

PSU 9 – Septic Tanks Policy

This policy is currently under review by :

[Draft PPS14-Sustainable Development in the Countryside](#) 

Subject to other policy constraints, planning permission will normally be granted for a development which requires the provision of a septic tank, provided it would not result in the creation of or an addition to an unacceptable pollution problem.

The provision of mains water and sewerage services is the responsibility of the Water Executive. Consultation will take place with the Water Executive on all applications for new buildings in rural areas. In the countryside it is desirable to connect new development to mains services if possible. However few buildings in the countryside will be within reach of a public water borne sewerage system and will rely instead on a septic tank or other small disposal plant for sewage disposal. Effluent from such installations is normally dispersed through a system of field drains before percolating to the nearest watercourse.

The District Council and the Department's Environment Service advise on the acceptability of sewage disposal where public facilities do not exist. **In such circumstances the number of septic tanks which will be permitted in a particular area will be determined by the subsoil conditions, the capacity of the receiving watercourse and the vulnerability of water catchment areas.** Where the Department is satisfied that further development could cause or add to a serious problem, that development will be refused planning permission.

Throughout the Northern Ireland countryside soil conditions are generally conducive to the safe and effective use of domestic septic tanks and soakaways. However, with the increasing number of rural developments and the use of chemical detergents in the daily water consumption of individual households, there is a potential pollution risk involved in this form of drainage. This policy is designed to ensure the protection of water resources from the build-up of septic tanks, particularly in areas protected for the abstraction of water for human consumption.

The planning and pollution control systems are separate but complementary. Pollution controls seek to protect public health and the environment. Planning controls are concerned with the appropriate use of land and the impact of development. Close consultation takes place between the planning and pollution control authorities.

Development plans will identify water catchment areas that are used or proposed to be used for public water supplies. In preparing plan policies and proposals account will be taken of the constraints on development as a result of the need to comply with any statutory environmental quality standards within these areas. **In some circumstances, in order to protect the most vulnerable environments, it may be necessary to set thresholds for the number of septic tanks that would be acceptable.** Exceptionally, where these thresholds have been passed or are threatened, planning permission may be refused for any further development involving an additional septic tank.

Planning Service will consult with the Environmental Health Officer (EHO) of the District Council on all planning applications involving the installation of septic tanks. Applicants must satisfy the EHO and the Department's Environmental Protection Division that the ground conditions are suitable for accepting a septic tank and soakaway discharge. The Department's consent to discharge effluent from a septic tank into a watercourse, or to a soakaway into the ground, is required under the Water Act (NI) 1972. Planning permission will be refused where it is clear that the necessary consent under the Water Act is unlikely to be forthcoming.

Applications involving the use of septic tanks must show accurately the proposed location of the installation and soakaways, and of drainage ditches and watercourses in the vicinity. Septic tanks and soakaways must be located within the application site and be within the applicant's control and therefore subject to any planning conditions relating to the development of the site. Septic tanks should be located at least 15 metres away from any dwelling and the soakaways should not drain across the curtilage of any neighbouring dwelling. If planning permission is granted for a development requiring a septic tank the requirements of the Environmental Health Officer and the Department's Water Executive and Environmental Protection Division will be added as informatives on the decision notice or incorporated as conditions of the planning consent.

From Planning Policy Statement 14 (Sustainable Development in the Countryside):

Policy CTY 14 – Development relying on Non-Mains Sewerage.

Planning permission will only be granted for development relying on non-mains sewerage, where the applicant can demonstrate that this will not create or add to a pollution problem.

Applicants will be required to submit sufficient information on the means of sewerage to allow a proper assessment of such proposals to be made.

In those areas identified as having a pollution risk development relying on non-mains sewerage will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances.

Justification and Amplification

4.105 Water is one of our most vital natural resources. Not only is it essential to sustain life itself, but it also plays a crucial role in our economic development and social well-being. Some uses can however threaten the very water quality on which they depend. Pollution can arise from point sources such as industrial or sewage effluent discharges, or can be diffuse such as road or agricultural run-off. It is important therefore that our water bodies - rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters, groundwaters and reservoirs - are protected from pollution and managed as a sustainable resource for all of the activities that depend on them.

