

Road Verges of Ecological Importance (RVEI) in Hampshire

Introduction

The objective of the Road Verges of Ecological Importance (RVEI) project is to identify the location and management requirements of ecologically important road verges in Hampshire, and for HCC Highways and their contractors to ensure the correct management is implemented.

Verges are often the only remaining semi-natural habitat in a farmed or urban landscape. This means they have had no artificial inputs of pesticides or fertilisers and have not been ploughed or re-seeded.

As a result they can support a rich and varied range of plants, many of which have vanished elsewhere in the countryside. This botanical diversity in turn provides a haven for pollinating insects, butterflies and small mammals and a feeding ground for birds. Road Verges also provide important connecting links for wildlife, linking areas of grassland with other valuable wildlife habitats such as hedgerows and woodland. This helps plants and animals to move as they need, to cope with disturbance and adapt to climate change. The most ecologically important verges within Hampshire have been included in the RVEI project.

The standard routine management of road verges

The County Council Highways Department is responsible for the management of the verges on all roads in the county, except motorways and major trunk roads. However, in built-up urban areas in towns and villages (usually defined as areas with 30mph or 40mph speed limits) the district councils maintain the highway verges on the County's behalf. In most cases they do so at a higher cutting frequency in order to match the civic amenity standards they set for other public open spaces. The grass-cutting frequencies vary from district to district according to the level of enhancement the individual district/borough councils have chosen.

In rural areas, HCC maintain the highway verges (via appointed contractors) with a standard cutting regime whereby grass and foliage are now cut once per year, during summer. Swathes are cut back to 1m or 2m wide, depending on location. Where there is a visibility or safety issue, the verges will be cut as frequently as necessary to keep sight lines open.

Once every three years the whole width of the verge is cut right back to the highways boundary to prevent them becoming too overgrown. HCC cut 3,700 km of rural verge every year.

Sites identified as being of ecological importance are included in the RVEI project and are covered by a separate cutting programme regardless of whether they are urban or rural site.

See: <https://www.hants.gov.uk/transport/roadmaintenance/grasscutting>

Identifying RVEI sites

A wide range of data has been used to identify appropriate sites since the 1980's. This has included an ongoing botanical survey programme co-ordinated by the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre, and species records from conservation organisations, individual botanists, members of the public and Town and Parish Councils. Evaluation and selection of RVEI sites is undertaken by the Hampshire Biodiversity Information Centre (HBIC). To qualify as an RVEI, the road verge must be recognised as meeting the criteria for a 'Site of Importance for Nature Conservation' (SINC). This is a county wide designation that recognises local sites of substantive nature conservation value. The site must either support a good quality fragment of unimproved or semi natural habitat (grassland/ woodland/ heathland/fen etc.) or support one or more notable species. The one exception to this is where there is local public interest in a road verge that doesn't quite meet SINC criteria but supports an attractive flowering vegetation community. These sites have been added to the RVEI project on the basis of 'community interest'.

Of particular importance are a number of verges around the south Basingstoke area which are included in the RVEI scheme, as they support the Striped Lychnis moth. The Striped Lychnis moth is nationally rare and restricted to the southern counties of England. In Hampshire, the caterpillars have been found almost exclusively on the tall yellow flower spikes of the Dark mullein plant (*Verbascum nigrum*) which are present on these verges. Eggs are laid in June and July on the underside of leaves, and the caterpillars hatch in August. The caterpillar when fully grown is about 4cm long, bright yellow and green, with yellow bands and black stripes and spots on each body segment. These verges should not be disturbed between May and September when the food plant is in flower, so these verges should only have one early full width cut in April. This will help reduce the vigour of the vegetation that has grown up over the winter and is still early enough not to damage any emerging Dark mullein flower heads.

The detailed list of SINC criteria can be found here:

<https://www.hants.gov.uk/landplanningandenvironment/environment/biodiversity/informationcentre/sincs>

Management of RVEI sites

Plants need to remain uncut throughout their flowering and seeding seasons if they are to survive and reproduce. Routine cutting that takes place during the summer can be damaging and when carried out repeatedly in consecutive years can result in plant extinction. This means that most RVEI verges will be cut in April and/or September instead of the routine management.

This helps to ensure the survival of rare species and/or species rich grassland, as it avoids cutting during the flowering times of key species and allows the plants time to set seed (flowering times as defined in *A Wildflower Key* by Francis Rose). However cuttings are left in situ and can cause a mulching effect which needs to be monitored as this can also be deleterious to the survival of the rare plant/community. More frequent cutting can help reduce the mulching effect.

Each RVEI site is allocated to one of four cutting regimes

- **April cut:** for verges with species, which would still be in flower in September.
- **Late September cut:** for verges with species, which would be in flower during the April cutting period.
- **April and late September cuts:** for verges with species flowering and setting seed between May and mid September
- **Routine cut:** the standard routine cutting regime outlined earlier where it is the most appropriate for maintaining their ecological interest.

The RVEI cut is normally for the full width of the verge. RVEI sites WILL NOT be subject to the routine 1-2m rural swathe cuts carried out in the summer unless required for visibility reasons. Each RVEI site has a risk assessment carried out by County Highways to assess if visibility cutting is needed for safety reasons or to maintain right of way. The safety of road users takes priority over the allocated RVEI cutting regime.

Each RVEI site will have several marker posts installed on the verge to alert contractors to check the management code and to raise awareness of the project. The marker post locations will be checked each year to ensure they reflect the correct location of RVEI sites.

Monitoring of RVEI sites

There are some 200 RVEIs in Hampshire. HBIC undertake to re-survey all RVEI sites over a ten year cycle to ensure the management regime that is being applied is effective in maintaining their interest. Data/observations from the public and local naturalists for particular RVEIs are welcomed.

Information held

The following information is maintained by HBIC on a geographic information system (GIS) and supplied to HCC Highways and other partner organisations including utility companies.

- Unique reference of site assigned by HBIC e.g. RV043
- Road number and name e.g. U170 Port Lane
- Unique Street Reference Number from National Street Gazetteer e.g. USRN 44301989
- Approximate central grid reference of road verge site e.g. SU44332629
- Description of location of site e.g. Both sides of Port Lane south of Down farm
- Any other designations such as SSSI or SINC or RVEI
- Interest features of site such as Chalk Flora, Woodland Flora, Invertebrate species etc.
- Number of indicator species i.e.: plants that indicate it is a good quality example of that type of habitat or lists specific species that are considered notable*
- Months during which interest features are visible or most vulnerable e.g. Jul-Sep
- Date the interest was first confirmed on the site
- Date of the last survey (HBIC hold survey data)
- Timing of cut that is most suitable for site e.g. April cut only

***Notable species** include species protected under European legislation and the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 (as amended); and species listed under; S41 of the Natural & Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (Priority species); the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species; the Birds of Conservation Concern Red list; and species listed as being nationally, county, or vice-county rare or scarce. Many species will have several designations.

Contact Details

For further information about verge cutting or verge signs please contact:

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For further information on the RVEI project or to report important plant sightings please contact:

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