

CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL

Item No 3.1

REGULATORY COMMITTEE

5 February 2024

DEPUTATION REQUESTS

Subject	Deputation
3.1 In relation to item 7.1 - Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2015 - Licensing of Sexual Entertainment Venues	Sex Workers Union (verbal and written submissions)

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25th January 2024

FAO Councillor Neil Ross, Councillor Jack Caldwell, Councillor Denis Dixon, Councillor Margaret Arma Graham, Councillor Martha Mattos Coelho, Councillor Joanna Mowat, Councillor Susan Rae, Councillor Val Walker, Councillor Norman Work

Please find below the deputation statement from Sex Workers Union (Branch 600 at Bakers and Food Allied Workers Union) for the meeting to be commenced on 5th Feb 2024. Sex Workers Union (SWU) consists of workers across all aspects of the sex industry who trade their own sexual labour, we do not represent bosses or management. Our membership consists of strippers who currently work at the SEVs in Edinburgh.

This deputation has been written with direct consultation and input from the affected dancers in Edinburgh, as well as dancers across England, Scotland and Wales who kindly contributed their direct knowledge and input from their own experiences on how SEV licensing affects them. ECC has already heard from many dancers working in SEVs about how their job has given them strong community support and networks, the opportunities to study, start businesses, provide for themselves and their dependents, and to spend quality time with their families. Strippers are in a unique position within the sex industry due to legal workplaces; this has given rise to union membership alongside the benefits of strong peer and community support. We hope you find the information below useful and greatly encourage you to take the voices of the workers most affected by decisions surrounding SEV licensing into account, and to work with SWU to improve labour rights and working conditions for workers.

Throughout the consultation process SWU have stressed the importance of keeping venues open to provide economic security to the many dancers dependent upon this industry. Forcing women to find new jobs in a tough economic climate during the cost of living crisis is extremely questionable for a City Council that has a duty of care towards all their constituents, including dancers. Edinburgh City Council needs to take into consideration various factors such as costs of childcare, mental health, disability, workplace flexibility and other discriminations that leave stripping as the best, if not only, option for a predominantly female workforce.

“Opportunities beyond stripping”

Some councillors have spoken at length about providing work opportunities beyond stripping. This is easier said than done, though we have received little support from such councillors on this subject despite our attempts at meeting with them to discuss this.

The stigma tied to sex work is a great hurdle faced by dancers when trying to leave stripping. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, to explain resume gaps. Many dancers are also concerned about being taken seriously when it comes to the transferable skills they have acquired during dancing. Partly due to this, many of them do not wish to replace dancing with another profession. The new job might not be an appropriate fit for their life circumstances and specific needs. Stripping (like many other forms of sex work) offers a greater degree of flexibility and more accommodations compared to other jobs. Many dancers are single mothers or individuals with mental or physical disabilities that impact their ability to hold down more structured jobs. Mothers in particular, especially those on single income

households, face various structural disadvantages when it comes to access to employment and childcare. For example, £6.49 per hour is the average cost per child for an Edinburgh nursery. Minimum wage is £10.90 per hour. This leaves mothers on minimum wage with an average of £4.41ph left over after childcare. If they worked 8 hours a day that is £35.28. If they worked full time at five days a week it is £176.4 a week. It's simply not a liveable wage and especially infeasible during the current cost of living crisis. Unless these structural issues are resolved, women including caregivers and those without family wealth and support will continue to seek out sex work as an income generating activity and it is imperative that their safety is paramount to and prioritised by ECC.

Furthermore, due to the lack of communication from those same councillors who were allegedly willing to support dancers in finding alternative work, alongside the cuts to public funds, we have no faith that such measures will be taken.

Involving dancers in the consultation process

Dancers are an integral part of the industry and as a result we would like to know how the Council plans to include them as stakeholders when a licence is up for renewal. We understand that pressure groups and charities (none of which exclusively work with sex workers) are informed when a licence is being applied for, and owners of the clubs are also contacted as stakeholders. We believe if ECC genuinely cares about women's wellbeing then dancers would be positioned first and foremost as important stakeholders in the process. SWU will always welcome the opportunity to contribute towards discussions on how to create safer and fairer working environments for dancers.

Material repercussions of SEV licensing

We would like to know why the council decided to try to close down workplaces with growing union presence instead of seeing this as a benefit and an opportunity for Edinburgh to lead the way across the whole of the UK, bringing the strip club industry into 2024.

