I am writing to you in relation to the matter of how water companies deal with school laboratories.

It was recently brought to my attention that water companies have been infected with the same health and safety sensitivity that plagues many aspects of practical science in schools. This time it is the manner in which school laboratories are categorised by the water companies and can mean huge increases in the money they are charged, often inappropriately according to the industry’s own guidance.

Laboratories are regulated because they use chemicals that would be harmful if they were to backflow into the main water supply. The industry guidance indicates that the risk from schools (though they may utilise similar chemicals) is much less (CAT 4 classification) than industrial laboratories (CAT 5 classification) mostly because the scale of potential harm is also much smaller (due to the much vastly smaller quantities of chemicals used and the sporadic nature of that use).

Schools appreciate that they are a greater risk than households (CAT 3 classification - though they too utilise chemicals that would be harmful if they were to backflow into the general water supply) but that they should not be treated as if they were industrial laboratories. The industry guidance from the Water Regulatory Advisory Service (WRAS), agrees with schools and indicates that school laboratories should expect to be rated below industrial labs. That is not the practice on the ground.

I wrote to all of the water companies to ask them of their practices and how they approached the categorisation of schools. Many of them quoted the regulations and that laboratories should be rated like any other laboratory, requiring specialist sinks and taps and specialist dishwashers for laboratory equipment – costing around £3,500 rather than the £300 they would otherwise spend. There is also a problem that some water companies advise the use of end of tap fittings that would make it impossible to carry out a
number of practical activities currently required by the curriculum for A level Chemistry. Some water companies took a much more relaxed view and rate schools in line with domestic kitchens. I was pleased to see there were companies that took the approach recommended in the guidance, where they did a check with the schools and rated them based on the approach within the school.

My concern is that there does not seem to be a consistent approach across the UK with regard to the most fundamental service of providing water to school laboratories. Some water companies would appear to be prefer to take an inordinately cautious approach, citing health and safety as the reason for that caution. In the process it is likely that schools in some areas will pay far more for their water than other areas, increasing the costs of those schools to provide the kind of science experiences that will provide the UK with the new scientists it so desperately needs.

I would like you to have a look at the problems this is causing and consider providing water companies with more authoritative guidance on what the Government expects of water companies.

No-one wants to place undue risk to the public water supply but schools should not have to pay the price for over-cautious water companies. I look forward to hearing how you will address the matter.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Miller
Chair