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: 017

Submitter: Fiction Nightclub, ONE22 Bar, and Vent Nightclub

Date authorised for publication: 1 April 2026

Submission to the Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation

Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Fiction Nightclub | ONE22 Bar | Vent Nightclub
Canberra, ACT

March 2026

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Executive Summary

We are the operators of Fiction Nightclub, ONE22 Bar, and Vent Nightclub — three dedicated nightlife venues in Canberra's CBD. Together, our venues employ approximately 120 people directly and indirectly, and contribute to the cultural and economic fabric of the city's night-time economy.

This submission draws on seven years of frontline experience operating nightlife venues in Canberra. It identifies five structural barriers facing night-time venues — particularly nightclubs — that are making these operations increasingly unviable in the ACT. We welcome the opportunity to offer practical, evidence-based recommendations drawn from reforms already working in New South Wales, Victoria, and Queensland.

The five structural barriers are:

1. **Liquor licence fees** that are the highest in Australia by a significant margin — up to 10 times what equivalent venues pay in other jurisdictions.
2. **A regulatory framework** that fragments compliance across up to 10 government agencies, with no single point of contact and a licensing team that has been substantially reduced.
3. **Labour and operating costs** compounded by the ACT's unique portable long service leave levy on hospitality — a charge no other state or territory imposes.
4. **The absence of late-night public transport**, which limits the catchment area for nightlife venues and contradicts the government's stated ambition for a 24-hour economy.
5. **A grant and funding framework** that systematically excludes nightclubs and electronic music — the dominant form of live performance in Canberra's nightlife sector.

We respectfully urge the Committee to consider the recommendations set out in this submission and welcome any further conversations on this matter.

1. About the Submitter

We have operated in Canberra's Civic precinct for seven years, running Fiction Nightclub, ONE22 Bar, and Vent Nightclub. We are among the largest and most active dedicated nightlife operators in the ACT.

We make this submission not as critics of government, but as long-term investors in Canberra's night-time economy who want to see it succeed. We have survived where many have not — multiple long-established nightclubs, live music venues, bars, and restaurants have closed in Canberra in recent years, each citing the same structural pressures we describe in this submission.

Our operations directly and indirectly employ approximately 120 people, including bartenders, glass collectors, door staff, management, DJs, and promoters. Beyond our direct workforce, we engage contracted security providers, cleaning companies, sound and lighting technicians, graphic designers, marketing professionals, and a network of local and touring artists. We contribute to the ACT economy through wages, supplier payments, licence fees, and the broader ecosystem of services that depend on a functioning night-time economy.

We welcome this Inquiry and are grateful for the opportunity to present the operational realities that we believe the Committee needs to hear.

2. The State of Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Canberra's night-time economy generates approximately $3.8 billion annually in economic activity, supports more than 30,000 employees across 2,100 businesses, and accounts for 32,205 workers in the core night-time economy sector.[1]

However, these headline figures mask a troubling trend. While core night-time economy sales rose 6% to $253 million in 2024, drinks business spending fell 0.8% and employment fell 8% — representing more than 2,600 jobs lost in night spots between 2023 and 2024. Canberra experienced a -0.4% decline in core night-time economy establishments compared to other Australian capitals.[2]

The paradox is clear: aggregate sales figures are rising, but the businesses and jobs that sustain the night-time economy are declining. Venues are closing, employment is falling, and the operators who remain are absorbing unsustainable costs.

It is worth noting that the ACT Government's own strategic documents identify the night-time economy as a priority. The *Tourism 2030 Strategy* lists among its top priorities the need to "develop, attract and promote a calendar on quality events, including business events" and to "support the development of local arts and cultural experiences."[3] The *ACT Strategic Economic Development Framework* identifies "Celebration culture, connection and experience" as Mission 1, committing to "showcase Canberra's cultural talent through events, festivals, and experiences that bring people together" and to "strengthen the city's identity as a destination of creativity and connection throughout the day and night."[4] The *Growing Canberra's Night Time Economy* commitment states that the government "will continue to support the growth of Canberra's night-time economy as part of our commitment to a more dynamic, inclusive and liveable city."[5] The barriers identified in this submission are directly undermining the government's ability to deliver on these commitments.

2.1 Venue Closures — A Pattern, Not an Anomaly

In the past five years alone, Canberra has lost more than half a dozen dedicated nightlife and live music venues — some of which had operated for close to two decades. The closures have included long-standing nightclubs, dedicated live music rooms, underground dance venues, and cocktail bars. Several well-known restaurants and dining establishments have also closed during the same period.

