

Birmingham to Exeter Route Strategy

March 2017



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Route strategies

The division of routes for the programme of route strategies on the Strategic Road Network

- London to Scotland East
- London Orbital and M23 to Gatwick
- London to Scotland West
- London to Wales
- Felixstowe to Midlands
- Solent to Midlands
- M25 to Solent (A3 and M3)
- Kent Corridor to M25 (M2 and M20)
- South Coast Central
- Birmingham to Exeter
- South West Peninsula
- London to Leeds (East)
- East of England
- South Pennines
- North Pennines
- Midlands to Wales and Gloucestershire
- North and East Midlands
- South Midlands



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1. Introduction

The modernisation of England's motorways and major A roads, also known as the strategic road network (SRN), is making a vital contribution to economic wellbeing and growth. This Route Strategy – one of 18 such reports – provides a statement on the current performance of, and perceived pressures on, the Birmingham to Exeter route to inform the planning of future investment.

The SRN supports national and local economic prosperity by:

- linking together major cities
- connecting with extensive local road networks
- providing links to major ports, airports, and rail terminals
- enabling good access to regions and cross-border routes between the nations of the United Kingdom

The establishment of Highways England through the Infrastructure Act 2015 has changed fundamentally the way we plan investment in the network. Funding is now determined every 5 years, in the [Road Investment Strategy \(RIS\)](#), which is set by Government. We are currently delivering on the commitments that were set out in the first RIS covering 2015 to 2020, which are already making a difference for road users across the network.

At the same time, we are working closely with the other 3 bodies with statutory responsibility for the RIS – Department for Transport, Office of Rail and Road and Transport Focus – on preparing for the next RIS (RIS2) for the period after 2020.



Purpose of Route Strategies

Route Strategies provide a high level view of the current performance of the SRN as well as issues perceived by our stakeholders that affect the network. They are one of the key components of research required for developing the RIS. This suite of Route Strategies builds upon the analysis underpinning the first set of Route Strategies undertaken between 2013 to 2015, which together provided the first comprehensive assessment of the entire network. This time the Route Strategies aim to:

- bring together information from key partners, motorists, local communities, construction partners, environmental groups and across the business
- achieve a better understanding of the condition and performance of our roads, and local and regional aspirations
- shape our investment priorities to improve the service for road users and support a growing economy
- help inform the next RIS¹

Strategic themes

The Government’s vision for transforming the SRN is described in the [Road Investment Strategy post 2020: Planning Ahead](#) document available on www.gov.uk. This vision builds on the 5 broad aims published in the [Road Investment Strategy for 2015-2020](#): economy; network capability; integration; safety; and the environment. It also builds on Highways England’s 5 strategic outcomes (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). Using the evidence from this and the other 17 Route Strategies, we will develop proposals that can help bring the Government’s vision for roads to life.

RIS1 Strategic Vision as reiterated in “RIS Post 2020: Planning ahead”



Figure 1.1 - RIS1 strategic vision

Highways England Strategic Business Plan’s key outcomes



Figure 1.2 - Highways England strategic outcomes

¹See Chapter 6 for more information on the next RIS

Stakeholder engagement

Building on the engagement we started in the first round of Route Strategies, we have continued to work closely with a wide range of stakeholders to enhance our understanding of the strategic road network, and identify where users and other stakeholders feel investment is needed.

We used a number of methods to collate information. For example, we launched an online tool for customers and stakeholders over the summer of 2016 to inform us of the issues and challenges on our roads that affected them. As well as information collated from a range of people within Highways England, more than 300 different stakeholder organisations provided important feedback on the network during the evidence collection period. There were also more than 370 individual members of the public who contributed information. In total, around 2,700 individual points were raised by external stakeholders.

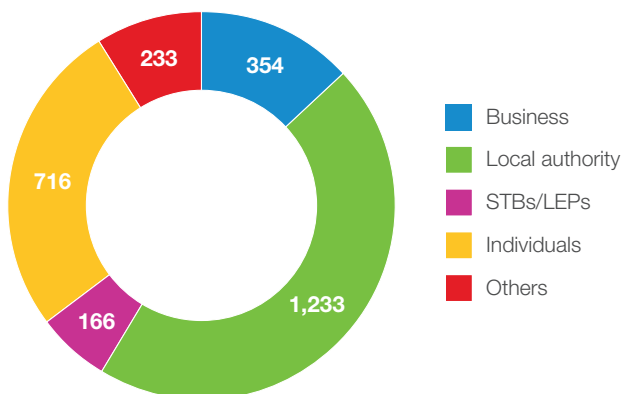


Figure 1.3 - External stakeholder responses

We are increasingly working with subnational transport bodies (SNTBs), including Midlands Connect, England's Economic Heartland and Transport for the North, so we can ensure that their developing strategies and planning are integrated into our thinking (and vice versa).

Transport Focus

We commissioned Transport Focus, the road user watchdog, to undertake research on road user priorities. More than 4,400 interviews were undertaken with drivers across the SRN. Figure 1.4 below shows the breakdown by user type and purpose.

Completed interviews		
	3,487	79%
	322	7%
	407	9%
	206	5%
Commuting	501	11%
Business	1,367	31%
Leisure	2,457	56%






































Figure 1.4 - Driver sample breakdown

250 fleet managers from a mix of industries, size and regions

The research found that the Birmingham to Exeter route was well rated, with 62% of users rating their experience of the route as either extremely good or fairly good. However, as Table 1.1 shows, 43% of users still experienced problems using the route, with congestion and roadworks cited as the 2 main causes.

The full report has been published on Transport Focus's website www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/road-to-the-future.

We will continue to work closely with Transport Focus to understand customer priorities to ensure that the next RIS reflects their needs.

Experienced problems %	Route impacted	Largest problem	Second largest problem
61%	M25 to Solent		
58%	London Orbital and M23 to Gatwick		
50%	South Coast Central		
46%	Solent to Midlands		
44%	East of England		
43%	Birmingham to Exeter		
41%	South West Peninsula		
41%	North and East Midlands		
40%	London to Scotland East		
40%	South Pennines		
39%	Kent Corridor to M25		
37%	London to Scotland West		
32%	Midlands to Wales and Gloucestershire		 
30%	Felixstowe to Midlands		
30%	South Midlands		
28%	London to Leeds		
27%	London to Wales		
17%	North Pennines		


 Congestion/traffic queuing
  Roadworks
  Delays caused by accidents/roads closed
  Roads busy/high volume of traffic

Table 1.1 - Transport Focus summary

2. The route

The Birmingham to Exeter route is key to connecting Birmingham and the West Midlands with the South West and plays a vital role in providing a link between major towns and cities in the UK.

It comprises most of the M5 from Exeter (junction 31) to Birmingham at its intersection with the M42. It runs near key cities such as Worcester, Gloucester, Bristol and Exeter.

The route is 295 miles long with 4.2 billion vehicle miles recorded on this route in 2014. It is a high-standard network with sections of 3 and 4-lane motorways. Smart motorways have been established on the route, with sections of dynamic hard-shoulder running. On-going investment will add all-lane running to the M5 between junctions 4a and 6.

The route begins on the outskirts of Birmingham at the intersection of the M42 and runs down to junction 31 at Exeter. It provides access to areas such as Devon, Somerset, Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. The route is also a link to airports at Birmingham, Bristol and Exeter, and leads to Bristol port and a number of key strategic employment sites along the route, such as the Avonmouth and Portbury docks.

A high proportion of journeys on the route are long-distance commercial and leisure-related trips. In a number of areas, particularly around the major conurbations of Worcester, Cheltenham and Gloucester, Bristol and Exeter, a significant proportion of the traffic is local, comprising shorter-distance trips.

Nationally, the route provides a gateway linking the South West to the North, as well as intersecting with roads such as the M4, which provides a link to both Wales and London. Heading north to south, the route interconnects with the M42, M50, A46, A40, A417, M4, A30 and A38, providing numerous pan-regional route options involving use of the M5.

