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**Blaenau Gwent Council Panel Peer Assessment Findings report**

**Adroddiad Canfyddiadau'r Panel Cymheiriaid**

**Cyngor Blaenau Gwent**

**1 Introduction and Background**

1.1 In accordance with the performance duties under the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council commissioned a Panel Performance Assessment (PPA) via the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

1.2 The onsite assessment was completed over a four-day period concluding on 21st November 2024 with a feedback presentation provided to the council outlining the key findings detailed within this report.

1.3 The assessment was undertaken based on the council’s agreed scoping document and the WLGA’s PPA methodology, which was developed with the sector. The PPA methodology provides an overarching framework: the lines of enquiry are not prescriptive but provide guidance to the panel on the areas that could be explored to meet the statutory duty. However, the extent to which the panel explores those areas should be proportionate to the council’s scope but sufficient to enable the panel to form a conclusion.

1.4 In accordance with the statutory guidance the PPA is not an audit or an inspection and does not seek to duplicate work undertaken by regulators and other bodies. Whilst the panel has undertaken a corporate assessment, this assessment was not in-depth and should be considered alongside other sources of assurance such as the council’s own self-assessment, internal audit reviews, external audit and regulatory reviews.

1.5 In preparing for the PPA, the council scoped their requirements to maximise the value and impact of the assessment to the council. The specific areas of focus identified by the council are reflected in paragraph 3.2.

1.6 This report provides a summary overview of the conclusions of the panel reported by exception.

# **2 Peer Team**

2.1 The following peers were commissioned by the WLGA to undertake the assessment. Selection of the peers was agreed and at the discretion of the council, based on suitability of skills and experience:

1. Independent Chair: Jack Straw
2. Senior Member Peer: Cllr Julie Sangani
3. Senior Officer Peer: Rhys Cornwall
4. Wider Public, Private, or Voluntary Sector Peer: Sara Powys[[1]](#footnote-2)
   1. The panel were supported by Ann-Marie Mc Cafferty (Improvement Officer) and Lyndon Puddy (PPA Manager) from the WLGA’s Improvement Team.

# **3 Scope and Approach**

3.1 From 1st July 2024, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (BGCBC) and Torfaen County Borough Council (TCBC) will share a chief executive for an initial period of up to nine months. As part of this arrangement, both councils have agreed to a ‘discovery phase’ mandate, which will involve investigating the potential benefits and challenges of closer collaboration. The councils have commissioned the Peer Assessment Panel to provide an honest and impartial assessment of the current corporate health of the organisation and help inform future options.

3.2 The PPA will examine the councils’ position in relation to the three performance duties, that is the extent to which the council is

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

The council has requested the following themes be utilised to inform the assessment:

1. Member/officer relations
2. Sustainability (finance, demand, transformation)
3. The Marmot policy commitment
4. The Discovery Phase (federation)

Throughout the PPA leadership, culture and readiness to deliver will feature.

3.3 In undertaking the assessment the panel conducted a desktop review of council’s documents, data, external reports and other relevant intelligence. The onsite stage of the review involved a series of individual meetings and focus groups with the following stakeholders:

* Leader of the Council and the Cabinet
* Chief Executive Officer and Corporate Leadership Team including S151 Officer
* Heads of Service and Team Managers
* Leaders of the Opposition Group
* Backbench Elected Members
* Staff focus groups
* Trades Unions
* Partner Agencies
* Business Fora
* Children and young people
* Resident Group-
* Chair/Vice Chair: Governance & Audit Committee
* Chair/Vice Chairs of all 4 scrutiny committees
* Vice Chair: Standards Committee
* Chair/Vice Chair Democratic Services Committee
* Local Partnership – (company commissioned to support the Discovery Phase).

