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# Do you have a private sewage treatment system?

This leaflet covers what you need to know to keep your system clean, safe and legal

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Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Gníomhaireacht Comhshaoil Thuaisceart Éireann

Norlin Airlan Environment Agency



An Agency within the Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

Gníomhaireacht de chuid na Roinne

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil  
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

An Agency w/in the Department o

**Fairmin, Environment  
an' Kintra Matthers**

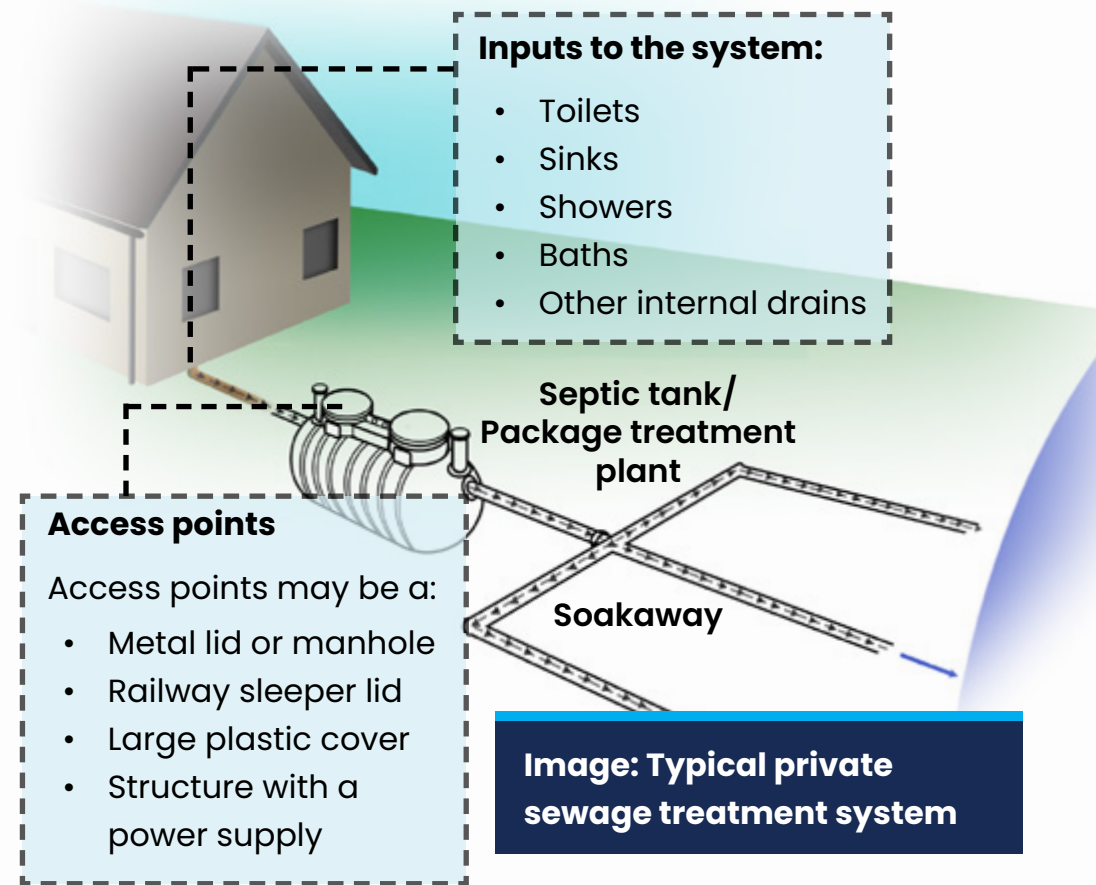
## What is a private sewage treatment system?

Usually found in rural areas, a private sewage treatment system (PSTS) is a way of dealing with wastewater from your home if you are not connected to the public sewer.

The most common types of PSTS are **septic tanks** and **package treatment plants** which discharge to a **soakaway** and/or sometimes a **watercourse**.