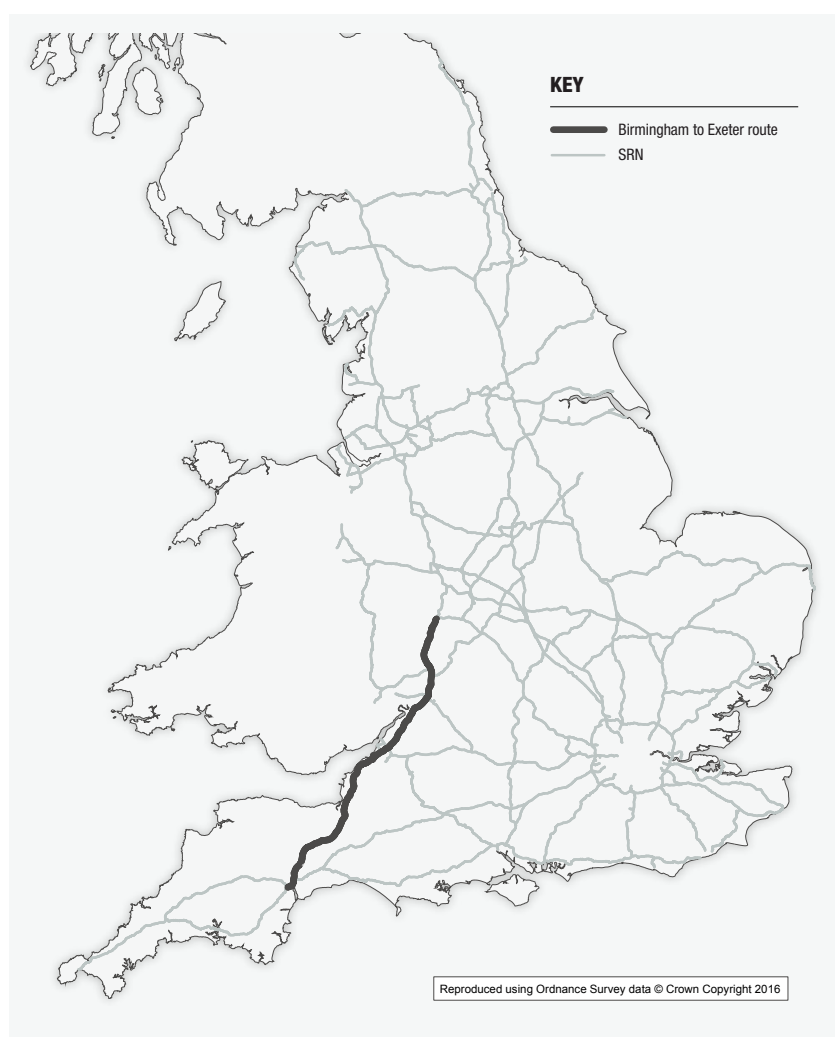


Figure 2.1 - Route overview map

The route plays an important role in supporting the distribution of goods and strategic traffic between the Midlands, the South West and the rest of the UK.

Freight trips constitute at least 15% of traffic across the entire M5 and make up a third of traffic on the busiest sections around Exeter and Weston-super-Mare. The route is used to access the ports at Bristol, Plymouth and Weymouth and plays a key role in the distribution of fresh produce from the South West. It also supports the retail, tourism and leisure industries by serving the key cities and major towns.

There are major shopping centres and attractions at Birmingham, Bristol and Exeter. Additionally, major tourist destinations served by the route include the Cotswolds, Bath, Cheddar Gorge and Weston-super-Mare, while there are other popular destinations in Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall. Many of these journeys are seasonal, and increased traffic is experienced on the route due to tourism during the holiday periods and at weekends throughout spring and summer.

Key areas of industry along the route include locations such as the employment areas at Avonmouth and Severnside, Aztec West, Hinkley Point power station, and Huntspill Energy Park.



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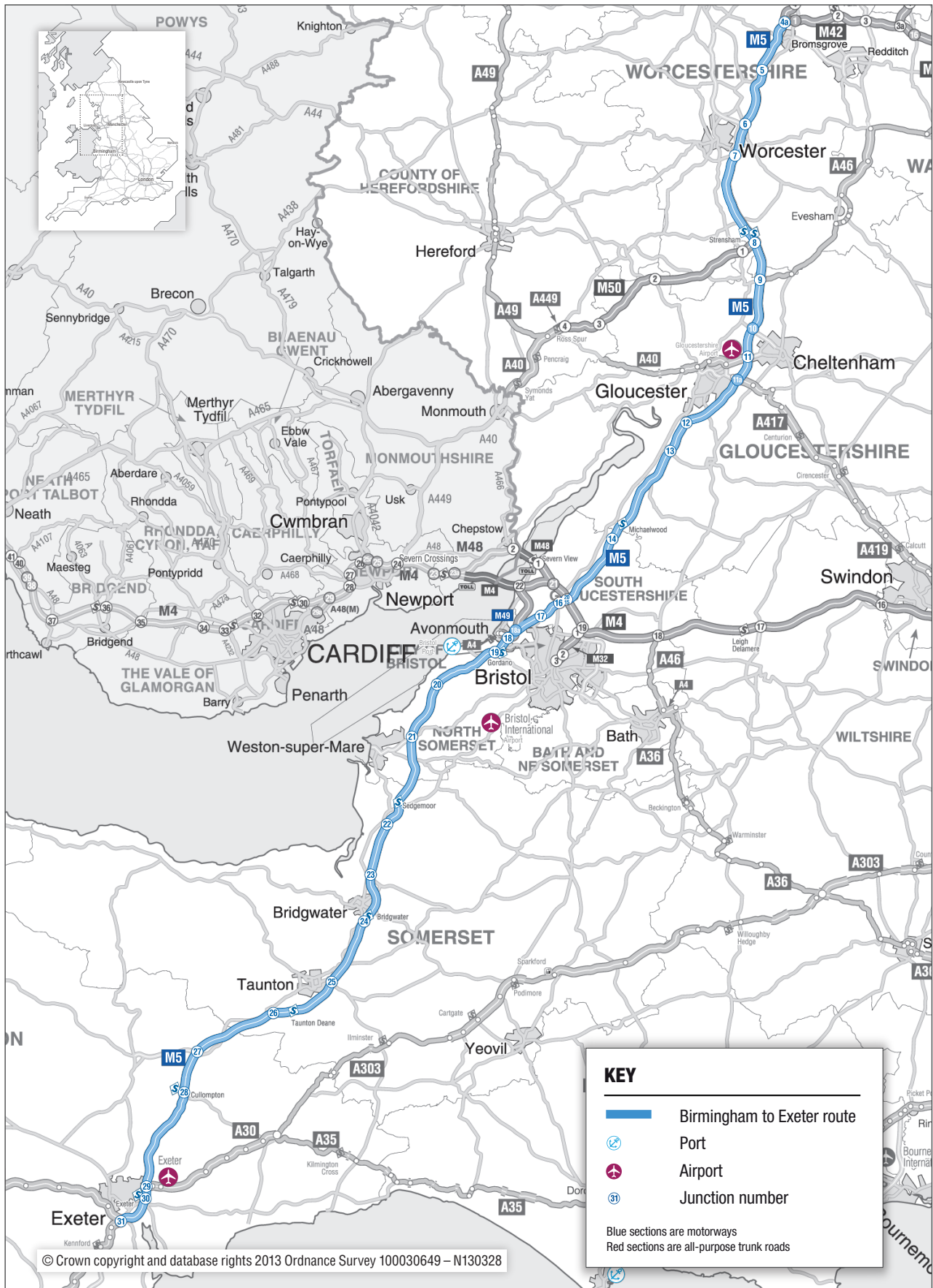


Figure 2.2 - Route Strategy overview map



3. Current constraints and challenges

This chapter outlines the emerging issues raised by stakeholders and is supplemented by Highways England information.

The following text and figures within this chapter provide a summary of the information collected and applied to our strategic themes.



A safe and serviceable network

There are concentrations of safety issues at various points on the route, particularly around Bristol, Bridgwater, Taunton and Exeter.

As the route is entirely made up of motorway, incidents are primarily related to junction layouts (such as M5 junction 19), or locations where incidents occur in congested conditions. There are also locations where junctions are closely spaced together (such as M5 junctions 15 to 16 and junctions 18 to 18a) which can lead to unsafe weaving movements.

Around Bristol operational resilience can be an issue, as any closures or disruption to the Avonmouth bridge or the M5 results in traffic diverting through Bristol, due to the lack of suitable diversion routes between the M4 and M5. This is also the case from junction 19 to junction 20, where M5 traffic is routed along the A370 through villages.

The same issue occurs at Exeter with the Exe bridge and lack of a strategic alternative route.



More free-flowing network

Congestion affects a number of sections on the route, especially where the M5 provides access to major urban areas. The sections where the M5 connects to other motorways (M42, M4, M48, M49) and strategic routes (A46, A40, A417, A38, A30) also experience congestion.

