an increase in the risk to public health. We will continue to prioritise interventions at high-risk premises and explore options for promoting improved compliance with food hygiene requirements. According to the data, compiled by High Speed Training, Blaenau Gwent has the worst food hygiene ratings across Wales, with an average score of 3.91 from 244 premises. [Food Hygiene Report 2024 | UK Ratings | Towns, Cities & Regions](#)



highspeedtraining.co.uk

Key Challenges Identified for Action in 2024/25

- The number of adults suspected of being at risk of abuse or neglect and the number of adult safeguarding referrals has increased significantly
- Safeguarding performance shows a decline in the number of newly registered children that were visited within 10 days of being registered
- There is an increasing number of children on the Child Protection Register
- An increased number of Children Looked After are being placed outside of Wales which is difficult for the child and costly to the Local Authority
- Workforce stability is a risk for Social Services
- Address the current staffing capacity that is reliant on grant funding and the impact this may have
- Recruitment of adopters is an area of improvement needed for the service
- Implement actions from the Social Services Staff Survey and repeat the survey next year to assess progress
- Continue to deliver DFGs in private homes linked to available budget and demand
- Identifying the required funding to support people on housing benefit or universal benefit to prevent people from becoming homeless
- Preventing homelessness continues to be a challenge with the percentage becoming homeless increasing
- To aim for lowering the number of families that are placed in B&B - 15 families were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation in 2023/24, which has exceeded the target of 12
- reduction in the overall percentage of premises that are classed as broadly compliant with food hygiene requirement



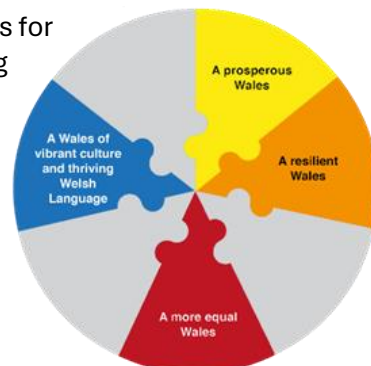
Performance Indicator	Data					Comment and RAG Rating
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	
The number of adults provided with electronic assistive technology during the year <i>Work to be undertaken to improve the data validation of this PI</i>	245	169	216	210	221	Improved Figure higher figure is better
The total number of adult clients currently in receipt of electronic assistive technology	1264	1353	1527	1639	1768	Improved Figure higher figure is better
Number of children on the Child Protection Register	61	52	64	62	103	Significant Increase lower figure is better
Number of Children becoming Looked After (CLA) during the year	62	38	47	63	54	Improved Figure lower figure is better
Total number of CLA who are placed within Wales, but outside of the responsible LA (excluding those in adoption placements) (as at 31st March)	Not available	65	51	52	46	Improved Figure lower figure is better
The total number of CLA at the end of the collection year who are placed outside of Wales (as at 31st March)	Not available	5	6	12	16	Increased Figure lower figure is better
% households successfully prevented from homelessness (section 66)	72	59	75.2	63.5	55.2	Reduced Figure and target of 60 not met higher figure is better
Number of additional affordable housing units delivered <i>Figures represent 'tenanted homes'</i>	7	67	43	6 units Total	25 units Total	Improved Figure higher figure is better
Numbers waiting on the social housing register: Total Single Applicants	2,151 1,051	1,218 592	4,191 1,742	4,688 2,592	2,562 1,185	Improved Figure lower figure is better
Number of disabled facilities grants completed	N/A	30	31	63	91	Improved Figure higher figure is better
Homes for Ukraine Scheme: Guests Population Share	-	-	-	57 74%	72 91%	Improved Figure higher figure is better



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.

The following narrative provides an evaluative reflection of the activity, undertaken throughout 2023/24, 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

The Council's budget is continually monitored to ensure we are using our resources as economically and efficiently as possible, whilst ensuring we can plan for the mid and long term. Robust financial planning and management is in place to help monitor resources effectively, updates are provided on the financial position of the Council to senior officers and through our democratic process.

The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) serves as the central financial planning tool for the Council, it is a rolling plan that aligns to the priorities in our Corporate Plan and is updated continually to reflect changing circumstances and policy choices impacting the Council's finances. The MTFS projects the Council's expenses and necessary reductions over a five-year period to establish a balanced budget.

[Microsoft Word - Appendix 5 - MTFS Final \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)

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%.

Over the 10 years of austerity, the Covid pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis Blaenau Gwent has seen its budget reduce by around £40million, with a further £10 million required next year even after an uplift of around 2.8% in our funding from Welsh Government 2024/25. Also, we are predicting an additional £25m savings are required to be found over the next 4 years. To meet these challenges, we must think about the way we provide services to make savings, and how we can generate income. This may mean us having to reduce, change or stop some services or look at alternative delivery models. In order to consider this a financial meeting model is to be established, following the Torfaen Council model, these sessions will be called, 'Apollo'.



The 2023/24 financial year continued to be challenging for the Council, with emerging cost pressures arising due to high inflation, impacting on the cost of goods and services, increasing fuel prices, and above expected pay awards. Despite this, the Council delivered services to its residents within the approved budget of £184m.

The overall provisional outturn across all Portfolios is a favourable variance of £4.3m, before transfers to and from reserves. The favourable variance decreases (by £1.1m) to £3.2m after the net transfers to specific reserves (£1.4m) and a draw from the General Reserve (£0.31m). As a consequence of the overall position, only £0.82m from Specific Reserves has been required for 2023/2024, compared to budget.

The Council's 'bridging the gap' programme of strategic business reviews continued throughout the year to create efficiencies and financial resilience for the future, aiming to make savings totalling £3m. Whilst some of the projects have exceeded the agreed target, a number of projects did not achieve the target with some of the anticipated financial efficiencies to be generated from 2024/25 onwards.

Within the overall positive financial position for 2023/2024, a number of cost pressures have continued throughout the financial year or emerged during the last quarter. There is a risk that these will continue into 2024/2025. Budget Holders will develop Action Plans to mitigate any cost pressures or identify other expenditure reductions within the portfolio to fund it.

The revenue budget financial statement provisional outturn as at 31st March 2024:

Portfolio/ Committee	2023/2024 Revised Revenue Budget	2023/2024 Provisional Outturn 2023/2024	Favourable/ (Adverse) Variance	Favourable/ (Adverse) Variance (after Net transfers to/from Reserves)
	£m	£m	£m	£m
Corporate Services	18.07	16.10	1.97	1.82
Social Services	54.39	54.04	0.35	0.36
Education & Leisure	73.57	72.82	0.75	0.38
Economy	1.98	1.66	0.32	0.32
Environment	34.57	33.65	0.92	0.75
Planning	1.55	1.20	0.35	0
Licensing	0.15	0.15	0	0
Sub-Total	184.28	179.62	4.66	3.63
FSM Direct Payment – School Holidays	0	0.31	(0.31)	0
Less Contributions to Specific Reserves (not included within Management Accounts)				0.40
Total	184.28	179.93	4.35	3.23

Our work is set within the context of ever increasing financial challenges. We cannot hide from this fact as we continue to manage with depleting resources by finding more effective and efficient ways of working. We must ensure we do everything within our power to be ready to meet this challenge head on. Changing and adapting our operational practices and rethinking our service delivery will be a constant as we face up to the difficult financial situation.

Looking forward we will continue to focus on delivering efficiencies, savings and investing in new technologies, in order to further protect frontline services. But we must also rethink the way we deliver all of our services.



Audit Wales undertook a review of the Council's Financial Sustainability in 2023/24 and found that, *'the Council has appropriate arrangements in place to support its financial sustainability, but these will only be effective if it works at pace to identify, approve and implement sufficient savings to reduce its medium-term funding gap in a sustainable way'*.

The report included two recommendations for the Council to implement:

- We found that the Council has not yet identified all the savings it will need to close the funding gap over the medium term. The Council should focus sufficient capacity and resources to progress and quantify sustainable and transformational options which are in line with its strategy and address the funding gap beyond 2025-26.
- To ensure that councillors and other stakeholders are able to transparently monitor the anticipated impact of the Council's financial strategy on local communities, the Council should ensure that it considers and reports on the impact of its financial strategy on the achievement of its corporate objectives.

