

Cabinet – 7 February 2024

Balloon and Sky Lantern Release Policy

Portfolio: Councillor Flint – Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Space

Related portfolios: Councillor Murphy – Street Pride

Service: Place & Environment

Wards: All

Key decision: Yes

Forward plan: Yes

1. Aim

- 1.1. To make Walsall a cleaner, greener borough, known as a place, where nature is respected and protected and where parks and open spaces support the health and wellbeing of our residents and visitors.

2. Summary

- 2.1. Releasing balloons or sky lanterns is often a chosen way to mark an event, commemoration, or celebration. However, while these tributes are carried out with good intent, they can be damaging to the environment and present a fire hazard with ignited lanterns causing potential harm to open spaces and residential areas.
- 2.2. Over 160 local authorities have implemented bans on the release of balloons or sky lanterns, emphasising the need for eco-friendly celebrations to protect the environment, wildlife, and public safety.
- 2.3. The proposed policy will ban the release of balloons and sky lanterns from land owned and maintained by the council including the adopted highway. The policy is provided at **Appendix A** of this report.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1. That Cabinet approve the adoption of the Balloon and Sky Lantern Release Policy, provided at Appendix A of this report.

4. Report detail - know

Context

- 4.1. In recent years, outdoor balloon and sky lantern releases have become increasingly popular at community events or as part of commemorative and celebratory occasions. Whilst providing what may be initially considered to be a beautiful spectacle, the potentially harmful consequences for wildlife and property are often overlooked.
- 4.2. Balloon and lantern releases can pose a direct threat to wildlife, as animals may ingest balloon remnants or become entangled in them, leading to injury or death. The plastic waste generated from these releases becomes litter and exacerbates the broader issue of single-use plastic pollution. Additionally, ignited lanterns may descend and cause fires in open spaces or residential areas.
- 4.3. To date, over 160 English councils have banned sky lanterns including the following West Midlands local authorities:
 - Birmingham City Council
 - Bromsgrove District Council
 - Dudley Borough Council
 - Herefordshire Council
 - Malvern Hills District Council
 - Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council
 - Sandwell Borough Council
 - Shropshire Council
 - Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
 - Staffordshire Borough Council
 - Staffordshire County Council
 - Staffordshire Moorlands District Council
 - Telford and Wrekin Council
 - Warwickshire County Council
 - Warwick District Council
 - Wolverhampton City Council
 - Worcester City Council
 - Worcestershire County Council
 - Wychavon District Council
 - Wyre Forest District Council
- 4.4. The council holds and hosts events in its parks and green spaces, as well as other council venues, such as schools. The proposed policy would ban balloon and sky lantern releases across all of the Walsall Council estate including on the adopted highway. The policy would also encourage private landowners and event organisers to consider alternative options such as kites, balloons on strings or candle lit vigils.

Council Plan priorities

- 4.5. This Policy supports the Outcome: The people of Walsall feel safe in a cleaner, greener borough.

Risk management

- 4.6. Balloon and lantern releases pose significant environmental and safety risks. Released balloons contribute to litter and pollution, posing a threat to wildlife that may ingest or become entangled in them. Balloons can take years to decompose, causing harm to ecosystems. Additionally, released lanterns can cause fires when they descend and ignite dry vegetation. The use of open flames in lanterns also poses fire hazards, potentially endangering lives, and property. Both practices can result in substantial economic costs for communities, necessitating cleanup efforts and potentially leading to legal consequences for event organisers.

Financial implications

- 4.7. A ban on balloon and lantern releases may reduce the appeal of council venues and sites for third party events and therefore income generation could be reduced. The impact cannot be quantified due to a lack of relevant data but is expected to be minimal.

Legal implications

- 4.8. Councils in England already have powers under the 1990 Environmental Protection Act to take an individual to court if they believe them to be guilty of a littering offence or, as an alternative, they may issue a Fixed Penalty Notice. However, proving the offence is very difficult making effective enforcement extremely difficult.
- 4.9. The act of releasing balloons or lanterns is not in itself an offence, however, if they are not disposed of responsibly, they do litter the environment.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.10. None arising from this report.

Property implications

- 4.11. The policy would apply to all council owned and operated land. Tenants would therefore need to be made aware of the policy if approved by Cabinet.

Health and wellbeing implications

- 4.12. A clean, healthy environment plays an important role in improving wellbeing. Eliminating rubbish and waste is an important part of this as litter gives an indication that people do not respect their local environment and it leads people to feel less safe in their communities.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.13. While a ban on the release of balloons and lanterns addresses environmental concerns and promote safety, it may inadvertently impact diverse communities differently. Events that traditionally use these releases, such as celebrations and memorials, hold cultural and emotional significance for a number of groups.
- 4.14. The enforcement of bans may disproportionately affect lower-income communities, as these events are often more accessible and affordable forms of expression. Without alternative means of expression, marginalized communities may feel their cultural practices and celebrations are restricted.
- 4.15. This can be addressed by the council setting out affordable, accessible alternatives that are acceptable such as memorial walks, candles in jam jars, planting trees or flowers and the use of bubbles instead of helium balloons.
- 4.16. Balancing environmental conservation with the diverse needs and expressions of communities is crucial for a fair implementation of the proposed ban.

Staffing implications

- 4.17. None arising from this report.

Climate Impact

- 4.18. Adopting the policy will have a positive impact upon the climate as there will be a reduction in litter, which is costly to disposed of in term of carbon production.

Consultation

- 4.19. All organisations on the council's Safety Advisory Group have been consulted on this policy and are supportive.

5. Decide

- 5.1. There are two options, to allow the release of balloons and lanterns, or to prohibit the activity.
- 5.2. Allowing the activity may be perceived as a fun and beautiful experience to watch/participate in. However, it ultimately has a very detrimental impact upon the environment, which can last for decades due to the slow decomposition of plastics.
- 5.3. Prohibiting the activity has a positive impact upon the environment and the council is able to support and encourage more sustainable alternatives, thus this is the recommended course of action.

6. Respond

- 6.1. The council will promote the policy on its website and will ensure that anyone wishing to hold an outdoor event on council land is made aware of the policy through the application process.

7. Review

- 7.1. The policy will be reviewed should legislation be changed, or significant customer feedback indicate that the implementation of the policy is problematic.

Appendices

Appendix A - Balloon and Sky Lantern Release Policy

Background papers

Information drawn from the following websites:

[RSPCA: Sky Lanterns and Animal Welfare](#)

[Sky Lanterns – Find out how we're campaigning for a national ban – NFUonline](#)

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