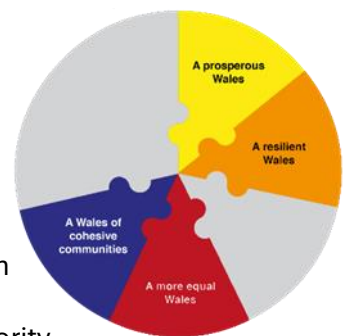


Well-being Objective 3

Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient

Why This Is Important as an Area of Focus - The Council wants to encourage and support people to make healthy lifestyle choices to enable children, young people and families to thrive. Research has proven people demonstrating positive health behaviours from birth throughout their life will lead to greater independence, and people being free from complicated health conditions later in life. This in turn could reduce demand on services and ensure the services that are provided are high quality, efficient and responsive to local people’s needs. With reduced funding and increasing demand on services the Council can no longer do everything it has done in the past. The focus must be on those actions that will have the greatest impact.



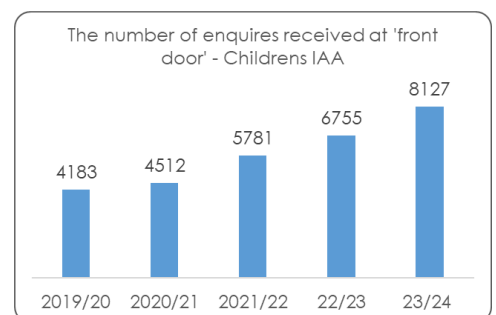
Safeguarding the most vulnerable people in the community continues to be a top priority for the Council alongside transforming the aspirations of residents and valuing fairness and equality in everything we do.

What We Aim to Achieve - An increase in the resilience of communities, where everyone is welcome and safe and which minimises dependency and maximises independence.

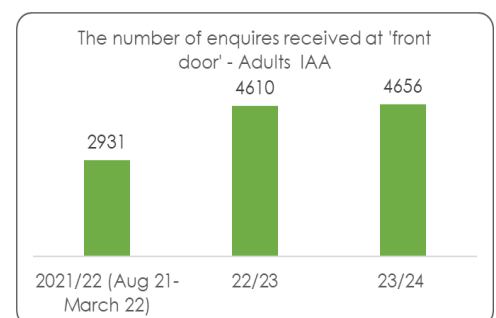
The following narrative provides an evaluative reflection of the activity, undertaken throughout 2023/24, across service areas that directly support this Well-being Objective. The narrative reflects what has gone well but also, and more importantly, where we are experiencing challenges. These challenges 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.

Information Advice and Assistance

The Social Services Directorate continues to have dedicated Information Advice and Assistance (IAA) Teams for both Children and Adult Social Services working as the first point of contact for the public who wish to access advice and support. The teams take a preventative and strength based approach to ensure needs are met at the earliest opportunity, by providing the right services to prevent needs from escalating.



Referrals into Children's Services IAA continues to increase. The numbers during 2023/24 are significantly higher with an increase of 1,372 compared to 2022/23. Of the 8,127 referrals during 2023/24, 711 (8.7%) were referred to preventative services (Families First), compared to 6,755 referrals in 2022/23, with 772 (11%) of referrals to Families First.



Referrals into Adults Services IAA data collation was revised in August 2021; therefore, data is only comparable to one previous year and demonstrates a slight increase in contacts. Of the 4,656 enquiries during the year, 2,506 (54%) were resolved at referral and did not require a comprehensive assessment by the long-term teams. In comparison, 60% were resolved within the IAA team during 2022/23.

A review has been undertaken by relevant service managers of preventative services considering how we can

better support our children and families in Blaenau Gwent at a preventive level; this included

recommendations about the way the Family Information Service, Flying Start and Families First work together, including the development of one front door / early help hub. This will ensure families are easily able to access the information they need.

