



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMICS, INDUSTRY  
AND RECREATION**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy](#))

**Members:**

**MR T WERNER-GIBBINGS (Chair)**  
**MS F CARRICK (Deputy Chair)**  
**MR T EMERSON**  
**MS E LEE**  
**MR S RATTENBURY**

**PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**TUESDAY, 12 MAY 2026**

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**Secretary to the committee:**  
**Ms S Milne (Ph: 620 50435)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

## **The committee met at 9.32 am**

**DOTTA, MR JOSH**, Director, Fiction Club, ONE 22 and Vent nightclub  
**NIKOLIC, MR NESH**

**THE CHAIR:** Good morning and welcome to the first day of public hearings of the Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation for its inquiry into Canberra's night-time economy. The committee will today hear from a range of representatives from local businesses, including nightclubs and live performance venues. The committee will also hear from MusicACT.

This committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. We wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's event.

This hearing is a legal proceeding of the Assembly and has the same standing as proceedings of the Assembly itself. Therefore, today's evidence attracts parliamentary privilege. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of the Assembly.

This hearing is being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and web streamed live. If taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses use these words, "I will take that question on notice". This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript. We welcome our first witnesses, Nesh Nikolic, owner of local businesses, and Josh Dotta from Fiction nightclub, ONE 22 Bar and Vent nightclub.

Please note, as witnesses you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Would either of you like to make a brief opening statement or are you happy to go straight into questions?

Would either of you like to make a brief opening statement or are you happy to go straight into questions?

**Mr Nikolic:** I do have a little brief opening statement.

**THE CHAIR:** The briefer the better and the more questions come through, but yes, absolutely, if you have got one.

**Mr Nikolic:** Sure. I am Nesh Nikolic. I am a local resident and owner of numerous tenancies here in the city that are served by the night-time economy. I am also a business owner and landlord. I would like to firstly say I that welcome the committee. It is important. Many of the infrastructure projects here in Canberra I am going to be the beneficiary of, along with my children, and so I do appreciate those works. However, the staging and planning around these has really significantly affected the city.

My tenants and I have watched with growing concern that these projects have steadily eroded the accessibility and foot traffic and overall appeal of the city, particularly the interchange area, the London Circuit-Alinga Street precinct. Stage 2 works of the light rail, the law courts car park being closed, scaffolding within Garema Place and so on and so forth have all abruptly the city in a particular way, specifically the lyric theatre as well, and the occupation of the car park alongside it.

This is a vicious cycle. Fewer patrons means reduced spending in these areas. It increases graffiti; there is property damage which makes it less appealing. In particular, families, women and people being by themselves report feeling less safe. It is a deterrent to visiting the city—and also accessibility. Without intervention, I think we are at risk of becoming a ghost town, so to speak, in terms of other choices being available to go to other areas like Belconnen, Woden, et cetera.

So, I think we are at a bit of a crossroads and attention to this is very much needed and I just want to thank you for holding this committee.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Nikolic. Mr Dotta?

**Mr Dotta:** I will say something. I operate, as you can see, three late-night venues in the city. I would say, singlehandedly, I am probably the most impactful and important person when it comes to this inquiry for the night-time economy. I have been voicing this for quite some time. I have met with Elizabeth's office, back in the day. I have met with Thomas's office. I did not get a chance to meet with Labor's. You know, I have actively said, "Come out and have a walk around late at night and see how the city is". To no luck. I think Michael Petterson, as of recently, did a walk around, not late at night, but he still at least gave us that opportunity.

I opened Fiction a year before COVID hit. So, one week out from my first birthday, we had to shut down because of COVID. I then operated through COVID, you know, hoping that things would change after, and reinvested back in the city and took over venues that had closed down, that were not going to reoperate, to give more environments and more opportunity, especially for the younger adults in the city.

You could say then there was the COVID hangover. I could say we have probably just gotten over the COVID hangover, but things are worse now than they ever have been.

This inquiry, I would like to say, has probably come a little too late in my opinion, but hopefully we can make some movements because my workforce is drastically reducing. It is a big bundle of issues and hopefully something can happen.

And as you can see in my submission and also my submission 17B after the ACT government submission, they are very factual. There is not much emotion in there. It is all painting the picture, black and white. If that is not enough, then I do not know what else I can do because I am a very emotional person and I have been emotional up to now. And it is like, if I cannot state the facts, I do not know what else we can do.

**THE CHAIR:** Excellent. We will move to questions. First, one for Mr Nikolic. In your submission, you have talked about strengthening models of governance and

consultation. Can you provide an example or a jurisdiction that you think the committee should take note of, in terms of best-practice governance or most-effective governance? And if so, why? Or, not a jurisdiction necessarily but a model that you are aware of that would be an improvement or a strengthening.

**Mr Nikolic:** Sure, thank you for the question. Four weeks prior to the lyric theatre car park being closed, myself and numerous other business owners in the precinct went along to the construction meeting that was being held monthly and we were told—advised—that it would simply be closed. No other consultation was provided. No other messaging was provided prior. There was no preparation. And I think that is quite appalling, in fact.

I did reach out to Minister Barr's office at a later date, after that, and although he said at a previous Legislative Assembly meeting that consultation was widely held, his office did respond saying that they did not have to and they did not need to, so they did not. They simply advised us.

When I think about public consultation, that is actually listening to the folk who are on the ground, taking their considerations into mind and then making a decision from that so that planning staging could be appropriate so it does not affect the city, which actually just does harm to the community. So, I hope I have responded to that question appropriately.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Mr Dotta, in reference to the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors *2024 Night-time economy report*—and Mr Nikolic, I think you mentioned it briefly just then—it reported an eight per cent reduction in employment. Presumably, this is not just Canberra, this is capital cities more generally. The same report also mentions—and, once again, I presume this is an average as opposed to city-to-city—a four per cent increase in establishments and a six per cent increase in turnover in the ACT.

From your experience on the ground, can you elaborate on what you think is happening to cause an increase in establishments and turnover, but a reduction in employment?

**Mr Dotta:** Well, it is pretty self-explanatory; I think the costs are high. So it means when your costs are high and, unfortunately, when you are a business owner and you do not have the luxuries of endless amounts of money, you have got very fixed overheads. Your rent is fixed, your insurances are fixed, which we can talk about in a whole other part. So then you go to look at where can you reduce your costs. Unfortunately, every year with alcohol, levies go up; costs go up, inflation; we are getting emails about petrol prices, so we have got extra costs on that. Where do we cut our costs? Where can we cut people?

This is something that the government has always overlooked. They think small businesses keep making more money, they can employ more. No. It is the other way around. My costs are higher. I am now the maintenance guy, I am half the marketing guy, I am the managers, you know. Three years ago, I had them all employed whilst, as you can imagine, probably a bit less turnover. That is the reality of it.

The workforce is drastically reducing in the city because, one, the customers are

reducing, and the turnover is increasing because the costs are so high. So we are reducing the kids, and it is just going to keep going down. The turnover might eventually then catch up to it and start reducing, because it is no longer viable for them to come out. But the turnover is more because the businesses that are surviving, we are having to be vigilant, we are having to adapt and we are doing everything we can to increase the turnover.

How long that will last, who knows? And how much further can we keep cutting our employees until it is not viable? That is the question.

**THE CHAIR:** So, less employees but spread over more establishments, as more establishments are opening?

**Mr Dotta:** Well, yes, you could say that, yes. More establishments are opening.

**THE CHAIR:** That is from the report.

**Mr Dotta:** Yes, the report is saying that. So, more establishments might be opening, but with less employees. It means people are doing more than they can. I have gone to some new venues on Northbourne Avenue, and the owner is in there with their mother, and the mother cannot even speak much English. Regardless of that, that is just showing you where these small businesses in this night-time economy are at. They are having to bring in family members that are working for free.

So, there is your revenue going up, but they are not paying their families. They are probably not paying themselves as well, or bare minimum. People are taking the risks, they are wanting to get into business. They are taking that opportunity and the factors that are holding them back are governance issues.

**MS CARRICK:** With respect to cost, the liquor licensing is very high compared to other jurisdictions.

**Mr Dotta:** Ten times over Queensland, yes.

**MS CARRICK:** And presumably there are other ACT government charges and then there are federal government charges. Are you able to say what sort of per cent of costs would be ACT government charges, where our government has got some control over those levers?

**Mr Dotta:** The liquor licence is a massive one. Insurances are definitely high in the ACT compared to other jurisdictions. There are two right there. I could not probably rattle it all off the top of my head.

The liquor licence alone, that is an employee for me per year. That is for each venue. So, if you give me similar liquor licenses to that of Sydney or Queensland, I would be able to employ an extra person. Just there is showing what can be done.

Plus, the government here decides to give concessions to night-time businesses but, unfortunately, mine do not get anywhere near the concessions they should be getting. One of them gets zero concessions. And I probably employ the most people or

thereabouts in that venue, per night in the city. Yet I am getting zero concessions.

**MS CARRICK:** What are the concessions that you could get?

**Mr Dotta:** If you have live music, you get up to 80 per cent reduction of liquor licence fees. You know, all the hoops you jump through, you can get it. Unfortunately, they always seem to find ways that I do not get it in a lot of instances. So again, we are picking and choosing who we want to give the concessions to, as well.

**MS CARRICK:** If the numbers of people coming into town are down—there is the bus issue, like the buses not running late—

**Mr Dotta:** Late night transport, yes.

**MS CARRICK:** The transport issue and, as you say, we are just getting over COVID. Do young people want to stay local in their districts? Is it a deterrent, with the cost of things, the lack of public transport, to catch a taxi home to some of these districts? It adds a lot to the expenses of a night out.

**Mr Dotta:** Massively.

**MS CARRICK:** It is quite a centralised model that we have in Canberra. Do you think that there is any room for some decentralisation of the night-time economy?

**Mr Dotta:** You can, but if you have got a failing city, do you think you are going to—are you going to sacrifice that for suburbs? Plus you have got the noise constraints that people are going to want in the suburbs. We built this city; we are spending all this money on this rail into the city, and now we are going to say, “How about let’s look at other areas”?

If you want to do that, I am all for it. I am all for more in the city. But when you do not have a network there, you are alienating the city as it is. You are going to do more damage by creating more precincts. And we do not have the infrastructure in these precincts either, to say, “Let’s go boost all those local shops or have more precincts.” You do not have it there.

It is very expensive for the—I call them kids—young adults, to come to the city. They are probably a bit more frivolous with their money. They are not so concerned with interest rates or all that, because they probably do not have mortgages, but it is still expensive for them to come out. Then you put in the compounding effect of the cost for the venues, the alcohol prices and all that. A lot of people say kids do not want to drink; they do, it is just that it is too expensive for them.

**MS CARRICK:** And when you talk about the number of precincts, in the city itself it seems to be—like you have got Lonsdale Street, Garema Place area—

**Mr Dotta:** I would say it is from the roundabout, the rainbow roundabout in Lonsdale Street down to Garema Place, and that is probably as far as this whole night-time economy is.

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, because I just wonder how decentralised it is in the city itself, like it tries to cover Melbourne Building—

**Mr Dotta:** It is not very decentralised. The Melbourne Building has a bit. Sorry, you come down to the Social Central Club, that seems to go all right quite late night every night but the reason is the bar is closed and the pokie room is still open. So there is there is a bit of a night-time economy and it is around the pokies, unfortunately.

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, and if they try and do West Bank and then the old Boulevard, it used to be. How do you get the vibe?

**Mr Dotta:** I think what Nesh was saying before is it is also the antisocial behaviour—and it is not to say this is what is causing all the issues—but the governance in the city is gone. It is terrible. You can tell that the police force there are well under resourced et cetera. Where they are picking their priorities and what is being dealt with? I can tell you, every day, you have got people across the road right now drinking, you know. Whereas people come to the city, families come to the city, they go to QIC buildings because they are well-protected, they have got their security monitoring flat chat. You can park in there, you can go up, you can walk around and leave and not have to deal with outside of the buildings that QIC own and operate.

So that brings problems—like with Nesh and that—where we cannot control them and look after the streets ourselves. We cannot do that, we do not have those powers. So when there is a lot of antisocial behaviour happening in the city as well, you cannot allow for someone to open down the road and try to bring up the precinct where the old Transit Bar was because there is not enough governance. To walk through it is scary enough as it is.

I messaged Tom a couple of weeks ago and, again, it shows the negligence of this government in staying on top of things and trying to keep it afloat in the city. You have all these works happening here in Garema Place and they cut out power for one weekend. It was only one weekend, but still, the whole of Garema Place was unlit. You had no lights. As a female, as a young family walking through there, it would be one of the scariest things you would have to deal with. Late night; no lights at all.

Where is the control? Where is the monitoring of whoever is doing the works to have temporary lights for one night? Is that how much we do not care about this city, that we cannot even put in temporary lights for one night? You walk through that, you do not know if the lights are not on the next weekend, but you are probably telling everyone, “Do not go to the city. It is unsafe.” It is just another day and another instance of us local businesses having to pick up the pieces.

**MS CARRICK:** Thank you.

**MR EMERSON:** On that, the government submission says there is not a need for a night-time economy coordinator/commissioner role in the ACT because you are not dealing with multiple levels of government; you do not have local councils to deal with. But your submission speaks to the value of having a one-stop shop. So, what gaps do you think that kind of a role would fill?

