





Report of: Environment Scrutiny Committee

To: Executive Board




Date: 3rd December 2007

Item No:

Title of Report : Mass Balloon Releases


Summary and Recommendations


purpose of report: To present to Executive Board the recommendations made by Environment Scrutiny around mass balloon releases and their environmental impacts on wildlife


Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Jean Fooks, Cleaner City Portfolio Holder and Councillor Caroline Van Zyl, Sustainable Environment and Climate Change Portfolio Holder


Scrutiny Responsibility: Environment Scrutiny Committee






Ward(s) affected: All


Report Approved by: Nichola Stretton (Financial & Asset Management)
Emma Griffiths (Legal & Democratic Services)


Policy Framework:

Recommendation(s): The Executive Board is asked to respond to the Environment Scrutiny Committee's recommendations:

1. If it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations outlined.
2. If agrees when will the recommendations be implemented and who will take the lead?

If it disagrees why?

4. If more information is required from other officers when that will be considered?
--

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Environment Scrutiny Committee considered a briefing report outlining the impacts of mass balloon releases on wildlife. (see Appendix 1)
- 1.2. This issue had been raised at North Area Committee by Ann Spokes – Symonds and the minutes of this minute are set out in section 1.1 of the briefing report.
- 1.3. The Environment Scrutiny Committee considered further evidence from Ann Spokes – Symonds, who distributed copies of the Marine Conservation Society leaflet highlighting the hazards to wildlife of mass balloon releases.
- 1.4. Minutes of the meeting and the Committee's recommendations are detailed below.

2. Minutes of Environment Scrutiny Committee – 12th November 2007

35. IMPACT ON WILDLIFE OF MASS BALLOON RELEASES

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services submitted a report (previously circulated now appended) exploring the impact on wildlife of balloon releases, suggesting a number of ways in which the Council could act if it wished to prevent mass balloon releases in Oxford. With the agreement of the Committee, Anne Spokes-Symonds addressed the meeting to speak in favour of the proposals to curtail mass balloon releases.

Members noted from the report the ways in which balloon releases were often used as part of charitable fundraising events. However, the Committee also agreed that the environmental issues needed to be addressed. Members also compared the codes of practice which were set out, from the National Balloon Association and from the Marine Conservation Society and agreed that the guidelines from the Marine Conservation Society should be used in any policy that the Council might develop in relation to mass balloon releases. Members suggested that while the report provided a good basis from which to begin a debate on the issue, some further research might be required to provide further evidence on which a firm decision could be made.

Environment Scrutiny Committee resolved to recommend to the Executive Board:

1. *That organisations should be encouraged by the Council to abide by the Marine Conservation Society code of practice on balloon use.*

MCS Guidelines

- *Don't let go of balloons outdoors*
- *Fill balloons with air rather than helium.*
- *Use balloons made of natural rubber latex rather than mylar (foil) balloons.*
- *When tying balloons use natural cotton rather than plastic ribbon.*
- *Securely tie any balloons that are used outside*
- *Always hand tie balloons rather than using plastic valves*

That the above code of practice should coincide with

2. *The Council publicising information and launching an education campaign around the hazards of mass balloon releases on wildlife.*
3. *That Officers are asked to investigate the feasibility of introducing a by-law banning mass balloon release within the boundaries of Oxford City.*

3. Legal comments

- 3.1. Mass balloon releases could be banned from council owned land, such as parks and leisure sites. A restriction could be written into contracts and become a condition imposed on any event held on council owned land.

4. Comments from Portfolio Holder (Councillor Caroline van Zyl)

- 4.1. I would welcome the cessation of mass balloon releases because of the environmental / ecological impacts. I assume that there is a requirement for the Council to be notified of any intended mass balloon release? If there is not maybe there ought to be?
- 4.2. I am less enthusiastic about the introduction of any bye laws.

5. Comments from Portfolio Holder (Councillor Jean Fooks)

- 5.1. I think that Executive Board should consider the recommendation that the Council does not participate in mass balloon releases itself and possibly asks that no-one should do so in Council-owned parks. These would cost nothing whilst a byelaw has time and resource implications.

6. Comments from the Strategic Director (Sharon Cosgrove)

- 6.1 None received.