A response to these recommendations will now be developed for implementation over the coming year. The full Audit Wales report can be found here - [Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council – Financial Sustainability Assessment \(audit.wales\)](#)

Budget Engagement

The Budget for 2024/25, was agreed by Council in early 2024 following widespread engagement events across the Borough. This was to gain the views from members of the public on prioritising council services, setting council tax, and potential saving proposals. Engagement took place using a range of methods including face to face indoor events, a questionnaire and an online engagement session. From the questionnaire there was a total of 680 responses. People told us:

- Schools were a top priority for them with (42%) of our residents identify this as the highest priority;
- the service deemed the least important by respondents when considering a budget setting process would be Running an Efficient Council (41%); and
- Three out of every five respondents generally considered any increase in Council Tax either not very acceptable or not acceptable all (60%).

The feedback from the budget consultation was presented to Council and was taken on board as part of the budget setting process for the year. Engagement with our communities with a wide range of issues including our budget will remain a priority and will be further strengthened by the Council's revised Engagement and Participation Strategy.

Statement of Accounts

The audit of the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts has been concluded with a qualified opinion being issued by the Auditor General for Wales on 31st October 2023. The delay in concluding the 2021/22 Audit together with the action required to resolve issues raised during 2021/22 (specifically relating to the valuation and useful economic life of fixed assets) has resulted in delays to the preparation and audit of the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts. This delay has been further exacerbated by the ongoing resolution of a number of complex accounting issues identified during the audit. No opinion has yet been issued for the 2022/23 accounts, with conclusion of the audit being anticipated in October 2024 (subject to completion of the Accounts and resources of Audit Wales). Consequently the 2023/24 Accounts have been delayed as a result of the issues with previous years' accounts and audits, with completion of the Draft Accounts estimated for November 2024 and conclusion of the audit by Audit Wales will be subject to completion of 2022/23 accounts and available resources.

Workforce

The Council has some difficulties with recruiting into some professional and technical roles. 20% of vacancies advertised were appointed after a second advertisement. There is some reliance on agency workers to cover



staff absence and hard to fill specialist roles and projects.

The Council continues to prioritise reducing sickness absence in the workforce to prevent capacity impacts on service delivery. In 2023/24 the average days lost per employee was 11.82 days which was a reduction from 15.5 days the year before but still remains high. 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.

There have been 2 cases of recorded capability in 2023/24, 10 grievance cases, and 38 investigations in line with the Council's Disciplinary Policies.

The UK gender pay gap was 14.3%, in 2023. The Gender Pay Gap information is presented and published through the Council's Pay Policy Statement. We annually consider the issue of gender pay to help us understand the difference in average earnings between women and men.

The Council is confident that 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 increased from 162 in 2022/23 to 304 in 2023/24 but the number of non-employee accidents has decreased from 325 in 2022/23 to 299 in 2023/24. The number of employee accidents/incidents and diseases reportable to the HSE has increased from 9 in 2022/2023 to 19 in 2023/2024

Corporate Governance

Code of Governance

The Authority has had a Code of Governance in place since 2010. This Code sets out the Governance Framework for the Authority setting out our approach and commitment to achieving and maintaining good corporate governance within the organisation. Good corporate governance ensures that the Council is accountable, transparent, effective, and efficient in delivering services and fulfilling our responsibilities to our citizens and stakeholders.

The Code demonstrates that in most areas we have effective governance arrangements in place which are continually improving, but also recognise that there is further work to do. The code is reviewed on an annual basis to ensure it reflects the current governance arrangements of the Authority. The Code forms the basis against which the Annual Governance Statement is produced and outlines seven core principles which helps to achieve good governance. The latest Code of Governance can be found [here](#).

Annual Governance Statement 2022/23

The AGS is developed using CIPFA/Solace's Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework (2016). Welsh Government anticipates that relevant bodies will prepare an annual governance statement on internal control using the CIPFA/Solace Framework to best represent proper practices in relation to the statement on internal control which requires an annual governance statement to be produced.

As best practice CIPFA recommends that:

- a full draft version of the AGS should accompany the statement of accounts; and
- the AGS should be approved by members meeting as a whole committee at the same time as the statement of accounts is approved under Regulation 10(2) in Wales.



The draft AGS 2022/23 was presented to Governance and Audit Committee in January 2024. At this time there were no amendments to the report. The final AGS is to be presented to Committee alongside the statement of accounts 2022/23, as per CIPFA guidance. However, this has been delayed owing to our 2022/23 accounts not yet being finalised or signed off by Audit Wales.

The statement is collated following an evidence gathering exercise which calls upon a number of sources including:

- Internal and external regulatory reports;
- Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Manager; and
- Senior Manager Assurance Statements.

[Appendix 1.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

Performance Management

The Council's Well-being Objectives, within the Corporate Plan, have been used to shape all service planning throughout the organisation. Business plans are the main performance management tool to help officers across all services to provide evidence either via Performance Indicators or a quarterly narrative of how their work has helped to achieve real outcomes for residents and communities across the county, this also helps staff to understand how the work that they do contributes to the Council's well-being objectives and vision. The Business planning process also helps to identify the risks and opportunities that may impact delivery. Business plans help us to allocate resources effectively, prioritise activities, and communicate the achievements and challenges of each service to the public and stakeholders by helping to form performance reports.

As well as holding performance information in relation to progress made against the Council's Corporate Plan, business plans also allow for officers to update progress against other strategic priorities including the Council's Decarbonisation Plan, Welsh Language Strategy and our responsibilities under the Environment Act. Following the development of the Council's new Strategic Equality Plan performance measures are being developed and will be incorporated into our business plans to ensure that monitoring of the plan is effective.

In 2023/24 a review of Performance Management processes took place and included a review of performance reporting to ensure that they continue to help senior officers to measure progress and impact of the Council's priorities as well as identify areas of improvement. As a result of this review, and through discussions with Torfaen Council, new formats of displaying performance information are in the process of being developed and previous reporting formats have been put on hold. The full outcome of the review and changes to the performance management process will be reported in the next self-assessment report.

Audit Wales undertook a review of how the Council uses the service user perspective to inform senior officers and Members when they are making decisions. Following this review, three recommendations were made, this includes that the Council should strengthen information provided to senior leaders and assure that robust arrangements should be in place to check the quality and accuracy of the service user and outcomes data. The Council's new Engagement and Participation Strategy shows our commitment to working with the community to shape services collectively. Information from the Business Plans will continue to feed various corporate reporting so that senior leaders understand whether services are meeting the needs of the community, and the Council's Data Maturity Assessment process will inform areas such as the arrangements in place for the quality and accuracy of data that we hold, including qualitative and quantitative data.

[Use of performance information: service user perspective and outcomes – Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council \(audit.wales\)](#)

<https://www.data.cymru/data/self-assessment-performance-data>

Risk Management

The Council recognises that risk is inherent in everything it does and that some level of risk-taking is necessary to achieve its ambitions and aspirations for the county. However, the Council also acknowledges that it has a duty to protect the public interest and safeguard the resources entrusted to it by the residents and taxpayers of



Blaenau Gwent. Therefore, the purpose of risk management is to ensure that the Council has a robust and consistent framework for identifying, evaluating, and managing the risks that may affect our strategic and operational objectives, as well as the Council's reputation and public confidence.

A risk register is provided to senior leaders and reported through Governance and Audit Committee to help monitor the key risks facing the Council. It is a document that records risks and importantly contains the actions that are needed to be made to mitigate or manage them. It helps to priorities resources and can help address any emerging risks in a timely manner. As of March 2024, the Council had identified 11 corporate risks 7 of these are classified as High and 4 classified as Critical.

Risk Reference and Description	Risk Score (as at March 2024)	Direction of Travel from Previous Quarter
CRR1: Failure to deliver and sustain the changes required to ensure that vital services are prioritised within the financial constraints faced by the Council.	Critical	↔
CRR2: Failure to ensure that the Councils ICT arrangements provide assurance in terms of operational functionality and data security and enable the required digital transformational change.	High	↔
CRR4: Safeguarding - Failure to ensure adequate safeguarding arrangements are in place for vulnerable people in Blaenau Gwent	High	↔
CRR5: There is a risk that the Council's Business Continuity processes are not robust enough to enable the provision of critical services in an emergency.	High	↔
CRR14: Failure to improve staff attendance rates within the Council will lead to an unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively and financially.	High	↓
CRR19: 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.	High	↔
CRR21: The Financial resilience of the Council could be at risk if the Council does not ensure that financial planning and management decisions support long term stability and sustainability	Critical	↔
CRR22: Failure to deliver the Council's priorities within the agreed annual budget resulting in the increased use of emergency finance measures and the drawdown of reserves.	High	↔
CRR25: The school in an Estyn category and currently in receipt of Council Intervention fails to make appropriate progress against the Statutory Warning Notice to Improve and Post Inspection Action Plan.	High	↔
CRR28: Failure to maintain appropriately skilled, adequate staffing resources will lead to an unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively.	Critical	↑
CRR31: Replacement of Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS) (CareDirector v5) by January 2026	Critical	New Risk



To help mitigate these risks several controls are either in place or being developed, this includes:

- Undertaking a fundamental review of our Performance Management Framework to ensure we are providing Elected Members with a balanced picture of the strength and weaknesses of the Council going forward
- Strengthening performance management to ensure accountability at senior manager level for the delivery of change and efficiency.
- Looking at collaboration opportunities with neighbouring authorities.
- Delivery & further development of the Bridging the Gap Programme.

