Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Submission number: 020

Submitter: Mill Theatre at Dairy Road

Date authorised for publication: 22 April 2026

MILL THEATRE AT DAIRY ROAD

Submission to the Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy: A Producer's Perspective

I provide this submission as an independent producer and the owner of the Mill Theatre at Dairy Road, a small-scale professional venue that serves as a vital node in Canberra's cultural ecosystem. Opening our doors in 2022, the Mill Theatre's trajectory has mirrored the sobering national landscape for live performance. We operate within a climate where only four in ten venues across Australia have successfully returned to pre-pandemic activity levels. We are observing a persistent shift in consumer behavior characterised by just-in-time booking habits and a marked reduction in discretionary secondary spending.

However, our experience at Dairy Road also highlights the immense potential of the night-time economy when supported by high-quality, intimate infrastructure. Our first-year survey revealed a highly engaged, loyal audience, primarily older patrons on mid-to-high incomes, who specifically seek out the Mill for its professionalism, innovation, and intimacy. While word-of-mouth remains our strongest organic driver of attendance, the data confirms that cultural activity is not an isolated luxury, but a powerful economic stimulator for the surrounding precinct.

I present this submission from the perspective of what is required to foster greater cultural activity, which I believe is the essential engine required to drive broader economic recovery and precinct sustainability in the ACT.

Term of Reference 1: Economic Performance, Employment, and Business Sustainability
The closures of iconic mid-sized venues like Sideway and Transit Bar are not merely losses of local culture; they represent the removal of essential economic infrastructure. These venues provided consistent, specialised employment for technical staff, security, and hospitality workers. When these anchor venues disappear, the precinct effect is diminished, making it significantly harder for the remaining small businesses to capture the footfall required to cover soaring operational costs. For a night-time economy to be sustainable, it requires an always on integrated solution rather than a collection of ad hoc experiences.

A clear example of this fragmentation exists at my own doorstep: the main restaurant at Dairy Road does not open on Wednesday nights, even when the Mill Theatre has scheduled performances. This lack of precinct alignment directly impacts consumer investment; over four years, our Wednesday shows have never sold out. When the dinner half of the "dinner and show" equation is missing, the general public loses interest in the precinct as a destination. Ad hoc operations create a cycle of uncertainty that discourages patrons from venturing out.

Employment trends within this sector further highlight this fragility. We are seeing a rise in poly-employment, where workers in the arts and hospitality must juggle multiple roles across different venues just to meet basic living expenses. For a business like the Mill Theatre, sustainability is a delicate balancing act. While our audience engagement is high, the increasing cost-of-living pressures on our patrons and our staff means that traditional models of ticket sales alone are often insufficient to meet the rising costs of insurance, utilities, and talent.

Term of Reference 2: The Regulatory Environment, Planning, and Infrastructure
The liquor licensing fee reductions introduced by the Better Regulation Taskforce have been a standout success. I experienced the direct impact of this reform firsthand when a neighbouring bar at Dairy Road approached me to collaborate specifically to qualify. By offering a significant reduction for low-occupancy venues that showcase live performance, the ACT Government has provided a tangible confidence boost to the private sector. It signals that the government is willing to back artists, which in turn encourages precinct owners to do the same. This is a highly effective lever that should be protected and expanded.

However, true sustainability requires a permanent shift in how the ACT views the night. We must move away from a reliance on pop-up festivals and events, which often provide only a temporary spike in activity, and toward levers that support ongoing, nightly engagement. We need the same level of strategic, synchronised investment as our daytime industries to ensure that when the lights go on in a theatre, the surrounding precinct remains open and accessible. This includes addressing the perennial handbrake of inadequate late-night public transport, which remains an equity and safety issue for both patrons and the late-shift workers who power this economy.

A central part of this evolution must be the development of Special Entertainment Precincts and the adoption of Vibrancy Reforms[1], as seen in NSW and QLD. Informed by several years of evidence-based consultation via the Data After Dark[2] initiative, these models resolve the friction between urban densification and cultural activity. Without an integrated approach that connects licensing, noise protection, and transport, Canberra's night-time economy will remain a fragmented series of ad hoc events rather than the high-value economic driver it has the potential to be.

Term of Reference 3: The Role of Live Music, Special Events, and Hospitality in Attracting Investment
Cultural activity provides a halo effect for all surrounding businesses, acting as a primary driver for precinct investment. At the Mill Theatre, this impact is quantifiable: in our first year, 67% of attendees reported visiting another business at Dairy Road as a direct result of attending a show, with 74% of those patrons spending over $50 at neighbouring establishments. By our three-year review, these figures grew even stronger, with 71% of visitors engaging with the wider precinct and nearly 75% spending over $50 beyond their theatre ticket. These metrics underscore a fundamental truth: a vibrant

[1] The NSW Government's Vision for the State
https://www.nsw.gov.au/business-and-economy/office-of-24-hour-economy-commissioner/vibrancy-reforms
[2] Data after dark https://www.wsp.com/en-au/insights/data-after-dark-sydneys-night-time-economy

night-time economy is a symbiotic network. When a patron commits to a show, they stay for the hospitality, retail, and atmosphere, effectively turning a single ticket purchase into a broader economic contribution.

This local data mirrors broader studies into the impact of entertainment venues as high-value anchor tenants. For example, a 2017 study found that Sydney's Enmore Theatre alone generated over $39 million in economic activity per year[3]. Despite this potential, Canberra's night-time economy currently faces a chicken or the egg dilemma, as identified by the Night Time Industries Association (NTIA) in 2023. Consumers are hesitant to venture out for fear of finding limited dining or entertainment options, while operators remain wary of investing in live performance without the guarantee of consistent patronage.

