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Lived experiences of cannabis among Londoners

**A summary report of research
conducted on behalf of The Mayor's
Office for Policing and Crime**

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1. Background and methodology

1.1 Background and objectives

This work was commissioned by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime on behalf of the London Drugs Commission (LDC). Set up by the Mayor of London in 2022 following his 2021 manifesto commitment, the LDC will consider a wide range of evidence regarding the impacts of use of recreational cannabis on people's lives and on communities in London. It also seeks to explore experiences in other parts of the world which have adopted alternative approaches to the control of cannabis, and how these could inform debate about the future of cannabis management in London.

The research conducted by Thinks Insight & Strategy sought to gather evidence on the lived experiences of recreational cannabis use among Londoners, specifically to examine:

- Attitudes towards cannabis use among users and non-users, including lived experiences, drivers of use, and impacts of use
- How cannabis use relates to health, where health considerations may act as both a driver and consequence of use
- How cannabis use relates to perceptions and experiences of engaging with the police and criminal justice system
- Perceptions of models for management of cannabis, including the current model and alternatives based on international examples

1.2 Methodology

In order to explore Londoners' experiences and their related views in depth, a qualitative approach was adopted.

The research took place on a specialist online community platform, allowing each participant to share their views in a private, secure forum, with only researchers able to see their responses and interact with them. Given the sensitive subject matter, it was key to offer participants the opportunity to take part anonymously and privately.

Over the course of five days, participants completed a series of tasks and activities, using a range of different tools such as short polls, video and audio submission, and several projective exercises (for example, asking participants to submit pictures they associate with cannabis), to suit individual communication preferences and needs. Conducting the research over this period of time gave participants room for reflection and allowed the research team to introduce new information and probe on previous responses as and when needed. Fieldwork was conducted from 14-19 October 2022.

Sampling

Participants were chosen to represent different experiences of and familiarity with the recreational use of cannabis, while also reflecting London's diversity. As this was qualitative research, participants were not recruited to be statistically representative of London's population, but rather purposive sampling techniques were deployed, meaning quotas were set to ensure the sample could be considered symbolically representative of the broader population and therefore likely to represent a spectrum of views.

Working with a specialist recruitment partner, participants were drawn from three London boroughs. Boroughs were selected on the basis of being representative of different levels of cannabis use as measured by criminal justice responses and varying socio-demographic traits, as well as being located in different parts of London. The boroughs have been intentionally anonymised to further protect the confidentiality of respondents.

The sample comprised a mix of those who have used (illegal) cannabis for recreational purposes (differentiated from legal CBD products and medically prescribed cannabis), who admit to knowing people who use cannabis, and those who feel cannabis use impacts their local area (e.g. visible use, dealing) but do not use it themselves or know users. The sample did not include participants with no experience of cannabis, whether first- or second-hand.

To ensure representation of a broad range of views, during the screening process participants' perceptions of the drivers of cannabis use were recorded, as well as their attitudes towards and experiences of the criminal justice system relating to cannabis use.

All participants were given the choice to take part in the research anonymously, with contingencies in place for safeguarding purposes.

Achieved sample

| 37 individuals completed the online community tasks, across 3 London boroughs | |
|--|---|
| Gender | 20 x women and 17 x men |
| Age | 9 x aged 18-25, 16 x aged 26-40, 8 x aged 41-60, 4 x aged 61+ |
| Ethnicity | 17 x from ethnic minority backgrounds, including Black African, Black Caribbean, South Asian, and mixed ethnic backgrounds, 20 x from white backgrounds |
| Education | 6 x educated up to GCSEs, 11 x A-levels, 13 x Bachelor's degree, 7 x post-graduate degree/qualification – or equivalent qualifications. |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Employment status | 25 x employed full time, 6 x employed part time, 3 x students, 2 x economically inactive, 1 x unemployed |
|-------------------|--|

How to read this report

Due to the qualitative nature of the research, the findings are indicative only. Where views of ‘many’ or ‘some’ are expressed, this refers to a proportion of the sample and not the wider population of Londoners. The aim of this research was to open up discussion and hear about the lived experience of ‘real’ people in depth and breadth, not to show how prevalent views are within the general population of London.

Research findings

2. Key tensions

The research uncovered a range of attitudes towards cannabis and levels of understanding of cannabis management, with several associated tensions. These act as a summary of key findings from this research.

- **Key tension 1: Londoners began from very different mindsets in terms of their attitudes towards and experiences of cannabis.**
These range from those who felt cannabis use was part of their personal identity, to those who felt it was a sign of delinquency and decline.
 - However, across mindsets there was an understanding that **cannabis use is difficult to manage, and the current system is felt to be failing to manage cannabis appropriately**, whether by being too punitive or too lax.
- **Key tension 2: Participants have set their own 'red lines' for cannabis use** by which they define what is and is not an acceptable, safe or appropriate level of use. For example, while many felt cannabis should be legally available, they wanted to see age restrictions, as with alcohol.
 - However, **what is an 'acceptable level of harm' is difficult to define.** For example, while some felt their personal use doesn't harm anyone, some non-users don't want to bring their children to parks where they are concerned people might be smoking cannabis.
 - **Users were also often able to recount both positive and negative experiences of personal use.** Positive experiences may include relaxation, socialising and/or pain relief. Negative experiences can include hallucinations, paranoia, or feeling unwell. However, these were often attributed to a 'bad batch' or irresponsible personal use, rather than to intrinsic harm from cannabis. Users often felt that responsibility for avoiding negative experiences is down to individual actions, rather than the wider legal management of cannabis. For example, using a weaker strain of cannabis, choosing to abstain from use or using it when in the right frame of mind.
- **Key tension 3:** While many users and non-users felt personal use should be decriminalised, they **remained uncomfortable with the production and supply of illegal drugs** and were less sure how this should be managed.
 - Participants recognised the **inherent difficulty in a model where personal use is decriminalised, but production and supply remain illegal.** Profit was also contentious in that some didn't want to see 'dealers' making a profit, some didn't want to see the government making a profit, and others thought a new model should support small businesses to make a profit.

