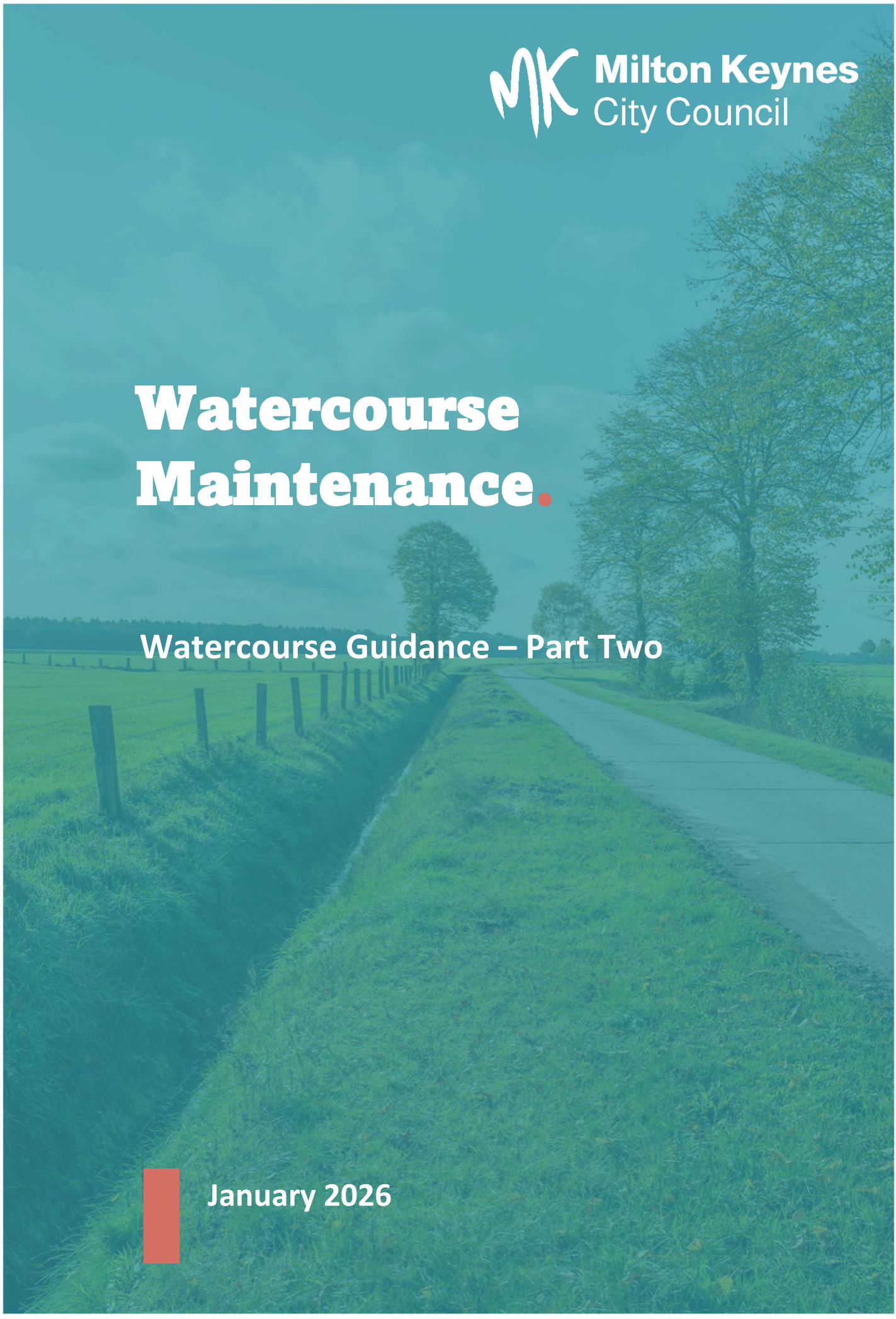


Milton Keynes City Council

Watercourse Maintenance.