Police and Cyfannol (Domestic Abuse Support) remain part of the IAA hubs to ensure that referrals are supported correctly to avoid the need to escalate for statutory assessment. The service manager for IAA and Youth Offending Services (YOS) regularly correspond to ensure referrals are made to REACH where support can be offered for prevention support to young people who offend.

Safeguarding

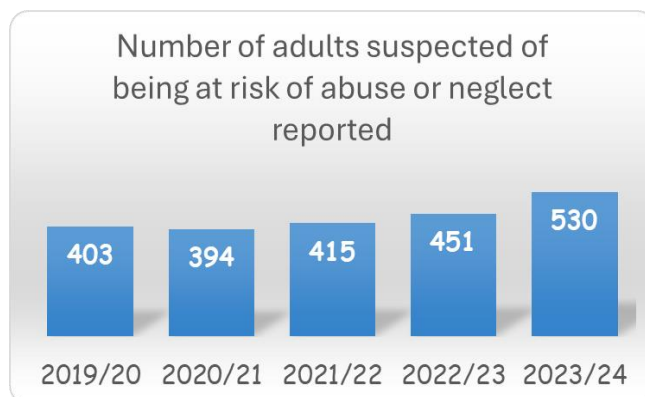
The Council's corporate safeguarding arrangements are continually being strengthened with it being recognised that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. We recognise our duties in protecting and promoting the welfare of children, young people, and at-risk adults. This includes collaborating with other organisations to help all children and young people achieve their full potential while continuing to care for the most vulnerable individuals in our communities. An annual safeguarding report is produced and presented to Senior Managers and Elected members. The latest safeguarding report can be found [here](#)

The Safeguarding Education Team continue to work closely with educational establishments to meet the educational needs of Children Looked After (CLA). The team have appointed two Education Support Workers, via the Virtual Schools Grant, to further enhance the support available to CLA. The way in which the Council works together has contributed well to improving multi-agency working and the support schools receive to manage the needs of pupils and their families more effectively. We support children and young people's educational learning opportunities whilst working collaboratively with Aneurin Leisure Trust with an aim to ensure that all children and young people's well-being and educational needs are catered for.

Audit Wales have confirmed that they will be returning to Blaenau Gwent at the end of 2024, to undertake a follow up review of our corporate safeguarding arrangements.

We recognise the importance of having a robust and sustainable Safeguarding Teams across both Adult and Children's Services to ensure we not only meet our legislative requirements, but that we are also able to protect our most vulnerable citizens.

All safeguarding referrals continue to be managed in line with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures and statutory requirements. The well-being of people needing our care and support, and carers needing support is paramount to service delivery and this includes respecting their culture, beliefs and other personal characteristics, and respecting their wishes and feelings



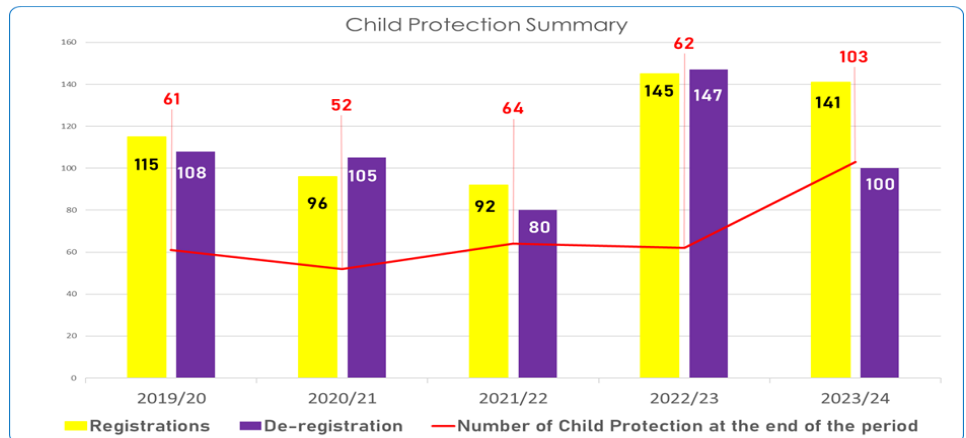
The Council has seen an increase in adult safeguarding referrals compared to the previous year, as shown in the graph above. This increase may be reflective of there being more adults at risk due to increased poverty with regards to the cost-of-living crisis affecting all local communities. The Safeguarding network event delivered by Gwent Wide