These are not isolated failures of individual businesses. The operators who closed consistently cited the same structural factors: licensing fees, insurance costs, construction disruption, rising energy and wage costs, and an unsustainable regulatory burden. When experienced, long-standing operators with established customer bases and decades of goodwill cannot sustain their businesses, the problem is systemic.

2.2 What Remains

As of early 2026, Friday night trade has materially declined and is increasingly dependent on headline-driven programming. Our three venues and a small number of other operators are what remain of the city's dedicated nightlife sector — and trade is heavily concentrated on Saturday nights.

[1] *Measuring the Australian Night Time Economy 2025*, Council of Capital City Lord Mayors.

[2] *Measuring the Australian Night Time Economy 2025*, Council of Capital City Lord Mayors.

[3] ACT Government, *Tourism 2030: ACT Tourism Strategy 2023-2030*; Tourism 2030 Strategy Phase 2.

[4] ACT Government, *ACT Strategic Economic Development Framework*, Mission 1: Celebration culture, connection and experience.

[5] ACT Government, *Growing Canberra's Night Time Economy*.

Newer venues that have attempted to trade on Fridays have generally been forced to abandon the night within months because revenue did not cover costs. Most operators are unable to sustain regular Friday trading without headline acts or special events to draw a viable crowd.

The ACT Government describes its vision as a "24-hour economy." The reality on the ground is a six-hour economy on one night a week.

2.3 Insurance Pressure

Public liability and property insurance premiums for nightlife venues have risen sharply in recent years, and the burden of operating in the ACT is particularly acute. Insurance brokers have advised that the ACT is considered one of the riskiest jurisdictions in the world for late-night venue operations — driven by a combination of the territory's regulatory environment, its litigation culture, and the prevalence of "if you don't win, you don't pay" legal advertising that encourages claims against venues.

The insurance system for late-night venues in Australia is broadly broken, but it is even more so in Canberra. Premiums and excess structures are disproportionately high and do not reflect actual risk improvements made by operators — venues that invest in compliance, CCTV, security upgrades, and staff training see little or no reduction in their insurance costs. The insurance market for late-night venues is thin, with few providers willing to quote and limited competitive pressure to keep prices reasonable. Excess levels can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, meaning that even when a venue is insured, the practical cost of any claim falls on the operator.

This is not a problem that individual venues can solve through better management. It is a structural failure of the insurance market compounded by the ACT's regulatory settings, and it represents one of the most significant ongoing costs and risks facing every nightclub operator in the territory.

2.4 Construction and Access Disruption

Ongoing construction and development activity in Civic — including the light rail extension and major building projects — has materially impacted late-night foot traffic and trading conditions. Changed pedestrian access routes, reduced parking availability, disrupted streetscapes, and extended construction timelines have all contributed to reduced patronage and increased difficulty for patrons accessing venues. These are temporary disruptions in theory, but they compound the effect of the permanent structural pressures described throughout this submission.

2.5 Supplier Cost Pressure and Global Uncertainty

Ongoing global uncertainty, including fuel supply constraints and broader economic pressures, is already translating into increased supplier costs across the hospitality sector. Operators are receiving supplier notifications of price increases linked to fuel and logistics. These cost increases flow through to core inputs such as beverages, consumables, and services.

While this is a broader macroeconomic issue affecting many industries, night-time economy venues are particularly exposed due to already elevated fixed costs in licensing, security, and labour. Venues cannot continue to absorb these increases without passing costs onto consumers, which risks further reducing demand and accelerating the decline of late-night trade.

3. Liquor Licence Fees — The Highest in Australia

This is the most significant regulatory barrier facing nightclub operators in the ACT, and the area where the disparity with other jurisdictions is most stark.

3.1 What the ACT Charges

Under the Liquor (Fees) Determination 2025 (No 2), DI2025-285, a nightclub with 350+ occupancy capacity trading to 5am pays **$36,930 per year** in liquor licence fees.[6]

For context, the same determination charges a restaurant of equivalent capacity and trading hours $12,305 — meaning a nightclub pays three times more than a restaurant in the same building, with the same capacity, trading the same hours. This 3:1 ratio is consistent at every capacity tier and every closing time.

