

Progress against our Characteristics of an Outstanding Council

It is important to the organisation, to not just review the services we are delivering to our residents and businesses, and the impact they are having, but we must also ensure that our own internal processes and systems are working well, ensuring we are using the resources available to us as efficiently and effectively as possible, with robust controls, systems and processes supporting every aspect of the Council's activity.

The development of our Corporate Plan was important in setting our priorities and commitments, but without defined specific organisational conditions, we will never be as effective as we can be in delivering upon all of the outcomes we are seeking to achieve. Therefore, in order to review where we are organisationally and to provide a full picture of Council activity, the following section provides an overview of our progress against the Characteristics of an Outstanding Council.

An Innovative Council that

- is transformative and prepared to do things differently
- has an appetite for risk
- fosters innovation inside and outside the workplace
- is inquisitive and open to new trends and technologies

Our focus has developed over the last year, in line with our characteristics, and many changes have taken place to help us become more innovative as a Council. Importantly, we have continued to adjust quickly and respond positively to new challenges and initiatives, demonstrating that there is a willingness to adapt and deliver in ever changing circumstances. However, as we move forward, we must match our willingness to take risks and deliver new innovative projects, with the pragmatism required to bring projects to an end when it is clear we are unable to take them forward or they will not deliver intended benefits.

During 2024/25 we have focussed on developing the skills, knowledge and experience of all our staff so they are able to meet changing demands in service delivery and priorities. We have implemented a new online learning and development platform called Thinqi that provides accessible training and development information to meet the needs of individuals and services.

Risk Management

The Council recognises that risk is inherent in everything it does and that some level of risk-taking is necessary to achieve its ambitions and aspirations for the county. However, the Council also acknowledges that it has a duty to protect the public interest and safeguard the resources entrusted to it by the residents and taxpayers of

Blaenau Gwent. Therefore, the purpose of risk management is to ensure that the Council has a robust and consistent framework for identifying, evaluating, and managing the risks that may affect our strategic and operational objectives, as well as the Council's reputation and public confidence.

A risk register is provided to senior leaders and reported through Governance and Audit Committee to help monitor the key risks facing the Council. It is a document that records risks and importantly contains the actions that are needed to be made to mitigate or manage them. It helps to priorities resources and can help address any emerging risks in a timely manner. As of March 2025, the Council had identified 9 corporate risks 7 of these are classified as High, 1 classified as Critical and one classified as Medium which will be de-escalated from the Corporate Risk Register.

Risk Reference and Description	Risk Score (as at March 2025)	Direction of Travel from Previous Quarter
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CRR1: Failure to deliver and sustain the changes required to ensure that vital services are prioritised within the financial constraints faced by the Council.	High	
CRR4: Safeguarding - Failure to ensure adequate safeguarding arrangements are in place for vulnerable people in Blaenau Gwent	High	
CRR5: There is a risk that the Council's Business Continuity processes are not robust enough to enable the provision of critical services in an emergency.	High	
CRR14: Failure to improve staff attendance rates within the Council will lead to an unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively and financially.	Critical	
CRR19: If the Council does not manage its information assets in accordance with requirements set down within legislation, then it may be faced with financial penalties and possible sanctions that hinder service delivery.	High	
CRR21: The Financial resilience of the Council could be at risk if the Council does not ensure that financial planning and management decisions support long term stability and sustainability	High	
CRR22: Failure to deliver the Council's priorities within the agreed annual budget resulting in the increased use of emergency finance measures and the drawdown of reserves.	Medium	
CRR25: The school in an Estyn category and currently in receipt of Council Intervention fails to make appropriate progress against the Statutory Warning Notice to Improve and Post Inspection Action Plan.	High	
CRR28: Failure to maintain appropriately skilled, adequate staffing resources will lead to an unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively.	High	

Moving forward, risk management is to be one of the first areas that Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent Council's will look to align. Meetings have taken place with the relevant officers to establish the differences in each approach and to consider which aspects to take forward so that one effective framework can be implemented across both Councils. A review of the Council's risk registers is underway which will inform a comprehensive review of the Corporate Risk Register.

Rebel BGT

The challenges faced by councils today such as the impact of global events, shrinking budgets, cost of living, escalating demand, and growing inequality across our communities, aren't problems we can solve with yesterday's tools. These are deep, interconnected challenges that demand new approaches, fresh perspectives, bold experimentation and collective creativity. That's where Rebel BGT comes in.

Rebel BGT isn't a project, a policy or just a concept, it's a mindset and culture. A way of behaving that values curiosity over certainty, collaboration over silos, and experimentation over perfection. It's about creating a culture where unconventional thinking is welcomed, where diverse perspectives are not just accepted but actively sought out, and where innovation thrives through collaboration. We want to build a work environment that's alive with innovation and ideas - a place where creativity, curiosity, and courage are part of our everyday toolkit.

All staff in Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen Councils can play a vital leadership role. Rebel BGT is for everyone. Rebel BGT is about making a difference,



challenging the norm, and shaping the future of the Council so we reach our goals and deliver against our objectives. Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen staff will be able to:

- Share and vote on your boldest ideas
- Comment on others' suggestions
- Track how ideas evolve and influence our direction
- What would you change or improve?
- What's holding us back?
- Where do you see opportunities for innovation?
- How can we work better together?
- How can we better serve our communities?

Artificial Intelligence

The Council is looking to drive innovation and increase efficiency in its services by adopting AI practices into everyday activity. The Council has been using Co Pilot for some time and this, alongside more targeted use of AI, has started to see a number of improvements to service delivery. Completed projects to date are outlined below, with a number of other projects in progress.

