



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

Local Councils and Emergency Planning

Report on a Survey Facilitated by the
National Association of Local Councils

The LSE GV314 Group

September 2025

Introduction

This note sets out and discusses the main findings of an online survey conducted between by the LSE GV314 Group between February and May 2025. The questionnaire (Appendix A) was sent by officers at the National Association of Local Councils to members through two routes. First through an email to the chairs of the County Associations of local councils (N=43) to distribute to their members and second through inclusion in an emailed Newsletter, circulated to “around 7,000” members. The number of usable responses (i.e. those who had completed the survey and agreed to participate in the research) was 415. 289 responses came through the County Chairs and 126 through the Newsletter. The questionnaire was anonymous and did not ask respondents to name the authority they represented, so it is possible that two or more responses came from the same parish or town council and we were unable to determine the extent of any such overlap. The method of administering the questionnaire means that it is not possible to calculate a total response rate.

Unless otherwise stated “council” in this report refers to a town or parish council.

The LSE GV314 Group consists of staff and students in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics and Political Science following the undergraduate course *Empirical Research in Government* (course code GV314).

Contact: The LSE GV314 Group
e.c.page@lse.ac.uk

Experiences and activities in past emergencies

All parts of the United Kingdom experienced the COVID-19 emergency between 2020 and 2022. The large majority of respondents, 85 per cent, reported that their council helped at least a little or some of the time (53 per cent) and around one third (32 per cent) helped all or most of the time. Only 15 per cent reported their council did not help at all. Respondents from councils located in towns were more likely to report being active the whole time ("urban with a significant rural population" 48 per cent and "urban covering whole or part of a city or town" 40 per cent) than parts of conurbations (33 per cent) or "largely or mainly rural" areas (29 per cent). There appears to be some regional variation too, with greater activity reported in the South West (44 per cent) and South East (41 per cent) than the East Midlands (19 per cent) and the North West (19 per cent).

For those reporting some activity, the most commonly cited was that of "signposting sources of support" for their communities (84 per cent reported their council did this). This was also among the "most important" services provided by respondents' councils during COVID-19, with 50 per cent citing it as one of the two most important of the services they provided. Among the more commonly reported activities, and more frequently rated as important were "collecting food or medical supplies" (54 per cent and 45 per cent respectively) and "identifying vulnerable people" (57 and 31 per cent). A range of other services – providing local information to service providers of other authorities and bodies, facilitating local distancing, arranging transport and events, counselling, providing personal protective equipment were reported as activities their council had provided but were not considered as important as the top three.

Table 1 How respondent's council helped in COVID-19

	% did this	% rated most important
Signposting sources of support	84	50
Collecting food and/or medical supplies	54	45
Identifying vulnerable	57	31
Local information to service providers	54	14
Facilitating social distancing	39	10
Arranging transport	20	6
Arranging events	19	5
Counselling	17	4
Personal protective equipment	15	2
Arranging repairs	6	1
Other	19	9
Total	384*	177*

*N=346, totals add to over 100 per cent as multiple responses possible

Among the “other” ways in which councils helped were details and variants of the activities already listed as well as a range of different kinds of activity including making available a network of volunteers able to offer help of different kinds, depending on the circumstances of the person or household, collating details of businesses able to deliver food, setting up ways of getting information to people without access to computers or smart phones and some pointed to activities specifically tailored to the locality such as one respondent who reported “[We] safely opened the public toilets which the management trust gave up during the pandemic. We are in a tourist hotspot so were inundated with visitors when restrictions began to ease”.

We asked whether respondents’ councils had experience of any other kinds of emergencies aside from COVID-19 in the past 10 years, with an emergency defined as “a turn of events that threatens serious damage to human welfare, the environment or security of the community”. Two-thirds of respondents (66 per cent) reported no emergency in their council while one third did, with 20 per cent reporting one emergency and 13 per cent more than one. Respondents from the North East (63 per cent) and the North West (42 per cent) were the most likely to report one or more emergency, while those from the East of England (20 per cent) and the West Midlands (25 per cent) the least, with the remaining regions closer to the average of 33 per cent. These emergencies were predominantly weather-related and included dealing with floods (52 per cent of those reporting one or more other emergencies), storms (42 per cent), power cuts (38 per cent). 22 per cent described the emergency as involving “other” issues such as civil unrest, major fires, interruption of utility supply, major traffic accident and sink holes.

