



Briefing 21-08

January 2020

## **The releasing of doves and butterflies at funeral ceremonies and other celebratory events.**

**To:** All Chief Executives, Senior Policy Officers Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

### **Key issues**

- Following concerns raised by a member authority on the emerging practice of releasing doves and butterflies at funerals, APSE has gathered comments and information from other local authorities, as well as businesses offering the service, and wildlife charities and groups, as to the safety and animal welfare aspects of these practices.
- From the data gathered, APSE member councils have concerns about the releasing of wildlife as a decorative element of funeral and celebratory services and this APSE briefing has also taken into account the legal and reputational issues arising from allowing such practices on council-owned land.
- APSE has included within the briefing note a policy adopted by a member authority which has taken the decision to ban such practices on its own land.

### **Background**

APSE recently received a request for information about the practice of releasing live 'doves' and butterflies at funeral ceremonies, due to a member authority's concerns over the resultant harm to birds and butterflies, which occurred after their unauthorised 'release' at two recent funeral services. These incidents resulted in staff having to collect doves from around the grounds, after the service, and taking them to an animal rehoming centre before they were predated. The second involved the release of non-native butterflies in December which were immediately grounded by the temperature shock and subsequently died.

The practice of releasing white doves has been around for thousands of years and is a popular custom in many cultures. Their symbolism is also prominent in many world religions where doves represent love, peace, honesty, and loyalty, acting as a good omen at traditional gatherings such as weddings or funerals

The first known white dove releases occurred in Egypt about five thousand years ago and it was also prevalent in Chinese, European, Greek, and Roman cultures. Although they differ slightly in their mythology, releasing white doves has positive connotations in all cultures in which it appears.

In Christianity, where white doves represent peace, love, faith, purity, and eternal life, a white dove released at a funeral, or memorial service, is being marketed as a way to bring peace and comfort to the bereaved, as they watch the symbolic spirit of their loved one ascend to the heavens.

It is therefore not surprising that the release of doves, and more recently butterflies, is growing in popularity. There are a growing number of companies who are now trading in providing birds and butterflies for funerals and other celebratory events.

Publicity brochures enthuse of how releasing the doves will provide a sense of letting go, which will helping mourners cope with the loss of their loved one.

Trained handlers can be on hand to release the doves, or alternatively, they will allow mourners the opportunity to release the birds if they so wish, with the handler offering advice on how to safely handle the birds.

On the surface this appears to be a thoughtful and comforting way to say goodbye to loved ones, but in reality, the releasing of doves and butterflies has a much more gruesome side which mourners may be unaware of.

## **Releasing doves**

The “doves” that people rent for weddings, funerals, and other occasions are often actually pigeons who are bred to be all-white as well as other birds such as white Ringneck Doves, Rock Doves and King Pigeons. During the transit from their loft etc. they are ‘put’ into cages, and then taken to unfamiliar locations, and turned loose. When the ‘doves’ are released, attendees at the event probably assume that they have been “set free” and will live happily ever after. In reality the short flurry of flight will in fact lead to early deaths for many of the birds, as these domesticated birds often get hurt or lost, or are killed by predators, such as hawks, ravens, gulls, dogs and cats. Many more are killed by road traffic or starve to death being unable to cope in the wild. Even if they do find a bird group to join, the doves are still disorientated and will continue to be an easy target for predators. A famous example of this problem, was when in 2014 the Vatican released doves as a

symbol of peace, only to have a black crow and seagull immediately attack the newly released doves to the shock of the watching crowd.

Some businesses state that their 'doves' will return to their shelters but again in reality, that may not always be the case as trained doves can only be released on a clear day and not far from their home, whilst also ensuring that there is a reasonable amount of time before the sun sets. Doves cannot navigate after dark. Therefore, funerals in the late afternoon in winter can cause particular problems. As a consequence, even when hiring a professional it is reported that with regards to white Homing Pigeons, casualties are still common, with many birds being hurt, lost and killed trying to get home.