4.106 The context for the protection of water resources is provided by the EC Water Framework Directive (WFD) that came into force in December 2000. This established a new framework for the management, protection and improvement of the quality of water resources across the European Union. The WFD requires the completion of management plans for all river basins in Northern Ireland by the end of 2009. Among the objectives of these management plans is the protection and improvement of the ecological and chemical water quality of the Region.

4.107 The Directive consequently has implications for decision-making in the development sector. New development relying on non-mains sewerage may, either individually or cumulatively, increase the risk of groundwater pollution. As such, it has the potential to adversely affect the ecology and chemical quality of the water environment.

4.108 Accordingly it is desirable for new development to connect to mains services wherever possible. However, it is acknowledged that it will not be feasible for many buildings in the countryside to connect to a public water borne sewerage system and they will rely instead on some means of 'on-site sewage treatment', such as a septic tank or package treatment plant. Effluent from such installations is usually dispersed through a system of channels or field drains before percolating to the nearest watercourse.

4.109 The aim of this policy is to protect the Region's water resources from the actual or potential polluting effects of onsite treatment plants, particularly in areas identified for the abstraction of water for human consumption.

4.110 The planning and pollution control systems are separate but complementary systems of control and regulation designed to protect the environment from harm as a result of development and related operations. Pollution controls seek to protect public health and the environment. Planning controls are concerned with the appropriate use of land and the impact of development on the environment.

4.111 Under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, the consent of the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service is required to discharge any trade or sewage effluent or any other potentially polluting matter from commercial, industrial or domestic premises to waterways or underground strata.

4.112 However planning applications for development in the countryside relying on non-mains sewerage are often made prior to applications for 'Consent to Discharge' under the Water Order. It then falls to the planning system to assess whether the arrangements for the treatment of effluent would create or add to a pollution problem. In such cases consultation will be undertaken with Environment and Heritage Service and the Environmental Health Department of the local council.

4.113 The number and type of on-site sewage treatment plants which will be acceptable in a particular area will be determined by the sub-soil conditions, the sensitivity and capacity of the receiving watercourse and the vulnerability / sensitivity of water catchment areas. In addition such installations should be located at least 15 metres away from any dwelling and soakaways should not drain across the curtilage of any neighbouring property.

4.114 Planning permission will be refused for development relying on non-mains sewerage where the physical arrangements proposed for on-site sewage treatment are unsatisfactory or in cases where 'Consent to Discharge' under the Water Order is unlikely to be forthcoming due to pollution risks. Environment and Heritage Service may identify certain areas where a pollution risk exists sufficient to warrant no further development relying on non-mains sewerage arrangements. In appropriate circumstances these will be highlighted in the relevant development plan for the area.

Information to accompany planning applications

4.115 If Consent for Discharge has been granted under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 for the proposed development site, a copy of this should be submitted to accompany the planning application.

4.116 In other cases, applications involving the use of non-mains sewerage, including outline applications, will be required to provide sufficient information about how it is intended to treat effluent from the development so that this matter can be properly assessed. This will normally include information about

ground conditions, including the soil and groundwater characteristics, together with details of adjoining developments existing or approved.

4.117 Where the proposal involves an on-site sewage treatment plant, such as a septic tank or a package treatment plant, the application will also need to be accompanied by drawings that accurately show the proposed location of the installation and soakaways, and of drainage ditches and watercourses in the immediate vicinity. The site for the proposed apparatus should be located on land within the application site or otherwise within the applicant's control and therefore subject to any planning conditions relating to the development of the site.

4.118 The Department of the Environment Planning Service has powers under the Planning General Development (NI) Order 1993 to request applicants to supply such additional information on the proposed development as is considered necessary to allow proper determination. Where information on the means of sewerage is requested, but not provided planning permission will normally be refused on the basis of insufficient information to properly determine the proposal.