The only section of the route with smart motorway infrastructure in place is between junctions 15 and 17 around Bristol, although a section between junctions 4a and 6 is committed and currently under construction, and is planned to be completed during 2017.

Congestion is generally concentrated around locations near to major urban areas and where multiple routes meet, such as:

- in the north of the route around Tewkesbury
- the Cheltenham and Gloucester conurbation and Stroud
- around Bristol
- to the south around Weston-super-Mare, Taunton and Exeter

The route around Bristol and Exeter experiences congestion related to both the urban area and route interchanges. Around Bristol there are interchanges between the M4, M48 and M49, and around Exeter there are interchanges with the A30 where traffic combines with the M5 traffic between junctions 29 and 31.



Supporting economic growth

The route is a critical strategic link between the South West and Midlands. It is vital to pan-regional economic growth, and also provides local access to many urban areas. The route plays a major role in supporting the national economy.

The evidence base identifies a large number of current and proposed development opportunities either along the route itself or near to other major highway corridors that take direct access from the route. These comprise:

- northern section investment around Tewkesbury, Stroud and Cheltenham and Gloucester
- development at Avonmouth and Severnside
- an urban extension at Weston-super-Mare and junction 21 Enterprise area
- Hinkley Point C and Huntspill Energy Park, a designated Enterprise Zone, located close to the M5 with access provided via junctions 23 and 24 from the M5
- the recently announced garden village at Culm (east of Cullompton) and the garden town at Taunton
- key growth sites east of Exeter that will impact on the route

The area south of Bristol relies on the M5 to feed strategic trips to and between economic hubs. The South West relies on the strategic highway connectivity provided by the M5.



An improved environment

The route passes through a number of areas experiencing different environmental challenges.

On the route, noise and air quality problems are an issue, as the route passes by urban areas with Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) and Noise Important Areas (NIAs) as shown on figures 3.1 to 3.3. The route also provides access to the Malvern Hills and Cotswold Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).

In the northern section there are areas with flooding risks around Tewkesbury and Stroud, around Bristol at Avonmouth, and in the southern section at the Somerset Levels and Taunton.



A more accessible and integrated network

The evidence has identified locations where walking and cycling are most affected by the SRN. Lack of crossing facilities has been identified as an issue where the M5 passes through Tewkesbury (junction 9), Bristol (junction 19) and Tiverton (junction 27).

The evidence review has also highlighted locations where local highway authorities see opportunities to open up new routes of access to the SRN. This includes alterations to existing SRN junctions or the need to provide additional junctions.

Birmingham to Exeter - Route Strategy: Map 1 of 3

KEY

- Supporting economic growth
- Free-flowing network
- Safe and serviceable network
- Improved environment
- Accessible and integrated network