- **Automation in Supervisions** – the project exemplifies how targeted automation can unlock capacity, improve service quality and support a culture for continuous improvement.
- **Automation in Democratic Services** – Initial focus was on one Committee but the project is scalable to cover other committees, setting a precedent for future innovation across Council services.
- **Use of Power Platform in Adult Services** to streamline the authorisation of commissioned services – can be used across other services
- **Education Fixed Penalty Notices** - Achieved 29.84% time and 31.02% cost savings. Completed project using Capita ONE FPN module.
- **Tech Services Order Book** - Automating high-volume service request processing, reducing manual workload and improving.

This work demonstrates the council's commitment to innovation, efficiency, and citizen-focused service delivery through smart digital investment.

An Aspirational and Visionary Council

- improves lives through effective political and officer leadership
- identifies and grasps opportunities for the future
- Sets a clear direction and long-term goals
- Reduces its carbon footprint

We have set a clear direction within our organisation and share our long-term goals for improving Well-Being across Blaenau Gwent. Our Corporate Plan aims to do this by clearly setting out what we aim to do and how we plan to achieve it and is well understood and supported politically and organisationally.

The introduction of an Annual Delivery Plan for each financial year is used to monitor and report our progress against our aspirations for the lifespan of the Corporate Plan. We also continue to work alongside our partners in the Gwent Public Service Board (PSB) by working together to become a 'Marmot' region with the intent of taking evidence-based action to reduce inequalities and address key challenges to current and long-term well-being across the region, to reduce the inequities that affect the wider determinants of health.

A number of sessions have been held with staff across the organisation focused on embedding the Marmot principles throughout the organisation and into service delivery for all areas of the Council. Work was undertaken with senior managers to establish a number of key indicators to measure over the life of the Plan and which will be included within business plans. Each service area is therefore gaining a better understanding of how they are having a direct impact on delivering the Marmot principles.



Our Masterplan, based on the Marmot Principles, will provide future leaders with a clear vision for the county. It will help us stay focused and will inform our actions and decisions for our future. This long-term planning will help us know where we want to go and the best way to get there. Our current and future Corporate Plans will continue to be important milestones along the way, but together with our Masterplan, this will allow us to foresee challenges, prepare for them and make sure that our daily actions match our ultimate goals.

Joint Executive Team

The Council has a structure in place to support the delivery of services and decision making via its Joint Executive Team (JET). JET has operated with interim arrangements for over a year including an interim Chief Executive. In January 2025 Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent Council's agreed to operate under one Joint Chief Executive. Following this, arrangements were put in place to support and stabilise the senior management structure within both Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen with permanent positions established. Work is ongoing to create a permanent structure below the Corporate Directors and should be in place before the end of 2025.

Political Structure

In 2021, the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales reformed the ward boundaries of Blaenau Gwent. The changes meant that the number of Blaenau Gwent councillors reduced by 9, taking the council from 42 to 33 members. This equates to an average of 1,545 electors per councillor. The number of wards also reduced from 16 to 14, with each ward electing more than 1 councillor. 9 wards have 2 councillors, while 5 wards have 3 councillors, and 5 wards saw no change under the reform. These changes came into being from May 2022, as part of the local government election. Following the election there was a change to the political make up of Blaenau Gwent Council, moving from being Independent to Labour. The political make-up of the Council is currently:

- Labour 21;
- Independent 10;
- Minority Independent (Cwm Ward) 1; and
- Minority Independent (Ebbw Vale South) 1.

Democratic Process

Council committees are an essential part of the democratic process within the Authority. They enable elected members to exercise their decision-making powers, scrutinise the performance and policies of the Council, and represent the views and interests of their constituents. Council committees also provide a forum for public participation and engagement, where citizens and stakeholders can voice their opinions, concerns, and suggestions on matters impacting them and their communities. Council committees aim to conduct their business in an open, transparent, and accountable manner, and to uphold the principles of good governance and public service.

The Cabinet is effectively the decision making body of the Council. It has responsibility for making decisions which are in line with the Council's overall policies and budget. If it wishes to make a decision which is outside the budget or policy framework, this must be referred to the Council as a whole. Members have the responsibility to ensure that the necessary business of the Council is carried out efficiently, effectively, and in a manner appropriate for the proper conduct of public business. The Cabinet carry out all of the Local Authority functions which are not the responsibility of any other part of the Authority, whether by law or under the Constitution.

The 33 Blaenau Gwent elected members are collectively the decision making body for the Authority. This is complemented by an officer structure of trained and experienced people. Most policy decisions are developed by the Cabinet, which comprises the Leader of the Council and four Cabinet Members with individual portfolio responsibilities:





Cllr Steve Thomas
Leader of the
Council
Cabinet Member
Corporate and
Performance



Cllr Helen
Cunningham
Deputy Leader of
the Council
Cabinet Member
Place and
Environment



Cllr John C
Morgan
Cabinet Member
Place and
Regeneration



Cllr Sue Edmunds
Cabinet Member
People and
Education



Cllr Hadyn Trollope
Cabinet Member
People and Social
Services

In addition to the Cabinet, the Authority's Committee structure also comprises three decision making Committees: 1 x Planning and 2 x Licensing; four Scrutiny Committees; a Standards Committee; a Democratic Services Committee; and a Governance and Audit Committee.

Scrutiny is made up of non-Cabinet Members who are appointed to sit on the Committees to support the work of the Cabinet and the Council as a whole and to hold the Cabinet to account. The Committees have no decision making powers; however, they act as a check and balance on the powers exercised and decisions taken by Cabinet. Scrutiny enables non-Cabinet Members to have a greater say in Council matters.

Our Governance and Audit Committee is firmly embedded within our governance arrangements. The committee is made up of 6 local authority elected members and 3 lay members - one of which holds the role of the Chair. A mix of both local authority members and lay members further strengthens the level of independent challenge within the committee. The committee has a key oversight and assurance role in areas such as risk management, financial management, and our Complaints process. Another critical role of the committee is to

provide assurance that the Council is responding appropriately and effectively to reports from our external regulators.

