

Object and Fawcett Society Press Release

Government's proposed reforms to lap dancing club licensing too weak

As MPs debate lap dancing club licensing reforms (1), Object (2) and the Fawcett Society (3) are urging the Government to close loopholes in Home Office proposals. The proposed reforms would leave venues hosting lap dancing less than once a month exempt from tighter regulation and leave local people facing a 'postcode lottery' as to whether they get a say in licensing decisions.

Following intensive campaigning by Object and the Fawcett Society the Home Office has proposed reforms that will put an end to the absurdity of lap dancing clubs being licensed in the same way as cafes and restaurants. Instead they will be licensed as 'Sex Encounter Venues' (4). This new legislation has the potential to deliver real change, giving local authorities greater regulatory powers and enabling more local people to object to license applications on a wider set of grounds than presently allowed. However, the proposals as they stand are flawed:

- The legislation is optional – local authorities wouldn't be required to adopt it, thereby failing to guarantee all local people a greater say in the licensing of lap dancing clubs.
- The proposals exempt venues hosting lap dancing less than once a month. This will likely fuel an expanding sub-market of lap dancing agencies out-sourcing 'lap dancing nights' to pubs and clubs.

The Government is also facing pressure from other quarters. Councillors have today written an open letter in the Guardian warning that the optional nature of the reforms will lead to a 'postcode lottery' in which some local communities can have a say in the licensing of lap dancing clubs, whilst others remain powerless (5). MPs have also been putting forward amendments that would make the reforms mandatory and applicable to all venues hosting lap dancing, however often it is provided (6).

Dr Sasha Rakoff, Director of Object commented:

"Thanks to inadequate licensing, local communities countrywide have found themselves unable to have a say in the opening of lap dancing clubs – venues which reinforce sexist attitudes and create 'no go areas' for many women. Whilst we welcome the Government's commitment to tackling this, making the reforms optional is a fatal flaw which will seriously undermine their impact. It will see only some local communities empowered in licensing processes and create a 'patchwork' of licensing regimes likely to be exploited by the industry.

It is crucial that licensing reforms offer a real solution to what is a very real problem - as shown by overwhelming public support for Object and Fawcett Society's campaign. We urge the Government to ensure this is achieved by making the reforms universal across England and Wales."

Dr Katherine Rake, Director of the Fawcett Society commented:

"It is crucial the Government honours its pledge of giving local communities a stronger say in stopping lap dancing clubs opening. But the proposals fail to make the grade. Local people would be faced with a 'postcode lottery' as to whether they do get a greater say, and a lucrative market of 'lap dancing nights' in pubs and clubs, catered for by lap dancing agencies, would flourish unabated by the new regulations.

“Lap dancing fuels a sexist culture in which women are treated as ‘sex objects’, and areas surrounding lap dancing clubs can become ‘no go’ areas for women. Piecemeal regulation of the industry is not enough. Every local person should be guaranteed a say in the licensing of lap dancing in their area, however frequently individual venues host it.”

**For further information and to request interviews please contact
Kat Banyard (Fawcett Society) on 0207253 2598 / 07775 855037
or Sandrine Leveque (Object) on 07975 897005**

Notes to Editor

- (1) Reforms to the licensing of lap dancing clubs are contained in the Home Office Policing and Crime Bill. MPs sitting on the Policing and Crime Bill Committee are currently debating the reforms. <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2008-09/policingandcrime.html>
- (2) Object is a human rights organisation that challenges sexism in the representation of women in the media and popular culture www.object.org.uk
- (3) The Fawcett Society is the UK’s leading campaign for women’s rights. www.fawcettsociety.org.uk
- (4) The reforms will give local councils the same controls that currently apply to sex shops and sex cinemas. Despite offering live entertainment for sexual stimulation lap dancing clubs currently require only a Premises Licence – the same licence applicable to cafes and restaurants.
- (5) The letter has been signed by Councillor Antonia Bance, Oxford City; Cllr Rania Khan, London Borough of Tower Hamlets; Cllr Jeane Lepper, Deputy Chair Licensing Committee, Brighton and Hove City Council; Cllr Gill Mitchell, Leader of the Labour Group, Brighton and Hove City Council; Cllr David Pearson, Blackburn with Darwen Council; Nancy Platts, Labour Parliamentary Candidate Brighton Pavillion; Cllr Rachael Saunders, London Borough of Tower Hamlets.
- (6) Amendment 78 tabled by Lynda Waltho MP would remove the ‘less than once a month’ exemption from Clause 25, Part 2 of the Policing and Crime Bill, and Amendments 62 and 63 tabled by Roberta Blackman-Woods would see the reforms become universal across England and Wales.