

National membership – an introductory discussion paper

At the 2019 Annual Conference, we committed to considering a nationally administered membership. At the simplest level, this provides an opportunity for us to make use of the shared infrastructure that Eventor gives us, to remove unnecessary duplication and free up State Association resources. At the more far-reaching levels of change, it could involve membership itself becoming a national concept, with membership of Orienteering Australia also making you a member of your nominated State Association and club.

A very wide range of membership structures has evolved across the states over time. In part this is because State Associations have different structures – in some, the clubs play a large financial role and club membership is in some ways the basic unit of membership (i.e. joining a club makes you a member of that State Association), in others the main level is the State Association, with clubs having little financial or constitutional responsibility.

In essence there are three broad options that could be considered. Each of these has variations around the detail.

1. Membership remains with the states as it currently stands but Eventor is used as a common database

In essence, this is the status quo, although it would require more explicit recognition that Eventor is indeed a national database for the purpose. Under this structure, states would retain control of their membership structure, which given the wide range of memberships would be complex to administer. (In some cases, e.g. Victoria with a wide range of club arrangements, there is a lot of complexity even within the state, which they are currently trying to simplify).

2. States agree on a common membership structure

This is a variation of (1) where the State Associations agree on a common set of membership categories. This would likely also require a consistent set of membership categories at the club level. Under this proposal, either states/clubs could retain their own fees or could agree on a common set of fees.

3. Membership becomes national

Under this model, an orienteer becomes a member of Orienteering Australia, and by virtue of that membership becomes a member of their nominated State Association and club. This provides the greatest overall unification, and is most likely the most efficient in terms of overall administrative effort across OA and the State Associations, but would be complex to implement (for example, it would likely require matching constitutional changes for OA, all State Associations, and potentially clubs where they are incorporated bodies). There are two potential financial variations of this model – one where revenue is periodically remitted to States, and a second where OA retains membership revenue, in exchange for the reduction of payments by the states to OA. (Preliminary budget calculations suggest that if membership fees went to OA rather than the State Associations, this would provide sufficient revenue to allow the abolition of the State Registration Fee, and potentially some reduction in other fees).

If we had a uniform set of membership categories, what might it look like?

The simplest model of membership categories would be purely individual (with sub-categories: senior, junior, life and perhaps others).

At present, most states have family memberships (although Victoria does not). Historically, part of the rationale for this was that a significant proportion of the cost of servicing a membership was printing and postage of hard-copy publications, something which is no longer so much the case.

Removing family memberships would simplify the membership structure and administration considerably (and would also pre-empt possible issues with different definitions of “family” in different states). However, it may also lead to a loss of membership as there is no longer any incentive to list family members who rarely participate on a membership. One option which would partially alleviate this (at least with respect to children) would be to set junior membership fees at a nominal level.

A further question is whether to retain remote associate memberships in those states which have them (currently SA, WA and Queensland). When these memberships were established they carried a substantially smaller set of rights, but two major differences to full memberships (receipt of the Australian Orienteer, and participation in the Australian Championships) have become less relevant over time, as the Australian Orienteer is now available online and there is no longer a membership requirement to participate in Australian Championships.

How is membership structured in other countries?

There are two structures which are relatively commonplace in other countries:

- Orienteers join a club and acquire their affiliation with the national federation through that (e.g. New Zealand, Sweden)
- Club and national federation membership are separate (e.g. UK, Finland). In some cases, the ‘national federation membership’ takes the form of a ‘competition licence’ which is required to take part in national events.

The strong role of regional bodies (state associations) in Australia is something of an outlier and reflects the strong state role in sport in Australia (including through state government). Regional associations exist in other countries but mostly have a limited role in areas such as fixture coordination (Scotland is one exception). Canada is one country whose organisational structure is broadly similar to ours, although the number of clubs is smaller (only 8 of the 13 provinces/territories have associations affiliated to Orienteering Canada, and in 3 of those 8, the provincial/territorial association is also the single club).

In parts of Europe, especially Scandinavia, multi-sport clubs are relatively common with orienteering being one of numerous components.

What other issues need to be considered?

Depending on the extent to which change is proposed, there are many issues which would need to be worked through before anything could be implemented (the more complex options certainly could not be implemented before the 2022 membership year). Issues so far identified are listed in the following text; there may be others.

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Some considerations/issues for national membership

1. Different organisational structures in different states
 - In some states you join the state association by joining a club, in others state and club membership are separate
 - Some states have significant numbers of remote associates
 - Some states have a low membership fee and get most of their money through participation, others have a higher membership fee
 - In some states the option exists of social membership (or similar) for clubs without joining the state association; in one it is possible to join the state association without joining a club
2. Different membership categories
 - Victoria has individual membership (senior and junior) only, others have family membership
 - In those states which have family membership, different criteria exist as to who can be included (e.g. whether there is a limit on the number of senior members in a family membership)
 - Most or all states have life memberships; in some states/clubs there are also club life memberships
 - Some states offer concession membership to students (and perhaps other concession holders)
 - The category of registered officials exist but it is unclear whether anyone is actually using this
 - Some states (WA, SA, Queensland currently, NSW in the past) offer remote associate memberships
 - In the past, introductory memberships (a lower rate for the first year) have been offered
 - Some states have associate group memberships (e.g. for schools)
3. Handling of casual membership
4. Distribution of revenue
 - If OA collected revenue, would need to be distributed periodically to states (and potentially clubs, or that could be managed through states)
 - An alternative would be for OA to retain membership revenue in exchange for a corresponding reduction in payments from states – potentially the abolition (or at least dramatic reduction) in the State Registration Fee
5. Implementation
 - In theory Eventor should make this relatively simple. It would be useful to know how much work it currently is at state level to administer memberships. (Would we potentially need to employ someone/expand someone's hours to manage it nationally?)
 - To what extent do we already have a national database?
6. Membership formalisation and rights

- A national membership might create constitutional issues at the state/club level – the most likely issue is that many state/club association constitutions contain a (generally ignored) provision that applications for membership need to be approved by the committee.
- Some European countries have the concept of a national competition ‘licence’ which is required to participate in higher-level competitions, and is separate from club membership. (No OA event requires membership as a condition of participation, although some state championships do, at least in theory).

7. Multiple affiliations

- Some people are members of multiple clubs
- Other entities (e.g. NOL teams) have been set up as ‘clubs’ in Eventor to help manage those competitions (it may be possible to do likewise for Schools Championships teams).

8. Timing of memberships

- In all states, memberships are notionally for the calendar year
- It is likely that different timeframes exist for how long it takes a membership to lapse after not being renewed (31 March is typical, but probably not universal) – it is also desirable that details of non-renewed memberships are still accessible to states/clubs so they can follow up
- Memberships taken out late in a year in some states can be carried through to the end of the following year (either formally or in practice). In the past some states have offered discounted memberships for the second half of the year but it is unclear if any still do