



**HILLINGDON**  
LONDON

**CONSULTATION PAPER**

**THE HILLINGDON KHAT REPORT 2011**

**The story of Khat and the implications for the residents of  
Hillingdon and beyond**  
(DRAFT version: December 2010)

**Contents**

- Part one:** The international story - from the desert to the UK
- Part two:** The national story - Khat consumers
- Part three:** The national story - from Heathrow to the streets of Hillingdon
- Part four:** The Hillingdon story / social issues caused by Khat
- Part five:** The Hillingdon story / health issues caused by Khat
- Part six:** The Hillingdon story / crime and ASB issues

**This report contains our findings to date.  
We would welcome your views and comments.**

(Please submit your ideas by Friday 21 January 2011)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

## **Part one: The international story - from the desert to the UK**

1. For centuries, the male elders of tribes in the Horn of Africa have spent their evenings out in the desert chewing the leaves of Khat, whilst talking over the day's events with their friends in convivial conversation. A cultural pastime that is still seen today.
2. Historically, Khat has been consumed because of its stimulant properties and its low production costs. To many, it is an inexpensive way to relieve the poor quality of life experienced in those areas.
3. Khat is a plant sown as a seed and which can take up to five years to mature enough to be consumed. It thrives in the arid desert conditions of Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the Yemen where an estimated 103,000 hectares of land are used for its cultivation.
4. Khat varies in strength from region to region. Kenyan Khat is considered to be the strongest and, thus, the most popular.
5. Once mature, the plants are cut by hand and made into bundles of some 250 grams in weight and wrapped in banana leaves to maintain freshness. Up to 200 bundles are then placed in cardboard boxes at a time for transportation.
6. In addition to bundles, Khat can also be obtained via the internet as alcoholic drinks, some 40 per cent proof, as leaves for tea, as chewing gum, in seed form and as small plants.
7. The land used for its cultivation and sale is, nowadays, largely owned by a small number of companies, some of them it is thought officially controlled, particularly in those areas currently seeing internal conflict.
8. These organisations utilise highly sophisticated methods of cultivation, production and transportation of Khat to all parts of the world, by air.
9. Today, large refrigerated lorries transport the bundles of Khat from the areas of production to such airports as Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi and Moi International Airport in Mombassa for shipment to the UK.
10. Flights arrive daily from these airports to Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester and Manston in Kent.
11. This well managed and controlled supply chain management system, ensures that the Khat arrives with the consumer within three to five days of cultivation. This is important as Khat loses its potency the longer the time lag between cutting and chewing. Three days is considered the maximum best time for consumption. However, it is now believed Khat can be frozen and still maintain a degree of potency.
12. It would seem to be a very big industry, particularly in Kenya. The Kenyan Embassy in London has, therefore, been asked by the Deputy Mayor of London's office if they can inform us as to its value to the local economies and how many people are employed in production and distribution.

13. The total annual imports of Khat into the UK come from Kenya, Ethiopia and the Yemen, with some coming into Kenya from Somalia. An annual total of around 1,950,000 kgs – some 1,917 tons
14. Each flight brings in over 36 tons of Khat a week – 7 tons per flight, with flights five days a week. A total of 9000 boxes or some 1.8 million bundles each week being imported into the UK.
15. A market that is just twenty years old and that is growing by, it is estimated, some 80 per cent a year.
16. The demand for Khat has grown in pace with the growth in the number of refugees and immigrants from the Horn of Africa moving to live in the UK.

