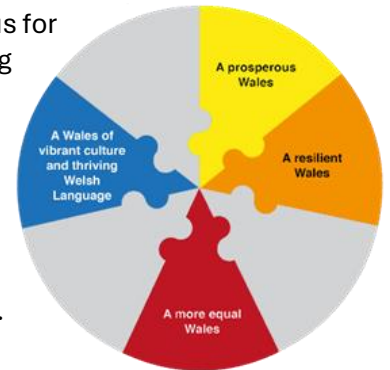


Well-being Objective 4

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

Why This Is Important as an Area of Focus - The Corporate Plan provides the focus for delivering lasting change for the area. It also provides the platform for transforming Blaenau Gwent into a more confident and capable Council. The ambition is to deliver better outcomes for the people of Blaenau Gwent and that ambition is underpinned by solid and sustainable plans, ensuring the Council can be held to account for what it has promised to deliver. Maximising the impact of resources to deliver those outcomes sits at the heart of this priority, including; understanding costs, controlling expenditure, maximising income and aligning resources to the needs of residents, businesses and visitors to build a Blaenau Gwent for the future.



What We Aim to Achieve – Blaenau Gwent Council works in partnership to provide high quality services to meet local need, and improve the quality of life and well-being within the community.

The following narrative provides an evaluative reflection of the activity, undertaken throughout 2023/24, across service areas that directly support this Well-being Objective. The narrative reflects what has gone well but also, and more importantly, where we are experiencing challenges. These challenges have then been collated together at the end of each section. These areas will be identified as areas of focus moving forward and will be reported as part of our next Self-Assessment, as well as performance monitoring throughout the year.

Finance and Resources

The Council's budget is continually monitored to ensure we are using our resources as economically and efficiently as possible, whilst ensuring we can plan for the mid and long term. Robust financial planning and management is in place to help monitor resources effectively, updates are provided on the financial position of the Council to senior officers and through our democratic process.

The Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) serves as the central financial planning tool for the Council, it is a rolling plan that aligns to the priorities in our Corporate Plan and is updated continually to reflect changing circumstances and policy choices impacting the Council's finances. The MTFS projects the Council's expenses and necessary reductions over a five-year period to establish a balanced budget.

[Microsoft Word - Appendix 5 - MTFS Final \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)

The baseline revenue funding the Council received in 2023/24 from Welsh Government, after allowing for transfers, was £139.7m, an increase of 6.5% (£8.5m). The all-Wales average increase in the Local Government Settlement was 7.9%.

Over the 10 years of austerity, the Covid pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis Blaenau Gwent has seen its budget reduce by around £40million, with a further £10 million required next year even after an uplift of around 2.8% in our funding from Welsh Government 2024/25. Also, we are predicting an additional £25m savings are required to be found over the next 4 years. To meet these challenges, we must think about the way we provide services to make savings, and how we can generate income. This may mean us having to reduce, change or stop some services or look at alternative delivery models. In order to consider this a financial meeting model is to be established, following the Torfaen Council model, these sessions will be called, 'Apollo'.



The 2023/24 financial year continued to be challenging for the Council, with emerging cost pressures arising due to high inflation, impacting on the cost of goods and services, increasing fuel prices, and above expected pay awards. Despite this, the Council delivered services to its residents within the approved budget of £184m.

The overall provisional outturn across all Portfolios is a favourable variance of £4.3m, before transfers to and from reserves. The favourable variance decreases (by £1.1m) to £3.2m after the net transfers to specific reserves (£1.4m) and a draw from the General Reserve (£0.31m). As a consequence of the overall position, only £0.82m from Specific Reserves has been required for 2023/2024, compared to budget.

The Council's 'bridging the gap' programme of strategic business reviews continued throughout the year to create efficiencies and financial resilience for the future, aiming to make savings totalling £3m. Whilst some of the projects have exceeded the agreed target, a number of projects did not achieve the target with some of the anticipated financial efficiencies to be generated from 2024/25 onwards.

Within the overall positive financial position for 2023/2024, a number of cost pressures have continued throughout the financial year or emerged during the last quarter. There is a risk that these will continue into 2024/2025. Budget Holders will develop Action Plans to mitigate any cost pressures or identify other expenditure reductions within the portfolio to fund it.

The revenue budget financial statement provisional outturn as at 31st March 2024:

Portfolio/ Committee	2023/2024 Revised Revenue Budget	2023/2024 Provisional Outturn 2023/2024	Favourable/ (Adverse) Variance	Favourable/ (Adverse) Variance (after Net transfers to/from Reserves)
	£m	£m	£m	£m
Corporate Services	18.07	16.10	1.97	1.82
Social Services	54.39	54.04	0.35	0.36
Education & Leisure	73.57	72.82	0.75	0.38
Economy	1.98	1.66	0.32	0.32
Environment	34.57	33.65	0.92	0.75
Planning	1.55	1.20	0.35	0
Licensing	0.15	0.15	0	0
Sub-Total	184.28	179.62	4.66	3.63
FSM Direct Payment – School Holidays	0	0.31	(0.31)	0
Less Contributions to Specific Reserves (not included within Management Accounts)				0.40
Total	184.28	179.93	4.35	3.23

Our work is set within the context of ever increasing financial challenges. We cannot hide from this fact as we continue to manage with depleting resources by finding more effective and efficient ways of working. We must ensure we do everything within our power to be ready to meet this challenge head on. Changing and adapting our operational practices and rethinking our service delivery will be a constant as we face up to the difficult financial situation.



