# Submission Cover Sheet

## Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Submission number: 014

Submitter: Australian Hotels Association (AHA) ACT

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Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Via email: LACommitteeEconomics@parliament.act.gov.au

To whom it may concern,

**RE: SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO CANBERRA'S NIGHT-TIME ECONOMY**

The Australian Hotels Association (AHA) ACT is pleased to present this submission to the Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy.

Our members – accommodation hotels, pubs, bars, nightclubs, taverns, restaurants and cafés – are the backbone of Canberra's Night-Time Economy. Their ability to survive is shaped by government policy, regulation, and investment. Accordingly, this submission discusses and recommends a range of holistic measures, supported by empirical evidence, to foster a vibrant Territory after dark.

AHA ACT are willing to provide further information should the Committee require it. Please do not hesitate to contact me using the details below to discuss any aspect of this submission.

Yours faithfully,

[redacted]

**CHRIS GATFIELD**
**General Manager**
**Australian Hotels Association ACT**
[redacted]

# Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

AUSTRALIAN HOTELS ASSOCIATION ACT

# About the Australian Hotels Association

The Australian Hotels Association (AHA) is a leading organisation of employers, comprising over 5,000 members, served by branches in every state and territory and a Canberra-based national office.

AHA ACT is the leading industry representative body in the ACT licensed hospitality, accommodation and tourism industry, representing **accommodation hotels, pubs, bars, nightclubs, taverns, restaurants and cafés**.

AHA ACT advocates for members on tourism, education, liquor licensing, regulation, training, and workplace relations, and works with a wide spectrum of stakeholders in the ACT, including Government agencies, political leaders from all sides of politics and other key industry groups.

For more information, visit www.actaha.org.au

# Contents

# Executive Summary

Canberra's night-time economy (NTE) is a vital part of the Territory's economy. As a dynamic sector, it encompasses a diverse range of businesses, creative industries, and community experiences that collectively shape Canberra's identity and prosperity. The NTE delivers an estimated $4.7 billion in annual turnover, accounts for approximately 13 percent of the total ACT employment, and comprises around 2,300 establishments operating across the hospitality, entertainment, tourism, and cultural sectors.[1] This industry not only sustains economic activity, but also provides a foundation for social interaction, innovation, and urban activation, reinforcing Canberra's reputation as a progressive, liveable, and inclusive city.

Although modest increases in NTE turnover and the number of establishments have been recorded, in recent years the sector has simultaneously experienced an employment contraction of approximately 8 percent.[2] This disconnect signals the presence of structural pressures – rising operating costs, entrenched labour shortages, escalating insurance premiums, and inflexible regulatory settings – that are collectively compressing margins, constraining workforce participation, and diminishing the sector's capacity to deliver a diverse and high-quality night-time offering. These challenges threaten to undermine the sector's role as an engine of economic growth, a driver of cultural expression, and a key contributor to Canberra's global brand.

Crucially, the available evidence does not indicate a decline in consumer demand for night-time activities or experiences. Rather, it reveals a suite of systemic impediments – external to demand – that are inhibiting the sector's ability to innovate, adapt, and realise its full potential. Without targeted reform, Canberra's NTE risks being unable to sustain its current contributions, let alone expand to meet the evolving needs of residents, businesses, and visitors. This submission therefore advances a comprehensive, evidence-based, and future-focused reform agenda, structured around five interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars:

1. Economic Sustainability & Business Viability: Addressing cost pressures, supporting business resilience, and ensuring sustainable growth across the sector.
2. Vibrancy & Cultural Activation: Enabling a diverse and dynamic range of events, experiences, and creative opportunities that foster community connection and cultural enrichment.

[1] Council of Capital City Lord Mayors – Measuring the Australian Night-Time Economy 2025
[2] Ibid.

3. Regulatory Modernisation & Planning Certainty: Streamlining regulatory frameworks to reduce red tape, enhance planning clarity, and support innovation and investment.
4. Access, Transport & Workforce Enablement: Improving late-night transport, workforce mobility, and access to safe, reliable services that underpin sector participation and operational viability.
5. Governance & Strategic Leadership: Establishing clear and accountable structures for cross-government coordination, industry engagement, and long-term strategic vision.

A guiding principle of this reform agenda is closer alignment with New South Wales NTE and Vibrancy Reform settings, enabling ACT venues and workers to operate within a broadly consistent cross-border regulatory and policy environment.

Collectively, the Association's recommendations aim to secure a thriving, resilient, and globally competitive night-time economy for Canberra – one that creates lasting value for local communities, businesses, and the broader ACT region.

This submission champions economic stewardship – not deregulation for its own sake.

# Recommendations

## 1. Economic Sustainability & Business Viability

*Addressing cost pressures, supporting business resilience, and ensuring sustainable growth and employment across the sector.*

**Recommendation 1 – Insurance Reform**

Revisit and implement mechanisms to improve insurance affordability and underwriting stability for hospitality and live entertainment operators, including consideration of risk-pooling or mutual models, as market contraction limits venue viability.

**Recommendation 2 – Light Rail Business Mitigation Program**

Establish a targeted, time-limited financial assistance program for businesses directly impacted by light rail construction, limited to businesses that:

a) Demonstrate a turnover reduction of 30 percent or more compared to the pre-construction period; and
b) Demonstrate measurable impacts on access, visibility and amenity.

**Recommendation 3 – Liquor Licence Fee Framework Reform**

Review and restructure the ACT liquor licence fee framework to better reflect venue size, employment contribution, revenue, cultural programming frequency and relative risk profile. Benchmark overall fee levels and structures against New South Wales liquor licence costs to maintain cross-border competitiveness.

**Recommendation 4 – Workforce & Skills Development Strategy**

Develop targeted workforce initiatives to address hospitality labour shortages, including dedicated chef and kitchen training pathways, targeted workforce development missions, and promotion of hospitality careers.

**Recommendation 5 – Worker Safety**

Increase penalties for assaulting, intimidating, or harassing frontline hospitality staff, and launch a comprehensive public awareness campaign to reinforce that such behaviour will not be tolerated.

**Recommendation 6 – Workplace Protection Order Reform**

Strengthen the existing Workplace Protection Order framework to adopt a more human-centred, common-sense approach that improves access to protection and better supports victims. By reworking the framework to streamline and eliminate unnecessary red tape.

**Recommendation 7 – Expand Direct International Air Connectivity to Canberra**

Leverage the full capacity of Canberra Airport by establishing and strengthening connections with major international hubs, including Singapore, Hong Kong, and Delhi.

**Recommendation 8 – Increase Funding for VisitCanberra**

Allocate additional resources to VisitCanberra to enhance promotion and advertising, and expand their overseas operations, thereby strengthening Canberra's brand image as a leading international destination.

**Recommendation 9 – Business Events Fund**

Increase investment in the Business Events Fund to $1m over four years to ensure Canberra continues to attract forward bookings.

## 2. Vibrancy & Cultural Activation

*Enabling a diverse and dynamic range of events, experiences and creative opportunities that foster community connection and cultural enrichment.*

**Recommendation 10 – Venue Investment & Infrastructure Grants Program**

Establish an ACT Venue Investment and Infrastructure Grants Program to support sound attenuation, compliance upgrades, safety improvements and programming capacity for live music and performance venues.

**Recommendation 11 – Trading Extensions for Live Programming**

Provide a two-hour trading extension for venues that program live entertainment on nights where entertainment is provided after 6 pm.

**Recommendation 12 – Expand Live Programming Fee Incentives**

Reduce liquor licence fees for venues with a capacity of over 350 that regularly program live entertainment, recognising their cultural and economic contributions.

**Recommendation 13 – Expansion of the Special Event Fund**

Increase the Special Event Fund to $2 million per annum to strengthen visitation, economic return and year-round activation of Canberra's night-time economy.

**Recommendation 14 – Experience-Based Diversification Strategy**

Align night-time economy reform with evolving youth preferences by incentivising experience-based programming, cultural events and diversified venue models beyond alcohol-centric consumption.

### Recommendation 15 – Funding for the City Renewal Authority

Continue to fund the work of the City Renewal Authority in relation to infrastructure upgrades, improvements to safety and the perception of safety, connectivity, and city regeneration in the CBD.