## **Part two: The national story - Khat consumers**

17. The main users of Khat come from Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Yemen, an estimated 400,000 people – 200,000 men and 100,000 women and the rest children. An estimated 300,000 are over 18 years old.
18. Based on the 2005 ACMD report, an estimated 34 per cent of men are users – 68,000 men with an estimated 20 per cent of women also being users – 20,000 women. A total of some 88,000 users or consumers in the UK.
19. In London there are an estimated 50,000 users and in Hillingdon some 10,000.
20. It must be noted that these figures can not be substantiated due to lack of up to date or available data, although we have been informed that they reflect figures held by the Home Office.
21. Based upon the total street value of Khat imported into the UK (£468 million), and with an estimated 88,000 consumers, the average expenditure on Khat is circa £5,300 per user.
22. Of the total number of users, some eighty per cent, however, are occasional users i.e. up to two bundles per week and one bundle at a time and spending around £10.00 to £15.00 a week (circa £780 per annum) on purchase.
23. The balance can be defined as heavy users, consuming more than two or three bundles at a time, every day, at a cost of well over £100.00 per week. However, heavy users tend to chew Khat whilst smoking cigarettes and/or cannabis, drinking alcohol and eating food. Thus, their expenditure is very high per week. The vast majority of heavy users being men aged between 20 and 40 years.
24. Occasional users tend to consume Khat in their own homes but heavy users join with other Khat users in various types of buildings – called Khat houses. Some can be described as cafes, others are private homes. In Hillingdon, they are mainly around the Hayes centre. Many of these heavy users spending most days and nights at Khat houses with their friends.
25. There is anecdotal evidence, however, that Khat is beginning to be consumed outside of the Somalian community and thus, the type of environment used for Khat consumption will vary.

### **Part three: The national story - from Heathrow to the streets of Hillingdon**

26. There are three agencies responsible for checking cargo into the UK – the UKBA for security and VAT, Port Health, to ensure that materials, particularly food stuffs, will not be of harm to consumers and DEFRA, which is responsible for ensuring that plants are not imported that might have a damaging effect on indigenous flora and fauna.
27. Every container flown into UK airports is scanned for radio-active materials and, occasionally, the UKBA carries out searches of individual containers, chosen at random, to check that they contain what is put on the manifest. Port Health at Heathrow did do a check last year on a shipment of Khat and found it to be unfit for human use as it was dangerously high in pesticides. However, they had to release the shipment as they did not have the authority to refuse entry.
28. None of these agencies are responsible for Khat imports, due to lack of clarity as to its definition and, thus, the identity of the lead agency.
29. Boxes of Khat are not regularly checked by anyone, for anything, and there are national security concerns that some of these boxes, particularly from Somalia, may contain other items, for example, banned drugs, other products and, indeed, guns and explosives for use by terrorists in the UK and Europe.
30. There are also concerns over the smuggling of Khat from Heathrow into countries in which it is banned, particularly the USA. We understand that discussions are taking place between the UKBA and its US counterparts into action that might be taken to stop such activities.
31. Khat is banned in most countries, except for the UK and the Netherlands, due to two chemicals naturally found in the leaves - Cathonine and Cathine. These are considered to be constituents of Class A drugs, although a report published by the UK's Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) in 2005 disagreed. It recommended to Government that it should not be banned.
32. Once at Heathrow, the Khat is taken to a storage area where agents arrive to purchase the boxes of Khat. VAT is charged on each box which is paid, in cash, by these agents. The total value of VAT collected on Khat imports is in the region of £3 million per year.
33. Boxes of Khat are put into large lorries and taken out of the airport vicinity to various nearby car parks. It has been estimated that each lorry load consists of 10 to 20 large boxes. No one knows who controls these lorries.
34. It is in these areas where the boxes are bought by 'retailers' from across the UK.
35. Each box, containing up to 200 bundles, costs the retailer around £35. On average, it takes just 2 hours for each lorry to be emptied.
36. Each retailer purchases, on average, 2 boxes (400 bundles) – a cost of £70 or 17p per bundle. These are put in cars or vans for onward transportation to

other London boroughs and to such cities as Bristol, Manchester, Sheffield Birmingham.

37. The bundles are then sold to consumers for some £5.00 per bundle. A profit of approximately £4.30 per bundle to the retailer.
38. With each bundle being sold to consumers for an average of £5.00, and with some 1.8 million bundles being imported each year, the UK street market value of Khat is around £9 million per week or £468 million per year
39. However, whilst, obviously, no one knows the true figure of Khat smuggled out of Heathrow into the USA, it is thought that some twenty per cent may be the amount illegally shipped to the United States each week - some 360,000 bundles or 900,000 kilograms. Based on a US street value of \$400 per kilo (as given in the ACMD 2005 report), the US Khat market is worth some \$360 million per week. The UK figures may, therefore, be reduced.
40. In Hillingdon, it's believed that there are off-licenses, cafes, restaurants and grocery stores selling Khat, mostly situated around a small area of Hayes in the south of the Borough. These range from grocery type shops to cafes specially designed for Khat users known as Mafreshis.

