



# Devon Resilience Innovation Project (DRIP)

## Stakeholder Engagement End Report 2025



Devon Resilience  
Innovation Project  
DRIP



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## Key Achievements



Contributed  
to **88** events  
and meetings

**32**  
direct contacts  
and support  
engaged



**26**  
Parish Council  
areas supported



**32%**

of councils had  
or were working  
on Emergency  
Plans

**2021**



**70%**

of councils had  
or are working  
on Emergency  
Plans

**2024**

**15**  
presentations  
delivered





## Executive Summary

The DRIP project is funded by DEFRA as part of the £150 million Flood and Coastal Resilience Innovation Programme (FCRIP) which is managed by the Environment Agency to develop and test new approaches to help communities become more resilient to the effects of flooding and climate change.

This six-year initiative aims to reduce the impact of flooding to communities across Devon through a combination of interventions to improve flood resilience. The impact of stacking resilience measures will be evaluated as part of the projects learning.

DRIP runs from 2021 until 2027, working with 19 organisations to improve resilience to flooding in 26 communities across Devon.



DRIP is broken down into four work packages (WP):

- WP1 Natural Flood Management
- WP2 Property Flood Resilience for targeted community assets
- WP3 Surface water Flood Warning App (using rainfall radars, smart gullies and soil sensor technologies)
- WP4 Flood Hub resource.

Many of the communities selected in WP 1-3 would not typically be high priority within the local flood risk management strategy due to the low numbers of properties at risk. DRIP is a unique project to help neighbourhoods be better prepared for and able to recover more quickly from flooding by improving community resilience.

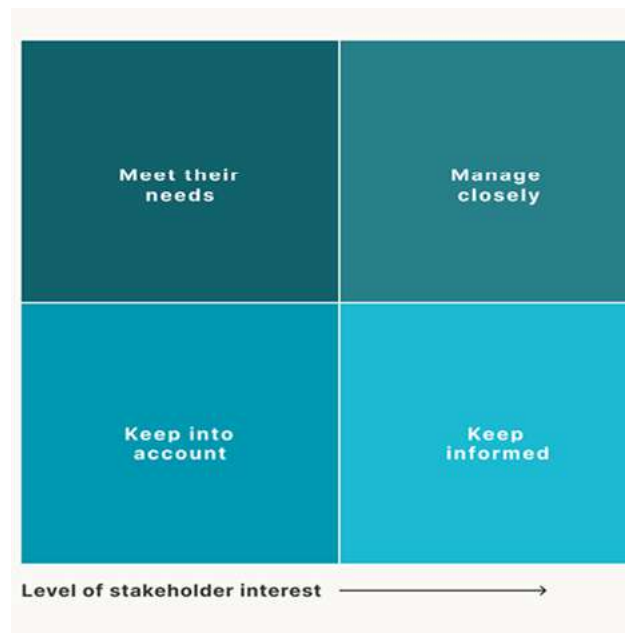
Devon Communities Together (DCT) was selected as a project partner to focus on stakeholder engagement. The definition of a stakeholder, in the broadest sense, is an individual or organisation that has an interest (stake) in the project.



# 1) Project Objectives

The emphasis on stakeholder engagement within DRIP underscores the importance of community and partner involvement in developing effective and sustainable flood resilience. By fostering active participation, the programme aims to co-create solutions that are both scientifically sound and locally relevant.

DCT's role was to support, advise and help the project partners to engage constructively with their stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement is key to the success of DRIP as for communities to be more resilient, they need to engage with the processes that will enable this. Nature based solutions need to be maintained and monitored, property flood resilience needs to be in situ and deployed at the appropriate time, surface water flood warnings need to be received, understood and acted on and the flood hub online resource needs to be easy to access, clearly communicated and used by the public for it to have a purpose.



The first step in the engagement process is to ascertain who your Stakeholders are. In order to do this workshops were held at the project outset. Stakeholders included Elected members, Council Officers, Funders, Utility Companies, Parish Councils, Community Groups, Landowners etc. The interest/influence matrix as seen below was then used to decide how these stakeholder groups could best be communicated with e.g. Elected members wouldn't want the same level of local engagement as a community group or Landowner might, but they may want to be regularly updated on strategic decisions.





