

# Sewer flooding guide



**Scottish  
Water**

Trusted to serve Scotland

We are very sorry you have suffered flooding from the public sewer. Scottish Water understands the impact and distress sewer flooding can cause and we will endeavour to help resolve the situation.

This guide provides useful information when dealing with a sewer flooding incident and how Scottish Water will work to assist you.



Sewer flooding incidents can be classed as:

**Internal:** Where waste water has entered your property

**External:** Where waste water has flooded your garden (within your property boundary) or roads or paths but not entered your property.



Following a flooding incident where damage has occurred, we would always recommend you contact your insurance company as soon as possible. They can offer advice and guidance. It is also advisable to take photographs and keep a note of any damage. Remember you may need to keep damaged items if you intend to make an insurance claim. More information about insurance and compensation can be found on page 7.

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## our process

In the event of sewer flooding from our sewers, we will do all we can to assist. Scottish Water will work hand in hand with the local Council, emergency services, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) if necessary. Our Customer Charter provides further information about this support and our service standards and is available on our website: [www.scottishwater.co.uk](http://www.scottishwater.co.uk)

Once Scottish Water is notified of a flooding incident, we will:

- attend the flooding as soon as possible (usually within 4 hours for an internal flood and within 24 hours for an external flood). Please note that in the event of extreme weather conditions these times may vary.
  - identify if the issue is the responsibility of Scottish Water and resolve it if it is our responsibility.
  - assist with any clean up required and where appropriate, disinfect the affected area (this may be completed by our contractor partners or representatives).
- carry out on-site investigations to identify likely causes. If the flooding is caused by a complex issue, additional resources may be contacted for assistance. A CCTV survey of the affected sewer may also be carried out at a later date.
  - keep you updated on findings during these on-site investigations.



**Flooding can be caused by prolonged or heavy rainfall, typically in the form of severe localised storms that can overwhelm the sewer system.**

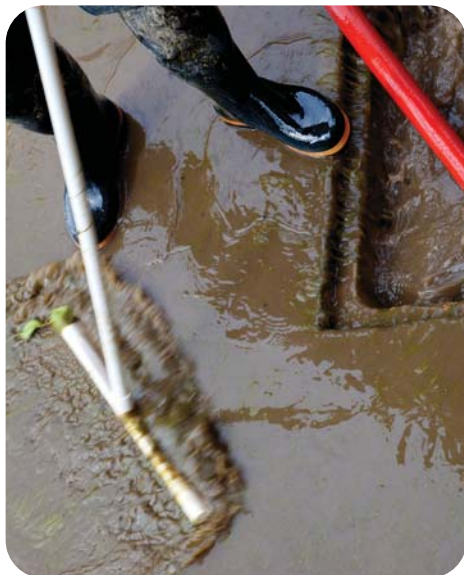
## safety first

Basic hygiene precautions should be taken when coming into direct contact with waste water.

These include:

- wash hands after any contact.
- protect any cuts and grazes.
- disinfect footwear and clothing.
- keep children, the elderly, pets or anyone with a health condition out of the affected area.
- make sure any electrical equipment that has been water damaged is safe before further use. This inspection is best undertaken by a qualified electrician.
- where possible, open windows to increase ventilation to the affected area – make sure it is safe to do so.

In the unlikely event of illness such as vomiting or diarrhoea, you should contact your GP immediately.



**Keep children, the elderly, pets or anyone with a health condition out of the affected area.**

## causes of sewer flooding and responsibility

Flooding incidents may be:

**Internal** – where waste water enters your property by 'backing up' through toilets or sinks or enters from the outside through doorways, cable ducts or air bricks which are commonly located near ground level.

**External** – where waste water has flooded your garden (within your property boundary) but not entered your property. This may occur by waste water escaping from external drains.

