

Interactive comment on ““Are we talking just a bit of water out of bank? Or is it Armageddon?” Front line perspectives on transitioning to probabilistic fluvial flood forecasts in England” by Louise Arnal et al.

Anonymous Referee #2

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Dear authors,

Thank you for the interesting read. To me this is a valuable insight in the reality of flood forecasting and (early) warning in practice, provided first hand, by the duty officers of the UK Environment Agency. I appreciate the choice of the authors to present many quotes from the interviews performed, which helps in their attempt to make an authentic account of the current practice, as well as the expectations of the upcoming introduction of a probabilistic flood forecasting system.

I have the following general comments:

The experience with the recent (2013/2014) transition from single forecast to 2-scenarios may be quite relevant for the perception of the interviewees and prospects of the upcoming change from two scenarios to probabilistic forecasts. Did you discuss this with the interviewees and could you perhaps elaborate more on this aspect in the paper?

From reading the paper I get the impression that there is little known yet about what will be the procedures for preparing, communicating internally, and use in warning decision making of the probabilistic forecasts. Could you, for example in the Context section, elaborate on what is known, and what was known to the interviewees at the time of the interviews, about the upcoming transition to probabilistic forecasts? If nothing is known yet, the good thing is that the recommendation of co-design (recommendation 3) can still be taken up, and at the same time it might explain some of the perceived challenges associated with the upcoming transition to using probabilistic forecasts.

The presentation and discussion of the answers of the interviewees to the last question, about the upcoming introduction of probabilistic flood forecasts, seems to me to be somewhat limited. This impression is fed by the sudden change in reporting format from in-line quotes to a wordcloud, summarising table (Table 1), and a reference to an Appendix, none of which are discussed in the manuscript text (lines 460-464). I may be overlooking something, and if not, you may well have chosen this approach for good reasons. If by design, then I would recommend to explain the reasons in the same section (Section 4.3.2). If possible, however, I would recommend continuing with the reporting format of the previous sections, or at least including a discussion of the wordclouds and Table 1.

Also the Discussion and Recommendation section leaves me with a feeling that more reflection on the interview results can be done. It would be, for example, interesting to reflect on whether the interviewees' answers to the first questions are in-line with,

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help explain, or not, their perceived opportunities and challenges (last question). The 10 recommendations in section 5.2 seem somewhat disconnected from the interview results (only Refs to literature are given). I would recommend to put in, in Section 5, more references to findings reported in earlier sections of the paper.

Specific questions and comments:

- You focus on the benefit of probabilistic forecasts of increasing lead time (e.g. p1 I14 and I36, p3/4 I124/125, while other benefits include the potential of increasing the probability of detection of floods (reducing missed events), and supporting risk-based decision making. Could you reflect on this in the text? E.g. adding advantages or explaining why you refer mainly to increasing lead time. Interview findings indicate that in the current practice final decision of issuing a warning is often based on nowcasts with lead times of only a couple of hours and/or on observations (e.g. page 7 line 267 and page 11 line 397/398). Do the interviewees and/or you think that the introduction of probabilistic forecasts is going to change this practice? Could you reflect on this in the paper?

-Some of the duty officers (DOs) seem to be concerned about how the probabilistic forecasts will be received by the action response units. Does this mean that in the current practice, forecast hydrographs are send along with the warning to action response units? Please clarify in the text.

- I may have missed it, but could you include more information (and refs if available) on the probabilistic forecasting system that will be used? Is it based on meteorological ensembles or on another probabilistic forecast method? Will the MFDOs be responsible of running it through the hydrological models (as they seem to be now)? Will hydrological uncertainty also be included in the hydrometeorological ensemble, and how? etc. Please also reflect on whether this information on the features of the new forecasting system was known to the interviewees.

-When reading Table 1, I do not perceive a strong concern about the upcoming intro-

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duction of probabilistic forecasts, while when reading the quotes of Annex C I do sense a strong concern among the Duty Officers interviewed. This concern seems mainly to be that probabilistic forecasts will put all the responsibility of taking a decision with themselves (rather than with the forecasters or with the action response units). Could you note and discuss this in Section 4.3.2.? And then elaborate on recommendations on how to prevent/manage that? For example, Recommendation 9), setting guidelines on ‘..the forecast confidence at which certain decisions and actions should be made..’, may also not be the answer, because the DOs indicated in the present-day practice the value of local expert judgement in issuing warnings and seem to appreciate having the freedom of applying such expertise. Prescribing decision making rules, may, therefore, be a step too far in taking away forecast interpretation responsibility from them.

