

J.C. W.P.

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Action on bars wins approval

By PETER TOPPING

Government departments have welcomed the publicity being given to rip-off bars but say the problem is difficult to solve.

Vague laws are one difficulty. There is also the fear that tourists will be scared off altogether.

Hongkong Tourist Authority spokeswoman Ms Penny Byrnes ruled out an HKTA blacklist of bars.

She reiterated advice given to all tourists arriving in Hongkong — use HKTA member shops, restaurants and bars.

"The HKTA supports any moves that improve protection for tourists, but we are not a policing body," she said.

"Complaints passed to the association can only be dealt with by due process of law."

The Legal Department considers the Trade Descriptions Ordinance to be of little use against overcharging in bars.

A Liquor Licensing Board official said it would be impossible to regulate the

price of a drink or the "services" that pad out the rip-off bills.

Unhappy customers can bring deception charges against bars under the Theft Ordinance, but as a Crown counsel pointed out, if a customer does not ask the price of drinks he cannot be deceived.

If a person claims he is intimidated into paying an exorbitant bill, a section of the Crimes Ordinance on Criminal Intimidation could be used.

The section deals with threats made to a person with the intention of alarming him, making him do something illegal, or omitting an act he is legally entitled to do.

Most tourists do not have time to stay and give evidence that they were intimidated into paying. Only assault speeds the process up and convictions following such strong-arm methods have been made recently.

The Government's inter-departmental committee on retail malpractice last month called for action.

Representatives from Customs and Excise, the Consumer Council, the Legal De-

partment, the police, HKTA, and the Economic Services Branch will meet again in another three months to check if there has been any progress.

Since their meeting last month police in Tsimshatsui, the area with most of the problem bars, carried out an extensive survey and sent details to the Liquor Licensing Board.

The board has the power under the Dutiable Commodities Ordinance to impose conditions on a liquor licence, or even revoke it, but officials say they will seek legal advice before acting on police information.

Mr Peter Chan, chairman of the Liquor Licensing Board, agreed that the problem should receive "utmost attention, top priority," and that he would raise the matter at an open meeting next Wednesday.

Major credit card companies confirmed that they are willing to support moves initiated by the Consumer Council to revoke accreditation of bars that are the subject of continued complaints, saying such a move would improve standards here.