



Testing the waters:

**Assessing information on private
water supplies and sewerage
facilities**





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About us

The Consumer Futures Unit puts consumers at the heart of policy and regulation in the energy, post and water sectors in Scotland. Part of Citizens Advice Scotland, we research and gather evidence, which we use to improve outcomes for consumers.



CONSUMER FUTURES UNIT PURPOSE

Providing a voice for consumers in Scotland on energy, post and water

By working under a framework of internationally recognised consumer principles, we seek to deliver strategic outcomes through a combination of:

- ▶ Gathering and sharing evidence
- ▶ Developing consumer focused policy
- ▶ Improving consumer experience through advocacy

OVERARCHING CONSUMER PRINCIPLES

Information | Access | Choice | Redress | Safety | Fairness | Representation

STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

- ▶ Markets are shaped around consumers
- ▶ Services are accessible to consumers regardless of their income or location
- ▶ Consumer principles are at the heart of government policy and regulation
- ▶ Utility products and services deliver the right outcomes for consumers



Executive Summary

Private water supplies and sewerage facilities are owned and managed by a private party, rather than by Scottish Water. There are over 20,000 registered private water supplies in Scotland. Most of them are situated in rural or remote areas.

The local authority area of Aberdeenshire has the most private water supplies (7,805), followed by Argyll and Bute (3,361) and Highland (2,448)¹. Depending on the size of the local authority area, the percentage of the population reliant on private water supplies can be significant (e.g., 31.4% in Argyll and Bute). For many, water quality can be poor², leading to risks of serious health issues for those consuming the water.

Similarly, there are at least 458,000 properties in Scotland that are not connected to the public sewerage network and therefore use private sewerage facilities. If private water and wastewater facilities are not maintained to an acceptable standard, they can cause problems for public health and the environment. In order to ensure that those managing and using private water and wastewater services can do so effectively, they need access to information that clearly sets out what they need to do to sustainably maintain a safe drinking water supply, and

appropriately manage their private sewerage facilities.

During 2016-17, the Consumer Futures Unit (CFU) initiated research to identify the availability and accessibility of information on rights and responsibilities to users and managers of private water and sewerage services. This Insight Report, which accompanies a technical report³, summarises the research that was undertaken, sets out the findings that emerged and provides policy recommendations. The study will inform the work of the Scottish Government's Rural Provision Working Group, of which the CFU is a member, in developing supportive strategies to help communities meet minimum legal water quality standards.

Most information on private water and sewerage supplies is available online, or can be accessed directly from public bodies that are responsible for supporting communities using private water. However, results show that more needs to be done to improve the quality of information and that there is an opportunity to improve the accessibility of, and signposting to, consumer-focused information.

¹ See Annex 1 for an overview of number of private water supplies per local authority.

² Drinking Water Quality Regulator for Scotland (2017). Drinking Water Quality in Scotland 2016: Private Water Supplies <http://dwqr.scot/media/34963/dwqr-annual-report-2016-private-water-supplies.pdf>.

³ Available from the CFU on request.

Executive Summary

As part of a holistic and consumer focused support strategy, the CFU is recommending that Citizens Advice Scotland and the Drinking Water Quality Regulator for Scotland (DWQR)⁴ facilitate the development of a comprehensive information hub to which other consumer channels, for example local authority websites, can direct users or owners of private water supplies.

During 2017-18, the CFU, in partnership with the DWQR, is conducting further consumer-based research to better understand the range of support that is required to meet the needs of private water and sewerage communities.

Results from this research will inform the work of the Rural Provision Working Group and the development a suitable and more comprehensive framework of support.

⁴ The DWQR exists to ensure that drinking water in Scotland is safe to drink.



Introduction

The Consumer Futures Unit

The Consumer Futures Unit (CFU), part of Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), uses research and evidence to put consumers at the heart of policy and regulation in the energy, post and water sectors in Scotland. We work with government, regulators and business to put consumers first, designing policy and practice around their needs and aspirations.

CFU membership in the Rural Provision Working Group

The CFU represents the needs of consumers that use the public network in terms of water and wastewater services and also, through our membership of the Scottish Government's Rural Provision Working Group (RPWG), those that use private facilities. The RPWG has been established to “assess the present extent of private water and sewerage services, the operational difficulties arising from these arrangements, and options available to improve the provision of water and sewerage services in rural areas”⁵.

