

To Whom it May Concern

We are writing to you as a new voice of nighttime entertainment in Northern Ireland called Free the Night. We have recently formed after reviewing what has been brought forward for the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill.

We feel there has been a distinct lack of representation for nighttime entertainment, specifically within the culturally rich music scene of Northern Ireland. Key voices involved within the night time economy have not been involved or, more specifically, made aware of the consultation process until now.

Due to this, we have not been able to respond to the consultation that was carried out previously as an organisation. However, we hope that you will be able to address some of our concerns and take them on board when the Committee for Communities report to the Assembly. We have waited for 25 years since the original announcement of licensing reform and want to ensure the legislation is correct for the next 25.

We have listed some of our main concerns in the attached document.

Please feel free to contact us for more information on these points.
We will be reaching out to your staff for a meeting in the near future.

Best wishes,

Free the Night

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Below is a list of our main concerns.

From what we understand the licensing changes are not based on any type of international model or best practice. Has the committee received any responses to the consultation which looked at models from other cities around the world? If not would the committee be willing to explore this avenue?

We have experts with whom we can put the committee in contact to discuss how other major cities like Manchester moved to a more progressive and economically beneficial model. A good starting point may be the 'Sound Diplomacy' - 'A Guide to the Night Time Economy' report:

"According to the UN, by 2050 over 80% of the world's population will live in urban areas. This can be seen as a challenge or an opportunity. To feed and house people, we will have to create more on the same land. But cities don't have to just grow higher and lower – into the sky or underground – they can also grow in the use of time. Exploring how to make more use of the evening and night time provides jobs, supports community cohesion and supports social inclusion.

A growing city, one capable of meeting the needs of an increasing population of all ages, expands into the night. In London, the night-time economy is predicted to grow by £2bn from 2017 to 2026.

Melbourne, Australia's fastest-growing city, has more leisure and entertainment premises per capita within its city limits than any other city in the world. Austin, the self-proclaimed 'live music capital of the world', is also America's fastest-growing city, with over 1m inhabitants. Not only are these cities growing in size, but they are also making better use of their time – their evenings and night times.

The night time economy requires the same management policies, structures and strategies as the daytime economy. This means training and appointing specialists across city planning, regeneration, economic development, tourism and enforcement. It means exploring how to incorporate these uses into how the city grows and supports its people and infrastructure.

What is at stake? Jobs. Retention of young people and entrepreneurs. Creating a healthier, vibrant and liveable city for your ageing population. Up to one-third of your economic output. An increase in tourism, hotel stays and dwell times. A smarter, more sustainable and fairer city that promotes community inclusion, the importance of social activity and engagement. Smarter, cost-saving tools to minimise environmental and human impact.”

Initially, we were very concerned about the liquor and entertainment licensing laws coming in line with each other. We have been informed that 104 so-called ‘late’ licences will be available, however we feel that venues should be able to benefit from late trading throughout the year. It is clear to us that this move does not support the creative community, venues, culture or overall economy of Northern Ireland.

The new legislation is not a step forward and does nothing to help attract people into our towns and cities. It also makes Northern Ireland a less attractive place for tourists wanting to experience the diverse musical landscape of Northern Ireland.

The licensing law change with regard to entertainment licence is based on a decision/theory from 2016. It is now five years later and we feel this calls for a proper re-examination. Why has this never been properly discussed in parliament or even by any public representatives publicly since 2016?

From the DoC website:

“As entertainment licences may be granted beyond the late opening hours available under an alcohol licence, this has led to illegal sales of alcoholic drinks and an increase in drug use. It is proposed that the law will be amended to provide that any grant of late opening hours or the proposed occasional additional opening hour will require that an associated entertainment licence will not extend beyond the latest time alcoholic drinks can be consumed in licensed premises. It is intended that this proposal, which would prohibit entertainment licences from being granted beyond the permitted drinking hours, will help to offset the issues associated with problem premises.”

Can we be provided for evidence over an extended period of an increase in drug use that is directly related to venues that open past 1 am? Can we be provided with any evidence that shows a recreational drugs issue in NI which is related to dance floors?

We would like to see the statistics on charges that have been brought against people arrested for drug-related crimes in city-centre venues that open to 3am. We would also like to see A+E intakes on a Friday and Saturday between 9-3 am where patients have been admitted for recreational drugs usage in night time venues.

We recognise these details may not be readily available but are important in order to get a true representation of drug issues. We will happily work to provide this information for the committee if we can be given time to do so.

From what information we do have, (PSNI drug seizures sheet) we can see that the numbers for drug seizures of powdered ecstasy (MDMA) and in pill form in the year up to 2020 across all of Northern Ireland, from Monday to Sunday is tiny.

The Trends in Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland 2006/07 to 2019/20 also gives no indication of a recreational drugs issue associated with the night time economy.

Furthermore, we can see from this study by the University of Cambridge that there is no correlation between later drinking times and associated violence.

We believe the idea of restricting venues that allow patrons to dance and consume alcohol later into the night does not make for a good argument to address drug-related issues. If you want to tackle drug crime, tackle it at source - not by hindering the economy, local artists and businesses.