Contact : Julia Woodman, Scrutiny Officer

Tel : 252318 E mail : jwoodman@oxford.gov.uk

Background papers : None

Report of: Head of Legal and Democratic Services

To: Environment Scrutiny Committee

Date: 12th November 2007

Item No:

Title of Report : Mass Balloon Releases Briefing Note



Summary and Recommendations



Purpose of report: The Committee requested further information on the impact of mass balloon releases at the meeting on 6th August 2007. This report sets out the impact on wildlife and suggests a number of ways in which City Council could act if it wishes to prevent mass balloon releases in Oxford.

Key decision: No

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Jean Fooks, Cleaner City Portfolio Holder and Councillor Caroline Van Zyl, Sustainable Environment and Climate Change Portfolio Holder

Scrutiny Responsibility: Environment Scrutiny Committee

Ward(s) affected: All



Report Approved by: Nichola Stretton, Finance and Asset Management and Emma Griffiths, Legal and Democratic Services

Policy Framework:

Recommendation(s): The Scrutiny Committee should consider this report and decide whether it wishes to take this issue forward. Recommendations should be referred to the Executive Board.



1. Introduction

- 1.1 At the North Area Committee meeting on 2nd August 2007, the Committee heard from Ann Spokes-Symonds on the impact of mass balloon releases on wildlife. The minutes of the meeting are set out below for information.

North Area Committee – 2nd August 2007 - Mass release of balloons

Ann Spokes-Symonds said that the mass release of balloons during events etc. had a detrimental affect on wildlife, not just in the vicinity of the balloon release, but further a-field, in some cases thousands of miles away. She said that birds treated the deflated balloons as food and tried to feed their chicks them, likewise turtles swallowed pieces of balloon which they thought were fish and caused internal problems resulting in death. She said that she had tried to discover when a ban on the mass release of balloons was instigated by the Oxfordshire County Council, but despite her best efforts had failed to uncover any evidence such as a Committee decision that such a ban existed.

Ann Spokes-Symonds asked that the North Area Committee persuaded the Oxford City Council to ban mass balloon releases from City Council owned properties and land and to send a strong message out on the damage that these balloons can cause to wildlife.

Councillor Fooks agreed with Ann Spokes-Symonds that it was not just marine life that was affected by this, but other wildlife. Councillor Armitage added that as a Governor of a School he would take the message back on the dangers to wildlife of these balloon releases.

The Committee agreed to refer the issue of mass balloon releases in Oxford to the Oxford City Council Environment Scrutiny Committee, to consider what measures the City Council could do to prevent this from happening such as banning mass balloon releases from City Council owned land and property.

- 1.2 At the Environment Scrutiny Committee meeting on 6th August 2007, members asked for a briefing note on this issue, setting out options for the city council to prevent balloon releases happening on council owned land.

2. The impact of mass balloon releases on wildlife

- 2.1 The Marine Conservation Society has produced a leaflet on the impact of mass balloon releases on wildlife. According to the leaflet, around 90% of balloons released rise to a high altitude and burst into tiny fragments. About 10% don't burst and can be carried long distances, littering areas of land and sea. Both land and sea animals can be killed if they swallow part of a balloon. There are recorded cases of pygmy sperm whales, leatherback turtles, dolphins, loggerhead turtles and sea birds such as fulmars that have died after eating either latex or foil balloons. Whilst it is difficult to prove that the ingestion of a balloon has been a direct cause of death, the fact that the balloon is present in the animal's stomach means that the animal doesn't rapidly digest the balloon, or that death occurred shortly after ingestion of the balloon.
- 2.2 Animals, such as sea turtles, will often mistake floating balloons for prey such as jellyfish. According to research, most leatherback turtles washed up on UK shores have digested litter in their gut. (Shaver and Plotkin, 1998). Experiments in the USA showed that captive loggerhead turtles fed with small pieces of latex balloon took up to four months to pass the fragments. They experienced floatation abnormalities and blood-sugar levels dropped.
- 2.3 Latex (rubber) balloons are made of natural material and will eventually biodegrade (at the same speed as an oak leaf, as quick as 6 weeks, but possibly up to 4 years). It can take a lot longer for a latex balloon to biodegrade in seawater than on land. Mylar (foil) balloons are made of silver foil and it is not known how long it takes for them to biodegrade, if they do at all. Litter from balloons is an issue on beaches in the UK and elsewhere. Research by the Marine Conservation Society's Beachwatch project has shown that the number of balloons and balloon pieces found on UK beaches each year has trebled since 1996. Additional problems can be caused when balloons are tied together with plastic ribbon, which doesn't biodegrade and can entangle animals.
- 2.4 It should be noted that under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, it is illegal to litter, with fines of up to £2500 for each offence. At present, balloon releases are not currently defined as litter. The Marine Conservation Society leaflet says that a number of local authorities in the UK, including South Hams District Council, Shetland Islands Council and Oxfordshire County Council have banned mass balloon releases. However, Oxfordshire County Council has no record of taking this decision.