SWU firmly believes that the cap should be set above the currently operating three clubs to avoid endorsing a monopoly. Creating a monopoly by capping the number of SEV licences at three will concentrate all of the Edinburgh industry within three businesses. A councillor-imposed monopoly will give the current clubs no incentive to improve conditions as dancers are left with no alternative. With no new innovative businesses with better working conditions, dancers who wish to run their own

co-operative nights without bosses will also not be able to. Pushing dancers further into the hands of possibly exploitative bosses during a cost of living crisis goes directly against ECC's duty of care for their constituents.

With the current cost of living crisis, more people are seeking to supplement their income with sex work. We have seen this across our networks as former sex workers reappear asking for advice on returning to the industry, as well as a lot of women looking to start dancing as a direct result of the current economic climate. Currently, the number of dancers vastly outstrips the demand and club owners can be quick to take advantage of the situation. With fewer venues in operation, this power imbalance will be exacerbated.

Our members convene that following club closures the first reaction is for dancers to travel to other cities in order to work. This is not a viable option for everyone: it is harder for people without a car, as public transport timetables do not always match a night job schedule and the cost of overnight stays adds an extra expense that not everyone can afford. Night buses can often be rowdy, and take a long time, especially late at night or early in the morning. Women with young children are left exhausted the following day. This situation affects performers with children and/or dependents the most, as they are often unable to arrange childcare for longer hours or weekends away – it may prove too costly or simply unfeasible.

Some might opt instead to work outside of club spaces, offering private shows in hotels, Airbnbs, and people's homes. It is evident as to why this is problematic: the performers would face greater danger working without the support of security staff or CCTV. Others yet may give up dancing altogether to move onto more dangerous and criminalised forms of sex work.

ECC needs to understand that dancing and sex work is an income generating activity often with very little barriers to entry, and immediate access to cash. This provides the necessary resources people need to survive, especially during this cost of living crisis. Pushing vulnerable women into destitution during a cost of living crisis should be a concern for ECC and we encourage councillors to take into consideration these very real and material factors at play when considering SEV licensing.

Personal impacts on dancers

Since 2018 when this consultation started, dancers have faced years of uncertainty that has taken an immense toll on their mental health. It has also tied up much of our time and resources when SWU wishes to focus on improving workplace

conditions for women, a focus the council claims to supposedly care about. The precarity of work within the industry, with dancers being subject to the whims of club owners, will only increase if venues close or gain a monopoly, again affecting mental health and income.

We have already highlighted the benefits of legal workspaces in terms of community and peer support. Isolation amongst sex workers who do not have a workplace or work in criminalised workplaces and conditions exacts a huge mental toll and leaves them open to higher risks such as violent clients and exploitative management. This is something the council should not be encouraging.

Licensing suggestions

We have identified a few main issues around the introduction of the new licensing policy. We strongly encourage the licensing committee to take them into consideration.

1. The egregious cost of licensing fees should be reconsidered. While it might seem on the surface that business owners are the ones absorbing it, it is almost invariably passed down to dancers in the form of increased house fees, higher percentages per dance, or other kinds of fees. The same applies to the cost of legal representation for clubs during the licence renewal process. Through fighting for worker status in employment tribunals, SWU is actively trying to end these exploitative practices and ECC can help by actively encouraging clubs to let their dancers unionise and have a say in their workplace conditions.
2. The ongoing pressure from small but vocal pressure groups to close down strip clubs means that the annual licence renewal comes with stress and uncertainty that other licensed premises and their staff do not have to encounter. This discourages workers from reporting exploitative incidences for fear of repercussion upon the premises. When something happens, dancers may choose to avoid contacting the police for fear of the club losing its licence and therefore the dancer losing their livelihood. The perpetrator going unpunished is a preferable scenario than everyone in the building losing their source of income. This is something that staff in other licensed venues do not have to consider and we urge ECC to take this into consideration in the way such premises are licensed.
3. We disagree with the Scottish Government's statement that all forms of sex work is violence against women and girls. In framing sex work this way, as

conceptual and ideological violence against women and girls, it negates the very real and physical incidences of violence and assault that happen to workers on their job. It becomes impossible to talk about genuine physical violence that can occur if the work itself is framed by state policy as being inherently violent - how can you complain about violence at work when your work is seen as violence in itself? It is imperative that the Equally Safe strategy takes this into consideration when framing all incidences of commercial sexual labour as violence.

We tentatively look forward to hearing about the conclusions of your meeting and urge you to seriously consider the points raised above during your discussions.

Sex Workers Union at Bakers and Food Allied Workers Union

On behalf of dancers in Edinburgh