Returning to school after COVID-19 lockdown

Guide for Technicians

*17th February 2021 - Many schools have allowed at least some access to technicians during the latest closure so many of these tasks may have been already carried out – but it remains a useful checklist.*

When returning to school there are some important things to consider before ‘normal’ activities begin again: -

* **Taps and Sinks**: - The HSE has recently issued guidance regarding Legionella in workplaces that have been in lockdown. The school/Local Authority should have procedures in place for managing this risk. Consult them before using any water supplies. If they are content that all appropriate measures have been taken then run the water for 5 to 10 minutes through the system to ensure it is working. This will refill any drain traps which have evaporated.
* **Chemical Store: -** Check that the store is secure and has not been tampered with in any way. Chemicals that exist on the latest stocklist are all present and accounted for. There may be specific chemicals that required attention due to shelf life, such as potassium. Look for any distortions in bottles that may indicate pressure build up. If there are any signs of leakage, or any unusual smells, seek guidance immediately.
* **Radioactive Store**: - Check that the store is secure, and all radioactive sources are present and accounted for. Check that the sources are still within their leak test period.
* **Electrical Safety**: - It may be that some electrical items are outwith their PAT test period. Check all electrical equipment before use and label and remove any items that fall into this category to be tested. If the testing is done inhouse, then items can be tested on a rolling basis as they need to be used. If it is done externally, contact the company as soon as possible to arrange a test before the start of term – if possible. If testing cannot be done in time, make sure the teachers know so they can plan their lessons accordingly.
* **Equipment yearly checks**: - Fume cupboards, autoclaves, extraction systems, steam engines, and other bits of equipment may be out of their yearly test period. If so, they must be fully tested and comply with all relevant regulations before being used. As with PAT testing. If it is not being done inhouse then contact the testing company as soon as possible to ensure it can be done before the start of term. Again, if there is a delay, let the teachers know to inform their planning.
* **Gas Supply: -** Check all rooms with a gas supply for full functionality. It may have been switched off at the building’s main gas valve. Immediately report any gas smells as this may indicate a leak.
* **Electrical systems: -** If any of the rooms have an emergency shut down system, check that it is still fully operational, and all buttons function correctly. Report any faults immediately
* **Eyewash: -** If you have eyewash bottles in labs, check they are not out of date. If, as is better, you have an eyewash station, ensure the tubing is sterilised and replaced above the tap. (A plumbed in station will only need to be cleaned and run for a while – once Legionella tests have been carried out.
* **Fridges and Freezers: -** Check that these have not been tampered with or switched off. If they have, they will need to be emptied and cleared out – This should be done carefully particularly if there was organic material inside that might have rotted.

**Microbiology –** Dispose of all sub-cultures and plates. Check the master culture is still in date. Disinfect “Clean Room” surfaces and all storage fridges with Virkon. If microbiology work is being undertaken, new cultures might need to be obtained.

* **Ventilation: -** It is a good idea to open all windows and let rooms ventilate for at least 5 minutes.
* **PPE: -** Any PPE should be checked by a competent employee that it is fully functional and has no damage before use. **NB** It may be that your school has donated some of their PPE as a result of COVID-19. If this is the case, no activities that require the use of this PPE should take place until it has been restocked.

Each member of staff should have personal eye protection and should be provided with alcohol based antiseptic wipes for cleaning through the day.

* **Social Distancing –** This does not just apply to classrooms. Technicians should see about measuring and marking out social distancing spaces in the prep room and putting other procedures in place.

Only one person should be in the chemical store at any one time – unless it is an unusually large one. The same applies to other storage spaces.

Technicians should also be a part of the discussions about any rearrangement needed for labs/workshops

* **Equipment and ordering –** Given that practical work will be carried out by individual students now rather than groups, some readjustment will be needed. Once themaximum class sizes are known and audit of equipment will highlight any areas where extra is needed to be bought or where the experiment might need to be re-cast as a teacher-demonstration.
* **Setting out and clearing up** – By far the best option is for equipment to be set out for each pupil in trays. More trays may be needed.

In addition, the setting out and clearing up of practical classes will probably take longer than before so technicians should be consulted about feasibility when any new timetabling arrangements are drawn up.

The cleaning and sterilising of equipment between uses will also need to be considered.

**Consultation**

As mentioned in a couple of places above, there are likely to be all sorts of changes needed to how teaching in general and practical science and technology in particular are managed. Extended time needed for setting up and clearing away may affect timetabling. Changes may be needed to experiments. Some equipment will need to be sterilised on a regular basis. More individual kits will be needed which may have purchasing as well as preparation implications, etc, etc.

It is important that technicians are consulted fully before these changes are implemented to avoid the risk of measures being put in place that turn out to be impractical.