**Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council**

A statue of a dragon in front of a building

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**Annual Governance Statement**

**2023/24**

**(reporting from April 2023 to June 2025)**

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Annual Governance Statement 2023 – 2024

**Introduction**

This Annual Governance Statement (AGS) provides an account of the processes, systems and records the council has in place to demonstrate effectiveness of its governance arrangements. It principally covers the period April 2023 to March 2024 (updated to cover up to June 2025 for areas of significance).

**Scope of Responsibility**

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (‘the Authority’) is responsible for ensuring that its business is conducted in accordance with the law and proper standards, and that public money is safeguarded, properly accounted for, and used economically, efficiently and effectively. The Authority also has a general duty under the Local Government Measure (Wales) 2009 and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

In discharging this overall responsibility, the Authority is responsible for putting in place proper arrangements for the governance of its affairs, facilitating the effective exercise of its functions, which includes arrangements for the management of risk.

The Authority has approved and adopted a Code of Governance, which is consistent with the principles of the CIPFA/SOLACE Framework “Delivering Good Governance in Local Government”. A copy of the code is available from the Governance and Partnerships Section.

This statement explains how the Authority has complied with the code and also meets the requirements of regulation 5 of the Accounts and Audit (Wales) Regulations 2014 in relation to the publication of a statement on internal control to accompany the Statement of Accounts.

**The Purpose of the Governance Framework**

The governance framework comprises the systems and processes, and culture and values, by which the Authority is directed and controlled and its activities through which it accounts to, engages with and leads the community. It enables the Authority to monitor the achievement of its strategic objectives and to consider whether those objectives have led to the delivery of appropriate, cost-effective services.

The system of internal control is a significant part of the framework and is designed to manage risk at a reasonable level. It cannot eliminate all risk and can therefore only provide reasonable and not absolute assurance of effectiveness. The system of internal control is based on an ongoing process designed to identify the key risks to the Authority, to evaluate the likelihood of those risks being realised and the impact should they be realised, and to manage them efficiently, effectively and economically. These will include achievement or not of the Council’s policies, aims and objectives.

The governance framework has been in place at the Authority for the year ended 31 March 2024 and extended to June 2025 in line with the approval of the 2023/24 Annual Statement of Accounts.

The Annual Audit Summary for 2023 from Audit Wales was received in January 2025, following signoff of the Blaenau Gwent accounts 2022/23 (in November 2024). The report includes a synopsis of each review undertaken by Audit Wales over the year.

Details of the Proposals for Improvement and recommendations issued by regulators during 2023/24 and 2024/25 are available from the Corporate Performance Team, and progress against their achievement is reported within the relevant business plan and included in the Finance and Performance Report. These proposals are attached at Appendix A.

**The Governance Framework**

The governance framework includes the key elements of the systems and processes that comprise the Authority’s governance arrangements, along with an assessment of their effectiveness. The ways in which the Authority demonstrates this are outlined below. Each core principle set out in the Authority’s Code of Governance is identified, along with the self-assessment of how well it is applied and how we propose to further improve.

To achieve the principles of good Corporate Governance, the Council has demonstrated how it has worked towards the seven Core Principles of good governance, as outlined below. This review of effectiveness includes detail of the work that has been undertaken, as well as how we plan to further improve, with each section split to report against the following three areas:

* How we do this;
* Review of Effectiveness; and
* Areas for Further Development.

The detail provided has been informed by the work of the Senior Managers who have responsibility for the development and maintenance of the governance environment, the Audit and Risk Manager’s annual report, and by the commentary from the external auditors and other regulators.

**The Seven Core Principles of Good Governance**

1. Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law;
2. Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement;
3. Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits;
4. Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of the intended outcomes;
5. Developing the entity’s capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it;
6. Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management; and
7. 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.

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

# How we do this

A Governance Framework exists that sets out the standards and processes to be adopted by both Members and Officers. Codes of Conduct, detailing Member / Officer relations, are contained within the Constitution and all are required to make declarations of any interests that impact on their positions / functions. These documents are periodically reviewed and updated, and are influenced by best practice and recommendations from both internal and external regulators.

Members’ declarations are retained by the Monitoring Officer and Officers’ declarations are held by Service Managers. All Council meetings are conducted in accordance with the agreed democratic process and have declarations of interest as part of the agenda, with any declarations noted in the minutes and Members withdrawing or not taking part in the debate as appropriate.

A Policy Framework exists to guide both Members and Officers in fulfilment of their roles. This includes a Whistle-Blowing policy enabling Members, Officers and the public to report any concerns regarding the integrity and operations of the Authority. In addition, policies such as disciplinary or grievance procedures have been formulated for dealing with breaches to the codes.

Both Officers and Members are advised through the induction process of the standards of behaviour required by the Council throughout their term of office or employment. Continued adherence to the ethical values of the Authority is confirmed through a performance review protocol for all Officers and a Personal Development Review (PDR) / Competency Framework (CF) in place for Members. The PDR / CF is a mandatory process for senior salary holders, and non-senior salary holders are also offered the opportunity to undertake a PDR / CF. In 2022/23 no PDR's were offered as it was the first year of the new administration and members were provided with the opportunity to bed into their roles. The PDR process was then introduced in 2023/24 with 13 members completing the process. In 2024/25, all 13 members undertook a six month review to consider progress.

The Authority’s constitution has a published Scheme of Delegation of Functions, which is agreed and published annually. This scheme details subject areas and identifies the bodies or individuals responsible for decision making. It sets out the terms of reference for the various committees in operation. In addition, both the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer have oversight of the decisions made by the Authority to ensure their lawfulness and financial probity.

# Review of Effectiveness

Each Committee conforms to legislative requirements including compliance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 and 2011, Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The decision making process is documented and the Authority’s Scrutiny Committees can ‘call in’ a decision which has been made by the Cabinet but not yet implemented. No decisions were called in during 2023/24 or 2024/25.

Work has continued to strengthen Blaenau Gwent’s Scrutiny and Democratic Committee arrangements. Following the Local Elections in May 2022 a comprehensive induction and refresher programme was put in place. The Blaenau Gwent programme is supplemented with the All Wales Academy E-Learning Modules as well as a dedicated member’s online resource library. An extensive member development programme is also in operation.

Each member is provided with a laptop and offered a mobile phone to support them to undertake their roles.

The Ombudsman received 15 complaints for Blaenau Gwent during 2023/2024 and closed 16, as some complaints were carried over from the previous year. During the year, one complainant from a service area complained that they had not received a formal response from the department that investigated the original complaint. This was referred to the Ombudsman’s Office who felt that the complainant had received a formal response within 20 working days and the recommendation was complied with.

Over the year, three whistleblowing complaints were received, one was rejected as not eligible and two remaining were concluded during 2023/24.

In order to evidence the robust application of the Authority’s Code of Conduct an Internal Audit review of the declarations of interest process was undertaken in 2021/22 and a follow up undertaken in 2023/24 with 2 of the 4 weaknesses addressed at the time. The report was discussed within directorates to reinforce the need for up to date declarations of interest.

# Areas for Further Development

* Continued adherence to the Authority’s policies and procedures which exist to guide Members and Officers to comply with the Council’s expectations in terms of acting with integrity.
* In line with good practice, an annual review (as a minimum) of the Constitution and Scheme of Delegation to ensure the Authority’s governance and decision making processes remain fit for purpose.

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| **Core Principle B - Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement** |

# How we do this

In July 2024, the Council’s Engagement and Participation Strategy 2024/28 was approved. The Strategy includes four Key Objectives for implementation which are included within an action plan and monitored through the Council’s business planning function. The four key objectives are:

* To mainstream effective engagement and participation approaches across the Council;
* To ensure that we engage with the people of Blaenau Gwent in the most effective, collaborative way;
* To actively encourage our communities & future generations to participate in council decision-making activity; and
* To maintain best practice in engagement & participation and keep up to date with the latest innovations to help support our communities.

[Engagement and Participation Strategy 2024 - 2028 | Blaenau Gwent CBC](https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/en/council/policies-plans-strategies/engagement-and-participation-strategy-2024-2028/#:~:text=As%20a%20Council%20we%20are%20committed%20towards%20everyone,communities%2C%20stakeholders%2C%20partners%2C%20staff%20members%20and%20elected%20representatives.)

There are various engagement groups in operation across the Council such as the 50+ Forum, Youth Forum & Regional Youth Forum, and Children’s Grand Council. The Council also engages with the business community through channels such as the ‘Business Hub’, the Enterprise Board and through various town centre business forums.

The following participation and engagement activities have taken place:

* Public Space Protection Order Survey
* Continuity of Learning Plan Survey
* Childcare and School Hub Survey
* Public Services Board Climate Change Survey
* Universal Free School Meals Survey
* Rights Respect Equalities Survey (x3)
* Operating Model & Agile Working Survey
* Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/27 Survey & Workshop
* Council Budget 2023/24 Survey; online engagement session; in-person community hub events
* Ebbw Vale Sustainable Link Survey; in-person event
* Gwent Well-being Plan Consultation Survey
* A range of Early Years, Parents & Wider Community events and consultations
* Young People Democracy & Voting Registration Events (x4)
* Taxi Licensing Policy Survey
* School Inclusion & Improvement, Partnership Agreement Survey & Visioning Event
* Age Friendly Intergenerational Event
* Wood Environmental Permit Survey

With regards to corporate organisational engagement, advice and guidance is provided to service areas in-line with National Principles for Public Engagement. Snap surveys have also been used across the Council to gain feedback and information. At the end of 2024 a staff survey was undertaken with 42% of the workforce taking part. These results highlight a number of strengths but also where further work and improvement is needed. Next steps will include a detailed analysis of the results and developing an action plan for improvement.

Working with the Welsh Local Government Association, Data Cymru and other Council’s across Wales, the Council undertook a resident survey in October 2024. A total of 1,808 Blaenau Gwent residents completed the survey. The intelligence from this survey will be used alongside other public engagement that the Council undertakes in order to appropriately action the areas that require most improvement.

In early 2025, the Council undertook an engagement programme with the community regarding the setting of the Council budget for 2025/26. A total of 817 respondents took part in the poll, which equates to just over 1% of the area’s population. This response rate is slightly up from last year when 680 responses were received. This is broadly in-line with expected response rates for

budget engagement processes from previous years and is the second highest response rate for budget engagement carried out by the Council.

Children and Young People’s Participation work included supporting regular Youth Forum events, supporting members to deliver local and regional priorities; and coordination and facilitation of the Children’s Grand Council.

The Gwent PSB has undertaken a regional well-being assessment. This used a wide range of qualitative and quantitative information including data, academic research, evidence, and people’s views (engagement) to help understand Wellbeing across Gwent communities. This assessment formed the basis of the development of the Gwent Well-being Plan which was published in August 2023. To support the implementation of the Plan, Blaenau Gwent has established a Local Well-being Partnership.

In 2022, the Council agreed a new Corporate Plan 2022/27 which set out the Council’s priorities up to 2027:

* Maximise learning and 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 high quality services at the right time and in the right place; and
* Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient.

The Council reports progress against the Corporate Plan Implementation Plan and within the annual Self-Assessment process.

Blaenau Gwent continues to work with a wide range of partners where partnership opportunities provide better outcomes for local residents than the Council could achieve if working on its own. We work in partnership with a variety of stakeholders including staff, residents, and businesses. The Council also has in place a Partnership Scrutiny Committee where reports from external partners are received. Examples of collaborations and partnerships include:

* Education Achievement Service (EAS)
* Aneurin Leisure Trust (ALT)
* Gwent Archives
* Gwent Crematoria
* Shared Resource Service (SRS)
* Gwent Public Service Board (PSB)
* BG Local Well-being Partnership
* Cardiff Capital Region City Deal
* Local Nature Partnership Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen
* Tech Valleys
* Valley Task Force
* Gwent Wide Adult Safeguarding Board (GWASB)
* South East Wales Safeguarding Children Board (SEWSCB)
* Greater Gwent Health, Social Care and Well-being Partnership

The Council has an established engagement framework for staff and the Council’s Trade Unions and the Consultation Framework has been reviewed and updated.

The Council is working with Town and Community Councils with regular interaction with the Clerks. Development has included a Clerks Forum and engagement plan developed for approval. Alongside this, the common agreement has been reviewed and agreed.

A Corporate Communications Strategy has been developed, and an organisational review of the communications function was undertaken in March 2022 with an agreed programme of activity established.

# Review of Effectiveness

To ensure relevant stakeholders are engaged throughout the Council’s policy development and decision making processes, comprehensive engagement events have been held throughout the year.

The Policy, Partnership and Engagement Team have supported several engagement and participation activities and events. The Council continues to hold several key engagement and participation activities and events including the Youth Forum, Children’s School Grand Council, 50+ Forum and key corporate consultations on issues such as the Council Budget.

The Council also continues to develop its use of social media channels such as Facebook (including BG Family Information Service, BG Youth Services and General Offices pages), X (formally Twitter), Instagram and Linkedin.

Engagement with staff regarding the process for staff supervision has been undertaken which has led to improvements to the process in order to encourage discussion in identified areas.

Engagement arrangements with Audit Wales are in place with regular meetings with the Head of Governance and Partnerships, regular meetings with the Section 151 Officer and separate monthly meetings with the Joint Chief Executive. Quarterly meetings are also undertaken with the Political 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 the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). On a quarterly basis the Director of Social Services and/or Heads of Adult and Children’s Services meet with CIW to discuss achievements, performance and key challenges. CIW also undertake an annual review and evaluation of the Directorate’s performance.

The Regional Partnership Board (RPB) has agreed an Area Plan 2023/28 which sets out their response of the findings of the regional Population Needs Assessment, prepared to meet the requirements of the statutory guidance under section 14A of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. The Plan will align to other strategic drivers such as the Gwent Public Service Board Well-being Plan, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board Integrated Medium Term Plan and supporting Integrated Service Partnership Board Plans.

# Areas for Further Development

* Develop an action plan to respond to the findings from the staff survey
* Develop an action plan to respond to the findings from the residents survey.

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

# How we do this

The Authority has reviewed its priorities, vision and values and these are set out in the Council’s Corporate Plan 2022/27. The Corporate Plan acts as the Council’s business plan and is directly linked to the priorities in the Gwent Well-being Plan. The Corporate Plan was approved by Council on 26th October 2022.

The priority areas identified in the Corporate Plan also act as the Council’s Well-being Objectives as part of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act.

In October 2022 the Council produced its first annual Self-Assessment 2021/22, developed as a requirement of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. In October 2023 and 2024, the second and third self-assessment was received by Council.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 established statutory Public Service Boards (PSBs) to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing across Wales by strengthening joint working across all public services. There is a statutory requirement for all PSBs to develop a Well-being Assessment and a Well-being Plan.

A Gwent Public Service Board has been established, under Section 47 (1) of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. This arrangement has replaced the individual Public Service Boards in each of the five Local Authority areas of Gwent. As part of this, a Joint Public Service Board Scrutiny Committee has been established and is operated by Blaenau Gwent Council. The Blaenau Gwent Partnership Scrutiny Committee considers items that relate to Blaenau Gwent as identified as part of the Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership.

The Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan came to an end in 2023. The Gwent PSB has undertaken a regional wellbeing assessment. This used a wide range of qualitative and quantitative information including data, academic research, evidence, and people’s views (engagement) to help understand Wellbeing across Gwent communities. This assessment formed the basis of the development of the Gwent Wellbeing Plan which was approved in August 2023. he Well-being Plan is available here: [**Gwent Well-being Plan – Gwent Public Services Board Gwent Public Services Board (gwentpsb.org)**](http://www.gwentpsb.org/en/well-being-plan/gwent-well-being-plan/) along with a number of supporting documents.

The Authority has a Strategic Equality Plan 2024/28 in place which sets out the Council's vision and commitment to advancing equality in Blaenau Gwent. The Plan was subject to consultation with residents, staff, partners and stakeholders. The plan outlines the council's equality objectives and actions for the next four years, as well as how it will monitor and report on its progress. The plan identifies six equality objectives that the council will focus on, which are:

* Equality Objective 1: We will be a fair and equitable organisation.
* Equality Objective 2: We will be a workplace that champions diversity and inclusion.
* Equality Objective 3: We will create a fair and inclusive learning culture for all children and young people with a focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion.
* Equality Objective 4: We will promote and support inclusive, safe and cohesive communities.
* Equality Objective 5: We will ensure effective engagement and participation for people with protected characteristics.
* Equality Objective 6: We will strive to reduce inequality caused by poverty.