- **Key tension 4: There was an appetite for more information on the legal management of cannabis, both in the UK and in other parts of the world.** For some, their attitude towards cannabis was informed by its illegal status; the fact it is illegal informs how they felt it should be managed. Others were unaware of the current laws around cannabis and their views were informed by the way they see police manage it in their communities.
 - **Further research and education were also felt to be needed on the potential benefits and risks of cannabis use.** Education on the potential risks and how to use cannabis appropriately was felt to be important, including among those who use cannabis.
 - At the end of the research, some participants reflected on how **their views had changed upon receiving more information** about how cannabis is managed in the UK and in other countries. Irrespective of their starting position, they were largely more open to exploring other models than they had been at the start of the research.

Research findings in detail

3. Attitudes to cannabis use

Overall, views and experiences of cannabis were mixed. Most participants expressed at least some nuance in their opinions, recognising that people might benefit from its use even if they personally didn't use it. Several acknowledged its potential risks and harms, as well as scenarios where use may be more or less appropriate (in ones own home versus outside a school, for example). Users themselves also often described both positive and negative experiences of using cannabis.

The diversity in views and experiences allowed participants to be categorised into six audience mindsets.

3.1 Audience mindsets

The six audience mindsets show the various starting points from which Londoners approach cannabis. They include people's own cannabis (non-)use, their views on its drivers and impacts, and its current and future management. The mindsets are not discrete categories, but instead form a spectrum, from those most open to cannabis use and its legalisation, to those mostly against both.

Given the small sample size, these mindsets have not been analysed quantitatively. There are no trends evident in demographic characteristics – a spread of ages and backgrounds is represented across the spectrum of mindsets identified.

Utopian**Ideological supporter****Social user****Not for me****Conformist Disapproving**

Utopian

Utopians advocate for the free and largely unregulated use of cannabis, in part because they believe in its intrinsic value from a medicinal or societal point of view. They are typically users of cannabis in some form (albeit usage may fluctuate over time), and while not necessarily heavy users (although they are more likely to be than users in other mindsets), some may see their use as part of their identity, or spirituality.

"[Cannabis] was used as a somewhat coping mechanism to get my mind off of something and not feel the negative emotions of sadness and anger anymore. The high gave me a buzz and got me spirited to carry on. I was with a friend, and this was a good, safe social setting for us after a gym work out to unwind and be at a simulated peace."

Ideological supporter

Ideological supporters may or may not have used cannabis themselves but support legal reform, which they feel would protect users by enabling the drug to be regulated. They believe such reform would have wider societal benefits, such as reducing stop-and-search practices which are felt to disproportionately impact people of colour¹. This audience tend to be motivated by social justice or approach the matter from a public health point of view. In general, they look at it from a societal rather than a personal, individual angle, even if they are users themselves.

"Young Black people are infinitely more at risk of stop and search powers by the police and regularly the suspicion of possession of cannabis or smell in the local area is their justification for stopping and violating young Black males' rights."

Social user

Social users use cannabis either with friends or at other social events when the opportunity presents itself. They may not purchase it themselves and tend not to have strong views on cannabis or its regulation. Overall, they would probably lean

¹ [Stop and search figures](#) broken down by ethnicity and area show that the Metropolitan Police stopped and searched 69.5 Black per 1,000 people, compared to 20.4 white people. [Gov.UK. 'Ethnicity facts and figures: Stop and search' \(2022\).](#)

towards laxer legislation or some form of decriminalisation, but it is not a social or political issue they feel passionately about.

"I was a little worried that we would get caught but we didn't. Everyone was very chilled and [cannabis was] offered to everyone although there was no pressure to take part. We just talked about our lives and had a laugh."

Not for me

Despite not being current users themselves, this group have adopted a 'live and let live' mentality to cannabis use. They may have had a bad experience, feel it is not good for their personal health, or just not be interested in using it. However, they don't mind others using it, including those within their social circle and communities. They are likely to feel the current criminal justice system response to cannabis is overly punitive towards users and are open to other models of regulation, particularly those that legalise personal use in the home.

"A lot of people in my area sell and smoke cannabis. It doesn't bother me, but I do feel bad for elderly people at times as the smell is quite prominent, and the deals are obvious and could make some people feel uncomfortable."

