



Severe winter weather: Preparation and response

- Emergency planning
- Highways – snow and ice
- Greenspace, floods, and arboriculture (trees)



Dorset
Council

Where to find information and who to contact

If there is a genuine emergency and life is in immediate danger, call 999 for the emergency services.

- Our customer services team can be contacted 24/7 on 01305 221000
- For the latest information on disrupted council services, visit [Disrupted services - Dorset Council](#)
- To report an emergency on the highway, visit [Highway emergencies - Dorset Council](#)
- To report an issue on a road, pavement, footpath or bridleway or hedge/tree issue, use our [online reporting forms](#)
- Find out where we will be gritting on our [gritting page](#)
- See our [sandbag and local flooding advice](#), including nearest community sandbag stores
- Notify us of an incident that is likely to cause [internal property flooding](#)
- Check for [flooding in Dorset](#)
- Read more about our approach to [emergencies and severe weather](#)
- [See the LGA Councillor Guide to Civil Emergencies](#)

Dorset Council operates a 24/7 system for responding to emergency issues, one of these being severe weather which can pose significant challenges for communities and authorities.

Whilst when incidents occur they can be deemed to be an emergency within a community, in many cases they can be managed by Dorset Council and partners as “business as usual”.

For this reason, the best point of contact in the first instance is via our 24/7 customer services team on 01305 221000. There will, however, be some incidents that do require an emergency response

What constitutes an emergency?

From a council perspective, an emergency is an event that:

- Presents a risk to life
- Puts vulnerable people and communities at risk
- Risks property and infrastructure
- Causes significant harm and disruption beyond normal business operations

Dorset Council's role in emergency planning involves

- Proactive risk management to prevent incidents occurring
- Ensuring plans are in place to reduce, control, or mitigate the effects of emergencies.
- Responding to incidents, conducting post-event briefings, and continuously improving our processes.

During emergencies, we have a command-and-control structure, comprising our officers

- **Emergency Management and Resilience Team:** Operates 24/7 with a team member acting a Duty Emergency Planning Officer.
- **Gold officers:** Provide strategic direction. From 1 January 2025, this is the council's Senior Leadership Team.
- **Silver officers:** Handle tactical roles. These are performed by a mix of officers, from Service Managers up.



- **Bronze officers:** on the ground delivering services to our communities, including Local Authority Liaison Officers (LALO) are our eyes and ears at the scene, linking with emergency services), building control, communications, highways, flood and coastal engineers, adult social care, children services, housing, property surveyor and waste services and other services.

We have 24/7 LALO duty rotas covering the whole of the county – one covering the east, and one covering the west.

Access to the Duty Emergency Planning Officer, Gold or Silver should be via customer services on 01305 2210000.

Partner organisations

Often a response will include a wide range of our partner organisations, from blue light to health services and the Environment Agency.

We work with these partners through the Local Resilience Forum

We are all known as Category One responders. There are Category Two Responders too, which includes utilities providers.

What is a major incident?

A major incident is declared when a partner believes they cannot meet the demands of an incident alone and seek support of other agencies. Examples in recent time have included COVID 19, Poole Harbour oil spill and Wareham Forest fire.

Severe weather planning

We have mechanisms in place for planning, recovery and learning:

- **Severe Weather Group:** Chaired by the Environment Agency, prepares for summer and winter weather challenges.
- **Winter Preparedness:** Ensures assurance and readiness within Dorset Council. Chaired by our emergency planning team.
- If we get a significant weather warning, we hold pre-meetings and coordinate responses for emergencies. These are at a multi-agency level, as well as locally through the Dorset Council Incident Management team.

Dorset Council will lead on the recovery from the incident to help our communities return to normal.

Community resilience

A lot of focus is on community resilience, ensuring that our own communities can respond and support themselves where possible. The Local Resilience Forum provides guidance and tools via the [Dorset Prepared website](#). Support can also be provided via the Emergency Management and Resilience Team.



What happens when an incident occurs

Notification: Generally, our duty emergency planning officer receives the first notification of an incident. They will assess the risk and will determine if they can manage it themselves or if there is a need to link in with our services, such as communications, highways, rangers etc. For a significant incident, they will mobilise the command-and-control structure of Gold (strategic) and Silver (tactical) These officers will work alongside their opposite numbers from partner agencies.

Gold sets the strategy, and Silver determines how the strategy will be actioned.