## 3. Regulatory Modernisation & Planning Certainty

*Streamlining regulatory frameworks to reduce red tape, enhance planning clarity, and support innovation and investment.*

### Recommendation 16 – Noise Regulation Modernisation

Modernise permissible noise limits under the *Environment Protection Act 1997* to reflect contemporary mixed-use urban environments and declared entertainment precincts.

### Recommendation 17 – Safeguards Against Vexatious Complaints

Introduce safeguards against vexatious noise complaints, including:

a) A minimum threshold for the number of complainants; and
b) Complaints must not be submitted anonymously.

### Recommendation 18 – Codification of Agent of Change

Codify and strengthen the "Agent of Change" principle, ensuring new developments adjacent to existing live music or entertainment venues bear responsibility for appropriate noise attenuation.

### Recommendation 19 – Precinct-Based Planning Expansion

Expand and formalise precinct-based planning frameworks to cluster entertainment activity and reduce land-use conflict.

### Recommendation 20 – Operational Flexibility & RAMP Reform

Enable seasonal flexibility in venue capacity and reform RAMP arrangements to ensure voluntary trading-hour adjustments do not negatively affect business valuation or access to finance.

### Recommendation 21 – Al Fresco Dining Fee Standardisation

Standardise al fresco dining fees across precincts to improve fairness, predictability and equity for operators.

**Recommendation 22 – Repeal Liquor Regulation 2010 Schedule 1, Part 1.2 (Buildings and Fittings) - 1.6 (Dancefloors)**

Abolish outdated and unnecessary regulatory requirements in relation to dancefloors in licensed premises, thereby supporting greater operational flexibility and innovation for venue operators.

## 4. Access, Transport & Workforce Enablement

*Improving late-night transport, workforce mobility, and access to safe, reliable services that underpin sector participation and operational viability.*

**Recommendation 23 – Fare-free Weekends**

Make the free public transport services on Friday and Saturday nights from 6 pm to 4 am on key routes servicing entertainment precincts (Civic, Braddon, Dickson, Manuka, Kingston) permanent.

**Recommendation 24 – Late-Night Public Transport Alignment**

Mandate late-night public transport services aligned with trading hours in key night-time precincts, with services operating until at least 2 am Friday–Saturday and 1 am Thursday–Sunday on all routes serving entertainment zones. Services must provide a minimum 30-minute frequency, with clear timetables published at venues and transport hubs.

**Recommendation 25 – Night-Time Transport Advisory Group**

Establish a Night-Time Transport Advisory Group with representatives from Transport Canberra, AHA ACT, rideshare operators, and nightlife precinct managers. This group would regularly assess late-night transport performance, proactively address emerging issues, and coordinate service improvements to align with night-time economy trading patterns.

**Recommendation 26 – Rideshare Access Reform**

Permit rideshare vehicles to access all taxi ranks and bus zones in entertainment precincts from 10 pm onwards, with designated rideshare-only zones established in Civic, Braddon and Dickson to reduce footpath congestion and improve patron safety. Implement clear signage and real-time digital wayfinding at all designated pick-up locations.

## 5. Governance & Strategic Leadership

*Establishing clear and accountable structures for cross-government coordination, industry engagement, and long-term strategic vision.*

**Recommendation 27 – Night-Time Economy Coordinator**

Appoint a dedicated Night-Time Economy Coordinator within the ACT Public Service to serve as a central liaison between industry and government. This role would streamline cross-agency regulatory processes and oversee the implementation of night-time economy reforms, working closely with the City Renewal Authority to maximise renewal and activation initiatives in key precincts.

**Recommendation 28 – Liquor Licence Fee Discount for Industry Association Members**

Provide a 10 percent reduction in liquor licensing fees for licensed premises that maintain active membership in a recognised industry association. This measure is intended to incentivise industry engagement and promote adherence to best practice standards.

# The Structural Context of Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Businesses operating after 6 pm are a core engine of the ACT economy, employment generation, and urban vibrancy. The NTE generates approximately $4.7 billion in turnover and directly supports more than 32,000 workers – figures that reinforce the sector's centrality to the ACT's prosperity, quality of life, and competitive positioning within the national context.[3]

Nevertheless, the sector faces a critical inflection point. Recent years have seen notable shifts in visitation patterns within Canberra's Central Business District (CBD), driven largely by structural changes in work patterns and the relocation of major government agencies. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of hybrid and remote work arrangements across the Australian Public Service, which remains the city centre's largest workforce. As a result, a significant proportion of employees who were previously daily commuters now work from home for part of the week. Recent data indicates that around 61 percent of employees in the Canberra CBD work from home at least some of the time, reducing traditional weekday office occupancy and daytime foot traffic in the city centre. [4]

These changing work patterns have had a direct impact on visitation to Civic, particularly during weekday mornings and lunch periods when the CBD historically relied on office workers for activity and trade. While overall visitation to the city centre has shown some recovery and shifted toward later afternoon and evening periods, the traditional weekday daytime economy remains weaker than prior to the pandemic.

The movement of several Commonwealth government departments to the Barton precinct has also contributed to the redistribution of employment activity away from Civic. Barton now records extremely low office vacancy rates, while vacancy in the CBD remains comparatively higher, reflecting a shift in the location of large office-based workforces.

Despite a positive trajectory in establishment growth – approximately 4 percent over the period – and consistent increases in sales and employment, employment within the NTE declined by approximately 8 percent over 2023-24.[5] This paradox underscores significant structural pressures that, if left unaddressed, risk undermining the scale and sustainability of the sector's economic and social contributions.

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[3] Council of Capital City Lord Mayors – Measuring the Australian Night-Time Economy 2025
[4] Roy Morgan – Work from Home
[5] Council of Capital City Lord Mayors – Measuring the Australian Night-Time Economy 2025

National labour force statistics reveal that this phenomenon is not unique to Canberra. Across Australia, employment in hospitality subsectors such as pubs, taverns, and bars remains materially below pre-pandemic peaks, while restaurants and cafés have seen additional employment contraction in 2023–24.[6] Simultaneously, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Job Vacancy data confirm that vacancy rates in Accommodation and Food Services remain well above the February 2020 baseline, signalling persistent workforce shortages and heightened competition for skilled labour.[7]

This complex interplay – declining employment despite steady or rising consumer demand – reflects a form of structural compression that manifests through several interconnected pressures:

- Intensifying wage competition and labour scarcity, which elevate operating costs and constrain workforce availability
- Escalating insurance premiums, which erode margins and increase business risk profiles
- Ongoing energy and input cost inflation, further narrowing the financial viability of many enterprises
- Disruption from major infrastructure projects, which temporarily depresses turnover and affects business continuity
- Rigid regulatory frameworks that limit operational flexibility and adaptability to changing market conditions

It is essential to recognise that the contraction in employment and staffing intensity within the NTE is not a function of declining public interest or participation in Canberra's nightlife. Rather, it is the result of cumulative margin compression and heightened structural costs, which together restrict the sector's ability to recruit, retain, and fully engage its workforce.

This distinction – between demand-side stability and supply-side constraint – is fundamental to the deliberations of this Committee and to the effective design of responsive, evidence-based policy interventions.

[6] Australian Bureau of Statistics – Labour Force
[7] Australian Bureau of Statistics – Job Vacancies

# Pillars

## 1. Economic Sustainability & Business Viability

A resilient and prosperous NTE relies fundamentally on a stable business environment, underpinned by effective risk management, access to critical infrastructure, and a sustainable, skilled workforce. Each of these elements faces significant challenges. Each requires coordinated, evidence-based intervention to ensure Canberra's NTE remains robust, competitive, and future-ready.

### 1.1 Insurance as a Market Constraint

The affordability and availability of insurance is a systemic and defining structural constraints on NTE businesses. What was once a background operational expense has rapidly evolved into a frontline issue, with the capacity to determine programming, venue viability, and sectoral resilience. The Australian Prudential Regulation Authority's National Claims and Policies Database documents years of sustained underwriting losses in the public liability insurance sector.[8] The Insurance Council of Australia cites a complex interplay of factors – including social inflation, a marked increase in the severity and frequency of claims, reinsurance contraction, and heightened exposure to climate and catastrophe risks – as principal drivers of premium escalation and market volatility.[9]

This committee's previous Inquiry into Insurance Costs revealed the severity of the situation: 44 percent of surveyed businesses reported premium increases exceeding 20 percent over two years.[10] For many small and medium-sized operators – particularly those hosting live music, performance, and cultural events – insurance is no longer just an operational cost but a critical determinant of whether they can remain open and continue to contribute to Canberra's cultural ecosystem.

