

Township Septic System Inspection Program

Working with residents and businesses to better manage septic systems

Southern Grampians Shire Council, Southern Grampians, Victoria



Key Messages

- Community education builds residents and businesses capacity to manage their septic systems.
- Despite a lack of maintenance, most township septic systems only require minor repairs to function compliantly.
- Septic systems beyond their life expectancy can continue to function compliantly with maintenance and monitoring.
- Agencies need to work collaboratively to better resource and manage septic systems and achieve environmental, liveability and public health benefits.

Project Overview

In 2013, Southern Grampians Shire Council commenced an inspection program to determine the status of septic systems within the Shire's six unsewered townships. The program was initiated after the Council's *Domestic Wastewater Management Plan (2006)* identified extensive wastewater issues across the Shire, which to be managed effectively, required information about individual septic systems. The main objectives of the program are to:

- Address community concerns about environmental pollution and public health hazards posed by poorly functioning systems and discharge of effluent and greywater from properties.
- Develop an understanding of the locations, conditions and uses of many of the aged septic systems.
- Provide community members with the education and advice about the maintenance and upkeep of onsite domestic wastewater management systems.
- Evaluate the current and potential environmental and public health risks posed by onsite septic systems.
- Determine what interventions should be implemented to address the extensive issues associated with septic systems across the Shire and include these in the updated Council *Domestic Wastewater Management Plan*.

Organisations

Southern Grampians Shire Council, Corangamite Catchment Management Authority, Southern Rural Water, and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) are involved in the program. Consultants were engaged to undertake the first inspection in Branhholme, which was part of a broader wastewater feasibility study. Since then all inspections have been completed in-house by Council.

Audit Program

The program methodology is continually improving based on experience and lessons learnt in previous township audits. The study method is also guided by relevant legislation and policy, the natural and built heritage of the region, physical characteristics (i.e. topography, soil and catchment hydrology), stakeholder engagement and knowledge of the existing wastewater systems within the townships.

Septic system inspection

Using an audit criteria and inspection sheet developed by Council, officers completed a thorough assessment of each septic system in the township. The audit considered aspects such as: tank condition, effluent line condition, pump operation (if applicable), sludge depth, EPA Code of Practice compliance and plumbing compliance.



A black water septic system in the township of Branhholme.

Outcomes

Community Education

In many cases, audits were undertaken with the property owner/tenant present. This allowed information about the systems operation and maintenance to be easily obtained (i.e. system usage parameters and frequency of pump-outs), providing officers with technical information to assist with the audit. Perhaps more importantly, this process allowed the owner to directly receive advice on how to better maintain their system. At the conclusion of each audit, property owners were issued a letter from Council specifying their system's compliance and the legislative requirements for maintenance. A fact sheet providing information about actions that should be implemented to maximise the efficiency and life of their systems was also enclosed in this correspondence.

Septic tank compliance

Stakeholder engagement revealed a notable lack of understanding regarding the maintenance of septic systems. When asked when their tank was last pumped out, nearly 40% of respondents in Branhholme responded *"either do not know or think the tank has never been pumped out"*. As such, Council expected a high number of non-conformances to be identified in the audit. However, the audit results were generally pleasing, given that the majority (60%) of systems in Penshurst and Glenthompson did not pose an immediate public health concern and required only minor maintenance to conform to regulatory standards. Major non-conformances were identified in 26 and 28 properties in Penshurst and Glenthompson respectively. These systems were classified as posing an immediate risk to public health and required urgent works to meet the current wastewater system design standards. Issues identified included an urgent need for pumping out of the system, complete structural failure of the system, missing or significantly damaged septic tank lids and/or surface discharge of effluent/greywater onto land, street or roadside.

Future work

To fully assess and respond the issues presented by domestic onsite wastewater treatment Council needs to:

- Continue to monitor compliance of existing systems in the townships to ensure public health is protected.
- Assist home owners in monitoring and maintaining their septic systems through community education and support.
- Investigate opportunities to assist owners experiencing hardship to maintain, repair or replace failing septic systems.
- Consider implementing septic inspection levies, to recover the cost of compliance monitoring in the long term.
- Require information about the adequacy and location of septic tank/s and effluent infiltration area to be submitted with Town Planning, Building and Septic Systems applications. This information will verify whether effluent is treated and maintained within the allotment and if the wastewater management systems maintenance will be impeded.
- Work with Wannon Water to obtain funding to undertake detailed analyses of groundwater and geological parameters in the townships and identify suitable long-term alternatives to installing traditional gravity sewers.

Lessons Learnt

- Residents have a proactive approach to the inspections and are a key part of the program's success. Many desire to learn more about making their septic systems work better.
- Community members are concerned about incurring the costs of required upgrades or imposed system changes. They would prefer to maintain existing infrastructure but are open to making improvements, dependent on funding.

More Information

For more information visit the resource library on the Clearwater website <https://www.clearwater.asn.au>

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Glenthompson has a total of 89 private dwellings, all serviced by domestic onsite wastewater systems.