

A new look at hawkers

The Urban Council is to be commended for giving Hongkong's oldest social-commercial-law enforcement-cleanliness-hygiene-health-congestion-traffic-estate-and-no-doubt-many-other-side-issues problem yet another airing. If Mr Joseph Chan jumped the gun yesterday by stating that Mrs Elsie Elliott's working group had "recommended sweeping changes" we can all contain our patience and wait for its final report.

And if the working group can succeed, where many others have failed, in finding an overall long-term solution, Hongkong will be deeply in its debt. The idea of licensing all illegal hawkers is not a new one and it has some attractions. If that is to be the thrust of the group's recommendations, let us hope that by giving it full consideration we can work out a solution acceptable to all.

There were last year about 26,000 licensed street traders in the urban areas, of whom about 2,000 were in off-street bazaars. In addition there were about 7,200 street traders who frequent public housing estates in the urban area. More than a year ago, the then Secretary for Health and Welfare, Mr Henry Ching, told Legislative Council there were about 19,000 habitual illegal hawkers plying their trade, despite enforcement action, the vast majority in the urban areas.

The figures undoubtedly change from time to time and no doubt if word gets around that the Council is to throw open licences to all comers, there will be many more than 19,000 applicants. The chairman of the Council's markets and street traders committee, Mr Shum Choi-sang, estimated that if all hawkers are to be cleared from the streets, about 90 new markets will have to be set up. He didn't put a monetary figure on that but bearing in mind the Council's chronic financial problems, his estimate that it would take eight to 10 years to build those markets is probably well short of the mark.

Moreover, while legalising the hawking trade fully or almost fully, would resolve the problem of illegal traders, they would need increased supervision. And indeed licences would have to specify very clearly the restrictions so that we are not simply inviting urban chaos. The cases of cooked food trolleys last year are a clear pointer to the damage and injury they can cause.

But none can dismiss the importance of hawkers both as a convenience to the public, and to the economy as a whole. The Economic Services Secretary, Mr Piers Jacobs, estimated they contributed about \$1 billion to the economy or about .6 per cent of total GDP. However, we do need to make it possible for them to operate in a way where they continue to provide a service to the public with the minimum disruption to others.

From what she said on Radio Hongkong yesterday morning, Mrs Elliott is fully aware of the problems and is holding discussions widely with Government departments. If at the end of these she and the working party can come up with recommendations that will enable the Urban and New Territories District Councils to offer a new deal on hawking, that will be widely appreciated. The problem has been with us since Year One and we are certain it will continue long after 1997. How to make it socially acceptable must be our chief concern.