



Cyngor Bwrdeisdref Sirol
Blaenau Gwent
County Borough Council

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's Summary Self-assessment 2021/22



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

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Introduction

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, requires councils to keep their performance under review through self-assessment, with the need to publish a report setting out the conclusions of the self-assessment once every financial year.

This is the first self-assessment report of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council covering the year 2021/22. The focus of the self-assessment is the Council's Corporate Plan and providing an assessment of how well the Council feels it has achieved its Well-being Objectives, as outlined in the Corporate Plan, and where further improvement is required.

To align to the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the Council has also provided an assessment against the sustainable development principle, the 7 corporate areas of planning and the well-being goals.

Our Understanding of Blaenau Gwent

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.

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. 2021 Census data for other pieces of information are still to be released so the following information is taken from the 2011 Census. When using a population of 69,800, the working age population is 62.1% with 24.7% being economically inactive. 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)

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council employs 2,854 people. A total of £146.1 million was spent on providing services during 2020-21, the 2nd lowest spending of the 22 unitary councils in Wales. The area has 6 (13%) of its 47 areas deemed the most deprived 10% of areas in Wales, this is the 6th highest of the 22 unitary councils in Wales (Source: Stats Wales).

Overall Council Self-assessment

The self-assessment process has identified areas in which the council is progressing well and areas for development. An overall Council Self-assessment has been provided to consider:

- 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?

Is the Council exercising its functions effectively?

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 has, over the years, had an impact on employment prospects. However, the Council is looking proactively at the opportunities in which it can provide and support in order to diversify businesses and employment opportunities to support communities now and in the future. The area faces issues with health and wealth inequality, alongside social issues affecting our families and young people.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been devastating globally and will have a significant detrimental impact on the economy and the way we live, work, learn and socialise for the foreseeable future. The Council has had to respond to this unprecedented situation and has done so at pace, bringing an innovative approach to problem solving and changes in service delivery, ensuring that the health and well-being of our residents and communities has been the driver for our decision making and actions.

As a Council we face increasing demand and costs for some of our services 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.

The Council is embracing the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and is starting to adapt the way that it works. As part of this, we are working collectively to adapt the culture of the organisation and embed the ethos of the Act into all that we do. It is recognised however that we are still in the early years of implementing the Act and there is still more to do over the coming years.

In 2021 the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act came into force. This Act is a substantial piece of legislation covering electoral reform, public participation, governance and performance and regional working. It is designed to be a more streamlined, flexible, sector-led approach to performance, good governance and improvement. The intention is for councils to be proactive in considering how internal processes and procedures should change to enable more effective planning, delivery and decision-making to drive better outcomes. The Council is actively working to implement this Act which will also replace the current improvement duty for principal councils set out in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

The Corporate Plan is a very important strategic document for the Council which clearly sets out our priorities and how we will target our limited resources in order to support these objectives. The priorities in the plan align with what local people have told us is important to them during public engagement events, in particular that they want strong and clean communities and they want to see our economy grow for the wellbeing of our future generations. Education and Social Services continue to be priorities as we work to improve standards in our schools so that all children and young people reach their full potential and we continue to look after the most vulnerable people in our communities against increasing demand for these services.

Is the Council using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively?

Budget monitoring and management is a key feature at the Council. Effective arrangements are in place whereby budget holders meet regularly with finance partners to consider expenditure and any areas of overspend, with appropriate actions identified early on to tackle any areas in deficit.

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

As part of the Auditor General's Audit of Accounts, it was identified that significant improvements had been made in the quality, control, standard and timeliness of finances between 2016/17 to 2020/21. During 2020-21, Audit Wales examined the financial sustainability of each council in Wales. In Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, it was concluded that the Council has improved financial planning and better-than-expected Welsh Government

settlements mean the Council is better placed to maintain its financial sustainability over the short term, but challenges remain to fully close budget gaps over the medium term.

The results of the 2021 Census may have an impact on the Local Government Settlements moving forward. The changes identified below may mean a reduction in the amount of monies the Council receives as well as having to undertake a review of service planning and provision moving forward following a reduction in the population. Services such as Education for school places, the LDP for housing and Social Services for social care will need to consider how this will impact service provision and funding in future years.

