



E-MAILED
- 4 NOV 2022

**Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson MLA
Minister for Health; Mental Health**

Our Ref: 76-19699

Hon Peter Foster MLC
Legislative Council Committee Office
18-32 Parliament Place
West Perth WA 6005

By email: env@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Mr Foster

Thank you for your letter of 17 October 2022 regarding the Standing Committee 'Petition No.62 legalising cannabis in Western Australia'. I appreciate the opportunity to provide comment about the terms of the petition and submissions of the Hon Sophia Moermond MLC (principal petitioner) and the Hon Wilson Tucker MLC (tabling Member).

Cannabis use and harm in Western Australia and impacts of legalisation

As highlighted in the petition and in Mr Tucker's correspondence, cannabis is the most used illicit drug in Western Australia. Most recent data from the 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey found seven percent of Western Australians aged 14-17, and 23.1 percent of respondents aged 18-24, reported using cannabis in the previous 12 months.

The physical and mental health consequences associated with cannabis use are well established. Cannabis use is associated with respiratory, cardiovascular and gastrointestinal problems, as well as anxiety, depression, paranoia and psychosis. The risk of experiencing these harms increases the earlier, and more frequently, a person starts using.

Longitudinal studies report that cannabis use can impair cognitive development and negatively impact life outcomes, particularly in people younger than 25 years. Cannabis can impact a young person's brain which can result in impaired learning, memory, attention and decision-making. Adolescents who use cannabis are more likely to leave school early and achieve lower educational attainment, use other illicit drugs, experience suicidal thoughts and develop dependence.

Research from the United States (US) shows that states that have legalised cannabis have higher prevalence of use and greater volume of use of cannabis products. Liberalisation in the US has also led to more permissive attitudes amongst people who do not use. This change is supported by data that indicates that perceptions of cannabis use in the US are becoming more positive, with perceived harmfulness significantly declining amongst adults and adolescents.

Further, most non-users in the US have stated that legalisation of cannabis has removed a barrier to trying cannabis in the future, and most research study participants (non-users) admit to wanting to try (and will try) cannabis at some point.

Perceived risk of harm and acceptance of use are important factors in preventing use amongst the general population and children and young people.

Researchers have suggested that legal recreational cannabis markets may not reach maturity for some years. It is therefore difficult to assess the long-term impacts of cannabis legalisation on use, harm and other social outcomes until industry maturity is reached. Experts have cautioned against drawing conclusions regarding public health effects of cannabis legislative changes from other jurisdictions at this early stage.

The evidence about the impacts of legalised cannabis use is still emerging. The McGowan Government continues to monitor and remain abreast of research and data related to this issue.

Impacts on economy and crime

The cost of cannabis use to the Australian economy has been estimated at \$4.5 billion per year, including costs related to health and premature mortality, workplace impacts, crime and criminal justice. While some US research suggests economic benefits from increased tax revenue, there is currently no definitive link between the legalisation of cannabis and decreased crime. It is therefore too early to draw conclusions regarding the economic impacts of the legalisation of cannabis for recreational use on the Western Australian economy.

Government response to drug related harm

Responding to drug harms in the Western Australian community requires a balance of initiatives that include prevention, early intervention and treatment.

The Western Australian Alcohol and Drug Interagency Strategy (WAADIS) 2018-2022 is Western Australia's key policy document outlining strategies to prevent and reduce the adverse impacts of alcohol and other drug use. It operates under the national framework of supply, demand and harm reduction and is underpinned by two core elements: first, a focus on prevention and early intervention; and secondly, on providing support for those who need it.

In December 2022, the McGowan Government will launch a new state-wide campaign to increase awareness of the potential harms associated with cannabis use before the age of 25.

Because of the harms associated with cannabis use, it is against the law for people in Western Australia to possess, use, manufacture, cultivate or supply cannabis.

To reduce lifelong legal consequences of a first offence, people apprehended for simple cannabis offences by police in Western Australia may be issued a Cannabis Intervention Requirement under the Cannabis Intervention Requirement Scheme (CIRS). This CIRS provides an opportunity for first time offenders, in possession of not more than 10 grams of cannabis or a smoking implement containing traces of cannabis, to attend a one-to-one session with a counsellor in place of going to court and receiving a criminal conviction.

The McGowan Government have significantly expanded the number of government funded residential rehabilitation therapeutic communities for alcohol and other drugs, as well as provided expanded capacity in our Community Alcohol and Drug Services.

Position of the McGowan Government

The McGowan Government remains committed to ensuring there is access to medicinal cannabis for people with medical needs. However, there is a large body of evidence on the physical and mental health harms related to non-medicinal cannabis use which has the potential to have significant impacts on the broader community.

While the McGowan Government supports a health-based approach to the treatment of people with problems associated with drug and alcohol use, legalising cannabis for recreational use is not supported. Consistent with the available evidence, it is this Government's position that the harms brought about by legalisation of non-medical cannabis for personal use does not currently outweigh any possible benefits to the Western Australian community.

Our priority is, and remains, the health and wellbeing of our community.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on this issue.

Kind regards



HON AMBER-JADE SANDERSON MLA
MINISTER FOR HEALTH; MENTAL HEALTH

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