Although several controls are in place and the financial stability is closely monitored, financial stability is likely to continue to be a corporate risk for the organisation in the near future.

Moving forward, risk management is to be one of the first areas that Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent Council's will look to align. Meetings have taken place with the relevant officers to establish the differences in each approach and to consider which aspects to take forward so that one effective framework can be implemented across both Councils.

[GOVAUDIT2407D5 Corporate Risk Register Report Quarter 4 2023 2024.pdf \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)

Council Property

A corporate property management group has been established to look at the medium to long term position of council buildings. The Council Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMP) is being produced.

As the Council has moved to a more agile model of working, there are less staff using offices on a daily basis and consideration will be given to how best meet the future needs of staff. A review of accommodation, with the potential view to reduce it further, is currently being considered in order to protect jobs and cut costs.

A Specialist Surveyor has been engaged to undertake a Condition Survey of the Councils main office, the General Offices to undertake an appreciation of schedule of maintenance costs for the medium and long term.

Work continues to increase the occupancy rate of the Industrial Portfolio, working closely with the Estates team and Technical Services. The portfolio remains steady at around 95% occupancy. The portfolio continues to house a large number of our SMEs and about 800 jobs in total.

Work is continuing to address the water ingress issues at the Hybrid Units with Kier. This continues to be a challenge alongside managing the relationship with the tenants.

Council Assets

The Council continues to ensure that the buildings and assets we have are reflective of our current working arrangements. In 2023/24 a review was held focusing on the current use of operational buildings and the future requirements the Council will need to deliver services that meets the needs of our residents. This review was also held in conjunction with, and has relevance to, the Workforce Strategy and Review of Agile Working.

A decision was made by Council to close a Council working hub, Anvil Court in Abertillery. This decision was made to support the Council's financial position. The Council currently has agile working hubs across the Borough which provides office and hot desking space for employees. The Landlord has been notified of the Councils intention to bring the lease to an end, reducing the Councils Assets and moving to more agile ways of working as well as delivering services via a community hub model helps to deliver our services both economically and efficiently.

A Corporate Property and Asset Management Group has been established to discuss accommodation needs, building status and potentials for cost savings. As part of this Community Asset Transfers (CATs) have been



undertaken by the Council. Many (CATs) are on short term leases or tenancies, so the focus on completing longer term leases continues, where this is possible, and addressing any issues which stop the Council entering into longer term arrangements. Progress on the CATs include:

Completed CATs (in the last two years)	Close to Completion	New CATs Being Processed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Millennium Gardens (Terence Gardens) Brynmawr –lease to Growing Spaces November 2021 Sirhowy Woodland – licence completed June 2021 (common land). Market Hall Cinema Brynmawr - freehold transfer April 2022 Rassau Community Centre – handover to new trustees completed at the end of the reporting year so is the most recent entry in this category. Rassau Resource Centre – lease to Rassau Resource Community Centre CIC completed 1 Sept 2023. Beaufort Welfare - upper Changing Room & Rugby Pitch. Lease to Beaufort RFC Fields and Facilities Ltd. completed 25 Jul 2023. Beaufort Welfare – lower Changing Room & Football Pitch. Lease to Glyn Ebbw Fields & Training Facilities Ltd completed 25 Jul 2023. Roseheyworth Field – changing rooms and pitches. Lease to Tylerian Belles Sports Association Limited completed 19 July 2023. Cwm Community Allotments – lease to Barefoot Farm CIC completed 5 February 2024 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hilltop Fields Pavilion (shared with Flying Start), changing rooms and pitches – awaiting Fields in Trust consent for completion of lease. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wetland area at Jim Owen Pavilion, Cwmtillery – Solicitors instructed to prepare agreement for Pentref Tyleri CBC (occupy part of Abertillery Excelsiors pavilion/ Garden). Coedcae Scout Hall – Property surrendered by Scouts. Growing Spaces have withdrawn application and feasibility is underway for potential service & community use. Windsor Road Field – solicitors instructed to draft lease for Abertillery Bluebirds’ to take on playing field for junior football use. Six Bells Tennis – solicitors instructed to prepare lease for Six Bells Park Community Tennis Ltd for kiosk and land for new cabin/ changing facility, subject to FiT approval. Brynithel Recreation Ground - shared pavilion (Flying Start) and pitches. Awaiting clarity over Group’s (St. Illtyds Sport & C.I.C.) ability to proceed.

Occupation of CATs needs to be regularised on some sites where groups are in occupation, but formal / revised paperwork need to be concluded. Progress of these CATs include:



Community Asset Transfer	Progress
Bedwellty Park Bowling Green & Pavilion	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
Cwm Welfare – fields and pavilion	Cwm Community Sports CIC are currently on a tenancy at will and negotiations are ongoing regarding a potential CAT. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
Blaina Institute	Blaina Community Institute Limited have been in occupation of the building since 1/6/17. A lease was completed on 19 September 2023.
Metropole Theatre Abertillery	Occupied by Awen Cultural Trust under terms of a Licence from 09/04/2021. Lease negotiations are progressing. A list of works was agreed at the point of transfer and the Council are looking to source funding contributions from the Welsh Governments 'Transforming Towns' program. A portion of the building is occupied by Abertillery Museum under a separate Lease agreement.
Llanhilleth Institute	Draft lease issued to Llanhilleth Miners Institute - negotiating
Tredegar Sports Ground pavilion, stand & pitches	Occupied under Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
EV Welfare rugby stand, pitches, terrace	Eugene Cross Park Sports Ltd are occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site – application made to Charity Commission who have confirmed that BGCBC can grant a lease. Solicitor has issued a draft lease.
Cricket Pavilion – EV Welfare	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
EV Welfare – bowls pavilion & 2 greens	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.

Procurement

The Council's Commissioning and Procurement strategy has been revised through the year, which sets out four objectives to help achieve the vision of 'Maximising the Socially Responsible Blaenau Gwent Pound'.

The four objectives of the strategy set out how our commissioning and procurement activities will support the Council's corporate priorities:

- Objective 1: Ensuring legal compliance and robust and transparent governance.
- Objective 2: Promoting socially responsible procurement activities and processes.
 - 2.1 Increasing community and social value benefits delivered by suppliers.
 - 2.2 Contributing to the Council's aim to be a Net Zero Council by 2030.
 - 2.3 Improving Fair Work and Safeguarding practices within our supply chain.
- Objective 3: Securing value for money and managing demand through effective and robust contract management arrangements; and
- Objective 4: Promoting innovative and best practice solutions.

Key deliverables and performance metrics are being developed to ensure that outcomes from the Commissioning and Procurement strategy can be measured effectively, progress against the strategy will be reported in the next self-assessment.

Early in 2024 Audit Wales conducted an audit focusing on the arrangements the Council has for commissioning services. The main purpose of the audit was for Audit Wales:



- to provide assurance that councils have proper arrangements for commissioning services to secure value for money in the use of resources.
- to provide assurance that councils are acting in accordance with the sustainable development principle in commissioning services.
- explain how councils approach the commissioning of services and inspire and empower councils and other public sector bodies by identifying and sharing examples of notable practice/approaches where relevant.

The findings and recommendations have been presented to Senior officers to action. The progress of recommendations will be reported through democratic process and next self-assessment.

Equalities

We recognise as public service providers that we have a key role to play in making a real difference to people's lives. Therefore, we will continue to strive to meet our vision '*Blaenau Gwent – a place that is fair, open and welcoming to all by working with and for our communities*' as outlined in our Corporate Plan. To help implement this vision the Council has a Strategic Equality Plan in place with equality objectives which show due regard to how the Council can contribute to a fairer society by advancing equality and good relations in our day-to-day activities.