Persistent underwriting losses across multiple years typically prompt insurers to raise premiums, tighten policy exclusions, or withdraw from the market altogether. These responses disproportionately affect businesses that are already high-risk or operate at the cultural and creative frontier – such as live music venues and event organisers. The 2024 Federal Inquiry into the live music industry formally recognised insurance as a binding constraint on cultural activity. It is recommended that governments urgently investigate mutual or pooled models to sustain the sector.[11]

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[8] Australian Prudential Regulation Authority – National Claims and Policies Database
[9] Insurance Council of Australia – Insurance Industry Snapshot
[10] ACT Legislative Assembly – Inquiry into Insurance Cost in the ACT
[11] Australian Parliament – Inquiry into the challenges and opportunities within the Australian live music industry

From an economic and public policy perspective, a contraction in private underwriting that restricts socially and economically beneficial participation constitutes a market failure. This justifies calibrated, strategic government intervention – whether through mutual insurance schemes, targeted subsidies, or regulatory reform – to restore market functionality, protect Canberra's creative infrastructure, and enable the next generation of growth and innovation in the NTE.

The Association acknowledges that the ACT Government's legislative powers are constrained in relation to broad reforms affecting insurance affordability and availability, as many of these issues fall within the Commonwealth Government's jurisdiction. Nevertheless, we strongly endorse this Committee's previous recommendations on insurance costs in the ACT. The AHA urges the government to take decisive action to implement these recommendations through legislative change, aiming to achieve meaningful reductions in operating costs for NTE businesses.

***Recommendation 1 – Insurance Reform***

*Revisit and implement mechanisms to improve insurance affordability and underwriting stability for hospitality and live entertainment operators, including consideration of risk-pooling or mutual models, as market contraction limits venue viability.*

## 1.2 Infrastructure Disruption and Turnover Impacts

While major infrastructure investment is essential for the long-term growth and vibrancy of the ACT, such projects can inflict significant and immediate disruption on businesses located within construction corridors. Infrastructure Australia recognises that extended construction phases can materially affect turnover and business viability for adjacent operators, especially small and independent enterprises.

The Sydney Light Rail project stands as a landmark case: over $31 million was distributed to impacted businesses through structured small-business assistance programs. Audit and evaluation found that earlier program implementation and clearer eligibility criteria would have improved effectiveness. However, the necessity and legitimacy of mitigation were never in doubt.[12]

Subsequent projects, such as the Sydney Metro, have adopted more advanced criteria – including predefined geographic and impact zones – to streamline access to assistance and reduce administrative burden.[13] Data from these initiatives, as well as from peer-

[12] NSW Audit Office – 2016 Audits
[13] Sydney Metro – Small Business Owners Support Program

reviewed studies, consistently show that foot traffic reductions of 30–60 per cent are common during periods where access, parking, or visibility are impaired.[14] Such disruptions can threaten not only the survival of individual businesses but also the broader economic and social fabric of precincts targeted for renewal.

In the ACT, the need for structured mitigation – be it through direct financial assistance or no-interest loans, rent relief, marketing support, or proactive consultation with affected businesses – should be regarded as an intrinsic and non-negotiable aspect of major infrastructure delivery. This is not an exceptional measure, but the adoption of national best practice.

***Recommendation 2 – Light Rail Business Mitigation Program***

*Establish a targeted, time-limited financial assistance program for businesses directly impacted by light rail construction, limited to businesses that:*

*a) Demonstrate a turnover reduction of 30 percent or more compared to the pre-construction period; and*

*b) Demonstrate measurable impacts on access, visibility and amenity.*

## 1.3 Liquor Licence Fee Framework Reform

Hospitality venues are central to Canberra's social, cultural, and economic life. Restaurants, pubs, bars, and live music venues are major employers, vital to tourism, and drive the city's NTE. However, the current ACT liquor licence fee framework fails to fully recognise the broader contributions of venues offering on-site hospitality.

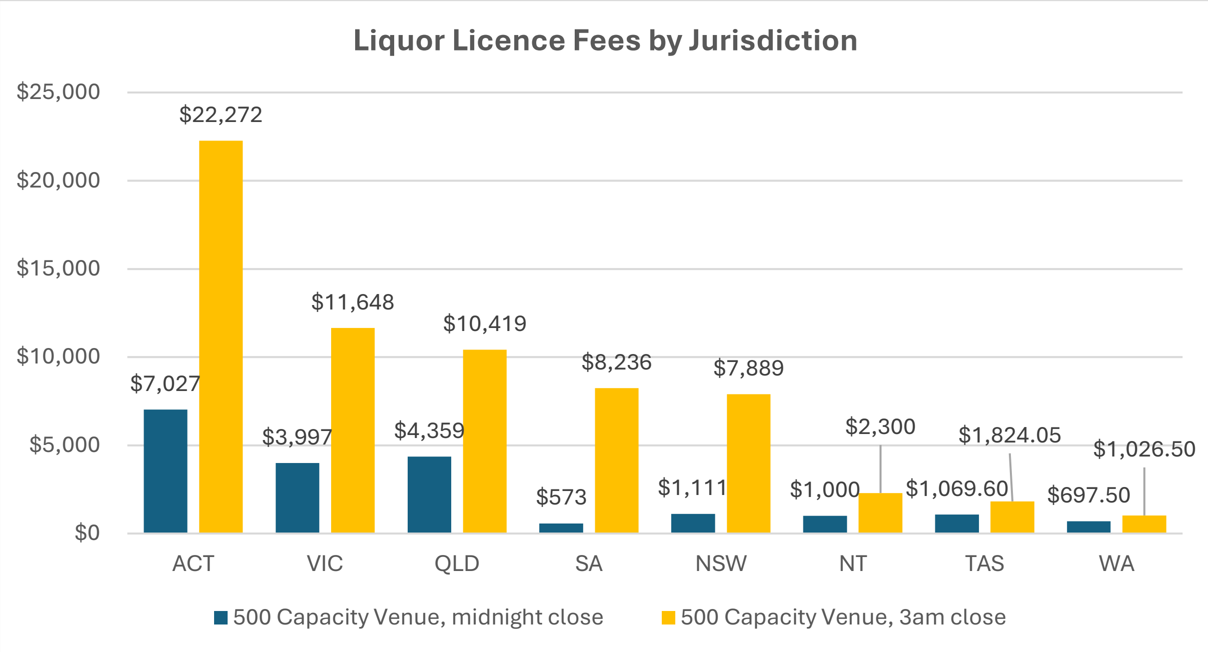
Businesses offer diverse employment opportunities, ranging from chefs and bartenders to security personnel, event staff, and musicians. Many jobs are entry-level, attracting young people, students, and those seeking flexible hours. As labour-intensive businesses, they employ significantly more staff per square metre than most other licensed premises.

Beyond employment, venues also serve as vital cultural institutions, hosting live music, comedy, performances, trivia, festivals, and community events that shape Canberra's creative identity. These activities support local artists and foster social connections for residents and visitors. Maintaining a diverse network of venues for cultural programming is essential to the ACT's NTE.

[14] Sydney Metro – Chatswood to Sydenham Environmental Impact Statement May 2016

Smaller venues with limited capacity often operate with tighter margins yet contribute significantly to precinct activation and neighbourhood vibrancy. Thus, licence fees should better reflect the relative risk profile of different venues.

Liquor licence fees in the ACT are significantly higher than in any other jurisdiction in Australia. For example, a 500-capacity venue that closes at midnight pays an annual fee of $7,027, compared to $1,111 for the same venue in New South Wales. If the venue trades until 3 am, the annual fee is $22,272 compared to just $7,889 in New South Wales.




The Association recommends a risk-based framework that considers venue operations, compliance history, and management practices, enabling regulatory costs to better align with actual oversight requirements.

Such a framework should involve:

- A base fee, determined by licence type;
- A compliance history fee if the venue has committed a serious breach of the Liquor Act (such as serving liquor to a minor, or serving an intoxicated patron);
- If a venue has a compliance history fee, the following additional fees should also apply:
  - A trading hours fee if the venue operates:
    - Between midnight and 2 am, or;
    - after 2 am
  - A patron capacity fee

In recalibrating the ACT's liquor licence fee framework, the Government should explicitly benchmark headline fees and loadings against those paid in New South Wales to ensure that Canberra venues are not exposed to systematically higher regulatory costs than their cross-border competitors.

