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**Blaenau Gwent Panel Peer Assessment Response Report**

**Adroddiad Asesu Ymateb Cymheiriaid Panel Blaenau Gwent**

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**Background**

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 places a duty on all councils in Wales to undertake a Panel Performance Assessment (PPA) once during a political cycle.

The PPA looks to review the governance arrangements of a Council at a corporate level in order to assess the extent to which a Council:

* is exercising its functions effectively;
* is using its resources economically, efficiently, and effectively; and
* has effective governance in place for securing the above.

The policy intent of the Act is to create a more streamlined, flexible, sector-led approach to performance, good governance, and improvement

In addition to fulfilling the statutory requirement, an effective PPA can inform the council’s improvement journey, building on the annual self-assessment, supporting it to look to the future through a different lens. The PPA has provided an opportunity to test thinking with impartial expert peers, who provide alternative perspectives through independent, objective challenge in making their recommendations.

**Blaenau Gwent Process**

The PPA process in Blaenau Gwent took approximately 5 months from agreeing the initial scope to the final report being received in early 2025

As part of the process a desktop review of council documents, data, external reports and other relevant intelligence was undertaken. The panel were onsite in Blaenau Gwent, between 18th and 21st November 2024, in order to conduct a number of interviews and focus groups.

The PPA examined the councils’ position in relation to the three performance duties outlined in paragraph 2.2 and the Council also requested for the following themes to be reviewed to inform the assessment:

* + Member/officer relations
  + Sustainability (finance, demand, transformation)
  + The Marmot policy commitment
  + The Discovery Phase (federation)

Throughout the PPA leadership, culture and readiness to deliver were also considered.

**Legislative Requirement**

In response to the issued PPA Report, the Council is required, under the Local Government and Elections Act (Wales), to state in its response any actions it proposes to take to increase the extent to which it meets the performance requirements.

The action plan that follows is provided to discharge that statutory requirement and responds to the Panel’s 15 recommendations for improvement and identified strengths and areas of innovation.

The Blaenau Gwent Executive Team is accountable for the delivery of actions identified; however, implementation may sit with other officers. Actions identified will be included within the relevant business plan and also included as part of the Council’s report tracker. Progress and status updates will be provided to the Governance and Audit Committee as part of their work programme and within the Council’s performance self-assessment reporting.

**Statutory response statements**

**The extent to which we accept the conclusions in the report**

*“The Council accepts the report and its conclusions. It notes that the Assessment was a useful process in order to drive improvement across the Council. The Council requested for additional areas to be considered by the Panel and this was supported and informed the final recommendations.*

*For future Assessments, we would welcome greater content in the final report on the evidence seen which has led to each recommendation”.*

**The extent to which the council intends to follow any recommendations contained in the report**

*“The Council accepts all recommendations made in the PPA report and has put in place an Action Plan setting out how it will take each recommendation forward. It should be noted that this Assessment has been done at a particular point in time and progress has already happened quickly around some areas”.*

**Overall Panel Conclusion**

* the council effectively exercises its functions within the challenging demographic and financial constraints it faces
* There are a number of strengths such as stable leadership, a long-term vision, improved strategic decision-making, and greater accountability
* There is widespread support for the proposed federation
* There is a clear understanding of its role and has outlined a new vision in its corporate plan
* The cross-cutting nature of the corporate plan can promote shared ownership throughout the organisation, which can help align resources with key priorities
* The adoption of the Marmot Principles in Blaenau Gwent has the potential to be a significant step forward in addressing deep-rooted deprivation
* The workforce is an asset- loyal, committed, and passionate about serving the community
* The council’s ‘Bridging the Gap’ program outlines plans to address medium-term revenue pressures, incorporating all the typical elements of such a strategy

