

Engaging the Community – a snapshot

Making interactions meaningful and creating community action

Our vision is for resilient Western Australian communities that work together to build capability and capacity to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies.

The DFES Community Engagement framework guides DFES to ensure a consistent and coordinated effort to build disaster resilience in partnership with the community and emergency service volunteers. This Community Engagement Snapshot provides a brief overview of our approach and steps to help you engage with the community.



DFES approach to community engagement

With the increasing frequency and severity of disasters in Western Australia, along with the expansive size, variety of hazards and diverse climatic conditions, now more than ever we need to work in partnership to build resilience and make WA a safer state.

The way we work with communities must actively involve people in developing the right knowledge and skills that lead to stronger self-reliance and capability. This requires a deeper level of practical engagement than just providing information, brochures and static displays.

What is a disaster resilient community?

A community that works together to understand and manage the risks it confronts: it has the ability to use local networks and resources to support actions required during an emergency and to support recovery efforts.

Changing behaviours

Communities that are well connected, informed and actively involved in planning and preparation activities are more likely to respond appropriately and recover more quickly. We must encourage and support active participation in hands-on activities that enable the community to understand and accept risks, and support and encourage individual and community actions. To do this, we must work with the community and our network of volunteers to build upon its existing strengths and resources.

Engagement essentials

- Communities that have a say in identifying their risks and developing locally appropriate solutions, are more likely to empower local action.
- Engagement must be an ongoing process, maintained over time and as communities change – not just when an emergency happens, but before, during and after an event.
- Activities where people share knowledge, learn together and practice new skills with others in their area, and are much more likely to lead to individual actions to prepare for and prevent disasters.

Characteristics of resilient communities

Function well under stress.

Successfully adapt to local and current circumstances.

Can draw on their own skills, knowledge and resources (self-reliant).

Have strong social capacity – networks, connections, leaders and trusted relationships.

Our work with communities aims to enhance these characteristics, encourage individuals to understand their shared responsibility for managing the risk they face and act on that knowledge.

Together, we can all contribute to building disaster resilience by ensuring our daily interactions with the community include meaningful conversations that encourage people to act on the risks they face. Community members must understand their shared responsibility to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from a disaster.

Our engagement objectives

Increase understanding of risk and support action

To work collaboratively with the community and volunteers to raise awareness and understanding of risks, and encourage and support individual and community action to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.

Build on existing local strengths, skills and networks

To build upon existing strengths, capacity, resources and skills in the community to create stronger networks, knowledge and support systems that enable communities to be more self-reliant when faced with a disaster.

Work together with others in emergency management

To work in partnership with volunteers and other organisations involved in emergency management to implement a coordinated approach to enhancing community preparedness and building disaster resilience, across agreed areas of community engagement focus.

A planned approach to engagement

DFES personnel and our network of volunteers on the ground in each region are best placed to understand the local communities in which they work, identify hazards and risks applicable to the local area, and to establish strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

Activities to engage with the community must be thoughtfully and carefully planned. We start by being clear on the purpose and context of our engagement activities – that is, what do we already know about this community, what are the community behaviours and actions we want to support, and how can the community's local knowledge and skills contribute to local solutions? With this in mind, we use the following approach for all of our engagement activities.



Purposeful

- Engagement activities are clear, targeted and designed with specific aims to increase disaster resilience in the community.

Plan your engagement

Get to know your local community by making a simple community profile on one page including:

- Population, localities / suburbs, types of housing and land uses, key businesses, main community facilities, transport routes and known risk areas.
- Strong community groups and leaders (both formal and informal) who can help connect you.
- Other emergency management organisations.

List the people you need to engage and state what you want to achieve by getting them involved.

- Start with small groups.
- Choose a day and time when most people can attend.
- Allow enough lead time so local people can hear about your activity.
- Use a range of ways to inform and invite people along e.g. social media, local newsletter, notice boards, ask community leaders to invite their contacts, encourage people to 'bring a friend or neighbour'.



Practical

- On-ground, hands-on programs are accessible, consider community diversity and encourage active participation.
- Every interaction we have with a community member is an opportunity to ask about and suggest preparedness and safety actions they could do.

Use hands-on activities

Choose on-ground activities that will get people interested and involved.

- Identify risks to be understood by the community and what individual actions are needed.
- Ensure activities will increase understanding of risks and shared responsibility and result in people taking action.
- Use tools, resources and support available from the DFES Community Preparedness Directorate to help plan your activities.

