

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
SUMMARY REPORT

ONSITE WASTEWATER MANAGEMENT PLAN 2025–2029

Proudly working
with and for
our community



Executive Summary

The Onsite Wastewater Management Plan 2025-2029 objectives are to protect public health and the environment. This will be done through risk-based inspections of onsite wastewater management systems (septic tanks) with special supply catchments, and targeting identified historic clusters of failing systems in the declared sewerage district.

The City of Ballarat sought community feedback to determine:

- What the community understands about septic tanks and the Plan
- How frequently people are servicing their OWMS
- What is important to the community regarding the impacts of poorly maintained systems
- Feedback on compliance strategies the City of Ballarat have identified for managing (high-risk) septic systems
- Identify education opportunities to empower owners/occupiers with OWMS to self-manage systems, preventing system failure.

Key stakeholders were contacted directly for feedback on the plan and included:

- Central Highlands Water Authority (CHW)
- Environment Protection Authority (EPA)
- Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action (DEECA)
- Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs)
- City of Ballarat Statutory Planning Department and Sustainable Environment Department
- Plumbers known to install OWMS within the municipality.

Community feedback highlighted preferences for a balanced, practical approach to managing septic systems.

Most respondents were homeowners with direct experience using onsite wastewater management systems, providing valuable insight into current practices and challenges.

Participants emphasised the importance of education and clear information to support self-management, rather than increased regulation or inspection requirements. There was a strong appetite for accessible resources, reminders, and guidance to help property owners maintain systems effectively and reduce environmental impacts.

Some residents raised questions about whether a levy or fee would be introduced to support implementation of the plan, existing resources will be utilised. Inspections will target high risk systems in special water supply catchments and known historical clusters of systems within or near the declared sewerage district.

Consultation Period

Consultation ran for the month of September (30 days) and included:

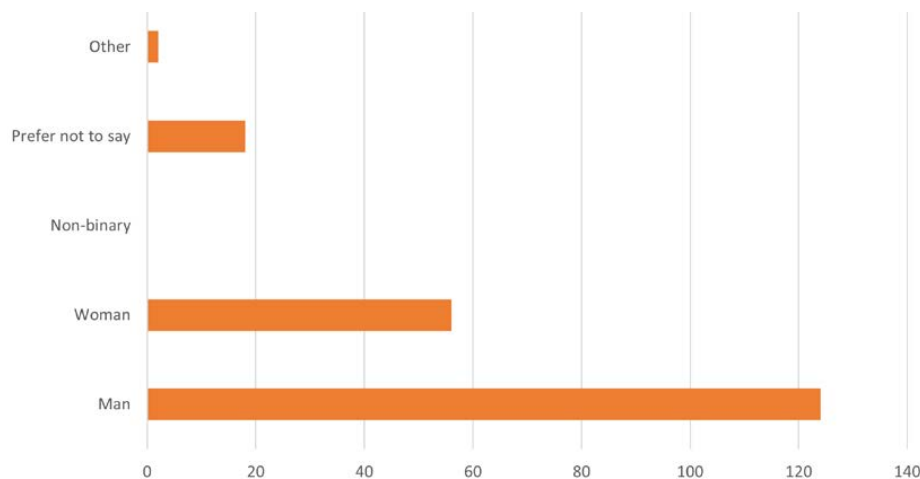
- Online survey accessible via the MySay Ballarat website
- Mailout to 3170 properties identified as having a septic tank
- Requests for hard copies of the questionnaire were accommodated. Questionnaires were posted with reply paid envelopes or could be picked up in person from the Phoenix Building (19 hard copies of the questionnaire were returned to City of Ballarat)
- City of Ballarat Social media channels used to communicate the plan is out for consultation
- Direct contact with key stakeholders (i.e. CHW, EPA and CMA) via email inviting feedback.

Over 200 responses received from the community, and 6 from key stakeholders including CHW, CMAs (x2), City of Ballarat business units (x2) and plumbers (x2).

