

# AERONAUTICAL INFORMATION CIRCULAR P 137/2024

UNITED KINGDOM

# NATS

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03301-383495 (Content - CAA/General Aviation Unit)

## Date Of Publication

25 Jul 2024

## Subject

Safety

## Cancellation

P 045/2021



## HOT AIR BALLOON AWARENESS

### 1 Introduction

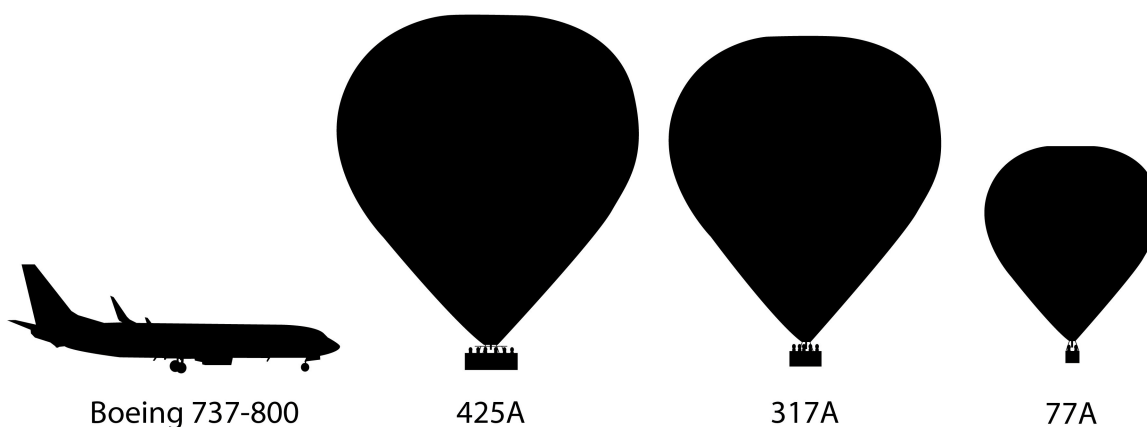
- 1.1 Commercial ballooning has grown rapidly in the United Kingdom since the introduction of a UK Commercial Pilot's Licence for balloons in 1988 and the associated standards for commercial ballooning. Operators declare to the CAA that they will be undertaking commercial passenger ballooning and that they meet and maintain specific standards.
- 1.2 Under the Standardised European Rules of the Air, civil Rules of the Air Regulations or military Regulatory Publications, all aircraft give way to balloons and this AIC gives other airspace users and air traffic controllers information on the scale of the activity in the UK and some of the operating criteria for passenger balloon flights.

### 2 Scale of Activity

- There are currently over 20 declared balloon operators, operating over 100 balloons in the UK;
- Over 2000 commercial passenger balloon (CPB) flights carrying over 25,000 passengers are undertaken in the UK each year;
- There are additionally over 600 private or commercial operation (non-CPB) balloons with valid Certificates of Airworthiness in the UK.

### 3 Size

- 3.1 Some hot-air balloons are extremely large and other airspace users and air traffic controllers have sometimes experienced difficulties in gauging how far (laterally) away they are. The diagram below takes a silhouette of a Boeing 737-800 and places it alongside scale silhouettes of a 19 passenger 425,000 cubic feet (CU FT) balloon (the largest currently operated in the UK), a 16 passenger 317,000 CU FT balloon and a 77,000 CU FT balloon that is typically used for sporting and recreational flying and carries two passengers.



### 4 Where

- 4.1 Hot-air balloon flights can take place anywhere in the UK, but flight operations are most likely away from steep and rocky terrain and immediate coastal areas, and usually outside controlled airspace (CAS). Activity is particularly high in the Bristol and Bath

area and generally in the south of England, particularly in Essex, Surrey, Sussex and Kent. Balloons can launch from almost any suitable site with the landowner's permission and may launch from built-up areas with the additional prior permission of the CAA and from within CAS with the additional prior permission of Air Traffic Control (ATC).

- 4.2 A CPB balloon is required to contact the appropriate ATC unit if its flight takes it within 3 NM horizontally and/or 1000 FT vertically of CAS, unless there is a local agreement in effect, as is the case with Bristol ATC and with Norwich ATC.

## **5 When**

- 5.1 In order to fly in the most stable conditions and to avoid thermal activity, balloons are normally operated early in the morning and during the three hours prior to sunset during the summer period. It is possible to fly at any time during daylight hours on a calm winter's day. Commercial balloons are limited to day flying only and should land with reasonable daylight remaining. Very rarely, sporting and recreational balloon flights are made at night, but these are invariably planned to land after sunrise. Activity is higher at weekends and on public holidays and there are often organised balloon meets across the UK on summer weekends with up to 100 balloons flying at the larger events. Details of organised meets are usually promulgated by NOTAM.

- 5.2 Ballooning will normally occur under a stable air mass and all commercial balloon flights must be conducted under Visual Flight Rules (VFR) with, below 3000 FT, visibility of at least 3 KM, clear of cloud and with the surface in sight. Within CAS not subject to permanent Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) the required visibility is at least 5 KM. Outside CAS, non-commercial balloon flights conducted under VFR require a visibility of 1500 M.

- 5.3 The surface wind limit is 15 KT for balloons to launch, but most flights are conducted when the surface wind speed is less than 8 KT.

## **6 How**

- 6.1 All balloons, unless in tethered flight, track downwind.

- 6.2 Commercial balloons often fly below 2000 FT, affording the best view for their passengers, but can be found up to FL 100. Flights commonly last for about one hour, but this can be extended considerably if a suitable landing site cannot be found on track. Fuel duration varies with the balloon size and conditions, but is normally between 1½ and 2 hours. The balloon will usually descend to low level for the last 15 to 20 minutes of the planned flight in order to assess the low level winds and to manoeuvre for landing. A pilot can 'steer' a balloon using the wind directions between the surface and the gradient wind direction, which may vary by 30° or more. This often occurs during early morning flights and the balloon may be seen to climb or descend rapidly to achieve such steerage.

- 6.3 During flight, a balloon may also descend towards points of interest, for example lakes. If a balloon is seen to be close to touching the water it is probably not in any difficulty.

- 6.4 A balloon is most manoeuvrable when in equilibrium; neither climbing nor descending. Descent is achieved either by letting the hot air inside the balloon envelope cool naturally or by opening the parachute vent in the top of the envelope (which reseals once the control line is released). Operation of the vent will cause the balloon to descend rapidly until more hot air is added to arrest the descent. Normal descent rate is less than 600 FT per minute and a large passenger balloon will rarely exceed this below 2000 FT Above Ground Level (AGL) as it may not be possible to recover even with the use of all (up to four) burners. The manufacturer's stated limit for climbing and descending is between 800 and 1000 FT per minute - surprisingly quick - and a balloon in this mode of flight will usually be unable to reverse this climb or descent quickly and should be given a wide berth.

## **7 Communications**

- 7.1 Balloonists communicate with their retrieve teams and with other balloons on channel 122.480 in the UK, normally using hand-held radios. The same radios are used for ATC communications, when required. Some commercial balloons that are regularly operated in and around CAS now carry a lightweight Mode-S transponder; however, Secondary Surveillance Radar (SSR) equipment is not yet commonplace in balloons.

## **8 Action for Declared Balloon Operators**

- 8.1 Declared balloon operators should consider including some of the information contained in this circular in their Operation Manual.

## **9 Further Information**

- 9.1 See Guidance for Balloon Operators (<https://www.caa.co.uk/commercial-industry/aircraft/operations/types-of-operation/guidance-for-balloon-operators/>) for more information.