**Executive summary**

**4. Overall conclusions**

* 1. Overall, the panel concludes that the council effectively exercises its functions within the challenging demographic and financial constraints it faces. The council understands the scale of its sustainability challenges and has an ambitious plan in place to address these challenges and improve its long-term finance and service viability.
  2. The panel observed several positive changes following the appointment of the interim[[2]](#footnote-3) joint Chief Executive. Elected Members, staff, and partners highlighted strengths such as stable leadership, a long-term vision, improved strategic decision-making, and greater accountability. Many noted that the organisation feels vastly different from 12 months ago and expressed being energised by the new vision for Blaenau Gwent Council and its citizens. However, there were differing views on the extent of change achieved, coupled with a sense of urgency regarding the speed at which the council should move to implement phase 2 of the proposed federation with Torfaen County Borough Council.
  3. The panel observed widespread support for the proposed federation. However, they recognise that a programme of such significant transformation will require investment in developing the skills and capabilities of the leadership team to effectively deliver the necessary changes at the pace required.
  4. The council has a clear understanding of its role and has outlined a new vision in its corporate plan. The updated well-being objectives are more integrated than previous priorities and align with both the Gwent Public Services Board’s Well-being Plan and the Marmot Principles, which focus on addressing the root causes of health inequalities.
  5. The cross-cutting nature of the corporate plan can promote shared ownership throughout the organisation, which can help align resources with key priorities. This approach ensures efficiency and maximises the role of governance in supporting decision-making, risk management, and performance monitoring. However, the panel identified areas for improvement, suggesting that the plan could benefit from simplification and streamlining. Additionally, there is a need to prioritise key areas for delivery to ensure focused and effective execution.
  6. The adoption of the Marmot Principles in Blaenau Gwent has the potential to be a significant step forward in addressing deep-rooted deprivation. These principles offer a comprehensive framework to tackle inequalities and enhance the quality of life for its residents. However, the panel has identified several challenges that need to be overcome to effectively translate these principles into tangible outcomes and the communication of the principles and approach needs to be appropriate for all stakeholders.
  7. Blaenau Gwent's workforce is an asset- loyal, committed, and passionate about serving the community. Many staff members feel motivated by the new leadership and are eager to engage with the new vision and the opportunities of the proposed federation. However, not all staff groups demonstrated knowledge or understanding of that vision. The council’s leadership recognises that the workforce itself is a crucial asset for driving the change necessary to implement the Marmot Principles effectively. The panel found a good understanding of its strategic workforce priorities but mixed views across the organisation regarding agile working practices and recommends a review of its effectiveness.
  8. The council’s ‘Bridging the Gap’ program outlines plans to address medium-term revenue pressures, incorporating all the typical elements of such a strategy, however more work is required to provide the sufficient detail needed to deliver. The council has set a balanced budget, using reserves as part of its approach, but this raises concerns about long-term sustainability. While many councils face similar challenges due to public sector financial constraints over the past 14 years, Blaenau Gwent has an opportunity to explore innovative solutions during the Discovery Phase to address these issues.

**5 Local Context**

1. Blaenau Gwent is a county borough situated in the southeast of Wales, bordered by Monmouthshire and Torfaen to the east, Caerphilly to the west, and Powys to the north. The county is home to several key towns, including Abertillery, Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale, and Tredegar. Despite being relatively small, covering an area of 42.09 square miles, Blaenau Gwent is largely rural in character. The population is around 66,900, with approximately 6.2% of the population, or around 4,035 people, identifying as Welsh language speakers.
2. Several transformative initiatives and projects aim to drive the economic growth of Blaenau Gwent. The Tech Valleys Vision is a key catalyst, focusing on fostering technological and business growth in the region, aiming to create new opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship. In addition, the Valleys Regional Park will enhance the area's natural beauty, attracting visitors and businesses alike. This project aims to make the region more appealing for tourism, recreation, and investment, capitalising on the stunning landscapes and promoting sustainable development.
3. Additionally, the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal plays a crucial role in supporting economic development by funding infrastructure projects and promoting collaboration across local authorities, aiming to stimulate regional growth. The Welsh Government and EU investment into the Heads of the Valleys Road and the improvement of rail links to Cardiff are set to boost connectivity, making Blaenau Gwent more accessible and better linked to key economic centres.
4. In 2021, the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales reformed the ward boundaries of Blaenau Gwent, reducing the number of councillors from 42 to 33 and the number of wards from 16 to 14. The current administration is a Labour majority with 21 councillors along with 10 Independent councillors, 1 Minority Independent (Cwm Ward) and 1 Minority Independent (Ebbw Vale South).
5. The Leader of the council is Councillor Stephen Thomas. The Deputy Leader is Cllr Helen Cunningham. The cabinet is made up of 5 Councillors including the Leader and Deputy Leader.
6. Delivery of the council’s services is managed by the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT), which is led by the Interim Joint Chief Executive Officer, Stephen Vickers. He is supported by four Corporate Directors, including the S151 Officer. The CLT structure is further supported by the Wider CLT, which includes all Heads of Service in addition to the core CLT team, contributing to the delivery of functions.