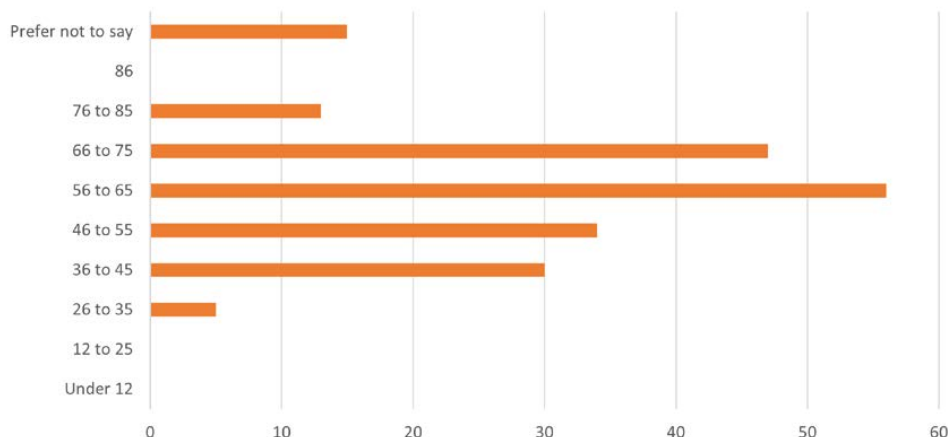
Demographic breakdown

The majority of respondents were male representing 62%, then female at 28%. The predominate age group being 55-65yrs (28%) followed by 66-75yrs (23%), 46-55yrs (17%), 36-45yrs (15%), 76-85 (6.5%) and only 2.5% representing 26-35yrs. This may be indicative of older respondents representing homeowners. It is important to represent that 20% of respondents considered themselves to be on a low income, earning less than \$650 per week.

Demographic: Respondants identify as



Demographic: Age of respondents



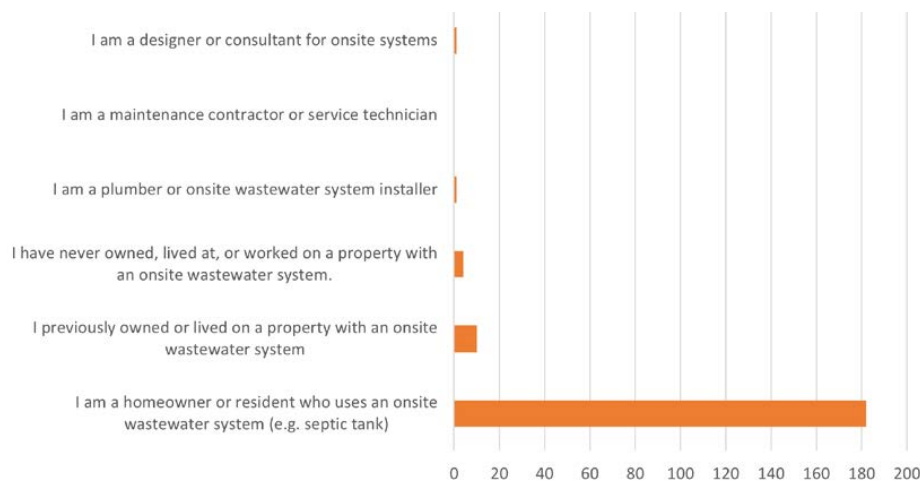
What We Heard

Community Profile and Experience

The majority of respondents (91.92%) are current homeowners or residents using an onsite wastewater (septic) systems or people who previously owned or lived on a property with an onsite wastewater system (5.05%), indicating a relevant and experienced sample group. 2.02% have never owned, lived at, or worked on a property with an onsite wastewater system.

Whilst there was minimal input from professionals such as installers (i.e. plumbers) or designers of septic systems at 1%, their input is important, however insights are primarily from end-users.

Respondant category breakdown

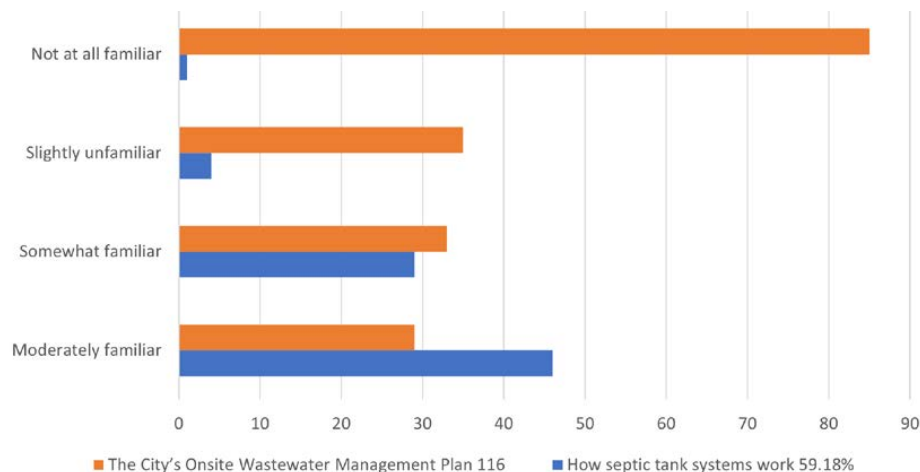


Knowledge and Familiarity (Septics & Plan)

