Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Submission number: 011

Submitter: Retail Drinks Australia

Date authorised for publication: 1 April 2026

P. 02 8335 3200
E. info@retaildrinks.org.au

PO Box 6261, Alexandria, NSW 2015
Suite W3G, Building 2, Sydney Corporate Park
75 O'Riordan Street, Alexandria, NSW 2015

25 March 2026

Standing Committee on Economics
Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory
196 London Cct
CANBERRA ACT 2601

EMAIL: LACommitteeEconomics@parliament.act.gov.au

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

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

On behalf of Retail Drinks Australia (**Retail Drinks**), we appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on the Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy.

By way of background, Retail Drinks is the national industry body representing the needs and interests of Australia's $18 billion packaged retail (off licence) liquor sector, with a vision to enhance the freedom to retail responsibly. Our membership represents the majority of all off licences in Australia, and members comprise some of the most recognised and trusted companies and brands in the industry, including:

- *Independent Retailers*, whether operating under a known retail banner/brand, or their own.
- *Chain Retailers*, including Coles Liquor and Endeavour Group.
- Small and large *Online Retailers* and retail marketplaces.
- *Retail Banner Groups*, including Independent Brands Australia (Cellarbrations, The Bottle-O, IGA Liquor, Porter's Liquor, etc), Independent Liquor Group (Bottler, Fleet Street, and Super Cellars), Independent Liquor Retailers (Local Liquor, Countrywide Liquor, Liquor & Co), Liquor Legends (Liquor Legends and Urban Cellars), Liquor Marketing Group (Bottlemart, Sip n Save, and Harry Brown), and Liquor Stax; and
- Small and large beverage producers, suppliers and service providers to the retail liquor industry.

Our ACT membership includes retailers operating across Canberra CBD and town centres that employ locals, contribute to the commercial life of their precincts and provide stable long-term tenancy in mixed-use centres.

We strongly support efforts to strengthen Canberra's night-time economy including the 2024 amendments which introduced Section 9 (d) (i) and (ii) of the *Liquor Act 2010* – which specifically calls out "*the responsible development of the ACT's night-time economy"* as one of the objects of the Act.

However, we do not support reforms that would create distortions in the market, particularly as they impact off licensees. While creating a vibrant nightlife is important, equally so is ensuring Canberrans can do this in a way that they choose. This includes events at people's homes, community facilities and more.

1. Economic Performance, Employment and Business Sustainability

Off licensees, to a reasonable extent, form part of Canberra's broader night-time economy. Many ACT liquor retailers trade to their licence conditions (typically 11pm) and contribute to economic activity beyond standard business hours. In suburban town centres in particular, small retail operators provide consistent commercial presence after dark, supporting foot traffic and contributing to the viability of neighbouring businesses.

RETAIL DRINKS AUSTRALIA

P. 02 8335 3200
E. info@retaildrinks.org.au

PO Box 6261, Alexandria, NSW 2015
Suite W3G, Building 2, Sydney Corporate Park
75 O'Riordan Street, Alexandria, NSW 2015

ACT off licensees are also local employers, supporting ~2,330 local jobs. They provide flexible employment for students and young workers, stable roles for long-term staff and managerial opportunities. These businesses pay commercial rents, contribute to payroll tax and source goods and services through local supply chains. Their viability therefore has broader economic implications for the precincts in which they operate.

However, business sustainability pressures are increasing. Businesses face rising labour costs, escalating insurance premiums, energy price volatility and supply chain costs that have tightened margins across the sector. Compliance and reporting requirements also continue to expand. For small businesses operating on modest turnover, the cumulative impact of these pressures can materially affect long-term viability.

Importantly, the 50% discount on liquor licence fees from July 2025 do not apply to off licences, while providing significant benefit to larger venues in other licence categories. This presents a significant disadvantage to off licensees, even for those who are diversifying for the benefit of the night-time economy by operating under a general licence selling small amounts of food and drink for onsite consumption.

