

# Which incorporated legal structure should we choose?

Legal information for Victorian community organisations

## This fact sheet covers:

- an overview of four common legal structures that can be used to incorporate a not-for-profit organisation
- some options for changing between legal structures, and
- overseas recognition of different legal structures.

This fact sheet provides general information about the incorporated legal structures available to Victorian community organisations.

## What incorporated structures are available for not-for-profits in Victoria?

There are four common structures that can be used to incorporate a not-for-profit (NFP) organisation in Victoria:

- an incorporated association (the most common NFP legal structure – 38,000 in Victoria)
- a company limited by guarantee (CLG) (the next most common NFP legal structure - 11,000 in Australia)
- a non-distributing co-operative (around 1,800 in Australia), and
- an indigenous corporation (about 2,600 in Australia).

These are not the only structures available for NFPs. For example, there are also charitable trusts, trade unions and companies limited by shares (although usually used for for-profit businesses). This sheet does not cover these structures, but for more information on charitable trusts, go to Not-for-profit Law's overview, [Fundraising Foundations and Charitable Trusts](#).

Note that a choice of entity type may not be available to an NFP. In certain circumstances, laws require organisations which are undertaking specific activities to adopt a particular legal structure. For example, Victorian laws require organisations that provide housing services to the public and want to become a 'registered housing association' to be a company limited by guarantee.

Key regulators referred to in this fact sheet are:

- [Consumer Affairs Victoria \(CAV\)](#) for NFPs registering in Victoria (note: each State and Territory will have their own equivalent regulatory body for registering NFPs if you choose to register outside of Victoria)
- [Australian Securities and Investment Commission \(ASIC\)](#)

### RELATED RESOURCES

For information on the meaning of not-for-profit, go to [What does not-for-profit mean?](#)

- [Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission \(ACNC\)](#), and
- [Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations \(ORIC\)](#).

## Questions checklist

It is helpful for an NFP deciding which structure to use to first answer the questions set out below.

- What geographic area does the NFP cover or intend to cover? That is, does the NFP operate across multiple states and/or territories or intend to do so?
- What is the size, scope and nature of the NFP's proposed or actual activities?
- What is the amount and type of property, money and other assets held or to be held by the NFP?
- What capacity does the NFP have to properly meet its corporate governance, administration and legal and regulatory compliance obligations internally and/or externally?

## Quick Comparison

Structure	Recommended for...	Not suitable for...
Incorporated Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Locally focused not-for-profit community groups wanting to operate in Victoria.</li> <li>• Groups with limited capacity to meet reporting obligations. However, note that if the association is also a charity registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission it will have other reporting, governance and compliance requirements.</li> <li>• Groups with limited funds and resources, as costs associated with setting up and running incorporated associations are sometimes (but not always) less than those involved in CLGs and specialist structures like co-operatives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groups with less than 5 members.</li> <li>• Groups engaging in activities in multiple states and territories on a regular (or more than very occasional) basis, unless further steps are taken to become a Registered Australian Body with ASIC.</li> </ul>
Company Limited by Guarantee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisations wanting to engage in activities nationally or in more than one state or territory, on a regular or more than occasional basis.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groups with limited resources, as CLGs reporting to ASIC must meet stricter requirements, and reporting deadlines are more strictly enforced (with higher</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Larger not-for-profits, including those that only operate in one state, often use this structure.</li> <li>• Charities registered with the ACNC, as CLGs that are charities only report to the ACNC, and are regulated under the more flexible Governance Standards rather than the <i>Corporations Act 2001</i> (Cth) (<b>Corporations Act</b>).</li> <li>• Housing and aged care providers (who must be CLGs).</li> <li>• Wholly owned subsidiary organisations, as only one member is required (but note three directors are required).</li> </ul>	<p>penalties for non-compliance).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Note for charities:</b> CLGs registered as charities report to the ACNC, not ASIC, and the ACNC takes a more educative regulatory approach than ASIC, and therefore resourcing is less of a concern for CLGs registered as charities.</li> </ul>
<p>Non-trading / non-distributing co-operative legal structure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Groups serving their members (eg. a member owned art co-op, ski lodge or a childcare group providing community services to its members).</li> <li>• Groups that wish to follow the <a href="#">‘co-operative principles’</a> (although groups that do not adopt the co-operative legal structure may still adopt the ‘co-operative principles’ as part of their organisation).</li> <li>• Note, in general, only ‘non-distributing’ co-operatives will meet the definition of ‘not-for-profit’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not be suitable for organisations that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• do not want to function under the ‘co-operative principles’</li> <li>• do not have resources to manage ‘active membership’ requirements (the CNL requires that members of co-operatives are ‘active’ in relation to ‘primary activities’ – NFPs can deem that a member paying a subscription fee that is applied to a ‘primary activity’ is an ‘active member’)</li> <li>• want different classes of members with different voting rights</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Groups with limited resources, as offences (similar to CLGs) apply where cooperatives do not meet certain obligations such as holding AGMs in time, and other offences unique to co-operatives apply such as for a failure to cancel membership of non-active members.</li> </ul>

