

DAPTC – Emergency Preparedness Survey Report

Key findings

- a. **Flooding and weather-related disruption dominate the risk picture.**
Surface water, groundwater, sea flooding, strong winds, heat, snow, and ice are all identified across the county. Of these, flooding (67.82% likely/very likely) and wind (68.7%) are cited as most likely.
- b. **Transport disruption is a major operational issue.**
Councils frequently mention road traffic accidents (66.95% likely/very likely), and to a lesser extent road closures, access restrictions, diversions, and high-speed roads through villages.
- c. **Preparedness is highly uneven.**
Some councils have mature or evolving plans (36.52%), while many have no formal plan (43.48%) and several say they do not consider one necessary (20%).
- d. **Where plans exist, councils often want help to refresh or test them.**
Existing plans are not always up to date, fully resourced, or 'road-tested'. One in five councils would like to test their plans.
- e. **Volunteer capacity is a recurring weakness.**
Councils often lack enough trained volunteers, contingency cover, or confidence about roles in an emergency. 48.9% of those responding to a survey question about capacity, either disagreed that volunteer capacity was sufficient, or did not know.
- f. **Equipment and storage are common gaps.**
PPE, radios, hi-vis clothing, generators, first aid kits, signage, lighting, sandbags, and secure storage are repeatedly mentioned.
- g. **Communications resilience is mixed.**
Some councils report good mobile and broadband coverage, but a significant proportion report that mobile coverage (35.65%) and/or broadband (19.13%) are poor.
- h. **Many councils do not budget specifically for emergency planning.**
Some partially budget and seek grants; others fund work ad hoc; most (61% of those responding) do not allocate anything separately.
- i. **Councils want support to be local, practical and proportionate.**
Preferred support includes introductory briefings and dedicated council sessions. 76% expressed a desire for a briefing of some kind.
- j. **There is a strong distinction in respondents' minds between emergency services and parish-level community coordination.**
Several comments show uncertainty about the council's role and what is realistically Expected

Analysis of responses

A. The local risk picture is varied and strongly place-based

Breaking down responses by location, the survey confirmed that Dorset is not a single risk area, the type depending heavily on geography.

- **Rural villages and parishes** focus on flooding from rivers, groundwater and drains, road traffic accidents, blocked access, fast traffic, and road diversions through narrow lanes.

B. Flooding and severe weather are the strongest recurring themes

Whilst flooding was a strong theme (67.82% considered it likely/very likely), comments identify it as taking multiple forms:

- a. property and business flooding

- b. surface water flooding
- c. groundwater flooding
- d. sea flooding
- e. sewer overflow
- f. flooding linked to blocked drains or heavy rainfall

Strong winds are even more frequently identified as a risk (68.7% likely/very likely), sometimes accompanied by fallen trees and powerline disruption. Several councils also point to heat, snow and ice, but these are generally seen as less frequent or less immediately disruptive than flooding.

This indicates that most councils are thinking first about weather-driven events, especially where they recur regularly enough to affect roads, homes, and access to services.

C. Transport and access disruption are central local resilience concerns

Whilst responses about weather-related events show that councils are worried about dramatic “headline” emergencies, road traffic incidents also rank highly amongst risks (58.26% cite them as likely/very likely). Arguably the consequences are less severe, but the following consequences may nonetheless require a localised emergency response:

- a. road closures
- b. traffic congestion and diversions
- c. key routes being cut off
- d. narrow lanes used as diversion routes
- e. limited pavement provision and pedestrian safety
- f. isolation caused by geography or single-route access

In several comments, respondents note that a single incident on a main road can isolate a parish or overwhelm local routes. That is highly relevant for planning, because it means emergency arrangements must include traffic management, route alternatives, and communication with neighbours and principal authorities.

D. Many councils have no formal plan, or only partial arrangements

The responses around the existence of Community Emergency Response Plans suggest a significant deficit in local preparedness:

- a. No plan and no current need perceived (20%)
- b. No plan, but want to know more (43.48%)
- c. Draft or embryonic plan (12.17%)
- d. Existing plan needing refresh or testing (24.35%)

There appeared to be confusion between Business Continuity Plans and Community Emergency Response Plans. This is a small but important finding. It implies that future guidance should explain the difference clearly.

