

Well-being Objective 1

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

How well are we doing?

Good progress has been made against Well-being Objective 1, particularly in education outcomes, reduced exclusions, youth engagement, STEM development and local apprenticeship opportunities through Aspire. However, challenges remain around attendance, specialist provision, support for children looked after, school finances and the future of employability funding. A continued focus will be needed on vulnerable learners, financial sustainability and clear pathways into skills, training and employment.

What we said we would do in our 2024/25 Self-Assessment	What we achieved
Schools to produce deficit reduction plans identifying financial efficiencies and their impact	The Local Authority has worked closely with schools to develop robust deficit recovery plans. While school finances remain challenging, with balances deteriorating from a £1.279 million deficit in 2024/25 to a £2.965 million deficit in 2025/26 across 15 schools, this is still significantly better than the £4M deficit forecast by the end of March 2026.
Strengthen support for families considering or choosing Elective Home Education by providing timely advice, guidance and school-based options to help them make informed decisions and keep children in education settings where appropriate.	Electively Home Educated (EHE) pupil numbers have increased from 229 to 286. Supporting families remains a key priority, with a renewed emphasis on providing early intervention and timely support to help families make informed decisions and access appropriate educational opportunities.
Continue to support the 2 schools in an Estyn category, The River Centre and Abertillery Learning Community	The River Centre has been removed from an Estyn category, Abertillery Learning Community has made significant progress against its Estyn recommendations.
Prioritise Key Stage 4 performance where declines have been identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key Stage 4 performance was mixed across the measures reported.• A–A* performance increased in 3 of the 4 mainstream schools. The Blaenau Gwent 5A*–A average increased by 2.1 percentage points to 11.5%, compared with the Welsh average of 18.1%.• Capped 9 Point Score: performance increased in 3 of the 4 mainstream schools. The Blaenau Gwent average increased by 8.6 points to 342.9, compared with the Welsh average of 354.3.• Literacy Measure: performance increased in 3 of the 4 mainstream schools but decreased in 1 school. Overall, the average decreased by 0.6 points to 35.7, compared with the Welsh average of 38.6.• Numeracy Measure: performance increased in 2 of the 4 mainstream schools. The average increased by 0.2 points to 33.6, compared with the Welsh average of 36.0. Science Measure: performance increased in 3 of the 4 mainstream schools. The Blaenau Gwent average increased by 0.5 points to 33.7, compared with the Welsh average of 35.8.

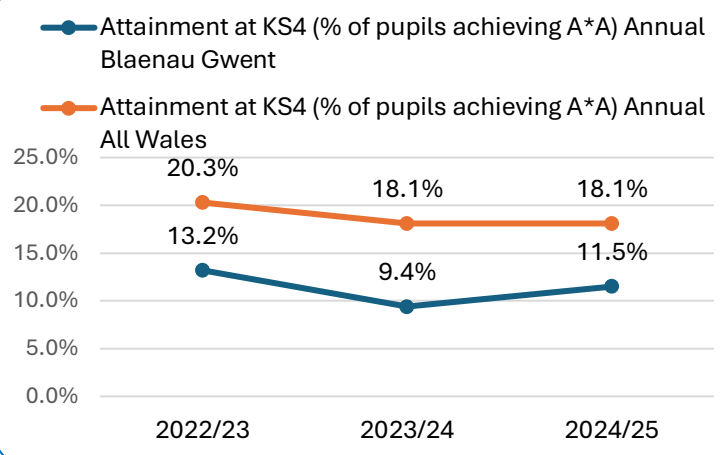
Develop a Council Property Strategy and set performance targets through the Asset Management Plan.

A Property Strategy and Strategic Asset Management Plan are being developed, supported by a new corporate asset group.

How do we know?