Conformist

This audience are not current users either, but they may have used cannabis infrequently in the past. Their attitudes to use are driven by the legal status of cannabis – for them, any illegal activity is wrong. When introduced to examples of cannabis being legally prescribed for medical reasons, this group become more open and some feel their attitudes towards cannabis use would be more lenient if it wasn't illegal.

"My attitude to cannabis as a recreational drug has not changed whilst it remains a criminal offence - I don't agree with buying it illegally and smoking it. If it was legalised, regulated and properly controlled then I would be more open to private use by adults."

Disapproving

This audience are adamant non-users and see cannabis use as a sign of delinquent behaviour. They feel it has a negative impact on their communities and are worried about how its use may influence children and young people. There are some perceptions that cannabis use leads to decline within the community and the onset of crime. Some, though, are open to the idea of legal medical use of cannabis, if thoroughly regulated.

"The area I live in, lots of people smoke cannabis. It smells really bad and I always start feeling sick and want to vomit. It's not a good experience to have people around who smoke it."

3.2 Perceptions of drivers of use of cannabis

Across the mindsets, relaxation, escapism, and fun with friends were the most frequently perceived drivers of use. Use for these reasons can be pre-planned or habitual, or, for social users, more opportunistic. Many participants were also familiar with medical uses of cannabis such as pain management and the treatment of anxiety and stress, although not all were aware that medical cannabis can be prescribed by specialist clinicians in the UK.

"[People use cannabis] for its properties, so to feel calmer or tranquil. To regulate sleeping or appetites. It can also be used as a form of pain relief." (Utopian user)

Conformists and disapproving audiences tended to be more sceptical of these drivers of use. Several were critical about the use of drugs, including cannabis, to forget one's problems or stresses, and felt it was not appropriate to use recreational drugs for such purposes. Some also felt they would need to see more evidence to feel comfortable with medical use of cannabis, although others were accepting of this, even if they would not use it themselves. These audiences were significantly more likely than others to suspect peer pressure and addiction as reasons for cannabis use.

"[People use cannabis as] a distraction to real life problems and they enjoy the effects of it." (Disapproving)

3.3 Perceptions of impacts of use of cannabis

Views on the impacts of cannabis use diverged. Many perceived impacts to be positive, helping relieve stress and pain in users. However, participants acknowledged that people may react differently to cannabis use and several current and past users recounted negative experiences of hallucinations or paranoia while using the drug. Those who felt more positively tended to attribute such negative experiences to 'bad batches' rather than to cannabis itself, although a few had been put off from using it again.

"I've only used it once and felt very paranoid when I did... People have different experiences so my first time could have been an exaggeration." (Not for me)

While those who felt less positively about cannabis use identified a risk of addiction or dependency, very few (across more and less positive mindsets) spontaneously raised concerns about longer-term risks to physical and mental health such as psychosis or lung damage (from smoking cannabis). Utopian users and ideological supporters in particular were, conversely, more likely to stress a perceived lack of

harmful health effects of cannabis, particularly when compared to legal substances such as alcohol and tobacco.

Those who felt less positively about cannabis were most likely to raise community and societal impacts of use. They were concerned about cannabis use contributing to criminal activity and general decline in their communities, with the smell thought to deter non-users from certain public spaces.

"It puts people off going to places like parks. I wouldn't take my kids to a park where I know it is used. I wouldn't want them to smell or witness it." (Disapproving)

Ideological supporters and utopian users were more likely to see negative societal impacts as stemming from the current punitive approach to cannabis and the effect this has on Black communities in particular.

3.4 Perceptions of cannabis as a gateway drug

Views were mixed as to whether cannabis acts as a gateway drug, where use raises the risk of use of other (potentially Class A) recreational drugs. Opinions were similarly mixed with respect to whether cannabis use raises the risk of problematic substance use more widely. Some – particularly utopian users and ideological supporters – described cannabis as distinct from other recreational drugs, on the grounds it is considered to be a 'natural' substance. These participants felt the effects of cannabis were milder and easier to control than other drugs ingested in pill or powder form, for example.

"Smoking [cannabis] is a lot more of a controlled way to consume substances [than ingesting other recreational drugs]. As we say – 'what happens if you overdose on marijuana?' – 'you have a good night of sleep!'" (Utopian user)

For those who admitted to being polydrug users, cannabis was usually the first drug they had tried, it being the most accessible and 'softest'. However, these participants felt they had always been open to trying other recreational drugs, cannabis had simply been the easiest to access initially and had not facilitated, or encouraged, use of other recreational drugs. A minority of polydrug users, however, acknowledged that they probably 'chased other highs' after using cannabis.

Conformists and disapproving non-users were more likely to express concerns about cannabis use leading to other recreational drug use, delinquency, and addiction, though also acknowledged this view was not based on personal experience but rather their perceptions and assumptions.

Across the spectrum of mindsets, participants' understanding of the risks and benefits of cannabis use tended not to be grounded in independent and objective evidence – medical or otherwise – but rather drawn from their own experiences

and local anecdotes. This points to a need for more education on the issue to enable people to reach more objective, informed viewpoints.

4. Cannabis and the criminal justice system

Participants were asked to share what they understood to be the legal position with respect to cannabis use in London, alongside any related experiences and perceptions of the police and criminal justice system. They were then provided with information on the legal status of cannabis drawn from official sources, as well as references on possession that reflect common perceptions of cannabis management.

