

# Hartlepool Community Safety Team

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## Cannabis Farms: Advice for Landlords

There is a growing trend across the country for cannabis growers to set up their operations in flats or houses in residential streets. Aside from attracting criminals and drug users into the street, the consequences of having a farm set up in a rental property can be disastrous for the landlord too.

This guide is aimed at residential landlords to try and help you spot the warning signs and avoid having your business (and reputation) ruined.

### What is a cannabis farm?

Sounds like an obvious question, but do you actually know what it means to have a cannabis farm set up in your property?

Cannabis farming is big business and is increasingly being carried out by organised crime gangs. Apart from the likely damage to your property caused by their operations these gangs have been known to use extreme and casual violence to protect their operations.

For smaller operations, the cannabis farm will be restricted to the attic, garage or one or two rooms of the property. For larger operations the whole house may be given over to the cannabis plants. If this is the case, the gang will probably strip anything of value or that would be in their way out of your property. This could include fixtures and fittings including the bathroom suite, kitchen units, internal doors, etc.

Next, as many plants as possible will be crowded into the space available. Plants may be grown in soil or hydroponically (just water with added nutrients). Propagation equipment such as UV lights, heaters and watering systems are also likely to be installed, often involving the knocking-through of internal walls to allow the construction of heating/ventilation ducts through the property. The gang may also install ceiling or extractor fans to circulate air causing further damage, increasing the risk of electrical fire and possibly connecting your property illegally (and dangerously) to the National Grid via a nearby lamp post.

Additionally, as the cannabis plants grow better with high temperature and humidity the resulting water damage to the property is likely to be extensive. Plus, as this is a criminal operation, the gang are unlikely to want to pay for all the power or water used by the farm so you could be faced with huge unpaid utility bills on top of your

building repair costs. The amateur electrical cabling and combination of electrical appliances and water can also lead to electric shocks, fires or even explosions.

## **Tips for spotting potential cannabis farmers**

As with all prospective tenancies, the first thing to remember is it is your property so don't feel rushed or pressurised into accepting *any* tenant – even if the property has been vacant a while. It is also important not to assume that all prospective tenants will be potential cannabis farmers. These criminals are not genuine tenants looking for somewhere to live and have no interest in setting up home in your property. By doing a bit of homework before handing over the keys you could save yourself a lot of trouble in the long run.

Top of the list to set your alarm bells ringing should be any tenant who is offering 6-12 months' rent in *cash up front*. This could be a scam to avoid having you come round to the property to collect the rent and spotting their operation.

Drugs gangs will often put forward a 'respectable' looking person as the proposed tenant to try and avoid rousing suspicion. They will be looking out for landlords who are not very 'switched-on' and so will be unlikely to carry out pre-tenancy checks or keep a close eye on their property. If you use a letting agent, make sure they are carrying out the necessary regular checks on your property. Beware of any unusual queries about your property (such as undue interest in how to access the property from the side/back).

Take time to carry out basic checks on prospective tenants including credit checks and taking up references. You may even wish to visit the tenant at the current address and/or get a reference from their current employer as well as current landlord. Asking for photographic ID, and keeping a copy of it, is also a good idea. At the very least, you want to know that your prospective tenant is a real person not a false name. You may wish to get involved with the 'Good Tenant Scheme', which aims to help find quality tenants for landlords. You can find out more about the Scheme by contacting the Housing Advice Team (contact details at the end).

If you would like any advice on any aspect of renting a property (either as a landlord or as a tenant) please contact the Housing Advice Team.

## **What about 'cuckoo-ing'?**

Not all cannabis farmers will approach you as prospective new tenants. A new trend spreading around the country is the practice of 'cuckoo-ing'. Here the criminals target a vulnerable existing tenant, often (but not always) someone with substance misuse problem, learning disability or mental health condition. The gang will then trick or force the tenant to allow their property to be used as a cannabis farm and/or as a base for drug dealing. In some cases the original tenant may flee the property (and may even become homeless). There have also been reports of cuckoo-ed tenants becoming victims of modern-day slavery and being forced to work on the cannabis farm for the drugs gang against their will. The person being cuckoo-ed may be unwilling to raise concerns for fear of repercussions or violence.