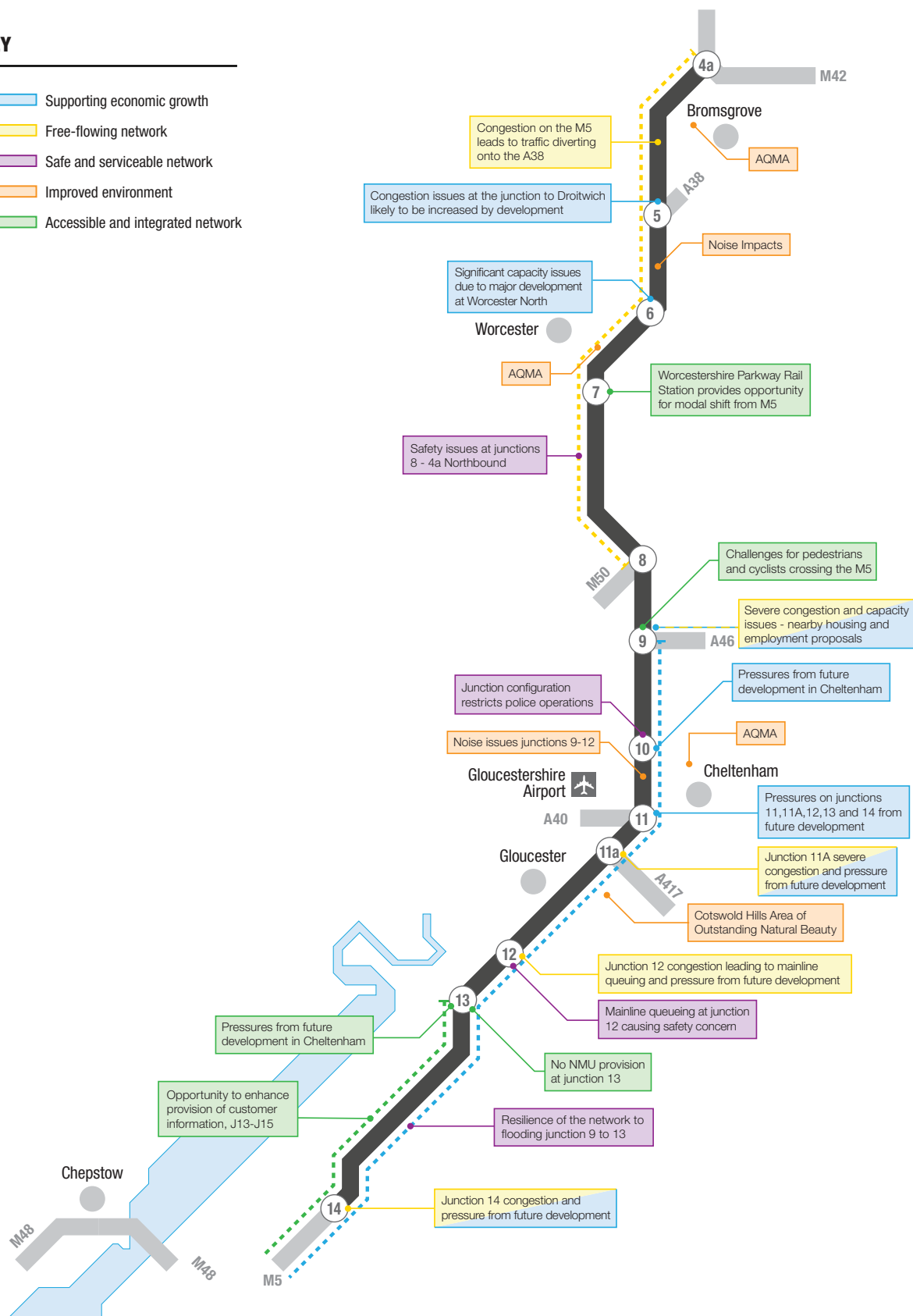


Figure 3.1 - Key challenges for the route

Birmingham to Exeter - Route Strategy: Map 2 of 3

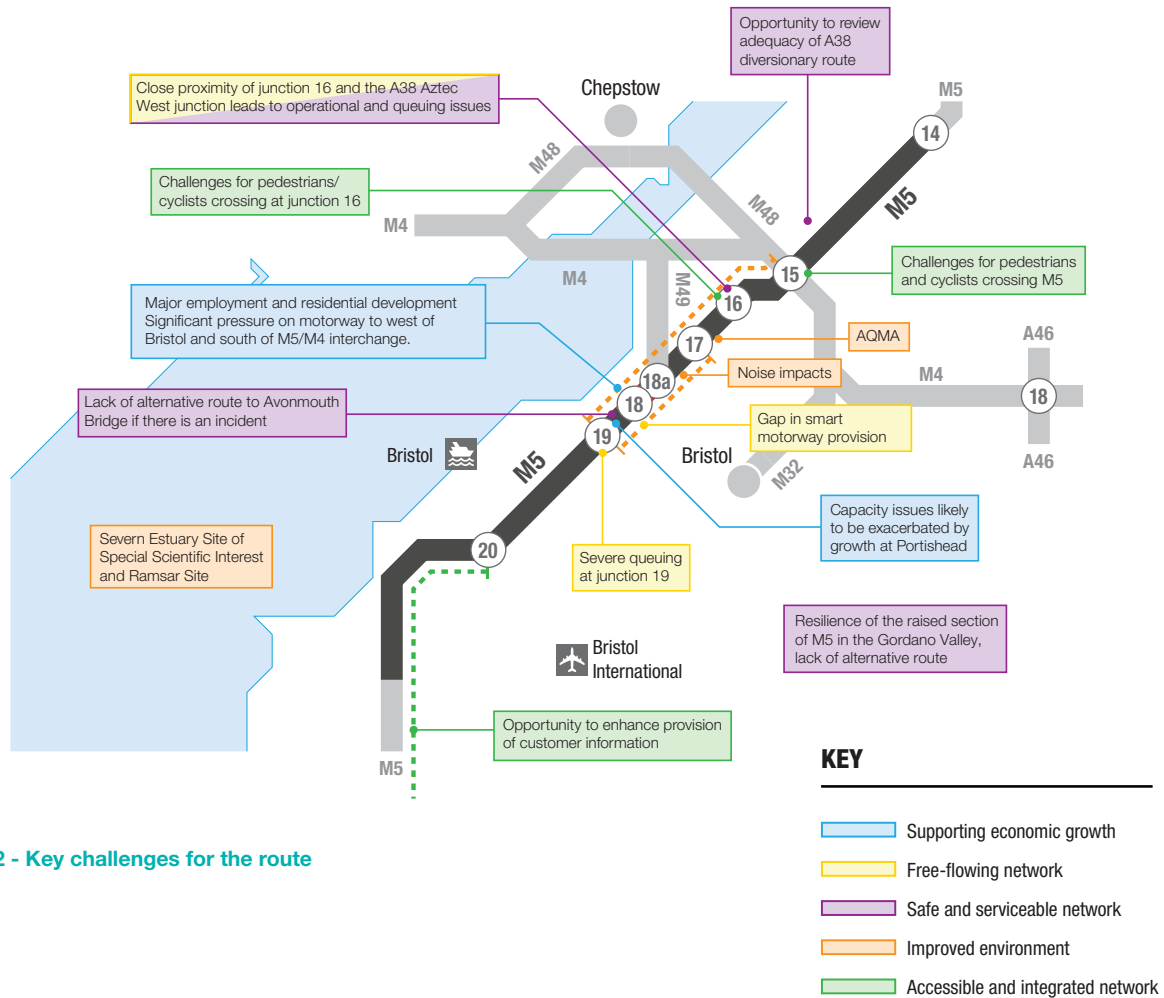


Figure 3.2 - Key challenges for the route

Birmingham to Exeter - Route Strategy: Map 3 of 3

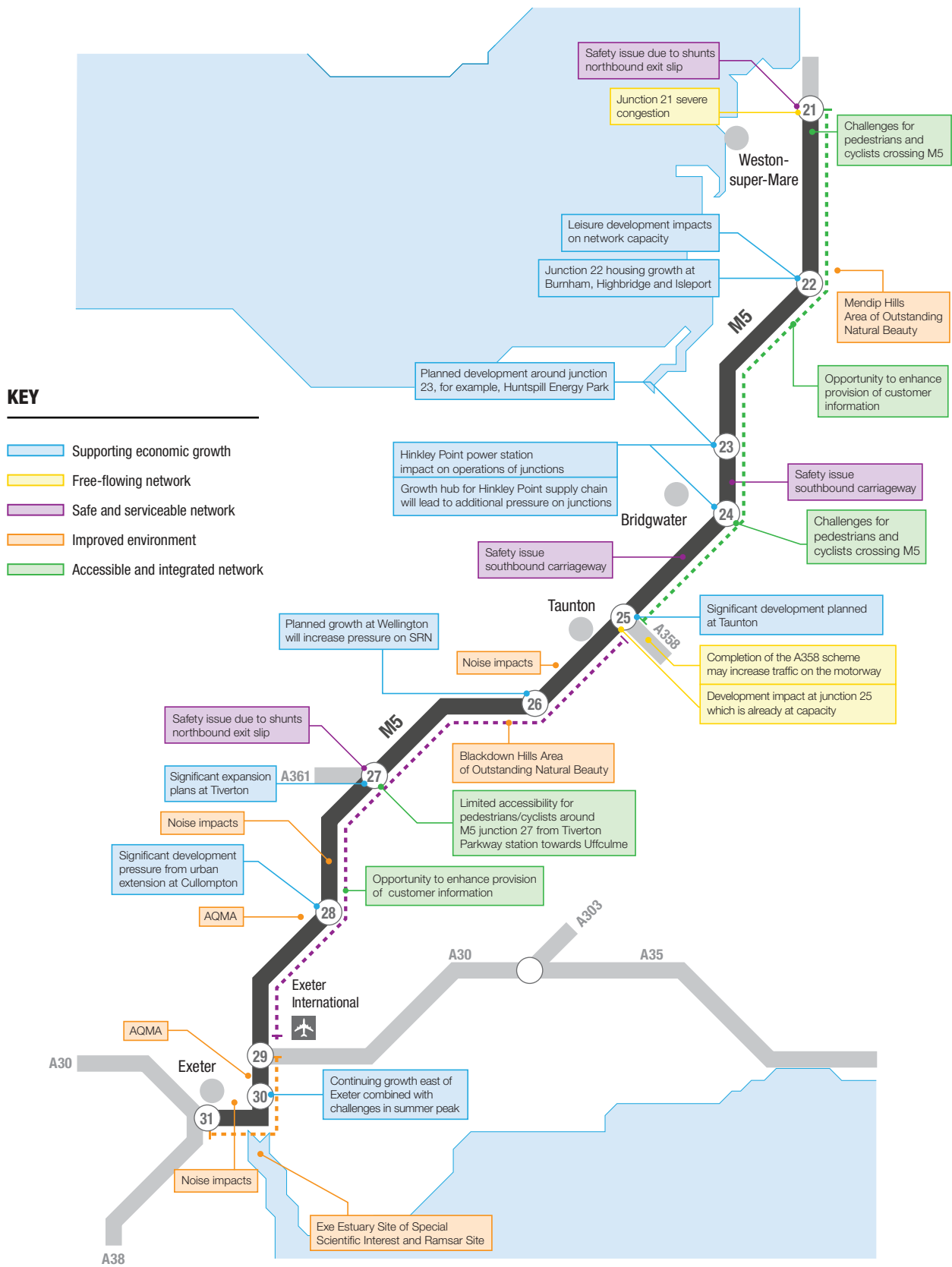


Figure 3.3 - Key challenges for the route

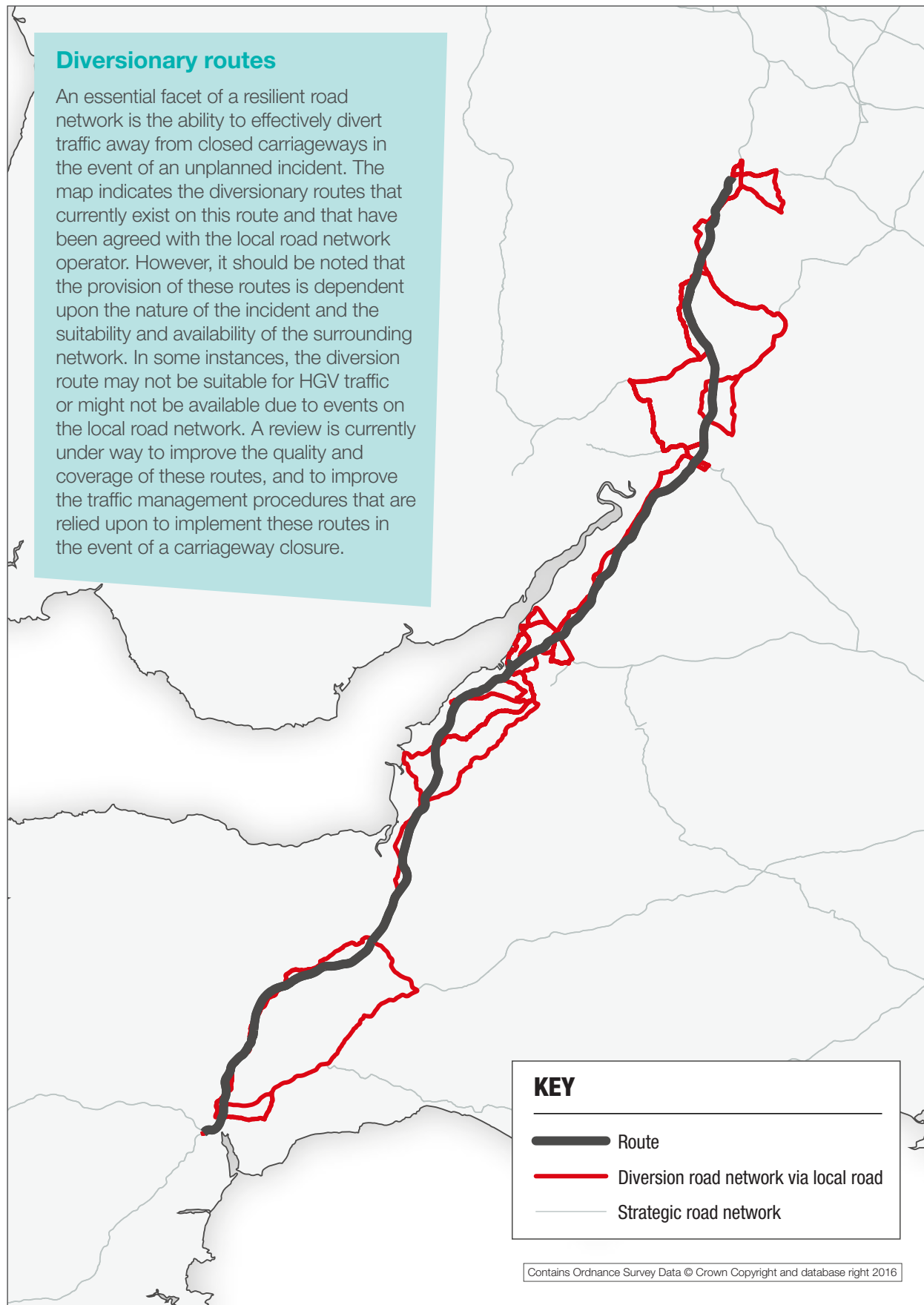


Figure 3.4 - Birmingham to Exeter diversionary routes

Maintaining the strategic road network

We carry out routine maintenance and renewal of roads, structures and technology to keep the network safe, serviceable and reliable. We also ensure that our contractors deliver a high level of service on the SRN to support operational performance and the long-term integrity of the asset.

The heavy year-round use of all our routes means that they require regular maintenance and inspections for repairs to keep them fully operational, in order to support economic growth. Our maintenance regime focuses on 4 key aspects of the routes: road surfaces, bridges and structures, drainage and earthworks. The summary condition of each on this route is set out below:

Road surface

The surface conditions across the route is considered to be sound or with some deterioration, with less than 0.5% having severe deterioration that would require focused investigation.

Bridges and structures

The structures across the route are mostly in very good or good condition. According to an analysis of current data, less than 1% of our structures are in poor or very poor condition.

Drainage

Drainage assets are represented by both linear assets (for example pipes, channels, ditches, drains) and non-linear assets (for example gullies, chambers). Across the route, drainage assets are considered to be in good and very good condition for linear and non-linear assets, respectively. Of those assets inspected, just under 75% of linear assets have been assessed as having no defects or only superficial defects, while just over 85% of the non-linear assets fall in these same categories.

Earthworks

The geotechnical earthworks across the route are considered to be in good condition, with the total length of earthworks that require further investigation amounting to less than 5%.

New assets have an operational 'life', during which, under normal conditions and maintenance, the risk of failure is expected to be low. Beyond this period, the risk of asset failure is expected to increase, although for many types of asset the risk of failure remains low and we do not routinely replace assets solely because they are older than their expected operational life. We use a combination of more regular maintenance and inspection, along with a risk-based approach to ensure that assets remain safe while achieving value for money from our maintenance and renewal activities.



Future developments

We have taken steps to transform our approach to maintenance by establishing an asset management programme that develops and implements the Asset Management Framework for Highways England.

The framework aligns strategic objectives with regional asset management plans and lifecycle asset management plans. It also includes the analysis required to plan the investment and expenditure on the strategic road network during the next road period, developing the business case options for capital renewals. It will provide a clear articulation of the total value that will be delivered by investment in RIS2, including the costs and benefits of delivering the capital renewals programme.

Operations

We are establishing a nationally consistent approach to the management of our operational capability through our Operational Excellence change programme. This will deepen our understanding of how our interventions impact on the performance of the network and on the journeys of our customers. We are using the latest analytical software to process traffic data and gain insight into:

- how our operational services can improve safety and provide security to road users
- how the attendance of a traffic officer has an impact on incident durations
- how information provided by Highways England can benefit road users who plan their journeys beforehand and then while on their journeys