Looking forward we will continue to focus on delivering efficiencies, savings and investing in new technologies, in order to further protect frontline services. But we must also rethink the way we deliver all of our services.

Audit Wales undertook a review of the Council's Financial Sustainability in 2023/24 and found that, *'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'*.

The report included two recommendations for the Council to implement:

- 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.

A response to these recommendations will now be developed for implementation over the coming year. The full Audit Wales report can be found here - [Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council – Financial Sustainability Assessment \(audit.wales\)](#)

Budget Engagement

The Budget for 2024/25, was agreed by Council in early 2024 following widespread engagement events across the Borough. This was to gain the views from members of the public on prioritising council services, setting council tax, and potential saving proposals. Engagement took place using a range of methods including face to face indoor events, a questionnaire and an online engagement session. From the questionnaire there was a total of 680 responses. People told us:

- Schools were a top priority for them with (42%) of our residents identify this as the highest priority;
- the service deemed the least important by respondents when considering a budget setting process would be Running an Efficient Council (41%); and
- Three out of every five respondents generally considered any increase in Council Tax either not very acceptable or not acceptable all (60%).

The feedback from the budget consultation was presented to Council and was taken on board as part of the budget setting process for the year. Engagement with our communities with a wide range of issues including our budget will remain a priority and will be further strengthened by the Council's revised Engagement and Participation Strategy.

Statement of Accounts

The audit of the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts has been concluded with a qualified opinion being issued by the Auditor General for Wales on 31st October 2023. The delay in concluding the 2021/22 Audit together with the action required to resolve issues raised during 2021/22 (specifically relating to the valuation and useful economic life of fixed assets) has resulted in delays to the preparation and audit of the 2022/23 Statement of Accounts. This delay has been further exacerbated by the ongoing resolution of a number of complex accounting issues identified during the audit. No opinion has yet been issued for the 2022/23 accounts, with conclusion of the audit being anticipated in October 2024 (subject to completion of the Accounts and resources of Audit Wales). Consequently the 2023/24 Accounts have been delayed as a result of the issues with previous years' accounts and audits, with completion of the Draft Accounts estimated for November 2024 and conclusion of the audit by Audit Wales will be subject to completion of 2022/23 accounts and available resources.

Workforce



The Council has some difficulties with recruiting into some professional and technical roles. 20% of vacancies advertised were appointed after a second advertisement. There is some reliance on agency workers to cover staff absence and hard to fill specialist roles and projects.

The Council continues to prioritise reducing sickness absence in the workforce to prevent capacity impacts on service delivery. In 2023/24 the average days lost per employee was 11.82 days which was a reduction from 15.5 days the year before but still remains high. There are a series of actions in place to include regular monitoring of performance, target setting at service and Council level and case analysis. An in-depth review of sickness absence and well-being is undertaken on an annual basis, and this is scrutinised by Members.

There have been 2 cases of recorded capability in 2023/24, 10 grievance cases, and 38 investigations in line with the Council's Disciplinary Policies.

The UK gender pay gap was 14.3%, in 2023. The Gender Pay Gap information is presented and published through the Council's Pay Policy Statement. We annually consider the issue of gender pay to help us understand the difference in average earnings between women and men.

The Council is confident that men and women are paid equally for doing equivalent jobs across the business. The gender pay gap shows that the workforce is predominantly female with women occupying a high percentage of jobs across all four pay quartiles. The pay gap in Blaenau Gwent continues to be significantly lower than the national average.

On an annual basis the Council is expected to report on its annual performance with regards to health, safety and welfare at work. The number of employee accidents/incidents has increased from 162 in 2022/23 to 304 in 2023/24 but the number of non-employee accidents has decreased from 325 in 2022/23 to 299 in 2023/24. The number of employee accidents/incidents and diseases reportable to the HSE has increased from 9 in 2022/2023 to 19 in 2023/2024

Corporate Governance

Code of Governance

The Authority has had a Code of Governance in place since 2010. This Code sets out the Governance Framework for the Authority setting out our approach and commitment to achieving and maintaining good corporate governance within the organisation. Good corporate governance ensures that the Council is accountable, transparent, effective, and efficient in delivering services and fulfilling our responsibilities to our citizens and stakeholders.

The Code demonstrates that in most areas we have effective governance arrangements in place which are continually improving, but also recognise that there is further work to do. The code is reviewed on an annual basis to ensure it reflects the current governance arrangements of the Authority. The Code forms the basis against which the Annual Governance Statement is produced and outlines seven core principles which helps to achieve good governance. The latest Code of Governance can be found [here](#).

Annual Governance Statement 2022/23

The AGS is developed using CIPFA/Solace's Delivering Good Governance in Local Government: Framework (2016). Welsh Government anticipates that relevant bodies will prepare an annual governance statement on internal control using the CIPFA/Solace Framework to best represent proper practices in relation to the statement on internal control which requires an annual governance statement to be produced.

As best practice CIPFA recommends that:



- a full draft version of the AGS should accompany the statement of accounts; and
- the AGS should be approved by members meeting as a whole committee at the same time as the statement of accounts is approved under Regulation 10(2) in Wales.

