**Our Understanding of Blae****nau Gwent**

**Overview of Blaenau Gwent**

Blaenau Gwent is a place like no other. It is a place of heritage and dramatic change, with a sense of its past but its eyes firmly on the future. At the head of the Gwent Valleys – Blaenau Gwent provides a unique environment to live and work. The Tech Valleys Vision, Valleys Regional Park and Cardiff Capital Region City Deal combined with new transport links through the soon to be completed Heads of the Valley Road and rail routes to Cardiff bring a bright future. Together with the amazing location and surrounding parkland our people and communities make Blaenau Gwent great. Our people have influence on the local, national, and international stage in the arts, sport and politics for many generations – putting Blaenau Gwent on the map for all the right reasons.

Graphical user interface, application

Description automatically generated

**The Blaenau Gwent Area**

The Blaenau Gwent area is relatively small geographically. It is 42.09 sq. miles being, at most, 15 miles north to south and 8 miles east to west. Blaenau Gwent is defined physically by high hillsides dividing the three main valleys. These valleys are home to towns and villages which seem to merge into one. However, each community proudly maintains its own character and traditions. Although the towns give the area a busy, urban feel, Blaenau Gwent is actually a largely rural area. Wherever you are, beautiful countryside is never far away.

**The Blaenau Gwent Population**

Results of the Census 2021 show that the resident population of Blaenau Gwent is 66,900, which is a decrease of 4.2% from the 2011 Census when the population was 69,800. As of 2021, Blaenau Gwent was the sixth most densely populated of the 22 local authority areas, with around four people living on each football pitch-sized area of land. The population change by age group in Blaenau Gwent shows that there has been an increase of 9.0% in people aged 65 years and over, a decrease of 7.5% of people aged 15 to 64 years, and a decrease of 5.4% of children aged under 15 years. The population is projected to continue to decrease, including a 9.9% decrease in the number of children, a 6.1% decrease in the number of working age population and a 24.2% increase in the number of people aged 65 and over (Source: Stats Wales).

The percentage of residents aged 16 years and over who are economically active and in employment in Blaenau Gwent is at 52.2% an increase of 2.7% since 2011. The 2021 Census showed that Blaenau Gwent had the highest proportion of residents aged 16 to 64 years who were economically inactive and long-term sick or disabled across the whole of England and Wales at 36.1%. 49% of women and 55.7% of men, aged 16 years and over were in employment. 2.7% of women and 4.1% of men in Blaenau Gwent were unemployed.

21% of Blaenau Gwent Adults with a disability were economically active and employed. However, in contrast, Neath Port Talbot and Blaenau Gwent have the joint-third highest proportion of economically inactive disabled residents (76.9%) across both England and Wales, and the highest in Wales.

The 2021 Census identified that there are 4,035 Welsh speakers living within Blaenau Gwent, which equates to 6.2% of the population. The aims of Blaenau Gwent’s Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/27 are linked with the Welsh Government’s vision to create a million Welsh speakers in Wales by 2050. To meet this aim, Blaenau Gwent would need a 46% increase in speakers which equates to 1,856 people.

As at 31st March 2023, the Council headcount was 2,892. A total of £188.7 million was spent on providing services during 2021-22, which is the 3rd lowest spending of the 22 unitary councils in Wales. (Data Cymru - Revenue Outturn Expenditure 2021/2022).

**Blaenau Gwent Council**

The Council continues to be the largest employer within the borough, employing 2,953 people (including school based staff). Almost 80% of the Council’s workforce are in permanent roles which provides a stability within the establishment. Vacancies remain consistent with last year, however, there has been an improving position for Social Services where there has been success with recruitment days. The Catering and Cleaning services have been asked to consider similar action to address recruitment and retention difficulties. There are recruitment and retention difficulties in pockets of professional and technical areas. Over half of the workforce remains ‘service based’ with the remaining staff split between home workers at 8%, and agile workers at 34%. The Council has a low level of diversity amongst its workforce with 69% identifying as ‘British/Welsh/English/Scottish/Northern Irish’, which is reflective of the community. Promoting diversity in the workforce will continue to be a key priority as part of the Council’s Workforce Strategy. The Council has an ageing workforce where 58% of the workforce is over the age of 46, with 10% of the workforce aged 29 and under.

**Democratic Arrangements in Blaenau Gwent**

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

* Labour 22; and
* Independent 11.

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

The 33 Blaenau Gwent elected members are collectively the decision making body for the Authority. This is complemented by an officer structure of trained and experienced people. Most policy decisions are developed by the Cabinet, which comprises the Leader of the Council and four Cabinet Members with individual portfolio responsibilities. In addition to the Cabinet, the Authority’s Committee structure also comprises three decision making Committees: 1 x Planning and 2 x Licensing; four Scrutiny Committees; a Standards Committee; a Democratic Services Committee; and a Governance and Audit Committee.

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

**Corporate Leadership Team**

The Council has a structure in place to support the delivery of services and decision making via its Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). During 2022/23, CLT underwent a number of changes with the appointment of a new Corporate Director of Regeneration and Community Services. It has operated with an interim Chief Executive and interim Corporate Director of Social Services throughout the year. The Council also has in place a Wider Corporate Leadership Team (WCLT) who support CLT in its role of providing strategic direction to the organisation. It is a forum to disseminate information and to communicate messages, ensuring a ‘one council’ approach.

**External Audit**

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.

**Audit Wales**

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.

Audit Wales Reporting during 2022/23 include:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Local Reports** | **National Audit Wales Reports** | **Audit Wales Reports still in Progress (with the outcome of each expected in 2023/24)** |
| * Springing Forward * Assurance and Risk Assessment Review * Corporate Safeguarding Follow up | * Learning from Cyber Attacks * Time for Change – Poverty in Wales * A Missed Opportunity – Social Enterprises * Together we can – Community Resilience and Self Reliance | * Examination of the Setting of Well-being Objectives * Unscheduled Care Project * Review of Planning Service * Building Safety * Brown Field Sites * False Fire Alarms * Digital Strategy Review * Use of Performance Information – Service User Perspective and Outcomes |

The Annual Audit Summary for 2022 from Audit Wales is expected following the signoff of the Blaenau Gwent accounts in 2023. The report will include a synopsis of each review undertaken by Audit Wales over the year.

**Estyn**

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.

In late 2022, the Local Authority were subject to an Estyn inspection, in line with the Local Government Education Services (LGES) framework. The outcome of the Inspection was positive and there was no requirement for follow-up activity. Three recommendations were received and there will be regular reporting on progress against these to Members in 2023. You can read the Estyn report in full [here.](https://www.estyn.gov.wales/provider/6779999)

**Care Inspectorate Wales**

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.

As Blaenau Gwent last received their performance evaluation and assurance check in November 2021, no further local reports were received throughout 2022/23. However, during the year, three national reports were received:

* National review of the use of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) in Wales 2021-22 – received February 2023;
* Updated Code of Practice for our local authority inspection activity – published May 2023; and
* How we inspect local authority social services and CAFCASS Cymru.