Signs that a tenant might be being cuckoo-ed include:

- An unexpected increase in the number and variety of visitors to the property
- A rise in the number of vehicles visiting the property, particularly new vehicles, hire vehicles and taxis
- A rise in general anti-social behaviour in the street and surrounding area
- A sudden rise in complaints from neighbours about a tenant
- Signs your tenant is in distress such as unexplained injuries, lack of self-care, appearing fearful of being seen speaking to you, reluctance to leave (or return to) the property
- Legitimate visitors and neighbours may be reporting similar concerns to you

Of course, these signs could all be indicative of other problems entirely, but trust your instincts and if alarm bells start to ring you can discuss your concerns in confidence with the Community Safety Team or the Housing Advice Team (contact details at the end).

## Spotting signs a cannabis farm has been installed in your property

There are two tell-tale signs (and a few others that might be harder to spot) that a cannabis farm has been set up:

1. Are the windows constantly covered or curtains permanently closed, especially with dark plastic?

*Windows are covered both to stop people seeing the operation and also to control lighting inside with UV lights.*

2. Can you smell a strong, sickly smell coming from the property?

*Cannabis has a very strong, distinctive smell. Many farms are discovered by nearby residents reporting being able to smell the drug coming from a property.*

3. Is there excessive security at the property?

*The cannabis farmers want to protect their crop from the police, landlords and rival drug dealers. Excessive security measures for a residential property may include extremely large padlocks on gates, double/triple locks on doors, portcullises/grilles on doors and windows, window bars.*

4. Is there a high level of condensation at the property?

*The farmers are trying to create greenhouse-like conditions in the property. Are the windows misted up, even when it is not cold outside? Is there evidence of damp that does not seem to affect other properties in the street e.g. peeling paint/wall paper, exterior render falling off the walls? In winter, is this house the only one without snow on the roof indicating a higher temperature?*

5. Can you hear a loud continuous hum coming from the property?

*The farm will often have large extractor fans to ventilate the plants which can sometimes be heard outside or in the next door property.*

6. Are there lots of visitors at unsociable hours/do the occupants only seem to come and go late at night? Alternatively, does the property look like no one lives there with no visitors, bins never put out for collection, unkempt gardens, etc.?

*While a large number of visitors could simply indicate the occupant have lots of friends and family, if it is lots of different people and they are coming at all hours of the day and night they could be customers or drug-runners coming to collect stock. In some cases, the farmers do not actually live in the property, they just call in to tend to the plants, usually late at night to avoid attracting attention.*

7. Are new occupants moving a lot of 'industrial' looking equipment into the property such as ventilation units, cabling, powerful lighting, etc.?

*While the new occupants could be starting renovations on the property, the setting up of a cannabis farm needs a lot of equipment. If you notice this alongside other signs on this list, it could be time to start being concerned.*

If you are concerned that you can see some of these signs at your rental property it is important not to confront the tenants directly as this could put you at risk. Report any concerns using the contact information below.

## **Help and Advice**

Anyone who may have information about drugs activity in their local area is asked to contact the Cleveland Community Drug Enforcement Team on 101 or via their confidential line on 0800 0929 702. Alternatively, contact Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111 or via [www.crimestoppers-uk.org](http://www.crimestoppers-uk.org).

Advice and support, including free of charge crime prevention visits for residents, can be obtained from Hartlepool Community Safety Team on 01429 523100 or by email to [community.safety@hartlepool.gov.uk](mailto:community.safety@hartlepool.gov.uk).

Advice on all aspects of renting a property as a landlord or a tenant can be obtained from the Housing Advice Team on 01429 266522.