

# Proposed council position on sex work 'dangerous' warns union

Plans for Edinburgh Council to officially adopt a position that sex work is 'not a valid form of work' have been described as "dangerous" by a union warning it will lead to further harm.

As the Scottish Government seeks to implement its 'Equally Safe' strategy, local authorities have been asked to have a 'clear position statement in place that recognises commercial sexual exploitation as a form of violence against women and girls'.

Last week city councillors were set to debate the controversial move, which wouldn't result in any immediate changes but could influence how strip clubs are regulated in future and other policy decision-making.

However a report containing the one-page statement was pulled from the policy and sustainability committee at the last minute to give members more time to consider the impact. It is due to be tabled again in October.

Since taking power at the City Chambers in 2022 the Labour administration has made two failed attempts to end the operation of the city's 'sexual entertainment venues' (SEVs) by setting the maximum number of venues at zero, and has

supported this new position being adopted.

If approved it would be the official view of the council that sex work, which includes “escorting, camming, sugar daddying/sugar mummying, online videos and galleries, peep shows, and live sex shows”, is not a “valid form of work and / or a civil right, which should be legalised and regulated”.

But Sex Workers’ Union, who defeated the council in court over its first bid to ban strip clubs, said it was “an inherently dangerous position for the council to dictate that all sex work is exploitation and violence”.

And it criticised the authority for not directly engaging with sex workers or pro-decriminalisation organisations about the plans before putting them in front of councillors.

“It not only removes sex workers ability to decide for themselves where they have and have not experienced violence, but removes our ability to access workers’ rights, which would enable us to fight against any exploitation in our workplaces,” a spokesperson for the union said.



Cllr Mandy Watt Deputy Leader of the Council PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

Deputy council leader Mandy Watt said: “Job fairs, careers advice at school, job centres. It’s not a valid form of work because none of those are entry routes to that type of work – and rightly so.

“Therefore their [SWU’s] argument that it’s just a job like any other, it’s not.

“There’s already been a lot of consultation and research done by experts that is contained within the report.

“A large part of it is around societal attitudes and around the growth in accessing unsuitable material in schools; young people accessing pornography and stuff that leads to sexism, misogyny and objectification.”

Cllr Watt said SEV licensing has to be reviewed annually anyway, and it would be up to the regulatory committee to decide any changes. “We would invite the Equally Safe team to

have input to the committee and they would say this is our position on it," she added.

The report to councillors said there was "overwhelming support" for the position statement from "professionals across agencies, services, organisations and specialisms in Edinburgh".

It said this "demonstrates the widespread recognition of the harms of the sex industry in all its various forms, and its impacts on individuals, families, communities and society".

The aim of implementing it is to "further embed the Equally Safe strategy across Edinburgh and to improve service response to the needs of people affected by commercial exploitation".

The report admitted the council had been through "considerable turmoil" from the two attempts to set a 'nil cap' on SEVs, and the current policy which allows the existing three lap dancing bars to stay open 'is incongruent with the proposed position statement, which can lead to reputational risk for the council'.

It added: "Although not enforceable, the proposed position statement directly opposes both the licensing of SEVs as well as the legitimate existence of saunas in Edinburgh, thus contradicting existing policies in this area."

SWU called on councillors to reject it.

"Both national and international evidence, including from various UN working groups and bodies, demonstrates that further criminalising sex workers or their clients creates conditions where sex workers are more likely to be exploited and experience violence," the union said.

"If Edinburgh City Council is to make a policy decision that directly impacts sex workers, it not only needs to consult those workers, but make an evidence led decision – instead of

one informed by the councillors' subjective morals.

"Sex workers don't need councillors to "save" us, we need access to human rights, as well as the labour rights and legal protections that all workers are due, so we can enforce safe working conditions through collective worker power and trade union representation.

"We are sex workers and we will continue to oppose the Equally Safe strategy, because it is not safe for us."

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter