

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council



Code of Governance

2023/24

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Introduction

This Statement has been prepared in accordance with guidance produced by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE) however, the content remains very much the Council's own. The Code of Governance sets out seven core principles of good governance designed to guide local authorities in ensuring their governance arrangements ultimately facilitate the transparent, efficient and accountable use of resources for their citizens.

Corporate Governance is the framework of accountability to users, stakeholders and the wider community, within which organisations take decisions, manage their functions and achieve their objectives.

Good corporate governance requires local authorities to carry out their functions in a way that demonstrates accountability, transparency, effectiveness, integrity, impartiality and inclusivity. Corporate governance is also the structure through which strategic objectives are set and performance monitored.

This code demonstrates Blaenau Gwent Councils approach and commitment to achieving and maintaining good corporate governance. We have demonstrated 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.

Governance Principles

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council operates through a Governance Framework which brings together an underlying set of legislative requirements, governance principles and management processes. This document aims to codify this framework and enable the Council to transparently demonstrate how it operates against the best standards of Governance and judge and measure any necessary improvements.

Responsibilities for Corporate Governance

The Leader and all Members of the Council, along with the Chief Executive Officer and Corporate Leadership Team, are responsible for the development, delivery and review of robust corporate governance arrangements. This Local Code is used as a framework to conduct business to deliver improvements for the people of Blaenau Gwent.

Monitoring and Review

The Council has delegated the monitoring of compliance with the Code and monitoring its effectiveness to its Governance and Audit Committee. Following a review of the Code of Governance and how well or otherwise it is working, the resultant report, the Annual Governance Statement, will be considered and approved by the Governance and Audit Committee to test the level of assurance received.

Where the review of the Council's governance arrangements reveals possible gaps or weaknesses, action is agreed to ensure effective governance in future. These actions are added to the Council's Action Plan contained within the Annual Governance Statement. This plan is monitored by the Council's Governance and Audit Committee to ensure effective and timely implementation.

Independent sources of assurance concerning the Code's suitability and effectiveness include Internal Audit, External Audit, the work of the Council's Ethics and Standards Committee, Governance and Audit Committee and the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Function.

Local authorities continue to be monitored by inspectors and regulators. Progress has been made against the recommendations of Regulators' reports which are helping to shape the Governance Framework of the Authority. A process is in place to monitor all of the proposals for improvement identified by Audit Wales. These are monitored using a 'report tracker' and it is maintained by the Corporate Performance Team. All 'open' proposals for improvement are included within the relevant business plans and reported through the democratic process.

Review of Effectiveness

To achieve the principles of good Corporate Governance, the Council supports and will apply the seven Core Principles of good governance as follows:

- Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law.
- Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.
- Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.
- Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes.
- Developing the entity's capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.
- Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management.
- Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit to deliver effective accountability.

These principles are not to be considered in isolation as they are all interconnected and overlap or merge with each other.

Core Principle A - Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law

The Council recognises that openness, integrity and accountability of individuals within an organisation form the cornerstone of effective corporate governance. The Council's credibility and reputation depends upon high standards of behaviour from its staff, Members and representatives and aims to have shared values across all these groups. The Council's Corporate Plan 2022/27 contains a set of shared values, namely:

- Respectful;
- Inclusive;
- Collaborative;
- Accountable; and
- Supportive.

Therefore, the Council aims to operate within a culture of behaviour based on shared values, ethical principles and good conduct and expects its senior members and management to exercise leadership in promoting these principles.

The Corporate Plan 2022/27 sets out an ambitious programme of activity for the Council. The priorities, also referred to as Well-being Objectives, have been developed in order to support communities of Blaenau Gwent and to define modern and high quality services which support

economic growth and well-being.

The Plan outlines four high level priorities, each of which is underpinned by solid and sustainable business plans, which describe the activity to be undertaken by each service area of the Council, ensuring the Council can be held to account for what it has promised to deliver.