Note that views may be at least partly indicative of the wider context during the time of the research, which took place at a time of low levels of approval of Government, particularly in London². Negative media coverage of policing, and the Metropolitan Police in particular, may have been front-of-mind for many, even if they did not raise such issues explicitly.

4.1 Perceptions of how the criminal justice system manages cannabis

Across mindsets, there was a shared perception that the current system is not working well, although reasons for this view differ. Those who felt more positively about cannabis use tended to see the law as punitive and unnecessarily harsh for behaviour they consider to be largely harmless. Those who felt more negatively tended to express a belief that the system typically does not uphold the cannabis laws currently in place. Across audiences, some felt that attempts to do so represented a poor use of police time.

There was a widespread perception that cannabis use is mostly tolerated, but that the law – when it is applied – is applied inconsistently. Across mindsets, there was a view that this results in unfair outcomes, particularly for ethnic minorities, who were seen as more likely to be suspected of and prosecuted for crimes that white people ‘get away with’. For some, this perception was based on personal experience, while for others it was based on anecdote and reporting in the media.

Although many participants had strong views on the fairness of the law, knowledge of the actual legislation and exact rules varied. While many knew that cannabis is classified as a Class B drug in the UK, and is thus illegal, participants did not tend to be aware of the details, such as the definitions of amounts for personal use versus supply.

² At the point of fieldwork, YouGov’s weekly tracker of Government approval shows 73% of Londoners polled disapproved of the Government. [YouGov. ‘Government Approval Weekly Tracker’ \(17 October, 2022\).](#)

"I think you are only allowed to carry an amount for personal use otherwise it would be classed as dealing." (Not for me)

Despite knowing it is illegal, most assumed there would be little or no consequence if caught smoking and/or carrying small amounts of cannabis for personal use. Among disapproving and conformist mindsets, this was often based on seeing cannabis consumed openly in their communities and feeling the police didn't do anything about it. Similarly, users reported feeling able to consume cannabis more openly than in the past.

*"I think cannabis use is tolerated if it is for your own use."
(Conformist)*

Because of this widespread sense of impunity, crackdowns seem all the more arbitrary and disproportionately targeted at minority communities. There was also a strong sense that individual experiences depend on personal characteristics and the discretion of the police officer(s) in question.

"I have heard about people getting stopped and searched in the street when police officers have suspected them of possessing cannabis or other drugs on them. The police probably had good intentions in the first place, but often it is groups of young black males that are unfairly targeted. I suspect it had happened because the police had unconscious bias about who they thought would be using drugs." (Social user)

4.2 Experiences of the criminal justice system

For those with personal experience of the criminal justice system in relation to cannabis, their interactions varied from amicable to acrimonious. Most commonly, cannabis users within the sample had small amounts of the drug confiscated and received a warning. These warnings were largely seen as justified, with participants accepting their punishment even if they disagreed with the current legislation.

"As the police officer walked away [from our car] he said 'don't smoke lads' or something along those lines [...] The officer probably said what he said as he sees it a lot and actually cared for us to stop." (Utopian user)

However, some recounted first- and second-hand experiences that had felt more hostile or unfairly targeted. Participants described instances where Black friends or partners were singled out for body or car searches, or where they were felt to have received a harsher punishment than a white cannabis user would have (or had) received in the same situation, as the following quotes demonstrate:

"Even though at the time [of the stop and search], myself and this other white friend were the ones holding the joints, it was

my [Black] boyfriend who was most aggressively spoken to, addressed, and body searched.” (Ideological supporter)

“Friends were driving and were stopped by a police car for no apparent reason other than they were Black in a nice car. The police officers that stopped them said there was an issue with insurance and asked for car details. The officers started off aggressively and the driver reacted politely and provided all the documentation but the officer seemed unsatisfied. [The officer] asked whether anybody had been smoking cannabis because they could smell it from the car. This friend does not smoke cannabis nor has ever smoked cannabis and replied as such. The police officers vacated everyone from the car and searched the car thoroughly... They were eventually let go but this caused a lot of trauma to my friends. They were massively impacted and for a while they did not drive that car around and took public transport.” (Ideological supporter)

Among those who did not have any experience of the criminal justice system or police themselves, including non-users and those who feel less positively about cannabis, there was felt to be controversy surrounding police stop-and-search practices in London. This remained front-of-mind in discussion about the management of cannabis, and searches for cannabis were widely felt to be inappropriately applied to Black people.

4.3 Reactions to how the criminal justice system currently manages cannabis

Participants were introduced to the following information on the legal status of cannabis, drawn from official sources, as well as a range of references on possession that reflect common (mis)perceptions of cannabis management.

Cannabis is classified as a class B drug. This means that any person who is caught with cannabis risks up to five years in prison, an unlimited fine, or both. It also means that a police officer has powers to stop-and-search any person if they have ‘reasonable grounds’ to suspect that they’re carrying cannabis.

Being convicted of producing and supplying cannabis risks up to 14 years in prison, an unlimited fine, or both.

For those caught with a small amount of cannabis – typically less than one ounce (28 grams) – police can issue a warning or an on-the-spot fine if the possession is deemed to be for personal use only.