A review of the Equality Impact Assessment process has been undertaken and approved by Cabinet. This process is now called an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) and is for both new and existing policies and practices (when reviewed). The IIA now also includes the Socio Economic Duty and where there has been deemed to be a substantial (or likely) negative impact the Council must report this accordingly, outlining any decisions taken with any mitigations considered/actioned.

The Authority is committed to the principles of the Wales Procurement Policy that identifies Procurement as a strategic enabler, delivering key policy objectives to support the Council’s economic, social and environmental priorities. Work has progressed significantly with regards to procurement and contract management. Further work is being undertaken to implement the new Procurement Legislation which came into force in February 2025.

The Welsh in Education Strategic Plan 2022/32 (WESP) sets out how the local authority will carry out its education functions to improve and increase the use of Welsh in Education over the next ten years. The plan will contribute to Cymraeg 2050 initiative, where the Welsh Government wants to have 1 million Welsh speakers in Wales by 2050.

2024/25 Council data shows that the Council has identified 42 members of staff who are fluent Welsh speakers. The total number of staff who have Welsh language speaking skills ranging from ‘fluently’, ‘quite well’, ‘moderately’, ‘foundation’ to Courtesy/Entry Level, is 629. This is an increase of 24 members of staff from the 2023/24 reporting period (605 members of staff reported in 2023/24).

The Authority receives a capital allocation from Welsh Government that is used along with the capital receipt reserve to form a capital programme providing a range of sustainable benefits for the Authority. The funding is allocated based on alignment with corporate and national priorities.

# Review of Effectiveness

IIAs are undertaken against all relevant proposals, and included within the Council’s reporting template and strategic business reviews. The Annual Report to the Equality and Human Rights Commission was published and submitted within the appropriate timescales. The Report was included on the Council website in March 2024.

The Council has in place a Welsh Language Promotion Strategy and, on an annual basis, prepares an Annual Welsh Language Monitoring Report, which is produced in accordance with the requirements of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. The purpose of the report is to inform the public on any significant changes and updates made by the Council to improve compliance with the Welsh Language Standards; and detail the progress that has taken place over the last year in relation to the Welsh language and culture.

In November 2021, the Welsh Language Commissioners Office (WLCO) opened an investigation with Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council following concerns raised during a direct verification assessment of whether the Council was compliant with the Welsh Language Standards in terms of providing a Welsh language telephone service. In April 2022, the Council provided an initial response to the investigation, which, in turn, raised further compliance concerns with regards to promoting services, assessing the language skills of staff, providing training opportunities, and assessing the language needs of posts. This led to the terms of reference for the investigation being widened to include a number of additional operational standards. In September 2022, a final determination of the investigation, in accordance with Section 77 of the Welsh Language (Wales) 2011 Measure was provided to the Council. The determination outlined the steps required to reach compliance and expected delivery timeframes. It also requested the Council take forward an organisational approach (including clear accountability and governance framework) to develop an Action Plan, with a deadline 31 January 2023. The final draft Action Plan was signed off by CLT on the 26th January 2022, with the WLCO signing off the report on the 5th April 2023. In March 2023, a core group was formed to support the implementation of the Action Plan. Confirmation was received from the WLCO on 1st July 2024 that the investigation had been successfully implemented and therefore closed.

In June 2024 the WLCO launched a new investigation, following a public complaint in July 2023 regarding Aneurin Leisure Trust’s (the Trust) limited use of the Welsh language across its websites, social media, and signage at Parc Bryn Bach. In June 2024, a final decision notice was received which set out the required actions, timelines for compliance, and requested that the Council, in partnership with Aneurin Leisure Trust, implement an organisational approach with clear accountability and governance to develop an Action Plan by 4th September 2024. The WLCO approved the Action Plan on 20th September 2024 with a stated completion deadline of 20th March 2025. To ensure the implementation of the plan’s actions, action leads met on a six weekly basis. The group helped drive progress, complete the required actions, and enhance compliance with the Council’s Welsh language obligations. Confirmation was received from the WLCO on 20th March 2025 confirming that the investigation has been closed and that there was no further action required.

The Welsh Language Core Compliance Officer Group, established to implement the actions of the original WLCO investigation, remains in place to maintain good practice and ensure compliance with the Welsh Language Standards, this includes an updated membership and terms of reference.

It is a statutory responsibility for the Corporate Director of Social Services to assess the effectiveness of the delivery of Social Services and produce an Annual Report. The Annual Report contributes to and forms part of the Annual Council Reporting Framework (ACRF). The report of the Corporate Director of Social Services 2022/23 was presented to the People Scrutiny Committee in September 2023 and the report for 2023/24 was presented in September 2024.

The Transformation Programme to support the continued development of a ‘seamless system’ of care, support and well-being in Gwent, in response to the Welsh Government’s new long term plan for health and social care, ‘A Healthier Wales’, has seen progress across the four identified programmes with evaluation reports demonstrating both financial efficiencies and improved wellbeing outcomes for citizens have been achieved. Following on from this, the Blaenau Gwent Integrated Service Partnership Board (ISPB) has been established to act as an enabler for embedding a whole system approach that integrates health, local authority and voluntary sector services, and is facilitated by collaboration and consultation.

Compassionate Communities is also part of the Transformation Programme that aims to provide place based services to improve the well-being of people across Gwent. Work includes the development of IAA outreach across the Compassionate Communities within 11 GP practices and also at community and acute hospital sites, where initial positive outcomes have been reported. Compassionate Communities also include Community Connectors actively participating in Multi-Disciplinary Team Discussions and Hospital discharge follow up phone calls.

Strong progress continues to be made on the Council’s Welsh Education Strategic Plan 2022/32 (WESP), and as part of this Plan Blaenau Gwent has opened a 210 place Welsh Medium Seedling Primary School in Tredegar, it will move to permanent accommodation in September 2025, Ysgol Gymraeg Tredegar.  In order to support seedling provision and develop increased capacity across childcare and early years’ settings, a further two Welsh Medium Childcare settings are being established, one at the Glyncoed Primary new build site and one in the new Tredegar seedling school provision.

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# Areas for Further Development

* Continue to proactively promote and implement the Welsh Language Standards across the Council.
* Review of the business planning framework and priorities linked to the aligned to the federated approach with Torfaen Council and the adoption of the Marmot principles.
* Implementation of the new Procurement Legislation.

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

# How we do this

The Authority has strengthened its Performance Management Framework to ensure a consistent approach and accountability for performance improvement. This process has been aligned to the Risk Management Framework to provide one approach for data collection and monitoring. Further work is to be undertaken in this key area of work to more closely align to the processes in Torfaen Council.

A Strategic Commercial and Commissioning Board is currently in operation, although is due for review to assess whether other groups in the Council could take on this responsibility moving forward. The Board provides oversight and scrutiny of the Council’s commercial activities, primarily commissioning, procurement, investments and trading. The board provides challenge with regards to the merits of each spending proposal and contracts over £75k and ensures a consistent approach to spending in line with the objectives of the Authority.

The corporate reporting format has been designed to guide officers and members to consider the key implications of any proposals put forward. The report has defined areas for considering options appraisal, risk, staffing and financial impact, along with the contribution to the Sustainable Development Principles. A recent addition to the template is an integrated impact assessment section which combines the Equalities Impact Assessment with the Socio Economic Impact Duty. This assists in the process for making informed and transparent decisions and ensures the links between budget and planning are considered as well as legislative requirements.

# Review of Effectiveness

Self-evaluation arrangements are in place and continue to be refined, requiring each service area to consider how its activities contributed to the achievement of its intended outcomes and support the Council to achieve its goals. The process enables us to gather and use good quality information to better understand how we are performing. Following the introduction of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, the Council has developed three Annual Self-Assessments which have been agreed by Council and included on the Council website.

In November 2024, the Council underwent a Peer Panel Assessment, a statutory requirement under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. As part of the process a desktop review of council documents, data, external reports and other relevant intelligence was undertaken. The panel were then onsite in Blaenau Gwent, between 18th and 21st November 2024, in order to conduct a number of interviews and focus groups.

The PPA examined the councils’ position in relation to the three performance duties, that is the extent to which the council is:

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

The Council also requested for the following themes to be reviewed to inform the assessment:

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

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

The PPA made 15 recommendations to the Council. The Council has drafted a response to the final PPA report and developed an action plan to implement the recommendations. The draft response and action plan are to be presented to the Governance and Audit Committee early in the 2025/26 cycle, who can make recommendations for changes.

The remit of the Strategic Commercial and Commission Board focuses on the strategic direction of the Council’s commercial activities including the commissioning and procurement of the organisations third party spend.

