

PRIVATE DRAINAGE SYSTEMS

Frequently Asked Questions

1. WHAT IS PRIVATE DRAINAGE?

Private drainage refers to wastewater systems that provide sewage disposal for homes that are not served by South West Water's main sewage infrastructure. This could include septic tanks, sewage treatment plants and sewage pumping stations.

We manage 107 private drainage systems on behalf of Cornwall Council. These drainage systems remove, treat, and dispose of foul sewage from Council and ex Council owned homes that have been sold through the Right to Buy scheme.

2. WHAT IS FOUL SEWAGE?

Foul sewage is wastewater from toilets, sink waste, dishwasher/washing machine drainage and water from bathing. Foul sewage does not include surface water.

3. WHAT IS SURFACE WATER?

Surface water is rainwater collected from guttering and drainpipes. Surface water should not go into your private drainage system.

4. WHY DO I HAVE PRIVATE DRAINAGE?

If your home is not close to a South West Water main foul drainage system, you will have a private drainage system instead. Homes with private drainage are usually in very rural areas.

5. HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE A PRIVATE DRAINAGE SYSTEM?

You will have been informed when you moved into your home. You may have a septic tank or sewage treatment plant in yours or your neighbours' garden, that is inspected, serviced, or emptied on a planned schedule by Cornwall Housing. If you have a sewage treatment plant or septic tank, you should not receive sewerage bills from South West Water.

6. WHAT IS A SEPTIC TANK?

A septic tank is an underground, watertight container. It is used to treat and store sewage or wastewater from buildings not connected to South West Water's main public foul sewer.

Septic tanks are typically made of concrete, fiberglass, or plastic. Some old systems are made from blocks. The tank collects wastewater from toilets, sinks, showers, and separates out liquids from solids.

7. WHAT IS A SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANT?

A sewage treatment plant removes pollutants from wastewater so the treated water can be safely released into the environment. These plants come in various sizes depending on how many properties they serve. Modern sewage treatment plants use electricity, while older ones work using gravity and filtration. The treated water is usually discharged into a nearby stream or a drainage field.

8. WHAT IS A DRAINAGE FIELD?

A drainage field works with septic tanks and sewage treatment plants to spread liquid waste into the ground. Microbes in the soil provide further treatment. Drainage fields usually last 15–25 years before they need replacing or an alternative solution is needed.

9. WHAT IS A SEWAGE PUMPING STATION?

A sewage pumping station is used to pump sewage to South West Water's mains drainage. They usually serve whole housing estates rather than individual homes.

10. INSPECTION AND MAINTENANCE

Private drainage systems need regular inspections and servicing to ensure they work properly.

11. DESLUDGING / EMPTYING

Septic tanks and sewage treatment plants should be emptied ("desludged") regularly by a licensed contractor. Cornwall Housing hires a local contractor to empty tanks as part of a planned schedule. The contractor removes the solids, while the liquids flow into a nearby drainage field.

12. I AM A COUNCIL TENANT. WHO PAYS FOR MY SYSTEM?

If you are a Cornwall Housing tenant, the cost of emptying the septic tank or treatment plant, servicing and maintenance is included in your service charges, which include VAT.

13. I AM A FREEHOLDER. WHO PAYS FOR MY SYSTEM?

Freehold properties sold through the Right to Buy scheme may still share private drainage systems operated by Cornwall Housing. Freeholders must pay their share of maintenance, emptying, repair, and replacement costs. This is based on the "benefit and burden" principle. Freeholders are billed annually for emptying, inspection, and servicing (April–March of the previous financial year). Freeholders must also contribute to system replacements when needed. Cornwall Housing charges an additional management fee for the service charge to oversee inspections, maintenance, and replacements.

14. WHY DO I HAVE TO CONTRIBUTE?

Your contribution is a legal requirement stated in your property's conveyance documents. If it is not specifically mentioned in the documents, Cornwall Housing will still request payment based on the "benefit and burden" principle if you benefit from the system.

15. HOW ARE THE CHARGES CALCULATED?

Annual costs are split equally among the properties that use the system, including both council and freehold homes.

In cases where usage differs significantly (e.g. a pub sharing a system with houses), charges are adjusted based on estimated usage. For example, a pub would pay more than each house.

