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**Cannabis Legalisation Poll**

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**July 2019**

Momentum is building behind cannabis legalisation but no poll has ever asked what messages would be most likely to sway public opinion.

In May 2019, Volteface and the Evening Standard commissioned the polling agency Survation to find out which arguments would incentivise the British public to support the legalisation of cannabis and which would deter them. A nationally representative sample of respondents were given a list of statements that outlined the arguments for and against the legalisation of cannabis and were asked the extent to which they found them to be compelling. The statements used in the poll aim to reflect the arguments that are commonly made on each side of the legalisation debate. Alongside this message testing, the poll identified what proportion of the British public would support cannabis reform.

This briefing summarises the poll's key findings and considers what lessons can be learnt.

## Arguments For the Legalisation of Cannabis

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The most persuasive argument to legalise cannabis is that "it could take an estimated £2.5 billion a year out of the hands of criminals and the black market and bring this money into the regular economy", with 72% indicating that this would be a compelling argument. Interestingly, this argument was the most compelling for people who support the legalisation of cannabis (89%), as well as those who do not (51%).

Another influential message was that regulation "could create estimated tax revenues of £1 billion per year which can be spent on public services" (68%). Growing Brexit uncertainty and years of austerity may well have played a pivotal role in pushing the economic argument to the forefront, particularly when reference is given to concrete numbers.

However, the argument that legalising cannabis would create thousands of new full-time jobs was considered to be the least compelling, 15% less compelling (53%) than the tax revenue argument and 19% less compelling than the black market argument. This suggests that the public have difficulty envisaging what a legal cannabis industry would look like and how this could benefit the British economy.

The poll revealed that the public are also highly compelled by the argument that legalisation "could allow the authorities to strictly regulate and label the strength of cannabis sold and limit the potency" (68%). In comparison to other Western countries, there has been more concern around the harms of high potency cannabis, commonly known as skunk.

It is perhaps surprising then that the argument that legalisation "could improve the mental and physical well being of people who use cannabis" was 10% less

compelling (58%). The public are compelled by the argument that access to high potency cannabis should be restricted, but at the same time appear less sympathetic towards the wellbeing of cannabis users.

This is reflected by the finding that the least compelling reason to legalise cannabis was that "criminalising people who use cannabis is wrong and ruins life chances" (49%), the only argument which less than 50% of those polled found compelling.

The majority of the respondents also found the following arguments to be persuasive: "it could reduce children's access to cannabis by shrinking the black market and introducing legal age limits for cannabis use" (66%) and "it could lead to a reduction in violence and exploitation associated with illicit cannabis markets" (66%). This increased to 76% in London and 81% in Northern Ireland, regions which have historically experienced higher levels of violence.

## Arguments Against the Legalisation of Cannabis

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When respondents were presented with the arguments against the legalisation of cannabis, it appears that those which were considered to be most compelling outlined clear undisputed harms. Harms that were subjective or too far removed from current experience were perceived as less compelling.

The most compelling argument against the legalisation of cannabis was the argument could lead to an increase in car accidents because of people driving while under the influence of cannabis (65%). This reflects the experience in Canada and the US, where cannabis impaired driving has become a highly salient issue.



There is also high concern surrounding arguments that suggest cannabis legalisation will lead to an increase in addiction (59%) and mental health problems (63%), and will lead to cannabis becoming normalised and perceived as a harmless drug (62%). These findings reflect the unique British awareness and concerns around the harms associated with cannabis, particularly the impact it can have on mental health.

Arguments that related to usage were considered as less compelling but still seen as persuasive by the majority of the British public. These were that legalisation: “could lead to a significant increase in use among adults” (56%), “could lead to a significant increase in use among children” (58%) and “could increase the public visibility of cannabis use” (55%). It is interesting that the argument that legalisation “could lead to a significant increase in use amongst under 18s” polls only 2% more highly than the argument that “it could lead to a significant increase in use among adults”. There is strong evidence to show that cannabis use at a young age can have a deleterious impact on developing brains, whereas the harms cannabis poses to adults is much lower. At this moment, public opinion does not seem to reflect this distinction.

58% of the public were compelled by the argument that legalisation “could lead to increased use of class-A drugs because cannabis is a gateway drug”. 34% of respondents found this argument to be unconvincing, possibly because they do not believe in the gateway effect or do not see class A drug use to be problematic in of itself.

The only argument which less than 50% of respondents saw compelling was that cannabis legalisation ‘could lead to the legalisation of other drugs’ (49%). It is likely that many respondents disbelieved this prediction, perceiving it as too far removed from current policy.

## Support for cannabis reform

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The poll identified that only 30% of the UK oppose the legalisation of cannabis, which is consistent with a poll Volteface commissioned in October 2018, where 31% were opposed and 59% were in favour.

However, in a departure from the 2018 poll, Volteface’s new poll gave respondents the option of answering ‘neither support nor oppose legalisation’, which 20% of respondents opted for. This brought the total percentage of those supporting the legalisation of cannabis down from 59% to 47% but had no effect on those who were against reform. This is of interest as it shows that of the 20% who are undecided, it can be estimated that around 12% would support legalisation if made to choose.

When respondents were given statements that described different types of cannabis policy, there was similar levels of support for the legalisation (28%) and decriminalisation of cannabis (30%), with a combined total of 58% supporting some form of cannabis reform. 35% supported the statement that the sale and possession of cannabis should remain a criminal offence.

The poll also broke support for legalisation down by how respondents voted in the 2017 General Election. Support for legalisation is highest among Liberal Democrat voters (61%), with SNP voters coming in at 59% and Labour voters at 56%. Less than half of Conservative voters support the legalisation of cannabis (36%), though 50% said that they would support some type of cannabis reform.

Support for legalisation is highest in London (63%), Northern Ireland (58%) and Scotland (51%) and lowest in Yorkshire and Humber (36%), the South East (39%) and the North East (41%).

Support for legalisation has always been higher among younger people but, interestingly, support is now higher among those aged 25-34 (65%) than among those aged 18-24 (57%). This goes against polls conducted by [YouGov](#) and [Populus](#) in 2018.

## Conclusion

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This poll shows that there continues to be high levels of support for cannabis reform in the UK, with the majority of the UK in favour of legalisation.

In other countries which have legalised cannabis, the economic case has played an influential in making the case for reform and it is unlikely that the UK will be the exception to this rule. What is more culturally unique is the concern that the public have around the use of high potency cannabis and the impact this can have on mental health. These debates have not been at the forefront in North America but they will be in Britain as the country moves closer towards a regulated recreational market for adult use of cannabis.

If reform is to become a reality, advocates must carefully consider the findings of this poll and make arguments that speak to the public’s priorities and lived experiences.

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Polling data available on request.



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**Volteface** is an advocacy organisation which seeks to reduce the harm drugs pose to individuals and society, through evidence-based policy and reform.

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