Any recommendations made by Audit Wales and our other external regulators, are received by the relevant Scrutiny Committee for monitoring and then by the Governance and Audit Committee to be assured of progress. This is the Council's key document to demonstrate how accepted proposals for improvement / agreed recommendations received, are being addressed.

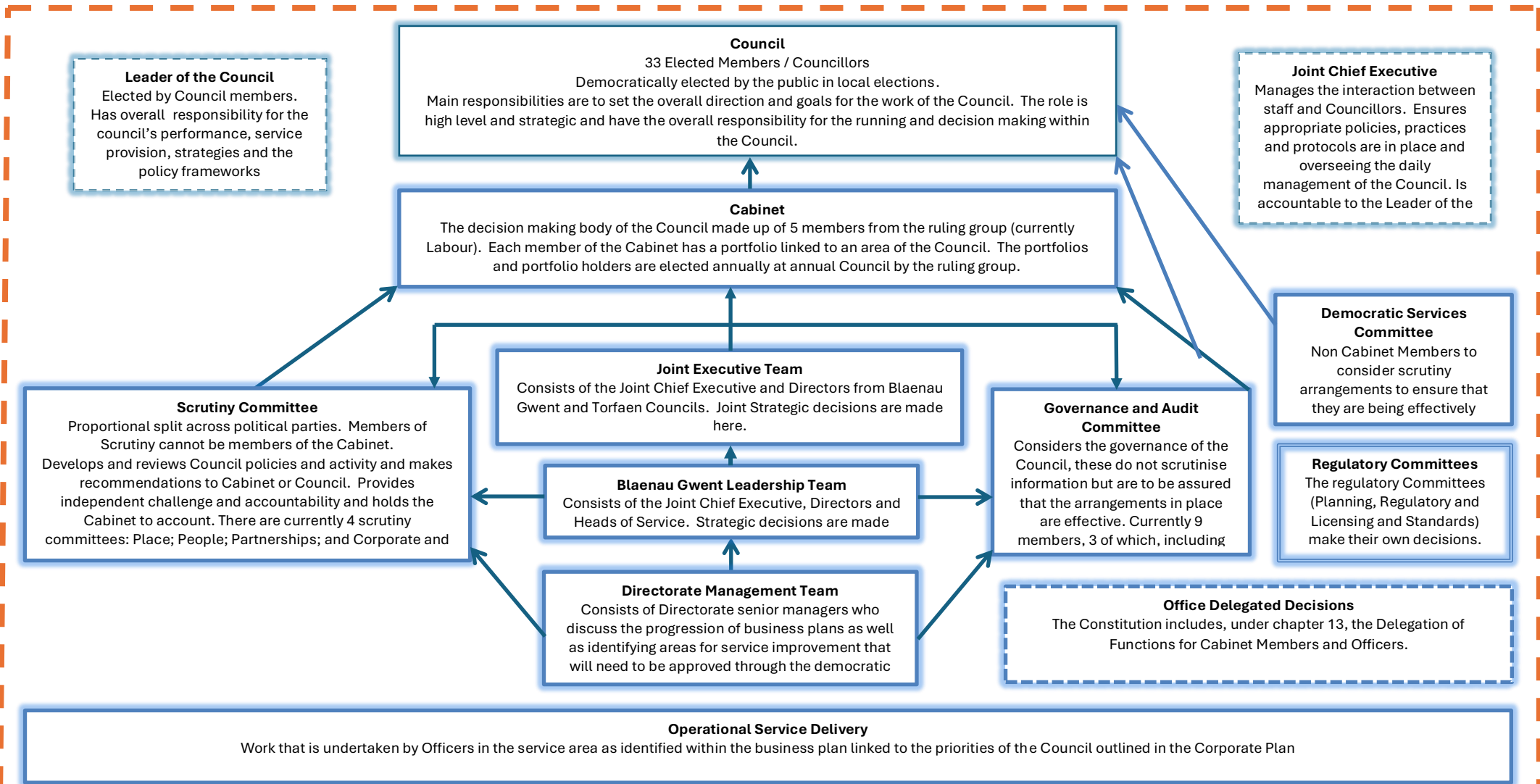
Our Action Plan is updated and reported on a regular basis to provide assurance to the Governance and Audit Committee. Monitoring of service specific recommendations is the responsibility of the Council's scrutiny committees, with annual progress updates being prepared for the Governance and Audit Committee for assurance purposes.

Strong democratic governance is a key element to us being a well-managed organisation and is therefore critical to meeting our performance requirements.

Committee Meetings and papers can be found here: blaenau-gwentintranet.moderngov.co.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?Categories=



Blaenau Gwent Council Governance Structure



Reaching Net Zero

The Councils journey towards reaching Net Zero by 2030 continues with the implementation of the [Decarbonisation plan 2020 -2030](#). This year we will be conducting a midpoint review of our Decarbonisation Plan. The focus will be on maximising our carbon reductions by targeting our largest non-procurement emissions sources. The review will have two phases:

The first phase will have two main elements breaking down in detail:

- Our progress so far and;
- What still needs to be done to reach Net Zero.

The second phase:

- Will develop more detailed projections of carbon reductions, costs and timescales. With the aim of covering both our full path to Net Zero and provide an estimate of how much progress we will be able to make by 2030 given the available resources.

Our latest available figures for Net Zero 2030 are show below. These direct carbon emissions figures exclude our spend based procurement emissions figures which are not suitable for tracking progress and for which we are also far more reliant on actions by others to reach Net Zero for these emissions.

Tonnes CO2e/year	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	Change from Base Year	Change from Last Year
Non-Spend Based Carbon Emissions	14,783	11,818	13,100	12,353	11,949	11,381	-23%	-5%

Our buildings have been identified as our largest emissions source. In the last year we have placed significant focus on taking action to decarbonise our schools. This has included working with the Welsh Government Energy Service to develop an ongoing solar programme for schools, including air source heat pumps at Glyncoed Primary and Ysgol Gymraeg Tredegar to support them in being fully Net Zero.

