

Safety Note 21

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CHRISTMAS TREES AND DECORATIVE LIGHTING

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INTRODUCTION AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Before installing Christmas trees and decorative lights Heads of Schools and Functions must take steps to ensure that the necessary level of fire and general safety is maintained. A proportionate risk assessment should be undertaken around the installation location and tasks undertaken and this may need communicating to the fire safety team (see below).

Certain types of Christmas trees are extremely combustible and the introduction of these additional hazards into buildings can increase the risks to the building users. If you are considering having a Christmas tree and decorative lights then additional fire safety precautions may need to be taken, especially in open access areas, where the public have access or in fire escape routes.

GUIDANCE ON CHRISTMAS TREES AND DECORATIVE LIGHTS

Users should follow the general principles of risk assessment described in COP-4. This section will cover general risk controls around the safe use of Christmas trees and decorative lighting.

- A. Choice of tree**
- B. Position of tree**
- C. Tree lighting**
- D. Christmas tree decorating and storage of items**

A. Be aware of the risks to yourself and others

- Where possible only use artificial trees inside buildings
- All artificial trees should be flame retardant
- Trees must be securely positioned in place
- Consider a "pop-up" artificial tree to allow working from the floor-level when decorating

If a natural cut tree is considered the only option then the tree must remain watered and a risk assessment must be carried out and submitted to the Fire Safety Advisor identifying the tree location and watering procedure prior to the introduction of the tree to ensure the building fire risk assessment is updated appropriately.

Natural trees can dry out and should therefore be kept in a tree stand filled with water and located away from heat sources. A natural Christmas tree can consume 1 to 2 litres of water a day. Therefore, arrangements to refill the water must be in place, including holiday periods. Immediately prior to placing the tree in the stand remove the bottom 25mm of trunk and allow water uptake by the tree's capillary action. Without cutting the trunk the tree may not take in water and quickly dry out.

A dry burning tree can rapidly fill an area with fire and smoke as illustrated in [this YouTube video](#).

B. Position of tree

Trees **should not** be positioned: -

- Where they can compromise escape routes from the room or building.
- Adjacent to fire exit doors
- In stairwells or on stair landings
- Alongside flammable liquids or large amounts of combustible materials

C. Christmas tree lighting

Decorative lights should be CE marked and LED type only, operating at low voltage (9-36v) with a mains transformer or by battery. Before using a mains transformer, undertake a visual check for damage or faults and that the portable appliance test was completed within the last 12 months (COP-12).

Low voltage mains powered decorative lights should: -

- Only be used if they are connected through a local RCD plug or socket
- Not be left switched on out of normal working hours (COP-7)
- Have cables arranged to avoid creating trip or entanglement hazards, consider using cable mats. Do not place cables under carpets.
- Use exterior rated lighting sets for trees in outdoor settings

D. Christmas tree decorating and storage of items

When decorating if using a stepladder or kick-stool, please check it is in good condition immediately prior to use (COP-35). Ensure that stepladders are used on a level surface that is dry and apply three-points of contact at all time when working from the stepladder. You should work in pairs and move the stepladder as required to avoid over-reaching.

When storing Christmas trees and decorations avoid damp conditions, and store items away from flammable materials and below head height. Remember to maintain easy access to electrical items for scheduled portable appliance testing.

Have a happy and safe Christmas.

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