

Connecting communities when it matters most



How Lauren Giddins supports rural communities before, during and after flooding

When you speak with Lauren Giddins, Village Agent Programme Manager at Thrive, one thing becomes clear very quickly.

Her work is rooted in connection, connecting people to support, communities to services, and local knowledge to system-wide decision-making.

Leading a county-wide service across Somerset, Lauren coordinates a network of around 60 village agents and five team managers, working together to help people stay safe, well, and connected, particularly in rural areas.

"Our role is about making support feel accessible and human," she explains.

"That might mean solving practical problems, working with partners, or simply being present in communities when people need reassurance."

A county-wide network built on local knowledge

At the heart of the programme is a simple but powerful principle: local presence matters.

Village agents are often based within the communities they serve, meaning they bring trusted relationships, insight, and an understanding of local needs that cannot be replicated from a distance.

The service is organised by locality, with one dedicated team focused on supporting timely discharge from Somerset's acute hospitals, demonstrating how community support and health systems are increasingly interconnected.

Because the agents are part of their communities, they are often the people residents turn to first.

That trust is absolutely critical.

Responding to flooding: a calm, coordinated approach

During the recent flooding of January 2026 in Somerset, Lauren and her team played a central role in supporting communities, combining on the ground presence with system level coordination.

Village agents were visible at every local flood hub, offering reassurance, practical help, and a familiar, trusted face.



At the same time, the team maintained a strong virtual presence in resilience cell meetings, ensuring alignment with partners and rapid response to emerging risks.

This included targeted outreach and welfare calls, supported by data to identify vulnerable residents, a QR code system provided by the local authority to track interactions, clear communications, and ongoing recovery support through Flood Cafes with the Somerset Rivers Authority.

Reaching those that others have missed

A key strength of the village agent model is its ability to identify and support people who may not be visible to statutory services.

By reviewing their own internal records and cross referencing with local authority data, Thrive was able to contact individuals in affected areas, including those not previously identified as vulnerable.

Local knowledge enabled tailored support, from arranging evacuations to assisting isolated residents and responding to specific needs within the community.

A trusted role within the Local Resilience Forum

Thrive's established relationships with statutory services meant they were quickly integrated into the Local Resilience Forum response.

Their role bridged system coordination and community delivery, ensuring information flowed both ways and that support remained accessible to residents, including those who are digitally excluded.

Challenges and lessons learned

While the response was strong, several challenges highlighted areas for improvement.

Balancing our work with partners whilst maintaining a local presence, rapidly reallocating staff capacity required careful management.

Data sharing processes created delays, and time was needed to establish shared communication systems.

Lauren stated that establishing clear systems in advance such as data sharing agreements and communication platforms is essential to enable a faster, more coordinated response during a crisis.

Organisations must also build flexibility into their ways of working so they can adapt quickly, reallocating resources where they are most needed.

Strengthening community resilience requires a balanced and proactive approach that connects both system-level coordination and local delivery.

This means being visibly present in resilience structures while also engaging directly with communities in familiar, trusted spaces.

Clarity around roles and boundaries is equally important, ensuring that responsibilities are understood and duplication or gaps in support are avoided.

Making use of existing community spaces such as village halls or local hubs can significantly improve engagement, particularly when combined with more accessible and informal opportunities for people to connect, ask for help, and feel supported.

Looking ahead: Building on what worked

Future planning will focus on strengthening data sharing, establishing shared communication approaches, improving coordinated communications and reinforcing links between resilience planning and community delivery.

Continuing recovery support through community spaces and building strong partnerships and flexible working will remain a priority.

A connected, human approach to resilience

The response showed what making Somerset stronger looks like in practice: connection, collaboration, and community.

The role of the village agent network is to ensure support is coordinated while remaining human and accessible.

The focus now is on making future responses faster, more joined up, and more effective, recognising that similar events will happen again.

Thrive plans to enhance public communications, particularly for digitally excluded residents, by preparing printed updates and ensuring information is disseminated quickly through trusted channels.

What stood out most was how communities and partners came together. Thrive and the village agent service helped connect those pieces, making sure support was coordinated but also felt human and accessible.

Because resilience is built on strong communities, trusted relationships and good connections between them.

Action with Communities in Rural England
contact@acre.org.uk | www.acre.org.uk
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