

Drainage

Information for those with problem drains



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Purpose

- The information within this leaflet is aimed at those who are having problems with their drains.
- Aims to give you information to help you understand your responsibilities and involvement of other Authorities and Mole Valley District Council
- The following items often give rise to blockages which can easily be avoided. Please do not flush the following items down the drain:
 - Disposable nappies
 - Cloth, rags or clothes
 - Quantities of fat e.g. contents of a chip pan
 - Incontinence pads
 - Plastic toilet block holders

Introduction

Sewerage is removed from your home to a treatment plant via a network of pipes. The responsibility for maintaining and cleansing this sewerage network depends on whether they are drains, private sewers, or public sewers.

Drains & Sewers

What is a drain?

A drain is a pipe that drains a single property, these drains can be either foul water (sink, bath, toilet etc.) or surface water (rain).

The owner of a house is solely responsible for maintaining a drain, clearing blockages and repairing any faults. Even where the drain extends outside the boundary of the property (e.g. under the road or under a neighbour's garden) the owner or occupier of the house served by the drain is still responsible right up to the main public sewer (see diagram on page 3)

What is a sewer?

A sewer is a pipe which conveys either foul or surface water from more than one house. A sewer may be either **Public** or **Private**, and can carry either clean (surface) or dirty (foul) or a combination of both surface and foul water.

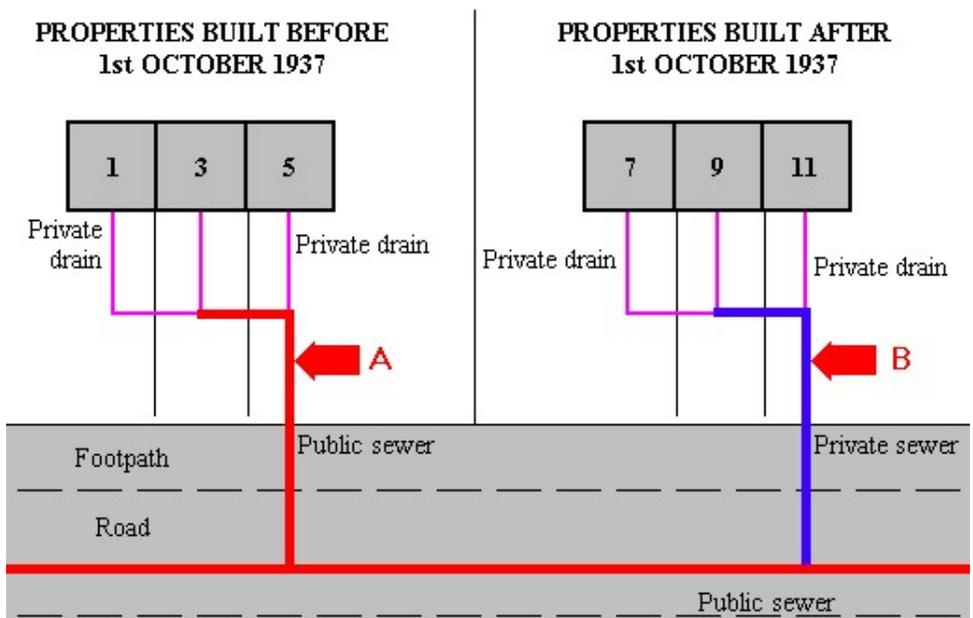
Generally in this area the two systems of foul and surface water are separate.

A **Public Sewer** is a sewer that has been adopted and is maintained by the sewerage undertaker, which in the Mole Valley area is mainly **Thames Water** or for the very south western area **Southern Water**. Such sewers are usually found under the highway but can in fact run anywhere. A sewer under a highway is not automatically a public sewer. The Council and both **Thames Water** and **Southern Water** hold copies of the Public Sewer Maps that show the positions of all public sewers. If a sewer is not marked on the Public sewer Maps then it will be assumed to be private.

