

Monthly Report for March 2024 Sue Osborne

2024/5 Council Budget: Somerset Council has voted through plans to set a budget for the coming financial year but received a stark warning of significant challenges in the years ahead.

LibDem Council Members unanimously agreed a range of measures to bridge a funding gap of £100m for 2024/25, including cost cuttings, increasing Council Tax by 5%, and using £36.8 millions of reserves (a council's equivalent of savings). The proposals also include a 'capitalisation direction' request of £36.9m – seeking permission from Government to borrow money or sell assets to pay for day-to-day running costs. Amid specific plans to cut costs and increase fees, around 1,200 jobs are expected to go at Somerset Council over the next three years equivalent to about a quarter of the workforce. As a result of the cuts some Town Councils have stepped in to save services (CCTV, public toilets etc) but this has resulted in a 179% council tax increase in Taunton, 90% in Yeovil and 164% in Bridgwater.

Council papers are still predicting a further £103 million budget gap in 2025/26.

Gigafactory plans for Puriton site: Agratas, a new business within the Tata Group, has confirmed its plans to build a gigafactory producing EV batteries at the Gravity Smart Campus site in Puriton, near Bridgwater. A £4 billion investment, the factory will create up to 4,000 jobs and many more as part of the supply chain. It is envisioned that the plant will be operational in the second half of the decade, eventually producing 40GWh of battery cells annually, enough to supply approximately 500,000 passenger vehicles. Once fully operational, the factory is set to be Britain's biggest battery factory, and one of the largest in Europe. Over the next five years, Somerset Council plans to invest in the infrastructure, skills, site access and connectivity which will be paid for by the Business Rates generated by the factory once it is operational.

Under the surface exhibition: 'Under the Surface' is an exhibition of photographs by renowned Somerset-based photographer Matilda Temperley, reflecting on 10 years since the devastating floods of 2013-14. It is on display at Somerset Rural Life Museum, Glastonbury from Saturday 2 March to Sunday 19 May. Alongside the exhibition, a programme of events and activities will take place supported by Somerset Rivers Authority (SRA). These include family activities during the Easter Holidays, run in collaboration with the RSPCA and Somerset Wildlife Trust, where visitors can take part in climate-themed craft activities.

Healthy Somerset: A new website has been launched by Public Health to help people in Somerset lead a healthier life. The new site – www.healthysomerset.co.uk – features health and wellbeing resources tailored to all age ranges – making it even easier for users to find the information and support they are looking for. The new refreshed layout of the site breaks down services and support to represent the ages and stages of life from the 'best start in life' (0-5 yrs), through to 'starting well' (5-18 yrs), to 'living well' (18-65 yrs) and 'ageing well' (65+).

To view the website and be empowered on your journey to a healthier lifestyle, visit: <https://bit.ly/healthy-somerset>.

Chard Enterprise Centre: The new Chard Enterprise centre, offers flexible office and light industrial workspace to support small and medium enterprises. Costing £4.2m the Enterprise Centre has been made possible after successfully securing £1.7m funding from the European Regional Development Fund. Chard Enterprise Centre forms part of a network of workspace services offered by Somerset Council. The Enterprise Centre network aims to offer quality workspace and business support in areas where commercial providers do not operate. There are currently 10 sites across the county and, in addition to Chard, there are centres in Highbridge, Dulverton, Wheddon Cross, Frome, Minehead, Wells, Williton, Wiveliscombe and Bruton.

Take the Pressure Off: Over half of all strokes and heart attacks in Somerset are caused by high blood pressure. Known as the silent killer, high blood pressure is quick and simple to diagnose and to treat. NHS Somerset, together with Somerset Council is launching their biggest ever campaign 'Take the Pressure Off' with the aim of testing thousands of residents to increase awareness and early detection of high blood pressure. The "Take the Pressure Off" campaign is designed to encourage residents, particularly those aged 40+, to regularly check their blood pressure and take necessary steps towards managing their health. In addition to workplace testing, the campaign will be partnering with local sports clubs to help raise awareness of the risks of high blood pressure, particularly to males and those who identify as male, across Somerset. Residents are also encouraged to borrow a free blood pressure monitor from their library to test their own blood pressure in the comfort of their home, or visit their local pharmacy for a quick and easy check.

Portrait of His Majesty The King: The government is offering a free framed portrait of His Majesty The King to all town, parish and community councils in the United Kingdom from 12 February. The closing date for applications is 28 March. Applications can be made via: <https://tpc-portraitscheme.cubiquityonline.com/login>

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