Respondents show strong familiarity with how septic systems work with 59.18% very familiar and 23.47% moderately familiar, reflecting practical knowledge from daily use.

In contrast, awareness of the City's Onsite Wastewater Management Plan is lower, being 43.37% not at all familiar, 17.86% slightly unfamiliar, highlighting a gap in understanding of council specific initiatives.

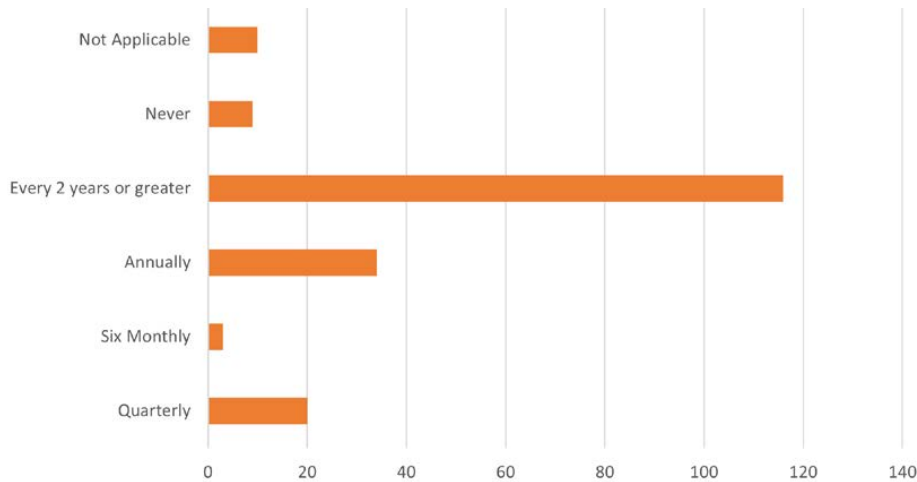
Respondant category breakdown



Maintenance Practices

60.42% of respondents reported servicing their system every 2 years or more, 29.69% reported serving annually or more often; 4.69% report never maintaining their systems. It's important to note the survey did not capture the type of system from respondents (i.e. primary or secondary) which may have provided further insight into servicing frequencies. In councils experience occupier knowledge of how to technically classify systems can be inaccurate.

Septic tank servicing frequency

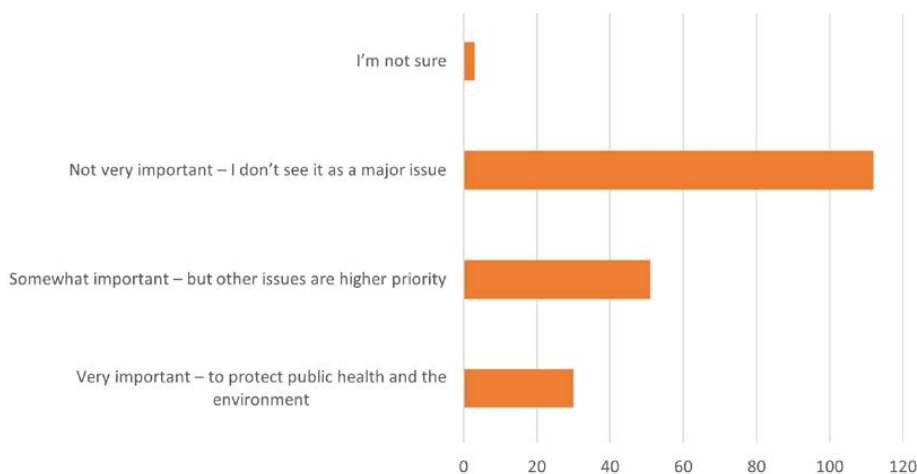


Perceived Importance of Council Management

Over half of respondents (57.1%) view council management of septic systems as 'not very important' (not a major issue), while 26.0% consider it somewhat important but lower priority.

