

Khat (qat)



What is Khat?

Khat is a plant, the leaves and stalks of which are chewed to create a 'high' and a sense of alertness which is followed by a feeling of calm over several hours. Its use is most prominent among East African communities, most commonly Somalians and users are generally male – although some increases in female usage of khat in Somalia has been reported.

Legal Issues

- on 3 July 2013 the Home Secretary announced that the Government had decided to ban khat. From 24 June 2014 khat has been controlled as a class C drug.
- persons found in possession of khat for personal use are liable to arrest and the penalty could be up to two years in prison, an unlimited fine or both. Persons who supply or import khat are liable to arrest and the penalty could be up to 14 years in prison, an unlimited fine or both.

- the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) have issued guidance for officers to first issue a “khat warning” for a first offence of possession, a £60 fine for a second offence and arrest on the third offence.

Why Khat was Banned

- the Home Office have stated the following reasons for banning khat:
- concerns raised by the Somali community, particularly from wives and mothers, that khat use prevented the community from integrating in the UK as it prevented their husbands and sons from engaging in education and employment;
- concerns raised by Somali womens groups that the use of khat caused men to neglect their families due to khat using sessions which last several hours;
- the active ingredients of khat, cathenone and cathine, have been controlled class B substances in the UK since 2010;
- the United States of America and many European Union countries have already banned khat; and
- the ban would prevent the UK from becoming a hub to distribute khat to other countries where it is illegal.
- the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) was asked by the Government to produce a report on the potential harms of khat to individuals and communities in the UK. The overwhelming majority of ACMD members recommended that khat should not become a controlled substance and stated that banning it would be “disproportionate” for the following reasons:
 - no direct link between khat use and medical conditions could be identified, other than a small amount of reports of liver toxicity;
 - where khat use was a factor in health issues it presented as part of a wider range of causes; and
 - it was difficult to ascertain whether khat caused societal problems or if khat use was a symptom of these issues.
- the ACMD called for a wide ranging multi-agency approach to address the issues in communities which use khat instead of making it a controlled substance.
- members of the Somali community also spoke out about the banning of khat. Several importers of khat noted that their import businesses created jobs for the Somali community which would now be lost. Growers in East Africa, largely Somalia and Kenya, also objected to the impact this would have on their businesses.
- objections to the ban were also raised as the growth and supply of khat could be pushed underground and criminalise people who use it. Some Somali groups objected on the grounds that gathering to chew khat together can be a social activity which is a part of Somalian culture. Some Yeminese groups objected as the use of khat is part of the traditional Yemini wedding ceremony. Due to these cultural uses for khat, some opponents of the ban have suggested that criminalising the substance could further marginalise East African communities in the UK.

Local Impact

- khat use tends to be concentrated in Somali communities, of which there is a low concentration in the Borough, the ban was not expected to have a significant impact in Barking and Dagenham.
- prior to the ban there had been no reports of people presenting to services in the Borough requiring support with khat use, although this could be because it was legal at that point and therefore not perceived as an issue.
- although LBBDD appears to be unaffected by the recent changes in law neighbouring boroughs such as Waltham Forest and Newham might be affected as there have been reports of the use and selling of khat in those areas.
- the Secretary of the Barking Somali Women's Association has reported that khat is not readily available in the Borough, and that residents usually travel to Newham to obtain it if they buy it at all.
- communities have been fully informed of the consequences of being in possession of khat now that it is illegal,
- as a result of the illegalisation of khat there was a possibility that there would be an increase in drug related offending and that the price of khat could increase in value which could force users to source additional funds;
- the Public Health England Alcohol and Drug team raised concerns that those individuals who used khat previously may turn to alternative drugs now that khat is illegal. However, it was agreed to be unlikely that drug users of legal substances would turn to more problematic or illegal substances; and
- as a result of khat being an impractical drug to smuggle into the country (it is a large plant and the leaves only have potency for two to three days after being picked) there may be attempts to set up khat factories in the Borough similar to cannabis farms.

Since the Khat Ban

- since the ban there have been four arrests for the possession of khat in LBBDD. The four arrests came from one incident in Abbey Ward where a bag containing khat was thrown from a vehicle's window while being pursued by the Police. All four occupants were under 18 and resided outside the Borough.
- there have been no arrests for khat supply in LBBDD.
- no presentations to substance misuse services for khat use have been reported.
- the LBBDD Drug Strategy Manager has proactively worked to raise awareness of the khat ban in the Borough. Discussions have been held with the Barking Somali Women's Association, who have publicised the availability of a khat discussion group for women affected by khat use. So far there has not been any uptake for this group.
- the Drug Strategy Manager has also contacted shops throughout the Borough to ensure that they are aware that khat has become a controlled substance and that selling it is now an offence of supplying a class C drug.
- anecdotally, people are reported to be using khat through 'e cigarettes'.