**6 Strengths and Areas of Innovation**

6.1 A dynamic interim Chief Executive actively engaged in the role, who has improved the clarity and accountability of the council’s leadership structure. In doing so, has laid a strong foundation for the significant period of organisational change ahead.

6.2 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.

6.3 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. By working more closely together, Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen aim to better respond to the evolving needs of their communities while improving service delivery and managing financial constraints. This proposed federation reflects a forward-thinking approach to collaboration in the public sector, with the potential to set a new precedent for local government cooperation in Wales.

6.4 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. The Marmot Principles offer a framework for addressing these challenges, supporting the council’s mission to improve health outcomes, reduce inequalities, and foster a fairer society for all its residents.

6.5 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. This approach is not only about shared goals but also about creating more impactful, joint interventions. A notable example of this is the community safety initiative, where the council works closely with the Police on a task force to tackle anti-social behaviour, responding directly to community reports and concerns.

6.6 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 collective sense of purpose and direction is contributing to improved morale and engagement across the organisation.

6.7 The council’s engagement and participation strategy is outreach-focused, using various methods to gather diverse community voices. Key systems, such as the Blaenau Gwent Citizen Panel, the 50+ forum, Youth Forum, and Voices of the Valley, aim to ensure broad participation. The council is also shifting toward using videos and short clips to boost engagement. Recently, they completed a resident survey as part of a pan-Wales project, which supports benchmarking across councils. This initiative reflects the council's commitment to continuous learning and improving their engagement strategies. For those digitally excluded or preferring in-person interactions, initiatives like "Talk Together" help reach these residents directly in the community.

6.8 The council shows a strong commitment to workforce development, staff wellbeing, and engagement. It has thoroughly reviewed its recruitment and retention strategies and is adopting innovative practices to tackle workforce challenges. These include community outreach to boost recruitment and creating apprenticeship opportunities in areas with staffing difficulties.

**7 National and Local Challenges**

7.1 Blaenau Gwent Council, like all councils in Wales, is facing significant financial sustainability challenges. Key areas under pressure include social care, education, and housing services. These difficulties are driven by rising demand, inflation, and the cost of living. Despite these challenges, the council has managed to balance its budget for the current year. However, this report highlights the need for the council to reconsider its long-term financial strategy, particularly in terms of reducing its reliance on reserves (see paragraphs 8.11 to 8.16 for further information).

7.2 The council faces difficulties in recruiting for both senior-level and technical roles, which are highly competitive due to the higher pay offered by private sector employers. This pay discrepancy makes these positions in the public sector less attractive, especially when compared to the private sector (see paragraphs 8.17 to 8.20 for further information on workforce).

7.3 Blaenau Gwent faces significant challenges related to deprivation, with some of the highest levels of poverty in Wales. 37% of children aged 0-4 are living in income deprivation, the highest overall rate in Wales. The data indicates the deprivation is fairly evenly spread across the council area.[[3]](#footnote-4) Additionally, Blaenau Gwent had the highest percentage of areas in the most deprived 50% in Wales (85.1%).[[4]](#footnote-5) These high levels of deprivation place considerable strain on local services, as there are increased demands for support, particularly from vulnerable individuals.

**8 Overview of Findings**

8.1 The panel, acting jointly, is required to assess the extent to which the council is meeting the three performance duties, that is, the extent to which:

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

8.2 The panel was able to triangulate and gather evidence from diverse sources that provided assurance the council is generally meeting its performance duties. The evidence included internal reports and documentation, stakeholder feedback, performance data and metrics, and audit and regulatory reports.

8.3 The key findings are detailed below, along with the panels recommended areas for improvement, focusing on the areas that would have the greatest impact on progress.

**The extent to which the council is exercising its functions effectively: Key findings:**

8.4 **Strategic and Political Leadership –** The panel's assessment indicates a strong alignment and unity between the senior executive officer team and the council's political leadership, which is crucial for effective governance and service delivery. This unity is particularly evident in their shared commitment to the council's priorities and the effective execution of essential functions.

8.5 The appointment of the interim joint Chief Executive marks a significant shift in the council’s leadership and strategic direction. With the Leader and cabinet at the helm, an ambitious vision for the future has been introduced focusing on transformation and sustainability. Central to this vision is the ongoing Discovery Phase to explore the benefits and opportunities of the proposed federation with Torfaen Council.

