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Auditor General for Wales

# Well-being of Future Generations: An examination of 'Improving access to, and the quality of open spaces for the benefit of our communities, businesses and visitors' – **Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council**

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This document is also available in Welsh.

The team who delivered the work comprised Dave Wilson, Charlotte Owen and Allison Rees, programme managed by Non Jenkins under the direction of Huw Rees.

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# Summary report

## Summary

### Why we undertook the Examination

- 1 In accordance with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (the Act) the Auditor General for Wales (the Auditor General) is statutorily required to examine public bodies to assess the extent to which they have acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when:
  - a setting their wellbeing objectives; and
  - b taking steps to meet them.
- 2 The Act defines the sustainable development principle as acting in a manner: ‘...which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.
- 3 The Auditor General must provide a report on his examinations to the National Assembly for Wales at least a year before each Assembly election. The first such report must be published in 2020, before the 2021 Assembly election.
- 4 The Auditor General has undertaken examinations across the 44 bodies covered by the Act to inform his report to the National Assembly during 2018-19 and 2019-20.
- 5 The findings in this report are based on fieldwork that we undertook during the period July to September 2019.
- 6 This report sets out our findings from our examination of ‘improving access to, and the quality of open spaces for the benefit of our communities, businesses and visitors’, a step the Council is taking to meet its wellbeing objectives.
- 7 It also sets out the Council’s initial response to our findings.

### What we examined

- 8 We examined the extent to which the Council is acting in accordance with the sustainable development principle in improving access to, and the quality of open spaces for the benefit of our communities, businesses and visitors.
- 9 In order to act in accordance with the sustainable development principle public bodies must take account of the following ‘ways of working’:

## Exhibit 1: The 'five ways of working'

The table below sets out the 'five ways of working' as defined in the Welsh Government's 'Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 The Essentials'<sup>1</sup> document.

<b>The Five Ways of Working</b>
<b>Long term</b> The importance of balancing short-term needs with the need to safeguard the ability to also meet long-term needs.
<b>Prevention</b> How acting to prevent problems occurring or getting worse may help public bodies meet their objectives.
<b>Integration</b> Considering how the public body's wellbeing objectives may impact upon each of the wellbeing goals, on their other objectives, or on the objectives of other public bodies.
<b>Collaboration</b> Acting in collaboration with any other person (or different parts of the body itself) that could help the body to meet its wellbeing objectives.
<b>Involvement</b> The importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the wellbeing goals, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the area which the body serves.

- 10 Our examination found 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.

<sup>1</sup> Welsh Government, **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 The Essentials**, 2015.

# Detailed report

## Part One: Examination Findings

Although some projects have been designed to deliver longer-term outcomes, the Council has yet to plan delivery of this step over the long term

### What we looked for

- 11 We looked for evidence that the Council:
- has a thorough understanding of current and long-term needs and the associated challenges and opportunities;
  - is planning over an appropriate timescale;
  - has resources allocated to ensure long-term benefits; and
  - has appropriate monitoring and review.
- 12 Our examination was also informed by the positive indicators for the 'long term' that we have identified and used as part of this examination.<sup>2</sup>

### What we found

- 13 We identified the following strengths:
- the Council's Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) contributes to meeting the wellbeing objective of Strong and environmentally Smart Communities.
  - the Council proactively seeks external funding to help resource delivery of this step. It recently secured Enabling Natural Resources and Wellbeing in Wales (ENRaW) funding for the Resilient Greater Gwent Project, which will tackle biodiversity decline and help increase ecosystem resilience across Gwent.
  - the ENRaW grant provides short/medium-term funding but is designed to enhance biodiversity in the long term.
- 14 We identified the following areas for improvement:
- the Council does not have a long-term strategy for improving access and quality of open spaces, supported by outcomes.
  - the Council's Corporate Plan 2019-20 (or its well-being statement for 2018-19) does not include evidence to support why this step is important.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1

- while the Corporate Plan 2019-20 contains three potential measures of performance to assess progress in delivering this step, there is no baseline data or information, nor projected targets/ambitions included in the corporate plan against which progress can be measured; and
- the Council considers delivering this step as potentially vulnerable as most of the funding available to support the step is from external grants. Without external grants, officers say they would only have the resources to focus on the basics of land and footpath maintenance.

