

M4 to Dorset Coast Connectivity RIS2 (2020 – 2025): Strategic Study



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Foreword

Highways England is the government company which plans, designs, builds, operates and maintains England's motorways and major A-roads, known as the Strategic Road Network (SRN). This network connects England's major urban areas, provides access to geographically peripheral areas and major ports and airports, and enables cross-border connectivity across the United Kingdom.

There are few north-south connections across the South West of England. At present, east of the M5 motorway spine, the SRN route uses the A46 and A36 via Bath and Salisbury. There are more direct routes that use either the A350 or A338 corridors, but neither of these roads currently form part of the SRN. Stakeholders we have spoken to consider that a lack of suitable north-south road connections from the Dorset Coast to the M4, and onwards to Bristol and the Midlands, is constraining growth across the region, and leading to problems with congestion and highway safety.

As such, the Government included a commitment in its second Road Investment Strategy (RIS2) to undertake a strategic study into road connectivity between the M4 corridor and the Dorset Coast, incorporating the major towns of Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole, Weymouth and Portland.

We will now be undertaking this study, exploring the role of both the existing A46 / A36 SRN corridor as well as other road corridors, including the A34, A350, A338 and parts of the A37. The study will consider their performance against a range of objectives agreed with key local stakeholders through workshops in the first half of 2021, and aligned with both RIS2 and wider government objectives. These objectives are shown later in this booklet, on page 5. The Strategic Study sits alongside and will input into a wider corridor study led by the Western Gateway strategic transport body, which will consider wider transport connectivity issues, including rail.

As we take this work forward, we want to work closely with local partners and stakeholders so that we can support both national, regional and local aspirations and objectives. We recognise that the SRN does not operate in isolation and is an important part of the wider transport network, supporting the movement of people and goods, the operation of bus and coach services, and walking and cycling. We will therefore be seeking input and critique from a wider range of organisations to help identify local context, issues and aspirations.

This booklet has been developed to set out our approach to the study and how we propose to work collaboratively with you and other key partners to fulfil its objectives. We look forward to working with you on this important study.



Planning for the Future

In RIS2, the Government set out its vision for a safer, more reliable and greener SRN that uses new technology, supports the country's economy and is an integrated part of the national transport network.

Looking beyond the second road period (2020-2025), we will continue to keep our customers at the centre of our long-term planning approach. We will work collaboratively with communities and partner organisations to best achieve the Government's strategic vision, as described in our Strategic Business Plan¹ and Delivery Plan². Our proposed approach to planning for the future of our roads is set out in our Vision for Route Strategies³ document, published in June. This vision will ensure that we develop and operate the network our country needs to prosper in the decades to come.

Our route strategies process provides an opportunity for us to better understand pressing priorities and be clear about what we intend to do where, why and when. We are already working on the next generation of route strategies, building on committed enhancement schemes and the pipeline of schemes being developed for possible construction for the next roads period (2025-2030).

Our strategic studies address complex problems on our network and, along with our route strategies, inform our longer-term plans for the SRN. This M4 to Dorset Coast Connectivity Study is one of the new strategic studies set out in RIS2.



