

Curfews alone won't alter drinking culture

Penalising all for the actions of a few is not the solution, writes **Rolly De With.**

IN many ways the curfew on inner-city licensed premises has worked, but in other ways it has created many more problems and not delivered the solutions that the community had hoped for.

What we have seen is a dramatic decrease in entertainment-related visitations to the city and a less-than-acceptable reduction in incidents.

Newcastle is no longer the mecca for entertainment in the Hunter, and no longer offers a diverse variety of live music.

It was recognised by the local police command that drunken violence was "out of control".

The only measure to combat this was to introduce strict conditions and a curfew on hotels in Newcastle. This intervention policy has been in place since 2008.

I agree with Newcastle City local area commander Superintendent Max Mitchell when he says there are still too many assaults in our city.

There needs to be a holistic approach from all stakeholders including the community to bring about cultural change.

It is disappointing that on the eve of the introduction of the "hassle-free nights" program, another intervention policy has been introduced at Hamilton.

Hassle-free nights is an initiative of the NSW government that could see Newcastle benefit from a \$1 million contribution to address social and transport issues and the introduction of CCTV.

These issues have been raised by the police, community groups and the hotel industry.

We now have every venue in Newcastle and Hamilton operating with a 1am or 1.30am lockout.

Curfews and lockouts alone will not alter the culture and attitude of the community towards excessive

alcohol consumption. There needs to be a commitment from all stakeholders if we truly want to make our city a safe and enjoyable place at night. There must be mutual respect and a true and sincere desire to make improvement.

We hear from our patrons about how difficult it is to get a taxi at peak times. We know that the public transport is inadequate or not satisfying demand. We know that the choice and variety in entertainment offered is not meeting demand.

There are too many constraints preventing the development of new and diverse venues for Newcastle. We need more variety and more well-run venues offering an entertainment choice for all ages.

The young people in our community seem to be the forgotten voice in all of this. Whether it is Newcastle or Hamilton, the majority

of people socialising on a Friday and Saturday night are well-behaved, well-dressed, polite people, looking at socialising for a good time. They are your sons, daughters and grandchildren. They are all good people and have a right and deserve a safe environment for recreation and entertainment.

The Australian Hotels Association, along with the police, patrons and residents all want the same thing – a safe, vibrant, culturally diverse city

Everyone wants to enjoy a place of their choice. We all have the right to be safe, we all have the right to have a drink and we all have a right to get

home safely within a reasonable time.

If we don't consider the voice of the young people, we will inevitably force them away from our city. Why would they stay when they are not welcome and where their voice is

not heard? To penalise all for the actions of a few, is not the solution.

Newcastle needs diversity. In a city where more businesses are leaving and closing down, we are still unable to welcome and support those that are willing to take a risk and invest in our city.

The Small Bar at The Royal, and The Kensington, are examples of this and should be judged on their merits.

By placing the curfews and restrictions on the city's venues, we face the risk of pushing our young people further afield, limiting the potential for development in our city, and still not offering a genuine solution.

Rolly De With is the Australian Hotels Association Newcastle sub-branch president.



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