Only 15.3% rate it as very important for protecting public health and the environment, indicating limited community urgency for enhanced oversight.

Importance: Council manage septic tanks



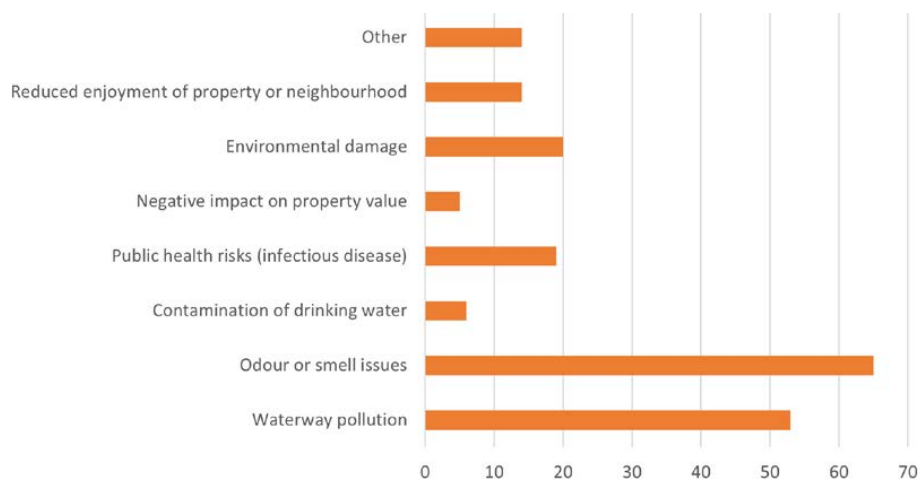
Identified Risks from Poor Management

Nuisances dominate concerns from poorly managed septic system. Odour (smell) issues rank top at 33.16%, followed by waterway pollution (27.04%) and environmental damage (10.20%).

Broader public health impacts like infectious disease risks (9.69%), drinking water contamination (3.06%) were 12.75% collectively. Property value impacts were less emphasized (2.55%), suggesting perceptions focus on sensory and local environmental effects over systemic threats.

Respondents who answered 'other' captured themes that their system was working well, but dependent on system type and build quality. If installed as per council permit there should be no issues, and noting physical failures such as pump failure and overflowing septic tank tanks.

Respondant category breakdown



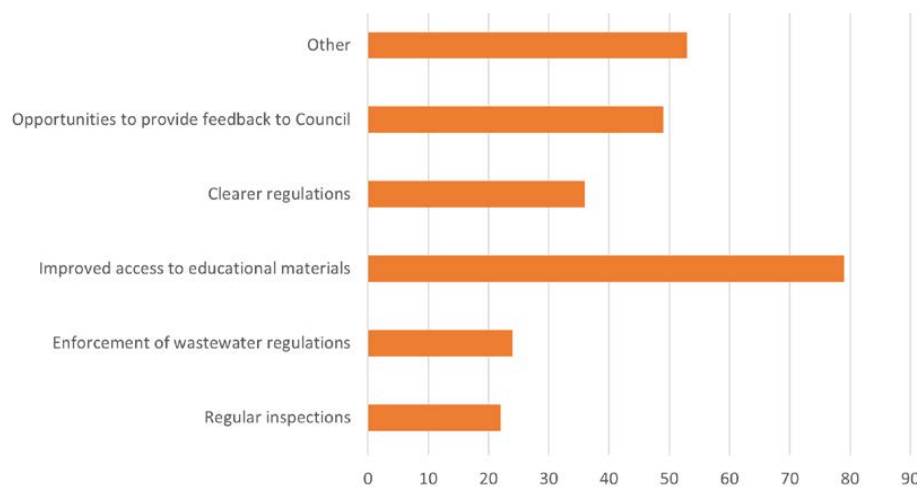
Desired Improvements and Changes

Strong preference for education and resources, with 40.31% wanting improved access to education materials about septic systems.

Community engagement is valued, including opportunities for feedback to council (25.0%) and clearer regulations (18.37%); enforcement (12.24%) and regular inspections (11.22%) rank lower, favouring a supportive over regulatory approach.

Respondents who answered 'other', captured themes of people wanting to connect to the reticulated sewerage system and permission to install alternative systems to those currently approved. Respondents were of the opinion that the management of septic tank systems is the responsibility of the owner.