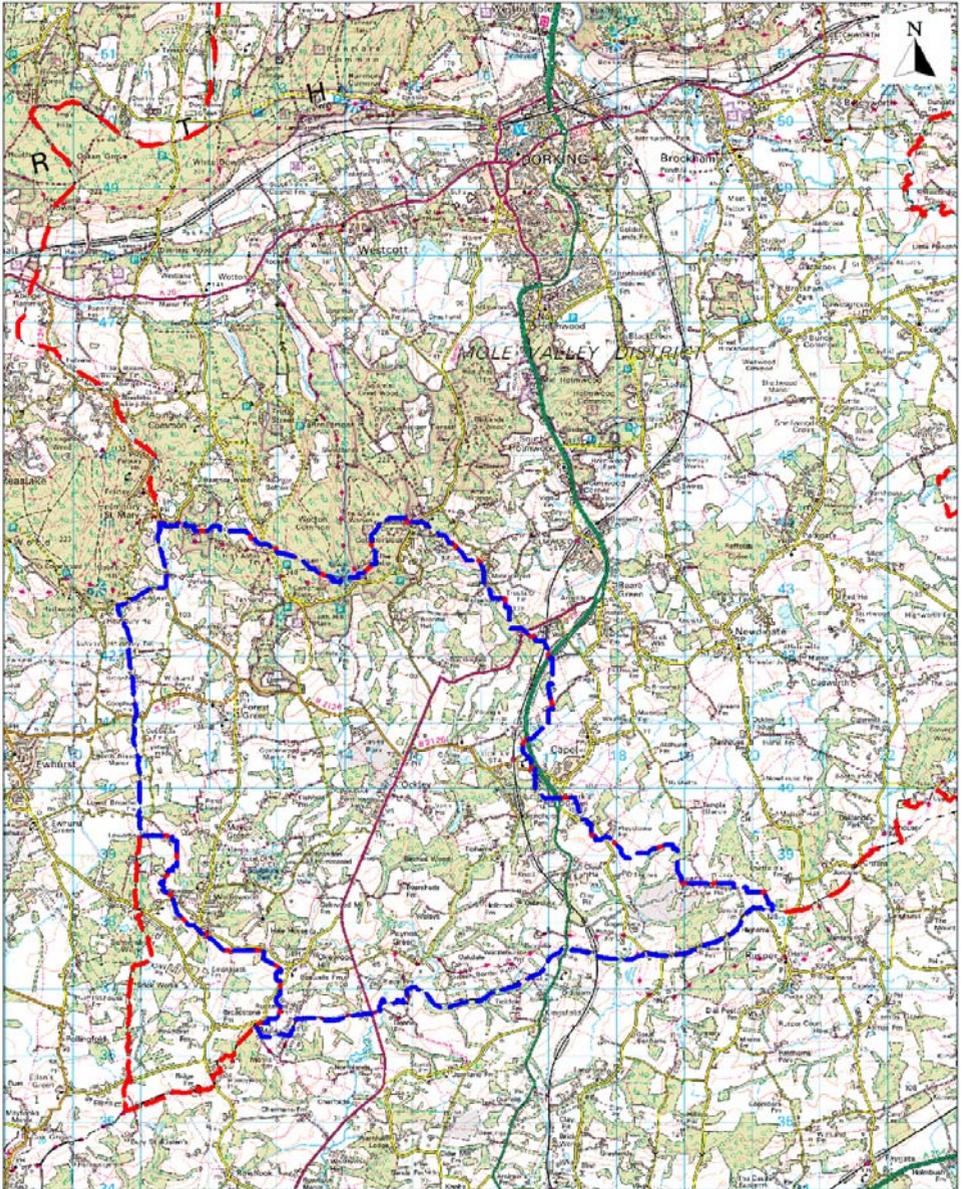
A second type of **Public Sewer** is one that was built as a private sewer before **1st October 1937** but then as a result of a change in the law, became the responsibility of the sewerage undertaker. Plans of this type of sewer seldom exist, so each case has to be assessed by the sewerage undertaker using the evidence available.

A **Private Sewer** is the responsibility of the owners or occupiers of the houses it serves. This means that the owners or occupiers of all houses upstream of the blockage or defect are all responsible for clearance or repair. If you rent a property you should contact your landlord to clarify your responsibilities regarding sewers serving your property

To try to explain this further, consider the two blocks of houses in the following diagram. If a blockage occurs at 'A', clearing it will be the responsibility of the Sewerage Undertaker for the area, since any pipe serving more than one property built before **1st October 1937** is automatically a public sewer. However if the blockage occurs at 'B', clearing it will be the responsibility of the owners of numbers **7, 9 and 11** even though it is in the garden of number 11. In fact, even if blockage 'B' occurred under the road or footpath, it would still be the responsibility of the owners of **7, 9 and 11** to clear, since pipes serving properties built after **1st October 1937** are private until they connect to the public sewer.



Areas covered by Thames Water and Southern Water



Mole Valley District Council
Pippbrook
Dorking
Surrey
RH4 1SJ
Telephone: 01306 885001
Website: www.molevalley.gov.uk

— Southern Water Area **— Thames Water Area**

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Rural Drainage

In many rural areas there are no Public Sewers and sewerage has to be disposed of in other ways. There are various systems in use such as cess pits, septic tanks and mini-treatment works.

What is a Septic Tank?