**Mr Dotta:** As I said at the start, I have been quite vocal for quite some time and it is just running around in circles. There is only so much people can do and, you know, up are not meeting the right people—or, they all have their own agendas. It is like we just need someone to listen and then try and take some action because no one is doing that.

And realistically, I do not think I have ever seen any of you at my clubs. The people making the decisions should have an idea of what is going on, on the ground. And you are not going to get that by just putting out, like you said, public consultations. And when you actually ask questions, they say, “We do not have to answer that. We are not coming back.”

That is why there is a need for this, because there needs to be someone to be able to speak for us, to be able to consolidate all the venues that are having the issues, to identify what the big issues are, to then be able to put action in. We have had this night-time ministry now since October or November last year and I have not heard “boo” from it. We have not had “boo” come from it, you know? Right now it is—

**Mr Nikolic:** If I can address some of that as well: having a voice is, I think, part of the problem that this precinct does not have—and having a centralised person or place that potentially has some actual power to address some of our concerns.

When a family comes into the city—they come for dinner—and they struggle with finding parking and all the challenges with accessibility, there is unpleasantness as you are trying to navigate through to your venue, there is graffiti, there is unruly behaviour, there are safety issues, there are lighting issues and so on, it is a deterrent.

These are all what I call friction points. The more friction you place in an area, the less likely you are going to return. And whether that is the temporary stuff of construction, it is unpleasant, you do not pick that venue. You pick another venue. When you multiply all of those factors, it is not very compelling to come back into the city. And if we do not have a compelling city, then obviously trade becomes an issue, employment becomes an issue, the more unruly behaviour becomes an issue, and that is that ongoing erosion.

Someone on the ground who can hear our voice and advocate for that and hopefully have some power to say, “This is actually important. Not for the business owners, not for the landlords but for our community. This affects all Canberrans.”

And Canberra having a voice about what they want their city to look like and feel like, whether it is going for a night-time dinner, whether it is coming in for some dessert with the family, whether it is going to a nightclub later on, whether it is being able to get home from those venues, whether it is public transport, whether it is where you can park—which is almost literally none at the moment, unless you are willing to walk 300-500 metres.

These are all erosions of the city. And I love the city and we need a voice for the city, and I think Canberrans deserve more.

**MR EMERSON:** I am thinking about the lighting example where someone within government might find out, for example, the lighting in Garema Place is planned to be

shut off for the weekend, and raise a red flag and say, “Hey, that is actually going to be hugely problematic for all these venues.” Is that the sort of thing—as well as the list that you have provided—for which you would want to see an advocate within government, within the public service, in a way that a ministerial position might not be able to be in the weeds on the day-to-day operational issues like that?

**Mr Dotta:** Yes, definitely.

**Mr Nikolic:** Absolutely.

**Mr Dotta:** It is the heart of Canberra. What we are talking about is our heart of Canberra. And if we are willing just to go, “It will be fine as it is,” it just shows that we are neglecting it. And like you said, the locals care. People care about it. You have got submissions in the inquiry from local residents. I have never seen that in an inquiry before, to this extent. That just shows how much people care and how much the locals notice it as well. You know, it is not just us businesses. We are the ones fighting to stay afloat and keep the city alive, but it is the locals as well.

We are on the ground. These people that run these businesses and these institutions, we are on the ground. We are not on a boat, you know, up in Hervey Bay or somewhere; we are on the ground. We are listening to the locals. We are there. We are their voice of reason and we are trying to give them what they want. And then when we are trying to pass that on to the government, we need someone there as a voice for us. Because, as you see in my submission, I deal with essentially up to eight different government bodies, you know?

How do we have to keep replicating this information? How do we have to keep passing it on to so many people, whilst we are talking about all the other issues we are facing?

We are sitting here going, “Let’s make change, but you guys have got to do it yourself again,” essentially. Without having this person there, you are leaving the ball in our court again—whilst you guys are doing all the government, you know?

**MR EMERSON:** When you are engaging with those eight different government bodies, is there any one of those bodies where you feel like, “You are on my side here. You are trying to drive the things that I am trying to drive”?

**Mr Dotta:** Sometimes, yes. But it is more like, I go, “I have just passed this information—” And it’s, “Oh, well, they are a different thing. They are different to us. You are going to have to relay the information to us again.”

So, even in the bodies that control and govern this city and this night-time economy, they do not even speak to each other. So how can you expect us to do it? That is why we need this person: so they can consolidate, so they can make it clean and clear for us, so we do have, you know, the light at the end of the tunnel type of thing.

**Mr Nikolic:** I think there are many ways to solve a problem like this because it is a multi-dimensional problem, whether it is a role or whether it is actually having current government that is receptive to what we are talking about today.

I think part of this problem has become because they have not been receptive to our

voices, our public consultation. I think it is very obvious to everyone here and all Canberrans that the staging of all of these works is in serious question. Going out and staging the removal of car park after car park, which just destroys accessibility.

Accessibility is number one. Every time you build a precinct, whether it is a Canberra city, a Woden, a Belconnen, a Gungahlin, everything revolves around how you access that area. And we have destroyed accessibility, whether it is the parking, whether it is about how you can walk from one venue to another. This is why we call it a “city”: we are trying to bring all of our amenities close together. And we have actually just cut it all up at the moment with multiple projects harming that accessibility. And then what comes with that, obviously, is graffiti and safety and so on and so forth.

It is the staging that I think is a really serious question. That public consultation was not—I do not believe—held appropriately.

**MR EMERSON:** A quick follow-up on this issue. In November 2023 the city centre entertainment precinct was established. What effective actions have you seen, if any, to activate that precinct and enliven that precinct in the last two and a half years?

**Mr Dotta:** Well, I think the ACT government actually said they have done a couple of things in their submission. But as you can see, a lot of it is more around, I would say, evening orientated stuff and family orientated stuff versus, you know, things that could do more for the city, the youth et cetera. Other than that, we do not see much. To tell you the truth, I have not seen anything, really. I have been very vocal for quite some time and things are going backwards. They have not gone forwards.

**MR EMERSON:** The precinct, is it more lively or less lively since November 2023?

**Mr Dotta:** I would say it is probably less lively; way less. There is a common saying that you meet with most people in hospitality in the night-time economy, “Take me back to COVID times.” Literally, you can read articles about it. “Take me back to COVID times.” So that answers your question there.

**MS LEE:** Thank you both for attending today. I have a question for each of you. I hope that is okay. Mr Nikolic, you said in your opening statement that we are at a crossroads and that, without intervention, things are going to be very dire. What types of interventions do you consider necessary, especially in the short term, that will support what you are trying to do to ensure that the city centre is vibrant?

**Mr Nikolic:** As to what can be done now In the short term, there are some very practical suggestions to be tabled. One is car park accessibility. I raised this before the contract was signed between the government and Multiplex for the Lyric Theatre. They are taking up some of the car park area. They currently have two rows of sheds that line up next to each other. It is reasonable. They need to have sheds for workers and the like. I made suggestions to numerous people about stacking the sheds, so that you can halve the shed space. That would open up many more car parking availabilities in that area. There was a possibility of going to Mooseheads, who have office space that would have been available literally across the road. That was not used either. That would have given value to the local economy here as well.

You could potentially look at assistance with accessibility around town. Some transport options that circulate around the precinct on a regular basis would be helpful, particularly if there is a free shuttle bus. That is a fairly cost-effective idea. And there are even the aesthetics, such as graffiti removal. This is all about addressing the friction points of parking, accessibility, getting in and out of the city, and the feel of the city—lighting and making sure there are cameras up, so that there is safety, and having more police on the ground. It gives the impression that we care for our precinct. Those are some ideas.

**MS LEE:** Thank you very much. Mr Dotta, you have spoken about the imperatives, in terms of making it viable to do business, including liquor licensing. We understand the cost of it. The other area you address in your submission is in relation to portable long service leave. Could you expand on the impact? You have already discussed how it has already impacted your ability to hire people.

**Mr Dotta:** Yes. Those are more costs. The proof is in the pudding for that one. You can look at the stats. I rotate my staff so much. I have staff members leaving me every week and new ones come in. On average, they are there for six-month periods. Why am I paying long service leave for them? Where is that money going? What is happening with it? I have people who work for me and have been in the industry for 15 years. Essentially, they have not received that. Something needs to be done with it. I do not know if you guys are aware, but there are the international students here on visas et cetera, and everyone gets the same benefits now—casuals versus part-timers versus full-timers. Casuals pretty much get the same benefits as full-time employees now, plus all of the loading on top.

A lot has been done for the workers, and those things should be there, but less than five per cent of the people in this industry stay for longer than 10 years. The stats are there. Why are we the only state with a government that decided to bring this in and hold it there? New South Wales clearly dropped this idea. It does not make sense. Why are we doing this? People ask: “Is it revenue raising?” They are trying to get some money in because they know this money is not going to be paid out. Why is it there? It does not make sense, and the proof is in the pudding. It would be great if the ACT could lead Australia and bring in portable long service leave for the people in the industry who deserve it, but around 98 per cent of people in the industry will not ever see that money. What is the logical reasoning behind that?

You could have a person who could speak to the venues, and then they could speak to the people in the industry, like the ones who work for me and have been doing it for longer than 10 years, and not only here in ACT. They have gone to Sydney, worked for big companies like Merivale et cetera and come back. You could speak to them. That is where you will find those people—not put out a public thing and say, “We need to speak to anyone who has worked in hospo for 10 years to see how we can work around it.” By having that person, by having that ministry, and hearing those voices that constantly speak to us, you can find the solutions to these problems a lot quicker and a lot more efficiently, and they would probably be the right solutions as well, because, again, the people who are making the decisions are not the people the decisions are being made for.

**MS LEE:** Thank you. You mentioned that you have to deal with eight different—

**Mr Dotta:** Yes. That is how many are involved in it. On average, I would be dealing with at least five different government bodies every month.

**MS LEE:** Following on from Mr Emerson's question about the night-time economy coordinator, would you see that role as a one-stop shop? That is what you were looking at?

**Mr Dotta:** Yes. A perfect example to put to you is that I speak with liquor licensing people about pretty much all my stuff, but then, when the walks are done, it is about compliance. And then I speak to the compliance people and say, "By the way, I emailed ACT liquor licensing about this stuff," and they say, "That's them. That's a different department." So the ones you have to deal with are not the ones doing the compliance work. It is so messy. As a business in the current environment, you say, "Come on, guys." That is why this person would be very good, because it is a mess.

**MS LEE:** I appreciate that. Thank you.

**MR EMERSON:** The New South Wales 24-Hour Economy Commissioner has 64 FTE staff. You mentioned that you would envision one person with a couple of staff. Do you have a sense of what you would need?

**Mr Dotta:** Yes—a team. At the moment, acknowledging and saying stuff and announcing reform is happening, but, when push comes to shove, nothing has been done. That is the issue. We want to see action. We are sick of hearing "This will happen" or "We're going to do this and do that," because nothing ever happens. A perfect example is accessibility. We get an announcement that the roadworks are going to happen for the walking path and they do not happen. There is the lighting in the city. All this work has been happening and there is no lighting.

**Mr Nikolic:** It is also a question of responsiveness. We ask a question of government and the response is: "We'll take that on notice. We'll come back to you." We have been asking for rates relief or land tax relief so that business can maintain staying afloat, and the answer since day dot—it has been going for over a year now—has been: "We'll come back to you." Last night, I attended another meeting with the same response: "We're still looking into it." We were told at one point that a new police station would be stood up, particularly for the evenings in the city. Last night we were told that it is probably not going to go ahead, because of resourcing.

I understand that there are some practicalities, and we get the lip service, but where is the actual follow-through? That is part of the problem. If you cannot do rates relief, just say, "We can't do it." Let us get on to the next topic so that we can see what we can do. Just be honest with us. It is really difficult to maintain a business and keep the city alive. If we lose these venues—and many venues have been lost already or had to relocate out of the city—they are, once again, more erosion pieces. It is not part of the solution; it is part of the problem. It compounds.

**THE CHAIR:** We will go for a bit longer because I have a couple of quick questions. Mr Dotta, the concessions are interesting. What concessions, if any, do you receive from the government? And what is the reasoning for the ones that you do not get? What

is the rationale that you receive?

**Mr Dotta:** There are the three venues. I get some concessions for ONE22 because it is a bar—a cap of 200 or whatever it is. I do not believe I get many for what was the Cube nightclub. If I do, it is very miniscule. And I do not get any for Fiction at all. It is quite funny: when you look at the tier basing for liquor licence fees in Canberra, a late-night venue that finishes at 12 and has a capacity of seven might be paying \$5,000, but, the later you go and the more capacity you have, it starts to jump quite substantially. They are bringing in concessions for the lower-tier licences. In my opinion, they want the higher amount of money. What is the reasoning behind a late-night venue that has more people coming to it not getting a concession versus other businesses? What is the reasoning from the government? What is the reasoning from the people who make decisions about that? Again, we could have a body that we could speak to properly. I have never had an answer. I do not know. What is the answer? I do not think they could tell you, besides the value. That is what I believe. It is \$40,000 versus \$5,000.

**THE CHAIR:** There is the cost late at night for lots of people. Mr Cocks has one question. We are already over time.

**MR COCKS:** I really want to touch a bit more on the barriers that you have been talking about.

**Mr Dotta:** I will tell you right now: it is late night as well. Sorry—you probably have more resources going to pubs on Lonsdale Street versus nightclubs.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Dotta, Mr Cocks has a question.

