

1st December 2014

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance & Resources) – Councillor Gannon

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Executive Director, Resources

Ward(s) affected:

All

Title:

Proposed voluntary ban on the release of sky lanterns from Coventry City Council owned land hired for events, or events organised and/or funded by Coventry City Council

Is this a key decision?

No

Executive Summary:

The growing popularity of sky lanterns over recent years has increased concerns about the impact they have on the environment, wildlife and farm animals. The possible safety risks involved were highlighted a year ago when West Midlands Fire Service identified a sky lantern as the likely cause of a devastating fire in Smethwick which caused £6million worth of damage.

As a result of these concerns a number of councils throughout the country have introduced voluntary bans on their release on Council owned land hired for events.

This report proposes a voluntary ban prohibiting the release of sky lanterns at Council run events, events that are undertaken on City Council owned land or funded by the Council.

Recommendations:

For the Cabinet Member (Strategic Finance & Resources):

- a) To approve the application of a voluntary ban on the use of sky lanterns at all City Council organised events or events that are undertaken on City Council owned land or funded by the Council.
- b) To clearly stipulate at procurement and tendering stage of event contracts that the use of sky lanterns are not permitted, communicated through Assistant Director for Communities and Health and the Events Safety Advisory Group and enforced through the procurement process.

List of Appendices included:

None

Other useful background Papers

Industry Code of Practice – Sky Lanterns

List of Authorities who have applied a voluntary ban on the use of sky lanterns on Local Authority land

West Midlands Fire Service, Smethwick statement

Department of Communities and Local Government, Fire and Rescue Monthly bulletin 49, September 2014

Tesco's to ban sky lanterns, following FG campaign January 2014

Sky lanterns: the difference between high and low quality

Doc 5a Sky Lantern Briefing note October 2013

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

Health and Safety Strategy Group 15th October 2013

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Proposed voluntary ban on the release of sky lanterns from City Council land hired for events, or events organised and/or funded by Coventry City

1. Context

- 1.1 Sky lanterns (known by a variety of names including Chinese lanterns) are small hot air balloons made of paper, with an opening at the bottom where a small fire is suspended on a base framework containing an ignition source. They are intended to be launched into free flight, rising by the enclosed hot air. Sky lanterns float up into the air and remain airborne for as long as they are filled with hot air. Evidence suggests lanterns sometimes drift back to land whilst still alight.
- 1.2 Internationally many countries have banned the use of sky lanterns due to their unregulated manufacture and potentially hazardous nature. The UK has not, to date, banned sky lanterns. However 33 councils so far have taken the decision to apply a voluntary ban.
- 1.3 The Chief Fire Officers Association, Farmers Guardian, National Farmers Union, Women's Farmers Union, Marine Conservation Society, Country Land Owners Association, Newmarket Stud Farmers Association and RSPCA are amongst those urging individuals to use alternatives to sky lanterns and to ask event planners and retailers to use alternatives as well. Suffolk Fire and Rescue Group, Master Thatchers and Suffolk Wildlife Trust have also noted their concerns. A plea for councils to use alternatives in their events and to ban releases of sky lanterns on their own land has also been issued by many of these organisations. Two professional bodies for events professionals – the Local Authority Events Organisers Group and the National Outdoor Events Association also support the ban on lanterns.
- 1.4 In 2013, a major fire which estimated six million pounds worth of damage was caused by a sky lantern in Smethwick, Birmingham; this was one of many but by far the largest. Some lanterns (dependent on the quality of their manufacture) can be hazardous to humans, the environment, livestock/animals, property and aviation. Materials used in some lanterns have been found to be harmful, not biodegradable and contain asbestos. In addition some lanterns have been found to have non-drip fuel cells, increasing the risk of burning debris when lit. The use of sky lanterns is prohibited at both Knebworth House and at the Glastonbury Festival.