The Strategic Equality Plan 2020-2024 concluded in early 2024, and a new plan for 2024-2028 has been developed. Some of the key achievements of the Strategic Equality Plan 2020 -2024 for 2023/ 2024 includes:

- Specific Staff Training sessions held to cover topics including Neurodiversity, Cultural Awareness and Anti-Racism
- Establishment of Traveller Education Service in a local school
- Increased Awareness of a range of campaigns across the organisation
- Revised Integrated Impact Assessment

The Strategic Equality Plan 2024/28 has been developed following extensive public engagement which involved 160 people with lived experiences from across the identified protected characteristics. Furthermore, 48 individuals participated via an online questionnaire, which encouraged people to share their views and experiences, and talk broadly about equality, diversity, and inclusion, this along with engagement with our staff has helped to develop six objectives in the plan:

- **Equality Objective 1:** We will be a fair and equitable organisation.
- **Equality Objective 2:** We will be a workplace that champions diversity and inclusion.
- **Equality Objective 3:** We will create a fair and inclusive learning culture for all children and young people with a focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion.
- **Equality Objective 4:** We will promote and support inclusive, safe and cohesive communities.
- **Equality Objective 5:** We will ensure effective engagement and participation for people with protected characteristics.
- **Equality Objective 6:** We will strive to reduce inequality caused by poverty.

An Oversight and Delivery Group has been created to oversee and track progress towards the new Strategic Equality Plan. The group includes representatives from various service areas within the Council, ensuring a broad and balanced perspective, and enhancing transparency throughout the organisation. The group also provides an opportunity to discuss any challenges in meeting the objectives and serves as a platform to find potential solutions.

To help guide the delivery of the Strategic Equality Plan a Lived Experience Network has also been established. This network is for people who have protected characteristics who want to share their stories, challenges, and achievements with the Council. The network aims to be a platform to raise awareness and influence change.



The progress of the Strategic Equality Plan and updates from the network will be provided by an annual monitoring report.

[2-strategic-equality-plan-2428.pdf \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)

[Equalities Dashboard - Data Cymru](#)

Welsh Language

All local authorities across Wales are required to produce a strategy outlining how we, along with support from our partners, intend on promoting the Welsh language, increasing language visibility and opportunities and to engage with the Welsh language and culture. 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. The Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/2027 is in its second year of implementation.

Internal monitoring procedures have been reviewed and updated to include the consideration of the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy within the business planning arrangements for all directorates. Inclusion of the

Promotion Strategy monitoring within the business plans aims to make staff more aware of how their work can and does support our objectives and ensures more accountability against specific actions as we are able to monitor their application within the relevant departments work.

Progress has been made against the objectives in the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy for 2023/ 2024, this includes:

- Promoting positive aspects of our Welsh language and culture inside our organisation, outside with the public, and through our education channels;
- St. Davids celebration day event held to recognise and celebrate Welsh Language achievements; and
- Promotion of the Welsh Language at community events including a local library.

As of March 2024, the total number of staff who have Welsh language speaking skills ranging from 'fluently', 'quite well', 'moderately', 'foundation' to Courtesy/Entry Level, is 605 (20%). This is an increase of 68 members of staff from 2022/23. There have been no complaints received from members of the public in relation to the Welsh Language for the year.

For 2023/24 there was a Welsh Language Commissioner's Office Investigation (WLCO) open. The investigation covered the following:

- Telephone Services;
- Training Provision;
- Recruitment Process; and
- Promotion of Welsh Language Services.

To address these concerns a core officer group was established, and action plan developed. The action plan outlined how the issues would be addressed with timeframes set. The Council submitted the Action Plan to the WLCO on the 31st of January 2023 and received approval in March 2023. All actions have now been completed apart from two:

- Welsh language training package to be made available to all staff via the Council's new e-learning portal (currently being commissioned); and
- Develop procedure for ensuring Welsh language training is repeated periodically via e-learning portal (including refresher training).

Due to technical issues outside of the Council's control the launch of the new e-learning portal has been delayed, in the interim further Welsh Language training has been uploaded on the Council's intranet.

To ensure the Council complies with Welsh Language requirements, the core group of officers continue to regularly meet to track developments, address challenges, and work towards solutions.



The Council has a 10-year Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) to further help in meeting Welsh Governments target of reaching 1 million speakers within Wales by 2050. The progress of the WESP is monitored through the Blaenau Gwent Welsh Education Forum (WEF). The WEF take place every term and have been praised by Welsh Government and colleagues for their strong partnership working. The WEF will continue to meet, and WESP will continue to be implemented to ensure that the Council continues to commit and support the Welsh Government national vision.

Welsh Government's 'More than just words' 2022/27 is a Welsh language plan for health and social care which aims to ensure people can access the care they deserve and require in the preferred language choice. Social Services continue to monitor compliance and continue to ensure that when citizens contact both our Adult and Children Services Departments, that they are offered the opportunity to communicate in the language of their choice. The 'More Than Just Words' action plan has progressed, there is liaison with the local Welsh language champions and promoting the wide resources and opportunities available is now standard. Our commissioned providers work in partnership with us to promote the Welsh Language and this is reflected in our contracts and service level agreements.

Town and Community Councils

Town and Community Councils (TCCs) can help the Council understand the issues that impact the local community. The Council continues to engage with TCC's on a range of issues including the Council budget. There are four TCCs in Blaenau Gwent:

- Tredegar Town Council;
- Nantyglo & Blaina Town Council;
- Abertillery & Llanhilleth Community Council; and
- Brynmawr Town Council.

In 2023/24, the Council and the four TCCs established new liaison arrangements via a Charter of Common Agreement. This Charter promotes best practices and shared principles like openness, respect, honesty, and prioritising citizens. This Charter will be reviewed by all Partners once during each Council term, or more often as appropriate if deemed necessary. The Partners will conduct this review and develop an annual progress report against the commitments within the Charter. Quarterly liaison Committee meetings continued to be held throughout the year helping to improve communication, relationships, and collaboration. In 2023/2024, the Council and all TCCs signed the new Armed Forces Covenant, a pledge of mutual support between local civilian and Armed Forces communities.

A forward work programme has been designed with monitoring and review processes incorporated. This approach will not only improve guidance and engagement with TCCs in the future but also allow partners to ensure that the joint commitments outlined in the charter stay appropriate and relevant over time.

Engagement and Participation

Engagement, participation, and customer experience are vital themes that influence the Council's service design and decision-making processes. The Council is dedicated to long-term community support and aims to achieve this through active community engagement. Effective engagement is essential for the Council's efficient operation, ensuring that the services provided are suitable and meet the needs of users.

A new Engagement and Participation Strategy setting out the Councils vision for Engagement and Participation has been developed following consultation with the public. 170 responses were received from the community who shared views on the draft objectives in the strategy and how the Council should engage with citizens in the future.



A detailed action plan has been developed to support the implementation of the strategy setting out a range of actions allocated to service areas across the organisation. The progress of the implementation of the strategy will be reported in the next self-assessment report.

- [blaenau gwent Engagement and Participation Strategy - Search \(bing.com\)](#)

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 three years as well as being able to identify the number of complaints per service area received. The process will be further strengthened to help identify themes and learning for improvements to be made in the future, this will be reported in the next self-assessment. During the year there has been 139 cases of feedback recorded across the Council. These 139 cases consisted of:

- 93 complaints; and
- 46 compliments.

90 cases were closed (completed) during the reported period. Of those, almost three quarters (66) were within timescale. 22 were after timescale but within 3 months. Only 2 were after 3 months but within 6 months. None took longer than 6 months.

Information Governance

During the period the Council received a total of 1,044 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. This is up 6.8% from the previous year where 978 requests were received which itself was up 13% from the previous year.

Under legislation, the Council is expected to respond to FOIs within 20 working days. Blaenau Gwent has dipped below this level and seen 88% of FOIs throughout the Council responded to within the allocated 20 days. Of the 12% that have not met the requirement, 8.6% (90 requests) were provided late and 3.4% remain outstanding as of July 2024.

This year the Council received a total of 83 Subject Access Requests (SARs) in comparison to 60 the previous year, and 54 the year before. This represents an unprecedented 38% increase in requests over the year, and a 53% increase over the two years. Since we are not permitted to ask for reasoning or justification as to why SARs are being made, it is very difficult to pinpoint a reason for this increase, however, we are looking into whether there are any trends or specific service users which are impacting this also to see if more can potentially be done to better manage this obligation.