Table 2 sets out how respondents’ councils helped in the other emergency. Because the nature of the emergencies differed the categories of help are also different, though as with COVID-19, signposting local people to sources of support was a commonly reported activity (71 per cent of respondents) and generally perceived to be among the two most useful for 37 per cent of respondents. Reporting problems to other authorities was more commonly reported (80 per cent) but regarded as marginally less important (34 per cent). Providing sandbags, providing local information to service providers, acting to reduce the impact of the emergency, identifying vulnerable people providing shelter and distributing food or drink were also commonly provided services by councils in an emergency and were also regarded as of importance.

Table 2: Activities in non-COVID-19 emergency

	% did this	% rated most important
Reported problems	80	34
Signposted support	71	37
Provided local knowledge	53	19
Identified vulnerable	43	16
Acted to reduce impact	36	17
Provided sandbags	34	23
Provided shelter	31	16
Distributed food or drink	24	16
Diverted traffic	21	8
Provided electricity	12	5
Counselled	9	2
Transported people	7	0
None of these	11	na
Total	431*	193*

*N=122, totals add to over 100 per cent as multiple responses possible

Experience of emergency planning

We asked whether respondents' councils had emergency plans. 31 per cent responded that they had an emergency plan and a further 11 per cent indicated they had a partial plan for some emergencies rather than a comprehensive emergency plan. 29 per cent had lists of contacts and procedures that could be used in an emergency while a further 29 per cent had no emergency plan of any kind. While 42 per cent of respondents report their councils having either a comprehensive or a partial emergency plan, this was higher in Yorkshire and the Humber (60 per cent), the East of England (51 per cent) and the South West (50 per cent) but lower in the West Midlands (20 per cent) and the North East (32 per cent). Rural areas (44 per cent) appeared slightly more likely than urban areas (32 per cent) to have an emergency plan of some kind.

The most common issue dealt with in councils' emergency plans (see Table 3) are specifying places of safety (90 per cent of plans contain provisions on this matter), signposting residents to sources of help (85 per cent), contacting local volunteers (78 per cent) and locating vulnerable people (73 per cent). Access to utilities (57 per cent) and transportation to safety (27 per cent) were issues covered less widely in emergency plans. The "other" issues covered in emergency plans (9 per cent) included pre-emptive measures (e.g. to prevent flooding), emergency power generation and informing residents what to do in an emergency.

Table 3: Topics covered in emergency plans

	%
Places of safety	90
Signposting	85
Contacting local volunteers	78
Locating vulnerable	73
Tools and equipment	62
Access to utilities	57
Transportation to safety	27
Other	9
Total	480*

*N=173, total adds to over 100 per cent as multiple responses possible

When we asked whether respondents felt their councils should devote more attention to emergency planning, 40 per cent said they should, 32 per cent they should not, 17 per cent that they did not know and 11 per cent gave another answer. These "other" answers included, most commonly, statements explaining that they did not have the time or resources or were otherwise unable to do more. Some in this "other" category set out that they were in the process of doing more and some explained they felt this was not really their function as parish councils. Those councils with a comprehensive written emergency plan were less likely (21 per cent) to agree that the council should devote more attention to emergency planning, those with partial plans were most likely to agree (56 per cent), while 46 per cent of those with no plan would like to see more attention devoted to emergency planning. Councillors were slightly more likely (43 per cent) to favour greater effort than officials (37 per cent). There appeared to be a clear linear effect of length of time respondents have served in their council with those in the council for three years or less far more likely (48 per cent) to favour extra effort for emergency planning than those who have served for 20 years or more (27 per cent). More emergency planning was more favoured by respondents from urban councils (55 per cent) than rural councils (38 per cent) and councils with a rural hinterland (42 per cent). There were some regional differences in responses to this question, most notably respondents in the West Midlands (58 per cent) were more likely to favour more council effort devoted to emergency planning than the North West (31 per cent).