8.6 **Regulatory Reports** – The panel's review of the regulatory reports over the past two years concluded that there were no significant issues suggesting the council had failed in its core functions. However, they raised concerns about a previous regulatory report concerning the governance arrangements for the council-owned company *Silent Valley Waste Services Limited*.

8.7 Specifically, the panel questioned whether the council had addressed the issues highlighted in that earlier report. In response, the panel was reassured that the governance issues identified are being addressed in the ongoing governance review process. This review is part of the Discovery Phase aimed at ensuring that both councils can implement best practices in future governance arrangements. This review offers an opportunity to not only address past concerns but also to strengthen governance structures for the future. The panel advises that it would be prudent to move beyond the recommendations outlined in the Audit Wales report, the details are outlined in paragraph 8.27.

8.8 **Corporate Plan** – The council has outlined a new vision in its corporate plan. The updated well-being objectives are more integrated than previous priorities, ensuring a one council approach to achieving the council's goals. These objectives now align with both the Gwent Public Services Board's Well-being Plan and the Marmot Principles, which focus on addressing the root causes of health inequalities.

8.9 However, the panel noted that further work is required to simplify the corporate plan. The complexity of the current framework needs to be addressed, particularly by streamlining and clearly defining what success looks like across short, medium, and long-term timeframes. By doing so, the council can improve resource planning and strengthen the connection between corporate and service planning, ensuring more effective implementation and governance of the well-being objectives. This theme is further explored in paragraphs 8.34 to 8.37 and includes the panels recommended areas for improvement.

8.10 **Partnerships** – The Public Services Board (PSB) is still maturing as part of the broader Gwent approach, but at the local level, there are strong local delivery groups in place. These groups have reached a collective agreement on how to work together effectively, ensuring that local priorities are addressed in a coordinated manner.

**The extent to which the council is using its resources economically, efficiently, and effectively: Key findings**

8.11 **Budget planning and financial management:** The council is effectively utilising its resources despite confronting significant challenges that are common across other councils in Wales. High demand for services and inflationary pressures are major factors contributing to these difficulties. Additionally, the council's small size and the high levels of deprivation in the area further strain its capacity to deliver services. However, the council has demonstrated a clear understanding of its sustainability challenges. Recognising the need for long-term financial stability, it has developed an ambitious plan to tackle these issues.

8.12 The council has set a net revenue budget of £184.942 million for the financial year 2024/25, up from £178.375 million in 2023/24. This budget includes the need to identify £8.5 million in savings to balance its finances. To address specific pressures and ensure a balanced budget, the council has planned to use one-off reserves for both 2023/24 and 2024/25.

8.13 As of the latest available figures (subject to finalisation of the accounts), the council reported a £3.23 million underspend in 2023/24 and projects an underspend of £1.82 million for 2024/25, before any transfers. This indicates that the council has managed its resources effectively, achieving savings beyond what was originally anticipated.

8.14 For 2024/25, the council has set a cash-flat delegated budget for schools, meaning that the overall funding for schools remains unchanged from the previous year. However, to support specific pressures within the education sector, the council has allocated over £800,000 in additional funding. Despite this support, the balance of school reserves fell significantly in 2023/24, dropping from £4.8 million to £1.4 million. This sharp decline suggests that schools are facing substantial financial pressures, which may affect their ability to meet future challenges without further intervention.

8.15 Other critical areas facing significant budget pressures include social services, housing, and Additional Learning Needs (ALN), all of which are challenges shared across councils in Wales. These sectors are under additional strain due to inflationary pressures, further impacting the council’s ability to maintain service levels. Moving forward, the council must reduce its dependency on one-off reserves and adopt a more sustainable financial model to better fund its services.

8.16 The council's Bridging the Gap transformation programme, which is aligned with budget savings targets outlined in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), aims to address these issues. While there was a shortfall in meeting the savings target, this was offset by underspends across service areas. The council recognises that the transformation programme should be delivered at a faster pace to keep on track and needs more detail. The panels recommended actions for improvement are outlined in paragraphs 8.42 to 8.45.

**Workforce**

8.17 The council clearly understands the importance of workforce development, staff wellbeing and involvement. It has undertaken a review of its approach to recruitment and retention and has examples of innovative practice, such as outreach activity into communities to support recruitment. It is also creating apprenticeship opportunities in areas where recruitment is a challenge and has undertaken work to understand future workforce needs. However, it continues to experience difficulties in recruiting to senior and technical roles, particularly where salaries are not comparative to the private sector.