#### **Part four: The Hillingdon story / social issues caused by Khat**

41. There are numerous social problems associated with the use of Khat, particularly those caused by male heavy users.
42. These problems include many effecting family life – mainly that the husband/father is unemployed, spends most days and nights and most of the family's income at Khat houses and is not at home to assist his wife in handling family matters, including dealing with the children. We were also told of instances of domestic violence. A significant proportion of Somalians also appear to be living in privately rented accommodation, much of it in poor condition. All these issues often result in family breakdowns.
43. In addition, the noise from Khat houses day and night, together with groups of heavy Khat users chewing, smoking, drinking, shouting and spitting out chewed leaves on the pavements outside of these buildings, causes great concern to local residents. Such behaviour is seen as being very intimidating and anti social and is creating community tensions within these areas.
44. However, it must be said that there is no evidence that Khat is in itself the sole cause of these social problems.
45. It could be argued that it is the joint consumption with other substances and alcohol, together with frustration at being unemployed, family issues, being alienated from the main stream community due to poor English and lack of personal esteem that together contribute to these social problems.
46. Whilst it is accepted that some Somalian women chew Khat, there does not appear to be any evidence that they also use Khat houses or, indeed, cause family or social problems.
47. However, it appears that most Somalian children recognise the dangers of overuse of Khat and are not chewing it themselves. It seems that it is the over twenties who are giving most cause for concern.
48. There are over forty groups in the UK established to assist Somalian refugees, fifteen in Hillingdon, with a broad range of remits.
49. In addition, in Hillingdon agencies such as HAGAM and Tageero, EACH and the Somali Mental Health Project also provide help and guidance to Somalian families.

## **Part five: The Hillingdon story / health issues caused by Khat**

50. Of great concern are the potential health risks of Khat. These are many and varied and, in most cases are dependent upon the physical and psychological manner of each individual, whether they are occasional or heavy users.
51. It is recognised that there is unlikely to be much harm in chewing Khat on an occasional basis, say once or twice a week, although it does depend upon each individual's metabolism.
52. It is also recognised that Khat can be addictive to some users but then, as was pointed out, many other things can also be addictive, for example, alcohol, tobacco and, of course, hard drugs.
53. The main health problems associated with the heavy use of Khat include increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, insomnia, constipation, lethargy, hyperactivity, loss of appetite, diminishing sex drive, depression, tooth darkening, euphoria and hallucinations, and mental health
54. However, there is no clear evidence that Khat alone is causing these problems. As we have learnt, heavy users consume a concoction of things and it may well be that these health problems are caused by a number of factors.
55. Indeed, the over use of any one substance or a mixture of a number, can be detrimental to health, for example, overuse of salt, sugar, fatty food as well as alcohol and tobacco.
56. For those heavy users who have become addicted to Khat, help is available. National bodies such as Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT) offer help and in Hillingdon the local NHS Trust, HAGAM, Tageero, EACH and the Somali Mental Health Project can also provide support and assistance.
57. Unfortunately, it appears that co-ordination between these agencies, in terms of helping Khat users, is not all it should be, although we understand that it is intended to establish clearer channels of communication and to take a more positive multi-agency approach when dealing with heavy users of Khat.



## **Part six: The Hillingdon story / crime and anti social behaviour issues**

58. Of concern to resident groups and the police in Hayes, Hillingdon – where the majority of Khat users live – are the effects of such anti social behaviour as the noise from Khat houses day and night, together with groups of heavy Khat users chewing, smoking, drinking, urinating, shouting and spitting out chewed leaves on the pavements outside of these buildings and in local streets.
59. However, the vast amount of anti social behaviour is not caused by Khat users per se, but by youngsters aged 14 to 20 who use Khat houses as a base for meetings and for smoking cannabis and drinking alcohol.
60. To overcome such anti social behaviour, it is possible for local Safer Neighbourhood Police Teams to close down Khat houses by taking out Anti Social Behaviour Orders.
61. It is believed that some Khat users are driving whilst still under its influence, although there is no evidence to confirm this as there are no tests available for assessing Khat in the bloodstream or urine
62. Other than occasional anti social behaviour, no other criminal acts are considered to be undertaken by Khat users.
63. From a policing point of view, it is accepted that banning Khat will not stop its use but drive it underground and in the hands of criminal gangs – if such gangs are not already involved.
64. There is unanimous agreement that Khat needs to be classified, although there is no firm view as to what that classification might be

**London Borough of Hillingdon  
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