

Building community resilience in Staffordshire



A conversation with Michelle Cliff, Rural Development and Resilience Manager, Support Staffordshire

When emergencies hit rural communities, the first people to step forward are often neighbours, volunteers, and local community organisations.

In Staffordshire, much of the work to connect these grassroots strengths with the formal emergency structures is led by Michelle Cliff, Rural Development and Resilience Manager at Support Staffordshire.

We sat down with Michelle to learn more about her role, how it blends rural development with emergency preparedness, how community hubs are emerging as a practical model of local resilience, and what lessons she's learned about building trust between communities and the Local Resilience Forum (LRF).

A role shaped by rural roots and rural emergencies

Michelle's position is split between two worlds that increasingly overlap: rural development and community resilience.

On the rural side, she leads Support Staffordshire's work as part of the ACRE Network, managing the Rural Housing Enabler, project staff, and working closely with Village Hall advisers.

This includes delivering Defra-funded support for village halls and buildings across the Staffordshire Moorlands.

But the other half of her role is where things get especially interesting.

Michelle works directly with the Staffordshire Local Resilience Forum and emergency partners to ensure the voluntary and community sector plays an active, recognised role in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies.

This includes supporting pandemic and public health communications, helping to reduce misinformation, preparing for weather-related infrastructure failures such as power outages and loss of communication, working with local communities on flood risk, the county's most significant emergency risk, and developing community emergency hubs that can be activated quickly led by local volunteers.

"We're using our knowledge, networks and community level relationships to empower communities," she says.



"It's about making sure they have a role, and feel they have a role, when something happens."

The rise of community emergency hubs

One of the most exciting developments has been Staffordshire's move toward light touch, community led emergency hubs.

These aren't large rest centres or command posts.

They're small, local spaces often village halls, church halls, libraries or even pubs identified by the community itself as the right place to gather, get information, support neighbours and link with local authorities when needed.

"We're not going in with a pre-set model," Michelle explains.

"Communities know best where their hub should be."

Support Staffordshire is working with the National Consortium for Societal Resilience to develop simple, scalable resources, two page guides, starter conversations, and easy steps that communities can build on over time.

The aim? Start small. Keep it simple. Let communities grow their own model.

Valuing local knowledge and avoiding disempowerment

One of Michelle's most powerful reflections came from witnessing an exercise held in a very isolated, rural village hall where the local authority unintentionally side-lined the community.

"The community felt totally disempowered," she says.

"They weren't asked about their hall, their broadband issues, how they communicate - nothing."

It was a clear lesson: rural communities don't want emergency planning done to them. They want it done with them.

This insight now shapes her entire approach: involve communities early, ask what they can offer, acknowledge their knowledge, assets, and existing networks.

Make them central partners, not passive participants.

As Michelle puts it: "We want communities to come away feeling empowered."

A stronger relationship with the LRF

Support Staffordshire's involvement with the LRF has steadily grown from supporting the VCSE sector during the Covid-19 pandemic to contributing to communications on civil unrest, delivering messaging around health inequalities, and participating in strategic meetings, networks, and exercises.

These include Staffordshire LRF strategic partnership meetings, national Voluntary Community Sector Emergency Partnership (VCSEP) meetings, local Staffordshire Voluntary Emergency Network (SVEN) meetings, strategic level coordination meetings as part of Support Staffordshire's embedded role within the LRF, and the police-led Protect and Prepare board.

They now play an active role in bringing local intelligence from volunteers and parish councils, sharing information through voluntary sector channels, supporting the Staffordshire Voluntary Emergency Network, and providing a bridge between statutory agencies and the wider voluntary sector.

Their unique strength lies in their close connection to rural communities.

As Michelle explains: "We know who the key people are. We can quickly tap into who the right person is in any area."

This strong rural network, spanning parish councils, village halls, and community groups, forms Support Staffordshire's distinct advantage in resilience planning.

What's in it for communities?

For local people, the benefits are clear: stronger local networks, increased confidence in responding to floods, storms, or outages, and better communication before, during, and after emergencies.

This approach fosters a real sense of ownership and empowerment, while also providing reassurance that their experiences and concerns are heard at county level.

Importantly, the challenges faced by the voluntary sector such as limited capacity, funding pressures, and volunteer shortages are fed directly into the strategic system, ensuring they are properly recognised and understood.

Advice for other ACRE members

Michelle is clear that none of this happened overnight.

The journey accelerated during the pandemic, when Support Staffordshire's strengths became visible in real time, but its continued success has been driven by long term relationship building.

Her advice is to start where communities are, offer practical and simple tools, and use real emergencies and weather events as opportunities to engage.

She also emphasises the importance of maintaining regular communication with the LRF, even when progress feels slow, and of demonstrating the value the voluntary sector brings while being honest about its limitations.

Above all, she stresses the importance of building relationships as the foundation for long term success.

A growing model for rural resilience

Listening to Michelle, it's clear that Staffordshire is building something powerful rooted in community assets, shaped by local knowledge, and connected into the wider emergency system without losing its local identity.

Her work shows exactly why the ACRE Network's rural reach is so valuable: Because resilience starts in communities, not command rooms.



Action with Communities in Rural England

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