# Areas for Further Development

* Undertake the annual Corporate Self-Assessment
* Implement the PPA action plan
* Review of the business planning process and review of business plans aligned to the Corporate Plan and corporate developments.
* Undertake a review of the Strategic Commercial and Commission Board to consider how best to take this work forward.
* Review the Performance Management Framework alongside the framework and arrangements undertaken in Torfaen Council.

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

# How we do this

Blaenau Gwent has 33 elected members who collectively make up 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 Members with individual portfolio responsibilities. The portfolios are agreed at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Council in May of each year.

In addition to Cabinet, the Authority’s Committee structure 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.

Members are appointed to these Committees, each of which is supported by relevant officers. Payments to Members are in line with the determinations of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales.

There are four statutory posts in place namely; the Head of Paid Service, the Monitoring Officer, the Head of Democratic Services and the Section 151 Officer. These are satisfied by the appointments of the Joint Chief Executive, the Head of Legal and Compliance, the Head of Governance and Partnerships and the Corporate Director of Corporate Resources (previously Chief Officer – Resources), respectively. These post holders are charged with ensuring elected Members receive appropriate advice.

There are four further officer roles, who were established from May 2025 namely:

* the Strategic Director Children, Young People and Families (formally theCorporate Director of Education), who is also the Deputy Chief Executive;
* the Strategic Director Adults and Communities for both Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen (formally theCorporate Director of Social Services);
* the Corporate Director of Economy and Place (formally Director Regeneration and Community Services); and
* the Director of Neighbourhood Services for Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen.

The Authority has a clear set of strategic outcomes, supporting actions and competencies which relate to service delivery. Both Members and Officers receive appropriate training to enable them to develop / enhance the necessary skills to fulfil their roles.

A Performance Coaching Scheme exists for Officers, and a Personal Development Review Scheme (PDRs) and Competency Framework for Members. For Members the scheme ensures an appropriate level of competency and aims to identify any further training needs or continuous professional development requirements that are required for the job. Most officer posts have a detailed job description and person specification, and selection is made through a robust recruitment process to meet the specific skills and competencies of the post. Role descriptions for Members are established and include specific role descriptions for senior member roles. These are included within the Constitution.

# Review of Effectiveness

A review of various member support and development documents has been undertaken and approved by Council in March 2023. These include the Member Development Strategy 2022/27, Mentoring Framework, and a reviewed PDR / Competency framework. The PDR / Competency Framework process is mandatory for all senior salary holders and offered to all members. A review of the Petitions Protocol has also been undertaken and now includes e-Petitions which has been approved by Council and included on the Council’s website.

During January 2025 Council agreed for a Joint Chief Executive appointment covering both Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen Councils. As part of this appointment, there has been a review of the Director posts with continued work to be undertaken to review the Senior Leadership structure across the two Council’s to establish a federated approach and to streamline approaches.

The Council has in place a Trade Union Facilities Agreement which was reviewed and updated in 2020. The review included the granting of more temporary facilities time to the Trade Union as part of the Council’s commitment to work in social partnership with them.  There is also a calendar set annually for formal engagement of the Trade Unions with Directorates, Corporate Leadership Team and the Cabinet.

In July 2024, the Council’s Engagement and Participation Strategy 2024/28 was approved. The Strategy includes four Key Objectives for implementation which are included within an action plan and monitored through the Council’s business planning function.

In house, on the job training continues and essential external training is undertaken. In January 2025, the Council introduced a new learning management system, Thinqi, which will provide access to essential and additional learning for both officers and Members.

Managers and staff have the ability to discuss capability and capacity issues as part of 121 discussions and the performance review process. Directorate HR Business Partners There were 2 cases of capability recorded in 2023/24 – both employees no longer work for the Council.

10 grievance cases were investigated across the Council during 2023/24. 7 resolved and 3 were active into 2024/25. Two were collective grievances – one of which is now an Employment Tribunal claim, and this has implications for 81 plus staff.

Over the year, three whistleblowing complaints were received, one was rejected as not eligible and two remaining were concluded during 2023/24. No new whistleblowing complaints were taken forward up to June 2025.

A plan to develop a Leadership development programme is underway but this will be dependent on corporate funding.

# Areas for Further Development

* Further roll out and enhancement of the Thinqi learning platform.
* Implementation of the new Engagement and Participation Strategy.
* Review of the Leadership programme
* Establish the new senior leadership structure.

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

# How we do this

The Authority has in place a Risk Management Framework that includes a Risk Management Strategy and a Risk Management Handbook. The risk management arrangements are set out in the Performance Management Framework and are aligned to the corporate business planning process. These set out the risk appetite of the Council and provide a methodology to ensure the consistent assessment / prioritisation of the risks the Authority faces and any mitigating actions.

The Council has an adopted corporate policy to deal with complaints. A review of monitoring complaints has been undertaken and new processes and nominated officers have been identified.

A Governance and Audit Committee operates in line with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure and the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, receiving reports from internal and external regulators on the internal control environment, risk and governance. The Committee provides appropriate challenge and seeks assurance in line with its terms of reference that are laid in the constitution.

As a Local Authority it is vital in the work that we undertake that we collect and process personal information in order to fulfil our obligations and perform many of our day-to-day operations. In May 2018 the GDPR came into force and made significant changes to how the Authority handles personal information and placed many additional obligations on organisations. A project team was created at the time to manage the work needed to ensure the Authority was compliant with this new legislation which has since been disbanded but the work to ensure continued compliance is ongoing through the work of the Information Governance Forum (IGF) that is chaired by the Senior Information Risk Owner (SIRO) and supported by the Authority’s Data Protection and Governance Officer which is a mandatory role within the legislation. GDPR legislation has since become known as UK GDPR and currently remains identical to the EU GDPR although some changes are currently proposed and out for consultation.

Whilst implementing GDPR in 2018 the Council implemented an Information Asset Owner structure in order to be compliant with the legislation and ensure that there are clear defined lines of responsibility towards information assets owned by the Council. Information Asset Registers are in place for each area of the Council and regularly reviewed to ensure that there is corporate oversight of all key information systems and to risk assess these in terms of the confidentiality, integrity and availability.

In addition to the Information Asset Registers the Council also adhered to an additional obligation under GDPR to create a Record of Processing Activities for all departments. This document provides the ability to drill down to the necessary level of detail required under GDPR to identify when the Council collects and processes personal information, why it is doing this, what legally permits it to do this.

# The Council also has a suite of Information Governance and Security policies and procedures that are regularly reviewed to manage and ensure compliance with its statutory duties.

A Digital and Service Design Board has been established with a corporate programme for digital projects. A Digital Strategy has been developed and approved by Council. An ICT Roadmap and Digital Solutions process has been established which looks to create long term, sustainable and relevant ICT infrastructure throughout the Council and its services.

# Review of Effectiveness

The Authority’s key governance systems continue to be risk assessed and included in the annual audit plan. The Audit Plan outturn position for 2023/24 was a total of 33 final audit reports split between 10 Full Assurance, 14 Reasonable Assurance, 8 Limited Assurance and 1 No Assurance.

# A revised Anti-Bribery, Anti-Fraud and Anti-Corruption Policy was reported to Governance and Audit Committee on 17th April 2024.

# During 2022/23 the Council set up a group to review its governance and oversight arrangements in respect of other companies in which it has an interest to ensure the arrangements are adequate and effective. The Council’s accounts list a number of companies in which the Council has an interest and who are currently delivering public services on our behalf. Therefore, those included within the review were:

# Aneurin Leisure Trust;

# Education Achievement Service (EAS);

# Gwent Crematoria; and

# Gwent Archives.

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The Review used a Code of Practice to develop its Terms of Reference to provide assurance that the main areas of oversight and governance were adequate and effective in terms of the companies within its scope – covering off the principles of good governance namely Accountability; Leadership; Integrity; Stewardship and Transparency’. Various sets of information and data was provided by each of the companies to provide assurance against the Terms of Reference for the review.

# The Risk Management Strategy and Handbook were reviewed and adopted in August 2024. The Professional Lead – Risk and Insurance advises Departmental Management Teams and CLT to facilitate challenge / discussions on directorate risks. This has resulted in a more consistent approach to risk evaluation and reporting becoming embedded across the Council.