### Tips for finding your PSTS

- **Look for access points** – Since most systems rely on gravity to carry wastewater, tanks are typically installed down slope from the building served
- **Find where your main sewer pipe leaves the building** – tanks should be located at least 7 metres from your property, often within the curtilage, but not always. Older tanks can be found much closer, often within 3 to 6 metres
- **Vegetation patterns** – typically nettles, or greener, faster growing vegetation can indicate the tank and soakaway location
- **Discharge pipe** – could be discharging to a soakaway and sometimes the water environment. If discharging to the water environment the discharge pipe should normally be located below the waterline



### How do private sewage treatment systems work?

Use the QR codes below to view our short animations on how septic tanks and package treatment plants work. For more detailed guidance, visit [www.netregs.org.uk/environmental-topics/water/septic-tanks](http://www.netregs.org.uk/environmental-topics/water/septic-tanks)



**Animation**  
Septic tanks



**Animation**  
Package  
Treatment  
Plants

## Who is responsible?

### Who looks after your private sewage treatment system?

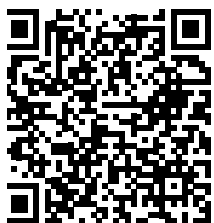
As the owner or occupier, you are responsible for the system. This includes keeping it in good working order, arranging regular tank desludging, making sure you have the necessary consent from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), and covering all associated costs.

Where a system is shared with other properties, responsibility is shared by all owners, even if the tank is not on your land.

### **You must:**

- **have a consent from the NIEA** (see below)
- **get it desludged regularly**
- **maintain the system and all connected pipework**
- **not cause pollution or an environmental nuisance**

Old tanks made of brick, block, or cement can leak over time. If your system isn't maintained, it could be causing pollution, or creating a nuisance or complaints, which may affect your ability to sell your property.



### **Apply for a domestic consent**

Scan the QR code or visit <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/regulating-water-discharges> to apply for a domestic consent.

## Maintaining your private sewage treatment system

**Septic tanks** – it is important that you get your septic tank desludged regularly to keep it working properly – how often this needs done will depend on household size and usage.

**Package Treatment Plants** – these need regular servicing, carried out by a qualified professional. Refer to manufacturer's recommendations for further details on service and maintenance.

### **Free desludging service – NI Water**

NI Water provides a free desludging service once every 12 months for customers who are not connected to the main sewer network, provided service conditions are met. See the back page for details of how to request this service.

**Inspect your system** – Slow drains, bad smells, or wet ground near to the tank or soakaway are signs of potential problems. Contact a qualified drainage specialist or plumber for advice. They should be able to help you identify problems and gauge the approximate type and size your tank is, or should be for your property and how full it is.

A good time to check if your system is working properly is when it's desludged or serviced.

Keep your tank and system accessible at all times by avoiding it being covered with vegetation, heavy objects, vehicles or buildings.

# How to keep your private sewage system working properly

Looking after your system helps prevent pollution, nasty smells, and costly repairs. A healthy system should produce clear, mostly odourless liquid. Here's how to keep it that way:



## Keep rainwater out

Roof drains and gutters should never feed into your sewage system. Too much water can overwhelm it and wash out the helpful bacteria that keep it working.



## Regular desludging

Follow the manufacturers recommendations. NI Water and other licensed contractors can do this for you.



## Soakaways

Failing to desludge your tank regularly can cause blockages of the soakaway and/or the system. If this happens you may need to jet-clean or replace them.



## What goes in matters

Only flush toilet waste and wastewater. Use cleaning products that are septic-safe. Never use bleach as this can kill the bacteria that break down the sewage.



## Package treatment plants

These need regular servicing, carried out by a qualified professional. Refer to manufacturers' recommendations for further details on service and maintenance.



## System discharges

If possible, check the end of the discharge pipe. A pale liquid with little or no smell is normal. If the discharge is dark, smelly, or contains solids there is a problem.

# NEVER:

- X Flush anything other than human waste and toilet paper** – put everything else in the bin
- X Dispose of grease or cooking oil down any drain** – wipe out pans, pour fat into a container and put into a bin
- X Use bleach or other cleaning products that are not septic-safe**
- X Put paints, solvents or chemicals down any drain** – dispose of them at a civic amenity site
- X Use caustic soda or drain cleaners to clear blockages** – try boiling water instead

# Where should I go for further information?

- **A licensed drainage contractor or service engineer** – for advice on desludging tanks, inspections, repairs and new installations
- **NI Water** – you can request a desludge service by scanning this QR code, filling in the online form at [niwater.com](https://niwater.com) or by emailing [waterline@niwater.com](mailto:waterline@niwater.com)
- **The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA)** – for regulatory advice or to report water pollution concerns
- **Solicitor or surveyor** – for advice when buying or selling a property with a private sewage treatment system (PSTS)
- **Building standards** – for advice on making alterations or installing a new system
- **NetRegs** – for practical guidance and tools on how to comply with environmental regulations



## Further information



Scan the QR code or visit <https://www.netregs.org.uk/environmental-topics/water/septic-tanks/septic-tanks-useful-links> for further information and guidance on PSTS.