**Overall Progress of the Sustainable Develo****pment Principles**

**Lo****ng term**: the importance of balancing short-term needs with the need to safeguard the ability to also meet long term needs

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

In order to support future Town Centre Regeneration, Placemaking Plans have been produced and progressed, as requested by Welsh Government, enabling the authority to access Placemaking Grant monies in order to provide flexible support for a wide range of projects aimed at rejuvenating town centres.

The Council has a long term aim of developing alternatives for power generation and as part of this Dulas Consultants have carried out a feasibility study to utilise hydro generation to power electric pumps at Silent Valley. The delivery of wind generation projects and hydro generation projects supports long term thinking with regards to fuel consumption.

It is a priority for us to raise the profile of play by improving the quality and equity of play provision throughout the Borough for all our children and young people. To achieve this, we are refurbishing and maintaining existing play provision to acceptable levels and developing new initiatives based on identified need within the Borough. Chartist way play area has been confirmed as needing to be relocated and the contract for this work has been let, meeting with contractor will be held shortly to develop programme of installation.

Significant progress has been made over the past 10 years on improving the Highway network, however, the absence of Welsh Government funding for 2023/24 and the end of Blaenau Gwent Prudential Borrowing Programme has curtailed Capital investments in the highway network. The completion and formal adoption of the Highways Asset Management Plan 2023 - 2028 will support and drive the Authority's approach to maintenance over the next 5 years.

Although it is recognised that evidence to show long term improvement will take time, we know that the work undertaken now to ensure that all children and young people are given the best start in life, will enable them to grow into fruitful adults living a healthy, fulfilling life whilst contributing to society and forming a valuable part of their community. Work demonstrates that we are delivering higher levels of language acquisition and reading across the board, and overall enabling positive outcomes and attainment.

Recruitment and retention difficulties have impacted on services. All directorates have developed a workforce plan for 2022/23 with a detailed action plan to address these issues. In addition, the ongoing work corporately will support directorates to recruit and retain staff by further modernising the Councils approach and marketing the Council as an ‘Employer of Choice’. Whilst the risk remains high, staffing pressures in some services have eased with successful recruitment to vacant roles. In addition, other measures that will support in the longer term include effective workforce and succession planning, the management of sickness absence, and where appropriate working regionally/nationally.

Long term succession planning in respect of sustainability of our services and staff is ongoing and in respect of our social care staff and an Induction Programme was developed and advertised for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW). The first sessions started in June 2022 and continued on a weekly basis. Feedback from the sessions revealed that the cohort of newly qualified social workers found the sessions extremely beneficial and that they felt much more prepared to carry out their roles confidently.

The Strategic Commercial and Commissioning Board has been strengthened to include a clearer focus on how it supports achievement of the ambitions set out in the commercial strategy. Commercial activity is far more evident in the bridging the gap proposals to support the Medium Term Financial Strategy, ranging from third party spend, cost shift for transactions, and more efficient channels. A review of the commercial strategy is planned for the end of the year which will assist in how we target our efforts on areas that need progressing.

**Pre****vention:** how acting to prevent problems occurring or getting worse may help public bodies meet their objectives

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

The Council’s Community Hub model continues to be strengthened with relevant and focussed support provided to the community in the community. The Hubs support those in the community experiencing poverty. Support includes: Universal Credit; discretionary housing payments; Free School Meals and Clothing Grant Applications; and the Winter Support Fund. The table below provides a breakdown of the number of residents supported through the Community Hubs during the period:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Ebbw Vale** | **Tredegar** | **Brynmawr** | **Abertillery** | **Cwm** | **Blaina** | **Llanhilleth** | **Overall** |
| **May**  | 430 | 230 | 129 | 198 | 46 | 63 | 53 | **1149** |
| **June** | 186 | 147 | 87 | 116 | 23 | 23 | 17 | **599** |
| **July** | 205 | 131 | 76 | 80 | 21 | 20 | 19 | **552** |
| **August** | 158 | 129 | 77 | 70 | 7 | 20 | 5 | **466** |
| **September** | 178 | 77 | 53 | 94 | 12 | 17 | 7 | **438** |
| **October** | 161 (approx. 127 unlogged) | 268 | 85 | 133 | 23 | 32 | 15 | **717** |
| **November** | 159 | 118 | 77 | 82 | 14 | 21 | 6 | **477** |
| **December** | 95 | 67 | 49 | 58 | 20 | 6 | 3 | **298** |
| **January** | 168 | 192 | 109 | 98 | 16 | 17 | 9 | **609** |
| **February** | 177 | 208 | 120 | 139 | 11 | 20 | 8 | **683 (759 inc. unlogged fuel)** |
| **March** | 273 | 190 | 204 | 179 | 14 | 23 | 15 | **898** |
| **April** | 162 | 147 | 110 | 124 | 16 | 24 | 12 | **595** |
| **Total** | **2352** | **1904** | **1176** | **1299** | **223** | **286** | **169** | **7481 (exc. unlogged fuel)** |