**Overall Strengths Recognised**

* A dynamic interim Chief Executive actively engaged in the role, who has improved the clarity and accountability of the council’s leadership structure.
* The interim Chief Executive (CEX) and the Leader of the council have gained strong trust and backing from all levels within the council, reflecting a high level of confidence in their leadership abilities.
* The council operates within a Welsh public sector that is facing significant sustainability challenges. In response to these challenges, the council is embarking on a radical intervention through a proposed federation with Torfaen Council.
* The adoption of the Marmot Principles in Blaenau Gwent is an important step, as it directly acknowledges the significant challenges the area faces, particularly around health inequalities and social determinants of health.
* Partners were complimentary of the way the council has shared its corporate plan and priorities, setting clear expectations that partner priorities should align wherever possible. By aligning resources and priorities with partners, the council demonstrates its commitment to addressing local issues more effectively and improving outcomes for the community.
* The panel's findings highlight a work environment characterised by professionalism and mutual respect. At the strategic level, there is clear evidence that the leadership team is aligned with the council's goals, demonstrating a strong commitment to collaboration in achieving these objectives. This alignment between leadership and organisational goals is positively received by both staff and Elected Members.
* The council’s engagement and participation strategy is outreach-focused, using various methods to gather diverse community voices
* The council shows a strong commitment to workforce development, staff wellbeing, and engagement.

**Our Response to the 15 Recommendations Including Action Taken To Date (July 2025)**

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| **PPA Recommended Action for Improvement** | **PPA Recommendation Detail** | **Updated Position** | **Action to Address Recommendation** | **Expected Completion Date** | **Responsible Officer/s** | **BRAG** |
| **Agile working** | The approach to agile working needs urgent and thorough review. | Accommodation Strategy Needs reviewing so that it is fit for purpose  A working group has been set up and all properties have been visited by CEX  The Vitecc has been taken off the market to ensure there is enough office capacity across Blaenau Gwent.  The General Offices and Vitecc are currently undergoing some development.  A strategic program of delivery will be introduced as part of the new ways of working. This includes a program focused on all work places. | Review of the existing Accommodation Strategy to ensure the Council has effective available workspace for staff | Late 2025 | Chief Executive |  |
| Review the application of the agile working policy aligned to above | Early 2026 | Chief Executive  Head of OD | Not Due to Start |

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| **PPA Recommended Action for Improvement** | **PPA Recommendation Detail** | **Updated Position** | **Action to Address Recommendation** | **Expected Completion Date** | **Responsible Officer/s** | **BRAG** |
| **Completion of accounts** | The council should complete the accounts for the year ending promptly. While there may be no material impact, completing the accounts is essential for maintaining assurance and a positive public perception. | The 2022/23 accounts were signed off by G&A on 20/11/2024. | Draft 2023/24 accounts are scheduled for consideration by G&A on 22nd April 2025. | Completed | Director Corporate Services  Service Manager  Accountancy |  |
| Final 2023/24 accounts scheduled for sign off by G&A July 2025 | July 2025 |  |
| 2024/25 draft accounts to be prepared by August. | September 2025 |  |
| **Report on legacy governance Issues (certain projects)** | A report should be presented to the Cabinet addressing any outstanding governance issues, especially legacy concerns. Although the council has appropriately addressed the key audit recommendations, providing a public report will offer further assurance to stakeholders. | Silent Valley Waste Services Ltd - Report presented to Council on 27th March 2025 re company dissolution | Silent Valley Waste Services Ltd - Report presented to Council on 27th March 2025 re company dissolution | Completed | Chief Executive  Director Corporate Services |  |

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| **Review of Governance and Audit Committee** | While the Governance and Audit Committee is properly constituted and operating in accordance with regulations, there are conflicting reports on the timeliness, quality, and analysis of information presented. A thorough, open, and inclusive review should be conducted to ensure clarity in roles, effectiveness, and alignment with best practices. This review should occur during the Discovery Phase to enhance learning and improve assurance. | * Work has been undertaken with the G&A Committee. Informal meetings / workshops are now scheduled into the cycle along with formal meetings. * The Chair and Vice Chair of G&A are now included as part of Chairs and Vice Chairs meetings to share learning. * A FWP providing the future cycle of items has been developed. * Pre meetings with the Chair and Vice Chair are taking place to discuss the agendas and reports. * Data Cymru training provided to Governance and Audit Members * Discussion held on the governance arrangements of the Council and where information is reported in order to provide assurance of the overall system | Continue with formal and informal meeting approach and continue with the amended arrangements as identified. | Completed | Director Corporate Services  Service Manager Performance and Democratic |  |