3.2 What Other Jurisdictions Charge

We have verified the following annual licence fees for a comparable nightclub — 350+ capacity, trading to 5am, clean compliance record:[7]

Jurisdiction	Annual Fee	Multiple vs ACT	Source
ACT	**$36,930**	—	DI2025-285 (Nov 2025)
Victoria	~$17,137	ACT is **2.2x** more	Liquor Control Reform Regulations 2023
NSW	$7,589	ACT is **4.9x** more	Liquor & Gaming NSW (2026)
Queensland	~$3,630	ACT is **10.2x** more	OLGR (2025-26)

An operator running multiple nightclub venues in the ACT faces a cumulative licence fee burden that is multiples of what the same operation would cost in any other Australian jurisdiction. The difference is not marginal — it is measured in tens of thousands of dollars per year, money that could otherwise be directed toward employing staff, investing in venue improvements, or simply keeping the doors open.

It is also important to note that not all venues qualify for the fee reductions the government has introduced. Venues above certain capacity thresholds, or those that do not meet specific cultural programming criteria, receive no discount whatsoever. The headline reform does not reach the venues that need it most.

3.3 The Structural Problem

The fee structure carries several compounding issues that go beyond the headline figures:

- **The nightclub classification premium**: A nightclub pays approximately three times more than a restaurant of equivalent capacity trading the same hours. This 3:1 ratio is consistent at every capacity tier and every closing time. There is no evidence-based justification for this — risk should be assessed on an individual venue's compliance record, not on a blanket classification.

[6] ACT Liquor (Fees) Determination 2025 (No 2), DI2025-285, Schedule 1.

[7] Sources: ACT — DI2025-285; Victoria — Liquor Control Reform Regulations 2023; NSW — Liquor & Gaming NSW published fee schedules (2026); Queensland — OLGR published fee schedules (2025-26).

- **The late-trading escalator**: Each additional hour of trading past 1am adds thousands of dollars to the annual fee. If the government wants a 24-hour economy, later trading should be incentivised, not penalised.
- **No recognition of actual trading frequency**: A venue that can only viably trade one or two nights per week pays the same annual fee as a hypothetical seven-night operation. The fee structure assumes a business model that has not existed for nightclubs in Canberra for years.
- **No compliance-based discounts**: Unlike NSW, where good operators receive automatic fee reductions of 5–10% after years of clean compliance — and live music venues can access reductions of up to 80% — the ACT charges the same fee regardless of an operator's track record.[8] The absence of any incentive-based relief means there is no reward for good behaviour and no pathway to a lower cost base.

3.4 Why This Matters

The fee structure was designed in an era when the government viewed late-night venues primarily as a harm-management problem to be taxed into compliance. Every other major jurisdiction has since reformed its model to recognise the night-time economy as an economic asset worth supporting.

NSW charges a base fee of $811 and loads risk only onto non-compliant operators — good operators receive automatic discounts of up to 10%. Queensland charges a flat ~$3,630. The ACT charges $36,930 and applies no discount for compliance, no reduction for limited trading days, and no recognition that a venue operating one night a week presents a fundamentally different risk profile to one operating seven.

Recommendations — Licensing and Fees

Recommendation 1: Restructure liquor licence fees to align with other jurisdictions. The ACT's fee structure should be reformed to eliminate the nightclub classification premium, introduce risk-based fee loading (rewarding compliant operators with reduced fees), and bring total fees to within a comparable range of NSW and Victoria.

Recommendation 2: Introduce per-trading-day fee options. A venue that operates 52 nights per year should not pay the same annual fee as one that operates 365 days. Consider a hybrid model with a lower base fee plus a per-night levy.

Recommendation 3: Remove the late-trading escalator. If the government wants a 24-hour economy, later trading should be cheaper, not more expensive. The current structure charges $3,516 per additional hour past 1am — a direct disincentive to late-night trading.

[8] NSW Liquor & Gaming, Compliance Incentive Scheme — fee reductions of 5–10% for clean compliance history; live music venue fee reductions of up to 80% under the Live Music and Performance Conditions.

4. Regulatory Burden and Multi-Agency Fragmentation

4.1 The Multi-Agency Maze

A nightclub operator in the ACT routinely interacts with up to 10 separate government agencies:

1. **Access Canberra — Liquor Licensing**: licence applications, renewals, amendments, annual fees, RAMP approvals, floor plan changes, extended trading authorisations, incident reporting.
2. **Access Canberra — Compliance/Inspections**: on-site compliance checks, noise monitoring, CCTV compliance, RSA enforcement.
3. **ACT Policing (AFP)**: security and safety operations, incident response, patron behaviour, crowd management coordination.
4. **Environment Protection Authority (EPA)**: noise complaints and standards enforcement.
5. **CMTEDD / Better Regulation Taskforce**: policy development, night-time economy reforms.
6. **City Renewal Authority**: precinct management, activation programs, CCTV infrastructure.
7. **Events team**: special event declarations, extended trading during events.
8. **Planning & Land Authority**: development applications, change of use, building compliance.
9. **WorkSafe ACT**: workplace health and safety, crowd management obligations.
10. **Fire & Rescue / Emergency Services**: occupancy loading compliance, fire safety.

