

Special protocols during the covid-19 emergency

Harrow Nature Conservation Forum April 26th 2021

The government's latest advice (21st April 2021) states "When you volunteer, you can meet in groups of any size from different households, both indoors or outdoors. However, meeting in smaller groups can reduce the risk of coronavirus spreading. You can also meet in groups for activities like volunteer recruitment and training. This does not include meeting in groups for social activities."

Physical meetings outdoors to review sites, discuss work with contractors etc., and committee meetings held outdoors.

This refers to meetings held entirely outdoors.

Participants should maintain a two metre distance at all times.

Passing of materials from one person to another should be avoided. All paperwork, maps etc. should be circulated electronically before the meeting.

If it is unavoidable that more than one person touch the same object then hand sanitizer with an alcohol content greater than 60% should be used by everyone touching the object both before and after touching it. Participants should not use their hands to depress the plunger, use a clothed part of the body – e.g. the forearm if wearing long sleeves. Where possible (e.g. at the car park at Wood Farm) have a route to a wash basin with soap ready and free to access so that participants can wash their hands after the meeting without touching any door handles on the way in or out.

Working parties

Up to now we have applied strict protocols to ensure that virus cannot be transmitted between volunteers by contact with tools. Transmission via surfaces was initially flagged as important when COVID-19 responses were based on those effective against influenza. In fact, transmission of COVID-19 via surfaces seems to be relatively unimportant. The Centre for Disease Control in the USA writes "Spread from touching surfaces is not thought to be a common way that COVID-19 spreads". As the incidence of the disease falls, and as more and more volunteers have been immunized, we believe that the strict rules on tools, where once touched a tool had to remain in a locked room for three days before being used again, can be set aside.

However this only emphasizes how important it is to maintain measures to reduce the risk of person to person contact, and these are set out in the protocol below.

Invitations to working parties

Until the COVID-19 emergency relaxes further we will not advertise working parties widely, for example on the HNC website or via the general email alert. Rather, a relatively small number who we know or who have indicated particular interest will be contacted by email before each working party. In that email people should be told that they must not attend a working party if they have any of the three common symptoms of COVID-19; that is:

- a high temperature – this means you feel hot to touch on your chest or back (you do not need to measure your temperature)
- a new, continuous cough – this means coughing a lot for more than an hour, or 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours (if you usually have a cough, it may be worse than usual)
- a loss or change to your sense of smell or taste – this means you've noticed you cannot smell or taste anything, or things smell or taste different to normal

Anyone with these symptoms should self-isolate and contact the NHS for the appropriate test kit (at time of writing, this is a PCR test, not a lateral flow test).

At the tool store

Tools can be collected from or returned to the tool store at any time. When a group is present outside the tool store, as occurs before a working party at Stanmore Common, the normal practice should be that one person goes inside to collect or return the tools and the store is then locked. There must never be more than one person in the tool store at any one time. If two people in a group outside the tool store do both need to go in to collect or return particular items then they must go in one after the other and should both wear face masks.

Gloves

Even before COVID-19 volunteers usually wore gardening style protective gloves during working parties. Such wearing of gloves should be especially encouraged now. In particular, any tool that is shared between volunteers should always be handled using gloves.

Skin hygiene

Hand sanitizer with an alcohol content greater than 60% will be stored in the tool store and available at all times during the working party. Volunteers should not use their hands to depress the plunger, use a clothed part of the body – e.g. the forearm if wearing long sleeves. Volunteers should apply hand sanitizer or wash their hands with soap and water:

- On arrival at the meeting point
- Any time gloves are removed and in particular before a meal break
- At the end of the work party before leaving for home

Please use the bottles of sanitizer in numerical order and alert Steve Bolsover as soon as the last bottle (it is so marked!) begins to be used.

Social distancing

Volunteers are to remain two metres apart at all times. There are to be no exceptions to this rule and organizers must plan tasks consistent with it.

Lunch breaks are a pleasant part of all day working parties and are even more important in these days of increased social isolation. However social distancing must be maintained – all volunteers must sit at least two metres apart and all breaks must take place in the open air – even where a building is available (the Old Dairy, the Masefield Avenue building) this is not to be used by volunteers at break times.

It is traditional for organizers to bring biscuits and other treats for volunteers. This can continue but carried out carefully to avoid possible transmission: bring a new, unopened packet of biscuits or candy bars, sanitize hands then open the packet carefully so as not to touch the biscuits or candy, and set the packet out so that volunteers can help themselves by touching only the item they are taking. At the end of the break the person who brought the packet should take any remainder home for their own use.

In the earlier, stricter version of this protocol it was stated: *“Bags, backpacks and other items brought by volunteers must remain with them or on the ground at the work site. They should be transported to the work site by that volunteer, not in a wheelbarrow. No volunteer should touch another volunteer’s bag or other item.”* Since transmission via surfaces is thought to be rare this rule can now be relaxed, but we should still try to minimize handling of bags by multiple volunteers.

Injuries

A first aid kit from the tool store should be taken to the work site as usual. If an injury occurs then social distancing may have to be abandoned. Use common sense: the first priority is treating the injury and getting the injured person help or to hospital if that is necessary. If time allows, the organizer should remove their gloves and apply hand sanitizer to their hands before administering first aid, however if immediate attention is required the organiser and others should give it and apply hand sanitizer once the immediate crisis is over.

Stephen Bolsover 26th April 2021