# The highest level risks faced by the Authority are recorded on the Corporate Risk Register. The main risks facing the Authority during the period were:

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| **Risk Description** | **Potential Impact** |
| Failure to deliver and sustain the changes required to ensure that vital services are prioritised within the financial constraints faced by the Council. | Financial pressures and demand challenges will result in reductions to services, significant impacting their availability and quality. |
| Failure to ensure that the Councils ICT arrangements provide assurance in terms of operational functionality and data security and enable the required digital transformational change | Service continuity impacted, transformation of services cannot take place and the potential for cyber attacks |
| Failure to ensure adequate safeguarding arrangements are in place for vulnerable people in Blaenau Gwent | Vulnerable people at risk of harm and abuse. Negative reputation for the Council |
| Failure to improve staff attendance rates within the Council will lead to an unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively and financially | Unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively and financially support the cost of sickness absence. |
| If the Council does not manage its information assets in accordance with requirements set down within legislation, then it may be faced with financial penalties and possible sanctions that hinder service delivery. | Financial penalties and possible sanctions that hinder service delivery |
| The Financial resilience of the Council could be at risk if the Council does not ensure that financial planning and management decisions support long term stability and sustainability. | Inability to deliver effective services/ lower quality services provided.  Unplanned reduction of services provided. |
| Failure to deliver the Council's priorities within the agreed annual budget resulting in the increased use of emergency finance measures and the drawdown of reserves | Adverse impacts on the community  Lack of service provision  Not meeting statutory requirements |
| Replacement of Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS) (CareDirector v5) by January 2026 | Essential services are impacted by the loss of data systems. Poor reputation for the Council |
| The school in an Estyn category and currently in receipt of Council Intervention fail to make appropriate progress against the Statutory Warning Notice to Improve and their Post Inspection Action Plans. | Poor reputation of the Council  Statutory intervention  Standards of education are not improvement |
| There is a risk that the Council’s Business Continuity processes are not robust enough to enable the provision of critical services in an emergency | Essential services not delivered to an acceptable standard during disruptive incidents. Poor reputation for the Council |
| Failure to maintain appropriately skilled, adequate staffing resources will lead to an unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively | Vital services will not be protected if the Council fails to find more efficient ways of working and improvements to social, economic and environmental well-being of the areas will not be achieved |

# A copy of the full Corporate Risk Register can be obtained from the Risk Management and Insurance Section.

# All Strategic Business Review projects are risk assessed using the Corporate Risk Management Framework. Decisions on managing those risks are agreed and monitored as part of the project management arrangements that are in place.

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# All Data Protection Impact Assessments are approved by the Data Protection & Governance Officer to ensure that there are effective controls in place to mitigate the risk of a Data Protection Breach. Where a Data Protection incident is reported, the Data Protection & Governance Officer will investigate the cause and review the responsible service area controls to ensure they are effective. The Data Protection & Governance Officer, Information Governance Forum and the Council’s Senior Information Risk Officer (SIRO) review the Council’s information governance arrangements to ensure they are fit for purpose.

# Areas for Further Development

* Regular review of Risk Management arrangements to ensure they remain fit for purpose and are implemented consistently.

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

# How we do this

Decision making processes for both Officers and Members are set out in the Constitution. Boundaries are clearly defined, and the Committee structure includes decision making, scrutiny and regulatory functions. A set of Financial Procedure Rules and Contract Procedure Rules have been adopted to ensure consistency, transparency and value for money in financial management and procurement. The Corporate Director of Corporate Services ensures the Authority’s financial management arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Chief Financial Officer in Local Government (2016). An annual Statement of Accounts is produced and presented to Members for scrutiny. A period of public consultation is held where members of the public can inspect the accounts.

A Governance and Audit Committee is established that has the primary function of reviewing financial reports and considering governance arrangements. The Committee aims to seek assurance that the governance framework operating within the Authority is robust, effective and efficient. This is achieved, in part, through the Committee receiving this Annual Governance Statement. The role and scope of the Governance and Audit Committee are set out in the Constitution and align to the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

The Internal Audit Service works on a risk based approach, to an annual audit plan, in order to assess the internal control environment of the Authority. The work of the section is prioritised in line with the Authority’s objectives. The results of all audit work are reported to the Governance and Audit Committee who can, if necessary, call Officers to account where weak control is identified. Policies are maintained for Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery, and Anti-Money-Laundering. Adherence to these is considered as part of the work of the Internal Audit function.

Engagement arrangements with Audit Wales are in place with regular meetings with the Head of Governance and Partnerships, regular meetings with the Section 151 Officer and separate monthly meetings with 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 members.

The Social Services Directorate is subject to audit, inspection and review by the Care Inspectorate for 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. Regular liaison meetings are held with the Directorate, the Cabinet Member and the Chair and Vice Chair of Scrutiny Committee.

The Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014 places a statutory duty on all local authorities to produce an annual report on the discharge of its social services functions. The Council’s arrangements to meet their safeguarding responsibilities are scrutinised members. In both 2022 and 2024, Audit Wales undertook follow up reviews of the Council’s Corporate Safeguarding Arrangements, following reviews undertaken in 2014 and 2019. In February 2025 the Council received the outcome of the report, Audit Wales found that, ‘*Overall, the Council has not made sufficient progress to address the outstanding corporate safeguarding recommendations.’* The Council has developed an action plan to respond to the outstanding recommendations. This action plan was presented to the Governance and Audit Committee in June 2025.

Council meetings are held open to the public and are also recorded. Notes and meeting recordings are published on the Authority’s website. The Council has adopted Microsoft Teams to support virtual meetings. Each democratic meeting is recorded and then uploaded onto the website. In future, the livestreaming of Council meetings will be put in place, with consideration of other meetings also, in order to meet the requirements of the Local government and Elections (Wales) Act. As part of this, a Multi-Location Meeting Policy has been produced. A hybrid meeting system is installed at the General Offices, this system is functional with Microsoft Teams and provides a hybrid meeting function to adhere to the remote meeting requirements as part of the Local Government and Election (Wales) Act. A review of Council facilities is currently being undertaken and will include the space and facilities provided to Members.

The Council continues to fulfil its obligations under the Freedom of Information Act and provide information to requestors wherever possible in the interests of transparency. In addition, requests under GDPR legislation for access to information held on a person are also fulfilled in line with the legislation.

# Review of Effectiveness

The Council strives to ensure continuous improvement in the delivery of its services through its improvement planning process and the Performance Management Framework. It has strengthened these arrangements to align them with risk management and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 as well as identifying levels of accountability. Future arrangements include working more closely with Torfaen Council on a 12 week performance reporting schedule, as well as establishing monitoring arrangements for how we are meeting the Characteristics of being and Outstanding Council and the development of a Marmot Masterplan.

There is a Leadership Team in place (formally Wider Corporate Leadership Team) who effectively support the Joint Executive Team (formally CLT) in its role of providing strategic direction to the organisation. It is a forum to disseminate information and communicate messages ensuring a one council approach as well as networking with colleagues and peers and providing personal development opportunities.

A performance management system, utilised by the whole Council is in place which incorporates the majority of the Councils business planning and performance arrangements, so that there is one place for information management and monitoring.   The system works to avoid duplication and to provide a consistent approach across the Council.  The system includes statutory monitoring as well as business plans, self-evaluations, risk, proposals for improvement from auditors, decarbonisation actions, Environment Act actions, performance indicators and sustainable development. A review of this system has been undertaken, and both equalities and Welsh Language reporting is to be included as part of the system.

The Authority’s assurance arrangements conform to the governance requirements of the CIPFA Statement on the Role of the Head of Internal Audit.

An external peer review of the Internal Audit Service was undertaken in 2022/23 and the results reported to the Governance and Audit Committee. The review found that of the 274 applicable best practice requirements (Public Sector Internal Audit Standards) Blaenau Gwent conforms with 267, 6 have partial compliance and there is one area of non-compliant. An Action plan has been developed to address the areas of partial compliance whilst the Council has determined to accept the risk associated with the area of non-compliance.

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| **Internal Audit Grading 2022/23** | **No of Audits Undertaken 2022/23** | **No of Audits Undertaken 2023/24** | **No of Audits Undertaken 2024/25** |
| Full Assurance | 9 | 10 | 5 |
| Reasonable Assurance | 14 | 13 | 17 |
| Limited Assurance | 6 | 4 | 1 |
| No Assurance | 10 | 1 | 2 |
| Non-graded | 0 | 5 | 11 |

No grade is given for some of the audits undertaken which includes follow ups, Grant Certification and ad-hoc pieces of work such as investigations and providing advice. Whilst these audits do not lend themselves to the standard audit gradings, any points of note or concerns identified will be reflected in the annual report of the Audit and Risk Manager.