We are also working on reducing energy demand from buildings such as The Works: Ebbw Vale Leisure Centre, Ebbw Fawr Learning Community Campus, and the General Offices to support potential energy savings, carbon emission reductions, and cost savings.

In relation to Net Zero 2050, this year a Citizens' Forum was organised on the Future of Travel in Blaenau Gwent (with funding from Innovate UK). The Forum agreed a set of 10 recommendations for actions that the council and/or its partners could realistically take over the next 5 years to improve travel in Blaenau Gwent, as well as a set of fairness principles to inform how these are taken forward.

The ten recommendations made by the forum were:

1. Reduce car use for commutes
2. Increase transport options for the evening
3. Always have wheelchair ramps on trains
4. Improve taxi services
5. Encourage people to walk cycle or wheel
6. Improve public engagement in transport planning
7. Increase flecsi bus publicity, capacity and funding
8. Provide better options for school journeys
9. Explore taking buses back in public ownership



10. Promote and expand community transport schemes

The recommendations have been presented by members of the forum to an elected members briefing session and to the Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being partnership. The council will provide forum members with progress updates every six months for at least the next two years. The first detailed response is scheduled for September, after a workshop with officers and partners and review through the democratic process.

Carbon reduction is considered in all commissioning and procurement sourcing strategies. Depending upon the nature and scope of each requirement, this may relate to product specifications, operating methodologies and/or supplier carbon reduction plans, which sets out a supplier's current carbon footprint and organisational initiatives designed to reduce future carbon omissions.

We are working with Welsh Government and the WLGA, via the National Procurement Network, in developing a common approach to using Carbon Reduction Plans within our procurement processes. This approach has been developed by 10 Councils across the Southeast Wales Procurement Network, to ensure a consistent approach across the region, and to support the achievement of our respective 2030 Net Zero target.

The performance of our Carbon Footprint, associated with the Council's Commissioning and Procurement activities, is circa 75% - 80%, which is consistent across other Welsh local authorities.

Citizens' Forum on the Future of Travel in Blaenau Gwent

The recent Citizens' Forum on the Future of Travel in Blaenau Gwent was organised by Blaenau Gwent Council and funded by Innovate UK, the UK Government's innovation agency, as part of their Net Zero Living programme. The forum was made up of 21 Blaenau Gwent residents who were selected to be representative of the borough by sortition lottery from 6,500 randomly selected households. The sortition process selected people to be representative in terms of demographics, concern about climate change, number of cars in household and distance of travel to services.

The Forum was asked the question: *'How can Blaenau Gwent come together to make local travel fairer, greener and better for everyone?'*

The forum took place over three, in-person, full day sessions in January and February 2025, and gave forum members a chance to hear from expert speakers to learn about the issues and discuss them in small groups with facilitation from public involvement charity Involve. The forum agreed ten recommendations (see page 22 of Appendix A), for local actions that could be realistically taken in the next five years by the council and/or its partners.

As part of the forum process, the Council committed to provide a full written response to the ten recommendations and hold an in-person meeting to present back. We are currently in the process of developing this response, supported by Involve, with relevant officers and stakeholders from the council and partners organisation meeting on Tuesday 30th September. The intention following this is to bring the proposed response back through the Democratic process in December 2025 /January 2026. Following approval, the intention is that the response will become a live document, with six monthly updates to forum members for a least two years after the initial response.

An High Performing Council that

- communicates council priorities and expectations
- is always learning and looking to improve
- measures what matters to residents and communities
- uses self-evaluation to focus on impact and outcomes
- understands its purpose and delivers its functions effectively

Performance Management

As part of the Federated approach the Council has streamlined its performance management processes to align with Torfaen Council.



This has included enhancements to audit processes and amending performance reporting schedules so that both authorities receive performance information simultaneously, promoting collaboration and transparency.

The Council's Well-being Objectives, within the Corporate Plan, have been used to shape all service planning throughout the organisation. The internal business plans that track progress and performance across the organisation have been revised to include key structural changes and officer responsibilities, aligning with the strategic vision and enhancing priorities to ensure they are outcome focused. These business plans will continue to evolve to reflect the changes across the organisation.

Future adjustments to the performance monitoring processes across the organisation will include a review of the annual delivery plan to ensure actions are outcome-oriented, continuous amendments to business plans to accommodate directorate changes, and the implementation of internal governance arrangements to integrate performance monitoring into council-wide discussions.

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 regards effective self-assessment as fundamental to enabling Councils to understand how they're performing and where they could do better. Our performance reporting arrangements are therefore critical to the Council's response to the Act.

Aligned with the ethos of the Act, our Performance Management Framework is as much about implementing changes to processes, as it is about fostering a new culture of continuous self-assessment and improvement in the Council, by placing a much greater prominence on service-planning and the importance of routine performance monitoring.

Our business plans have been developed to ensure that there is 'golden thread' from the Marmot Masterplan, to the Corporate Plan, to business plans and within strategic policies and strategies. Routine monitoring of business plans enables the Council to monitor key actions associated with the Corporate Plan and delivery plan. Our approach therefore continues to be carefully nurtured, supported and challenged, as it develops, ensuring it is working as expected, across the Council.

We have begun making use of available data that is on the Data Cymru hub; to benchmark our performance and more recently we have been working with other local authorities and Data Cymru, in order to further develop this system and the availability of comparative information.

The Joint Executive Team has a strong focus on performance, through an agreed twelve weekly performance schedule. This provides a specific focus on each directorate's performance, relating to risks, progress against our Corporate Plan and 'deep dive' investigations into areas of performance causing concern.