We feel the views of those who this legislation most affects have not been taken into consideration; those involved in the nighttime industry need to be aware and be engaged with throughout this governmental process which will affect them. Could you inform us if any night-time venues, promoters, musicians, DJs, artists/performers, staff etc have been involved in this consultation? And would the committee be willing to hear further information from those this directly affects?

Personal safety and getting home safely at night is a priority for us. The current and suggested regulations do not, in our eyes, take this issue into consideration and leave the city centre as a total free-for-all zone when trying to get home at the weekend. Our public transport system is pretty much non-existent after midnight, leaving our taxi drivers to deal with an influx of people within an extremely narrow time frame. Many people can't find transport home and end up having to walk or share taxis with strangers. This can be incredibly dangerous in a city like Belfast where young people have been attacked for passing through areas where there is a strong sectarian divide. It in particular leaves young women, the LGBT+ community, BIPOC and other minority groups in vulnerable and potentially dangerous situations. We believe everyone has the right to enjoy Belfast's rich night time culture without putting themselves at risk every weekend.

The ROI made similar changes to what is being suggested right now to their legislation in 2008. Prior to 2008, there were 340 nightclubs. Now there are approximately 85. Where is the evidence that this new legislation will be beneficial in any way?

Southern Ireland is planning to overhaul their licensing laws, which will include an extension to times and legal distinction between a pub and nightclub (or night-time venue). This will encourage more people to travel to the south to socialise, meaning potentially even greater losses for Northern Ireland's night time economy. Venues are vital not only for long-term careers but for part-time work for students, foreign nationals and so on. By placing restrictions on venues, more will close and unemployment will rise. Can we see any risk assessment that has been taken on this?

The authorities need to re-engage with venues and businesses to see what they need. This is particularly important now that our industry is facing over a year of pandemic related losses, which are set to continue for the majority of 2021. At this stage, revised licensing laws are essential for survival.

We would ask that opening hours are extended, not curtailed. The standard closing times in Europe are between 6-8 am. Many have the ability to trade 24 hours if they wish. The measures proposed are backward, oppressive, anti-business and make Northern Ireland a less desirable location for locals and tourists alike.

The changes are underestimating the wishes of young people and consumers in general. This will have a hugely negative impact and could even contribute to social unrest (including a move towards illegal unregulated parties) and will in no way help to relaunch a beleaguered night-time economy and businesses.

We would like to see a mechanism to bring our cities in line with our counterparts in the rest of the UK and Europe. To push a bill through now will have a detrimental effect on the industry and will lead to the closure of more venues and further loss of jobs.

We have the creativity, talent and drive to make NI a much better place to live in or travel to. Below is a very short list of clubs both in the UK and further afield and their opening times. How can our promoters and young local artists ever compete?

Amsterdam - Shelter - 24 Hour
Athens - Six D.O.G.S - 23:59 - 08:00
Berlin - Berghain - 24 hour
Bern - Kapitel - 23:59 - 06:00
Bratislava - Radost - 23:00 - 08:00
Brussels - Fuse Club - 23:00 - 07:00
Budapest - Lärm - 23:00 - 06:00
Copenhagen - Culture Box - 23:00 - 08:00
Glasgow - Sub Club - 22:00 - 04:00
Helsinki - Kaiku - 22:00 - 05:00
Lisbon - Lux Frágil - 23.59 - 06:00
London - fabric - 23:00 - 08:00

Madrid - Mondo - 23:59 - 06:00
Nicosia - Klubd - 23:59 - 06:00
Paris - Rex Club - 23:59 - 07:00
Prague - Cross Club - 20:00 - 07:00
Rome - Neo Club - 23:59 - 08:00
Sofia - Balta Club - 23:59 - 07:00
Stockholm - Under Bron - 22:00 - 05:00
Vienna - Grelle Forelle - 23:00 - 06:00
Warsaw - Smolna - 22:00 - 08:00
Zagreb - Aquarius - 23:00 - 07:00

We hope that our concerns and questions can be taken into serious consideration during the upcoming Committee for Communities meeting and all future decisions surrounding the amendment.

Please feel free to contact us for more information on these points. We will be reaching out to your staff for a meeting in the near future.

Best wishes,
Free the Night

Signatories

Sunil Sharpe Give Us The Night
Boyd Sleator Northern Ireland Humanists
Genevieve Taylor Triple Threat Management
Holly Lester Duality Trax
Timmy Stewart Extended Play / The Night Institute
Claire Hall Urban Scale Interventions
Oisín O'Brien DSNT / Visual Spectrum
Jordan McCuaig Nocturne / The Night Institute
Peter Gibney Plain Sailing / Harbour Music Society
Adam Magill Korova / Spilt Milk Records
Andrew Bowan (aka AnD)
Michael Jervis Third Source
John Dixon JD TV
Niall McKernan District / Digital Nation
Paddy Towe Twitch
Steve Boyd Thompsons Garage
Chris Nesbitt Computer Controlled Records