Private Water Supplies and Private Sewerage in Scotland

During 2016-17, the CFU undertook research into assessing the quality and accessibility of information on the rights and responsibilities for users and managers of private water and sewerage facilities. Private water and sewerage services are not owned or managed by Scottish Water, but by a responsible private party for example, a landowner, individual or community consisting of domestic and non-domestic properties.

⁵ Rural Provision Working Group (2014). Terms of Reference. Not publicly available.

Private Water Supplies

In Scotland, there are 22,118 registered private water supplies. Most exist within rural areas and supply around 193,000 people in their homes and work, and many visitors to Scotland every year⁶. Owners or users of private water supplies are responsible for ensuring that the water quality complies with minimum standards. At the time the study was conducted, these standards were set out in the Private Water Supplies (Scotland) Regulations 2006 (The Regulations), which were updated to The Water Intended for Human Consumption (Private Supplies) (Scotland) Regulations 2017 on 27 October 2017. The issues described in this report are relevant to both sets of regulations.

The Regulations require the maintenance of water treatment infrastructure by responsible parties to ensure that drinking water is fit for consumption. They are enforced by local authorities for Type A supplies⁷ through water quality monitoring and conducting risk assessments of water sources and catchments, storage tanks, pipework and treatment systems⁸. Business or public properties that use a private water supply have a duty to display a notice informing members of the public that the water supplied in the property is from a private source. Local authorities are supervised by the Drinking Water Quality Regulator (DWQR), which provides them with advice and support.

⁶ Drinking Water Quality Regulator for Scotland (2017). Drinking Water Quality in Scotland 2016: Private Water Supplies <http://dwqr.scot/media/34963/dwqr-annual-report-2016-private-water-supplies.pdf>.

⁷ The 2017 regulations use the same two categories to classify private water supplies using descriptors rather than 'Type A' and 'Type B' supplies. This report uses 'Type A' and 'Type B'. Type A supplies are those which serve more than 50 people, or supply 10m³ or more of water per day on average, or supply a commercial or public activity, regardless of volume. The latter might refer to, for example, food producers (with some exceptions), hotels, holiday let accommodation, bed and breakfast establishments and village halls.

⁸ <http://dwqr.scot/private-supply/information-for-pws-owners-and-users/type-a-private-water-supplies/>

Introduction

Type B supplies (i.e. domestic supplies that supply less than 10m³ of water per day or serve less than 50 people) are exempt from annual testing and risk assessments. However, local authorities must test water quality if requested to do so by the users or owners.

Should the water quality of a Type A or Type B supply pose a risk to public health, local authorities have a duty to take action⁹.

Previous data collection and research demonstrate that the water quality within private water supplies in Scotland can be poor and can in some instances, be a very real threat to human health¹⁰.

Private Sewerage Systems

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) currently estimates that approximately 458,000 properties in Scotland rely on private sewerage systems¹¹. Most of these systems are septic tanks, but other treatment facilities are used as well. Private sewerage treatment is regulated by SEPA in line with the Water Environment (Controlled Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2011. Regulations require that any discharge from private sewerage must be registered with, and authorised by SEPA, and that registered private wastewater systems must be kept in good working order.

Non-compliance with regulations can result in pollution incidences endangering the environment and consumers (e.g., through polluting bathing waters or bodies of water used as private water supplies).

Challenges in Maintaining Compliant Standards in Private Water Supplies

Several key factors may impact those responsible for maintaining a private water supply and cause them to struggle to meet or maintain minimum compliance standards:

- > They may lack the financial means to carry out necessary improvements to meet water quality standards.
- > One-off local authority grants to properties using private water may not be sufficient to deliver the changes required to make a water source safe to drink.
- > They may not possess the technical insight or capability required to implement water quality improvements.
- > Information supporting the safe management of a private water system may be difficult to find.
- > Additionally, consumers may find themselves unable to improve water quality as the ownership and therefore responsibility for maintaining a private water supply may rest with an estate owner rather than the rented properties that use the supply.

⁹ For instance, local authorities have the duty to (in the case of Type A supplies), or may (in the case of Type B supplies) serve a notice, including remedial actions necessary to make the water wholesome and time periods. If no action is taken within the timescales outlined in the notice, the local authority can implement improvements and recover the costs from the person who failed to take the steps.

¹⁰ Drinking Water Quality Regulator for Scotland (2017) Drinking Water Quality in Scotland 2016: Private Water Supplies <http://dwqr.scot/media/34963/dwqr-annual-report-2016-private-water-supplies.pdf>.