¹ <https://highwaysengland.co.uk/strategic-business-plan/>

² <https://highwaysengland.co.uk/delivery-plan/index.html>

³ <https://highwaysengland.co.uk/media/w0vhd3un/vision-for-route-strategies.pdf>

Connecting the M4 and the Dorset Coast

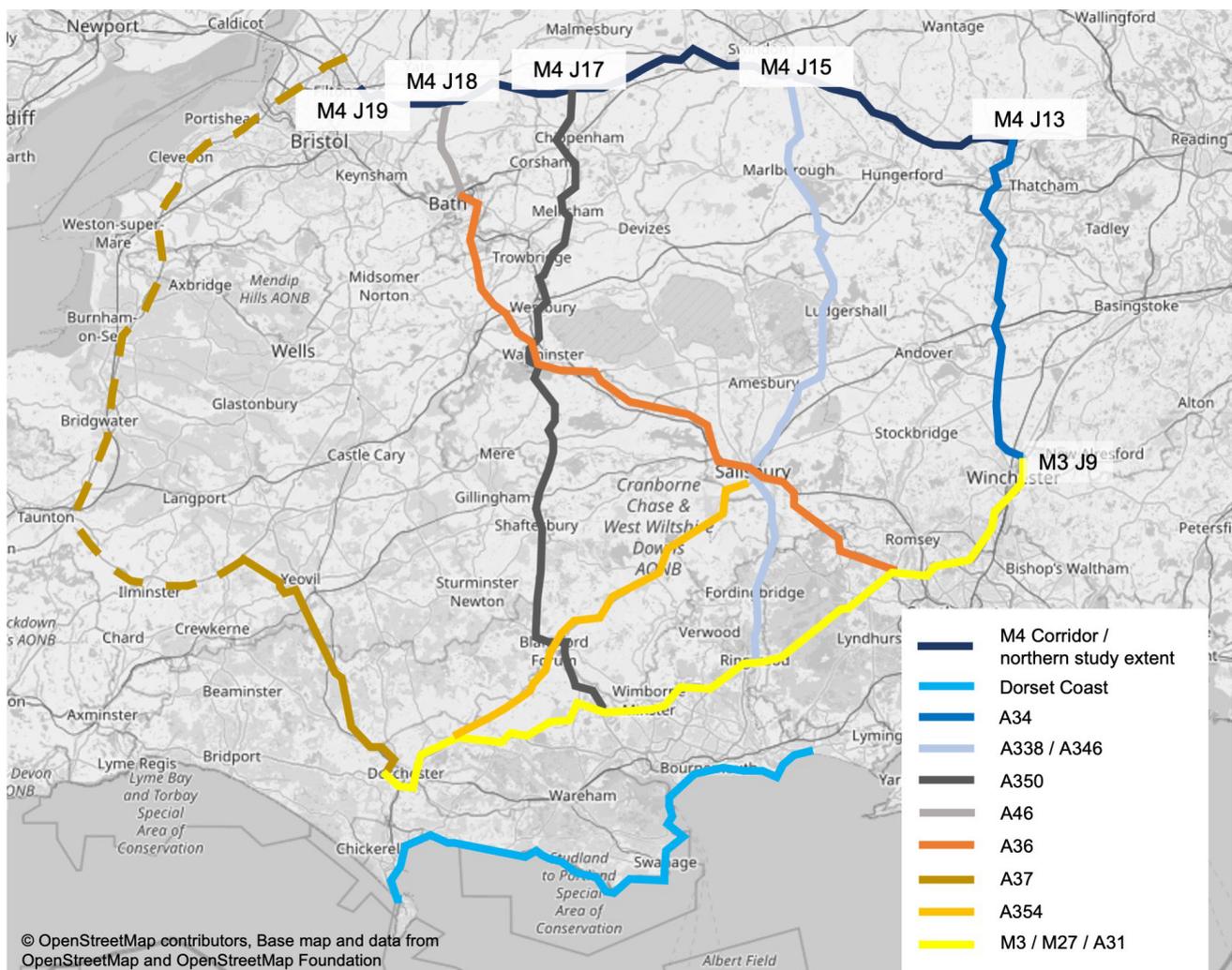
There are few direct north-south connections across the South West of England. The present strategic route for this area is a mixture of the A36 and A46, via Bath, Warminster and Salisbury. We are aware that there is concern amongst local communities that the volume of traffic using this route is leading to problems with congestion, road safety and air quality, and is impacting on the Bath World Heritage Site.

Key stakeholders in the area have suggested that there may be a strategic case for adopting an alternative corridor as the main strategic route for the area. This could be accompanied by a coordinated programme of upgrades to provide a quicker, more reliable and high-quality route linking the M4 to the Dorset Coast including Bournemouth and Poole, with its economically-important port facilities.

Through the first half of 2021 we have been working with key stakeholders, including the DfT, local authorities and Sub-National Transport

Bodies to agree the scope of the Strategic Study and to undertake initial work looking at the range of potential different routes that are in scope and assessing their characteristics and performance against our study objectives. We have agreed that the Study will investigate a number of routes beyond the existing A46 / A36 SRN corridor and A350 corridor identified in RIS2, including different combinations of routes that use the roads shown in the figure below. This includes existing SRN (A34, A36 and A46), parts of the future Major Road Network (parts of the A338 and A350), and major A-roads (the A37, A346, A354 and the remainder of the A338 and A350).