By reviewing and modernising the liquor licence fee framework, the ACT Government can establish a fairer, more contemporary system that acknowledges the employment, cultural, and economic value of hospitality venues, while supporting the ongoing growth of a safe, vibrant, and diverse NTE. This approach will also reduce red tape and enhance transparency for operators

***Recommendation 3 – Liquor Licence Fee Framework Reform***
*Review and restructure the ACT liquor licence fee framework to better reflect venue size, employment contribution, revenue, cultural programming frequency and relative risk profile. Benchmark overall fee levels and structures against New South Wales liquor licence costs to maintain cross-border competitiveness.*

## 1.4 Labour Scarcity and Workforce Sustainability

Accommodation and Food Services remains one of the largest employers in the Australian economy, accounting for approximately 981,100 jobs – 6.7 percent of the national workforce – and serving as the backbone of the NTE.[15] However, the sector faces persistent and intensifying labour shortages, with vacancy rates remaining stubbornly elevated and a range of occupations – including chefs, bar staff, security personnel, and event managers – routinely appearing on national shortage lists.[16]

The causes are multifaceted: a combination of low wage growth, rising cost of living, increased competition from other sectors, and a lack of affordable housing near late-night precincts. Compounding these challenges are significant barriers to workforce participation, particularly for younger workers, women, and those living in outer suburbs. Urban research consistently identifies late-night transport access as a primary determinant of whether individuals are able – and willing – to participate in the NTE workforce.[17] When safe, reliable, and affordable transport options are not provided in alignment with venue trading hours, staff availability for evening and night shifts drops sharply, further exacerbating labour shortages and limiting sector productivity, growth, and innovation.

The accommodation and food sector is now at a crisis point due to the acute lack of qualified chefs. Many businesses have been forced to rely on sponsored migrant workers

[15] Australian Bureau of Statistics – Labour Force
[16] Australian Bureau of Statistics – Job Vacancies
[17] Mayor of London – Developing a night-time strategy (Part 2: Guidance, precedents and case studies)

as a stop-gap measure, but this approach has become increasingly untenable as the minimum salary for visa sponsorship has soared from $53,900 in 2022–23 to $79,499 in 2026.[18] This escalation significantly increases fixed labour costs for venue operators and further narrows already compressed margins, particularly for small and independent hospitality businesses. This makes it even more critical that government and industry co-invest in robust domestic training pathways for chefs and kitchen professionals, so that local skills supply can keep pace with labour demand and reduce reliance on increasingly costly visa sponsorship

Addressing workforce sustainability in the ACT NTE requires policy solutions that are intentionally cross-sectoral, integrating workforce planning, transport, housing, and education. Similarly, ongoing investment in international workforce development missions is important to ensure that Canberra remains a destination of choice for immigrants looking to bring their skills to Australia.

Without such measures, the NTE's capacity to attract and retain the talent necessary for sustained growth will remain at risk, undermining both economic outcomes and the vibrancy of Canberra's nightlife.

***Recommendation 4 – Workforce & Skills Development Strategy***

*Develop targeted workforce initiatives to address hospitality labour shortages, including dedicated chef and kitchen training pathways, targeted workforce development missions, and promotion of hospitality careers.*

## 1.5 Worker Safety

AHA ACT have received an increasing number of reports about assaults, intimidation and antisocial behaviour towards hospitality workers in Canberra, in both accommodation hotels as well as pubs and bars. Frontline hospitality staff are increasingly reporting experiences of verbal abuse, intimidation, threats, and even physical assault from customers.

The consequences of this behaviour are far-reaching. Venue owners have reported that staff subjected to this behaviour feel unsafe, unsupported, and traumatised by their experiences. Young workers, who form the backbone of the hospitality workforce, are especially exposed to these risks. This creates additional staffing issues for an industry already struggling to fill positions.

[18] Department of Home Affairs – Temporary Skilled Migration Income Threshold

The AHA commends the Barr Government for its leadership and innovation in establishing Workplace Protection Orders (WPOs), which have set a national benchmark for worker safety. We acknowledge the Government's ongoing commitment to fostering safer workplaces and recognise the positive impact these reforms have had across our community.

Building on this strong foundation, we request a review of the current WPO application process to ensure it remains effective, accessible and supportive for those seeking protection. Our members specifically note that the first 7 steps could be managed via an online submission portal. As well as recommending that the authorisation requirements identified in steps 1 and 2 be recorded once permanently, rather than resubmitted for each application.

We note with interest the recent announcement from the Victorian Government regarding the Crimes Amendment (Retail, Fast Food, Hospitality and Transport Worker Harm) Bill 2025[19], which will legislate new criminal offences specifically targeting individuals who assault, threaten, or intimidate customer-facing workers, ensuring that such behaviour is met with swift and serious legal consequences.

This framework recognises that respect and safety for frontline workers are essential, and that abuse is not "part of the job". We see strong potential for a similar model in the ACT, building on existing WPO and strengthening consequences for staff abuse.

***Recommendation 5 – Worker Safety***

*Raise the penalties for assaulting, intimidating, or harassing frontline hospitality staff, complemented by a public-facing campaign to reflect the fact that behaviour is unacceptable.*

***Recommendation 6 – Workplace Protection Order Reform***

*Strengthen the existing Workplace Protection Order framework to adopt a more human-centred, common-sense approach that improves access to protection and better supports victims. By reworking the framework to streamline and eliminate unnecessary red tape.*

[19] Victorian Legislation – Crimes Amendment (Retail, Fast Food, Hospitality and Transport Worker Harm) Bill 2025

## 1.6. Visitor Economy and Events

Canberra's visitor economy is a substantial contributor to the NTE. Whether international or domestic, all overnight visitors to Canberra need a place to stay, somewhere to eat, and somewhere to socialise after dark.

While Parliamentary sitting weeks provide strong trade for both accommodation hotels and other hospitality venues, the remaining weeks of the year can be highly variable. Business events deliver much-needed mid-week traffic, supporting hospitality venues and adding vibrancy to the city. The redevelopment of the National Convention Centre will drive increased business and conferencing visitation and is strongly supported by AHA ACT.

However, this significant redevelopment will not be complete for some years to come, and it is vital that the Capital continues to secure forward events while it is underway. The Canberra Convention Bureau operates in an extremely competitive market and should be appropriately resourced to continue to win business based on Canberra's unique attributes and visitability. We recommend a total investment of $1 million over 4 years.

International visitors, though representing a smaller proportion of total arrivals, deliver a markedly higher economic contribution than domestic visitors, spending 3.2 times as much as domestic overnight guests.[20] In the previous year, international travellers accounted for only 4.26 percent of all visitors, yet they generated nearly 20 percent of total visitor expenditure.[21] This disparity highlights a substantial, untapped opportunity for economic growth, one that Canberra cannot afford to overlook.

Despite the progress delivered through the Government's T2030 Tourism Strategy, to unlock the ACT's full potential and realise the benefits of global engagement, Canberra must adopt a more ambitious, targeted approach to attracting international markets.

The city boasts a suite of world-class attractions: renowned national cultural institutions, influential political and diplomatic precincts, excellent universities, and access to unspoiled natural environments – all of which position Canberra as a distinctive global destination. International travel demand is highly segmented: holidays (38 percent), visiting friends and relatives (35 percent), education (11 percent), and business (10 percent) all drive international arrivals.[22]

However, persistent barriers continue to impede growth. Canberra faces limited direct international air connectivity and lower global brand awareness than Sydney and

[20] ACT Government – T2030 ACT Tourism Strategy: Phase 2
[21] Ibid.
[22] ACT Government – Tourism in the ACT (September 2025)

Melbourne. Among the ten busiest international airports worldwide, only Doha currently offers a direct flight to Canberra; however, these services are infrequent and unreliable.[23]

One of the most persuasive cases for improved connectivity lies in Canberra's thriving international student sector. With over 20,000 international students enrolled each year and a recent ranking among the world's top 30 student cities, international students are not only frequent travellers themselves but also serve as vital links to their families and networks abroad.[24]

Expanding direct flights – especially to key Asian hubs – will streamline travel, reduce journey times, and enhance Canberra's appeal as a destination of choice. The loss of the Singapore-Canberra-Singapore service in 2020 was a setback; restoring and expanding such direct links must now be an urgent priority for Canberra to surpass pre-pandemic levels and secure its position as a leading international gateway.