Local Resilience Forums (LRFs), the bodies made up of local public service providers in English localities, have duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to assess and publish a Community Risk Register for each local area which assesses and outlines the main risks it faces. Each of the main member organizations, "category 1" responders, including police, fire, NHS services as well as county, district and unitary councils, has a duty to develop an emergency plan for its own organization.

Consequently, the LRFs, which are encouraged to consult parish and town councils, are both the backbone of the national system of emergency preparedness as well as an important focus of local emergency planning. When we asked respondents whether they were familiar with the work of their LRF, only 7 per cent stated that they followed the work of the LRF closely, a further 39 per cent stated they had "some familiarity" with their LRF's work but the majority, 55 per cent, said they knew "little or nothing" about their LRF. Respondents whose councils had done their own emergency planning tended to know more about their LRF: only 36 per cent of those in councils that had a comprehensive emergency plan said they knew little or nothing about their LRF compared with 61 per cent of those with no kind of emergency plan at all. Moreover, councillors were slightly more likely to say they knew little about their LRF (61 per cent) than officers (49 per cent). Having had experience of emergencies other than COVID-19 also made a slight difference with 58 per cent of those who had not experienced such an emergency knowing little or nothing about the LRF compared with 46 per cent of those who had.

When we asked about the relationship between the LRF and their council, many respondents had difficulty locating their relationship in the set of responses set out in Table 4. Only 12 per cent of respondents indicated a mutual interest between their council and the LRF in emergency planning issues, a further 10 per cent were interested in their LRF, but their LRF did not show any interest in return. 24 per cent indicated a mutual lack of interest between the LRF and the council and a further 5 per cent suggested that they did not reciprocate the LRF's interest in their council. A large portion of respondents said that none of these relationships applied (30 per cent) and 20 per cent did not know. We did not include any follow-up questions to allow us to say why "none of these" options applied, but it is clear that those who selected this option were very unlikely to have any familiarity with the work of their LRF: 77 per cent of respondents selecting this option had little or no familiarity with their LRF as did 82 per cent of those answering "don't know" in Table 4.

Table 4: Which best describes the relationship of respondent's council to the LRF

	%
We're interested in them and they in us	12
We're interested in them but they're not interested in us	10
We're not interested in them but they are interested in us	5
We're not interested in each other	24
None of these applies	30
Don't know	20
Total	100

N=411

Nevertheless, when asked about the future of LRFs very few expressed any firm desire to see them abolished in favour of an alternative set of arrangements for emergency planning. While many respondents (43 per cent) did not know whether changes to the LRF system would enhance emergency planning, 46 per cent wanted the LRFs to carry on; either keeping LRFs as they are (11 per cent) or enhancing their powers (35 per cent). Those who knew most about the work of their LRFs were substantially more likely to suggest LRFs were key to the future of emergency planning; 70 per cent of those who had some familiarity with their LRF believed the LRF should stay as it is or have a strengthened role compared with only 26 per cent without such familiarity.

One question sought to establish views about the particular advantages of local councils in responding to emergencies by asking what makes parish or town councils especially effective in emergencies compared with other responders. We presented a list (Table 5) and asked respondents to pick the two most important contributions. The knowledge of local conditions was cited by 59 per cent as one of the two most important contributions local councils can make.

Table 5: Advantages of local councils in emergencies

	%
Know local conditions	59
Can mobilise local volunteers	34
Can signpost people to other sources of help	28
Can be a very early responder	21
Can provide accommodation and places of safety	18
Have the trust of the local community	17
Have equipment and tools locally	10
Can fill the gaps in services provided by other responders	4
None of these	2
Total	193*

*N=414, totals add to over 100 per cent as multiple responses possible

APPENDIX A

Responses to questions (for precise wordings see Appendix B)

Q1 Your position in the council

	N	%
Councillor	186	45.4
Clerk or other officer	217	52.9
Other	7	1.7
Total	410	100.0

Q2 Was your council able to help in COVID-19?