**MR COCKS:** I want to hear from you about late night as well, but I am very keen to understand the stacking of barriers that you were talking about. To what extent does that flow into business decisions, as you are looking at things like employment of staff or hours that you are open, or even a decision about whether to stay open? Is that actually getting to a crunch point or is this something that business can keep absorbing?

**Mr Dotta:** We are getting crunched. It has got to the point now that, if I did not have acts on Friday nights, the attendance in the city would be, I reckon, 30 per cent of what it is on Friday nights. On most Friday nights, with the acts I bring in, I end up losing over more than 50 per cent of the time, but I am still doing it because, firstly, I want to see this city live, and, secondly, I still see the value of a brand for a business, but how much longer am I going to keep doing these Friday night events and keep taking risks with acts? When it comes to entertainment, we are not a city that is on your normal route. To bring acts here, it costs more than for them to fly to Sydney or Melbourne, so they have to weigh that into it. When we are constantly getting squeezed, we have to start making tough decisions, such as whether to focus just on Saturday nights. I closed my venue Cube and reopened it as a new concept. Our saying is: one night done right. We are only open on Saturday nights because it is not viable to open on Friday nights.

**MR COCKS:** This question is for both of you. The other thing I am worried about is that the barriers you are talking about might lead to a change in people's habits. Once they stop coming out—

**Mr Dotta:** There is already a change. People are already changing their habits in this city late at night. I will tell you that much. As I say in my submission, the government are saying they want a 24-hour economy. It is more like a six-hour economy one night a week. Like I said earlier, take us back to COVID times. When we were in our bubble, people were going out more.

**Mr Nikolic:** Venues are not trading as long. That is for sure. Venues are not open in some cases. Venues have closed in other cases or had to move out; they are trading somewhere else. They had to make that decision, and it means they are taking their staff with them and they are taking the experience with them. That has a follow-on effect, because you might come in for one venue, but then you go to another. That is the idea of going to a busy city. That is the appeal, or at least it is supposed to be the appeal. So, as it erodes over time, it is not sustainable and it will continue to go down that path. It will be a vicious cycle of closures and a reduction of time that venues are open, and it becomes less and less appealing. Why would someone come to the city if they have something a bit more accessible? At least that is the question that is beginning to be asked.

**Mr Dotta:** Can I just say something? Weekly, you have to push the stone in Canberra.

**THE CHAIR:** Josh, I am going to wrap it. On behalf of the committee, thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*.

**Short suspension.**

**CAFFERY, MR DAVID**, Personal capacity  
**SEKULESS, MS ALEXANDRA**, Producer, Mill Theatre at Dairy Road

**THE CHAIR:** We welcome Lexi Sekules, from the Mill Theatre at Dairy Road, and David Caffery. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Would either of you like to make a brief opening statement?

**Mr Caffery:** Yes, please.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Caffery?

**Mr Caffery:** I have been waiting for this moment for 17 years, because 17 years ago I appeared before the parliamentary inquiry into live community events, when the night-time economy was perceived to be an issue, potentially, by the government. After the number of reports that we have been through, it is timely that we now have this conversation.

Let me start with a headline. Per capita, by LGA, Canberra is the worst performing night-time economy of any capital city in Australia. However, not all LGAs are comparable. Let me repeat that: per capita, by LGA, Canberra is the worst performing night-time economy of any capital city in Australia.

It is not quite fair to say that ACT Labor is governing the worst NT in the country, but it is not far off. The data that I present to you today, which I have tabled via your colleagues, is the same data that Minister Cheyne has also put forth to you to show how well we are doing. I say this purely to show the complexity of the issue. Data is complex, but the night is even more so.

No-one is taking leadership in this space. No-one is getting data in this area. No-one is making sense of the data in this area. How could we possibly have a thriving economy, especially in the night-time? We do not have a leader or a night-time manager to make sense of it. With all due respect, and to jump forward, to suggest that a coordinator would be sufficient for this type of role clearly shows that we do not quite understand the issue. And we do not, because the data is complicated. LGAs are complicated. We have an LGA that is the entire ACT. The LGA in Adelaide has 13,000 people and it is a grid, so they are not comparable.

It is the reason that MusicACT did not release that data at the 2024 election. We wanted to, but we thought it would be unfair. However, I think that, halfway through a period now, or a term, it is data that ought to be broadcast at this time, because it is relatively true. We are not doing very well. I have said this for 17 years. We cannot play if we do not feel safe.

Let me tell you a little anecdote. In a role that I have—which I am not representing right now—through the City Renewal Authority, there was a project which I oversaw. We paid a very good security guard to become undercover, to roughen up his clothes and to assimilate into what we call the antisocial behavioural group that are in the city. It is a complex group of people; most of them are not actually homeless. He became one of

them. He did this because the police said to us that there is no data on antisocial behaviour in the city. He recorded six major incidents every day that he worked. He tabled this information via CRA to the minister for policing and to the police.

When I was riding here this morning, at 19 past nine in the morning, there was a known guy drinking goon on a \$20,000 bench in the renewed part of the city. That is not a problem in its own case, but the recommendation of this report has not been heard. We need to stop people drinking in public areas in the mornings and in the early afternoons, because by the time they are smashed, by the time they have created groups of drug dealers around them, it is too late. Stabbings are happening. There was a sword in Glebe Park only a couple of weeks ago. I was actually with the security guard who assimilated himself, and he knew exactly who that person was.

These are known problems, and the government are waiting to see what else we are going to have. Do we need another murder in the city before this place is deemed safe? I think we need to move on the recommendations that are ahead of us. I will make way for questions.

**THE CHAIR:** You can table the rest of it later; all good. Ms Carrick?

**MS CARRICK:** When we talk about safety, and people talk about passive surveillance and having crowds of people in an area to create passive surveillance, in the city, do you think that there is a core area where the night-time economy is—Lonsdale Street, presumably Garema Place and a few blocks around that—or is it too scattered? You have the Melbourne Building, you go further south; if they do West Basin, and there is NewActon. It is quite a spread-out night-time economy. Is that an issue or should it be more contained? You cannot stop businesses going where they want to go, but—

**Mr Caffery:** Of course. That is a reasonable question. However, I would assert that an economy is everywhere. There is no specific location that the economy needs to take place. The government have tried to manage an economy in a certain demarcation. It is called an entertainment precinct, and I am glad to see it was passed not too long ago. Unfortunately, it missed two residential buildings—one hotel, one residential building. The residential building, by the way, is a known complainant regarding every sound emission of major events, including the Multicultural Festival. It is in the papers that they complain about significant events. At least we got that passed. I am answering your question, Ms Carrick, because there is a demarcated area for where that should and will be able to take place, from a built-form perspective.

I think you are asking a really good question that we assessed in our *Cool Little Capital* action plan in 2015. Environmental authorisations are the mechanism by which the EPA, our sound management regulator, would allow for sound to happen in different parts of the ACT. That function, that environmental authorisation process, is extremely limited. It assumes that no-one would need, after 10 pm, to have loud noise—loud noise being much lower than I am talking right now—unless you have more than 2,000 people.

**MS CARRICK:** When you say that the economy is everywhere—and I get that—there is the entertainment precinct in the city, and Gungahlin has one, too, but they do not have the noise level—

**Mr Caffery:** They are going to have a problem with that one.

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, they need to deal with the noise in their entertainment precinct.

**Mr Caffery:** If you lived in that area and your noise went up, what would you think?

**MS CARRICK:** If you are in an entertainment precinct, presumably—

**Mr Caffery:** But what if you bought before the entertainment precinct?

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, that is an issue. Going back to the economy being everywhere, and not just in the city, we will hear that the city is really important for life; but, Lexi, your business is not in the city. My question is: with the town centres, how do we balance the economy around beefing up the city plus having it in other areas, like the town centres?

**Ms Sekules:** I will close a loop on the SEPs, the special entertainment precincts; then I will directly answer your question. In other states and territories, there has been immense success with special entertainment precincts. I believe Queensland led the way with the work they did in the Fortitude Valley. There is an organisation called the Live Music Office. It is a national body. It was originally funded by APRA AMCOS, and it now receives Music Australia funding, which is an arm of Creative Australia, essentially, with federal funding. With their regulation ideas and proposals around how to successfully manage special entertainment precincts, there are massive precedents, basically.

Going to your question, for me, it is more about how an economy is stimulated, I suppose. When there is cohesion with policy or cohesion amongst industries and businesses, that is when there is success, whether that is for the daytime economy or the night-time economy. At Dairy Road, where I am, which, as you say, is not in the city, it is about there being a confidence boost for all the businesses involved.

If I can speak to one point in my submission, the Better Regulation Taskforce did something which I think has been absolutely phenomenal, a complete game changer, which is the reduction in the cost of liquor licences for businesses who engage in or support artistic activity. When government does something that lets business have more confidence, my experience is that a precinct can grow.

For example, because of that act by the Better Regulation Taskforce, a very well-known bar, Ambrosia Bar and Lounge, is now partnering with me. They came to me. I did not have to do the hustle, which I have done; many on the committee will know about that hustle of trying to explain why cultural activity can be an economic boost. They came to me. I do not think that has ever happened before. Usually, it is me doing the hustle.

I hope I am answering your question, Ms Carrick, when I say that it is about the involvement of government in providing confidence. After the COVID years—that time of COVID and this time after—people like me, companies and businesses like mine, have a confidence issue. Normally, as with Dionysus and Dave Caffery, we have a high-risk appetite. We are up for the gamble. I engage in activity when I do not make

a dollar. I spend a lot, but I do not make a dime, until the activity has started and the interface with the general public happens.

It is about, I guess, what I offer. My perspective is that, no matter where it is, how does government make sure that our high-risk appetite is activated and supported? Because then we will start doing things with you. I hope that is helpful.

**Mr Caffery:** The question is a strategic one, but I will be practical about it, because I would like to investigate this opportunity of a night-time manager. Again, I will go away from the word “coordinator”. I do not think it is appropriate. The question becomes: does the night-time manager work for the City Renewal Authority—which goes to your question about the CBD—or does it work for something like the Better Regulation Taskforce, which is not bound to lines?

My suggestion is that it should be BRT, not because of anything to do with CRA, other than their structural requirement of focusing on the city. I think they are very good at what they do. It would be fair to suggest that the night-time economy is not directly on their radar by agenda, by set agenda from people such as yourselves. I do not think it is them trying to block anything out whatsoever. They do not have resources to do everything; no department does. I think BRT has done a really good job in at least getting the special entertainment precincts up. I think there is work to be done there—a lot of work to be done, I might add.

For example, Dairy Road cannot get a special entertainment precinct, even though the developer might put themselves forward and satisfy the requirements. It is apparently just up to the government to declare where it would be. I do not think that is right. I think it should be a deployable mechanism.

If I may talk to that for a moment, and going directly to your astute point, Ms Carrick, there is the Old Canberra Inn. The Old Canberra Inn has been around for about 165 years. The planning department, 20 years ago, allowed apartments to be built there. Those apartments are now holding this beautiful old establishment to the absolute decibel—45 dBA. I am talking over it right now. They get complaints all the time from known people who live in those apartments who complain.

It is no-one’s fault. It is not the planning minister’s fault; it is not the fault of the head of ACTPLA or whatever they are called now. It is an issue of a lot of different complexities coming together and squashing Ben Johnston, who is talking here today, who owns the Old Canberra Inn, and stopping him playing music at a pub where it has always been played before Canberra was even a city. The CRA would not be able to do anything about it. The Better Regulation Taskforce can.

I can talk to that issue very briefly. I want to assert one point, which is that special entertainment precincts should be a deployable mechanism, so that they can be applied in other parts of the ACT.

**MR EMERSON:** Following on from that, with the New South Wales 24-Hour Economy Commissioner, one of the programs that they have rolled out is the New South Wales Uptown Program, which seems to do the kinds of things that you are talking about.

**Mr Caffery:** A great program.

**MR EMERSON:** It is focused on the formation of local business communities, activating precincts, and getting businesses working together—who are, of course, sometimes your competitors, and that can be challenging to do. Continuing on this point about having a dedicated function, role or office within government to deliver something like that, how do you see that as necessary, if you do? With the Better Regulation Taskforce, the framing is, “We’re creating the environment in which you might be able to thrive as businesses,” which is quite different from proactively cultivating precincts and playing a more active role. It is a bit of a convoluted question, but there are some threads there that you can run away with.

**Mr Caffery:** It is an astute point, Mr Emerson. I think that would need to be worked out. As to whether or not BRT is the right approach, I really do not know; I am not an expert in how bureaucracy should operate. However, I can say that they have been successful in what they have been doing, and I think that is rare. We have not seen that enough. The task force has pushed through, and there have been some really smart people in there.

You have referred to the commissioner, in New South Wales. That is a very different role. That guy is overlooking an entire state, and it is a big state. That is not relevant here. We can always learn from him. He is very good. However, I recommend that it is a specialist partnership procurement; therefore, it would be a private office that would directly report to an executive in the ACT government. I do not know who that would be. I do not have any preformed ideas; I can just say that BRT would do it quite well. I do not know whether it has to be BRT.

