



Legislative Assembly for the
Australian Capital Territory

Standing Committee on Economics,
Industry and Recreation

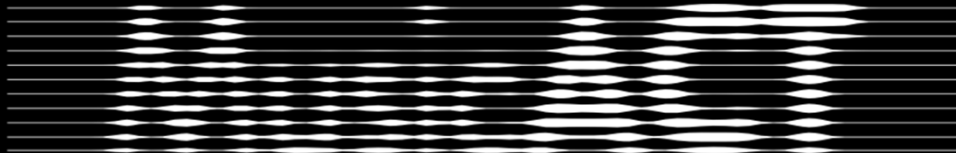
Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Submission number: 016

Submitter: MusicACT

Date authorised for publication: 1 April 2026



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SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ECONOMY AND GENDER AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY

Inquiry into the Night-Time Economy in Canberra's CBD and Town Centres

MusicACT is the peak body for contemporary music in the Canberra region, championing a vibrant and diverse music community across both live performance and recorded music. As the leading advocate for local artists, industry professionals, and music lovers alike, MusicACT works to elevate the profile of the region's contemporary music scene, support the growth of local talent, and foster meaningful connections between musicians, venues, and audiences. From grassroots gigs to studio recordings, MusicACT is committed to ensuring that the nation's capital has a thriving, sustainable, and celebrated music culture.

This submission presents findings from a survey we distributed to the ACT music community through our communications networks between January and March. We had 56 responses from those who live, work, and participate in Canberra's night-time economy (NTE). These respondents include musicians, music industry workers, venue operators, hospitality workers, and audience members. The data specifically speaks to two terms of reference: (1) the role of live music, special events, and entertainment venues in attracting residents, visitors and investment; and (2) governance arrangements, including the potential for a dedicated Night-Time Economy Coordinator or Office.

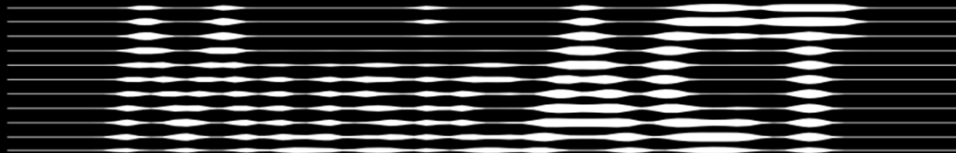
The survey evidence is clear: Canberra's live music and night-time economy sector is under significant and growing strain. More than seven in ten responses report that the situation has worsened in recent years, while fewer than one in ten see improvement. The sector identifies structural barriers — insufficient venues, low artist fees, regulatory burdens, noise restrictions, and poor late-night transport — as the principal causes. Overwhelmingly, stakeholders affirm that live music is essential to a healthy night-time economy and that government intervention is both necessary and urgent.

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Section 1: The Role of Live Music, Special Events, Hospitality and Entertainment Venues

1.1 Respondent Profile

The survey captured a diverse cross-section of those involved with the ACT's night-time economy:

Respondent Category	Count	% of Total
Musician / artist (sole trader)	22	39.3%
Music industry worker (tech, manager, promoter, etc.)	12	21.4%
Audience member	12	21.4%
Venue owner / manager / operator	5	8.9%
Night-time economy worker (hospitality, security, retail)	3	5.4%
Other (comedian, part-time musician, etc.)	2	3.6%

1.2 Live Music as an Economic and Cultural Driver

The result was near-unanimous - a combined 98.2% of survey respondents rate live music as either Essential or Very Important to a healthy night-time economy.

These figures reiterate that live music is not a peripheral add-on to Canberra's night-time economy — it is, in the view of the community, crucial to it. Live music drives foot traffic to precincts, supports hospitality income, and creates the cultural identity that attracts both residents and visitors to town centres after dark.

"Dissent, Smith's Alternative, Shadows, Baso, Pot Belly and Gang Gang are making Canberra a culturally interesting place to be and should be protected and supported."

— Music industry worker

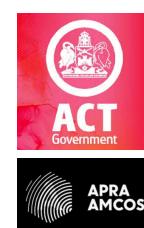
"There is a thriving and very high quality scene here and I think it could be the best in Australia if supported."