It is therefore illegal to use cannabis (smoke weed) anywhere in the United Kingdom, including within one’s own home.

Since November 2018 doctors in the UK have been able to prescribe certain cannabis-based products for medicinal use, but access is still limited.

Despite a shared perception that instances of imprisonment are rare, a 5-year sentence for personal use felt harsh and surprising to many participants. Including for those who felt less positively about cannabis, this was considered a disproportionately long sentence for personal use – indeed, among disapproving participants, there was a view that it should not be a priority for the criminal justice system.

"So even having a joint for your personal use could land someone up to 5 years in jail? Utter nonsense. Prison should be for actual criminals doing harm to people, and definitely not cannabis users." (Utopian user)

"If you are just caught smoking it to be given a fine and have to go to prison for up to 5 years, I find quite harsh. This is because a person could smoke it one time and make a mistake and shouldn't have to be punished as much as someone who has been doing it for a long time and he's also buying and selling it to other people." (Conformist)

"There is probably no need to change the law itself, but we need to have some clear direction from the criminal justice system on whether this is something they intend to police vigorously or to decide that the force of the law will only be used for repeat offences or in connection with more serious crimes." (Disapproving)

Only a very small minority felt that long sentences, as well as stricter policing, would act as a deterrent to production and supply.

"I would increase the sentencing for producing and dealing cannabis to 25 years. I believe this would act as more of a deterrent." (Conformist)

That police can employ 'reasonable grounds' for stop-and-search was felt to be a significant part of the issue that leads to the disproportionate targeting of individuals from an ethnic minority background and, in particular, young Black men³. This was seen as problematic across audiences who felt is risked racial profiling.

³ [Stop and search figures](#) broken down by ethnicity and area show that the Metropolitan Police stopped and searched 69.5 Black per 1,000 people, compared to 20.4 white people. [Gov.UK. 'Ethnicity facts and figures: Stop and search' \(2022\).](#)

*"I think the law needs to be more distinct and clear because phrases like reasonable grounds are too subjective and can be abused by people or police officers who have biases."
(Ideological supporter)*

"The only part I don't agree with is the stop and searches. We all know law enforcement have the propensity to stop 'Black and ethnic minorities' versus the wider white population. Also, if you're a white male, you're probably going to get slapped with a fine, but a Black male would most probably get arrested and charged." (Conformist)

Some participants felt that police were likely to apply warnings or fines for possession of cannabis for personal use, and were less likely to enforce stricter measures, with this confirmed for participants by reports in the media and other online spaces. Such reporting sometimes suggests this can apply for amounts up to one ounce⁴. Government and police guidelines, however, state only that "Police can issue a warning or an on-the-spot fine of £90 if you're found with cannabis" – they do not specify up to what amount⁵. Those who were positive about cannabis saw the application of 'softer' warnings or small fines as a step in the right direction (although for the most part they would still like to see personal use decriminalised entirely). Those who felt less positively about cannabis, or who had limited or no experience of it, were less sure and were concerned it could allow people to sell cannabis to others. Participants diverged on whether they felt that an ounce was a small or large amount, depending on their own experience.

"That's a huge amount of cannabis [to only get a warning or a fine]. But I'm pleased it has a warning or fine." (Social user)

Some users were surprised and disappointed to learn it is illegal to use cannabis in one's home. Across audiences, there was a sense that the home is not – and should not be – policed and participants were unsure if this is an appropriate use of police resources. Furthermore, many reflected that while this is technically the law, it is not what they had seen occur in their personal experiences. As a result, there was some feeling that the law should reflect what the police actually intend to uphold.

"I would have thought if you do it in your own home, you're not hurting anyone." (Not for me)

⁴ Mainstream media often suggests that police can issue a warning or fine if you're caught with less than one ounce of cannabis. However, the official guidance does not indicate an amount by which police will issue a warning or fine. [The Sun. 'Is cannabis illegal in UK and where is weed legal to smoke and buy?' \(2022\).](#)

⁵ [Gov.UK. 'Drug licensing factsheet: cannabis, CBD and other cannabinoids' \(2020\).](#)

However, a small minority welcomed the fact that cannabis consumption (namely smoking) is illegal in one's home, as they felt this could still affect – and harm – others in the same home.

"One needs to be considerate of their surroundings, neighbours and the wider community and not think only of themselves within their own domicile." (Conformist)

While many were aware that medical use is legal in the UK when prescribed by specialist clinicians for specific medical conditions, some (largely non-users) were not. Irrespective of wider views about recreational cannabis, however, there was widespread openness to medical use, provided it is properly regulated and supplied only through prescriptions. That said, some expressed concerns about opportunities to take advantage of the system, i.e. whereby individuals attempt to access prescriptions they do not need. There was also a desire for more research into the effectiveness and safety of cannabis for medical use.

"I would only allow cannabis on medical grounds, by the professional people for medical need, otherwise there should not be any supply by anyone in UK." (Disapproving)

4.4 The tension between personal use and 'drug dealing'

While personal cannabis use was *broadly* accepted among participants, there was widespread unease about supply, with any form of drug dealing (and most assume that cannabis dealers also deal other drugs) associated with decline and danger in the local community and beyond.