By better understanding our current operational performance, we can create a baseline from which we can identify opportunities for improvement.



4. Current investment plans and growth potential

Investment in the strategic road network can make areas more attractive for inward investment, unlock new sites for employment and housing and facilitate regeneration.

From servicing the UK's logistics needs, linking our manufacturing heartlands and connecting to our international gateways, supporting services-driven activity in high-growth towns and cities, to meeting the needs of our visitor economy, the SRN is critically important to servicing the UK economy.

Economic context

Highways England has been working with a wide range of stakeholders to develop a strategic economic growth plan, which we are calling *The Road to Growth*. This plan explores the economic role of the strategic road network, and aims to explain how we will further increase our contribution to the UK economy. As part of the evidence base for *The Road to Growth*, over 400 economic hotspots – or economic opportunity areas (EOAs) – around the SRN have been identified in consultation with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). The figures in this chapter highlight the EOAs which most closely align and are supported by the route.

To inform the development of *The Road to Growth* and assess the relationship between the SRN and economic growth, a suite of evidence reports were completed. These reports were published alongside The Road to Growth discussion paper and were subject to public consultation from November 2016 to January 2017. Alongside the engagement we have undertaken with all LEPs across England, the following evidence reports have ensured we have a more comprehensive economic evidence base and a better understanding of future challenges and opportunities:

- economic growth and the SRN – an evidence review of the relationship between transport investment and economic growth

- commercial development – an assessment of the relationship between the main property sectors and the SRN
- international gateways – a review of principal international gateways (ports and airports) and their contribution to the economy
- socio-economic analysis and future forecasts – mapping of socio-economic data (population, deprivation and employment) and sectoral forecasts up to 2030. This included identification of the likely growth forecasts for all sectors with a particular focus on those sectors heavily dependent on the SRN

The Road to Growth sets out our evidence findings to date and the steps we will take to enhance our enabling role in supporting economic growth.

Innovation

In April 2016, we published our Innovation, Technology and Research Strategy which set out how Highways England will use pioneering behaviours to help support our strategic objectives and create value for customers and stakeholders.

The £150 million Innovation Designated Fund was established to support innovative capital projects and to support developing the use of emerging technologies, new materials and ways of working.

Investment plans

The following figures show the location of Highways England major improvement projects which have previously been announced to help tackle some of the issues on the network. The Highways England website and delivery plan updates should be consulted for the latest information.

The figures also show strategic studies which have been progressed during RIS1, innovation projects and economic opportunity areas.

Birmingham to Exeter - Route Strategy: Map 1 of 3

KEY

Highways England major improvement project

Innovation

Strategic study

Economic opportunity areas

Housing and mixed use

Mixed employment cluster

Urban centre

International gateway

Industrial

Research and technology

Energy

Intermodal transport hub

Logistics



Figure 4.1 - Investment plans and economic opportunity areas

Birmingham to Exeter - Route Strategy: Map 2 of 3

KEY

- Highways England major improvement project
- Innovation
- Strategic study

Economic opportunity areas

- Housing and mixed use
- Mixed employment cluster
- Urban centre
- International gateway
- Industrial
- Research and technology
- Energy
- Intermodal transport hub
- Logistics

