

**Senate Estimates, February 2023**  
**Opening statement: Sue Woodward AM**  
**Commissioner**  
**Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission**

I would like to introduce myself as the new Commissioner of the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission, and to outline priorities to support the sector.

I was delighted to start as the ACNC Commissioner on the 12th of December. I have come full circle as I was involved in informing the policy that established the ACNC and was the inaugural Policy and Education Director.

As the Chief Adviser for Not-for-profit Law at Justice Connect for many years, I have an intimate understanding of charity law and the Acts I now administer.

There are now around 60,000 registered charities, and the sector has a substantial economic and social impact.

Our latest data shows it generates revenue of more than \$176 billion, attracts \$12 billion in donations and employs 1.38 million people – more than 10% of Australia's workforce. But it is largely powered by volunteers – around 3.4 million. More than half of all charities have no paid staff at all.

Our role as the regulator is critical to support a vibrant sector that inspires public trust. We help charities stay on track with governance, assisting them to meet reporting and other obligations. We weed out bad actors who could potentially taint the reputation of the whole sector.

We are a rich source of data, provided by charities in their annual reporting. It confirms the significant economic value charities add to our economy and allows us to see trends across volunteer numbers, charity size, purpose, activities, and locations.

We are committed to sharing data, and we do that in several ways.

For example, anyone can search for information about charities for free on their phone or computer using the Charity Register. Millions of people do each year.

This year, we will publish the ninth edition of the Australian Charities Report, an annual comprehensive overview of the sector, with an interactive data tool that allows researchers and policy makers to dive deeper.

The ACNC does not develop law or policy – we administer it, using the strong legal framework of the Charities Act and the ACNC Act, and in accordance with our Regulatory Approach Statement that explains how we approach our role as a regulator. The law outlines which entities can be registered, the purposes that are deemed charitable and the rules charities must operate within.

Charity advocacy has at times been a concern to Senators and the public. To be clear, I will restate our longstanding guidance, available on our website.

Charities can advocate to promote or oppose a change to any matter of law, policy or practice – as long as it furthers their charitable purpose. 'Charitable purpose' has a special legal meaning that is associated with charity registration. Charities cannot have a purpose to promote a political candidate or party.

Senators and the public can be assured that checks and balances exist. Disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living rises have affected the sector. Demand for charity services is rising, even while many charities struggle with workforce and volunteer issues.

One of my priorities is to focus on continuing to reduce red tape for charities so that they can focus their resources and efforts on their missions. We have worked with states and territories to harmonise fundraising red tape, with the latest reforms taking effect in Queensland late last year.

In December, the ACNC reached a milestone 10-year anniversary. It is a great point for me to take the reigns as we move into the next decade and the ACNC becomes a mature regulator.

I am passionate about this sector, and I am privileged to be in this role.

I want to be transparent about our work, and I want to support charities to be transparent and vibrant, so they can get on with their job of serving the community.

And I will strive to cement the ACNC's place as a world-class regulator.