The four high level priorities are:

- Maximise learning skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent.
- Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities
- An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place
- Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient

The Council has a responsibility to the people of Blaenau Gwent to help improve the social, economic and environmental well-being of the area. By setting a small number of strategic priorities within the Corporate Plan it will allow efforts to be concentrated on delivery in these areas and ultimately, help to improve the quality of the lives of residents. In March 2024, the Council developed an implementation plan and key performance indicators against each Corporate Plan priority in order to effectively monitor implementation of the Plan and transparently report progress.

The priorities have not been developed in isolation and alignment has also been made to the Marmot Principles (8 principles set out to tackle and reduce inequalities) and the priorities from the Gwent Public Service Board (PSB) Well-being Plan.

The Council will achieve this by holding, communicating, and keeping under review:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Council Constitution including member and officer policy frameworks• Frameworks for Scrutiny and Cabinet• Informal protocols re: Complaints – Members and Officers• A Petitions Protocol• Registers of Interest for Members and Officers• Procedural rules for Members and Officers to declare an interest in the business under consideration at all Committees and Council• Each Committee has an advisory officer to promote the appropriate conduct of meetings• Contract Procedure Rules• An Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy including a fraud hotline• Defined Competency Framework for staff• A Whistleblowing Policy• The operation of an Ethics & Standards Committee including independent external membership with defined terms of reference• A delegated responsibility for key officers regarding fraud, codes of conduct, standards and whistleblowing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An Internal Audit Service and a Governance and Audit Committee as part of the Council's assurance framework. The Committee has defined terms of reference and a third of its membership must be lay members• The maintenance of an Annual Schedule of Member Remuneration, the holding of a register to record payments and publication online• Induction training for Officers and Members including standards of behaviour expected and ongoing Member Development Programme• Member Competency Framework and Personal Development Reviews to inform individual Member development as well as the Member Development Strategy and Training Programme• A Member Mentoring Framework• A formal opportunity for all Members at the beginning of a meeting to declare their interests
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The Council has set out minimum standards of behaviour and has provided guidelines to help maintain and improve standards. These include a Dignity at Work Policy in addition to its Codes of

Conduct and Whistleblowing Policy.

The Council has adopted a Constitution which:

- Clearly defines those functions which will be reserved to the full Council for decision, those decisions which will be taken by the Cabinet or its individual members, and those which are delegated to senior officers. The full Council sets the strategic direction through the adoption of major policies and the budget, the Cabinet takes major decisions within the overall policy and budget framework, helping to develop new policies. Officers take day to day decisions within the policy and budget framework.
- Sets out the responsibilities and procedures for decision making. Decisions which can be taken by the Cabinet, the regulatory Committees and full Council are shown in sections 4-7 of the Constitution. In addition, the Council's policies and protocols set out the processes that must be followed in decision making e.g. Organisation Development Policies, Licensing and Planning Applications, Appeals, tabling motions at Committees.
- Establishes through the Overview and Scrutiny Committees a robust overview and scrutiny role. These Committees between them have powers to review and scrutinise decisions relating to any of the Council's activities, including considering policy proposals prior to adoption by the Council or the Cabinet or having 'call in' procedures following a decision.
- Sets out clearly the role of the Leader and Cabinet and in particular makes it clear that they are responsible for providing effective strategic leadership to ensure the Council successfully discharges its overall responsibilities for the activities of the organisation as a whole.
- Operates three Regulatory Committees, Planning Committee, General Licensing Committee and Statutory Licensing Committee, which have specific powers delegated to them by the Council.
- Makes clear the roles of all Councillors both in their formal decision making/policy development role and as local members.

The Constitution sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are made, and the procedures followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people.

The Constitution contains comprehensive Financial Procedure Rules and Contract Procedure Rules (in sections 16 and 17), governing the process to be adopted in conducting the Council's business.

The Constitution and other formal documents set out clear protocols and codes of conduct to ensure that the requirements and boundaries of decision making are clear to Members:

- Members' Code of Conduct;
- Standards Procedures;
- Code of Conduct on Planning Matters;
- Roles and responsibilities of Overview and Scrutiny Committees; and
- Local Member / Officer Protocol.

In addition, there are a set of Employment Policies which clearly inform officers on expectations in the decision-making process.

