

## One year on since the ban of the herbal stimulant Khat

One year ago, the herbal stimulant Khat was banned in the UK. Ashley Community Housing (ACH), as a specialist Housing provider for some of the most vulnerable in our society, played an important part in raising awareness of the ban and creating activities to support our tenants and users of Khat to help them with the transition.



### **Traditional drug**

Chewing Khat has been a cultural tradition in the Horn of Africa for many centuries. It is particularly common within the Somali community, to which both Bristol and Birmingham home over 10, 000 members of. Khat acts as a stimulant similar to amphetamine, and was made a Class C drug in the UK due to much-disputed fears over its health and social impacts and concerns that the UK was becoming a hub for its supply around Europe.

There have only been a few arrests here in Bristol since it was made a Class C drug, but that doesn't mean the transition has been easy. Members of certain ethnic minorities say there has not been enough support available for people who recognize the need to give up the drug.

Khat has been chewed for centuries, and is an important social custom, in the Horn of Africa - and among many members of the large migrant communities who have made Bristol their home.

### **Lack of Rehabilitation activities**

It is widely believed amongst East African migrant communities in Bristol and Birmingham that the Khat ban was implemented quickly and lacked support for users. For example, there was no provision of rehabilitation programmes, making it difficult for people to move on from a drug which has been chewed for generations and with great cultural significance.

Some of our tenants told us that although stopping chewing Khat a year ago has had a positive effect on their life, it was extremely difficult - and made worse by a lack of tangible help. The posters and leaflets distributed in community languages were just not enough. Some say the ban has allowed many to turn their lives around; others that it has destroyed community links, and pushed users towards alcohol and harder drugs instead.

### **ACH working with DWP to help long term unemployed back into work**

ACH is targeting the long term unemployed back into work. Most of our clients are ex Khat chewers. We believe help with employment in a culturally sensitive environment is one of the best solutions to help make the transition. We have seen huge rise for the attendance of our classes and job clubs. The informal conversations with former Khat chewer tenants and those from the community who access our support services in all their forms, has found that many need signposting to other services such as mental health service, debt advisers, immigration solicitors and even family mediators. However, with cuts to legal aid and the number of free advice agencies dwindling and those that exist oversubscribed, these vulnerable groups do face challenges that need a **holistic community based response**.

It is also believed Khat has not gone away - just went underground, becoming more expensive and with preservatives so it will keep for longer, making it even more potent.