From Bristol Airport expansion to the A303 – these are the key South West transport stories for 2023

The past 12 months have brought some improvements – and promises – for the region's transport infrastructure – but it's not all been straightforward.

We take a look at some of the biggest projects across the South West.

What's next for Bristol Airport?

Campaigners are opposing the Bristol Airport expansion plans (Image: BAAN)

A decision is expected soon on the expansion plans for Bristol airport.

A group of campaigners have appealed to the High Court against a decision to allow the expansion of the airport over environmental concerns

The transport hub was given the green light by the Planning Inspectorate in February.

Under the plans the airport says it will be able to increase its current capacity from 10 million to 12 million passengers a year, while adding thousands more parking spaces. It is yet to hit the current cap and before the pandemic, fewer than nine million passengers used the airport.

The two-day appeal hearing held in November at Bristol's Civil Justice Centre examined whether the Planning Inspectorate acted correctly when granting planning permission in February.

The airport had initially been refused permission by North Somerset Council in 2020 after the local authority decided environmental and societal impacts outweighed the economic benefits of the expansion.

The expansion was also opposed by Bristol City Council, Bath and North East Somerset Council, and the West of England Combined Authority.

Its proposals have been backed by UK business body CBI , which said the expansion would help meet the region's growing demand for air travel, create new international opportunities for South West businesses and be a "significant step" towards the government's 'levelling up' agenda.

The appeal judge is expected to make a decision on the case early this year.

Other regional airports

Exeter airport, which was this year named one of the best by passengers in a customer satisfaction survey commissioned by Which?, reported a slow recovery after the pandemic.

Exeter Airport saw a drop from nearly one million passengers in 2019 to just 27,000 at the height of the pandemic.

The airport was also affected by the liquidation of airline Flybe in 2020, which had its base nearby.

Managing director Stephen Wiltshire said in this interview that although the facility there had been an increase in summer passenger numbers, it was still making a financial loss.

At Cornwall Airport Newquay, Cornwall councillors have opposed plans for it to sell the airport and instead retain just a minority stake .

Cornwall Council has previously said that it would like to reduce the amount of subsidy that the council pays to keep the airport running – last reported to be around £3.5million a year. It has said that it wants to use more of the land at the airport for business development and is undertaking a review of the whole site.

The airport site is already home to the commercial airport itself as well as Spaceport Cornwall which hosted the first, ultimately unsuccessful, space launch from UK soil by Virgin Orbit in January. Part of the airport site has already been developed as an Enterprise Zone which saw the creation of Aerohubs which provide business and workspace.

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New rail stations

Pictured: Richard Cole, programme Sponsor for Network Rail; Don Alexander, cabinet member for transport; and Tom Pierpoint, business development director for GWR
(Image: Bristol City Council)

Due to open this year is the £4.2m train station at Portway Park and Ride near Bristol.

It is the first station to be built in Bristol since Parson Street in 1927 and is expected to open in the summer with half-hourly services between Bristol Temple Meads and Severn Beach.

Also on the cards is a planned train station at the new arena in Filton- but this will not open until 2026 . The station was initially due to open in 2023 but delayed have been blamed on design changes. before the YTL Arena opens in 2024, as a key part of the transport plan to get people to concerts.

North Filton station is one of three new stations opening over the next few years, with services running from Bristol Temple Meads to Ashley Down, the arena, and Henbury. The project, part of MetroWest phase 2, is reopening an old railway line

with newly built stations.

And there is further good news for passengers in Portishead and Pill.

A project to re-open an abandoned railway line between Portishead in North Somerset and Bristol has received approval.

North Somerset Council first submitted its application to restore the passenger line in November 2019 as part of the MetroWest Phase 1 project to link and upgrade the railway system in the Bristol area.

Portishead's passenger station closed in 1964 and was due to reopen in December 2024 , before delays on a decision amid concerns over rising costs.

The approval will mean preparation work can begin on stations and amenities on the line at Portishead and Pill, which will connect with Bristol Temple Meads Station.

Exeter's £16million Marsh Barton Railway Station is set to open in Spring 2023 after a seven year delay.

The station should have been up and running in December 2016, but spiralling costs and protracted discussions with the rail industry led to delays.

In Torquay, plans are in the advanced stages for the 'Torquay Gateway' train station built for the Edginswell area of the town. Funding was awarded from Network Rail and Department for its development in November .

It is set to cost £13.1 million in total, with another £3 million coming from the Towns Fund.

It is hoped that construction will start in the Summer of 2023 for completion by the end of 2024.

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What's happening at Dawlish?



Aerial view of Coryton Cove and Kennaway Tunnel, near Dawlish. The next phase of works will include cliff stabilisation work between Dawlish and Holcombe
(Image: Network Rail)

The next phase of work to protect the storm-battered rail line at Dawlish from coastal erosion is underway.

BAM Nuttall is to design a series of resilience measures along the iconic coastal railway between Dawlish and Holcombe, south Devon.

BAM Nuttall has been involved in resilience work salong the coastal rail route that was washed away at Dawlish during the storms of February 2014.

Since then, work has been ongoing to create two new sections of sea wall due to be completed this year.

Meanwhile, public consultation was underway in November on how to protect the 1.8km section of railway running along the coastline from Parson's Tunnel to Teignmouth.

Network Rail promised to look again after campaigners rallied against proposals to build-out the railway into the sea, losing part of the beach at Holcombe.

Big road schemes

The green light has been given to a major road upgrade of the A417 between Gloucester and Swindon, National Highways has announced. In April, it was reported that a final decision on the much-needed 3.4-mile route upgrade between the Brockworth bypass and Cowley roundabout was expected to be made by the Secretary of State this autumn, prior to construction starting.

Now, Transport Minister Huw Merriman has given the long-awaited decision for the scheme to go ahead, which is hoped to improve the connection between two dual carriageway sections of the A417 at Brockworth and Cowley, and links between the M4 and M5. The A417/A419 provides an important route between Gloucester and Swindon that helps connect the Midlands/North to the South of England. It's an alternative to the M5/M4 route via Bristol.

Preparatory work can now begin early next year thanks to the granting of the Development Consent Order (DCO) with the view to starting construction later on in 2023.

A303

National Highways has awarded contracts worth around £1.3bn for upgrades of the A303 in the South West – but the controversial scheme is far from a done deal.

The government-owned organisation is looking to perform a £1.7bn upgrade of the road between Amesbury and Berwick Down, which could include a two-mile-long tunnel under Stonehenge.

The planning application for the transformational scheme is still awaiting redetermination from transport secretary Anne-

Marie Trevelyan, after a High Court quashed predecessor Grant Shapps' order to proceed with the plans in 2021. A legal challenge had been brought by campaigners concerned about the project's potential impact on the world heritage site.

National Highways has said in the meantime, to ensure programme timescales are maintained, civil engineering firm Costain and consultancy Mott MacDonald have been awarded a £60m contract to provide technical and construction management services.

A30

Work to dual the A30 in Cornwall is set to be complete by Christmas 2023.

The much-anticipated new A30 between Chiverton Cross and Carland Cross has been punctuated by road closures.

The scheme will see an entirely new road built between the two busy roundabouts near Truro , with the old road to the north being retained and downgraded to a local route.

The plans had been in the pipeline for several years and the new road is expected to open in late 2023 at the earliest.

A version of this article appeared in the Western Daily Press Business Guide

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