

Place and Resources Scrutiny Committee

21 May 2026

Emergency Response to Flooding Incidents in Dorset (Storm Chandra)

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member: Click or tap to enter a date.
Cllr S Bartlett, Planning and Emergency Planning

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:
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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 This report summarises Dorset Council's response to Storm Chandra and the subsequent ground water flooding, with a focus on the lessons learnt. For avoidance of doubt, this debrief report focuses solely on the Council's response to the flooding, not any remedial action. Full Council on 10 February announced additional flood prevention funding, and initiated a formal investigation into the flooding – a mix of statutory S19 site specific flood investigation reports alongside a wider strategic review covering the whole Dorset Council area. This was subject to a separate report being considered by Cabinet on 19 May 2026.
- 1.2 Exceptional rainfall, including Storm Chandra, led to widespread flooding that affected homes, businesses, roads and vital services. Many communities experienced significant disruption, and in some cases devastating impacts. Flooding from groundwater remained dominant across the Dorset central chalk band, with a rare Amber warning for ground water being declared by the EA on 31 January 2026 and remaining in place for a number of weeks.
- 1.3 Debriefing following response to incidents is a key part of the emergency planning cycle, with learnings fed into future planning and response. Responses of the magnitude of the Storm Chandra flooding are generally subject to a Dorset Council debrief, which then feeds into a wider Local Resilience Forum debrief. The focus of this report is Dorset Council's own debrief findings, identifying what went well, what

didn't go so well, and what could we do better in future. This will hopefully provide the Committee with a worked example of how learnings are achieved and future service delivery improved.

2. **Recommendation(s)**

- 2.1 That the Place and Resources note the findings of the debriefing.

3. **Reason for the recommendation(s)**

- 3.1 To provide assurance over the Council's response, and the processes for organisational learning.

4. **Storm Chandra**

- 4.1 Dorset experienced several intense rainfall events through January 2026, culminating in Storm Chandra (26–27th), which delivered exceptionally heavy rain onto already saturated catchments. This led to increased surface water run-off into already swollen rivers and streams, with groundwater reaching unprecedented levels, with a rare Amber warning for ground water being declared by the Environment Agency on 31 January 2026 and remaining in place for a number of weeks.
- 4.2 Flooding was widespread across Dorset, affecting residential properties, businesses, the road network and sewage systems. In the worst cases, the internal property flooding to people's homes was devastating.
- 4.3 Following Storm Chandra, conditions remained unsettled through February 2026. The Environment Agency's Wessex situation reports show that January 2026 was the second wettest on record for the Wessex area, with average rainfall being 200% of the long-term average with 190mm rainfall. Groundwater levels across the chalk aquifer were above normal to exceptionally high throughout February and March – the highest since records began. Throughout early February to March, multiple Environment Agency groundwater flood warnings remained in force.

5. **Emergency Response**

- 5.1 The Dorset Local Resilience Forum (LRF) is the principal mechanism for multi-agency cooperation under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (which is the UK's primary legislation for emergency preparedness and response. It establishes a legal framework for how organisations prepare for, respond to, and recover from major incidents).
- 5.2 There are statutory requirements on local authorities (alongside Police; Fire; Ambulance Service; Health; Environment Agency) who are defined as "Category One responders". The Dorset LRF is based on the Dorset Constabulary boundary. Collectively LRF partners will co-ordinate the response and, should any partners become overwhelmed, support their delivery with resourcing or capability at their

disposal. The principle mechanisms for this in response are: i) PEAT – pre-event assessment teleconference – where we consider implications of a response and preparedness based on intelligence received; ii) Strategic Coordinating Group – a meeting of senior “Gold” officers to set the strategy for response; and iii) Tactical Coordinating Group – a meeting of “silver” officers that determine the tactical response to the strategy that has been set. This is then delivered by “bronze” – highways teams; fire personnel etc.