¹¹ This number is modelled based on location of the main sewer.

Introduction

Challenges in Maintaining Compliant Standards for Private Sewerage Facilities

Equally, several factors may result in non-compliance for private wastewater facilities:

- > Consumers may not be fully aware of their responsibility to register and properly maintain treatment facilities. Approximately 40% of septic tanks in Scotland remain unregistered, as estimated by SEPA¹².
- > Unregistered sewerage facilities cannot be tested and standards enforced by SEPA. This increases the likelihood of unacceptable discharges to the environment.

- > Shared sewerage systems can result in issues related to shared responsibilities such as cost, technical feasibility, and maintaining a system. Currently, there are no grants available for the maintenance or improvement of private sewerage facilities.

In order to ensure responsibilities are met, is essential that access to comprehensive information on rights and responsibilities is available to those that use and manage private water and wastewater facilities.

¹² <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0040/00402151.pdf>

Research Aims and Methodology

Research Aims

The CFU commissioned a desk-based study to identify and evaluate publicly available information on private water and sewerage facilities¹³. The study was carried out by the independent research company RDF Consulting Sàrl between October and November 2016. It looked at:

- > Information available to Scottish consumers responsible for private water supplies and private sewerage regarding their rights and responsibilities.
- > Accessibility (e.g., ease of finding information, use of non-technical language) and comprehensiveness of information.
- > How well the information is signposted, giving an indication of how easily it therefore can be found by consumers.

Research Methodology

Availability of Information

Sources of information were evaluated against a set of consumer focused questions¹⁴:

- > Understanding formal responsibilities and consumer rights.
- > Understanding the practicalities associated with demonstrating compliance.
- > Improving water quality and safety of supply/private sewerage facilities.

¹³The study covered websites from local authorities, the DWQR, SEPA, and the CAS public advice website and other relevant stakeholders. Besides Scottish websites, online sources from other English speaking countries outside the UK were analysed to collect best practice examples. Local authorities, the DWQR, and international stakeholders were asked to provide additional information only available in hard copy, if available. No additional documents were received.

¹⁴ See Annex 3 for overview of research framework applied. The methodology is described in more detail in the Technical Report.

The questions were based on consumer focused principles¹⁵ to evaluate whether or not information met consumer needs or identify gaps.

Accessibility of Information

Accessibility of information was assessed on the following:

- > Ease of finding relevant web based information.
- > Ease of finding relevant information within the located web pages.
- > Comprehension (i.e. use of consumer-centred vs. technical language).
- > Scope and extent of information.

Signposting

Signposting between sources of information was assessed by counting the number of other sources that included a link to any one source. This made it possible to assess which sources were referred to most, but also which sources included the most links to other sources.

¹⁵ See Annex 2.

Research Findings

Overview of the Findings

Online resources seem to be the main publically available source for those looking for information on private water and sewerage. Additionally, direct contact opportunities for example by telephone or email, are provided by many local authorities for information and support.

Although accessible and easy to read information on private water supplies does exist, it is not always available from the obvious portals that somebody searching may go to. Simple, clear and detailed information is available on the DWQR and CAS public advice websites¹⁶, as well as on some local authority websites. However, signposting by some local authorities to these sources is poor, which could result in consumers being unable to find essential information that they require.

On the whole and compared to private water supplies, information on private sewerage facilities is poor: much scarcer, less accessible, and more poorly signposted. The most accessible and comprehensive sources are the SEPA and CAS public advice websites; additional good sources include the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust.

Other general non-Scottish online resources identified the Charter of Rights and Responsibilities by the Irish National Federation of Group Water Schemes¹⁷ as an example of one of the most accessible and comprehensive sources on private water supplies. Few international resources were found on private sewerage; however, the Homeowners Guide to Septic Systems¹⁸, published by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, was identified as a good example.

¹⁶ <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/scotland/>

¹⁷ [http://www.nfgws.ie/kfmgetfull/fckeditor/File/Charter%20of%20Rights%20\(revised%202010\).pdf](http://www.nfgws.ie/kfmgetfull/fckeditor/File/Charter%20of%20Rights%20(revised%202010).pdf)

¹⁸ https://www3.epa.gov/npdes/pubs/homeowner_guide_long.pdf

Key Findings: Existing Resources

Information on Private Water Supplies

Overall, there are a relatively small number of information sources on private water supplies. Compared to information held on the DWQR website, most of the other sources reviewed in the study are significantly more limited in terms of scope or extent of information.