Term of Reference 4: Opportunities to Diversify and Enhance the Night-Time Economy
The primary focus of successful 24-hour economy policies globally is the always-on principle. As an independent producer operating in a precinct currently struggling with a lack of public transport and inconsistent neighbouring hours, I fully support this shift.

A key opportunity for diversification lies in the packaging of experiences. Over the last 12 months, my discussions with Events ACT and the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse (ATDW) - Australia's central digital platform for tourism - indicate that integrated experiences and packages are receiving the most traction on their websites. The fact that these packaged offerings are outperforming standalone listings proves that modern consumers seek a complete, reliable evening rather than a single, isolated event.

Ultimately, any measure to enhance the night-time economy must aim to restore market confidence. Data from the ATDW and Events ACT provide me, as a producer, with the confidence to program; meanwhile, direct measures from the government, such as the liquor license fee reductions, provide my hospitality neighbours with the confidence to stay open. The greatest opportunity in the current climate is to implement enhancement measures, such as vouchers or targeted promotional subsidies for business partnerships, that all serve one main principle: making producers and business owners feel secure enough to invest in Canberra after dark.

Terms of Reference 5 & 6: Governance, Coordination, and Best-Practice Principles
I would like to address these two terms jointly, as the governance of our night-time economy is inextricably linked to the international and domestic best practices we choose to adopt.

First, it is important to acknowledge the high-calibre work already being done within the ACT. We have incredible existing momentum through agencies and initiatives such as MusicACT and their What's

---

[3] Night Time Industry Association 2023 State Election Agenda
https://ntia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/NTIA-Election-Agenda-NSW-State-Election-2023.pdf

On? Lots On (WOLO) guide, produced in collaboration with BMA Magazine. This open-access platform is a world-first that provides a direct line into our city's actual activity levels. Similarly, the ATDW platform and the Events ACT fund provide essential frameworks for promoting and sustaining events. The Committee is likely also aware of the NSW Government's cultural tax reforms and vibrancy initiatives, which serve as a domestic benchmark for modernising the sector. It is worth evaluating how we can elevate and better resource these existing ACT agencies rather than potentially re-inventing the wheel.

However, a massive and ongoing impost on Canberra's night-time economy is the behavior of the Territory's largest publicly funded creative employers: the Canberra Theatre Centre (CTC) and The Street Theatre. As an independent producer, I have observed a troubling pattern where these institutions, rather than acting as sector leaders, actively suppress the independent ecosystem that develops and de-risks work. Whether it is the CTC's territorial behavior, such as programming works like *Helios* only after they have been successfully proven by small venues like the Mill[4], or The Street Theatre increasingly eating into the niche programming of venues like Smith's Alternative, this extractive approach breeds fragility. When the most heavily funded bodies in the city absorb audiences cultivated by independents and block workforce training pathways, they become barriers to sustainable growth.

A healthy night-time economy relies on a diverse hierarchy of venue sizes, a principle clearly demonstrated in the success of the London borough of Camden. As a global music capital, Camden's strength lies in its ecosystem of small grassroots to established venues that have hosted world-renowned artists and shaped culture for generations. Our international and domestic peers have shown that strength comes from a respect for independent venues that draw footfall and contribute to the tourist economy. I urge the Committee to recognise that true governance reform requires more than just new offices; it requires a clear directive from leadership to ensure our major institutions support, rather than suppress, the local sector. A vibrant Canberra is not built through consolidation and institutional dominance, but through the plurality and mutual respect of a functioning cultural ecosystem.

Any Other Issues: Canberra's Cultural Cringe

One final, critical issue the Committee must address is the Canberra Cultural Cringe. It is a well-worn trope that much of Australia mistakenly thinks Canberra sucks, but the more damaging reality is that we have sector leaders and institutions who wrongly perpetuate this myth from within. Canberra is

---

[4] Letter to MLAs: Sector Growth or Sector Suppression? Programming and Governance at the Canberra Theatre Centre
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1M1TW0GE2yXFVQ5EOXKuuNLImy3Abc4qn-nE_ARO5fcM/edit?usp=sharing

changing, the very existence of this inquiry is a testament to that journey, but we cannot achieve a thriving night-time economy while we continue to quietly undermine our own local creators.

It is time to call out a cultural bias that assumes anything produced locally is inherently second-rate. This is not just a matter of hurt feelings; it is a destructive economic and social force.[5] There remains a fixed mistaken belief, shared by some local media and major bureaucrats, that if a work comes from somewhere else, it must be better. As the national capital, we must avoid being overly Canberra-centric, but we must also stop ostracizing local creativity simply because of its origin. This snobbery creates a vicious cycle: our artists begin to believe they are inferior, they play small or they leave the city.

Growth in the night-time economy depends on plurality, trust, and a government that ensures its bureaucracy protects the downstream stakeholders who are actually building Canberra's future. We must reframe this narrative by championing things of and from this city, following the lead of globally recognised Canberra artists like Genesis Owusu. This city deserves more, and its creatives deserve the respect of the institutions funded to serve them. To build a world-class night-time economy, we must first root out the cultural cringe that suggests we aren't already world-class.

[5] Public Statement: It's Time to Call Out a Cultural Cringe which Harms This City
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YkR3mr1NhgBoUsXcwi5EqV6EpcfEey_TonE_A4GycaA/edit?usp=sharing