

RETURNING TO WORKING PARTIES TAKING INTO ACCOUNT COVID-19 AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

Working parties have been suspended since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the need for social distancing measures in line with other organisations. Working parties are the key element of how The Hanneys Flood Group protects our villages on behalf of the residents and local community assets. Some thought has been given as to when and how The Hanneys Flood Group could resume at least some working party activity and what changes to procedures are needed to be implemented to enable that to happen.

The **main risks** that work parties present in terms of COVID-19 transmission relate to

- **safe working distances**
- **handling of tools and equipment**
- **provision of PPE.**

Safe Working Distances

Issue

For most tasks, volunteers work together or semi-independently with hand tools at a distance of more than 2 metres so that they do not injure each other with tools or branches etc. Some tasks involve “buddying up” – for example working on the water, cutting large tree limbs or shifting a heavy branch, where it is easier and safer for more than one person to work in close proximity.

Some work areas involve narrow footpaths, ditches, culverts restricted in size, etc and some tasks naturally limit how many people can effectively take part – this may impact on being able to maintain social distancing.

Solution

The type of site and nature of the task needs to be taken into consideration when deciding how many volunteers can take part in a work party to ensure social distancing can be observed.

Working practices need to be changed to ensure those tasks that bring volunteers into close proximity of each other are either modified or excluded for the time being. Clearing fallen trees from the Brooks has been successfully trialled using two and three man teams.

We should limit work parties to a smaller more manageable size, at least to start with – say a maximum of 8 volunteers. We have 30+ reasonably active volunteers on our books and have had between 8 and 26 at each work party during 2019 -2020.

Handling of Tools

Issue

Tools present a potential source of transmission as they may be handled by more than one person.

Solution

All volunteers should wear gloves to protect their hands. Tools (previously cleaned) are issued to individual volunteers for the duration of the work party and are not widely shared amongst the group. Tools are wiped down with disinfectant wipes before being placed back in the Hanney Hut at the end of the session. Once returned to the Hanney Hut they should not be used again for a minimum of 72 hours.

PPE

Issue

At present work gloves are provided by The Hanneys Flood Group for all volunteers and need to be worn for all tasks, these are not personal issue and are just held in open boxes in the Hanney Hut. The same goes for safety helmets, lifejackets, waders and high-viz vests. Waders and lifejackets are mandatory when working in the water and are frequently worn by at least some members of each working party. Other PPE is only worn for occasional tasks. All shared PPE provides a potential risk of transmission.

Solution

Gloves are provided to each volunteer on a personal issue basis and are then retained and cleaned as necessary by the volunteer, or the volunteer has the option to use their own gloves.

Lifejackets and waders are provided to selected volunteers on a personal issue basis and then retained by that volunteer for the duration of this pandemic. (To minimise the potential for COVID-19 transmission, some waders, lifejackets, gloves and wading sticks are currently already personally issued to strategically located key holders who are experienced HFG Team Leader volunteers in case of sudden flooding. This is to ensure somebody with a key can access the Hanney Hut and its equipment in a flood or other emergency).

Helmets and Hi-Viz vests can be handed out on the day as personal issue to those carrying out tasks requiring their use. Helmets can be wiped down with disinfectant at the end of use and handed back to the Team Leader who can carry out a further clean if necessary before they are re-used. High-viz vests can be collected in, laundered if necessary by the Team Leader. Once returned to the Hanney Hut they should not be used again for a minimum of 72 hours.

Other considerations

Contact Tracing

Team Leaders to keep a record of all volunteers present at a work party (we do this anyway). Volunteers must notify the Team Leader if they later display any COVID-19 symptoms. The Team Leader to contact all volunteers present to warn them of possible contact with someone suffering from COVID-19.

We should make it clear that volunteers must not attend work parties if they or any family member display any possible symptoms of COVID-19. Also, that they should not attend if they are in a high-risk vulnerable group or are actively shielding.

We could consider requiring volunteers to wear face masks whilst volunteering. This is likely to be tricky as volunteering is hard physical work and the wearing of a face mask could present problems with over-heating and discomfort. It is also difficult to reposition masks when wearing work gloves. Preference would be not to require the wearing of face masks as we rarely work in such close proximity to other volunteers or to members of the public due to the nature of tasks and sites we work on. If volunteers want to wear a mask then they should bring their own.

Education and public events are not at present taking place but our practices and activities offered may need to be reviewed in line with latest guidance before we resume such activities.

As general good practice all volunteers must bring and use antibacterial hand sanitiser at the beginning and end of their working party, and, wash their hands thoroughly when returning home.

Question: With the suggested working practices outlined above in place could we consider resuming volunteer work parties in August 2020?

Answer: We can return to holding working parties with the additional guidance and hygiene measures outlined above in place with limited numbers of volunteers, following The Hanneys Flood Group COVID-19 Safe Guidelines for Working Parties Risk Assessment, 1st August 2020.