Availability of Information on Private Water Supplies

The majority of websites included in the study were found to provide only basic information on private water supplies such as the nature of a private water supply, classification of Type A and B water supplies, and the grant scheme. Information on more specific topics, such as whose responsibility it is to maintain the water supply, and users' rights, is less commonly available. Little information is available on the risks to health from consuming water from a poor quality private supply.

The most comprehensive suite of information on private water supplies is held by DWQR, followed by the CAS public advice website and a few local authority websites. Even though in comparison to other sources, these websites are the most comprehensive sources of information, they do not answer all questions consumers might expect to see addressed. Many local authorities that have a significant number of private water supplies have very limited, or even no information on their websites.

Accessibility of Information on Private Water Supplies

Generally, most information resources are easy to find through on-line searches, and sites are easy to navigate to obtain relevant information, i.e. clearly labelled information within sources.

Research Findings

In terms of how comprehensive and easily understood resources are, most websites, for example DWQR, offer information that is

clearly and simply written and manage to avoid technical language, providing information in the form of ‘frequently asked questions’.

Varying degrees of accessibility: consumer centred versus technical language

Example of consumer centred, accessible language:

Q “Why should I get my drinking water tested and what does this involve?”

A “You, your family and visitors to your home or business all have a right to expect safe, clean drinking water. Testing the water helps discover problems with your supply’s quality. The two main groups of impurities that can affect drinking water quality are micro-organisms and chemicals.

- > if you are on a type ‘A’ supply, we will contact you to arrange a sampling appointment and advise if a charge is applicable.
- > if you are on a type ‘B’ supply, you must ask us to undertake a test. At the moment we won’t charge you for this service but we reserve the right to regularly review our charging policy.”

(Source: North Lanarkshire Council website)

In addition to online information, many organisations invite people to contact them directly for information using email, online forms, and by telephone.

However the effectiveness of direct engagement with local authorities, in terms of accessibility and comprehensiveness of information, is unknown.

Research Findings

Signposting Information on Private Water Supplies

Signposting consumers to the information they need is essential. However, sources that consumers are signposted to are not always the most accessible or comprehensive, such as privatewatersupplies.gov.uk. Only a few links were found for more accessible and comprehensive sources, for example DWQR or CAS websites.

Availability of Information on Private Sewerage Facilities

Basic information on private sewerage is sparse. Not all of the consumer questions used by the study to assess available information¹⁹ were answered by the information resources reviewed, for example, exemption from public sewerage charges or consumer rights in relation to access to private sewerage facilities. SEPA, Fife Coast and Countryside Trust, and CAS public advice websites contained the most comprehensive consumer-based information.

Few local authorities publish online information on private sewerage facilities, which is probably reflective of the fact that they do not have a formal role for regulating private sewerage treatment.

Accessibility of Information on Private Sewerage Facilities

Information on private sewerage facilities is difficult to find. Even when a website does contain information, locating the relevant information within the website can prove difficult.

Signposting Information on Private Sewerage Facilities

Signposting to information on private sewerage is poor. Comprehensive and accessible sources such as the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust are poorly signposted by other sources, which could result in consumers failing to find the information they are looking for.

Signposting by local authorities to comprehensive information sources is poor or non-existent, which may reflect their lack of formal role or responsibility regarding private sewerage services.

¹⁹ See Annex 3.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Improving Existing Resources

Comprehensive and accessible information exists on most aspects of private water rights and responsibilities. However, in some instances, it is difficult to find on websites. Even some of the best sources identified do not provide comprehensive information for users and managers of private water supplies. Information on consumer rights and responsibilities for private sewerage facilities is scarcer and less comprehensive.

Improving Signposting of Information

Where information exists, signposting consumers to it can be poor in many cases. This could hinder, and in some cases prevent consumers from finding the information they need, which in turn could negatively impact their ability to keep private water or sewerage facilities legally compliant. Simple measures could improve access to the right information – such as encouraging local authorities to signpost consumers to good information sources such as DWQR, SEPA and CAS, or to replicate the information from those sources within their own websites.

Future Research

Further consumer research could be undertaken to inform future policy on how information on private water and sewerage services could be made more useful to consumers, and where that information should be stored.

Recommendation

Further consideration should be given by the Rural Provision Working Group to undertake research to identify more clearly what information consumers need and where it should be made available. Further research will examine the role of online information alongside other information channels.