Indigenous Corporation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups. The structure strives to take into account indigenous customs and traditions.</li> <li>Corporations holding or managing native title under the <i>Native Title Act 1993</i> (Cth) and the <i>Native Title (Prescribed Bodies Corporate) Regulations 1999</i> (Cth) must incorporate as an Indigenous Corporation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups.</li> <li>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations that do not wish to be regulated by ORIC.</li> </ul>
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## Incorporated Associations

Feature	Brief description
Relevant laws	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Associations Incorporation Reform Act 2012</i> (Vic) (<b>Association Act</b>)</li> <li><i>Associations Incorporation Reform Regulations 2012</i> (Vic)</li> <li>If registered as a charity, the <i>Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012</i> (Cth) and the associated regulations (including the Governance Standards).</li> </ul>
Where an IA can operate?	<p>A group incorporated under the Associations Act can operate in Victoria. Any Victorian association that operates outside Victoria will need to register under the Corporations Act as a 'Registered Australian Body', incorporate separately in each state, or incorporate as a company limited by guarantee. Occasional or one-off activities in another state (such as holding a conference, or a fundraising event) would not normally count as 'operating', but carrying on more regular and substantial activities might.</p>
Government regulator	<p>The Registrar of Incorporated Associations at CAV. If you are a Registered Australian Body you must also report to ASIC.</p> <p>If the incorporated association is registered as an Australian Registered Body under the Corporations Act, it will also be regulated by ASIC, and required to comply with certain provisions of the Corporations Act, notably directors' duties and the requirement to display its ABRN after its name on all public documents.</p> <p>If you are registered as a charity, you will be registered with the ACNC, and must also report to the ACNC. This means incorporated associations will report to at least two regulators.</p>
Required abbreviation	An incorporated association must use 'Incorporated' or 'Inc.' after its name.
How common?	In Victoria there are approximately 38,000 incorporated associations.

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Brief description</b>
<b>Description</b>	Incorporated Associations were introduced as a legal structure to provide a simple and inexpensive means of incorporating not-for-profit groups. All States and Territories have their own slightly different laws to set up associations.
<b>Suitable for</b>	For most locally-focused not-for-profit groups wanting to operate in Victoria, an Incorporated Association is an appropriate structure. It is often less complex to set up than a CLG, and the regulator, CAV, takes a more educative approach than the regulator of CLGs, ASIC (note that regulation of charity CLGs has transitioned from ASIC to the ACNC). CAV generally does not impose late fees when deadlines for reporting are not met.
<b>Not suitable for</b>	<p>This structure cannot be used for groups with less than 5 members or for a parent organisation that wants to set up a wholly owned subsidiary (i.e. with the parent organisation as the sole member).</p> <p>Incorporated associations that are registered charities will need to report to both CAV and the ACNC.</p> <p>Groups wishing to operate outside of Victoria will need to register as an Australian Body with ASIC, and then undertake limited ongoing reporting to ASIC as well as CAV.</p>

## Company limited by guarantee (CLG)

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Brief description</b>
<b>Relevant laws</b>	<p><i>Corporations Act 2001</i> (Cth), <i>Corporations Regulations</i> (various)</p> <p>If registered as a charity, the <i>Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012</i> (Cth) and the associated regulations (including the Governance Standards).</p>
<b>Where can a CLG operate?</b>	A CLG can operate (that is, carry on activities) anywhere in Australia.
<b>Government regulator</b>	<p>ASIC. ASIC is an independent Commonwealth government body that regulates CLGs and also for-profit companies.</p> <p>All CLGs must initially register with ASIC. CLGs that are charities can apply to register as a charity with the ACNC, which then handles ongoing regulation (so that charity CLGs only reports to one regulator). Many Corporations Act requirements for CLGs 'switch off' when a CLG registers with the ACNC.</p>
<b>Required abbreviation</b>	Must use the word 'Limited' or 'Ltd' after its name (although charities that meet certain requirements can become a 'special purpose company' and can apply for an exemption from this requirement).
<b>How common?</b>	In Australia there are approximately 11,000 CLGs.

