

## Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

### Annual audit summary 2020

This is our audit summary for Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council. It shows the work completed since the last Annual Improvement Report, which was issued in June 2019. Our audit summary forms part of the Auditor General for Wales' duties.



More information about these duties can be found on our [website](#).

## About the Council

### Some of the services the Council provides



#### Key facts

The Council is made up of 42 councillors who represent the following political parties:

- Independent 24
- Labour 13
- Minority Independent 4
- Save Us Now 1

The Council spent £148.1 million on providing services during 2019-20, the third lowest spend of the 22 unitary councils in Wales.

As at 31 March 2020 the Council had £14.7 million of usable financial reserves. This is equivalent to 9% of the Council's annual spend on services, joint fourth lowest percentage of the 22 unitary councils in Wales.

## Key facts

Blaenau Gwent County Borough has 6 (13%) of its 47 areas deemed the most deprived 10% of areas in Wales, this is the 6th highest of the 22 unitary councils in Wales.<sup>1</sup>

Blaenau Gwent's population is projected to decrease by 0.7% between 2020 and 2040 from 69,615 to 69,157, 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.<sup>2</sup>

## The Auditor General's duties

### We complete work each year to meet the following duties

- **Audit of Accounts**

Each year the Auditor General audits the Council's financial statements to make sure that public money is being properly accounted for.

- **Value for money**

The Council has to put in place arrangements to get value for money for the resources it uses, and the Auditor General has to be satisfied that it has done this.

- **Continuous improvement**

The Council also has to put in place arrangements to make continuous improvements, including related plans and reports, and the Auditor General has to assess whether the Council is likely to (or has) met these requirements.

- **Sustainable development principle**

Public bodies need to comply with the sustainable development principle when setting and taking steps to meet their well-being objectives. The Auditor General must assess the extent to which they are doing this.

<sup>1</sup> An area in this context is defined as a 'Lower Super Output Area'. Source: Stats Wales

<sup>2</sup> Source: Stats Wales



Since the Spring of 2020, the ongoing pandemic has affected our audit work. We recognise the huge strain on public services and have reshaped our work programme, and found new ways of working to reduce its impact on public bodies' response to COVID-19, while still meeting our statutory duties.



**To meet the Auditor General's duties we complete specific projects, but we also rely on other audit work, and the work of regulators such as Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn (the education inspectorate). We take the findings of our audit work into account when assessing whether the council has put in place arrangements to secure value for money. Our findings and conclusions are summarised below.**

## What we found

### Audit of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council's 2019-20 Accounts

Each year we audit the Council's financial statements.

#### For 2019-20:

- The Auditor General gave an unqualified true and fair opinion on the Council's financial statements on 3 March 2021.
- Whilst our audit opinion was unqualified, we have included an Emphasis of Matter paragraph (as with all councils in Wales) as per ISA706 within our Auditor's Report. This is in relation to material valuation uncertainties regarding the Council's property assets and also Pension Fund property assets, as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Council's Annual Governance Statement and Narrative Report were prepared in line with the CIPFA Code and relevant guidance. They were consistent with the financial statements prepared by the Council and with our knowledge of the Council.
- The Council provided draft financial statements on 10 September 2020, however these were incomplete and contained several significant errors. A second improved set of draft accounts was produced for audit on 23 September 2020.
- A number of changes were made to the Council's financial statements arising from our audit work, which were reported to the Audit Committee in our Audit of Financial Statements Report in March 2021.
- The Auditor General has not yet issued the certificate confirming that the audit of accounts for 2019-20 has been completed due to our ongoing work in relation to concerns raised in correspondence in respect of Silent Valley Waste Services Ltd.

- In addition to the Auditor General's responsibilities for auditing the Council's financial statements, he also has responsibility for the certification of a number of grant claims and returns. Our work to date has not identified any significant issues.
- Key facts and figures from the 2019-20 financial statements can be accessed [here](#).

## **Well-being of Future Generations Examination – An examination of 'Improving access to, and the quality of open spaces for the benefit of our communities, businesses and visitors' (October 2019)**

The examination that we undertook in 2019-20 considered the extent to which the Council has acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when taking steps to improve access to, and the quality of open spaces for the benefit of our communities, businesses and visitors. We concluded that the Council is acting in accordance with the sustainable development principle: it collaborates well with others, but lacks a clear long-term, joined-up plan. The report can be viewed [here](#).

## **Continuous Improvement**

The Auditor General certified that the Council has met its legal duties for improvement planning and reporting and believes that it is likely to meet the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 during 2020-21.

## **Financial Sustainability (March 2020)**

During 2019-20 we examined the financial sustainability of each Council in Wales. In Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, we concluded that despite a history of service overspending, the Council has recently taken steps to increase its level of useable reserves and is developing a more sustainable financial strategy. The report can be viewed [here](#).

## **National Fraud Initiative**

In October 2020, the Auditor General published his report on the findings of the latest National Fraud Initiative (NFI) data-matching exercise in Wales. The exercise helped public bodies in Wales, including the 22 unitary authorities, identify fraud and overpayments amounting to £8 million. The report can be accessed on our website [here](#). NFI continues to be developed and in the forthcoming NFI exercise (NFI 2020-22), local authorities will have access to matches designed to help identify potential fraudulent applications for COVID-19 business support grants.

