

NEW SOUTH WALES |
URBAN TRANSFORMATION

Powering Up the Neon Grid to Revitalise New South Wales, Australia

New South Wales' 24-Hour Economy Strategy demonstrates how place-based governance can help cities to revitalise the night.



NEW SOUTH WALES 



Michael Rodrigues is NSW's first ever 24-Hour Economy Commissioner, having been appointed in April 2021. In the role, Michael leads the Office of the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner in NSW Government and is responsible for delivering the NSW 24-Hour Economy Strategy.



Sydney Harbour during the 2025 festival, Vivid Sydney, NSW, Australia.
Image: Destination NSW

The Challenge

After hosting the 2000 Olympics, Sydney's nightlife and music scene boomed in inner-city districts, including Kings Cross, Surry Hills and Potts Point. However, by 2019, Sydney's after-dark scene had been decimated, with the city ranking 48th out of 48 cities worldwide for nightlife in *Time Out's* City Index.

The decline was largely attributed to the lockout laws introduced in 2014 to curb alcohol-related violence and was further exacerbated by the global pandemic which saw the capital city and the state of New South Wales (NSW) locked down. As people stayed in, at-home and on-demand services including Netflix and Uber Eats surged. NSW's going-out economy was facing an existential threat.

The Response

The silver lining in NSW was that the lockout era prompted a shift in policy echoing a broader international reassessment of night-time governance. The NSW Government repealed the lockout laws and, in 2021, appointed the inaugural 24-Hour Economy Commissioner to lead the Office of the 24-Hour Economy Commissioner (O24HEC) and deliver the 24-Hour Economy Strategy for Greater Sydney.

In 2023, the world's first Minister for Music and the Night-time Economy, the Hon. John Graham, was appointed. In addition, the remit of O24HEC was expanded across NSW, with the ambition of, once again, elevating the state's nightlife and music scene, and unlocking the potential of a 24-hour economy.

NSW 24-Hour Economy Strategic Pillars

1

An Enabling Regulatory Framework

Regulatory and legislative amendments aimed at bringing back vibrancy to enable diverse, sustainable and safe night-time economies across NSW.

2

Vibrant Coordinated Precincts and Places

Fostering collaboration among stakeholders to support precinct building and place-based economies.

3

Night-Time Workers, Culture and Industry Collaboration

Collaborating across government and industry to support night-time workers, businesses and cultural entrepreneurs to thrive in the 24-hour economy.

4

Safety, Mobility, Access and Inclusion

Enabling ease of movement to and from precincts while championing the wellbeing and safety of all within the night-time economy.

5

Authentic Storytelling

Celebrating the unique stories of our districts and promoting the experiences they offer to locals, visitors and workers.

| *Image: 24-Hour Economy NSW*

The Solution

Significant parts of Greater Sydney bear witness to the “Great Australian Dream”: the post-World War II aspiration for a multi-bedroom house with a backyard and multi-car driveway. Combined with the geography of the city, this meant nightlife and entertainment was concentrated in two or three precincts, rather than spread out as it would have been in cities which were established before the invention of the motor vehicle.

The concentration of an alcohol-centred nightlife, although considered exciting and vibrant for some, led to negative outcomes. Lockout laws curbed these outcomes, primarily by reducing patronage, but triggered unforeseen consequences. The curfew mostly impacted clubs and live music venues, with knock-on effects for bars, restaurants and retail that relied on the footfall and revenue of pre-late-night crowds. As activity declined, investment capital—crucial to the evolution and innovation of culture and nightlife—moved elsewhere.

These insights led to the concept of the Neon Grid to decentralise nightlife to diverse locales. The Neon Grid concept is designed to tell the story of people and places as the state lights up at different times of the day and night.

The five key pillars of the 24-Hour Economy Strategy refer to a district-based approach (pillar 2), empowered by an enabling regulatory framework (pillar 1) led by our storytellers—the nightlife industry (pillar 3).

The state calibrates transport to ensure accessibility and safety (pillar 4) while sharing the outputs and experiences through authentic storytelling (pillar 5).

Vibrant and coordinated precincts or districts are the new players in the going-out economy. While they bear a resemblance to the Business Improvement District model found in the United Kingdom and United States, they are supported by a range of place-based initiatives. Such initiatives include the

- **Uptown District Acceleration Program:** A dedicated business-to-business support program
- **Special Entertainment Precinct (SEP):** Local authorities and councils can designate, by state legislation, later trading hours

and higher noise levels for areas with a primary entertainment purpose

- **Purple Flag Program:** An internationally recognised accreditation program which recognises mature going-out districts that are welcoming, vibrant and well-managed

A legislative reform agenda known as the Vibrancy Reforms has been supporting venues and precincts. The reforms are a cross-government initiative led by O24HEC that were passed in NSW Parliament from 2023 to 2025. In addition to the SEP intervention, the reforms incentivise the bringing in of live music and performances to dining and creative sectors while helping to reduce bureaucracy.



The 5,000-person welcome event in the Chippendale Collective, a district supported by the Uptown District Acceleration Program, as a result of a district-wide partnership with the 2025 International Astronautical Congress in Sydney.

Image: 24-Hour Economy NSW



The Enmore Road SEP was the first in NSW and has been named one of the best going-out districts in the world (*Time Out*, 2023), with boosted foot traffic, business revenue and night-time visitation. Several areas within metro and regional NSW are planning new SEPs.
Image: Inner West Council

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Live performance at the Camelot Lounge in Marrickville, Sydney, one of four accredited Purple Flag precincts in NSW, with more to come.
Image: 24-Hour Economy NSW



The Neon Grid is helping recalibrate the going-out experience in NSW, adapting NSW to the lifestyles and needs of post-pandemic consumers.



To some extent, the Neon Grid's decentralised approach has played to natural consumer behaviours prompted by the pandemic, specifically the move towards flexible or hybrid working. This is particularly significant in NSW; a state of over 8 million people spread across more than 800,000 km², or 309,000 mi².


Local, vibrant and interesting neighbourhoods with well-managed nightlife centres reduce travel time and associated cost. With a lower barrier to entry, neighbourhood nightlife locales provide an accessible alternative to the lure of the couch and encourage repeat going-out behaviour, essential to the sustainability of the night-time economy.

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The state's network of over 30 (and growing) well-coordinated, self-sustaining precincts is helping, once again, to elevate NSW's reputation as a vibrant, globally acclaimed destination.

This status is reflected in Sydney's latest rankings:

- 5th in Time Out's Best Cities in the World for Culture (2025)
- 8th in Euromonitor's International Top 100 City Destinations Index (2025)
- 11th globally in Resonance Consulting's 2026 World's Best Cities report

NSW's experience demonstrates how place-based governance can help cities worldwide rebalance safety, culture and economic vitality after dark. 

To find out more about the NSW 24-Hour Economy Strategy, please refer to <https://www.nsw.gov.au/business-and-economy/office-of-24-hour-economy-commissioner/24-hour-economy-strategy>