We have also agreed that only the part of the A37 that provides access to the A303 (where committed improvements schemes are being developed) and onwards to the M5 will be included in the project scope. The remainder of the A37 will not be considered due to the complexities in connecting through Bristol onto the M4.



Our Approach

From Summer 2021

The initial stage of our work will focus on bringing together evidence on the role that each of the corridors within the scope of the Strategic Study is currently playing, and the influences behind any changes to this in the future, taking account of the aspirations of relevant partner organisations and key stakeholders. This work will be carried out throughout the remainder of 2021 and early 2022 and will focus on:

- A review of the current role of each corridor through examining road usage patterns (including existing patterns of congestion, accidents and freight movement) as well as considering how each road corridor supports the local economy and impacts on local communities and the local environment and landscape.
- Engagement with local and regional partners to understand how the local context is likely to change in the future, including through the implementation of committed transport schemes and the potential impacts of development and growth around these corridors.

- A call for proposals to help us develop a longlist of potential interventions that could be brought forward to help improve connectivity between the M4 and Dorset Coast.

From early 2022

Work will start with a sifting of our longlist of interventions, based on their performance against a set of agreed Study objectives (shown below), alongside deliverability considerations. This will result in a shortlist of interventions that can be combined in a number of corridor scenarios and be tested using our area-wide strategic highways models.

This process will allow us to understand the performance of different corridors against each other, and to determine whether an alternative strategic corridor would perform better than the existing A46 / A36 route. It will also allow us to identify interventions that could be brought together to achieve the overall objective of improving connectivity between the M4 and the Dorset Coast.

We are aiming to report the recommendations from our work in late summer 2022.

Improving Safety for All	Providing Fast and Reliable Journeys	Delivering Better Environmental Outcomes	Meeting the Needs of All Users
Provide a safe route linking the M4 to the Dorset Coast	Provide a quick, direct route linking the M4 and the Dorset Coast Reduce delays and improve journey time variability caused by congestion Help ensure convenient access from ports on the Dorset coast to the M4 for freight traffic	Provide opportunities for travel by sustainable and low carbon modes Identify opportunities to improve the natural environment and green infrastructure Be a good neighbour and improve access and environments for communities	Provide opportunities for walking, cycling and horse riding to enable healthier lifestyles Provide a route that appropriately separates strategic and local traffic Provide a route that supports tourism, economic growth and jobs

Our Approach

Future Phases of Work

The M4 to Dorset Coast Connectivity Study is intended to be a strategic study to determine whether an alternative strategic corridor to provide the desired level of connectivity exists. If the Study shows that this is the case, it is likely that it will also identify a number of schemes that might be required to bring the preferred corridor up to the required standard to form part of the SRN, which minimise the impact of strategic traffic movements on the environment, landscape and local communities, and provide associated benefits to the area, for example through the provision of new walking and cycling routes.

These schemes will potentially be of a scale where they would need to be subject to separate studies in their own right, and we will determine how to take these forward upon completion of the Strategic Study in the second half of 2022. The findings of these studies would further inform decisions on investment and delivery in future roads periods.

Next Steps

Throughout the process outlined above we will continue to engage with key partners and stakeholders, building on the workshops we have held to develop the scope of this work.

We want our partners to understand the process we are taking to deliver this study and have the opportunity to influence its outcomes, critique our approach and help us shape the study findings, ensuring we find the right balance in addressing the important questions.

In particular, we are aware that the Western Gateway Sub-National Transport Body are undertaking their own set of multi-modal transport corridor studies throughout 2021 and 2022, including one that will consider movement between the Midlands and the South Coast. We have been, and will continue to work closely with Western Gateway to align the two studies as closely as possible, sharing our evidence and testing potential interventions to make sure that the study outputs are co-ordinated and complementary.

Moving forward, our first step will be to invite key stakeholders, including local authorities, sub-national transport bodies and local enterprise partnerships to contribute to our evidence base over the Autumn. However, if you have any initial questions or thoughts about this study then don't hesitate to get in touch. Contact details for the study are provided at the rear of this booklet.



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