The service undertakes follow up audits where the original audit had been graded as Limited or No Assurance. In 2023/24 there were 4 follow up audits. From these, 3 had weaknesses that had not been mitigated at the time of follow-up, and consequently were escalated to the Governance and Audit Committee. In 2024/25, 11 follow up audits took place.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Internal Audit Indicator** | **2023/24 Outturn** | **2024/25 Outturn** | **Target** |
| % Audit Plan Completed | 68.06% | 67.79% | 73% |
| % Audits Completed within the Time Allocated | 75% | 100% |  |
| % Weaknesses Accepted by Service Managers | 100% | 98.45% |  |
| average number of days to issue final reports | 4.4 days | 4.05 days | 5 days |

Alongside audits the service has undertaken a number of investigations, one concluded during the year and was reported to the Governance and Audit Committee.  The findings indicated poor adherence to policies and a catalogue of errors.  All investigations were concluded, and the Governance and Audit Committee were updated in their informal workshop in December 2024.

The third investigation has concluded based on the original scope, but reporting is deferred whilst other external influences impact on reporting timelines.   Initial work has identified a number of significant weaknesses within an establishment and an interim report has been issued to the department to enable progress to be made in addressing the concerns raised.

Audits have been spread across directorates to ensure coverage enables an audit opinion on the whole control environment, subject to the usual limitations of risk assessing and sampling.    The pattern of the audit gradings issued is comparable with previous years although there has been a slight increase in the number of No Assurance and Limited Assurance reports.

In forming the audit opinion, consideration is given to the combination of No Assurance and Limited Assurance gradings, the number and types of investigations undertaken, and the actions taken in respect of findings for follow-up audits.  In each of these areas there has been an increase on the previous year’s outturn, indicating a downturn in the control environment, but there are no individual findings of such significance to cause concern regarding the integrity of the financial statements.  There are no trends or patterns to the outcomes of the audit work that suggest issues in a specific service area / department.  However, it is noted that there are several contract related audits (Under £75k; Contract Safeguarding) and corporate audits (Absence Management; Petty Cash) amongst the poorer graded reports and consequently audit work in 2024/25 was targeted to establish whether there are underlying reasons for this.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council ‘s system of internal control during the financial year 2023/24 operates to a level which gives Reasonable assurance on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the organisation’s framework of governance, risk management and control.  However, it is also acknowledged that increased coverage of contract related systems, and corporate systems is needed during 2024/25 to ensure the findings relating to these areas are not wider spread.

The Authority received and processed 959 Freedom of Information requests between 1st April 2024 and 31st March 2025. This is down from the previous year where 1044 requests were received. Despite this reduction the requests received in 2024/2025 are still almost equal to the previous year and represents a 13% overall increase in the last 3 years. Under the FOI Act the Council is expected to respond to FOIs within 20 working days. In recent years the Council has achieved a response rate within the permitted 20 working days of 88% for each of the last two years. However, in the 2024/2025 improvements have been made to this and a response rate of 91.6% (878 out of 959) was achieved.

During 2024/25 the Council recorded a total of 42 data breaches. This is an increase from 34 in the 2023/2024 period but within the same bracket of between 30-45 per year that has been noted over the last 5 years. For every data breach suffered the Council must make a decision on whether it meets the threshold to report the incident to the regulator, the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO). During the 2024/2025 period the Data Breach Panel concluded that it was necessary to report 2 of the 42 data breaches to the ICO. In 2023/24 no data breaches were reported to the ICO. The ICO assessed the two breaches and determined that no further action on the Council is necessary, and that the response taken by the Council to contain and minimise the impact were appropriate.

During 2024/2025 Blaenau Gwent CBC received a total of 88 enquiries to make a Subject Access Request and receive copies of the information held about themselves in line with the Data Protection Legislation. This is a slight increase on the 83 received during the previous period and maintains the significant increase from 60 enquiries in the 2022/2023 period. The Council are not permitted under the legislation to ask for reasoning or justification as to why the requester is making the enquiry so understanding the reasoning behind this increase is difficult other than to assume that the public are more aware of their rights under the legislation and that staff are able to recognise such requests better to ensure that the correct process is followed.

# Areas for Further Development

* Reporting the results of assessments against the new global standards to Governance and Audit Committee.
* Work to improve the response rate of both Freedom of Information and Subject Access Requests
* Work with Torfaen Council on reviewing and alignment, where appropriate, of governance arrangements.
* Through the business planning process, evidence implementation of the Characteristics of an Outstanding Council.
* Development and monitoring of the Marmot Masterplan.

# Significant Governance Issues

We have been advised on the implications of the results of the review of the effectiveness of the governance framework, and that the arrangements continue to be regarded as fit for purpose subject to the significant governance issues to be specifically addressed as outlined below:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Issue** | **Progress Update** | **Further Action Required** | **Responsible Officer** |
| The uncertainty around the current and future economic impact of:   * Cost of Living Crisis * WG future financial settlements   Ongoing uncertainty around the medium to long term impact of these may pose significant challenges for the Council and it will be critical for the Council to demonstrate that it has appropriate governance arrangements in place to manage its financial position. | Robust Financial monitoring is undertaken and reported regularly into Scrutiny and Cabinet.  Appropriate financial planning arrangements are in place with the Medium Term Financial Strategy clearly articulating the challenges needing to be addressed.  The Council’s approach to identifying savings to bridge the funding gaps in future years is being developed across a variety of high level workstreams / themes. | Continue to develop the Council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy and plans to bridge the funding gaps in the medium term. | Corporate Director of Corporate Services |
| The Statement of Accounts for the 2023/2024 financial year have not been completed and did not meet statutory deadlines.  Delays experienced in finalising and completing the audit of the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts have impacted upon 2023/24 and 2024/25.  A significant issue identified during the external audit of the Council’s 2022/23 Statement of Accounts related to the governance failings / lack of council oversight of the joint venture agreement between the Council and Welsh Government (WG) for the Lime Avenue development. The agreement imposes a significant liability on the Council however the arrangement had been entered into without due consideration by the Corporate Leadership Team and / or Cabinet / Council. | The preparation and audit of the final 2023/24 accounts is nearing completion with the final accounts and accompanying Audit Wales report scheduled for presentation to Governance & Audit Committee on 28th July 2025.  The target date for preparation of the draft accounts for 2024/25 is September 2025.  Significant progress has / is being made in addressing the issues that have contributed to the delays, and it is expected that the preparation of the 2025/26 and future years annual accounts will be achieved in line with statutory deadlines.  In March 2025, with the agreement of Welsh Government, the terms of the Lime Avenue Joint Venture were amended. The changes removed the requirement for the Council to purchase the Welsh Government capital share at that end of the agreement and, as a result, with effect from the date of the agreement, this significant liability has been removed.  The Council’s Constitution and Financial Procedure Rules are being enhanced to more clearly define delegated responsibilities, specifying that any contractual agreements imposing significant long-term liabilities on the Council must be reviewed and approved by the Section 151 officer or their representative before being entered into.  The circumstances and the impact of this issue has also been highlighted to senior leaders across the organisation to raise awareness of future risks and impact. | Preparation of 2024/25 Statement of Accounts by September 2025.  Accounts for 2025/26 onwards to be finalised within Statutory deadlines. | Corporate Director of Corporate Services |

Whilst there remain some areas that require development or further improvement, in considering the governance framework and its application as detailed in this statement, we are of the opinion that the governance arrangements in place for Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council are effective and remain fit for purpose, providing an adequate level of assurance for the Council.

(signed)……………………… (signed)……………………….

**Councillor Steve Thomas Rhian Hayden**

**Leader of the Council Corporate Director of Corporate Services**

**July 2025 July 2025**

(signed)……………………….

