

EVALUATION OF LAMBETH'S PILOT OF WARNINGS FOR POSSESSION OF CANNABIS - SUMMARY OF FINAL REPORT

Background

In order to address concerns about the level of police resources required to arrest and prosecute for possession of cannabis, in July 2001 Lambeth BOCU introduced a policy of issuing warnings on the street for this offence. The policy was initially intended to run as a pilot for 6 months, and its aims were to reduce the amount of time officers spent in dealing with cannabis possession offences, and to increase the time they spent on more serious offences, particularly Class A drug offences, robbery, gun crime and burglary.

Before the pilot began the Borough Commander asked Consultancy Group to undertake an evaluation. It was agreed that this would exclude public opinion and concentrate on assessing police activity against drugs in Lambeth and adjoining Boroughs, and the perceptions that Lambeth officers had of the policy's impacts. Subsequently the Police Foundation commissioned MORI to survey public perceptions within the Borough.

The evaluation was based on offences and disposals data, together with other measures of police activity, and assessed officers' views through focus groups held before and during the pilot, and through a questionnaire survey. Although only 51 officers (6% of the Borough's strength of 860 officers) completed the questionnaire, officers who had direct experience of issuing warnings were well represented.

Findings - Police activity

The measures of police activity demonstrate that the policy has succeeded in releasing resources, and that activity against more serious offences has increased.

During the 6 months of the evaluation, Lambeth officers issued 450 warnings. This released at least 1350 hours of officer time (by avoiding custody procedures and interviewing time), equivalent to 1.8 full-time officers. A further 1150 hours of CJU staff time was released by avoiding case file preparation.

In comparison with the same 6 months in 2000, Lambeth officers recorded 35% more cannabis possession offences and 11% more for trafficking. In adjoining Boroughs possession offences fell by 4% and trafficking fell by 34%.

Lambeth also increased its activity against Class A drugs relative to adjoining Boroughs.

Findings - how the warnings policy worked

Of the 450 warnings, 4% were repeat offenders and 9% were juveniles. 52% of those warned were Lambeth residents.

Confiscations averaged 3.6gm per warning for herbal cannabis (including reefers), and 4.9gm for resin.

No formal complaints were recorded relating to the warnings pilot.

Findings - officer perceptions

Before the pilot began, officer concerns centred on

- whether the public would understand the policy
- whether misunderstandings would cause friction between officers and the public which could affect officer safety
- whether there would be an increase in complaints and particularly challenges to officers' integrity in disposing of confiscated cannabis
- whether the policy would limit the intelligence that officers would have otherwise gained in the course of an arrest
- the perceived lack of briefing and detailed instructions about the policy.

The concerns about officer safety and challenges to police integrity have not been borne out during the pilot. However the focus groups held during the pilot and responses to the officer questionnaire show that at least a significant minority of officers are still concerned about

- public misunderstanding of the policy
- feeling that their powers to deal with drug offences have been limited
- the possibility that they may be losing opportunities to gain intelligence.

The low response to the officer questionnaire suggests that most Lambeth officers have no serious concerns about the policy. However, amongst the 50 officers who did respond to the questionnaire, a majority felt that

- the policy had resulted in no change in the way they spent their time on duty
- the policy would lead to increased drug use in Lambeth (both cannabis and Class A)
- the policy should be discontinued and not extended to the rest of the MPS.