# Next steps in the battle against alcohol harm in the NT

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| **Author** | Tenille Fricker |
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### It is prudent that harm minimisation is the driving force of the new Liquor Act

A revision of the Northern Territory Liquor Act was a key recommendation of the Riley Review and will cement the alcohol reforms arising from it, and ensure they endure.

The Economic Policy Scrutiny Committee of the Northern Territory’s Parliament is currently looking at the Liquor Bill 2019 which was rewritten following the former Chief Justice Trevor Riley’s review of the territory’s alcohol policy and legislation.

It is well established that the NT has the highest levels of consumption of alcohol products and alcohol harm in Australia. Alcohol costs the NT community dearly in lives lost, rates of disease, emergency department attendances, assaults and children suffering from Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. As well as having a significant social and economic impact, it negatively affects those who drink and the people around them, including their family, friends and community members.

However, the picture is not all bad and positive change is under way.

The NT has started to see some substantial reductions in alcohol harm. This is due to the Government’s comprehensive program to address alcohol harm, focused on the adoption of 219 of 220 recommendations of the Riley Review.

The passage of the Liquor Bill 2019 and the associated introduction of Risk-Based Licensing are the largest reforms remaining.

The Bill contains a number of crucial reforms, including the introduction of harm minimisation audits, the requirement for licensees to pay annual fees for the licence and authorities it holds, and the ability of the Liquor Commission in the NT to cancel licences for a premises that have ceased to operate.

FARE and the Alice Springs-based People’s Alcohol Action Coalition strongly supports the Bill and wants to see it passed into law and have proposed a number of changes to strengthen the Bill. These have been outlined to the Committee both in writing and verbally.

Harm minimisation is appropriately the primary purpose of the Bill, but the harm that the Bill will seeks to minimise is not defined in the Bill. It is important for regulators that there is a clear understanding of the harm the Bill is intending to reduce. This is needed to measure success when the new Act is reviewed in due course.

The passage of this legislation must serve as a clean break to a new system. For this to be achieved, the transitional arrangements in the Bill need to be amended to provide that all unresolved liquor applications lapse when the legislation is passed. This will ensure that all new applications are appropriately considered under the new Act not the old law.

Unsurprisingly, alcohol industry submissions to the Committee’s inquiry have sought to water down obligations on industry under the Bill. Industry trades in and profits from a harmful product. It is essential that it appropriately contributes to reducing the substantial social cost and harm of alcohol. Part of this contribution needs to include monitoring and compliance – a normal part of business practice. The nature of industry’s business makes this a non-negotiable from FARE’s perspective, and one hopes from the Assembly’s too.

FARE and industry are in agreement on one thing though: the need to amend the provision in the Bill allowing service of complimentary drinks by commercial businesses. This provision goes against the intentions of the recommendations of the Riley Review, subverts the regulatory environment that exists for the sale and service of alcohol and contributes to the normalisation of alcohol in the NT community.

The Committee is due to report on the Bill by tomorrow, 6 August 2019, which also happens to be the next meeting day for the Assembly. Debate on the Bill is expected to follow shortly after.

The NT Government must continue to lead the way on alcohol policy in Australia and finish what it started, ensuring the best legislation passes into NT law.

Finally, we would like to congratulate NT Government for the progress they have made in tackling the enormous task of reducing the Territory’s unacceptable level of alcohol harm so far. The progress to date has been extraordinary – this legislation will only enhance this progress.

### Metadata

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