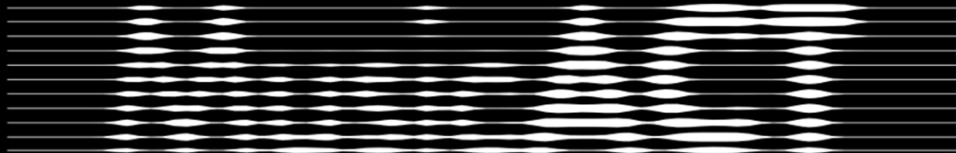
— Musician / artist (sole trader)

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1.3 A Sector in Decline: Evidence of Deteriorating Conditions

Despite the clear importance placed on live music and entertainment, the survey reveals an economy in distress. When asked how working in Canberra's NTE had changed over the past five years, the gap between those reporting conditions have worsened (71.4%) and those saying they have improved (5.4%) is stark, and the proportion describing their participation as "no longer viable" signals real risk of permanent loss to the cultural sector.

"Currently the nightlife in Canberra is struggling. Of the 30+ years I've been watching the scene, it has never been this bad."

— Music industry worker

"This government does NOTHING for artists and creators and venues. There is a glaring absence of support."

— Musician / artist (sole trader)

1.4 Barriers to Live Music Participation and Income

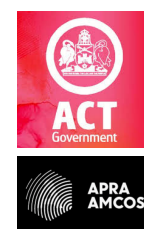
Respondents were asked to identify the biggest barriers to earning income from night-time music work. The following barriers were nominated across multiple-selection responses:

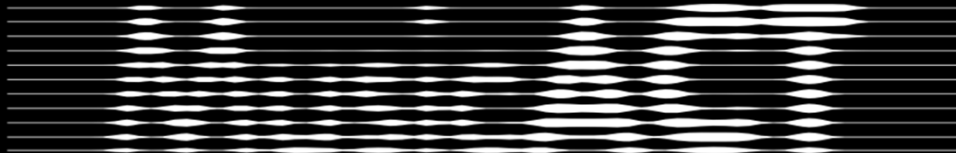
Barrier	Count	% of Respondents
Fewer live music opportunities	31	55.4%
Cost of living pressures	31	55.4%
Low or stagnant artist fees	24	42.9%
Late-night transport access	17	30.4%
Licensing or compliance costs	17	30.4%
Noise restrictions	15	26.8%
Safety concerns	4	7.1%

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Noting that “fewer live music opportunities” and “cost of living” sit at exactly 55.4% each is notable: this indicates a critical dynamic where both supply (fewer venues and bookings) and demand (audiences with less disposable income) are contracting simultaneously. When combined with low artist fees (42.9%), the data paints a picture of an ecosystem where participation is economically unsustainable for many practitioners.

"To say the night-time economy limits earning an income in music is a massive understatement. Venues owned by the same group and not open to others playing there, fewer venues, and stagnant fees."

— Musician / artist (sole trader)

1.5 The Regulatory Environment

Respondents were asked to characterise their experience of ACT laws and regulations affecting live music at night and it is significant that 33.9% of respondents find regulations actively restrictive, more than six times the number who find them supportive (5.4%). Combined with the 17.9% who lack sufficient familiarity to assess the regulations (suggesting poor communication and accessibility of regulatory frameworks), the data points to a governance environment that is not serving the live music sector.

"Noise ordinance exemptions for live music, even if only before 10pm or sunset, would make a meaningful difference. Fix noise laws so new developments can't slowly strangle the venues that were already there."

— Musician / artist (sole trader)

"Provide a insurance scheme backed by the ACT government, reduce or abolish liquor licensing fees, and implement agent-of-change protections."