**Stephen Vickers**

**Joint Chief Executive**

**July 2025**

**Appendix A.1**

**Audit, regulatory and inspection work reported during 2023/24 and 2024/25**

**Audit Wales Local Reports:**

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| --- | --- |
| **Examination of the Setting of Well-being Objectives (Local Report) (Issued September 2023)** | |
| ***Report findings and Recommendations for Improvement:*** | |
| Ref 146 | The Council can describe how it considered the sustainable development principle when setting its well-being objectives, but it could more clearly document this and the steps it will take to deliver them, as well as strengthening citizen involvement   * The Council should strengthen its application of the sustainable development principle when it next develops its well-being objectives by drawing on the views of the full diversity of the population to inform the objectives * The Council should demonstrate more clearly in future corporate plans:   + how it has applied the sustainable development principle in the setting of its well-being objectives; and   + the steps it intends to take to deliver its well-being objectives. * The Council should ensure there is an effective framework for assessing progress against the well-being objectives over the short, medium and long term and that measures reflect the strategic and cross-cutting nature of the objectives. |
| **Use of performance information: Service User perspective and Outcomes (Local Report) (Issued March 2024)** | |
| ***Report findings and Recommendations for Improvement:*** | |
| Ref 154 | The Council provides limited performance information to enable senior leaders to understand the perspective of service users and the outcomes of its activities and thus, effectively manage its performance.    Information on the perspective of the service user   * The Council should strengthen the information it provides to its senior leaders to enable them to understand how well services and policies are meeting the needs of service users.   Information on its outcomes   * The Council should strengthen the information provided to senior leaders to help them understand the impact of its services and evaluate whether it is delivering its long-term objectives and intended outcomes.   Information on the quality and accuracy of data   * The Council needs to assure itself that it has robust arrangements to check the quality and accuracy of the service user and outcomes data it provides to senior leaders. |
| **Digital Strategy Review – (Local Report) (Issued May 2024)** | |
| ***Report findings and Recommendations for Improvement:*** | |
| Ref 153 | At the time of our fieldwork the Council was developing its new digital strategy and was gaining a good understanding of its current situation to inform that strategy. Subsequent to fieldwork, the Council published its Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-27. The Council has not however carried out a mapping exercise to identify potential stakeholders to involve in the development and delivery of its strategy. The Council is in the process of setting outcomes and measures against its new digital strategy. Costs for resourcing and delivering a new digital strategy are not fully identified as a result and arrangements are not in place to routinely monitor or review the Council’s overall strategic approach to digital.   * Resourcing - To ensure the strategic approach aligns with available resources the Council should identify the resources its new strategy requires. * Arrangements for monitoring value for money - To be able to monitor the value for money of its next digital strategy, the Council should strengthen its arrangements for monitoring both its progress and impact over the short, medium and longer term. |
| **Financial Sustainability Review (Local Report) (Issued August 2024)**  ***Report findings and Recommendations for Improvement:*** | |
| Ref 162 | The Council has appropriate arrangements in place to support its financial sustainability, but these will only be effective if it works at pace to identify, approve and implement sufficient savings to reduce its medium-term funding gap in a sustainable way.   * We found that the Council has not yet identified all the savings it will need to close the funding gap over the medium term. The Council should focus sufficient capacity and resources to progress and quantify sustainable and transformational options which are in line with its strategy and address the funding gap beyond 2025-26. * To ensure that councillors and other stakeholders are able to transparently monitor the anticipated impact of the Council’s financial strategy on local communities, the Council should ensure that it considers and reports on the impact of its financial strategy on the achievement of its corporate objectives. |
| **Arrangements for Commissioning Services – (Local Report) (Issued September 2024)** | |
| ***Report findings and Recommendations for Improvement:*** | |
| Ref 161 | Overall, Audit Wales found that the Council is not able to demonstrate that it routinely secures value for money through its commissioned services, but it is introducing a more strategic approach to strengthen its arrangements.   * **Establishing commissioning arrangements**   To enable the Council to assess and report on value for money of commissioned services, it should ensure it has an established and comprehensive options appraisal process to support decision making on commissioned services. The rationale for commissioning decisions should be:   * fully documented; * informed by consideration of both short and long term factors; * informed by the views of those who would be affected by the commissioned service; and * risk assessed including considering the full costs and benefits of each option. * **Establishing commissioning arrangements**   To enable the Council to assess and report on value for money of commissioned services, it should ensure it has an established and comprehensive options appraisal process to support decision making on commissioned services. The rationale for commissioning decisions should be:   * + fully documented;   + informed by consideration of both short and long term factors;   + informed by the views of those who would be affected by the commissioned service; and   + risk assessed including considering the full costs and benefits of each option. |
| **Corporate Safeguarding Arrangements Follow Up Report – (Local Report) (Issued February 2025)** | |
| ***Report findings and Recommendations for Improvement:*** | |
| Ref 161 | The Council has not made sufficient progress to address the outstanding corporate safeguarding recommendations. As a result, we are unable to gain assurance that the Council has proper arrangements for all aspects of corporate safeguarding.  No new recommendations were provided by Audit Wales but the Recommendations and Proposals for Improvement from the 2014, 2015, 2019 and 2022 reports need to be embedded. |

**Appendix A.2**

**Audit Wales National Reports 2023/24 and 2024/25:**

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| **Use of Performance Information – Service User Perspective and Outcomes (National Report) (Issued July 2024)** | |
| Ref 154 | Apart from a few councils, councils provide limited performance information to enable senior leaders to understand progress towards the outcomes they are seeking to achieve, and the perspective of service users. This hinders councils’ ability to know if they are meeting the needs of local communities and providing value for money |
| **Digital by design? Lessons from our digital strategy review across councils in Wales (Issued 2024)** | |
| Ref 153 | Overall, Audit Wales found that, while many councils recognise the role digital can play in delivering their longer-term ambitions, weaknesses in their arrangements pose value for money risks.  Councils were, to varying extents, thinking about how they could use digital to deliver better outcomes and achieve their strategic ambitions over the long term. However, Audit Wales identified consistent weaknesses in resourcing and monitoring that pose value for money risks. Fundamentally, councils did not appear to have an explicit focus on value for money or the sustainable development principle in developing their digital strategies. Audit Wales identified five key improvement areas across all 22 Councils (lessons relating to evidence, collaboration, resourcing, impact and learning). |
| **Corporate Joint Committees – commentary on their progress (National Report) (Issued November 2023)** | |
| Ref 159 | Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) are still in their infancy. I was initially concerned about their slow and varied progress, and Welsh Government’s preparedness to facilitate their implementation, but there have been more positive signs of the CJCs moving forward recently. |
| **Governance of National Park Authorities (National Report) (Issued April 2024)** | |
| Ref 163 | The governance model for National Park Authorities provides a clear framework to discharge their key functions, but weaknesses in its implementation present a risk to good governance |
| **Affordable Housing (National Report) (Issued September 2024)** | |
| Ref 168 | The delivery of affordable homes has been slow and more expensive than initially expected, partly due to pressures outside of the Welsh Government’s control. If the Welsh Government is to meet the 20,000 social homes target by March 2026 it will need to spend significantly more than planned. It will also need to deliver all the schemes in its pipeline, some of which are considered risky, and a small number more.  There are positive aspects to the underpinning governance and management arrangements, including a collaborative approach and the core processes for managing grant funding. There are also areas for improvement around a more long-term approach to need, planning and funding, and doing more to ensure investment in affordable housing contributes to wider policy objectives. |
| **Active Travel (National Report) (Issued September 2024)** | |
| Ref 169 | Despite increased spending through its Active Travel Fund and a new, wide-ranging, delivery plan, the Welsh Government remains a long way from achieving the step change in active travel intended through the Act. And approaches to monitoring and evaluation do not currently go far enough to enable robust tracking of progress or an overall assessment of value for money. |
| **Financial Management and Governance – Lessons from Audit for Community and Town Councils in Wales (Issued March 2025)** | |
| Ref 179 | In recent years, unitary authorities have sought to transfer assets and services to community councils. These increasing responsibilities mean that there is an ever-growing need to ensure that community councils have in place sound systems of internal control, financial management and governance. |
| **No time to lose: Lessons from our work under the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Issued April 2025)** | |
| Ref 183 | This report makes four recommendations. They are strategic recommendations to the Welsh Government, designed with the wider conditions for progress in mind. They call on the government to minimise funding uncertainty to help bodies plan effectively and to encourage investment in prevention. They also call on government to take a fresh look at the assessment of performance and impact under the Act and to clearly set out a scope and timetable for its own evaluation of the Act in the context of wider scrutiny. |

Details of progress against these proposals can be obtained from the Governance and Partnerships Section.