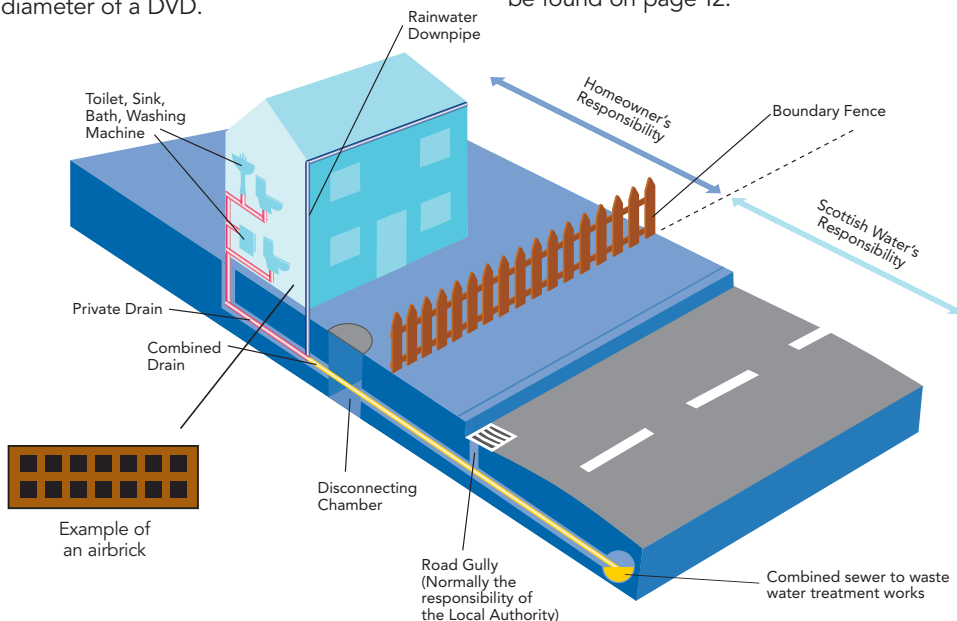
This diagram shows a typical layout of how a property connects to the public sewer. Showers, baths, toilets, sinks and water using appliances such as washing machines are all connected and waste and waste water is carried from a private pipe to the main sewer. The private drain which runs from your house to the public sewer can be just 4 inches wide, which is less than the diameter of a DVD.

The sewer system can cope with regular flows but blockages, extreme weather conditions or pumping station issues can cause waste water to flood your property.

If the flooding is caused by a blockage in the public sewer, Scottish Water will attend and clear the blockage. If extreme weather has caused waste water to overflow, we will carry out a clean up and investigate further.

If the sewer flooding has occurred as a result of an issue with your private pipework, you will be responsible. The diagram shows that anything from inside your property to the property boundary is usually your responsibility. If you are in any doubt, further information can be found at: [www.scottishwater.co.uk/responsibility](http://www.scottishwater.co.uk/responsibility)

If your issue has been identified as 'private' and beyond the responsibility of Scottish Water, we would recommend you contact a licensed plumber or your landlord/ Council if the property is rented – further information about licensed plumbers can be found on page 12.



## Blockages (also known as 'chokes')

Blockages are the most common cause of sewer flooding incidents that we deal with. This may be as a result of inappropriate items being flushed down the toilet or fat, oil and grease being put down the kitchen sink. Flushing anything other than pee, poo and toilet paper can cause blockages in the system. Unfortunately Scottish Water have no control over what people put down sewers and under such circumstances, we cannot be liable for any damage that is caused by this. We are committed to raising awareness and working with customers to reduce these incidents occurring. Silt or gravel may enter the sewer system at a drain or access point and accumulate in the pipe which can also cause blockages.

## Extreme weather

Sewer flooding can be caused by prolonged or heavy rainfall, typically in the form of severe localised storms that can overwhelm the sewer system. Surface water flooding (not waste water) in road gullies is usually the responsibility of the local council. Extreme weather can also put a large strain on pumping stations. If you are worried about the possibility of flooding due to extreme weather, please contact SEPA's Floodline on **0345 988 1188**.

## Defective pipework or equipment failure

Pipes in the sewer network may deteriorate over time and collapse or be damaged by a third party working in an area. Tree roots can also damage pipework and restrict the flow if they are able to access pipework through a loose joint or crack. This can cause waste water to back up through the network.