- 5.3 Dorset Council operates a “command and control” structure, which is set out in its Emergency Response Plan. In many instances emergency planning and other teams will respond to incidents without activation of this plan. However, it is mobilised where the incident is significant or is escalated to the LRF. Our command and control structure consists of Gold (strategic) at Senior Leadership Team level; and Silver (tactical) fulfilled by a range of officers across the Corporate Director, Heads of Service and Service Manager positions. They are supported by the Emergency Management and Resilience Team, as tactical advisors, and Local Authority Liaison Officers – a pool of staff that have volunteered their services to be the “eyes and ears” on the scene of an incident, as well as the conduit with emergency services on the ground. This command and control structure is subject to a 24/7 duty rota, 365 days a year.
- 5.4 A range of other services have an out of hours provision, including Highways, Communications, Customer Services, Building Control, Flood & Coastal Engineers, Adult Social Care, Children's Services and Assets and Property. For a response such as Storm Chandra, other services are also called upon outside of these standby arrangements, but this is on a “best endeavours” basis, alongside calling on additional (i.e. ‘not on duty’) support to bolster out of hours provision.
- 5.5 Weather events are generally classed as “rising tide” incidents, insofar as there is a lead-in period where intelligence can be gathered and resource/capability can be assessed. This would ordinarily be the weather alerts and warnings issued by the Met Office. Any LRF partner can determine the need for a PEAT/Pre-event Assessment Teleconference. Based on the Met Office intelligence, relevant Dorset Council teams were approached to determine whether there was a need to stand up a pre-emptive Incident Management Team (IMT). IMT’s are our internal mechanisms for seeking assurance that all key services are informed, have the capability to mobilise relevant resources based on the intelligence received, determine any further actions necessary, and inform those officers (Gold/Silver) that may then input at the LRF / multi-agency level.
- 5.6 Consulted services did not deem that a pre-emptive IMT was necessary, based on the intelligence received, and were comfortable in their preparations. Similarly, no LRF partner deemed it necessary to call a PEAT. Overnight rainfall (26th / 27th January) and subsequent flooding exceeded anticipated levels based on the intelligence. An LRF PEAT was called early on 27th January, and soon morphed into an LRF Tactical Coordinating Group (TCG), as the level of flooding and disruption was requiring significant response across a range of partners. Following this Dorset Council invoked

its own IMT that sat throughout the initial days of response, chaired by Silver and Gold. For this particular response, Silver was the Head of ICT Operations and Gold was the Director for Legal and Democratic Services.

- 5.7 Between 27 and 30 January 2026, a total of seven TCGs were held, reflecting the sustained and evolving nature of the incident. Flooding affected multiple areas at different times rather than a single hotspot, requiring an ongoing reassessment of impacts and priorities.
- 5.8 The flooding put significant pressure on a number of Dorset Council teams – both in and out of hours (who had also been responding to a range of weather events leading up to Storm Chandra, alongside other incidents):
- 5.9 Highways Team responded to over 100 cases of serious flooding. A number of Dorset's main roads became temporarily impassable. These included:
 - Parts of the A37, A354, A350, A356 and the B3092
 - A35 from Organford Lane to A351 Bakers Arms
 - A35 at Winterbourne Abbas (National Highways Trunk Road)
 - A351 at Corfe Castle
- 5.10 The highways response was site specific, but included a range of road closures; temporary lights; liaison with flood wardens; gully clearance and jetting of drains. With the level of groundwater as high as it was, further mitigation was often limited, as there was nowhere to disperse the water to. Aside from the Councils action taken to try and prevent and mitigate impacts, there were occasions where unfortunately the only option was to evacuate premises on the grounds of safety and relocate residents to a place of safety. This then becomes a multi agency response, with the fire service helping residents from their homes, and the Council providing temporary accommodation – whether through the mobilisation of rest centres or rehousing. Although it is quite common that those displaced will make their own arrangements, via families and friends.
- 5.11 Evacuations were required from a number of sites – most notably Thornicombe Travellers site near Blandford and Gladelands Park Homes site in Ferndown, with rest centres and temporary accommodation mobilised. In addition some relocations from East Street in Blandford and the transfer of a resident with care needs within the winterbournes (alongside an evacuation carried out by the housing provider, utilising their business continuity arrangements). Although not stood-up, a rest centre was near to mobilisation for parts of Dorchester and on standby for East Street in Blandford.
- 5.12 The response required active involvement of a large number of teams in and out of hours, including (but not limited to) – Highways; Emergency Planning; Communications; Gypsy and Traveller Liaison; Customer Services; Dorset Travel; Local Authority Liaison Officers; Housing; Adults and Children's Social Care teams.

- 5.13 Following conclusion of a response, the Council actively undertakes a debrief with the key services that responded to understand i) what went well; ii) what didn't go so well; and iii) what could be done differently in future. The key findings are set out in Section 6 of this report. Just to reiterate, this is separate to the future prevention considerations and investigations that are subject to the Cabinet report on the 19 May.
- 5.14 Flooding events of the magnitude as those experienced posed by Storm Chandra also emphasise the need for communities and individuals to look at their own resilience plans. Embedding community resilience is key, and Dorset Council is committed to improving this and supporting future development. We are working with Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils to liaise with individual parish and town councils to better identify and understand specific risks within their areas. This doesn't absolve the local authorities and other emergency responders of any need to action, but recognises that there can often be an early intervention at a local level.

