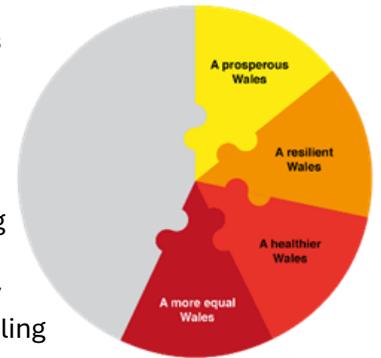


Well-being Objective 1

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

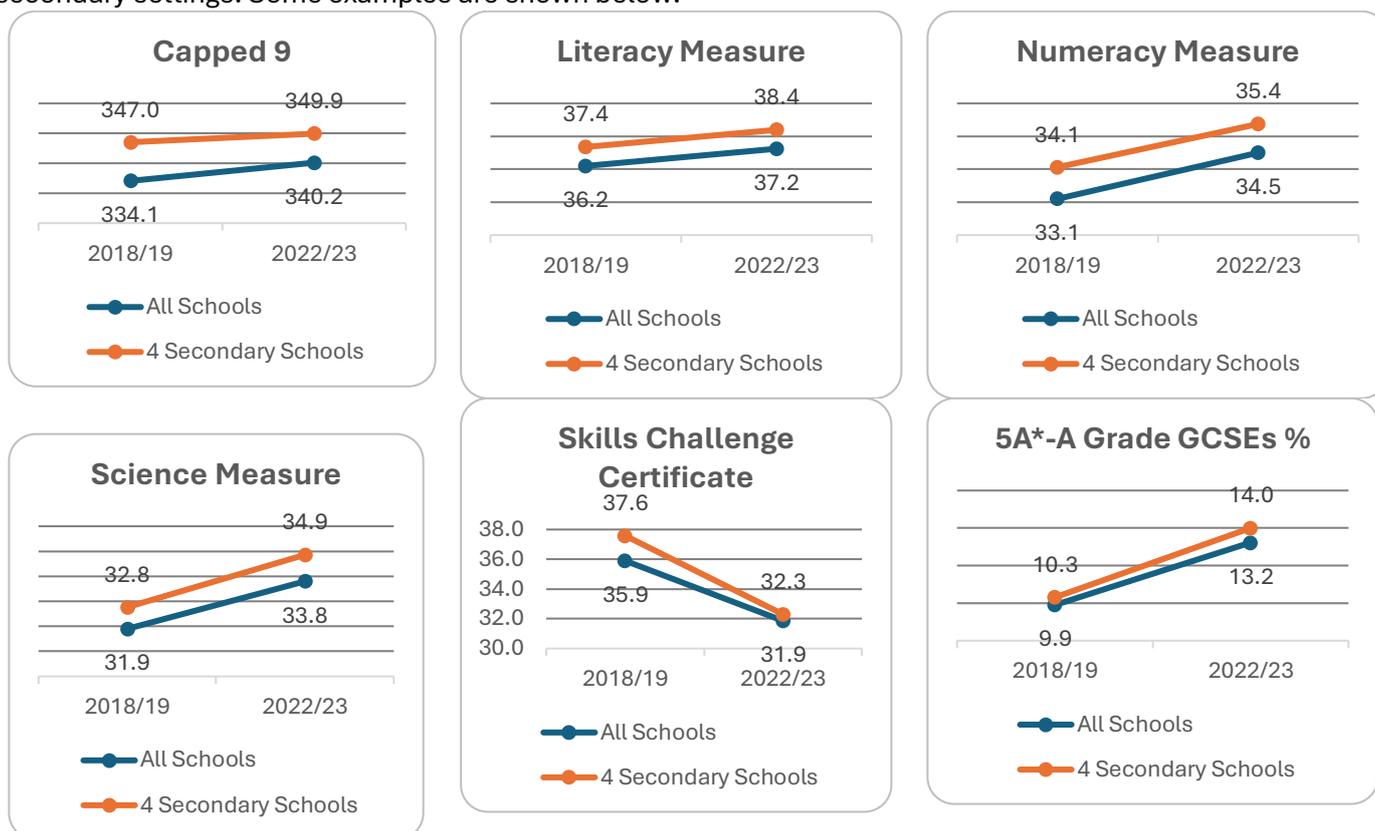
service delivery, namely: School Improvement and Inclusion; Education Transformation and Business Change; and Young People and Partnerships.