Raising attainment within our schools

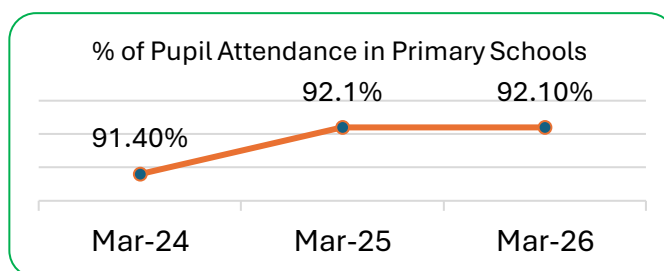
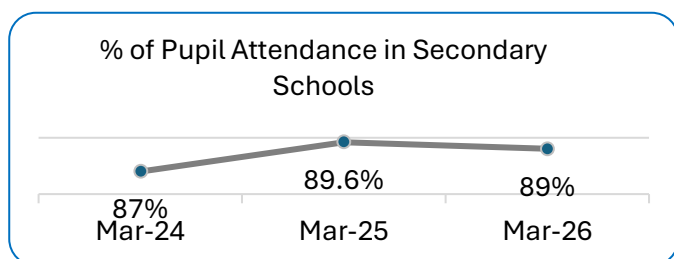
The percentage of pupils achieving A* to A grades improved by 2.1 percentage points between 2023/24 and 2024/25. This improvement was mainly because one school performed significantly better, exceeding the average for similar schools by 6.6 percentage points. Girls' results also improved; however this further widened the existing gap between girls' and boys' performance in Blaenau Gwent.



Increasing Pupil Attendance

School attendance has improved in both primary and secondary schools, broadly reflecting national trends.

Primary attendance increased from 91.4% in March 2024 to 92.1% in March 2025 and remained at this level in March 2026. While performance has been maintained, attendance remains below the 2024 level but declined by 0.6 percentage points in the latest year and remains two percentage points below target requiring continued focus on attendance practice, early intervention and support for schools, learners and families.



Secondary attendance improved from 87% in March 2024 to 89.6% in March 2025, before reducing to 89% in March 2026. This is the highest improvement in secondary attendance rates in Wales at this point. However, performance remains below our ambitious 91% target, so continued support is needed to address barriers to attendance and sustain

improvement.

Fixed-term exclusions and exclusion days have decreased overall, including in secondary, primary and special schools. Special school exclusions relate to one school only. Persistent disruptive behaviour remains the most common reason for exclusion, while verbal abuse or threatening behaviour towards adult's accounts for the greatest loss of learning time. The Education Welfare Service continues to work with schools to strengthen early intervention and targeted support.

Data analysis	Number of Exclusions	Days of Exclusion	Permanent Exclusions
Secondary	58	77	1
Primary	-89	-77.5	0
Special Schools	-34	-8.5	0
Increase/Decrease (-)	-65	-9	1

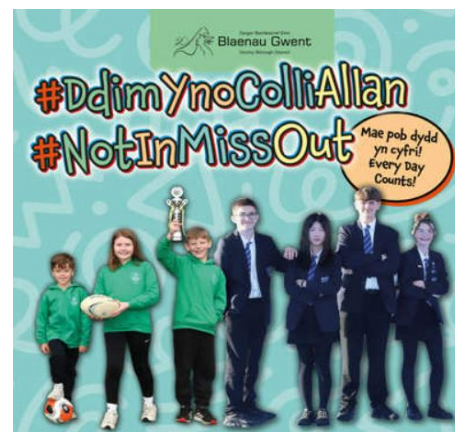
Note – Exclusion Data can include learners excluded more than once

Improving attendance remains a core priority for the Education Directorate. The Council's [#NotInMissOut](#) campaign promotes the importance of good attendance and signposts families to support.

The attendance pathway, introduced in September 2023, has supported improved attendance in many schools where fully implemented. The Education Welfare Team will continue to work with schools and families through the pathway and planned support activity where attendance concerns are identified.

Schools causing concern

During 2025/26, the Council maintained oversight of school performance through evidence, professional discussion and targeted support, including the Local Authority School Improvement Service and Team Around the School approach. Strengthened arrangements improved monitoring and follow-up, with enhanced support for schools in Estyn categories, including an Accelerated Improvement Board at Abertillery Learning Community. Progress was evident, with All Saints Primary and Bryn Bach Primary removed from Estyn review and the River [Centre](#) removed from special measures. No schools now remain in Estyn review, although one school continues to require significant improvement, highlighting the need for continued targeted support to sustain progress.



Entitlement to Free School Meals (eFSM)

Blaenau Gwent has consistently had among the highest proportions of pupils entitled to free school meals compared with other local authorities in Wales. An anomaly in the process meant that statuses were being recorded in a way that artificially inflated the numbers in 2020/21 and 2021/22, with numbers now returning to pre-Covid levels.