The Council actively supports the Asylum Dispersal Scheme to provide future families, who have experienced considerable hardship, with the route to a long-term safe haven. It is recognised that there are long-term implications of participation in the Asylum Dispersal Scheme and considerations on services such as education, mental health provision, housing and homelessness. The Scheme helps to prevent vulnerable children and their families from further trauma and suffering in areas of significant conflict and, further, discharging both moral and humanitarian obligations.

Environmental Health responded to 316 Housing Safety/Standards service requests relating to sub-standard Privately Rented Sector accommodation, damp nuisance, Warm Home Nest Inspections, including the approval of 4 New Landlord loans. (total £160k). In addition, Housing Solutions dealt with 9 owner occupier loans (£61,500) and 20 empty property grants (£600,000).

We continue to manage Sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) to deal with stormwater locally (as close its source as possible), to mimic natural drainage and encourage its infiltration, attenuation and passive treatment. All SuDS applications, enquiry responses and inspections are ongoing throughout the borough. Various meetings with developers take place to discuss regulations and options available to developers.

Work to provide good quality education services and local employment opportunities such as Vulnerable Learners Support, Youth Service and Youth Support Services prevent the impacts of poverty and material deprivation from getting worse. The Aspire Shared Apprenticeship Programme has continued 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.

LGBTQ+ support groups for children and young people are still in operation across Blaenau Gwent. The support groups provide appropriate information and the opportunity to speak about feelings, empowering young people to ensure their voice is heard within a safe space.

We always work with a preventative approach, preventing problems from getting worse and continually aiming to improve services. This approach has led to numerous improvements ranging from maintaining our corporate assets such as buildings, roads, bridges etc. to preventing safeguarding issues developing by encouraging everyone with a concern about themselves, a child or adult at risk of abuse or neglect, to report it. Our website has recently been updated making this process as easy as possible.

**Integr****ation**: considering how public bodies’ well-being objectives may impact upon each of the well-being goals, on their other objectives, or on the objectives of other public bodies

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

The authority has worked with its regional school improvement service to strengthen the challenge and support it provides to schools. Education is also working closely with Regeneration and achieving a reduction in the percentage of adults aged 16-24 with no qualifications. Integrated work between Education, Regeneration and the SRS is ensuring that effective digital communication methods and systems are in place for our community to grow. Digital development will provide children and young people with opportunities to learn in these fast advancing digital times that we live in. Internal systems are being updated to move towards more online communication and ICT methods for both new school and existing school settings delivered through our Sustainable Communities for learning / Progress in skills.

We deliver council wide integrated services in respect of safeguarding and have made it everybody’s business by identifying a lead officer from each Council service to ensure that all service areas are working towards the safeguarding agenda.

Integrated work is taking place across the council to develop and monitor the delivery of the Decarbonisation Strategy and the Environment and Biodiversity Strategy, both of which outline responsibilities to support these agendas across all Council services. Through a joined up approach to service delivery the Council will be able to achieve more using less resource. This year saw a refresh of our Climate Group, which is now chaired by our Interim Chief Executive, its core membership also includes our first elected 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.

Integrated work throughout directorates has continued to ensure effective delivery of all services and projects such as work undertaken with Coleg Gwent and the refurbishment of the Monwell Building into a high value engineering centre (HIVE). The £12.5m investment will deliver an Advanced Engineering Centre close to our Blaenau Gwent Learning Zone campus, which will offer high-quality engineering education to equip young people with skills for the future.

**Collab****oration**: acting in collaboration with any other person (or different parts of the body itself) that could help the body meet its well-being objectives

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

The Council is currently in the process of developing new liaison arrangements with each of the four Town and Community Councils (TCCs) from 2023/24. The current Charter of Common Agreement between the Council and each of the four TCCs was last reviewed during 2019. It was refreshed in line with the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015, and The Independent Review on TCCs in Wales published in October 2018, to ensure it remained fit for purpose.

The Charter is designed to build on existing best practice and embrace the shared principles of openness, respect, honesty and the common priority of putting citizens at the centre. It sets out how the Council and each TCC aim to work together towards collective long-term goals in a collaborative, preventative and integrated way, particularly in relation to:

* Ethics;
* Local governance and information;
* Consultation;
* Land use planning;
* Budget setting;
* Practical support; and
* Monitoring and reviewing the Charter.