Reporting against our Corporate Plan is taken through our Democratic Process on an annual basis.

To take our aspiration of becoming a high performing Council to the next level we need to become more data and intelligence driven going forward. Throughout the year and moving into the next there has been a targeted approach to reviewing service priorities and the data that will support the evidencing of delivery.

Work has also started on the use of Power BI for our data presentation and the establishment of real time data being available to assist with monitoring purposes. This key piece of work will continue throughout 2025/26 with the aim of getting the majority of report utilising Power BI and also the integration of Power BI with some Council systems.

Communication

The Council provided messages throughout the year that included updates on emergencies such as Storm Bert, Storm Darrah, and the Cwmtillery coal tip landslide. These communications supported resident evacuations and informed elected members, the community, and the press. The federated council approach with Torfaen has also been communicated regularly within the organisation. Communication teams from both Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen will



collaborate more closely as part of this approach, this includes Blaenau Gwent using the same software as Torfaen for communication messages. The outcomes from this joint working will be reported in the next self-assessment report.

A Collaborative and Inclusive Council that

Cherishes inclusivity and equality
Recognises the contribution of others
Welcomes challenge and communication from colleagues, peers and partners
Focuses on strengths of partners and communities
Is open to sharing resources with partners and communities
Welcomes ideas and is open to support to deliver its strategic priorities

Equalities

The 2024-28 Strategic Equality [Plan](#) (SEP) was published in April 2024 and the first Annual [Report](#) for the plan highlights the council's ongoing efforts to promote equality and inclusion, while also identifying areas for improvement and future actions.

To facilitate the year one action plan the council has established a Strategic Oversight and Delivery Group, which is responsible for reviewing and monitoring our progress on each action related to our Strategic Objectives. By aligning these actions with our business planning processes, we have ensured that they are effectively tracked and continuously improved. The group, chaired by Councillor Chris Smith, our Equality Member Champion, who also represents the Council on the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) Members Equality Network.

The council has introduced an Equality E Learning Module for all staff through its training platform, Thinqi. Additionally, Elected Members have also been encouraged to complete the training. Elected Members have received several member Briefing sessions on key equality matters including Gypsy Traveller and LGBT+ History Month and Diverse Cymru's Cultural Competency Scheme.

Throughout this reporting period, as an organisation we have continued to recognise and mark international campaigns, including, Black History Month, Holocaust Memorial Day, LGBTQ+ History Month and International Women's Day.

The Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) process remains a crucial tool for facilitating and informing our decision-making processes. Recognising the need for improvement, we have identified better monitoring of the IIA's usage as a key action for the 2025-26 period. This will be a primary focus in our Year 2 action plan to ensure the process is effectively utilised and continuously improved. Moving forward we are committed to addressing actions, requests, and complaints from the public related to equality. These will be thoroughly reviewed, and appropriate measures will be taken. All such matters will be documented and reported to

members through our annual reporting process, ensuring transparency and accountability.

Blaenau Gwent Pride

Throughout 2024/25, the Council, as part of its Strategic Equalities Plan, prioritised LGBTQ+ rights and planning activities to take forward into 2025/26. As part of this, Blaenau Gwent held its first Pride festival in May 2025; a grassroots initiative driven by the passion and efforts of local individuals and community groups. With volunteers at its heart, the event reflected the power of coming together to create something meaningful, even on a modest scale. From organising activities to bringing people together, this celebration truly belongs to the Blaenau Gwent community. The event represents the strength and heart of our community, led by passionate individuals who believe in making Blaenau Gwent a place of acceptance and understanding. It's about taking meaningful steps toward inclusion in a way that feels personal and approachable.

Gwent Public Service Board (GPSB) Joint Scrutiny Committee

Blaenau Gwent Council has been appointed as the host authority to undertake the administrative arrangements and provide



dedicated support and advisers for the GPSB Joint Scrutiny Committee. The aim of the Committee is to scrutinise the effectiveness of the GPSB by reviewing the decisions made, or actions taken by the Board; scrutinising the Board's governance arrangements; and to make recommendations based on this to the Board. The Committee has met four times between April 2024 and June 2025 and has considered items that included:

- Gwent Well-being Plan 2023-28 - Delivery Plan Development;
- Gwent Well-Being Plan Annual Report 2024;
- Gwent Public Services Board Delivery Framework: Best Start in Life;
- Everyone Lives in a Place they Feel Safe: Community Safety Review & Strategic Safe Communities Partnership Board;
- Best Start in Life: PSB Progress Update;
- Climate & Nature Area of Focus Progress Report;
- Fast Track Gwent; and
- Gwent Well-being Plan Annual Report 2025.

Town and Community Councils

Town and Community Councils (TCCs) can help the Council understand the issues that impact the local community. The Council continues to engage with TCCs on a range of issues including the Council budget.

There are four TCCs in Blaenau Gwent:

- Tredegar Town Council;
- Nantyglo & Blaina Town Council;
- Abertillery & Llanhilleth Community Council; and
- Brynmawr Town Council.

In 2024/25, the Council and the four TCCs continued to build upon existing liaison arrangements and worked in partnership to develop a refreshed Charter of Common Agreement. The new Charter promotes best practices and shared principles like openness, respect, honesty, and prioritising citizens. To date not all TCC's have signed the Charter, and further conversation is required to get full sign off.

The Council and all TCCs publicised the signing of the Armed Forces Covenant, a pledge of mutual support between local civilian and Armed Forces communities, as well as working together on Budget development, Christmas Adornments on Streetlights, Anti-Social Behaviour reporting, and well-being event planning & promotion.

A forward work programme has been designed with monitoring and review processes incorporated. This approach will not only improve guidance and engagement with TCCs in the future but also allow partners to ensure that the joint commitments outlined in the Charter stay appropriate and relevant over time.