## The Council has designed this step to prevent ecosystem decline and promote the wellbeing of local people, but more data is needed to measure and monitor progress

### What we looked for

- 15 We looked for evidence that the Council:
- has a thorough understanding of the nature and type of problem the step could help prevent from occurring or getting worse;
  - has resources allocated to ensure preventative benefits will be delivered; and
  - is monitoring and reviewing how effectively the step is preventing problems from occurring or getting worse.
- 16 Our examination was also informed by the positive indicators for 'prevention' that we have identified and used as part of this examination.<sup>3</sup>

### What we found

- 17 We identified the following strengths:
- the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) will support delivery of this step by helping to maintain and improve the physical and mental health and wellbeing of people who live and work in the borough and offer opportunities for community engagement and volunteering.
  - the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) also seeks to prevent serious or irreversible damage to ecosystems.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1

- Blaenau Gwent’s wellbeing assessment has drawn on research by Mind (2013)<sup>4</sup> on the significant positive associations between mental and physical wellbeing and increased trees and access to greenspace in urban areas.
- the future population of Blaenau Gwent is predicted to decline. Officers say that improving access, quality and better promotion of open spaces can help reverse the predicted population decline by creating a great place to live to retain people living in the Borough and attract new businesses, thereby creating new employment opportunities in the Borough.
- the Council wants to eliminate and prevent social exclusion, isolation, and loneliness, by ensuring social events such as litter picks in open spaces get more residents involved and generate a sense of pride in their communities and prevent anti-social behaviour.

18 We identified the following areas for improvement:

- the Council needs to better understand the current physical and mental health of its residents and levels of social isolation to ensure delivery of this step is making a positive difference to people’s lives.
- the Council would like to engage more with GPs and other health practitioners to prescribe ‘access to open spaces’ to patients to help improve their mental health. For over ten years, GPs have been able to prescribe physical activity through the National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS) and the Council would like to widen this offer to improve mental health.
- the Council is aware that anti-social behaviour within the open spaces is a possible deterrent for local communities to visit and enjoy open spaces. Prior to the WFG Act, in 2015, Torfaen County Borough Council developed a South East Wales Uplands Landscape Crime Toolkit within an area encompassed by Torfaen, Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent Councils. The toolkit contains approximately 40 actions to address arson, fly-tipping and illegal off-road driving. The Council has yet to assess the impact of this toolkit in preventing anti-social behaviour in the Borough’s upland areas.

<sup>4</sup> Feel better outside, feel better inside: Ecotherapy for mental wellbeing, resilience and recovery. Available from: <http://www.mind.org.uk/media/336359/Feel-better-outside-feel-better-insidereport.pdf>.

The step has been designed to deliver multiple benefits, and there is positive integrated working between key partner organisations across Gwent, however, this is not yet fully reflected within plans, and within the Council this step remains in the ‘ownership’ of the Regeneration and Community Services

#### What we looked for

- 19 We looked for evidence that the Council understands:
- how this step could contribute to the seven national wellbeing goals;
  - how delivery of this step will impact on the Council’s wellbeing objectives and wider priorities; and
  - how delivery of this step will impact on other public bodies’ wellbeing objectives.
- 20 Our examination was also informed by the positive indicators for ‘integration’ that we have identified and used as part of this examination.<sup>5</sup>

#### What we found

- 21 We identified the following strengths:
- the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) links to each of the national wellbeing goals and the Council’s wellbeing objective of Strong and Environmentally Smart Communities;
  - ‘to look after and protect the environment’ is a Blaenau Gwent Public Services Board (PSB) wellbeing objective. The PSB recognises the value of accessing open spaces, with significant benefits to people’s mental and physical wellbeing. This PSB wellbeing objective aligns closely to this step.
  - the Blaenau Gwent Well-being Assessment identifies the need to ‘create opportunities and improve access to green spaces for the communities of Blaenau Gwent and visitors to the county’. The Council has drawn on this evidence base to inform the development of the step.
  - the PSB provides a strategic link with partners who are able to support delivery of this step. The Strategic Support Group brings partners together at a more operational level.
  - the Resilient Greater Gwent bid led by the Council’s ecologist identified the opportunity to integrate work across partner organisations to further enhance the quality of open spaces.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 1

