

Balloon and Sky Lantern Release Policy

Introduction

In recent years outdoor balloon and sky lantern releases have become a common event at summer fairs, fundraising events, opening of new stores, or part of commemorative and celebratory occasions. However, what is less known is what happens once these items have been released and the potentially harmful consequences for wildlife and property that can occur as a result of this form of celebration.

The Marine Conservation Society (MSC) - an internationally recognised charity for the protection of seas, shores and wildlife has produced a thorough and detailed Pollution Policy and Position Statement on Balloons and Sky Lanterns, asking UK Local Authorities to recognise balloons and sky lanterns as a form of littering and to ban all outdoor releases. This stance is actively supported by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), the National Farmers Union (NFU) and many other public organisations.

Objective

The objective of this Policy is to prohibit the intentional outdoor release of balloons and sky lanterns from Preston City Council owned land and premises, and to discourage such releases from other land within the Preston City Council area.

Scope

In order to minimise the risks, particular to the environment, livestock, wildlife and marine life, posed by the outdoor release of balloons and sky lanterns within the administrative area of Preston City Council, the Council prohibits the intentional outdoor release of balloons and sky lanterns from any land and premises owned by it. Piloted hot air balloons are not covered by this Policy.

This Policy covers all types of balloon and sky lantern materials, and includes single or multiple balloon and/or sky lantern releases.

Balloons are any inflatable flexible bag filled with gas, such as helium, hydrogen, nitrous oxide, oxygen or hot air made from materials such as rubber, latex, natural latex, paper, polychloroprene, foil, mylar or a nylon fabric. This includes biodegradable balloons.

Sky lanterns (sometimes known as Chinese or Floating Lanterns) are made of thin paper held by a wire or bamboo frame and lifted by heat from a naked flame.

Litter and the threat to wildlife and other animals

Littering from balloon and sky lantern releases not only impacts on our local environmental quality but threatens the health of wildlife as well.

The RSPCA state that deflated balloons or balloon fragments can look very attractive as food to many different animals and any fragments left on the ground or floating in water can easily be eaten. Ingesting balloons can cause death by blocking the digestive and/or respiratory tracts, and is likely to be slow. This has been witnessed and documented in marine turtles, dolphins, whales and farm animals. In 2013, DEFRA produced "Sky lanterns and helium balloons - an assessment of the impacts to livestock and the environment" in which they identified the choking of a goat and the fatal choking of a cow due to swallowing balloon fragments.

Many marine species have been found with balloons in their stomachs, probably having mistaken them (as well as plastic bags) for jellyfish, a staple food for many species.

The "UK & Eire Marine and Turtle Strandings & Sightings Annual Report 2002" reports on a green turtle found in UK waters with a large fragment of a balloon in its stomach and plastic in its oesophagus. Cause of death was given as oesophageal and stomach impaction. The "British Isles and Republic of Ireland Marine Turtle Strandings and Sightings Annual Report 2010" found, in 32 post-mortems, that 5 of those turtles had evidence of litter ingestion.

The problem is getting worse as recent evidence shows an increase in balloon-related litter. The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) annual "Beachwatch" survey in 2011 collected more than 1,359 balloons from UK beaches, over three times as many found in 1996! Following the findings of a conference in 1989 on plastic and other debris found at sea, public concern led to the cancellation of mass releases in many cities and several states in the US and Canada.

An estimated 90-95 per cent of released balloons will rise to an altitude of three kilometres and burst into small fragments. The remaining balloons may float many miles before descending to the ground or sea semi-inflated.

Even small-scale releases and balloon races may have a serious effect on the environment and animals – the balloons are often not adequately inflated and the attached strings, ribbons may entangle animals. Many such balloons are also intentionally weighted with tags, further increasing the likelihood of it landing at sea or in the countryside.

Fire Risk

Sky lanterns pose a fire hazard to dry standing crops, stacks of hay or straw, forestry and farm buildings, thatched cottages and other buildings. The Chief Fire Officers Association have called for the a review of sky lantern releases, after evidence emerged that a sky lantern caused a major fire at a plastic recycling centre in Smethwick, West Midlands.

Permitted Releases

In exceptional circumstances balloon releases from Council owned land and premises, may be considered if they are for scientific or research purposes, for example, weather balloons. In determining such requests the Council will expect that supporting evidence is provided identifying any risk and/or any hazards to the environment together with any appropriate mitigation measures.

Alternatives

Many balloon and lantern release events are planned for fundraising and celebrations. The Marine Conservation Society has provided the following list of alternative ways to replace the release of balloons and sky lanterns:

- Flags, banners and pop-ups - When budgets are tight many businesses are realising the benefits of using reusable eye-catching signage. Colourful streamers, flags, banners and other signs save money and time over balloons, string, helium and lanterns.
- Balloon sculpture - Turn balloons into something stunning with a hired-in balloon artist or try your own.
- Virtual balloons and races - The RSPB have launched a new virtual balloon race where you can design and personalise your balloon and then track it on Google maps.
- Pop a balloon - Put a raffle ticket in a few balloons before blowing them up. Let them go indoors and ask people to pop them. The raffle ticket indicates the prize.
- How many? - Fill a car with blown up balloons and get people to guess how many there are. The closest guess wins a prize.

Regulation and Promotion

The Council will inform event organisers of its Balloon and Sky Lantern Release Policy by means of including relevant information within booking forms, and other appropriate material. Any licence issued by the Council, to occupy its land and property, will contain appropriate provisions.

The Council will include appropriate provisions within any new tenancy agreements, leases, licences of its land and premises.

Whilst the ban relates solely to Council owned land and premises, the Council will promote the awareness of the potential harm of balloon and sky lantern releases, where appropriate. The Council will encourage the public to act responsibly and consider the risks posed through the release of balloons and sky lanterns, particularly to wildlife, livestock and the environment.