Indicator	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Entitlement to FSM (Pupils aged 5 – 15)	25.5%	31.4%	33.3%	24.6%	24.1%	25.3%	26.2%
Entitlement to FSM (All pupils)	23.7%	28.4%	30.3%	22.3%	21.9%	23.2%	23.2%

Note – 2025/26 figures were unverified at the time of reporting.

Current levels of pupils entitled to FSM rank Blaenau Gwent as the sixth highest local authority in Wales. This appears to conflict with other measures of deprivation across Blaenau Gwent, compared with other local authorities, where levels of deprivation are higher.

Sharing free school uniform and essentials within local communities

Through the Deal and Mission 2 activity, families can donate and access pre-loved school uniform and essential items through one local platform. This helps reduce costs, keeps usable items in circulation, and supports children to arrive at school equipped and ready to learn. Sharing and reusing items locally also helps reduce waste, tackle inequality and strengthen community connections.



Electively Home-Educated Pupils

The number of children who are EHE in Blaenau Gwent has continued to increase during 2025/26. There are currently 286 pupils recorded on the EHE database, compared with 229 at the same point last year, showing an increase of 24.9%. This includes 33 pupils from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community. The Education Welfare Service continues to support families and monitor arrangements, with a focus on maintaining appropriate contact and ensuring visits increase in line with the growing number of pupils. This remains an area requiring continued oversight to ensure children and families receive the right support and that the Council maintains a clear understanding of this changing pattern of education.

Education and Children Looked After (CLA)

At the end of March 2026, 202 children were looked after by the Local Authority, including 151 of statutory school age at the end of the 2024/25 academic year, an increase from 141 the previous year. Most children looked after continue to be educated in Blaenau Gwent mainstream schools, although the number accessing Local Authority maintained special school placements has continued to rise, from 14 in 2023/24 to 24 in 2024/25. A small number attend independent settings outside Blaenau Gwent.

School stability remains a key consideration when matching children to placements, with transport provided where needed and processes in place to minimise delays where school moves are unavoidable. However, 22 children looked after experienced at least one non-transitional school move during 2024/25, compared with 10 in the previous year.

Almost all learners achieved recognised qualifications at the end of statutory education, with the majority progressing into post-16 education and/or training. Personal Education Plan timelines also improved significantly, with 97% initiated within statutory timescales, compared with 67% the previous year; only one plan was delayed due to the complexity and timing of an Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Child entering care late in the academic year.

Additional Learning Needs (ALN) 0-25

During 2025/26, good progress has been made in implementing ALN reform. All former statements of Special Educational Needs have been transferred to Individual Development Plans, statutory reviews were completed on time, and agreed provision was put in place by schools. Schools are following statutory processes, queries have been managed effectively, and there were no pending tribunal cases at the point of reporting, although some delays remain due to staff absence and capacity pressures.



Guidance, training and updated processes have strengthened support across schools, early years, post-16 education, children looked after, electively home-educated learners and those educated outside school. Transition, inclusion and reintegration planning have also improved, supported by reviews of specialist provision, statutory panel activity and the new post-16 provision at Pen-y-Cwm School's Vision [House](#). Further work will focus on maintaining ALN guidance and induction, strengthening health and early years collaboration, and improving the timeliness of post-16 transition planning and record transfers.

Education Finance

The Council allocated £60.979 million through the Individual Schools Budget in 2025/26, with a further £283,537 supporting regional school improvement arrangements.

School finances remain under significant pressure. Overall balances deteriorated from a £1.279 million deficit in 2024/25 to a £2.965 million deficit in 2025/26, with 15 schools reporting deficit balances. Although this was lower than the forecast cumulative deficit of £4 million by the end of March 2026, the year-on-year deterioration remains substantial.

The Council has worked with schools to develop deficit recovery plans, identify sustainable efficiencies and strengthen financial monitoring. These arrangements may have contributed to the position being around £1 million lower than forecast; however, further recovery is required. Several schools are unable to set balanced budgets for 2026/27, and there remains a significant risk that overall balances will deteriorate further by March 2027. Recovery plans will continue to be subject to senior officer scrutiny and ongoing monitoring through the Medium-Term Financial Strategy

Youth Service

Blaenau Gwent Youth Service continued to provide high-quality universal, targeted and specialist support for young people aged 11–25, helping them develop skills, improve well-being, participate in their communities and manage key transitions. During 2025/26, the service engaged 2,032 members, reaching 19% of the local youth population. While membership reduced due to the temporary closure of two youth centres for refurbishment, overall contacts increased by 22% to 29,917, and both centres have since reopened with improved facilities.