The Safeguarding Board earlier this year focused on the impact of poverty on the most vulnerable. The increase could also be due to awareness raising through the regular Safeguarding training that we deliver jointly with Caerphilly safeguarding team. Child Protection reports identified that 100% of Initial Child Protection Conferences were held in timescales. As at end of 2024 there were 103 children on the Child Protection register in comparison to 62 children as at the end of 2023.

Safeguarding performance shows a decline in the total number of visits to children on the child protection register that were completed within statutory timescales:

- 2023/24 – 1,270 (66.2%)
- 2022/23 – 1,516 (87.5%)

100 children were removed from the child protection register during the year. Of those the average number of days they were registered is 209.7 days.



All newly appointed Council staff are informed of the Council's safeguarding arrangements as part of their induction programme and are required to undertake the relevant level of safeguarding training.

There are 203 Children Looked After (CLA) which is the same number as at the end of previous year. The rate of admissions into care has dropped this year with 63 children in 2022/23 and 55 this year.

The mediation service has proven invaluable as a preventative service, preventing family breakdowns and reducing the number of children requiring out of home placements, either via the CLA route or those experiencing homelessness. Both mediation posts are fixed term via Supporting People Housing Support Grant funding and Regional Innovation Fund grant money, and it has now been confirmed that this service will continue to be funded for another year.

An audit framework for the Safeguarding Team has been established in order to assess practice across Children's Services. The Safeguarding Manager has developed an Independent Review Officer (IRO) good practice standards action plan during this period to act as a framework to benchmark the IRO roles and responsibilities against. Progress against the action plan will be reported on with the annual IRO report.

The Council continues to work in partnership with Cyfannol to support people experiencing domestic abuse. We have commissioned a dedicated Cyfannol Support Worker to be based within the Adults Safeguarding Team providing information, advice and support to people who are experiencing domestic abuse.

Safeguarding processes are well established in the Youth Service and are fit for purpose. Appropriate policies and procedures are in place, with robust records kept on all safeguarding matters including Duty to Report (DTRs) referrals to Social Services, feedback and staff training. Termly meetings are held between the Youth Service and the Safeguarding in Education Officer, and any areas of concern outside of child protection are escalated through this process. All Youth Service staff have received training in Prevent and actively use this understanding to identify any concerns in youth settings. Staff are giving regular opportunities to attend other training to identify, support and report safeguarding issues which include child exploitation, domestic abuse, emotional wellbeing support. Youth workers continue to effectively contribute to care and support plans and attend various multi-agency meetings in relation to safeguarding issues including Section 115 meetings and Community Safety Meetings.

Working in Partnership

Effective collaboration and partnership working assists us in identifying existing needs and shape and commission future sustainable services.

Both Commissioning and Housing Support Grant teams are continuing the joint working with attendance and participation in Gwent wide Regional Commissioners meetings; Care Home Webinars; Domiciliary Care Forums; DEWIS advocacy meetings and national webinars /meetings with Care Inspectorate Wales and Social Care Wales.

Better care joint working with Torfaen Council is proving successful, with a Single Handed Care Occupational Therapist specialist working equally between Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen, allowing for a greater emphasis on the better care ways of working with shared knowledge, discussions and decisions. This in turn should reduce the reliance on double handed domiciliary care packages and promote better outcomes for people receiving care and support

Adult Services social workers and support workers have undertaken a comprehensive training programme which focusses on collaborative conversations and balancing rights and responsibilities. In addition, we have created a staff mentor partnership with colleagues from Caerphilly Council as a part of embedding this approach within our communities.