The Charter contains expectations around the facilitation of quarterly Liaison Committee meetings. These committee meetings help to foster good communication, working relationships, and better joint working for the benefit of local people. In addition to the member Liaison Committee, a regular quarterly officer meeting comprising the four TCC Clerks and Corporate Policy staff also exists to support the partnership working arrangements. Going forward, this meeting will seek to strengthen arrangements for advice and interaction with TCCs and will look to seek support from the Council’s Wider Corporate Leadership Team to ensure all local issues are considered appropriately.

The South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) continues to form relationships with other councils in the region to improve outcomes for children who are placed for adoption. An example of this is working with communication teams to promote adoption within the region to attract adopters.

A Gwent Public Service Board (PSB) has been established, replacing the individual PSBs across Gwent. As part of this, a Joint PSB Scrutiny Committee has been established and is operated by Blaenau Gwent Council. The Gwent PSB has undertaken a regional well-being assessment. This used a wide range of qualitative and quantitative information including data, academic research, evidence, and people’s views to help understand well-being across Gwent communities in order to inform the Gwent Well-being Plan.

A Service Level Agreement is in place between the Council and Rhondda Cynon Taff Council as the Lead Authority for the Shared Prosperity Funding (SPF) within the Cardiff Capital Region. SPF is now available to support projects under the Support for Local Business, People and Skills, and Community and Place themes. Our SPF aim is to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK.

The Employment and Skills Strategy has been produced and will provide opportunities to raise aspirations and support economic growth through partnership working.  It outlines a range of priorities to ensure individuals and businesses have access to the right support in terms of skills and employment.

The Regional Partnership Board (RPB) is in place to manage and develop services to secure strategic planning and partnership working between local authorities and Local Health Boards and to ensure effective services, care and support are in place to best meet the needs of their respective population.

**Invo****lvement**: the importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the well-being goals, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the area which the body serves

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

To gain a wider understanding of how the Council is performing it is important to understand the views of businesses, staff, Trade unions and the local community. This also helps the authority to develop, design and amend services for the future.

Throughout the year there has been a wide range of engagement activity across the Council, this has involved face to face engagement with residents, online surveys, and specific targeted events. To understand the engagement activity across the Local Authority, and to map the type and level of activity being delivered across the organisation, an Engagement Calendar has been developed and is updated and shared across the organisation quarterly.

The calendar also includes the reach of engagement, the result of engagement, any feedback and whether an evaluation was undertaken. The following participation and engagement activities have taken place:

* Public Space Protection Order Survey
* Continuity of Learning Plan Survey
* Childcare and School Hub Survey
* Public Services Board Climate Change Survey
* Universal Free School Meals Survey
* Rights Respect Equalities Survey (x3)
* Operating Model & Agile Working Survey
* Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/27 Survey & Workshop
* Council Budget 2023/24 Survey; online engagement session; in-person community hub events
* Ebbw Vale Sustainable Link Survey; in-person event
* Gwent Well-being Plan Consultation Survey
* A range of Early Years, Parents & Wider Community events and consultations
* Young People Democracy & Voting Registration Events (x4)
* Taxi Licensing Policy Survey
* School Inclusion & Improvement, Partnership Agreement Survey & Visioning Event
* 50+ Resident Group Engagement Event
* Wood Environmental Permit Survey

**Engagement Activity with Citizens**

Throughout the year service areas across the authority hold specific engagement activity to obtain feedback from partners, including members of the community, to help review and develop changes to service delivery. Some of the areas we have involved the community this year include:

Budget Engagement Programme - The programme began in early 2023 following the announcement of the Local Government Settlement by Welsh Government and included indoor events across our four well-being areas held at different times throughout the day, including the evening, to help maximise attendance. The events provided an opportunity for people to find out more information and to speak to Members and Officers. An evening session was also held online via the Microsoft Teams platform. All those attending events were encouraged to participate in a survey which was also shared on social media. The intention of this was to get as many people as possible participating and sharing their views on prioritising council services, setting council tax, and potential saving proposals for now and the future. A total of 3,736 questionnaires 5.5% of the area’s population were completed and returned to the council via the questionnaire portal (Snap). This is the highest level of response received by the Council for a budget engagement survey.

Blaenau Gwent Youth Forum - The youth forum provides opportunities for young people living in Blaenau Gwent to have a voice on issues that impact them, and to become actively involved in local decision making. The forum also helps to develop the skills and experience of young people in the community in a variety of ways, helping to build their confidence, and develop their communication and social skills.

Members of the youth forum are involved in a range of activities including being involved in several pieces of work which has represented Blaenau Gwent at a national level. In 2022, the Blaenau Gwent youth parliament representative attended a 3-day annual conference which included over 200 young people from across the country.

