

Leaks from Domestic Heating oil storage tanks

Over the last few years there have been an increasing number of pollution incidents caused by faulty or badly maintained domestic central heating oil tanks. Leaked oil can be very difficult and expensive to clean up. In some circumstances houses have been evacuated because of oil soaked into the ground nearby producing fumes and odours, making it impossible to live in the properties. A little time and money spent on maintenance now may avoid clean-up costs of thousands of pounds in the future.

What can Happen?

Below are a few examples of what can happen if things go wrong. These are real incidents.

- The oil supply pipe between the tank and the house developed a leak. Heating oil contaminated the ground beneath a neighbour's house. The neighbour's house had to be evacuated and the ground floor completely removed to deal with the contaminated ground.
- A newly installed oil fired boiler was not connected up properly. On firing the system, oil was pumped out across the floor inside the house. Oil soaked into the ground at the wall/floor junctions. Fumes filled the house for several months and the house had to be evacuated while the floors were removed and the contamination cleaned up.
- A central heating oil tank mounted on concrete block supports corroded over time. Oil leaked out of the tank, staining the supports and soaking into the ground below. Water pipes to two houses ran under the spill area. As oil can penetrate plastic water supply pipes, there was a serious risk of the water supply being contaminated. The water pipes had to be replaced and the contaminated soil removed.
- All of the above incidents cost several thousands of pounds to rectify and caused considerable stress and disruption to the residents.

Prevention is better than cure – Things to look out for:

- A strong smell of solvent, petrol or oil inside or outside your home or in your cupboards, black stains and dead plants or grass around your tank as this could indicate a leak.
- Check the condition of your tank regularly. If it is a metal tank, ensure it is painted regularly to avoid the metal corroding.
- If possible, supervise any deliveries of oil. Make sure you do not order more oil than you can fit in your tank.

- Monitor and become familiar with your normal usage rate 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 without checking when their last delivery was, doubling the amount of oil lost into the ground without realising. The more oil lost, the more difficult and expensive the clean up.
- Have a thorough regular maintenance check carried out by a competent person on your whole system, not just the boiler.
- Keep fill points on the tank clear of obstructions and ensure they are tamper proof.
- 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 within this leak proof trough. 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. Some designs of tank incorporate a bund. The tank has a second skin which acts a safety net if the tank leaks.

You should also review your home insurance policy to make sure you are covered for oil leaks or spills.

What to do if you suspect an oil leak:

- try to find out where the leak is coming from
- switch off your oil supply at the tank and arrange to have it emptied (if needed)
- arrange for an engineer to repair or replace your tank or pipework
- if the leak could affect a stream, pond or other water supply, call the Emergency Oil Care Hotline on 080 0807 060
- never use detergents or a hose to wash the spill away
- prevent the spill from entering drains by blocking its flow using earth, sand or commercial products that absorb oil
- keep your home well-ventilated by opening windows and doors
- call your household insurance company or landlord and make them aware of the leak
- if there is a strong smell of oil in your home, call the Environmental Health Section at Antrim Borough Council on 028 94463113.

Do not put off taking action or assume the problem will go away.