- the Gwent Green Grid Partnership, of which the Council is a member, is identifying regional pathways to improve access to open spaces locally and throughout the region. This partnership working will result in a Gwent Access Strategy.
- Council officers have contributed towards the South East Wales Area Statement to identify strategic opportunities to improve the quality of open spaces. They have also worked with partners to profile the resilience of ecosystems in South East Wales.
- the Council works closely with Natural Resources Wales on the production of a State of Nature report for Gwent and an associated Nature Recovery Action Plan.
- the Council's work on biodiversity and ecosystem resilience has been designed to contribute to the Welsh Government's Nature Recovery Action Plan objectives.

22 We identified the following areas for improvement:

- while the Council officers we spoke to understand the wider benefits of meeting other Council priorities, ownership of this step remains mostly within Regeneration and Community Services, suggesting that the Council has not yet taken the opportunity to harness wider Council resources to plan and deliver the step.
- it is unclear how delivery of this step is reflected in the plans of partners and other council services identifying specific actions they will take and timescales.
- 'Building a Healthier Gwent' is the ten-year public health strategic plan to improve the health and wellbeing of the population of Gwent. Improving access to and the quality of open spaces for the benefit of public health is not included.

**The Council is collaborating well to deliver this step and wants to expand its network of partners, but collaboration could be better co-ordinated**

#### What we looked for

23 We looked for evidence that the Council:

- has considered how it could work with others to deliver the step (to meet its wellbeing objectives, or assist another body to meet its wellbeing objectives);
- is collaborating effectively to deliver the step; and
- is monitoring and reviewing whether the collaboration is helping it, or its stakeholders meet wellbeing objectives.

24 Our examination was also informed by the positive indicators for 'collaboration' that we have identified and used as part of this examination.<sup>6</sup>

### What we found

25 We identified the following strengths:

- the Council is the lead body for the Resilient Greater Gwent project and a member of the Gwent Green Grid Partnership (GGGP). These groups work together to improve the health of Gwent's natural assets and maximise the wellbeing benefits that they provide.
- there is a joint Local Nature Partnership between the Council and Torfaen County Borough Council. The Local Nature Partnership set up a steering group this year to structure its work.
- Council officers participate in the Eastern Valleys Panel (one of Natural Resources Wales' landscape panels). Council officers facilitated involvement of the local nature partnership (which spans the boundaries of both Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen) into the landscape panel.
- Council officers facilitate and co-chair the Gwent Strategic Wellbeing Assessment Group. Whilst this group was not established specifically to support delivery of the step, it does identify the need for good quality natural areas to be a key regional priority.
- while the PSB provides strategic direction, the Strategic Support Group provides operational collaboration specifically with the Police and Fire and Rescue services. The Fire and Rescue service has provided a water filling facility along the Ebbw Fawr trail which was funded by Natural Resources Wales as part of the PSB's 'Blaenau Gwent on the Move' project.
- there is close collaboration with neighbouring authorities on the development and delivery of projects relating to rivers, footpaths, cycle paths etc which cross county boundaries;
- community groups endorse the management plans put in place by the Council and manage some of the Borough's nature reserves in partnership with the Council.
- there are several community groups that have an interest and an active role in managing local green spaces. These groups either work together across a wide area or are dedicated to one open space within the Borough. The Ebbw Fawr Trail consists of 14 individual community groups that help manage numerous sites including Beaufort Ponds and Woodlands, Parc Nant-y-Waun and Roseheyworth Community Woodland. As well as working with the Council, these groups engage with the Gwent Wildlife Trust, Groundwork

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 1

Wales and Keep Wales Tidy. This collaborative approach has resulted in five open spaces in the Borough being awarded Community Green Flag status.