Expanding the number of direct international flights would attract regional and rural travellers from the surrounding Southern NSW region who might otherwise be compelled to fly out of Sydney. By positioning Canberra as the preferred departure point for international journeys, the ACT stands to increase overnight domestic visitation, both before and after long-haul flights. This not only drives additional economic activity within the local hospitality sector but also strengthens Canberra's reputation as a key regional gateway.

***Recommendation 7 – Expand Direct International Air Connectivity to Canberra***
*Leverage the full capacity of Canberra Airport by establishing and strengthening connections with major international hubs, including Singapore, Hong Kong, and Delhi.*

***Recommendation 8 – Increase Funding for VisitCanberra***
*Allocate additional resources to VisitCanberra to enhance promotion and advertising, and expand their overseas operations, thereby strengthening Canberra's brand image as a leading international destination.*

***Recommendation 9 – Increased Investment in the Business Events Fund***
*Increase investment in the Business Events Fund to $1m over four years to ensure Canberra continues to attract forward conferencing bookings.*

[23] Official Aviation Guide – Busiest Airport in the World
[24] University of Canberra - Embracing Aussie culture: Becoming a Canberra local

## 2. Vibrancy & Cultural Activation

A thriving NTE is defined not only by its commercial metrics but by the richness of its cultural, artistic, and social offerings. Canberra's capacity to attract visitors and foster community cohesion is directly linked to the vibrancy and diversity of its after-dark landscape. Live music, special events, and adaptive trading frameworks are fundamental levers that generate sustainable, multidimensional value for the city.

### 2.1 The Economic Multiplier of Live Music

Live music and cultural programming are often mistakenly dismissed as discretionary amenities or non-essential luxuries. However, contemporary economic modelling and international research demonstrate that these activities serve as powerful economic multipliers and foundational infrastructure for broader creative and tourism ecosystems. Ernst & Young estimates that live music alone contributes approximately $16 billion annually to the Australian economy and supports more than 40,000 direct jobs, acting as a catalyst for substantial indirect employment across hospitality, accommodation, transport, and associated industries.[25]

The Live Music Office analysis reveals that every dollar spent on live performance generates three dollars in total economic activity when accounting for downstream and spillover effects within local economies.[26] Illustrating that investment in live music delivers outsized returns not just for artists and venues, but for the entire network of businesses and workers embedded in the NTE.

Grassroots hospitality venues serve as critical infrastructure for creative industries, providing essential performance and development opportunities for emerging artists and incubating talent that feeds into larger-scale events and touring productions. Without a robust pipeline of small and mid-scale venues, the creative supply chain weakens, leading to diminished capacity for major events and a reduction in Canberra's cultural capital.

New South Wales provides a pertinent policy example through its Vibrancy Reforms, specifically designed to reduce barriers to existing live music venues and foster the establishment of new ones. Under these reforms, licensed venues that regularly host live music and performance are eligible for significant incentives – most notably, an 80 percent reduction in liquor licence fees and an extension of trading hours by two hours on nights when live entertainment is provided (subject to development consent).[27]

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[25] Ernst & Young – Economic contribution of the venue-based live music industry in Australia
[26] Live Music Office – The economic and cultural value of live music in Australia 2014
[27] NSW Government – Vibrancy Reforms

To access these benefits, venues must program at least two live music or performance events per week, each with a minimum duration of 45 minutes after 8 pm.[28] These initiatives have proven effective in strengthening the viability and cultural contribution of live music venues and provide instructive precedent for the ACT's own policy development.

Regulatory settings and cost structures that restrict programming capacity – such as onerous licensing requirements, excessive insurance premiums, or stringent noise constraints – have significant downstream economic consequences. Suppressing live music and cultural activation not only diminishes direct revenue streams, but also erodes the reputational benefits that a vibrant, creative city provides.

A Member Only survey conducted by the AHA ACT consistently identifies costs and noise restrictions as the principal barriers to expanding live entertainment programming. Members noted that liquor licence fee discounts would encourage more live entertainment, as well as a handful of targeted asks (grants/compensation during construction and higher decibel limits).

In response, this submission recommends extending trading hours for venues that offer live programming after 6 pm and broadening Live Programming Fee Incentives to include venues with a capacity exceeding 350 patrons. In addition, proactive policy measures that streamline approval processes and invest in cultural infrastructure are essential to sustaining and amplifying these multiplier effects.

***Recommendation 10 – Venue Investment & Infrastructure Grants Program***
*Establish an ACT Venue Investment and Infrastructure Grants Program to support sound attenuation, compliance upgrades, safety improvements and programming capacity for live music and performance venues.*

***Recommendation 11 – Trading Extensions for Live Programming***
*Provide a two-hour trading extension for venues that program live entertainment on nights where entertainment is provided after 6 pm.*

***Recommendation 12 – Expand Live Programming Fee Incentives***
*Reduce liquor licence fees for venues with a capacity of over 350 that regularly program live entertainment, recognising their cultural and economic contributions.*

[28] NSW Government – Vibrancy Reforms

## 2.2 Special Events and Return on Investment

Strategic investment in special events and festivals has consistently delivered strong economic and community returns for the ACT. Parliamentary debate and public reporting have highlighted the significant impacts of the Special Event Fund, with one cited example demonstrating that a $1.7 million investment generated over $220 million in economic impact – a remarkable return by any standard.[29]

Tourism Research Australia notes that events drive increased accommodation occupancy, stimulate off-peak visitation, and extend average length of stay, thereby broadening the economic benefits beyond immediate ticket sales or venue revenues.[30] The economic case for event funding is thus clear, compelling, and supported by robust empirical evidence. Beyond the financial returns, events and festivals contribute to social wellbeing, city branding, and the cultivation of civic pride.

Targeted rollout of events catering to the most profitable markets is essential to unlocking Canberra's full tourism potential. As the second-youngest city in Australia, Canberra's Government must actively embrace and leverage this demographic advantage. Young people represent a dynamic and rapidly growing segment, offering unparalleled opportunities for the hospitality and tourism sectors. For example, Spilt Milk, a one-day music festival, accounts for almost one-third of Floriade's month-long economic impact, underscoring the immense value of youth-oriented events. The figure overleaf illustrates the economic impact and the different visitor profiles of Floriade, Enlighten, and Spilt Milk.

While continuing to champion iconic festivals such as Floriade and Enlighten, it is imperative that Canberra broadens its event portfolio to attract and engage younger audiences. This strategic expansion will not only stimulate higher levels of domestic visitation and spending but also position Canberra as a leading destination for the next generation of travellers.

This submission strongly recommends that the Government develop a strategy to proactively encourage, attract, and host events that are designed to draw young people into the city, thereby substantially growing Canberra's domestic tourism market. Collaborate with industry stakeholders, educational institutions, and creative partners to deliver experiences that resonate with this target audience, fostering a vibrant and dynamic city atmosphere that supports sustained economic growth.

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[29] ACT Legislative Assembly – *Hansard (Special Event Fund and Major Events Economic Impact)*. 11 April 2013, pg. 1555

[30] Tourism Australia – Annual Benchmark Report 2024

| Event | Duration | Visitors | Economic Impact | Visitor Origin Profile |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Spilt Milk** | 1 day | ~36,000–45,000 attendees | ≈ $14.9 million (2023 estimate) | ≈70–75% interstate visitors, mainly from Sydney, regional NSW and Melbourne. Young demographic (18–30). Many travel specifically for the festival and stay overnight. |
| **Enlighten Festival** | ~17 days | ~200,000+ visitors | ≈ $15–20 million estimated economic activity | ≈20–30% interstate visitors, majority ACT residents and nearby NSW visitors. Works more as a city activation event rather than a destination tourism draw. |
| **Floriade** | ~30 days | ~400,000–500,000 visitors annually | ≈ $50 million annual economic benefit | ≈30–40% interstate or international visitors. A mix of ACT locals, domestic tourists, and some international travellers visiting Canberra attractions alongside the festival. |

*Source: ACT Government, Tourism Research Australia, Visit Canberra, and event reporting (2023).*

***Recommendation 13 – Expansion of the Special Event Fund***
*Increase the Special Event Fund to $2 million per annum to strengthen visitation, economic return and year-round activation of Canberra's night-time economy.*

## 2.3 Experience-Based Diversification Strategy

Recent years have seen a profound transformation in the way young people engage with the NTE, a shift that is fundamentally reshaping patterns of consumption, participation, and risk. Understanding and responding to these changes is critical to designing a resilient and forward-looking policy framework for Canberra's after-dark landscape.