	N	%
Helped all or most of the time	130	31.9
Helped some of the time	121	29.7
Helped little of the time	94	23.1
Not helped at all	62	15.2
Total	407	100.0

Q3 How your council helped in COVID-19

	N	%
Signposting sources of support	291	84.1
Identifying vulnerable	197	56.9
Collecting food and/or medical supplies	187	54.0
Local information to service providers	186	53.8
Facilitating social distancing	134	38.7
Arranging transport	69	19.9
Arranging events	66	19.1
Counselling	58	16.8
Personal protective equipment	50	14.5
Arranging repairs	21	6.1
Other	67	19.4
Total	1,326	383.2

(N=346, multiple responses possible)

Q4 Most important activity in COVID-19

	N	%
Signposting sources of support	172	49.9
Collecting food and/or medical supplies	156	45.2
Identifying vulnerable	108	31.3
Local information to service providers	49	14.2
Facilitating social distancing	33	9.6
Arranging transport	19	5.5
Arranging events	16	4.6
Counselling	15	4.3
Personal protective equipment	8	2.3
Arranging repairs	2	0.6
Other ways	32	9.3
Total	610	176.8

(N=345, multiple responses possible)

Q5 Have there been other emergencies in last 10 years?

	N	%
Yes, there has been one	83	20.4
Yes, there has been more than one	54	13.3
No	269	66.3
Total	406	100.0

Q6 Did the emergency involve....

	N	%
Flood	71	51.8
Storm	58	42.3
Power cuts	52	38.0
Civil unrest	1	0.7
Other	30	21.9
Total	212	154.7

(N=137, multiple responses possible)

Q7 Activities in other emergency

	N	%
Reported problems	98	80.3
Signposted support	87	71.3
Provided local knowledge	64	52.5
Identified vulnerable	52	42.6
Acted to reduce impact	44	36.1
Provided sandbags	41	33.6
Provided shelter	38	31.1
Distributed food or drink	29	23.8
Diverted traffic	26	21.3
Provided electricity	14	11.5
Counselled	11	9.0
Transported people	8	6.6
None of these	15	10.9
Total	527	430.6

(N=137, multiple responses possible)

Q8 Most important activity in other emergency

	N	%
Signposting support	45	36.9
Reporting problems	41	33.6
Providing sandbags	28	23.0
Providing local knowledge	23	18.9
Acting to reduce impact	21	17.2
Providing shelter	20	16.4
Identifying vulnerable	20	16.4
Distributing food or drink	19	15.6
Providing diverted traffic	10	8.2
Providing electricity	6	4.9
Counselling	2	1.6
Total	235	192.6

(N=122, multiple responses possible)

Q9 Does your council have an emergency plan?

	N	%
Has a written emergency plan	129	31.3
Has lists of contacts and procedures	119	28.9
Partial not comprehensive plan	45	10.9
None of these	119	28.9
Total	412	100.0

Q10 What is in emergency plan(s)?

	N	%
Contacting local volunteers	134	77.5
Signposting	147	85.0
Places of safety	155	89.6
Locating vulnerable	126	72.8
Access to utilities	99	57.2
Transportation to safety	46	26.6
Tools and equipment	107	61.8
Other	15	8.7
Total	829	479.2

(N=173, multiple responses possible)

Q11 Would you like your council to devote more to emergency planning?

	N	%
Yes	164	39.7
No	131	31.7
Don't know	71	17.2
Other (please specify)	47	11.4
Total	413	100.0

Q12 How familiar are you with the work of your LRF?

	N	%
I follow the work of the LRF closely	27	6.5
I have some familiarity with the work of the LRF	161	39.0
I know little or nothing about the LRF	225	54.5
Total	413	100.0

Q13 Which best describes the relationship of your council to the LRF?

	N	%
We're interested in them and they in us	48	11.7
We're interested in them but they're not interested in us	42	10.2
We're not interested in them but they are interested in us	19	4.6
We're not interested in each other	99	24.1
None of these applies	122	29.7
Don't know	81	19.7
Total	411	100.0

Q14 Which things make parish or town councils especially effective in emergencies?

