

# Blaenau Gwent Annual Self-Assessment 2023/24

Blaenau Gwent Council looks to operate as a self-improving organisation, whereby there is a recognition of what has gone well, but, and most importantly, it recognises where improvements are to be made. The Council works to respond to the following questions in the work that it undertakes:

- **Is the Council exercising its functions effectively?**
- **Is the Council using its resources economically, efficiently and effectively?**
- **Are the governance arrangements of the Council effective for securing continuous improvement?**

Our Self-Assessment provides an overview of the work that has been undertaken throughout 2023/24 and has been written to consider:

- **How well are we doing? Narrative of the activity that has taken place;**
- **How do we know? Qualitative and quantitative evidence provided; and**
- **What and how can we do better? Actions to implement over the coming years.**

The focus of the Annual Self-Assessment is the Blaenau Gwent Council's Corporate Plan priorities, known as Well-being Objectives, and providing an assessment of how well the Council feels it has achieved against these during 2023/24 and the challenges to progressing these.

The Corporate Plan 2022/27 Well-being Objectives are:

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

These objectives are to be delivered by the Council in the medium to long term and therefore will not be fully implemented within this short timeframe. The Self-Assessment provides an assessment of service delivery throughout 2023/24 that contribute to these objectives. Detailed assessments of service delivery are included throughout the document on pages 20 to 68.

The Self-Assessment is published on an annual basis to provide an account of how the Council has operated over the year including what we have done well and, more importantly, where further progress is required.

Under each Well-being Objective is an annual delivery plan supported by operational business plans. Overall, for 2023/24, the majority of actions, contributing to the Well-being Objectives have been achieved, however, we fully recognise that we still have a number of challenges to address and further work is to be undertaken to fully achieve each of our long term aims.

## **Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent**

This Well-being Objective looks to increase resilience within the community by providing high quality education and skills to support a thriving economy from birth onwards, minimising dependence and maximising independence.

Throughout 2023/24 the Council has achieved in a number of key areas with some areas of weakness, however, the Council feels the achievements outweigh the weaknesses.

The performance of our young people at Key Stage 4 clearly demonstrates the hard work of our pupils and the high quality of teaching and learning across schools. This was also reflected in the Estyn inspections of 6 of our schools during the period, where no school was placed in a statutory category.



The very low numbers of NEETS demonstrates that nearly all of our learners have continued in higher education or training, or have gone on to secure employment after leaving school at the end of year 11.

It is very pleasing to see that Brynmawr Foundation School have continued to go from strength to strength and that they are no longer a school causing concern however, one school remains a school causing concern, the River Centre. The Local Authority will continue to provide enhanced support to the River Centre, in order to support it to be removed from an Estyn category.

There has been an increase in attendance this year, but figures are still not back to pre-pandemic figures, consequently continuing to improve attendance in schools will be a key priority for the Local Authority in the academic year 2024/25. We will be running a campaign #everydaymatters.

Schools have worked hard to put in place support for learners who are at risk of exclusion, fixed-term or permanent, and the youth service have also provided instrumental support. There has been a reduction in exclusions, but they still remain higher than pre-pandemic levels and further reducing exclusions continues to be a priority for the Local Authority.

The area has seen an expansion in the STEM initiative, providing support across a number of schools, raising aspiration and preparing children for their journey into the world of work.

The Council is actively working with the private sector to deliver opportunities to support more and well-paying jobs into the area. Attracting companies and industries into Blaenau Gwent is a key priority for the Council. During the period the Council opened an enterprise hub (Goldworks) and the inward investment by Ciner remains a target project for the area. There has also been an increase in our industrial portfolio income, all of which has contributed to improving Blaenau Gwent's position in the UK Competitive Index.

In 2023/24, construction began on the High Value Engineering (HiVE) Site to create a new multi-million hi-tech post 16 education facility in Ebbw Vale. The facility will provide state-of-the art training and education for young people and businesses in the fields of robotics, advanced materials, manufacturing and digital, and enabling technologies. However, in 2024/25 the company converting the facility went into administration resulting in the contract being terminated impacting the completion date of this, and other projects.

### **Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities**

This Well-being Objective looks to reduce carbon emissions, and provide an environment which supports growth and well-being and connects communities.

Throughout 2023/24 the Council worked to address a number of areas but also has a number of challenges to address moving forward.

Since 2019 the Council have exceeded the Welsh Government target for recycling. This has been an improving picture over these years and this data shows that, when compared to other Councils in Wales, we are performing well. However, next year the target is set to increase to 70% and achieving this will be very difficult. Analysis has been undertaken on the amount of residual (black bag) waste collected and from what areas across the borough to support a targeted campaign across the borough to encourage higher levels of recycling. The Council will need support and buy in from the community and local businesses so that together the higher levels of recycling can be achieved. If the Welsh Government target is not met, financial penalties will be imposed which in turn will impact Council finances.