A Well Managed Council that

- Embraces its core values
- Values the well-being and contribution of staff
- Invests in staff and has plans for a future workforce
- Has good governance to ensure robust decision making

Workforce

The Council continues to be the largest employer within the borough, employing 1,728 people excluding school-based staff or 3,000 when including school based staff. 73% of the Council's workforce are in permanent roles which provides a stability within the establishment, this is a slight reduction from last year when those in permanent roles were at almost 75%. 12% of staff are in fixed term positions and 11% are relief positions. The majority of relief positions are in Catering & Cleaning and Social Services, which is consistent with what you would expect from



the nature of the workforce in these areas. Vacancies remain consistent, with over 90% of roles filled in each directorate. Over half of the workforce remains ‘service based’ with the remaining staff split between home workers at 7%, and agile workers at 36%. 50% of the workforce has more than 10 years’ service.

The Council has a low level of diversity amongst the workforce, 65% (of those who have provided the information) have indicated that they identify as British, Welsh, English, Scottish, Northern Irish. (This is reflective of the community). Promoting diversity in the workforce will continue to be a key priority as part of the Council’s Workforce Strategy. The Council has an ageing workforce where 56% of the workforce is over the age of 46, with 10% of the workforce aged 29 and under.

Investing in Blaenau Gwent future workforce

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.

External Aspire Apprentices	Internal Aspire Apprentices	Aspire Children Looked After
Total Number of Apprentices 139	Total number of Apprentices 41	Number of referrals from 14+ team 27
Number of Apprentices Currently on Programme 41	Number of Apprentices currently on programme 14	Number of work placements/ traineeships facilitated 18
Percentage that live in BG 47%	Percentage that live in BG 70%	Number of those now in employment 7
Percentage that are male 84%	Percentage that are male 44%	
Percentage that are female 16%	Percentage that are female 56%	
	Number of Apprentices have moved into employment 17	

Annual Governance Statement 2023/24

The Annual Governance Statement (AGS) is developed using CIPFA/Solace’s Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework (2016). Welsh Government anticipates that relevant bodies will prepare an annual governance statement on internal control using the CIPFA/Solace Framework to best represent proper practices in relation to the statement on internal control which requires an annual governance statement to be produced.

As best practice CIPFA recommends that:

- a full draft version of the AGS should accompany the statement of accounts; and
- the AGS should be approved by members meeting as a whole committee at the same time as the statement of accounts is approved under Regulation 10(2) in Wales.

The final Annual Governance [Statement](#) 2023/24 was presented to Governance and Audit Committee on 28th July 2025, alongside the 2023/24 Statement of Accounts as per CIPFA Guidance. At this time there were no amendments to the report. Owing to the delays in reporting the AGS alongside the Statement of Accounts, the AGS covers the year 2023/24 but provides detail up to June 2025 where possible.

The statement is collated following evidence gathering exercise which calls upon a number of sources including:

- Internal and external regulatory reports;
- Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Manager; and
- Senior Manager Assurance Statements.

Code of Governance 2023/24



The Authority has had a Code of Governance in place since 2010. This Code sets out the Governance Framework for the Authority setting out our approach and commitment to achieving and maintaining good corporate governance within the organisation. Good corporate governance ensures that the Council is accountable, transparent, effective, and efficient in delivering services and fulfilling our responsibilities to our citizens and stakeholders.

The Code demonstrates that in most areas we have effective governance arrangements in place which are continually improving, but also recognise that there is further work to do. The code is reviewed on an annual basis to ensure it reflects the current governance arrangements of the Authority. The Code forms the basis against which the Annual Governance Statement is produced and outlines seven core principles which helps to achieve good governance. The latest Code of Governance can be found [here](#). The 2024/25 Code of

Governance is to be presented to Governance and Audit Committee following the reporting of the Annual Governance Statement 2023/24.

Peer Panel Assessment (PPA) 2024

In November 2024, Blaenau Gwent Council held their first Peer Panel Assessment as part of the requirements under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The Act's regard for effective self-assessment is fundamental to enabling the Council to understand how we are performing and where we could do better, and this is very much aligned to our beliefs which have underpinned the development of our new systems and processes.

The PPA examined the councils' position in relation to the three performance duties as well as

- Member/officer relations;
- Sustainability (finance, demand, transformation);
- The Marmot policy commitment; and
- The Discovery Phase (federation).

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

The panel concluded that:

- 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; and
- 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 were recognised as:



- 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; and
- The council shows a strong commitment to workforce development, staff wellbeing, and engagement.

In responding to the PPA report, the legislation requires the Council to respond to:

- The extent to which we accept the conclusions in the report;
- The extent to which the council intends to follow any recommendations contained in the report; and
- Any actions it proposes to take to increase the extent to which it meets the performance requirements (an Action Plan).

The statement for the “the extent to which we accept the conclusions in the report” is as follows:

“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 statement for the “extent to which the council intends to follow any recommendations contained in the report” is as follows:

“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”.

A total of 15 recommendations were provided to the Council. The recommendations have been used to establish an action plan in order to appropriately respond and implement the findings. The findings and action plan can be found [here](#).

Staff Survey

In November 2024, the Council conducted an anonymous staff survey to assess employees' perspectives on working for the organisation. The survey addressed topics including job responsibilities, work environment, communication, and management practices. Of the 1,857 non-school-based staff members invited to participate, 784 responded, resulting in an



overall response rate of 42%, which represents a slight decrease from 45% in 2019. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with various statements, choosing from: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Some of the results from the survey included that 75% of respondents were able to strike the right balance between their work and home life, whilst 68% of staff felt they have opportunities to develop new skills. The results from the survey will be used to drive improvements and make internal changes across the organisation.