- Could you reflect on whether the interviewees see the probabilistic forecasts as an additional input to their flood forecast confidence assessment? The DOs are already communicating a confidence level with the warnings they send-on down the line. One quote in Appendix 3 confirms seeing this as an opportunity, but it would be interesting to read from you what is your impression on this for the other interviewees.

- Page 4 line 130/131 refers to the EA already using probabilistic coastal flood forecasts. Why not learn from the experiences of that earlier transition (perhaps too long ago), or at least from the user experiences. Could you elaborate a bit more, e.g. whether or not you think that would be interesting for other researchers and the EA to pick up.

- Page 5 lines 182-184: Consider referring back to these research questions in your Conclusions section.

- Page 6 lines 222-227: Choosing the What-if scenario could be perceived as quite a responsibility. A responsibility that might be (partly) taken away with the introduction of probabilistic forecasts. Did you discuss this with the MFDOs and what are their and your thoughts on this? Consider elaborating on this in the paper.

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- Are all the warnings issued being archived (including alerts, issue time, updates, etc.)? Are actual flood occurrences being documented? And if so, are the archives being compared and analysed? Could you reflect on this, and do you think such analysis could be/has been helpful for identifying challenges in the current forecasting system and warning practices, as well as for analysing in the near future the impact (or lack thereof) when introducing the probabilistic forecasts and identifying persistent and potentially new challenges?

- Page 11 line 391/392: Could these differences perhaps also be a consequence of differences in catchment size/rainfall-runoff response time/land use and differences in flood management actions that follow the warnings and the time these measures take? Consider mentioning/reflecting on this (at this point) in the paper.

- Page 11 line 400: Are the DOs being scored, and if so, how are they scored, and what are these scores used for? If possible, would be interesting to comment on below this citation, and perhaps consider to reflect on how such scoring may have an encouraging or discouraging impact on the uptake of probabilistic forecasts.

- The paper concerns the upcoming transition from a 2-scenario forecast to a probabilistic forecast, but the Supplementary material seems to focus on the recently completed transition from a single forecast to the two scenario's (following 2013/2014). Please clarify, e.g. in the author response, not necessarily in the manuscript.

Detailed comments and editorials:

p1 I12 Consider ..inclusion of uncertainty information in..

p1 I13 Consider ..potential upcoming floods.. instead of 'future' to avoid confusion with climate change. Also consider for other occurrences of 'future'.

p1 I18 Consider ..understand their perception on how this transition..

p1 I24 This sentence is rather broad and in my view not necessary. Consider leaving it out. Instead consider putting some of the key findings and recommendations (similarly

to what is written in the Conclusions section)

p1 I38/39 Consider ..given the explicit provision of uncertainty information.. Single forecasts are as uncertain as probabilistic forecasts. The uncertainty is just not shown.

p2 I42/43 ..designed to capture scenarios that may not always realise.. That does not sound quite right/the point of probabilistic forecasting. Consider just leaving that whole sentence out, or reformulate to something like "Warning on the basis of low probabilities of flood, for example, will reduce the chance of missing an event, but will also lead to more false alarms."

p2 I44 Consider .. when a pre-defined threshold (e.g. river stage) is reached..

p3 I88 Consider ..whilst local flood authorities..

p3 I113 I would suggest including here an explanation on how the two scenarios are prepared. (I realise this is described later, but it left me curious from this point onward, especially because it matters for the context of the interviews to what extend these two scenarios are a step towards probabilistic forecasting or not).

p3 I114-118 I am not sure if I now understand correctly how the two scenarios should be used. This might be due to me not being a native speaker, but if you could reformulate to further clarify, that would be appreciated.

p3 I120 ..potential risks of impacts.. Please reformulate.

p4 I129 I do not think you can 'ensure' the appropriate use. Consider to reformulate, e.g. 'support'.

p5 I171 ..advance..

p5 I186 ..communicated by several interviewees,..

p6 I234 'waiting for the forecast to be confident' Please explain how the forecast can become confident in the context referred to here (present practice).