E. Councils with plans often need help to move from paper to practice

Even where a plan exists, individual comments from many councils identify gaps:

- the plan is out of date
- it needs reformatting
- it needs to be aligned to a Dorset template
- it needs testing
- it needs better logging, reporting, and review processes
- it needs clearer ownership and resourcing
- it needs a better point of contact in Dorset Council during incidents

This is a classic “maturity gap”: the plan may exist, but the operational confidence to use it is weaker than the document itself suggests.

F. Volunteer capacity and training are major vulnerabilities

The survey suggests that volunteer resilience is often assumed rather than built. Councils frequently say they:

- a. do not have a pool of trained volunteers (39% of those responding considered their community to have sufficient capacity, 25% said that training covered required knowledge/skills, and 16.3% said volunteers were trained in the use of equipment)
- b. need more contingency in the volunteer base (48.9% of those responding to a survey question about capacity, either disagreed that volunteer capacity was sufficient or did not know)
- c. need more accessible training (only 21% considered training to be easily accessible)
- d. need first aid, safeguarding, interpersonal and technical training
- e. need clearer roles in an emergency

Where councils do have stronger arrangements, individual respondents refer to:

- f. flood wardens
- g. first responders
- h. local farmers
- i. community volunteers
- j. WhatsApp or email groups
- k. annual training or exercises

This suggests that Dorset-wide support should not only help councils write plans, but also help them create and sustain a realistic volunteer network.

G .Equipment, places of safety and storage are recurring

The comments show a consistent pattern: councils know what they might need, but not always how to secure, store, maintain or fund it.

Items commonly referred to in comments include:

- a. PPE, including hi-vis jackets
- b. radios or walkie-talkies
- c. portable generators and charging stations
- d. torches and emergency lighting
- e. first aid kits and blankets
- f. sandbags and flood equipment
- g. barriers, cones and signage
- h. water pumps
- i. public alert systems

Only 25.6% of respondents said they had appropriate equipment storage arrangements.

A majority (63.6%) of those responding about places of safety confirmed that such a facility had been designated. Comments revealed that places of safety are sometimes identified informally — usually village halls, churches, pubs or scout huts — but not always formally designated. In some cases, councils are still negotiating with trustees or committees. This is significant, because a place of safety is only useful if it is agreed in advance, accessible, and supported by clear expectations about storage, opening, and use.

H. Communications resilience is mixed and sometimes fragile

Many respondents report good mobile (29.57%) and broadband (44.35%) coverage, but there

are enough exceptions to show that communications are a key resilience issue. Councils mention:

- a. loss of internet access
- b. no landlines
- c. network overload during incidents
- d. need for multi-channel communications
- e. WhatsApp, email and local contact lists
- f. the value of radios and alert systems

This suggests that emergency plans should assume communications failure as a realistic scenario, not a remote possibility.

I. Budgeting and governance are inconsistent

Many councils (61% of those responding to a specific question) say they do not budget for Community Emergency Response Plans. Some budget partially and seek grants; some fully fund the work themselves; others rely on ad hoc officer time.

This matters because a plan without time, money, equipment and review arrangements is unlikely to be sustained. It also suggests that emergency planning should be treated as part of core resilience and community leadership, not as an optional extra.

J. Councils want support that is practical, not theoretical

The strongest support preferences are:

- i. an online or in-person briefing (42%)
- j. a briefing for the clerk and/or other relevant officer (24%)

Drawing on responses to related questions and individual comments, the following are also identified as helpful to councils:

- table-top or desktop exercises
- clear guidance on what the council is expected to do
- help from Dorset Council when a plan is invoked

This is a very clear signal. Councils do not generally want lengthy theory or technical policy papers; they want usable tools.

Discussion

The main policy implication of the survey is that Dorset's parish and town councils are willing to contribute to local resilience, but they need a clearer, lighter-touch and more practical framework. The strongest need is not for complex doctrine, but for confidence, coordination and realistic tasking.