	N	%
Know local conditions	242	58.6
Local volunteers	140	33.9
Signposting	117	28.3
Can be early responder	88	21.3
Provide places of safety	74	17.9
Trust of local people	68	16.5
Can provide equipment and tools	43	10.4
Can fill the gaps	17	4.1
None of these	10	2.4
Total	793	193.4

Q15 View of reform of LRFs

	N	%
Strengthen LRFs	145	35.1
Keep LRFs as they are	46	11.1
Disband LRFs and create a national resilience authority	15	3.6
Disband LRFs and plan on a service-by-service basis	9	2.2
None of these would improve emergency planning	22	5.3
Don't know	176	42.6
Total	413	100.0

Q16 Type of council area

	N	%
Largely or mainly rural	303	73.2
Urban with a significant rural population	52	12.6
Urban, covering whole or part of a city or town	35	8.5
Urban, part of conurbation	9	2.2
Prefer not to say	2	0.5
Other (please specify)	13	3.1
Total	414	100.0

Q17 Region

	N	%
South East England	102	24.7
East of England	35	8.5
East Midlands	21	5.1
Yorkshire and the Humber	56	13.6
North East England	38	9.2
North West England	55	13.3
West Midlands	55	13.3
South West England	44	10.7
Other	6	1.5
Prefer not to say	1	0.2
Total	413	100.0

Q18 How long in council

	N	%
Less than 3 years	90	21.7
3-9 years	155	37.4
10-19 years	119	28.7
20 years and over	48	11.6
Prefer not to say	2	0.5
Total	414	100.0

Q19 Sex

	N	%
Female	246	59.6
Male	156	37.8
Prefer not to say	11	2.7
Total	413	100.0

Q20 Age

	N	%
Under 36	7	1.7
36-50	50	12.1
51-65	186	45.0
Over 65	161	39.0
Prefer not to say	9	2.2
Total	413	100.0

APPENDIX B Survey Questions

Q1 What is your position in your parish or town council?

- Councillor
- Clerk or other officer
- Other (please specify) _____

Q2 During the COVID emergency, between March 2020 and February 2022, how would you describe the activity of your parish or town council to help people through the pandemic?

- We were able to help all or most of the time
- We were able to help for some of the time
- We were able to help for little of the time
- We were not able to help at all

Q3 In which of the following ways was your parish or town council able to help during the COVID emergency? Please tick as many as apply.

- Distributing and/or collecting food and/or medical supplies
- Facilitating social distancing
- Arranging transport for community members
- Arranging repairs for people's property, appliances or equipment
- Providing or distributing personal protective equipment
- Arranging socially distanced community events
- Providing counselling and/or companionship
- Identifying vulnerable members of the community to authorities or neighbours
- Signposting members of the community to sources of support and help
- Giving local information to other service providers
- We helped in other ways

Q3A Please describe the other way(s) you helped your community during the COVID emergency not included in the earlier list.

Q4 And what type of help that you provided would you say had the greatest impact during COVID? Please select a maximum of TWO

- Distributing and/or collecting food and/or medical supplies
- Facilitating social distancing
- Arranging transport for community members
- Arranging repairs for people's property, appliances or equipment
- Providing or distributing personal protective equipment
- Arranging socially distanced community events
- Providing counselling and/or companionship
- Identifying vulnerable members of the community to authorities or neighbours
- Signposting members of the community to sources of support and help
- Giving local information to other service providers
- In the other way(s) described in my previous answer

Q5 Apart from the COVID emergency, has there been another emergency in your parish or town council's area in the last 10 years? An "emergency" is understood to be a turn of events that threatens serious damage to human welfare, the environment or security of the community.

- Yes, there has been one
- Yes, there has been more than one
- No

Q6 We would like to ask you to think about the most recent of these other emergencies you have experienced Please describe this emergency (please tick as many issues as were involved in it)

- Flood
- Storm or extreme wind
- Power cuts
- Civil unrest or disorder
- Other (please specify) _____

Q7 Here is a list of some of the ways that local councils help their communities in an emergency. In the emergency you are describing, which of these things did your parish or town council do? Please tick all that apply.

- Provided or arranged emergency shelter and accommodation
- Provided or arranged emergency electricity supplies
- Distributed or arranged the distribution of food or drink
- Provided local knowledge to the emergency services
- Identified and helped protect the most vulnerable members of the community
- Distributed sandbags and similar aids to flood prevention
- Diverted traffic away from affected areas
- Transported people to safety or care
- Signposted members of the community to sources of support and help
- Counsellel those affected
- Took action to reduce the impact of the emergency
(e.g. pumping water, removing fallen trees, making homes secure)
- Reported local problems to relevant bodies
- None of these

Q7A Please describe briefly what your parish or town council did during this emergency.

