

Understanding contracts



Legal information for community organisations

This fact sheet covers:

- ▶ general principles of contract law
- ▶ reviewing a contract and approval processes for contracts
- ▶ specific types of contracts



Disclaimer

This fact sheet provides general information about contracts. This information is a guide only and is not legal advice. If you or your organisation has a specific legal issue, you should seek legal advice before deciding what to do.

Please refer to [the full disclaimer](#) that applies to this fact sheet.

Contracts are part of everyday operations for many not-for-profit organisations. It's important to know what issues to look out for when signing on the dotted line.

Although your organisation may not have much bargaining power when negotiating and signing contracts, especially standard form contracts, there are some key principles to consider.



Tip

If a contract is too risky, you should seek legal advice. And remember, your organisation can always choose not to sign it.

General principles



What is a contract?

A contract is a legally-binding promise or agreement made between two or more 'parties'.

A contract may be oral or written.



A contract will be valid and enforceable only if the following **four formal requirements** are met:

1.	• agreement (an offer is made, and that offer accepted)
2.	• consideration (an exchange or benefit – each party gives something in return)
3.	• intention to create legal relations (it is clear that the parties intended the agreement to be binding – distinct from early negotiations or discussions that are not binding, or 'agreements to agree' sometime later), and
4.	• certainty of terms (the subject matter, key promises about the subject matter, timing and parties are all clear and certain)

If an agreement meets these four requirements, it will be **legally binding** on the parties and they will have rights and obligations under the contract. This means there can be consequences if the parties don't do what they have said they would do (that is, perform the promises each party has made) under the contract.

Who can a contract be enforced against?

A contract can only be enforced against those who are a party to the contract.

This concept, known as **privity**, prevents individuals or businesses who are not parties to a contract from being able to enforce the obligations of the contract, or have the obligations enforced against them.

Privity can be an important issue in contracts between two parties that are intended to benefit a third party. In general, at least one of the contracting parties will have to be willing to enforce the contract if the third party is not receiving the intended benefit.



Note – who are you contracting with?

Be clear about who you are contracting with – is the other party an individual, company, or trust?

For example, if it's a company, is it registered in Australia or overseas? Have you checked whether the company has an ACN, and is this described accurately in the contract? Some groups of people, including businesses and associations, can't enter into agreements in their own right. Additionally, business names are not always the same as the companies or people that own the business name.

If you are contracting with an individual, are they who they say they are? Check the individual's identity documents to ensure the person you are dealing with is who they say they are.

It's important to conduct a due diligence check on the other party when considering entering into a contract. Action you can take includes:

- complete an ABN search to confirm the details of the contracting party, and
- complete a company search on the ASIC register to ensure the contracting party is who they say they are

The ASIC register can provide a report about the searched entity, including company structure, listed directors, company address and the company's credit score, which can inform you as to the accuracy and viability of the contracting entity.



Knowing who you are contracting with is important when determining:

- the risks of entering into a contract, and
- who to enforce the contract against in case of a dispute

What are the consequences of breaching a contract?

This area of law can be complex. However, in general, if one party breaches its obligations to another party (or parties) under a contract, then a court can require the breaching party to compensate the other party (or parties) for any losses suffered because of the breach. This compensation is referred to as 'damages'.

Often, a court will award damages rather than make a party do what they said they would under the contract (which is known as 'specific performance'). So, although a contract is binding and requires performance, one party may not be able to force the other party (or parties) to do what they agreed to, but damages may be available.



Case study

Kids of Brunswick is a charity holding a fundraising event in a local restaurant. On the day of the event the restaurant cancels the booking, saying they have had a last minute request to hold a wedding, and that the wedding party is willing to pay double the price being paid by the charity.

Kids of Brunswick's committee meets urgently. They locate a series of emails with the restaurant that includes the terms of hire, a confirmation of booking, and a record of the deposit paid. In their view, this series of emails amounts to a contract.