The Council actively recognises the limits of lawful activity placed upon them whilst also striving to utilise powers to the full benefit of their communities through:

- Legal and Financial advice in the preparation of Council, Committee and Cabinet reports;
- The availability of the legal advice at the meetings of the Council, the Cabinet and Statutory Committees;

- Professional development and training (including multi-agency training for Adult and Children's Services' Social Care staff in particular);
- The Council's policies and protocols setting out the processes; and
- Integrated Impact Assessment processes.

Core Principle B - Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement

The Council recognises its primary purpose in delivering services for the people of Blaenau Gwent and the specific need to engage with them and other stakeholders in planning services to be delivered and to be accountable to them for those services.

The Council aims to achieve this by:

- Clear lines of communication with people and organisations to which the Council is accountable;
- Clear statements of the role of its members in their various offices;
- Clear statements of the roles and accountabilities of staff in their job descriptions;
- Terms of reference for the Council's committees and holding them open to the public;
- A clear statement of strategic priorities, activity and performance indicators as included within the Corporate Plan 2022/27;
- Operation of an effective complaints procedure;
- Staff consultation and engagement in decision making;
- Ensuring staff are clearly accessible to the public through meetings, telephone availability, email, and where appropriate home visits; and
- Ensuring partnership arrangements and procurement arrangements are similarly clear about accountabilities.

In September 2021, the five Public Service Boards in Gwent were dissolved so that one Regional Gwent Public Service Board could be established. The Gwent PSB brings public bodies together to work to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Gwent. They are responsible, under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, for overseeing the development and delivery of a new regional Gwent Well-being Plan 2023-28, which is a long-term vision for the well-being of the area. In order to develop this new Gwent PSB Plan, the Gwent PSB undertook a regional Wellbeing assessment, the evidence of which has been used to develop the Well-being Plan for Gwent. The final Well-being Plan must be published no later than 12 months following an ordinary local government election. Normally this would mean that the Plan should have been published in May 2023, however, because the final plan needed to go to the Boards of the eight statutory members, it had agreement for a slight delay to publication. The Gwent PSB Well-being Plan was published in August 2023. The final Plan sets out two key objectives for the region:

- We want to create a fairer, more equitable and inclusive Gwent for all; and
- We want a climate-ready Gwent, where our environment is valued and protected, benefitting our well-being now and for future generations.

Five steps have also been established to achieve the two overarching objectives. Delivery plans for each step explaining what will be done in the short, medium and longer term, who will do it and by when, will be developed during the first year of the plan using the five ways of working as a framework. These will be published as part of the first annual report. The delivery plans will be complemented by local delivery plans at a county level. These will be written by Local Delivery Groups, which mirror the membership of the PSB but at a more local level. The five steps are:

- Take action to reduce the Cost of Living crisis in the longer term;
- Provide and enable the supply of good quality, affordable, appropriate homes;
- Take action to reduce our carbon emissions, help Gwent adapt to climate change, and protect and restore our natural environment;
- Take action to address inequalities, particularly in relation to health, through the framework of the Marmot Principles; and
- Enable and support people, neighbourhoods, and communities to be resilient, connected, thriving and safe.

As part of the development of a Gwent Public Service Board, a Joint Public Service Board Scrutiny Committee has been established and is managed by Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council on behalf of the Board.

A Corporate Communications Strategy (2020-25) is in place and is a key strategy as part of the overall governance framework. The strategy has six key drivers with the aim of delivering excellent, innovative and cost-effective two-way communications with key target audiences. Its overall aim is to build a positive reputation for the Council to create trust and confidence in Council services.

The Council's first Commercial Strategy was approved in 2020. In April 2024, Cabinet agreed a revised Strategy covering the period 2024/27. The strategy supports how the council can plan and find innovative ways to change how it delivers services to the community. It will have a fundamental role in driving further transformation and modern service delivery models for the Council as well as maximising financial efficiencies. The Strategy is underpinned by two key principles and three priorities:

- **Principle One:** Develop a culture that supports the organisation to become more commercially minded.
- **Principle Two:** Develop the organisational governance and procedures that will support commercial planning.
- **Priority One:** To change the way in which Elected Members and staff perceive and drive forward commercial opportunities.
- **Priority Two:** To build and embed the organisational approaches that support the development of alternative models of service delivery.
- **Priority Three:** To develop an organisational programme of proposed commercial investment opportunities.