16. WHEN WILL I GET MY INVOICE?

We will write to you every July with a breakdown of the costs. Your invoice will follow approximately 4 weeks later.

17. HOW CAN I PAY MY INVOICE?

Payment details are on the back of your invoice.

18. DOES MY COUNCIL TAX COVER THESE COSTS?

No, your council tax does not include costs for managing your private drainage system.

19. WHY DO FREEHOLDERS PAY FULL SEWERAGE CHARGES WHILE CHL TENANTS DON'T?

Freeholders pay their fair share of all costs, including inspection, servicing, emptying, replacement, and the management fee retrospectively, whereas CHL tenants pay their fair share as part of their monthly rental charges. If you would like further information, please request a copy of the Service Charge Policy from RTB-Leasehold@cornwallhousing.org.uk

20. WHAT OTHER CHARGES MIGHT I NEED TO PAY?

To keep the system in line with environmental regulations, you may also need to pay for blockages, fencing repairs, vegetation management, or anything else required to keep the system accessible for contractors.

21. WILL PRICES GO UP?

If contractor costs for inspection, servicing, emptying, or repairs increase, these costs will be passed on to you. However, if costs decrease through new contracts, the savings will also be passed on to you.

22. WHY DO I PAY VAT?

Freeholders must pay VAT on repairs and maintenance but not on emptying. This is an HMRC requirement.

23. WHY DO I PAY ELECTRICITY CHARGES FOR MY SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANT?

Sewage treatment plants need electricity to run. Many have separate electricity meters, which are read during inspections. The cost is shared equally among all the properties that use the system.

24. WHY DO I PAY A MANAGEMENT FEE?

The management fee covers Cornwall Housing staff who oversee the operation of your drainage system.

25. HOW DO I DISPUTE ANY CHARGES?

If you want to dispute a charge, please email us at RTB-Leasehold@cornwallhousing.org.uk. This allows us to record and investigate your concerns.

26. WHY HAS THE INSPECTION AND SERVICING FREQUENCY CHANGED?

If your system is not working properly, it may need more frequent inspections and servicing to keep it running and prevent pollution.

27. WHY HAS THE EMPTYING FREQUENCY CHANGED?

If your system is not working correctly, it may need emptying more often to avoid pollution.

28. MY SYSTEM KEEPS BREAKING DOWN AND COSTS MORE THAN IT SHOULD

Private drainage systems don't last forever and will eventually need replacing, either because they are no longer working or to meet environmental regulations.

CHL provides guidance to help you maintain your system, reduce breakdowns, and keep costs low. This includes tips for avoiding blockages and emergency callouts.

These guides are shared with freeholders and tenants and are available on our [website](#)

29. WHO SHOULD I CONTACT IN AN EMERGENCY?

If there's a blockage or other problem, contact Cornwall Housing:

Email: info@cornwallhousing.org.uk

Phone: **0300 1234 161**

30. WHAT ARE ENVIRONMENTAL PERMITTING REGULATIONS?

The Environmental Permitting Regulations (2016) are laws that apply to private drainage systems. They are enforced by The Environment Agency.

31. WHAT ARE GENERAL BINDING RULES?

If have a septic tank or small sewage treatment plant, you don't need an Environmental Permit as long as you meet all of the General Binding Rules.

These rules apply to;

- Domestic sewage (sewage from homes, not businesses)
- Septic tanks (where solids sink to the bottom and liquids drain into a drainage field)
- a small sewage treatment plant (also known as a 'package treatment plant' - a system that treats the liquid, so it is clean enough to go into the ground or a surface water)

If your system doesn't meet these rules, Cornwall Housing may need to make changes, such as upgrading the system or applying for a permit.

32. WHAT HAPPENS IF MY SYSTEM CAUSES POLLUTION?

If the wastewater discharge from the private drainage system causes pollution, it is deemed as "committing an offence."

If your drainage system causes pollution, it is considered an offence. The Environment Agency may offer advice to fix the issue, but if the problem continues, they can take legal action, including prosecution or fines.