## **Releasing butterflies**

A more recent development has been to release butterflies at funerals and celebratory events, as a way to add a personal and memorable addition to a funeral or memorial service. The symbolism being that butterflies are a sign of freedom, new life and the beginning of a new journey, associated with resurrection.

Again, in relation to the breeding and handling of butterflies there are major concerns, some have even described the lack of value assigned to the life of the butterfly as turning them into no more than 'wildlife confetti'.

Often butterfly breeders mass-produce the animals and ship them flattened and sealed in tiny boxes transporting them over long distances. Many are crushed or die from exposure before they even reach their destination. It is claimed that those which do survive the trip might *not* be considered the lucky ones. Again, like domesticated doves and pigeons when captive-bred butterflies are turned loose, and left to fend for themselves in an unfamiliar area, they struggle to find food sources and often can't survive in the new climate. Many like the ones mentioned by the local authority which initially raised their concerns about the release of doves and butterflies, die very soon after release due to the shock of temperature change.

Butterflies are declining drastically through loss of habitat and intensification of farming and forestry. However large scale and frequent releases may deflect attention from this risk, changing public attitudes to the conservation of 'wild' populations, through the seeming abundance of the species, when used for such practices. This is a major concern of Butterfly Conservation who feel that using

butterflies as confetti may encourage a dangerous attitude to the safety and future of wild creatures, that are considered so unimportant that they can be boxed, transported and released into areas whatever the suitability or rarity.

It should also be remembered that releasing non-native species into the UK is illegal. Introducing non-native species can be a significant problem due to their unsuitability to survive, but also their potential to spread disease to native populations, and even alter their genetic make-up if breeding occurs

### **RSPCA Advice**

On the matter of dove and butterfly releases the RSPCA had the advice below:

*“Regarding the dove releases, only trained homing pigeons (which can include white ‘doves’) should be released as they have the ability to ‘home’ (navigate back) to their loft. There are also considerations around the time of day and weather conditions at the time of release to minimise the chance of birds becoming lost. If the correct species is used and there are no welfare issues the RSPCA would not, in theory oppose birds being released. If however, the birds are unable to home, then they could suffer and struggle to survive in the wild. In the situation described, it sounds very much like unsuitable birds have been used, and that the person(s) responsible for the birds has effectively abandoned them in which case there could be potential offences under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.#*

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*In the case of butterfly releases, if the species is not native to the UK then it would be an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Companies advertising butterflies for releases often don't give the species name but some specify that they only deal in Painted Lady Butterflies as they are native to the UK. Releasing butterflies into the wild could introduce disease to wild populations, and (depending on the species involved and time of year) there might not be enough or suitable food to sustain released butterflies. Other factors that are important for the survival of released butterflies include the time of year, time of day, temperature, weather and habitat type. Releasing butterflies in December in the UK is likely to lead to them dying. Releases could also alter the genetics of native populations. For instance, recent research on commercial captive-bred monarch butterflies in the US has shown that they are genetically and behaviourally different to wild monarchs. Unfortunately, invertebrates like butterflies are not covered by animal welfare legislation but, although there is debate about whether insects can feel pain or not,*

*the RSPCA believes that they should be given the benefit of the doubt and treated in a manner that minimises the risk of harm. We are concerned that butterflies are being used as nothing more than cosmetic extras in funerals and weddings, rather than being treated as living creatures'*

## **Considerations**

Whilst recognising the sensitivities for families, who may be regarding such practices as acts of fond remembrance, respect or celebration, from the evidence gathered, and the concerns raised by a number of member authorities, it does appear that the use of wildlife such as doves, and butterfly releases, may be considered to be little more than effectively abandoning them; in which case there could be potential offences under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Therefore, the practice of dove and butterfly releases, may be considered prejudicial to animal welfare.

As such the authority raising the initial concerns, has agreed to be identified Kettering Borough Council has drawn up a policy which forbids the use of wildlife and insect release at any of their funerals suggesting that as an alternative:

*'if the deceased had a particular interest in a particular aspect of wildlife, there are numerous charities which would appreciate and benefit from a donation of the money which would otherwise be spent on such a release'*

Several other local authorities which responded to the request for information, also stated that they did not allow the release of doves on their land as part of a funeral celebration due to concerns over animal welfare. Attached is a copy of the Kettering Borough Councils Wildlife and Insect Release policy.