Across mindsets, most adopted the view that private use, especially in one's home, is acceptable, as long as no harm is done to others. The risk to oneself was felt to be minimal – or at least no worse than smoking cigarettes or consuming alcohol – including among those who have had negative experiences. As a result, many felt that adults should be allowed to make this choice for themselves.

"I think police could show a bit of sense if they know [it's] for personal use. If you are in your own home you should be allowed to smoke as long as you do not have a garden growing in your basement. Some people don't get this long for domestic violence." (Not for me)

When asked to consider whether personal use of cannabis had potential to harm others, participants focused narrowly on the impact on children of observing drug consumption. Among more disapproving participants, exposing one's neighbours to the strong smell associated with cannabis smoke was explicitly considered to be anti-social.

"I think [keeping use in the home illegal] is fair because the smell would not only inconvenience others perhaps even within

the household (asthmatics or anyone who has allergies), nobody else should have to inhale the fumes or be exposed to second hand smoke!" (Conformist)

Drug dealing, on the other hand, was associated with criminality in a way that personal cannabis use was not. The drug trade was widely associated with violence and with fuelling other illegal activities. Across mindsets, many saw drug dealing as harmful to their communities and did not want to see dealers operating there, while others were concerned about the impact on young or older/vulnerable people.

"I feel bad for elderly people [in my community] because the smell is quite prominent and the deals are obvious and could make some people feel uncomfortable." (Not for me)

As a result, participants understood that managing cannabis use and supply is difficult and nuanced. They understood that, if use was accepted as legal, then there would have to be some form of legitimate supply. However, many were less comfortable with the supply element. When exploring different types of supply and control, participants could see pros and cons to all models, as opposed to one model being overall the 'right' option.

5. Models for cannabis management

Six different models for managing cannabis were explored with participants, including the prohibition model in place in the UK. Each was based on an alternative model to govern recreational cannabis, adopted in at least one jurisdiction outside the UK. Participants were asked to reflect on which models, if any, they would support being adopted in the UK, as an alternative to the current position where cannabis for recreational purposes is illegal.

Participants were not provided with information as to how well these models are perceived to work or in which countries they operate. The models were presented as potential futures for how cannabis could be managed in the UK, i.e. as stimulus for inspiration and discussion.

5.1 Responses to example models

Audiences who felt more positively about cannabis unsurprisingly tended to prefer options which involve decriminalisation and/or legalisation of cannabis across production, supply, and use. Those who felt less positively tended to look for models which would keep cannabis out of public spaces and which they felt could realistically be enforced consistently and fairly.

Table 1 displays the models which participants were exposed to and the pros and cons they identified for each. These perspectives are not necessarily representative of views across Londoners more widely, given that participants all had at least some experience of cannabis whether through personal use, knowing others who use it or from seeing it used in their communities.

Table 1: Overview of models introduced and participants' perceptions of each

| Model | Pros | Cons |
|---|---|--|
| Production, supply and use of cannabis for non-medical purposes remains a criminal offence , but production and access for medical uses is legal, regulated through prescriptions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largely supported and seen as uncontroversial. • Those who previously did not know cannabis for medical use was already legal in the UK were receptive to this. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some disapprovers were looking for further research to evidence the medical benefits of cannabis use. However, they were warm to the idea, even if they would not use it themselves. • A minority were concerned that some may take advantage. |
| Production and supply of cannabis is a criminal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt to largely already be the case in the | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some felt this to be unfair to renters, |

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| <p>offence but possession of small amounts of cannabis for personal use at home is decriminalised.</p> | <p>UK, with many reflecting that what people do in their own homes is their business.</p> | <p>who may not be allowed to use (smoke) cannabis in rented accommodation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Across audiences, participants questioned how people would access cannabis to use legally for personal use if production and supply remained illegal. |
| <p>Production beyond for personal use and supply are criminal offences, but people are permitted to grow up to a small number of cannabis plants each for personal use, or join a cannabis club. In choosing to join a club, their individual personal allowance is transferred to a grower who supplies members.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Those who felt more positively about cannabis saw growing your own plants as a way to ensure the product is safe to use. Those who didn't want to grow their own plants, but were interested in using cannabis, liked the option of joining a cannabis club for personal use. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Those who felt less positively about cannabis had concerns that self-growing could lead to an unregulated illegal market in which people may sell from their own plants. |
| <p>Production, supply, and use of cannabis are all legal and regulated. The market is entirely controlled and regulated by the government.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some who felt less positively about cannabis could see a way in which this model could work. They reasoned that cannabis use is unlikely to go away, and it is not always a good use of police resources to monitor and respond to it. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Across audiences, many sought clarification on what government 'control' would look like. At the time of the research, wider trust in government was low and participants had concerns about how government contracts are managed.⁶ Reference |

⁶ Polling by Ipsos Mori in October and November 2022 found that only 12% of the UK public trusted politicians to tell them the truth. (Sample: 2,009 British adults aged 16+). [Ipsos Mori. 'Ipsos Veracity Index 2022' \(2022\)](#).