Each agency has its own processes, forms, timelines, and contact points. Many deal with overlapping subject matter — noise, safety, crowd management — but do not communicate with each other. In practice, this means operators report the same information to multiple agencies in different formats, navigate compliance frameworks that overlap or contradict, and spend management time on bureaucratic navigation instead of running their businesses.

4.2 The Licensing Team Has Been Gutted

While fees have remained at the highest level in the country, the service operators receive in return has deteriorated. Industry perception is that frontline licensing and compliance resources have been significantly reduced, contributing to slower processing times and reduced service levels. The team was absorbed into the new City and Environment Directorate through the 2025 public service restructure, and operators report that the transition has compounded these issues.

Operators are paying premium fees for a diminished service. Every other jurisdiction we have examined provides either a dedicated single-purpose regulator (NSW's Liquor & Gaming NSW, Queensland's OLGR) or a dedicated coordination role (NSW's 24-Hour Economy Commissioner, Queensland's Night-Life Economy Commissioner) — or both.

4.3 The Value-for-Money Question

We respectfully ask the Committee to consider what operators receive in return for the highest licence fees in Australia:

- No dedicated Night-Time Economy Commissioner or Coordinator
- No single point of contact across government
- No formal industry consultation framework

- No structured information-sharing between regulatory agencies
- Slower processing times for applications and amendments
- An enforcement-first approach rather than a partnership-first approach

To be clear: the issue is not the existence of regulation — it is the lack of coordination, the duplication, and the absence of any proportionality. We want regulation that is efficient and fit for purpose, commensurate with what we pay.

Recommendations — Regulatory Reform

Recommendation 4: Establish a single-agency regulatory model for the night-time economy. Consolidate all night-time economy regulatory functions under one team with one point of contact, following the NSW (Liquor & Gaming NSW) or Queensland (OLGR) model.

Recommendation 5: Publish annual reporting on licensing fee revenue versus service delivery costs. If the government is collecting $36,930 per venue, the industry has a right to transparency about how that revenue is spent and what service levels it supports.

5. Labour Costs and the Portable Long Service Leave Levy

5.1 The Staffing Requirements of a Single Night

Operating a nightclub for a single night requires a significant workforce across multiple categories:

- **Hospitality staff**: bartenders, glass collectors, cloakroom and door staff — all paid at casual Saturday penalty rates under the Hospitality Industry (General) Award 2020, which mandates a 1.5x multiplier on Saturdays and 1.75x on Sundays.
- **Contracted security**: nightclub operators are required to engage licensed third-party security providers. Licensing requirements and RAMP conditions set minimum staffing levels based on venue capacity and layout, meaning the security cost commitment is largely the same regardless of how many patrons come through the door on any given night.
- **Entertainment and production**: DJs, performers, contracted sound and lighting operators, photographers, and videographers.
- **Venue operations**: dancers, contracted cleaners, and other support roles required to present and maintain a venue to the standard expected by patrons and regulators alike.
- **Management and compliance**: duty managers responsible for RSA compliance, incident reporting, and liaison with police and licensing authorities.

On top of direct wages and contractor fees, operators must also fund superannuation at 11.5%, the ACT Portable LSL levy at 1.07% of total wages (from July 2026),[9] workers compensation insurance, and payroll tax where applicable.

The labour cost of opening the doors on a single night — before a single drink is sold — is substantial. Across multiple venues on a Saturday night, the combined wage and contractor bill runs into the tens of thousands of dollars.

5.2 Why Non-Saturday Trading Is Unviable

The critical point is that the cost base barely drops on a quiet night, but revenue collapses. The sheer number of operational requirements to open a nightclub — security, hospitality staff, entertainment, production, cleaning, compliance — means the minimum cost of opening the doors is substantial regardless of how many patrons walk in. These are not optional overheads; they are regulatory and operational prerequisites. Every night a venue trades is a financial commitment made without any guarantee of return.