A septic tank treats domestic sewage and discharges either into a watercourse or into the ground. In septic tanks the solids in the sewage settle to the bottom and the relatively clear liquid that is left forms a layer of scum on its surface. Bacteria feed on this liquid and digest some of the matter in it. The liquid then either passes into another settlement tank before passing to a watercourse or is discharged underground through a network of pipes to filter through the soil. Septic tanks are capable of treating all of a household's domestic sewage. However the solids that build up at the bottom of the tank do need to be pumped out about once a year.

Who is responsible for maintaining the septic tank?

If the tank serves only your home then you alone are responsible for both maintaining and emptying the tank. If several houses share the tank then the responsibility, and cost, is normally shared between the owners. If you rent your property then either you or your landlord

maybe responsible. Your tenancy agreement should specify who is responsible.

What is a cesspit?

A cesspit is simply a sealed storage tank into which sewage is drained until it can be taken away by a tanker. The sewage is not treated in the tank. Older cesspits are usually cylindrical pits lined with either brick or concrete. Modern cesspits are made from fibreglass, steel or polythene. Current building regulations require cesspits to be able to hold at least 18,000 litres of sewage. It is estimated that each person produces 115 litres of sewage a day. For a family of four this means that the tank will need emptying about once a month.

Who is responsible for maintaining the cesspit?

As with septic tanks the owner is responsible for getting the tank emptied. If you find it requires emptying on an increasingly frequent basis this may be due to damage to the tank which is allowing ground water in. At the same time this could mean that sewage leaks outward which could result in the Council taking legal action to have the tank repaired or emptied.

The Council's Role

The Council is usually able to advise householders of their legal responsibilities. Where a problem is identified with a private sewer and the householders who are responsible for repairs or maintenance do not co-operate to have the work carried out, the Council have legal powers to serve a statutory notice requiring the work to be undertaken by those responsible. This is normally issued by the Environmental Health & Housing Department.

If the notice is not complied with within a specified timescale the Council may carry out the work themselves and reclaim the expenses from the person or

persons concerned by apportionment of the costs.

The minimum specified time for a clearance of a blockage is 48 hours, for minor repairs 7 days and major repairs 21 days. This means that a blockage, for example, could remain in place for 48 hours before the Council can clear it, with extra cleaning costs and administrative costs added to the basic unblocking charge. In the majority of cases the cost will be divided equally between all the householders using the length of defective sewer.

If you require any further advice on private drainage matters please contact our Environmental Health & Housing Department.

Road Drainage

Roads are generally drained through road gullies situated at the side of the road, these are then connected to either a public surface water sewer, directly to a watercourse or a private surface water sewer before connecting to a public surface water sewer or watercourse.

If the highway is public highway (adopted by the highway authority) then the gullies and the drainage to the public surface water sewer or watercourse are the responsibility of the highway authority which in Mole Valley is **Surrey County Council**.

These blocked gullies should be reported to **Surrey County Council**.

If the highway is private then the gullies and their connection to the public sewer or watercourse are the responsibility of the owners or occupiers of the highway or area being drained.

Blockages to the public surface water sewer should be reported to the sewerage undertaker, either **Thames Water** or for the very South West corner of the district **Southern Water**.

Questions

If my Property has a private drain or sewer, why should I pay Sewerage Charges?

The bulk of the Sewerage Charge is spent on treatment and disposal of foul sewerage at a network of Waste Water Treatment Plants. It is also spent on the maintenance of the public sewer network into which the private systems connect.

When I bought my property, the Search said the property was connected to the public sewer. Don't I have a private sewer or drain?

The search question only asks whether the property is ultimately connected to the public sewer system, for the purposes of finding out whether the Sewerage Charge is payable by the occupants. It doesn't search for the method of connection, which is irrelevant to the payment of the charge. Every property will have at least a private drain, and properties built after 1st October 1937 may have lengths of private sewer as well.

Where can I find out what private drains and sewers serve my property?

This information will usually be shown on your property Deeds. Unless the property was built very recently, the Council will have no record of the private drainage serving your property (we would only know the route through the plans submitted for Building Regulations approval). If the information is not shown on your

Deeds, you will have to organise a private survey to trace the routes of the pipe work.

Who is responsible if I rent my Property?

If you rent your property and have a problem with sewerage, you should contact your landlord.

Who is responsible if I am a Council or Housing Association Tenant?

As the landlord either the Council or the Housing Association will be responsible and you should contact them if you have a problem.

What can I do if my drain or private sewer blocks?

You should employ a private contractor; there is a wide choice to be found in Yellow Pages under "Drain and Pipe Cleaning". Always ask for a quote before employing any contractor, and check whether your household insurance will cover the cost.

Where several houses are affected by a blockage in a private sewer you should try to agree to share the cost with each householder "upstream" of the blockage before employing a contractor. The Council could become involved in disputes where householders cannot agree between themselves to the sharing of these costs.

