LG00044

Lanes Group plc Best Practice Series

Septic Tanks: a guide for property owners

Septic tanks

Most properties in the UK are connected to the public wastewater system, which carries waste to the treatment works where it is cleaned so that it can be safely returned to the environment. Responsibility for this system mainly lies with your water and sewerage company.

Where homes and buildings are off the beaten track, and don't have access to the sewerage network, there may be a septic tank. If you have one, then it's your responsibility.

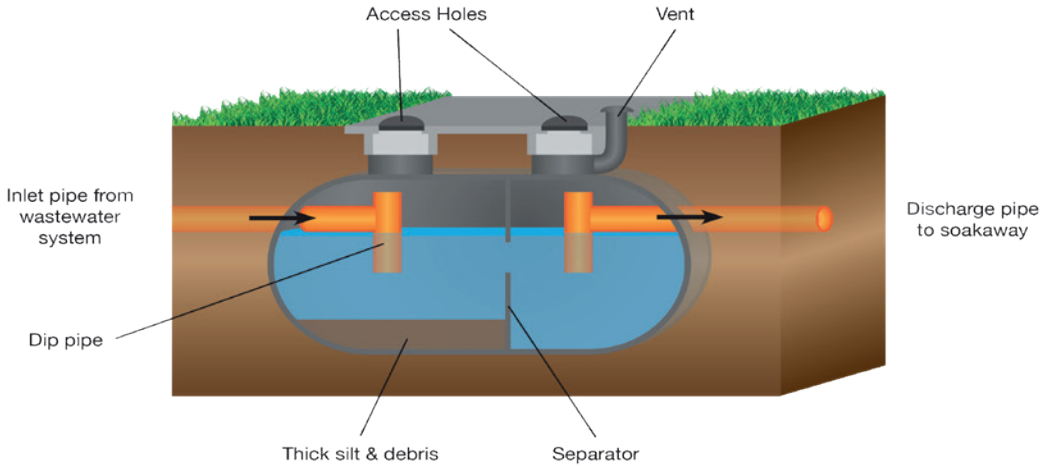
This leaflet aims to clarify the new stuff, and remind you of best practice for keeping your septic tank in good order, so that you benefit from a functioning sewage system, don't pollute the environment, or fall foul of the law.

How does a septic tank work?

Let's start with the obvious. Most people know that a septic tank is where sewage goes, but are vague on what happens next. It's important that you understand how it works and why, so that you can do your bit in ensuring that it does it properly.

Septic tanks use natural processes to manage sewerage over time in a sealed environment.

Below, is a diagram of a typical septic tank.



Inside the tank

Your drain takes wastewater from your bath, toilet, sink, kitchen and washing machine etc. to the septic tank.

1. Solid matter settles at the bottom of the tank and, over time, decomposes until it forms a dense sludge. This has to be manually removed at regular intervals by a specialist waste company.

2. Once the solids have fallen down to the bottom, the remaining liquid is allowed to drain out of the tank and percolate into a drainage field or soakaway. This may be a grassed or gravelled area where the liquid waste benefits from natural cleansing by the surrounding ecosystem.

3. Any scum, mostly made up of oils, fats and grease, rises to the top of the liquid to form a layer on the surface. This too must be removed by a specialist waste handler and disposed of according to regulations.

Septic tank: dos and don’ts

1. Take care not to upset the balance of the natural bacteria which treats the sewage.
Chemicals, anti-bacterial agents, bleaches and the like will interfere with the eco system required to break down the waste matter. Check that all cleaning products going into your drains are septic tank-friendly.

Flushing too much water into the tank will also upset the tank’s natural processes. This can happen if you run washers and dishwashers too frequently, for instance, or if you connect rainwater pipes to the system. Not only will too much water dilute the bacteria and prevent it from carrying out its decomposing function, high water flow (in wet weather, for instance) may cause solids to be swept straight through instead of being allowed to settle in the bottom of the tank.

2. Check the soakaway regularly.
An adequate drainage field is as important as the tank itself. It’s an integral part of the process. As long as the septic tank installation was appropriate for the environment and property, it should cope with volume of effluent. But do remember that in prolonged wet weather, sodden ground may be unable to absorb more liquid, forcing the waste to the surface or back into the tank.

3. Maintain your tank.
You must have the sludge and scum professionally removed at appropriate intervals. If you don’t, accumulated matter will eventually stop the tank from working as it should. Removal is easily arranged. Most companies (like Lanes) offer a contract so that you don’t even need to be home when the work is done. They will advise you how often it should be done, according to the size of the tank and number of occupants at the property. A planned maintenance contract also has the advantage of fixing the price for three years. And you’ll get all the requisite paperwork for your records.

Look at the legislation

It is your responsibility that your septic tank is correctly installed, functions properly, and doesn't cause pollution, a health hazard, or a nuisance. Septic tanks are covered by specific legislation directly, and other legislation indirectly. Here is a breakdown, but you'll find more detailed information online at www.gov.uk/guidance/general-binding-rules-small-sewage-discharge-to-a-surface-water

Building Regulations 2010 – Drainage and waste disposal

These regulations deal with septic tank installation regulations and the owner's responsibilities, including:

- That the tank is in the right place
- That its capacity is adequate for the property it serves
- That it won't pollute local watercourses
- That the system is suitable for local ground conditions – particularly important for drainage fields (or soakaway)
- That the tank is emptied and maintained regularly

Local Authorities have the powers to test systems and take legal action if they find any issues.