The draft AGS 2022/23 was presented to Governance and Audit Committee in January 2024. At this time there were no amendments to the report. The final AGS is to be presented to Committee alongside the statement of accounts 2022/23, as per CIPFA guidance. However, this has been delayed owing to our 2022/23 accounts not yet being finalised or signed off by Audit Wales.

The statement is collated following an evidence gathering exercise which calls upon a number of sources including:

- Internal and external regulatory reports;
- Annual Report of the Audit and Risk Manager; and
- Senior Manager Assurance Statements.

[Appendix 1.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

Performance Management

The Council's Well-being Objectives, within the Corporate Plan, have been used to shape all service planning throughout the organisation. Business plans are the main performance management tool to help officers across all services to provide evidence either via Performance Indicators or a quarterly narrative of how their work has helped to achieve real outcomes for residents and communities across the county, this also helps staff to understand how the work that they do contributes to the Councils well-being objectives and vision. The Business planning process also helps to identify the risks and opportunities that may impact delivery. Business plans help us to allocate resources effectively, prioritise activities, and communicate the achievements and challenges of each service to the public and stakeholders by helping to form performance reports.

As well as holding performance information in relation to progress made against the Councils Corporate Plan, business plans also allow for officers to update progress against other strategic priorities including the Council's Decarbonisation Plan, Welsh Language Strategy and our responsibilities under the Environment Act. Following the development of the Council's new Strategic Equality Plan performance measures are being developed and will be incorporated into our business plans to ensure that monitoring of the plan is effective.

In 2023/24 a review of Performance Management processes took place and included a review of performance reporting to ensure that they continue to help senior officers to measure progress and impact of the Council's priorities as well as identify areas of improvement. As a result of this review, and through discussions with Torfaen Council, new formats of displaying performance information are in the process of being developed and previous reporting formats have been put on hold. The full outcome of the review and changes to the performance management process will be reported in the next self-assessment report.

Audit Wales undertook a review of how the Council uses the service user perspective to inform senior officers and Members when they are making decisions. Following this review, three recommendations were made, this includes that the Council should strengthen information provided to senior leaders and assure that robust arrangements should be in place to check the quality and accuracy of the service user and outcomes data. The Council's new Engagement and Participation Strategy shows our commitment to working with the community to shape services collectively. Information from the Business Plans will continue to feed various corporate reporting so that senior leaders understand whether services are meeting the needs of the community, and the Council's Data Maturity Assessment process will inform areas such as the arrangements in place for the quality and accuracy of data that we hold, including qualitative and quantitative data.

[Use of performance information: service user perspective and outcomes – Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council \(audit.wales\)](#)

<https://www.data.cymru/data/self-assessment-performance-data>

Risk Management

The Council
recognises that risk











is



inherent in everything it does and that some level of risk-taking is necessary to achieve its ambitions and aspirations for the county. However, the Council also acknowledges that it has a duty to protect the public interest and safeguard the resources entrusted to it by the residents and taxpayers of

Blaenau Gwent. Therefore, the purpose of risk management is to ensure that the Council has a robust and consistent framework for identifying, evaluating, and managing the risks that may affect our strategic and operational objectives, as well as the Council's reputation and public confidence.

A risk register is provided to senior leaders and reported through Governance and Audit Committee to help monitor the key risks facing the Council. It is a document that records risks and importantly contains the actions that are needed to be made to mitigate or manage them. It helps to priorities resources and can help address any emerging risks in a timely manner. As of March 2024, the Council had identified 11 corporate risks 7 of these are classified as High and 4 classified as Critical.

Risk Reference and Description	Risk Score (as at March 2024)	Direction of Travel from Previous Quarter
CRR1: Failure to deliver and sustain the changes required to ensure that vital services are prioritised within the financial constraints faced by the Council.	Critical	
CRR2: 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.	High	
CRR4: Safeguarding - Failure to ensure adequate safeguarding arrangements are in place for vulnerable people in Blaenau Gwent	High	
CRR5: 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.	High	
CRR14: 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.	High	
CRR19: 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.	High	
CRR21: 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	Critical	
CRR22: 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.	High	
CRR25: The school in an Estyn category and currently in receipt of Council Intervention fails to make appropriate progress against the Statutory Warning Notice to Improve and Post Inspection Action Plan.	High	
CRR28: Failure to maintain appropriately skilled, adequate staffing resources will lead to an unacceptable impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively.	Critical	



CRR31: Replacement of Welsh Community Care Information System (WCCIS) (CareDirector v5) by January 2026	Critical	New Risk
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To help mitigate these risks several controls are either in place or being developed, this includes:

- Undertaking a fundamental review of our Performance Management Framework to ensure we are providing Elected Members with a balanced picture of the strength and weaknesses of the Council going forward
- Strengthening performance management to ensure accountability at senior manager level for the delivery of change and efficiency.
- Looking at collaboration opportunities with neighbouring authorities.
- Delivery & further development of the Bridging the Gap Programme.

Although several controls are in place and the financial stability is closely monitored, financial stability is likely to continue to be a corporate risk for the organisation in the near future.