8.18 Many staff members are motivated by the new leadership and are excited about the opportunities the proposed federation brings. While some staff are fully engaged, not all staff groups fully understand or are aware of the new vision. This may indicate a need for better communication and alignment around the organisation's strategic direction.

8.19 There is a strong sense of social partnership within Blaenau Gwent and a feeling that it punches above its weight. However, there is also a concern about resilience and a reliance on grant funding to support service delivery. This was aligned with a perception that there was a lack of focus on key issues, such as staff sickness.

8.20 There are differing opinions within the organisation regarding the effectiveness of agile working practices. Some staff expressed frustration, and businesses that the panel spoke to also voiced concerns about difficulty in contacting key staff. They felt that agile working was impacting the council's responsiveness, hindering timely communication and engagement. The panel has recommended a review of the approach to agile working. This review could help refine or adapt agile methods to ensure service needs are preeminent.

**Recommended action for improvement**

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| **1** | **Agile working**  The approach to agile working needs urgent and thorough review. |

**Communications**

8.21 Staff acknowledged improvements in the council’s communication of key developments and organisational news, appreciating the efforts to enhance transparency and keep them informed. However, there is a sense that good news stories are not being effectively communicated, and the council may be missing an opportunity to promote its successes. This perspective was also supported by the businesses the panel engaged with.

8.22 While communication has improved, some staff feel that the volume of emails, particularly those that cc all staff for every message, has become overwhelming. This might suggest that while the council’s intention may be to ensure everyone is informed, the method may be causing communication fatigue or frustration.

8.23Additionally, there is a desire for more two-way communication, with staff wanting formal channels to submit ideas or suggestions for improvement. This reflects their interest in actively engaging with leadership and contributing to shaping organisational changes.

8.24 The panel advises that, as part of the review of agile working practices, the council consider whether the staff insight survey provides sufficient data to support and inform the implementation of its workforce strategy.

## **The extent to which the council has effective governance in place: Key findings**

## 8.25 The panel concluded that the council's governance framework and operations are generally sound. Their key findings are as follows:

* **Corporate Plan**: The council has a corporate plan that complies with the Well-being of Future Generations (WBFG) Act 2015, ensuring alignment with sustainability and long-term well-being objectives.
* **Governance Framework**: The council has a solid governance framework, including the necessary standards, processes, and policies to ensure proper governance. It also has a constitution and a scheme of delegation, which clearly outline decision-making responsibilities.
* **Regulatory Compliance**: There are no current concerns raised by regulators regarding the council's governance or operations.
  1. While these findings suggest the council is generally on track, there are areas for improvement. The Discovery Phase, in collaboration with Torfaen Council, presents an early opportunity for both councils to enhance their governance arrangements and adopt best practice
  2. **Recommended actions for improvement**

To further strengthen governance transparency, build upon public trust and align with evolving best practices, the following actions should be undertaken:

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| **2** | **Completion of accounts**: The council should complete the accounts for the year ending promptly. While there may be no material impact, completing the accounts is essential for maintaining assurance and a positive public perception. |
| **3** | **Report on legacy governance issues**: A report should be presented to the cabinet addressing any outstanding governance issues, especially legacy concerns. Although the council has appropriately addressed the key audit recommendations, providing a public report will offer further assurance to stakeholders. |
| **4** | **Review of Governance and Audit Committee**: While the Governance and Audit Committee is properly constituted and operating in accordance with regulations, there are conflicting reports on the timeliness, quality, and analysis of information presented. A thorough, open, and inclusive review should be conducted to ensure clarity in roles, effectiveness, and alignment with best practices. This review should occur during the Discovery Phase to enhance learning and improve scrutiny functions. |

8.28 By addressing these areas, the council can further strengthen its governance framework, promote transparency, and ensure that it is well-positioned to meet the challenges of an evolving governance landscape.

8.29 In addition to the three performance duties, the council requested peer insight on the following areas as part of the panel assessment.

1. Member/officer relations
2. Sustainability (finance, demand, transformation)
3. The Marmot policy commitment
4. The Discovery Phase (federation)

The panel’s key findings and areas for improvement are as follows:

**Member/officer relations: key findings**

8.30 The relationship between members and officers is professional and respectful with a shared commitment to the council’s objectives.

