

Clarke likely to rule out shift in legal status of cannabis

Alan Travis
Home affairs editor

Charles Clarke, the home secretary, is expected to rule out a change in the legal status of cannabis today when he announces the results of the government's review of medical evidence on the harmful effects of the drug.

A decision will be accompanied by an announcement of a drive against British cannabis farms and a public education campaign clarifying the harm and illegal status of the drug which has been tried by more than 40% of teenagers.

Mr Clarke will also rule out a separate classification for "skunk" and other higher potency varieties of cannabis.

The public education campaign will "nail the myths" that cannabis is a harmless drug or that it is legal. Mr Clarke has conceded that the decision taken by his predecessor, David Blunkett, to downgrade the drug from class B to class C created confusion over its legal status.

The decision to leave cannabis as a class C drug means that possession now typically attracts a caution rather than prosecution.

It follows a review by the government's experts – the advisory committee on the misuse of drugs – of the recent evidence on its harmful effects. It is believed several members of the committee including its chairman, Sir Michael Rawlings, would

have resigned if Mr Clarke had gone against their recommendation. The committee concluded that the impact of smoking cannabis on mental health was more serious than previously thought but not enough to justify reclassification.

"The risk to an individual of developing a schizophreniform illness as a result of using cannabis is very small," the report concluded, according to a leak to the Guardian last week. "The harmfulness of cannabis to the individual remains substantially less than the harmfulness caused by substances currently controlled



Cannabis is likely to stay a class C drug following a review of medical evidence about its potential harm

under the Act as class B." The announcement is likely to provoke a sharp response from rightwing tabloids but the political landscape has shifted following the election of David Cameron as Conservative leader. Mr Cameron signed a report by the Commons home affairs select committee urging the government to review the status of ecstasy.

The Tories have dropped their campaign to reverse Mr Blunkett's decision which was taken to give the police more time to concentrate on class A drugs.