



**HILLINGDON**  
LONDON

## **THE HILLINGDON KHAT REPORT 2011**

**The story of Khat and the implications for the residents of Hillingdon and beyond**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

## **Part I: 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 (Gebissa, 2010). To many, it is an inexpensive way to relieve the poor quality of life experienced in those areas.
3. Historically Khat has been used to treat various ailments such as depression. The New Testament contains the earliest written record of the medical use of Khat (Cox, 2003).
4. Harvested throughout the year in a variety of climates and soils, the evergreen shrub is cultivated as a small bush or tree. Its aromatic seedless leaves have a slightly sweet taste. The plant is sown as a seed and 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 over 100,000 hectares of land are used for its cultivation (Beckerleg, 2010). The plant is harvested in the early hours of the morning and by late morning it is sold in the market.
5. Khat is conventionally chewed, with only a small number of users consuming a drink made with dried Khat leaves. Khat leaves and stalks are chewed slowly to release the active ingredients of Khat which are swallowed with saliva. Leaves and stalks are chewed into a ball shape, which is characteristically stored in the user's cheek for a while.
6. Khat varies in strength from region to region. Kenyan Khat is considered to be the strongest and, thus, the most popular (Neil, 2007).
7. Once mature, the plants are cut by hand, 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 for transportation (RESPOC, 2010).
8. 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 (FreshGAT™, 2010).
9. The land used for its cultivation and sale is, it is believed, owned by a small number of companies with some of these companies thought to be officially controlled, particularly in those areas currently seeing internal conflict (Beckerleg, 2010).
10. These organisations utilise highly sophisticated methods of cultivation, production and transportation of Khat to all parts of the world, mainly by air.
11. 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.
12. Flights arrive daily from these airports to Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester and Manston in Kent (RESPOC, 2010).
13. 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 of significant

importance as Khat loses its potency the longer the time lapse between cutting and chewing (Books Llc, 2010). Three days is considered the maximum time of durability for chewing. However, it has become apparent that Khat can be frozen and still maintain a degree of potency.

14. It would seem to be a very big industry particularly in Kenya and subsequently, the Kenyan Embassy in London has been contacted by the Deputy Mayor of London's office to provide any information as to its value to the local economies and how many people are employed in production and distribution.
15. The total annual imports of Khat into the UK come from Kenya, Ethiopia, Yemen and Somalia via Kenya. An annual total of around 1,95million kgs/1,917 tons. (RESPOC, 2010)
16. Each flight brings in over 36 tons of Khat a week equating to 7 tons per flight, there is one flight a day, five days a week. A total of 9,000 boxes or 1.8 million bundles each week being imported into the UK (RESPOC, 2010).
17. The demand for Khat has increased with the growth in the number of refugees and immigrants from the Horn of Africa who have moved to the UK.

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

18. The main users of Khat come from Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Yemen. The most recent recorded data that is from the 2005 ACMD report. The number of users are estimated at 400,000 people (200,000 men, 100,000 women and the rest children aged over 12 years (ACMD, 2005). It is estimated 300,000 are over 18 years old.
19. It was reported that an estimated 34 per cent of men are users – 68,000, an estimated 20 per cent of women are users – 20,000 women. A total of 88,000 users or consumers in the UK.
20. In London there are an estimated 50,000 users and approximately in Hillingdon there are 10,000 users.
21. 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.
22. 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 (RESPOC, 2010).
23. Of the total number of users we have two clearly defined group; occasional users and heavy users. Approximately eighty per cent 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 (Buffin, 2008).
24. 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. In addition, heavy users tend to chew Khat whilst smoking cigarettes and/or cannabis, drinking alcohol and eating food. Therefore, a heavy user's expenditure is very high per week. The vast majority of heavy users are men aged between 20 and 40 years (Turning Point).

25. Occasional users normally chew Khat in their own homes but heavy users meet with other Khat users in various types of buildings – called Khat houses or Mafreshi (Patel, 2007). Some can be described as cafes, others are private homes. In Hillingdon, they are mainly around the Hayes town centre. Many heavy users spend most of their days and nights at Khat houses with their friends.
26. There is anecdotal evidence that Khat is beginning to be used outside of the Somali community and therefore the type of environment used for Khat consumption will vary.