An Engaging and Accessible Council that

- uses a wide range of tools to engage with residents and stakeholders
- involves staff and residents on issues that affect them
- harnesses ideas come from customers and staff
- is open and honest with staff and residents
- shares timely information, advice and guidance and celebrates success

Engagement and Participation

Engagement, participation, and customer experience are vital themes that influence the Council's service design and decision-making processes. The Council is dedicated to long-term community support and aims to achieve this through active community engagement. Effective engagement is essential for the Council's efficient operation, ensuring that the services provided are suitable and meet the needs of users.

In June 2024 the Council's new Engagement and Participation Strategy was approved. This sets out why we need to engage, who with and how we will achieve this. We will use the same principle for the participation element, although this will be more specific to address the requirements detailed in section 4 of this report to ensure that local people are able to participate in the making of decisions by the council.

In order to develop the strategy a public consultation was held with 170 responses received. Common themes from the engagement included:

- Targeted engagement with young people, older people, the digitally excluded and hard to reach communities;
- Providing and acting on feedback from consultations and engagement activity e.g. 'You said, we did...' communications;
- Availability of hard copy surveys, leaflets and consultation documents where possible;
- Optimise timing of face-to-face engagement activity or online meetings to ensure working people can participate;
- Ensuring a consistent, easy to understand engagement approach is used by all departments across the Council; and
- Making use of the Community Hubs as an opportunity for people to take part in engagement activity.

There were also some more negative comments received about the number of surveys and consultation exercises carried out (consultation fatigue) and a perception that the Council doesn't listen to responses.

Some common themes for participation emerging from the consultation responses to be considered through the Action Plan included:

- Optimise timing of committee meetings to ensure working people can participate;
- Providing more information about the decision-making process and decisions or outcomes from committee meetings via communications channels;
- Increased opportunities for people to engage directly with councillors, either face-to-face or via online MS Teams or Zoom meetings;
- Encourage people to participate in local democracy, with 80-90% of respondents wanting to see 'more' opportunities to find out how the Council works and attend, watch, speak or submit questions to Committee meetings; and
- Some interest in learning more about the role of a County Borough Councillor and how to become one in future.



There were also some more negative comments received evidencing some misconceptions about the role and salary of a Councillor, which could be addressed through a continued targeted myth busting communications campaign and information with the resident survey to raise awareness.

In 2024/25 the Council has successfully carried out a Staff Survey across the Council and also have facilitated participation of local residents in the nationally driven local Resident Survey with over 1,800 people taking part.

Freedom of the Borough – Steve Jones MBE

Marathoner Steve Jones MBE, OLY has received the Freedom of the County Borough of Blaenau Gwent for his outstanding contribution to the world of running.

Councillors bestowed the honour at a meeting of the Council, with record breaking Steve (well known as ‘Jonesy’) in attendance live from his home in Colorado, United States. Family and friends also dialled in for the momentous occasion.

2024 marked the 40th anniversary of Steve Jones’ momentous victory at the Chicago Marathon in 1984, a triumph that captivated the world and solidified his place in athletic history. On that day in 1984, Jones, from Ebbw Vale, not only crossed the finish line first but also shattered records, demonstrating an extraordinary blend of grit, determination, and sheer willpower. He set a new world record, completing the course in a remarkable 2 hours, 8 minutes, and 5 seconds.

This month also marks 40 years since Steve took the London Marathon title. His list of running achievements is impressive and can be found [here](#).



An application has been made to place a 2.85-metre-high statue to commemorate Steve Jones at Ebbw Vale Sports Centre. The project is being delivered by a group that includes the Local Authority, Aneurin Leisure

Trust, Councillors and a representative who fundraised for the project.

The sculpture, to be mounted on a locally quarried limestone boulder is to be a silhouette showing Steve Jones wearing the number 10 breaking the world record in 1984 when winning the Chicago Marathon.

Resident survey

Let’s Talk: Living in Blaenau Gwent survey was undertaken in October/November 2024 and was undertaken by Data Cymru, a branch of the Welsh Government, on behalf of Blaenau Gwent local authority.

The survey was for Blaenau Gwent residents to assist the Council to better understand:

- What is important to you;
- Your experience of your local area; and
- How you view and interact with the Council.

Responses were received from 1,809 Blaenau Gwent residents. The survey providing valuable insights into various aspects of living in Blaenau Gwent. The survey covered demographics, health, satisfaction with the local area, safety, council services, and interactions with the council.

The responses are now being used to help shape the local area and local services.

Member champions

There are a number of Member Champions in place who represent specific key areas of work. The Member Champions are:

- Equalities,

Welsh Language and Diversity;



- Age Friendly;
- Smart Money, Poverty and Inequality;
- Climate Mitigation;
- Armed Forces;
- Wellbeing; and
- Digital.

We communicate openly and honestly with residents and Members. This communication is frequent and through variety of mediums, which has proven to be highly productive, with large amounts of interactions and feedback. We celebrate our successes well and are open and honest in areas where our plans have not been delivered, as intended.

A Financially Astute Council that

- has robust financial governance
- successfully manages resources and seeks value for money
- generates income where appropriate
- maximises inward investment
- invests in preventative services

Audit Wales undertook a review of the Council's Financial Sustainability in [2023/24](#) and found that, *'the Council has appropriate arrangements in place to support its financial sustainability, but these will only be effective if it works at pace to identify, approve and implement sufficient savings to reduce its medium-term funding gap in a sustainable way'*.

In response the Council responded to the two recommendations identified by Audit Wales. This has included the Bridging the Gap programme which remains the Council's strategic approach to achieving financial

efficiencies and improving financial stability while setting a balanced budget. The Strategic Business Reviews are structured around the following themes:

- Income Generation;
- Asset Optimisation; and
- Collaboration and service redesign.

The progress against Bridging the gap projects are reported to members on a quarterly basis. The Council has also agreed to explore closer collaborative working with Torfaen County Borough Council, it is anticipated that this will result in more resilient services and potential cost efficiencies. Implementation of identified opportunities will form the basis of an agreed Transformation Programme over the next 3 years.

