



# Uttlesford District Council

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# Bonfires Leaflet

**T**he bonfire's name comes from the medieval bon-fires of animal bones - and while modern day bonfire ingredients may not be as gruesome, they still cause pollution and local nuisance. Bonfires may be fun, but they aren't usually the most environmentally-friendly way of getting rid of your rubbish.

### **WHAT'S WRONG WITH A GOOD OLD-FASHIONED BONFIRE?**

Bonfires can be very irritating to neighbours - the smoke, smuts and smell they cause are the subject of many complaints to local authorities. Smoke can ruin your neighbours' enjoyment of their gardens, prevent them from opening their windows or hanging washing out, and reduce visibility in the neighbourhood and on roads.

There is no doubt that bonfires cause air pollution; burning garden waste will produce smoke especially if it is damp and smouldering rather than dry and blazing. Like tobacco smoke this will contain the poisonous gas carbon monoxide and other noxious or irritating compounds. Burning plastic, rubber or painted materials not only creates an unpleasant smell but also produces a range of poisonous compounds.

All of these compounds can have damaging health effects, but if exposure to bonfire smoke is short lived, serious harm is unlikely. However problems may be caused for susceptible people such as children, asthmatics, bronchitis sufferers or those with heart problems. Even if the immediate health risk is small, your bonfire will be adding to the general background level of air pollution. Air quality in the UK often hits the official "poor" level - do you really want to make it worse?

Weather conditions can make matters worse. If the air is still, particularly in the late afternoon or evening, smoke will linger in the air. A dry, blazing bonfire will help to lift smoke and fumes upwards. On the other hand if it is too windy, smoke may blow into neighbouring properties and across roads causing annoyance or danger.

Don't forget that bonfires can be dangerous from a safety point of view - spreading fire to fences or buildings, scorching trees and plants. Exploding cans and bottles can also be a hazard when general rubbish is burned, and bonfires are often used as a refuge by animals - look out for hibernating hedgehogs and sleeping pets.

## **WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?**

Do you really need to burn? Disposal methods which are far less environmentally damaging are available.

### **Composting and Recycling**

Most kitchen and garden waste - even cardboard and paper - can be recycled into compost. Rather than burning garden waste a compost bin will produce a useful soil conditioner, saving money on commercial products. Food waste placed in the brown wheeled bin will be composted by the Council.

Woody waste can also be shredded to make it suitable for composting or mulching; you can buy or hire shredders and some allotment societies have their own. Remember, that shredders can be noisy - don't replace one nuisance with another!

Advice on composting is available from the following:

**[www.recyclenow.com](http://www.recyclenow.com)**

Household waste should certainly not be burned on a bonfire. Many items can be recycled; to find out more about recycling facilities or composting contact the Council's Recycling Officer on 01799 510510.

## **Collection**

Garden waste should not be mixed with other household waste but placed in special bio sacks available from the Council. Waste may also be taken to the local amenity site. The same goes for furniture; old beds and sofas are not suitable for burning and if you can't take them to an amenity site, the Council will collect them.

## **WHAT'S THE LEGAL POSITION?**

Many people assume that there are specific bye-laws to prohibit bonfires. There aren't. If used sensitively, the occasional bonfire - or barbecue - should not cause a major problem and an outright ban would be unreasonable. However if a neighbour is causing a continuing nuisance by burning rubbish, the law is on your side.

Under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, it is an offence to cause a statutory nuisance. This includes smoke, fumes or gases "emitted from premises so as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance", and can include nuisance created by bonfires. To be considered a possible nuisance, the bonfire would have to be a regular problem and interfering substantially with your well-being, comfort or enjoyment of your property.

If you are bothered by persistent bonfire smoke it is best to approach your neighbour first and explain the problem. You may feel awkward, but they may not be aware of the distress they are causing and it might make them more considerate in the future. If this approach fails, contact the Council's environmental health section. They will take reasonable steps to investigate your complaint and can take action under the Environmental Protection Act by issuing a nuisance abatement notice. The same Act allows you to take private action in the magistrates' court.

Remember, if the fire is only occasional this is unlikely to be considered a nuisance. Similarly, if you are being troubled by a series of bonfires from different neighbours, each one of whom only burns occasionally, this will not be considered a nuisance because no single individual can be held responsible. In this situation all you can do is encourage them to consider the alternatives - give them a copy of this leaflet!

Finally, under the Highways (Amendment) Act 1986 anyone lighting a fire and allowing smoke to drift across a road faces a fine if it endangers traffic. Contact the police in this case.

### **BUT I LIKE BONFIRES...**

A bonfire can be a convenient way of getting rid of a large amount of waste, or perhaps you want a bonfire just for fun; on Guy Fawkes night for instance. Some people simply like making fires - perhaps it's part of human nature! If you must have a bonfire, it's only fair to warn your neighbours (and they are much less likely to complain if you do). Remember that bonfire and barbecue parties can cause noise as well as smoke - two good reasons for letting them know in advance. And don't save up your old junk to burn on bonfire night - why not go to an organised event instead!

## GARDEN BONFIRES

### THE GOOD BONFIRE GUIDELINES

So you can't resist it. If you are determined to have a bonfire, follow these guidelines and the chances are you won't cause serious nuisance.

-  Only burn dry material.
-  Never burn household rubbish, rubber tyres or anything containing plastic, foam or paint.
-  Never use old engine oil, meths or petrol to light the fire or encourage it.
-  Avoid burning when the wind will carry the smoke over roads or into other people's property.
-  Avoid burning at weekends and on bank holidays when people want to enjoy their gardens.
-  Avoid burning when the air quality in your area is "poor" or "very poor".
-  (You can check this by ringing the air pollution advisory service on 0800 556677)
-  Never leave a fire unattended or leave it to smoulder - douse it with water if necessary.

If you require this publication/form in an alternative format and/or language please contact us on 01799 510510.

### UTTLESFORD DISTRICT COUNCIL

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