

Our Understanding of Blaenau Gwent

The Blaenau Gwent Area

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



The Blaenau Gwent Population

Results of the Census 2021 show that the resident population of Blaenau Gwent is 66,900, which is a decrease of 4.2% from the 2011 Census when the population was 69,800. As of 2021, Blaenau Gwent was the sixth most densely populated of the 22 local authority areas, with 615 people per square kilometre, which equates to around four people living on each football pitch-sized area of land. The population change by age group in Blaenau Gwent shows that there has been an increase of 9.0% in people aged 65 years and over, a decrease of 7.5% of people aged 15 to 64 years, and a decrease of 5.4% of children aged under 15 years. If these figures continue, the population is projected to continue to decrease, including a 9.9% decrease in the number of children, a 6.1% decrease in the number of working age population and a 24.2% increase in the number of people aged 65 and over (Source: Stats Wales).

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

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

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

Blaenau Gwent is made up of five towns: Abertillery; Blaina, Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale; and Tredegar. These towns are split into four valley areas: Lower Ebbw Fach; Upper Ebbw Fach; Ebbw Fawr; and Sirhowy. Further data and information on the Blaenau Gwent Valleys can be found using the following links:

- Lower Ebbw Fach Valley – [Lower Ebbw Fach well-being assessment \(gwentpsb.org\)](https://www.gwentpsb.org)
- Upper Ebbw Fach Valley – [Upper Ebbw Fach well-being assessment \(gwentpsb.org\)](https://www.gwentpsb.org)
- Ebbw Fawr Valley - [Ebbw Fawr well-being assessment \(gwentpsb.org\)](https://www.gwentpsb.org)
- Sirhowy Valley - [Sirhowy well-being assessment \(gwentpsb.org\)](https://www.gwentpsb.org)

Blaenau Gwent Council

The Council continues to be the largest employer within the borough, employing 1,731 people excluding school based staff or 3,030 when including school based staff. 73% of the Council's workforce are in permanent roles which provides a stability within the establishment, this is a reduction from last year when those in permanent



roles were at almost 80%. 12% of staff are in fixed term positions and 10% are relief positions. The majority of relief positions are in Catering & Cleaning and Social Services, which is consistent with what you would expect from the nature of the workforce in these areas. Vacancies remain consistent, with over 90% of roles filled in each directorate, other than Education where there is a 21% vacancy rate. Over half of the workforce remains 'service based' with the remaining staff split between home workers at 7%, and agile workers at 36%. More than half the workforce has more than 10 years' service.

The Council has a low level of diversity amongst the workforce, 67% (of those who have provided the information) have indicated that they identify as British, Welsh, English, Scottish, Northern Irish. (This is reflective of the community). Promoting diversity in the workforce will continue to be a key priority as part of the Council's Workforce Strategy. The Council has an ageing workforce where 55% of the workforce is over the age of 46, with 10% of the workforce aged 29 and under.

Political Structure

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council was established following local government reorganisation on 1st April 1996. In 2021, the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales reformed the ward boundaries of Blaenau Gwent. The changes meant that the number of Blaenau Gwent councillors reduced by 9, taking the council from 42 to 33 members. This equates to an average of 1,545 electors per councillor. The number of wards also reduced from 16 to 14, with each ward electing more than 1 councillor. 9 wards have 2 councillors, while 5 wards have 3 councillors, and 5 wards saw no change under the reform. These changes came into being from May 2022, as part of the local government election. Following the election there was a change to the political make up of Blaenau Gwent Council, moving from being Independent to Labour. The political make-up of the Council is currently:

- Labour 21;
- Independent 10;
- Minority Independent (Cwm Ward) 1; and
- Minority Independent (Ebbw Vale South) 1.

Democratic Process

Council committees are an essential part of the democratic process within the Authority. They enable elected members to exercise their decision-making powers, scrutinise the performance and policies of the Council, and represent the views and interests of their constituents. Council committees also provide a forum for public participation and engagement, where citizens and stakeholders can voice their opinions, concerns, and suggestions on matters impacting them and their communities.

Council committees aim to conduct their business in an open, transparent, and accountable manner, and to uphold the principles of good governance and public service.

