

LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE IN MILTON KEYNES – A PRECIS**Grass Cutting**

Milton Keynes Council maintains over 10 million square metres of grassland for the benefit of residents and visitors to Milton Keynes.

Council managed public land is mown on a cyclic programme between March and late October. The schedules are arranged to match the expected growing pattern of the grass and any specific management requirements for biodiversity, expected public use and highway safety.

Schedules can be delayed by public holidays and bad weather.

Persistent rain can cause the ground to become too soft, leading to a risk of the mower becoming bogged, rutting and damaging the surface. The Council is sometimes required to divert the crews away from their planned routes or even suspend an operation entirely, recovering it later. Mowing is also suspended during periods of prolonged dry weather. The schedules can therefore be subject to sudden and radical alteration in response to environmental conditions.

Rural road verge mowing of junction sightlines and visibility splays is not included in the regular schedules. Mowing is undertaken on a rotational basis throughout the growing season.

Hedges

Hedgerow maintenance is restricted by law during the nesting season. Therefore if a hedgerow is believed to be the home to nesting birds, the Council will not be able to carry out works until the birds have vacated.

Landscape hedges were never designed to act as a security or privacy barrier but were planted to soften the built environment, or retained as former field boundary features pre-dating the development of Milton Keynes. Hedges are living, ever-changing organisms and consequently do not have the static qualities, such as those of a fence, required for security or privacy. Park and Open Space hedges are managed as part of the Council's landscape asset and are cut on a cyclic basis.

Shrub Maintenance

Shrubs are pruned during the winter between November and March.

Shrubs are managed through a variety of recognised management methods, dependent on location and species. The main pruning period is between November and March.

Trees

Branches which interfere with pedestrian and vehicular traffic, street signs and lights, and those that obstruct sightlines in relation to the highway are removed as part of a crown lifting program.

The Council undertakes regular inspections of its tree stock. Trees have evolved over millennia and those chosen for planting in the street and within parks and open spaces display characteristics which are suited to those locations. The Council will only undertake works to trees where there is shown to be a significant risk to persons, property or to the long term health of the tree. Undertaking tree shaping, reduction or other "topping and lopping" practices is not in the best interests of tree health, leads to weak re-growth of branches and to long term maintenance costs for the Council. Often the best course of action is to allow trees to develop naturally.

Winter Landscape Maintenance

The Council's winter programme consists mainly of pruning work to maintain overhanging shrubs and hedges, but does not include specialist tree works, where a tree surgeon would be required to climb one or more trees.

Not all trees, shrubs and hedges require an annual prune. Some operations, such as coppicing, where the planting is cut back for horticultural purposes (to allow planting to regenerate and make new growth) may be many years apart.

Winter pruning is also subject to weather conditions, such as snow or very wet weather which may mean that there is no access for the machinery. High winds and other extreme weather conditions may mean that the landscape resources are diverted to deal with emergencies such as clearing snowfall or removing broken branches and fallen trees.

Weeds and Pesticides

The term "pesticide" is confusing in that it covers both pesticides and herbicides (weedkillers). The Council's contractor uses herbicides approved by the Chemical Regulation Directorate, mainly for weed control in planted beds, since the cost of employing enough staff to do this work by hand would be prohibitive. In certain circumstances, manual forms of weed control are not as effective; many invasive weeds regrow from underground stems and roots if they are not completely removed.

The Council's Landscape Service uses "contact" and "translocated" herbicides that affect only the plants on which they are applied. The translocated type moves through the weed and will often eradicate it completely in the first application. Contact herbicides, as their name suggests, will only affect that part of the plant that is touched by the substance. Both translocated and contact herbicides are designed to break up into their constituent parts on contact with the soil. This significantly reduces the risk of any serious pollution incident occurring.

There is strict legislation in place governing the use of all pesticides in the public domain. Any operative using pesticides must be properly trained and certified in the use of the substance and the relevant equipment. The Council specifies in its contracts the correct certification of any direct labour or contracted staff engaged in public open space pesticide use.

In order to prevent weeds becoming a problem, our contractor uses chipped pruning waste as a mulch around desired planting. This not only suppresses weeds but also acts to reduce the effects of drought during hot summers. Other methods, such as hoeing and hand weeding are used where this is not possible as well as around seasonal bedding and herbaceous planting where there is a risk herbicides may damage desired planting.

The Council's Street Cleansing department is responsible for weed killing on highway surfaces.

Parishes and Landscaping

The Parish/Town Councils of Olney, Stony Stratford, West Bletchley, Western Underwood, Ravenstone and Woughton are responsible for landscaping works in their areas.

The above Town and Parish Councils have been granted a budget from the Council to manage landscape maintenance within their parish areas, as part of the localism agenda. They have appointed their own contractors or are undertaking the work

themselves. Additionally, Town and Parish Councils often maintain areas in their direct ownership, such as sports grounds.

Other Organisations

Not all landscaping is maintained by the Council. Apart from the Parish and Town Councils mentioned above, some landscaping will be maintained by businesses (such as in shopping or commercial areas), private householders and the Parks Trust.