

Volunteering in Parks Manual – Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. What is the Volunteering in Parks Manual?

The Volunteering in Parks Manual (Manual) is a toolkit that aims to provide staff and volunteers with essential information to effectively implement, support and participate in volunteering programs and activities. Much of the information is not new but brings together in one place the shared commitments, requirements and processes in a reference guide to:

- Ensure activities are safe and well governed
- Ensure activities are meaningful and rewarding
- Create and support mutually beneficial relationships
- Maintain and improve the parks estate
- Align with responsibilities to Managing Country Together
- Ensure all parties meet legislative requirements and national standards of volunteering

2. Why do we need the Manual?

Volunteering in parks is one of the largest volunteer programs within Victoria. Such a significant program requires both Parks Victoria (as the land manager) and volunteers to have a clear understanding of shared commitments in attracting and supporting volunteering activities.

Several external audits, first in 2015 and again in 2019, highlighted that both volunteer groups and Parks Victoria could potentially face significant legal, safety and other risks without improved strategies and processes to support volunteering. The Manual clarifies the commitments and obligations of volunteers and Parks Victoria, aligned with national standards of volunteering and legislation including *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004*, *Child Safe Standards*, *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014 (Vic)*, *Health Records*, *Discrimination Laws* and *Equal Opportunity*. The Manual does not replace the need for regular collaborative conversations between park staff and volunteers.

3. Why are we releasing a Manual now?

Parks Victoria staff and volunteer groups have been calling for better documented guidelines on volunteering programs. Much of what the Manual reflects is the achievements that have already been made by staff and volunteers including improvements to safety standards, increased recruitment, more registrations through ParkConnect and better understanding of volunteer contributions through reporting. The Manual documents these successes and provides a valuable tool to provide support to both staff and volunteers to work together towards common goals. However, release of the Manual now doesn't mean that it will not be constantly reviewed and improved, particularly in relation to practical implementation, including priorities and timelines. The Manual will be progressively implemented in collaboration with volunteers.

4. What consultation with volunteer groups was undertaken during the Manual's development?

In developing the Manual, a consultation process took place over 18 months with a stakeholder reference group consisting of seven volunteering peak bodies as well as an internal implementation group

consisting of representative operational staff. Prior to this a detailed best practice analysis reviewing over 45 organisations and in-depth desktop research was undertaken.

5. Is there opportunity for further feedback and review?

Yes. Parks Victoria is committed to continuous improvement and will be conducting regional forums to ensure that staff and local volunteer groups can get together to discuss the Manual's implementation, including what has been working well, priorities and timelines for new requirements as well as volunteering challenges and new ideas. With COVID-19 restrictions we have all had to adapt timelines and be flexible in new ways of working, which has meant some delays to original proposed sessions for 2020. We are working through plans to engage with our volunteers further in 2021; in the meantime if you have any ideas or feedback please feel free to email volunteer@parks.vic.gov.au.

6. What activities does the Manual cover and how is 'volunteering' defined?

The Manual is aligned with Volunteering Australia's definition of volunteering, based on the premise of a person/s giving their time for no financial gain for the common good. In the first instance, application of the Manual will focus on 'formal volunteering' (e.g. volunteering that takes place within organisations in a structured way). This includes structured volunteering activities that occur as part of an organisation or structured volunteering activities by an individual under the auspice of an organisation.

While a visitor participating in a recreational activity (e.g. a guided walk or ride) would not be considered a volunteer, the walk leader who is volunteering their time would be a volunteer and therefore would need to implement the relevant governance processes.

Whilst we also value Informal volunteering including activities that take place outside the context of an organisational setting and structured activity (e.g. an individual recording their observations or taking photographs whilst recreating; or an individual picking up litter as part of an informal walk), we will consult and consider options to recognise these contributions into the future.

A research permit is required if a regulation requires it and the activity includes handling or removing any items from a Park.

A volunteer activity is not considered an 'Event' and is not subject to an Event Permit unless there is a commercial element.

7. What's new in the Manual that we have not been already doing?

The Manual brings together in one place a wide range of commitments and shared obligations that enable volunteers and Parks Victoria to work more effectively together. Most of these requirements have been evolving over several years, with only a few new requirements.

Contractor engagement

Based on volunteer and staff feedback a new three-way agreement will be introduced that will enable volunteer groups to engage contractors under specified conditions. This new agreement will make it easier for volunteer groups to contract out a wide range of the common lower risk activities. Training and support on this new agreement will be undertaken with local teams and volunteers.

Working with Children Checks (WWCC)

Consistent with Child Safe Standards developed by the Commission on Children and Young People, Parks Victoria is dedicated to providing a child safe environment across all its managed parks and reserves, with a zero tolerance for child abuse that includes a risk-based screening process of staff and volunteers. Our parks are open to everyone, young people are actively encouraged to visit and experience parks and many facilities are shared. For this reason Parks Victoria has determined that all staff and volunteers that operate in parks will be required to hold a Working With Children Check. Please refer to the Frequently Asked Questions about the WWCCs for further details.

While separate communications and Frequently Asked Questions on WWCC will provide further details, the deadline for mandatory WWCC's has been extended to **31 December 2021** to enable more support to be provided to volunteers and work through some practical implementation issues.