Supporting the Council's approach to becoming commercially minded, a Business and Commercial Opportunity Network has been established to lead on the development of commercial projects working with a range of stakeholders across the Council to review existing approaches to commercialisation within the organisation.

The Council continues to develop the way in which it engages with the community. In January 2024, Corporate Overview and Performance Scrutiny Committee approved a draft Engagement and Participation Strategy to go out for consultation. Public consultation ran through March and April 2024, with 170 responses received. An updated Strategy has been produced as well as a supporting action plan and these are scheduled to be approved through the democratic process in July 2024. The strategy includes four Key Objectives:

- **Objective 1:** To mainstream effective engagement and participation approaches across the Council.
- **Objective 2:** To ensure that we engage with the people of Blaenau Gwent in the most effective,

collaborative way.

- **Objective 3:** To actively encourage our communities & future generations to participate in council decision-making activity.
- **Objective 4:** To maintain best practice in engagement & participation and keep up to date with the latest innovations to help support our communities.

Following a review of customer service delivery, Cabinet approved the Council's Customer Service Strategy 2023/27 in October 2023. The Strategy is underpinned by three key principles and three priorities:

- **Principle One:** to deliver a Positive Customer Service experience;
- **Principle Two:** investing in our staff to support customers and to resolve queries at first point of contact where possible;
- **Principle Three:** developing a culture that supports digital improvement, innovation and continues to make the best use of new technology;

- **Priority One:** designing services to meet the needs of our customers;
- **Priority Two:** delivery of a customer focused culture;
- **Priority Three:** giving our customers the choice on how they interact with us, based on feedback.

Alongside the Customer Service Strategy Cabinet has also approved a Digital Transformation Strategy 2023/27 for the Council. The Strategy is underpinned by two key principles and three priorities and are essential to improving and delivering our services in the future:

- **Principle One:** developing a culture that supports digital improvement and a seamless customer experience;
- **Principle Two:** improving collaboration to make the best use of knowledge and expertise to create better services;

- **Priority One:** to be a customer focussed organisation;
- **Priority Two:** to be a digitally enabled Borough;
- **Priority Three:** to maximise the use of our resources and technology.

The key themes and priorities of this strategy have been developed through user research and engagement with customers; staff engagement; senior management workshops; elected member engagement; discussions with local authority partners and results of digital maturity assessments.

The Council has been working on a number of digital and customer centred projects. To support this, a Digital Service Board has been established and Digital Champions identified in each service area. The board will establish a programme of service redesign reviews based around customer and user experience and to establish digital solutions.

The Council is developing an approach where services are designed around the customer and this is informing both the corporate digital programme, and service re-design to maximise digital innovation. This approach recognises that offering effective digital solutions in relevant services benefits both the customer and the organisation, whilst enabling capacity for the more complex interactions that require the human touch.

The Council continues to develop its use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook and to support the development of digital channels for future service delivery.

The Council will continue to ensure its users have the opportunity to influence and receive high quality of service, making the best use of resources to deliver excellent value for money.

Core Principle C - Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 established statutory Public Service Boards (PSBs). The purpose of the PSBs is to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being in its area by strengthening joint working across all public services in Wales.

Each PSB must prepare and publish a plan setting out its objectives and the steps it will take to meet them. This is called a Well-being Plan. It must say:

- Why the PSB feels their objectives will contribute to achieving the well-being goals
- How it has had regard to the assessment of Well-being in setting the objectives and steps to take.

Each PSB will carry out an annual review of their plan showing their progress. When producing their assessments of well-being and Well-being Plan, PSBs must consult widely.

The Statutory Members of each PSB are:

- The Local Authority;
- The Local Health Authority;
- The Local Health Board;
- The Fire and Rescue Authority; and
- Natural Resources Wales.

