

...EVERYDAY ADVENTURE

Party/Fiesta Tents Guidance

Over the last 10 years or so Scouting has seen a trend develop towards favouring the use of lightweight tents away from the traditional heavier canvas tents such as mess tents and patrol tents. Fiesta/party tents were used extensively at the EuroJam and World Scout Jamboree events.

Scouting has experienced a growing number of incidents involving these tents, including two particular incidents with party tents where sudden, short-term bad weather led to injury and damage. One of the incidents led to serious personal injury to a young person, and the other a dangerous occurrence involving the rail network.

This guidance aims to help raise awareness of the issues, discuss the benefits and drawbacks of this type of tent and assist in assessing the appropriateness of the tent for the purpose required.

Scouting requires members to undertake a risk assessment for all activities and events. This is the principle tool to determine what is, or is not, safe for the particular circumstances of their event. Carrying out this risk assessment is part of our 'duty of care' to both the young people and others we participate with.

In this process there will be certain things that are under your control such as the adequacy of the skill and competency of the person(s) erecting the tent, the age or quality of the equipment itself and the suitability of the equipment for the event. However other elements such as weather conditions are obviously not in your control but must be considered in the risk assessment process.

Therefore, the risk assessment process requires you to consider what is reasonably foreseeable (think of all the likely things that could go wrong) and to be objective in the assessment.

We then need to consider what actions will "control" the risk (i.e. decide what we can do to eliminate or reduce the risk to as low a level as possible). Assessments must be objective.

Here are some pros and cons of party tents against conventional mess tents or marquees:

Issues	Party tent	Conventional canvas
Weight of the tent	Party tents are generally made of very lightweight manmade material. The material is more prone to flying off in a burst of wind so will need additional bodies to handle it if conditions are unfavourable.	Canvas is much heavier and therefore there is a greater risk of manual handling injuries when lifting canvas off and onto frames or for storing. However, the weight of the canvas is a benefit in reducing the likelihood of it flying about in windy conditions.
Size of the tent	Party tents are available in large sizes and can sometimes be increased on a modular basis through zipping sections together.	Mess tent and patrol tents are usually one fixed size and any attempt to "join" one to another is often less than satisfactory and are rarely wind or water tight.

		Modern mess tents can be extended modularly by lacing in additional sections.
Fire resistance of the material	<p>The manmade material is usually highly flammable and if any cooking or open flame activity takes place inside the tent then suitable distances from the sides of the tent must be maintained.</p> <p>Keep gas burner flames away from the tent sides. Check for advice on the use of gas inside tents.</p>	<p>The canvas material tends to be treated with a fire retardant spray as part of the waterproofing of the material. Canvas will burn, but the ignition time is generally longer than party tents.</p> <p>Keep gas burner flames away from the tent sides. Check for advice on the use of gas inside tents.</p>
Structural rigidity	<p>Party tents are generally supported by a 'slot together' tubular frame structure which is designed to support the weight of the covering and also to support the tent from wind blowing onto the sides and top.</p> <p>Many party tent types are supplied with small ratchet straps and large pegs so that the frame can be secured to the ground (if not a hard surface).</p>	<p>Similarly, mess tents usually have a tubular steel frame and patrol tents may have steel or wooden poles like traditional marquees.</p> <p>Mess tents are supplied with guys on the corners (and sometimes sides too) and patrol tents have numerous guys.</p>

Planning for an event

Selection of the tent for an event may depend on what your unit has available to use. For many summer events (and, therefore, hopefully fine weather conditions) it could be satisfactory for party tents to be used.

If you have the option, select the location for pitching the tent carefully. If there is no option then the means of securing the tent to the ground will be a crucial element. Any tent should be securely pegged/fastened to the ground.

In exposed windy areas, shelter for the tent near high hedges, tree lines or buildings must be considered. When weather is more likely to be a factor, such as in the winter period or when exposed to off shore winds, then the design, condition, structure and type and quantity of securing to the ground must be seriously reviewed.

When erecting and de-rigging the tent, ensure there are adequate numbers of capable, experienced helpers, especially when handling the tent material and placing it over/off the frame. Ensure there is one person in charge and that all involved are briefed properly so that the operation is safe and smooth.

Secure the material corners down or use guys to ensure it does not blow away if this is possible.

When on grass or soft ground (as opposed to tarmac), have some suitable metal pegs for anchoring either ropes or ratchet straps to (these should ideally be a minimum of 400mm long and 12mm in diameter if dog screw pegs are not available).

Ensure the pegs are positioned in the ground before handling the material, so the 'over the top' ropes or ratchet straps can be attached beforehand or quickly if needed. The ratchet straps are used to secure the frame to the ground and the cover is fixed to the frame with the short 'bungee' cords.

Ensure the suitable metal pegs are available for securing the frame in position (often the side poles have a round plate at the bottom with holes for pegs to secure the frame). Try to get an angle on the pegs as opposed to going straight down.

Some manufacturers advise that that 'Tie Down Kits' (comprising of long dog screw pegs and ratchet straps) are used, and as an indication, the number of tie down kits they recommend are summarised below. You should always check with your own suppliers' advice.

On solid ground, when pegs are not an option, the use of weights for tying off the ropes or ratchet straps should be made available. For example, the base weights for 'Herras' fencing are great as they have holes cast in them to tie off to. You need to have a reasonable number available and ready.

Where the tent has a ground frame strut, the weights should again be tied on so the weight cannot slip off if the tent lifts. Ensure there are adequate weights available to secure the tent.

Wind hazard

The light weight material is highly prone to flying if the wind gets under it, and when tents are left with sides open this risk increases. When rigging and de-rigging, you cannot avoid this risk but you can minimise the number of persons exposed to the risk. With a tent in the higher risk state, it should ideally not still be in use for other purposes.

If tents are being occupied especially during the erection or break down of the camp or event, care must be taken to consider other associated risks should the tent "take off".

Monitoring (dynamic risk assessment)

Once the tent is up, ensure leaders monitor the weather, considering the potential risk from changing conditions. This should form part of the briefing from the leader in charge.

In really extreme weather conditions, we cannot ever guarantee any tent will stand firm, but we can remove persons at risk if it looks to be a problem. Be prepared to evacuate the tents and move persons away to a place of safety. Taking them down may increase the risk of a "fly away".

Use of the party tent when not completely erected

There may be situations, especially when striking camp, when tents are still 'in use' even though partially de-rigged. With an open end it is foreseeable that a strong gust of wind could enter the tent and lift up a bit like a parachute.

Leaders must assess and reassess what the tent is being used for at such times and if other risks are present, then accept that they might not be able to safely use the tent and need to fully de-rig it. For



example, if lunch is being served, do it earlier when the tent is fully secure and then fully de-rig in one operation.

Summary

When you purchase a tent, ensure it is suitable for your future needs. Regretfully, not every tent is suitable for every purpose.

When you consider all the event issues in your risk assessment, selection of the right kit for the job is key. Don't just use the tent you have if it is not suitable, try to borrow a suitable one from other Groups.

As in all Scouting or life activities there are no guarantees, but we can learn from our, or other people's, experiences and do our best not to let it happen again.

Our thanks to Dave Allen, County Safety Coordinator for Essex, and his team for letting us use their advice.

