

SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL 3 – 2018/2019: AIR QUALITY
MEETING 4 – 14 FEBRUARY 2019

BONFIRES: COMMENTS RECEIVED FROM CLLR MIRIAM RICE ON
BEHALF OF HER CONSTITUENTS IN NORTHOLT MANDEVILLE WARD

Air quality is, rightly, an important, contemporary topic of discussion. We all, after all, need to breathe, and with conditions like asthma on the rise, this is becoming increasingly difficult.

In fact, I'll be open here. I have a vested interest: I have asthma. But, we all have a vested interest: we all breathe. Whereas it's uncomfortable and unpleasant to breathe in potentially toxic smoke, for an asthmatic it can be an attack trigger. For me, this is uncomfortable, for others it can be deadly.

Efforts are being made to reduce industrial pollutants, as well as those from motor vehicles and, latterly, from wood-burning stoves, if the Government's Clear Air strategy is to be believed. Over the course of successive Governments, the UK has sought to clean up the air that we breathe.

The one legacy area of traditional Britain that has been under-addressed, however, is that of private bonfires. The law is currently vague on this, in that there is no specific legislation to prohibit them, but it is my understanding that it is an offense to cause fumes or smoke to be released that are either harmful or are otherwise detrimental to the enjoyment of one's property.

Ealing Council's own website states that "smoke from bonfires causes severe distress to sufferers of respiratory and other diseases." It also has a checklist of recommendations to mitigate the effects including, but not limited to:

- Checking weather conditions, such as wind condition
- Ensuring that you're only burning dry, untreated materials
- Burning in small quantities
- Advising neighbours before lighting

Like any issue that requires the onus of responsibility to be placed on the individual to temper their rights, or perceived rights, against their responsibilities, it leaves the matter open to massive interpretation and at the whim of their understanding or, dare I say, the degree to which they actually care about the effects of what they're doing.

Does anyone really believe that someone looks at the rubbish they're about to burn and decides not to because there are one or two pieces of "the wrong" material in there? Or, maybe it's slightly damp but it can't wait because the garden needs clearing before that all-important party on Saturday.

In short, it is not clear to me that this advice is ever actually followed.

I have, before now, observed the following:

- One, or more, local residents burning something that smelt not dissimilar to Dettol antiseptic liquid.
- Burning on cold, humid days where damp hangs heavy in the air and captures the smoke, causing the pollution to remain for many hours.
- Given the drift, burning on days where it's clearly windy enough for their smoke to be carried a considerable distance.
- A neighbour lighting a bonfire when their next-door neighbour clearly has a window left open; now, this could be deliberate; perhaps they were hanging sausages, but the implication is that they weren't aware.
- Periods of a week or so, in the case of one particular neighbour, where they indulged in a stream of bonfires, leaving their garden looking like the landing area for a series of alien spacecraft.
- It is my conjecture that one neighbour was, at least for a short period, burning small quantities of their household waste in a small incinerator, on a regular basis.

It's even worse in the summer, when it's a warm day, as the effect of local bonfires sometimes makes it impossible to have windows open which, as you might imagine, is more than a little uncomfortable.

I have also never, in my entire life, been asked if I am happy with a neighbour lighting a bonfire. It is possibly the case that residents will ask their next-door neighbours, each side, but given that nobody really seems to understand, or care, where their smoke goes, that is never going to be enough. And, in fairness, when your "neighbour" is a block of flats, are you realistically expected to consult every resident?

Bonfires are, in fact, so common in my area that on any given day there's a good chance that I will encounter the effects of at least one bonfire while walking down the road, even if I haven't already inhaled a lung-full, opening the door.

The point I'm making here is that the "rules" aren't, or the "advice" isn't, enough to ensure that people actually mitigate the effects of their actions. Whilst I'm sure there are actually people who do follow the rules, in good faith, and do everything they can to alleviate the problem, in short, and somewhat unsurprisingly, we can't actually really trust all people to behave themselves on a voluntary basis.

So, do people actually need to burn their waste?

It is likely that some people consider it a cheaper option, given that the council charges for the disposal of garden waste. It's possibly also more convenient to rake garden detritus on to a small pile, rather than bag it up and, potentially drag it through the house. Having undertaken the latter on a number of occasions, it isn't always a small job. I also had to take it to the tip myself, as I wasn't aware of any Council collection at the time, and in that area.

This aside, it's hard to conclude that people actually "need" to burn their rubbish, it's just potentially a bit easier, and a little cheaper – although with a hidden environmental and health cost. But what the hey... it saves paying for the Council to do it, saves a little work, and oh, don't you remember those lovely bonfires we used to have as a kid? Nostalgia, laziness, and saving a few pennies goes a long way.

So, to sum up:

- Bonfires cause health issues
- People don't follow the guidelines
- People don't actually need to have the bonfire in the first place

No truly environmentally-conscious Council could think that private bonfires were an acceptable way to deal with waste. The only limitation here, as I understand it, is the law. What can the Council actually do? That is the question.