On nights other than Saturday, revenue is drastically less. Friday nights in particular generate a fraction of Saturday trade, yet the cost of opening remains largely the same. The result is that every non-Saturday night a venue attempts to trade carries a significant risk of loss. Over a year, these losses accumulate to a point where it is financially irrational to open.

This is why dedicated nightclubs in Canberra have been forced to reduce operations to Saturday nights only. Newer venues that attempted to trade Fridays abandoned the night within months — the numbers simply do not work unless there is a major headline act, and even then, attracting acts of that calibre to Canberra is a challenge in itself. There is effectively no nightclub offering in Civic on any night other than Saturday. The government's "24-hour economy" rhetoric implies venues should be open more often — but the breadth of requirements to operate, and the absence of any guaranteed return, make it impossible.

[9] ACT Long Service Leave (Portable Schemes) Act 2009; Services Industry Scheme commences 1 July 2026; levy rate set at 1.07% of total wages.

5.3 The Portable Long Service Leave Levy

From 1 July 2026, all ACT hospitality employers must pay 1.07% of total wages into the ACT Leave Authority's Services Industry Scheme. This is a portable scheme — workers accumulate long service leave across multiple employers in the industry.

The ACT is the **only jurisdiction in Australia** imposing a portable LSL levy on hospitality.

Jurisdiction	Portable LSL for Hospitality?	Status
ACT	**Yes**	**Commences 1 July 2026**
NSW	No	Not proposed
Victoria	No	Not proposed
Queensland	No	Not proposed
SA	No	Not proposed

The levy is estimated to collect approximately $8 million annually from hospitality businesses alone. It is well-documented that only about 10% of hospitality workers remain in the industry long enough to qualify for long service leave (7 years in the ACT). This means the majority of levy revenue will accumulate in the fund and may never be paid out to the workers it is supposedly collected for.

We are not opposed in principle to workers receiving long service leave. We ask the Committee to consider whether imposing this levy on an industry that is demonstrably under pressure — and that no other jurisdiction has seen fit to burden in this way — is appropriate at this time.

Recommendations — Labour and Operating Costs

Recommendation 6: Defer the portable long service leave levy for night-time economy businesses until the sector can demonstrate measurable recovery — not just announced reforms, but improvement in venue numbers, employment, and patronage.

Recommendation 7: Review minimum security staffing requirements through formal industry consultation with operators and insurers to align mandated security levels with real risk profiles rather than worst-case assumptions.

6. The Late-Night Transport Gap

6.1 The Core Problem

Public transport services largely cease before the night-time economy reaches peak operating hours. The ACT Government cannot credibly promote a 24-hour economy while providing no public transport infrastructure after midnight.

Canberra's light rail runs its last service at approximately 1:00am on Friday and Saturday nights.[10] Most bus routes cease operating between 10:00pm and 11:00pm. There is no dedicated late-night or overnight bus network. The only late-night service that ever existed — the Nightrider — was quietly discontinued after the 2015–16 New Year period and never replaced.

The December 2025 fare-free public transport trial made buses free on Friday and Saturday evenings from 6pm through to 28 February 2026 — but it did not extend the hours of service. Making a bus free does not help when the last bus leaves Civic at 11pm and the venue is open until 5am.

6.2 How Other Jurisdictions Compare

Feature	Melbourne	Sydney	Canberra
All-night trains/trams (Fri-Sat)	Yes — hourly trains, 30-min trams	Metro runs 24/7	No
Dedicated night bus network	21 routes	16 NightRide routes (nightly)	None
Last regular service from CBD	Runs all night Fri-Sat	NightRide midnight–4:30am	~1:00am (light rail Fri-Sat)
Dedicated NTE transport strategy	Night Network (launched 2016)	Linked to 24hr Economy Strategy	No
Government investment	Significant ongoing	Significant ongoing	Fare-free trial only (ended Feb 2026)

Every other jurisdiction that takes its night-time economy seriously has invested in late-night transport. The ACT is asking private operators to build a 24-hour economy while providing zero public infrastructure after midnight.

6.3 The Effects

The absence of late-night transport has three direct consequences for the night-time economy:

First, **it caps demand**. A nightclub's potential customer base is limited to those who can get home. In a city where the suburbs are 15–30 minutes' drive from Civic, cutting off public transport at midnight eliminates a significant portion of the potential market — particularly younger patrons, students, and anyone who wants to drink responsibly.

Second, **it increases safety risk**. Without public transport, people drive. Drink driving incidents, pedestrian safety around rideshare pickup zones, and crowds waiting for limited taxis in the early

[10] Transport Canberra, Light Rail Timetable (Fri/Sat services); Bus network timetables (current as at March 2026).

hours all become the operator's reputational and regulatory problem — for incidents that occur because the government has not provided basic infrastructure.