**Appendix B**

**Progress made against the Areas for Further Development identified from the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement**

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| **Core Principle A – Behaving with integrity, demonstrating strong commitment to ethical values, and respecting the rule of law** | | |
| **Recommendation for Improvement made in the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement** | **Action Undertaken during 2023/24 and 2024/25 (Progress Update)** | **Further Action Required** |
| Continued adherence to the Authority’s policies and procedures which exist to guide Members and Officers to comply with the Council’s expectations in terms of acting with integrity. | A risk based audit plan was operated for 2023/24 which included examination of the Authority’s policies and procedures. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| To evidence robust application of the Authority’s Code of Conduct, Internal Audit to undertake a follow up audit of declarations to evidence whether improvement has been made | A follow-up Audit of Declarations was conducted and not all of the weaknesses highlighted had been addressed.  The report was presented to the Governance and Audit Committee and managers have been tasked with ensuring future compliance.  Managers to ensure compliance with Declaration of Interest process. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| In line with good practice, an annual review (as a minimum) of the Constitution and Scheme of delegation to ensure the Authority’s governance and decision making processes remain fit for purpose | Minor amendments made to the Constitution in line with local changes. Discussions held at the Constitutional Working Group and approved at Council. | Work to be undertaken during 2025/26 to note the changes in officer and member arrangement linked to the federation with Torfaen Council. |

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| **Core Principle B – Ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.** | | |
| **Recommendation for Improvement made in the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement** | **Action Undertaken during 2023/24 and 2024/25 (Progress Update)** | **Further Action Required** |
| Supporting the development and implementation of the Gwent Well-being Plan. | The Gwent Well-being Plan has been agreed and is operational as well as the Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership. Monitoring is undertaken by the Gwent Public Service Board and Gwent Strategic Well-being Action Group as well as with the Gwen PSB Scrutiny Committee. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| Development of Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership Plan and priorities | Local priorities for the Blaenau Gwent Local Well-being Partnership have been established and agreed. Monitoring is undertaken by the Gwent Public Service Board and Gwent Strategic Well-being Action Group as well as with the Gwen PSB Scrutiny Committee. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| Review of the Engagement and Participation Strategy with alignment to the Communications Strategy and continued implementation of the Council’s Engagement Programme | The Engagement and Participation Strategy was approved July 2024 and actions included within the relevant business plans for monitoring. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |

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| **Core Principle C – Defining outcomes in terms of sustainable economic, social, and environmental benefits.** | | |
| **Recommendation for Improvement made in the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement** | **Action Undertaken during 2023/24 and 2024/25 (Progress Update)** | **Further Action Required** |
| Implementation of the actions against the Welsh Language Compliance Investigation. | Established an Officer Group (CS092) with responsibility for preparing and implementing the Welsh Language Investigation Action Plan. The action plan has been completed, and this was confirmed by the Welsh Language a Commissioner in July 2024.  Confirmation was also received from the WLCO on 20th March 2025 confirming that the second investigation had been closed and that there was no further action required. | The Welsh Language Core Compliance Officer Group, established to implement the actions of the original WLCO investigation, remains in place to maintain good practice and ensure compliance with the Welsh Language Standards, this includes an updated membership and terms of reference. |
| Review of the business planning framework and priorities linked to the implementation of the Corporate Plan. | Work has been undertaken to further align the priorities within the business plans to the Corporate Plan. | Continued review of the business planning aligned to the federated approach with Torfaen Council and the adoption of the Marmot principles. |
| Continue to support the collective and individual body duties under the Well-being of Future Generations Act. | Continued implementation of the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations Act and aligning to the Council’s governance processes. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| To implement the new code of practice in relation to the performance and improvement framework of Social Services in Wales. | Continued implementation of the new code of practice in relation to the performance and improvement framework of Social Services in Wales. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| Implementation of requirements under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. | An action plan developed and implemented in order to address the relevant areas from within the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 | Moved to business as usual – no further action |

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| **Core Principle D – Determining the interventions necessary to optimise the achievement of intended outcomes.** | | |
| **Recommendation for Improvement made in the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement** | **Action Undertaken during 2023/24 and 2024/25 (Progress Update)** | **Further Action Required** |
| Undertake an annual Corporate Self-Assessment and consider arrangements for a Peer Panel Review as part of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. | In October 2022 Council received the first annual Self-Assessment 2021/22, developed as a requirement of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. In October 2023 and 2024, the second and third self-assessment was received by Council.  In November 2024, the Council underwent a Peer Panel Assessment and the Council has developed an action plan which is to be signed off by Council in July 2025. | Implementation of the action plan in line with monitoring requirements.  Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| Review of the business planning process and review of business plans aligned to the new Corporate Plan. | Work has been undertaken to further align the priorities within the business plans to the Corporate Plan | Continued review of the business planning aligned to the federated approach with Torfaen Council and the adoption of the Marmot principles. |

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| **Core Principle E – Developing the entity’s capacity, including the capability of its leadership and the individuals within it.** | | |
| **Recommendation for Improvement made in the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement** | **Action Undertaken during 2023/24 and 2024/25 (Progress Update)** | **Further Action Required** |
| Consider a review of the Leadership Development Programme. | A number of strategic programmes have been established which include a number of areas identified by the PPA Panel.  The following Development Programmes will be led by a member of the Executive Team:   * Investing in our people; * Rebel Culture; * Our Workplaces; and * Assurance and Risk. | Review the training options available for leadership team which can also be utilised for members (joint sessions where appropriate) |
| Implement the mentoring scheme for members. | A review of the Mentoring Framework has been undertaken and approved by Council in March 2023. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| Embed the e-Petitions Protocol | A review of the Petitions Protocol has also been undertaken and now includes e-Petitions which has been approved by Council and included on the Council’s website. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| Review of the Engagement and Participation Strategy with alignment to the Communications Strategy and continued implementation of the Council’s Engagement Programme | The Engagement and Participation Strategy was approved July 2024 and actions included within the relevant business plans for monitoring. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |

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| **Core Principle F – Managing risks and performance through robust internal control and strong public financial management** | | | |
| **Recommendation for Improvement made in the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement** | **Action Undertaken during 2023/24 and 2024/25 (Progress Update)** | **Further Action Required** |
| Regular review of Risk Management arrangements to ensure they remain fit for purpose and are implemented consistently. | The Risk Management Strategy and Handbook were reviewed and adopted in August 2024. | Further review of risk management arrangements linked to the federated approach with Torfaen Council. |
| Conclude the review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti-Bribery Policy and update as appropriate. | The review of the Anti-Fraud, Anti-Corruption and Anti Bribery Policy was concluded and the revised policy reported to Governance and Audit Committee in April 2024. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| Continued inclusion of key governance systems in the internal audit plan to ensure key elements of the governance framework are prioritised and examined annually | The risk based audit plan for 20223/24 has prioritised a number of key governance systems for audit during the year. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| To assess and demonstrate its compliance with the Local Government Measure, and the aims and objectives of the Council, the annual report of the Governance & Audit Committee will be produced summarising the year’s activity and evidencing their responsibilities as part of the governance arrangements. | The Governance and Audit Committee Annual Report was reported to Committee on 18th September 2024. This will be an annual process. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |

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| **Core Principle G – Implementing good practices in transparency, reporting, and audit, to deliver effective accountability** | | |
| **Recommendation for Improvement made in the 2022/23 Annual Governance Statement** | **Action Undertaken during 2023/24 and 2024/25 (Progress Update)** | **Further Action Required** |
| Managers to implement the actions identified to address weaknesses highlighted by Internal Audit.  Meetings are undertaken with the Wider CLT, in addition to responsible Officers, and timescales are set for implementation.  Managers to ensure systems for which they have responsibility have robust internal controls to further improve the integrity of the Authority’s processes. | Internal audit reports have been subject to follow up review where they are graded Limited Assurance or No Assurance. Information is reported to the Governance and Audit Committee. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |
| Internal Audit continue to undergo an external peer review (every 5 years). | Progress against the action plan developed in response to the external quality assessment undertaken in 2022/23 has been updated and reported to the Governance and Audit Committee.  The action plan for the EQA is reported annually to Governance and Audit Committee.  Progress against the actions were reported to Committee for the last time at its April 2025 meeting. | Going forward, the results of assessments against the new global standards will be reported instead. |
| Managers to implement the proposals for improvement from external auditors. | Report tracker in operation and includes all Audit Wales reports, this is managed by the Corporate Performance Team.  Further development of the audit tracker has been undertaken to include all external audits (not just Audit Wales) and aligned with Torfaen Council to have the same system operating within the two Councils.  All reports will be provided to Governance and Audit Committee for assurance and continued performance monitoring via the relevant scrutiny committee. | Moved to business as usual – no further action |