Moving forward, risk management is to be one of the first areas that Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent Council's will look to align. Meetings have taken place with the relevant officers to establish the differences in each approach and to consider which aspects to take forward so that one effective framework can be implemented across both Councils.

[GOVAUDIT2407D5 Corporate Risk Register Report Quarter 4 2023 2024.pdf \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)

Council Property

A corporate property management group has been established to look at the medium to long term position of council buildings. The Council Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMP) is being produced.

As the Council has moved to a more agile model of working, there are less staff using offices on a daily basis and consideration will be given to how best meet the future needs of staff. A review of accommodation, with the potential view to reduce it further, is currently being considered in order to protect jobs and cut costs.

A Specialist Surveyor has been engaged to undertake a Condition Survey of the Councils main office, the General Offices to undertake an appreciation of schedule of maintenance costs for the medium and long term.

Work continues to increase the occupancy rate of the Industrial Portfolio, working closely with the Estates team and Technical Services. The portfolio remains steady at around 95% occupancy. The portfolio continues to house a large number of our SMEs and about 800 jobs in total.

Work is continuing to address the water ingress issues at the Hybrid Units with Kier. This continues to be a challenge alongside managing the relationship with the tenants.

Council Assets

The Council continues to ensure that the buildings and assets we have are reflective of our current working arrangements. In 2023/24 a review was held focusing on the current use of operational buildings and the future requirements the Council will need to deliver services that meets the needs of our residents. This review was also held in conjunction with, and has relevance to, the Workforce Strategy and Review of Agile Working.

A decision was made by Council to close a Council working hub, Anvil Court in Abertillery. This decision was made to support the Council's financial position. The Council currently has agile working hubs across the Borough which provides office and hot desking space for employees. The Landlord has been notified of the Councils intention to bring the lease to an end, reducing



the Councils Assets and moving to more agile ways of working as well as delivering services via a community hub model helps to deliver our services both economically and efficiently.

A Corporate Property and Asset Management Group has been established to discuss accommodation needs, building status and potentials for cost savings. As part of this Community Asset Transfers (CATs) have been

undertaken by the Council. Many (CATs) are on short term leases or tenancies, so the focus on completing longer term leases continues, where this is possible, and addressing any issues which stop the Council entering into longer term arrangements. Progress on the CATs include:

Completed CATs (in the last two years)	Close to Completion	New CATs Being Processed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Millennium Gardens (Terence Gardens) Brynmawr –lease to Growing Spaces November 2021 • Sirhowy Woodland – licence completed June 2021 (common land). • Market Hall Cinema Brynmawr - freehold transfer April 2022 • Rassau Community Centre – handover to new trustees completed at the end of the reporting year so is the most recent entry in this category. • Rassau Resource Centre – lease to Rassau Resource Community Centre CIC completed 1 Sept 2023. • Beaufort Welfare - upper Changing Room & Rugby Pitch. Lease to Beaufort RFC Fields and Facilities Ltd. completed 25 Jul 2023. • Beaufort Welfare – lower Changing Room & Football Pitch. Lease to Glyn Ebbw Fields & Training Facilities Ltd completed 25 Jul 2023. • Roseheyworth Field – changing rooms and pitches. Lease to Tylerian Belles Sports Association Limited completed 19 July 2023. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hilltop Fields Pavilion (shared with Flying Start), changing rooms and pitches – awaiting Fields in Trust consent for completion of lease. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wetland area at Jim Owen Pavilion, Cwmtillery – Solicitors instructed to prepare agreement for Pentref Tyleri CBC (occupy part of Abertillery Excelsiors pavilion/ Garden). • Coedcae Scout Hall – Property surrendered by Scouts. Growing Spaces have withdrawn application and feasibility is underway for potential service & community use. • Windsor Road Field – solicitors instructed to draft lease for Abertillery Bluebirds’ to take on playing field for junior football use. • Six Bells Tennis – solicitors instructed to prepare lease for Six Bells Park Community Tennis Ltd for kiosk and land for new cabin/ changing facility, subject to FIT approval. • Brynithel Recreation Ground - shared pavilion (Flying Start) and pitches. Awaiting clarity over Group’s (St. Illtyds Sport & C.I.C.) ability to proceed.



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cwm Community Allotments – lease to Barefoot Farm CIC completed 5 February 2024 		
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Occupation of CATs needs to be regularised on some sites where groups are in occupation, but formal / revised paperwork need to be concluded. Progress of these CATs include:

Community Asset Transfer	Progress
Bedwellty Park Bowling Green & Pavilion	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
Cwm Welfare – fields and pavilion	Cwm Community Sports CIC are currently on a tenancy at will and negotiations are ongoing regarding a potential CAT. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
Blaina Institute	Blaina Community Institute Limited have been in occupation of the building since 1/6/17. A lease was completed on 19 September 2023.
Metropole Theatre Abertillery	Occupied by Awen Cultural Trust under terms of a Licence from 09/04/2021. Lease negotiations are progressing. A list of works was agreed at the point of transfer and the Council are looking to source funding contributions from the Welsh Governments ‘Transforming Towns’ program. A portion of the building is occupied by Abertillery Museum under a separate Lease agreement.
Llanhilleth Institute	Draft lease issued to Llanhilleth Miners Institute - negotiating
Tredegar Sports Ground pavilion, stand & pitches	Occupied under Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
EV Welfare rugby stand, pitches, terrace	Eugene Cross Park Sports Ltd are occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site – application made to Charity Commission who have confirmed that BGCBC can grant a lease. Solicitor has issued a draft lease.
Cricket Pavilion – EV Welfare	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.
EV Welfare – bowls pavilion & 2 greens	Occupying under terms of Tenancy at Will. Charity site - application will need to be made to Charity Commission for a lease to be granted.