The work of the Regional Partnership Board (RPB) supports the delivery of integrated responsive care and support across the region. However, there is still a great deal of work to do to ensure the Area Action Plan, developed by the RPB, translates into meeting the needs of local citizens. The vehicle for Blaenau Gwent to make this happen is the Integrated Services Partnership Board (ISPB). This board has set a small number of priorities based on the those outlined in the Area Plan. A number of task and finish groups have been set up to progress these priorities. An example is the campaign to increase breast feeding rates in Blaenau Gwent and improve the oral hygiene of children. Both areas have seen significant activity early in 2024, with the expectation that evidence will follow after 12 months of the difference that has been made.

Benefits continue to be realised for and by the workforce through the scale of opportunity possible due to the joint workforce development service model hosted by Blaenau Gwent in partnership with Caerphilly. When comparing the performance of the collaborative approach to other workforce development services in Gwent some key headlines from 2023/24 include:

- Supported 56% of the internally sponsored Social Work students in Gwent (44);
- Delivered 64% of all the Newly Qualified Social Workers in Gwent (29); and
- The social care workforce in the area had access to the largest training offer provided across Gwent, 85% of the total offer.

A Gwent Dementia Action Plan has been developed and aligns to the 20 All Wales Dementia Pathway of Standards which will also include performance measures. Workstream subgroups have been developed to take forward this programme of work which includes the following workstreams:

- Engagement;
- Memory Assessment Service/Dementia Connector role;
- Dementia Friendly Hospital Charter; and
- Education/Workforce and Measurement/Performance.

Workforce

Our workforce continues to be our greatest asset to ensure we deliver the best care and support available. During the year, a Social Services staff survey was undertaken with responses painting a positive picture for staff working within the social services directorate, particularly about the way in which staff were supported in their jobs. An action plan has been developed to work towards making the required improvements identified within the survey. This survey will be repeated next year to measure the progress that has been made.

Having a skilled and motivated workforce is essential in order to provide high quality services. As part of this, the Council has a Joint Workforce Development Team with Caerphilly County Borough Council with

responsibility for delivering a training and development strategy that supports development opportunities for staff at all levels in Social Services.

Workforce stability is a key consideration within Social Services as some teams are facing staffing shortages, however, it is acknowledged that this is a Wales wide position and there is no simple solution. The department continues to look at innovative ways of managing the workload within teams as well as developing recruitment and retention strategies to address workforce pressures. Despite these significant pressures the existing staff and providers of services have continued to ensure children and adults needs are met, risks are managed, and safeguarding issues dealt with.

During 2023/24 we saw a stabilisation of our workforce within Childcare Social Work teams. Turnover of staff still occurs; however, we have been able to fill these vacancies. Staffing levels in our provider services have also seen workforce stabilisation and a reduction in the use of agency staff. This has resulted in a reduction in staff sickness which no doubt has led to an improved consistency of care.

The way the workforce wants to learn has changed, they expect choice and flexibility. Various initiatives within the organisation are in place to support improving digital confidence and access to digital learning. The authority underpins its approach with the recognition of barriers that exist for parts of the social care workforce, so the offer includes the traditional classroom route.

A number of posts within Social Services are supported via grant funding. There is a significant risk that this funding will come to an end in March 2025. With referrals into Social Services increasing, there is a risk that this will impact service delivery and sustainability moving forward. Workforce and capacity is a key risk area for Blaenau Gwent and is featured on the Corporate Risk Register which is monitored regularly by Corporate Leadership Team.

Budget

Going forward, the Social Services Directorate are exploring opportunities to generate income as opposed to proposing further budget/service cuts. In addition, we are in the process of looking at alternative ways of managing demand by harnessing the existing strength within our communities and in doing so minimising dependence on statutory services. We are also exploring and promoting assisted technology to support the workforce and meet the future demand of our citizens.

Disability Services

We aim to deliver Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) in private homes to support independent living within a target of 330 days, and this was achieved delivering within an average of 329 days. This represents a significant reduction in the average number of calendar days taken to deliver a DFG Social Services have recently launched the opening of a Community Café based at the Blaina Institute. The café will support adults with disabilities to have placements as part of their day activity offer providing catering students with the opportunity to develop invaluable life, social and future work skills within the world of catering and hospitality.