2 Options considered and recommended proposal

- 2.1 Internationally Spain, Malta and Austria and some states within the USA have banned the use of sky lanterns. Tesco's stopped the sale of Sky lanterns in 2012. Various charities (such as Marillac Care in Brentwood, the, Isle of Man Children's Centre CAFOD and the RAF Association) and land owners (The Hall, Sudbury) have also banned releases of balloons and sky lanterns.
- 2.2 Currently there are no national or international product standards for the design and manufacture of the lanterns, resulting in them being presented in varying degrees of quality, shapes and sizes. Poorer quality lanterns present a wide

range of potential hazards that increase the risk to both user and environment. The substandard lanterns often look the same as a good quality lanterns, the principal issues are that they are made using poorer quality materials that are prone to damage, which can affect their performance which increases the associated risk. An example of this is the use of poorer quality paper which tears easily. Some cheaper lanterns on the market have been found to contain asbestos in the eco-string element. Asbestos cannot be detected in the lanterns with the use of a standard EN71 tests and a specific test must be carried out to establish if the product has asbestos in it. The type of asbestos found in many types of lanterns is chrysotile (white asbestos). It is difficult to establish if the lanterns contain asbestos without undertaking the specialist tests. Research indicates that the fuel cells on cheaper lanterns can be prone to leak, both prior to lighting and during the lanterns flight. Many cheaper lanterns are also packaged and distributed without full instructions about user safety.

2.3 In a nationwide survey in 2011, a third of Britain's fire brigades said they had received emergency callouts to extinguish lanterns. Damage included scorched gardens and roofs. Fire fighters said they had experienced a number of false alarms as the lanterns had burnt themselves out before they had arrived. The lanterns are at their most dangerous in the summer months because of the drier conditions.

2.4 West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) is calling for an urgent review of legislation regarding the use of airborne fire lanterns. This request comes as the brigade tackled one of the largest fires in the West Midlands of England, involving 100,000 tonnes of recycling material and causing an estimated six million pounds worth of damage. The fire was started by a sky lantern which landed at a plastics recycling plant in Smethwick. In response to the fire, Poundland decided to stop selling sky lanterns and recalled their entire stock on 6 July 2013.

2.5 Research evidences that a sky lantern may land when the flame is still alight, making it a fire hazard. In typical designs, as long as the lantern stays upright the paper will not get hot enough to ignite, but if the balloon is tilted (say, by the wind or by hitting some object); it may catch fire while still in the air. All the paper will usually burn in a few seconds, but the flame source may remain lit until it hits the ground.

2.6 The Government has warned people not to use sky lanterns due to their effects on livestock and the countryside. The warning issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government is published on the department's website and says "We recommend you do not use sky lanterns as you have no control over them once they have been set off. They can kill animals, litter the countryside and start fires. If you do choose to set them off, always follow the manufacturers' guidance/instructions carefully. Campaigners including the Women's Food and Farming Union (WFU) and the Country, Land and Business Association (CLA) have welcomed this guidance as a step forward, but have urged the Government to press ahead with a full ban.

3 Results of consultation undertaken

The Health & Safety Strategy group requested that further research was undertaken prior to any consultation taking place.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

With immediate effect

5. Comments from Executive Director, Resources

5.1 Financial implications

Resources required to deliver this ban are low level in terms of officer time to state the negative impact of balloon and sky lantern releases, in addition to the creation of guidance documentation and procurement and tendering process.

If terms of hire are found to have been breached – i.e. if someone reports a release on council land then the enforcement could be delivered through refusal to allow that person/organisation to hire in the future or some other appropriate action. This could have financial implication however this outcome is considered a low risk as there are many alternatives to sky lanterns.

If the proposal to apply a voluntary ban on the use of Sky Lanterns was declined and injury or property damage was sustained, the financial impact to the organisation could be significant.

5.2 Legal implications

The Council, as landowner or the promoter of an event, can impose reasonable conditions on the use of its land or on how events are run. Given the risks associated with the use of sky lanterns, it is reasonable for the Council to prohibit their use where it can.

6. Other implications

None.

6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?

This supports the Council's objective to improve the environment and tackling climate change.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

Based upon information available both nationally and internationally it is foreseeable that levels of risk are attached to the use of Sky Lanterns due to the unregulated design and manufacture. Without the application of a voluntary ban on the use of Sky Lanterns on City Council land or events where the City Council has a financial interest it would prove very difficult to mitigate responsibility within both civil litigation and criminal prosecution.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

None.

6.4 Equalities / EIA

None.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None.

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None.

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