Recommendation

In order to ensure consumers can access the resources they need, information on private water supplies should be reviewed for comprehensiveness, clarity and accessibility to existing sources. Scottish websites containing information should undergo a regular review to ensure they it is up-to-date. In addition, a comprehensive single online hub that combines all relevant information, written in plain English, for users and managers of private water supplies and private sewerage facilities would simplify the search for advice and information.

Recommendation

Public bodies that have a responsibility to support private water and wastewater consumers should be encouraged to provide clear links to existing key reference sources, which could form the basis of an information hub. Strategies to encourage more comprehensive access by local authorities should be considered by the Rural Provision Working Group.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Post Report Update

The new Regulations classify all privately rented property as commercial properties, and therefore as subject to annual testing. As a result, there is a greater need for more available and accessible information and support as those affected by this change have not previously had to undergo more rigorous scrutiny. As a result of the new Regulations, the workload of local authorities will increase; this places greater importance on users and managers having access to necessary information.

Following the research presented in this Insight Report and also work undertaken by the Centre of Expertise for Waters (CREW) in 2016 into communities' attitudes, acceptance and issues

regarding private water supplies²⁰, the CFU and DWQR have jointly commissioned further research:

- > To better understand the range of support required to meet the needs of private water users, owners and communities to comply with minimum requirements in terms of drinking water quality in a sustainable manner, and improve the reliability of their water supply.

The results from all three studies will inform further policy development, including the development of an Information Hub for users and managers of private water and sewerage supplies, and additional support to address

²⁰ Teedon, P., Currie, M., Helwig, K., and Creaney, R. (2017). Engaging communities around private water supplies. CRW2014_12. Available online at <http://www.crew.ac.uk/publications>.





Appendices

Annex 1: Number of private water suppliers by Local Authority area

	Number of Type A supplies	Number of Type B supplies	Total number of supplies	% of Population served by PWS
Aberdeen City	0	54	54	0.1
Aberdeenshire	234	7,571	7,805	13.7
Angus	43	405	448	2.9
Agyll and Bute	477	2,884	3,361	31.4
City of Edinburgh	1	16	17	0.0
Clackmannanshire	4	22	26	0.7
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	12	39	51	1.8
Dumfries and Galloway	157	1,264	1,421	14.1
Dundee City	0	1	1	0.0
East Ayrshire	2	206	208	0.7
East Dunbartonshire	1	18	19	0.2
East Lothian	4	34	38	0.5
East Renfrewshire	3	131	134	1.4
Falkirk	2	8	10	0.0
Fife	34	301	335	1.1
Glasgow City	0	0	0	0.0
Highland	758	1,690	2,448	14.1
Inverclyde	7	55	62	1.7
Midlothian	6	58	64	0.5
Moray	103	714	817	4.7
North Ayrshire	12	266	278	1.9
North Lanarkshire	0	15	15	0.0
Orkney	29	209	238	7.1
Perth and Kinross	288	1,304	1,592	19.7
Renfrewshire	4	122	126	0.4
Scottish Borders	152	1,298	1,450	13.0
Shetland	2	55	57	0.7
South Ayrshire	28	208	236	1.0
South Lanarkshire	16	284	300	0.3
Stirling	62	368	430	6.1
West Dunbartonshire	7	13	20	0.2
West Lothian	10	47	57	0.3
SCOTLAND	2,458	19,660	22,118	3.6

Source: Drinking Water Quality Regulator (2017). Drinking Water Quality 2017: Private Water Supplies, p. 6. Retrieved from <http://dwqr.scot/media/34963/dwqr-annual-report-2016-private-water-supplies.pdf>.

Annex 2: Consumer Principles

The CFU uses consumer principles to assess, and advocate for, the consumer interest. The principles form an integral and essential part of the framework that the CFU uses to develop and communicate policy and practice. They are generic and can be applied across all consumer interfaces / outcomes, whether as part of service delivery or regulation. They allow organisations to champion consistent and transparent policy positions across a diverse range of subject areas, helping staff and management to operate confidently

and effectively when new or unfamiliar issues arise. They provide a straightforward framework for explaining to stakeholders how consumer issues can be identified and analysed.

The consumer principles also support the CFU's consistent approach to advocacy work across subject areas, extend previous thinking to new topics and are not driven by individual preference.