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

The 33 Blaenau Gwent elected members are collectively the decision making body for the Authority. This is complemented by an officer structure of trained and experienced people. Most policy decisions are developed by the Cabinet, which comprises the Leader of the Council and four Cabinet Members with individual portfolio responsibilities:





Cllr Steve Thomas
Leader of the Council
Cabinet Member
Corporate and Performance



Cllr Helen Cunningham
Deputy Leader of the Council
Cabinet Member
Place and Environment



Cllr John C Morgan
Cabinet Member
Place and Regeneration



Cllr Sue Edmunds
Cabinet Member
People and Education

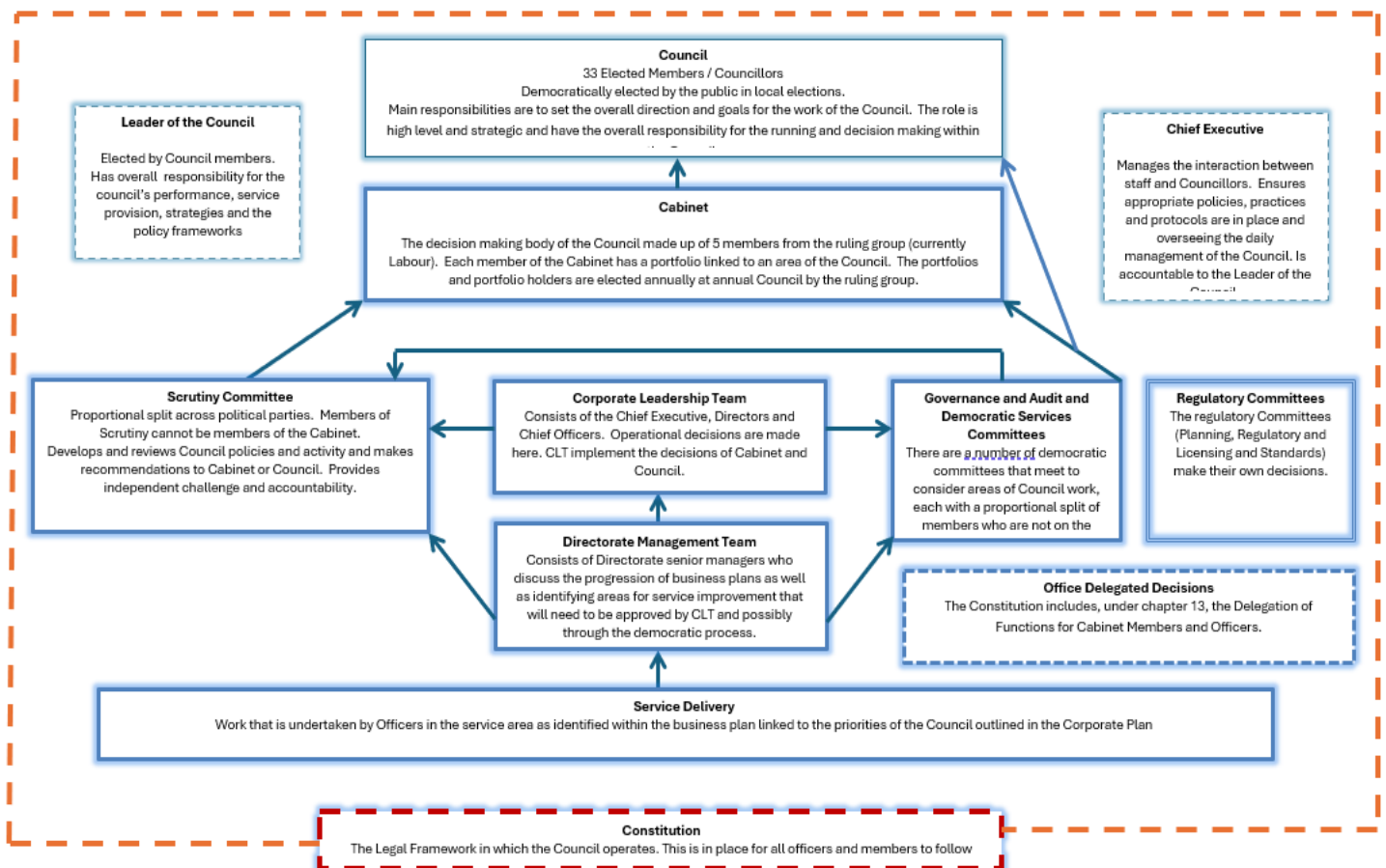


Cllr Hadyn Trollope
Cabinet Member
People and Social Services

In addition to the Cabinet, the Authority's Committee structure also comprises three decision making Committees: 1 x Planning and 2 x Licensing; four Scrutiny Committees; a Standards Committee; a Democratic Services Committee; and a Governance and Audit Committee.