In addition to the statutory members each PSB will invite the following people to participate:

- Welsh Ministers;
- Chief Constables;
- The Police and Crime Commissioner;
- Certain Probation Services; and
- At least one body representing relevant voluntary organisations.

PSBs will also be able to invite other public service organisations to participate.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places a duty on each public body to carry out sustainable development. Sustainable Development is defined as a process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales. This needs to be done by taking action in accordance with the sustainable development principles so that the well-being goals are achieved.

The application of the five ways of working identified in the act is how public bodies are able to maximise their contribution to the National Well-being Goals.

In addition to the Codes of Conduct and protocols referred to under Core Principle A, the Council seeks to maintain high standards in the conduct of its business and avoid prejudice, bias and conflicts of interest. This is achieved through the development of a Strategic Equality Plan, a Welsh Language Promotion strategy, in line with the requirements of the Welsh Language Standards, and various engagement forums such as Youth Forum, and 50+ Forum.

The Equality Act 2010 (the Act from here on in) came into operation on 6th April 2011. The Act replaced the existing 116 different pieces of law relating to equality and put them all together in one piece of legislation. The Act strengthens the law in important ways, and in some respects extends current law to help tackle discrimination and inequality.

In March 2024 Council approved the Strategic Equality Plan 2024/2028. To create a Plan that is relevant to those living and working within Blaenau Gwent, public engagement was undertaken and included a public engagement programme which involved 160 people with lived experiences from across the identified protected characteristics and a formal consultation process which took place in January 2024.

The plan contains Six Equality Objectives:

- We will be a fair and equitable organisation;
- We will be a workplace that champions diversity and inclusion;
- We will create a fair and inclusive learning culture for all children and young people with a focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion;
- We will promote and support inclusive, safe and cohesive communities;
- We will ensure effective engagement and participation for people with protected characteristics; and
- We will strive to reduce inequality caused by poverty.

Core Principle D - Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes

Leadership is exercised by clearly communicating the Council's purpose and vision for Blaenau Gwent and its intended outcomes for its citizens and service users. The Council's vision is:

Blaenau Gwent – a place that is fair, open and welcoming to all by working with and for our communities

The Council exerts a wider influence within the community and also delivers services through a mixture of procurement, in-house provision and partnerships to help achieve these outcomes.

Following the introduction of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, the Council is required to undertake a corporate self-assessment at least once on an annual basis. The Council has used its current business planning process to gather evidence as well as identifying a number of key documents to reference. In October 2023 the Council approved its second Self-Assessment the focus of which was the Council's Corporate Plan priorities, known as Well-being Objectives, and an assessment against the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2021, and providing an assessment of how well the Council feels it has achieved these and where further improvement is required. The business planning process has also become more streamlined with the incorporation of Performance Indicators, Risk, Equalities, Welsh, the Environment Act, Decarbonisation and proposals for improvement from auditors into one monitoring form on a central system. The self-evaluation process directly links to the business planning process. The business planning process will undertake a review alongside the development of the Corporate Plan so that it reflects the needs of the Council.

The Council prepares an Annual Budget to resource its service priorities. A Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is reviewed and updated at least annually, and a summarised version was endorsed by Council on 21st December 2022, and includes projections up to 2028/29 to aid improved service planning. The MTFS is next due for review during 2024.

Core Principle E - Developing the entity’s capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it

The Council strives to ensure continuous improvement in the delivery of its services through its improvement planning process and its Performance Management Framework, and has strengthened these arrangements to align them with risk management as well as identifying levels of accountability.

The remit of the Wider Corporate Leadership Team (WCLT) has been reviewed. Its broad purpose is to effectively support the Corporate Leadership Team in its role in providing strategic direction to the organisation. The WCLT is also a forum that takes a distributed leadership approach to disseminate information and communicate messages, network with colleagues and peers and provide personal development opportunities.

Ensuring that Members and Officers have the necessary skills to operate a multi-million-pound business that provides a range of different services is one of the most important aspects of Governance. The training needs of Members is undertaken as part of the development of the Committee Forward Work Programmes as well as through the Member Competency Framework and Personal Development Reviews. The Council holds the Wales Charter for Member Support and Development (Level 1). Following the local elections in May 2022, the Council provided a Member Induction and Refresher Training Programme with sessions established into the following categories:

- Mandatory;
- Recommended;
- Beneficial; and
- Useful

The Council will ensure those responsible for Governance of the Council will have the necessary skills, knowledge and experience they need to perform well.