## 2) Project Deliverables

The DRIP stakeholder engagement strategy, taken alongside the list of stakeholders, is based on discussion between partners identified at the start of the project. Its purpose is to guide the project, as well as the individual project leads. The engagement strategy determines how the project team/partners will interact and engage with the stakeholders identified.

**Stakeholder Engagement Plans** are an important part of the engagement process as they define how, where and what type of engagement is expected to happen. Partners were encouraged and supported to develop their project specific stakeholder engagement plan before starting their engagement activities. Stakeholder Engagement Plans enabled pilot projects to consider their geographical area, the type of stakeholders they will be engaging with and the best ways to approach this engagement.



Some DRIP pilot projects were already well established, with their role in DRIP being an extension of work they had already carried out e.g Connecting the Culm (CtC), Building Resilience in Communities (BRIC) while other pilot projects were starting from a less well-established position. It was difficult to engage with some of the pilot projects in part due to their time constraints but in some cases due to sensitivities around the projects themselves e.g. Devon Wildlife Trust (DWT).

Engagement activities took many different forms as you would expect in a project of the scale of DRIP. Landowner engagement was carried out by land agents who already had a relationship with individuals. Community engagement had to be tailored to the audience, so some events started from a very basic level of understanding, using appreciative enquiry techniques, slowly building trust. Other engagement was with flood groups or at resilience forums, so a level of knowledge had already been established.

DCT worked closely with Devon Community Resilience Forum (DCRF) to encourage pilot project communities to create and adopt Emergency Plans (EP's). EPs are one of the resilience measures that help communities to be self-sufficient in a flood incident until the Emergency Services can get to their community and take over the support as required.

**70%** of the pilot project areas either had an EP or were starting work on an EP by April 2025. This was achieved by persistent and tactful contact with parish clerks who tend to be time poor but keen to help if you can make it easy to do so.

DCT's time on DRIP has delivered/introduced 13 PowerPoint presentations, Lessons Learned Log, List of engagement tools and Case Studies that can be found as appendices to this report.



# 10 key principles of stakeholder engagement

The following principles were shared with partners and form the backbone of the stakeholder engagement strategy...

1

## Communicate

Before aiming to engage and influence stakeholders, it's crucial to first seek to understand and ensure the intended message is understood and the desired response achieved. Consistent and clear communication will ensure that affected parties will understand the intended benefits of the project and some may become third party endorsers.

2

## Consult, early and often

Ask the right questions to gain useful information and ideas. To engage their support, ask stakeholders for their advice and listen to how they feel.



4

## Plan it!

A more deliberate approach to stakeholder engagement is encouraged. Careful planning and investment of time in this area has significant payoff.

3

## Remember, they're only human

Operate with an awareness of human feelings/potential personal agendas. Accept that humans do not always behave in a rational, reasonable, consistent or predictable way. As flooding is a very emotive subject, the partners are aware that engagement should be approached in a sensitive way.

5

## Relationships are key

Commit energy and time to building high-level relationships – this engenders trust. Seek out networking opportunities. We cannot make any assumptions and need to ensure that we have done enough to understand their needs and interests, perceptions, concerns and culture. Working with stakeholders isn't a one-off activity. It is an ongoing process and the partners will keep stakeholders involved and informed about what's going on throughout the life of the project.





**6**

### **Simple, but not easy**

Effective stakeholder engagement requires subtle skills such as being empathetic. Engage, interact, listen – show you care.



**7**

### **Just part of managing risk**

Stakeholders can be treated as a category of (and/or a mitigation of) risk and opportunities that have probabilities and impacts. Stakeholder engagement will increase the chance of success of pilot projects identifying supporters and potential saboteurs and winning them over is part of project risk management.

**8**

### **Compromise**

Find the best compromise across a set of stakeholders' diverging priorities. Assess the relative importance of stakeholders to establish a weighted hierarchy.



**9**

### **Understand what success is**

Examine the value of the project to the stakeholder. Ask what their success criteria are. Seek to clarify expectations - perception of success is influenced by the who, what and how? We need to define what this project isn't, to manage expectations: we are carrying out an experiment as DRIP is an innovative project.

**10**

### **Take responsibility**

Good project governance is key to any project. It's the responsibility of everyone to maintain an ongoing dialogue with stakeholders.





### 3) Timeline and Schedule

DCT started with the DRIP in April 2021 and their input tapers down and draws to a close in 2025. As with many of the project partners, DCT had staff changes in the early part of the project. This understandably led to a slowing down of productivity. This said, the third member of DCT staff stayed with the project from August 2022 until DCT's completion on DRIP in 2025.

### 4) Budget and Financial Summary

DCT kept to budget throughout the duration of the project with funding allocated for staff time and travel expenses. The funding was front loaded, with DCT's input scaled back to 12 days for 2025, then DCT's funded input into the project finished.

### 5) Challenges and Risks

DRIP is an innovative project, so challenge and risk are inherent. The important aspect of this is to take learning from these challenges.

Getting some of the project partners to engage with DCT/Stakeholder engagement generally was a challenge. The already established pilot projects had their own approaches to stakeholder engagement that were working well and didn't need DCT support. One pilot project felt that their subject area was extremely sensitive, so didn't want to engage the wider community. Other pilot projects were working closely with consultants (due to the nature of the pilot) and weren't ready to undertake stakeholder engagement until much later on in the project timeline. Despite numerous offers of help with events, a lot of activity went on without DCT input. This wasn't an engagement issue due to the experience of the pilot project leads, but it did make keeping track of engagement extremely challenging.

Stakeholder engagement plans play a key part in the stakeholder engagement of DRIP as they set the geographical parameters as well as the engagement parameters at the outset of the project. There were some project partners who didn't want to follow the same format as others, and this made the Stakeholder Engagement Plan process more challenging than it needed to be.

With a multi partner project and some geographical cross over between work packages a joined-up approach to stakeholder engagement was a real challenge. This was particularly so when the work packages were at different stages in their development. Not only were DRIP pilot projects to be considered but also the EA work areas. Flood risk is a highly emotive subject with multiple agencies involved. Even before you put DRIP into the mix, communities are often confused about which agency is responsible for which aspect of flood protection. Mixed messaging and multiple engagements were something that we tried hard to avoid, but didn't always manage to achieve. When engaging with communities, they often had to offload their frustrations about lack of support with local flooding. Devon County Council (DCC) employees were particularly targeted (due to dissatisfaction with DCC Highways) as there wasn't an appreciation of the different departments within DCC and at times disconnect between directorates. This was a challenge on two fronts; firstly, because the time needed to engage was longer than planned and two because



in some instances, DCC staff didn't want to be involved in the engagement. This was overcome by engagement being carried out with a different emphasis (e.g. Emergency Plans) so the focus was directed elsewhere.

When lack of engagement from a particular project partner was raised, this was accepted rather than addressed. This approach didn't help the engagement strategy as milestones weren't achieved but no action was taken.

There is a risk that communities/landowners will lose enthusiasm for the nature-based solutions once the project closes. This can be mitigated by implementing a sound exit strategy that ensures communities/landowners remain engaged, enthusiastic and have the correct skills and support to continue to monitor and maintain the assets.

With a project of the size and duration of DRIP, it's no surprise that changes take place throughout the life of the project. Four pilot project area changes were made due to a variety of reasons from lack of staff time to staff leaving and positions not being backfilled. Pilot project areas of Ashburton and Lymptone were removed in 2024 after considerable engagement had taken place. These were well considered strategic decisions made in the best interests of the project, but did impact on stakeholder engagement time and effort as relationships take time to establish.

Complexity of language, use of jargon and lack of clarity of message were real risks for DRIP. DCT played a key role in ensuring that plain English was used in public facing documents such as information leaflets and questionnaires.

The May 2023 local elections returned different officers in many of our pilot project areas. This challenged DRIP as relationships that had been nurtured now had to be started again as the project was approaching delivery stage. With the benefit of hindsight, we could have been more proactive and benefitted from the enthusiasm of newly elected representatives sooner than we did.