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

Committee Meetings and papers can be found here: blaenau-gwentintranet.moderngov.co.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?Categories=



Corporate Joint Committees

Blaenau Gwent Council is one of ten local authorities across South East Wales who are part of the Cardiff Capital Region. The Cardiff Capital Region is one of four Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) across Wales that were established under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 to help regional collaboration

between authorities leading to a more streamlined way of working. The CJCs were given several functions which included developing transport policies, preparing a strategic development plan and to consider what is



likely to improve the economic wellbeing of its area.

In November 2023 Audit Wales produced a report providing a commentary of progress made on the establishment of regional Corporate Joint Committees , provided in the summary were five recommendations, full report can be found [here](#) . Blaenau Gwent Council as part of the CJC will work towards the recommendations made in report with progress reported through Regional Cabinet meetings.

Gwent Public Service Board (GPSB) Joint Scrutiny Committee

Blaenau Gwent Council has been appointed as the host authority to undertake the administrative arrangements and provide dedicated support and advisers for the GPSB Joint Scrutiny Committee. The aim of the Committee is to scrutinise the effectiveness of the GPSB by reviewing the decisions made, or actions taken by the Board; scrutinising the Board’s governance arrangements; and to make recommendations based on this to the Board. The Committee has met four times since it was established in March 2023, and have undertaken work such as reviewing Gwent’s first Well-being Plan and providing feedback on the Gwent PSBs performance management framework. The Committee will continue to support the Gwent PSB as well as the work of the Blaenau Gwent Local Delivery Group.

Corporate Leadership Team

The Council has a structure in place to support the delivery of services and decision making via its Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). CLT has operated with interim arrangements for over a year including an interim Chief Executive, Corporate Director of Social Services and Corporate Director of Education. These arrangements will look to be made permanent during 2024/25 when arrangements will also be put in place for the operation of a Joint Chief Executive with Torfaen Council. Since April 2024, the Council has also created a new post of Director of Corporate Services, appointed to in September 2024 and secured permanency of the Corporate Director of Education position. The Council also has in place a Wider Corporate Leadership Team (WCLT) who support CLT in its role of providing strategic direction to the organisation. It is a forum to disseminate information and to communicate messages, ensuring a ‘one council’ approach.

Internal and External Audit

The Council is subject to numerous internal and external audits and regulatory reviews each year. These are undertaken to ensure the Council provides value for money, services are being run efficiently and effectively, and that improved services are being delivered. The Council is monitored by a number of external regulatory bodies, the main of which are: Audit Wales; Care Inspectorate Wales; and Estyn.

Audit Wales

Engagement arrangements with Audit Wales are in place with meetings held with the Head of Governance and Partnerships, with the Section 151 Officer and also the Chief Executive. Quarterly meetings are also undertaken with the Leadership.

Audit Wales Reporting during 2023/24 include:

Local Reports	National Audit Wales Reports	Audit Wales Reports still in Progress (with the outcome of each expected in 2023/24)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examination of the Setting of Well-being Objectives • Review of Planning Service • Digital Strategy Review • Use of Performance Information – Service User Perspective and Outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unscheduled Care Project • Brown Field Sites • False Fire Alarms • Corporate Joint Committees – commentary on their progress • National Park Authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unscheduled Care Project • Commissioning • Financial Sustainability • Safeguarding Review Follow Up • National Study Temporary Accommodation

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



Estyn

The Authority's Education Services have regular Local Authority Link Inspector (LALI) meetings convened with Estyn in line with inspectorate requirements. The Education Directorate reports progress against the Local Government Education Services (LGES) framework to Scrutiny and Cabinet. The Authority has update meetings between the Corporate Director Education, Members, and the Welsh Government officials as and when required and the Education Achievement Service (EAS) also provides updates on the school improvement agenda to the Cabinet and Scrutiny Committee.

Care Inspectorate Wales

The Social Services Directorate is subject to audit, inspection and review by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). On a quarterly basis, the Corporate Director of Social Services and Heads of Adult and Children's Services meet with CIW to discuss achievements, performance and key challenges.

During the year, Blaenau Gwent received the following from CIW:

- Assurance Check Letter – Adult Community Team in Blaenau Gwent with a focus on adults with a learning disability.
- National review of:
 - The use of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) in Wales 2022-23 – received February 2024;
 - Rapid Review of Child Protection Arrangements;
 - Care Homes for Care Homes Operating Without Registration; and
 - The Public Law Outline in Wales.

Internal Audit

An annual report, outlining areas that have undergone an assessment via Internal Audit, is provided to the Council's Governance and Audit Committee and also included in the Audit and Risk Manager's objective review of the Authority's system of internal control.

Internal Audit issued 33 final audit reports during the year:

Audit Grading	No of audits
Full Assurance	10
Reasonable Assurance	14
Limited Assurance	8
No Assurance	1

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.

