

Water systems in unoccupied buildings and construction sites

Due to the current Covid-19 pandemic many businesses have moved their staff from operating in their business premises to working from home. The current pandemic creates even more focus on the safety of water systems. Covid-19 causes problems for the respiratory system, this makes the person high risk to the effects of legionella. Legionella affects the respiratory system also and could have devastating effects on a person with Covid-19.

As businesses have shut their premises down this now means that water systems may be left unused. The building water systems usually have a high turnover of water usage in normal conditions. This turnover of water limits the possibility of water 'standing' and becoming a risk due to bacterial growth. Temperatures within the building and water systems may also be a factor that will increase risk of bacterial growth.

Dutyholders have a responsibility to ensure water systems do not become a risk to the building users. When the buildings open once again after the 'lockdown' it is essential that the water system is safe to operate. It is advised that the usual regime of monitoring the water system in line with the risk assessment should be carried out during the 'lockdown' period if possible. If this is not possible due to the Covid-19 pandemic reasonable steps should be taken to ensure the water system is safe to use before the building becomes occupied again. Each water system is required to be assessed to identify any possible risk. It may also be required that dutyholders re-visit their water system risk assessments to ensure it accommodates for 'lockdown' situations in the future. All essential works must be carried out in line with social distancing requirements, a risk assessment should be carried out.

Construction Sites – commissioned and part commissioned potable water systems

As some construction sites closed quickly due to the Covid-19 pandemic it may also mean that some potable water systems may have been left part installed, part-commissioned (filled but not tested) or fully commissioned state but not in use. As these sites have not been open this could mean that the water system has not been in use and water turnover may not have been possible.

Temperatures of the water system will also need to be considered, as we move to the summer months water temperatures may rise in the dormant system which also poses a risk of bacterial growth. It may also be the case that water heating system heat sources have not been active to heat any hot water storage vessels again having potential for bacteria growth. When site operations begin it is essential that any water system is safe to operate. All water systems need to be assessed on a case by case scenario to ensure they are not a risk. If there is any suspected risk, then a full re-commissioning may be required. Attention should also be paid to any pipe work that may have been left open which could allow contaminants to enter the system.

There is a magnitude of buildings that could be unoccupied at the moment – pubs, restaurants, hotels, shops, vets, cafes, libraries, cinemas, theatres, churches, dentists, all buildings and water systems are required to be assessed on a case-by-case scenario.

Guidance can be found here:

Health and Safety Executive <https://www.hse.gov.uk/legionnaires/>

Technical Guidance HSG274 Part 2 <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg274.htm>

Approved Code of Practice and Guidance L8 <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/l8.htm>

The European Study Group for Legionella Infections - ESGLI, has guidance for managing legionella in specific settings

https://www.esamid.org/research_projects/study_groups/legionella_infections/

Dental practices - <https://legionellacontrol.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/legionella-guidance-for-dental-surgeries-covid-19.pdf>