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p7 I257 please add who has the 'Expert knowledge'.

p7 I264 please also describe how/for what/when the 'reasonable worst case' should be used.

p9 I345 please consider to add also the procedure for using the reasonable worst case again.

P10 I380 - 383 seem to me a bit too personal. Kindly double-check.

p12 I453 In my view this is an important finding that can also be used in the upcoming transition (and gives reason for a positive prospect). I cannot recall whether you clearly refer back to this finding in the Discussion and Conclusion sections at the end of the paper, but if not, I recommend including it.

p13 I463/464 Unclear, and appears as a stand-alone sentence. I suggest making this part of a discussion to be added, of Fig. 5, Table 1, and Appendix C. (See also my third general comment)

p13 I463 consider ..sound extreme.. or alternative formulation.

p13 I469/470 I do not understand this sentence. If we achieve increased confidence levels before moving up lead time, why is the second part of the sentence, about the chaotic system, posing problems? Consider clarifying or leaving out the sentence.

p13 I472/473 ..'uncertain' science.. Not sure I understand. Do you mean new discoveries being at first 'uncertain' (or not trusted), until the experiment has been reproduced with the same results (or tested in pilots, practice, etc.)? Or do you mean, more specifically, the science of quantifying uncertainty associated with predictions? Consider reformulating.

p13 I490/491 consider ..decision makers operate, and where the forecast..

p13 I497 consider ..uncertainty information.. or ..information on uncertainty..

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p14 I512/513 ..crucial to develop a methodology.. Not sure if a single methodology is the 'crucial' solution of the challenge of using probabilistic forecasts. It may be that case-dependent and user-community dependent ways have to be found, by scientists and users together, on how to effectively use confidence (uncertainty) information.

p14 I418 I do not think this reflects the main idea of probabilistic forecasts, nor that the provision of scenarios causes more false alarms. I would argue the other way around, that having the scenarios, the probabilistic forecasts, gives the opportunity to the decision maker (and its beneficiaries) to balance the number of missed events and false alarms to their needs. Please reformulate.

p14 I425 This seems a bit out of the blue and not clear to what extend you think this relates specifically to EA communication pathways and warning procedures.

p14 I531 Consider adding a brief explanation on what is a 'post-factual society'.

p15 I547 consider ..we made a list..

p15 I548 consider something like ..The recommendations concern actions we think the EA should take with high priority..

p15 recommendation 1: Before this campaign, should there first be known a bit more on how the change will be done, or not?

p15 recommendation 2: consider ..to all players..

p15 I577 is this recommendation specifically for EA, or for the flood forecasting and early warning research community. If the latter, consider moving this elsewhere.

p16 I582/583 given the reported differences in catchments, forecast performance, impacts, and warning response actions, etc., double-check this recommendation. Consider 'customised' rather than 'homogeneous'.

p16 I601 consider ..should be collected and used to update design and procedures..

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p16 l602 consider ..To handle situations..

p16 l613 stand-alone sentence, consider moving somewhere else or elaborating.

p17 l623 because of the mentioned concern of the responsibility of decision making being pushed down to the DOs, I would not write 'lie mostly outside their role', rather just something like 'the main perceived challenges concern..'. In the sentence before, perhaps it would be more clear to write something like '..concerns about impacts of this transition on the communication and interaction between them.'

p17 l624 consider replacing 'translating uncertain information to a binary decision' (because it is a challenge that they already perceive in the present situation) for the worry of the responsibility of decision making being pushed further to them.

p17 l625 consider reformulating to something like ..High priority actions were recommended to the EA.. to support a successful..

p23 Caption figure 4: consider ..Complex flood forecast interpretation landscape.. because the decision making landscape includes more elements, such as external pressure.

p23 Caption figure 5: please add from what the opportunities and challenges arise (e.g. ..from the introduction of probabilistic flood forecasts)

p24 Title table 1: consider ..A sample of supporting quotes..

p24 Table 1 line 2: 'improve long-term communication' please clarify.

p24 Table 1 line 2: add a full-stop at the end of the sentence.

p24 Table 1 line 5: consider ..contain information on forecast uncertainty..

p24 Table 1 line 22: ..it is worth noting that..

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