

**Site Assessments in Accordance with  
EPA Wastewater Treatment Manual: Single House Treatment Systems  
Guidance to Planning Applicants.**

**1.0 Why the move to EPA from SR6 and private assessors from HSE?**

Prior to June 2005, sites for one off houses in County Limerick, and in most Counties were assessed in accordance with SR6: *Septic Tank Systems: Recommendations for Domestic Effluent Treatment and Disposal from a Single Dwelling House*. This document originally dates back to the mid 1970's and, despite being updated in 1991, it was still considered to be outdated in that it dealt only with septic tank systems and did not provide guidance on more modern systems of wastewater treatment. It also did not take account of the greatly increased volumes of wastewater produced in modern households as a result of modern living standards and the almost universal use of appliances such as automatic washing machines and dishwashers etc. In addition, the standards contained in SR6 were not considered to provide a high enough level of protection to either groundwater, surface water or public health.

The EPA Manual "Single House Treatment Systems", which was published in 2000, provides detailed guidance on how sites should be assessed and how systems should be designed so as to improve the level of protection afforded to both the aquatic environment and public health. The system of site assessment required under the EPA document involves several elements:

1. A desk study which looks at available documented information on a site. This includes information on the soils, geology, location of wells and streams etc.
2. A visual assessment, which involves looking at the site and its surroundings to gain an indication of how well or poorly drained the site is likely to be and what targets are likely to be at risk in the area (eg. rivers and streams bounding a site, public or private wells in close proximity to the site).
3. On-site investigations including an assessment of the soil profile up to a depth of 2m, or greater in some cases, and percolation tests to confirm the drainage conditions
4. Recommendations as to the form of wastewater treatment, if any, is best suited to the site conditions.

Assessing sites and designing systems in accordance with the EPA Manual, rather than SR6, involves a much greater investment of time and a greater range of skills and expertise. It was not possible for the Council to provide this service either directly or through the agency of the HSE and so it was necessary to move to a system of approved private assessors, employed directly by the applicant.

**2.0 What does being on the Council's approved list of site assessors mean?**

In order to protect planning applicants and in an attempt to achieve a high quality service, the Council established a list of approved site assessors. To be included on the approved list, assessors have to demonstrate an understanding of the EPA site

assessment procedures, either by passing the FÁS course in “Site Suitability Assessment for On site Wastewater Management” or by otherwise demonstrating competence to the satisfaction of the County Council.

In addition to demonstrating competence, all approved assessors are required to have a minimum of €1,000,000 professional indemnity insurance so as to protect the applicant in the case where a site has been incorrectly assessed or a system incorrectly specified and where problems subsequently arise.

Finally, all approved assessors are required to sign up to a number of conditions, which include submitting results of all site assessments to the County Council and agreeing to be excluded from the list if they are found to have misrepresented sites or made inappropriate recommendations.

It should be noted that the assessors are not employed by the County Council and inclusion on the list only implies that the assessors have met the criteria outlined above.

The approved list has been drawn up with a view to providing some level of protection to planning applicants. Nevertheless, applicants are advised that the assessors are employed directly by them and that Limerick County Council cannot take any responsibility for the quality of reports produced.

### **3.0 What are you paying for?**

The cost of site assessments is not set by Limerick County Council. The Council is aware that the cost to applicants has increased under the new system. This is largely because of the greatly increased time input required by the assessor and the greater degree of detail required in terms of system design and specification.

The new procedure requires a significant amount of background work to be done both before and after the site visit and also requires the assessor to spend between one and two days on site (depending on the drainage conditions).

### **4.0 What level of service should you expect from your assessor?**

In assessing a site for planning purposes, the level of service provided by the approved assessor and the cost of this service is ultimately a matter to be agreed between the assessor and the client. Limerick County Council is not in a position to dictate to assessors what they should charge or exactly what service they should provide.

However, there appears to be some degree of variation in the quality of service provided and the charges levied. As a result, applicants are advised to shop around and get the best deal possible. As in all things, price alone should not be the final decider and you, as an applicant, should be sure you are getting the service that is most appropriate to your needs and represents the best value for money.

The following is intended to guide you in what to look for when employing an assessor to check your site. When you approach an assessor you should try to establish the following

1. What does the assessor charge for a full site assessment, including a completed Site Characterisation Report which can be submitted with your planning application?
2. Does this fee include digging the holes or will you have to organise and pay for a machine to do this?.
3. Will the assessor visit your site and give you an initial opinion on whether or not it is likely to pass the full site assessment, for a reduced fee? **This is particularly important if, for example, your site shows obvious signs of impaired drainage such as rush growth, water logging or excessive poaching by stock.** Some assessors charge the full fee for a site visit some do not. Some operate on a deposit/refund basis. Be sure you know exactly how much you will pay.
4. Will the assessor carry out an initial assessment and advise you on the best location to place your percolation area? Even on the standard ½ site, conditions can vary considerably and some areas may pass the assessment while other may not. On marginal sites, it is important that the best possible location be chose for the assessment. Some assessors expect you to have dug the holes before they will visit the site, this may result in the site not being tested in the most suitable location.
5. Will the assessor carry out a level survey of your site and produce a contour drawing? This is particularly important on sloping sites, where a longitudinal section through the site may be requested by the Council. However, not all assessors are in a position to provide this type of service and it may need to be done by your engineer or architect.
6. Is the assessor independent or is he/she tied to a particular system manufacturer? As with all things, independent advice, while possibly more expensive in the first instance, might save you a lot of money in the long run by ensuring that you get the treatment option best suited to your site.

## **5.0 What will you be expected to submit as part of your planning application?**

As a minimum you will be expected to submit the following:

A detailed Site Characterisation Report. This should be completed on Limerick County Council's Site Characterisation Report form and all the relevant data requested in the form should be given, including site layout plans and longitudinal sections showing all the relevant features listed in the report form.

A detailed system design. It is understood that some assessors prefer not to specify individual system makes or models and may just specify a generic system type. In such cases, the assessor may provide a list of suitable systems from which the

applicant should choose one. Details of this should be submitted with the planning application including a manufacturer's specification and evidence of Agreement Board Certification. However, a detailed design of any polishing filter specified should be provided, including a dimensioned plan, cross-section and longitudinal section showing existing and proposed ground levels along with pipe invert levels, pipe types and details of all materials to be used.

Also, it is important that all of the drawings submitted as part of your planning application are consistent: for example, the site layout drawings produced by your architect should show the same type of system, in the same location as specified by your site assessor in the Site Characterisation Report. Drawings should be revised to resolve any discrepancies.

Failure to submit adequate information with the planning application may result in requests for further information and unnecessary delays.