Q8 And of these measures that you mention, which TWO would you consider made the biggest difference to the way the emergency was handled?

- Providing or arranging emergency shelter and accommodation
- Providing or arranging emergency electricity supplies
- Distributing or arranging the distribution of food or drink
- Providing local knowledge to the emergency services
- Identifying and helping protect the most vulnerable members of the community
- Distributing sandbags and similar aids to flood prevention
- Diverting traffic away from affected areas
- Signposting members of the community to sources of support and help
- Transporting people to safety or care
- Counsellel those affected
- Taking action to reduce the impact of the emergency (e.g. pumping water, removing fallen trees, making homes secure, advising people on measures to take)
- Reporting local problems to relevant bodies

Q9 When you think about the role of your parish or town council in planning for community-wide emergencies, regardless of whether those emergencies are caused by accidents, natural hazards or man-made threats, which best describes the position of your council?

- We have a written emergency plan
- We have written plans for some emergencies (e.g. floods), not a comprehensive emergency plan
- We have lists of contacts and procedures that may be of use in an emergency
- None of the above

Q10 Which of the following are covered in your emergency plan(s)? Please tick as many as apply

- Contacting local volunteers who can give assistance
- Signposting members of the community to sources of support and help
- Making available places of safety
- Locating and helping vulnerable people in the community
- Access to essential utilities (e.g. electricity, phone).
- Transporting those affected to safety
- Making available tools and equipment to deal with problems
- Our emergency plan(s) cover(s) other things (please specify)

Q11 Would you like your parish or town council to devote more attention to planning for emergencies?

- Yes
- No
- Other (please specify) _____
- Don't know

Q12 How familiar are you with the work of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) for your area? Which of the following best describes it. The LRF is the body in charge of coordinating emergency planning within the area covered by your local police authority.

- I follow the work of the LRF closely
- I have some familiarity with the work of the LRF
- I know little or nothing about the LRF

Q13 When you think about the Local Resilience Forum for your area, which best describes the current relationship with your parish or town council?

- We keep track of their work and they take an interest in ours
- We keep track of their work but they take little interest in ours
- We don't keep track of their work and they take little interest in ours
- We don't keep track of their work but they take an interest in ours
- None of these applies
- Don't know

Q14 Here is a list of things that some say make parish or town councils especially effective in emergencies compared with other responders. Thinking of your own council, which, if any, do you think are the most important? Please select a maximum of TWO

- Know local conditions
- Can be a very early responder
- Have the trust of the local community
- Can mobilise local volunteers
- Can fill the gaps in services provided by other responders
- Can signpost people to other sources of help
- Can provide accommodation and places of safety
- Have equipment and tools locally
- None of these

Q15 There is some talk of reviewing the role of Local Resilience Forums in emergency planning. Which, if any, of the following proposals for reform do you think would most improve emergency planning in your town or parish?

- Keep the Local Resilience Forums more or less as they are
- Strengthen the role and responsibilities of Local Resilience Forums
- Disband Local Resilience Forums and plan for emergencies on a service-by-service basis
- Disband Local Resilience Forums and create a national resilience authority with regional and local offices
- None of these would improve emergency planning
- Don't know

Q16 How would you classify the area served by your town or parish council?

- Largely or mainly rural
- Urban with a significant rural population
- Urban, covering whole or part of a city or town
- Urban, part of conurbation
- Prefer not to say
- Other (please specify) _____
- Don't know

Q17 And in which part of England is your council located?

- South East England
- East of England
- East Midlands
- Yorkshire and the Humber
- North East England
- North West England
- West Midlands
- South West England
- Other _____
- Prefer not to say

Q18 How long have you been serving your current local council?

- Less than 3 years
- 3-9 years
- 10-19 years
- 20 years and over
- Prefer not to say

Q19 Are you ...

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Q20 What is your age?

- Under 36
- 36-50
- 51-65
- Over 65
- Prefer not to say

If you have any comments on your council and emergency planning please write them here



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

lse.ac.uk/government

