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Public responses to flood warning messages: the Floodline service in Scotland

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Over the past decade, efforts have been made to improve the national flood warning system in Scotland, with new capabilities in the underlying flood forecasting tools, as well as development of an active flood warning dissemination service. This paper focusses on the latter service, for which there are around 26,000 customers registered at present, and which saw over 300,000 individual messages being issued during recent floods in winter 2015/16.

However, notwithstanding such promising signs of change, evidence of how (if at all) the flood warning messages disseminated by the service actually impacts on recipient behaviour remains more limited. For example, this includes knowledge of the extent to which the messages influence actions on flood preparedness and mitigation. In consequence, there are also ongoing questions over the cost-effectiveness of the service in its current format, and of its scalability to even larger numbers of recipients.

This paper will present initial findings from the first detailed study of customer perceptions of the messages distributed via the Scottish flood warning system, officially known as Floodline. In particular, the primary focus will be on results generated from a web-based questionnaire survey of registered Floodline customers. The survey was designed to assess associations between multiple customer characteristics, including location and risk level, type of warning message received, prior experience of flooding, risk awareness, and demographics.

The study was conducted for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, which is responsible for running the Floodline service. More broadly it resonates with current emphases on exploring effective means of hazard communication and encouraging public engagement in flood risk management.