A growing body of national and international evidence demonstrates a sustained decline in the frequency and intensity of alcohol consumption among young adults. Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare confirm that the proportion of 18–24-year-olds who consume alcohol monthly fell from 34 per cent in 2019 to 29 per cent in 2022–

23, extending a decade-long downward trend.[31] This shift is not simply a matter of reduced consumption, but reflects a broader reorientation towards experience-driven, culturally rich, and socially diverse forms of night-time engagement.

Importantly, research indicates that this pattern is accompanied by a rise in 'pre-drinking' or 'pre-loading' behaviours, where cost-of-living pressures and comparatively lower off-premise alcohol prices incentivise consumption before attending a venue. While this may reduce in-venue spending on drinks and food, it does not diminish demand for live music, social connection, or cultural experiences – activities that now serve as primary attractors for young patrons. At the same time, venue operators face increased operational costs, including licensing, staffing, compliance, and insurance, which are not offset by beverage sales alone. This dynamic places pressure on traditional business models and underscores the need for adaptation.

The contemporary youth demographic is increasingly seeking night-time experiences that prioritise live music, food activation, cultural programming, and safe, engaging social environments – rather than being exclusively oriented around alcohol consumption. Diversification of venue offerings is therefore both a response to and a catalyst for demographic change. By supporting live entertainment, creative events, and precinct activation, policymakers can align with young people's evolving expectations and drive broader participation in the NTE.

***Recommendation 14 – Experience-Based Diversification Strategy***
*Align night-time economy reform with evolving youth preferences by incentivising experience-based programming, cultural events and diversified venue models beyond alcohol-centric consumption.*

## 2.4 City Renewal Authority

AHA ACT strongly advocates for the continued funding and resourcing of the City Renewal Authority (CRA) to progress infrastructure upgrades, public realm improvements, and place-based regeneration across Canberra's Central Business District (CBD).

A safe, well-connected and attractive CBD is fundamental to the success of the hospitality, accommodation and tourism sectors. Hotels, pubs, clubs, bars and restaurants are among the most visible contributors to city activation, particularly in the evening and night-time economy. CRA-led initiatives such as enhanced lighting, improved streetscapes, pedestrian and cycle connectivity, public transport integration,

[31] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare – Young people's consumption of alcohol

accessibility upgrades, and wayfinding have a direct and positive impact on visitation, dwell time and consumer confidence.

Improving both actual safety outcomes and the perception of safety remains a critical priority for hospitality operators and their patrons. Investment in high-quality public spaces, passive surveillance, and infrastructure that supports safe movement between transport hubs, accommodation, entertainment precincts and parking facilities is essential to encouraging greater use of the CBD outside traditional business hours. These outcomes also support broader government objectives around urban liveability, inclusion and economic participation.

The AHA ACT further supports the CRA's role in supporting the NTE, encouraging mixed-use development, and enabling events and cultural activity that attract both locals and visitors. A vibrant CBD not only enhances Canberra's reputation as a capital city but also underpins business confidence and investment decisions within the hospitality sector.

Continued funding for the CRA will ensure that momentum is maintained on long-term renewal projects, avoid fragmented delivery across agencies, and provide certainty to businesses operating in or investing in the city centre. The AHA ACT considers this investment essential to maintaining the competitiveness of Canberra's CBD relative to other Australian capital cities and to ensuring it remains a welcoming, safe and economically productive precinct.

The impact of the City Renewal Authority's work would be further enhanced by the establishment of a dedicated Night-Time Economy Coordinator, providing a single point of strategic alignment between precinct renewal, activation programs and broader NTE policy.

***Recommendation 15 – Funding for the City Renewal Authority***
*Continue to fund the work of the City Renewal Authority in relation to infrastructure upgrades, improvements to safety and the perception of safety, connectivity, and city regeneration in the CBD.*

# 3. Regulatory Modernisation & Planning Certainty

A contemporary, adaptive, and evidence-based regulatory environment is essential to supporting the long-term vibrancy of Canberra's NTE. As the city continues to grow and densify, the interface between entertainment venues and residential development becomes increasingly conflicted. Without targeted regulatory reform, there is a risk of escalating land-use conflict, venue attrition, and a consequent erosion of Canberra's cultural and economic capital.

## 3.1 Sound Regulation

Canberra's NTE will struggle to expand and diversify meaningfully unless the regulatory framework in relation to sound is updated to reflect the realities of Canberra: an increasingly dense city of nearly half a million people. The system is overly reactive to complaints, fragmented across multiple agencies, and applied unevenly across different precincts. This discourages venues from investing in capital improvements and experimenting with offerings.

The limits on sound from entertainment venues in many parts of Canberra are set at levels that prohibit live performance and, in some cases, jeopardise the provision of outdoor seating. Some venues have reported to AHA ACT that even well-behaved patrons leaving a venue can breach permissible noise limits in suburban areas.

While residents are entitled to enjoy peace and quiet in their own homes, that does not mean they should expect total silence if they have chosen to live in proximity to a licensed venue. Similarly, a particularly motivated or fixated complainant should not be able to shut down a venue providing live entertainment to the rest of the community, nor should they be permitted to do so anonymously. Fun isn't silent. As a modern, growing city with a vibrant tourism industry, Canberra should not be either.

***Recommendation 16 – Noise Regulation Modernisation***

*Modernise permissible noise limits under the Environment Protection Act 1997 to reflect contemporary mixed-use urban environments and declared entertainment precincts.*

***Recommendation 17 – Safeguards Against Vexatious Complaints***

*Introduce safeguards against vexatious noise complaints, including:*

*a) A minimum threshold of 5 people from different households for the number of complainants; and*

*b) Complaints must not be submitted anonymously.*

## 3.2 Agent of Change and Land-Use Conflict

The ongoing process of urban densification in Canberra has increased the proximity between new residential developments and established hospitality venues. International planning literature consistently identifies this interface as a key driver of venue closure, with noise and amenity complaints often precipitating costly litigation, reduced trading hours, or permanent closure. The resulting loss of cultural infrastructure both diminishes the city's vibrancy and undermines economic activity, employment, and Canberra's attractiveness as a destination for both residents and visitors.

To address these challenges, the Agent of Change principle – firmly embedded in NSW and Victorian planning frameworks – assigns primary responsibility for acoustic mitigation and amenity management to new developments adjacent to existing venues. This approach recognises the primacy of established entertainment venues and seeks to protect them from potential negative externalities generated by new residential encroachment. [32]

Recent reforms in NSW, including the broader suite of Vibrancy Reforms, have increased complaint thresholds and introduced requirements for complainant identification, without any evidence of the corresponding increases in systemic harm. These measures have provided greater certainty to venue operators and reduced the risk of vexatious complaints, thereby supporting a more balanced and sustainable approach to planning and regulation. The ACT's own Entertainment Precinct documentation has acknowledged the need to update noise standards and planning controls to better align with the intended outcomes for mixed-use precincts and safeguard the public value of cultural infrastructure.

In this context, regulatory modernisation is not about indiscriminate deregulation, but about aligning planning frameworks with contemporary best practice, community expectations, and objectives of government. Reform in this area is essential to preserving the delicate balance between residential amenity, economic development, and cultural vibrancy.

***Recommendation 18 – Codification of Agent of Change***
*Codify and strengthen the "Agent of Change" principle, ensuring new developments adjacent to existing live music or entertainment venues bear responsibility for appropriate noise attenuation.*

[32] City of Sydney – An Open and Creative City

## 3.3 Precinct-Based Planning

There is a growing consensus, supported by international and interstate experience, that spatial clustering of entertainment venues within designated precincts can help to optimise the management of amenity impacts, enhance compliance visibility, and reduce land-use conflict. Precinct-based planning provides a clear spatial framework for the coexistence of nightlife and residential uses, reducing regulatory ambiguity and providing greater certainty for residents and operators alike.