Dorset councillors

Although the response is officer-led, Dorset councillors do provide:

- **Political leadership** - Ensuring that the council is meeting its obligations, in terms of preparing for and responding to emergencies.
- **Civic leadership** - providing a focal point for the local area during an emergency.
- **Community leadership** - helping to increase community resilience and supporting communities' emergency responses and through the period of recovery.

See [A Councillors Guide to Emergency planning](#) for full details.

Coordination and communication

Messaging to Dorset councillors is generally coordinated by Gold officers, although for less significant issues where Gold has not been mobilised, the emergency planning team will aim to inform ward members that an incident has occurred within their area.

We ask councillors to please bear with us while we get this communication out: Officers will be busy responding to the incident, and resources can be stretched (particularly out of hours, where duty arrangements are operated). On occasions, communications will also be led by another partner agency, which can delay the issuing of press releases.

Please be mindful that officers will be busy dealing with the response, and refrain from contact unless it is essential.

We ask our councillors to coordinate with communication colleagues before engaging with the press. This is particularly important for incidents where there may be Police or other regulatory investigations underway.

Effective emergency response and community resilience are vital for managing and recovering from emergencies. By understanding their roles and responsibilities, councillors, towns and parishes can better support their communities during these challenging times.



Snow and ice

Why do we grit?

Our aim is to ensure safe travel and minimise accidents during winter. We have a statutory duty to keep roads clear of snow and ice as far as is reasonably practicable. We blend the Highways Act 1980 and National Guidance into our Dorset-specific policies to shape our gritting decision-making process.

See: [The Statutory Duty \(Highways Act 1980\)](#) + [National Guidance](#) = [Dorset Council Policy](#)

When do we grit?

Our decision-making officers use detailed weather forecasts from Met Desk to determine when and where to grit. We get a detailed forecast for each of our 23 individual routes. This is known as route-based forecasting and provides accurate forecasts which help us avoid unnecessary gritting, saving resources and reducing environmental impact.

Previously it was one-out-all-out, wasting a lot of salt when not needed, and more recently we split the county into quarters. Now we have accurate forecasts for individual routes, so we don't waste salt on routes that don't need to be treated, which is better for the environment and it saves money.

Each route is covered by an 18-tonne lorry equipped with gritting machinery. A typical gritting run takes about 2 hours. Salt costs about £50 per tonne. A single gritting run costs approximately £7,500, including salt and labour.

Extreme weather

When snow is forecast, and it is likely to be significantly more severe, we go into a different mode where we are likely to get into a full emergency planning system and work with other authorities. We coordinate with emergency services to ensure critical access and safety.

If we are inundated with snow, we drop back from the primary network and we default to the ploughing network covering the core arterial routes. It is unrealistic to plough every single route, so we have to concentrate on making the strategic points of Dorset accessible.

[Read more about snow clearance](#)

Gritting - in numbers

- To do our gritting runs in two hours of driving time, we have five operational depots around the county and 25 gritter vehicles.
- For driving time regulations, we have a main crew during the day, a night crew and a crew on rest.
- This year, 2024/25, 87 of our regular highways crew are on standby to undertake gritting or ploughing duties.
- We maintain just over 12,000 tonnes of salt across our depots to ensure we have enough for the entire winter season.



- We have 4 duty engineers, 2 of those typically make decisions on whether we will go out gritting. We have 11 duty supervisors, usually 2 working at any one-time covering east and west of the county. We usually only have one duty engineer making the decision each week.
- If we go to full snow mode, we double up drivers and we get extra supervisors in, so we have enough resilience.

We have a business-as-usual gritting programme or an all-hands-on-deck to operate our gritters and get the ploughs on.

Where do we grit?

[See our gritting updates page to see when and where the last roads were gritted and when they will be gritted next.](#)

We cover 1,100 km of the highway network (about 28 per cent of our overall network).

The 23 main gritting routes, collectively known as the 'precautionary salting network', encompass A, B, and well-used C class roads. They also include:

- Links to hospitals, large industrial estates, transport interchanges, emergency services stations (including manned Coastguard and RNLI stations), and other critical infrastructure.
- Routes to all urban schools with more than 500 pupils and rural schools with 350+ pupils.
- Primary bus routes with substantial frequency.
- Main routes through towns and villages with populations of more than 750.

We also treat the A35 trunk road between Bere Regis and Charmouth, on behalf of National Highways.

When it snows, our crews clear and treat routes on what is known as the 'priority ploughing network.' These key north/south and east/west routes are cleared of snow before clearing the remaining gritting network.

