



Drugs hit

This month will mark a year since the reclassification of cannabis from a Class B drug to a Class C drug across the UK. Police officers were asked to take a presumption against arrest where adults are found in possession of a small amount of the drug. Jonathan Webster reports on how officers in a different policing environment, Amsterdam Police, deal with cannabis and 'harder drugs' such as heroin.

 Amsterdam has a reputation for its beautiful canals, architecture, flower markets and coffee shops. Yet, people do not tend to just pop into the coffee shops for a cappuccino, but to smoke a joint of cannabis.

The officers who police the drugs scene in Amsterdam are called the Horeca Interventic Team (HIT) which roughly translates as the Entertainment Intervention Team. It is their role to monitor the use of drugs, legal and otherwise, within the entertainment spots of the Netherlands capital.

Curiously enough, despite the fact that it is their mission to get out and about amongst the hip, young urban populace, the officers of HIT are a rather private bunch, and notoriously publicity shy into the bargain.

Seated at a smart second

floor conference table are my interviewees; Willem van der Kolk, chief officer who sets the overall policy and work practices of HIT, and Sera Cremers, director of field operations who leads the police officers down on the streets.

'HIT has been in existence for 12 years, and was created to stay one step ahead of the criminals, especially the drug barons,' According to Mr van der Kolk.

The conversation soon focuses on Amsterdam's famed relaxed policy to soft drugs; especially relevant in the light of the de-classification of cannabis in the UK to a class C drug. Ms Cremers is keen to set the record straight on a common misunderstanding: 'Actually, the soft drugs solution wasn't an especially Amsterdam solution. It was, in fact, a solution for the whole of Holland. And we

relaxed the law concerning soft drugs back in the late 70's.'

She adds: 'There are two main points about drugs. In Holland we say that we have to firstly, protect national health, and secondly, we have to fight against misdemeanours that are related to the drug culture. And I think that when it comes to licensed coffee shops we are winning, and we have a good legacy and network of licensed establishments.'

Mr van der Kolk interjects at this point with some facts and figures: 'There are around 200 coffee shops in Amsterdam where you can buy soft drugs. And around 45 shops where you can both indulge soft drugs and alcohol. Right across Holland there are maybe 400 coffee shops that are licensed to sell marijuana. Although it has to be said that these are mainly in the bigger

cities, which, of course, apart from Amsterdam, include Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht.'

As for what coffee shop owners and their soft drug customers can and cannot do, Ms Cremers is pretty adamant: 'A person who visits a coffee shop has to be eighteen. Then it is the coffee shop owner's responsibility to check the ID if he thinks a customer is underage. Thirdly, you cannot sell more than 5 grams of cannabis or marijuana to one person. And finally, the owner is not allowed to have, at any one time, more than half-a-kilo of marijuana/hashish.'

She adds: 'It is part of my duty to go in and check how much hashish and marijuana a café owner has in his shop. I also check the age of customers to see if there are people who are underage. We are very strict about peo-

ple exceeding the 5 gram limit. Most owners know better than to break that rule.'

And what happens if they do? Quick as a flash back comes the reply: 'They would not be so stupid. But if they did get cute, then they know that we in conjunction with the prosecutor's office would probably, at a very minimum, close them for one week. And to lose a whole week's business is pretty serious stuff. And if they transgressed again they would get closed for two weeks. And if they did it again they would never open again. They could lose everything.'

It appears that there are two lists for drugs in Holland. Heroin, cocaine, LSD and ecstasy fall within List 1: the banned category. Whilst 'soft drugs' like cannabis are on List 2.

As to whether the rules about what drug users can and cannot do are sticking, both officers are in little doubt that things are holding up nicely.

Ms Cremers says: 'With so many tourists and rich fiscal pickings, you can imagine that the last thing that the café owners want to do is to lose their licence. So they will take great care that the wrong kind of people aren't hanging out in their coffee shop.'

The café culture soft drugs policy seems to be working at least as far as Dutch adherents are concerned, although the policy in the UK does not allow such coffee shops and critics, including the Federation, argue the dangers of cannabis as a 'gateway drug'.

However, Mr van der Kolk: 'Our research shows us that there has been, thankfully, very little temptation for soft drug users to gravitate towards serious use of hard drugs, and, furthermore, our wider research shows us that, in addition to this welcome fact, there are less people using hard drugs than in other countries who are much more prohibitive right across the board.'

Yet, he sounds a word of caution, adding: 'I cannot say that you never get Dutch people who aren't tempted to use both soft and hard drugs. Nevertheless, from what we can tell the percentage is very low.'



Cat and mouse

Such a scenario would seem to indicate that the Amsterdam and Dutch national police have got the drugs issue just where they want it; a situation that is both contained and out-in-the-open. But things are, evidently, not quite as easy as they might at first appear. Whilst they feel in control of the 'soft drugs' situation, small-time dealers to the international drugs barons are always trying to break through the Dutch defensive dam. Ms Cremers says: 'It is a constant game of cat-and-mouse'

She added: 'No sooner does it seem that we, in conjunction with our friends in Customs, have closed down one supply route than the criminals are trying to open up another. The situation seems to get momentarily more acute when they want to try to get a new fashionable drug into the country. But, luckily, due to our vigilance here at HIT and at national level, we seem to, for the most part, be one step ahead of the criminals.'

Ms Cremers is directly involved in the operations carried out and she recalls a recent

swoop in the early hours of Sunday morning, putting the cat amongst the pigeons and gave certain hard-drug clubbers a very nasty headache indeed.

'Interestingly enough, we did a swoop on an after-hours club just the day before last. Our undercover intelligence had told us that dealers were peddling hard drugs at this event on a regular basis. I passed on our information to the city prosecutor and she said, "OK, here's a search warrant, I want you and your team to go inside and arrest anybody falling foul of the law".'

She adds: 'So leading a force of 50 officers and five dogs we swooped at around 8.00 am. The scene was a little bit tense because many of these particular clubbers are hard drug users and they don't care for the police spoiling their fun. But I wasn't going to take any attitude. We turned on the lights, stopped the music and let the dogs get to work. Anybody who didn't smell of roses was pulled to one side and unceremoniously searched. It was a good morning's work, in

that there were nine arrests: seven for possession and use of hard drugs and two for exceeding the permissible level of soft drugs.'

Punishment

It is always gratifying to police men and women anywhere if, after a lot of hard work apprehending criminals, those falling foul of the law, certainly when it comes to serious offences, are given suitably severe sentences. Obviously the question of suitable punishment is a bit of a sore point for our Dutch friends.

According to Mr van der Kolk: 'The punishment in Holland, even for big-time criminals isn't very tough, in the sense of being able to put them away for long custodial sentences; and that can sometimes be a little demoralising. But we are, nevertheless, all very dedicated. The way it works is that we at HIT catch the illegal drugs traffickers and then the actual sentencing is done by the Prosecutor's office.'

'However, we have found that there are other ways we can hurt suspected criminals.'

Working in conjunction with our colleagues within the tax police we now have the power to confiscate a known drug runner's money, take-away his material assets and freeze his bank accounts, with the aim of getting back the money he has earned from his ill-gotten gains and putting him out of business, hopefully for good.'

With the UK de-classifying some soft drugs does Mr van der Kolk and Ms Cremers whether they would recommend a similar soft drug café culture in London and other major UK towns and cities?

Ms Cremers replies: 'Judging from our successful experience of containment and openness I think that such a licensed café culture policy would, on balance, be a positive thing. It would certainly free up police resources to keep the lid on hard drugs and have more time to catch the big drug barons who ultimately do the most damage to society.'