- the Council has recently started collaborating with smallholders and local farmers. Old school playing fields are left to grow as hay meadows and are available for farmers to cut to feed livestock. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement as these were grass areas the Council traditionally cut. The Council is assessing other possible areas in the Borough for the same purpose.
- Council officers in the Regeneration and Community Service proactively support community groups with good, positive working relationships.

26 We identified the following areas for improvement:

- the Council has a range of measures in place to improve the quality of, and access to, open space, but has not yet identified how it can encourage people to make use of it. It recognises that behaviour change is one means of achieving this.
- the Council is not maximising the potential of other Council services staff to work with Regeneration and Communities staff to deliver this step.
- the Council stated that collaboration can be challenging due to the political will of some neighbouring councils to work together, the limited resources and staff capacity to commit to pursuing and maintaining further collaborations.
- the lack of a long-term strategy on delivering this step means collaboration is not always as joined up and co-ordinated as it could be.

**Although the Council works well with several community groups in designing and managing open spaces, it could do more to involve businesses and local people**

#### What we looked for

27 We looked for evidence that the Council has:

- identified who it needs to involve in designing and delivering the step;
- effectively involved key stakeholders in designing and delivering the step;
- used the results of involvement to shape the development and delivery of the step; and
- sought to learn lessons and improve its approach to involvement.

28 Our examination was also informed by the positive indicators for 'involvement' that we have identified and used as part of this examination.<sup>7</sup>

### What we found

29 We identified the following strengths:

- in preparing the Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan, there was involvement of residents and other stakeholders through the 'Blaenau Gwent we want' engagement programme. This revealed that people wanted more to be done to protect the environment and to make the area a better place to live, work and attract more visitors.
- the Council has engaged with businesses on some activities designed to deliver the step, eg the Active Travel agenda and community allotments, with businesses interested in accessible open spaces from a workforce wellbeing perspective.
- the Council promotes 'paws on patrol' which encourages dog walkers to report suspicious behaviour to the police. This initiative encourages community involvement and responsibility for their areas to reduce anti-social behaviour.
- the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Forward Plan (2019-2022) identifies several opportunities to engage with young people.
- the Council is acting as the lead PSB sponsor of the 'Blaenau Gwent on the Move' project which sought funding from Natural Resources Wales. As part of this project, the Council is working with partners, businesses and residents to improve access to the outdoors for health benefits. This project helps the Council become aware of some of the community groups as well as how many people use some of the open spaces. Examples include local litter picking groups in different open spaces with the Council providing personal protective equipment and a weekly Parkrun at Bryn Bach Parc.
- through the management plans in place for some open spaces in the Borough, the community groups managing these spaces can design and deliver activities and projects within these areas.

30 We identified the following areas for improvement:

- despite the step referring to improving quality and access of open spaces for the benefit of businesses and some specific examples of where this happened, there has been limited work undertaken to date with businesses.
- the Council will need to decide what information it needs to plan and deliver this step. This is likely to be different to the information it currently holds.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 1

- the Council wants to involve local people to help it gain a better understanding of who is using open spaces and why, as well as understanding why people do not use open spaces.

## Part Two: Council's response

- 31 Following the conclusion of our fieldwork, we presented our findings to the Council at a workshop in September 2019. In attendance was the Council's Ecologist, Team Leader for Green Infrastructure, Infrastructure Service Manager, Education Transformation Manager, Education Facilities Officer, Community Safety Manager, and Professional Lead for Community Engagement, Equalities and Welsh Language. Also attending the workshop was a representative from the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service and the Commercial Director for Aneurin Leisure Trust.
- 32 At this workshop the Council began to consider its response to our findings and as a result of discussions at the workshop and further reflection on our findings the Council has developed the following actions:

### Long term

- Develop a clearer vision within the Corporate Plan – long term 30 years
- Increase areas of managed land (woodlands/grassland/habitats)
- Engage with parents at an early stage to support a greater level of early years engagement
- Encourage economic ventures that will ensure management of the resource through employment and education

### Prevention

- Ensure people feel, and are able to access open spaces, eg through:
  - Providing the right information – maps, routes etc
  - Promotion
  - Culture and behaviour change
  - Ensuring open spaces are accessible, inclusive and safe

### Integration

- Build on the Forward Environment Plan.
- Ensure all business plans recognise the step and play an active role. Section 6 duty.
- Ensure there are clear goals that all organisations can buy into and work towards.

