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## **REFORM NEEDED TO REALISE WOLLONGONG'S OUTDOOR DINING FUTURE**

The region's peak business advocacy organisation, Business Illawarra, has called on Wollongong City Council to reform its rules for outdoor dining to enliven the CBD and help local hospitality businesses recover from the pandemic.

Executive Director of Business Illawarra, Adam Zarth, said that his organisation had been hearing from frustrated members in the hospitality sector that they are unable to make use of outdoor areas because existing rules are too restrictive; particularly food and beverage operators in the Crown Street Mall and the City Centre.

Business Illawarra is calling for a review of the complex existing framework governing outdoor dining in the Wollongong CBD, with a focus on;

1. Updating and consolidating all Council documentation on outdoor dining into a single, easily-accessible policy document;
2. The development of a simple, user friendly application system for outdoor dining permits;
3. The greater use of Council-owned and managed road reserves and land for outdoor dining;
4. Waiving application and licensing fees for outdoor dining within the CBD;
5. The inclusion of the Wollongong CBD in the NSW Government's alfresco dining trial, with a view to embedding the arrangements long-term if the trial is successful
6. Greater consistency in designation of eligible 'zones' for outdoor dining within the city.

"Wollongong City Centre has suffered its share of setbacks during the pandemic, so as we continue the economic recovery we are advocating for outdoor dining as a way to build new vibrancy, visitation and life in the CBD," said Mr Zarth.

"While the Illawarra economy is showing great signs of recovery and even growth, there remain sectors that continue to struggle, particularly those hardest hit by the pandemic such as hospitality and tourism."

"Most hospitality businesses are small enterprises with limited resources to deal with complex administrative requirements, and a number have raised concerns with us about the application process for outdoor dining permissions, the ongoing relevance of rules for different 'zones' within the CBD in the face of changing consumer habits as well as the high application fees."

"We have conducted our own review and agree that Council's existing outdoor dining policies and rules are very difficult to navigate and may be discouraging businesses from applying for outdoor dining permits."

"We are now urging Council to review its processes and materials and announce a user-friendly system that promotes the reasonable use of Council road reserve as well as Council owned and managed land for outdoor dining."

"We believe the right permit arrangements for outdoor dining should help hospitality businesses to attract patrons and increase foot traffic in the CBD, which should have flow on positive effects on other businesses and the local economy."

“Business Illawarra has long campaigned across the wider region for the removal of local government red-tape that hampers business growth and development. This is a relatively low-cost measure to support small businesses.”

“The NSW Government recently implemented an Outdoor Dining initiative with changes to the liquor regulation and planning requirements to improve Council approval processes in support of an ‘alfresco dining trial’ which runs until 31 October 2021. We urge the Council to consider this initiative at least as an interim measure to address business concerns, with the potential to adopt it in the longer term should the trial prove successful.”

### **Comments from Business Illawarra members**

Ryan Aitchison, Manager of The Illawarra:

*“We want to increase our offering to customers by providing an outdoor dining offering under our awning on Market Street. Market Street Hospitality business could add a new dynamic to their business by taking advantage of the wide footpath found on this street. The extended Development Approval process to apply for this is costly and time-consuming. We also have the additional challenge where one street is under council jurisdiction (Market St), and the other controlled by RMS (Keira St)”*

Nathan Stratton of La La La’s:

*“Our biggest problem is the confusion and complication caused from applying to have outdoor seating. We feel like we are bounced around between council departments at times as we seek clarification in what we can and can’t do”*

*“It would be great to have a more streamlined process to make it easy for small hospitality operators to navigate. With the demands that running the business on the day to day adding to trying to find the right answers, it can be difficult to manage and often overwhelming.*

*We want to do our part and add to helping create a vibrant city, by offering our customers a choice when dining with us.”*

Matt Russell of All Good Things Café:

*“During the height of the COVID pandemic, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian suggested that outdoor dining provides a great opportunity for businesses to succeed, allowing people to frequent their favourite cafes whilst staying COVID safe. It is hard for us to understand the number of restrictions put in place to stop small business operators from trying to succeed.*

*“Under current health restrictions it would not be possible for us to operate solely on the indoor tables we have. Outdoor seating allows our customers to have a safe and healthier option while enjoying our products. It is also beneficial to council as we are continually cleaning the area our tables are to ensure it is appealing and attractive to our customers.”*

*“As we continue to build focus on a healthy, active lifestyle in the area, allowing operators and easier way to activate outdoor dining spaces will not only add value to the business, but also will make the city streets more attractive as they would come to life with more activity.”*

— ENDS —

### **About Business Illawarra**

Formerly the Illawarra Business Chamber, *Business Illawarra* is the region’s peak business organisation; a not-for-profit advocacy group dedicated to the economic development of the Illawarra.

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