

Public Sector Equality Duty

We were encouraged by the discussion of the Public Sector Equality Duty during the Committee Meeting of 4 October 2023. Councillors asked questions about discrimination or inequality specifically relating to the applicant and the venue. There was also discussion about taking a 'gender neutral' approach in terms of the application of SEV policy and consideration of the protected characteristic of disability.

Unfortunately, what councillors failed to do was engage with the wider issues of an industry where women are sexually objectified and the idea that men are entitled to access women's bodies is reinforced.

As equality law expert Karon Monaghan KC put it to the Women and Equalities Committee in 2018, Sexual Entertainment Venues *"have an impact on the wider community because they promote the idea that sexual objectification of women and sexual harassment commonly in those environments is lawful and acceptable...How are we [licensing SEVs] in the 21st century? We are not going to get rid of sexual violence if we mandate the sexual objectification of women in licensed venues."*

We were told that there was no evidence in Cheltenham of a link between the lap dancing club and harassment and violence towards women and girls. But research clearly tells us that there is a link between sexist and misogynistic attitudes, a culture that perpetuates and reinforces these messages and the perpetration of sexual violence. Lap dancing contributes to a culture that reinforces sexist and misogynistic attitudes.

- A study for The Journal of Sex Research found that more than half of the men interviewed visited strip clubs to escape social conventions and rules that required them to treat women as equals. One contributor commented that, *"With all of this sexual harassment stuff going around these days, men need somewhere to go where they can act like they want."*¹
- A review for the Government Equalities Office in 2020, found that there was strong evidence of a link between the sexual objectification of women and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours towards women.²
- A 2011 research study of women who perform in lap dancing clubs found that over half of participants reported frequent incidents of sexual assault.³

¹ Frank, K. (2005). Exploring the motivations and fantasies of strip club customers in relation to legal regulations. Archives of Sexual Behavior, 34(5), 487-504

² GEO (2020). The Relationship Between Pornography Use and Harmful Sexual Behaviours: Literature Review.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/952526/The_Relationship_between_Pornography_use_and_Harmful_Sexual_Attitudes_and_Behaviours-_literature_review.pdf

³Sanders, T., & Campbell, R. (2012). The Regulatory Dance: Sexual Consumption in the Night Time Economy – Briefing for Licensing Practitioners. University of Leeds.

Dear Licensing Team

Date: 10 November 2023

SEV Licence Application - 23/01596/SEXA

We are writing on behalf of our members to object to the application submitted by Red Apple Associates Limited to allow for lap dancing at Jessop House, 30 Cambray Place, Cheltenham to coincide with race meets at Cheltenham Racecourse. We are disappointed but not at all surprised that the applicant has submitted an application for year round lap dancing.

We refer to our letter of objection dated 10 September 2023 which details our concerns relating to the impact on the lives of women and girls of Cheltenham (both women working in the sex trade and women and girls in the wider community), which we believe should be considered as part of Cheltenham Borough Council's Public Sector Equality Duty in deciding the outcome of this application.

Lap dancing clubs - where women are sexually objectified and the idea that men are entitled to access women's bodies is reinforced - contribute to harmful sexist and misogynistic attitudes that underpin the endemic abuse, harassment and violence against women and girls in society.

We attach the full results of GlosWomen's Race Week survey (Please see '**Appendix**'). As mentioned previously, women reported feeling unsafe in Cheltenham during Race Week and a number of respondents felt that the presence of lap dancing reinforced the sexual objectification of women and girls.

Sex equality concerns not 'moral objections'

GlosWomen, along with a number of other objectors, attended and contributed to the Licensing Committee Meeting on 4 October 2023, where a variation of an existing licence at Under the Prom was granted to allow for lap dancing to take place during the November race meet.

We were pleased that objections made on the basis of sex equality concerns were not dismissed by the Licensing Committee as 'moral objections', as has been the case previously. We hope this change in approach will allow for more detailed consideration of the impact of the sex trade on women and girls and how this contributes to sexist and misogynistic attitudes that drive male violence against women and girls in society.

It was also positive to hear of the new survey launched by the Cheltenham Community Safety Partnership to understand how safe women feel in the evening and at night in the town centre, as well as a commitment to consult with local women on the proposed Pledge for Women's Safety.

- A 2013 United Nations study found that for men who admitted subjecting women to rape, the most frequently cited motivation was a belief in their entitlement to sex.⁴

Councillors must also consider the fact that the majority of sexual harassment and violence is not reported by women and girls. We live in a culture that normalises such abuse, blames women for the violence they are subjected to and, if women do report, a criminal justice system that routinely fails and re-traumatises them.

Our research showed that over half of the women and girls surveyed had experienced sexual comments or noises, such as catcalling or wolf whistling during Race Week, while a third experienced unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature, such as kissing, brushing up against someone.

Councillors have previously heard evidence from the Cheltenham Guardians of the numerous interventions that they have to make during Race Week, to prevent women from being cornered by men.

The Licensing Committee will also no doubt be aware of recent press coverage of Cheltenham Race Week in The Sun and The Daily Star, where a male patron enthusiastically described the lap dancing club and women working there as “three floors of wh***s”. This is derogatory and misogynistic language and an example of the attitudes reinforced by lap dancing.

Supply and demand

It seems clear from the pattern of Sexual Entertainment Venue licence applications (which always coincide with race meets) that lap dancing only becomes viable at times when racegoers, with cash to spend, arrive in town. Even then, it seems that significant effort is needed to drum up business. The applicant always requests variations to the SEV policy standard conditions to allow for leafleting, the running of a minibus (to advertise and transport patrons) and to extend operating hours.

By granting a licence for year round lap dancing, particularly on terms that allow for extended operating hours and advertising and solicitation, Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) are complicit in creating demand for lap dancing, which contributes to a culture that reinforces sexist and misogynistic attitudes towards women.

We are often told that CBC’s hands are tied in respect of the grant of Sexual Entertainment Venue licences because it is a legal activity and due to the existence of the frequency exemption. However, CBC’s own Sexual Entertainment Policy allows for a nil cap for SEV licences.

4

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/9/half-of-men-report-using-violence-and-a-quarter-perpetrate-rape-according-to-un-survey>

In respect of the frequency exemption, the relevant legislation does allow for these provisions to be repealed and we would hope that CBC will use whatever influence it may have to call for such a change.

We hope that the Licensing Committee will show their commitment to ending the sexual objectification and commodification of women by refusing this application.

Yours faithfully

Gloucestershire Women's Liberation Collective (GlosWomen)

About GlosWomen

GlosWomen is a women's liberation collective, bringing together women from all over the county of Gloucestershire, who share a vision of a world where women and girls can live free from male violence and all manifestations of misogyny. We aim to bring about change through activism, discussion and raising the voices of women and girls.



Appendix - GlosWomen's Race Week Survey

Please see separate PDF attachment