Community link network

Community routes serving smaller villages and hamlets not on the primary routes will be treated when snow is forecast or during prolonged periods of freezing temperatures to ensure rural communities can continue to travel.

We treat these differently as it is not practical for us to salt these on every gritting run.

If we know there is bad weather coming in, or we are likely to have snow or prolonged periods of really cold weather we will get a layer of salt down on these community routes. Getting salt on to a road before snow arrives makes it easier for the salt to work back through and dissolve the snow.

It's important to understand that salt is not a magic solution. It needs time to work and must be worn into the road by traffic to be effective.

Grit bins

We have a network of grit bins where we don't do lorry salted routes. We fill up each bin at start of the gritting season. If they run down, please let us know if they need to be refilled. See further details here:

[Salt bins - Dorset Council](#)



Winter gritting is a collaborative effort that requires understanding and support from all community members. By working together, we can ensure our roads remain safe and accessible throughout the winter season.

Greenspace, coastal risk and arboriculture (trees)

The Greenspace, Flood Risk and Arboriculture teams support the council's wider response to emergencies and severe weather, actively working together to protect and look after our communities.

Green Space

Our Green Space team provides operational management of our assets including rights of way, countryside sites, highway verges, trees and other greenspace areas

Coastal risk

Our coastal risk management team has an overall objective to manage the risk to life, property and the environment from coastal erosion and flooding. The team takes a strategic approach to planning, many years in advance, the coastal defence structures which will be necessary to keep communities safe.

We lead and manage local flood risks, including risk of flood from surface water, ground water, streams, ditches and smaller rivers. The Environment Agency has overall responsibility for flooding from main rivers and the sea.

In the winter, our coastline is vulnerable to increased erosion due to wave action and storm tides. Cliff recession may result in loss of the coast path. Our ranger services take appropriate action and close paths to public for safety and post storm will negotiate with landowners on the possibility of creating alternative routes.

Flood

Read more about flooding, including preparation, help during and after a flood and managing flood risk - [Flooding - Dorset Council](#)

Our Flood Risk management team doesn't have an incident response duty. However, they have a role in trying to reduce potential for flooding and support long term resilience. We have a strategic overview of the local sources of flooding, and make recommendations post event to the Highways team, Wessex Water, Environment Agency to make changes to reduce future risk.

The team works with the Environment Agency to promote community self-resilience, supporting the development of flood wardens in parishes and towns.

We also offer a discretionary sandbag supply service. Some parishes and town councils provide storage facilities for their distribution around the county area. See our [sandbag and local flooding advice](#), including nearest community sandbag stores.

Flood wardens are normally volunteers from parish and town council areas which is a tremendous benefit for Dorset. In some areas, we are also responsible for putting out temporary flood defences, particularly at West Bay, when storms are predicted.



Dorset Council is responsible for three harbours – Bridport, Lyme Regis and Weymouth. We make significant preparations for the winter to reduce the impact on harbour users. This includes lifting most recreational vessels out water at Bridport and Lyme Regis, which are more exposed than Weymouth Bay. We secure vulnerable exposed areas, onshore clearing of loose materials and tying down items. We remove summer pontoons and swim buoys at each harbour.

We play a part in post-storm clearance too (eg pebbles from Monmouth beach that end up on The Cobb following storms.)

Trees

Our Arboriculture team is responsible for around 250,000 trees. These are mainly trees linked to the highway. However, in keeping with our general statutory responsibilities, and as owner of trees next to schools and other public buildings, we also have a duty to ensure trees do not cause harm or injure the public.

The team's duties include inspections, surgery including felling, crowning, reducing, and planting. The team also handles emergency tree clearance, especially during winter storms.

During the winter, demand increases on all our teams. If a significant response is required, we are supplemented by contractors and supported by our rangers.

It is important we respond as quickly as possible, especially if trees are uprooted on the highway, or blocking the highway, and presenting a danger to highway users.

We prioritise A roads and roads that lead to emergency facilities. In these circumstances, the trees are cut and left safely by the carriageway for collection later.

Support to communities

Our rangers teams span the county. Our rangers are 4-wheel drive vehicle trained and can support social care teams to make house calls to vulnerable people as part of the council's emergency response protocol during snowy weather conditions.

In emergency situations, our teams can pass on important information and check people are being supported by family, friends and neighbours, for example during storm-related power outages.