## **APSE Comment**

The views of many organisations have been taken into account in order to ensure an equitable balance was taken when considering the issue of releasing doves and other birds, and butterflies as part of a funeral service or other celebratory events.

However, from the data gathered, there does seem to be an overwhelming body of evidence which suggests that the releasing of doves and butterflies is fraught with dangers for the species concerned, much of it life threatening.

It is therefore likely to be insufficient for local authorities to rely upon the bereaved families to ensure that these practices are properly managed; they are unlikely to possess to the appropriate knowledge regarding species type, life-cycle, feeding and breeding

needs. Therefore, the safety of these animals and insects cannot be assured which may lead to albeit unintentional but potentially unlawful activities.

In England local authorities have a duty to protect and promote biodiversity as part of their policy or decision making. As such there is a need to be actively supporting and meeting this duty in the manner in which services are managed and provided. It is therefore recommended that to comply with this duty, the releasing of animals and insects, as highlighted in this briefing, should be considered urgently by councils and effective policies developed to prohibit harm to the species concerned, as well as to prevent albeit unintentional breaches of wildlife protection laws on council land. The policy developed by Kettering hyperlinked below may provide a useful point of reference when looking at potential policies to adopt, particularly in bereavement services, and taking account of the need for sensitivity, in turning down requests from bereaved families.

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# Wildlife & Insect Release Information

## Warren Hill Crematorium and Council Cemeteries

### Introduction

The Council acknowledges that families like to mark the passing of a loved one in different ways and wherever possible we are willing to support those wishes. However, there is a demand for the release of birds and butterflies at services which is a concern because of the risks to the animals concerned and to the environment.

### Information

The Council has considered evidence from an increasing number of organisations concerned about the growing trend to release birds and insects at ceremonies including funerals.

Please find guidelines and advice for our sites below.

### Butterflies and other insects

The release of butterflies and other insects is not appropriate either for the insects themselves or the general environment. The conditions of transport may be of poor standard and when released a number of environmental conditions will impact on them.

Factors that are important for the survival of released insects include the time of year, time of day, temperature, weather and habitat type. Releasing butterflies into the wild could introduce disease to wild populations, and (depending on the species involved and time of year) there might not be enough or suitable food to sustain released butterflies.

Research on commercial captive-bred butterflies in the US has shown that they are genetically and behaviourally different to the wild species.

Please note that the release of non-native butterflies is illegal in England under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

We have direct experience of non-native butterflies being released at the crematorium and dying almost immediately because of when they were released.

## Birds and other animals

There are considerations around the time of day and weather conditions at the time of release to minimise the chance of birds becoming lost. If, however, the birds are unable to home, then they could suffer and struggle to survive in the wild. There are also concerns of birds being attacked and injured/ killed by predators.

This is viewed as effectively abandoning them, in which case there could be potential offences under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

## Requirements

In view of the range of parameters which may impact on the welfare of these animals and insects if released, the Council does not consider it appropriate to permit such releases. Therefore, it's a requirement that such releases are not permitted on the Council's land.

The Council is investigating alternative ways of allowing the life of the deceased to be celebrated which do not involve live creatures and information will be provided when available.

Alternatively, if the deceased had a particular interest in a particular aspect of wildlife, there are numerous charities which would appreciate and benefit from a donation of the money which would otherwise be spent on such a release.

If you have any questions about this guidance, please do not hesitate to contact the Bereavement Services team by email [\(insert address\)](#) or by telephone [XXXXXX](#) and staff will be happy to provide advice.

## Other organisations

Organisations which do not support releasing wildlife include:

- Sands
- The Butterfly Conservation Organisation
- Pigeon Rescue
- RSPB
- Peta
- Dorset Butterfly Conservation
- One Green Planet.