Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Submission number: 015

Submitter: The Meem Collective

Date authorised for publication: 1 April 2026

Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation
ACT Legislative Assembly

Submission from Ben Johnston, The Meem Collective

27 March 2026

1. About me and my venues

My name is Ben Johnston. I am the Managing Director of The Meem Collective, which operates the Old Canberra Inn in Lyneham and Dickson Taphouse in Dickson. Together, our venues employ around 70 Canberrans, host live music and community events, and trade late into the evening, week in and week out.

I am making this submission because Canberra's night-time economy is at a tipping point. The decisions you make in this inquiry will determine whether small, independent venues like mine survive and grow, or slowly disappear under the weight of rising costs and inflexible regulation.

2. The reality on the ground

From an operator's perspective, the key pressures are clear:

- Operating costs have exploded – wages, insurance, input costs and utilities have all gone up faster than our ability to raise prices without losing customers.
- Labour shortages, especially for chefs and skilled kitchen staff, are now chronic, not temporary. Chef sponsorship is now too expensive to be sustainable.
- Regulatory settings – from licensing to noise to planning – remain complex, slow and risk-averse, even when everyone agrees in principle that we want a more vibrant city.

Workers compensation insurance in the ACT is among the most expensive in Australia because of the system's unlimited liability settings, which means every additional dollar of wages carries a higher on-cost here than in many other jurisdictions. On top of that, wages keep rising, superannuation is now 12 per cent, and new obligations like portable long service leave are being layered over the top – it is costs on costs on costs.

3. Labour, chefs and portable long service leave

The food side of the night-time economy is in crisis. There is a severe shortage of qualified chefs and experienced kitchen staff in Canberra. Many businesses, including venues like mine, have been forced to rely on sponsored migrant workers just to keep doors open. That model is becoming financially untenable.

The minimum salary for employer-sponsored visas has risen sharply in recent years – from around $53,900 in 2022–23 to nearly $80,000 in 2026 – adding tens of thousands of dollars to our annual wage bill for each sponsored chef. For small and independent operators working on tight margins, this is a massive fixed cost that we cannot simply pass on to customers.

Against that backdrop, proposals for a portable long service leave scheme for hospitality are extremely worrying. Portable long service leave would function, in practice, like an additional payroll tax at precisely the time when many venues are fighting just to survive. It adds cost and administrative burden in an industry defined by casual and part-time work, high turnover and already significant compliance obligations.

My clear recommendation is that the ACT Government **abandon any move to introduce portable long service leave for hospitality**. If government wants a sustainable local workforce, it should focus on funding proper training pathways for chefs and hospitality careers, and on removing barriers to people taking and staying in these jobs, rather than layering on a new, blunt cost.

4. Licensing costs are unfair and outdated

Canberra's liquor licensing framework does not reflect the reality of how different venues operate or the risks and contributions they represent.

At Old Canberra Inn, roughly half of our turnover now comes from food, yet we are subject to the same liquor licensing costs as venues whose business model is overwhelmingly alcohol-driven, such as large CBD nightclubs. This "one size fits all" approach takes no account of the proportion of food versus alcohol sales, even though venues that lean heavily into dining, families and live music generally present a lower risk profile than high-volume drinking venues.

The contrast with our own business in NSW is stark. My partners and I also operate the Steam Packet Hotel in Nelligen on the NSW south coast. The liquor licence there costs about **$1,400 a year**, while at Old Canberra Inn the ACT liquor licence is around **$16,000 annually** for a venue that employs more people and relies far more heavily on food sales. That difference is impossible to justify and sends a clear signal that Canberra is a much more expensive place to run a small, community-focused pub than just across the border.

At the same time, massive packaged liquor retailers such as Dan Murphy's pay licence fees that do not reflect the sheer volume of alcohol they sell or the comparatively low number of staff they employ relative to that volume. These outlets can move enormous quantities of alcohol with far fewer employees than a hospitality venue, yet their regulatory contribution does not scale accordingly. If liquor licensing is genuinely risk- and impact-based, large-format liquor retailers should pay materially higher licence fees than small and medium hospitality venues that employ more people and provide supervised, social environments.

