

Private Water Supplies Advice sheet

The Legal Situation

The Private Water Supplies Regulations 2009 update earlier regulations. The 2009 Regulations also incorporate the latest advice and knowledge from around the world about what is good and what is bad about drinking water quality.

All private water supplies are required to be registered with the local authority where the source of the supply is located.

If you get your drinking water from a private supply that serves 50 or more people or provides water to a commercial activity like a hotel, restaurant, bed and breakfast or campsite then the 2009 Regulations will classify the supply as a “Large” supply.

This means that the drinking water quality will be monitored and assessed against the requirements set out by the European Union in the Drinking Water Directive of 1998.

If you get your drinking water from a private water supply that does not fall into the description of a large supply then it is a “Small” supply and the drinking water quality only has to meet standards detailed in the Regulations.

Maintaining or improving your supply

The most important thing you can do is to know your supply and look after it. Your private water supply is composed of the source, a pipe or pipes that convey the water to your home or premises (that may have tanks or junctions along the way) and finally the plumbing within your home or premises.

You should know about all parts of the supply so that you can tell if something changes or goes wrong. If you know your supply you will be in a better position to react if there are changes in the quality of the water or if something else goes wrong with the supply e.g. a broken pipe.

If you share the supply or your pipes run across somebody else’s land then make an effort to talk with them and to share your experiences of the supply.

- If you are new to the area then your neighbours will be an invaluable source of information.
- If you have lived there for a while then you will be a very useful contact for others who may be trying to get to know the supply.
- Talk to local tradesmen e.g. plumbers, who may have worked on the supply. They will be able to advise of local conditions and known local problems as well as their solutions.
- Talking to your solicitor or examining the title deeds or rental agreement for your property is another way you may be able to learn where the source of your supply is located. You may also discover what rights you have over the gathering of water and the maintenance of the supply.

Where does the water in my private water supply come from?

Water can come from sources such as rivers, streams or lakes. This kind of supply is called a “surface water” supply. These supplies would normally require some form of water treatment before they would be suitable for use as a drinking water supply.

Water can also come from under the ground. These types of supplies include springs, boreholes or wells and are called “groundwater”.

Groundwater can provide very clean sources of water particularly those from deep underground like boreholes. It can sometime be difficult to be sure of the source just by looking at the water. For example, sometimes what appears to be a spring is really the outlet for field drains.

In other cases shallow wells are really getting water from just below the soil surface and so can easily be contaminated.

Some groundwater, however, may have naturally occurring chemicals in them such as iron or manganese that will stain clothes or make the water unpleasant to drink.

Why should I get my water tested and what will this involve?

You, your family and visitors to your home or business all have a right to expect clean, safe drinking water. Drinking water supplied from the public mains is carefully and regularly tested to make sure that it is clean and safe.

While it is not possible for all private water supplies to be tested in the same manner, as the cost alone would be too expensive, it is sensible to know what problems may be present in your private water supply. Testing the water helps to discover these problems.

If you are on a large supply then the environmental health service will contact you to arrange when a sample can be taken. We will also be able to advise you about the costs involved.

If you are on a small supply then you will have to ask for testing to be undertaken. The environmental health service will be able to advise you about who can take samples and the costs involved.

There are two main groups of impurities that can affect drinking water quality – microorganisms and chemicals. If certain types of micro-organisms are present in your drinking water then these will pose an immediate risk to your health and the health of your family or visitors.

In some circumstances such organisms can cause serious long-term illness, such as kidney failure, long after the immediate effects (severe sickness and diarrhoea) have passed. In some unfortunate cases the presence of such organisms in drinking water has resulted in death.

The presence of some very rare chemicals in your drinking water may lead to an increased risk of poisoning or developing cancer if the water is consumed over a long period of time. Other chemicals may make the water look or taste unpleasant while some can cause clothes to be badly stained when they are washed.

A typical sample will involve a professional from the local authority visiting your home and, after cleaning the kitchen tap, taking samples looking for harmful micro-organisms and chemicals that may be present in the water you are drinking.

Once the samples have been taken they will be sent to a certified laboratory where a series of tests will determine if the quality of your drinking water complies with the Regulations.

As soon as the results of the tests are known the environmental health service will contact you with the details.

If any of the results suggest that the drinking water quality is not as good as it should be then the environmental health service will give you further advice on how to improve the quality of your drinking water.

The environmental health service can also assist you in undertaking a user/owner risk assessment. This process highlights actual and potential problems that may be affecting your private water supply. This allows you to take steps to secure the safety of your drinking water supply for you and your family.

The owner/user risk assessment

This risk assessment for private water supplies is designed to allow real or potential contamination risks to be identified in order that suitable steps can be taken to remove or reduce the dangers.

The risk assessment is primarily concerned with protecting the health of you, your family and those who may visit your home or business.

The risk assessment looks at things that may affect the quality of your drinking water and will enable you to decide if you may have problems with your private water supply.

The risk assessment does not look at the quantity of your supply or whether it will sometimes dry up. If your supply dries up, but starts again after heavy rain, then it may be collecting run-off water which may be contaminated.

If you think this may be happening then you should consider having your supply investigated more thoroughly.

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A user/owner risk assessment is one where the owner or user of the private water supply can assess potential risks to their supply by completing a simple form.

If you think you have problems, then the next step will be to have a full risk assessment undertaken. You can do this yourself but you will probably need the help of a suitably qualified and experienced professional such as an environmental health officer.

The environmental health service has staff who can arrange to undertake a full risk assessment or to assist you in completing one yourself.

Private Water Supplies and food businesses

A significant number of food businesses currently utilise private water supplies as part of their operations. These businesses include small guesthouses, large hotels and food manufacturers.

In terms of 'The Private Water Supplies Regulations 2009', such businesses are defined as a 'commercial activity'.

Any supply utilised as part of this commercial activity would be deemed a large supply and fall under the scope of these Regulations.

However, in addition to the Regulations, specific food legislation, will also apply. Regulation (EC) No. 852/2004 on the Hygiene of Foodstuffs lays down specific rules regarding water supplies utilised by food businesses. Chapter 7, 1(a) in particular states that: *'There is to be an adequate supply of potable water, which is to be used whenever necessary to ensure that foodstuffs are not contaminated'*.

'Potable water' means, in this instance, water meeting the minimum requirements laid down in Council Directive 98/83/EC (as amended by Regulation (EC) No. 1882/2003) on the quality of water intended for human consumption.

The use of private water supplies as part of any food operation varies, but could include the following activities:

- Washing of foodstuffs (in particular high risk, ready to eat food such as salad items, fruit, vegetables etc.).
- Cleaning of food equipment, utensils and surfaces.
- As a food ingredient.
- For the production of ice.
- For hand washing by food handlers.

Considering the activities above, the potability of any private water supply could have a direct bearing on the safety of the food provided for consumption. It is therefore deemed a critical area of the operations. Failure to assure a consistent safe supply of water could potentially pose a risk to health not only via consumption, but indirectly via contaminated foodstuffs.

In addition to the legislative requirements detailed above, Regulation EC No. 852/2004, Article 5 also stipulates that: *'Food business operators shall put in place, implement and maintain a permanent procedure or procedures based on HACCP principles'*.

In view of the potential risks associated with the use of a private water supply, any documented HACCP (hazard analysis critical control point) based system should include an assessment of the necessary control measures, monitoring procedures, contingency plans etc. to ensure a consistent, safe supply of water is provided as part of the food operation.

If you would like any further information or advice please contact Environmental Health and Licensing, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, The Council Offices, Campus East, Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire AL8 6AE. Telephone 01707 357242

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