Practical activity ideas

- Property walk through
- Street Meet
- Open day
- Preparedness demonstrations
- Community workshop
- Small group conversations

It can be hard work to get people involved

One of the biggest challenges we face in improving community safety and disaster resilience is the complacency or lack of awareness by communities about the risks they face.

Communities experiencing more frequent disasters, or that have recently experienced a serious incident, are more likely to engage in hazard identification and preparation. It is much more challenging to engage with people who have limited or no personal experience of disasters, or do not perceive themselves or their properties to be at risk. People must be receptive to learning and acting on information in order to change their attitudes and behaviours.

Communities learn and act in different ways

Communities come in all shapes and sizes, and change constantly: they are not simply geographic areas. Some are bound by a common interest, lifestyle, culture, circumstances, age and/or degree of isolation or remoteness. Engagement activities need to be mindful of the characteristics of the communities we are trying to reach and must be adapted to suit.



Every engagement activity you undertake must include a 'call to action' – clear and real advice on community preparedness and safety actions that people should do to address the local risks they face.



Partnership-based

- Respect, value and draw on relationships that DFES personnel and our network of volunteers have with local communities.
- Collaborate with other organisations, individuals and DFES departments.

Don't do your activities alone

Work together with other groups to encourage participation and build skills.

- Ask community leaders and local groups to encourage participation in your activities using their own networks.
- Contact other organisations involved in emergency management and plan activities together.
- Respect that community members already have knowledge and skills – personally ask them to be involved in planning and solutions to address risks.

Some groups to think about:

- Schools
- Sporting clubs
- Men's Shed
- Mothers' groups
- Landcare
- Art & craft
- Seniors
- Business groups
- Cultural groups
- Other emergency services
- *Who else in your community?*



Proven

- Use engagement activities that are shown to work in the local community.
- Robust evaluation and analysis of community preparedness activities guides delivery and effective use of resources.

Keep doing only what gets people involved

Continue with activities that people attend and result in action; change activities that don't work.

- Check back on how the activity went.
- Did people participate / attend?
- Do people better understand their responsibility and actions they need to take?
- Have participants gone home and acted on their risks?
- If it didn't work well, try a different approach.
- Contact other brigades / units and learn about what worked for them in their communities.

Did it work?

- Ask participants for feedback.
- Follow up a few weeks later to find out what actions they took or if they need more help.
- Use a short survey to gather responses.

Need help?

- Contact the DFES Community Preparedness Directorate for help on gathering feedback.



All communities are different and the DFES approach to engagement is therefore flexible and adaptable.”

Where can we get support with our community engagement activities?

The DFES Community Preparedness Directorate (CPD) guides the strategic direction of engagement activities, community safety programs, and training and support to build our organisation’s capacity in effective community engagement. In agreed areas of community engagement focus, the CPD works alongside DFES regions and personnel, and other emergency service volunteers to:

- Identify and build relationships with community leaders, local organisations and existing community networks.
- Build internal capacity to work with communities to improve disaster resilience through providing training, resources and support.
- Support activities that can be delivered in partnership with local groups where community members are involved in risk identification and planning and preparing for disaster.

Community preparedness programs

The Community Preparedness Directorate, in partnership with career and volunteer personnel, and other external delivery partners, provides a suite of targeted community preparedness programs. These include Bushfire Ready, School Aged Education, At-Risk Communities, Juvenile & Family Fire Awareness (JAFFA), Get Ready, and cyclone and flood information.

How do we know if our engagement is effective?

When communities are actively engaged and invested in building their own disaster resilience, we will see positive changes in behaviour and the level of self-reliance in a community, as follows:

1. **Individuals and households** have an increased understanding of risk, and undertake effective actions to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from disaster.
2. **Local community leaders, networks and organisations** have an increased understanding of risk, increased capacity to work with their local communities towards disaster resilience and improved self-reliance.
3. **Organisations and volunteers involved in emergency management** demonstrate increased collaboration and coordination in enhancing community preparedness and disaster resilience.

Where to find out more

The **Community Engagement Framework** is available from: www.dfes.wa.gov.au/publications

Community Preparedness Directorate

Email: communitypreparedness@dfes.wa.gov.au
Phone: 08 9395 9816

Community engagement toolbox on the [DFES intranet](#).

Online community engagement module from the [DFES eAcademy](#).