Remember that a type of Public Sewer is one that was built as a private sewer before 1st October 1937

What can I do if a public sewer blocks?

Public sewers are the responsibility of the Sewerage Undertakers which for the Mole Valley areas is either Thames Water or Southern Water. You should report the blockage to them giving as much information as possible. **Thames Water 08459 200800 Southern Water 08452 780845**

What happens if my drain or private sewer requires repair?

You should arrange for repair by a contractor. The cost of repair to a private sewer should be shared by the various householders which the sewer serves.

Your Buildings Insurance Policy may cover the cost of the repair – Look under “accidental Damage to Services” clause in your Policy. Alternatively there are a number of repair polices commercially available, often offered by the water companies themselves.

What happens if I don't clear the blockage or carry out repairs?

Mole Valley District Council has public health powers which allows us to demand the clearing of blockages or the carrying out of any repair work in the private part of the drainage or sewerage network. This is done by the Council serving legal notice on the relevant owners. Failure to comply with this notice is an offence, which can lead to prosecution. If the owners do not comply with the notice, the blockage or repairs may be carried out by the Council in default with the full costs

being recovered from the relevant owners.

What do I do if a road gully blocks?

Road gullies on the public highway are the responsibility of the highway authority which is **Surrey County Council** and blockage of these gullies needs to be reported to them on **08456 009009**.

In some instances a gully may be in a private area, such as a garage compound, in this case it will be up to the landowners or landlords to maintain, and blocked gullies should be reported directly to them.

Can the Council offer advice?

Yes. Environmental Health & Housing Department will be pleased to offer advice as part of its Public Health duty. However please note that we rarely have information about the routes of drainage serving your property or equipment to establish the cause of the problem, and it might be quicker and easier to get consensus from your neighbours and then use a private contractor to find this out for you on site.

Remember that a type of Public Sewer is one that was built as a private sewer before 1st October 1937

Contacts

Thames Water

Office
Thames Water Utilities Ltd
PO BOX 436
Swindon
SN38 1TU
Tel 08459 200 800

Southern Water
Tel 08452 780845

Surrey County Council

Office
Contact Centre
Floor 3
Conquest House
Wood Street
Kingston upon Thames
KT1 1AB

Tel 08456 009009

Mole Valley District Council

Office
Environmental Health & Housing
Department
Pippbrook
Dorking,
Surrey,
RH4 1SJ
Tel 01306 885001

Emergency Line Tel 01372 376533

Disclaimer

This advice has been provided merely to assist members of the public as a guide to their rights and responsibilities. No responsibility is accepted by the Council for any inaccuracy contained in it and you are strongly advised, before taking action, to seek independent legal advice.

Summary

- Sewerage is removed from your home to a treatment plant via a network of pipes. The responsibility for maintaining and cleansing this sewerage network depends on whether they are drains, private sewers, or public sewers.
- A drain is a pipe that drains a single property, these drains can be either foul water (sink, bath, toilet etc.) or surface water (rain). The owner of a house is solely responsible for maintaining a drain.
- A sewer is a pipe which conveys either foul or surface water from more than one house. A sewer may be either **Public** or **Private**
- A **Public Sewer** is a sewer that has been adopted and is maintained by the sewerage undertaker, which in the Mole Valley area is mainly **Thames Water**
- A second type of **Public Sewer** is one that was built as a private sewer before **1st October 1937** but then as a result of a change in the law
- A **Private Sewer** is the responsibility of the owners or occupiers of the houses it serves.
- A septic tank treats domestic sewage and discharges either into a watercourse or into the ground.
- If the tank serves only your home then you alone are responsible for both maintaining and emptying the tank. If several houses share the tank then the responsibility, and cost, is normally shared between the owners
- A cesspit is simply a sealed storage tank into which sewage is drained until it can be taken away by a tanker.
- For a family of four this means that the tank will need emptying about once a month. As with septic tanks the owner is responsible for getting the tank emptied.
- If the highway is public highway then the gullies and the drainage to the public surface water sewer or watercourse are the responsibility of the highway authority which in Mole Valley is **Surrey County Council**.
- Blockages to the public surface water sewer should be reported to the sewerage undertaker, either **Thames Water** or for the very South West corner of the district **Southern Water**.

Alternative formats

If you would like this document in another format or language please visit the Council's main reception in Dorking or the Leatherhead HelpShop. Alternatively you can contact us by:

Fax: 01306 876821

E-mail: alternative.formats@molevalley.gov.uk

Website: www.molevalley.gov.uk

Si desea este documento en otro formato o idioma sírvase visitar la recepción principal del Consejo en Dorking o el Leatherhead Helpshop. También puede comunicarse con nosotros por:

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