# Former London police commander warns tracking minor cannabis use wastes vital resources



The issue of policing low-level cannabis use continues to stir controversy, particularly in London, where a former senior police officer, Brian Paddick, has voiced strong criticism of current enforcement strategies. Speaking from his extensive experience, including as a pioneer of a limited decriminalisation scheme in Lambeth back in 2001, Paddick argues that the focus on individuals caught with small amounts of cannabis is not merely misguided but a misallocation of police resources.

Paddick’s insight is timely as it comes in the wake of increasing discussions around cannabis decriminalisation, with London’s Mayor Sadiq Khan echoing calls for a reevaluation of cannabis laws. Paddick contends that tracking low-level cannabis use detracts from addressing more pressing criminal activities, such as street robbery and the distribution of harder drugs like heroin and crack cocaine. He asserts that the reallocation of police efforts can significantly improve community relations, stating, “When I was the police commander in Brixton, I was very concerned about the impact of policing possession of small amounts of cannabis on police and community relations.”

His pilot scheme, which offered warnings instead of arrests to those caught with minor cannabis possession, reportedly garnered substantial local support—around 80% of residents were in favour of the approach. Critics, however, have argued that this liberal stance toward cannabis could send mixed signals, especially to younger individuals. Yet, Paddick reiterates that the argument framing cannabis as a gateway drug is increasingly viewed as antiquated and not supported by empirical evidence. Furthermore, he highlights that the policing of cannabis often disproportionately targets young Black men, which raises serious questions about fairness and equity within law enforcement practices.

An analysis of the pilot scheme indicates it was effective in freeing up police resources, resulting in a significant reduction of police hours spent on cannabis-related cases, which allowed officers to concentrate more on serious crimes. A report from the Metropolitan Police Authority indicated that the programme helped save over 2,500 police hours in its first six months and encouraged a 19% increase in arrests of Class A drug dealers. These statistics underscore the potential benefits of redirecting police focus onto higher-priority crimes, as opposed to minor drug possessions.

However, practical challenges emerged from the scheme, particularly in defining what constitutes a ‘small amount’ of cannabis, leading to confusion among officers. The lack of a clear legal definition complicated enforcement, with officers often needing to consult supervisors during complex cases. Critics within the community also raised concerns that the initiative might inadvertently encourage cannabis dealers to exploit loopholes in policing regulations.

With growing public support for cannabis decriminalisation and the ongoing complexities surrounding its policing, the conversation initiated by figures like Paddick is pivotal. It not only highlights the necessity for a reassessment of drug policies but also raises vital questions about resource allocation within policing and its broader impact on community safety and cohesion. As discussions evolve in the political landscape, the insights of experienced former officers could guide more effective and equitable practices in drug enforcement across the UK.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/29/tracking-low-level-cannabis-use-wastes-police-time-london-brian-paddick), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/29/tracking-low-level-cannabis-use-wastes-police-time-london-brian-paddick)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/29/tracking-low-level-cannabis-use-wastes-police-time-london-brian-paddick), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2002/jul/02/drugsandalcohol.immigrationpolicy), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/jul/02/drugsandalcohol.immigrationpolicy)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/dec/29/drugsandalcohol.immigrationpolicy), [[6]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/london-s-drugs-experiment-wins-residents-support-5361663.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/london-s-drugs-experiment-wins-residents-support-5361663.html), [[7]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/how-lambeth-was-used-to-test-softly-softly-scheme-6111335.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/29/tracking-low-level-cannabis-use-wastes-police-time-london-brian-paddick), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2002/jul/02/drugsandalcohol.immigrationpolicy)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/29/tracking-low-level-cannabis-use-wastes-police-time-london-brian-paddick), [[7]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/how-lambeth-was-used-to-test-softly-softly-scheme-6111335.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/29/tracking-low-level-cannabis-use-wastes-police-time-london-brian-paddick> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/may/29/tracking-low-level-cannabis-use-wastes-police-time-london-brian-paddick> - In this article, Brian Paddick, a former senior Metropolitan Police officer, argues that focusing on individuals possessing small amounts of cannabis wastes police resources and diverts attention from more serious crimes. He reflects on his 2001 pilot scheme in Lambeth, London, which decriminalised minor cannabis possession, stating it eased community tensions and allowed officers to concentrate on higher-priority issues like street robberies and hard drugs. Paddick also highlights that 80% of local residents supported the decriminalisation approach.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2002/jul/02/drugsandalcohol.immigrationpolicy> - This article discusses the Lambeth cannabis pilot scheme, which began in July 2001, where individuals caught with small amounts of cannabis were given warnings instead of arrests. The scheme saved over 2,500 hours of police and civilian staff time in the first six months and led to a 19% increase in arrests of Class A drug dealers. However, some critics argued it caused confusion among children and potentially encouraged crack cocaine dealers.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/dec/29/drugsandalcohol.immigrationpolicy> - Scotland Yard extended a controversial pilot scheme in Lambeth, south London, that relaxed the force's attitude towards cannabis possession. The six-month initiative, which began in July 2001, was due to end on December 31 but was extended pending a comprehensive review. The scheme involved issuing on-the-spot warnings to individuals caught with cannabis, aiming to free up police resources for more serious crimes.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2001/jul/02/drugsandalcohol.immigrationpolicy> - This article reports on the start of a six-month experiment in Brixton, south London, where individuals caught with small amounts of cannabis were given on-the-spot warnings instead of being arrested. The pilot scheme aimed to free up police time to focus on more serious crimes and was seen as a potential model for decriminalising cannabis possession in the UK.
6. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/london-s-drugs-experiment-wins-residents-support-5361663.html> - A police scheme in Lambeth, south London, where individuals possessing cannabis were given verbal warnings instead of arrests, received overwhelming support from local residents. Over 80% of those questioned backed the liberal approach to cannabis, leading to discussions about extending the policy to other areas.
7. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/how-lambeth-was-used-to-test-softly-softly-scheme-6111335.html> - The article examines the Lambeth cannabis pilot scheme, which allowed police to focus on more serious drugs like heroin by issuing warnings to individuals caught with small amounts of cannabis. Evaluations showed it saved 1,350 hours of police time in the first six months. However, critics noted a 35% increase in cannabis possession offences and an 11% rise in trafficking during the same period.