

# Background Paper

Club Covert

19/03431/SEXA

Dear Sir/Madame,

## OBJECTION TO GRANTING A SEXUAL ENTERTAINMENT LICENSE TO COVERT CLUB, BATH ROAD

In our society women's bodies are routinely sexualized for commercial gain. Women are bombarded by images of highly sexualized beauty in all forms of media. Their bodies are used to sell products and generate revenue, shaping the way women and girls understand their role in, and value to, society. Eating disorders, self-harm and low self-esteem have become common among our teenage girls, who have been taught that their value lies primarily in the desirability of their bodies.

While the Bishop of Gloucester works to fight these problems in our area with her Liedentity campaign, I am distressed to find Cheltenham Borough Council signaling its potential endorsement of the sexual exploitation of women's bodies for money. I am writing to ask the Council to refuse the application for a sexual entertainment license by Covert Club on the Bath Road and to take steps to ensure that licensing loopholes which permit sexual entertainment in our community are closed. Not only is sexual entertainment harmful to women and girls as a class, it is completely out of keeping with the ethos of the Cheltenham community and the lucrative reputation that our town is keen to cultivate as a centre of culture and history.

Lap dancing clubs create the illusion that there exists a subclass of women that it is acceptable to exploit for money. They teach our men and boys that it is possible to put a price on sexual access to women. There is an inescapable logic to the prevalence of rape and domestic violence in our country, when we consider the dehumanizing impact of the commercial exploitation of women's bodies. While parts of our society continue to treat women as commodities, a minority of men will abuse them as such. Local organisations like Gloucestershire Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (GRSAC) are at the forefront of combating these ills in our community. It is unclear to me why the sexual entertainment industry has been allowed to gain a foothold in Cheltenham at all, but the Council now have an opportunity to act decisively in favour of the wellbeing and self-esteem of the women and girls who live here. To grant this license would be to openly disrespect the mission of groups like GRSAC. In legitimizing the sexual entertainment industry, the Council would be contributing to the social conditions that make their difficult work with survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence necessary, advocating the kind of commodification of female bodies that leads to the dehumanisation and abuse of women.

Sexual entertainment is the most extreme, legal manifestation of commercial sexual exploitation in our country. Its harms impact the safety of our communities on multiple levels. Extensive documentation shows that it is usually accompanied by the very worst forms of illegal activity. Women who have exited the industry describe exploitative employment practices, relentless pressure to provide illegal sexual services and the routine violation of personal and legal boundaries by patrons. Pimps and brothel keepers are known to use lap dancing establishments as hiring grounds, with sex trade survivors frequently reporting that they were first prostituted after working in the sexual entertainment industry. Cheltenham's local pimps will no doubt be delighted by the recruitment opportunities that Covert Club intends to offer them.

In light of these facts about threats to public safety, it is extremely concerning to learn that Dan Field, the owner of Covert Club, has not enrolled his establishment in Cheltenham's Night Safe scheme. Given the inevitable proliferation of criminal activity at sites of sexual entertainment, it is astonishing that the Council are considering granting a license to a club that is already demonstrably less safe than other local venues. Mr. Field's conviction for assaulting a patron of one of his establishments in 2016 suggests that he rejects the model of community safety promoted by Night Safe and prefers to take a more direct approach to the security of his businesses. This is not something I wish to see more of in my community.

Quite why the Council are considering endorsing this gift to local criminals is beyond me. I have lived in and around Cheltenham since childhood and seen the community build its reputation as an up-market regency town. We are known for our celebrations of culture and music, for our preservation of history. Cheltenham Literature and Jazz Festivals are nationally celebrated, and we take pride in sharing our history as a spa town and the birthplace of the renowned musician Holst. It was unsurprising to me to learn that Mr. Field is not from Cheltenham himself. Perhaps he cannot be expected to understand the character and history of a town that he has not grown up in. Mr. Field is from Swindon, a decidedly different town to Cheltenham and not one I can imagine local residents wishing to emulate. I am surprised to find the Council prepared to countenance drastically changing the character of Cheltenham at the request of someone who is not even a local resident. What part of the community does Mr. Field believe he will be enhancing by bringing the sex trade to our town? How will a booming sexual entertainment industry benefit Cheltenham's reputation as a high end, regency spa town and a centre of culture? Mr. Field's professional profile shows him to be a competent businessman. I fear that his pursuit of profit has made him careless of the broader implications of a growing sexual entertainment industry in our town, a town which is not his own. However, the Council has a responsibility to consider the potential harms to its citizens extremely carefully, and the profitability of commercial sexual exploitation should not be deemed more important than its negative impact on the broader community and reputation of the town.