Therefore, you will get over a really specific but small problem. It is the same reason, I would suggest, that it has taken 17 years for this known problem to get to this very room, which is that it is not in anyone’s portfolio. It is not in anyone’s passion to try and fix the issues that people like Josh are going through. They are very specific problems, and they do require someone who does go out at night. Okay, it is an obvious thing to say, but you cannot be an expert in something you are not practised in. That is why I recommend that it would be easier for the ACT government to procure that skill, rather than assume they would find it internally.

**Ms Sekules:** I would like to point out where I think things are already going well, because I think it is important to make note of that. There is the work that MusicACT has done, particularly their “What’s On? Lots On.” guide, which was done in partnership with *BMA*. I mentioned previously the confidence piece; then there is the awareness education piece. Letting everyone in the ACT know just how much fabulous stuff is going on is incredibly important. I think it is useful to note that you already have a partnership there between MusicACT and *BMA*.

The event fund that Events ACT have always offered has been an absolute game changer for me. It just so happens that, currently, I am not eligible for it. Ongoing activities are not funded. But in my first year, Events ACT worked with me to make sure that I would be eligible—exactly how and what it was that I was going to apply for. It was about being able to have that small boost in marketing funding, plus the

conversations with them and their partners over at VisitCanberra.

I still occasionally speak with VisitCanberra and, in those meetings, they provide anecdotal or real data that is a goldmine for me, because it provides me with confidence. They were the first ones to let me know that people are paying for experiences—packages. That was just from a conversation with the team in VisitCanberra.

I do not know whether the committee is aware of the Australian Tourism Data Warehouse. VisitCanberra is attached to this, as indeed are all tourism agencies across the country and across jurisdictions. That is a place and an avenue where I can upload my activity, and it gets distributed amongst any media outlets.

I am mentioning those things, first of all, just for the committee to hear some positives, as well as picking up on this idea of a manager. Let's not reinvent the wheel, because government can be a little bit too good at doing that. It is about having a manager who is aware of what is already going on well, and who is working in that space of collaboration and coordination.

**MR EMERSON:** Thank you for that. Do you want to add something, Mr Caffery?

**Mr Caffery:** Yes. It is a little bit close to home. I have declared that I work for the City Renewal Authority. We are a specialist provider of activation services for the city. The model works really well. It is not about me; it is not about whoever won that procurement. A government agency procured a specialist to advise and deliver on this area, and manage it quite specifically, and very well, I think. It is a highly auditable process. That is a great model for this. It could be BRT; it could be someone else. Maybe Tara Cheyne wants to start a new department for the night; I am not sure. But procure that specialist service, manage it really carefully and get rid of them if you do not like them. It is a much better process for the government, I think, than to be stuck with someone who was not quite right for the role, but they have to see out their term.

**Ms Sekules:** One thing that CRA does, which I think would be where a point of difference is really important, is that night-time economies need an “always on” mentality, as opposed to the one-off or the pop-up festivals—which I think, across the board, ACT does incredibly well. There are a lot of these one-off festivals.

I will give you an anecdote from my submission. In my building, the main restaurant is not open on Wednesday nights. I have never had a sold-out night on a Wednesday night. Of course, it is my belief—every couple years I do a survey, and I definitely will do this survey—and my experience, over four years, that when a patron cannot have that full experience, they are once again less confident in making that investment and going out.

**MR EMERSON:** The report that came up with the earlier witnesses, *Measuring the Australian night-time economy 2025*, from the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors, found that Canberra, among capital cities, ranked equal last with Hobart for the total proportion of venues open after 9 pm, and it was shown to underperform the national average in each of the four time windows measured—evening, early night, late night and early morning.

Mr Caffery, in your submission you have spoken about the need for a night-time activation strategy. The question is: do you strongly see this as a role for government? Again, government might say, “We create policy settings; industry does what they do,” or government might say, “Actually, we have a responsibility to activate the night-time economy because we’ve said it’s a priority, we’ve set up a minister and so on.” What do you see as the extra value in having government drive that kind of process? With the role that you are imagining, would that person be responsible for developing and delivering such a strategy?

**Mr Caffery:** Yes, they would; that is the short answer. The precedent is that, in every major city in this country that does it, the government do it. RISING festival, which is happening in a couple weeks in Melbourne, which is the new version of the Melbourne Festival, is a project by government. The night-time activation of Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney—or New South Wales—Perth, and beginning to be in Darwin, is activated by the government.

**Ms Sekules:** This is where Dave and I maybe are out of step and not doing the same dance. I would see benefit—although I totally hear and acknowledge a 17-year journey—in policies being leveraged in order for business to at least come on the journey with you in relation to this. I refer again to the fact that we have high-risk appetite. I suppose it is a matter of asking: what is that perfect balance? Seeing that government does not have a high-risk appetite, how do you incentivise and give us the confidence?

**Mr Caffery:** If I may spin in our dance?

**Ms Sekules:** Sure.

**MR EMERSON:** It is going so well. It is beautiful to watch!

**Mr Caffery:** The night-time manager should be doing exactly what Lexi is saying, but they should also have campaigns, both media and physical activations, including grants, under the same campaign, which is something that we have been trialling with City Renewal Authority. Wonderful World was aiming at a very different market, but it had a layering of business engagement with a media campaign. Places like Mooseheads could still do the media of their own activation within that campaign, and what you get is a double bounce on a trampoline. You get more outcomes from a strategic investment from the government.

**MS LEE:** Mr Caffery, I want to follow up on something that you said in your opening when you spoke about, for want of a better phrasing, undercover security who went in and did what he did and was a report that was handed to CRA and the police minister. Do you have a copy of that report that you can table for the committee?

**Mr Caffery:** That is owned by the City Renewal Authority. So the answer is I do not.

**MS LEE:** Okay; no worries. Noting what you said about a night-time economy manager, coordinator or commissioner, you said that you thought that that would probably be better suited with the Better Regulation Taskforce as opposed to with the CRA.

**Mr Caffery:** Purely because of the demarcation of the requirements of the City Renewal Authority—that is all.

**MS LEE:** Noting that, is there something that the CRA could be doing to boost the night-time economy within, obviously, the limitations of their resourcing and remit?

**Mr Caffery:** That is a great question, Ms Lee. I have every faith that, if parliament or the appropriate minister requested the City Renewal Authority to look at the night, then they would be very good at it.

**MS LEE:** Ms Sekules, in your submission, you spoke that there are some sector leaders at institutions that perpetuate the “Canberra sucks” well-known trope. Could you perhaps expand on what you meant by that?

**THE CHAIR:** I was hoping someone would ask about that.

**Ms Sekules:** I cannot believe I put “Canberra sucks” in my submission. If I can keep banging the same note about confidence and link my answer to that, I believe there is a very specific Canberra cultural cringe. There are people around the country, but even here in the ACT, who think that Canberra sucks. I experienced this as a jobbing actor when I would be on a gig somewhere else, and I would feel a sense of embarrassment or that I needed to apologise—like “I actually come from Canberra.” Some people would try to be sympathetic and tell me about their year 6 bus trip that they went on.

**MS LEE:** We are all familiar with that one.

**Ms Sekules:** I think we are actually culturally the age of a teenager, right? We are just starting to bust out of our clothes, acne present, but energy present as well. That is this kind of myth outside of Canberra. Within the ACT, I have experienced, and very specifically in what I have spoken to publicly, the Australian War Memorial not supporting or believing in local Canberra work. I called that out when they announced their new theatre and they got a Perth company to do a show about Vivian Bullwinkel. That was after they knew very perfectly well that a year ago I had done the very first revival of *The Shoe-Horn Sonata*, which is the show about Vivian’s story. It was actually a play originally done in Sydney—because, of course, a Sydney company does the Canberra story first in the nineties—which was all about raising awareness and funds for a memorial for nurses on Anzac Parade. Due to that play—but that play being done in Sydney about our Anzac Parade!—there is now a memorial for nurses.

I experienced this Canberra cultural cringe—that the War Memorial assumed local is only community or amateur. It is such an important part of the ecosystem. But, in this city, how do we—without having to move postcodes—go from community to independent to professional? There is no reason why we cannot do that in this city. The other big players, I believe, who contribute to the Canberra cultural cringe are right here: the Canberra Theatre Centre and the Street Theatre. They are funded bodies who, in my experience, do not believe that local and professional can exist without unfair interrogation and assumptions. That is my experience. If we do not tackle that idea, how will we attract enough people? How will we get the confidence of businesses to be open to book an artist? So I guess that is the rub.

**MS LEE:** It was mentioned—and I cannot remember whether it was Mr Caffery or Ms Sekules—that it seems like precincts are kind of restricted in terms of whether they self-appoint them as an entertainment precinct and that it relies on government to do so. What would help, from a government perspective? We hear from various individual organisations and businesses that they just want government to get out of the way—that they are more than capable of dictating, initiating and going forward and they actually want government to get out of the way. Then, at other times, you have this contrast of where you need that leadership from a policy perspective from government as well. What would help, from a government perspective, to ensure that different businesses are able to thrive in making sure that our nightlife is vibrant?

**Mr Caffery:** With regard to the special entertainment precincts, you are right: it is only managed by government at the moment. What I am asking for is that there be a streamlined process for a developer or property owner to be able to ask for a special entertainment precinct to be demarcated across their precinct. There are many channels in which that could happen. I am not an expert in the planning area, but I assure you, Ms Lee, if you asked the Better Regulation Taskforce to look into that, they would develop a good answer for you.

**MS LEE:** Thank you.

**Ms Sekules:** I support that. My experience has always as one little body and one little producer. The promotion of Canberra cultural activity and Canberra creatives being of a national standard is essential. I cannot tell you how essential that education piece is. Over four years, I have had audiences who cannot believe that the show was local. They thought it was all a touring show, which speaks to Canberra cultural cringe. I also support what Dave said. That is a real issue. There is a myth within the city, and that is a real problem.

**MS LEE:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Sekules, thank you very much. You have done a lot of thinking over a few years about how to improve the relationship between the bigger theatres and smaller theatres, and the sentiments you expressed have been echoed, a bit from the Tuggeranong Arts Centre and other smaller organisations.

**Ms Sekules:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** What is the ideal relationship or the most effective relationship perhaps—with the give and take? Obviously, it does not feel like there is a lot of give. “Extractive” was the word I think you used. That is a really evocative word. How does it work better in a way that government can help?

**Ms Sekules:** Thank you, Chair. This is my favourite topic of all time.

**THE CHAIR:** You are welcome.

**Ms Sekules:** Again, I will point to precedent. In America, you will have a great, big, amazing Broadway show, but very few of them actually start there. There is a cute

name, which kind of addresses exactly what we do not have here and why that system and that ecosystem works so well. Shows often start off-Broadway, and that is very similar to the independent space or smaller venues. You could say that a show at Tuggeranong Arts Centre could be called off-Broadway, and at the Mill it is off off-Broadway. It sounds as if it is to do with location, and sometimes it is but, in America, they are actually all in a Broadway area anyway or close by.

**THE CHAIR:** The scale and cost and—

**Ms Sekules:** Exactly. A show that does very well off off-Broadway will—

**THE CHAIR:** *Hamilton.*

**Ms Sekules:** Yes, great; fantastic. “Very well” means that all those costs are well and truly recouped and money is made and there is great positive feedback. So a producer who owns or works only at the next level up in the ecosystem off-Broadway, picks up that show. The show goes very well, everyone makes their money and there are usually—this is important—royalties. So the show is not “extractively” pinched and redone; royalties trickle down to the off off-Broadway venue—so everybody is happy. Then, if the off off-Broadway run does incredibly well, a producer for Broadway and a venue owner will pick it up, and this is the transfer system. So, in America, it has that cute title and they do exactly the same in the UK. Other markets around the world are mostly a part of the touring market from those two big hubs. In Europe, it is incredibly different, because so many venues are producing venues and so they are often not available or free to take on someone else’s work.

But, in Australia—and it is the case that what I talk about here in the ACT has happened in Australia for a very, very long time—we do not have a transfer system. We do not have a healthy ecosystem where a great product outgrows one venue and is then picked up—and, do not forget: the royalties then go down. I think Canberra is absolutely ripe to work on our own transfer and ecosystem. That is what I believe.

**THE CHAIR:** I have certainly heard about the transfer of royalties within English soccer. A good player will be taken from a small club and a small club will get transfer fees. But that kind of trickle-down is regulated within contracts. The English Premier League, let alone the government, do not say, “You have to pay XYZ.”

**Ms Sekules:** Sure. Let me tell you a time when government has gotten involved in this space. The then Australia Council—it is now called Creative Australia—had a special fund, the majors and minors fund. The “majors” are now called “framework companies” under the NPAPF, the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework. They used to be called the majors. There used to only ever be 28 federally ongoing funded companies. They could only get a little bit more if they partnered with a “minor” company. I think that small, short-term incentive ideas and programs like this are absolute gamechangers, because they kick-start conversations and networks which can last for forever—absolutely forever.

I will talk about when this does not go well. A show that I co-produced with Dave, called *Helios*.