## **Environmental Health Follow-up Review (November 2019)**

We examined whether the Council's environmental health service was continuing to deliver its statutory obligations with fewer resources. We concluded that the Council has made progress in addressing the recommendations raised in 2014. Collaborative working with Torfaen CBC to date has contributed to the Council's ability to deliver with less. Following the withdrawal from the arrangement in November 2019 the Council will face additional financial and operational

pressures that may affect its ability to continue providing environmental health services to the same standard. The report can be viewed [here](#).

## **Follow-up review of Corporate Arrangements for the Safeguarding of Children (October 2019)**

Our review sought to answer the question: Can the Council provide assurance that it has addressed the recommendations and proposals for improvement contained in the Auditor General's national and local reports published in 2014-15? We concluded that the Council has made limited progress in addressing our previous recommendations and proposals for improvement and safeguarding arrangements are not consistent enough to provide assurance across all service areas. The report can be viewed [here](#).

## **Supporting Financial Resilience Follow-up Review (August 2020)**

Our review sought to answer the question: Can the Council provide assurance that it has addressed the proposals for improvement detailed in the 2018 Supporting Financial Resilience review output? We concluded that the Council has responded positively to the findings of our report: it is making progress against the proposals for improvement and has future work planned to fully address them. The report can be viewed [here](#).

## **Other Inspectorates**

We also took into account the reports of Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and Estyn as well as any subsequent actions taken by the Council in response. CIW published its Local Authority Performance Review in August 2020; it is available [here](#). Estyn did not undertake an inspection of Local Government Education Services in Blaenau Gwent during 2019-20.

## **Local Government Studies**

As well as local work at each council, each year we also carry out studies across the local government sector to make recommendations for improving value for money. Since the last annual improvement report we have published the following reports:

### **The ‘Front Door’ to Social Care (September 2019)**

We considered the effectiveness of the new ‘front door’ to social care, looking specifically at services for adults. We found that whilst councils are preventing social-care demand, information, advice and assistance are not consistently effective. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

### **Review of Public Services Boards (October 2019)**

We inspected how Public Service Boards are operating; looking at their membership, terms of reference, frequency and focus of meetings, alignment with other partnerships, resources and scrutiny arrangements. We concluded that Public Services Boards are unlikely to realise their potential unless they are given freedom to work more flexibly and think and act differently. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

### **Progress in implementing the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Act (November 2019)**

We examined how the new duties and responsibilities of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act are being rolled out and delivered. We found that victims and survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence are often let down by an inconsistent, complex and fragmented system. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

### **Rough Sleeping in Wales – Everyone’s Problem; No One’s Responsibility (July 2020)**

We looked at how well public services are responding to the issue of rough sleeping. Overall, we found that responding to COVID-19 is an opportunity for public bodies to start addressing long standing weaknesses in partnership working which has stopped them from tackling rough sleeping in the past. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

## Better Law Making (September 2020)

This report draws on five reports published between 2019 and today looking at how local authorities are responding to the challenge of implementing new legislation. Implementation is a complex task which needs to be fully thought through by the Welsh Government and the Senedd whenever they bring forward and make any new legislation. The paper highlights the difficulties faced by local authorities and their public sector partners in implementing their new responsibilities. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

## Commercialisation in Local Government (October 2020)

Councils have conducted commercial activity for a long time, and many councils are exploring additional commercial opportunities to mitigate against the financial pressures they face. Our report is specifically targeted at helping elected members and senior officers to examine and judge the potential impact on their organisations when considering whether to undertake commercialisation. It will also help councils to demonstrate how well they are discharging their value for money responsibilities. The full report can be viewed [here](#).

## Planned work for 2020-21

We also looked at the key challenges and opportunities facing the Council. These risks could have an effect on the council's ability to meet its legal obligations in relation to the sustainable development principle, the use of its resources and continuous improvement.

The most significant risk and issue facing councils and the wider public sector during 2020-21 is the COVID-19 pandemic. We have shaped our work to provide assurance and challenge in a way which helps to support the Council through this period. Our work for 2020-21 includes:

- **Recovery planning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic;**
- **Covid-learning project – helping to identify and share learning from the way in which public bodies have responded to the pandemic;**
- **Assurance and risk assessment;**
- **A review of the Council's financial sustainability;**
- **A review of People, Performance and Financial Resilience in Community Services; and**
- **A review of data-driven decision-making.**

The Auditor General is independent of government, and is appointed by Her Majesty the Queen. The Auditor General undertakes his work using staff and other resources provided by the Wales Audit Office, which is a statutory board established for that purpose and to monitor and advise the Auditor General. The Wales Audit Office is held to account by the Senedd.

The Auditor General audits local government bodies in Wales, including unitary authorities, police, probation, fire and rescue authorities, national parks and community councils. He also conducts local government value for money studies and assesses compliance with the requirements of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009.

Beyond local government, the Auditor General is the external auditor of the Welsh Government and its sponsored and related public bodies, the Senedd Commission and National Health Service bodies in Wales.

Audit Wales is the non-statutory collective name for the Auditor General for Wales and the Wales Audit Office, which are separate legal entities with their own legal functions, as described above. Audit Wales is not a legal entity.

We welcome correspondence and telephone calls in Welsh and English. Corresponding in Welsh will not lead to delay. Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth a galwadau ffôn yn Gymraeg a Saesneg. Ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

This document is also available in Welsh.