



Drainage is one of those 'out of sight and out of mind' type things. For most of us, the only time we contemplate drainage is when it goes wrong. In fairness, there wasn't really a lot any of us living in towns and cities could do in terms of maintaining old-fashioned drains other than not putting stuff down them that shouldn't go down them.

But all this is changing. With the advent of Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS), drainage is no longer just hidden under the ground. It is no longer the sole preserve of water companies, drainage & sewerage companies and local authorities. Residents and community groups can now play a (vital) role in SuDS; in how they are deployed and in how/when they are maintained. Which is fantastic, well, would be fantastic if those self-same residents and communities could get a clear picture of what SuDS are and how they function!

There is, of course, a wealth of exceedingly useful and valuable information out there. Ever since SuDS started to become a thing, the construction industry started to provide excellent technical information on their CIRIA and susdrain websites to help their members understand, plan, construct and maintain SuDS. However, this information isn't aimed at people who don't have drainage or SuDS expertise. It is robust technical information for experts. Which is where Teresa and Phiala come in. But it does beg the question what a narratologist and a Food Scientist are doing writing a document entitled 'Simple SuDS' that tells you about swales and rain gardens.....

In 2007 Phiala was, like many other people, dragged into the world of Flood Risk Management when flood water threatened her home in July of that year. She was lucky, the water only lapped around her front door and crept into her garage, her home remained dry. Many, many, thousands of others weren't so lucky. However, like many other people who live at risk of flooding, the psychological impact of that event stayed with Phiala for a long time.

Similar, but less dramatic events in 2008 and 2009 led Phiala and her neighbours to set up Loddon Valley Residents Association. For them, it felt like nothing was seemingly being done to manage their flood risk and they saw the need to take back some control. This led to the establishment of partnership meetings with the local flood authorities and becoming involved in planning (another steep learning curve). And ultimately to becoming a Trustee of the National Flood Forum, an independent member of the Thames Regional Flood & Coast Committee and doing a part time PhD on flooding and community engagement (around a day job as a Research Director for a food, drink and personal care research agency).

Compared with Phiala, Teresa was a late-starter and first became involved as a Parish Councillor in 2011 when her local area began to see increased flooding. Having directly experienced the helplessness you feel as the water comes closer to your property (like Phiala, she was lucky, it only came to the door), she worked to get the local community included in an Environment Agency and County Council property level resilience (PLR) scheme, creating a Parish-wide flood plan along the way. Then, when the Somerset Levels and Moors flooded so spectacularly in 2014, she founded the West Somerset Flood Group of towns and parishes to speak up for the people of West Somerset. The group published a report detailing how the flashy high-risk steep valleys of West Somerset, with their scattered population and high runoff, have a very different experience of flooding from the Levels, as do our coastal communities. Now also Vice Chair of the District Flood Board and convenor of the West Somerset Natural Flood Management People and Partnerships group (yep, a mouthful, but you have to be careful not to tread on others' toes), she has ended up working to join up local networks, create partnerships, challenge received wisdom and inspire people to think about the impacts of the Climate Emergency wherever she can. In particular, she wants those who manage flood risk to recognise that communities are their equal partners in tackling issues to do with flooding.

Becoming a 'floodie' often requires you to go on a number of exceedingly steep learning curves. The floodie world is full of self-taught amateur experts (that's us folks) in everything from planning, drainage, soil and hydrology to governance, third sector activities, and grant applications. There is a HUGE amount of experiential knowledge out there that could greatly benefit others, and we are hoping that the launch of this document sets in motion the development of other resident and community group developed guides.

The language of flood risk management is fraught with acronyms and abbreviations (FCERM LTIS anyone?) and specialised terms which often mean you spend your first few years with a glossary permanently by your side (and often you need a glossary to understand the glossary). And that's all before you realise that different experts use these technically terms differently!

Supporting and representing flood risk communities

Both Teresa and Phiala now look back at those early years wishing we knew then what we know now. This is never more the case than with drainage. We have both witnessed new development going up and wish that we'd had the knowledge to intervene and get things installed and maintained correctly. We have sat in planning meetings where long-serving officers and agents still think that drainage is a minor detail to be sorted out after permission has been granted. We have ground our teeth when Planning Authorities set standard drainage conditions that nobody will inspect or enforce, or that we know will be unworkable in practice. And we have seen a few horrors during construction that could have been challenged by a well-informed local community group. SuDS should not involve horror stories. They present a unique opportunity not just to tackle flooding but also to provide a range of other benefits, not least to provide attractive green/blue spaces for us all to enjoy. Wouldn't it be lovely if SuDS were a love story (although, in practice, we suspect it would be more of a RomCom).

This is really how the idea for the Simple SuDS guide came about. Then, when Phiala was conducting PhD interviews with Lead Local Flood Authority members, she found a clear call for information on SuDS that residents and community groups could use to support the work of the Lead Local Flood Authorities (the rights and wrongs of this are, of course, up for debate!).

From the very beginning it was clear that simplicity and everyday language were required to help residents and communities wrap their heads around SuDS. If you are faced with a swale that is constantly full of water or a retention basin that constantly runs dry, what on earth do you do? How do you even know it's a swale or retention basin and how do you know if this is right or wrong, to whom do you turn too and how, on earth, do you go about understanding all the SuDS that may have been deployed on your development? Where do you start? Well, you can view it as a mystery story and play detective yourselves. Or you can read our Simple SuDS guide.

Simple SuDS has been designed by residents (floodies) for residents. Teresa and Phiala have worked exceedingly hard to ensure that plain non-technical English has been used (and please do flag up anything you think is unclear) to provide a non-nonsense explanation of the technical terms that residents and community groups will doubtless encounter on their SuDS learning curve.

That said, nobody wants a guide to a technical device to be written by any old people which is simple but not quite right! Fortunately for all of us, it is not just Teresa and Phiala who have invested time in creating this Simple SuDS guide. We've had a lot of advice from experts, for example CIRIA's Paul Shaffer (we really can't thank Paul enough for his generosity, in terms of both the time he has given us and the platform CIRIA have provided for the document) and his colleague Louise Walker, Eleanor Starkey from Newcastle University and Anna Beasley from JBA consulting. It was very important to both Teresa and Phiala that the document was factually correct. Just being simple isn't good enough!

'Simple SuDS' is a living and breathing document. Our aspiration is that it should grow with the experiences of other residents and community groups. That the expert knowledge held within these groups and individuals should be brought together and included in the guide. After all, it is only through gathering all forms and types of knowledge that you can hope to have any understanding of something so complex as flood risk management and drainage.

We know all too well that we haven't looked at the very thorny issue of SuDS in the Planning process, but we hope that, in the near future, there will be another guide to sit alongside this one to help local people find their way through that maze. Equally, we hope that there will soon be a guide to SuDS for homeowners, setting out the many ways that people can manage water on their own properties for a safer, cleaner and more sustainable world.

Access the

[Simple SuDS for Local People – A Guide to Sustainable Drainage in Developments](#)

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