They call the restaurant and tell them they are breaching their contract to hire out the restaurant. The restaurant tells them they are sorry, but they will not perform their obligations under the contract. This refusal is a breach of the contract.

Kids of Brunswick finds a hall to hire at the last minute and is able to organise a number of caterers to provide food and service for the guests. Kids of Brunswick does their best to get a reasonable price, but because of their last-minute request, the caterers and hall hire end up costing four times the price they would have paid for the restaurant.

Kids of Brunswick speaks to a lawyer after the event, who advises them they can seek damages from the local restaurant for breach of contract – the difference between the price they would have paid, and the more expensive price they had to pay because of the restaurant's breach. The lawyer writes a letter to the restaurant and, after speaking to their own lawyers, the restaurant eventually agrees to pay the difference.



Case example – damages for breach of contract

In expectation of receiving a 30-year lease from the Cessnock City Council under an agreement to lease, a company (123 259 932 Pty Ltd) spent almost \$3.7 million constructing a hangar on the council's land at Cessnock Airport. The council had contracted to take all reasonable action to obtain registration of a plan of subdivision by a sunset date. By the time the council breached the agreement and repudiated the contract, the company's business was plainly not profitable. The Court of Appeal awarded the company damages for breach of contract of almost \$3.7 million plus interest.

The Court held that the sum of money awarded was intended to place the injured party in the same position as if the contract had been performed.

Cessnock City Council v 123 259 932 Pty Ltd [2024] HCA 17



Tip

It's important to mitigate loss when a party has breached an agreement. Just because a party has breached a contract does not give the other party a right to accumulate huge losses and expect these to be covered. Only a reasonable amount can be recovered.

What about non-binding agreements?

Some documents look like contracts, but are not intended to be binding. For example, in some cases the parties will create a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (**MOU**) to set out the framework of a proposed arrangement to aid further discussion and negotiation. If a document such as an MOU is not intended to be binding, this should be clearly stated in the document.

There can also be 'agreements to agree', which like an MOU sets out the parties' intentions, but do not create binding obligations.



Caution

If your organisation is signing a document, but does not intend it to be binding, it's very important to **make sure that the document clearly states that it does not intend to create binding obligations** (although a court may still hold that a document is intended to binding on the parties depending on the relevant facts).

Similarly, if your organisation is relying on statements in a document that are not intended to be binding, this may cause problems if your organisation acts inconsistently with what the document says – so be careful and consider whether it would be more appropriate for your organisation to enter into a contract rather than relying on a non-contractual document.



What is a deed?

A deed is a special type of binding promise or commitment to do something.

A deed does **not** require consideration (see 'What is a contract?' above) to be valid and enforceable, so deeds are sometimes used where there is no consideration, or where the existence of consideration may be open to question. The absence of consideration is overcome by the idea that the deed represents a solemn act, that the person signing the deed intends to uphold their promise.

An example is when property is given as a gift. There is no consideration, so a deed of transfer of ownership is often used.

Different states and territories have specific formality requirements for deeds to be valid, so it is important to check the requirements for your jurisdiction or seek legal advice before executing a deed.

Execution (signing) and enforcement

To avoid difficulties enforcing a contract, check that it will be signed by authorised persons. The organisation's constitution may contain special rules about how the organisation can execute documents.

It's common practice for:

- corporations to execute by two directors, or one director and the secretary, and
- incorporated associations to execute by two members of the committee, or one member of the committee and the secretary



Tip

Ask for evidence that the person signing has authority to do so, for example, by requiring identification and evidence that a relevant position in the company or organisation is held (such as a copy of the person's power of attorney authorising that individual to sign the type and value of contract on behalf of the company or organisation).



Note – electronic signatures

A contract may be executed with an electronic or digital signature in certain circumstances.