**Mr Caffery:** Great show.

**Ms Sekules:** It was an amazing show. We produced that at the Mill. There were a fantastic couple of shows. It is actually on this month The Canberra Theatre Centre are playing the show again. It is fine for there to be a competitive marketplace and for shows to return. That is great. In relation to this, one of the main things that I think should be happening is nothing other than a simple awareness that the show has already been produced at complete and full risk of these two players here. This is exactly what I think should happen: just look at who operated and who is the stage manager for that show and then the Canberra Theatre Centre look at their staff list and look who their casuals are, and get the operator and stage manager, who knows the artist from when they were here, to operate and stage manage again. We are talking about royalties and money—that is one thing—but there are also people, human beings—

**THE CHAIR:** Yes; growing experience and ability.

**Ms Sekules:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Because the opportunity to do a show at a bigger theatre would challenge you, but you had already increased the skillset, right?

**Ms Sekules:** Yes. I do think that the return of *Helios* should be in a bigger venue, but not in the Courtyard studio. But let's put that to one side.

**THE CHAIR:** Sure.

**Ms Sekules:** What would happen, though, is the artists see the stage and go, “Hey, hey.” They have already developed the relationship; that that operator already knows all the cues. Then, when that person goes, “I went to Canberra and had the same operator.” It is positive vibes and positive discussion about what it is like to do any creative activity in the ACT. So it is not just about money and royalties; it is also about human beings and our people.

**THE CHAIR:** Performance and emotional capital as well.

**Ms Sekules:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Mr Caffery, do you have anything to add to that?

**Mr Caffery:** I am not the theatre expert.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. A final couple of comments from either of you?

**Mr Caffery:** Our sector is on its knees. I do not think you will get from anyone under about 50 years old—I cannot speak for anyone over that—that they have ever seen such a bad position for a night-time economy. It has been exasperated by some activities by the ACT government, but it is not the ACT government's fault. However, this is a time when we need empathy, this is a time when we need understanding and it is also a time when we need action. We have been talking about this for 17 years. I am a fan of the light rail; however, the sequencing of it has been appalling for the state of our

businesses. The only silver lining on this cloud is that there are going to be so many businesses go out that later on it will be easier. It is the only silver lining I can see. That is where we are at.

You will get some more impassioned people today. Please be empathetic with them. Please understand that the next three people that you are about to talk to have worked extremely hard to try and get our artists on show, on stage and to push through all these regulative barriers and risk their own money—and I can assure you none of them are wealthy—because we are passionate about the “cultural development” of our city. That is a phrase that was in the terms of reference. I was really proud to see that in there, I think it is a really good phrase to have. Cultural development is a difficult journey, and it takes understanding and some action—not just some headlines.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Carrick has one quick question.

**MS CARRICK:** When I was growing up, there were lots of kids that were in bands and playing and everyone was out on the street. We did not have devices.

**Mr Caffery:** How good was that? Bring it back.

**MS CARRICK:** It was good. You see the old videos of the punk rock bands and the local kids. Do we still have that level of young people coming through that are in bands and playing locally—that culture that we used to have?

**Mr Caffery:** It is a great question, Ms Carrick. I am very proud that we were part of the Wonderful Battle of the Bands, which happened at Dissent Bar—a popular place in this building, I understand. It had showcases of wonderful groups of young musicians also playing in same bands with the older musicians and it had that electric feeling that you are referring to that Woden Community Centre famously had—and they did Battle of the Bands for years. I believe you have a submission from them. It is not dead, but it needs revival.

**MS CARRICK:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I thank you for your attendance today. That was excellent.

**Ms Sekules:** Thank you.

**Short suspension**

**CONWAY, MR SAMUEL**, Director, Gang Gang Cafe  
**JOHNSTON, MR BENJAMIN**, Managing Director, The Meem Collective  
**McQUINN, MR DAVID ROSS**, Director, Such and Such Restaurant

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome, everyone. Please note that, as witnesses, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Would anyone like to make a brief opening statement? Otherwise, we will go straight to questions.

**Mr Johnston:** Yes; I would.

**THE CHAIR:** The briefer the better, but by all means.

**Mr Johnston:** Sure. The Meem Collective operates the Old Canberra Inn and Dickson Taphouse in the ACT. We also have a pub in New South Wales, which is relevant because different situations and regulations apply between the two, so I am quite well qualified to talk about some of those. In brief, the heart of the night-time economy is business. That is how it generates whatever the business might be, whether it is a food business, an entertainment business, a pub or a nightclub. It is something that operates in the night-time economy space. It is a business at its heart. In the ACT, two thirds of people are employed by business. With everything to look at, how are we going to have a sustainable night-time economy and how are we going to grow the night-time economy? We need to look at how are we going to grow business, how are we going to support business and how are we going to make business sustainable.

I will quickly touch on something that I think says how the government can sometimes be disconnected from that: portable long service leave that has been introduced. Essentially, this policy does not really appear to have any tangible benefit. There is no data to suggest that anybody in the hospitality industry is going to be attracted to it if long service leave can be applicable to casual workers as well. Obviously, full-time employees already get that. I will not dwell on that too much, but this policy was introduced without any relevant data to support it. Before the government implements any policy, it needs to look at, firstly, do we need it? What is it trying to achieve? Secondly, what impacts will putting it in have on businesses? And we need to look at the cost and the benefit, and be really clear about that.

Another thing that leads to is this: we need a night-time economy commissioner, coordinator, manager—someone who can interface with the government in all areas to grow the night-time economy and make sure that physical spaces are also going to be suitable. There are a lot of things. It is not just a business. There is also the environment that they operate in. They could be into that. They could work with the CRA. The CRA has a bit of a checkered history. There is what they have done in Braddon, for example. It is seriously underwhelming. We should have done better with this globally recognised precinct, or what we purport to be a globally recognised precinct. We just got a bit of grey bitumen and a few planter boxes. Those orange bollards are still there. Really? We can do better than that. A night-time economy commissioner can help with that by saying, “Let’s talk to everyone and have a strategy.” On that matter, let’s have a strategy. We do not have a strategy at the moment. We need to start with that. A night-time commissioner, or whatever you want to call that position, can then drive that

policy. Potentially, they can help shape that policy. What is the outcome we want? Let's be clear about that. Let's start with that. What's our strategy? How are we going to implement it? Get someone to work across government and help make it happen.

Other people will probably touch on the sound laws. Some things are hopefully meant to be progressing at the moment, which include order of occupancy changes. Who was there first? If the pub was there first and you move next to the pub, consideration has to be made about that. Another thing is the number of complainants. These are policies that cost no money. The government should be acting on these right now. The number of complainants needs to be increased from one, as it is currently, to what it is in New South Wales, which is five. That was done through the vibrancy reforms in New South Wales. We do not have to be groundbreaking; we just need to adopt sensible policies that other jurisdictions have made and make them happen right now. Again, that is a zero-cost policy. It is common sense and it regards the specifics of the sound regulations. Sam will probably talk about it more, with Gang Gang. We do not have to change all of the sound settings to make it fairer for business and the residents as well. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much. We will go to questions. Mr Emerson, you have the call.

**MR EMERSON:** Thank you, Chair. I should first declare that Mr Johnston and I both ran as Independent candidates in the 2024 elections, so I have a conflict of interest. But I think most people know most of the witnesses.

**THE CHAIR:** I do not.

**MR EMERSON:** He is well-known in Kurrajong. My first question is for all of you. Thanks for appearing and thanks for your submissions. We really appreciate it. There is plenty going on, so thanks for taking the time to be here. This is for each of you: why is establishing a dedicated role, office, person, coordinator, manager or commissioner within government, as a kind of one-stop shop for night-time economy related issues, important? What is lacking?

**Mr Johnston:** I sort of touched on that, so maybe I will give these guys a go.

**Mr Conway:** Currently, you have to deal with disconnected sections of government. It is hard to know who you need to reach out to or what you even need to do. It could be so much more streamlined. Also, having someone with industry experience would help significantly.

**Mr McQuinn:** It is exactly that: the removal of bureaucracy and red tape to streamline it, because that takes up an inordinate amount of time in our businesses. For example, to erect the umbrellas that are at the front of Such and Such, I had to coordinate between four different departments, both territory and federal departments, and get them all to talk to each other and agree with each other. I had the NCA telling me that I needed approval from the City Renewal Authority, which told me I needed approval from Access Canberra, which told me I needed approval from TCCS, which then told me I needed approval from the NCA. It became a bit of a rigmarole. After months and months, when I finally got the NCA to look at the space, they said, "I don't know why

we thought that this was an issue. Done”. It would be good to remove that bureaucracy and get some results by having some KPIs that someone can work towards.

If we look at hospitality businesses as one example of the night-time economy, we estimate an 11 per cent closure rate over the next year. That should be considered a failure and someone within government should take responsibility for that. If we look at our spending going down in real dollars in the night-time economy—it is growing less than inflation—we should consider that a failure. There needs to be accountability and the removal of bureaucracy. I see the commissioner playing that role.

**MR EMERSON:** As it stands, do you feel that you have someone within government—not necessarily at the political level but within the public service—that you can go to, will advocate for you and is on your side, as opposed to just regulating you?

**Mr McQuinn:** From our personal experience, we have developed and built those relationships. Now I feel comfortable going to certain members that I have built a relationship with to talk about those sorts of things, including some people in this room, and I feel very appreciative of that, but that has taken eight years of running a high-end restaurant. It was only when we moved in next to the Legislative Assembly that it started to really accelerate.

**THE CHAIR:** That is so weird. How would that happen!

**Mr McQuinn:** Serving the ministers kind of helps. From our perspective, for a long time I did not feel supported and did not feel that we could come to government. I am curious to hear—

**Mr Conway:** I would agree with Ross. It is the same for us. We have been operating for five years and it has taken quite a bit of that time to develop relationships with people in different organisations and sections of government, and that is only through trial and error. We are slowly getting there, but there are different people for different sections of business.

**Mr Johnston:** Some of the people at Access Canberra are very helpful and professional, but who you are going to get is a bit ad hoc. Further, we have a night-time economy minister, but there is no-one there to really help. It is still about regulation. It is not that the person within government gets back to the commissioner or commissioner role. It should be about: “How are we helping people? How are we growing it?” It is about proactively trying to do it and maybe reaching out more and asking, “What do you need?” There has been the BRT stuff, the Better Regulation Taskforce stuff, which came out of that, but it sort of went around in circles for years. It really shows that we need somebody there.

**MR EMERSON:** It got stuck in that loop that Mr McQuinn was talking about.

**Mr McQuinn:** Definitely.

**Mr Johnston:** Exactly. So let’s get someone in there. Maybe a policy could come in as well and could be filtered through the night-time commissions: “Look at this. What do you see?” It could have been about light rail—“What do you think about that?” “Maybe

we need to support businesses in the city.” Then we could get on the front foot about that and come up with packages to support it.

**MR EMERSON:** There are a few businesses outside of the CBD—Mr McQuinn, you have one inside the CBD as well—outside of the City Renewal Authority’s remit. One of the things the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner in New South Wales is responsible for delivering is the New South Wales Uptown Program, which is focused on cultivating local business, communities and different precincts through grants and partnerships, in collaboration, and it seems to have been quite successful. Is that something that you would support for the more suburban venues?

**Mr Conway:** One hundred per cent—yes. You can see across the country and in different places around the world that, post COVID, there has been a big shift towards suburban shopping districts and venues outside of city centres. There was our event series, which was recently highlighted in an ABC article—a queer-trans celebration and fundraisers for different community initiatives. I am not sure if you guys are aware of where Gang Gang is. It is next to an oval. There are no other shops. There is no pass-through traffic or anything. It is a really important aspect as to why those events were so successful. You would rock up at 4 pm and there were 200 people in the most crazy costumes—super-revealing and crazy costumes—and they were all sitting outside having an amazing time. You did not have to walk past the Mooseheads line and did not have to worry about people coming past and yelling things out. Each event often raises over \$10,000, and they have had five of them now. That is a really good example of why these venues are so important outside of the city centre.

**Mr Johnston:** On that point as well, there are established businesses already outside of the city centre, such as Gang Gang and the Old Canberra Inn. It is hard enough to establish businesses now, so the ones that are already in existence really need the support. It is okay to say that we want to have an entertainment precinct and we want to develop that, bolster that, encourage that and nurture that, but we also need to look after what we already have, including the people who are already employing people, employing musicians and providing cultural spaces, which are really important. Those cultural spaces need to be throughout Canberra. We need to look at where pockets of activity are already happening and actually do something to support them.

**Mr Conway:** I was going to make a bit of an opening statement, but I will just lump it into my answer. I wanted to highlight that I do not think we would do the business now if we were offered an opportunity. Conditions have changed so much, even in five years. Margins are extremely tight for a business with the same angle that we have. We were wanting to increase interstate touring activity and increase international touring activity to the city. It was projected that we would operate at, I think, a 1.5 per cent profit margin, but last year we invested 2.5 per cent of our total business revenue into musicians, so we are putting double our net profit into artists. And there are cost increases. Our insurance went up from \$12,000 to over \$22,000, just last year, based on our live music activities. If that keeps going, it very quickly becomes an unviable business, which is already highly risky. Last week, we had to cancel an international show due to low ticket sales, which cost us \$2,500, which is a lot for a small business.

You have to be highly passionate about music to want to take these risks. I cannot see that many people want to enter this sector of the business community, which highlights

what Ben was saying about protecting the people who are already doing it. If you look at the arts policies and everything, that is what we are saying we are working towards. So protect what is already doing it.