Drawing on the analysis at 4 above, three themes stand out:

- a. **Capability varies widely.**
Some councils are ready to refresh and test plans. Others are starting from scratch. A single support offer will not suit all.
- b. **Local context matters more than generic risk lists.**
Coastal, rural, infrastructure-adjacent and market-town settings each have different priorities.
- c. **Councils need to understand their role.** Several responses imply uncertainty about the boundary between council action, community support, and principal authority/emergency service responsibility.

There is also a valuable methodological lesson. A few respondents questioned whether it is reasonable to ask parish councillors to estimate hazard frequency for unlikely events. That feedback suggests

future engagement should be simpler, more qualitative, and more focused on practical capability than on speculative likelihood scoring.

Recommended actions

Combining the analysis in section 4 above with the themes identified in section 5, and drawing on DAPTC's knowledge of the town and parish council sector, the following actions are recommended:

Immediate priorities

Produce a Dorset emergency planning starter pack

- plain-English explanation of the council role
- difference between business continuity and community response
- minimum recommended plan structure
- local template and checklist

Offer tiered support

- introductory briefing
- plan-building support
- refresh-and-test support
- bespoke support for higher-risk councils

Create a named contact route

- a clear point of contact for councils during planning (support via DAPTC) and 'live' incidents (support via Dorset Council)
- escalation guidance for emergency situations

Short-term actions

Develop a simple exercise and testing package

- desktop/tabletop exercise format [already developed and in use]
- annual review guidance
- debrief and lessons-learned template

Publish practical checklists

- places of safety
- equipment and storage
- volunteer roles
- communications arrangements
- emergency contact lists

Support volunteer and training capacity

- training menu for clerks, councillors and volunteers
- promote cooperation between neighbouring councils

Medium-term actions

Segment support by council type and risk profile

- coastal
- flood-prone
- trunk-road / access-constrained
- large town councils
- small parishes and parish meetings

Encourage formal agreements with local venues

- village halls
- churches
- pubs
- scout huts
- other community buildings
- clarify storage and access arrangements

Promote realistic budgeting

- modest annual resilience funding provision (revenue and/or reserves)
- grant opportunities where appropriate

Longer-term actions

Repeat the survey after support has been delivered

- shorter, more practical format
- less reliance on guesswork
- focus on changes in capability, confidence and uptake

DAPTC will engage with Dorset Council's Emergency Management & Resilience team to consider these recommendations, and whether we have a part to play in their delivery. We recognise that the approach needs to be practically achievable.

7. Conclusion

The survey provides a strong and useful picture of emergency preparedness across Dorset's parish and town councils.

Overall, the findings show that local councils are aware of the risks facing their communities, particularly flooding in its various forms, severe weather, road disruption, power loss, and fire. Many respondents also demonstrated a strong understanding of more localised or place-specific risks, including coastal erosion, cliff movement, road access problems, sewage overflow, fuel depot hazards, cyber disruption, and pollution incidents. This is an important strength: councils are not approaching emergency planning as an abstract exercise, but from a practical understanding of the realities in their own areas.

At the same time, analysis of the survey shows that preparedness is uneven. Some councils already have emergency plans, have begun drafting them, or are seeking to refresh and test established arrangements. Others rely mainly on informal networks, or the expectation that Dorset Council and the emergency services would take the lead in a major incident. This means the sector is not starting from zero, but neither is it operating at a consistent level of readiness. There is a clear gap between awareness of risk and the practical capability to respond.

The most significant needs identified are not sophisticated technical solutions, but basic practical support: clearer guidance on the council role, template plans, introductory briefings, testing exercises, volunteer recruitment and training, equipment lists, places of safety, and improved communication arrangements. Many councils also highlighted limitations in funding, storage, and access to trained volunteers. Taken together, these responses suggest that progress will depend on making emergency planning feel achievable, proportionate, and directly relevant to local circumstances.

The overall message is therefore encouraging but also challenging. There is evident goodwill, local knowledge, and willingness to engage. What is needed now is a structured and tiered support offer that helps councils move from interest to action, and from draft arrangements to tested resilience. If Dorset Council and its partners can provide simple, practical, locally adaptable support, there is a strong opportunity to improve community preparedness across the county in a realistic and sustainable way.

DAPTC Deputy Chief Executive

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