

Police chiefs u-turn on cannabis classification

By John Steele, Crime Correspondent

Last Updated: 2:31am GMT 21/11/2007

Police chiefs have come out in support of reclassifying cannabis as a Class B drug just three years after they supported the controversial Government decision to downgrade it legally to a less serious Class C substance.

Chief constables were in favour of the down-grading in 2004 because they believed it would free time spent on prosecuting cannabis users to tackle hard drugs.

Their view was heavily influential in the decision by the then-Home Secretary, David Blunkett.

However, they have reversed their stance because they now believe the downwards re-classification created confusion about the legality of the drug in the public mind and sent the wrong signals to teenagers, who suffer most from its harmful effects.

They are also concerned that organised crime gangs have targeted the UK, establishing thousands of back-street "cannabis factories" to grow the high-strength 'skunk' version of the drug.

The announcement by the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) comes weeks after the government's review into reclassification finished.

A final decision is expected next year, when the Government is expected to reclassify the drug.

Acpo will make its views clear to ministers and to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD).

Senior officers want the Government to consider the introduction of fixed penalty notices, currently for £80, for low-level cannabis possession - rather than the current cannabis "warnings".

If it re-classified the drug, the Government would have to decide whether to return the maximum penalty for possession to five years, after it was reduced to two years in 2004.

Tim Hollis, the Chief Constable of Humberside and chairman of Acpo drugs committee, said: "There is now a broad consensus. We would support re-classification of cannabis if that was the decision taken.

"There is growing evidence that the decision to down-grade from a B to a C drug led to confusion in many people's minds, particularly young people, about the legal status.



Chief constables believe the re-classification of cannabis sent the wrong signals to teens

"People are genuinely confused about where cannabis sits in the hierarchy. There is growing evidence of the potential harm cannabis can cause, particularly to teenagers. There is a disproportionate risk to young people, particularly from stronger cannabis."

Mr Hollis denied there had been a U-turn and added that Acpo had "acted with good faith and integrity when we argued (before the 2004 re-classification) and made representations for down-grading."

However, a great deal of evidence had emerged since about the risks of cannabis.

Mr Hollis warned that it would be "naive" to assume that re-classification would lead to more arrests of people with cannabis.

The power to arrest for drugs used to be geared to the classification of the drug and Class B possession was an arrestable offence.

Now, however, police have a general power of arrest if it is considered "necessary".

Mr Hollis commented: "Fixed penalty notices may become relevant."

In the last two years there has been a "proliferation" of cannabis factories in back street houses, run by Chinese and Vietnamese gangs using illegal labour, though hundreds have been closed by police.

He was speaking before the start of the annual Acpo drugs conference, in Cardiff, which heard evidence that overall cannabis consumption is falling but increasingly strong strains of the drug are fuelling a rise in mental illness - particularly psychotic ailments involving hallucinations, such as schizophrenia.

The decision also comes as a Government report revealed drug dealers were using prison as a chance to sell more drugs and grow their empires.

The Home Office's The Illicit Drug trade in the United Kingdom also reported low level drugs criminals, such as runners and storers, were receiving long prison sentences but seeing very little of the revenue their crimes earned, leaving those higher up the ladder making all the money.

French researchers at the University of Toulouse also reported evidence that young people who regularly used the drug were much more likely to consider taking their own lives than non-users.