Children's Services

Through the Welsh Government Radical Reform Grant, the Council was provided with money to purchase two detached 5-bedroom houses, at a cost of approximately £900,000, along with a further £700,000 for refurbishment costs. These will be providing safe, high-quality care for our local children to remain within the Borough. Blaenau Gwent had 5 children matched for adoption in the reporting period and 100% had their life journey material available within timescale. Recruitment of adopters is an area of improvement needed for the service, along with further work to meet our target of all children having a trauma nurture timeline prior to adoption.

Generic My Support Team (MyST) foster carers are to be recruited to act as realistic options for step down placements for complex children or as avoidant placements for those children who may escalate to residential placements. Our rate of disruption is low for Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) placements with 5 placement (children) breakdowns during the last financial year (2.8%) and even for these cases, due to the work undertaken by the SGO support team, all children were accommodated with other family members or returned to their birth parents with none of them coming back into the care of the Local Authority.

Earlier conversations at matching stage for children with adopters are taking place regarding potential post adoption contact with an emphasis on promoting contact with siblings. Contact agreements now reflect this. The South East Wales Adoption Service (SEWAS) continues to utilise in house psychology support provision for any additional needs outside those that the team can meet. This, along with referrals to Pathways provision, run by adoption UK and funded by Welsh Government Investment Grant, enables families to access specialised support, avoiding a need to source external provision wherever possible.

A formal review of Families First services has been finalised. The review included consultation with stakeholders in education and incorporated feed-back from staff. Recommendations of the review will be taken forward early next year but one main priority is the action needed to improve the internal forms within Families First to align them to the outcome focused practice embedded in Blaenau Gwent.

A report covering the annual activity across Social Services is developed and reported through the democratic process. The 2023/24 report can be found here: [C:\Users\morga_p2\AppData\Local\Temp\msoB597.tmp \(moderngov.co.uk\)](C:\Users\morga_p2\AppData\Local\Temp\msoB597.tmp(moderngov.co.uk))

Homelessness

During the reporting period, 76 households met the threshold for being threatened with homelessness. Of these, 41 (54%) were successfully prevented from losing their accommodation. Preventing homelessness continues to be difficult due to the continued lack of move on accommodation in the private and social housing sectors, combined with clients approaching the Council at crisis point, it continues to be difficult for the team to prevent homelessness and meet the target set.

We continue to work with Registered Social Landlords to identify properties for homelessness/resettlement schemes. During the year, 8 additional properties have been included, and a further 3 properties have been identified in partnership with Tai Calon, for inclusion in the scheme for which a funding bid has been submitted.

15 families were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation in 2023/24, which has exceeded the target of 12. This highlights the pressures on the homelessness services and the lack of social / private housing to move these families into and which leads to placing in unsuitable accommodation to meet the family's needs. Ongoing work is being carried out by the team to reduce this in 2024/25.

Through a partnership approach the Youth Engagement and Progression Team continue to support young people to prevent youth homelessness and to support emotional wellbeing. Support has also been provided for the local response relating to the resettlement scheme for Ukrainian people.

Housing Benefit

The Department of Work and Pensions provides Discretionary Housing Payment monies to the Council to support residents on housing benefit or universal benefit to 'top up' any shortfall that they have with paying rent and housing related expenses. Rents across the Borough have been increasing, a similar position to across Wales and the UK, and the reduction in funding since Covid are impacting these payments. These monies are used to prevent residents from becoming homeless and the increased number requiring support is putting pressure on the service. As there is a shortage of housing across the borough, many of those becoming

homeless may require B&B accommodation which is costly and not an appropriate long term solution.