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| **Commission a comprehensive member development programme** | This would include but not limited to:   * Consideration of the role of member/officer possibly based on the member led authority’ model; * Good governance and making difficult decisions; and * Support and development should also be considered for all members, scrutiny leads etc. | * Member Development Strategy in place * Extensive member development programme in operation linked to the work of committees and Council services * Work with Cabinet following AGM | Commission a facilitator to undertake appropriate training for all members and Cabinet specifically | By Autumn 2025 | Director Corporate Services  Service Manager Performance and Democratic  Head of OD |  |
| Development of a member learning and development plan that clearly identifies the training to be undertaken |  |
| Develop member training modules on Thinqi |  |
| **Commission a development programme for CLT** | The programme should include:   * Good governance; * Best practice in performance management; * Identification and delivery of outcomes; * Delivering transformative change; and * Skills to deliver in an environment of major change. | A number of strategic programmes have been established which include a number of areas identified by the PPA Panel.  The following Development Programmes will be led by a member of the Executive Team:   * Investing in our people; * Rebel Culture; * Our Workplaces; and * Assurance and Risk. | Review the training options available for leadership team which can also be utilised for members (joint sessions where appropriate) | October 2025 | Joint Chief Executive  Executive Team |  |

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| **Wellbeing objectives are broad and non-specific** | Need clarity on:   * actions and initiatives that will be taken to achieve the outcomes linked to the wellbeing objectives and Marmot Principles; * identify specific, measurable outcomes and include clear timelines; * clearly define success for each outcome using specific indicators; and * what difference key service user/resident can expect to see. | * Work has progressed with Wider CLT to review performance indicators as part of the Marmot Masterplan * Annual delivery plan for Corporate Plan * Indicators in place against each well-being objective | Develop annual reporting aligned to the Well-being Objectives | Completed | Director Corporate Services  Service Manager Performance and Democratic |  |
| Well-being Objectives monitored and measured within the business plans and dashboards | Completed |  |
| Undertake a review of the Well-being Objectives for new Corporate Plan and align to marmot principles | December 2025 |  |
| **Corporate plan** | Simplified shortened corporate plan be adopted to aid understanding at a workforce and resident level. | A 1 page summary of the Corporate Plan has been developed and included on the website | Develop a 1 page summary of the corporate plan | Completed | Director Corporate Services  Service Manager Performance and Democratic |  |

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| **Prioritisation of Marmot Principles**  **Evidence for Marmot**  **Communication of Marmot** | * Decide which principles impact most locally and prioritise * Identify priority actions to align with the chosen principles * Specify what success looks like in terms of outcomes and timescales * Integrate activity into service level plans. * Connect with other Marmot networks and organisations to gather evidence of successful interventions from other regions * This evidence can then be adapted to fit the specific local context, ensuring that interventions are based on best practices while also being relevant to the unique needs of the local community. * Establish an ongoing communication exercise covering all stakeholders in particular communities, residents, staff and elected members; and * This exercise should focus on the key aspects relevant to each group, ensuring clarity and engagement across all stakeholders. | * The Marmot principles are intrinsically linked and we need to work on all of them together. Within this we are identifying actions that will be quick wins and those which will have the most impact * Work has progressed with Wider CLT and Torfaen Council to review performance indicators as part of the Marmot Masterplan | Agree the performance indicators for the Blaenau Gwent Marmot Masterplan in the short, medium and long term | By September 2025 | Blaenau Gwent Executive Team |  |
| Align actions to the Marmot Principles | By October 2025 | Not Due to Start |
| Create a Marmot Masterplan dashboard for Joint Executive Team | Late 2025 |
| Create an engaging and comprehensive communication and awareness raising programme for Marmot for all partners: stakeholders; communities; residents; staff; and elected members | Late 2025 |