33. HOW CAN I CHECK IF MY SYSTEM HAS AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERMIT?

You can check if your sewage treatment plant has an environmental permit, and request a copy on the [Environment Agency Public Register](#)

34. HOW MUCH DOES AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERMIT COST?

There is a charge to apply for a permit, and the Environment Agency also charges an annual fee to regulate the system while the permit is active. However, permits for domestic systems treating less than 5m³ of sewage per day are free.

For more details, visit the Environment Agency website [Environmental permits: when and how you are charged - GOV.UK](#)

35. WHAT IS EFFLUENT SAMPLING?

If your sewage treatment plant has a permit, it must meet certain water quality standards before discharging into a river or stream. Cornwall Housing collects samples to ensure the system complies and doesn't cause pollution.

36. WHAT HAPPENS IF THE SAMPLE QUALITY DOESN'T MEET QUALITY STANDARDS?

If a sample doesn't meet permit requirements, Cornwall Housing will investigate the issue. This may involve retesting or carrying out emergency repairs to make sure the system is working correctly.

37. WHAT HAPPENS IF THE PRIVATE DRAINAGE SYSTEM CANNOT BE REPAIRED?

If the system cannot be fixed or has reached the end of its life, Cornwall Housing may need to tanker the waste away temporarily to protect the environment and prevent sewage spills. Replacement systems take time to plan and install, so tankering is a short-term solution.

38. WHAT IS THE LIFESPAN OF SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANT?

Sewage treatment plants last 15-25 years.

39. MY WASTEWATER SYSTEM NEEDS REPLACING. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

In 2023/2024, Cornwall Housing reviewed all 107 private drainage systems it manages for Cornwall Council. Cornwall Housing is now upgrading systems that are at the end of their life or no longer meet Environmental Permitting Regulations or General Binding Rules. If you think your system isn't compliant, contact Cornwall Housing for advice.

40. WILL UPGRADING REDUCE COSTS?

Replacing an old system with a modern one may lower servicing and maintenance costs. However, modern systems require electricity to run, so you'll need to factor in energy costs.

41. HOW MUCH WILL A REPLACEMENT SYSTEM COST?

The cost will be shared equally between Freeholders and Cornwall Housing. The final price depends on the best solution for your property:

Option 1: Connect to South West Water (SWW)

If SWW infrastructure is nearby, Cornwall Housing can apply for a "first-time sewage connection." SWW may cover the cost, but meeting their strict criteria can take years.

If the system doesn't qualify, Cornwall Housing could install a pumping station to divert sewage to SWW's system. This must meet SWW's standards for them to take over maintenance; otherwise, Cornwall Housing will maintain it and recharge Freeholders.

Option 2: Replace the system on Council land

If connection to SWW isn't possible, Cornwall Housing may install a new system on Council-owned land (space permitting). Percolation tests would confirm the soil is suitable for a drainage field.

Option 3: Replace the system on private land

If Council land isn't available or soil tests fail, Cornwall Housing will negotiate with private landowners for land use. Legal agreements would allow access for inspections and maintenance.

42. CAN FREEHOLDERS HAVE A SAY IN THE REPLACEMENT PROCESS?

Yes, Cornwall Housing will consult Freeholders about replacements. However, urgent environmental, health, or safety issues may require action without prior consultation.

43. CAN I TAKE OVER MANAGING MY OWN SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANT?

If you want to take responsibility for your system, including your neighbours', email **RTB-Leasehold@cornwallhousing.org.uk** to express your interest.

44. WHAT IF I SELL MY PROPERTY?

You'll need to give your solicitor information about the private drainage system. Ask your solicitor to contact Cornwall Council's legal team for details.

45. WHAT IF I MOVE OUT AND RENT THE PROPERTY?

Let Cornwall Housing know your new address. As the Freeholder, you're still liable for the system. Contact them in writing at **RTB-Leasehold@cornwallhousing.org.uk**

CORNWALL HOUSING

Information Classification: CONTROLLED

Contact us:

Email: info@cornwallhousing.org.uk

Telephone: **0300 1234 161**

By letter: **Cornwall Housing, Chy Trevail, Beacon Technology Park, Bodmin, PL31 2FR**

www.cornwallhousing.org.uk

Alternative formats:

If you would like this information on audio CD, audio tape, Braille, large print, any other format or interpreted in a language other than English, please contact info@cornwallhousing.org.uk

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