

Lead in Drinking Water – DWQR Project Update

The Drinking Water Quality Regulator for Scotland (DWQR) has established a project to review policy to drive achievement of a reduction of exposure to lead in drinking water. The project seeks to identify enablers and strengthen or introduce mechanisms with a range of stakeholders and influencers for the removal of lead service pipes and plumbing.

Why Lead is a problem

Lead is toxic and it accumulates within the body over a lifetime through exposure to lead sources in the environment. Sources include lead-based paint, contaminated soil, dust, petrol, drinking water, food and related products. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has allocated 50% of lead exposure as arising from drinking water. Their guidance is that lead piping be removed from the drinking water supply route.

In drinking water quality legislation, the limit for lead in drinking water has progressively reduced over the past 30 years to 10µg/l (micrograms per litre). Over the same period however, concerns have developed within Scotland's health professional community that even the 10 standard may be too high and there is an increasing view that we should strive to reduce lead levels in drinking water as far as is practicably possible.

Specific aims of the project

The specific aims are to:

- Ensure there is a clear and shared understanding of legislation as it relates to duties on drinking water suppliers
- Engage with health officials to identify common themes and to align drinking water quality policy with health policy
- Work with stakeholders to identify areas where policy can be aligned to ensure the risk of exposure to lead in the environment is minimised
- Investigate the various policy options available and work with our SG colleagues in determining the best way forward

Clear information for Consumers

A clear area of focus for the project has been to review information provided by key stakeholders on lead. This revealed a substantial variation in the existence of any information at all, across influencer organisations. Where it existed, the quality of information varied and its accessibility presented a confused position to anyone needing to find out about the issue in Scotland. A significant element therefore has been to establish clear and authoritative information on the impact of lead on health. This is now hosted on the NHS Inform website and all stakeholders have taken on board the need to have on their own websites, agreed signposting information and links to the NHS Inform information.

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/lead-poisoning>

Common Housing Standard

Over the summer months the Scottish Government has undertaken a Consultation on providing a common housing standard to replace standards applicable to different housing tenures. The project has taken the opportunity to present some questions in the Consultation on there being clearer statements within any new standard on the importance of there being no lead pipes or tanks in drinking water supply route into homes.

Risk of exposure to lead within Schools and Nurseries

A key sector of consumers at risk from lead in drinking water are children and babies. They absorb more lead than adults due to their growing bones and other organs within which lead can be deposited and accumulate as they develop. It is important therefore that we can have certainty that Schools and Nursery premises are free from lead. It is believed that attention to the removal of lead had been carried out in the past but in support of the project, local authorities have undertaken surveys of all their owned properties to ensure there is certainty around the issue.

A further survey is to be undertaken on behalf of DWQR to ensure a similar lead free status can be confidently expressed for all private schools and independent nursery premises.

The Care Inspectorate has been an integral part of the drive to ensure the risk of exposure to lead within care premises is addressed and they have adopted measures in their design principles for nursery provision and registration of new care services to ensure the importance of having a lead free water supply is actioned. Their Summer 2017 edition of Care News carries an item highlighting the issues.



Plumbers & plumbing information

As part of the drive to provide clearer information to consumers, Scottish Water has reviewed all of its letters and information leaflets relating to lead.

In conjunction with Scottish & Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers Federation (SNIPEF), and the Water Regulations Advisory Scheme (WRAS) they have produced a briefing note for housing Developers to raise awareness of the need to check for lead pipes and the removal of pipes and fittings where they are found. The note also highlights the illegality of using leaded solder on water supply pipework within the home and promotes awareness of the dangers of lead arising from the use of inferior quality brass fittings and taps.

Spreading the news

DWQR has raised awareness of the project and the continuing issues around lead by:

- Promotion of the work through the WHO International lead poisoning awareness week platform
- Engaged with health officials through presentation at HPS Health Symposium
- Published article in the Institute of Water Journal
- Blog on the WRAS website
- Supporting the use of Watersafe and SNIPEF registered plumber schemes
- Published item in Care News

Stakeholders

Key stakeholder and influencer organisations identified for communications and contributions in relation to the project include:

Scottish Government Health, Health Protection Scotland, Care Inspectorate, CPHMs, EHOs, REHIS, SG Water Industry, Scottish Water, SG Procurement, SG Housing, SHBVN, SG Building Standards, SG Estate, Historic Environment Scotland, Citizens Advice Scotland, COSLA, Shelter Scotland, SNIPEF, WRAS.

If you require further information or wish to provide comment, please contact DWQR

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