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| **MTFS is refined using the ‘Apollo’ programme approach and directly addresses** | * Identifying the long-term funding strategy for schools; * Quantifying the impact of demand management in social care; and * Ensuring resources are used solely to deliver transformation, rather than to cover in-year funding gaps. | Council agreed an alternative funding strategy for schools from 2025/26 onwards.  The annual funding uplift to school budgets will now reflect estimated cost of pay awards (and increments) replacing the previous strategy of linking the uplift to the Council’s AEF increase. This will ensure that pay pressures are fully funded and provide a level of assurance to schools for the main element of the costs. In addition the Council has agreed additional financial support to schools to rebalance budgets over the next two years, additional funding of £2.44m per annum has been built into the budget for 2025/2026 and 2026/2027 which should address historic cost pressures.  The Apollo / Bridging the Gap programme has identified a number of high level themes to address the budget gaps over the life of the MTFS, including demand management in social care and across the Council. Demand in social care will be assessed and quantified to more fully understand the impact that the implementation of prevention and early intervention strategies can / will have. Apollo is a standing item on the weekly Joint Executive Team Meeting.  The current MTFS and budget strategy is proposing no use of reserves to balance the budget. Use of reserve to balance the budget and cover in year funding gaps is not a sustainable strategy and impacts significantly on the Council’s financial sustainability whereas the use of these resources to deliver transformation will result in improved outcomes, identification of efficiencies and is an invest to save opportunity. | 1. Ongoing review of the MTFS to ensure aligns budget with council priorities 2. Develop joint development programmes across Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent Councils, with visions and purposes that are underpinned by the Marmot principles | Completed | Director Corporate Services  Service Manager  Accountancy |  |
| **Discovery Phase-transition to phase 2** | The phase 2 plan needs to ensure it effectively addresses:   * **Sustainability and resilience**: Ensuring long-term viability and adaptability; * **Delivery of outcomes**: Achieving measurable results and success; * **Alignment with Marmot Principles**: Ensuring the plan aligns with the principles of reducing health inequalities; and * **Prioritising key risks and outcomes**: Addressing areas of high risk and focusing on critical outcomes. | * Blaenau Gwent’s Senior Leadership Team stabilised with permanent appointments to Corporate Director of Education and Corporate Director of Corporate Services * Outcome of Discovery reported to Members in January 2025 and Councils have permanently appointed a Joint Chief Executive * Communication and engagement framework in pace for the workforce and the benefits of closer working as 2 Councils have been communicated to staff and members * Senior Joint Executive Leadership Structure developed and shared with Elected Members, leaders and staff * Alignment of functionality and line management to the Joint Structure – May 2025 * A programme of prioritisation, visioning and purpose is in place with 5 strategic delivery programmes and 4 strategic development programmes | Implementation of the Joint Senior Executive Leadership Structure and alignment of functionality | Complete | Blaenau Gwent Executive Team |  |
|  |
|  | Develop, and introduce new Joint Pay Structure and review BG Senior Leadership Pay Structure | September 2025 | Blaenau Gwent Executive Team |  |
| Implement legal agreement to support the joint working and joint roles | September 2025 |  |
| Develop transformation programme aligned to the strategic programmes to include resources to deliver this | September 2025 |  |
| **Discovery phase- transition to phase 2** | The council should work closely with the WLGA to share the learning across Wales | * Engagement has taken place with the WLGA and Councils across Wales to share learning. Democracy in Local Government Session, 5th March - Stephen Vickers, Chief Executive, Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council: Discussing innovative arrangements to improve services and sustainability | Actions Completed | Complete | Chief Executive |  |
| **Discovery phase- transition to phase 2** | The council should request Welsh Government to contribute funding to the transition costs as this represents a project of national significance and could provide valuable learning for the sector | Welsh Government has provided funding for year 1 transformation. | The Chief Executive to work with Welsh Government to consider options for funding contributions | Completed | Chief Executive |  |