Young people remained central to service development, with feedback from over 300 young people shaping priorities around well-being, life skills, inclusion, residential opportunities and safe social spaces. Partnership working also strengthened provision, including Welsh language opportunities and international participation through the Street Child World Cup in Mexico.



Prevention and targeted support remained key strengths. More than 190 young people were reviewed through early identification arrangements, all 61 young people initially unknown to services were contacted, and 97% progressed into education, employment or training. The EOTAS pilot also delivered positive outcomes, supporting 21 young people, with 95% returning to mainstream education, average attendance of 90%, and improved well-being for 80% of participants. The NEET figure is 2.6% (16 young people), which is above the Welsh average of 2.1%, and the need to sustain engagement following the reopening of youth centres.

The Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) Community Education Service

The GRT Community Education Service continues to provide targeted support for children, young people and families, working with schools, families and the Education Welfare Service to support attendance, learning and inclusion. Attendance improved from 76.22% in 2024/25 to 77.31% in 2025/26, and literacy support has helped many learners improve their reading and spelling. The



service also provides tailored one-to-one and small group support, including literacy and vocational learning for some secondary-age electively home-educated learners. A GRT Padlet has also been developed to help schools better understand GRT culture, promote inclusion and strengthen practice.

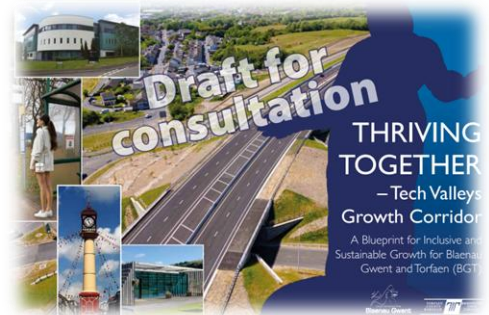
Blueprint for Growth

The joint Blueprint for [Growth](#) sets out a long-term approach to support economic growth across Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen by investing in people, places and businesses. It aims to create better conditions for local businesses, attract new opportunities, support good-quality jobs, and respond to

challenges such as low job density, out-commuting, and health and skills inequalities.

The Blueprint focuses on four areas: **Investment, Placemaking, Planning and Property**, covering business growth, town centres, connectivity, skills, land and buildings.

Scrutiny Committee considered the Blueprint in March [2026](#) and welcomed its ambition and focus on involving local people. Public engagement, consultation and an annual delivery plan will follow to help turn the vision into action.



Replacement LDP (RLDP)

In March 2026, the Council agreed to move from preparing its own RLDP to developing a joint plan with Torfaen County Borough Council. Following Ministerial approval, the previous plan was formally withdrawn, and work began on the Joint Local Development Plan, including governance, consultation, data and privacy arrangements. The focus is now on building the evidence base and delivery arrangements, including the Blaenau Gwent Growth Study and a shared consultation system. Joint working with Torfaen is now embedded, supporting a more consistent and long-term approach to land use, housing, infrastructure and economic planning up to 2041.

High Value Engineering (HiVE) Site (Hi-Tech Post 16 Education Facility) Blaenau Gwent Council – STEM Facilitation Project

The official opening of the HiVE STEM [Centre](#) marked an important milestone for STEM education in Blaenau Gwent. During 2025/26, it developed as a local hub connecting schools, employers and education providers, helping pupils access high-quality STEM experiences, employer links and clearer pathways into apprenticeships, higher education, training and employment. Future work will focus on raising awareness of STEM careers, supporting teacher development and continuing STEM League activity.



Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)

Ebbw Fawr Learning Community has become the first secondary campus in Blaenau Gwent to be named STEM School of the Year. The award recognises its work to expand STEM opportunities through hands-on learning, career-focused activities and skills development. STEM is now embedded across school life, supported by a dedicated STEM space, specialist equipment and a wide range of activities and clubs, with more girls taking part than ever before. The full story can be found [here](#).

Placemaking Plans

Positive progress has been made in delivering placemaking plans across Blaenau Gwent's town centres, with work moving from planning into delivery. Activity has focused on bringing empty and underused buildings back into use, improving key sites and public spaces, supporting businesses and events, and developing longer-term regeneration opportunities.

