# NT takes action on alcohol harm as true cost of harm revealed

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**The new NT Liquor Commission held its first hearing on Woolworths’ brazen attempt to open a Dan Murphy’s on a technicality during a liquor license moratorium.**

**And the NT Government released two reports on alcohol. First, on its progress implementing the recommendations arising from the Riley Review. The second was the report on the social and economic cost of harm in the NT, showing the staggering toll alcohol has on the Top End.**

**On Drink Tank today, FARE’s Senior Policy Officer Meredythe Crane details what last week’s activities mean for the Territory.**

### Woolies attempting to profit from the suffering

The dangers inherent in Woolworths’ application to open a Dan Murphy’s booze barn in Darwin cannot be underestimated.

If the application is approved, the Territory will see an enormous increase in the availability of alcohol in a jurisdiction already awash with booze and suffering from the highest levels of alcohol harm in the country.

The levels of alcohol consumption and associated harm in the Territory are well known – the highest rates of consumption in the country, high rates of alcohol-fuelled violence and crime, the highest proportion of deaths and hospitalisations attributable to alcohol in Australia, and a disproportionate impact of harm on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Currently, there is a [moratorium on takeaway liquor licences](https://newsroom.nt.gov.au/mediaRelease/22928) in the NT, which prevents new liquor licences from being granted.

In an attempt to circumvent the moratorium, Woolworths has applied to transfer and vary the licence for one of its existing BWS stores in Stuart Park to open a big box liquor outlet near Darwin’s airport (seeking to locate on airport land also avoids running the gauntlet of the Northern Territory’s planning authorities). Woolworths needs to apply to vary the licence, in addition to transferring it, since the conditions of the licence will change.

Woolworths is well aware that this is no like-for-like licence transfer. The BWS store at Stuart Park is a small convenience store in a suburban shopping centre, whereas the Dan Murphy’s store would be a supersized destination store located near vulnerable communities in Darwin and Palmerston.

Woolworths are conducting a significant public relations campaign to win support for the Dan Murphy’s store and appear to have secured the endorsement of the NT’s daily newspaper the NT News. Woolworths have claimed that the Liquor Commission has been delaying consideration of their application, but it was revealed before the Commission last week that Woolworths had yet to file all their documentation.

Recognising that there is a lot of interest and strong objections in this application, the NT Liquor Commission decided to hold a public hearing on the matter. Nearly 20 objections have been lodged by local residents, non-government organisations and representatives of Indigenous organisations. FARE and the NT branch of the Public Health Association of Australia have lodged a combined objection.

On Tuesday of last week (26 February), a [Directions hearing](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-26/dan-murphys-pledges-millions-darwin-economy-objectors-hearing/10851008) was held to determine the validity of the objections, identify what information should be provided to valid objectors, set a timeline for Woolworths to respond to the valid objections since they had not done this already, and set a date for the public hearing.

Woolworths has been given until 8 March to provide the Liquor Commission with all the information it is relying upon in its application to open the Dan Murphy’s store. The Commission will then consider the case for withholding information considered confidential, and circulate the relevant information to all objectors by close of business 19 March. This information will be critical since up until now, objectors have had little specific information to work with.

Objectors will then have until 26 March, when a second Directions hearing will be held, to prepare further submissions based on the additional information provided. At this second hearing, the public hearing date will be determined and all parties can concentrate their efforts on building their case.

Public health and community interest groups have vowed to fight Woolworths all the way.

### Progress on alcohol reforms in the NT

On Thursday of last week, the NT Government released its [12-month report](https://alcoholreform.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/658186/action-plan-alcohol-harm.pdf) on progress with implementing the recommendations arising from the [review of alcohol policies and legislation](https://alcoholreform.nt.gov.au/about-the-review). Former Chief Justice Trevor Riley QC made 220 recommendation in the [Final Report](https://alcoholreform.nt.gov.au/about-the-review/final-report) of the review, all of which were [accepted by the Government](https://alcoholreform.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/485314/Response-to-the-Alcohol-Policies-and-Legislation-Review-Final-Report.pdf) in full or in principle, except for one.

The NT Government has been busy over the last 12 months.

Seventy-five of the recommendations have been completed, not least of which have been the establishment of the NT Liquor Commission considering the Dan Murphy’s application, the introduction of a floor price on alcohol, increased powers to police, and the introduction of Police Auxiliary Liquor Inspectors (PALIs) who have taken over from regular police officers in providing Point of Sale Interventions (POSIs) outside bottle shops in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine.

Significant progress has also been achieved on others. For a detailed look at NT Government’s progress to date, you can read the [NT Government’s detailed response](https://alcoholreform.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/658251/table-recommendations-alcohol-policies.pdf) released with the overview.

As part of the release of the progress report, the NT Government implemented another recommendation in the Action Plan with the publication of [interactive data on five indicators for alcohol harm](https://alcoholreform.nt.gov.au/data-and-evaluation) on the Alcohol Policies and Legislation Reform website.

This webpage is in its early stages of development, but it provides some useful health and crime data such as alcohol-related emergency department presentations and alcohol-related deaths, that can be used by researchers and policy makers. The plan is to update this on a regular basis.

Also released last Thursday was the report revising the [social and economic cost of harm in the NT](https://alcoholreform.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/658249/social-costs-alcohol-consumption-nt.pdf). This report was timely in the context of the Directions hearing and the 12-month progress report, estimating that the annual cost of alcohol harm in the NT is $1.39 billion (based on 2015-16 data) equating to $7,577.94 per adult.

Previous estimates had put the cost of harm in the NT at [$642 million in 2004-05](https://www.territorystories.nt.gov.au/jspui/bitstream/10070/222498/1/CostofAlcoholintheNTFinalReportSept2009.pdf). However changed understandings about the impact of alcohol, more sophisticated approaches to measurement, and the inclusion of other factors such as child protection costs, means that the two figures are not directly comparable.

While alcohol consumption in the NT may have declined slightly over the past few years, the social costs and harm of alcohol have not. This report serves as a reminder of why the NT Government is undertaking this alcohol-reform program and why it is so important that the community gets behind the Government and supports it to continue on this path.

### Metadata

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