## 6) Key Achievements

Emergency Plans (EP) are one of the resilience measures that DRIP promotes to increase a community's ability to better cope with and recover from flood events. Working with DCRF, Parish Councils in pilot project areas were approached to see if they would like help to create an EP. There was a lot of resistance as many Parish Councils feel that they're being pulled in numerous directions and just don't have the time or capacity to take on anything else. After numerous phone calls, discussions with Parish Clerks, talks at Parish Council meetings and support events DRIP achieved a 32% increase in EP take up. EPs should be updated every three years, so this percentage is a moveable feast, but it's much easier to update an EP than to start the process from scratch.

Exton was a pilot project area that had suffered from quite regular flood events, but they only effected a small part of the village. At initial meetings with the Parish Council, it became apparent that they felt let down by several organisations and wanted something that DRIP couldn't offer – a hard engineering solution to flooding. This made engagement challenging and at times almost aggressive. After a lot of listening, we mutually agreed that creating an EP would help the community to increase its resilience. DCRF supported the community, and they completed their EP in October 2024. Storm Burt hit in November 2024, creating a flood in Exton and their EP was put into action. A group of children were rescued from the village hall.

They had to paddle from the village hall door to pavement, but all were safely evacuated and the property flood resilience (PFR) deployed to keep the building watertight. Signage, bought with DCRF funding was used to warn drivers not to go through the water and volunteers were in position to encourage sensible driving choices from road users. I attended a post flood event meeting where the EP was discussed, and some slight adaptations were agreed. Exton's development as a community with a Flood Group, EP and desire to learn about and improve their flood resilience is a great example of engagement success.

Communication of the DRIP message was as clear and simple as possible as we recognised that managing expectations was important. DCT marketing regularly promoted the DRIP message, circulated the newsletter to relevant contacts and advertised upcoming events. DCT presented a DRIP presentation to the Rural Flood Resilience Partnership, chaired by Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE) in December 24, taking the project message and lessons learned to a new and wider audience.





The baseline data gathered in 2023 showed that **62%** of pilot project areas clearly understood the DRIP message. Having this data enabled us to think about the best way to communicate with Parish Councils, making sure that the message got to those who needed to hear it.

DRIP is an innovative project, so learning is part of the process. Resilience measures are stacked to see what combination of measures could have the greatest positive impact in a flood event. DRIP is not designed to stop flooding, but rather to increase community resilience to flood events, increasing preparation time and decreasing recovery time post flood event. This is why stakeholder engagement is so important for DRIP as when the flood water comes, communities need to be ready to act, in a safe, supportive and ideally planned way.

## The Augmented Reality (AR) Sandbox

The AR Sandbox is an engagement tool that can be used for any level of engagement. By altering the topography of the sand and simulating rainfall (by placing your hand between the computer and the sand) you can show how water behaves in different geographical landscapes. NBS can then be used to show how this changes the path and ferocity of flow. I was very keen to have access to this engagement tool as its versatility made it useful to all project partners. After some discussion, persuasion and funding consideration it was agreed that Westcountry Rivers Trust (WRT) could create an AR Sandbox as a new pilot project. This has produced a DRIP engagement tool that all partners can be trained to use and will be a



legacy of the project that I'm proud to have instigated.



*“Adults and children were captivated by the sandbox, and it proved to be valuable for drawing attention and inspiring discussions on catchment functioning.”*

*“Great to be able to make the hills around us in the sand and see what happens to the rain as it falls.”*

*“The AR Sandbox acted as an ice-breaker, and a high percentage of attendees at events visited the table first.”*



## 7) Lessons Learned

DRIP is an innovative project and there has certainly been learning along the way.

The DRIP programme would have benefitted from less staff changes and recruitment challenges. North Devon Biosphere lost two excellent members of staff and then took almost 12 months to recruit a replacement for DRIP. Devon Wildlife Trust struggled to recruit, leaving a gap in capacity for several months. Our original DCC project manager moved on and the position was backfilled by the project officer, but this post wasn't recruited to, so again this left a capacity gap.

Flood resilience engagement would be much more straightforward if there weren't so many different organisations responsible for different aspects of water containment/flow/flood. This complexity is a frustration for members of the public before, during and after a flood event and seems unnecessarily complicated. We appreciate that this is outside the remit of DRIP and would be a strategic minefield to streamline, but it impacts negatively on engagement and does the reputation of local flood authorities and the EA no favours.