- **Ebbw Vale:** progress continues on the Northern Gateway, including acquisition and due diligence for key sites, temporary arrangements for the outdoor market, feasibility work at Station Square and future opportunities for the former Civic Centre site.
- **Tredeggar:** options are being developed for the Gwent Shopping Centre following Council acquisition, alongside the recommenced restoration of the former NCB Building and wider town centre improvements.
- **Brynmawr:** the first Food Festival increased footfall, façade improvements and cleansing have enhanced the town centre, and future use of the former Stagecoach Depot is being explored.
- **Abertillery:** the former Trinity Chapel has been brought back into use as a library and adult education facility, with increased membership and footfall, while further projects are progressing at Castle Street Library, Abertillery Institute and through the community-led Abertillery Town Boost.

Wider town centre activity has also supported regeneration, including £400,000 through the Transforming Towns programme, over 40 events in the last two years, shop local campaigns, murals, trails and pop-up activity. The Placemaking Wales Charter continues to guide the Council's approach, with further food festivals planned for 2026/27. The emerging Blueprint for Growth will provide a broader framework linking town centre renewal with economic growth, skills, transport, housing and infrastructure across Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen.

Town Boost

Through the Deal and Mission 4 activity, Town Boost brings residents, businesses and council teams together to improve local places through shared action and ownership. The first pilot in Somerset Street, Abertillery, delivered visible town-centre improvements, and learning from this will be used to extend the model to other town-centre locations.



Pride in Place Neighbourhood Fund

Blaenau Gwent has been identified to receive up to £20 million over 10 years through the UK Government's Pride in Place Neighbourhood Fund. Following Scrutiny and Cabinet approval in January 2026, the Sirhowy Valley was selected as the priority area, based on evidence of deprivation, health, employment and community safety need.

Work is now focused on establishing the foundations for long-term, community-led investment, including appointing an independent Board Chair, developing governance arrangements, recruiting a representative Neighbourhood Board and commissioning communications and marketing activity to raise awareness and encourage participation across Tredeggar and the Sirhowy Valley.

The Board and engagement activity will support community consultation and co-design in autumn 2026, ensuring local people help shape priorities and the future investment plan. Potential investment themes include town centres, housing, heritage, health and well-being, transport, community safety, skills, employment and wider community infrastructure.

Pride in Place Impact Fund

In addition to the long-term Neighbourhood Fund, Blaenau Gwent has secured £1.5 million through the Pride in Place Impact Fund to deliver visible improvements, strengthen communities and build local pride ahead of the wider investment programme.

The funding will support three key objectives:

1. **Stronger Communities and Community Capacity** will be delivered through a GAVO community grants programme, supporting grassroots projects, local initiatives and community organisations to strengthen well-being, resilience, civic participation and local leadership.
2. **Health, Well-being and Community Spaces** includes a £750,000 investment in Brynmawr Welfare Park to improve play and leisure facilities, support physical activity and create more inclusive spaces for children, young people and families.
3. **Towns Together** will support local town centre initiatives in Brynmawr, Blaina and Nantyglo, encouraging community participation, collaboration and pride in place.

Across all objectives, projects will be shaped through engagement with residents, partners, elected members and community representatives to ensure investment is evidence-led, locally supported and aligned with wider regeneration and community development priorities.

Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF)

Following the end of the UK SPF programme, the Council is reviewing project impact, capturing learning and considering how future employability and skills support can align with local need and new funding opportunities. While programmes such as Trailblazer and potential Local Growth Fund investment offer opportunities, they do not fully replace previous SPF activity. The focus is therefore on managing the transition carefully, identifying gaps, working with partners to maintain accessible support, and developing a longer-term approach to employability and skills growth across Blaenau Gwent.

Deal and Mission 4 - Public Artwork and Murals

Community-shaped murals are helping bring local identity, history and pride into public spaces across Ebbw Vale, Brynmawr, Tredegar and Blaina. Designed with residents and local groups, they support pride, belonging, connection and wider placemaking ambitions, with further community-led design planned for future locations.



