

Bonfires in Dittisham

Dave Hawkes, Dittisham Parish Council

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Parishioners again have been complaining about smoke from bonfires.

Bonfires cause significant air pollution. The smoke, especially from burning freshly cut “green” material, is unpleasant, but is also very bad for respiratory health and is implicated in a wide range of respiratory diseases including progression of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and lung cancer. It can exacerbate asthma attacks.

Bonfires are also a hazard during hot dry weather, especially if windy. If a bonfire were to spread and a larger fire take hold, our location in a steep-sided heavily wooded valley could lead to catastrophe.

If every dwelling had just one bonfire per year there would be on average 5 bonfires per week! Already the air quality in Dittisham can be significantly worse than urban areas that have strict environmental controls.

There is really no need to have bonfires for domestic garden waste. Green garden waste can be composted and twiggy or woody garden waste can either be left lying to provide a wonderful habitat for wildlife improving biodiversity, or can be chipped and used as mulch. Failing that garden waste can be collected (for a small charge) by South Hams District Council.

It is appreciated that we are unlikely to influence changes in South Hams’ bye-laws but might we not consider producing a set of local guidelines. I’m sure much of the nuisance from bonfires is not intentional, and gentle persuasion and increased public awareness might have the required effect. We would also need to discuss this with local gardeners.

In the longer term we should plan for composting facilities within the village, for example in the proposed new car park.

Any guidelines would only apply within the bounds of the village not the wider parish, where housing (and garden) density is much lower.

Guidelines might include:

1. Try to avoid bonfires altogether by
 - a. composting green garden waste
 - b. laying woody waste as sanctuaries for wildlife
 - c. chipping woody waste
 - d. using the facilities of South Hams to dispose of garden waste
2. If bonfires are necessary
 - a. Leave waste for 2 or 3 months to dry out before burning to reduce production of harmful smoke
 - b. Avoid having bonfires during the summer months (e.g May to October)
 - c. When burning in winter months, take care to choose days when the wind blows smoke away from adjacent properties, avoid burning in long dry spells, and light

bonfires in late afternoon, early evening when other residents are less likely to be in their gardens.

Does the DPC wish such guidelines to be developed and the means of their distribution to be explored?