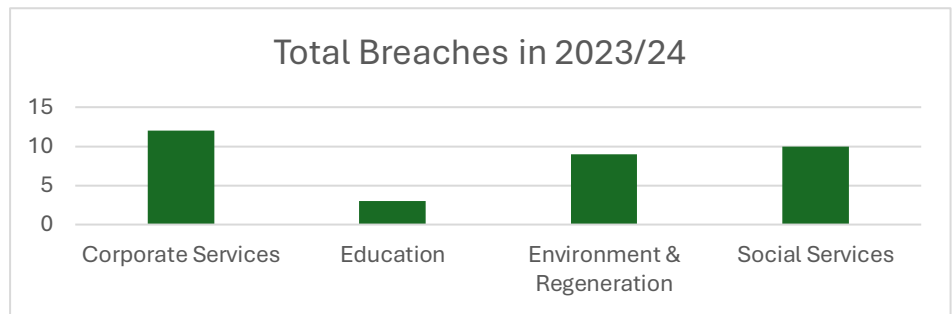
Prior to releasing information to a requestor, to maintain privacy and security, we are required to ensure that each requestor is entitled to receive the information before we can consider it a valid request. To do this we require ID from a requestor to enable it to be considered valid. For a variety of reasons requestors will often not respond to provide the relevant ID so their requests fail to become valid. During the period, 54 of the 83 requests provided ID and became valid. This is also an increase from the previous year where just 29 requests became valid. This is an 86% increase.

A standard SAR is permitted 30 calendar days from the time it becomes valid to provide the information to the requestor. In rare circumstances we are permitted to extend the time permitted from the standard 30 days to 90 days where it can be demonstrated that a request is large or complex. During 2023/24 the deadline was extended on a total of 6 requests out of the 54 valid requests received.



In total, the Council suffered 34 recorded Data Breaches during the period which are split between directorates. This has decreased from 45 Data Breaches last year and is also a slight decrease from the previous year of 37 breaches. The Council has previously created a Data Breach Handling Procedure in line with its GDPR and Data

Protection legislation obligations which it follows for every data breach identified. As part of this procedure for all data breaches that involve special category (sensitive) personal data or a high volume of data, the Council's Data Breach Panel will convene to consider the necessary actions. Of the 34 Data Breaches suffered during the year it was decided by the Data Breach Panel that none exceeded the threshold to report to the ICO for assessment.



Customer Services Strategy

The Council has reassessed its Customer Services delivery model to adapt to the evolving landscape of recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered how residents access council services. In response, the Council has formulated a Customer Service Strategy that outlines our vision and ambition for enhancing the customer service experience. The strategy outlines three key principles which aims to deliver a positive customer service experience, invest in staff to support customers to resolve queries at first contact where possible and continues to make the best use of technology.

The strategy is supported through customer services standards which helps define and set out what Blaenau Gwent customers can expect from Council services. A customer services charter has also been developed to reflect the commitment the Council has to all residents and visitors who use the services we provide and includes the pupils, parents and carers served by our schools.

Performance measures will be developed to help to monitor and review the impact of the strategy these measurements and progress made against these will be reported in the next self-assessment report.

[Customer Service Strategy | Blaenau Gwent CBC \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](https://blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/customer-service-strategy)

Digital Transformation Strategy

The way the public access Council services have changed with more services being delivered online; to help meet the needs of the community and help deliver our services more efficiently the Council has developed a Digital Transformation Strategy. The strategy is one of a set of strategic digital/ICT programmes designed to secure the future sustainability across the community and deliver improved outcomes for our customers, businesses and learners.

The Strategy is underpinned by two key principles and three priorities which are essential to improving and delivering our services in the future. The two principles within the strategy focuses on developing a culture that supports digital improvement and a seamless customer experience and improve collaboration to make the best use of knowledge and expertise to create better services.

A high percentage of those that visit the Community Hubs are identifying as being unable to self serve. The Council's preferred method of delivering services is via digital means but a high number of Blaenau Gwent people are not digitally able. In order to move to a more digitally operating model, the Council will need to ensure that the residents are able to keep up with this pace. A Digital Inclusion Officer has been appointed and will look to work from the Community Hubs to support those unable to self serve.



Work is ongoing to develop key performance measures to help monitor the impact of the strategy. The outcome of the first-year implementation of the Digital Transformation Strategy will be reported at the next self-assessment report.

[Blaenau Gwent Council Digital Transformation Strategy 2023 – 2027 | Blaenau Gwent CBC \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk)

Data Maturity

Data and insight are critical for the success of an organisation. Becoming a 21st Century Council means using data and insight to constructively and proactively challenge and learn in order to drive improvement and inform decision making. This can be achieved by having an effective Data Strategy in place. In order to develop a Data Strategy, it is important to understand the Council's data maturity. That is, its capability, effectiveness, and readiness to use data to achieve the strategic, operational, and corporate priorities.

Corporate Leadership Team agreed for the Council to progress with undertaking a Data Maturity Assessment in order to pursue the development of a corporate, one council approach to improve us as a data-driven Council, with the intention to develop an appropriate strategy and action plan.

The assessment is currently underway with Wider Corporate Leadership Team undertaking the process first, followed by performance officers from across the Council, and then an opportunity for all officers to take part.

The findings should assist the Council in understanding its data maturity, where it has strengths and also weaknesses in order to inform a delivery plan moving forward.

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. Further work has been undertaken over the year to review and enhance several member development policies and processes including:

- Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Petition Protocol; and
- Multi-Location Meeting Policy.

In 2023, the Council agreed to change its Scrutiny Committee structure, the Council now has 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 2023/24.



Evaluations are undertaken after every scrutiny meeting to review the processes in place and where further improvement can be sought. Learning is also undertaken annually and research from other areas considered. 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.

The Monitoring Officer and Head of Democratic Services meet regularly with Interim Chief Executive to discuss any political, governance or conduct issues, with a view to addressing issues early on to resolve quickly. The Constitution was updated and approved by Full Council on 21st September 2023.

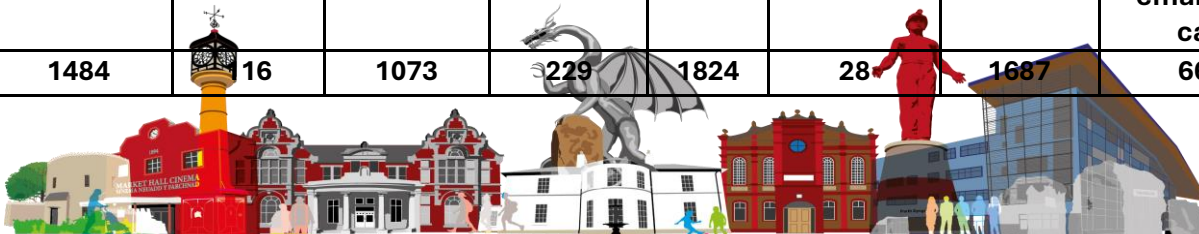
For 2023/24, there was one complaint against a Member which was taken forward for formal investigation by the Ombudsman's Office. Over the year no whistleblowing complaints were received.