Aspire Apprenticeship Programme

The Aspire Programme continued to support local people into employment and training while helping the Council and local employers develop skills in key service areas and sectors. New apprenticeships were progressed in areas including licensing, HGV mechanics, business administration, carpentry, care and countryside services. Since it began, Aspire has supported over 200 local apprentices, with a further 150 supported through related partnership programmes. In 2025/26 celebrated its 10th [year](#) and supported 15 internal and 40 external apprentices across manufacturing and engineering. The programme gained national recognition when the Shared Apprenticeship Programme won the Collaboration and Partnership Award at the IESA Awards with Merthyr Tydfil.



Trailblazer Programme

The Trailblazer [Programme](#) supports economically inactive residents to move closer to work through personalised help for people facing barriers such as disability, health conditions, caring responsibilities or low confidence. During 2025/26, it continued to support participants into employment, skills and training opportunities, with Blaenau Gwent's model recognised nationally and highlighted as good practice.



Since its launch, the programme has supported 240 participants with mental and physical well-being; 52 into community groups; 71 with life skills; 28 to gain qualifications; 45 into volunteering; 18 into work experience; and 11 into paid work trials. Future delivery will be strengthened through the Access Elemental System, improving monitoring and tracking of participant outcomes.

(Picture: Professor Isabel Oliver, chief medical officer visiting trailblazer activity)

Council Property and Assets

The Council will continue to maximise the efficient use of its remaining corporate assets, including the General Office, Energy Centre, ViTCC and Blaina ICC, while continuing to develop its hybrid working model to support the Medium-Term Financial Plan and Workforce Strategy.

The Council will also continue to manage its industrial assets to support local businesses, employment and wider economic growth. The Business and Innovation, Estates and Technical Services teams will work together to improve these assets, increase occupation and make best use of available space.

A new Property Strategy is being developed to align property decisions with the Council's priorities and set annual performance targets through the Asset Management Plan. A Corporate Property and Asset Management Group has also been established to review accommodation needs, building status, cost-saving opportunities and community use of buildings, including longer-term leases and Community Asset Transfers.

The focus moving forward will be on supporting community groups through the CAT process to support long-term sustainability. A draft Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMP) is being prepared for consideration, including plans to review and strengthen CAT policy and monitoring.

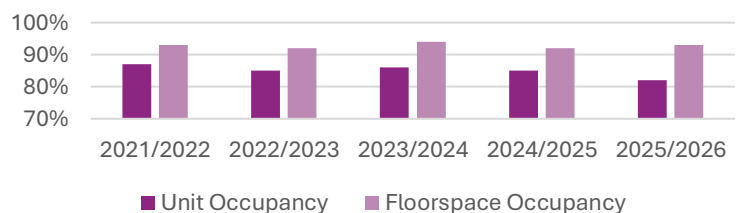
Industrial Portfolio

The Council's industrial portfolio provides a range of workspace to support businesses to start, grow and invest in Blaenau Gwent. This includes co-working and office space, small starter units and larger industrial premises, with available accommodation promoted through the Blaenau Gwent Business Hub and wider commercial market.

In 2025/26, the portfolio included 15 industrial estates and 193 lettable units, accommodating 114 businesses and supporting more than 800 jobs. Occupancy remained strong, with 83% of units occupied and 92% of floorspace let, showing continued demand for larger industrial accommodation.

External funding was also secured to refurbish vacant units and deliver wider improvement works, including roof and cladding upgrades from 2026/27. This will help bring more space back into use, improve the quality and sustainability of employment sites, and support business retention, investment and future growth.

Industrial Portfolio Occupancy Trends (Units and Floorspace) 2021/22 to 2025/26



Key Challenges and Actions for 2026/27

- **Strengthen financial recovery and improve attendance across schools**, with targeted action to reduce the £2.965 million deficit across 15 schools and improve attendance towards the 93% primary and 91% secondary targets.
- **Strengthen support for children looked after to improve school stability**, with a focus on reducing non-transitional school moves and monitoring the rise in special school placements.
- **Maintain accessible employability and youth progression support**, following the end of Shared Prosperity Fund activity, to reduce the NEET rate from 2.6% and sustain youth engagement.
- **Move regeneration, property and business space plans into delivery**, including the Blueprint for Growth, Joint Local Development Plan and asset plans, while improving use of industrial units and increasing occupancy from the current 83%.
- **Community Asset Transfers**, work to be undertaken to work more collaboratively across Blaenau Gwent service areas and also with Torfaen Council.