

Should Hong Kong legalise prostitution and can the territory learn lessons from the sex cities of Europe? THOMAS LARKIN reports.

A green light on red-light world

FOR 10 years, Hong Kong's finest minds have been wrestling with the thorny issue of whether to establish a formal red-light district in an attempt to control the territory's rampant prostitution.

Despite the ongoing debate in public and private, legislators are still no nearer reaching a decision. However, authorities in European cities where there are established red-light districts consider official licensing to be the only way to limit the spread of AIDS, to prevent children from getting involved in the vice trade and to keep an industry susceptible to crime as clean as possible.

Hong Kong's Fight Crime Committee two weeks ago once again raised the subject, first suggested by Mongkok police who control the heartland of the territory's prostitution problem. Typically, by the time discussion ended, members were still divided.

Committee member Peter Wong Man-kong said the Government must "face reality" and consider a red-light area as part of an overall review of policy on sex issues. But critics say legalising prostitution would encourage more people to consider the profession and lead to an increase in sex crimes, such as rape.

European capitals known for prostitution, such as Amsterdam and Hamburg, already have "official" red-light districts and say they are more than happy to keep them going. Amsterdam's Town Hall spokesman, Robert Christensen, agrees prostitution "is accepted as part of reality".

"It is the world's oldest profession and can't be stopped; even if we wanted to. The Dutch might not have a positive attitude to prostitution but it is accepted as part of reality. It is formally prohibited, but authorities turn a blind eye and businesses of this kind flourish."

Amsterdam's red-light district lies in the areas of Voorburgwal and Achterburgwal, in the west of the city, and Town Hall is introducing new pro-

cedures to formalise its control.

Under Dutch law, the trade is still forbidden but the Government will legalise women (and some men) in the New Year through a licensing system.

This, they say, will prevent the number of brothels from expanding and control the existing ones. Under the new proposals, the brothel's owner, whose name will be on the non-transferable licence, will be responsible for the health of the prostitutes.

Management will also have to allow prostitutes to refuse customers, and be held responsible if under-age girls are found working there. The location will also be controlled and licences will keep the trade away from sensitive areas such as churches and sports clubs, which might attract children.

Hartmut Kapp, head of public relations for the Hamburg police, said: "It is easy for police to control prostitution when there is a separate and known area. It is very seldom that a problem occurs in the prostitution area and, if there is, it is something that can be solved."

BUT Hamburg police say they are starting to notice an alarming trend: "There are more and more people setting up as prostitutes on the roadsides. Most are working for themselves and have drug habits such as cocaine and heroin. Our most recent reports show that up to 80 per cent of them are HIV carriers. But we can't measure it because they are not within our control," said Mr Kapp.

Another problem is the introduction of under-age girls from former communist countries such as Poland and East Germany. Police say they are being tricked into coming to Hamburg and then violently threatened to work as prostitutes.

Gangs are also moving in from the former Yugoslavia to establish a network of organised crime in the city. But police say criminal control over the trade is already strong.