**Mr McQuinn:** That is a big concern that I talk about with a lot of people in our industry. We are going to see homogenisation of the night-time economy and big groups will come in. We will see Merivale coming in. Three steak houses opened in the city over the past month. I think that is testament to how much Canberra has grown over the past 10 to 15 years, which is great, but, if it comes at the expense of small, independent and nimble operators, we are going to lose something, because those are the most exciting places to go. Sorry, I will be rude, but I do not really want to go to a Meat & Wine Co, 7 Cutz or a big corporate funded venue; I want to go to small independent operators that do something exciting and get me out of the door to spend money. It is so hard to justify going out and spending money at the moment. It is tough, so I need a real reason. That is a big risk that Sam just touched on: we are going to see big groups, and it will not be particularly nice for anyone.

**Mr Conway:** That is the way, isn't it—the death of independent venues. I think that has been one of the main reasons we have been punching above our weight as a city. We have Such and Such, Pilot, and Bar Rochford, the best bar in Australia in 2018, and I think we all know the troubles they are having at the moment. You cannot just replace these venues. There is the combination of so much. There are highly trained and experienced operators, and, if you lose those, there is absolutely no guarantee you are going to have anything of the same quality opening up again.

**MR EMERSON:** Thank you.

**MS LEE:** I thank you all for coming in and providing your evidence. Mr Johnston, you spoke earlier about portable long service leave and how it is difficult to see the justification, especially in light of the cost impost. One of the other areas that you have identified as a bit of a challenge is liquor licence fees, especially when you compare them to New South Wales. As you mentioned, you are in a good position to talk about both. Can you provide a bit more detail for the committee in relation to that? You were comparing the liquor licensing fees and the staggering difference—\$1,400 per year in New South Wales compared to \$16,000 in ACT. Can you give us a bit more of an outline? Are we comparing apples to apples?

**Mr Johnston:** To be honest, it is probably not 100 per cent apples to apples. The licence that we have at the Steampacket is until 12 pm, whereas we have a 2 am licence at the Old Canberra Inn. Having said that, that is a food-driven business. I do not know how many times we have traded past midnight, to be honest. It does not really happen. I am not 100 per cent sure, but it is potentially another couple of grand to get to that extension in New South Wales. It is going to be a quarter of the cost for a comparable licence. If we reduced hours back the other way, I think it is \$8,000. We pay an extra \$8,000 a year for the 10 pm to 2 am extension. I do not know if it is worth it, to be honest, but, if you compare apples to apples, it then becomes \$8,000 versus the \$1,400 minimum for the New South Wales licence.

**MS LEE:** So it is still a huge difference.

**Mr Johnston:** Yes—a huge difference.

**MS LEE:** Are there any other areas? You talked about vibrancy reforms in New South Wales. What are some reforms that you think could be applied in the ACT to support—

**Mr Johnston:** It would start with the no-cost policies, which are order of occupancy and the number of complainants. I understand that the current government were looking at making progress on those in this parliamentary term, but I do not know where that has got to. In New South Wales, they did proper research on identifying what the issues were and having a strategy, and then they came up with the night-time economy commission. A whole commission might be a bit overblown for the ACT. We would need to have something that fits what we need here, but in New South Wales they were pretty systematic about working through what the issues were, and these policies came as a result of that research and analysis, which is what we need to do.

**MS LEE:** Yes—the process.

**Mr Johnston:** Regarding portable long service leave, we have been at the Old Canberra Inn for 12 years, and I would say this policy was not a great policy before COVID, but, since COVID, we cannot even get full-time staff; we just have part-time students. They are all students. They work for the business while they are at university and then off they go.

**MS LEE:** They move on.

**Mr Johnston:** I have my data. It seems that it is hard for people to get the data, but I can say that, from my experience, that is very much the reality.

**MS LEE:** Thank you. Mr McQuinn, you mentioned that, in terms of the unused space in the CBD, landlords will keep it empty if they can afford to keep it empty. So there is no incentive. What do you think the government could be doing to ensure that we can minimise that unused space? No-one wants to see that and, of course, no business wants to see that either.

**Mr McQuinn:** Off the top of my head, something like a tax if there are no efforts to get people in. To me, that is probably the easiest way and can solve the problem of raising some revenue as well. We are just seeing stubborn landlords that are happy to sit on an empty tenancy rather than lower the valuation. I have been told as much by multiple people. To me, that links to the night-time economy, because it makes it harder to go from place to place and it means that people are sort of stuck in one zone. It is difficult to come from here, in this little Constitution Place precinct or the theatre, and then walk to Braddon, because people do not actually feel fantastic about walking to Braddon. You walk past the building with graffiti and broken windows, and then there is the wayfinding. This is a slightly tangentially related point, but the wayfinding is not amazing. It is not a particularly pleasant experience. People come and do their one thing and then they go home. There is not a lot of wandering around. I was in Melbourne not that long ago. Public transport is better, and there is how far we travelled over the course of one evening and how many different venues we visited.

**MS LEE:** Got your steps up, then!

**Mr McQuinn:** Yes. We were going all over the shop. I was thinking about whenever I have been out or have taken people out here. We go to the Melbourne Building and then we go home. That is it. That is partially because of those empty tenancies and partially because of wayfinding.

**MS LEE:** I was here on Saturday evening. No comments from you, Taimus, but I went to see the Whitlams! I noticed that Such and Such was not open. You would think that, for that location, you would be able to harness a bit more in terms of customers when you have big bands or big shows on in the Canberra Theatre. What is the reasoning for that? Is it unviable to open?

**Mr McQuinn:** After the show?

**MS LEE:** Before and after.

**Mr McQuinn:** On Saturday, we were open beforehand. I was there and we were open. Regarding afterwards, that has been something we have played around with. We definitely tried, but there is an attitude of Canberrans. A lot of them do not go out afterwards. It is kind of funny: when we first opened Such, we said we would be open after every theatre show—and there are quite a lot of theatre shows. You see the flood of people coming out at 9 pm and they just walk straight past and keep going. That is something that we have got used to. We have learnt. We try to stay open until 10 minutes past the finishing time, do everything else and then completely pack up. But, honestly, people seem to go to bed earlier and seem to be less excited. I know this is anecdotal, but going out in Melbourne—and admittedly we were on holiday, but we were visiting some of our friends—no question, we will go for a drink after we go to a show. Absolutely—that is what we would do. But here it very much feels like you do your thing and then you leave.

**MS LEE:** Thank you.

**MR BRADDOCK:** I would like to test the importance of late-night public transport, not just in terms of patronage but also for your staff. Do you have any information on that?

**Mr McQuinn:** I do not think they really view it as a viable option in any way, shape or form. We have one chef who does not drive and she has to run and grab the light rail because it is the last light rail. We are obviously not a very late-night business, but sometimes she will miss it and she has to catch an Uber or someone gives her a lift. They do not really view it as particularly viable. I do not know anyone that really catches public transport to and from work. It is either cycling or driving.

**Mr Conway:** We have over 55 staff, and I do not think any of them use public transport.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Thank you.

**MS CARRICK:** I am curious about anchor tenants. You would think that, for the precincts, the Canberra Theatre would be an anchor but it is not. For, say, Garema Place, could a new night-time economy manager do something to provide some sort of anchor

in there that brings people in centrally, like street theatres or bands right on Garema Place that brings activity in and attracts people? The Old Canberran Inn is like a destination in its own right; it is not in a precinct. Would some sort of anchor like that be good for the whole precinct?

**Mr McQuinn:** Absolutely. Though I think we need to be okay with maybe making some mistakes along the way. If we are going to try these events, let's actually swing for the fences and do something that is interesting, engaging and fun. There might be one that is a little bit too rowdy potentially, but we will survive and then we learn some lessons and refine for the future. What we cannot do is be doing these ones around the edges where we kind of go, "Let's make it safe and family friendly for absolutely everyone," and then wonder why no-one comes. That is probably my only feedback for that. But, yes, I think we absolutely can, yes.

**Mr Conway:** Building a culture that supports events takes time. We have always had that attitude with our business. We are still working on building that reputation where people will come and see someone when they do not necessarily know who it is. It takes consistency and dedication to build that and develop new audiences to come and support the activities. But I would also say that, even with the entertainment precinct, if you were to do a show in Garema Place, there is absolutely no way you would be able to keep it under 75 dB if it is out in the open.

**MS CARRICK:** No; I mean more of an anchor thing that is probably inside a building. It is very hard to curate what happens, but—

**Mr Conway:** Yes.

**MS CARRICK:** For example, if the Courtyard theatre was in Garema Place, it would be more of an attractor to create a destination there.

**Mr McQuinn:** But, if we are talking about people taking over spaces, absolutely; people will do those things. But the barrier to entry—and how difficult it is, as Sam touched upon—needs to be lowered. People in this city want to do creative, fun and interesting things. But, when you look at the economics of opening a business, as Sam said, there are easier ways to light my money on fire.

**Mr Conway:** Our festival is probably a good example. We are doing another festival this year, and we have a bit of public funding for it. We are looking at spending approximately over \$150,000 for a 1,000 capacity festival at Downer shops—and half of that is going to be our own money. We will be very lucky to break even. We are just doing that for fun and because we want to do that kind of thing for our community and our city, and we love it. You have to be pretty passionate to take those kinds of financial risks.

**Mr Johnston:** To touch on that as well, I was looking at taking over the Transit Bar in the city—and I even talked to Sam about it as well. That has been empty for a couple of years now. I really want to do that, because I love music and I get to make more noise. It is subterranean. It has a lot of green lights, but then there is just this big red light that says that, with the city at the moment, you do not want to open a business there. I have been waiting for an opportunity like that. The timing came up—and

obviously they are a bit related—but it was like, “Don’t do it; there is all of the disruption in there and everything.”

Back to your point, I guess, yes, there are plenty of buildings, but I guess that is just empty tenancies that can maybe be activated. That is something that the night-time coordinator could look at. If you are going to do public space activations, that is great. I think there should be more of that. I think it is a bit like “just do stuff”. What does an entertainment precinct look like? Let’s get a big program of things on there, but you have to support it with free public transport; you have to make it safe; and you have to improve the lighting. There are all of these things that go to creating a space that makes it work. Again, that goes back to the night-time economy coordinator. Let’s work across all of those different—

**MS CARRICK:** Yes; just plan it as much as you can. I noticed in your submission—and I dare bring it up—that you said that Phillip Oval in Woden could be a site on the proposed light rail corridor. Regardless, it is right on the public transport corridor, the north-south.

**Mr Johnston:** Public transport of some description; exactly right.

**MS CARRICK:** It is very central, and that would help support surrounding businesses and activate events and days and night there. It is a really good idea.

**Mr Johnston:** I think it is a very good idea.

**MS CARRICK:** It could be used. Can you tell me more about your thoughts on that?

**Mr Johnston:** One of the things is that you have to have these multipliers with this major infrastructure, and the reality is that it just does not add up. With Bruce, you go there and there are some new apartment buildings adjacent to it and the result, if anything, is that maybe the Old Canberra Inn gets a little bit of a kick on sometimes with the Raiders and the Brumbies. But, really, it does not have a net benefit. It is, as we talked about before, people going to a thing and then going home. That is not what we want. In Canberra, we need to connect everything.

At least there is going to be some more theatre stuff happening in the city, and, hopefully, eventually, once everything subsides in the city, that will work a little bit more. But, yes, why not? To me, that Phillip location makes a lot of sense. I think there is a lot more upside to go in that Woden precinct, and I think it could really help a lot of Woden businesses by moving it there.

**MS CARRICK:** There is a huge level of densification there at the moment. Once we have got the five towers on the pool and seven towers on the pitch and putt—and 17 towers up to 55 storeys is proposed around Scentre Group—that will bring us up over 10,000 apartments and 60 towers. We were talking before about the benefits of cool, independent businesses. You will find in Woden it is the big clubs—Hellenic Club, Southern Cross Club and the Bradley Street, Eats Street is Scentre Group. Do you think having an anchor like Phillip Oval that is pumping could help bring some street life outside of those three big things and activate more interest in independent—

**Mr Johnston:** Absolutely. When you know that you have people coming in, you are going to get some business from that. It creates a demand that needs to be met. So, yes, absolutely. It is like other infrastructure like light rail. If you build the infrastructure, then you get the housing developments. It is the same thing. If you put this infrastructure in the right place, you will build businesses around it. It is up to people to find the right spots and whatever, but I think there is a lot of upside in Woden. It seems to be a bit underdone at the moment. I think it would just help that growth.

**MR EMERSON:** Mr Johnston, you mentioned that sometimes people kick on after the footy and come to the Old Canberra Inn, but often people just go to the event and go home. This is a question for everyone: what do you see is the opportunity to activate more of these major events and, when we have major events going on, to then get people from those events into venues across the city? Is that a gap? Is that an opportunity to increase footfall?