### Collaboration

- Expand 'Blaenau Gwent we want' to capture and help understand people's views on open and green spaces
- Develop measures around recycling levels, antisocial behaviour issues and evidence of behaviour change

### Involvement

- Collate local evidence of groups with status and increase the number of constituted community groups involved in managing Green Open Spaces

33 We may monitor the Council's progress in implementing these actions and the extent to which they address the areas for improvement we identified in this report.

# Appendix 1

## Positive Indicators of the Five Ways of Working

### Exhibit 2: Positive Indicators of the Five Ways of Working

The table below sets out 'positive indicators' for each of the five ways of working that we have identified. We have not used the indicators as a checklist. They should be viewed as indicators. They helped us to form conclusions about the extent to which a body is acting in accordance with the sustainable development principle in taking steps to meet its wellbeing objectives.

#### What would show a body is fully applying the long-term way of working?

- There is a clear understanding of what 'long term' means in the context of the Act.
- They have designed the step to deliver the wellbeing objective/s and contribute to their long-term vision.
- They have designed the step to deliver short or medium-term benefits, which are balanced with the impact over the long term (within the project context).
- They have designed the step based on a sophisticated understanding of current and future need and pressures, including analysis of future trends.
- Consequently, there is a comprehensive understanding of current and future risks and opportunities.
- Resources have been allocated to ensure long-term as well as short-term benefits are delivered.
- There is a focus on delivering outcomes, with milestones/progression steps identified where outcomes will be delivered over the long term.
- They are open to new ways of doing things which could help deliver benefits over the longer term.
- They value intelligence and pursue evidence-based approaches.

#### What would show a body is fully applying the preventative way of working?

- The body seeks to understand the root causes of problems so that negative cycles and intergenerational challenges can be tackled.
- The body sees challenges from a system-wide perspective, recognising and valuing the long-term benefits that they can deliver for people and places.
- The body allocates resources to preventative action that is likely to contribute to better outcomes and use of resources over the longer term, even where this may limit the ability to meet some short-term needs.
- There are decision-making and accountability arrangements that recognise the value of preventative action and accept short-term reductions in performance and resources in the pursuit of anticipated improvements in outcomes and use of resources.

#### **What would show a body is taking an 'integrated' approach?**

- Individuals at all levels understand their contribution to the delivery of the vision and wellbeing objectives.
- Individuals at all levels understand what different parts of the organisation do and proactively seek opportunities to work across organisational boundaries. This is replicated in their work with other public bodies.
- Individuals at all levels recognise the cross-organisation dependencies of achieving the ambition and objectives.
- There is an open culture where information is shared.
- There is a well-developed understanding of how the wellbeing objectives and steps to meet them impact on other public sector bodies.
- Individuals proactively work across organisational boundaries to maximise their contribution across the wellbeing goals and minimise negative impacts.
- Governance, structures and processes support this, as do behaviours.

#### **What would show a body is collaborating effectively?**

- The body is focused on place, community and outcomes rather than organisational boundaries.
- The body has a good understanding of partners' objectives and their responsibilities, which helps to drive collaborative activity.
- The body has positive and mature relationships with stakeholders, where information is shared in an open and transparent way.
- The body recognises and values the contributions that all partners can make.
- The body seeks to establish shared processes and ways of working, where appropriate.

#### **What would show a body is involving people effectively?**

- Having an understanding of who needs to be involved and why.
- Reflecting on how well the needs and challenges facing those people are currently understood.
- Working co-productively, working with stakeholders to design and deliver.
- Seeing the views of stakeholders as a vital sources of information that will help deliver better outcomes.
- Ensuring that the full diversity of stakeholders is represented and they are able to take part.
- Having mature and trusting relationships with its stakeholders where there is ongoing dialogue and information is shared in an open and transparent way.
- Ensure stakeholders understand the impact of their contribution.
- Seek feedback from key stakeholders which is used to help learn and improve.



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