Community Hubs

The Council's Community Hub model continues to be strengthened 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:

	Abertillery	Blaina	Brynmawr	Cwm	Ebbw Vale	Llanhilleth	Tredegar	Overall
May	120	8	105	16	180	6	158	593
June	105	16	90	20	131	0	112	474
July	99	10	78	24	113	6	111	441
August	90	15	66	15	145	6	124	461
September	106	16	83	22	104	7	94	432
October	120	14	93	16	158	3	112	516
November	130	15	71	21	145	0	98	480
December	122	3	49	21	112	0	151	458 (496 inc 27 calls and 11 emails)
January	234	2	104	11	215	0	253	876 (57 Were emails and calls)
February	102	3	111	32	142	0	146	570 (34 were emails and calls)
March	96	1	93	18	154	0	157	552 (33 were emails and calls)
April	160	13	130	13	225	0	171	751 (39 were emails and calls)
Total	1484	16	1073	229	1824	28	1687	6642



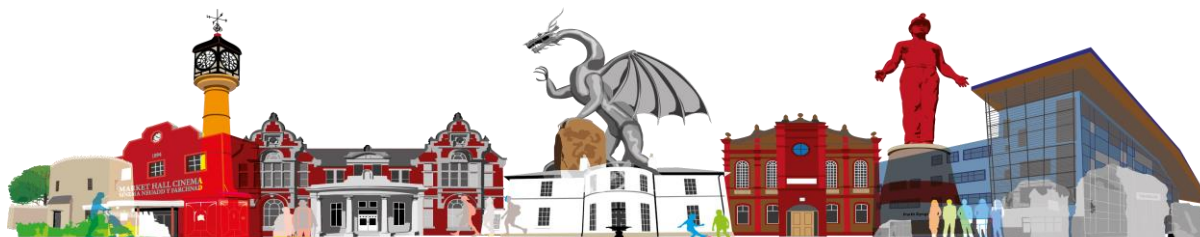
Key Challenges Identified for Action in 2024/25

- Prioritise the financial challenges being faced including budget pressures and service delivery requirements
- Identify budget saving proposals that address the budget shortfall and not rely on the use of reserves
- Work to complete the sign off of the 2022/23 and 2023/24 accounts and report these through Governance and Audit Committee.
- Address workforce recruitment across the Council and reduce the reliance on agency workers
- Further reduce the high levels of sickness absence
- Work with the Gwent Digital Exclusion Network to address the gap in resident's digital capabilities before moving services online
- Improve response rates to all FOIs received
- Improve response rates to all complaints received
- Manage the increase in Subject Access Requests being received
- Reduce the number of data breaches across the Council
- Respond to the Audit Wales Service User Perspective recommendations
- Implement the final actions from the Welsh Language Commissioner's Office Investigation



Performance Indicator	Data					Annual Target and or Figure We Are Aiming For
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	
Number of complaints received by Blaenau Gwent Council	-	-	105	133	93	Improved figure Lower Figure is Better
Number of Complaints Closed at Stage 1 during the period Percentage of Complaints Closed at Stage 1 during the period	-	-	100 99%	123 94.6%	86 95.6%	Improved figure Higher % Figure is Better
Number of Complaints Closed at Stage 2 during the period Percentage of Complaints Closed at Stage 2 during the period	-	-	1 1%	7 5.4%	4 4.4%	Figure small decline Higher % Figure is Better
Total Number of Complaints Closed during the period	-	-	101	130	90	Declined figure Higher Figure is Better
Number of Compliments received by Blaenau Gwent Council	-	-	29	28	46	Improved figure Higher Figure is Better
Council attendance and sickness The number of working days / shifts per full time equivalent (FTE) local authority employee lost due to sickness absence	13.9	11.67	16.74	15.5	11.8	Improved figure but 10 days per FTE target exceeded Lower Figure is Better
Total employee headcount	2777	2,854	2896	2,953	3030	N/A
Council	1565	1,648	1673	1650	1731	
Schools	1212	1,206	1223	1303	1299	
Labour turnover:						N/A
• Council	7.96%	5.2%	8.68%	15.05%	6.35%	
• Schools	9.67%	3.7%	7.13%	8.55%	7.78%	
% of external expenditure placed with Local Suppliers (i.e. Registered within Blaenau Gwent) and SME	-	-	-	21.5	15%	Declined figure and target of 25% not met Higher Figure is Better
% of external expenditure placed with SME's	-	-	-	10.7%	28% (UK)	Improved figure at a UK level and 15% exceeded Higher Figure is Better
Revenue outturn expenditure						N/A
£ per thousand	177,300	178,616	193,776	168.999*	179,940	
£ per head	2,543	2,557	2,767	2,413*	2,690	

*figure amended owing to Statement of Accounts not being signed off. 2023/24 Accounts also not signed off, Revenue Management Account Figures used.



Self-Assessment – Progress Made Against 2022/23 Actions

Through our previous self-assessment process, undertaken for the year 2022/23, we identified how well we were performing and what we could do better. In order to achieve this, we developed an action plan which highlights the areas where improvement was needed. The below table has been updated to show the progress made to achieve these actions throughout the year, with a summary of the work undertaken, any challenges that have arisen and our focus for the future. From evaluating our progress, we have set ourselves against Red, Amber, Green, Blue status which is aimed to give a clear snapshot of the progress we have made:

BLUE – Action has been completed

RED – Action is significantly behind target

AMBER – Action is behind target but is manageable

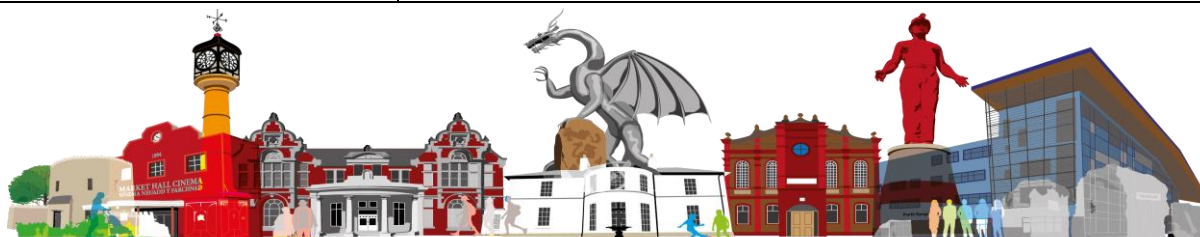
GREEN – Action is on target

39 actions were identified as part of the 2022/23 Self-Assessment. Of these: 7 are blue (completed); 26 are green; 5 are amber and 1 is red. Of the remaining 32 actions not completed, 29 will continue to be monitored into 2024/25 and 4 will move to business as usual.

Improvement Identified from 2022/23 Self-Assessment	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Capacity concerns across service areas	The Councils Workforce strategy 2021 – 2026 continues to be implemented across the organisation. Several key actions have been delivered as part of the Councils Workforce delivery plan which underpins the strategy. Most recent progress of the implementation of the workforce strategy can be found here	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Uncertainty of the economic impact of: Covid-19; the exit from the European Union; and WG future financial settlements	The Council has embedded the changes to local government regulations and monitoring of resilience issues impacted by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act into business-as-usual activity when the exiting the EU transition period ended.	Blue	Move to business as usual
Achievement of the 70% recycling target by 2024/25	The Council continues to exceed the Welsh Government statutory recycling target of 64%, with a recycling rate of 66.18% for 2023/2024. A new recycling target has been set of 70% for 2024/ 2025, working is ongoing to help reach this target including a food waste campaign and data analysis to determine what improvements need to be made to reach the 70% target. Regular meetings are held with the waste team which are specifically focused on reaching the target. If the council does not maintain and improves its recycling targets the Council will be imposed a financial penalty. If the current recycling rate of 66.18% remains the same in 2024/25 there are potential fines of £243,712 to be incurred by Blaenau Gwent.	Amber	Continue to 2024/25



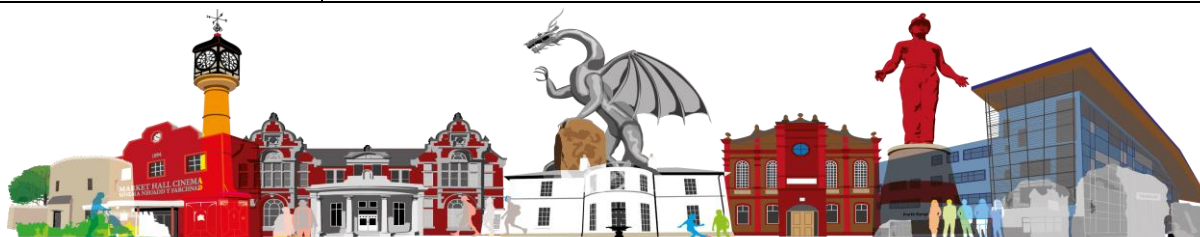
Improvement Identified from 2022/23 Self-Assessment	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Higher levels of language acquisition and reading in our very young children in the early years is required	GL assessments will be conducted in various schools to gauge reading levels. The Council has arranged with schools to cover 50% of the cost of the assessment of the schools who participate and share their reading data with the Council. Data gathered will help to identify gaps and barriers to reading and learning. The EAS undertook a review of reading in summer 2023 but due to ASOS many schools did not submit information on reading. Therefore, more data needs to be gathered from schools and this will continue as a priority in 2024/25.	Amber	Continue to 2024/25
Improve school attendance in both primary and secondary sectors	Increase in both primary and secondary attendance. Attendance Pathway implemented in the Autumn term 2023. Increased support to schools via grant funded officers for family engagement. Primary and secondary attendance forums re-established. Targeted support meetings held with schools in Q3 and Q4 for attendance. Attendance blitzes in secondary schools.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Improve progress between Key Stage 3 and 4, particularly in English, Maths and Science	Difficult to monitor progress due to changes in WG reporting – conversations ongoing with Team Leader Education Performance and schools. Also work with performance team to look at introducing Education Dashboard as a means of collecting and interrogating data.	Amber	Continue to 2024/25
Continue the work with Schools Causing Concern	Processes to hold the EAS to account in terms of the work of SIPs and pre-inspection reporting are in place and working well as evidenced by no new schools moving into a category in 23/24. TAS system to support schools causing concern embedded. Improved system for sharing information through Wider Group. Schools now reengaging with the LA through things like joint headteacher meetings which have excellent attendance across nearly all schools, and in working groups. Significant input from teams from across the Council including Education, finance and OD to support the River Centre which is the only school in BG in a category – however significant concerns remain. Significant improvement in quality of FADES from the Inclusion team have enabled more accurate evaluations of different service areas and planning for improvement.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Welsh Government require for a revision to the Delivery Agreement to be undertaken and approved by them.	The Replacement LDP Delivery Agreement timetable was reported to Scrutiny Committee on 18 th June 2024 and was later approved by Council on 18 th July 2024. Welsh Government formally approved the revised timetable on 24 th July 2024.	Blue	Complete



Improvement Identified from 2022/23 Self-Assessment	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Identifying capacity across the organisation to support the user design approach.	A session was undertaken by Service Works with CLT and training was then offered out further to digital champions and members of the Digital Board which looked at the end to end journey mapping. This capacity will now be led by Wider CLT.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Embed agile working.	Our agile working and flexible working policy has been reviewed and have been amended to reflect the current position and future management. The reviewed agile working policy was agreed by Council in April 2024. The changes that have been made to the policy can be found here :	Blue	Complete
Develop a data delivery plan to help implement the Council's vision for using data effectively and address inconsistencies across areas with regards to performance and reporting	A data maturity assessment is to be undertaken in 2024 which will be used to inform the Council's data vision and strategy.	Amber	Continue to 2024/25
Update and embed the Engagement Strategy.	<p>Amendments made following the draft Engagement & Participation Strategy and Action Plan, final version was presented and endorsed by Corporate Overview and Performance Scrutiny Committee in June and agreed at Council in July.</p> <p>Talk2gether has been designed following the guidance set in BGCBC's Engagement and Participation Strategy for 2024-28. It's an umbrella approach to all public engagement that shares the common goal of improving community well-being. Through a cohesive approach by all departments, it aims to ensure that all engagement carried out by the local authority is informed by best practice, whilst making public consultation straight-forward and 'under one roof' for the customer</p>	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Develop a vision and strategy for the future provision of ALN.	Our ALN strategies, policies and guidance have been reviewed in line with the ongoing ALN implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (ALNET) legislation, new Welsh Government guidance for Elective Home Education (EHE), and to further support in areas of EOTAS/Exclusion and Attendance. The relevant documents were presented to Cabinet in October 23 and can be found here	Blue	Complete



Improvement Identified from 2022/23 Self-Assessment	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Respond to the recommendations from the recent Estyn Inspection.	Work has been undertaken to address the three recommendations from Estyn. This has included revising business plans to incorporate the recommendations at both a strategic and an operational level. In response to the recommendations the self-evaluation cycle has been revised and a review of performance management process has taken place. An update on the progress made against these recommendations were presented to People Scrutiny Committee and can be found here	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Continue to monitor and improve on attainment levels.	Summer 2023 Key Stage 4 (KS4) results were positive and in line with the School Development Plan targets set by the 4 secondary settings. There were improvements in 23 out of 24 key measures across the 4 secondary settings	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Increase capacity at Pen-Y-Cwm and River Centre and reduce out of county placements, in turn reducing annual financial loss	A demand analysis and option appraisal for Pen y Cwm has been completed which will help to inform a business case to Welsh Government. Regional discussions are currently taking place to further inform the process	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Monitor Home to school transport funding issues	Consultation has started with Regeneration Directorate to look at working more closely on home to school transport across the two directorates. Monthly meetings continue with the Transport team to discuss any issues The Home to School Transport budget reported slightly favourable variance at the financial year end. The change of the Learner Travel measure has been put forward as a suggestion in the budget a savings process however this wasn't accepted, the LA to look at an alternative service delivery. Currently undertaking an options appraisal process	Amber	Continue to 2024/25
Secure external funding for European Social Fund (ESF) programmes e.g. Inspire;	European Social Fund programmes have now closed and transitioned into Shared Prosperity Fund youth programmes from April 23. SPF has been used to fund an 11-16 youth work team based in or aligned to schools, an alternative curriculum provision and a 16-25 youth work NEET team. This provision ensures the Youth Service is meeting the identified needs of young people 11-25 and underpins the local approach to the WG's Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YP NEET strategy). SPF is due to end in March 2025. Discussions are ongoing at both local, regional and national level to influence future UK Government funding options and to align with both WG and UK Government in readiness for any future rounds of funding. The Young People and Partnership Division works closely with the Regeneration Directorate in this area of work.	Green	Continue to 2024/25



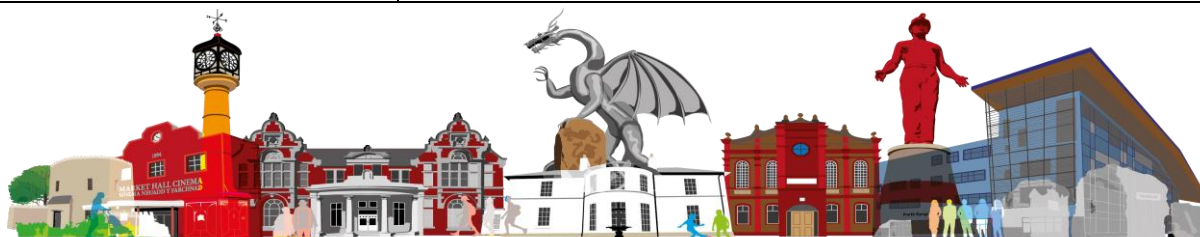
Improvement Identified from 2022/23 Self-Assessment	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Monitor closely school place and sufficiency of all schools, use data more effectively to inform long term planning.	A number of our Secondary schools are experiencing sufficiency issues, for the September 2024 academic session, a catchment area review has been undertaken and a consultation is taking place during the autumn term to gain more understanding and to help alleviate some of these issues	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Supporting the community to gain the right skills for a changing world and build capacity for lifelong learning.	Utilised SPF funding to have a coordinated approach of delivery across the LA, upskilling and offering work placement opportunities to improves skills across a range of occupational sectors. Engaged with several partners to facilitate these opportunities, community and voluntary sector partners, education and BGCBC teams Engaged with business to determine future skill needs and adapted courses and training to upskill employed as well as economically inactive individuals within our community.	Green	Move to business as usual
Progress with the development of CiNER	Planning issues largely complete save for compliance with conditions/s106. Awaiting conclusion of negotiations between Ciner and WG over land deal and UK Govt for assistance for project to proceed.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Progress with the development of Regain 2 to support growth and investment into the area	Regain 2 (now Goldworks) building completed and operational from November 2024.	Blue	Complete
Work to further improve our competitiveness across the UK.	Targeted the UKCI outputs and moved off the bottom of the UKCI for the first time since its inception, this performance measure is now business as usual.	Green	Move to business as usual
Our Climate group will work to prioritise key actions from the Decarbonisation plan in order to work towards achieving the Welsh Government Net Zero Targets of reaching a 63% reduction by 2030, an 89% reduction by 2050 and a 100% reduction by 2050.	The organisational Climate Group continues to meet on a six-week rotation to consider and action appropriate actions associated to the Council's existing Decarbonisation Plan for 2030, considering key issues such as accommodation and assets, fleet and transport, and ULEV infrastructure. The group has been actively involved in the work required for 2050, endorsing an area-based Net Zero 2050 Framework, and fundamentally shaping the preparation of the first Blaenau Gwent Local Area Energy Plan for 2024 to 2029, which sets out an initial pathway to help move forward on the challenging agenda for the local area.	Green	Continue to 2024/25



