

Note for Cabinet

5 February 2008

Additional Information regarding Balloon Releases

1 Summary

At Local Environmental Management Advisory Board on 21 January 2008, a recommendation was set out to “Adopt a policy to prohibit balloon releases from Council owned land or property.” No decision was taken and Members requested further information outlining:

- a) evidence that mass balloon releases cause harm to wildlife,
- b) any good practice guidance surrounding balloon releases,
- c) a list of other local authorities who have adopted a policy to prohibit balloon releases from their land.

2 Additional Evidence

- 2.1 The LEMAB report detailed the Encams policy and the Marine Conservation Society campaign against balloon releases. Both organisations believe there is a risk to wildlife and would therefore like mass balloon releases to be prohibited.
- 2.2 In addition to the above, the following information has been taken from the Cetacea Defence Website. They believe that once balloons are released, they can become a serious form of marine pollution. A long list of marine creatures – dolphins, whales, turtles, fish and seabirds – have been reported with balloons in their stomachs. It is believed that they mistake balloons and other buoyant plastics for their natural prey e.g. jellyfish and squid, and eat them. The following species, all of which occur in the North East Atlantic waters off the UK, have been reported with latex balloons in their digestive systems:

Common Dolphin
Risso’s Dolphin
Loggerhead Turtle
Leatherback Turtle
Blue Shark
Northern Fulmar

It is very difficult to prove that ingestion of a balloon has been the direct cause of death of a beached animal. However, the fact that balloons have been identified in the stomachs of these animals indicates that the balloons are not rapidly broken down by an animal’s digestive system and/or that the death occurred shortly after ingestion of the balloon. This can be caused by blockage of

the digestive and/or respiratory tracts, and is likely to be slow and painful.

Research states that latex balloons degrade faster than oak leaves and this is often used in defence of mass balloon release (an oak leaf can take six months to break down).

- 2.3 The Marine Conservation Society/ Reader's Digest annual Beachwatch beach clean and survey of coastal litter records hundreds of balloons in the UK, at an average rate of 3 balloons recorded per km of coast surveyed. In the 1997 Beachwatch survey, 538 balloons were found on 169km of coast.
- 2.4 The Sea Life Centre in Blackpool began an awareness campaign in 2006 as they claim balloon releases cause many creatures to suffer painfully slow deaths from choking or starvation as a result of swallowing balloons. The centre also says turtles have been washed up dead on Blackpool beach, one post-mortem revealed that its digestive tract was completely blocked by marine debris, this included a large fragment of blue latex balloon. The blockage led to the turtle starving to death.
- 2.5 The organisation "Keep Scotland Beautiful" has been working with local authorities to ban mass balloon releases at any event over which they have control and to introduce a condition on Entertainment Licences to prevent balloon releases. This has already been done with great success by Shetland Islands Council.
- 2.6 The National Farmers Union have also called on organisations to support a ban on balloon releases and claim "when the balloons land in grass fields they may be eaten by grazing livestock or contaminate hay, again with the risk of being swallowed by livestock when they eat the hay. Balloons are just another form of litter, making the countryside look untidy."

3 Code of Conduct for Balloon Releases

- 3.1 The National Association of Balloon Artists and Suppliers (NABAS) have produced guidelines and a code of conduct designed for anyone who is planning a balloon release.
- 3.2 The guidance is designed to minimise the risk of any potential danger to animals, sea creatures and the general environment (Annex 1) attached.
- 3.3 The guidelines have been drawn up using research from 1989 using a variety of balloons under various conditions to gauge the time needed for them to degrade. Results from the study indicate that the decomposition time for balloons is about the same rate as an oak leaf (6 months). They also state that only latex balloons

should be used for release and recommend that all associated components must be biodegradable.

4 Other Local Authorities - Balloon Release Policy

- 4.1 Information provided by the Marine Conservation society, claims that the following Local Authorities have adopted a policy to prohibit the release of balloons from Council owned land and property:

Plymouth City Council
South Hams District Council
Shetland Islands Council
Suffolk Coastal District Council

- 4.2 Plymouth City Council adopted the policy in 2007 and made the following comments: "We're not out to spoil anyone's fun and we're not against the sale or use of balloons for celebrating special events as long as they're disposed of properly afterwards....Releasing them into the air is what causes the problem and as a responsible Council it's our duty to raise awareness of the risk to wildlife and to do all we can to minimise that risk.....A local farmer tells us he finds up to 40 balloons on his farm each year and he had to call out a vet to treat a cow with a balloon caught in its throat."
- 4.3 The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) is planning a mail out to all local authorities to ban balloon releases from their land which may increase the number of authorities with a policy.
- 4.4 Whilst the numbers of authorities with a policy is currently low, the campaign is likely to gather momentum. The MCS, Encams, the RSPCA, and the NFU all believe there should be no balloon releases in the UK.
- 4.5 There is also support worldwide with the problems caused by mass balloon releases first highlighted at a conference in Canada in 1989 on plastic and other debris found at sea. Balloons had been found accumulating on islands off the east coast of Canada; some were still partially inflated and their country of origin was traced to the USA. Balloon releases immediately began to be cancelled in response to these findings and the Canadian government decided to cancel the release of tens of thousands of balloons in Ottawa to mark Canada Day. Awareness of the issue has continued to spread across the whole of North America and many states of the US have now abandoned balloon releases.
- 4.6 The environmental impact of balloon releases has also been considered in New South Wales and in 2000 there was an Act to amend the "Protection of the Environment Operations Act 1997" so

as to prohibit the mass release of balloons, making it an offence for any person to release 20 or more balloons.

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