Consumer Principles



Annex 3: Research Framework

Annex 3: Research Framework

The research framework used in this study was developed using the Consumer Principles (see Annex 1). It reflects questions that users and managers of private water supplies or private

sewerage facilities might ask, rather than starting from the rules or practices that they must or should follow.

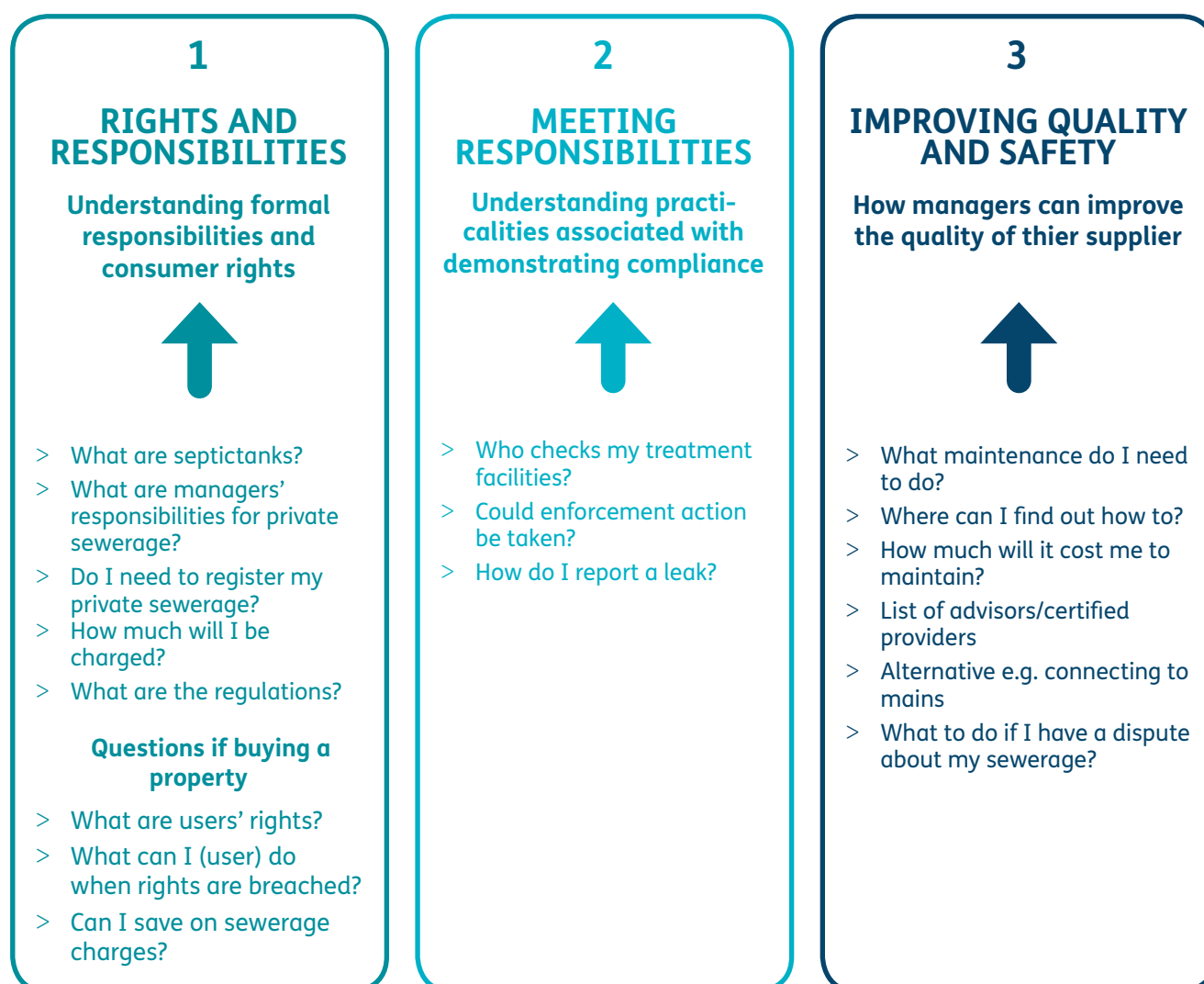
Figure A2.1: Research framework using consumer centred questions to evaluate the availability of information on private water supplies



Annex 3: Research Framework

Figure A2.2: Research framework using consumer centred questions to evaluate the availability of information on private sewerage facilities

Source: RDF Consulting research and analysis





For more information about the Consumer Futures Unit, visit:

www.cas.org.uk/spotlight/consumer-futures-unit

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