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

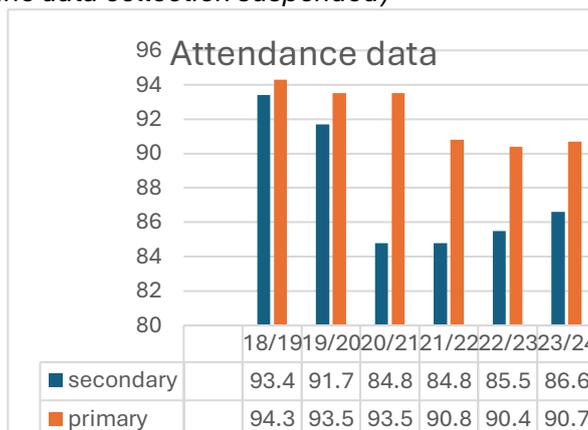
set by the 4 secondary settings. There were improvements in 23 out of 24 key measures across the 4 secondary settings. Some examples are shown below:



(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 \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

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 a 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

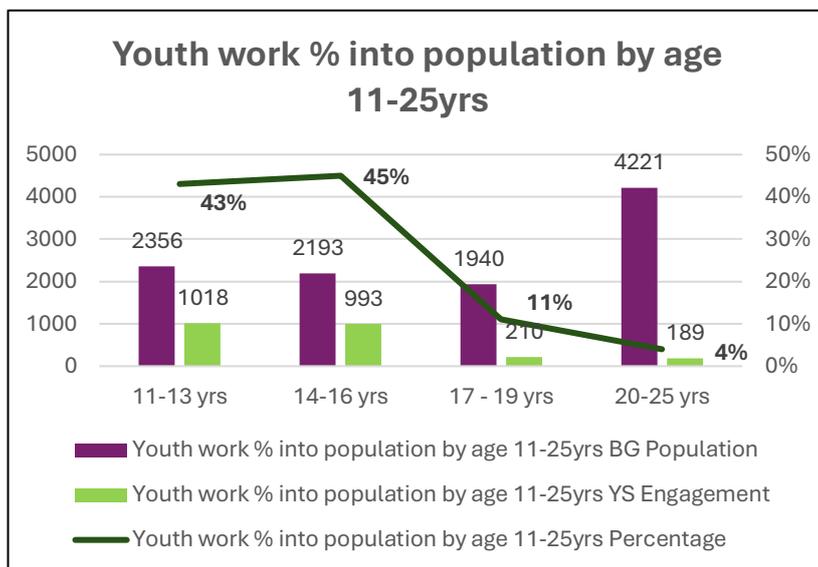
There are many strengths in the local authority’s work to reduce the impact that deprivation has on educational outcomes by providing support to low-income families and households. This work includes providing free school meals, period equity, vulnerable learners support, Youth Service and youth support 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

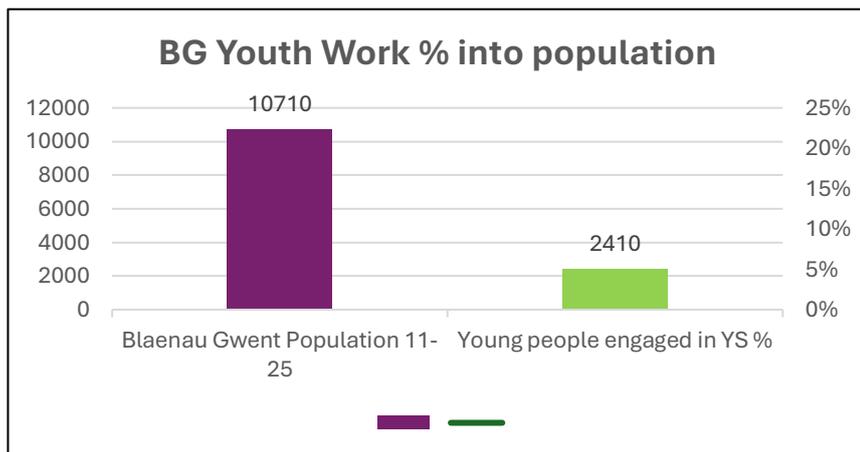
Blaenau Gwent Youth Service offers a comprehensive range of services for young people aged 11-25 years, centred upon voluntary engagement and the provision of informal learning. This approach promotes personal, social and emotional development whilst raising aspirations through the achievement of positive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



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