The London Night-Time Commission found that the strategic designation of entertainment precincts improves the effectiveness of compliance and enforcement regimes, aids in the coordination of public transport and safety services, and minimises reactive decision-making.[33] Evaluations of Queensland's Safe Night Precincts similarly demonstrate reductions in public disorder and improved safety outcomes when night-time activity is spatially concentrated and supported by coordinated transport, policing, and regulatory frameworks.[34]

For Canberra, the adoption of widespread precinct-based planning represents an opportunity to future-proof the NTE by clarifying expectations, reducing the burden of land-use conflicts, and encouraging long-term investment in entertainment and hospitality infrastructure. Such regulatory innovation is vital to sustaining the social, economic, and reputational dividends of a dynamic and inclusive night-time city.

***Recommendation 19 – Precinct-Based Planning Expansion***
*Expand and formalise precinct-based planning frameworks to cluster entertainment activity and reduce land-use conflict.*

## 3.4 Operational Flexibility and RAMP Reform

Canberra's extreme seasonality means many venues with outdoor areas can only use them for a few months of the year. For many businesses, this means that, while the venue has a certain overall patron capacity, it is effectively capped significantly below that due to the climate. While it is possible to permanently reduce a venue's patron capacity upon application, many operators do not want to impair the value of their investment by reducing the premises' size.

Similarly, many venues licensed to trade beyond midnight do not trade those hours in full, either due to changes in business models over time, seasonality, or a lack of patronage resulting from changes in patron behaviour. However, any changes to a venue's licensed

[33] Mayor of London – Developing a night-time strategy (Part 2: Guidance, precedents and case studies)
[34] Queensland Government – Safe Night Precinct Evaluation

trading hours similarly negatively affect the venue's potential value and may impede its ongoing and future access to finance.

This lack of flexibility also means that venues are paying liquor licence fees for patron capacity or trading hours that they do not use but cannot give away. Over 60 per cent of respondents in an AHA ACT member survey supported increased flexibility regarding patron capacity and trading hours.

Risk Assessed Management Plans (RAMPs) are mandatory documents for liquor license applicants that outline procedures for, at a minimum, responsible service of alcohol (RSA), security, surveillance, lighting, and patron management.

However, AHA ACT submits that there is scope to use RAMPs to allow venues to adopt voluntary caps on patron capacity or trading hours to reflect the venue's operations while maintaining investor confidence and protecting the value of the business.

This would also ensure that venues pay liquor licence fees appropriate to their actual operations, reflecting their appropriate level of risk and encouraging venue operators to reduce the operational requirements and associated costs of Policing.

***Recommendation 20 – Operational Flexibility & RAMP Reform***
*Enable flexibility in RAMP arrangements to allow operators to adopt voluntary trading-hour and patronage caps that do not negatively affect business valuation or access to finance.*

### 3.5 Al Fresco Dining Fee Standardisation

Outdoor dining brings life to high streets and encourages visitation to the city's dining and entertainment precincts. AHA ACT represents pub-style venues, accommodation providers, bars, restaurants, and takeaway venues. Outdoor dining is a fundamental part of the business of many of our members, due to the often-limited space in which they operate.

AHA ACT welcomes any encouragement and support to use footway spaces, such as footpaths and pedestrian areas, as additional seating for venues. The use of outdoor dining spaces significantly enhances the city's amenity, vitality, and appeal and encourages visitation to businesses.

Unfortunately, recent changes in working arrangements, such as work from home, have depressed weekday visitation to some of the traditionally busier areas of Canberra, which are classified as 'primary areas' and 'secondary areas' under the various issuances of the Public Unleased Land (Fees) Determination. Businesses in these areas are charged a premium for the use of outdoor dining space compared to other areas of Canberra (48% higher for primary areas and 19% higher for secondary areas).

AHA ACT submits that, given the ongoing impacts of these working arrangements and to encourage more businesses to activate outdoor spaces, the Committee recommends streamlining the fees for outdoor dining, lowering the fee for primary and secondary areas to match that of tertiary areas.

***Recommendation 21 – Al Fresco Dining Fee Standardisation***
*Standardise al fresco dining fees across precincts to improve fairness, predictability and equity for operators.*

## 3.6 Dancefloor Approval

Of all the unnecessary red tape and overregulation in the ACT NTE, the requirement for the Commissioner of Fair Trading to approve whether a dance floor is permitted in a venue (and the requirements for what constitutes a dance floor) stands out as a particularly egregious example of outdated and unnecessary regulatory intervention.

Schedule 1, Part 1.2 (Buildings and Fittings) - 1.6 (Dancefloors) of the *Liquor Regulation 2010* stipulates that the Commissioner may determine a specific area on the licensed premises to be used as a dance floor, that the dance floor must be clearly identified, using either a physical barrier, a distinct floor surface, or clear markings on the floor, that the designated dance floor area must not contain any tables, chairs, furnishings, or facilities for placing drinks, and that licensees must take reasonable steps to ensure that patrons do not consume or bring drinks onto a dance floor while it is being used for dancing.

Leaving aside the obvious parallels with *Footloose*, and with all due respect to the Commissioner, this type of overregulation serves no purpose. The decision to allow patrons to dance, the times they can dance, where they can dance, and what they can drink while they dance should be one for the operator, taking into consideration their risk appetite and insurance requirements.

***Recommendation 22 – Repeal Liquor Regulation 2010 Schedule 1, Part 1.2 (Buildings and Fittings) - 1.6 (Dancefloors)***
*Abolish outdated and unnecessary regulatory requirements in relation to dancefloors in licensed premises, supporting greater operational flexibility and innovation for venue operators*

# 4. Access, Transport & Workforce Enablement

## 4.1 Public Transport

A vibrant night-time economy depends on safe, reliable and affordable transport options for both patrons and workers. In Canberra, hospitality venues frequently operate later than public transport services, creating a gap that can discourage visitation, impose additional costs on workers, and increase reliance on private vehicles. Aligning late-night public transport services with the trading hours of key entertainment precincts would support the sustainable growth of Canberra's night-time economy while improving public safety and accessibility.

Hospitality workers are particularly affected by the current mismatch between trading hours and transport availability. Many employees finish shifts late at night or in the early morning, after public transport services have concluded. Without late-night buses or light rail services, workers must rely on expensive rideshare services, taxis, or private vehicles, which can create financial and logistical barriers to employment. Ensuring that public transport operates later, particularly on weekends and during peak hospitality trading periods, would improve workforce accessibility and support labour supply across the sector.

International and interstate evidence demonstrates that safe, reliable and affordable late-night public transport is a critical enabler of night-time workforce participation, particularly for younger workers, women and those living in outer suburbs. Cost-of-living pressures limited late-night services and perceived safety risks currently act as material barriers to staff accepting evening and overnight shifts and to patrons choosing regulated venues over informal or unregulated settings.

For patrons, late-night transport services provide a safe and convenient way to travel to and from entertainment precincts. Reliable transport reduces the likelihood of drink-driving, supports responsible alcohol consumption, and enables people from across the ACT and surrounding regions to participate in Canberra's nightlife. Cities with strong night-time economies typically integrate transport planning with hospitality trading patterns to encourage visitation and reduce congestion.

The Government's free public transport initiatives introduced on Friday and Saturday nights have proven popular with both the hospitality industry and our patrons. AHA ACT understands that while data indicates a 10 percent increase in use during those periods, this may be understated due to patrons not tapping on and off. From both a visitation and an environmental perspective, measures that encourage public transport use in the CBD should be continued, and we strongly recommend that fare-free weekends become a permanent feature of Government transportation policy.

Aligning transport services with trading hours would also support the activation of key precincts such as Civic, Braddon, Dickson and Manuka. When patrons know they can reliably travel home via public transport, they are more likely to stay longer, attend events, and visit multiple venues throughout the evening. This increases economic activity across hospitality, tourism, and entertainment sectors.

Importantly, late-night services do not necessarily require a full expansion of the transport network. Targeted extensions of existing routes, later final services on weekends, or demand-responsive night transport could provide practical and cost-effective solutions.

