

## **Opening statement**

**Sue Woodward AM**

**ACNC Commissioner**

### **Senate Estimates Economics Committee**

I would like to update the Committee on the ACNC's work since my last appearance.

Some of our key activities since February have included:

- consulting with charities on how we will collect information about related party transactions in their next Annual Information Statement. Based on the results of that consultation we have settled the form of the questions, updated our guidance and notified all charities of the changes via a direct mailout
- issuing guidance for charities wanting to advocate on the referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament
- revoking the registration of more than 700 charities for persistent non-reporting
- making a range of submissions on issues affecting charities, including written submissions to the Productivity Commission on Philanthropy and the Australian Accounting Standards Board (available on our website)
- undertaking meetings with State, Commonwealth and international regulators
- presenting keynote addresses at prominent sector events including Volunteering Australia's conference, the Connecting Up digital innovation conference and the Victorian Neighbourhood House conference
- in the context of documents being tabled in the Parliament about allegations against the Hillsong Church, issuing a statement (with the charity's consent) confirming that the ACNC is investigating, and explaining that the ACNC does not have legislative power to provide whistleblower protections
- adding further search options to the Charity Register, continuing to improve the usability for charities, donors, philanthropists and the public
- finalising our flagship publication the Australian Charities Report which will be released soon. This will be the 9<sup>th</sup> edition and is an annual analysis of the information charities report in their Annual Information Statements, and
- reaching 9,000 enrolments in our online learning program of free short courses for charities.

As mentioned above, one of our key priorities has been helping charities understand how they could participate in advocacy on the referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. We have shared our guidance widely through the media and on our social media channels. I recorded a podcast (available on our website) and highlighted it to every registered charity via our monthly e-newsletter 'The Charitable Purpose'. Recently, I also presented with the Australian Electoral Commission on advocacy and the referendum in a webinar convened by sector peak bodies.

This guidance is available on our website. The main points are:

- charities can and do advocate
- we recognise advocacy is an activity that can help charities achieve their purposes. As with other activities, charities need to consider how their advocacy furthers their particular charitable purposes
- charities also need to ensure that their advocacy activities are lawful, respectful and fair so that they continue to meet their obligation to comply with the ACNC Governance Standards.

The range of activities that could be considered as advocating are broad. Not every charity will actively campaign. Some charities may simply want to make a statement of support for a 'yes' or 'no' case. An example of this would be a message added to the signature block of a charity's email messages or on their website. Doing this will not jeopardise the charity registration with the ACNC.

On the red tape front, we welcomed the announcement in February of the agreement between the Commonwealth, State and Territory Treasurers to a set of nationally consistent charitable fundraising principles. This national approach to fundraising and subsequent red tape reform will save Australia's charity sector millions of dollars annually. Charities will be able to direct those savings toward helping the people who rely on them instead – which is excellent news for the sector.

I am happy to elaborate on these and other matters.