3. Positive aspects of balloon releases

- 3.1 A paper for Birmingham City Council on balloon release highlighted some positive aspects of balloon releases. For example, the important role they can play in raising funds for charities through highly visual

advertising and social events. Some businesses will rely on balloon releases for their income, such as balloon manufacturers, helium suppliers and balloon wholesalers. There is also conflicting about the harm that latex balloons can do to sea turtles. One experiment carried out in 1990 found that undecomposed latex fed to the turtles did not cause them any harm. It should also be remembered that latex balloons are made from rubber tree sap, a completely natural product.

3.2 A code of conduct for mass balloon releases is featured on the NABAS (the Balloon Association) website and is set out below.

1. Only natural latex rubber balloons will be used for Releases

Latex, being an organic product degrades naturally in the environment. Balloons made of any material other than latex and in particular foil balloons should not be used for Releases.

2. All components used in balloon releases must be biodegradable

Balloons must be hand tied; plastic valves should not be used. Any attached labels must be of paper, preferably recycled.

3. Only helium gas should be used to inflate the balloons

Helium is an inert lighter-than-air gas. As the balloon rises, the gas expands until eventually the balloon bursts producing small fragments, which aid decomposition.

4. No ribbons or strings must be attached to the balloons

Ribbons and strings represent a potential problem and must never be used in balloon releases. Labels should be attached via the hand tied balloon knot.

5. Balloons must always be launched singly

Single balloons disperse easily and quickly. They must never be tied together in bunches for balloon releases.

6. Full approval must be obtained from the relevant authorities

Releases exceeding 5000 balloons should not take place unless they have been cleared in advance with all relevant air traffic and local authorities. The Authorities must be notified in writing at least 28 days prior to the release.

7. Maximum balloon size

Balloons larger than 12“ cannot be released. It is forbidden to use balloons containing any metallic pigment.

8. All balloons sold near balloon releases must be weighted

Any balloons sold in the vicinity of a balloon release must be sold with a weight attached to ensure they cannot escape. Foil Balloons must never be released. Latex balloons with a plastic valve and ribbon must also be weighted.

- 3.3 There are strong arguments in favour of preventing mass balloon releases because of the environmental damage they can cause. Equally, there are arguments that if regulated, the impact that mass balloon releases have on the environment can be negligible.

4. What can Oxford City Council do about this problem?

- 4.1 If the Scrutiny Committee wishes to prevent mass balloon releases happening in Oxford, there are a couple of options available. Mass balloon releases could be banned from council owned land, such as parks and leisure sites. The city council could make a policy decision to do this. It could be written into contracts and become a condition imposed on any event held on council owned land.
- 4.2 The city council could take this a stage further and consider introducing a by-law banning mass balloon releases within the boundaries of Oxford city. This will need further investigation by legal services, but Environment Scrutiny Committee could recommend that this option be explored if it is considered necessary.
- 4.3 If the Scrutiny Committee does not want to recommend banning mass balloon releases in Oxford, then it could encourage organisations wishing to carry out a balloon release to abide by the Balloon Association code of practice. If any balloon releases are to happen from Council owned land, the City Council could insist that the code of practice is adhered to.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 The Environment Scrutiny Committee should consider the arguments put forward in this report and decide whether it wishes to recommend to Executive Board that action be taken to deal with mass balloon releases in the city.

6. Comments from Portfolio Holder – Cleaner City

Name and contact details of author:

Andrew Davies, Scrutiny Officer, Oxford City Council



Tel – 01865 252433
Email – adavies@oxford.gov.uk

Background papers:

