



VEFN Advocacy Update - Improving the Parks Victoria Volunteer Manual

Most Victorian Friend Groups are well aware of the 76-page Parks Victoria Volunteer Manual that seeks to provide an administrative framework for volunteers working on Parks Victoria land. What you may not be aware of is the ongoing background work and advocacy being conducted by the VEFN to improve this document and remove the administrative burdens that it places on Groups and their leaders. In this article we outline in detail the advocacy process so that you can understand the steps taken and know the full story.

The review process for this document goes back to 2019 when the Manual was put out for comment to involved parties that work with volunteers on land managed by Parks Victoria. Here a timeline of the advocacy process that VEFN has pursued on behalf of Friend Groups.

April 2021

To the surprise of the VEFN, following a “closed door” series of meetings with eight peak bodies including VEFN, the manual was launched in April 2021, prior to the resolution of a number of issues raised about the manual to do with the relationship Parks Victoria has with volunteers, especially those organised by outside groups, including VNPA. The major impact is likely to be on the many smaller, locally organised and quite often unincorporated groups, as the manual increases the administrative burden of group leaders without commensurate benefits to the achievement of their efforts.

June 2021

On behalf of its members who have raised a number of concerns, the VEFN wrote to the Parks Victoria CEO in June 2021, with a summary of key issues including: requirement of all volunteers irrespective of their relationship or involvement in a Group’s activities to register with Parks Connect, issues with timeliness and functionality of Parks Connect, administrative burdens placed on groups, and the requirement of *all* those involved in a Friends group activity to have a Working with Children’s Check – irrespective of their role and whether children are involved in the activity.

In this letter the VEFN requested the retraction of the Manual and a deferral of its implementation to allow for a wider and deeper collaborative review between Parks Victoria and environmental groups, such that the final Manual is practical, implementable, and supports our mutual aims of effectively delivering environmental and community benefits.

We received a response from the Parks Victoria Executive Director Marketing and Partnerships (on behalf of the CEO and Board) that we found unsatisfactory. It noted the VEFN’s concerns but made it clear that the manual would not be changed. The deadline for some of the manual requirements was extended, and a meeting was offered to further discuss timeframes.

September 2021

In early September 2021, following consultation with members, the VEFN then wrote to the Parks Victoria Board noting that massive volunteer effort and goodwill is being jeopardised by a unilateral approach to the introduction of an onerous and impractical volunteering manual. The VEFN requested the Board’s intervention to

- 1) Defer the introduction of the manual to allow for a comprehensive review to collaboratively produce a revised manual that is fit for purpose.
- 2) Support a model Child Safety policy (jointly developed by VEFN and Landcare Victoria), aligned with the Government’s child safety strategy and appropriate to the nature of activities undertaken by volunteer groups working in park settings.

- 3) Establish a user group, with volunteer involvement, to review and revise the Parks Connect system to make it user friendly and fit for purpose, and
- 4) Establish a user group with volunteer involvement to establish workable protocols for more regular ‘citizen science’ programs.

In late September we received a response from the Parks Victoria Board chairman recognising the contribution of volunteers and noting the commitment of Parks Victoria to support volunteers in protecting Victorian parks. The Board confirmed that it saw no reasonable justification to retract or defer the manual, and that elements of the manual not currently in practice will be progressively rolled out and the manual continuously improved. The Board maintained the view that volunteers will be required to hold a current Working with Children’s Check regardless of whether they work directly with children. Parks Connect was described as a management tool for use across multiple business areas. There was an offer to provide more training on its use and continue to enhance the system, with no acknowledgement of its current shortcomings. In closing, the letter encouraged us to meet with Parks Victoria’s volunteering team to discuss issues, directing queries to Tony Varcoe, Director Community Programs.

October 2021

In late October we replied to the Board, respectfully noting that their response failed to satisfactorily address our principal concerns, while appreciating the Board’s acknowledgement of the contribution of volunteers and their commitment to support them. We wrote that the VEFN will be referring the matter of the Working with Children Check to the Victorian Ombudsman. In good faith we would contact Tony Varcoe to address the on-ground realities of supporting volunteers to achieve joint management and conservation of the park’s estate.

Towards the end of 2021 we met with Tony Varcoe and colleagues to reiterate the request in our letter to the Board for regional workshops, with regional Parks Victoria staff and park rangers, Friends and Landcare groups and stakeholders, led by an independent facilitator to:

- 1) identify issues that impede practical implementation of the manual,
- 2) agree a process for addressing the poor usability and complexity of the Park Connect system,
- 3) find ways to substantially reduce the administrative burden placed on Friends group leaders by the manual; and
- 4) report back on issues raised and recommended solutions.

As in our letter to the Board, we requested a process(es) for implementing recommended solutions (including resources) in a timely and effective manner.

In the meantime, Groups should treat the Manual as a draft, and apply only what they feel is reasonable and practical.

The ball is now in Parks Victoria’s court to come back with a draft timetable and process for establishing the regional workshops. We will consult with our members about any preferred prioritising of regions for the first workshops and we will widely promote and advertise participation in these workshops when they have been agreed upon. Current suggestions include Central west (around Ballarat but which could pick up groups around Geelong and in the EVAN network), South-east Metro, picking up groups from the Dandenongs to the Mornington Peninsula and even the Prom), and possibly the Bellarine or Gippsland.

Get Involved

We encourage readers who are members of Friends groups to ensure your group is a financial member of the VEFN by lodging a membership application with the \$20 annual joining fee. Membership forms can be found at <https://www.friendsvic.org/join/>. This will support your group’s active participation in addressing this issue and a wealth of others related to supporting, promoting, and advocating for Friends groups across Victoria.

In addition, if your group wishes to be regularly involved in developing the VEFN’s approach contact Chair of the Parks Victoria Subcommittee Paul Strickland through paul_strickland@hotmail.com.

