

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
THURSDAY 7 DECEMBER 2017

RELEASE OF HELIUM BALLOONS AND SKY LANTERNS

REPORT OF THE GROUP MANAGER ENVIRONMENTAL AND REGULATORY SERVICES

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(This report is submitted for information. Any further action arising from the report would be recommendations to the Cabinet)

1. PURPOSE

To consider the findings regarding the impact of helium balloons and sky lanterns on the natural environment, public safety, and animals in West Oxfordshire.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) That the information in the report be noted.
- (b) That, based on the evidence outlined in the report, the committee considers if the council should take any further steps to prevent the release of helium balloons or sky lanterns on land it owns and/or controls.
- (c) The Committee considers whether it would wish officers to contact all Town and Parish Councils in West Oxfordshire to make them aware of the risks to the environment, public, and animals from helium balloons and sky lanterns and ask them to consider if they wish to take steps to prohibit balloons or sky lanterns being released on land they own and/or control.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 At its meeting on the 15th June 2017 the Committee resolved that officers be requested to give consideration to the current campaigns and report back on ways in which the Council could devise a scheme that could work in West Oxfordshire at a future date.
- 3.2 Officers have reviewed information on helium balloons and sky lanterns from a number of sources and established the following.
- 3.3 In 2013 Defra commissioned a report - Sky lanterns and helium balloons: an assessment of impacts on livestock and the environment. A copy of the report is available on the Council's Website and in the Members' Room. Hard copies can be made available on request.

The report reaches the following conclusions:-

Risks to livestock and animal health

Anecdotal reports and media coverage suggest widespread concern from farming groups and others over the impacts of sky lanterns on the health and welfare of livestock and horses. However,

the evidence reviewed indicates that the number of cases reported each year of animals affected through panic and fright and of ingestion of sky lantern debris is very small. On the basis of the evidence presented, it is difficult to conclude that the overall impact is anything other than of minor significance.

The main concern regarding helium balloons is in relation to ingestion by animals. Whilst there may again be a significant level of under-reporting, the current evidence indicates that the impact is very small and confined to only isolated incidents.

Fire risk (sky lanterns only)

Incidents in which sky lanterns were said to be directly implicated in starting fires have been reported from a variety of sources, including the Chief Fire Officers Association (CFOA). Given that any of these individual incidents has the potential to cause significant disruption, loss of property and risk to human and animal life, the project team has concluded that fire risk associated with the use of sky lanterns is significant.

- 3.4 The Defra report states that across England and Wales, 17 local authorities (15 in England; 2 in Wales) have applied a voluntary ban on the release of helium balloons from council-owned land. There are now more than 35 local authorities in England that have introduced bans, including Oxford City. In many cases, this voluntary ban also includes sky lanterns. These controls are only active on council-owned land (i.e. recreation grounds and parks) and they are described by councils as being purely voluntary bans – they are not able to take legal action against infringements. Under current legislation set out in the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (2005) or the Environmental Protection Act (1990), waste from balloons or sky lanterns is not classified as litter and as such, no specific legal action can be taken against releases.
- 3.5 The Council has not received any reported incidents involving helium balloons or sky lanterns during the last three years. If residents were to report incidents they would be signposted to the RSPCA (The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) in the case of incidents involving animals and to Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service in the case of incidents involving sky lanterns.
- 3.6 A number of organisations, including the RSPCA, have run campaigns to raise awareness of the issue and produced information about the risks to animals from helium balloons or sky lanterns – www.rspca.org.uk. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and the National Farmers' Union (NFU) have also called for bans. The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) are also running a campaign called 'Don't let go' to encourage local authorities to ban the release of balloons and lanterns on their land, more information can be found on their website - <https://www.mcsuk.org/campaigns/dont-let-go>
- 3.7 The CAA has also published a policy - Operation of Directed Light, Fireworks, Toy Balloons and Sky Lanterns within UK Airspace (<http://publicapps.caa.co.uk/docs/33/CAP736.PDF>). The CAA guidelines are laid down for the benefit of those planning to release balloons and sky lanterns.
- 3.8 Clearly, there are potentially 'harmful consequences' to animals, the public, and the environment from helium balloons and sky lanterns. The extent of the problem and the risks in West Oxfordshire are unknown, although based on the national research and local

data, any action the authority takes needs to be proportionate. It appears that there are no powers to control the release of helium balloons or sky lanterns and the council only has the ability to control activities on land it owns and/or controls. The council owns and controls the council offices and Depot in Witney and Chipping Norton, public toilets and car parks throughout the district, and a small number of open spaces including Kilkenny Lane Country Park and The Sports Pavilion and Fields, Monahan Way, Carterton. In addition, the council controls a small number of public open spaces including Church Green in Witney. There have not been any requests to release helium balloons or sky lanterns from these locations. Any requests to undertake activities at these locations would currently be dealt with on a case by case basis. In the future, if a request was made to the council, offices could refuse to allow the release of helium balloons or sky lanterns on all land that it owns and or controls which would prevent the release of helium balloons and sky lanterns.

- 3.9 Organisations and individuals are most likely to want to release helium balloons or sky lanterns in open parks and private land. Most parks in West Oxfordshire are controlled by Town and Parish Council's. The authority could write to these councils', making them aware of the risks to animals, the public, and the environment from helium balloons or sky lanterns and asking them to consider if they wish to take steps to prohibit the release of helium balloons or sky lanterns on their land. They could consider alternatives (e.g. bubbles, floating flowers (on a stream or river), plant a tree etc.

4. ALTERNATIVES/OPTIONS

- 4.1. The Committee could decide, based on the information in the report, to note the information and not to recommend the implementation of recommendations (b) and (c).
- 4.2. The Committee could decide to recommend the implementation of some or all of the recommendations.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. The research into helium balloons and sky lanterns has taken four hours and cost the council £280 and this cost has been met from existing resources.
- 5.2. The cost of implementing recommendation (b) would be met by existing resources that would refuse any future requests to release helium balloons and sky lanterns on land that is owned and/or controlled by the council.
- 5.3. The cost of implementing recommendation (c) and write to all town and parish councils would be approximately £140 in officer time.

6. RISKS

The risks are outlined in the report.

7. REASONS

To protect and enhance the environment of West Oxfordshire and maintain the district as a clean, beautiful place with low levels of crime and nuisance.

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Background Papers:

None