



Balloon and Lantern Releases

POSITION STATEMENT

What is the issue?

When balloons, Chinese Lanterns, floating ducks or other items are released into the environment the aim is to have fun or provide a spectacle. Unfortunately, the result is the items becoming litter, often far from the place of release, causing damage to wildlife and the environment. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful believes that alternatives must be found which do not have these negative impacts. A release for the purposes of this paper refers to the intentional act of releasing any item, including balloons, Chinese lanterns etc into the general environment. Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful believes that the mounting evidence that has emerged over recent years makes the case for any of these deliberate releases impossible to sustain.

DEVELOPING OUR POSITION

The debate about the ethical nature of balloon releases has been around for 30 years. A survey published by D.K. Burchette in 1989, was supportive of balloon releases and questioned their environmental impact.ⁱ In 2009, the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) among others led the way in terms of an NGO critique of balloon releases.ⁱⁱ It bases the policy on the harm that balloon debris can cause to marine life. Other organisations such as the RSPCA have also now strongly criticised balloon releases.

Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful is opposed to balloon releases. This applies from smaller events to larger events. It also applies to mylar and latex balloons. Since our foundation in 2000 we have always argued against people dropping litter in public spaces and balloons released into the open air inevitably end up in either a public space or the sea.

Furthermore, it is not just the balloons themselves that are a hazard. The ribbons that are often attached to them are also a hazard for our wildlife. The RSPCA and RSPB have reported issues around litter impacting birds across the UK.ⁱⁱⁱ

After balloons are released they rise to high altitudes where about 90% of latex balloons burst into smaller pieces. The balloon fragments then float back to earth over a large area. Even those balloons that do not burst (around 10%) pose a threat to wildlife when they eventually land.

The MCS Beachwatch survey has shown a general increase in balloon litter since 1996. In the 2011 Beachwatch survey, a total of 951 balloons and balloon strings were recovered, representing a density of 10.5 items/km surveyed and 0.5% of all litter picked up.

OUR POSITION

Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful believes that;

- We recognise that many groups who do use balloon releases do not recognise the harm being done and seek to raise awareness for a good cause. However, balloon releases are harmful to the environment and should not be part of any event.
- Local authorities and event organisers must act responsibly and think through the consequences and ensure that no damaging materials are released into the environment.
- We must promote alternative ways to raise awareness of issues, which do not cause harm to the environment.

OUR RECCOMENDATIONS

- All local authorities should ban balloon releases and not allow any events to use them as a form of celebration. Event licencing should explicitly state this ban. Those who ignore the ban should be subject to fines that offer a suitable disincentive.
- Legislation should be drawn up introducing a levy chargeable on littered items occurring above a certain threshold. We believe that helium filled balloons should be considered within this legislation. The revenue must be used to help pay for education and awareness raising and potentially for clean-up costs.
- Consumers should be educated to know how they can help reduce the damaging effects of balloons, e.g. tying them by hand rather than using string.
- Helium is a rare element and should not ever be used to fill balloons.
- Many events that include releases are for fundraising or memorials, and alternatives should be used, including lighting candles, planting trees/flowers or colour coordinated dressing and 'Mexican waves'.

- Publicity around the problems caused by balloons and promotion of alternatives should be used to ensure maximum reduction in the use of balloons.

OUR ACTIONS

- The Eco-Schools programme opposes balloon/lantern releases. Schools found to be conducting balloon releases are warned and risk losing their Green Flag status. Our policy on this is clearly stated on our website and forms an integral part of our litter topic. We will continue with this strong approach across Northern Ireland.
- Continue raising awareness through our communications channels on the impact of balloon and lantern litter in Northern Ireland. We will also continue to highlight the damage that litter such as this causes through our Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report.
- Promote alternatives through contacting organisations which have conducted balloon or lantern releases and informing them of the issues and providing a list of viable alternatives.
- From 2019 we will begin monitoring the impact of balloon releases specifically in our annual Cleaner Neighbourhoods Report.

CONCLUSION

Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful supports local authorities imposing a ban on balloon/lantern releases for public events. We encourage those organising events to seek alternatives and think about the harm that is being done to the environment. There are many alternatives and while we recognise that many events are hosted with good intentions, there is little point in trying to solve one issue whilst causing damage to the environment. We hope that by issuing this paper that we can help raise more awareness.

ⁱ D.K. Burchette, 1989. Report to the Environmental Committee, NABAS. “A study of the effects of balloon releases on the environment”

ⁱⁱ Beachwatch 2009. Marine Conservation Society Beachwatch Big Weekend 2009 Report. <http://www.mcsuk.org>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/litter>