Peer Panel Assessment (PPA) 2024

In November 2024, Blaenau Gwent Council will hold their first Peer Panel Assessment as part of the requirements under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. The Act's regard for effective self-assessment is fundamental to enabling the Council to understand how we are performing and where we could do better, and this is very much aligned to our beliefs which have underpinned the development of our new systems and processes.

Peer Review Focus

Blaenau Gwent is going into an innovative collaborative working agreement with Torfaen Council, with the first Joint CEX post in Wales. As part of the initial nine month discovery phase, we have commissioned the Peer Assessment Panel to help us inform future options and provide an honest, transparent and impartial assessment of the current corporate health of the organisation. This will help inform and provide valuable insight at a critical juncture in the discovery phase, is also a signal of our commitment to improvement and hopefully the outcome of the assessment will be complementary to the work being delivered. It will also help



Blaenau Gwent put itself in the best position to tackle the challenges ahead for local government in terms of financial sustainability, capacity and capability, to help transform and improve service delivery and outcomes for our residents, and the ability to help inform and influence future structure of local government in Wales.

At the end of the discovery phase, will the Council continue with the joint arrangements and, if so, what should the areas of focus be?

We are looking for the Peer Assessment to consider:

- Delivery – how is the Council demonstrating that it is using its capacity and capability in an economical, efficient and effective way to deliver core and challenging policy commitments
- Transformation/Change – how is the Council enabling and supporting cultural and organisational change through the performance and governance framework that is in place
- Governance – are the governance arrangements effective and transparent of internal arrangements and plans and their robustness and ability to support change and delivery
- Leadership – what is the effectiveness of the relationship between the political leadership and senior officers in the organisation to challenge itself to continuously improve how it delivers better outcomes for residents
- A specific focus on the culture of the organisation and the decision making framework. Are our politicians able to make informed strategic decisions that support the long term sustainability of the Council.
- To test out and challenge workforce capability to develop a progressive and positive organisational design and associated culture - supported by the workforce policies and strategies in place.

PPA Engagement and Participation

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 outlines that a panel must consult the following about the extent to which the council is meeting its performance requirements:

- local people;
- other persons carrying on a business in the council's area;
- the staff of the council, and;
- every trade union which is recognised (within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 (c. 52)) by the council.

A full Engagement Plan has been prepared for the PPA. This includes:

- **National Resident Survey for Blaenau Gwent** – The Council will facilitate the Living in Blaenau Gwent process from Monday 23rd September 2024 for six weeks to Sunday 3rd November (national standard timeframe). This will allow for indicative results from the survey to be available to the PPA following Data Cymru Data Validation Exercises.
- **Citizen/Service User Focus Groups** - To gauge service user perspective, the Council will hold 3 focus groups to cover service users/citizens and those actively involved in participative processes operated by the Council.
 - **Focus Group 1:** Aimed at engaged service users actively participating in existing mechanisms, to bring a blend of people from different networks and communities of Blaenau Gwent.
 - **Focus Group 2:** Building on the Council's strategy for moving to digital approaches this focus group will involve a blend of service users that mainly interacting with the Council via digital channels.
 - **Focus Group 3:** Aimed at children and young people (CYP), facilitated through the Blaenau Gwent Youth Forum to consider thematic priorities for the Council from the Corporate Plan. Consideration will also be given to representation of CYP from other relevant forums e.g. School Grand Council's and Youth Service Provision.
- **Local Businesses** - Aimed at engaging with a cross section of businesses and local companies operating in the area, with potential representatives from established mechanisms
- **Partnerships** – Engaging with Aneurin Leisure Trust, AWEN, Citizens Advice Bureau, SRS and representatives from the Local Delivery Partnership.
- **Council Staff** – to understand the views of Council staff.



- **Focus Group 1:** General focus group with a cross section of staff from the organisation covering broad categories such as Gender, Grade and Directorate, with a focus on also having representatives that are involved in key programmes such as Equality Lived Experience Network, and the Digital Champions.
- **Focus Group 2:** Front-line service provider staff.
- **Trade Unions** – At least one representative from each Council recognised Trade Union which will include Unison, Unite, GMB, and unions for those for teaching staff e.g. NAHT, NEU and NASUWT.

As outlined throughout this Self-Assessment, the Council actively engages and participates with staff and the local community in order to shape service delivery and understand need. This work will continue into 2024/25 and will be further enhanced by the agreement and implementation of the Council's Engagement and Participation Strategy. All of the activity outlined above will also be utilised moving forward for service delivery and will also inform our next Self-Assessment.