Third, **it contradicts the 24-hour economy rhetoric**. The ACT Government cannot credibly promote a vibrant night-time economy while simultaneously having defunded the only late-night bus service and offering no replacement.

Recommendation — Transport

Recommendation 8: Implement a permanent late-night transport service on Friday and Saturday nights, with services running until at least 3am from Civic to major suburban town centres. The Melbourne Night Network and Sydney NightRide programs provide proven models.

7. Grant Programs and the Live Music Definition Problem

7.1 Overview

Multiple grant programs exist at both ACT and federal level that purportedly support live music. The issue is not the existence of grants — it is where the money goes, who benefits, and how "live music" is defined.

7.2 Amp It Up! — Where the Money Went

The ACT Government's Amp It Up! program distributed $790,747 to 23 venues in Round 1 (2021) and $502,575 to 15 venues in Round 2 (2022).[11]

The program effectively subsidised competitor venues to add entertainment as a marketing feature, while the venues that depend entirely on music revenue struggled to survive.

7.3 The DJ and Electronic Music Exclusion

The federal Live Music Australia program ($20 million, 2020–2024) explicitly excluded "performances by covers artists or groups, tribute bands or DJs" from eligibility.[12]

This definition treats a DJ performing original electronic compositions or live remixes as somehow less "live" than a solo guitarist performing covers. It ignores that electronic music production is composition — producers write, arrange, and perform their music using electronic instruments. Where DJs perform original compositions or live remixes, they are engaged in the same creative act as any other musician performing their own work. The exclusion is arbitrary and out of step with the reality of contemporary music performance. It excludes the genre that is the primary draw for most nightclub audiences.

Canberra's nightclub scene is substantially driven by DJ and electronic music. MusicACT's own awards recognise this reality with a DJ of the Year category alongside Live Act of the Year. The federal funding definition has not caught up.

7.4 The Structural Inequity

The pattern across grant programs reveals a structural inequity. Grants subsidise venues that do not need music to survive — a cafe or restaurant adding a Friday night act is using the grant as a marketing subsidy, while its core food and beverage business sustains it regardless. A nightclub or dedicated music venue has no fallback; music is the business.

When a cafe receives $30,000 to put on live music, it can undercut the door charge of a dedicated music venue. Patrons choose the "free" live music at the cafe over the $20 cover at the purpose-built venue. The grant money intended to support live music ends up cannibalising the venues that provide it full-time.

[11] ACT Government, Amp It Up! Live Music Support Program — grant recipients and amounts published by artsACT. A significant proportion of recipients were venues whose primary business is food service, social or community club activities, or general hospitality — not dedicated music or nightlife. Meanwhile, dedicated live music venues that received support have in some cases still been unable to remain open.

[12] Live Music Australia program guidelines, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts. A narrow exception existed for DJs performing predominantly their own compositions, but the default position was exclusion.

The ask here is straightforward: a level playing field where dedicated music venues are not disadvantaged by the very programs designed to support them.

Recommendations — Grants and Funding

Recommendation 9: Create a dedicated nightclub and late-night venue funding stream, separate from general "live music" grants, acknowledging the unique cost structures (licensing, security, insurance) that nightclubs face and that cafes and restaurants do not.

Recommendation 10: Adopt an inclusive definition of "musician" and "live music" in all ACT Government grant programs — any artist performing original work, regardless of instrument. A DJ performing original productions is as much a live music artist as a guitarist.

8. Night-Time Economy Governance — A Missing Layer

8.1 The Current Structure

The ACT has a Minister for Night-Time Economy — one of the first dedicated NTE ministerial portfolios in Australia — following Tara Cheyne MLA's appointment after the 2024 election. The ACT Government has participated in global discussions, including the inaugural Global Night-Time Economy Ministers' Meeting, where ministers called for global adoption of NTE leadership.[13]

Despite the establishment of a ministerial portfolio and public calls for stronger coordination — including Thomas Emerson MLA's May 2025 declaration that the night-time economy was "in crisis" — the ACT has not implemented a dedicated commissioner or centralised operational structure comparable to NSW or Queensland.

8.2 What Is Missing

As of March 2026 — approximately 16 months after the post-election commitment to implement a co-designed night-time economy support package[14] — no dedicated commissioner or equivalent structure has been established.