Procurement

The Council’s Commissioning and Procurement strategy has been revised through the year, which sets out four objectives to help achieve the vision of ‘Maximising the Socially Responsible Blaenau Gwent Pound’.

The four objectives of the strategy set out how our commissioning and procurement activities will support the Council’s corporate priorities:

- Objective 1: Ensuring legal compliance and robust and transparent governance.
- Objective 2: Promoting socially responsible procurement activities and processes.
 - 2.1 Increasing community and social value benefits delivered by suppliers.
 - 2.2 Contributing to the Council’s aim to be a Net Zero Council by 2030.
 - 2.3 Improving Fair Work and Safeguarding practices within our supply chain.
- Objective 3: Securing value for money and managing demand through effective and robust contract management arrangements; and
- Objective 4: innovative and

Promoting best



practice solutions.

Key deliverables and performance metrics are being developed to ensure that outcomes from the Commissioning and Procurement strategy can be measured effectively, progress against the strategy will be reported in the next self-assessment.

Early in 2024 Audit Wales conducted an audit focusing on the arrangements the Council has for commissioning services. The main purpose of the audit was for Audit Wales:

- to provide assurance that councils have proper arrangements for commissioning services to secure value for money in the use of resources.
- to provide assurance that councils are acting in accordance with the sustainable development principle in commissioning services.
- explain how councils approach the commissioning of services and inspire and empower councils and other public sector bodies by identifying and sharing examples of notable practice/approaches where relevant.

The findings and recommendations have been presented to Senior officers to action. The progress of recommendations will be reported through democratic process and next self-assessment.

Equalities

We recognise as public service providers that we have a key role to play in making a real difference to people's lives. Therefore, we will continue to strive to meet our vision '*Blaenau Gwent – a place that is fair, open and welcoming to all by working with and for our communities*' as outlined in our Corporate Plan. To help implement this vision the Council has a Strategic Equality Plan in place with equality objectives which show due regard to how the Council can contribute to a fairer society by advancing equality and good relations in our day-to-day activities.

The Strategic Equality Plan 2020-2024 concluded in early 2024, and a new plan for 2024-2028 has been developed. Some of the key achievements of the Strategic Equality Plan 2020 -2024 for 2023/ 2024 includes:

- Specific Staff Training sessions held to cover topics including Neurodiversity, Cultural Awareness and Anti-Racism
- Establishment of Traveller Education Service in a local school
- Increased Awareness of a range of campaigns across the organisation
- Revised Integrated Impact Assessment

The Strategic Equality Plan 2024/28 has been developed following extensive public engagement which involved 160 people with lived experiences from across the identified protected characteristics. Furthermore, 48 individuals participated via an online questionnaire, which encouraged people to share their views and experiences, and talk broadly about equality, diversity, and inclusion, this along with engagement with our staff has helped to developed six objectives in the plan:

- **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.

An Oversight and Group has been



Delivery created

to oversee and track progress towards the new Strategic Equality Plan. The group includes representatives from various service areas within the Council, ensuring a broad and balanced perspective, and enhancing transparency throughout the organisation. The group also provides an opportunity to discuss any challenges in meeting the objectives and serves as a platform to find potential solutions.

To help guide the delivery of the Strategic Equality Plan a Lived Experience Network has also been established. This network is for people who have protected characteristics who want to share their stories, challenges, and achievements with the Council. The network aims to be a platform to raise awareness and influence change.

The progress of the Strategic Equality Plan and updates from the network will be provided by an annual monitoring report.

[2-strategic-equality-plan-2428.pdf \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](#)

[Equalities Dashboard - Data Cymru](#)

Welsh Language

All local authorities across Wales are required to produce a strategy outlining how we, along with support from our partners, intend on promoting the Welsh language, increasing language visibility and opportunities and to engage with the Welsh language and culture. The Council's Welsh Language Promotion Strategy has been developed in line with Welsh Governments target of reaching 1 million Welsh speakers across Wales by 2050. The Welsh Language Promotion Strategy 2022/2027 is in its second year of implementation.

Internal monitoring procedures have been reviewed and updated to include the consideration of the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy within the business planning arrangements for all directorates. Inclusion of the

Promotion Strategy monitoring within the business plans aims to make staff more aware of how their work can and does support our objectives and ensures more accountability against specific actions as we are able to monitor their application within the relevant departments work.

Progress has been made against the objectives in the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy for 2023/ 2024, this includes:

- Promoting positive aspects of our Welsh language and culture inside our organisation, outside with the public, and through our education channels;
- St. Davids celebration day event held to recognise and celebrate Welsh Language achievements; and
- Promotion of the Welsh Language at community events including a local library.

As of March 2024, the total number of staff who have Welsh language speaking skills ranging from 'fluently', 'quite well', 'moderately', 'foundation' to Courtesy/Entry Level, is 605 (20%). This is an increase of 68 members of staff from 2022/23. There have been no complaints received from members of the public in relation to the Welsh Language for the year.