For further information about how you can help reduce the chance of blockages to your property, please see page 9.



**Inappropriate items (such as wipes) being flushed down the toilet are one of the most common causes of sewer flooding.**

## clean up process

If your home has been flooded as a result of waste water from our sewers, Scottish Water will carry out a clean up of your property.

This clean up process will include:

- removing excess liquid
- removing any sewage debris or faecal contamination
- leaving the area to dry and applying a disinfectant.

Water Research Centre (WRc) tests have established that by using this approach, disinfection should remove all traces of bacteria within 24 to 48 hours.

There are some things you can do to help protect you and your family following an internal flood. These include:

- Wash down all surfaces with a disinfectant.
- Wash clothing, bedding and other soft furnishings on a hot wash.
- Remove any soft furnishings that have been damaged beyond repair from the affected area to reduce the spread of bacteria. Do not dispose of anything if you intend to make an insurance claim.
- Consider moderate heating to aid the drying process. Please note that this should be after 48 hours of the incident as higher room temperatures may prolong the life of bacteria.
- Allow everything to dry thoroughly and safely keep the area well ventilated.
- Flooring, such as tiling or laminate flooring, that covers hatch access to flooded areas under floors, may need to be lifted to allow access if required. If there is no access hatch it will be your responsibility to arrange access for us to carry out the clean up.



**When you contact us, we aim to attend within 4 hours for an internal flood and 24 hours for an external flood.**



## If your garden has been affected

- Leave lawns and borders to recover naturally. The UV rays from the sun will destroy bacteria over time. This can vary from 6 days in the summer to 20 days in colder/winter conditions depending on the soil type (see table below for details).
- Do not attempt to dig or rake any lawns and borders - this can spread the bacteria further into the turf which can enhance the bacteria.
- Do not excessively hose lawns and borders as this will saturate the ground and prolong the life of the bacteria.
- If you grow any garden fruit or vegetables, make sure you destroy them if they have come in to contact with sewage.
- Stay off paths and driveways that have been treated with disinfectant for a period of 3 hours to give the disinfectant an opportunity to take effect.

Recommended minimum number of days to keep off flooded outdoor areas:

Season	Turf/Clay	Soil/Sand
Spring	13	20
Summer	6	9
Autumn	13	20
Winter	18	11



### what to do if your home is uninhabitable

Scottish Water will, on occasions of severe internal sewer flooding, support a customer in finding temporary accommodation (local b&b/hotel) for the initial night, although in most instances your own insurance company will arrange this. It should be noted there is no legal obligation for Scottish Water to provide this service, but in such cases we would not wish to see a customer and their family stranded.

## further investigation

If further investigation is needed to determine the cause of the flooding, one of our network analysts will be assigned to investigate this. They will keep you updated throughout and notify you of any developments that they find.



**Surface water flooding in road gullies is usually the responsibility of the local Council.**

## insurance and compensation

We would always recommend you have the appropriate insurance cover for any eventuality. Scottish Water will always encourage a customer who has incurred loss or damage as a result of flooding to approach their own insurers in the first instance. Business customers are required to contact their Licensed Provider (the company they pay their charges to) to enquire about a claim.

- Your own insurance company will not normally need to establish liability before proceeding with your claim, which means work can start quickly to restore your home. Scottish Water does have to establish liability before any compensation can be considered, which can take longer.
- Most insurance companies will normally replace or settle on a new for old basis. Scottish Water will always deduct the depreciation of an item from any settlement (assuming Scottish Water is liable).
- Your insurance company may choose to claim against Scottish Water to recover costs if they believe we are liable. A successful recovery by your insurers may not affect your premiums.

However, this is at the discretion of your insurer and we would encourage customers to check their policy.

Please note that a failure to notify your insurance company of any flooding may jeopardise any future claims.

Whilst the public sewer belongs to Scottish Water, we have little control over what goes in to the sewer system. As such, many blockages are caused by inappropriate items or unforeseen events. Under such circumstances Scottish Water is not liable for damage. It is only where we are proven to have acted negligently that we will be liable for any damage.