2. Regulatory Environment: Licensing, Planning and Compliance

Retail Drinks has always supported proportionate, evidence-based regulatory frameworks that balance community safety with economic vitality. ACT off licensees operate within strict licensing conditions, responsible service requirements, age verification obligations and compliance monitoring frameworks. Our members are committed to meeting these obligations and maintaining high standards of practice. We have been leading this compliance through our *Industry Responsibility* initiatives, including the Online Alcohol Sale & Delivery Code of Conduct.

That said, the increasing layering of regulatory requirements warrants careful consideration. Recently proposed reforms affecting responsible alcohol delivery operations would add significant administrative and operational complexity for liquor retailers and delivery partners.

When considered in isolation, individual reforms may appear manageable. However, the aggregate effect of incremental regulatory change can create material strain. In considering how best to enhance business sustainability within Canberra's night-time economy, it is important that a holistic approach is applied, considering all business types, including all liquor industry players. Regulatory settings must also remain proportionate to demonstrated risk, administratively practical and implemented with sufficient consultation and transition time.

A stable regulatory environment encourages participation in evening trade and supports investment confidence. We are concerned as an industry body that the current approach is leading to unease in the market. The proposed withdrawal from online delivery platforms highlights the consequences of not adopting proportionate, evidence-based approaches to regulatory frameworks.

3. The Role of Hospitality, Live Music and Events

Retail Drinks is supportive of a thriving live music, hospitality, entertainment and events landscape in Canberra, as it enhances appeal to residents and visitors alike and contributes significantly to the Territory's cultural identity.

Many off licensees operate in conjunction to on-premises venues, restaurants and events. Retailers supply licensed functions, community gatherings and private celebrations. They form part of the broader distribution network that underpins hospitality activity in the ACT. A healthy hospitality sector benefits retail and vice versa.

RETAIL DRINKS AUSTRALIA

P. 02 8335 3200
E. info@retaildrinks.org.au

PO Box 6261, Alexandria, NSW 2015
Suite W3G, Building 2, Sydney Corporate Park
75 O'Riordan Street, Alexandria, NSW 2015

Policy approaches should reflect this interdependence and ensure that reform strengthens, rather than fragments, the broader liquor industry.

4. Opportunities to Diversify and Enhance the Night-Time Economy

The Inquiry appropriately recognises the importance of diversification in strengthening Canberra's night-time economy. Consumer preferences, particularly among younger demographics, are evolving. Consumers are increasingly favouring informal gatherings, smaller-scale social experiences and mixed-use precincts rather than exclusively late-night venue models.

Our sector has seen significant growth in demand for non-alcoholic wines and beers, reflecting changing consumer preferences and a broader moderation trend. Off licensees are uniquely positioned to offer the widest range of these products, a diversity that is often not available in pubs and clubs. Supporting consumer choice and convenient access is essential to fostering responsible consumption and sustaining a modern, thriving night-time economy.

Encouraging a diverse mix of responsible retail and hospitality activity can reduce over-reliance on any single sector and strengthen the overall resilience of Canberra's night-time economy.

5. Governance Arrangements and Coordination

Retail Drinks supports improved coordination of night-time economy policy across government. If the ACT Government considers establishing a dedicated Night-Time Economy Coordinator or similar office within the Public Service, it will be important that governance arrangements incorporate a broad cross-section of stakeholders, including the retail liquor sector (i.e. off licensees) alongside hospitality and cultural representatives.

Broad consultation ensures that policy reforms are balanced and evidence based. Inclusive governance structures can help identify unintended consequences of regulatory change and support collaborative problem-solving between government and industry.

6. Best Practice, Inclusion and Community Cohesion

International and domestic best practice suggests that vibrant night-time economies are underpinned by proportionate regulation, strong industry-government partnerships and mixed-use precinct design. Clear licensing frameworks, predictable enforcement and collaborative engagement provide stability and investment confidence.

Responsible, regulated off licensees contribute to structured and supervised transactions, robust age-verification processes and cooperation with enforcement agencies. Supporting compliant businesses strengthens community cohesion by encouraging activity within regulated environments rather than outside them. Inclusion is enhanced when diverse business models can operate sustainably and responsibly.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute and would welcome further engagement as the Inquiry progresses. I am available via (E) info@retaildrinks.org.au or (P) 02 8335 3200 if you wish to discuss further.

Sincerely,

Michael Waters
Chief Executive Officer