Licence fee reform should recognise differences in business models by weighting fees to alcohol volume, employment contribution and the balance between food and beverage trade, rather than treating all licences within a category as if they carry the same risk and social impact.

5. Canberra's "entertainment precinct" is on the brink

The ACT Government has deliberately branded and planned the city centre as Canberra's core entertainment precinct. Yet the very precinct that is meant to anchor our night-time economy is now on the brink of collapse. Years of light rail construction, road and public realm works have driven up costs, choked access and steadily eroded trade for city businesses. Instead of focusing on creating new entertainment precincts elsewhere, the Government must first do far more to support the venues and small businesses in the CBD it has already asked to carry the load.

The light rail project has cost well over a billion dollars, but the true cost has also been borne by small operators who have absorbed years of disruption with minimal direct support. That kind of infrastructure spend should always have built-in, meaningful business mitigation – not just marketing and slogans. At a minimum, liquor licence fees for venues in the city centre entertainment precinct should be waived for the duration of major construction impacts, alongside targeted cash support for the most heavily affected businesses. In addition, a portion of the Government's pledged 25 per cent increase in arts funding should be directed specifically to shoring up the cultural heart of Canberra in the city centre – supporting live music venues, performance spaces and arts-led activation in the very precinct that is supposed to anchor our night-time economy.

6. NSW vibrancy reforms and competitiveness

Canberra competes directly with nearby NSW for patrons, workers and investment. Yet our venues face higher relative costs and less flexible settings than comparable venues just across the border.

NSW's Vibrancy Reforms have changed the benchmark. Under those reforms, eligible live music and performance venues can access an 80% reduction in liquor licence fees (including risk loadings) and up to two hours of extended trading when they host qualifying live entertainment. At the same time, NSW has modernised noise regulation, raised complaint thresholds and removed many legacy licence conditions that restricted live music.

In contrast, Canberra venues pay liquor licence fees that do not adequately reflect our employment contribution, cultural programming or relative risk profile, and we do not receive any systematic fee relief or extended trading for investing in live music.

My recommendations are:

- **Benchmark ACT liquor licence fees against NSW** so that Canberra venues are not systematically disadvantaged on cost.
- **Introduce NSW-style incentives for live music**, including meaningful licence fee discounts and extended trading for venues that regularly program live entertainment.

- **Modernise noise regulation** and complaint handling by adopting key elements of the NSW model – higher complaint thresholds, clear consideration of "who was there first", and removal of outdated licence conditions that restrict music.

If the ACT wants a vibrant night-time economy, it cannot afford to be the least attractive jurisdiction in our region to run a venue.

6a. Noise thresholds outside the city centre

The recent changes to noise thresholds for venues in the city centre were a welcome step forward. However, the same logic needs to be applied to other established entertainment precincts across Canberra. Old Canberra Inn in Lyneham, for example, operates under noise limits that severely curtail our ability to host live music, despite being a long-standing venue in a mixed-use area where live music has been part of the local character for years.

Noise regulation should recognise the established character of entertainment precincts outside the CBD and apply consistent, evidence-based thresholds that allow venues to operate as live music spaces without being strangled by outdated limits. If reforms are sensible for the city centre, they are sensible for Lyneham, Dickson, Braddon and other precincts where venues contribute to the night-time economy.

7. Transport and getting people home safely

Safe, reliable, late-night transport is essential for both staff and patrons. Right now, many late-night workers in Canberra either drive when they would rather not, or spend large chunks of their pay on rideshare just to get home. That makes it harder to recruit and retain staff for evening and overnight shifts.

I support the idea of:

- A **free or heavily discounted late-night public transport trial** on Friday and Saturday nights between key precincts and outer suburbs, and
- Clearer, earlier and more generous **rideshare access to taxi and bus zones** in entertainment areas late at night.

These changes would improve safety, reduce costs for workers and patrons, and support the broader goals of the night-time economy without requiring major new infrastructure.

Major projects like the proposed new Canberra Stadium should also be deliberately located to support the night-time economy – for example, a stadium at the Phillip Oval site in Woden would sit on the future light rail corridor and be able to activate the many neighbouring businesses before and after events.