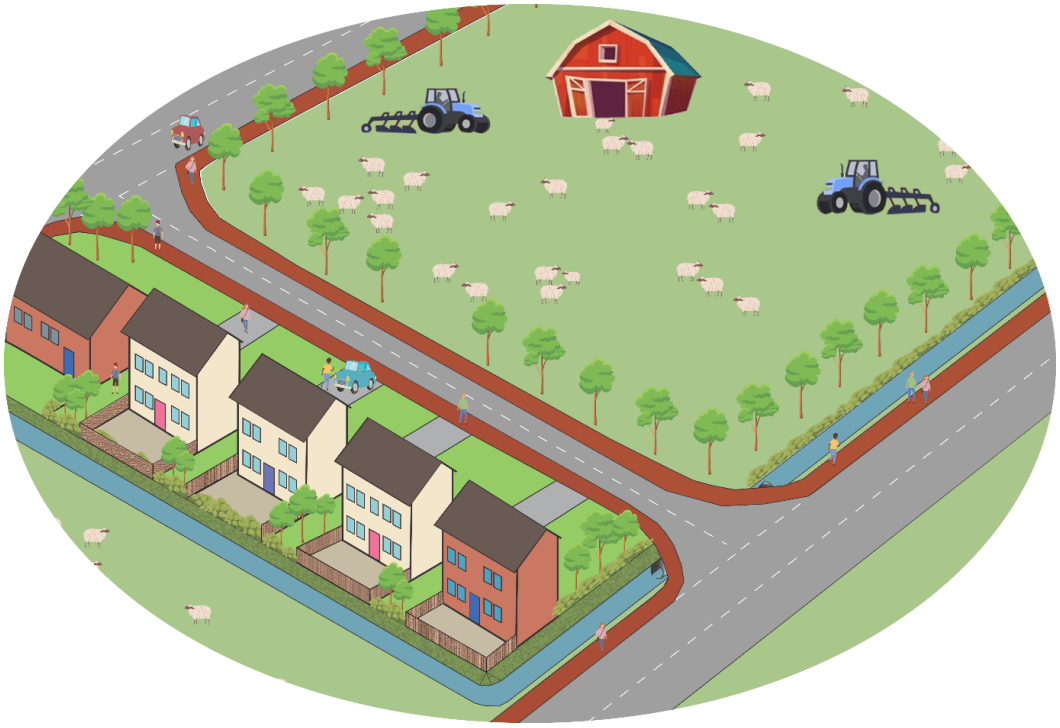
Watercourse Guidance – Part Two

January 2026

Identifying a Watercourse

A watercourse can be defined as any channel where water flows including rivers, streams, drains or culverts. This means maintenance requirements will vary across different types of watercourses.

Areas of rural highland can mean that surface water run off from land can travel to nearby villages very quickly, and natural techniques that slow the flow in watercourses may be appropriate. Man-made ditches move and deposit sediments in different ways to larger naturalised watercourses and may require a more frequent maintenance schedule. Over time, lots of watercourses have also been piped or culverted, and can be easily forgotten about until they collapse or become blocked.



Basic Steps in Maintaining a Watercourse

Regular routine inspections should be undertaken to determine when maintenance works are required.

For all watercourses it is good practice to develop a programme that sets out how often you will carry out maintenance works. Most watercourses require annual maintenance to some degree and the best time to undertake works is in mid-autumn in preparation for increased winter flows.

You should try and carry out the works when the water level is at its lowest i.e. when there has been little rainfall.

Small to medium sized open watercourses can be maintained by residents, landowners, and community groups. However, larger open watercourses and most culverts will require maintenance from a contractor. In some cases, larger watercourses may be designated as a 'main river' and the Environment Agency should be contacted for any additional advice around maintenance.

For open ditches, streams and smaller rivers

Keep growth of vegetation under control. It is recommended to cut only up to just above the water level on one side of the watercourse, leaving the fringe of the bank uncut, thereby maintaining some habitat as well as enabling a free flow of water in the ditch.

You don't always have to remove all vegetation and fallen branches to allow water to flow. Keeping some vegetation can be beneficial for wildlife, provide shade and prevent soil erosion.

Always consider the impact of removing or leaving obstructions to those upstream or downstream. Remove any physical obstructions such as rubble, larger fallen trees and branches and other waste materials (litter, grass cuttings etc), whilst retaining important wildlife features, so that water can flow freely.

There is a distinction between dredging and de-silting. De-silting involves the removal of accumulations of silts and sediments in order to restore the channel capacity. It does not involve widening or deepening the channel. Silt that naturally builds up in watercourses can be carefully removed along the length of the ditch to ensure it flows properly in the right direction.

For culverted watercourses

Piped or 'culverted' watercourses are prone to blockage or collapse and will degrade over time. Where they naturally silt up they can be difficult to access and clean. Blockages within the pipe or at the pipe entrance can cause flooding problems.

Culvert entrances and exits often have protective grilles to prevent debris entering the pipe and causing blockages. These should be inspected and cleared regularly, especially during the winter or periods of heavy rainfall when debris can accumulate very quickly.

Inspection of inside culverts should be undertaken by a contractor, who will use specialist equipment and training to undertake a CCTV survey.

To avoid the specialist maintenance requirements associated with a culvert, you may wish to reinstate the culvert back to being an open watercourse in a process sometimes known as daylighting.