Feature	Brief description
<b>Description</b>	Although we often think of a ‘company’ as being a business, a CLG is a special type of company structure for not-for-profit groups all across Australia. Just like a business company, it has ‘directors’, but unlike a business, has ‘members’ instead of ‘shareholders’. Some of the provisions of the Corporations Act (eg. directors’ duties and penalties) that apply to ‘for-profit’ companies also apply to CLGs, unless it is a registered charity, in which case it must comply with the <i>Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012</i> (Cth) and the associated regulations (including the governance standards).
<b>Most commonly used for</b>	NFPs wanting to operate across Australia, or in multiple states, often consider becoming a CLG. Larger NFPs, including those that only operate in one state, also often use this structure. Some legislation requires this structure for certain types of organisations (eg. registered housing and aged care providers).  A CLG structure is also suitable for a wholly owned subsidiary organisation, as it can be set up with just one member (but does need to have three directors).
<b>Comment</b>	CLGs can be more costly to establish than incorporated associations.  The penalties for non-compliance with reporting requirements and directors duties are higher than for incorporated associations, and tend to be strictly enforced.  <b>Important note:</b> A CLG that is also registered as a charity with the ACNC is, for the most part, regulated by the ACNC including in relation to reporting, record keeping and governance standards (including related penalties). Many of the penalties that apply to CLGs ‘turn off’ for those that are registered with the ACNC. The ACNC takes an educative approach to enforcement and will only impose penalties in cases of major-non-compliance.

## Co-operatives

Feature	Brief description
<b>Relevant laws</b>	Co-operatives are administered under the Co-operatives National Law, applied in Victoria by the <i>Co-operatives National Law Application Act 2013</i> (CNL).  If registered as a charity, then the <i>Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012</i> (Cth) and the associated regulations (including the Governance Standards) also apply.  Different reporting requirements apply for small and large co-operatives.

Feature	Brief description
<b>Where can a co-operative operate?</b>	<p>A group incorporated under the relevant state or territory co-operatives act can operate (that is, carry on its activities) in its home state or territory.</p> <p>Co-operatives can also operate in other states and territories (and how this occurs will depend on whether the other state or territory has adopted the CNL). Co-operatives may need to register with ASIC as a Registrable Australian Body if they will undertake regular activities outside of their 'home' state or territory. Registered Australian Bodies need to undertake limited annual reporting to ASIC as well as to CAV.</p>
<b>Government regulator</b>	The Registrar of Co-operatives at CAV.
<b>Required abbreviation</b>	The name of a registered co-operative always includes the word 'Co-operative', 'Co-op' or 'Coop' and ends with 'Limited' or 'Ltd'
<b>How common?</b>	There are approximately 900 co-operatives in Victoria.
<b>Description</b>	<p>A co-operative is an organisation that follows the co-operative principles set out in section 10 of the CNL. Co-operative principles include voluntary and open membership, democratic member control (members actively participate in setting policies and making decisions, equal voting rights among members – 'one member, one vote'), member economy participation, autonomy and independence, education training and information, cooperation among co-operatives, and concern for the community. There are both distributing and non-distributing co-operative structures. Only a co-operative which has rules to prevent surpluses or profits from being distributed to members is suitable as a not-for-profit structure.</p>
<b>Suitable for</b>	<p>Organisations that want to apply the <a href="#">co-operative principles</a> to their organisation. The Co-operatives Registrar under the CNL can only register groups that are "designed to function under the co-operative principles". Co-operatives are often set up for the mutual benefit of members (for example, for a member-owned art co-op, ski lodge or a community childcare co-operative). They can also be a suitable not-for-profit structure for providing community services, such as employee-member or client-member health services co-operatives.</p>
<b>Not suitable for</b>	<p>Co-operatives are not suitable for groups that do not want to function under the <a href="#">co-operative principles</a>, or do not have resources to manage active membership requirements, or organisations that want different classes of members (as, in general, it is difficult for a co-operative to have different classes of members with different voting rights). Due to strict liability offences, like those that apply to non-charitable CLGs, groups should consider whether they have resources to comply with CNL requirements in a timely way to avoid penalties (such as holding AGMs within required timeframes).</p> <p>Co-operatives that are charities will need to report to the state-based regulator of co-operatives as well as the ACNC.</p>

## Indigenous corporations

Feature	Brief description
Relevant laws	<i>Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006</i> (Cth) (began on 1 July 2007, replacing the <i>Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976</i> )
Where can an indigenous corporation operate?	Can operate (carry on activities) anywhere in Australia.
Government regulator	Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC) - a national body.
Required abbreviation	Must have the words 'Aboriginal Corporation', 'Torres Strait Islander Corporation' (or a number of allowable combinations) in its name.
Number	Approximately 2,600 across Australia.
Description	<p>The structure of an indigenous corporation is somewhat similar to a company limited by guarantee, although ORIC has some additional powers to those of ASIC, including power to call meetings of members and appoint special administrators.</p> <p>Indigenous corporations can, but do not have to be, 'not-for-profit'. Indigenous corporations that want to be not-for-profit must have a 'rule book' which prevents surpluses or profits from being distributed to members.</p> <p>Only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations can incorporate using this structure.</p>
Most suitable (or required) for	The indigenous corporation structure is designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, and attempts to take into account indigenous customs and traditions. Corporations holding or managing native title under the Native Title Act 1993 and the Native Title (Prescribed Bodies Corporate) Regulations 1999 must incorporate as this structure.
Not suitable for	Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups, or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander groups that would prefer to be regulated by a State regulator or ASIC.