8. Establish a Night-Time Economy Commissioner as the number one priority

Above all, Canberra needs a single person whose job is to wake up every day thinking about the night-time economy. At the moment, responsibility for venues, transport, planning, noise, policing and events is fragmented across multiple directorates, with no clear owner. A dedicated Night-Time Economy Commissioner or Coordinator within the ACT Public Service would give operators like me one door to knock on, and give government one clear line of sight over how all the moving parts fit together.

A good example of how this role could add value is in coordinating with the City Renewal Authority. Recent CRA works in Braddon were, in my view, conceptually underwhelming and poorly delivered for a precinct that is meant to be at the heart of Canberra's night-time economy. A Night-Time Economy Commissioner, working to a clear, whole-of-city NTE strategy, could have driven that project to be a genuinely world-class urban upgrade that actually supports venues, encourages night-time activity and fits within a coherent long-term plan. First, we need that strategy; then we need a Commissioner with the authority to make sure every major city project aligns with it.

This role should sit at a senior level, with the authority to coordinate across agencies, champion the interests of night-time businesses inside government, and hold the system accountable for delivering on the city's stated ambitions. It should oversee implementation of this inquiry's recommendations, drive precinct-based planning in genuine partnership with industry, and make sure that decisions about things like light rail, city works, licensing and noise are made with a proper understanding of their impact on the night-time economy as a whole.

From my perspective, establishing this Night-Time Economy Commissioner is the single most important reform the Committee can recommend. Without someone in government whose job is to join the dots and fight for this sector, all the other good ideas risk being lost in the gaps between agencies.

9. What I am asking the Committee to do

From my perspective as a multi-venue operator, the priorities are:

1. **Make the establishment of a Night-Time Economy Commissioner the number one recommendation of this inquiry**, with real authority to coordinate across agencies, implement reforms, and advocate for venues and workers in Canberra's night-time economy.
2. **Say no to portable long service leave for hospitality**. It is the wrong tool at the wrong time and will push marginal venues over the edge.
3. **Waive liquor licence fees for city-centre venues during major construction** and provide targeted cash support for heavily impacted businesses in the designated entertainment precinct.

4. **Stop expanding "entertainment precinct" branding into new areas** until the original city precinct is stabilised and its existing businesses are put on a sustainable footing.
5. **Reform liquor licensing** so fees reflect venue business models (food vs alcohol proportion), alcohol volume, employment contribution and cultural programming, and are benchmarked against NSW.
6. **Charge large-format liquor retailers materially higher licence fees** that reflect the volume of alcohol they sell and their minimal employment footprint.
7. **Adopt NSW-style vibrancy incentives** for live music and performance, including fee reductions and extended trading for venues that invest in programming.
8. **Back domestic skills and training** for chefs and hospitality workers, instead of relying on ever-more expensive sponsored visas.
9. **Invest in late-night transport** – particularly a targeted free or low-cost late-night PT trial and better rideshare access – so staff and patrons can actually get home safely.
10. **Locate the new Canberra Stadium where it will drive the night-time economy**, with a strong preference for the Phillip Oval/Woden site on the proposed light rail corridor, surrounded by existing businesses that can be activated on event days and nights.
11. **Extend noise threshold reforms beyond the city centre**. Changes to sound limits in the city centre were welcomed, but identical reforms desperately need to be made in other areas. Old Canberra Inn, for example, has noise thresholds that severely curtail music events, even though we are an established live music venue in a mixed-use precinct. Noise settings should reflect the character and history of entertainment precincts across Canberra, not just the CBD.

10. Closing

Old Canberra Inn and Dickson Taphouse are more than businesses. They are places where people meet, where local musicians play their first gigs, where communities form. I want to keep investing in these venues and in Canberra's night-time economy. But that will only be possible if the policy and regulatory environment starts working with us, not against us.

I would welcome the opportunity to give evidence at a hearing and to answer any questions about the realities of operating in Canberra's night-time economy.

Yours sincerely,

Ben Johnston
Managing Director, The Meem Collective
Operator – Old Canberra Inn and Dickson Taphouse

Contact:
Email: [redacted]
Mobile: [redacted]