8.31 The panel heard that improvements in communication had led to smoother and more consistent exchange of information between Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and cabinet. As a result of the improved dialogue, discussions are more focused and productive.

8.32 There is greater opportunity for cabinet to constructively challenge ideas, proposals and strategies put forward by CLT.

8.33 Given the exceptional level of change facing the council, the panel recommends the need for investment in developing both members and the CLT to navigate these changes effectively. The change includes

* Delivering on the federation proposal
* Delivering on the Marmot Commitment
* Extensive transformation programme
* Demand management
* Addressing the sustainability challenge

This recommendation is based on best practice when facing major change and does not indicate current failings.

**Recommended actions for improvement**

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| **5** | **Commission a comprehensive member development programme**.  This would include but not limited to:   * Consideration of the role of member/officer possibly based on the ‘member led authority’ model, * Good governance and making difficult decisions, * Support and development should also be considered for, backbench members, scrutiny leads etc. |

In the context of the significant change, a similar development programme is crucial for equipping the leadership team with the necessary skills and competencies to navigate the complex organisational changes and lead the transformation efforts.

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| **6** | **Commission a development programme for Corporate Leadership Team**.  The scope of his programme should include   * Good governance, * Best practice in performance management, * Identification and delivery of outcomes, * Delivering transformative change, * Skills to deliver in an environment of major change. |

# **The Corporate Plan and Marmot Principles - key findings**

**A Corporate Plan**

8.34 The current corporate plan includes wellbeing objectives, and the 8 Marmot Principles. To an extent the corporate plan format is driven by regulation and a drive to be comprehensive. This observation could well be relevant across all councils in Wales given the regulatory framework.

8.35 The corporate plan should be refined to ensure actions are clearly defined, outcomes are measurable and there is clarity on what success looks like at different time frames.

8.36 If the Marmot Principles are the key driver, then it should appear so. By directly linking the principles to specific objectives with clear time-bound targets then the principles move from the theoretical to the basis for action (see paragraphs 8.48 to 8.50 for further detail).

8.37 To ensure that the generational nature of the Marmot Principles is understood and that the expected changes are clear, it's essential to break down the long-term vision into specific, measurable targets for the short-term (1 year), medium-term (5 years), and long-term (10 years). This approach allows for tangible progress markers while maintaining focus on the broader generational goals.

**Recommended actions for improvement**

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| **7** | **Wellbeing objectives are broad and non-specific. Need clarity on**   * actions and initiatives that will be taken to achieve the outcomes linked to the wellbeing objectives and Marmot Principles, * identify specific, measurable outcomes and include clear timelines, * clearly define success for each outcome using specific indicators, * what difference key service user/resident can expect to see. |
| **8** | **Corporate plan**- Simplified shortened plan be adopted to aid understanding at a workforce and resident level. |

**B Marmot Principles**

8.38 The interim Chief Executive and the Leader have set a clear vision to tackle the inequalities affecting the quality of life for people in Blaenau Gwent. The panel found strong awareness of the Marmot Principles across all levels of the council.

8.39 The adoption of the Marmot Principles can be utilised in several ways. For example, they can influence resource allocation at the national level and drive changes in practice at both the service and community levels. Blaenau Gwent plans to use the principles in both of these respects, ensuring they inform strategic decisions and shape the way services are delivered to address local inequalities.

8.40 The council’s vision aligns with the regional strategy set by the Gwent Public Services Board (PSB), which became the first Marmot region in Wales in October 2022. By, it can strengthen the commitment to addressing inequalities and improving outcomes for Blaenau Gwent residents. However, the panel advises that local efforts should not wait for the regional framework to be fully implemented. There is a need to move quickly from principle to practice, a sentiment endorsed by most of the individuals the panel spoke with. As part of this shift, it is crucial for the council to set realistic aspirations. Given current resource constraints, the council should prioritise identifying which Marmot Principles will have the most significant local impact and align its actions accordingly. This will involve reviewing existing activities and identifying those which align to the chosen principles. This will involve reviewing existing activities to identify those that align with the chosen principles.

**Recommended actions for improvement**

To take the Marmot commitment to the next phase, the panel recommends the following actions:

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| **9** | **Prioritisation of Marmot Principles**   * Decide which principles impact most locally and prioritise * Identify priority actions to align with the chosen principles * Specify what success looks like in terms of outcomes and timescales * Integrate activity into service level plans. |

To enhance the impact of the Marmot Principles in Blaenau Gwent, it is recommended that the council contact other Marmot networks and organisations.

