

22 April 2020

Recommendations of IAKS Germany for the phased re-opening of municipal swimming pools

1. The situation

As of 15 March 2020, all swimming pools were gradually closed by order of the authorities. In the declaration of the Federal Government of 15 April, it became obvious that sports facilities and thus also pools will remain closed at least until 4 May. It goes without saying that we support all measures to contain the coronavirus epidemic. Unfortunately, however, no indication of whether, when and how they will re-open were given in the new legal ordinances of the German Länder. It was merely announced that events involving more than 1,000 participants would be prohibited until the end of August. However, this figure is also not used uniformly, and this creates uncertainty. In the view of sports associations, this uncertain situation should be remedied immediately. At the very least, there should be clarity about how the swimming season will progress. We therefore expect dependable statements from the Länder on how to proceed.

Pool operators need answers to the following questions in particular:

- When can pools expect to be re-opened (in a phased procedure, see below)? This question is of existential importance for operators – in most cases municipalities or municipal enterprises. Many cleaning and repair jobs have been carried out in the period since 15 March. This has meant that staff have also been working in compliance with the specified measures to contain the coronavirus outbreak. Our own survey shows that these measures will be completed in about one to two weeks, meaning that employees will be out of work from then on. If pools were to go back into operation on 4 May (possibly also in a phased procedure), most operators would be able to continue to employ their staff until then. If the closure continues, short-time working will have to be introduced on a massive scale.
- If numbers are limited to less than 1,000 users, is earlier re-opening possible before September? If not, this would mean that the outdoor pool season would be largely cancelled. Many outdoor pools are currently being prepared for operation, cleaned and filled. If they are not to go into operation this summer, overheads could be saved now on a huge scale.

Pools have so far been prevented from re-opening on the grounds of an increased danger of infection. This argument disregards the fact that the danger is relatively low and can be managed by adopting low-risk procedures. According to the unanimous opinion of experts, as confirmed by an expert opinion of the German Federal Environment Agency on 12 March, a visit to a public pool with conventional treatment of the pool water does not (!) increase the risk of human infection. Showering, the washing of surfaces, disinfectant in the water, and cleaning and disinfection are carried out in swimming pools on a far greater scale than at other facilities.

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We are happy to refer to the also published plans of the German Swimming Pool Association (DGfDB) and the European Waterpark Association (EWA). We at the IAKS are committed to sports facilities in general and are happy to advise the Länder on re-opening, always in consultation with the umbrella organisations also mentioned here. We unanimously propose a phased plan for the re-opening of swimming pools to the Länder.

2. Phased plan for the re-opening of swimming pools

Phase 1: During widespread social distancing

- From 4 May, indoor swimming pools will be opened for school games, organised sport and for individuals.
- Pool operators shall ensure that the pool shall not be used by any more users than half the number of lockers, and for monitoring purposes no more than 200 users at any one time (cf. Ordinance on Places of Assembly).
- No events, swimming courses, sauna infusions, massage and wellness treatments and no other group activities will take place.
- Restaurants and outdoor swimming pools will remain closed, as social distancing is difficult to enforce here and, despite the lower risk of transmission outdoors, outdoor swimming pools are leisure facilities more likely to encourage proximity.
- Recliners and seats are arranged to ensure a distance of 2 m.
- In the entrance area, the sneeze guards already familiar from supermarkets and pharmacies will be installed. Markings on the floor – also familiar from elsewhere – will distance people in foyers, showers, queuing areas for slides and saunas.
- Every other locker (in a staggered arrangement with the lockers opposite) is kept locked, and access is barred to every other shower and, possibly, urinal.
- Staff are instructed to strictly monitor compliance with these requirements and, in the event of non-compliance, to respond earlier than usual with expulsion from the facility.
- The emphasis is on the protection of users and staff. All employees are instructed in the obvious, straightforward hygiene rules.
- In cases of suspected infection or contact with a (possibly) infected person, the employee shall stay at home and take the necessary subsequent measures.
- Staff are divided by duty roster into two groups that have no contact with each other. Regardless of the daily requirement of social distancing, these two groups are strictly separated so that, in the event of one group being quarantined, restricted operation would then be possible with the other group.
- We wish to point out to the public and policymakers that all measures will be brought into line, even at short notice, with current events and with the new guidelines and go-aheads of the local authorities and Länder.
- Despite all protective measures, we are assuming that infection or contact with infected persons among employees or users cannot be ruled out. Should this happen, it could become necessary to close the pool again, and the public should be made aware of this possibility in advance.
- To limit the number of guests, a low-cost short-stay ticket (1, 1.5 or 2 hours) should be made available. All other ticket prices will be raised significantly. As a result, the length of stay and thus also any possible contact will be considerably reduced, the pools will be used primarily for swimming, and shorter stays will make the pools accessible to more users subject to the capacity restrictions.

Phase 2: Easing of regulations

In coordination with measures at other public facilities, the following easing measures could be implemented. Such measures should also become familiar and comprehensible to citizens from other facilities, so we consider coordination and alignment to be useful. This may well be the case about four weeks after Phase 1.

- The maximum number of lockers in Phase 1 is increased to 2/3, but for monitoring purposes to a maximum of 400 simultaneous users in indoor swimming pools. Larger spas could allow more people in at the same time with an individualised hygiene and safety regime, if compatible with the facility and its design.
- The first courses take place in compliance with the distancing rules. Swimming courses requiring direct physical contact cannot yet take place.
- Restaurants are opened. Food serving points must be provided with sneeze guards. Payment should be cashless. The seating in the restaurants is to be arranged in such a way that people sit together in twos and – with appropriate marking – household groups such as families, for instance, can sit at a few larger tables.
- Outdoor swimming pools are re-opened with limited capacity. Pool operators must ensure that no more users than half the lockers or the maximum number of simultaneous users specified in the risk analysis – for monitoring purposes, however, a maximum of 400 simultaneous users – are admitted to the outdoor pool. Even if restricted outdoor pool operation means higher losses for pool operators than estimated, which will be further increased by additional monitoring staff, we consider the use of our outdoor pools particularly necessary in the light of the travel bans in force. Due to the access restrictions, outdoor pools offer significantly better scope for monitoring than other open spaces, for example.
- Sports facilities especially for sports with direct physical contact remain closed. If distancing rules cannot be enforced in play areas for (small) children, these must also be closed.
- No children's birthday parties, events or any other group events will take place. For massage and wellness treatments, the procedure should be analogous to that used in physiotherapy practices.

For all measures of Phases 1 and 2, pool operators cannot be expected to shoulder the full burden of responsibility. Problems such as queueing at entrances must be solved, primarily by pool personnel, with suitable distancing measures such as markings or barriers. However, the supervisory authorities are to cooperate closely or even take a leading role in the regulation of such measures – possibly outside buildings and properties.

Phase 3: Full-scale operation

Full-scale operation should start on 1 September. However, this date must be treated at this stage with extreme caution and must be closely coordinated with subsequent developments and official requirements.

At this point, explicit reference is made once again to the work of the German Swimming Pool Association (DGfDB) and also the European Waterpark Association (EWA), which go into more detail in aspects of internal procedures such as disinfection, for example. It is of enormous importance for pool operators that an approximate date for re-opening is named so that activities relating to buildings and staff can be coordinated. The proposals being made here therefore refer not only to the practical issues but also to timing.



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