

The best time to inspect your rainwater goods is during or immediately after heavy rain, as this will let you identify any problem areas easily. Use a pair of binoculars to help you see what is happening at gutter level and a hand mirror to look behind downpipes.



Cold weather can cause severe damage to rainwater goods so it is especially worth while checking for signs of damage during the winter. If gutters or downpipes are blocked, water can easily become trapped and will expand as it freezes. The expansion of trapped water is sufficient to cause downpipes to crack or shatter allowing water to saturate the wall. Look for any signs of splits or cracks and have any broken sections replaced as soon as possible.

As you walk around your building you may also notice the early signs of corrosion. Rusting can usually be attributed to infrequent painting or painting that misses the inaccessible areas at the back of downpipes and hoppers.

Such corrosion can go unnoticed for some time as it is difficult to spot, so it can be a good idea to use a small hand mirror to examine the backs of your downpipes from time to time.



Check that gutters and downpipes have not been damaged by frost. If there are gutters that slope the wrong way (i.e. away from the outlet) or gutters that allow water to discharge over the wall surface they will need to be altered to make sure that the water can run away freely.

Signs of soil being washed away at ground level or splashes of soil on the base of the walls can be an indication that the water is not being caught by the gutter. Stains on brickwork or masonry that are visible when the weather is dry are also an indication that there might be a problem as are areas of washed out mortar immediately below gutters. If you can see a dripping section on a dry day, there may be a blockage, which needs to be removed.

Fixings



The fixings for downpipes and gutters should be checked as they can work loose. Metal fittings may corrode and cause damage to adjacent masonry or render. Any sign of movement or corrosion should be noted and remedial action taken before further damage occurs. Staining or algae around joints are clues that the connection may be faulty.

Ideally, downpipes should be fixed clear of the wall to allow access to the back of the downpipes for inspection and maintenance. Lead and cast iron downpipes can split or crack at the back if the protective paint layer breaks down and corrosion occurs. Splits and cracks will direct water into the fabric of the wall allowing the masonry to become saturated, so broken sections of downpipe should be repaired or replaced as soon as possible. Keeping the paintwork in good condition will minimise the likelihood of corrosion occurring.

As a rule of thumb, you should expect to have to repaint cast iron rainwater goods every five years and perhaps more frequently in coastal areas.

Do remember that some buildings do not have gutters. This may be acceptable as long as water can drain away from the base of walls effectively.



Action point Clear leaves and debris from gutters and downpipes regularly and at least twice a year, preferably in spring and autumn after blossom and leaf fall. More frequent attention may be needed if the building is surrounded by trees or perched upon by pigeons. When cleaning gutters start at the downpipe and look along the gutter. Even if the gutter is clear, drop a small pebble down the downpipe to check that it is not blocked.

Gutters should be cleaned using soft brushes and wooden or plastic shovels or trowels as metal tools can cause damage. It is advisable to wear thick gloves to protect your hands. You should place any debris you collect into a bag or bucket, which should be securely attached to your ladder. Debris should be disposed of safely (remembering that leaves can be added to the compost heap).

Action point You can fit bird/leaf guards to the tops of downpipes and soil pipes to help prevent blockages. However, these also need to be maintained if they are not to cause a problem themselves and should be checked regularly.