If internal flooding of your property is caused by waste water from our sewers but isn't due to general surface water flooding of the area; a defect in your own private drains or a result of your own actions, you may automatically get a payment equal to your annual waste water charge. This payment has no bearing on any claim that you may submit for the incident.

We may also reimburse your insurance excess as a gesture of goodwill, providing the flooding is not as a result of the instances mentioned above.



**If internal flooding of your property is caused by waste water from our sewers – you may be entitled to an automatic payment equal to your annual waste water charge.**

If you do not wish to claim on your own insurance or do not have household insurance, Scottish Water will endeavour to assist you as described in our Customer Charter, which can be found on our website and includes more information about our Service Standards.



**It is good practice to take photographs of the flooding and document any damage that has taken place – this can help with any claim.**

## prevention

Scottish Water are continually investing to help tackle problems caused by sewer flooding; this includes upgrading and building new waste water treatment works and waste water systems. Unfortunately we cannot control what people put down private drains and sewers. Over 80% of sewer blockages in Scotland are caused by inappropriate items being disposed of in toilets and drains. There are many simple yet effective things you can do to drastically reduce the chance of having to experience the trauma of sewer flooding.

### in the bathroom...

It's easy, just follow our Three P's rule and only flush pee, poo and toilet paper. Everything else should go in the bin, not down your toilet. Make it easy to save your drains, keep a bin in the bathroom for you to quickly, safely and hygienically dispose of all the 'never flush' personal items<sup>†</sup>.

Your bathroom checklist of 'never flush' items:

- all wipes (baby, personal cleansing, toilet and household cleaning) – even if the pack says 'flushable';
- sanitary items (sanitary towels, tampons, liners, applicators and backing strips);
- cotton wool, cotton buds, disposable nappies and nappy liners;
- condoms, incontinence pads, colostomy bags, used bandages and contact lenses.

<sup>†</sup> Special disposable bags are available at most pharmacies and supermarkets.

You should also safely dispose of:

- razor blades in a solid container before putting them in the bin,

- syringes and needles in a sharps box or take them to your nearest Needle Bank, and
- unused or unwanted medicines – return these to a pharmacy for safe disposal instead of putting them down your toilet or in your bin.

Even when you are out and about, make sure you use the bins provided in public toilets for any personal items.

### in the kitchen...

Fat, oil and grease in liquid form may not appear to be harmful as they don't get stuck in the plughole, but as they cool they congeal, harden and stick to the inside of drains and sewers. This builds up over time, which can cause blocked pipes and flooding. Pouring hot water down your plughole will not help to dissolve any fat, oil or grease. These should not be flushed down the toilet either.

All fats are equal. Whether it is saturated fat (like lard), mono-unsaturated fat (like olive oil) or vegetable oil – they all congeal and harden.

Your kitchen checklist:

- Fat, oil and grease – leave to cool and then scrape into a sealable container and put it in the bin\*.
- Give plates, pots, utensils and containers a quick scrape or wipe with some kitchen towel before washing and use a sink strainer in the plughole to catch any bits of leftover food going down the sink.
- Believe it or not soup, stocks, sauces and milk products all contain fat, which can also congeal and harden in your drains – leave these to cool/harden, scrape into a container and put them in the bin\*.

- Peelings – put any waste food and peelings into your household rubbish\*.

\* Please check with your local Council/waste contractor for information on how to dispose of/recycle used fat, oil and grease.

### in the garden...

Tree roots in sewers can also create problems for property owners. The roots from trees and shrubs can grow towards sewer pipes as they provide a source of the water, nutrients, and oxygen that roots crave. If a root finds a leak or loose joint, it will quickly grow into the pipe and restrict the flow of waste water, which can cause blockages, broken pipes and other serious problems. Repairing the damage caused by the roots can be extremely expensive. Consider a few precautionary measures when planting.

- Knowing the approximate location of your sewer connection can help you identify possible problems early. As a general rule, drains run straight so look out for any manholes or drain covers in your garden to determine the location.

- Being smart about how you plan landscaping is the best way to avoid problems and expensive repair bills. Limit the amount of plants you place close to private drains or sewers. Plant larger trees far away so the roots are not within reach of the pipes. If you do plant near private drains or sewers, select slow-growing trees with a small root ball. Also, avoid roots growing horizontally by digging a deep hole when planting.
- It is important to remember that you must not build or tarmac over any manhole covers in your garden. These can be used to provide access to the sewer system following a flooding incident and can help alleviate the problem. If you are in any doubt, please contact Scottish Water prior to carrying out any work.



**Do not build or tarmac over any manhole covers in your garden as they can help alleviate a problem if they are accessible.**



A smart brick

## what else can you do?

Know the signs of a possible issue. Slow flowing drains are the sign that the system is having a problem. You may hear gurgling noises or notice bubbles coming up from the toilet after flushing. Internal flooding may occur if no action is taken to remove the blockage.

There are a number of products available to protect your home from the risk of sewer flooding. These include non return valves which restrict the sewer from backing up into your property and smart airbrick covers which automatically provide protection in a flooding event. Further information about these products can be found online.

## environmental issues

Sewer flooding can cause serious environmental implications as well. During heavy rainfall, the flow of waste water in sewers increases hundreds of times. Diluted waste water can sometimes be allowed to flow into rivers or the sea to prevent homes from flooding. Unfortunately, if 'never flush' items have been flushed these can also escape, polluting rivers and beaches. This causes a health hazard, harms wildlife, and it's awful to look at too.



**You can drastically reduce the chances of suffering sewer flooding by considering a few precautionary measures when planting trees.**

## useful contacts

### Scottish Water

**Customer Helpline – 0800 0778778**

(24 hour service)

**Email:** [help@scottishwater.co.uk](mailto:help@scottishwater.co.uk)

You can write to us at:

Scottish Water  
PO Box 8855  
Edinburgh EH10 6YQ

**[www.scottishwater.co.uk](http://www.scottishwater.co.uk)**

Our website contains further information about our services. You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter for current service updates.

### Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)

Information on Scotland's environment, pollution prevention, regulation and other environmental initiatives.

**Pollution hotline – 0800 80 70 60**

(24 hour service)

**Floodline service – 0345 988 1188**

(24 hour service)

**[www.sepa.org.uk](http://www.sepa.org.uk)**

### Met Office

Weather and climate change forecasts.

**[www.metoffice.gov.uk](http://www.metoffice.gov.uk)**

### Scottish Flood Forum

A Scottish based charitable organisation that provides support for and represents those who are affected by or are at risk of flooding.

Helpline – **0131 563 9392**

**[www.scottishfloodforum.org](http://www.scottishfloodforum.org)**

### Citizens Advice Scotland

The Citizens Advice Service can help with a range of issues that may arise if you have been affected by sewer flooding. See **[www.adviceguide.org.uk/scotland](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/scotland)** for self-help information or to locate your nearest Citizens Advice Bureau.

## contacting a plumber

To find a licensed plumber in your area visit **[www.watersafe.org.uk](http://www.watersafe.org.uk)** or call SNIPEF on **0845 224 0391** who will be able to recommend a plumber. Office opening hours are Monday – Thursday 8.30am to 5pm and Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm. For out of hours, please visit the website or refer to your telephone directory.

Scottish Water supports and promotes the WaterSafe scheme. WaterSafe is a dedicated online search facility to help customers to find the nearest qualified plumbing and heating professionals in their area. Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers' Federation (SNIPEF) runs the Plumbing Industry Licensing Scheme and this is part of WaterSafe.



**Our website contains further information about our services. You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter for current service updates.**

Alternative formats of this booklet can be made available free of charge. For information on Braille, large print, audio and a variety of languages, please call our Customer Helpline. If you have a disability, medical condition or other reason where you will need special assistance from Scottish Water then please contact us and we can add your name, address and special requirements to our confidential Priority Services Register.

We record all calls for quality and training purposes.

 Customer Helpline (24 hours) 0800 0778778

 [help@scottishwater.co.uk](mailto:help@scottishwater.co.uk)

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