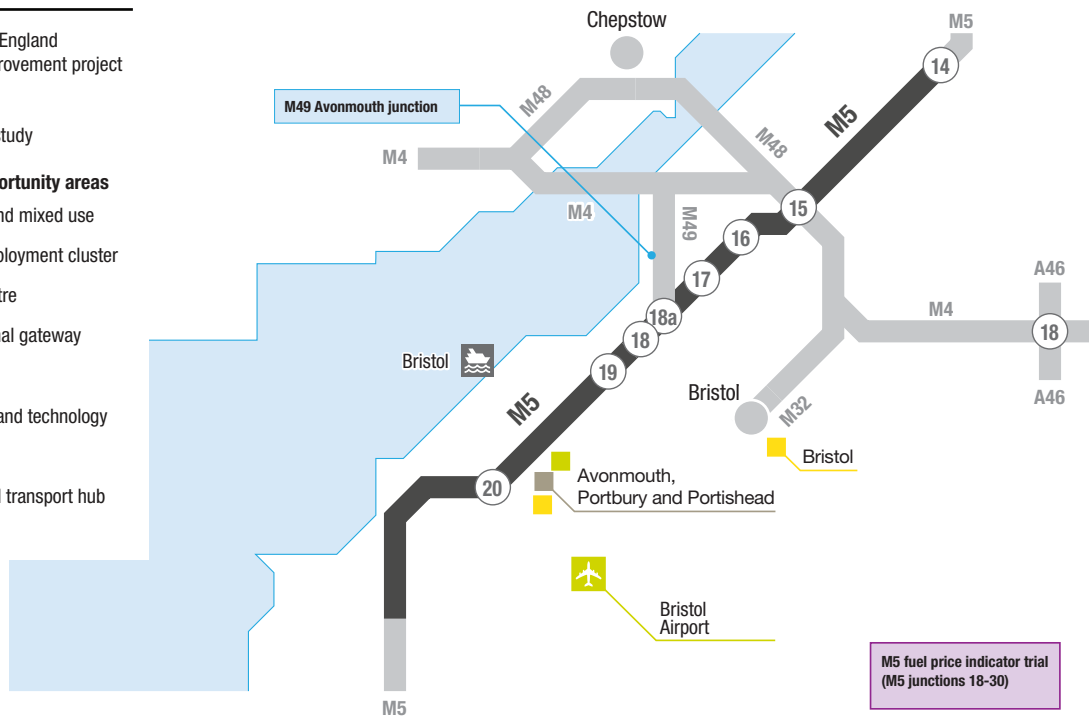


Figure 4.2 - Investment plans and economic opportunity areas

Birmingham to Exeter - Route Strategy: Map 3 of 3

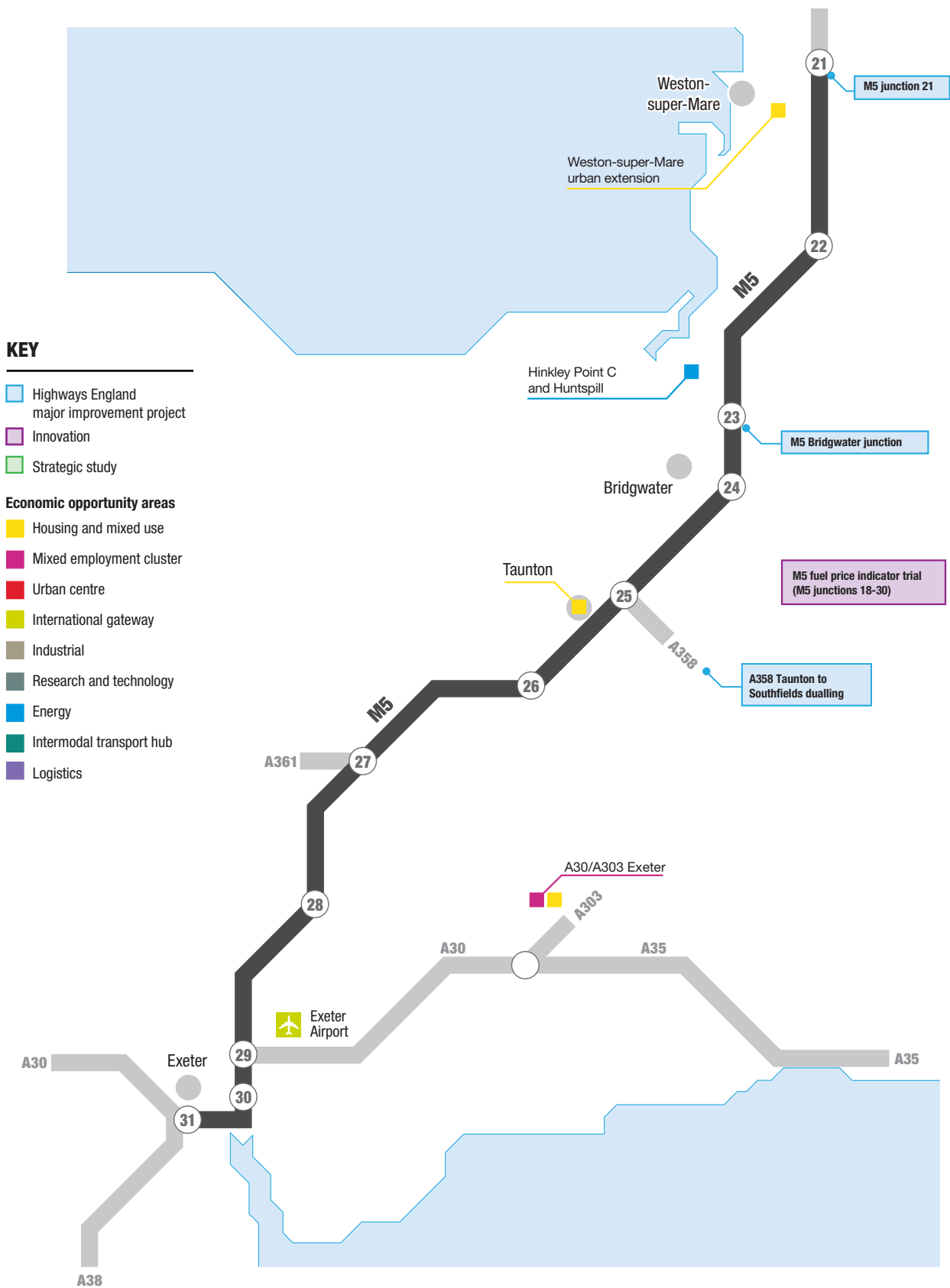


Figure 4.3 - Investment plans and economic opportunity areas

5. Future challenges and opportunities

Route Strategies have identified study areas on the strategic road network which require further investigation of the issues raised by stakeholders and identified through Highways England intelligence. These study areas will now be assessed further as part of our development for RIS2.

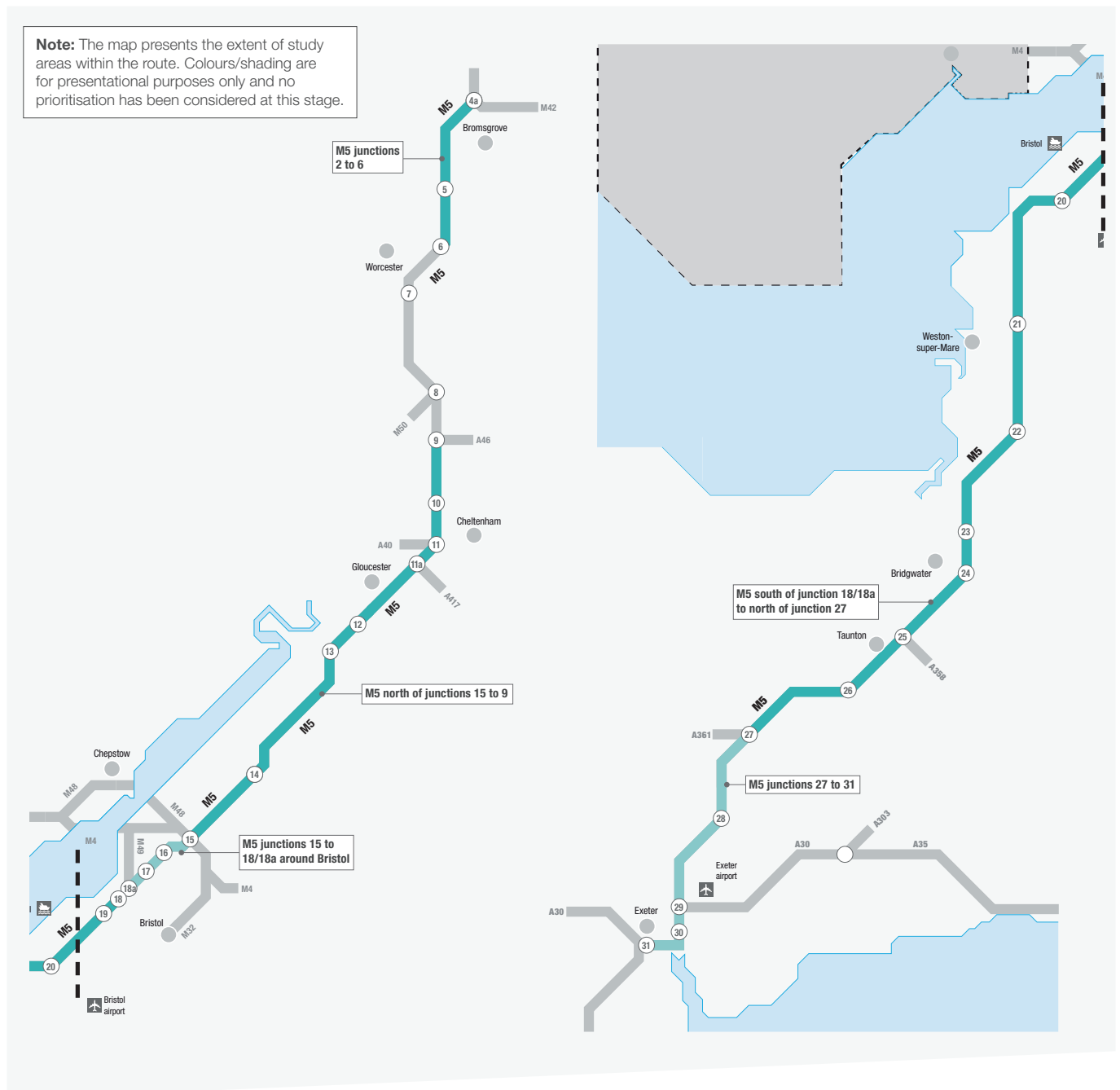
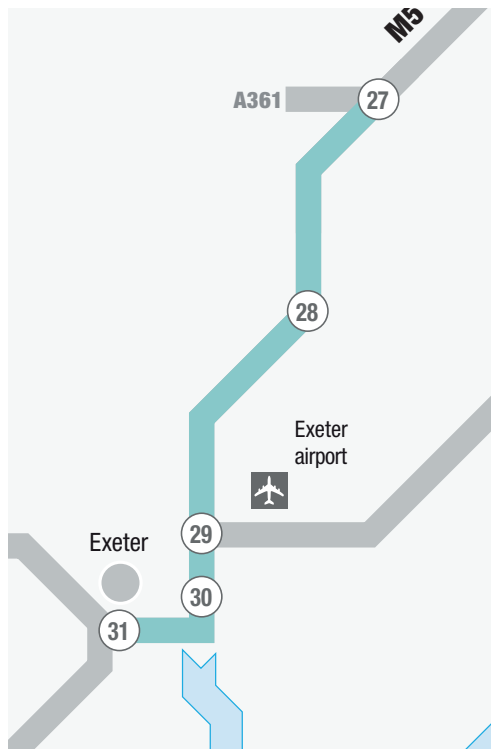


