

Sky lanterns and helium balloons

This Council notes with concern the risks posed by sky lanterns (often known as “Chinese lanterns”). Sky lanterns may look pretty, but the frames can kill or harm farm animals, and the candles are a major fire risk to crop fields and buildings. The release of helium balloons has become a significant source of littering in the countryside.

Sky lanterns are a fire risk. Once a sky lantern is lit, nobody knows exactly where it will land. Fields of standing crops, hay and straw stacks, farm buildings housing animals, thatched roofs plus lots more are all at a significant risk of being set alight.

Sky lanterns and helium balloons are a litter nuisance. Farmers and other landowners have to clear up the remnants of sky lanterns from their fields. Even bamboo lanterns marked ‘biodegradable’ can still take decades to degrade.

Sky lanterns can cause suffering or even kill animals including livestock. The risk is not only fire; sky lantern debris can cause immense stress and injury. Some of the key dangers are:

- Animals eating lantern debris which can cause tears or punctures to internal organs leading to a potentially life-threatening situation
- Animals getting splinters in their skin which may cause infection
- Animals becoming trapped or tangled in debris
- Frames of lanterns can contaminate crops which are then unknowingly fed to animals

All released balloons, including those falsely marketed as ‘biodegradable latex’, return to Earth as ugly litter. Helium balloons also pose a choking hazard to animals and cause dangerous power outages. Balloons are also a waste of Helium, a finite resource.

Sky lanterns pose a significant danger to aviation traffic such as planes and helicopters. There are concerns that lanterns can be drawn into aircraft engines and can delay take-off and landing. In addition, lanterns drifting across a night sky are commonly mistaken by the public and coast guards for marine distress signals.

The Council further notes that Essex County Fire and Rescue Service has warned people not to use sky lanterns after a stray lantern sparked a huge fire in Smethwick in the Midlands and that a ban is supported by the RSPCA, Marine Conservation Society, Women’s Food and Farming Union (WFU), Soil Association and National Farmers Union (NFU).

This Council therefore resolves:

1. To support a ban on the release of sky lanterns and helium balloons.
2. To review the terms under which Council land and premises are let to the public with a view to prohibiting their release;
3. To write to Town and Parish Councils and event venues in Uttlesford highlighting the risks and urging them to introduce voluntary bans;
4. To write to Uttlesford’s MP urging action at a national level.

5. To display publicity in Council premises raising awareness of the risks posed.
6. To treat reports of release of sky lanterns and helium balloons as potential littering offences.

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