How the Borough looks, and the state of our environment is a key area of interest to our communities. Fly tipping has seen a decrease this year compared to last year and this can be attributed to our increased enforcement activity. However, we still have over 900 incidents of fly tipping being reported, all of which needs to be cleaned up and disposed of by the Council. This again has a huge impact on the Council budget.



The Council will continue to work with the community to make the environment an enjoyable and clean space by encouraging people to dispose and recycle correctly.

Decarbonisation and working towards low carbon emissions is a key area for the Council. The work around decarbonisation of Council property is an ongoing challenge owing to the current age and state of much of our property and the lack of resources to be able to fully address these areas. Changes in our directly measured carbon emissions shows there has been a 3% fall in these emissions compared to last year and a cumulative 19% fall over the four years since our 2019/20 baseline. The Council has developed a 10 year Decarbonisation Plan and there are a number of initiatives and actions to implement over the coming years to support this crucial agenda.

### **Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient**

This Well-being Objective looks to increase the resilience of communities, where everyone is welcome and safe, and which minimises dependency and maximises independence.

Throughout 2023/24 this has been a key area for the Council and a lot of work has been undertaken to address this objective but there remain significant challenges in the longer term to address the predicted increase in demand for services, resulting from the forecast demographic changes

It is the council's aim to take a preventative approach and develop early intervention strategies to ensure needs of the community are met at the earliest opportunity, by providing the right services to prevent needs from escalating.

There has been an increase in demand and complexity across Social Services. The Information, Advice and Assistance (IAA) teams have seen increased numbers of contacts and referrals. Blaenau Gwent is also experiencing an increase in its ageing population alongside a reduction in the birth rate and the number of people of working age. These changing demographics are providing a difficult situation for the Council to manage potentially increasing need over the coming years. However, for 2023/24 the numbers of vulnerable adults supported by preventative services and not requiring longer term support, has remained relatively stable but it is recognised that there is more to do in this area as we strive to provide increased reablement and preventative solutions to proportionately meet needs of our vulnerable adults.

The Council is undertaking a review of its in house Provider services including residential and supported living provision. This has incorporated recommendations from CIW inspections during 2023/24 with an aim to provide more outcomes focussed and reablement provision that is integrated better into local communities. This work continues into 2024/25 as staffing structures, budgets, costs, and the potential to optimise digital solutions as part of care provision are reviewed.

The area has seen the number of children on the child protection register increase from last year, therefore this will be an area of focus moving forward. Work is to be undertaken during 2024/25 to better manage front door demand, and the outcomes achieved by our preventative services will be assessed.

Compared to last year we have improved on the number of affordable homes delivered, increasing from 4 in 2022/23 to 25 in 2023/24 as well as reducing the number on our social housing register, and significantly improved completions of our disabled facilities grant work. However, the area has seen an increase in the amount of homelessness compared to last year. This is a growing concern for the area as preventing

homelessness continues to be difficult owing to the continued lack of move on accommodation in the private and social housing sectors, combined with clients approaching the Council at crisis point. Bed and breakfast accommodation is having to be used which has increased and exceeds the Council target, this highlights the pressures and the lack of social / private housing available to support families. This will be a key area of work moving into 2024/25 and beyond.



## **An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services at the right time and in the right place**

This Well-being Objective provides a focus for the Council to work in partnership to provide high quality services to meet local need, and improve the quality of life and well-being within the community.

Throughout 2023/24 adequate progress has been made against this Well-being Objective with the achievements outweighing the challenges but noting that some of the actions are behind schedule or falling short.

Finance is a key and ongoing challenge for the Council. Over the years Blaenau Gwent has seen its budget reduce by around £40million, with a further £8.5m million required for 2024/25 and £6m for 2025/26, with potentially an additional £25m savings required to be found over the next 4 years. To meet these challenges, we must think about the way we provide services to reduce costs, and how we can generate income. This may mean us having to reduce, change or stop some services or look at alternative delivery models.

Alongside this there is a risk that school balances will be depleted by March 2025, and that many of our schools will be in a deficit. The Local Authority will work closely with schools to support them to produce deficit reduction plans and to identify financial efficiencies.

The Council will need to work more in partnership with more stakeholders (including our communities) moving forward as it is likely that we will be unable to deliver the amount and scale of current services, and we will need to work with partners for delivery to be undertaken outside of the Council.

As with all organisations, governance is key and ensures that the Council is working within legal requirements and in compliance with its own policies. We have a number of policies, strategies and arrangements in place that ensure we know what we are doing and why, conducting business in an open, transparent, and accountable manner, and upholding the principles of good governance and public service. The external audit reports we have received over the year have included some service based recommendations, but overall, most have recognised that we have made improvements, and we are aware of where changes need to be made.