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

27. There are three agencies responsible for checking cargo into the UK:
  - UKBA handles security and VAT
  - Port Health Authority ensure that materials will not be of harm to consumers; and
  - DEFRA who ensure that plants are not imported that might have a damaging effect on indigenous flora and fauna.
28. Every container flown into UK airports is scanned for radio-active materials. Occasionally, the UKBA carry out spot check searches on individual containers to ensure that they contain what is put on the manifest. Last year Port Health at Heathrow carried out check on a shipment of Khat and found it to be unfit for human use due to dangerously high levels of pesticides (Date, 2003). However, they had to release the shipment as they did not have the jurisdiction to confiscate the shipment.
29. None of the above agencies are responsible for Khat imports. This is due to lack of clarity to its 'definition' and, therefore a lead authority cannot be identified.
30. Boxes of Khat are not checked by any agency and there are national security concerns that some of these boxes, particularly from Somalia, may contain other items, i.e. illegal drugs, other products, including, possibly, guns and explosives for use by terrorists in the UK and Europe.
31. There are also concerns relating to the smuggling of Khat from Heathrow into countries where it is illegal, particularly the USA. We understand that discussions are taking place between the UKBA and its US counterparts regarding steps that might be taken to prevent such activities.
32. Khat is banned in most countries, with the exception of the UK and the Netherlands due to two chemicals naturally found in the leaves - Cathonine and Cathine. These chemicals are considered to be constituents of Class C drugs. Although the report published by the UK's Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) in 2005 disagreed and recommended to Government that Khat need not be banned as an offence is only committed if Cathonine and Cathine are isolated from the Khat plant (ACMD, 2005).
33. Once at Heathrow, Khat is taken to a storage area where agents arrive to collect the boxes of Khat. The agent pays the VAT due on each box which is usually paid in cash by the agent. The total amount of VAT collected on Khat imports is in the region of £3 million per annum (RESPOC, 2010).
34. Boxes of Khat are put on large lorries and taken out of the airport domain to various nearby locations usually car parks. It has been estimated that each lorry load contains 10 to 20 large boxes. No one knows who controls these lorries.

35. From this point the boxes are bought by ‘retailers’ from across the UK.
36. Each box contains up to 200 bundles and costs each retailer around £35.00. On average, it takes approximately 2 hours for each lorry load to be sold (RESPOC, 2010).
37. Each retailer purchases, on average, 2 boxes (400 bundles) – a cost of £70.00 or 17p per bundle. The boxes are put in cars or vans for onward transportation to other London boroughs and to other UK cities such as Bristol, Manchester, Sheffield and Birmingham (RESPOC, 2010).
38. The bundles are then sold to the consumer/user for an average of £5.00 per bundle. A profit of approximately £4.30 per bundle to the retailer.
39. With each bundle being sold for an average of price £5.00, and with 1.8million bundles being imported each year, the UK street market value of Khat is around £9 million per week or £468 million per year.
40. Heathrow is also used as a channel to smuggle Khat into the USA. It is estimated that twenty per cent may be the amount illegally shipped to the USA each week (360,000 bundles or 900,000 kilograms). Based on a US street value of \$400 per kilo (ACMD, 2005), the US Khat market is worth some \$360 million per week. If this is the case, the amount of Khat used in the UK may, therefore, be reduced.
41. In Hillingdon, it is 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 (Uxbridge Gazette, 2010). These range from grocery type shops to cafes specially designed for Khat users known as Mafreshis.

#### **Part IV: The Hillingdon story / Social issues caused by Khat**

42. A culture-based and social activity, Khat chewing is thought to enhance social interaction. The plant is chewed at Yemeni and Somali social occasions to increase socialisation. Khat is also thought to be to a stimulant used to stay awake. We understand that nightshift workers use the plant to postpone fatigue and stay awake. There is also anecdotal evidence that students are experimenting with Khat in an attempt to boost mental performance prior to exams.
43. There are numerous social problems associated with the use of Khat, particularly caused by male heavy users.
44. These problems include a detrimental effect on family life – whereby the husband/father is unemployed, spending most days and nights and the majority of the family’s income at Khat houses. He is not at home to assist his wife in family matters, including managing the children. We have also been advised of instances of domestic violence. A significant proportion of Somalis also appear to be living in privately rented accommodation, much of it in poor condition. All these issues may result in family breakdown.
45. In addition, there are such issues as the noise and nuisance coming from Khat houses during the day and night and groups of heavy Khat users chewing Khat and spitting out chewed leaves on the pavements and smoking, drinking and shouting outside of the premises (RESPOC, 2010). This type of behaviour is seen to be very intimidating, anti social and is creating community tensions within these areas.

