

Solihull Group

Risk Assessments – Notes for Guidance

Introduction.

The idea that walk leaders should complete a risk assessment, first emerged as part of the COVID-19 protocols which allowed us to start up group walks again when the first lockdown eased. Since then, there has been a further development, in that the providers of Rambler's public liability insurance etc., are asking for risk assessments to be carried out, as part of the commercial agreement with them.

The idea of walk leaders completing a risk assessment has proved to be somewhat controversial, in that walk leaders have quite understandably said "we have always recognised that we have a duty of care to walkers joining our walks and we verbally point out possible hazards at the start and during the walk." The issue is that previously, walk leaders have never been asked to write something down. Things changed because of the possibility of "litigation".

On the one hand we have a duty of care to volunteers and walkers and on the other the view of our insurance providers of the need to protect our walk leaders and the organisation against the possibility (no matter how remote) of "litigation". The reason that it has to be written down is to meet the need of lawyers and the courts who love things to be written down.

It is how it has to be written down that has proved to be quite controversial. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) who advise organisations say [...you must record your significant findings, including.

- the hazards (things that may cause harm)
- who might be harmed and how
- what you are doing to control the risks...]

Although the HSE and other consultants, provide templates to help organisations, these are designed to be helpful and there is not a legal mandate as to the design of such templates.

This document: -

- 1) explains how to carry out a risk assessment.
- 2) Provides a check list as an aide-memoire to remind walk leaders as to possible hazards.
- 3) A basic risk assessment template.

N.B. The key document in these notes is the basic risk assessment template under 3).
Walk leaders who are already experienced at completing risk assessment forms might

refer immediately to this. For others who would like to get a better understanding about how to carry out risk assessments then read on from here.

Carrying out a risk assessment – the theory.

Step 1: Identify the hazards

The process starts when carrying out a recce on a walk. Walk leaders should identify potential hazards, a hazard being something that has the potential to cause harm, or adverse health effect on a walker or walkers.

This is not new, walk leaders do it automatically all the time.

Step 2: Identify who might be harmed and how

There will be hazards that apply to everyone, for example walking along or crossing a busy road. Remember that some people will have particular needs. Walks that are very hilly and require a good level of fitness may not be suitable for very new walkers or people who are not fully fit. Some people are not happy crossing fields with cattle or horses in them.

Step 3: Evaluate the risk

Once you have identified the hazards, you need to decide how likely it is that harm will occur. As a general rule, you should do what is 'reasonably practicable' to protect people from risk of serious harm or injury.

You also need to consider:

- Could you get rid of this hazard completely? For example, if your walk takes you across a busy road is there a better route?
- Could you further control the risks so that harm is less likely? Taking our road example again it might be that you cross the road first before inviting and supervising the group
- Do you need to warn of the hazard?

Step 4: Document the findings

This is the bit that has caused the most controversy. It is essential that walk leaders keep written records. These should be simple and show that:

- A proper check was made
- You assessed who might be harmed
- You have dealt with significant hazards
- The remaining risk is low

Step 5: Review the risk assessment

It is recognised that walk leaders do repeat the same walks and where this is so, it is enough to use an earlier risk assessment as the basis for the walk that it is to be repeated. Things never stay the same and change brings potential new hazards. For example, a walk in the summer might be very different in the middle of winter. It might also be that on the original walk there was an incident, or you spot an hazard not observed previously.

Checklist or Aide Memoire

In any aide memoire, it is not possible to identify all the potential health and safety risks involved in a walk. These notes are for guidance and should not be seen as exhaustive. It is highly likely that new hazards will be spotted whilst on a recce of a planned walk.

Weather

The situation with the weather is complex and depends upon where the walk is taking place. Unless we are talking very extreme weather circumstances walks reasonably local to Solihull are fairly straightforward and often the weather means that for some people, walking is unpleasant. Walking further afield e.g. the Derbyshire Peaks may present different problems.