Signing a document electronically or digitally often involves inserting a picture of the person's signature into a document, but there are also third-party applications (such as DocuSign) that allow for a person to sign using special software, or by drawing their signature on a smartphone or tablet.

In many cases, an electronic signature will be treated the same as an ink signature on paper provided that the key elements of a contract are present (offer and acceptance, consideration, the intention to create legally binding relations, and certainty of terms of the agreement, as discussed above).

Different rules apply to deeds depending on which state or territory law governs the deed. If unsure, or if you are contracting with an overseas business, you should seek advice about the appropriateness of a particular electronic signature technique.

Sometimes, especially when contracting with government, special rules apply regarding which documents can be signed electronically. **Take care to check whether any special rules apply.**

Organisations should ensure they have appropriate procedures and policies around providing electronic signatures. Only those with the appropriate decision making (or delegated decision making) authority, in accordance with your organisation's policies and procedures and applicable legal requirements should be able to sign electronically, or provide explicit permission for someone to sign on their behalf. **If signing documents with another organisation, check to confirm the organisation and the person signing is authorised to sign electronically.**

An electronic signature can be challenged just like a written signature (for example, a person may deny that they signed), so, if you're arranging the execution of a contract, it can be worthwhile to require extra steps, such as having the signing witnessed and having correspondence that confirms the relevant person did sign the relevant document.

Varying a contract

Contract terms can be amended or changed (known as 'variation') after the contract has come into force.

This is done by agreement between all the parties to the contract. Some contracts will specifically deal with the requirements of a valid variation, and may limit what can be varied. All variations should be in writing and signed by each party to the contract, and the parties must adhere to the requirements of a valid variation.

Executing a deed of amendment or variation is often the best option, particularly where there is no consideration involved in the variation (beyond the consideration already provided for under the original contract). Sometimes variations may be done by separate written agreement.



Tip

Courts have recognised that variations can be made orally or implied from conduct, even if the original contract specifies that variations must be in writing. For example, this was discussed in *Wright v Foresight Constructions Pty Ltd* [2011] NSWCA 327, where an oral variation was deemed effective despite the original contract requiring written variations.

Nonetheless, while the inclusion of clauses in a contract that prescribe the requirements for any subsequent variation won't negate the risk of the contract being varied orally or by conduct, it will help to mitigate that risk. It is therefore still a good idea to include a 'no oral variation' clause in a contract.

Ending a contract

A contract can come to an end in a range of ways including:

• Performance	This is when the parties have finished fulfilling their obligations under the contract.
• Agreement	This can involve parties mutually agreeing to release each other from their obligations under the contract (mutual discharge) or replacing the contract with a new contract (novation).
• Operation of law	A contract may terminate automatically by operation of law. This can include, for example, where one party to a contract dies.
• Repudiation	<p>This is when a party shows an intention to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no longer be bound by the contract, or • fulfil the contract in a manner substantially inconsistent with their obligations <p>This does not necessarily include situations where a party has a different or incorrect view of its obligations under the contract.</p>
• Frustration	<p>Where the performance of a contract becomes impossible through no fault of either party to the contract, the contract is automatically terminated at the point of frustration.</p> <p>It's important to note that only future obligations are discharged at the point of frustration. Obligations that were due for performance before the frustrating event are still enforceable.</p>
• Breach	The end of a contract for breach can result from either an actual or anticipated breach of an essential term of the contract, or a sufficiently serious breach of a non-essential term of the contract.
• Termination	This is where the parties agree that the contract may be terminated by a period of notice, or upon occurrence of a specific event.



Caution

When seeking to terminate (end) a contract due to a breach by the other party, it's important to determine the seriousness of the breach. Only serious or fundamental breaches result in an innocent party having the right to terminate but those rights may be limited by the terms of the contract itself.

Purporting to terminate when you have no right to do so can have serious consequences including liability to pay the other party damages. You should seek legal advice if you are not sure whether you have a right to terminate a contract.

Reviewing a contract

You should read and understand the entire contract.