Improvements or changes in management of septic tanks



Community Sentiment

Community feedback indicated a level of support for the aim of the plan, with many residents emphasising the importance of practical education and resources to help property owners manage their own systems effectively.

However, this was overshadowed by respondents expressing concerns of being burdened with additional costs or regulatory requirements, preferring a focus on guidance and self-management over compliance-driven approaches. This feedback highlights the importance of balancing community expectations with City of Ballarat responsibilities. A risk-based inspection regime combined with an educational approach and access to resources can help build understanding of septic systems within the municipality, benefiting both individual households and the broader community. Strengthening this link can support greater community buy-in and shared responsibility for sustainable wastewater management.

Community Sentiment



Key Stakeholder Feedback

Feedback from Central Highlands Water and catchment management authorities was overall positive. Recognising the work already undertaken in special water supply catchments and supporting the proposed framework. Central Highlands Water would like to see further refinement for routine monitoring, including the resourcing that City of Ballarat plan to provide. There is support for inspecting the historic clusters of properties within or adjacent the declared sewer district (DSD) and sharing data between authorities to identify strategic reticulated sewerage infrastructure.

There were only two responses received from industry professionals. Feedback noted an inconsistency in enforcement by authorities. Challenges faced in ensuring compliance with onsite wastewater management regulations and guidelines. They identified a lack of customer awareness and cooperation for non-compliant systems including the non-compliant practices of competitors.

Closing the Loop & What's Next

Community feedback showed strong support for education and practical information to help property owners manage their septic systems. Many respondents emphasised the importance of regular servicing but wanted more guidance, clear information, and affordable ways to stay compliant rather than additional regulation or fees. Educating owners and occupiers of their responsibilities and appropriate management practices to reduce the risk of system failure will form part of the City of Ballarat approach in conjunction with routine monitoring program of identified high risk areas/systems in both special water supply catchments and the declared sewer district.

It is important to note that City of Ballarat are not intending to implement a levy or fee to fund the implementation of the plan, existing resources will be utilised.

Appendix / Supporting Documentation

A. Survey data (quantitative results)

1. Which of the following best describes your role in relation to onsite wastewater (septic) systems?	Percentage	Number of responses
I am a homeowner or resident who uses an onsite wastewater system (e.g. septic tank)	91.92%	182
I previously owned or lived on a property with an onsite wastewater system	5.05%	10
I have never owned, lived at, or worked on a property with an onsite wastewater system	2.02%	4
I am a plumber or onsite wastewater system installer	0.51%	1
I am a maintenance contractor or service technician	0%	0
I am a designer or consultant for onsite systems	0.51%	1
Total	100.00%	198

2. Do you have a septic tank system on your property?	Percentage	Number of responses
Yes	95.83%	184
No	4.17%	8
Unsure	0%	0
Total	100.00%	192

3. How often do you maintain or service your septic tank system?	Percentage	Number of responses
Quarterly	10.42%	20
Six Monthly	1.56%	3
Annually	17.71%	34
Every 2 years or greater	60.42%	116
Never	4.69%	9
Not Applicable	5.21%	10
Total	100.00%	192

4. How important do you think it is for Council to actively manage septic tank systems in unsewered areas of Ballarat?	Percentage	Number of responses
Very important – to protect public health and the environment	15.31%	30
Somewhat important – but other issues are higher priority	26.02%	51
Not very important – I don't see it as a major issue	57.14%	112
I'm not sure	1.53%	3
Total	100.00%	196

5. What do you think is the greatest risk resulting from poorly maintained (managed) septic tank systems?	Percentage	Number of responses
Waterway pollution	27.04%	53
Odour or smell issues	33.16%	65
Contamination of drinking water	3.06%	6
Public health risks (infectious disease)	9.69%	19
Negative impact on property value	2.55%	5
Environmental damage	10.20%	20
Reduced enjoyment of property or neighbourhood	7.14%	14
Other	7.14%	14
Total	100.00%	196

6. What improvements or changes would you like to see in the management of septic tank systems in our community?	Percentage	Number of responses
Regular inspections	11.22%	22
Enforcement of wastewater regulations	12.24%	24
Improved access to educational materials about septic tank systems	40.31%	79
Clearer regulations	18.37%	36
Opportunities to provide feedback to Council	25.00%	49
Other	27.04%	53
Total	100.00%	196