Food Resilience programme

The Council was awarded UK Shared Prosperity Fund Communities & Place funding for 2023/24 to 2024/25 to build Food Resilience across the Borough. The Blaenau Gwent food resilience programme was formed in consultation with Torfaen Council to build a co-ordinated approach to food resilience with the aim in the short term to support the impact of the current cost of living crisis, providing opportunities to tackle food poverty and engage with food producers to increase local and regional supply chains.

Working in partnership together with the BG Food Partnership, the food resilience priorities can be identified as taking action against the following issues:

1. Addressing the root causes of Food Poverty and barriers to accessing good food;
2. Encouraging Healthy, local & sustainable food consumption;
3. Improving the local food environment, community and culture, increasing skills, knowledge, and resources;
4. Encourage green spaces for local food growing initiatives; and
5. Supporting food businesses & the sustainable food economy.

During the year food resilience officers have been recruited to work in partnership with the BG Food Partnership coordinator to build relationships with various partners and stakeholders across the borough, to demonstrate a visible and accessible platform for change within our local food system. Engagement with businesses and community food providers has been a vital tool for both understanding the challenges residents face within a local context and identifying the key levers for change already present in the borough. A wide range of activity has taken place during 2023/24 through the food resilience programme. Some of these activities include:

- **Winter 2023-24 Emergency Food Support grants** - a total of 23 grants funded by the Welsh Government Direct Food Support Fund were awarded to providers including community groups, early years hubs, schools, and institutions. Providers offer food banks, crisis intervention support, community cafes, community growing projects and Food Pantries.
- **School Holiday Food Activities- interactive accessible information developed to signpost** parents to the support, including holiday activities for children across BG where food provision was included to help parents deal with the rising cost of living during school holidays.
- **Taste of Nature** - an 18 week pilot partnership project between the BG Food Partnership and Head4Arts, funded by Arts Council Wales. This innovative project tested creative arts and nature-based activities to promote healthier food choices among children and families. The program was successfully implemented at St Illtyd's Primary School, Flying Start Hubs, and as part of Clwb Llan's summer program.

The Focus of the food resilience programme for 2024/ 25 will be to engage more closely with local business to encourage sustainable practices within local food businesses through shortening supply chains, improving the healthy food offer, reducing environmental impact, diversifying business models, and the development of a local community food strategy.

Environmental Health

During 2023/24, 100% compliance with delivery of high-risk food hygiene interventions were achieved. We continue to see a reduction in the overall percentage of premises that are classed as broadly compliant with food hygiene requirements. This is a concern as a reduction in standards could potentially result in an increase in the risk to public health. We will continue to prioritise interventions at high-risk premises and explore options for promoting improved compliance with food hygiene requirements. According to the data, compiled by High Speed Training, Blaenau Gwent has the worst food hygiene ratings across Wales, with an average score of 3.91 from 244 premises. [Food Hygiene Report 2024 | UK Ratings | Towns, Cities & Regions \(highspeedtraining.co.uk\)](#)

Key Challenges Identified for Action in 2024/25

- The number of adults suspected of being at risk of abuse or neglect and the number of adult safeguarding referrals has increased significantly
- Safeguarding performance shows a decline in the number of newly registered children that were visited within 10 days of being registered
- There is an increasing number of children on the Child Protection Register
- An increased number of Children Looked After are being placed outside of Wales which is difficult for the child and costly to the Local Authority
- Workforce stability is a risk for Social Services
- Address the current staffing capacity that is reliant on grant funding and the impact this may have
- Recruitment of adopters is an area of improvement needed for the service
- Implement actions from the Social Services Staff Survey and repeat the survey next year to assess progress
- Continue to deliver DFGs in private homes linked to available budget and demand
- Identifying the required funding to support people on housing benefit or universal benefit to prevent people from becoming homeless
- Preventing homelessness continues to be a challenge with the percentage becoming homeless increasing
- To aim for lowering the number of families that are placed in B&B - 15 families were placed in bed and breakfast accommodation in 2023/24, which has exceeded the target of 12
- reduction in the overall percentage of premises that are classed as broadly compliant with food hygiene requirement