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| **10** | **Evidence for Marmot**   * Connect with other Marmot networks and organisations to gather evidence of successful interventions from other regions. * This evidence can then be adapted to fit the specific local context, ensuring that interventions are based on best practices while also being relevant to the unique needs of the local community. |

8.41 To ensure a shared understanding of the changes the Marmot commitment will bring in terms of service delivery and intended outcomes, and to make this real for service users, residents, staff and elected members, the panel recommends the council implement a tailored communications exercise.

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| **11** | **Communication of Marmot**   * Establish an ongoing communication exercise covering all stakeholders in particular communities, residents, staff and elected members. * This exercise should focus on the key aspects relevant to each group, ensuring clarity and engagement across all stakeholders. |

**Sustainability: Key findings**

8.42 Blaenau Gwent operates within a Welsh public sector that faces significant sustainability challenges, with the key difference between councils being the timing of when their reserves and resilience will be exhausted. The key challenges faced by Blaenau Gwent include:

* **Demography/demand:** Growing pressures due to demographic changes and increasing demand for services.
* **Falling population with high levels of deprivation**: Blaenau Gwent is experiencing a declining population, accompanied by high levels of deprivation, which adds to the pressure on public services.
* **Low levels of reserves/contingencies**: The council has limited reserves, which are critical for managing unexpected pressures or challenges.
* **Recruitment/retention issues:** Difficulties in attracting and retaining staff in social care, technical services, and senior management roles.
* **Forecast savings**: The level of forecast savings required in the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) is unlikely to be delivered without impacting service levels and standards, unless radical changes are made.

8.43 In large measure the Discovery Phase is in response to these challenges. The potential federation with Torfaen represents a radical intervention which could be key to maintaining service quality and sustainability in the face of financial and operational pressures.

8.44 The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) forecasts likely resources and demands, while also identifying challenging savings targets. There is an opportunity to revise and enhance the MTFS using the Apollo programme approach, which was designed in Torfaen.

8.45 The "Bridging the Gap" programme outlines the critical elements of a savings and transformation plan. The Interim Chief Executive is leading the effort to populate this programme over the next month in preparation for the upcoming budget setting. The panel recommends the following is prioritised during this process and beyond:

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| **12** | **MTFS is refined using the ‘Apollo’ programme approach and directly addresses**   * Identifying the long-term funding strategy for schools, * Quantifying the impact of demand management in social care, * Ensuring reserves are used solely to deliver transformation, rather than to cover in-year funding gaps. |

**Discovery Phase: Key findings**

8.46 The Discovery Phase presents a unique strategy to address the sustainability challenge with national significance. The panel has found clear and demonstrable support for the overarching vision, as well as positive endorsement for the Interim Chief Executive’s leadership and direction. There is also widespread recognition and backing for the Leader's role across the political spectrum. However, the panel advises that the council needs to move quickly beyond political considerations to focus on the practical details needed for phase 2.

**Recommended actions for improvement**

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| --- | --- |
| **13** | **Discovery Phase: transition to phase 2**  The phase 2 plan needs to ensure it effectively addresses the following**:**   * **Sustainability and resilience**: Ensuring long-term viability and adaptability, * **Delivery of outcomes**: Achieving measurable results and success, * **Alignment with Marmot Principles**: Ensuring the plan aligns with the principles of reducing health inequalities, * **Prioritising key risks and outcomes**: Addressing areas of high risk and focusing on critical outcomes. |
| **14** | The council should work closely with the WLGA to share the learning across Wales. |
| **15** | The council should request Welsh Government to contribute funding to the transition costs as this represents a project of national significance and could provide valuable learning for the sector. |

# **9 Improvement Support**

9.1 If you would like to discuss any further improvement support, please contact Jo Hendy, WLGA Head of Improvement.

# **10 Acknowledgements**

10.1 The panel and the WLGA would like to extend their thanks for the support in coordinating documentation requests, responses to queries, arranging meetings and workshops and providing onsite support.

