



Information about Bonfires and other open fires producing smoke

Introduction to the pollution issues associated with bonfires

Milton Keynes Council actively discourages bonfires whether they are in gardens, on allotments or demolition/construction sites. This is part of the council's ongoing commitment to improving the quality of our environment, in this case by reducing air and ground pollution.

Bonfires have a seriously detrimental effect on health and the wider environment. It is not possible to have a bonfire, of any sort, without it causing air pollution and releasing toxic chemicals into the environment.

Unless you live in a very rural area with no immediate neighbours the toxic fumes from any bonfire you light will affect other people. In any case the pollution from your fire will add to the general burden of air pollution which it is calculated causes over 32,000 premature deaths in the UK every year. One of the main health hazards from air pollution is tiny particles produced by combustion processes.

Bonfires produce copious quantities of these particles, which we see as smoke, in addition to hundreds of toxic chemicals. The ground under bonfires is also left in a polluted state. Repeated bonfires, for example on an allotment site, can leave the soil so polluted with toxic chemicals that it represents a significant risk to health to grow vegetables on that soil. Such ground could also be designated as "contaminated land" within the meaning of Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

Bonfires and the law

Where smoke causes a nuisance to the neighbouring properties, the smoke can be deemed a Statutory Nuisance under the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

If any smoke from your bonfire affects neighbouring properties or people then you will have caused a Statutory Nuisance because the toxic materials in the smoke are deemed to be "prejudicial to health". That is because the toxic chemicals and particles in bonfire smoke can have a significant affect on respiratory health when people breathe them in. This is particularly serious for children and anyone with any form of respiratory illness such as asthma.

If the council is satisfied that a Statutory Nuisance exists or is likely to occur or recur, we must serve an Abatement Notice. The penalty for contravention of a Notice under the above Act, by causing another smoke nuisance, could be prosecution in the Magistrate's Court leading to a fine up to £5000, and a daily penalty of up to £500 if the offence is repeated following an earlier conviction.

It is also an offence under the Highways (Amendment) Act 1986 to light a fire and allow smoke to drift across a road.

What is wrong with bonfires?

- Bonfires are anti-social sources of pollution and a serious health hazard.
- Burning garden or allotment waste is unnecessary and produces large amounts of smoke, especially if it is damp and smoulders, smoke is both seriously toxic and causes annoyance to others.
- The smoke particles, dioxins and other toxic compounds produced by bonfires are a significant contribution to air pollution which causes thousands of premature deaths in the UK every year.
- Wood smoke contains over 200 chemicals, many of which are highly toxic; such as dioxins, carbon monoxide, a whole range of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), aldehydes, phenols, cresols, nitrogen oxides, sulphur oxides, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and ultra-fine particulate matter (microscopic dust) which is inhaled deep into the lungs; cancer causing compounds in woodsmoke include benzopyrenes, dibenzanthracenes and dibenzocarbazoles.
- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the cancer risk from woodsmoke is 12 times greater than from equal amounts of tobacco smoke, and that is from burning 'clean' untreated wood (see Washington State Department of Ecology Health Effects of Woodsmoke).
- Burning treated or painted wood, plastic, rubber, or green weeds/plants etc. not only makes the smoke even more unpleasant but also produces an even greater range of highly toxic and carcinogenic compounds.
- Burning demolition or construction waste contravenes waste disposal regulations and is also "illegal disposal of trade waste".
- Bonfire smoke and fumes can have a particularly seriously detrimental effect on health for asthmatics, bronchitis sufferers, people with heart conditions and children.
- In addition to the health risks bonfires cause annoyance to neighbours, by making their houses and washing smell, and almost always constitute a Statutory Nuisance under the Environmental Protection Act 1990.
- The smoke, soot and smell from bonfires are the subject of many nuisance complaints to the council. All complaints are followed up and a first offence normally results in an explanation of why bonfires are bad for health and the environment and a request not to have any more. Repeated offences will result in the serving of an Abatement Notice prohibiting further fires.
- Smoke prevents your neighbours from enjoying their gardens, opening windows or hanging washing out, and reduces visibility in the neighbourhood and on roads.

- Anyone lighting a fire and allowing smoke to drift across a road commits an offence under the Highways Act 1980 if it reduces visibility for road traffic.
- Any bonfire is a health and safety risk. Bonfires are frequent, and needless, causes of admissions to hospital casualty departments.
- Fire can spread to fences or buildings and some cans are an explosion hazard when rubbish is burned.
- Bonfires often require the attendance of the Fire & Rescue Service which is a waste of their time & resources and may delay them in dealing with more serious emergencies.
- Piles of garden waste are often used as a refuge by animals, including hedgehogs, so look out for hibernating wildlife and even sleeping household pets. Just don't burn it!

Alternatives to Bonfires

Garden and allotment waste

Compost it! Don't burn it! Making compost at home is a good and effective way of reducing your waste and producing a rich material to use in your garden.

Milton Keynes Council is in partnership with recyclenow.com to provide low cost composting bins to the residents of MK, starting from £3 (plus £5 delivery), these can be ordered on **0845 077 0757**. See enclosed leaflet for composting tips and a step by step guide.

Remember if you burn this material in your garden or allotment not only are you causing air pollution but you are also polluting the soil with toxic and cancer causing chemicals such as benzo(a)pyrene and dioxins.

What about green waste recycling?

Milton Keynes Council has introduced a new free of charge weekly food and garden waste collection scheme in summer 2009. This new service will be introduced across the whole borough in two phases, so that everybody will have this service by the end of the summer.

The first phase of the new food and garden waste collection service starts in July 2009. We will automatically deliver a free wheeled bin to every household.

For further details, please contact the Environmental Services Helpline on **01908 252666**

Where are the local civic amenity sites?

As an alternative, garden refuse and other rubbish, may be taken to one of Milton Keynes Council's Civic Amenity sites which are situated throughout the Borough, at:

Crawley Road, Newport Pagnell

Newport Road, New Bradwell

Chesney Wold, Bleak Hall

How do I dispose of bulky household items?

Ring Milton Keynes Council's Environmental Services Helpline on **01908 252570** or call in at the council offices to book a special collection. Free collections take up to 10 working days and can remove unwanted bulky furniture and white goods.

Remember if you burn household waste, or items such as furniture, anywhere where it may affect other people or their property (which is everywhere in Milton Keynes) you will be causing a Statutory Nuisance. This is because not only is this anti-social behaviour but the highly toxic smoke and fumes given off are legally "prejudicial to health". In this case the council will serve an Environmental Protection Act 1990 Abatement Notice on you and if you repeat the offence take you to court where on conviction you can be fined up to £5,000.

Contact us:

If you have any questions about bonfires or this information please contact:

The Environmental Protection Team,

Community Protection Division,

Milton Keynes Council

Civic Offices, 1 Saxon Gate East

Milton Keynes MK9 3EJ

E-mail: ehpt@milton-keynes.gov.uk or

Tel: 01908 252398.