Press release
23 June 2014

Safer Bristol working with Somali community ahead of khat ban

Safer Bristol has been working closely with the city's large Somali community to lessen the impact of the government ban on khat when it comes into effect tomorrow (24 June).

Khat is a plant-based stimulant, predominantly used by Somali, Yemeni, Djiboutian and Kenyan men when they socialise in the mafrish – a house or gathering place where men have traditionally met to chew khat, talk and make decisions on behalf of the community. As khat is a socialising drug it is usually chewed for many hours.

Khat makes people more alert and talkative, can produce a feeling of calm if chewed for a few hours, can suppress the appetite and leads to periods of insomnia.

Peter Anderson, the council's Service Manager for Crime and Substance Misuse said: "Some khat users will use it once in a while, while others will use it every day. As with other addictive substances around 5% are what would be considered problematic users and need more help to stop their dependence. The risk is that they will switch to other drugs. We are signposting people who need help with addiction to treatment services in the area so they can get the support they need".

Wellspring Healthy Living Centre in Lawrence Hill has Somali male and female Wellbeing Support Workers to provide a service for the Somali community. Support is given on a one to one basis as well as group and peer support groups.

The Safer Bristol-funded Recovery Orientated Alcohol and Drugs Service (ROADS) also offers a range of treatment services to reduce the impact substance misuse has on individuals, families and communities. ROADS is currently working with the Somali community to deepen knowledge of its needs and bring in Somali language expertise. Help and support can also be sought from GPs.

Women in the Somali community – which numbers 10,000 in Bristol - have widely supported the ban saying that khat use leads to more incidents of domestic abuse and

family breakdown as men spend much time away from their families chewing khat with other men. As one of the effects of khat chewing is insomnia, this can affect users' ability to communicate with family members. The police estimate that of the adult users in Bristol 5-10% are female, whilst 80% are male.

The ban will mean that khat is classified as a class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. This is the least harmful category of controlled drugs (class A being the most harmful) putting khat on a par with other class C controlled substances such as ketamine and GHB.

Possession of a class C drug carries a maximum sentence of two years' imprisonment and a fine. Supply or production carries a maximum sentence of 14 years' imprisonment and a fine.

A system similar to a cannabis warning system will be applied by the police. Those caught in possession of khat for the first time will receive a warning that does not form part of a criminal record. A £60 fine applies for a second possession offence and those with a third possession offence face arrest.

Safer Bristol's Substance Misuse Team has been working in partnership with the community since the Government announced its plan to ban khat a year ago. Aside from health, their focus has been to identify ways to improve education, training and job opportunities for both traders and users.

Currently the council is working with the Somali community to signpost traders to appropriate employment and business support services to help facilitate the transition from khat being legal to being a banned substance.

The emphasis for users – whose English may not be as good as the traders - is to assist them to access English language courses which are free for those who are unemployed so they can improve their chances of employment. People are also being encouraged to access employment services offered by Job Centre Plus and other providers in Bristol.

The Bristol Somali Resource Centre in Barton Hill provides free impartial information and guidance, including welfare, training opportunities to increase employability and

development projects where the community can volunteer. They help with writing CVs, job searching, provide free IT services and advocate for the community.

Abdullahi Farah at the centre said: “We already support khat users and know the difficulties surrounding khat. It is intensive work and we need to work together”.

Peter Anderson said: “It is difficult to fully predict the impact khat classification will have on the Somali community until it happens but the community itself has been taking an active role in finding its own solutions”.

Ends

For further information please contact Hilda Kalap Media Officer on 0117 903 7953 or email hilda.kalap@bristol.gov.uk

Notes to Editors:

About Safer Bristol

Our job is to make Bristol safer for all citizens and visitors. As a partnership, we are responsible for co-ordinating actions which will tackle the adverse effects of crime and drugs on communities. For more information visit: www.bristol.gov.uk/page/safer-bristol/

Bristol Somali Resource Centre

The BSRC is a registered charity set up by a group of local volunteers in 2008 to help newly arrived immigrants. BSRC provides free and impartial information, advice and guidance on a range of issues including welfare, housing, immigration, schools and employment. It aims to get the voice of the Somali community heard in the area, promote community cohesion and reduce the isolation of Somali people.

Substance use treatment services:

- Wellspring Healthy Living Centre, Beam Street, Bristol BS5 9QY or Tel: 0117 304 1415

- Bristol Drugs Project offers a range of treatment services to reduce the damage drugs and alcohol problems have on individuals, families and communities. Bristol

Drugs Project aims to reduce harm, promote change, challenge prejudice and maximise people's potential.

BDP can be found at No.11 Brunswick Square, Bristol, BS2 8PE or contacted through their helpline on 0117 987 6000.

BDP will be able to offer referral to the rest of Bristol's Recovery Orientated Alcohol and Drug Service (ROADS)

- Developing Health & Independence (DHI) will be providing advice, information, one to one and group support for families affected by substance misuse, including khat. They will also empower and train family members to support one another within their communities. For more information or support call 0117 916 6588.

Domestic Abuse

- Sometimes when drugs are banned this can lead to an increase in violence in the home. Next Link offers crisis support and safe temporary supported housing to women and children experiencing domestic abuse and some of these are specifically for black and minority ethnic women.

  To find out more about the service please contact **Next link on 0117 925 0680 or text 07714 290 011**