**Mr Johnston:** Yes; massively. Enlighten and Floriade are great, but the ACT government does not sell the tourism experience for Canberra very well. It is all heavily skewed towards these major events. When those events are on, what the government should be doing more is packaging that up with the experience of Canberra and highlighting and promoting small businesses. When people go somewhere and they say, “I went to Canberra on the weekend. Yeah, Floriade was all right, but I went to this restaurant and, man, it was awesome and the waiter was really cool,” that is actually what they talk to their friends about. I just do not think the ACT government do that very well in general—just with its existing events. They are making efforts to provide a bit more spin-offs from Floriade around town and whatever. That is fine, but it is actually how to get more connection happening. When we have already got millions of people coming in, how do we then sort of share the love? Some of the links on the Visit Canberra website and whatever are pretty woeful. They are out of date. They do not even have the current information. Come on; we can do better.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a couple of questions about your sense—or various senses—of what the model for a night-time economy—insert description word—here. We have heard some competing visions or sort of philosophical approaches. You mentioned the New South Wales one. That has a staff of 25, the commissioner and a budget of 60 million people. I am not sure whether that would happen in Canberra. There is a tension between its own regulatory power or is it going to be someone who manages pathways and enables people or businesses to navigate what needs to be done, as opposed to being passed through various agencies? Is it a city focus, which we have heard already, or should it be looking at all of Canberra? Should it be focused on activation or regulatory management?

**Mr McQuinn:** I will go through them a little bit. I would rather see it focused on all of Canberra. I think all of Canberra is important, and I think we have some fantastic night-time areas that are not just in the city. Obviously, the city is going to probably take up a lot of attention, because it is the most activated and dense and kind of where people are spending their late night. I would probably rather see it be able to have its own regulatory powers or at least be able to make exceptions or kind of provide exemptions to the ones that are in place. For example, we met with the Chief Minister 18 months ago and there was a change to liquor licensing based on non-high-risk venues and, because we are a restaurant and not a nightclub, it made it a little bit easier to do it. But

I was like, “But why is this only happening when you are campaigning for votes? Why is this not happening throughout the whole process?” I do not want to have to go back once every three to four years and then continue to have that argument. That is where the night-time commissioner can come in and go, “We have this regulatory framework, but let’s make exceptions where it makes sense. Let’s actually respond to data actively, not once every three to four years.” That is probably where I see it.

**Mr Conway:** I agree. Something that just jumped into my mind as well is that, even the light rail and the businesses being affected by the light rail, if you had someone that was actually across the whole scope of what is going on and, I guess, having the best interest of the businesses, I feel like that whole situation could have been dealt with a lot better. I agree with Ross. I think it is just making it easier for businesses to understand what and how they get through all of these different things. For us, the first time round of the festival was just a nightmare. I think it was like six months or something for us to get the public land use permit—something crazy. We now have a coordinator at Events ACT who is amazing, and they have been really helpful with that—which is just a festival. That is just a good example of one section where, if someone were able to just streamline all those processes, it would just make life a lot easier.

**Mr Johnston:** It is pretty much all of the things that you say it should do. As to the exact powers it can have, can it actually enact policy? I do not know exactly what the terms are for that. But you cannot just make recommendations and then they do not get acted on, because that would just be really frustrating. So there needs to be some compulsion on the government, in whichever way that looks, for it to happen. I think that it should be across the ACT. It was a long road to get to an entertainment precinct and now there is one, but it is not going well. So, in a way, I think there needs to be a bit of a city focus initially, because you need to shore that up. One of my points was: do not go replicating this entertainment precinct around willy nilly when the one that was created is actually going terribly. It is really going badly, with businesses shutting left, right and centre. I know there is the timing of the light rail, but that is the reality. Let’s look at that as an example and get a version that works. There are a whole lot of inputs into creating that.

Also, I do not accept that people actually want to stay home. Yes, COVID happened and there was a lot of couch drinking or whatever. But I think you need to offer incentives. We cannot just give up on that. I think we need to offer things that will get people out, and I think the government can help that. It is, like, the activation. I think the activation thing is important, but, again, it goes back to late-night public transports, safe spaces and lighting. It is all of the things together. Let’s actually make a beautiful space as well. I cannot emphasise enough how important it is for Canberra to be a beautiful place. It actually helps with the tourism. In Canberra, you should have physical beauty everywhere. We have this natural setting. Let’s put the effort into our built spaces. That is why I was so disappointed with Braddon. It is like, “Seriously; this is what you have got?” I find it upsetting. We can do better than that and we should do better. All of those things act together to attract people into a space. I am not talking just Canberrans but also interstate tourism. Let’s put a lot of effort into the physical spaces as well.

**Mr Conway:** I agree with getting the entertainment district right and everything, but

I do not necessarily think that the policy was a bad policy. I think it would be incredible for us if they were to set up satellite zones of those entertainment districts to allow businesses that are already working towards these goals—

**Mr Johnston:** I think those exemptions or carve-outs could happen before it established them as an entertainment precinct.

**Mr Conway:** Yes; just give us the decibel limits and—

**Mr Johnston:** Yes, just say, “You now have different sound regulations.” That could be applied pretty quickly, you would think, without it being a whole entertainment precinct. Anyway, I do not know what the path of least resistance is there. We go back to the old sound of rustling leaves, which is pretty much the equivalent decibel or sound levels at the Old Canberra Inn—45 dB. The sound of people talking is louder than that. In Mowatt Street, it is about 60 to 65 dB. It is actually ridiculous. Why is it that we have this limit that actually does not make any sense, and you cannot do anything? It is absolutely putting a dampener on our sort of cultural activity. We would love to have a lot more bands playing there. We just have solo performers that sing quite late pretty much, but we would love to do bigger stuff. We can actually activate that car park there, but it is really difficult to do it when we need to max out at 45 dB.

**Mr Conway:** It is not possible.

**Mr Johnston:** We love to do fun stuff, and people love to enjoy it. It is just not fair that these people are literally being deprived of their good times because of one person. If that person complains, then it is all over.

**Mr Conway:** Our public consultation is first and foremost. We put so much effort into the public consultation with the apartments. We give them all free tickets to the festival. It is really operating on this goodwill and trust and hope that they are going to support the activities, and all it takes is for one person to decide that they do not want it—and there are no protections currently.

**THE CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, thank you very much for your attendance today. We appreciate it.

**Short suspension**

**AHMAD, MS SIA**, Director, MusicACT

**THE CHAIR:** We welcome Sia Ahmad, from MusicACT. Please note that, as a witness, you are protected by parliamentary privilege and bound by its obligations. You must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. Do you want to make a brief opening statement?

**Ms Ahmad:** No, I am okay; thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** I will go to Ms Lee.

**MS LEE:** Thank you for appearing today. In your submission, you mentioned in the survey that you undertook that, when asked what would most improve conditions for artists and music workers, the dominant response was incentives for venues to book live music. What are some of the incentives that you would like to see in place to ensure that that comes to fruition?

**Ms Ahmad:** Where do we start with incentives? I listened to the guys who were here before. If I think about my lens, the work we do at MusicACT, we are the advocates for the music ecosystem. There are the musicians, and we centre our work around what they need, and therein we have the ecosystem that supports them. You have the venues; you have the industry workers. That could be managers, PR reps and venue bookers, not just venue operators.

When you think about incentives, if you think about the artist first, it comes to a matter of funding, but where does that funding go? Does it go to the artist itself? Yes. Can we have more of that? Absolutely. But we also need to see incentives going to venues, to be able to put on events. We do have an expense crisis. There is the cost of living for the normal person, the everyday person at home. There is a cost-of-expense crisis for venue operators, for businesses, in terms of bringing in product and being able to sell that on. That is the crunch.

In our work, we preface original, contemporary music—music that is made by the artist that is performing, or made to be performed by the band that they are performing with. We have this issue as well: when you are trying to bring people into your business, what is the service provision of the entertainment offering? A lot of that tends to end up going towards covers musicians, so the risk on original musicians making their work, making their art, and doing that for the public, is reduced. When we have less venues allowing space for live music to happen, more than ever, in this region, where is the incentive for those venues to be able to showcase local talent, to showcase our creative capital?

**MS LEE:** In addition to financial incentives, is there anything else that, from a government perspective, can be done to provide incentives to ensure that that is able to be done?

**Ms Ahmad:** You have probably heard this one a bit today. Insurance is the key one. There are conversations around what insurance underwriting for musicians and artists is. Obviously, there are certain levers that have been activated in terms of insurance discount that the Better Regulation Taskforce have enabled, but it can go deeper, and it

is about what that looks like.

I know that conversation is there. If government funding, taxpayer funding, is there to alleviate the rise in insurance costs, or how insurance companies are deeming these kinds of ventures to be too risky and therein requiring higher premiums, obviously, we do not want to see taxpayer money going to insurance companies. But what is the scheme that can be generated to support and underwrite these ventures in their capacity as a crucial part of our creative ecosystem, to nurture and grow the creative potential of this region?

**MS LEE:** We have also heard from specific venues about the high cost of liquor licensing.

**Ms Ahmad:** Yes.

**MS LEE:** I know there has been some attempt made to give you a concession, if you book live music. Is that working? Is that going far enough? What is your view?

**Ms Ahmad:** It is probably not covering everyone's needs. Again, you would have heard that. I think it works for smaller venues at the moment, smaller cap venues. With the larger cap venues, the crew who run Fiction are completely out, because they are 300-plus. It is probably not something that I would consider to be in our wheelhouse, to be fair. If anything, I want to see a music industry that is holding its own ground, without the need of support from an alcohol-based industry.

That said, it is a product that probably needs to be sold in a lot of venues, to support activity or support the business. It does go hand in hand. What levers can be actioned in terms of further discount is probably important, but I think there is a lot more to be done across the board.

Prior to this job, I spent six years at Ainslie and Gorman Arts Centres, which is a government-owned building run by a not-for-profit organisation. That is probably a really great example where, with funding from a different lever—probably a more creative lever, let us say—more could be done to inhabit those spaces with art in general but music in particular. My role there was as a music programmer. We had a boom period post COVID with recovery and resilience funding, but then we completely dipped, as soon as that all ran out, when the two rounds ran out.

That was a point in time when there were certain venues, and venues that did not live off a hospitality offering, first and foremost, could have been something. They are not really functioning in that way, either. We are then talking about music venues, in the sense of independent, private businesses who are employing sole traders—that is, musicians. But what about the government facilities that do not have to function in a hospitality-first way? What does that mean? The liquor licence question for them is probably irrelevant, if they were to run a bar-free environment. But we then have the businesses who have to run with an alcohol-based business model; they are just not benefiting.

**THE CHAIR:** We have already heard today various perspectives about how or why a night-time economy commissioner, manager or coordinator might work and operate.

Should it be focused on regulatory coordination or should it be more focused on activation of areas? Should it be looking at the city quite discretely, or is it more of a night-time economy for the city and the rest of Canberra—all of Canberra? You have done some work with your survey on people within the ecosystem. What detail can you extract from the work regarding how they would expect such a role to function, and what responsibilities have you picked up that it should have?

**Ms Ahmad:** With the majority of our constituents, as an organisation, it is the artist base, first and foremost.

**THE CHAIR:** We have had more operators so far.

**Ms Ahmad:** Yes. The submissions show that it is due to the operators thinking about this in a way that I would say the artist is not, but what the artist wants is support for these venues, first and foremost. When we think about a night-time—whoever it is going to be, whatever the role is going to be called, it is a movable feast. But the idea is that the portfolio should be finding ways of providing opportunity for platform artistry.

It sits in an activation space, but it cuts across so many things. It is a bit chicken and egg, truthfully speaking. There is the idea of where we are servicing, as well. What would the commissioner's focus be? Is it the CBD area? It is a historical hangover. We are very much a centralised city because of the design and the way it is laid out. I grew up in Belconnen and, when I was cutting my teeth, I was still going into the city. Belconnen has venues. Who is looking after those venues?

At the core of it, I think our base would like to see opportunities for performance, or support to see performance happen in the CBD, or in whatever the night-time precincts would be. There is obviously a piece that the artist is probably aware of—not 100 per cent—but what is that regulatory support for those venues who are doing the heavy lifting of presenting live performance?

**THE CHAIR:** In a way, it would be mission-agnostic, perhaps, but with a focus on whatever can be done to enable performers to perform.

**Ms Ahmad:** That is the hardest thing. If you think about New South Wales, it is boom-time in terms of their funding, so they can activate a lot of things. The Great Southern Nights campaign has happened. That is taking over not just in Sydney; it is happening in regional centres as well. That is capturing live performance opportunity. Granted, they can funnel that money out to the LGAs, and the promoters and the venues in all these places. We do not have that. I know we do not have that kind of money to come into whatever this portfolio could do. That is fine. Within reason, what are the levers?

That is why it is chicken and egg, because if the regulatory support is there to support and enable these private businesses, more than, say, the government-owned facilities, to take risk in their programming, in their booking, inherently, those opportunities for performance appear. To be fair, there is probably more employment. None of these venues, apart from maybe Gang Gang, have a music programmer or a booker. Everyone is a bit like David. He is running the business, he is running the bar, he is doing the sound, and he is the one booking all the gigs, because he cannot afford the staff.

He can do the bar stuff, but, realistically, he is doing the lot, and good on him for the mission, but it is detrimental, when you are one person juggling all these things. With a business like his, what support can he receive, or what is the funding he can receive as a venue, that might be out of a night-time economy activation pool, so that he can pay someone to book shows—even if it is a small program of events? He engaged us to run the Battle of the Bands event there recently, and that says a lot, because he did not have the capacity to do something that he got government funding for, in itself.

**MS CARRICK:** I am wondering about home-grown musicians and supporting them. CIT has a creative music program. Are there opportunities to support the musicians that come through there, through the creative industries, to do local events? One of these night-time economy managers, commissioners or whatever could help the CIT, which has the creative programs, to find venues, and encourage them to perform, play and stimulate the areas where they are.

**Ms Ahmad:** If I am really honest, that encouragement cannot just be for a night. The encouragement has to start in the CIT context. We cannot assume that every student in the music stream is a performing artist, let alone someone looking to perform outside that environment. It is the same with the School of Music, to be fair. For better or worse, the lifeblood of our original live music performance part of the ecosystem is outside the institutions.

Yes, we should be encouraging the CIT to foster their talent and encourage them to be able to perform; then what are those platforms? There is a great, high-standard, high-quality auditorium in Woden now. The operation, to be fair, is like a venue for hire, because it is a business proposition for the institution. How do the students access that, to perform there? How do external promoters or artists have a way to access that?

**MS CARRICK:** Is that at the CIT?

**Ms Ahmad:** Yes, the CIT in Woden. Again, if this is a government facility, is it run merely as a business proposition? If it is for internal use, that is fine; but, for external use, or for use that can be beneficial to the region, how do we action that? If CIT cannot encourage its students to put on concerts while they are still studying, in that kind of context, what is the point of the night-time economy portfolio getting in touch with them and saying, “We’ll give you money to do this”?

One of the strengths of Canberra and this region is that there are a lot of people who are willing to do it themselves and make things happen. Most of the people you have spoken to today, in a music context, have been in bands or put on events themselves, and they have built themselves up. I ran a record label from my bedroom in Belconnen for 15 years, put on shows through this mechanism, brought international artists and connected them with local artists. That is why I am in this role now, because the institutions have not been able to support that. Realistically, the department, ArtsACT, has not been there to support that.

There are so many people like me who are doing the hard graft of making things happen from their bedrooms and garages, and doing stuff in bookshops. Smith’s is a venue now, but Smith’s was the alternative bookshop. It has done a whole journey, from a literature

space to a music venue.

These things happen because people are making things happen. Will the night-time portfolio assist that? Will it be willing to develop relationships? It needs to develop relationships with all the venues, with all the possible entities who could activate or essentially do the work better. CIT is great, but there are so many other fundamentals, in terms of the way it engages its students during the course, let alone what happens post course as well.

**MS CARRICK:** Regarding that venue at the CIT, I am not sure that it is accessible in the evening. It is on the first floor, I think. It is not on the ground floor, so how do you access it at night time?

**Ms Ahmad:** Exactly.

**MS CARRICK:** And how did it go wrong like that—that it is not an easily accessible thing that can be built up? Barriers seem to have been put in the way.

**Ms Ahmad:** Yes. You could go out on a limb and say the barriers were put in because they wanted to develop venue for hire. You have to pay for that access, don't you?

**MS CARRICK:** I have not known anyone using it.

**Ms Ahmad:** I do not think that is the reason, but I would say that is a great reason, or you need to have so-and-so staff per venue hire to allow access or whatever. It is not accessible. The old CIT complex, which is now the parking lot and is being developed as such near the hospital, also had a history of live performance. We had so many international touring acts playing in the auditorium, throughout the 90s in particular and the early 2000s, because it was a space that could be inhabited by independent promoters. It has actually gone backwards in terms of accessibility.

**MS CARRICK:** Yes. Nightlife used to be all through Phillip too. It is all gone.

**Ms Ahmad:** Yes. Going back to what Taimus was saying, there is this issue: we are trying to centralise what the night-time precinct, the night-time economy, can be. As Ben said before, we have a cluster of problems, in terms of engaging with the CBD, yet who is going to look after the Potbelly, the Baso and whatever else could happen there? Even if you think about the GIO and UC, as parts of the Greater Belconnen live music context, we do not have anything in Woden. I live in Weston Creek now. We do not have anything in that area. The best we can do is maybe pop-up events at the skate park. There are a lot of covers acts at the Southern Cross Club and the Hellenic Club, but that does not foster creative growth. I appreciate there is an audience for that, and that is great. You want to see people go to that than go to nothing at all, but how do you foster pride in local creativity if you do not have spaces where young people in the regions can cut their teeth?

I always say this about venues: in Canberra, we have to think about venues as an ecosystem. And, for the arts, what are the venues doing—say, from pub to theatre? If we do not have many venues at this small cap, how is the artist going to grow from playing to 50 to 100 people to being ready to play in the Courtyard Studio? We need

more venues across the board, and we probably need more venues in the different town centres, but who is going to do that? Who is going to activate that? Who is going to provide?

A really great initiative a while ago was the Renew Newcastle movement. Marcus Westbury and the whole Renew movement at large was fantastic. I admit I am not sure what he is working on at the moment. We kind of have that through City Renewal, but we do not have it in the same strength as what Marcus was doing. There was the number of pop-up venues and renewed shopfronts that became galleries or small venues, record shops, artisan shops or whatever in Newcastle, along Hunter Street, which was a dead zone. It was quite unsafe in a lot of ways. It really changed the complexion of Newcastle at that time. We have a lot of potential with that. In the 2010s, when You Are Here was starting with centenary funding and activation, they had a lot of support from CRA to take over a lot of spaces, and it was done well. It was great for CRA to do that, but, if they had someone in the night-time portfolio who could provide oversight to support those things or, again, provide funding to access them in a different context, that would be amazing.

**MS CARRICK:** Thank you.

**MR EMERSON:** As part of the coordinator function, we have heard a few witnesses talk about the need for an actual strategy. You have spoken about a few different ad hoc programs and different parts of government that might work. If a night-time activation strategy or something like that were developed and it was not only focused on going out and drinking but was also focused on social, cultural and economic activation—the arts—what are the sorts of things that you would hope to see such a strategy look at?

**Ms Ahmad:** Again, I will only use my lens as a music representative and a music advocate. It is an interesting one. We talk about activation. We talk about how to get people into places. When I think about a strategy for music within a night-time space, it involves how we are supporting existing venues, and then what does it look like to support other mechanisms? Not all of them have to be family-friendly and all-inclusive. There is a space for different horses for different courses. That is fine. There is research. As I was sitting out there, I was thinking about the work that Hobart has obviously done. Granted, it takes a very rich benefactor to undertake that work on a private level before engaging government and engaging the state.

DarkLab, which is the company that now runs Dark Mofo, is independent of David Walsh. They do a lot of work in terms of ensuring that Hobart remains an active area. They own a few venues themselves—a couple of blocks—and they make sure they are engaged with the whole demographic in their region. It counts for a lot to do that work. Hobart has certain advantages that we do not have, and we have some advantages that Hobart does not have. When we think about strategy, we would probably want to think about consultancy with people who have done it well. I mentioned Marcus Westbury before. That is around space. And then, through a music lens, it is about how we are seeing music being part of key drivers. Music is a quite accessible form of art. It is probably undervalued at the moment because of the way digital distribution and streaming have made it, for lack of better words, too accessible. But who is going to place the value on that? That has to be part of the strategy as well.

If the government is going to be involved in placemaking and activation in the precincts, then it has to be able to find the dollars to match the strategy. I think the strategy has to be centred around performance. It goes without saying. This is probably not the forum to talk about that; I will have that conversation with artsACT. But the strategy is paramount in terms of performance in the city centre, if that is where we are starting on that.

**MR EMERSON:** On that, what do you see as the biggest barrier to getting out to live music? One of our earlier witnesses spoke about the importance of an extended experience—someone kicks on and goes somewhere else after a gig or they have dinner before, or whatever it is. Are we lacking precincts where that is being offered? What are people reporting back to you, in terms of getting people out to music more often?

**Ms Ahmad:** This is probably the hard thing: the cost. We have this conversation in the office all the time. We recently did a collaborative co-presentation thing with the Canberra International Music Festival. The audience for that festival skews upper middle class and upwards. The financial metrics of that festival and what feels affordable skews very differently to going to see a young band or four young bands play at Dissent. But there is an expectation. This is my classic example: people do not really flinch when it is a \$50 or \$60-plus ticket for a theatre performance, a dance performance or a ballet performance, but when it costs \$60 to see four bands, there is reticence to pay that. I do not think that is the proper value either, because four bands could be four times one, times four. This is why I go back to: “Who’s going to cover that?” And, when the cost of a business’s running expense increases daily, to me, you should be seeing four bands with four members per band, and it should not cost \$15. People should not balk at that, and that is an educative process. You can only maintain those kinds of prices if someone is covering the balance.

When I was starting and I was playing at the old Transit Bar, they would give guarantees, because they knew they would make that much at the bar. It was amazing. This is the problem: in my job—and I do not want to say “back in my day”—

**MR EMERSON:** None of us do!

**Ms Ahmad:** None of us do, but how can you encourage young musicians and the early career artists to feel that they can actually give it a go and build careers and lives out of this kind of work when the value on their art is diminished to begin with and there is a cultural or social issue around the value of that? We need to find ways to encourage that. Government support probably goes a long way to doing that. I think it would be amazing if most small businesses did not have to rely on government support to take risks and push solid, creative agendas.

**MR EMERSON:** You touched on venue sizes and that pathway earlier. This is one area where perhaps government could play a role, because, otherwise, who is responsible for determining where the gaps are? We do not have a good 300-seater or we do not have a good 500-seater. Is that something that you think a night-time economy coordinator could focus on as well—looking at the gaps in the venue ecosystem for musicians?

**Ms Ahmad:** Yes.

**MR EMERSON:** Also, just quickly: where are they currently in the ACT? What are the venue sizes that you think we are missing?

**Ms Ahmad:** If we think about the ACT broadly, we are probably covered, but a lot of the conversation goes to: “We don’t have it in the CBD.” We are seeing all the work with CTC at the moment, and, within the community, there is a hesitancy to be positive about what that means, because no-one knows what it means for the local ecosystem. I have great contacts who are doing great work, but you do not know if they are going to be actioned by the CFC to engage local artists properly.

There is something you said about whether the portfolio can do better in terms of actively connecting a big player with the venue ecosystem better. It has obviously not happened that well in the past. It is just not doing its thing. Like I said, in the ACT we have government facilities—100- to 200-seater venues. We lost the standing room venue in the CBD when the ANU Bar redeveloped the Kambri precinct. What we had at the ANU Bar and Refectory was very much important to that time. There was talk about Nirvana and Green Day as I walked in. It is a really historical place in terms of Canberra’s music journey and story. We have lost that in the CBD—that big room. We have that at the UC, and Refectory is definitely capturing a lot of that. They are doing really well with that and they are kicking goals, so I am really happy about that. But then we have the issue of people not wanting to travel out of Belco. Canberra is so parochial at times, and we do not have great public transport, but people are also hesitant to drive to where is not that far. We are not dealing with Sydney or Melbourne traffic. The parking costs are exorbitant, but we are not dealing with that kind of traffic to go from north to south.

Within the ACT, we have a good range. It then goes back to the thing about accessibility to a venue. What is the cost barrier? An artist can play at Dissent because Dave is doing everything and doing a pretty good deal in the scheme of things, but for them to graduate to the Street Theatre, for instance, or the Belco Arts’ theatre, it is a whole different ballpark. And the arts centres have their own kind of wanton way of curating or programming as well, which sadly might not be as open-minded as what we need from the operators in those places. I left Ainslie and Gorman because of the financial situation. There is no programming team at Ainslie and Gorman. So there are venues that could be actioned, but realistically they are going to be actioned by independent promoters at the moment, not by the in-house team.

Again, there is a whole journey. I can talk about the venues ecosystem, because I think it is really important for an artist to be able to move through and feel comfortable in these kinds of more institutionalised spaces as well, but what is between Dissent and the University of Canberra? The Refectory is one thing, but what is between the Refectory and then playing at the Canberra Theatre Centre?

**MS CARRICK:** Do you think there should be more on the south side? There is an imbalance.

**Ms Ahmad:** There is an imbalance. I think that there is—

**MS CARRICK:** Can we do better to support the south side? Should it be dormitory?

**Ms Ahmad:** There should definitely be more activation on the south side. Leaning back to what I said, it is even about access to the Tuggeranong Arts Centre. It is a small venue. They have the sit-down bar kind of thing upstairs, and then they have their theatre, which is a 110-cap seater. I am going to say this: not every rock band or rapper wants to play at a sit-down venue; they want their audience standing up. Maybe they only want seated audiences when they are big enough and they are playing the Opera House, to be fair. Getting a foot in the door is pretty hard. If you look at their programming, it skews jazz, classical and blues. I do not think that is actually representative of the young demographic in Tuggeranong, but there are no alternative venues either. This is something I should have said earlier as well: the youth centre culture has changed quite a lot in the ACT. In the 80s, 90s and early 2000s, you had international touring acts playing at the old Civic Youth Centre. We do not see that and we do not see touring bands coming through.

To be fair, music tastes have changed, but we are not seeing young hip-hop artists inhabiting those spaces, or DJs or whatever doing concerts, takeovers and bringing in people. Granted, this is the focus of their work—it is about youth work, first and foremost—but they used to be social hubs where there were performance outcomes.

**THE CHAIR:** Although TAC did do a mean Battle of the Bands last year.

**Ms Ahmad:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, thank you for your attendance today. That was really interesting. On behalf of the committee, I thank all our witnesses who have assisted us today with their experience and knowledge. We also thank broadcasting and Hansard staff for their support. If a member wishes to ask questions on notice, please upload them to the parliamentary portal as soon as possible and no later than five business days from today.

**The committee adjourned at 12.30 pm**