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WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY: More than 120 prostitutes ply their trade in Medway's red light district. Picture posed by model

New law signals clampdown on kerb crawlers

CONTROVERSIAL changes to prostitution laws have been welcomed by Medway councillor Craig Mackinley.

As part of a number of amendments announced by Home Secretary Jacqui Smith last week, anyone looking to pick up a prostitute now faces a fine of up to £1,000.

Those who knowingly pay illegally trafficked women for sex could be hit with rape charges, while kerb crawlers could face prosecution for a first offence.

The measures have been backed by Tory Cllr Mackinley, who represents a ward neighbouring the New Road area of Chatham – Medway's 'red light district'.

The notorious area has more than 120 street prostitutes, making it the biggest red light zone in the South East outside London.

The River ward councillor said: "Residents have been fighting for years for relief from the relentless prostitution which blights their lives.

"They not only have to cope with late-night noise but also the unpleasant aftermath of discarded condoms, needles and excrement.

"Sensibly, residents have long advocated greater powers against kerb crawlers on the simple premise that if you get rid of the user, you get rid of the problem.

"These new laws, with fines up to £1,000 for first-time kerb crawlers, if properly enforced, could bring welcome relief.

■ BY SIMON ROBINSON

"About a year ago there was a name-and-shame report in the local press about kerb crawlers found guilty in court.

There was a resulting – albeit short-term – downturn in street prostitution, so the strengthening of sanctions against kerb crawlers could have a significant effect."

Cllr Mackinley said the new laws would provide some relief for residents but may also add to the confusion surrounding what actions are legal and which are illegal.

He also argued that tougher measures could lead to the illegal side of the industry being forced further underground, putting more women at risk.

Despite the drawbacks, Cllr Mackinley said an outright ban on prostitution was equally problematic.

He said: "Banning prostitution would be unworkable, if not wrong in practice. If people want to transact for an activity, at a private location that does not interfere with anyone else, then that should be the end of the matter. But in the case of a ban, what constitutes paying for sex?"

"Cash, gifts, settling a bill, paying for a holiday, a meal? I think you can foresee the problems."

Currently it is not illegal for someone aged 18 or over to work as a prostitute in off-street premises. Buying and selling sex is also legal, but soliciting and pimping are not.



SANCTIONS WELCOME:
Cllr Craig Mackinley