The results of the 2021 Census have identified that Blaenau Gwent has had a decrease in population by 4.2%, making Blaenau Gwent the second smallest population in Wales. Overall Wales has seen an increase of 1.4% in population. Although Blaenau Gwent has then second smallest population it is the sixth most densely populated of Wales 22 local authorities, with 615 residents per square kilometre. The population has continued to age. In Blaenau Gwent one in five people (20.3%) were aged 65 years and over on Census Day in 2021. Across Wales, this was 21.3%, a higher percentage than ever before. The chart shows the percentage change by age between 2011 and 2022 for Blaenau Gwent residents. Over the 10 years in Blaenau Gwent there has been an increase of 9.0% in people aged 65 years and over (17.7% for Wales), a decrease of 7.5% in people aged 15 to 64 years (2.5% for Wales), and a decrease of 5.4% in children aged under 15 years (1.0% for Wales). The Council is working collaboratively with the Office National Statistics to further understand and investigate the information from the 2021 census and what this means for Blaenau Gwent moving forward as more Census data is released.

Before the results of the Census 2021 were available it was already expected that funding will be a challenge over the next 5 years, while demand for services and demographic pressures continues to increase. Based upon the assumptions in the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the cost pressures identified (before the 2021 Census), a budget gap of £21m over the next 5 years is forecast as follows:

MTFS Budget Gap					
2022/2023 £m	2023/2024 £m	2024/2025 £m	2025/2026 £m	2026/2027 £m	Total £m
6.7	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	20.7

The Council's ability to progress a number of the Strategic Business Reviews has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. An update on the overall current financial assessment towards the budget gap is currently assessed as £6.8m over the period of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) as follows:

	Estimated Achievement			
	2022/2023 £m	2023/2024 £m	2024/2025 £m	2025/2026 & 2026/2027 £m
Strategic Business Reviews	2.69	1.18	1.26	0.8

Based on the current estimated achievement from the Strategic Business Reviews compared to the budget gap identified in the MTFS, there is a residual budget gap as follows:

	2022/2023 £m	2023/2024 £m	2024/2025 £m	2025/2026 & 2026/2027 £m
Residual Budget Gap	4.00	2.36	2.29	2.7

There is a potential risk that the current Strategic Business reviews do not identify sufficient financial benefits to 'Bridge the Gap' in the medium to long term. Additional or alternative proposals will therefore be required to mitigate the possible residual funding gaps in future years. Also, in 2022 the Council has seen price increases for

fuel and energy which in turn have a 'knock on' impact on other goods and commodities purchased by the Council. This, alongside other cost pressures being seen by the Council will need to be planned and managed accordingly.

Are the governance arrangements of the Council effective for securing continuous improvement?

The Audit Wales Annual Audit Summary of the Council 2021 did not identify any substantial issues and the report highlighted some strengths in the way the Council had utilised data to inform its response to the Covid 19 pandemic and support the recovery plan process. The report also mentioned the improved financial planning within the Council.

As a Council we are working towards our ambition of becoming commercially minded. As part of this a Commercial Strategy 2020/25 has been developed which looks to identify commercial approaches and highlight the conditions required for the Council to behave as a commercial organisation. This is written within the context of maintaining the Council's core purpose to provide public services delivering social value. There are a number of related strategies and programmes that contribute to the delivery of our Commercial Strategy and ambitions. These are:

- A Communications Strategy, 2020 – 2025;
- A Digital and Customer transformation programme; and
- The Workforce Strategy.

In addition to the supporting strategies and programmes highlighted above there are 5 specifically commercial ambitions:

- Commissioning and Procurement;
- Developing an investment Portfolio;
- Creating true commercial activities – profit and loss;
- Commercial and Entrepreneurial Culture;
- Contract and Supplier Management.

These will be driven by the Commercial Section but clearly involve all services, suppliers and partners. The building of knowledge, skills and capacity in the commercial approach will be key for us moving forward.

Another area of focus for the us is becoming digitally minded, providing a robust digital infrastructure and being innovative in our digital endeavours. An ICT Roadmap and Digital Solutions process has been established which looks to create long term, sustainable and relevant ICT infrastructure throughout the Council and its services including Office 365 and a review of the current software. The delivery of these processes have been recognised externally.

Owing to the global supply issues with ICT, as well as significant price increases, this is a risk to the Council financially and also to some suppliers who are experiencing financial difficulties. This situation will be monitored moving forward to assess impact.

The Council is committed to equalities, and this is evidenced through its delivery of the Blaenau Gwent Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) 2020/24. The SEP aims to put fairness and equality at the heart of everything the Council does and this is central to maximising well-being outcomes for residents, local communities, staff and visitors, now and in the future. As public service providers it is recognised that there is a key role to play in making a real difference to people's lives. Therefore, the Council will continue to strive to be a 'fair and equitable' organisation as outlined in the Corporate Plan 2018-22.

Safeguarding the most vulnerable people in the community continues to be a top priority for the Council. Audit Wales are currently undertaking a review of the Council's safeguarding arrangements, with a particular focus on the

activity being undertaken corporately. The review is still ongoing but a great deal of work has progressed within the Council with regards to safeguarding over the past few years. Safeguarding is recognised corporately as being everybody's responsibility. The Safeguarding Policy has recently been updated. As part of this the Council has identified a safeguarding lead officer from each directorate who meet regularly to review activity, data and processes with regards to safeguarding. Safeguarding is on the front page of the Council's website and online awareness training is provided to all Council staff. Volunteers and contractors are provided with a copy of the Council's corporate safeguarding policy and procedures. To show its strategic importance, safeguarding has been included within the leadership development model as well as being a key feature of all officer inductions.

Self evaluation is a key aspect of review and learning undertaken across the Council. As well as having an approach corporately, the Education Directorate also undertakes a self evaluation process. The Self Evaluation Report (SER) is developed to secure ongoing improvement in educational outcomes and effectiveness of provision. The findings from the SER are reflected as actions for improvement in the Directorate's Business Plans at Directorate, Service and Team levels. Effective self-evaluation means that the Directorate remains focussed on improving the right areas of work.

Future Actions and Areas for Development

The self-assessment report must set out conclusions as to the extent to which the council met the performance requirements during that financial year, and any actions it will take, or has already taken, to increase the extent to which it will meet the performance requirements.

Through the self-assessment, the Council has identified how well it is performing and what can be done to do better. In order to achieve this, the Council has developed an action plan which highlights the areas from the self-assessment where the Council has identified that improvements or further work is needed.

The actions will be monitored through the year as part of the council's performance management arrangements. The next self-assessment report will also include an assessment of the progress made on these actions.

Section	Theme	Improvement Required	Action	Lead
Overall Corporate Self-assessment Conclusion	Governance	Implement the Audit Wales recommendation with regards to Silent Valley Waste Services Ltd.	Develop a business case for the future of Silent Valley to be brought back under the remit of the Local Authority.	Commercial Services
			Undertake a review of the governance and oversight arrangements of companies in which the Council has an interest.	Corporate Services
	Workforce	Capacity concerns across service areas.	Address the staffing needs including recruitment and retention in services across the Council	Organisational Development
			Implement the strategy devised to consider short, medium and longer-term solutions to the workforce including the consideration to collaborate on a regional basis.	
	Financial	Uncertainty of the economic impact of: Covid-19; the exit from the European Union; and WG future financial settlements.	Continued financial monitoring and reporting through the Council's democratic process.	Resources
			Identify strategic business reviews to mitigate the possible residual funding gaps in future years.	Council
	Finance	The results of the 2021 Census may impact Local Government Settlements moving forward.	Consider the Census results when planning future budget settlements and service provision.	Council