46. However, it must be said that there is no evidence to substantiate that Khat is the sole cause of these social problems.
47. It could be argued that it is the joint consumption with other substances and alcohol, along with the frustration of 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.
48. Whilst it is accepted that some Somali women chew Khat, there is no evidence that they also use Khat houses or, indeed, cause family or social problems.
49. It also appears that most Somali children recognise the dangers of the misuse of Khat and are not chewing it themselves. It seems that it is the over twenties who are giving most cause for concern (Nabuzoka, 2005).
50. There are over forty groups in the UK established to assist Somali refugees, fifteen in Hillingdon, with a broad range of remits (Mental Health Alliance, 2009).
51. In addition, in Hillingdon agencies such as HAGAM and Tageero, EACH and the Somali Mental Health Project also provide help and guidance to Somali families (Mental Health Alliance, 2009).

#### **Part V: The Hillingdon story / Health issues caused by Khat**

52. The potential health risks of Khat 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.
53. It is recognised that there is unlikely to be much harm from chewing Khat on an occasional basis i.e. once or twice a week. Although this does depend on each individual's metabolism.
54. It is also recognised that Khat can be addictive to some users but this could be due to the individual's personality as the same can be said for other substances like alcohol, tobacco and drugs (Kebede, 2002).
55. 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
56. However, there is no clear evidence that Khat alone is causing these problems. It has become apparent in our finding that heavy users consume a range of other substances and it may well be that these health problems are caused by a number of factors.
57. Indeed, the misuse of any one substance or a mixture of a number can be detrimental to health.
58. Heavy users who have become addicted to Khat are able to receive help through national bodies such as Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT). In Hillingdon the local NHS Trust, HAGAM, Tageero, EACH and the Somali Mental Health Project can also provide support and assistance for this and other related issues (Mental Health Alliance, 2009).

59. Unfortunately, co-ordination between agencies, in terms of helping Khat users could be handled better, 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 VI: The Hillingdon story / Crime and anti social behaviour issues**

60. Of concern to resident groups and the Police in Hayes, Hillingdon (where the majority of Khat users in the Borough 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 (Uxbridge Gazette, 2010).

61. However, the vast amount of anti social behaviour is not caused by Khat users but by youngsters aged 14 to 20 who use Khat houses as a base for meetings and for smoking cannabis and drinking alcohol (Bashford, 2003).

62. To overcome such anti social behaviour, it is possible for local Safer Neighbourhood Police Teams to close down Khat houses by applying for Anti Social Behaviour Orders or a Closure of Premises Order under the Anti Social Behaviour Act.

63. It is believed that some Khat users are driving whilst still under its influence, although there is no evidence to confirm this, although a biochemical test is now commercially available to detect Khat constituents in urine (Cox, 2003).

64. Other than occasional anti social behaviour, no other criminal acts are considered to be undertaken by Khat users.

65. 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. Further, if it is made illegal the social circumstances that are already an issue may be exacerbated i.e. if the majority of the household income is already funding the use of Khat what are the possibilities of other activities taking place if there is no more money in the budget.

66. There is unanimous agreement that Khat requires a classification so that it can be regulated in some form, although there is no firm view as to what that classification might be at the moment.