## Incorporated Association or CLG

The tables above outline the key features of the four structures covered in this fact sheet. Most groups in Victoria choose between incorporating as an incorporated association or a CLG. For a more detailed comparison of these two structures, go to the Not-for-profit Law Guide, 'Incorporated association or company limited by guarantee?' on the [Legal Structure page](#).

## Changing between legal structures

It is usually possible for your group to change its legal structure, but there can be legal and administrative costs involved, and making the change can be time consuming. It is a good idea to

think about your group's future needs when deciding which legal structure to incorporate under to avoid having to change your structure down the track.

Where organisations do need to change structure, some common transitions are:

- 'converting' or 'migrating' from an incorporated association into a company limited by guarantee. This is possible with member approval if other requirements for a CLG are met. For more information go to Not-for-profit Law's [Changing structure](#) page
- transferring a CLG or a co-operative to an incorporated association, or
- if the group is an indigenous one, transferring its registration as an Incorporated Association or a CLG to being under the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act*.

## Overseas recognition

If your group wants to operate overseas it will need to seek legal advice about what the laws of the other relevant country/ies require. Using Australia as an example, any overseas (foreign) company that wants to 'carry on business' (conduct activities) in any part of Australia must register with ASIC under the Commonwealth Corporations Act. Many other countries will have similar requirements, even if your group is operating as a not-for-profit.

In general, a CLG structure (that is, incorporation under the Corporations Act) will be a more recognised structure in other countries, compared with other structures such as an Incorporated Association or Co-operative.

## OK, so what next?

Having read the brief profiles, you might already have an idea of which structure would work well for your group.

Most Victorian not-for-profit groups wanting to incorporate choose between becoming an incorporated association and a CLG. What is best for your group will depend on the particular circumstances and future plans of your group.

Co-operatives and indigenous companies are quite specialised. If your group would like to set up as one of these legal structures, we have provided links to websites with further information about these in the Resources section below.

# Resources

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## Not-for-profit Law Resources

### ✔ [Getting started](#)

This page of the NFP Law website contains links to resources and information produced to assist groups in their initial stages.

### ✔ [The incorporation decision](#)

Resources on deciding which is the best legal structure for your organisation

### ✔ [Setting up the organisation](#)

## Legislation

### ✔ [Associations Incorporation Reform Act 2012 \(Vic\)](#)

This is the legislation that governs the setting up and running of an incorporated association in Victoria.

### ✔ [Associations Incorporation Reform Regulations 2012 \(Vic\)](#)

This is a link to the regulations which govern the setting up and running of an incorporated association in Victoria.

### ✔ [Corporations Act 2001 \(Cth\)](#)

This is a link to the legislation which govern the setting up and running of a CLG.

### ✔ [Co-operatives National Law Application Act 2013 \(Vic\)](#)

This is a link to the legislation which governs the setting up and running of a co-operative in Victoria.

### ✔ [Corporations \(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander\) Act 2006 \(Cth\)](#)

This is a link to the legislation which govern the setting up and running of an Indigenous Corporation.

## Consumer Affairs Victoria (CAV)

### ✔ [Register as an incorporated association](#)

This page of the CAV website contains information on Victorian incorporated associations.

### ✔ [About co-operatives](#)

This page of the CAV website contains information on co-operatives.

## Australian Securities and Investment Commission

### ✔ [For companies – an overview](#)

This page contains an overview of starting, running and closing a company and contains information relevant to CLGs.

### ✔ [Registrable Australian Bodies](#)

This information sheet sets out the steps involved in registering an Australian body.

## Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission

- ▶ [Obligations for registered charities](#)

## Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations

- ▶ [Start a corporation](#)
- ▶ [Rule book](#)

## Other resources

- ▶ Comparison table on [differences between Incorporated Associations and CLGs in Victoria](#)
- ▶ [Get Mutual Website](#) for Co-operatives and Mutuals

A Not-for-profit Law Information Hub resource. Access more resources at [www.nfplaw.org.au](http://www.nfplaw.org.au)

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