The Council will achieve this by:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing with its Member Training Programme and mandatory training programme, including within the Member Development Strategy. • Member briefings on issues of importance to the Council. • Induction training and professional advice for Members. • Introduction of skills and experience requirements for special responsibility posts. • Continuing to develop Information Communication Technology (ICT) support for Members to give a better understanding of modern administration and to improve communication. • Operating hybrid meetings and broadcasting / recording these as part of the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 • Operating a competency framework for Officers and Members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Head of Paid Service is responsible for ensuring that the Council’s officer establishment is appropriately staffed to deliver the service priorities of the Council. In practice much of this responsibility is delegated to Directors, Chief Officers and Heads of Service. • The Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer and Head of Democratic Services will determine the requirements to discharge their statutory roles. • The MTFS looks forward over the next five years (2024/25 to 2028/29) to assess the spending pressures the Council is likely to face and the level of savings that will need to be made. • The Council benefits from its membership of the Welsh Local Government Association which provides support and assistance over a range of Council functions and responsibilities. Similar support is available
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentoring programme for Elected Members. • Arrangements for Members sitting on Outside Bodies • A Recruitment Charter ensuring the Council employ staff with necessary qualifications and experience to carry out the role expected of them. • Performance coaching in place for all staff and departmental monitoring. • Competency Framework and Personal Development Review Process in place for all Elected Members receiving a Senior Salary Allowance and offered to all other members. 	<p>to members of different professional bodies across the Council.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council remains committed to promoting health and well-being to its employees through periodic staff surveys and staff engagement. • The Council will expect similar values of staff development and empowerment of its partners and agents in service delivery.
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The Council recognises the need to have effective political and management structures and processes to govern decision making and the exercise of authority within the organisation. It believes it is important that all those involved in planning and delivering a service understand each other's roles and responsibilities and how together they can deliver the best possible outcomes.

To help achieve this, the Council's constitution clearly lays out its service portfolios and the role of and responsibility of all Members, along with those decisions retained by Council.

It specifically lays out, via job descriptions, the roles and responsibilities of the Cabinet Committee and its Cabinet Members, Scrutiny Committees and their Chairs, Scrutiny Members and Regulatory Committee Chairs and Members.

It identifies the Leader and Deputy Leader as having a specific role in providing leadership. Alongside this, the Council has established a Presiding Member Role which includes:

- Chairing Council Meetings;
- Maintain order and to protect the rights of Members including ensuring that Council business is handled on the basis of equality and impartiality;
- Promote democratic engagement and leadership; and
- Acts as the ambassador for the Council, attending events in order to publicise and raise the profile of the Council.

Membership of all political posts is determined each year at the Council's Annual General Meeting (including representational roles). The Democratic Services Committee keeps the roles and responsibilities under review. Additionally, the Council provides induction training for all new Members along with professional advice and a training programme available for all Members' participation.

All meetings are recorded and included on the Council website. Alongside this, minutes are kept which include:

- Attendance;
- Apologies;
- Declarations of Interest; and
- Decisions / Recommendations

The minutes sit alongside the recording of the meeting available on the Council's website.

A Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny meeting is held at least 3 times per year. There is also a series of planning meetings in place before a formal Committee meeting is held. Member Briefing and Training Sessions are organised for all Members on specific issues. Pre meetings are held with the whole committee before the formal committee takes place to discuss lines of enquiry.

Consideration is to be given to the establishment of a Chairs and Vice Chairs meeting to include the Governance and Audit Committee Chair and Vice also.

Similarly, on the Officer side, the Constitution lays out the Scheme of Delegation to Directors, Chief Officers and Senior Officers.