7. How familiar are you with the following aspects of septic tank systems?						
Answer choices	Very familiar	Moderately familiar	Somewhat familiar	Slightly unfamiliar	Not at all familiar	Total
How septic tank systems work	59.18%	23.47%	14.80%	2.04%	0.51%	100.00%
	116	46	29	4	1	196
The City's Onsite Wastewater Management Plan	7.14%	14.80%	16.84%	17.86%	43.37%	100.00%
	14	29	33	35	85	196

Industry Responses

1. How long have you been working in the onsite wastewater management industry?	Percentage	Number of responses
I have no experience	0%	0
Less than 1 year	0%	0
More than 1 year but less than 5 years	0%	0
5 – 15 years	0%	0
More than 15 years	100.00%	2
Unsure	0%	0
Total	100.00%	2

3. How frequently do you undertake the following activities in the Ballarat municipality?							
Answer choices	Weekly	Monthly	Quarterly	Annually	Every 2 years or greater	Never	Total
Installation of onsite wastewater management systems	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100.00%	100.00%
	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Maintenance of onsite wastewater management systems	50.00%	0%	0%	0%	0%	50.00%	100.00%
	1	0	0	0	0	1	2

4. What are the most common issues you encounter with onsite wastewater management systems?

Answer choices	Very common	Common	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	Total
System failure	0%	50.00%	0%	50.00%	0%	100.00%
	0	1	0	1	0	2
Improper maintenance undertaken	0%	100.00%	0%	0%	0%	100.00%
	0	2	0	0	0	2
Incorrect installation	0%	0%	50.00%	0%	50.00%	100.00%
	0	0	1	0	1	2
Site and soil limitations	0%	50.00%	50.00%	0%	0%	100.00%
	0	1	1	0	0	2
Inadequate land capability assessment	0%	50.00%	0%	0%	50.00%	100.00%
	0	1	0	0	1	2
Complexity of the permit process	0%	0%	0%	50.00%	50.00%	100.00%
	0	0	0	1	1	2
Inadequate or unclear guidance	0%	50.00%	50.00%	0%	0%	100.00%
	0	1	1	0	0	2

5. What challenges do you face in ensuring compliance with onsite wastewater regulations and guidelines in Ballarat?

	Percentage	Number of responses
Complexity of regulations	0%	0
Inconsistency in enforcement by authorities	100.00%	2
Lack of customer awareness or cooperation	50.00%	1
Non-compliant practices of competitors	50.00%	1
No issues (challenges)	0%	0
Other	0%	0
Total	100.00%	2

6. What improvements could be made in the collaboration between Council and industry professionals?

	Percentage	Number of responses
Enforcement of onsite wastewater regulations	100.00%	2
Increased communication / Access to industry relevant updates	50.00%	1
Simplified permit process (new systems/alterations)	0%	0
Opportunities to provide feedback to council	100.00%	2
None	0%	0
Other	0%	0
Total	100.00%	2

B. Engagement Letter



Dear Resident,

RE: Draft Onsite Wastewater Management Plan 2025–2029

Have Your Say on the City of Ballarat draft Onsite Wastewater Management Plan (OWMP) 2025–2029. Onsite wastewater management systems (e.g. septic tank systems) play a vital role in protecting human health, drinking water supplies and the environment.

We invite you to share your feedback to help shape this important document (plan). The OWMP outlines how Council will manage over 3,170 septic systems across Ballarat. To access a short, 10-minute survey you can:



Scan this QR code to view the City of Ballarat's MySay page, or visit mysay.ballarat.vic.gov.au

- Request a hard copy of the questionnaire with reply paid envelope by calling or emailing City of Ballarat at:
03 5320 5500
environmentalhealth@ballarat.vic.gov.au
- Collect a hard copy in person at Customer Service:
The Phoenix Building
25 Armstrong Street South
Ballarat Central VIC 3350



Scan this QR code for further information on Onsite Wastewater Management Systems (Septic Tanks)

City of Ballarat
Environmental Health Unit



Customer Service

Monday to Friday, 8.30am–5pm

Phone

5320 5500

Email

info@ballarat.vic.gov.au

Postal Address

PO Box 655

Ballarat, VIC 3353

Website

ballarat.vic.gov.au

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All information correct at time of publication.