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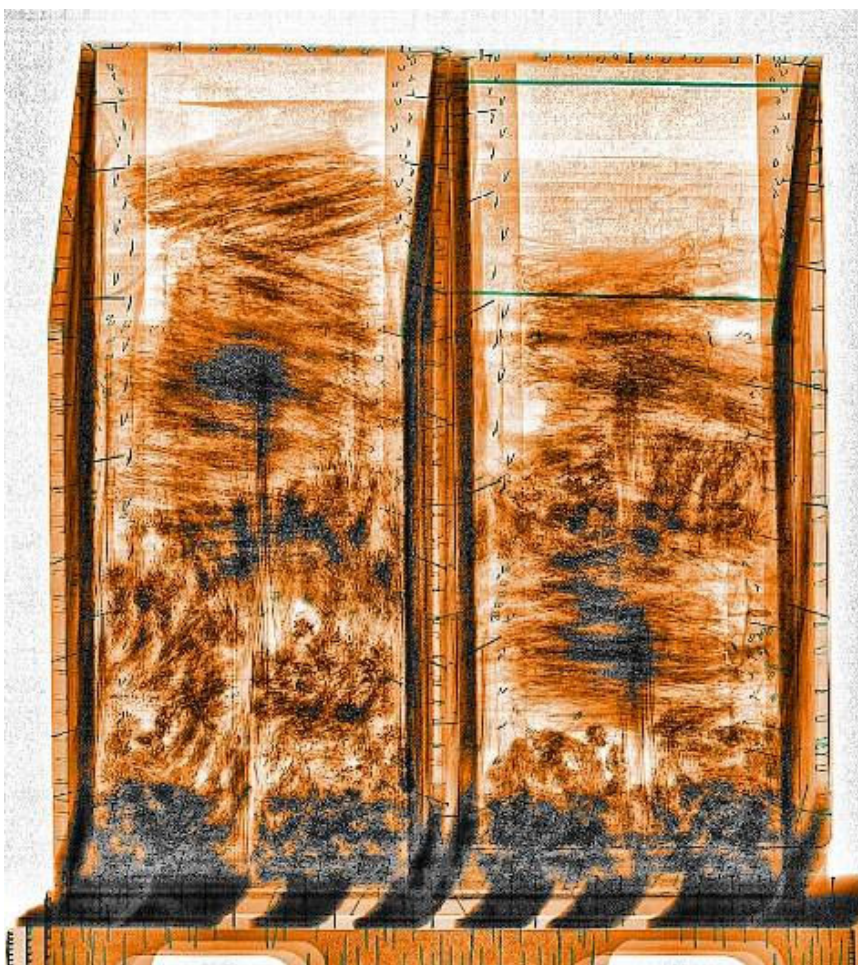


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X-Ray images of Khat shipments



Outer crates often of heavy cardboard or plywood construction (sometimes wrapped in black plastic)

Inner cardboard boxes / cloth bags containing bundles of Khat

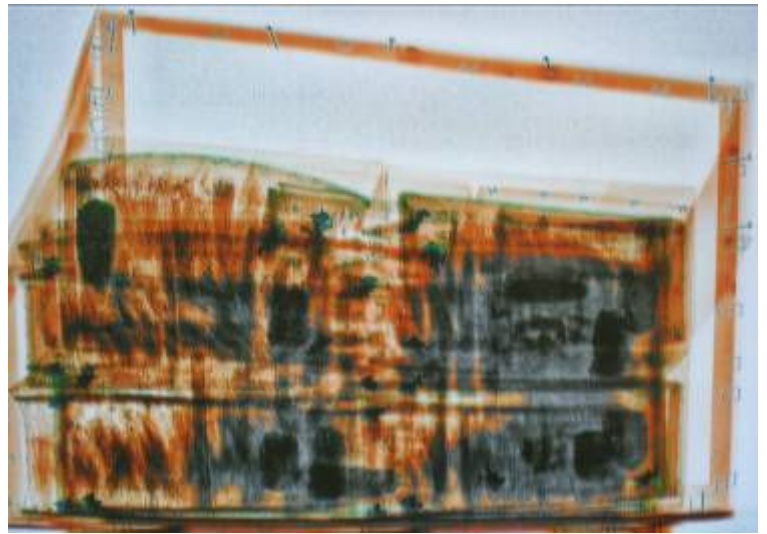






Outer cardboard box containing computer tower carcass with concealed bundles of Khat





Khat bundles hidden inside "Video Rocker Gaming Chair"





Typical x-ray image of Khat bundles with stalks clearly visible