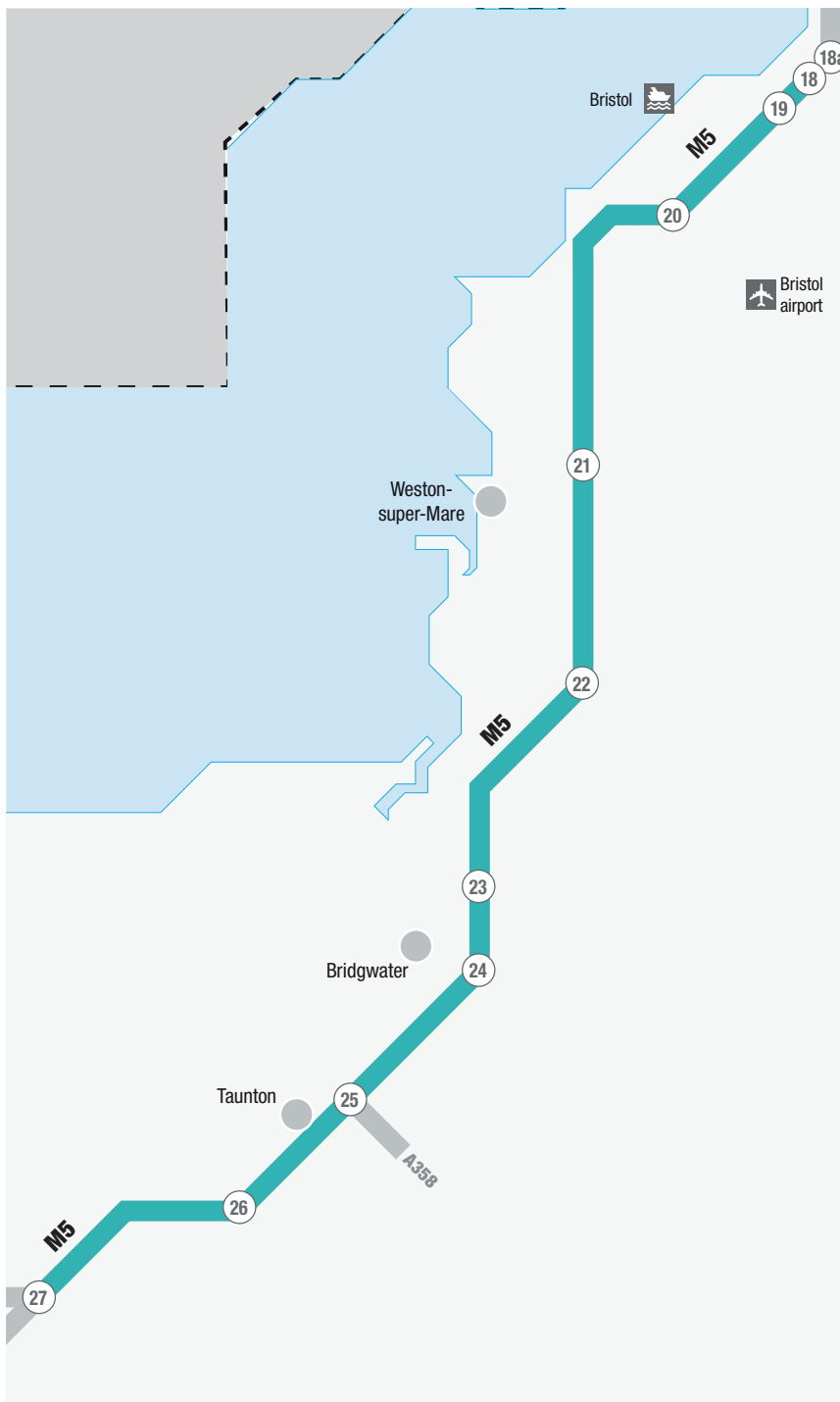
Figure 5.1 - Map of all study areas

M5 junctions 27 to 31



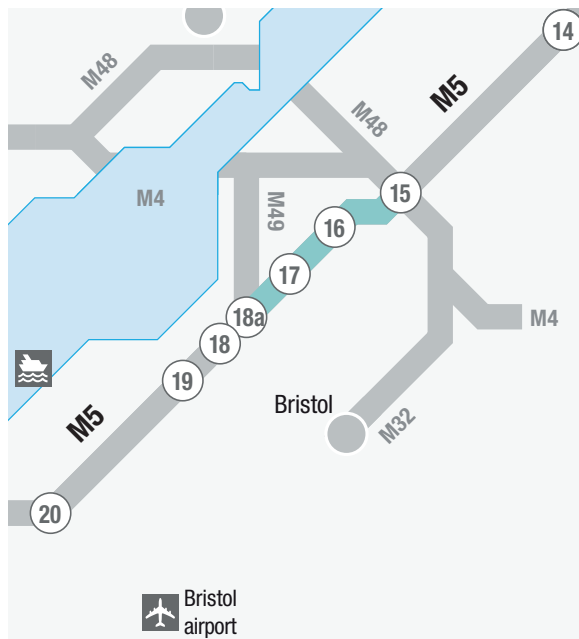
- M5 junction 31 is the main route into south Devon and Cornwall, while junction 27 is used for north Devon and junction 29 is used for Dorset.
- Future growth at Cullompton (garden village) and in and around Exeter will exacerbate congestion on the SRN at this location.
- Junctions 29 to 31 are a constraining point on the network where routes combine — A30 from the east and from the west. The section suffers from congestion and weaving issues.
- Large amounts of local traffic mix with long-distance traffic on this section of the network.
- High seasonal flows cause congestion at weekends during the holiday periods.