For 2023/24 there was a Welsh Language Commissioner's Office Investigation (WLCO) open. The investigation covered the following:

- Telephone Services;
- Training Provision;
- Recruitment Process; and
- Promotion of Welsh Language Services.

To address these concerns a core officer group was established, and action plan developed. The action plan outlined how the issues would be addressed with timeframes set. The Council submitted the Action Plan to the WLCO on the 31st of January 2023 and received approval in March 2023. All actions have now been completed apart from two:

- Welsh language package to be training made



available to all staff via the Council's new e-learning portal (currently being commissioned); and

- Develop procedure for ensuring Welsh language training is repeated periodically via e-learning portal (including refresher training).

Due to technical issues outside of the Council's control the launch of the new e-learning portal has been delayed, in the interim further Welsh Language training has been uploaded on the Council's intranet. To ensure the Council complies with Welsh Language requirements, the core group of officers continue to regularly meet to track developments, address challenges, and work towards solutions.

The Council has a 10-year Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) to further help in meeting Welsh Government's target of reaching 1 million speakers within Wales by 2050. The progress of the WESP is monitored through the Blaenau Gwent Welsh Education Forum (WEF). The WEF take place every term and have been praised by Welsh Government and colleagues for their strong partnership working. The WEF will continue to meet, and WESP will continue to be implemented to ensure that the Council continues to commit and support the Welsh Government national vision.

Welsh Government's 'More than just words' 2022/27 is a Welsh language plan for health and social care which aims to ensure people can access the care they deserve and require in the preferred language choice. Social Services continue to monitor compliance and continue to ensure that when citizens contact both our Adult and Children Services Departments, that they are offered the opportunity to communicate in the language of their choice. The 'More Than Just Words' action plan has progressed, there is liaison with the local Welsh language champions and promoting the wide resources and opportunities available is now standard. Our commissioned providers work in partnership with us to promote the Welsh Language and this is reflected in our contracts and service level agreements.

Town and Community Councils

Town and Community Councils (TCCs) can help the Council understand the issues that impact the local community. The Council continues to engage with TCC's on a range of issues including the Council budget. There are four TCCs in Blaenau Gwent:

- Tredegar Town Council;
- Nantyglo & Blaina Town Council;
- Abertillery & Llanhilleth Community Council; and
- Brynmawr Town Council.

In 2023/24, the Council and the four TCCs established new liaison arrangements via a Charter of Common Agreement. This Charter promotes best practices and shared principles like openness, respect, honesty, and prioritising citizens. This Charter will be reviewed by all Partners once during each Council term, or more often as appropriate if deemed necessary. The Partners will conduct this review and develop an annual progress report against the commitments within the Charter. Quarterly liaison Committee meetings continued to be held throughout the year helping to improve communication, relationships, and collaboration. In 2023/2024, the Council and all TCCs signed the new Armed Forces Covenant, a pledge of mutual support between local civilian and Armed Forces communities.

A forward work programme has been designed with monitoring and review processes incorporated. This approach will not only improve guidance and engagement with TCCs in the future but also allow partners to ensure that the joint commitments outlined in the charter stay appropriate and relevant over time.

Engagement and Participation

Engagement, participation, and customer experience are vital themes that influence the Council's service design and decision-making processes. The Council is dedicated to long-term community support



and aims to achieve this through active community engagement. Effective engagement is essential for the Council's efficient operation, ensuring that the services provided are suitable and meet the needs of users.

A new Engagement and Participation Strategy setting out the Council's vision for Engagement and Participation has been developed following consultation with the public. 170 responses were received from the community who shared views on the draft objectives in the strategy and how the Council should engage with citizens in the future.

A detailed action plan has been developed to support the implementation of the strategy setting out a range of actions allocated to service areas across the organisation. The progress of the implementation of the strategy will be reported in the next self-assessment report.

- [blaenau gwent Engagement and Participation Strategy - Search \(bing.com\)](#)

Complaints and Compliments

The Council has improved the reporting of complaints and compliments within the organisation by creating a Performance Information interactive dashboard. This tool enables the reader to examine the complaints and compliments submitted to the organisation over the last three years as well as being able to identify the number of complaints per service area received. The process will be further strengthened to help identify themes and learning for improvements to be made in the future, this will be reported in the next self-assessment. During the year there has been 139 cases of feedback recorded across the Council. These 139 cases consisted of:

- 93 complaints; and
- 46 compliments.

90 cases were closed (completed) during the reported period. Of those, almost three quarters (66) were within timescale. 22 were after timescale but within 3 months. Only 2 were after 3 months but within 6 months. None took longer than 6 months.

Information Governance

During the period the Council received a total of 1,044 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. This is up 6.8% from the previous year where 978 requests were received which itself was up 13% from the previous year.

Under legislation, the Council is expected to respond to FOIs within 20 working days. Blaenau Gwent has dipped below this level and seen 88% of FOIs throughout the Council responded to within the allocated 20 days. Of the 12% that have not met the requirement, 8.6% (90 requests) were provided late and 3.4% remain outstanding as of July 2024.