- No dedicated Night-Time Economy Commissioner or Coordinator is in place.
- No formal consultation framework exists between government and industry.
- The portfolio remains split across multiple government areas with no single point of contact for operators.

There is currently no structural mechanism within government that translates night-time economy policy into operational outcomes for late-trading venues. While the portfolio exists at a ministerial level, there is no dedicated office, no formal industry interface, and no accountability framework delivering measurable change.

The absence of a centralised model leaves operators navigating fragmented agencies, inconsistent policy signals, and reforms that have yet to materially impact trading conditions. Current policy focuses on activation and vibrancy, while operators are dealing with survival economics.

There is a broader concern among operators that the decision-makers who set the policies, determine the fee structures, and control the levers of reform are not regularly engaging with the venues and operators on the ground. The night-time economy cannot be governed effectively from a distance.

This concern is not abstract. In 2024, the Chief Minister and the Minister for Night-Time Economy used Bar Rochford — one of Canberra's most recognised and awarded hospitality venues — as the backdrop to announce a $2 million election campaign package for the night-time economy.[15] The co-owner of Bar Rochford, Nick Smith, has since publicly stated that no government minister has returned to the venue since that announcement — despite the venue having only broken even once in eight weeks at the time of reporting.[16] The Minister for Night-Time Economy has separately described Bar Rochford as a personal favourite in a published interview,[17] yet according to the

[13] Inaugural Global Night-Time Economy Ministers' Meeting; ACT participation confirmed through ministerial statements. However, no equivalent structural model has been implemented locally.

[14] November 2024 post-election supply-and-confidence agreement committing to a co-designed night-time economy support package.

[15] " 'I love this place': Bar Rochford's owner vows not to go down easy," *Canberra Times*, 2025.

[16] " 'I love this place': Bar Rochford's owner vows not to go down easy," *Canberra Times*, 2025.

[17] "Five Minutes with Tara Cheyne MLA, ACT Minister for Night-Time Economy," *This is Canberra / Region Canberra*.

operator, has not been back since the 2024 campaign.

This is not an isolated complaint. Operators across the sector report the same pattern: government figures are willing to stand in front of their venues when there is an announcement to be made, but are absent from the venues — and the conversation — when the cameras are gone. The gap between public rhetoric and genuine on-the-ground engagement undermines confidence that the people making decisions about this sector understand its day-to-day reality.

8.3 What NSW and Queensland Have Done

Element	NSW	Queensland	ACT
Dedicated role	24-Hour Economy Commissioner	Night-Life Economy Commissioner	None appointed
Legislation	Statutory (Dec 2023)	Night-Life Economy Commissioner Act 2024	None
Person in role	Michael Rodrigues (since April 2021)	JC Collins AM (since Sept 2024)	Nobody
Office/staff	Yes — Office of the Commissioner	Yes — within Dept of Housing & Public Works	N/A
Advisory council	24-Hour Economy Advisory Council	Expert panel	None
Annual report	Yes	Yes (2024–2025)	N/A
Industry consultation	Formal, ongoing	Formal, ongoing	Ad hoc at best
Years operational	5 years	1.5 years	0

NSW proved the model works five years ago.[18] Queensland legislated it and got it operational in months.[19] The ACT has had 16 months and delivered nothing on this front.

Recommendations — Governance, Planning, and Insurance

Recommendation 11: Establish a dedicated Night-Time Economy Commissioner with a defined remit and reporting structure within 6 months. The role should be legislated (following the Queensland model), filled by someone with genuine industry experience, supported by an office with staff and budget, and subject to annual reporting and a formal industry advisory council.

Recommendation 12: Introduce an "agent of change" principle in ACT planning law, following Victoria's lead. Residential developers building near existing music venues should bear the cost of noise mitigation, not the venue.

Recommendation 13: Commission a formal review of insurance market conditions impacting hospitality and nightlife venues, with a view to establishing a government-backed mutual insurance scheme or facilitated group purchasing arrangement. Insurance premiums and excess structures are disproportionately high, do not reflect genuine risk improvements by operators, and represent a structural barrier that the market will not resolve without intervention.

[18] NSW 24-Hour Economy Commissioner Act 2023 (commenced December 2023); NSW 24-Hour Economy Strategy.
[19] Queensland Night-Life Economy Commissioner Act 2024; Commissioner Annual Report 2024-2025.