M5 south of junction 18/18a to north of junction 27



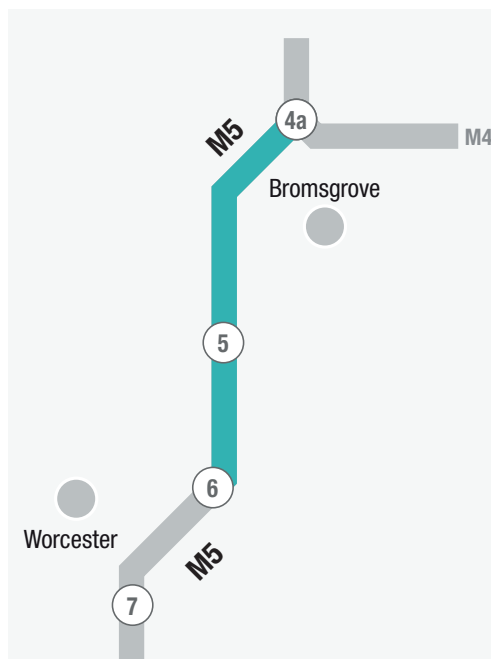
- The level of congestion, particularly at junctions 18 to 21, 22 and 25 will continue to increase.
- Due to congestion, areas of economic growth such as Avonmouth and Severnside, Burnham, Taunton and Bridgwater could be constrained.
- The majority of incidents occur at the junctions. Increasing traffic will lead to flow breakdown, and incidents on the mainline may also increase.
- Traffic diverting onto local roads will lead to more localised congestion and environmental issues.
- Lack of technology and information along the route is affecting the customer experience on this section of the network.
- High seasonal flows cause congestion at weekends during the holiday periods.

M5 junctions 15 to 18/18a around Bristol



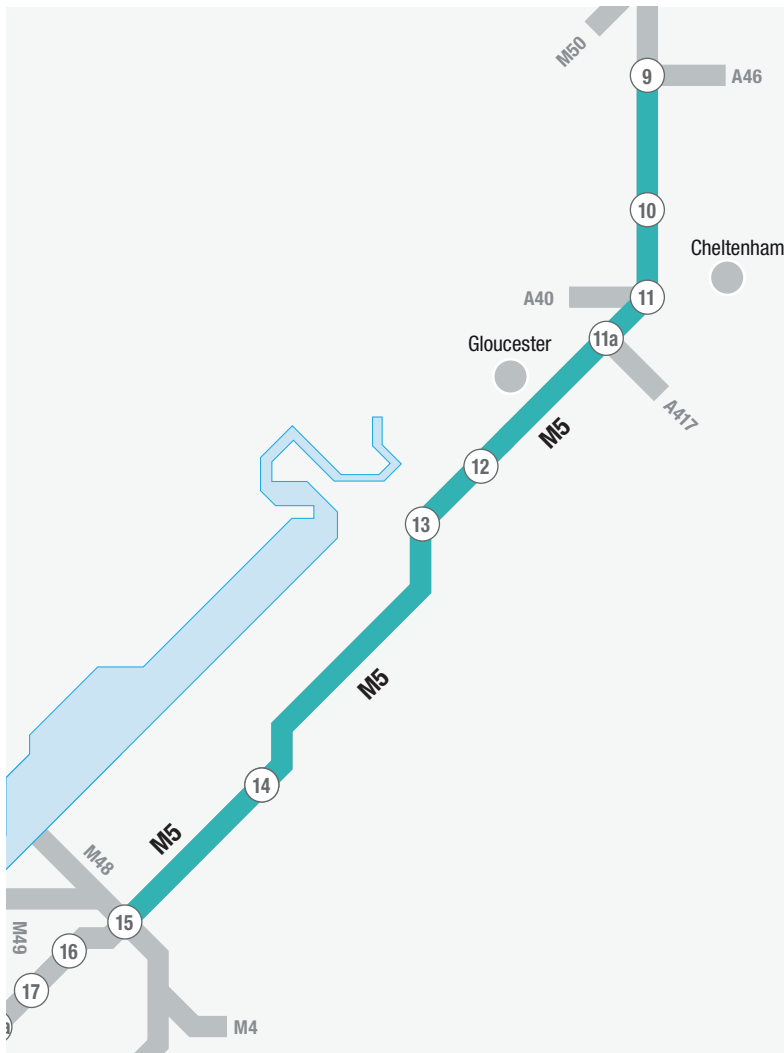
- The level of congestion, particularly at junctions 15, 16, 17 and 18/18a will continue to increase.
- Increasing congestion will constrain areas of economic growth, such as Avonmouth and Severnside and within and around Bristol.
- Junctions 18 and 18a are the main access to the future development sites at Avonmouth and Severnside.
- Congestion at these junctions could lead to an increase in incidents.
- There are large amounts of local traffic mixing with long-distance traffic on this section of the network.
- High seasonal flows cause congestion at weekends during the holiday periods.

M5 junctions 2 to 6



- Future growth in Bromsgrove, Worcester and the Black Country will exacerbate congestion on the strategic road network.
- There are large volumes of local traffic mixed with long-distance traffic on this section of the network.
- Congestion and poor journey time reliability, particularly between junctions 1 and 5, is affecting the customer experience on this section of the network.

M5 north of junctions 15 to 9



- The level of congestion, particularly at junctions 9, 10, 11, 11a, 12 and 14, will continue to increase. At more than 1 of the junctions the queues already extend back to the mainline, causing safety concerns.
- This increasing congestion could constrain areas of economic growth such as Tewkesbury, West Cheltenham, Gloucester and Stroud.
- Congestion at the junctions could lead to an increase in incidents.



6. Next steps

Our findings from this and other Route Strategies, as well as other research, will inform our first Strategic Road Network Initial Report which is to be published later this year. This will form the basis of a public consultation, which in turn will feed into decision-making on the next Road Investment Strategy (RIS2).

We are looking ahead to the next RIS and how we can support the Secretary of State in ensuring that value for money investments are made in the road network. The process for developing RIS2 is set out in our licence, and is in 3 phases: research, decision and mobilisation.

We are currently in the first phase – **research phase** – where we are gathering wide-ranging evidence on the state of the network and how we can ensure that improvements have maximum impact. The series of Route Strategies, of which this is one, is an important part of this phase alongside the outcomes of strategic studies which looked at particularly complicated problems on parts of the network and how to tackle them. Another key source of evidence is the Strategic Economic Growth Plan (*The Road to Growth*), which examines where and how the SRN can help support economic growth. This will emphasise that sectors dependent on the road network employ 7.4 million people, that we are already doing a great deal to support growth and that we want to do even more.

Now that this series of Route Strategies is published, we will continue our engagement with stakeholders, including other transport providers and authorities, on how best to address problems and maximise opportunities. For example, in working towards seamless end-to-end journeys for our customers, we will be focussing on how the strategic road network links with local roads and other modes of transport.

Findings from the research phase will feed into Highways England's Strategic Road Network Initial Report, expected to be published later this year, which will outline Highways England's ambitions for the network across 2020–2025 and beyond. The Initial Report will be the subject of public consultation.

In the **decision phase**, the consultation feedback will assist the Department for Transport in developing RIS2. In turn we will develop a Strategic Business Plan (SBP) setting out how we will deliver RIS2 as a business. Both the RIS and SBP will be reviewed by the regulator of roads, the Office of Rail and Road, to ensure that we have made the most efficient decisions. The final documents are to be published in 2019.



Figure 6.1 - RIS2 high-level process

In the final **mobilisation phase**, we will set out a Delivery Plan with a detailed programme of investment to be carried out in 2020 to 2025 on the basis of the commitments in RIS2.

Continued investment in modernisation, maintenance and operation will further improve the road network on top of the measures and schemes currently being undertaken, and will allow us to further support users of the strategic road network and the UK's economy. The rigorous process of developing RIS2 should ensure that the best use is made of taxpayers' money and that investments have the maximum impact.

The views and perspectives of different stakeholders, including motorists, are important to us. Stakeholders may also wish to contact one of the partner organisations. For example, stakeholders can keep up to date with Transport Focus' work, by signing up to their monthly electronic newsletter *Road User Voice*. Alternatively, stakeholders may prefer to make their views known through one of the many organisations involved in RIS2. They include the AA, RAC, RAC Foundation, Road Haulage Association, Freight Transport Association, Campaign for Better Transport, Confederation of British Industry and many others.

We will provide information about the process and emerging findings at events for representative organisations in spring 2017. At the same time, we are developing the dialogue with emerging SNTBs, local government, LEPs, business groups and environmental organisations. We want to align our analysis, and eventually our decision-making, with that of other organisations, so that we can maximise the benefit of investment, for example focusing on improving the interconnectivity between different modes and between the strategic and local road networks. This should lead to a richer discussion during public consultation on the Strategic Road Network Initial Report.





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