The event provided an opportunity for young people to develop their debating skills by researching specific topics and using persuasive arguments to share their views. In November, the youth parliament representative attended the House of Commons in order to debate on a number of topics. The House of Commons visit involved young people from across the UK and Overseas Territories coming together. Our youth parliament representative provided their views on the cost of living crisis and the impact that it will have on health now and in the future.

Participatory Budgeting - This is a democratic process that enables local people to have direct decision-making power over how public budgets are spent. The overarching aim of Participatory Budgeting is to increase community participation in decisions affecting their lives, and to enable spending decisions that better reflect local needs and address inequity. The community were actively involved in the planning and development of the participatory budgeting event. Members of the group were given training and took part in a series of supported delivery sessions to shape the programme, invite bidders to apply for funding, judge whether applications fit the set criteria, and plan the event. In November 2022, the Council supported the Gwent PSB the programme, ‘Community Voice, Community Choice’. 16 community groups were successfully voted by the public to receive monies to deliver local well-being projects, totalling £127,527.

Complaints and Compliments - Members of the public can have their say through the Councils Complaints and Compliments procedure. Feedback gained through this process helps the authority to understand what has gone wrong, put mechanisms in place to make improvements in order to prevent issues arising again. During the year there has been 161 cases of feedback recorded across the Council. These 161 cases consisted of:

* 133 complaints; and
* 28 compliments.

Of the 133 complaints received 63% were via email and 29% were via phone. The initial response for when a complaint is received is within 3 working days and an outcome with 10 working days. If the complaint is not resolved and progresses to Stage 2, the aim is for resolution within 20 working days but maybe longer if a case is complex. Complainants receive regular updates on the status of their complaint if, for any reason, we are unable to respond to a complaint within the timescales.

130 cases were closed (completed) during the reported period. Of those, just under half (60) were within timescale. 65 were after the timescale but within 3 months and 5 were after 3 months but within 6 months. None took longer than 6 months.

Engagement Activity with Businesses - The Council continues to engage with the business community through channels such as the ‘Business Hub’, the Enterprise Board and through various town centre business forums.

Businesses have had an active role in the development of Town Centre Placemaking Delivery Plans which aim to establish a sustainable future for town centres across the borough. Feedback was provided on key challenges being faced, potential opportunities, and what they would like to see happen to town centres in the future. Progress will continue in the implementation and development of these plans throughout the upcoming year and the Council will continue to engage with businesses through this process.

The Council will also relaunch the Enterprise Facilitation Project which will be a free, informal, and confidential service for aspiring entrepreneurs and business owners within Blaenau Gwent. The Enterprise team will support an effective business networking forum for start-up, new and small businesses in Blaenau Gwent.

Engagement with Staff - The Council recognises the critical need to communicate and engage staff in service delivery, transformation, change, new commercial thinking and financial efficiency. This is currently undertaken through a number of methods: regular one to one performance coaching; annual performance reviews; team, staff and management meetings; a regular newsletter from the Chief Executive; a staff newsletter; managers brief; engagement in financial planning; a dedicated engagement and consultation framework with the Trade Unions; and bi-annual staff surveys. A recent example of this is through the engagement activity with staff to gain their views on a new operating model and agile working.

Trade Unions - The Council has in place a Trade Union Facilities Agreement which has recently been reviewed and updated. The review included the granting of more temporary facilities time to the Trade Union as part of the Council’s commitment to work in social partnership with them.  We also have a calendar set annually for formal engagement of the Trade Unions with Directorates, Corporate Management Team, and Cabinet.  There is also a Corporate Health and Safety group held with the Trade Unions.

Council Committee Meetings - All Council meetings can be accessed through the Council website. The Council website also provides an opportunity to view Council documents including view past meetings, past agenda items and Committee work programmes. Through the revised Engagement and Participation Strategy systems will be enhanced and improved to make it easier for communities to be involved in the democratic process of the Council. Improvements will also be made to promote awareness amongst local people of how to become an Elected Member.

Engagement and Participation Strategy - Although the Council provides a variety of opportunities for people to get involved, we know that we can do better, and this will be a priority for the organisation for the year ahead through the development of our revised Engagement and Participation Strategy. The revised Engagement and Participation strategy will provide a more coordinated approach to engagement and will align with other strategic documents that are currently being developed including our customer services and digital strategy. It will also look at methods to improve engagement with partners including businesses, communities, staff and Trade Unions. The Engagement and Participation Strategy will be completed in 2024 with an action plan and monitoring framework to ensure that outcome focussed change is being delivered.