

# Oil Storage tanks

Advice to householders on how to prevent leaks and avoid clean-up costs

Don't allow your tank to leak!



**If you, or someone you know has oil fired central heating, this leaflet could help you avoid the cost and disruption of an oil leak.**

Every year there are several pollution incidents in South Gloucestershire caused by faulty or badly maintained domestic heating oil pipes and tanks. Leaked oil can be very difficult and expensive to clean up. In some circumstances residents have had to move out of their houses for months because fumes from leaked oil made it impossible to stay in the property.

This leaflet gives advice on how to prevent an oil leak; what to do if you find a leak; and the law relating to tanks and spillages. A little time and money spent on maintenance now, may avoid expensive clean-up costs in the future.

**It is in your own interest to prevent an oil leak!**

**Corroded, damaged or faulty tanks and pipe work can leak oil into the ground. Leaked oil can:**

- Cause fumes inside properties.
- Contaminate drinking water supplies. Oil can affect the underground plastic water pipes causing bad tastes and smells in drinking water in the neighbourhood.
- Pollute rivers, streams and ground water.
- Kill garden plants and vegetation.
- Run down drains and affect the operation of sewage treatment works and septic tanks.
- Spread through the ground and affect other properties.
- Soak into the brick or stonework of buildings.



**Below are a few examples of real incidents that have happened to people in South Gloucestershire.**

- An oil supply pipe between a storage tank and a house developed a leak. Oil seeped into the ground under a neighbour's house causing fumes inside the property. The neighbour had to move out while the ground floor was dug up to remove contaminated material. The cost of the clean-up amounted to several thousand pounds.
- A new oil fired boiler was installed incorrectly. When the boiler was turned on, oil pumped out across the kitchen floor. The oil soaked into the ground resulting in fumes filling the house. The house had to be evacuated while floors were dug up to remove the contamination. Costs amounted to several thousand pounds.
- A metal oil tank mounted on concrete block supports gradually rusted. Oil leaked out of the tank, staining the supports and soaking into the ground below. Water pipes to two houses ran under the affected area. Oil can penetrate plastic water pipes, so there was a serious risk that the water supply could become polluted. The water pipes had to be replaced and the contaminated soil removed. Costs ran into several thousand pounds.

**A leak of oil in or near your house could be a risk to your health. Fumes from the oil can give rise to symptoms including:**

- "feeling drunk" (sleepy, fuzzy headed, slow to react, dizzy)
- headaches
- feeling sick
- skin rashes
- sore throats
- If levels of oil fumes are very high, it could cause unconsciousness.

**Leaked oil can affect underground plastic water supply pipes and get into the water. Water contaminated with oil could be a risk to health.**

▮ An example of a corroded tank with left hand side support stained with oil & ground soaked with oil.



Health risks

# Insurance

**If your central heating system is run on oil, check your household insurance policy as not all policies cover damage from oil leaks. If it does not cover oil leaks, you should add this to your cover. If a leak occurs and you are not insured, you may have to pay for the clean-up yourself. Cover should include the cost of replacing lost oil; clean-up on your own property; and liability cover for any damage to neighbouring property, utilities or environmental clean-up costs.**

**Prevent a leak, save money, avoid the disruption of clean up**

What you should do to  
**prevent a leak**

**It is important to carry out regular checks and maintenance on your central heating system including the oil tank and oil supply pipes. If you cannot do this yourself, employ a competent person. The cost of a service will be considerably less than the cost of a leak and your insurance company may not pay out if the leak has been occurring over time so regular checks are vital.**



↳ integrally banded oil tank

## **The following points will help you know what to look out for:**

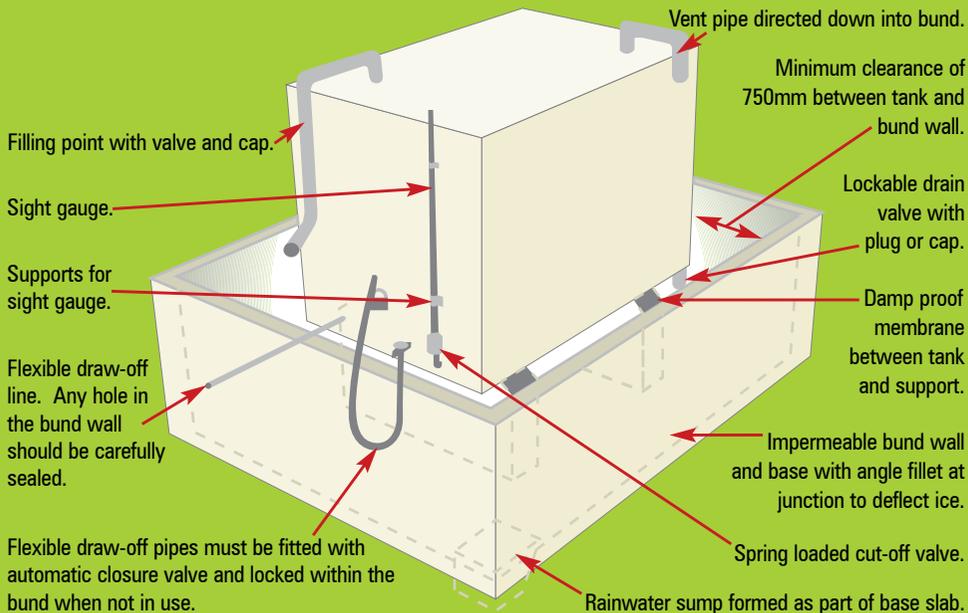
- 1.** If your tank is not bunded, consider building one. A bund is a collection trough which sits under the oil tank. In the event of the tank leaking, all the oil will be retained. The bund should have the capacity to hold at least 10% more than the capacity of the tank (as it can collect rainwater over time). Bunds can be built of brick, concrete or other watertight material. From time to time you may need to empty rainwater out of it, but do not be tempted to fit a drain hole, unless fitted with a tap which can be securely closed. Most new tanks are now supplied as double skinned units which removes the need for bunding. The tank has a second skin which acts as a safety net if the tank leaks. It is now a legal requirement for most commercial and larger tanks (more than 3,500 litres) to be fitted with a bund. Although not currently a legal requirement for domestic tanks, we would strongly recommend bunding in all cases. Some oil tanks now also incorporate over-fill prevention devices and warning alarms should oil levels drop suddenly.
- 2.** Check the condition of your tank regularly. If it is a metal tank, ensure it is painted regularly on all sides (including the base) to avoid the metal corroding.
- 3.** If possible, supervise any deliveries of oil. Make sure you do not order more oil than can fit in your tank.
- 4.** Spotting a leak early could save a lot of time and money so monitor and become familiar with your normal usage of oil. If consumption appears to go up, check for leaks immediately. There have been instances where people have re-filled a leaking oil tank increasing the amount of oil lost into the ground. The more oil lost, the more difficult and expensive the clean up.
- 5.** Have a thorough regular maintenance check by a competent person on your whole system, not just the boiler.

