

**Reply to: Angela Hartmann
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3/7/08

Councillor Ron Stone
Chair, Licensing Committee, BCC
39 Gotley Road
Brislington
Bristol
BS4 5AT

Dear Councillor Stone

Re: Please respond to Government consultation by calling for lapdance clubs to be licensed as Sex Encounter Establishments

As you know, Bristol Women's Forum has consistently raised concerns about the lack of powers that Bristol as a local authority has to regulate lapdance clubs and the lack of opportunities that citizens have to voice their concerns about existing or proposed lapdance clubs in our communities. Since 2003 we have made a number of statements to the Licensing Committee and to full Council, in addition to raising petitions and responding to consultations on Bristol's statement of licensing policy. We have been joined in our concerns by the Fawcett Society Bristol Local Group, Women's Aid, the University of Bristol Violence Against Women Research Group, Bristol Feminist Network, Bristol Rape Crisis and the Townswomen's Guilds.

Current lapdance club licensing criteria are wholly inadequate. As you will be aware, since the introduction of the 2003 Licensing Act lapdance clubs have been licensed in the same way that cafes and karaoke clubs are – with a Premises Licence. This prevents all local authorities from treating license applications from lapdance clubs differently to applications from cafés. Yet lapdance clubs are part of the sex industry, not the ordinary leisure industry. They normalise the sexual objectification of women and are counter to efforts to promote gender equality. Areas surrounding lapdance clubs can become 'no-go' areas for women, and individuals working in the clubs often face extremely poor working conditions.

We are also concerned about the lack of powers you hold to regulate lapdance clubs in Bristol. This includes being unable to make decisions in relation to the number of lapdance clubs permitted in our communities and the presence of 'private booths' in the clubs. Under the Gender Equality Duty every local authority is required to promote gender equality in all they do, but are prevented from doing so by the current licensing regime.

Bristol Women's Forum find it deeply troubling that citizens have no right to object to a lapdance club licence application unless they live within 100-200m of the proposed club. Furthermore, Premises Licences are granted in perpetuity, thus people are unable to lodge objections once a licence has been granted unless they relate to the contravention of one of the four licensing objectives contained in the 2003 Licensing Act.

The current licensing situation is the result of a loophole in the law. Other elements of the sex industry similar in nature to lapdance clubs, such as sex cinemas and sex shops, are licensed as 'Sex Encounter Establishments' or 'Sex Establishments'. This allows local authorities to

effectively regulate such premises. However, when the 2003 Licensing Act was introduced it stated that establishments licensed with a Premises Licence do not require another licence. Because lapdance clubs involve the sale of alcohol, and thus require a Premises Licence, they therefore are not required to obtain a Sex Encounter Establishment licence. This is a loophole that urgently needs to be closed.

A simple solution to this problem is to remove the exemption of holders of Premises Licences from requiring a Sex Encounter Establishment licence. Such a move would utilise existing legislation, rather than be based on the introduction of new legislation.

On 18th June 2008 Gerry Sutcliffe MP wrote to the Chief Executive of every local authority in England and Wales on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. As you will be aware the letter expresses the Government's concern about how lapdance clubs are currently licensed and asks for the views of local authorities on whether they should be licensed as Sex Encounter Establishments. The deadline for feedback is 15th August 2008.

This is at last an excellent opportunity for Bristol to communicate its experience and vision for a way forward. We urge you to respond to this consultation by expressing your support for a re-categorisation of lapdance clubs as Sex Encounter Establishments.

Licensing lapdance clubs as Sex Encounter Establishments would enable us to have a greater say about the presence and operation of lapdance clubs in our community.

We look forward to hearing from you on this important matter. Advisors from the Women's Forum will be pleased to meet with you and to provide any further information you may require.

Many Thanks,
Yours Sincerely

Margaret Gray and Val Jenkins
Co-Chairs on behalf of Bristol Women's Forum

Cc for information by email to:

Jan Ormondroyd, Chief Executive <jan.ormondroyd@bristol.gov.uk>

Helen Holland, Leader <helen.holland@bristol.gov.uk>

Alison Comley, Head of Safer Bristol <alison.comley@bristol.gov.uk>

Pauline Powell, Legal Services <pauline.powell@bristol.gov.uk>

All members of the Licensing Committee.