Section	Theme	Improvement Required	Action	Lead
Overall Corporate Self-assessment Conclusion Continued...	Governance	Implementation of Strategies and Plans	Continue to monitor and implement Strategies and Plans identified throughout the self-assessment via the business planning process	All relevant leads
	COVID 19	Audit Wales have identified that the most significant risk facing councils during 2021-22 continues to be the COVID-19 pandemic and its recovery	Continue to monitor and implement the COVID 19 Recovery and Renewal Plans via the business planning process.	All relevant leads
Protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure to benefit our communities	Finance	The budget monitoring in Community Services is robust but needs to reflect longer term planning.	Community Services to work closely with Resources to consider how medium term financial resilience can be strengthened.	Community Services and Resources
	Performance	Achievement of the 70% recycling target by 2024/25.	Actions within Business Plan	Community Services
	Governance	Community Services to share good practice throughout the directorate and across the Council.	Technical Services Income Generation Model to be presented to Wider CLT Reinstate Community Services Performance Reports	Community Services Wider CLT Corporate Performance Team
Support a fairer sustainable economy and community	Education	Higher levels of language acquisition and reading in our very young children in the early years is required.	This will feature in the recovery programme from COVID as we 'build back better' in line with Curriculum for Wales Reform	Education
	Education	Improve attainment of eFSM pupils and particularly our more-able pupils in the early years and throughout education	Identified within the business plan	Education
	Education	Improve school attendance in both primary and secondary sectors	Identified within the business plan	Education
	Education	Improve progress between Key Stage 3 and 4, particularly in English, Maths and Science	Identified within the business plan	Education
	Education	Continue the work with Schools Causing Concern	Identified within the business plan	Education
	Planning	Welsh Government require for a revision to the Delivery Agreement to be undertaken and approved by them.	Undertake a revision of the Delivery Agreement	Planning

Section	Theme	Improvement Required	Action	Lead
To enable people to maximise their independence develop solutions and take an active role in their communities	Workforce	Address the workforce pressures being seen locally and nationally, particularly in provider services and domiciliary care.	Work with the GSCG and TCG to alleviate pressures in both the short and long term. Work to establish the development of a Strategic Workforce Plan to support capacity issues across the Council.	Social Services OD Corporate Leadership Team
An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services we know matter to our communities	Communications	Implement the findings of the Council's Communication function	Embed the recommendations via the Communications Working Group	Commercial Services
	Commercial	Identifying capacity across the organisation to support the user design approach.	The Council to consider where the user design approach is required and ensure staff support the process.	Commercial Services
	Workforce	Gender Pay Gap – a review of the current data is to be undertaken in conjunction with the Workforce Strategy.	Identify actions/measures to further address the gender pay differences as part of existing Equality plans.	Governance OD
	Health	Undertake data analysis identify key health inequalities across Gwent, including the impacts of COVID 19.	The Gwent Well-being Plan to be informed by the data and develop appropriate actions for implementation to tackle health inequalities.	Governance
Well-being Goals	Financial	Maintain accurate records of all assets.	Identify the cause of the incorrect values in the fixed asset register and correct any values affected by the issue.	Resources
7 Corporate Planning Areas	Workforce	Embed agile working	Development of a Council Policy to support an aging workforce. Undertake a review of the agile working policy and council property, including the establishment of a staff survey.	OD
	Commercial	Supporting the Council with its commercial developments	The Council needs to undertake a review of its Commercial function and what it feels needs to be prioritised in this area moving forward. Develop an Investment Framework, in partnership with CIPFA, for approval at Council.	CLT Commercial Team

Section	Theme	Improvement Required	Action	Lead
7 Corporate Planning Areas continued	Governance	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.	Consider the development of a delivery plan for using data effectively and improve the consistency of performance reporting across the Council.	CLT All Service Areas Governance
	Customer	Further strengthen the Community Hub model.	Monitor the impact of Universal Credit on residents and identify what other support is available. Develop a Customer Services Strategy to continue the support provided to the customer and doing this in the right way.	Commercial
Sustainable Development Principles	Long Term	The Energy Prospectus will contribute towards the target of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2030.	Implementation of the Energy Prospectus	Regeneration
	Prevention	The activity of the Community Hubs to date is shown in the narrative.	Continue to review and further develop the Community Hub	Commercial
	Prevention	Establish Town Centre Advisory Boards.	Establish Town Centre advisory Boards across all towns.	Regeneration
	Integration	Examples of integrated working provided as part of narrative.	The Council will continue to work with partners across the Council	Council
	Collaboration	Examples of collaborative working provided as part of narrative.	Continue to work collaboratively with partners and identify further partnership opportunities.	Council
	Involvement	Update and embed the Engagement Strategy.	Continued engagement with various groups including the community, businesses, staff and Trade Unions. Update the Engagement Strategy to reflect areas of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.	Governance