

# Taking care of your wastewater

Code of Practice



# Looking after your wastewater

About 95% of the water we supply is returned to us for treatment and safe disposal. Our wastewater system is made up of 10,874 miles of sewers, around 1200 sewage pumping stations and 650 wastewater treatment works. We serve Cornwall, Devon, the Isles of Scilly and parts of Somerset and Dorset. That's about 1.8 million people year-round, and in the tourist season that can increase to over 10 million!

This leaflet explains how we do that. It covers information on about how our sewerage system works, responsibilities for pipework, what to do if you have a problem, and how you can apply for a new connection should you need to.

# Contents

Section 1: How the system works . . . . . 1

1. What is sewage? . . . . .1

2. The sewage pipes . . . . .1

3. Pumping stations . . . . .2

4. Wastewater Treatment Works. . . . .2

5. Responsibility . . . . . 4

A note on cesspits and septic tanks. . . . . 6

Section 2: If things go wrong . . . . . 7

Flooding . . . . .7

Pollution . . . . .10

Sewage odours . . . . .10

Misconnections. . . . . 11

Section 3: New connections . . . . . 12

Other ways to get in touch . . . . . 13

# Section 1: How the system works

## 1. What is sewage?

Sewage is a combination of the following:

- Domestic wastewater – all the wastewater from your homes
- Surface water – rainwater that falls onto private property
- Highway drainage – rainwater that falls onto the roads
- Run-off from agricultural land – water draining from fields
- Trade effluent – any liquid waste, other than domestic wastewater and surface water, put into the public sewers by businesses.

## 2. The sewage pipes

With many different types of wastewater, there are typically different types of sewer pipes. These are generally:

- Foul sewers – these carry only domestic wastewater
- Surface water sewers – these carry only surface water and some highway drainage, they usually drain directly back into rivers via oil interceptors
- Combined sewers – these carry both domestic wastewater and surface water. This type of sewer was mainly laid before the 1960s and tends to be more susceptible to flooding during heavy rainfall.

Our sewers are NOT intended to drain floodwater from rivers or run-off from agricultural land.

### 3. Pumping stations

The area we cover is famous for its rolling green hills and coastal coves. As beautiful as they are, they do pose a challenge for our water and wastewater services. That's why we have around 1200 sewage pumping stations. Where sewage can't be transferred solely by gravity, a pumping station and rising main may be involved.

As of October 2016, we automatically own, and are responsible for, all pumping stations that:

- Serve more than one property
- If serving only one property, is found outside the boundary of that property
- Has a rising main that communicates with or is connected to our sewer network.

### 4. Wastewater Treatment Works (also known as Sewage Treatment Works)

At our 650 wastewater treatment works, physical, chemical and biological processes are used to remove contaminants from wastewater. This produces safe, environmentally friendly, treated wastewater which can be released into nearby watercourses or the sea.

Wastewater treatment also produces a by-product called biosolids (sludge), which can be turned into fertiliser. It is a heavily concentrated collection of all the healthy bacteria in sewage.

All our treatment works; the processes that happen there; and products produced must meet the standards set by the Environment Agency (EA). The EA is a statutory body with powers and duties to protect and enhance the environment.

Sometimes, usually due to heavy rainfall, or unexpected pressure on our treatment works, we have to discharge sewage effluent (the mixture of domestic wastewater and surface water) into watercourses to prevent sewer flooding. This is our last resort. Any effluent discharged must comply with statutory standards set out by the EA. The EA carries out checks to make sure we meet those standards, and records showing the results are held in a public register.



## 5. Responsibility

Our sewer pipes are classed as either drains or sewers. These are then divided into public or private, as per the sewer ownership legislation of October 2011.

### Drains

Sewer pipework that serves a single property only

- **Private drain** – part of the drain that's located within the property boundary
- **Public drain (also known as a lateral drain)** – part of the drain that's located outside of the property boundary and connects to the public sewer.