* Gemma Wasley - Interim Cover for Head of Democratic Services, Governance & Partnerships
* Andrew Parker, Service Manager Policy and Partnerships
* Kate James, Professional Lead Engagement, Equality & Welsh Language
* David Arnold, Professional Lead for Partnerships
* Judith Cosgrove, Senior Business Support Officer
* Robyn Paul, Executive Assistant to the Chief Executive (Torfaen County Borough Council)
* Hannah Meyrick, Service Manager Business Support
* Victoria Daniels, Senior Business Support Officer

**Appendix: Recommended actions for improvement**

1. **Agile working:** The approach to agile working needs urgent and thorough review.
2. **Completion of accounts**: The council should complete the accounts for the year ending promptly. While there may be no material impact, completing the accounts is essential for maintaining assurance and a positive public perception.
3. **Report on legacy governance Issues**: A report should be presented to the Cabinet addressing any outstanding governance issues, especially legacy concerns. Although the council has appropriately addressed the key audit recommendations, providing a public report will offer further assurance to stakeholders.
4. **Review of Governance and Audit Committee**: While the Governance and Audit Committee is properly constituted and operating in accordance with regulations, there are conflicting reports on the timeliness, quality, and analysis of information presented. A thorough, open, and inclusive review should be conducted to ensure clarity in roles, effectiveness, and alignment with best practices. This review should occur during the Discovery Phase to enhance learning and improve assurance.
5. **Commission a comprehensive member development programme**.

This would include but not limited to:

* Consideration of the role of member/officer possibly based on the member led authority’ model,
* Good governance and making difficult decisions,
* Support and development should also be considered for backbench members, scrutiny leads etc.

1. **Commission a development programme for CLT**.

The scope of his programme should include

* Good governance,
* Best practice in performance management,
* Identification and delivery of outcomes,
* Delivering transformative change.
* Skills to deliver in an environment of major change.

1. **Wellbeing objectives are broad and non-specific. Need clarity on**

* actions and initiatives that will be taken to achieve the outcomes linked to the wellbeing objectives and Marmot Principles,
* identify specific, measurable outcomes and include clear timelines,
* clearly define success for each outcome using specific indicators,
* what difference key service user/resident can expect to see.

1. **Corporate plan**- Simplified shortened corporate plan be adopted to aid understanding at a workforce and resident level.
2. **Prioritisation of Marmot Principles**

* Decide which principles impact most locally and prioritise,
* Identify priority actions to align with the chosen principles,
* Specify what success looks like in terms of outcomes and timescales
* Integrate activity into service level plans.

1. **Evidence for Marmot**

* Connect with other Marmot networks and organisations to gather evidence of successful interventions from other regions,
* This evidence can then be adapted to fit the specific local context, ensuring that interventions are based on best practices while also being relevant to the unique needs of the local community.

1. **Communication of Marmot**

* Establish an ongoing communication exercise covering all stakeholders in particular communities, residents, staff and elected members.
* This exercise should focus on the key aspects relevant to each group, ensuring clarity and engagement across all stakeholders.

1. **MTFS is refined using the ‘Apollo’ programme approach and directly addresses:**

* Identifying the long-term funding strategy for schools,
* Quantifying the impact of demand management in social care,
* Ensuring resources are used solely to deliver transformation, rather than to cover in-year funding gaps.

1. **Discovery Phase- transition to phase 2:** The phase 2 plan needs to ensure it effectively addresses:

* **Sustainability and resilience**: Ensuring long-term viability and adaptability,
* **Delivery of outcomes**: Achieving measurable results and success,
* **Alignment with Marmot Principles**: Ensuring the plan aligns with the principles of reducing health inequalities,
* **Prioritising key risks and outcomes**: Addressing areas of high risk and focusing on critical outcomes

1. **Discovery phase- transition to phase 2.** The council should work closely with the WLGA to share the learning across Wales.
2. **Discovery phase- transition to phase 2:** The council should request Welsh Government to contribute funding to the transition costs as this represents a project of national significance and could provide valuable learning for the sector

1. Due to personal reasons, the fourth peer had to withdraw from the onsite visit last minute. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Since the completion of the PPA and the approval of the report, the Chief Executive position has now been officially agreed upon and signed by both Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen County Borough Councils. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. [Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019: deprivation analysis relating to young children](https://www.gov.wales/welsh-index-multiple-deprivation-2019-deprivation-analysis-relating-young-children-html#:~:text=Blaenau%20Gwent%20was%20the%20local%20authority%20with%20the,is%20fairly%20evenly%20spread%20across%20the%20Local%20Authority.) . [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. [Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) 2019: Results report](https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2020-06/welsh-index-multiple-deprivation-2019-results-report.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)