9. Summary of Recommendations

The following 13 recommendations are detailed within each section of this submission. For ease of reference, they are summarised here:

1. Restructure liquor licence fees to align with other jurisdictions *(Section 3)*
2. Introduce per-trading-day fee options *(Section 3)*
3. Remove the late-trading escalator *(Section 3)*
4. Establish a single-agency regulatory model for the night-time economy *(Section 4)*
5. Publish annual reporting on licensing fee revenue versus service delivery costs *(Section 4)*
6. Defer the portable long service leave levy for night-time economy businesses *(Section 5)*
7. Review minimum security staffing requirements through formal industry consultation *(Section 5)*
8. Implement a permanent late-night transport service on Friday and Saturday nights *(Section 6)*
9. Create a dedicated nightclub and late-night venue funding stream *(Section 7)*
10. Adopt an inclusive definition of "musician" and "live music" in all ACT Government grant programs *(Section 7)*
11. Establish a dedicated Night-Time Economy Commissioner within 6 months *(Section 8)*
12. Introduce an "agent of change" principle in ACT planning law *(Section 8)*
13. Commission a formal review of insurance market conditions impacting hospitality and nightlife venues *(Section 8)*

10. Conclusion

Canberra's night-time economy is not dying because of a lack of demand, a lack of talent, or a lack of willing operators. It is being suffocated by a regulatory and cost environment that is measurably worse than every other major Australian jurisdiction.

The ACT charges the highest liquor licence fees in the country. It is the only jurisdiction imposing a portable long service leave levy on hospitality. It has no late-night public transport. It has no dedicated night-time economy commissioner despite having a ministerial portfolio for the sector. Its grant programs exclude the dominant genre of music that drives its nightclub culture. And its regulatory framework fragments compliance across 10 agencies while the team that administers it has been significantly reduced.

Other jurisdictions have shown that these problems are solvable. NSW reformed its licensing, appointed a commissioner, invested in transport, and its night-time economy is recovering. Queensland legislated a commissioner role, established entertainment precincts, and is actively growing its nightlife sector. Melbourne never broke its system in the first place — it supported venues through planning protections, risk-based licensing, and all-night transport.

The government describes its ambition as a 24-hour economy. The reality, as this submission has documented, is closer to a six-hour economy on a single night of the week — and even that is under threat.

Despite these conditions, we continue to invest in our venues, in programming, and in employing people in Canberra. We do so because we believe in the city's future and in the potential of its night-time economy. But belief alone cannot sustain businesses operating against structural headwinds that no other Australian jurisdiction imposes on its operators.

The operators who remain in Canberra are not asking for sympathy. We are asking for informed decision-making — policy settings that reflect the reality of operating a nightclub at 3am on a Saturday morning in a city where foot traffic has collapsed, construction has blocked access, insurance has doubled, staff are impossible to find, and the licensing team has been significantly reduced.

We are asking the Committee to recommend reforms that give Canberra's night-time economy a genuine chance to survive and, in time, to thrive.

We welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee and to provide any additional information that would assist the Inquiry.

Josh Dotta
Fiction Nightclub | ONE22 Bar | Vent Nightclub
Canberra, ACT

Appendix: Key Sources and References

Legislation and Fee Schedules

- ACT Liquor (Fees) Determination 2025 (No 2), DI2025-285
- NSW Liquor & Gaming — Fee schedules (effective 15 March 2026)
- Victoria Liquor Control Reform Regulations 2023
- Queensland OLGR — Published fee schedules (2025-26)
- Hospitality Industry (General) Award 2020 (MA000009)
- Security Services Industry Award 2020 (MA000016)

Government Reports and Programs

- ACT Government — Transforming Canberra's Night-Time Economy (Better Regulation Taskforce)
- ACT Government — Night-Time Economy Fact Sheet
- Measuring the Australian Night Time Economy 2025 (Council of Capital City Lord Mayors)
- NSW 24-Hour Economy Strategy
- Queensland Night-Life Economy Commissioner Annual Report 2024-2025
- Queensland Night-Life Economy Commissioner Act 2024

Industry and Advocacy

- AHA ACT — Submission 036 to this Inquiry (26 March 2025)
- Thomas Emerson MLA — Night-Time Economy in Crisis (May 2025)
- MusicACT — Advocacy submissions
- Marisa Paterson MLA — Canberra's Night-Time Economy (Purple Flag accreditation)

ACT Government Strategic Documents

- ACT Government — Tourism 2030: ACT Tourism Strategy 2023-2030
- ACT Government — Tourism 2030 Strategy Phase 2
- ACT Government — ACT Strategic Economic Development Framework
- ACT Government — Growing Canberra's Night Time Economy