

**MEMBERSHIP, GROWTH & DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION**

Life Membership: A Permanent Vote, Not Just a Symbolic Honour

Depending on your state or territory, the model rules may not provide for this membership class. Check before you promise it

Life membership is frequently treated as a warm, symbolic gesture, a way of honouring long service with minimal formality. In many association constitutions, it is something considerably more consequential: a permanent membership class, often carrying full voting rights for the remainder of that person's life, granted through a decision that is hard to reverse unless the constitution provides a fair process for revocation.

Which rules apply to your association?

The law depends on how your association is set up. A **company limited by guarantee** follows the Corporations Act 2001 (Cth) and its constitution. An **incorporated association** follows its state or territory associations Act and its rules. A **registered charity** also follows the ACNC Act and the ACNC Governance Standards, and some Corporations Act rules are replaced for charities that are companies. Check your own governing documents, and get advice before decisions with legal consequences.

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Why This Is A Constitutional Decision, Connecting Directly To Earlier Guidance

In many association constitutions, life members have the same voting rights as ordinary members, though some constitutions make life or honorary membership non-voting, so check what yours says. This connects directly to our article on membership categories. Granting life membership is not a symbolic award sitting outside the association's actual governance structure. Where life members can vote, it is a permanent addition to the voting roll, and a board approving a life membership nomination should understand that it is making a lasting constitutional decision, not simply recognising a career.

A Compliance Trap Worth Checking Before Any Nomination Proceeds

For an incorporated association using its state or territory's Model Rules rather than its own rules, whether a life or honorary member class is available depends on the jurisdiction, because model rules differ. Queensland's model rules, for example, provide for ordinary members and any other classes the association names. If your rules do not provide for the class, the association must amend them, usually by special resolution, and lodge the change with the regulator before creating it. A company limited by guarantee likewise needs the class to be provided for in its constitution. An association that has been informally promising or discussing life membership without confirming this foundational point may discover its own governing document does not actually permit the honour it has been planning to bestow. A life membership nomination discussed in good faith for months can quietly collapse the moment someone actually checks the constitution, if the association never confirmed its rules permit the category in the first place.

The Revocation Gap Most Life Member Policies Never Address

Well-designed life membership policies address a question many associations never consider until it becomes urgent: what happens if a life member's later conduct damages the organisation's reputation. Better-designed arrangements include an explicit revocation provision from the outset, for example where the person's conduct breaches the constitution or would cause real reputational harm. That power must sit in the constitution, not just a board policy, and any revocation should follow the same fair process as member discipline: notice, a chance to respond and an unbiased decision-maker. A life membership policy without this provision has built a permanent, unconditional honour with no mechanism for the association to protect itself if circumstances change dramatically, years after the original, well-deserved recognition.

- Confirm your association's actual constitution permits a life or honorary member category before any nomination proceeds, particularly if your organisation operates under standard Model Rules.
- Treat every life membership grant as the permanent constitutional and voting decision it is, connecting directly to our article on membership categories.
- Build formal, written selection criteria and a nomination and due diligence process, rather than relying on informal board consensus for a decision with this much lasting weight.
- Exclude current board members from being nominated during their own term, avoiding the appearance of self-recognition in a process meant to honour long, disinterested service.
- Make sure your constitution, not just your life membership policy, allows life membership to be revoked, and that any revocation follows the same fair process as member discipline.

Life membership, done well, is one of the most meaningful ways an association can honour the people who built it. Done without the constitutional discipline this decision requires, it becomes a permanent governance commitment made with considerably less care than the honour itself deserves. This is one of the practical governance topics built into our Association CEO course, alongside the papers, tools and frameworks that turn the principle into your board's actual practice. [Explore the course](#)

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BOARDROOM ACTION WORKSHEET

Life Membership: A Permanent Vote, Not Just a Symbolic Honour

Turn the resource into evidence, a decision and an accountable next step. Keep the completed record in your association's approved board records system.

1 What is the issue or decision?

State the governance question in one clear sentence.

2 What evidence do we already have?

Record the facts, source documents and stakeholder evidence available now.

3 What evidence is still needed?

Identify the legal, regulatory, financial, member or operational information still required.

4 What is the agreed next action?

Capture the owner, timeframe and how the matter will return to the board.

Action owner	Review date	Board decision or resolution

General education, not legal, financial, tax, clinical or governance advice. Confirm specifics at the relevant primary source or with your own qualified adviser. Nexus Leadership is operated by Lipstick Consulting Pty Ltd · ABN 15 619 120 482.

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