

# Open letter against a nil-cap on SEVs

Dear Bristol City Council,

On the 8th of March 2021 Bristol City Council's licensing committee held a meeting to debate the future of the city's Sexual Entertainment Venues (SEVs) otherwise known as strip clubs. At this meeting, Bristol's licensing committee voted in favour of putting a proposed nil-cap policy to a 12-week public consultation. A nil-cap would make the two remaining clubs unable to renew their licence, effectively closing them permanently once their current licences expire.

The two strip clubs currently licensed in Bristol are Urban Tiger and Central Chambers. These are both family-owned businesses and female run, both are located in central Bristol. They are in good standing with Avon and Somerset Police, Bristol Nightlife and The Bristol Association of Restaurants, Bars and Independent Establishments (BARBIE).

These venues employ approximately 100 workers, including performers, hospitality staff, security and cleaners as well as providing a host of other benefits to the business community, suppliers and the wider local night-time economy. Most of those working at these venues have been out of work for over a year due to COVID. Some of them have been unable to access any financial support.

The women who chose to work in those establishments have done so for a multitude of reasons. Financial stability and flexible work shifts are the main ones, but also they do so to support themselves through education, to support their families, to work around childcare, to care for disabled family members, and many more including that they like the job. Closing these establishments would remove a key source of income for them, pushing the majority of them into either unemployment, precarious employment or underground work which would directly impact their safety.

In many cities in which nil-caps have been introduced, strip clubs have either gone underground, or dancers have resorted to working at private parties. In both cases, the performers face a huge lack of safety and an increase in violence. Pushing the industry underground does not decrease demand and removes the option of a safe working environment for these workers.

The current SEV license policy was introduced in Bristol in 2011. Licences are renewed annually, set out strict CCTV and security regulations, and are in addition to the other licences and health and safety requirements necessary to run a hospitality and live entertainment venue. There is a very extensive set of conditions that SEVs must adhere to in order to retain their licenses including a strict no-contact rule between dancers and customers, no dancing in enclosed areas, CCTV coverage of the venue, no outward marketing including ensuring no leaflets or posters, billboards or adverts are visible from outside the venue, no personal contact details to be shared between customer and performer, and more... CCTV is reviewed regularly by both police and members of the council and visits are frequently made to ensure the policy is being adhered to.

There have been no license breaches by the two currently operating clubs.

All of the dancers undergo identity checks when starting employment to ensure they have the right to work in the UK and have no criminal record. Contrary to the myth that anti strip club campaigners try to spread, it is not possible that any of the workers are "pimped out" or victims of human trafficking. All of the workers are consenting adults.

A significant number of the dancers are members of the United Sex Workers (USW) branch of the United Voices of the World union and are members of Equity. This allows them to organise and ensure fair working conditions and rights which they would be unable to do should their work be pushed underground. USW has also worked with dancers to create a progressive SEV policy in Camden and Edinburgh; there is an opportunity for Bristol to follow in their footsteps and create policy that centres the experiences and rights of the workers instead of giving credence to a puritanical and misogynistic minority who blame women, in particular sex workers, for the violence of men and the hyper-sexualisation of women in mainstream culture.

In 2019, Bristol City Council (BCC) spent thousands of pounds on a public consultation which showed that approximately 66% of Bristol residents were happy with the current number of SEVs and did not object to them. Why would the council, two and half years later, spend thousands again on another similar public consultation? It seems BCC is not going to accept any other answer from its residents than the one it wants to receive and does not respect their already-stated will.

One of the main arguments presented to argue for the nil-cap is that SEVs increase the rate of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in its surrounding areas. This is simply not true. [Avon and Somerset Police's Cumulative Impact Assessment](#) showed that from 2018-2020 neither venues were a source of concern for sexual assault in or around their premises. One venue was not even mentioned.

If the aim of BCC is to tackle VAWG in the city centre, it is strange that a club such as Pryzm - which has a sexual assault rate five times higher than Central Chambers and Urban Tiger combined - is under no threat of closure.

Statistics have also been collected from Swansea, Chester and Exeter; cities in which nil-caps have been introduced in the last few years. The closure of SEVs in those cities have shown to have had absolutely **no** impact whatsoever on reducing VAWG, the rates of sexual assault actually increased in the years following the nil-caps. There was a similar trend with Jack of Diamonds, a strip club in Old Market that lost its license in 2017. Freedom of Information data shows that violent crimes and sexual assault has risen despite it no longer being an SEV.

On multiple occasions, councillors mentioned the existence of documents which supposedly prove that the presence of SEVs has a negative impact on their surrounding area. The Bristol Sex Workers Collective (BSWC) reached out to the council on a number of occasions to ask for access to this "evidence", but was only ever met by silence. Official requests were also turned down for questionable reasons.

The current SEV policy in Bristol clearly states that moral judgments have absolutely no place when making decisions on the licensing of the establishments. As demonstrated, figures show that SEVs do not have any negative impact on crime, are safe working environments and have better regulation in place than most regular venues. We believe that shutting those places down would therefore be discriminatory, unlawful and infringe the Equality Act by taking away women's bodily autonomy and choices. And we are not alone: the BSWC started a [petition](#) against the closure of SEVs and has already gathered over 6,000 signatures so far.

We demand that Bristol City Council respects the law, democracy and honours workers' rights by voting against the proposed nil-cap.

Signatories:

Bristol Sex Workers Collective

- Megan Prescott, influencer
- Dr Katie Cruz, Senior Lecturer in Law, University of Bristol
- Dr Egle Cesnulyte, Lecturer in Politics/International development, deputy director of the Gender Research Centre, University of Bristol
- Dr. Anastacia Ryan - founder Umbrella Lane, Sex Worker Wellbeing Project , Scotland
- Prerna Menon - Coordinator Umbrella Lane, Sex Worker Wellbeing Project, Scotland
- Berlin Strippers Collective
- English Collective of Prostitutes
- Prof Jutta Weldes, University of Bristol
- Dr Jessica Paddock, University of Bristol
- Dr Chris Rossdale, University of Bristol
- Prof Teela Sanders, University of Leicester
- Dr Rosie Nelson, University of Bristol
- Dr Polly Galis, University of Bristol
- Dr Jessica Simpson, London School of Economics
- Paul W Fleming, General Secretary, Equity
- Simon Curtis, National and Regional Official - Wales and South West England, Equity
- National SEV Coalition
- Momentum Bristol
- Adam Brittain, Operations Director of BARBI
- Dr Carolina Are, researcher, blogger and activist at [bloggeronpole.com](http://bloggeronpole.com)
- United Sex Workers
- Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Bristol branch
- Hannah Nicholls, Pink Kitten Dance School
- Lily Fitzgibbons, Green Councillor for Bishopston and Ashley Down
- Young Greens
- All Black Lives UK
- East London Strippers Collective CIC
- Cleo Lake, activist and former Lord Mayor
- Bristol Labour Against Transphobia
- Cllr Ani Stafford-Townsend
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