— Venue owner / manager / operator

1.6 Improvements Needed: What the Sector Says

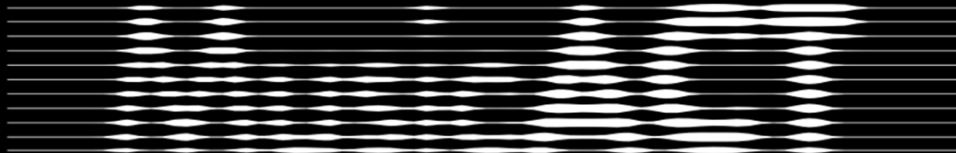
When asked what would most improve conditions for artists and music workers, respondents selected across multiple options. The dominance of “incentives for venues to book live music” (73.2%) above all other options suggests that respondents understand the supply-side constraint as foundational: without more venues actively programming live music, artist fees, transport, and noise reform become secondary concerns. This priority should inform the Committee’s recommendations.

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"Invest in live music as a critical economic driver of the night-time economy and build a dedicated mid-sized venue. We are currently forced to look interstate."

— Music industry worker

"Shift from short-term project grants to ongoing operational support, so venues can plan ahead and invest in quality programming."

— Venue owner / manager / operator

Section 2: Governance Arrangements and the Case for a Dedicated NTE Coordinator

2.1 Overview

The second term of reference asks the Committee to examine governance arrangements for the social, economic and cultural development of the night-time economy, including the potential remit of a dedicated Night-Time Economy Coordinator or Office within the ACT Public Service.

The survey data provides compelling evidence that current governance arrangements are failing the sector and that structured coordination would be welcomed by the community. Crucially, more than two thirds of respondents express support or openness to such an initiative.

2.2 Community Support for a Dedicated NTE Coordinator or Office

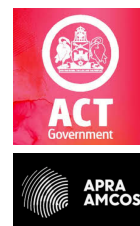
When asked whether a dedicated Night-Time Economy Commissioner or Office would improve outcomes for live music, artists, and venues, a combined 67.9% of responses were supportive of what this role could look like.

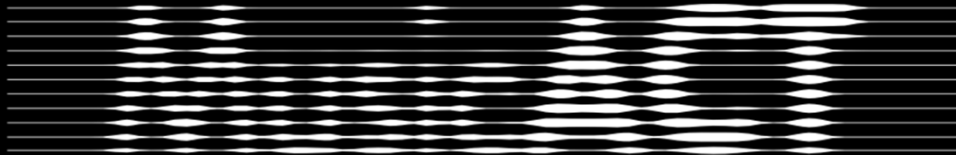
The level of community support is significant. With only 12.5% opposed, the survey provides a clear sign of hands for the Committee to consider this model seriously. The 19.6% who are unsure may reflect a reasonable desire for further information about the scope, remit, and accountability of such a body rather than principled opposition.

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"Night Mayor or NTE Commissioner — separate ministry or independent body. I don't mind which, as long as it's properly resourced and has genuine decision-making power."

— Music industry worker

"There needs to be a support structure for this community that is ongoing and not just when there is an election on the horizon."

— Musician / artist (sole trader)

2.3 What Governance Failure Looks Like: Stakeholder Evidence

Across qualitative responses, respondents consistently describe a gap between the cultural ambitions of the ACT Government and the lived experience of those working in the night-time economy. Key governance concerns include:

- Absence of a single point of contact or advocate within government for venue operators, artists and promoters
- Grants and funding programs perceived as inaccessible, short-term, or biased toward established or mainstream artists
- Regulatory decisions (noise, liquor licensing, development approvals) made without consultation with the live music sector
- A lack of strategic coordination between transport, planning, licensing, and economic development agencies as they relate to the night-time economy
- No formal mechanism for night-time economy data collection, monitoring, or policy evaluation

"Manage the grants process for live performances in a way that is accessible to all types of music, not just public-facing, mainstream events."

— Music industry worker

"Honestly, at this point in my music promotion career, I think there needs to be a dedicated government body. Nothing else has worked."

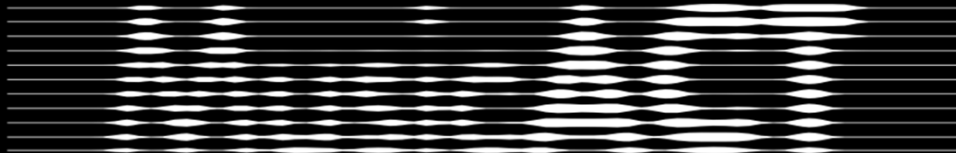
— Music industry worker (promoter)

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"ACT Government needs to do a serious, university-backed review of the night-time economy and create a dedicated body to act on its findings."