Budget Engagement

The Budget for 2025/26, was agreed by Council in early 2025 supported by an engagement programme which operated in early following the announcement of the Local Government Settlement in mid-December 2024 by Welsh Government. Due to the tight timeframes following the announcement, the approach for 2025/26 was agreed to be a budget poll, supported by social media promotion, and processes to support people taking part at our community hubs. The intention of all of this was to get people participating and sharing their views on prioritising council services and setting council tax.

A total of 817 respondents took part in the poll, which equates to just over 1% of the area's population. This response rate is slightly up from last year when 680 responses were received. This is broadly in-line with expected response rates for budget engagement processes from previous years and is the second highest response rate for budget engagement carried out by the Council.

The feedback from the budget consultation was presented to Council and was taken on board as part of the budget setting process for the year.



A Digital and Data Led Council that

- uses data to anticipate needs
- builds digital profiles to better understand customer journeys
- is always on – enabling residents to access a wide range of digital services
- actively involves residents through digital inclusion and digital platforms

Customer Services Strategy

After reassessing our Customer Services delivery model, last year the Council launched a new Customer Services [Strategy](#) to focus on delivering positive customer experiences, supporting staff to resolve customer queries at first contact and utilising technology effectively.

The Council continues to implement the strategy for 2024/2025 through a variety of programmes which includes training for customer-facing roles in our Contact Centre, community hubs, and benefit service equipping all corporate customer-facing staff with core customer service skills.

To test the criteria and gather insights into our Customer Services [Standards](#) and Customer Services [Charter](#) which was launched alongside the strategy, a pilot was conducted, and surveys were introduced to understand customer feedback and help improve service delivery. However, engagement has proven challenging, with only around 9% of surveys issued by the Contact Centre being returned, and approximately 13% of surveys issued by hubs being completed in a face-to-face setting.

Next year, we will review the strategy's impact on service delivery and customer experience, extend training across the organisation, and use the pilot findings to enhance our charter and standards. We have also

changed the customer survey model for 2025/26, so it now forms part of our new contact centre telephony platform.

Digital Transformation Strategy

The way the public access Council services have changed with more services being delivered online; to help meet the needs of the community and help deliver our services more efficiently the Council launched a Digital Transformation Strategy in 2023/ 2024. The strategy is in its first year of implementation and is one of a set of strategic digital/ICT programmes designed to secure the future sustainability across the community and deliver improved outcomes for our customers, businesses and learners.

In 2024/ 2025 there has been a range of programmes of work to support the delivery of the strategy. This includes:

- Utilising automation technology to improve internal processes;
- Reviewing our websites including content and structure; and
- Transitioning from Telephony to digital communication tools.

A new Digital Transformation [Strategy](#) has been developed for schools, outlining key elements related to the digital learner journey. This strategy is aligned with the Council's Digital Transformation Strategy 2023/27.

A high percentage of those that visit the Community Hubs are identifying as being unable to self-serve. The Council's preferred method of delivering services is via digital means but a high number of Blaenau Gwent people are not digitally able.

We found that:

- 56% of customers digitally self-served when completing service requests; and
- 44% of customers were supported by the Contact centre or Community.



In 2024/25 there has been increased effort to support residents who are digitally excluded. A Digital Exclusion Officer has been appointed to assist residents in the community with getting online, enhancing their digital skills and supporting the community to self-serve.

The Digital Exclusion Officer role is currently funded through Shared Prosperity Funding. Funding has been confirmed for 2025/26, enabling continued integration of the digital exclusion project within the hub model and ongoing support for the Gwent Digital Exclusion Network. However, as funding has not yet been allocated beyond this period, there is a possibility that the project may not continue in the future. The role of supporting residents within the Digital space will be delivered as part of the Community Hub mode and become a sustainable aspect of this moving forward.

A Gwent Digital Exclusion Network has also been set up by the Council to engage with 3rd sector partners to discuss what organisations are currently doing digitally and what organisations digital plans are for the future which enables collaborative working in this space.

Digital

Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, Monmouthshire and Newport City Council, are partners in the Shared Resource Service (SRS) which has successfully supplied technology services for this Council since 2016.

In order to support collaboration and alignment of services, plans are being put in place to create a unified Digital, Data and Technology (Ddat) service aimed at enhancing public service delivery across multiple local authorities. As part of this process, digital teams across Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, Monmouthshire and Newport will transfer into the SRS. Anticipated benefits include:

- Resilience for service development and delivery;
- Increased momentum to meet organisational digital ambitions;
- Maximising skills and capacity and avoiding duplication;
- Wider development opportunities for staff; and
- User centred design shaping services.

The SRS are seeking the creation of a modern, vibrant digital public service that will change the way we serve our citizens and stakeholders.

One Wales Office of Data Analytics

The One Wales Office of Data Analytics (OODA) will be a pioneering initiative, empowering communities of all kinds to shape their own future, in line with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and Marmot principles. We will harness the power of data, not as a tool of top-down control, but as a catalyst for community-led action and decision-making that promotes equitable and sustainable wellbeing for current and future generations. We envision a region where data is accessible, understandable, and used ethically to tackle inequalities and create a fairer society for all.

The OODA will deliver initiatives such as the Joint Approach to Community Wellbeing, known as the JACOB initiative. The OODA will be grounded in the principles of the Nesta Office of Data Analytics work to transform how we deliver public services. This function will focus on enhancing frontline services, generating actionable insights from data, fostering collaboration across agencies, and developing innovative solutions to address complex challenges. The benefits of this approach will be:

- Improved service outcomes for citizens through data-informed service design and delivery
- Increased efficiency, optimised processes and reduced duplication
- Improved resource allocation leading to cost savings
- Enhanced Strategic Decision-Making
- Reduced inequalities by targeting resources and interventions to address inequalities