Similarly, the right of individual performers to be objectified for financial gain in the sexual entertainment industry should not outweigh the negative impact of commercial sexual exploitation on the class of women in its entirety. While individual women may find careers in sexual entertainment acceptable, the impact of the industry as a whole is the normalization of commercial exploitation of women's bodies. This has an impact on women as a class that I believe overrides the right of individual women to choose participation in a self-objectifying and exploitative industry. Whether Covert Club's employees oppose the terms of their objectification or not, I and many other local women are demeaned and distressed by the sight of our sisters being sold at market. The omni-present advertising for sexual entertainment during race week obliges us to explain to our young children why their local community supports the sale of female bodies. It is important to see beyond the deceptive sex industry narratives of 'choice' and 'empowerment' to recognize what lap dancing really is: the right of one human being to purchase access to another's body. While reports of the discomfort felt by women around sexual entertainment venues are purely anecdotal and have been dismissed as irrelevant by the Council in previous licensing decisions, they are telling and often come from the most vulnerable in our community. Rape victims and women who have escaped the sex trade are legitimately triggered by the presence of sexual entertainment venues in their communities. Similarly, I would encourage the licensing committee to give due weight to the stories of women who have exited the sexual entertainment industry and testified to its harms. The Council should be prioritizing the real-life experiences of these vulnerable people, not disregarding their concerns in favor of profitability.

I am including references and urge the Council to consider them carefully.

#### References and Further Information

. Fact sheet from campaign group Not Buying It. This document provides objective evidence of the entirely preventable increases in illegal commercial sexual activity that accompany the licensing of sexual entertainment venues. If the Council are not prepared to accept the subjective experiences of local women who report increased rates of sexual harassment at the times when these venues are operating, perhaps they will at least consider the testimonies of exited sexual entertainment workers in this well referenced document. They deserve your respectful attention. The fact sheet also provides evidence of the broader harms to women and girls caused by commercial sexual entertainment:

<https://www.notbuyingit.org.uk/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet%20on%20Lap%20Dancing.pdf>

. The Liedentity Campaign can be found here and deserves the full support of the Council:

<https://www.gloucester.anglican.org/parish-resources/communications/liedentity/>

. Information on increasing rates of eating disorders in the UK and the impact of objectification on women:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50969174>

<https://www.healthline.com/health/sexual-objectification-eating-disorders-link#6>

. Statistics on the continued prevalence of sexual assault in the UK:

<https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/statistics-sexual-violence/>

. Information on the work of Gloucestershire Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre:

<http://www.glosrasac.org/>

. On Mr. Field's failure to register his business with Cheltenham's Night Safe scheme:

[https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/cheltenham-news/guardian-patrol-leaders-serious-safety-3713735?fbclid=IwAR1i\\_6774I8CGKEzVIFgl2cJmRLGXYUWqDTCjh1U-T8jMsEYxxtRPaGYVx0](https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/cheltenham-news/guardian-patrol-leaders-serious-safety-3713735?fbclid=IwAR1i_6774I8CGKEzVIFgl2cJmRLGXYUWqDTCjh1U-T8jMsEYxxtRPaGYVx0)

. Mr. Field's assault charge:

<https://www.swindonadvertiser.co.uk/news/14301525.manager-admits-assault-outside-baker-street-bar/>

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Dear sir or madam

I wish to formally object to the above application.

I am a resident of Cheltenham and avoid the town centre entirely during race week. The atmosphere is intimidating and since the Fantasy Club, now the Covert Club, began hosting lapdancing I have had to cancel the late-night appointments at my hairdresser, Cream, as I feel uncomfortable and unsafe

walking past the place. The staff in the salon said that they feel similarly. I was approached a couple of years ago by an individual outside this establishment who asked if he could assault me. This will be dismissed as "anecdotal" evidence, but I did not report it to the police because he did not physically do anything to me. I was frightened and rushed past him. I have since learned that I could have reported this and that my experience is invalid because I did not. If all women in the town start reporting what is said or intimated to them, let alone when they are touched, the police will have no time to deal with anything else; is this an environment the council is happy to foster?

Councils are legally bound by equality law to take measures to eliminate harassment, victimisation and discrimination of women - yet every year, despite protests from those of us who have to put up with this, you continue to allow these places to operate. Please read below why you can - and SHOULD - be refusing this and other applications - and that you can be held legally accountable if you do not.

<https://notbuyingit.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/documents/SheffieldShame.pdf>

By allowing this licence and others, Cheltenham Borough Council are breaching my human right to free movement. I should be able to walk around the town where I live, where I pay council tax, and indeed which I was at one point proud of - without feeling dirty, ashamed, uncomfortable or intimidated.

For once, please, please take the views of the women and men who protest SEVs seriously. We are in 2020, yet we are still having these battles.

Cheltenham could be, and should be, better than this.