By coordinating public transport services with night-time trading hours, the ACT Government can strengthen Canberra's night-time economy, support hospitality

***Recommendation 23 – Fare-free Weekends***

*Make the free public transport services on Friday and Saturday nights from 6 pm to 4 am on key routes servicing entertainment precincts (Civic, Braddon, Dickson, Manuka, Kingston) permanent.*

***Recommendation 24 – Late-Night Public Transport Alignment***

*Mandate late-night public transport services aligned with trading hours in key night-time precincts, with services operating until at least 2 am Friday–Saturday and 1 am Thursday–Sunday on all routes serving entertainment zones. Services must provide a minimum 30-minute frequency, with clear timetables published at venues and transport hubs.*

***Recommendation 25 – Night-Time Transport Advisory Group***

*Establish a Night-Time Transport Advisory Group with representatives from Transport Canberra, AHA ACT, rideshare operators, and nightlife precinct managers. This group would regularly assess late-night transport performance, proactively address emerging issues, and coordinate service improvements to align with night-time economy trading patterns.*

workers, improve safety outcomes, and enhance the city's reputation as a vibrant and accessible destination after dark.

## 4.2 Point-to-Point Transport

Accessible and efficient transport options are essential to the functioning of a safe and vibrant night-time economy. While taxis traditionally serviced late-night transport demand, rideshare services have become a major component of Canberra's transport ecosystem. However, current access restrictions often prevent rideshare vehicles from using taxi ranks or bus zones, even during late-night periods when buses are no longer operating. Allowing rideshare vehicles to access these spaces after public transport services conclude would improve transport efficiency and safety in key nightlife precincts.

At present, patrons leaving venues late at night frequently congregate on footpaths or roadside areas while waiting for rideshare pick-ups. This can lead to congestion, confusion about pick-up points, and increased risks for both passengers and drivers as vehicles stop in traffic lanes or in poorly designated areas. Enabling rideshare vehicles to use existing taxi ranks or bus zones during late-night hours would create clear, well-lit and predictable pick-up locations, improving safety and reducing street congestion.

Importantly, this reform would maximise the use of existing kerbside infrastructure without requiring new construction or significant public expenditure. Bus zones and taxi ranks often sit underutilised after public transport services conclude, representing an opportunity to repurpose these spaces during late-night hours to better serve contemporary transport patterns.

***Recommendation 26 – Rideshare Access Reform***

*Permit rideshare vehicles to access all taxi ranks and bus zones in entertainment precincts from 10 pm onwards, with designated rideshare-only zones established in Civic, Braddon and Dickson to reduce footpath congestion and improve patron safety. Implement clear signage and real-time digital wayfinding at all designated pick-up locations.*

By permitting rideshare vehicles to access taxi and bus zones after public transport services conclude, the ACT Government can improve late-night mobility, enhance safety for patrons and workers, reduce street congestion, and support the continued growth of Canberra's night-time economy.

## 5. Governance & Strategic Coordination

Effective governance is the linchpin of a successful and resilient NTE. The complex, cross-cutting nature of NTE policy – spanning planning, licensing, transport, tourism, policing, public health, economic development, and cultural portfolios – demands a governance framework that transcends traditional departmental silos. Without strong coordination, the risk of regulatory fragmentation, policy inertia, and duplicative or conflicting interventions is significant, ultimately undermining the sector's capacity for innovation, adaptability, and long-term growth.

### 5.1 Appoint a dedicated Night-Time Economy Coordinator

Leading jurisdictions have recognised this imperative and responded by creating centralised, empowered governance models. In New South Wales, the establishment of a 24-Hour Economy Commissioner has delivered tangible improvements in cross-agency engagement, streamlined regulatory processes, and provided industry with a clear, authoritative point of contact for advocacy and issue resolution.[35] Queensland's 2024 creation of a Night-Time Economy Commissioner similarly reflects the value of centralised leadership, providing a dedicated strategic focal point for cross-sectoral coordination, stakeholder consultation, and policy delivery.[36]

Single-point accountability – embodied in the Commissioner model or equivalent governance architecture – not only enhances reform sequencing and prioritisation but also reduces regulatory overlap and ambiguity. This clarity accelerates decision-making, improves the effectiveness of policy interventions, and increases public and industry confidence in the reform process. The Association notes that over 60 percent of our Membership base supports the creation of a central government-led coordinator.

The AHA acknowledges the creation of the Night-Time Economy Ministerial portfolio, and Minister Tara Cheyne MLA commitment and contribution to the Association and the broader NTE. We believe establishing a dedicated role to improve coordination among various agencies and the industry will align with the Minister's agenda and reinforce the work of her office.

In a policy domain as multifaceted as the NTE, robust governance structures are not merely symbolic; they are a foundational precondition for effective implementation, sustained investment, and the achievement of long-term economic, cultural, and social objectives for Canberra's night-time economy. Thus, the AHA ACT believes it has a role in facilitating connections between disparate 24-hour economy stakeholder groups and the

[35] NSW Government – Office of the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner
[36] Queensland Government – Night-Time Economy Commissioner

Government, which would be beneficial for industry. This position could be established either within Access Canberra or outside of the regulatory agency.

***Recommendation 27 – Night-Time Economy Coordinator***
*Appoint a dedicated Night-Time Economy Coordinator within the ACT Public Service to serve as a central liaison between industry and government. This role would streamline cross-agency regulatory processes and oversee the implementation of night-time economy reforms, working closely with the City Renewal Authority to maximise renewal and activation initiatives in key precincts.*

## 5.2 The Role of Industry Associations

Meaningful stakeholder engagement improves compliance outcomes and regulatory effectiveness. Industry associations play a critical role in disseminating regulatory updates, developing voluntary codes of conduct, promoting best-practice standards among members, and helping to reduce compliance risks. Many small businesses spend significant time navigating regulations, meaning associations can act as efficient intermediaries between the government and operators.

Australian regulators also recognise the value of collaboration with industry bodies to extend communication reach and improve compliance behaviour. Jurisdictions such as the Northern Territory already provide liquor licence fee discounts linked to membership in industry associations that enforce codes of conduct, demonstrating the feasibility of this model.[37] By lowering financial barriers to participation, the ACT can encourage venues to engage collectively in policy dialogue, enabling the government to receive clearer feedback and develop more responsive regulation. Ultimately, this approach improves compliance and fosters a more coordinated night-time economy sector.

***Recommendation 28 – Liquor Licence Fee Discount for Industry Association Members***
*Provide a 10 percent reduction in liquor licensing fees for licensed premises that maintain active membership in a recognised industry association. This measure is intended to incentivise industry engagement and promote adherence to best practice standards.*

[37] NT Government – Liquor Licence Fee Discount

## Synthesis

The evidence presented throughout this submission reveals a clear and consistent narrative. Canberra's NTE remains a structurally significant driver of economic output, employment, cultural vibrancy, and urban resilience. However, it also faces a series of interconnected challenges that, if left unaddressed, threaten its long-term viability and its capacity to generate value for the Territory's residents, businesses, and visitors.

First, the economic significance of the NTE is unequivocal: it delivers billions in turnover, sustains thousands of jobs, and acts as a catalyst for broader economic activity across sectors. Second, recent contractions in employment are best understood as symptoms of structural cost compression – manifested in rising operational expenses, labour shortages, and regulatory inflexibility – rather than as evidence of waning consumer demand.

This distinction is critical: the appetite for night-time experiences remains robust, but external pressures increasingly constrain the sector's ability to deliver them. Insurance and regulatory settings have emerged as key determinants of business viability. Escalating insurance premiums, complex compliance obligations, and outdated regulatory frameworks have compounded operating risks and eroded margins, highlighting the need for targeted reform. Similarly, the disruptive impacts of major infrastructure projects – while beneficial in the long term – require structured, anticipatory mitigation strategies to avoid disproportionate burdens on affected businesses and precincts.

The submission also underscores the measurable multiplier effects of live music, cultural programming, and special events. These activities not only generate significant direct and indirect economic returns but also foster community connection. Strategic investment and regulatory support in these domains yield dividends far beyond immediate financial outcomes.

Reforms to noise standards and the adoption of precinct-based planning are further identified as essential levers for balancing residential amenity with the imperative for urban vibrancy. These policy tools, combined with the diversification of venue offerings in response to evolving youth behaviour trends, create the conditions for a safer, more inclusive, and dynamic NTE.

Finally, the submission demonstrates that coordinated, cross-portfolio governance is critical for effective policy delivery. Such governance ensures that reform is not piecemeal or reactive, but integrated, strategic, and reflective of best-practice public administration.

In conclusion, the reform agenda advanced here is proportionate, empirically grounded, and firmly aligned with demonstrated best practice. These recommendations represent a commitment to economic stewardship and sustainable prosperity, ensuring that regulatory modernisation, sectoral diversification, and strategic investment are pursued.