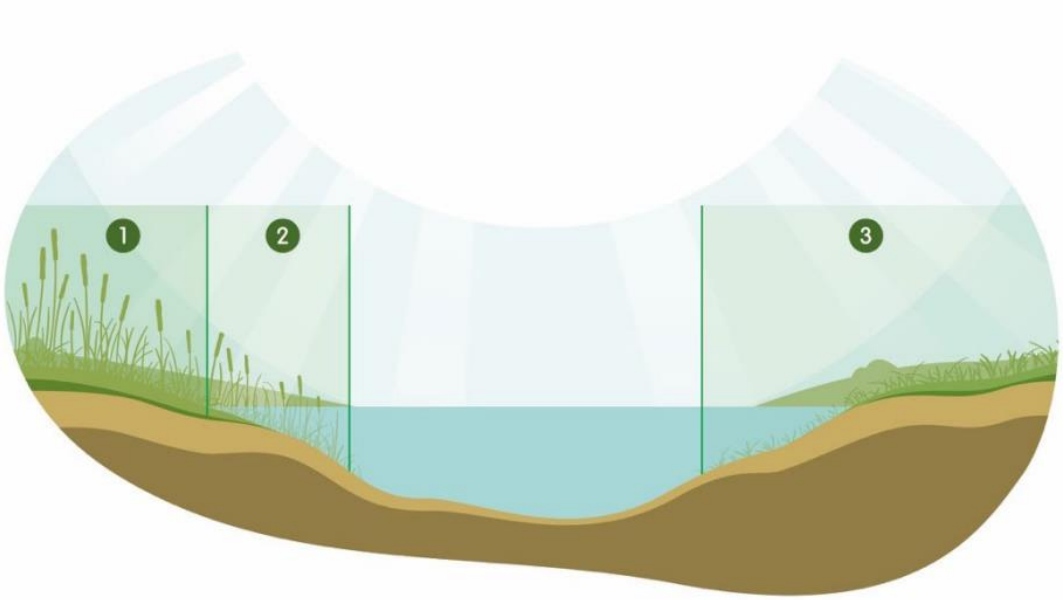


Figure 1: An example of how to manage an open watercourse, retaining wildlife benefits such as marginal vegetation. A cross-section of a watercourse. On the left is uncut vegetation above the water (labelled 1) and on the water's edge (labelled 2). On the right bank (labelled 3) is cut grass. Credit: Environment Agency with permission via OGL (Source: Owning a Watercourse).

Biodiversity

If you think the watercourse you are clearing may contain any protected species, please seek further professional advice before proceeding.

As part of your maintenance routine, planned works to a watercourse should be carefully timed and consider the impact on protected species. Protected species include native crayfish, water voles, great crested newts, nesting birds and bats.

Bird nesting season is usually between **March and September**. Between these times, you must survey any trees, hedgerows and vegetation prior to any works commencing to ensure nesting birds or other wildlife are not disturbed. However, it is strongly recommended to undertake vegetation, or tree works outside this period to prevent the risk of disturbing nesting birds or other wildlife.

Bats can roost in very small gaps between brickwork and are more likely to be found within culverts that have been poorly maintained.

Leaving vegetation clippings on the banks of the watercourse for a short period after maintenance, providing it does not blow into the watercourse and block it up, or obstruct any public right of way, allows any wildlife in the vegetation to return to their habitat.

As long as any removed silt is non–hazardous you can spread it thinly on the adjacent bank of the watercourse. Depositing silt on top of the banks of the watercourse allows for any organisms to move back into the ditch.

Some trees may have **tree preservation orders** (TPOs) on them, so if in doubt, check with Milton Keynes City Council.

If you have invasive plants or injurious weeds on your premises, you have a responsibility to prevent them spreading into the wild or causing a nuisance.

Preventing Pollution

Maintenance activities in or near water have the potential to cause serious pollution or impact on the bed and banks of a watercourse, and on the quality of the water. With careful planning you can reduce the risk of your work causing pollution. If you do cause pollution, you will be responsible for the cost of the clean up.

Potential pollutants of watercourses from nearby works could include:

- Silt
- Cement and concrete
- Chemicals and solvents
- Herbicides
- Waste materials

Staying Legal and Safe

This document has been created to support landowners in their riparian owner rights and responsibilities. This document is not intended to replace statutory or common law provisions.

Whenever carrying out maintenance to watercourses and ditches, you must ensure that the works you undertake are legal. Some activities may require additional permissions or consent. Remember, any works undertaken without consent from the relevant third parties could result in enforcement action. It is your responsibility to identify such permissions and adhere to the relevant laws, regulations, policies and procedures in place.

When undertaking works within or adjacent to a watercourse, landowners must assess their works to ensure they can be carried out without putting themselves or others at any kind of risk. Due to the range of risks posed by both open and culverted watercourses, landowners should assess this on a case-by-case basis. Milton Keynes City Council accepts no liability for any injury arising as a result of riparian maintenance.

If in doubt you should always seek advice.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