



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Health & Environmental Services Committee
Subject:	Balloon Releases at Council Events
Date:	5th November, 2008
Reporting Officer:	William Francey, Director of Health and Environmental Services (ext. 3260)
Contact Officer:	Wesley Thompson, Departmental Policy Manager (ext. 3377)

Relevant Background Information

The Marine Conservation Society has recently written to the Council, raising concerns about the environmental implications of balloon releases and asking the Council to consider either introducing a bye-law prohibiting balloon releases or a voluntary code to stop balloons being released. A number of publications point to both the positive and negative aspects of balloon releases. While the use of balloon releases in awareness and fund raising campaigns for important causes is recognised, there is acceptance that there are negative environmental implications. Views on the extent of the environmental impact of balloon releases vary widely, however, with some organisations advocating that they should not be held and others advising on how current practices can be improved to reduce the environmental effects.

A frequently quoted study concludes that most helium filled latex rubber balloons burst into tiny pieces about five miles above the ground and that the others biodegrade over a relatively short period, depending on environmental conditions (Burchette, 1989). The Balloon Association, in its code of conduct, advises against using ribbons, string and plastic valves, and encourages other practices aimed at reducing the environmental impacts. The Marine Conservation Society outlines evidence that not only are balloons littering, but they are potentially lethal to wildlife and have killed whales, dolphins, turtles, sharks and seabirds. They encourage a range of alternative uses of balloons for those with promotional, marketing or entertainment roles. While EnCams do not consider balloons to be a big source of litter, they agree that they are a pollutant and can have a damaging effect. They describe the best way to tackle problems caused by balloons that float back down to earth as not releasing them in the first place.

Enquiries within the Council indicate that, while the Council has held balloon releases in the past, environmental concerns have been recognised and they are no longer used. On rare occasions, balloons may be released on Council ground, at locations such as Malone House or Belfast Castle, by third parties, at charity events or wedding receptions. Concern has been expressed about the practicability of enforcing a ban on such third parties, particularly given that management may only realise that it is being done when the balloons are being released. Soundings from Departments support the formalising of a voluntary ban, and this has been endorsed by the Chief Officers' Management Team.

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to agree that the Council introduces a voluntary ban on balloon releases at Council events.