This should include a pressure test on the pipework between the tank and the boiler.

6. Keep fill points on the tank clear of obstructions and ensure they are tamper proof as cases of theft are increasing.
7. Take notice of staining on tank supports or bases or yellowing of plants/grass as these may indicate a leak.
8. Take notice of any oily smells. This may indicate a leak.
9. Take care when doing any building work near the tank or supply pipe. Make sure you know where the pipe is and ensure no damage occurs during building works.
10. Make sure you know how to isolate the tank to stop the flow of oil if there is a leak.
11. Changes to the Building Regulations have introduced rules covering distances from oil tanks to openings, water sources and buildings. If replacing an old tank, the supplier should be able to give you advice regarding whether the new tank needs to be relocated.
12. Plastic tanks are now popular and most come with a 10 year guarantee. Occasionally some have been known to crack and sunlight has sometimes been sighted as the cause. If this happens before the end of the guarantee period, a proportion of the cost may be refunded by the manufacturer.
13. Do not grow plants on or near the oil tank as this will hamper maintenance, prevent visual inspection and could even damage the tank.

**REMEMBER** in preventing leaks you could also be preventing possible legal action for contaminating land, drinking water supplies, streams or rivers.

# What you should do if you find a leak



## If you find a leak of oil on your system you should:

- Try and find out where the leak is coming from and stop further oil leaking as soon as possible. (This may include having the tank emptied as a matter of urgency).
- Contact your insurance company without delay.
- Any taste or smell of oil in your drinking water should be reported to the water supply company immediately. Do not drink any water suspected of being contaminated until tests have shown it to be safe.
- Call an engineer or other competent person to repair/replace the tank or pipe work as necessary.

- Contact us at the Environmental Health section of the Council for advice on health risks and cleaning up any contaminated ground. You should note however that we cannot do the clean up for you and whilst we can offer general advice, you may need to employ a specialist company/consultant to do an investigation and provide specific recommendations for clean up.
- Do not delay taking action. Quick action will prevent more ground becoming contaminated and reduce clean up costs. It may also avoid subsequent legal action.
- Do not assume the problem will go away
- Do not drink any water suspected to be contaminated
- Do not wash spilt oil into the ground or drains.
- Do not use detergents. If available, soak the oil up with an absorbent material.



# Legal implications

**If an oil spill causes a risk to human health; damages neighbouring properties; pollutes ground or surface water; or poses a risk to ecological systems, enforcement action may be considered by the Council.**

The land may be declared as Contaminated Land under Part 2A of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

An offence may also have been committed under the Environmental Damage (Prevention and Remediation) Regulations 2009. Enforcement may be considered if voluntary remediation is not carried out. Any enforcement action will be taken in line with our enforcement policy. The Environment Agency may also consider taking action to prevent or remedy pollution of controlled waters under the Water Resources Act 1991. They may require ongoing protection or decontamination for example where groundwater or surface waters are affected.



↑ Clean up of ground after leaking tank removed, showing drinking water pipe through ground.





# Websites

**Many oil tank suppliers also have information on oil storage on their websites.**

 [www.environment-agency.gov.uk/business/sectors/32603.aspx](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/business/sectors/32603.aspx)

 [www.southglos.gov.uk/NR/exeres/f782d904-9d37-4c91-b144-c18d1c664454](http://www.southglos.gov.uk/NR/exeres/f782d904-9d37-4c91-b144-c18d1c664454)

 [www.southglos.gov.uk](http://www.southglos.gov.uk)

## Contacts

### **South Gloucestershire Council Environmental Protection Team**

PO Box 2078

The Council Offices

Castle St

Thornbury

BS35 9BJ

☎ 01454 868001

✉ [Environmental.Protection@southglos.gov.uk](mailto:Environmental.Protection@southglos.gov.uk)

**This information can be made available in other languages, in large print, braille or on audio tape. Please phone 01454 868001 if you need any of these or any other help to access Council services.**