The two most important questions to ask when reviewing a contract:

- Does each party understand the promises made to them, and the promises made by them, under the contract?
- Is each party able to deliver on their promises?

Checklist – specific issues to help guide you review and understand a contract

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Term (duration) 	<p>Is the contract a 'one-off' arrangement (for example, the purchase of office equipment), or is it for a defined period (for example, one year of office equipment maintenance or servicing)? <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Some contracts 'renew' automatically unless a party cancels – be particularly careful about this in standard form contracts. If the contract is an 'ongoing' or 'automatically extending' contract, make sure your organisation understands how the cancellation process works and how much notice is required – and then put these dates in your diary.</p> <p>Similarly, some contracts have an option to renew that needs to be exercised by providing notice of an intention to renew within a certain timeframe. These dates should also be diarised.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Termination 	<p>Does the contract permit early termination? Be particularly alert to 'one-sided' termination clauses in standard form contracts, which allow the other party but not your organisation to terminate. If there is a chance that your organisation might want to end the contract early, then consider asking for an early termination right (for example, 'for convenience' or on the giving of a period of notice). For example, if your organisation loses funding for a project, it might be necessary to end contracts with service providers for that project. <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Termination rights can be 'for convenience' (for any reason), or can be limited to specific circumstances (for example, if your organisation loses funding).</p> <p>If a contract is terminated early but that termination is not permitted by the contract, then the terminating party will breach the contract.</p>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligations to pay money 	<div> <div>Scoping</div> <div> <p>Is a payment required only once, or are recurring (ongoing) payments required? How do these payments need to be made, and by when?</p> <p>Consider timing – are payments required in advance, or after receiving a product or service? Are prices clearly specified in the contract, and do they include GST? Do prices change over the term of the contract (for example, annually, or on renewal of the term)?</p> </div> </div> <div> <div>Capacity</div> <div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If your organisation is required to make payments to the other party, does your organisation have sufficient funding? Will your organisation have the funds at the times that payments are due under the contract? • If the other party is required to make payments to your organisation, are you confident that the other party has sufficient funding? Have you checked its financial position? Would it be sensible to ask for part or all the money up front? • Has your organisation considered the potential implications for a deemed acceptance model? Would it be appropriate to propose an acceptance process for delivered goods and services under the contract? </div> </div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligations to provide goods or services 	<div> <div>Scoping</div> <div> <p>What are the goods or services that are to be provided under the contract? Make sure both parties understand exactly what is to be provided or done.</p> <p>If appropriate, consider attaching photos, diagrams, plans, samples, colour swatches or detailed requirements, such as 'service standards' to the contract as a 'schedule'. Another way to do this is to set out a 'statement of requirements' that describes the scope, milestones and deliverables under the contract.</p> </div> </div> <div> <div>Capacity</div> <div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If your organisation is required to provide goods or services, is your organisation able to meet the time for supply and does it have the resources to do so (for example, staff and equipment)? Can your organisation provide the goods or services to the specifications required, and in the timeframes required? Will your organisation have (or receive) the funds necessary to provide the goods or services? • If the other party is required to provide goods or services, are you confident that the other party has the resources and expertise to deliver? </div> </div>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liabilities and indemnities 	<div> <div></div> <div> <p>An indemnity is essentially a promise by one party to compensate another party for loss or damage that the other party suffers either directly or indirectly as a result of performance (or non-performance) of the contract.</p> <p>An indemnity can be broad. It can apply if your organisation has only a very small involvement, or no involvement, in the loss or damage. Indemnities can expose your organisation to very significant liabilities.</p> <p>Read an indemnity clause carefully. Think about 'what could go wrong' – that is, what loss or damage could be suffered by the party your organisation is indemnifying. Consider whether that financial exposure is acceptable. Consider whether your organisation has any relevant</p> </div> </div>