Letter of Collaboration (opt-in at present)

The Letter of Collaboration is a short 'one-off' partnership agreement, that formalises the commitment of the volunteer group and Parks Victoria to work together and clarifies the responsibilities of each party. This will be progressively implemented through joint meetings between Parks Victoria and local volunteer groups.

Other actions that are not new:

Volunteer Activity Plans (VAP)

Volunteer Activity Plans have gradually been rolled out over the past five years with many groups across the State already using these Plans. VAPs are an opportunity for local park teams and volunteers to collaborate to identify and document the agreed annual work program and for the basis for the joint commitments for the next 12 months.

Safety checks

Over the past few years, a number of improved safety procedures have been introduced to reduce risks to both volunteers. These procedures are not new to the manual and ensure that both Parks Victoria and volunteer groups meet their legal obligations of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004*, duty of care and reduce risks of exposure to offences such as Workplace Manslaughter while providing a safe and rewarding environment.

8. What are the expectations and timelines for implementing the Manual?

As indicated in earlier communications the Manual will be progressively implemented with some processes not coming into effect until after further discussion and training has occurred. Many of the requirements of the Manual such as ParkConnect, safety documentation and reporting are already being implemented and we will continue to provide support to volunteers on uptake of these actions. Parks Victoria is committed to working with volunteer groups to collaboratively roll out the changed processes.

9. Why is the manual so long and do I need to read every page?

The Manual is broken down into sections, so you only need to read what is relevant to you and your activities. There is a table of contents so you can easily navigate to whichever part of the Manual you

need to refer to at the time. For volunteer groups the important information is set out in the 'Handbook' section in Part B of the Manual. A key finding from feedback gathered through our consultation with external volunteer organisations is that there is a strong preference for having all information contained in one Manual.

10. Do all volunteers have to register on ParkConnect?

All volunteers will be required to complete a full registration on ParkConnect. However, if a volunteer not on the ParkConnect attendance list attends on a day of activity, they can sign the Manual Attendance Sheet. The volunteer is to be prompted to complete a ParkConnect online registration at the end of the activity if they are likely to continue as a volunteer. Volunteer group leaders are not required to follow up on this prompt.

For large groups a Manual Attendance Sheet is to be completed with all the names of attendee's who are present. This situation would be relevant when engaging a group of volunteers that are not members of your group and that are unlikely to volunteer for your group on an ongoing basis (e.g. a school group).

11. Why should I use ParkConnect?

With more than 300 volunteer groups operating across the parks network, ParkConnect has been introduced as a 'all in one' volunteering management system to enable recruitment of new volunteers from the wider community, document volunteer preferences, skills and accreditations, plan and approve activities, and enable more consistent reporting on the contributions of volunteering in parks. It enables better documentation and reduces legal and other risks to volunteers. ParkConnect for many has been extremely successful in attaining additional volunteers that may not have previously been aware of the group and creates a great opportunity for support, succession and engagement.

We appreciate that it will take time for staff and volunteers to become more familiar with the details of how to best use ParkConnect and we offer ongoing training and support to maximise its use. ParkConnect is regularly being improved based on user feedback from volunteer groups, however a more formal review group will also be convened to provide feedback on improvements to the system.

12. How long do approvals for volunteer activities take through ParkConnect?

Staff will respond to activity requests within 7 to 14 days of submission. We understand that circumstances change including locations and dates, these can be easily amended up to the day of activity.

13. What support is provided if I can't use ParkConnect?

Parks Victoria is committing to supporting all volunteers to use ParkConnect and we encourage ongoing feedback, which has contributed greatly to system improvements. The Volunteer team is available to assist with enquiries, conduct training and receive feedback that may be used to enhance the system. If you require support or have feedback please contact volunteer@parks.vic.gov.au. Parks Victoria will shortly set up a consultation group of volunteers to continue to develop and enhance ParkConnect.

14. Does the Manual create additional administration burdens for volunteers and staff?

Parks Victoria recognises and values the immense amount of time volunteers invest in maintaining and protecting the estate. We do not want to prevent you from participating in the activities that motivate you.

Any processes that have been developed have been done so to reduce risk to both volunteers and Parks Victoria and strengthen partnerships. Documenting clear approval processes will reduce the administrative burden over time by streamlining approval processes (e.g. cultural assessments) that have traditionally delayed on-ground action through lack of transparency in process.

15. As a volunteer group leader what is my role in compliance?

Parks Victoria as the land manager has strict legal obligations to ensure that all volunteers are safe and engaged in meaningful activities. As a volunteer group you have your own legal and government policy responsibilities to also ensure that you keep the participants you engage safe and supported, and Parks Victoria is committed to supporting you through these processes.

A volunteer group leader's responsibility is to communicate the requirements, with the onus for compliance coming back to each volunteer. There is also a requirement for Parks Victoria to have sufficient processes in place to ensure that we are aligning to all relevant legislation and standards.

16. Is Parks Victoria offering support?

We are committed to maintaining, supporting and enhancing volunteer partnerships. If you have questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact volunteer@parks.vic.gov.au.