6. Key Findings of the Debrief

6.1 What Went Well

- 6.1.1 There was a rapid mobilisation and cohesive multi-service working, both in and out of working hours. The response was deemed to be well organised with clear lines of accountability, good prioritisation and proportionate and decisive decision making, aided by mapping. At times teams were split into separate response teams dealing with concurrent issues, and IMTs were running in parallel.
- 6.1.2 We were able to mobilise rest centres swiftly, staffed by social care colleagues with housing support, and with deployment of multiple Local Authority Liaison Officers acting coordinating on scene and acting as the conduit with emergency services on the ground. For the Thornicombe evacuation, this included transport provision by Dorset Travel and on scene coordination from Gypsy and Traveller Liaison Officers.
- 6.1.3 Public communication was deemed to be clear, particularly around road closures.
- 6.1.4 Highways response was proportionate with operational focus where the risks were deemed highest, managing what was a significant impact on large parts of the highways network.
- 6.1.5 The decision to cancel school transport on 30 January 2026 was made early and decisively, based on the intelligence available.
- 6.1.6 Working across multi agency partners was good, with timely and proportionate LRF meetings. The decision by Dorset Council not to escalate the amber warning for ground water flooding to multi agency Tactical Coordinating Group was the correct one, as there was no further proactive intervention that partners could provide at that time.

6.2 What Didn't Go So Well

- 6.2.1 Due to the extent and prolonged nature of the response, resilience across teams became stretched, with many team members working long hours whilst dealing with concurrent responses. This impacted on highways, emergency management and resilience, social care staff and the small pool of local authority liaison officers (being pulled away from their business as usual roles whilst attending multiple sites). We were fortunate that, whilst we were balancing incidents across wide areas of Dorset, we were not faced with multiple rest centre mobilisations at the same time, or subject to an unrelated concurrent emergency response (such as a significant fire).
- 6.2.2 Some internal communications across teams could be improved. There was some misrouting of calls, and management of reporting lists in and out of hours was not centralised, meaning that there was no single record.
- 6.2.3 Pressures on the small Emergency Management and Resilience team in responding to concurrent incidents meant that there were sometimes delays in notifying and updating ward councillors. Parish and Town Councillors also felt unsighted at times.
- 6.2.4 Data is key to decision making, and at times there was limited data available on the likely impacts of the Amber ground water flooding from Environment Agency. With levels of water in some cases unprecedented, there was no historical data to provide a firm indication of how flooding impacts would further impact.
- 6.2.5 Situational awareness is reliant on early notifications by services, councillors and community escalation. In certain cases, the Emergency Management and Resilience Team were not made aware of particular evacuation risks, which delayed Local Authority Liaison Officer deployment and consideration of rest centre mobilisation. This did not negatively impact on the response, but delayed decision making.

6.3 What Could We Look to do Differently in the Future

- 6.3.1 We need to look out how we can improve our communication channels into Parish and Town councils. Ordinarily there is a view that ward members can in part act as a conduit with the Parish and Town Council. But that is only feasible when they have been suitably briefed themselves, and as stated above, due to the response pressures this was not as prompt or detailed as we would ordinarily expect. This role may sit best outside of the Emergency Management and Resilience Team, and others deeply involved, during such intense incident response.
- 6.3.2 We are looking at how we can better build resilience across our teams, through identification of transferable skills and willing volunteers that can be upskilled as appropriate and temporarily transfer from services that are less time critical, in order to develop a wider cadre of staff that can respond over a prolonged period. This could be enabled via the new Enterprise Resource Planning implementation.

- 6.3.3 We can look at applying the same resourcing model that highways operate for snow events, with stand up of 12 hour shift patterns and suspension of other work.
- 6.3.4 Further progressing our work on joined up data sharing, to ensure that we have an improved visibility of those vulnerable people that are not supported by Dorset Council but potentially left without care or help.
- 6.3.5 Work is already underway (and planned prior to these flooding events) to further enhance community resilience, with an analysis of particular vulnerabilities and exposures within each parish and town council area, and the level of maturity in their own planning. Support is being provided by Dorset Association of Parish and Town Councils. We could also improve “what to do in a flooding incident” guidance for residents that are in specific areas that are more vulnerable to flooding, as part of our drive to improve personal resilience amongst communities.

7. **Alternative options considered**

N/A

8. **Legal considerations**

None

9. **Financial implications**

None, but appreciating that significant responses can result in high levels of unbudgeted cost.

10. **Natural environment, climate & ecology implications**

None, but the changing climate is leading to an increase in response to weather related incidents.

11. **Well-being and health implications**

None, but noting that the response involved prolonged working hours for a number of teams.

12. **Other implications**

None

13. **13. Risk implications**

HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Medium

Residual Risk: Medium

14. **Equalities**

N/A

15.Appendices

None

16. Background papers

None

17. Report sign-off

- 17.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Section 151 Officer and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)