	insurance, or whether any should be taken out to cover a breach of indemnity.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Force Majeure 	<p>A force majeure clause relieves a party from performing its contractual obligations due to an event outside the reasonable control of the affected party.</p> <p>Force majeure clauses usually exclude liability for a party who is unable to perform their contractual obligations due to a 'force majeure event', on the basis that such events are outside of the party's control. Examples of 'force majeure events' may include acts of God, natural disasters, national emergencies, government action or interference, wars or pandemics, but the types of events covered will depend on how the clause is drafted. Some clauses may specify an exhaustive list of events covered by the clause, whereas others may be open-ended and just give examples.</p> <p>If you anticipate that certain types of 'force majeure events' would drastically impact your ability to fulfil your obligations under the contract, it may benefit you to include that type of event in the contract's definition of force majeure.</p> <p>Also check that the party impacted by the 'force majeure event' is required to use reasonable endeavours to mitigate the effect of that event on its ability to fulfil the contract</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time for performance 	Does the contract stipulate a time for performance of the obligations under the contract? If timing is an essential term of the contract, it is important to follow the requirements within the required time frame or significant damages may result.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dispute Resolution 	<p>It's important to review any dispute resolution clause to determine how disputes are to be dealt with under the contract.</p> <p>A contract may require a party to follow a certain procedure for resolving disputes. Failure to follow these procedures carefully can result in otherwise valid claims under the contract becoming invalidated or excluded.</p> <p>A contract may also require a party to seek alternative dispute resolution such as mediation or arbitration before starting formal legal proceedings in a court or tribunal.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purposes of your organisation 	Not-for-profit organisations must ensure that they act within the scope of the purposes of the organisation. If you are not sure what the exact purposes of your organisation are, you may find a statement of purposes in the constitution (or rules) of your organisation. Consider whether the contract is consistent and within the scope of those purposes.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status 	If your organisation has DGR status, consider whether the proposed contract is consistent with the 'dominant purpose' or 'principal purpose' that your organisation is required to pursue in order to maintain that status.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Branding and intellectual property 	<p>Does the agreement allow another party to use your organisation's brand, or other intellectual property such as your organisation's work product or know how? Consider the terms of any licence and what limitations should be placed on this.</p> <p>If intellectual property is created in connection with the agreement, which party has the rights to that intellectual property?</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>



For more information, see our [guide to intellectual property](#). The guide covers the basics of making and protecting intellectual property, and avoiding infringing the intellectual property of others.

Specific types of contracts

The following comments relate to specific types of contracts that your organisation may come across.

Funding agreements

There is often limited scope to negotiate funding agreements, but this is not always the case.

Sometimes similar organisations (a coalition) will negotiate together, often through a peak body, for better funding terms subject to any competition laws which prevent them from doing so without a special exemption. This is especially the case where there is a common funding agreement in place.

If your organisation is not able to negotiate funding terms, you will need to decide whether to proceed (with an understanding of the risks) or walk away from the opportunity.

Pay close attention to the following:

- Can the government or other funder terminate or suspend the contract, or change the terms, without your organisation's consent? Consider carefully what could happen if those rights are exercised. Are you able to build related rights into any other contracts that your organisation enters into with suppliers?
- Is your organisation set up to meet all the detailed record-keeping, audit and insurance requirements?
- Is your organisation required to grant intellectual property rights to the government (including in relation to 'background' or pre-existing intellectual property)?

Consumer contracts

Under the Australian Consumer Law (ACL), certain goods or services purchased by 'consumers' come with automatic guarantees, including that they will work and do what you asked for.