### Sewers

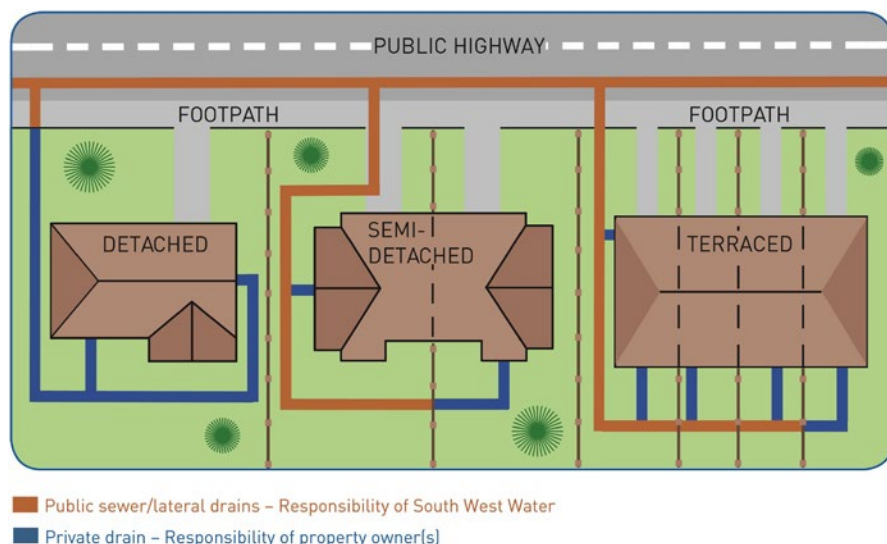
Sewer pipework that is shared by more than one property

- **Private sewer** – does not connect with our sewer network
- **Public sewer** – connects to one of our main sewers.

Generally, if a pipe serves just your property, you'll be responsible for it up to your boundary. If it serves more than one property, we're responsible unless the pipe doesn't connect to our main sewer.

This isn't always the case. If you are charged ground rent at your property, it is likely that the developer who built your property still owns the pipework underneath. When buying a property, you should ask your solicitor to check the drainage pipework within and outside your property boundary, to double check who's responsible.

The diagram below illustrates how common types of property can be affected. It's possible that your drains and sewers may be laid out differently to the picture. For example, a detached property may share pipes with another property, or a terrace house might not share pipes with another property.



To find out more about your drains and sewers, please visit: [southwestwater.co.uk/sewer-responsibility](https://southwestwater.co.uk/sewer-responsibility) or get in touch with our Services Team on 0344 346 2020, and they'll be happy to help you.

We keep records of our public sewers and you can request to see them at our offices by calling Source for Searches on 0845 330 3401. We can make extract copies available for a small charge.



## A note on cesspits and septic tanks

Your property might not be connected to our sewer network because it's instead connected to a private cesspit or septic tank. If this is the case, you're responsible for emptying and looking after the cesspit or septic tank, and all the drainage pipework connected to it.

# Section 2: If things go wrong

## Flooding

### What causes the sewer to flood?

We do our best to make sure there is adequate capacity in our sewers so that sewage doesn't escape from them.

But, there are reasons why a sewer might flood. Some are:

- Storms and high levels of rainfall overloading the sewer
- Sewer collapse caused by tree roots, or other damage
- Illegally flushed items (things that aren't pee, paper and pool!) causing blockages
- A pumping station or equipment breakdown.

If we know that either a blockage or equipment failure might lead to flooding, we do our best to have a representative onsite as quickly as possible.

If you spot a sewer that's looking like it might cause a flood, please let us know straight away by calling our Services Team on 0344 346 2020.

### We can work together to prevent this from ever happening

Most of our blockages are completely avoidable. They're caused by some of our customers misusing our sewers. So please remember the following:

## **1. Love Your Loo**

Please could you only flush the 3Ps – pee, paper and poo?

We deal with 8500 blocked sewers every year caused by people flushing illegal things down the toilet. Wipes, sanitary products and a whole range of unusual objects can find themselves at our sewage treatment works, clogging up our important machines. These blockages cost about £4.5 million a year, an amount that adds to our customers' bills.

## **2. Think Sink**

Each year, we remove 4,000 tonnes of fat and food waste from the region's sewers – that's enough to fill 25 double-decker buses!