This year the Council received a total of 83 Subject Access Requests (SARs) in comparison to 60 the previous year, and 54 the year before. This represents an unprecedented 38% increase in requests over the year, and a 53% increase over the two years. Since we are not permitted to ask for reasoning or justification as to why SARs are being made, it is very difficult to pinpoint a reason for this increase, however, we are looking into whether there are any trends or specific service users which are impacting this also to see if more can potentially be done to better manage this obligation.

Prior to releasing information to a requestor, to maintain privacy and security, we are required to ensure that each requestor is entitled to receive the information before we can consider it a valid request. To do this we require ID from a requestor to enable it to be considered valid. For a variety of reasons requestors will often not respond to provide the relevant ID so their requests fail to become valid. During the period, 54 of the 83 requests provided ID became valid. This is

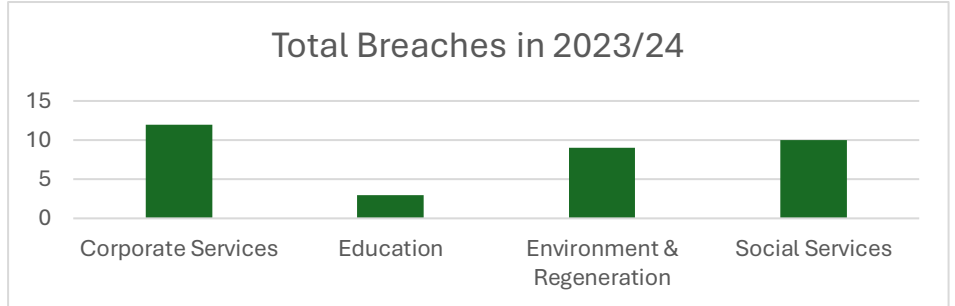
and also an



increase from the previous year where just 29 requests became valid. This is an 86% increase.

A standard SAR is permitted 30 calendar days from the time it becomes valid to provide the information to the requestor. In rare circumstances we are permitted to extend the time permitted from the standard 30 days to 90 days where it can be demonstrated that a request is large or complex. During 2023/24 the deadline was extended on a total of 6 requests out of the 54 valid requests received.

In total, the Council suffered 34 recorded Data Breaches during the period which are split between directorates. This has decreased from 45 Data Breaches last year and is also a slight decrease from the previous year of 37 breaches. The Council has previously created a Data Breach Handling Procedure in line with its GDPR and Data



Protection legislation obligations which it follows for every data breach identified. As part of this procedure for all data breaches that involve special category (sensitive) personal data or a high volume of data, the Council’s Data Breach Panel will convene to consider the necessary actions. Of the 34 Data Breaches suffered during the year it was decided by the Data Breach Panel that none exceeded the threshold to report to the ICO for assessment.

Customer Services Strategy

The Council has reassessed its Customer Services delivery model to adapt to the evolving landscape of recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered how residents access council services. In response, the Council has formulated a Customer Service Strategy that outlines our vision and ambition for enhancing the customer service experience. The strategy outlines three key principles which aims to deliver a positive customer service experience, invest in staff to support customers to resolve queries at first contact where possible and continues to make the best use of technology.

The strategy is supported through customer services standards which helps define and set out what Blaenau Gwent customers can expect from Council services. A customer services charter has also been developed to reflect the commitment the Council has to all residents and visitors who use the services we provide and includes the pupils, parents and carers served by our schools.

Performance measures will be developed to help to monitor and review the impact of the strategy these measurements and progress made against these will be reported in the next self-assessment report.

[Customer Service Strategy | Blaenau Gwent CBC \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/customer-service-strategy)

Digital Transformation Strategy

The way the public access Council services have changed with more services being delivered online; to help meet the needs of the community and help deliver our services more efficiently the Council has developed a Digital Transformation Strategy. The strategy is one of a set of strategic digital/ICT programmes designed to secure the future sustainability across the community and deliver improved outcomes for our customers, businesses and learners.

The Strategy is underpinned by two key principles and three priorities which are essential to improving and delivering our services in the future. The two principles within the strategy focuses on developing a culture that supports digital improvement and a seamless customer experience and improve collaboration to make the best use of knowledge and expertise to create better services.

A high percentage of visit the Community identifying as being

those that Hubs are unable



to self serve. The Council's preferred method of delivering services is via digital means but a high number of Blaenau Gwent people are not digitally able. In order to move to a more digitally operating model, the Council will need to ensure that the residents are able to keep up with this pace. A Digital Inclusion Officer has been appointed and will look to work from the Community Hubs to support those unable to self serve.

Work is ongoing to develop key performance measures to help monitor the impact of the strategy. The outcome of the first-year implementation of the Digital Transformation Strategy will be reported at the next self-assessment report.

[Blaenau Gwent Council Digital Transformation Strategy 2023 – 2027 | Blaenau Gwent CBC \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk)

Data Maturity

Data and insight are critical for the success of an organisation. Becoming a 21st Century Council means using data and insight to constructively and proactively challenge and learn in order to drive improvement and inform decision making. This can be achieved by having an effective Data Strategy in place. In order to develop a Data Strategy, it is important to understand the Council's data maturity. That is, its capability, effectiveness, and readiness to use data to achieve the strategic, operational, and corporate priorities.

Corporate Leadership Team agreed for the Council to progress with undertaking a Data Maturity Assessment in order to pursue the development of a corporate, one council approach to improve us as a data-driven Council, with the intention to develop an appropriate strategy and action plan.