For the purposes of the ACL, a 'consumer' is defined as a person, including a business, who acquires:

- goods or services costing up to \$100,000 (the individual unit cost of the goods or services is counted, not the total cost if multiple goods or services are purchased)
- goods or services costing more than \$100,000 which are normally bought for personal or household purposes (ie. goods worth more than \$100,000 which are purely for business use, such as machinery or farming equipment, are not subject to the consumer guarantees), and
- any vehicle or trailer used to transport goods on public roads (irrespective of cost)

If the goods or services do not satisfy the automatic guarantees, consumers may have rights which include:

- a repair, replacement or refund
- the ability to cancel a service, or
- the right to compensation for loss suffered



For more information, see [our fact sheet on Consumer Guarantees](#).

Unfair contracts

The ACL also includes protections for individuals and small businesses (businesses with less than 100 employees or less than \$10 million in revenue) from unfair terms in standard form contracts (**Unfair Contract Terms protections**).

A standard form contract is often one that is prepared by one party with no or very little opportunity for the other party to negotiate it – that is, contracts offered on a ‘take it or leave it’ basis.



Note – changes to the law

Significant changes to the Unfair Contract Terms protections legislation came into effect on 9 November 2023.

This legislation considerably expanded the scope of the unfair contract terms regime by:

- prohibiting unfair contract terms such that businesses proposing or seeking to rely on them would be exposed to the risk of serious penalties
- expanding the definition of small business to capture entities that either have up to 100 employees (increased from 20) or up to \$10 million in annual turnover
- for contracts to which the ACL applies, removing the upfront contract value threshold such that the Unfair Contract Terms protections will apply to all relevant standard form contracts with consumers and small businesses, and
- for contracts to which the *Australian Securities and Investment Commission Act 2011* (Cth) applies (including contracts related to financial products, such as credit contracts and insurance contracts), increasing the upfront contract value threshold from \$3 million to \$5 million, such that the Unfair Contract Terms protections will apply to relevant contracts below \$5 million

Ultimately, whether a term in a standard term contract is unfair is a matter for the court or tribunal to consider.

The ACL sets out examples of unfair terms which include terms that enable one party (but not another) to avoid or limit their obligations or to vary or terminate a contract. Terms which penalise one party (but not another) may also be unfair.



For more information, see [our fact sheet on unfair contract terms](#).

Auspice agreements

Auspice agreements can be particularly risky for 'host' organisations. (See 'Purposes of your organisation' and 'Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status' above).

If you are proposing to auspice a project that your organisation would not normally undertake, it is prudent to look at the circumstances very carefully and ensure they are consistent with your organisation's purposes, and be mindful of any conditions or restrictions related to tax concessions. Also remember that your organisation (and not the party that you are auspicings) will be responsible to the funding organisation.



For more information, see [our webpage on auspicings](#).

Lease agreements

In addition to making sure that your organisation is happy with the key commercial terms, other clauses that you should consider before entering into a lease include:

- **Outgoings** – make sure that you understand all outgoing (which may include general utilities as well as charges for cleaning, security or landscape services depending on the premises)
- **Repair and make good clauses** – some landlords require the tenant to regularly maintain the premises (such as painting or recarpeting every five years), so ensure your organisation budgets for this. Also take note of the end of lease requirements concerning the state in which your organisation must leave the premises (ie. the make good provisions)
- **Rent review** – have a clear understanding of the rent review process set out in the lease so you can budget for rent increases during the term. You should try to negotiate a specific rent review mechanism (for example, specific amount, or percentage)
- **Options to renew** – if there is an option to renew and your organisation wishes to exercise it (so that your organisation can stay longer than the initial term), ensure compliance with the notice periods set out in the lease
- **Insurance requirements** – in some cases tenants are required to take out insurance which adds to the overall cost of the premises
- **Permitted use and zoning** – ensure the permitted use stated in the lease is approved under the relevant zoning



For more information, see [our webpage on lease agreements](#).

Approval processes

Approval processes for contracts vary by organisation. At some organisations, for example, all contracts, or contracts that fall into certain categories, must be approved by the board or senior management.

Find out what approval processes apply when you start to negotiate a contract, so that you can arrange those approvals on time and avoid delays towards the end of the process.