

On a Tuesday, we join one of our regular contributors, Michael Taylor, from the French estate agency, Properties in France, based in the beautiful Loire Valley. Well Mike what do you have for us today?

Well it may seem a little strange but I want to talk about outside swimming pools.

The weather may not be conducive at the moment, but summer arrives early and this year brings a major problem for a lot of home owners who have existing swimming pools.

Ah, I know exactly what you are referring too. You are talking about the Raffarin Law that states that all swimming pools in France must have a standardised security system (dispositif de sécurité normalise)..

Absolutely right..... January 1st of this year was pretty critical for homeowners..... As of that date, owners should have met the standards set by the Law.

The French parliament passed the Raffarin law regarding the use of security systems around pools in order to prevent people, especially children, from drowning in private swimming pools.

The law applies to all open-air pools, buried or partially buried, whether they are for private individual use or collective use.

Failure to comply with the law is a punishable offence, and very expensive, as you risk a fine of up to 45,000 euros, that is about 30,000 pounds sterling.

The good news is that the law does not apply to indoor pools, above ground level pools or on-ground level pools. Although, of course, it is recommended that you remove any steps to a pool when it is left unattended.

Now here is a very important point. Homeowners with property available for seasonal rental should have had compliant systems in place by 1st May 2004, unless the pool was built before 2004, in which case the deadline was 1st January of this year.

This is just the first of a number of kickers and it is always a good idea to talk to your insurance company and your letting agent, as many people do not realise that they may need additional public liability cover and may be operating an illegal business if no pool security measures are in place.

Is the law easy to interpret, I had heard that there are varying standards.

Well, like most new laws, there are various interpretations but from what I understand, and this is what we are advising our clients, there are four safety systems that are available, fencing, alarms, shelters and covers.

Whatever system of security chosen, it must comply with the French standards association, the AFNOR.

Legally, you can use one standardised device. However, the French consumer safety commission advises using a barrier in conjunction with another safety measure.

Now here's where I recommend listeners grab a pencil, because I am going to give some important compliance information.

Here we go.....

Depending on which system you decide upon, it must have a compliance code....these are as follows:

For fencing and barriers - code - NF P90-306

For alarm systems - code - NF P90-307

For safety covers - code - NF P90-308

For shelters/verandas - code- NF P90-309

Here's the second kicker for pool owners.....

If you already have a cover or barrier that was installed before the new standards were issued, you can only use it if the supplier can prove that it is compliant. If it does not comply, you must purchase an appropriate device, which can be used in conjunction with your existing equipment.

So, lets go through the various options:

Firstly, and I think the most cost effective solution, is to have an alarm installed.

There are two types available, an infra-red beam alarm, also known as an area alarm.... Or..... a water disturbance alarm, otherwise known as an immersion alarm. These can cost under 1,000 euros.

Now, there are issues about how effective these are, for instance an infra-red alarm can be set-off by your pets or local wildlife.

A water disturbance alarm will not function when the pool is covered or if it ices over, and only raises the alarm after a potential accident is already in progress.

There is also some confusion as to whether an alarm still complies with safety standards, if the house is left empty for any length of time..... therefore, it may be advisable to use it in conjunction with another safety device.

Secondly, and probably the safest solution, is fencing. As far as I can see, the exact nature of a pool fence or barrier is not specified, but it should be at least 1.1 metres high and should have a childproof security system on any gates. The cost of these fences can vary depending on the size of the pool, but it is likely to be somewhere between 1,000 and 3,000 euros.

The good news is that finally, after a rather long delay, compliant fences are now on the market. There are several manufacturers

that now claim to provide fences that comply with AFNOR regulations, these include companies like: Encloture, Abeol, Acura, Technal and Oriol.

Let's have a look at another option. The third option is a safety cover. An ordinary pool cover will not suffice; in fact, they can be extremely dangerous.

What is required is a reinforced cover, which either covers the surface of the water or may also enclose part of the pool surround.

The cover has to be able to withstand the weight of an adult , weighing up to 100 kg walking across it.

All covers must be locked in the absence of adult supervision. These covers are very expensive, costing around 5,000 euros, but have other advantages, as they can be an effective heat retention device, as well as keeping your pool clear of leaves and other airborne rubbish.

The final option is a pool shelter, a similar sort of device to a safety cover. These are very expensive, and can cost between 25,000 euros and 50,000 euros.

These shelters come in all sorts of varieties, they can be fixed, removable, telescopic and even inflatable. As with the fixed cover, the shelter must be securely locked, when no one is supervising the pool. They provide excellent heat conservation and act as an effective barrier against leaves.

So, these are the options - if you need any other advice you can call AFNOR on 00 33 1 41 62 76 44 they have English speaking staff on hand to help you with any queries you may have.

Thanks Mike, now talking of holes in the ground, what can you tell us about the new regulations regarding septic tanks.

Well you certainly know how to pick them.....

There has been some confusion as to the new laws surrounding septic tanks, known as fosse septiques here in France.

In simple terms, the government has now enforced a law that states that by the end of 2005, that is last year, each Mairie must have in place necessary pollution and drainage controls for all properties within the commune.

Initially, when the law was first introduced, it stated that all septic tanks needed to be upgraded..... the responsibility for which fell to each individual property owner.

However, we are in France, and here if we don't like something, well we just don't do it. And as you can imagine, most property owners were none too keen to comply with the new regulations as they involved expenditure, so now it is up to each respective Mairie.

This is both an onerous and one helluva big task.

It is estimated that 3 out of every 4 septic tanks, will not conform to the new standards set for the European Community!!

The plan is that each Mairie will arrange for drainage engineers to visit every property that is not on mains drainage and inspect the existing tanks to see exactly what is required to make them conform to the new environmental and pollution standards.

The new laws impose an obligation on each commune to prepare a map called 'Carte d'aptitude des sols', that designates the areas that should have systems 'collectif' or 'non-collectif'. In the areas where non-collectif systems are designated, each commune has to have a pollution monitoring system in place..... This should have been done by the end of 2005.....I doubt very much that it has!

The law is all about pollution control and does not impose any construction obligation on communes that have designated systems 'collectif'. If your property falls within a 'collectif' area, where mains drainage has been installed, you will eventually be obliged to stop using your existing fosse and to connect to the mains drainage.

Obviously, if you are in the process of buying a new property, or indeed having one built.....The contractor will be aware of what is required, so it is obviously worth asking the question..... Am I going to need to install a new fosse septique or am I going straight onto the mains.....The latter would be the most financially beneficial to you

For older properties, you should ask at your local Mairie, if they have received information about the specifications of what is required – this of course depends on the type of property you own, how much land you have and the current system you have in place.

Before any work can be carried out, you will be asked to arrange for a specialist to visit your home to do a soil study, known as an étude de sol. The will cost around 400 to 500 euros, and is both mandatory and crucial..... as it will determine what system will work best for your property.

If you are buying a property that does not currently have mains drainage or a complete septic tank system, a soil study might be a good idea, so you know what your exposure is.

For those who already own and have a fosse septique.....I have spoken to several people and the general feeling is the same - sit tight for the time being and wait for your local Mairie to contact you. They are really going to have their hands full! It is estimated that an astonishing 3.5 million septic tanks don't conform to the new regulations!!

So, the initial inspections alone will take several years, so there is no need to panic! It may be wise to set some money aside for the inevitable work to be carried out when it becomes necessary.

I've put 7500 euros under the mattress and am waiting for the inevitable knock on the door....it's enough to drive a man to drink.....which reminds, today I am playing traitor to our region and going for a Languedoc red...lighter than my usual choice but nevertheless, a cheeky little number.....!!!!!!