Work Package two aims to install Property Flood Resilience (PFR) in selected community assets to help flood effected communities access food, medical treatment, shelter etc in/after a flood event. This work package was led by consultants who would carry out the surveys to see if the community asset would benefit from PFR and if so in what capacity. The project's approach was to send letters out on headed DCC/DRIP paper to the targeted community assets, offering them a free survey. Unfortunately, this wasn't received in the manner that was intended and was seen as a scam and disregarded by the majority of recipients. Face to face communication then had to take place to explain that the letters were legitimate and rebuild relationships. The lesson learned is that community face to face engagement should have been the first step, gaining trust and explaining the process with letters to follow once a relationship had been established.

We could have spent more time training Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) as the mantra for DRIP's engagement activities. This would have predominantly captured the community engagement as landowner engagement was generally carried out by project partner staff who already had a relationship with that individual. This decision was the right one as landowner engagement is notoriously difficult. Lack of trust in authorities means that landowner engagement

is best carried out by those who have an established relationship with the individuals concerned.



DRIP was a great project to demonstrate the importance of going to the community rather than expecting them to come to you. Engagement events at livestock markets in north Devon proved much more constructive than events in a village hall that communities were invited to attend. Having a local landowner who would advocate for the project also helped to break down barriers and encourage other landowners to trust what was being proposed and the people involved.



## 8) Stakeholder Feedback

On the whole stakeholder feedback from events was good. Communities were interested in the topic, but this didn't always convert into volunteers coming forward. Engagement often felt that education was the key role as in many communities, Natural Flood Management (NFM) was a new concept.

Some communities didn't feel that they needed support as they hadn't recognised their flood risk. This again turned a community engagement event into an education event. Some communities with well-established flood groups weren't keen to embrace natural flood management. Other communities felt that our proposal, for example of water gardens wouldn't be impactful enough due to the small number of properties in the village.

Some communities were just grateful that we'd made the effort to come and meet them on site. They appreciated the time spent with them and the information that was shared.

Engagement tools were a big help to start conversations. The Slow the Flow Top trumps cards worked well in Ashburton not only as an icebreaker but also as an educational tool. The community asked questions about the different nature-based solutions and then started to take about riverbank restoration and issues with water flow in areas of the catchment.

The AR sandbox has been extremely well received at every engagement event. It's a tool that can be engaging for school children and flood resilience specialists alike as the topography can be adapted to the audience.



*“During recent Tipton St John flooding, children were taken from school to home in a tractor and trailer. If we'd written that in an EP, H&S would have a field day!”*

*“It doesn't flood here. The village hall flooded once but that was because someone left the tap running...”*

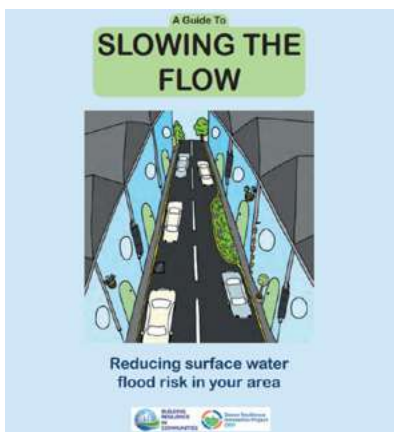


*“We don’t plan, we don’t strategize, we just do”*

*“Rural people are happy to help but don’t like the formality of a plan”*

One Parish Council was very clear that they didn’t need an EP, nor did they want another WhatsApp Group to join for the surface flood water warning system trail. This Parish Council didn’t recognise that their community was at risk of flooding, so the engagement proved a little difficult.

Another Parish Council reported that their landowners felt that nature-based solutions would negatively impact on their productive agricultural land. Unless they were suitably compensated for this perceived loss, they weren’t interested in engaging with the project.



The Slow the Flow booklet, created by BRIC was extremely well received by communities. Its clear messages, use of plain English and simplicity of format made it feel non-threatening and easily digestible.



Our takeaway message from Stakeholder feedback is that progress would have been easier if the pilot project communities had a better understanding of their flood risk and some concept of natural flood management. The pilot project areas that were already well established (pre-DRIP) already had this understanding (as well as pre-established relationships) and constructive engagement was much easier.