Improvement Identified from 2022/23 Self-Assessment	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Continue to work towards the recommendations made by our climate assembly.	The organisation, with its partners, continues to put the voice of our citizens at the heart of policy making and implementation. The new Net Zero 2050 Framework is based around the 4 key areas identified by the climate assembly for Blaenau Gwent, and several projects, programmes and initiatives are being introduced by the Council to support the recommendations set by the assembly including ELEV support infrastructure, active travel initiatives, and energy policies and projects. Furthermore, the organisation is leading the local partnership Climate Mitigation Group, and actively participating in regional and national partnerships on key issues associated to the assembly's recommendations.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Continue to support the national campaign to tackle Fly- Tipping (not up my street);	There has been an increased use of CCTV surveillance across the County Borough at prolific fly tipping locations resulting in 112 incidents of fly tipping being captured during 2023/24 Blaenau Gwent issued the third highest numbers of fly tipping fixed penalty notices in Wales during 2022/23 with 79 FPN's issued and have exceeded this number this year, with 110 fly tipping fixed penalty notices issued between April 2023 and March 2024.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Continue with the delivery of the Energy Prospectus to interest in energy development across the borough to facilitate a supply of renewable energy to meet the future energy needs of the area including consideration of wind and hydro generation projects;	<p>The Council continues with the delivery of the Energy Prospectus including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refit Project – energy conservation measures to 23 buildings across the corporate portfolio, Aneurin Leisure Trust and schools plus a street lighting upgrade. Measures included solar PV. Wind generation – progress has been made with one site to reach full business case development stage. • Solar generation – Welsh Government Energy Service has undertaken initial feasibility for solar farm potential. • Hydro generation – feasibility study completed and planning application drafted. • Expansion of the Works District Heating Network • Additional EV charge points have also been installed at the Council Depot as well as a rapid charge point installed at Community Meals base to allow for charging for new Community Meals ULEV fleet. Although the delivery of the Energy is progressing well, there are a number of projects still be worked through. Work is ongoing to understand residents transport use, behaviour, challenges and issues. Next steps will be to explore the challenge of behaviour change and what a net zero transition means for people in Blaenau Gwent. 	Green	Continue to 2024/25



Improvement Identified from 2022/23 Self-Assessment	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Re-establish and strengthen existing engagement networks as well as establish new opportunities for people to get involved.	The Engagement and Participation Strategy is to be approved in Mid 2024 and will incorporate a number of ways for people to get involved.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Ensure the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2020 – 2025 actions are regularly monitored, implemented and reviewed.	The safe reduction of children looked after continues to be a priority for the Council, despite a consistent increase in the referrals, which is reflected in our Care and Support statutory intervention and child protection registration numbers, the number of children looked after has remained relatively constant. The Council will continue to ensure the actions within the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy continues to be regularly monitored, implemented and reviewed.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Continue to implement the regional action plan to meet the needs identified within the population needs assessment.	The Regional Partnership Board aims to deliver integrated care in Blaenau Gwent and the region, but more efforts are needed to ensure the population needs analysis and Area Action Plan truly benefit local citizens. To achieve this, the Integrated Services Partnership Board has prioritised tasks from the Area Plan, forming task groups to advance these goals.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Take forward any learning from the outcome report requested by Care Inspectorate Wales on Public Law process.	Following the self-evaluation exercise requested by CIW on the Public Law Outline process, a Task and Finish Group has been developed and meets regularly to address the actions identified on short and medium term. Most actions have been completed now, with the plan due to be finalised during 2024/2025 with no issues or delays being identified.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Ensure that preventative support is available for adults and their unpaid carers, that promote and maintain personal independence;	During 23/ 24 the Council has provided a range of support for unpaid carers this has included carers support sessions, carers wellbeing groups additional carers short breaks/ respite opportunities. Additional support has been provided regionally for carers in relation to specific carers hospital discharge services, carers café and joint working with third sector partners. Over the year there has been a significant amount of investment to ensure new contacts made to adult services are responded to timely and consistently using a strength based approach, there have also been robust learning and development opportunities for all our teams to provide our staff with the skills to focus on the strengths and resilience of our citizens and their carers and develop care and support plans, where appropriate that balance appropriate rights and responsibilities alongside exploring appropriate preventative solutions. We will continue to focus on this area of work within Adult services.	Green	Continue to 2024/25



Improvement Identified from 2022/23 Self-Assessment	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Gain a greater understanding of the barriers to access digital solutions within our communities and develop support for those who wish to improve their digital skills.	Customer Services Strategy 2023-27 and Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-27 were reviewed to consider service delivery, including understanding access points across the Council and establishing what barriers people face. Our aim is to develop a culture that supports digital improvement, innovation and uses new technology. The Council is also responding to the Older People's Commissioner for Wales's 'Access Denied' report. A Digital Inclusion Officer is now in place who attends all our community hubs on a weekly basis to help residents get online.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Provide support to those impacted by the cost-of-living crisis via actions identified by the Cost-of-Living Member and Officer Groups.	The cost of living group has continued to meet throughout 2023/24 and has implemented a number of actions to support those most in need. Moving forward, a review of this group is to be undertaken to consider merging it with the current Local Well-being Partnership.	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Engage effectively across the organisation, with partners and key groups to develop the new Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2028.	The new Strategic Equality Plan 2024-28 was presented alongside the final Annual Report for the existing SEP. The plan was in April 2024. The annual reports progress was acknowledged and provides a good basis of the ongoing commitments in relation to Equality. The new SEP Delivery and Oversight Group was set up and has agreed Terms of Reference moving forward to monitor the progress of delivering the plan over the next four years. An internal and external Lived Experience Network has been established to reflect and capture people with protected characteristics experiences in working for and/or living in BGCBC.	Blue	Complete
Respond to the recommendations from the Welsh Language Commissioner.	The Welsh Language Investigation action plan completed, and Welsh Language Commissioners Office (WLCO) correspondence received to agree conclusion of the investigation. CLT agreed proposal to re-brand the Core Group of Officers to ensure continuation of best practice in line with the Welsh Language Standards. Continuation of delivering Welsh Language forward work programme including a programme of Welsh Cultural celebrations. The Welsh Language Annual Report presented to CLT and Corporate Overview and Performance Scrutiny, detailing the progress in meeting the standards. Positive comments were received by members acknowledging the progress and developments in relation to Welsh Language over the last year.	Blue	Move to Business as usual



Improvement Identified from 2022/23 Self-Assessment	Progress- What have we done?	Scoring	Status
Further embed safeguarding arrangements across the whole Council.	Work has been undertaken to implement safeguarding arrangements across the Council. As part of this, a review has been undertaken to consider how best to take this forward corporately, this approach is to be considered by CLT for implementation in 2024. Audit Wales intend to re assess safeguarding arrangements in Blaenau Gwent in late 2024.	Amber	Continue to 2024/25
Progress the Workforce Strategy including consideration of recruitment and retention across the Directorates	The Councils Workforce strategy continues to be implemented across the organisation with several key actions delivered through the year. This includes a review of our Agile Working and Flexible Working policies, development and implementation of Employer Supported Volunteering Policy and the continuation of our annual workforce profiles across all directorates & Schools to inform workforce planning. During the year the Council reviewed its recruitment and selection policy which works to ensure recruitment and selection is fair, objective and transparent as well as to recruit and retain individuals with the right experience, knowledge and competencies in a timely manner. The Council will continue to implement our workforce strategy through annual implementation plans which support workforce strategy objectives which includes considering recruitment and retention of staff across all Directorates	Green	Continue to 2024/25
Work to reduce the sickness levels across the Council.	During 2022/23 there was an improving picture with sickness levels reducing by 1.29 days per full time equivalent (FTE) employee when compared to the previous year, however sickness remains high at 15.45 days per FTE employee (13.71 days excluding COVID-19). Based on the comparative data available the Council had the highest level of sickness across Welsh Local Government. The Council has in place a range of support for staff and strategies to manage well-being, Sickness across the workforce continues to be monitored closely with quarterly review of sickness absence continuing as part of Corporate Leadership Team meetings and the Council continues to research any areas of good practice .	Green	Continue to 2024/25



Feedback

The Council welcome any feedback you might have about the Self-assessment 2023/24. Your views are important to us, and we want to know what information you would like to see and how you would like to see it reported. Please contact the team on the details below if you would like to give feedback on the Assessment or if you require this document in a different format e.g. large print, Braille, audio version, etc.

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Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael
yn Gymraeg

This document is available in Welsh.