In particular, four statutory appointments of Head of Paid Service (Chief Executive Officer), Monitoring Officer (Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance) Section 151 Officer (Chief Officer - Resources) and Head of Democratic Services (Head of Governance and Partnerships) are included along with their specific roles and responsibilities. This helps ensure Members receive appropriate professional financial, legal and other advice.

Similarly, the Council has the statutory roles of the Corporate Director of Education and Corporate Director of Social Services.

The Chief Executive Officer is responsible for all aspects of operational management and in practice operates this through a scheme of delegation.

The Chief Officer – Resources is responsible to the Council for ensuring that appropriate advice is given on all financial matters for keeping proper financial records and accounts, and for maintaining an effective system of internal control.

The Head of Legal and Corporate Compliance is responsible for ensuring that agreed procedures are followed and that all applicable statutes, regulations and other relevant statements of good practice are complied with.

To help clarify their respective roles the Council follows a Member/Officer protocol which is included in the Constitution.

The Council ensures effective management arrangements are in place and operates a Corporate Leadership Team of Chief Executive Officer, Corporate Directors and Chief Officers, supported by a Wider Leadership Team; together these ensure effective communication across all of the services of the Council.

Core Principle F - Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management

The Council has a Governance and Audit Committee which is politically balanced. It meets on a regular basis and is advised by the Council's Audit and Risk Manager and is normally attended by representatives of the Council's External Auditors. Members receive training on the special role of the Governance and Audit Committee.

Under the requirements of the Local Government Measure 2011 the role and purpose of Governance and Audit Committee and its membership have been revised ensure that it is set up to improve strategic planning and facilitate both scrutiny and challenge within the structures of the Council. The Governance and Audit Committee has the following functions:

- Review, scrutinise and issue reports and recommendations in relation to the Authority's

financial affairs.

- Review, scrutinise and issue reports and recommendations on the appropriateness of the Authority's risk management, internal control and corporate governance arrangements.
- Oversee the Authority's risk management, internal control and corporate governance arrangements.
- Oversee the Authority's audit arrangements and review its financial statements.
- Oversee the Authority's complaints performance.

The Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021 specified a number of changes that became effective from May 2022, namely

- Recruitment and selection exercise for all lay members;
- One third of the committee members must be lay persons;
- Chairperson must be a lay member; and
- Deputy Chair must not be a member of the Cabinet.

The Council will consider regularly its performance in achieving its key objectives through:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Development of Business Plans at all levels.• The setting of performance targets against all measures both national and local.• The understanding and analysis of comparative and trend data to develop targets.• Development, at all service and directorate levels, of both national and local data of priorities linked to the strategic outcomes.• Keeping value for money under review.• Reviews of service provision and priorities.• Preparation of externally audited accounts.• Annual approval of budgets and regular consideration of budget reports.• An effective member scrutiny function for all services to include performance and finance as part of their terms of reference. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arrangements to deal with service failure.• Monitoring of partnership arrangements.• Testing customer satisfaction.• Operating effective internal controls.• Monitoring complaints.• Ensuring competition in relevant service provision and proper contract management.• Service and Directorate Risk Registers which will be effective and proactively used and reported.• External audit scrutiny by Audit Wales and other regulators, through their regulatory plan.• Maintaining an effective Internal Audit Service and Governance and Audit Committee. |
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The Council has adopted a Risk Management Strategy with the ultimate aim of embedding a consistent and effective approach to Risk Management throughout the whole Council. The strategy is supported by a Risk Management Handbook (guidance)

The Risk Management Framework identifies the roles and responsibilities of Members and Officers, guidance on how to describe risk, and guidance on how to evaluate and assess risk. The framework requires that risk registers be maintained at Service / Department / Project levels and that these will support and feed the Corporate Risk Register which holds the most significant risks faced by the Council.

Regulatory Committees will take decisions based upon detailed reports with any late information being referred to in the minutes. Overview and Scrutiny Committees when undertaking work requested by Council, or the Cabinet, or when undertaking their own investigations, will agree reports containing the evidence which was considered to be material.

The Council is subject to numerous external audits and regulatory reviews each year. These are undertaken to ensure the Council provides value for money, services are being run efficiently and

effectively, and that improved services are being delivered. The Council is monitored by a number of regulatory bodies, the main of which are: Audit Wales; Care Inspectorate Wales; and Estyn.