Environment Agency PPG4 (Pollution Prevention Guidelines)

Environment Agency's PPG4 will help you to decide what type of off-mains drainage is best for your property, including what the EA will allow and when you need to get consent.

Public Health Act, 1936

You may be prosecuted by the Local Authority if you allow a septic tank to overflow or leak.

DEFRA General binding rules for small sewage discharges

The 2015 general binding rules focus on preventing pollution of the environment, the location of the septic tank and how the waste is discharged. Sensitive areas may require additional permits.

Changes to discharge rules

Previously, you could `discharge' the separated liquid from your septic tank to a drainage field or soakaway system which allows wastewater out through holes in the pipework into the surrounding sub-soils, or to a watercourse via a sealed pipe straight in to a stream or river.

Under the general binding rules 2015, you can no longer discharge directly to a watercourse. This already applies to new septic tank installations, but from 2020 it will cover existing systems too. That means you will have to replace or upgrade your system by 1 January 2020 — or before that date if you plan to sell your property. Your options are to change the septic tank for a sewage treatment plant producing cleaner wastewater, which is allowed into a watercourse. Or you can add a drainage field/ soakaway area to your system to absorb the effluent liquid into the sub-soil.

If in doubt, talk to an expert

Lanes is working hard to help clients follow best practice and protect the environment and waterways from pollution caused by wrongly installed or badly maintained wastewater and sewage discharge systems.

We are currently collaborating with www.catchmentbasedapproach.org/ (run by the Rivers Trust) and the www.callofnature.info/ campaign to this end.

If you have questions about any aspect of septic tank maintenance or installation best practice, speak to our experts on 0800 526 488.

Aberdeen
Harehill Industrial Estate
Murcar
Bridge of Don
Aberdeen
AB23 8BQ
Tel: 01224 709070

Birmingham
Unit 30
Minworth Industrial Park
Minworth
Birmingham
B76 1DH
Tel: 0121 352 3300

Bristol
Unit 5, 114 Burcott Road
Severnside Trading Estate
Avonmouth
Bristol
BS11 8AF
Tel: 0117 982 3999

Cardiff
Unit H2, Coedcae Lane
Industrial Estate
Pontyclun
Mid Glamorgan
CF72 9HG
Tel: 01443 224917

Chester
Lancing House
Broughton Mills Road
Bretton
Flintshire
CH4 0BY
Tel: 01244 661 691

Derby
Unit 4, Riverside Park
East Service Road
Raynesway
Derby
DE21 7RW
Tel: 01332 280280

Eastleigh
Unit 2-4 Parham Drive
Boyatt Wood Industrial Estate
Eastleigh
Hants
SO50 4NU
Tel: 02380 625750

Edinburgh
8 Youngs Road
East Mains Industrial Estate
Broxburn
West Lothian
EH52 5LY
Tel: 01506 862 286

Glasgow
Block A, Units 2-3
Drakemire Business Park
Drakemire Drive
Castlemilk, Glasgow
G45 9SS
Tel: 0141 631 4442

Leeds
No 17 Parkside Lane
Parkside Industrial Estate
Leeds
West Yorkshire
LS11 5TD
Tel: 0113 385 8484

London (Rainham)
16 Lamson Road
Off Ferry Lane
Rainham
Essex
RM13 9YY
Tel: 01708 528 770

Manchester
300 Lansdowne Road
Monton
Eccles
Manchester
M30 9PJ
Tel: 0161 788 2222

Plymouth
Unit 11, Bell Park
Bell Close
Newham Industrial Estate
Plympton, Plymouth
PL7 4TA
Tel: 01752 334280

Preston
Unit 4 Carnfield Place
Walton Summit Industrial
Estate, Walton Summit
Bamber Bridge, Preston
PR5 8AN
Tel: 01772 696696

Sevenoaks
Unit 8, Mill Place
Platt Industrial Estate
Maidstone Road
Platt, Sevenoaks, Kent
TN15 8FD
Tel: 01732 783110

Sheffield
Unit 14, Shepcote Way
Tinsley Industrial Estate
Sheffield
South Yorkshire
S9 1TH
Tel: 0114 281 8100

Slough
686 Stirling Road
Slough Trading Estate
Slough
Berkshire
SL1 4ST
Tel: 0333 344 9099

Stockton on Tees
Black Path
Off Portrack Lane
Stockton on Tees
County Durham
TS20 2AN
Tel: 01642 634 446

St. Neots
11 Chester Road
Colmworth Business Park
Eaton Socon
St Neots
PE19 8YT
Tel: 01480 225 680

Swaffham
57 Turbine Way
Swaffham
Norfolk
PE37 7XD
Tel: 01760 742 700

Washington
Unit 55
Hutton Close
Crowther Industrial Estate
Washington
Tyne and Wear
NE38 0AH
Tel: 0191 419 5656

Call us today and we will be delighted to help