When hot fat, oil and grease (FOG) cools, it forms a solid mass which can build up inside pipes. Even small amounts can contribute to blocked drains.

Please could you use a Gunk Pot to collect your fat in, rather than put it down the sink? Once it's cooled, you can put it in your bin.

### **A note on packaging**

Unfortunately, 'biodegradable' wipes take so long to break down that they build up in pipes and cause blockages. We're working with the rest of the water industry to encourage manufacturers and retailers to label their products responsibly. In the meantime, please bin wipes, sanitary products, nappies, condoms and anything else that isn't the 3Ps.

## What happens if I'm affected by public sewer flooding?

If a sewer floods, the best thing to do is to get in touch with our Service Team straight away. You can call them on 0344 346 2020. Our response will differ depending on whether the flooding is external or internal. More information can be found in Our Customer Promise.

We are not liable for any damage caused by sewer flooding unless we've been negligent and have helped cause the problem.

If you're not insured, or your insurers decline to help, please get in touch with us.

### **External flooding**

We'll get a representative onsite as quickly as possible to help with any clean up necessary as a result of the flooding.

### **Internal flooding**

We'll look into why the sewer has flooded, and we'll let you know if there's any work that we need to carry out to fix the problem. We'll also recommend local companies you can use who can provide specialist clean-up services.

## Pollution

We're committed to protecting the environment and do all we can to prevent pollution in our watercourses. If you spot pollution, we want to hear about it straight away. Please call us on 0344 346 2020 or fill out the form on our website. We'll look into it as a priority.

Some signs of a suspected pollution of a river or stream include:

- Sanitary products in the water, on land or bathing beaches including toilet paper, wipes, period products, condoms etc
- Water appears cloudy, milky or foamy
- Dead or ill-looking fish
- A noticeable sewage smell.

## Sewage odours

As long as there are no blockages and the sewage in our pipes can keep flowing freely, odour problems shouldn't happen.

Occasionally, something might happen at our treatment works which causes an odour. We always work hard to find out why and fix the problem as soon as we can.

There are other odours that are similar to sewage but aren't related to our sewer system. Some examples are muck spreading, or smells associated with pig and chicken farms.

If you notice an odour and believe it's coming from our sewers or treatment works, then please get in touch straight away and we'll look into it. Our Services Team can be called on 0344 346 2020.

## Misconnections

A misconnection is when a home or business has wrongly connected their foul plumbing to their surface water sewer, or vice versa.

This can happen when a property is built, when a building is extended, or during home improvements.

As the owner of surface water sewers, we always look into misconnection problems to make sure the issue is fixed.

If we find a misconnection on your property, we'll send you a letter that requests access to the property and that the misconnection is fixed.

To find out more, please visit: [southwestwater.co.uk/misconnections](https://southwestwater.co.uk/misconnections)



## Section 3: New connections

If you want to connect to our public sewer, you can find details on how to apply in our New Connections and Developer Services Charging Arrangements.

If you live on the Isles of Scilly, some of the arrangements are slightly different. Please get in touch with our Developer Services Team for more information.

In some cases, we don't give permission. This is usually because a new connection would be harmful to our sewer network. If you're not happy with our decision, you can appeal to Ofwat.



# Contact us

## Phone

**0344 346 1010**

to talk about your billing or account

**0344 346 2020**

about your water supply or wastewater services

### SignLive

Register at: [signlive.co.uk/login](https://signlive.co.uk/login)

### Relay

Contact us via Relay UK through  
the app or by dialling 18001 before  
the helpline number

## Social Media

WhatsApp  
Facebook  
Twitter  
Webchat

## Post

South West Water  
PO Box 4762  
Worthing  
BN11 9NT

## Website

For more information,  
please visit:  
[southwestwater.co.uk/  
your-account](https://southwestwater.co.uk/your-account)





This document is one of a series setting out key information for customers about our services, including charges and the support we offer during an incident.

To see other documents with key information, use the QR code or the link below.

[southwestwater.co.uk/important-information](https://southwestwater.co.uk/important-information)



This leaflet is available in other languages, large print, and braille.