Engagement arrangements with Audit Wales are in place with meetings held with the Head of Governance and Partnerships, with the Section 151 Officer and also the Chief Executive. Quarterly meetings are also undertaken with the Leadership.

The Authority's Education Services have regular Local Authority Link Inspector (LALI) meetings convened with Estyn in line with inspectorate requirements. The Education Directorate reports progress against the Local Government Education Services (LGES) framework to Scrutiny and Cabinet. The Authority has update meetings between the Corporate Director Education, Members, and the Welsh Government officials as and when required and the Education Achievement Service (EAS) also provides updates on the school improvement agenda to the Cabinet/CLT and Scrutiny Committee.

The Social Services Directorate is subject to audit, inspection and review by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). On a quarterly basis, the Corporate Director of Social Services and Heads of Adult and Children's Services meet with CIW to discuss achievements, performance and key challenges.

Core Principle G - Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit, to deliver effective accountability

The Council has an effective Internal Audit Service that works to an approved, risk assessed audit plan. The results of the audit work undertaken inform the annual opinion of the Audit and Risk Manager with regard to level of assurance provided by the Council's internal control environment.

In 2022, following the local elections, Blaenau Gwent Council had the number of Elected Members reduced from 42 to 33. Owing to this, a comprehensive desk top research exercise was undertaken to consider where the democratic function of the Council could be strengthened and modernised. These arrangements included, and have since been implemented including:

- A change to the remits of Scrutiny Committees, these are now:
 - Place Scrutiny Committee;
 - People Scrutiny Committee;
 - Partnership Scrutiny Committee; and
 - Corporate and Performance Scrutiny Committee.
- The establishment of a Presiding Member position;
- A reduction in the size of committees (each committee, with the exception of Planning, Regulatory & General Licensing Committee and Statutory Licensing Committee, will have 9 elected members);
- A reduction in the amount of items included on Scrutiny Committee agendas; and
- The minutes of meetings to only include:
 - Attendance;
 - Apologies;
 - Declaration of Interest; and
 - Decisions / Recommendations.

The minutes, alongside the recording of each meeting are found on the Council's website - democracy.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?Categories=

Cabinet and Council reports will contain all the information, evidence and comments needed to take decisions. The decisions of the Committees are formally recorded by video, in minutes and

within the decision sheet for Cabinet Committee decisions.

The Corporate Report Template has been designed so that it captures the required information in order to support discussion and decision making.

The Monitoring Officer is available to give advice to Members and staff on conflicts of interest and determine the public interest on Council agendas.

The performance management function works under the Head of Governance and Partnerships in the Corporate Services Directorate. The Council's Corporate Performance Framework includes the reporting of the Joint Report to Corporate Overview and Performance Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet Committee as well as service area reports being presented to the relevant Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet. Reporting includes progress updates against strategic priorities, the Council's most significant risks, regulatory update, financial position and core performance indicators. Service area reporting is also reported to each Scrutiny Committee.

The Council recognises the importance of partnership working and takes a lead role in the development of governance arrangements of the key strategic partnerships. When working in partnership the Council aims to have clear governance arrangements in place providing clarity about legal status, roles and responsibilities of partners.

Next Steps

The Council has recognised that it needs to clearly evidence its governance arrangements.

This is the latest version of a formal Code of Governance for Blaenau Gwent, and the Council is committed to keeping the Code under review and importantly to learn from its adoption to improve Governance arrangements "on the ground" for the benefit of the people of Blaenau Gwent.

The product of this review and other work will be included in the publication of the Annual Governance Statement.

It is intended that the review will provide an evidence base for the conclusions reached and importantly an action plan to be followed to ensure continuous improvement in the Council's Governance arrangements.

The Annual Governance Statement is to be considered by the Council's Governance and Audit Committee, to whom Council will delegate the role of seeking assurance of the effectiveness of the various arrangements described in this Code.

This will include a review of the evidence framework prepared to support the Governance Statement including the policy documents, standard operating procedures and guidance used along with consideration of their effectiveness.