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| | | <p>was widely made to government contracts to manufacture and deliver PPE during the Covid-19 pandemic being issued to connected individuals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Those who felt more positively towards cannabis felt this model fails to return opportunities for profit to communities that have historically been stigmatised in the management of cannabis. |
| <p>Production, supply, and use of cannabis are legal and regulated. The market is commercial, but producers and vendors (sellers) must have a licence (like with alcohol).</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Those who felt more positively about cannabis were very enthusiastic about this model and felt that regulation of production and supply would make use safer. Licenses were also felt to be good for new/small business and for regulating the industry without too much government control. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Those who felt less positively about cannabis were concerned about a 'for profit' model. They felt there was a risk that products might not be safe and could be marketed towards young people, with some comparing it to recent rises in the marketing of vape products. |
| <p>Production, supply, and use of cannabis is legal and mostly unregulated, similar to coffee.</p> <p>[NB: A fictitious model, this was used to illustrate what principles of a model operating largely</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Across audiences, there was little support for this model. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Across audiences, participants did not feel this model would be safe or appropriate. All wanted some sort of industry regulation, |

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| <p><i>unrestrained could look like.]</i></p> | | <p>particularly in setting age restrictions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants worried this model would be too lax and lead people to grow their own products which may be tainted or unsafe to use. Participants were looking for reassurance that safety and quality standards would be implemented in any new model. |
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5.2 A new model for cannabis management? Which principles matter to participants

Participants responded well to learning about alternative models of cannabis management and were largely open to options other than prohibition. That said, some key principles emerged which were considered important for any such model, regardless of individual perspectives on cannabis use:

- **Regulation:** Any model in which cannabis is at least in part decriminalised or legalised, must also involve regulation. Participants did not want to see a 'free for all' and are looking to regulation to ensure products are safe to use.
- **Age restrictions:** Participants agreed that clear and enforced age restrictions, meaning young people under the age of 18 could not purchase cannabis, would be crucial. Additionally, in any commercial model, marketing should be regulated so as not to target young people. This view was not driven by specific knowledge or concerns about cannabis use per se on young people but a desire to protect young people from any substance that could be harmful or mind-altering – such as vapes, cigarettes, or alcohol - alongside cannabis.
- **Legal medical use:** Participants were largely supportive of legal medical use of cannabis through prescriptions. Provided there is clear evidence to support the physical and mental health benefits, and prescriptions are monitored by GPs or other healthcare professionals, this was an acceptable form of use for the vast majority.
- **Ceasing of or limiting stop-and-searches for cannabis:** Many wanted to see an end to stop-and-search on suspicion of cannabis possession for personal use. Across audiences, there was a perception that enabling

police to enforce this at their discretion has contributed to racist practices, most often focused on young Black men. While those who feel less positively about cannabis use wanted to see greater enforcement of laws, this was more to do with keeping cannabis use out of public spaces and stopping dealing within their communities. While it is difficult for this audience to articulate how this would work in practice, they felt it was important that such enforcement does not unfairly target any particular group.

Views on cannabis management from those who felt more positively about cannabis use

However, participants' views diverged on a few key points. Those who **felt more positively about cannabis use** wanted to see:

- A system in which personal use, production and supply was, at a minimum, decriminalised, if not legalised (with many having difficulty distinguishing between the two).
- Market regulation to ensure products are safe to use and consumers can access products legally.

"[I'd like to see] people able to buy cannabis from specified places and able to consume it at specified places. The producers are licensed and the way it is grown and distributed is regulated." (Ideological supporter)

- A commercial market, in which licences are available for small businesses and there is no monopoly on selling that goes to large companies.
 - For some, this diverges from how alcohol and cigarettes are sold, in that they would like to see dedicated shops, like dispensaries, for selling cannabis. This was seen as having twofold benefits, in that it would be less visible to young people and the shop would also be able to provide information about products to ensure safe use.

"I think as part of licensing, anyone selling cannabis should have to complete some sort of training course. They should be able to give advice upon point of sale. I don't think it should be as easy as buying a bottle of vodka in a newsagent. A system like America's with dispensaries seems to work really well." (Utopian)

- Participants also felt a commercial market would lead to a decrease in the illegal production and supply of cannabis in their communities.
- While these participants wanted to see commercial profit for small businesses, they understood, and were largely content with, the government making some profit through tax revenue. This is despite the widespread lack of trust in Government among Londoners, as participants

thought expectation of profit could help motivate the Government to make changes to the current model of cannabis management.

"I don't object to the government receiving some level of tax revenue, as long as it doesn't make it more expensive than it is currently." (Ideological supporter)

Views on cannabis management from those who felt less positively about cannabis use

Those who **felt less positively about cannabis use** were more likely to advocate for a model where only medical use is legal, with some relaxation on laws for personal use:

- Medical use was felt appropriate if prescribed by GPs or other healthcare professionals. This was due to an inherent trust in medical models of management, with assumptions that cannabis must therefore be safe for this use, and that the healthcare system would only prescribe appropriate amounts for use.

"I believe access to cannabis should be via medical prescriptions. I believe cannabis overall should remain illegal unless prescribed by medical practitioners." (Disapproving)

- A number of those less positive about cannabis were open to the idea that some amount of personal use may be acceptable. They would want to see regulation that ensures use only takes place inside the home and is not consumed in open spaces, like parks.