— Audience member

2.4 Comparators: Evidence from Other Jurisdictions

The Night-Time Economy Coordinator or Office model has been implemented with measurable success in multiple comparable jurisdictions:

- Melbourne (Music & Culture) has a dedicated Live Music Coordinator who successfully advocated for agent-of-change protections and the decriminalisation of outdoor performances, with measurable growth in venue numbers and event activity.
- London's Night Czar coordinates across 32 boroughs and multiple agencies, providing the sector with a single government point of contact and resulting in reduced venue closures and greater investment in night-time precincts.
- Amsterdam's Night Mayor model is now replicated in more than 40 cities globally, with documented reductions in noise complaints, improved relationships between residents and venues, and growth in NTE employment.

Canberra's size and relatively contained urban footprint makes it well-suited to a lighter-weight coordination model, potentially a Senior Coordinator embedded within an existing directorate with cross-agency authority. The survey evidence suggests the sector does not require bureaucratic expansion, but focused and empowered advocacy.

Section 3: Summary of Recommendations

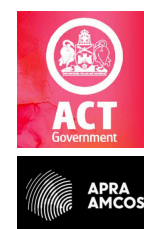
Based on the evidence presented in this submission, the following recommendations are put to the Committee:

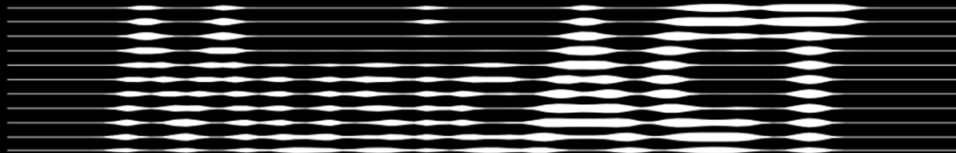
#	Recommendation
1	Establish a dedicated Night-Time Economy Coordinator or Office within the ACT Public Service with cross-agency authority, responsive to the 67.9% of survey respondents who support or are open to this model.

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2	Introduce incentive programs for venues to book and pay live music artists, addressing the 73.2% of respondents who identified this as the single most effective improvement available to the government.
3	Reform noise regulations and enact agent-of-change planning protections, as called for by 37.5% of respondents and consistent with best-practice models in Melbourne and other jurisdictions.
4	Extend and improve late-night public transport services, identified as a priority by 41.1% of respondents and a barrier to participation by 30.4%.
5	Review and reform the ACT liquor licensing, venue compliance and insurance frameworks to reduce regulatory burden, addressing the 33.9% who describe current regulations as restrictive.
6	Redesign government grants programs for live music to be more accessible to independent venues, smaller promoters, and non-mainstream music genres, addressing widespread dissatisfaction with current program design.
7	Protect and grow the supply of live music venues, with particular attention to a mid-sized (250–500 capacity) venue in or near Civic, as identified by multiple respondents as a critical infrastructure gap.
8	Establish an annual Night-Time Economy data collection and monitoring program to enable evidence-based policy evaluation and long-term planning.

Conclusion

Canberra's live music and night-time entertainment sector is essential to the cultural and economic vitality of the city, but it is under serious and growing pressure. Those who contributed to this survey are a good representation of the night-time economy ecosystem, from solo musicians struggling to earn a living wage to venue operators unable to cover their regulatory costs.

The Committee has an opportunity to make a lasting difference. The combination of targeted structural reform (noise laws, agent-of-change, licensing), financial support (grants, minimum artist fees, venue incentives), transport investment, and dedicated coordination through a Night-Time Economy Coordinator or Office would address the recurring failures the evidence identifies.

Canberra has the cultural potential to be one of Australia's great live music cities. What it currently lacks is the policy architecture and ongoing government commitment to realise this. This submission respectfully urges the Committee to act decisively on these findings.

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