We are helped to some extent by the Met Office who issue weather warnings, when severe weather has the potential to bring impacts to the UK. These warnings are based on the likelihood of impacts occurring because of severe weather, several factors have to be taken into account and these will include:

- Time of year
- Time of day
- Time of week
- Location
- Underlying wet or dry ground conditions
- Any local events taking place

The warnings to look out for are the yellow and amber warnings which are widely reported in the news media and on weather apps. Most important are the amber warnings, which whilst these do not happen often when they do, we need to take them seriously. For example, an amber warning of hot weather in the summer of 2021 did lead to the cancellation of a couple of walks and winter 2021 a cancellation due to snow.

N.B. In the event of walk leaders becoming aware of an amber weather warning they should consult the group chair about the viability of their walk proceeding.

Traffic

Consider do you need to cross or walk along a road? Bear in mind that whilst the obvious ones are main trunk roads, some bridle roads can be quite busy with farm machinery and farm livestock being moved.

Where leaders can find an alternative route to avoid the possible hazards try to do so. Where this is not practical, remember that leaders have a duty to warn. This could be at the start of a walk but always at the hazard. Leaders should consider using the backmarker or enlist the help of another walker to help negotiate the hazard. Always aim to walk on the righthand side of a road facing oncoming traffic and in single file.

Are there any railway level crossings? There are not many in our neighbourhood, but there are a couple. Where an alternative route is not possible leaders should consider using the backmarker or enlist the help of another walker to help negotiate the hazard.

Path surface and obstacles

Are there hazards such as slippery paths, loose rocks, stiles, fallen trees, steep drops?

This should be picked up on the recce and alternative routes found if necessary. Remember that the season of the year could impact on this with winter conditions being very different to summer.

Animals

On most of our walks there is the likelihood of there being fields with livestock. On most occasions the livestock will be spread out, used to walkers and it will not be a problem. Where the livestock have congregated together, particularly cattle especially if they have calves with them, it is important to give them a wide berth diverting off the footpath if necessary.

By the very nature of farming, it might not be possible to plan for this in advance as fields empty one day can have livestock in them on another. It's a question of deciding en-route of the action to take.

Communications

In our region walking is low risk, following regularly used footpaths and road networks but on occasions we walk further afield in areas where weather might cause us to lose visibility or phone signals. The main issue might be losing walkers and dependent upon group size leaders should appoint a backmarker and always keep in visual contact. This means that should visibility deteriorate that the group should be kept together and where possible avoid getting spread out.

Advice to walkers

Advice from Ramblers Central Office suggests that leaders ought to warn, in advance, of the need to wear, for example clothing appropriate to the likely weather conditions. There are

other examples, but recognising that all our leaders are volunteers with possible other demands on their time this might be problematical. Solihull Group have addressed this by setting out guidance for walkers on its website. This can be accessed via the following link.

[Walking with Us \(solihullramblers.org.uk\)](http://solihullramblers.org.uk)

N.B. The above is for guidance only, it is not exhaustive. Anything that walk leaders think might pose a hazard should be taken seriously whether it is included here or not.

Risk Assessment Template.

A suggested risk assessment template is attached. Whilst it has two pages to it, remember it is quality that counts and not quantity. If on your recce, in the unlikely event that there are no hazards, then don't enter anything for the sake of it, just record the fact that you have carried out a recce and risk assessment. It may well be that you will only have maybe two or three concerns. A recent risk assessment on a couple of short walks near to Solihull had only two potential hazards on one and four on another. Obviously this could be different for longer walks in more difficult walking situations.

Having completed the risk assessments the advice from Ramblers Central Office is that we should retain them for three years. Where a walk is being done as a one-off this is fine. However, many of our walks are repeated, in which case the risk assessment should be retained and reviewed, prior to the walk being repeated, taking account of any changed circumstances.

N.B. It should be remembered that if a walker suffers an accident on a walk, this should be reported to the group secretary either direct or via a committee member. There will be a form to complete and at this stage you will be asked for a copy of your risk assessment.

Solihull Group Walks – Risk Assessment Template.

Solihull Ramblers:

Assessment carried out by:

Date Recce/Assessment was carried out:

Date of next review:

Walk Location:

What are the hazards?	How could people be harmed?	Evaluate the risk – likelihood & impact	Control measures to be applied