"I would like it to be managed by enabling people to consume cannabis in their own home but not in public areas." (Conformist)

"I would like to see it properly controlled and available only through registered licensed premises for consumption in private. I would not like it to be used in open, public spaces and certainly not in the presence of children." (Conformist)

- In line with other mindsets, participants who felt less positively about cannabis also felt that current stop-and-search and sentencing practices were overly applied to certain groups. While they may not agree with personal use, they largely did not feel it should be punished severely and perceived current practices to be discriminatory. Rather, this audience is more focused on the enforcement of laws forbidding cannabis use in public places and in dealing with those selling cannabis and other illegal drugs in their communities, as these are the elements of use they feel are likely to impact them personally.

"Young people that make a mistake of smoking it on one occasion should not be punished the same way like someone who regularly sells it to others for money and profit." (Conformist)

5.3 Changing views on cannabis management

By the end of the research, some participants had begun to change their views. Those who began the research advocating for total legalisation acknowledged the nuances and challenges in managing cannabis and felt more strongly about the need for some sort of regulation.

"I've always been pro-legalisation, but since doing the research and considering different scenarios, I understand that it's a more complicated matter than just making weed legal and that's it. There needs to be some sort of regulation and law in place without overly restricting people's usage." (Utopian)

Others became more open to decriminalisation of some aspects of use, including personal use.

"I was shocked at how long the sentences could be as I must admit, I thought it was harmless. I still don't like drugs but if you use it for your personal use and you're not a drug dealer, then fine." (Not for me)

Among those who did not support cannabis use for recreational purposes and who were previously unaware that medical use is legal in the UK, there was a degree of openness to this.

"I have become more open minded for the people that may require cannabis for medical reasons." (Disapproving)

6. Considerations for the Commission

There are a number of considerations for the Commission to take into account as a result of this research. As a reminder, the research intended to explore views of Londoners who have experience with cannabis, whether through personal use, knowing others who use it or seeing it used in their communities. They did not necessarily have much or any knowledge of the current debates or wider research and literature on cannabis use – but their voices bring an important dimension to the Commissions' considerations.

- Findings suggest, among these participants at least, that irrespective of personal experience of cannabis, its current management is perceived to be ineffective. Whether or not participants felt that the current criminal justice response was too punitive, there was widespread agreement that it is inconsistently enforced. Personal use was seen to be generally tolerated and, as a result, instances of enforcement were felt to be harsh and often racially motivated.
 - **Consideration: Londoners are likely to be open to an exploration of alternative models of managing cannabis.** Whatever the model, including that of the status quo, it should be consistently enforced and applied.
- Participants set 'red lines' for cannabis use by which they defined what is and is not acceptable. No one, including users, wanted to see cannabis available to everyone, due to risk of use by minors. Additionally, an unregulated market for recreational cannabis (as is the current case, albeit that the market is entirely illegal) was seen to have the potential to lead to unsafe products. Those who felt less positively about cannabis use also wanted to see use restricted to the home, or at least kept out of public spaces.
 - **Consideration: Londoners would be looking for clear regulation in any alternative model of cannabis management.** However, regulation was largely felt to be more appropriate for the public sphere and personal use within the home is felt to be out of reasonable scope for policing.
- Many felt that personal use of cannabis should be decriminalised, but recognised the tension inherent in a model where production and supply remain illegal. There were differing views on who should be able to profit from cannabis in any model where production and supply are regulated, with some in favour of a commercial marketplace and others preferring not-for-profit options.
 - **Consideration: Londoners understand the nuances of different models of managing cannabis.** They spontaneously picked up on the complexities of dealing with the different elements of use, production, supply, and profit. While an unanimously preferred model will always be highly unlikely, any changes

considered to the current model of prohibition in the UK should explain how each of these elements would be managed.

- By the end of the research, some participants had reflected on how their views changed upon receiving more information about how cannabis is managed in the UK and elsewhere. Across audiences, there was some surprise at the severity of sentences possible for cannabis related offences, and the perceived leeway police are given in terms of enforcement. Some of those who felt less positively about cannabis who learned about the legal medical use of cannabis in the UK for the first time during the research became more open to seeing this use case. This suggests there could be some public openness to considering alternative uses and models of cannabis management, where appropriate information is provided.
 - **Consideration: Londoners respond well to further information about managing cannabis.** They showed a willingness to be open-minded and potentially to amend their views when introduced to other ways of doing things. This included those who felt more positively about cannabis developing a greater understanding of the regulations that might need to be in place to manage cannabis safely, as well as those who felt less positively displaying an open mind towards regulations allowing for different elements of personal use (such as medical use or in the home).
 - **Consideration: As well as further information about managing cannabis, further education on the impacts of cannabis could also be beneficial.** Participants tended to look at the impacts of cannabis from an anecdotal viewpoint and saw keeping safe from harm as users' personal responsibility. Negative experiences of using cannabis were seen as typically one-off's and the user's responsibility to manage. It is likely that education about the impacts of cannabis use, both those considered positive as well as negative, would be of value, rather than Londoners continuing to rely on their own personal judgment of what is and is not safe in use. Certainly, those Londoners participating in this research were open to learning more about cannabis.

About Thinks Insight & Strategy

We are an international insight and strategy consultancy, focused on providing our clients with the insight they need to make better decisions. We do this by putting the people who matter most to our clients' organisations at the heart of their thinking.

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