The assessment is currently underway with Wider Corporate Leadership Team undertaking the process first, followed by performance officers from across the Council, and then an opportunity for all officers to take part.

The findings should assist the Council in understanding its data maturity, where it has strengths and also weaknesses in order to inform a delivery plan moving forward.

Elected Members and the Constitution

The Council has set out minimum standards of behaviour and has provided guidelines to help maintain and improve standards. The Council's Constitution is a key document which sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are made, and the procedures followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. It also includes a code of conduct for both officers and members.

The Council has in place comprehensive arrangements for Elected Members. As part of this, there is an extensive Member Development Programme in place, aligned to the forward work programmes of the Committees and Council priorities as well as from the Personal Development Review (PDR) process in place for members. A variety of training materials, guidance and documentation is available to members and this is included within an online member library. Further work has been undertaken over the year to review and enhance several member development policies and processes including:

- Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council Petition Protocol; and
- Multi-Location Meeting Policy.

In 2023, the Council agreed to change its Scrutiny Committee structure, the Council now has four Scrutiny Committees:

- Corporate and Performance Scrutiny Committee;
- Partnership Scrutiny Committee;
- People Scrutiny Committee; and
- Place Scrutiny Committee.



Each Committee conforms to legislative requirements including compliance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009, 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.

Evaluations are undertaken after every scrutiny meeting to review the processes in place and where further improvement can be sought. Learning is also undertaken annually and research from other areas considered. This learning has led to an extensive review and change of the current democratic processes including a reduction in minutes, the live recording of meetings, significantly reduced agendas which only include key items and reducing the size of committees.

The Monitoring Officer and Head of Democratic Services meet regularly with Interim Chief Executive to discuss any political, governance or conduct issues, with a view to addressing issues early on to resolve quickly. The Constitution was updated and approved by Full Council on 21st September 2023.

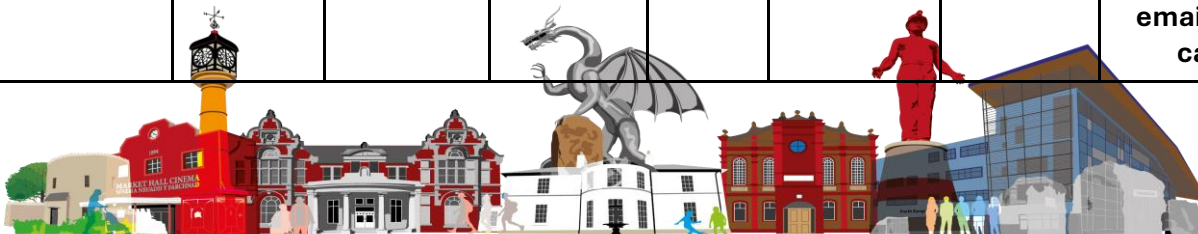
For 2023/24, there was one complaint against a Member which was taken forward for formal investigation by the Ombudsman's Office. Over the year no whistleblowing complaints were received.

Community Hubs

The Council's Community Hub model continues to be strengthened with relevant and targeted support based around the four strands in the Councils Cost -of -living action plan which provides a focus on Housing, Food, Fuel and Benefit/ Grant support. Officers across all community hubs continue to provide advice on a range of issues including budgeting as well as signposting customers to third party organisations for specialised advice. Other support available via the Councils community hubs include advice and guidance on council tax and blue badge applications as well as support to improve residents' digital skills.

The table below provides a breakdown of the number of residents supported through the Community Hubs during the period:

	Abertillery	Blaina	Brynmawr	Cwm	Ebbw Vale	Llanhilleth	Tredegar	Overall
May	120	8	105	16	180	6	158	593
June	105	16	90	20	131	0	112	474
July	99	10	78	24	113	6	111	441
August	90	15	66	15	145	6	124	461
September	106	16	83	22	104	7	94	432
October	120	14	93	16	158	3	112	516
November	130	15	71	21	145	0	98	480
December	122	3	49	21	112	0	151	458 (496 inc 27 calls and 11 emails)
January	234	2	104	11	215	0	253	876 (57 Were emails and calls)
February	102	3	111	32	142	0	146	570 (34 were emails and calls)



March	96	1	93	18	154	0	157	552 (33 were emails and calls)
April	160	13	130	13	225	0	171	751 (39 were emails and calls)
Total	1484	116	1073	229	1824	28	1687	6642

Key Challenges Identified for Action in 2024/25

- Prioritise the financial challenges being faced including budget pressures and service delivery requirements
- Identify budget saving proposals that address the budget shortfall and not rely on the use of reserves
- Work to complete the sign off of the 2022/23 and 2023/24 accounts and report these through Governance and Audit Committee.
- Address workforce recruitment across the Council and reduce the reliance on agency workers
- Further reduce the high levels of sickness absence
- Work with the Gwent Digital Exclusion Network to address the gap in resident's digital capabilities before moving services online
- Improve response rates to all FOIs received
- Improve response rates to all complaints received
- Manage the increase in Subject Access Requests being received
- Reduce the number of data breaches across the Council
- Respond to the Audit Wales Service User Perspective recommendations
- Implement the final actions from the Welsh Language Commissioner's Office Investigation