## 9) Recommendations for Future Projects

DRIP is an innovative project so is the ideal springboard for future project recommendations:

- 1 Levels of flood risk understanding in project communities would help engagement to be better targeted. A baseline measurement before stakeholder engagement starts would be beneficial.
- 2 Due to the likelihood of staff turnover in a project of this size and duration, simple project role descriptions would be helpful to ensure clarity of expectation for project delivery.
- 3 With a project of this duration, a review of project expectations part way through the project life cycle might be helpful. For example, the initial proposal was for communities to co-create natural flood management solutions. In reality this couldn't happen on private landowners' land so the engagement shift could have been towards NBS education generally and specific messaging around those catchments natural flood management.
- 4 A comparison of community co-creation of nature-based solution between estate/ community land and privately owned land would be a useful exercise to undertake. The disconnect between privately owned land and the community often makes this impossible. Admittedly there is co-creation with the landowner, but the nature-based solutions aren't community owned and maintained in the way that traditional co-creation could achieve.
- 5 As some DRIP pilot projects were already well established, an understanding of the levels of stakeholder engagement support required by project would be helpful. For future projects a graded scale of stakeholder engagement support might be useful, rather than time wasted on pilot project leads who were already engaging their captivated audiences and didn't want support or advice.
- 6 Better communication between work streams would reduce the likelihood of duplication of effort and engagement fatigue for communities. DRIPs stakeholder engagement landscape felt quite complex at times due to consultants working on some areas, some pilot project communities starting from a very low knowledge base and others being well established and functioning constructively within their own pre-established frameworks. Clarity of expectation needs to be clear for everyone on a project, ideally before the project starts and reviewed at predefined intervals.
- 7 It would be interesting to do a comparison of urban versus rural stakeholder engagement in a flood resilience project as part of the evaluation process. DRIP has one urban partner (BRIC) that was already well established when DRIP started. The BRIC team is adept at using Appreciative Enquiry techniques and arranged numerous engagement events at a variety of venues. Connecting the Culm is another well-established project pre-DRIP but in a rural location. They have a strong following and run regular well attended Connecting the Culm forum events. A direct comparison of approaches could be quite informative.



## 10) Conclusion

The stakeholder engagement aspect of DRIP has been challenging due to the low levels of NFM understanding and a lack of awareness around risk of flooding in many of the pilot project communities. Without an appreciation of need, the desire to engage reduces. The co-creation element of DRIP was also an unnecessary diversion, with communities unable to co-created nature-based solutions when the land was privately owned and often inaccessible to them.

On a more positive note, DRIP stakeholder engagement has educated numerous communities about the benefits and co-benefits of nature-based solutions, it has raised awareness of flood risk in individual communities and has enabled the creation of EP's and flood groups, contributing to DRIP's goal of stacking resilience measures.

Community buy in is vital for projects like DRIP, particularly when project funding stops and nature-based solutions need monitoring and maintaining. Landowners/community groups need to be willing and able to carry on the work that DRIP started, and this is less likely if relationships haven't been created, and trust established.

DRIP is an innovative project, so we look forward to the learning and evaluation of the project informing future flood resilience projects.





## 11) Appendices:

[Arnsteins Ladder of Participation](#)

[Flooding & Riparian Rights & Responsibilities](#)

[Original DRIP Presentation RFRP 12122024](#)

[Pilot Project Communication Baseline](#)

[WRT presentation](#)

[DRIP Board meeting 16102024](#)

[DRIP Board Meeting 16042024](#)

[DRIP Board Meeting 09072024](#)

[DRIP Presentation 04112024](#)

[DRIP Board Meeting 210125](#)

[DRIP DCRF Board Meeting 10/2023](#)

[DRIP Presentation Stakeholder Engagement Exeter Uni 02/2025](#)

[DRIP case studies 2024 various](#)

[Lessons Learned engagement activities DRIP](#)

[Community Emergency Plan \(CEP\) Presentation](#)

[Devon Community Resilience Forum Resilience Hub presentation](#)

[DRIP End Presentation](#)

[DRIP Stakeholder Engagement](#)

### **Charlotte Squire**

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## Thank you to the project partners:

