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19 January 2022

Councillor Emily Smith  
Leader of the Council  
Vale of White Horse District Council

Our Ref: 33482795

Dear Councillor Smith,

Thank you for your recent letter in which you set out the Council's opposition to the reservoir located to the south west of Abingdon and your concerns around the disruption to the local community, the impact on the environment, and the need for full and proper evaluation of alternative solutions. I have responded to the points you have raised and Nevil Muncaster, our Director responsible for the development of strategic water resource options, would be happy to arrange more detailed discussions, if that would be helpful.

We face severe challenges to our water supply. Climate change is affecting how much water is available whilst at the same time we will need to supply water to more people, as the population continues to grow, and ensure we protect and improve our environment. We are working with the other water companies in the South East, as part of Water Resources South East (WRSE), to develop a plan for the whole South East region to ensure we can provide a safe and dependable water supply for future generations.

WRSE has taken a fresh and objective look at the challenges facing the region and how best to solve them, looking beyond individual water company boundaries to identify the options that will provide resilient supplies more efficiently and provide wider benefits. WRSE has considered over 2,000 options including measures to reduce demand, inter-regional transfers, within region transfers, water recycling, desalination, reservoirs, and nature based solutions.

WRSE has just published its Emerging Regional Plan. This shows the combination of options that are the most cost-efficient way of addressing the potential shortfall in our water supplies faced across the region and includes many different actions, including tackling the amount of water that is lost through leaks in our water pipes, changing how people and businesses' use water and developing new water sources. The work completed to date indicates that the South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) will be one of a number of schemes needed to ensure a secure and sustainable water supply. The emerging plan is the first step towards developing the best value plan for the region which will be produced later this year and will be the foundation of each of the SE water companies' draft Water Resources Management Plans (WRMP). WRSE is running a consultation on the Emerging Regional Plan, which runs from 17 January to 14 March 2022, and will continue to engage with stakeholders as it prepares the best value plan. The water industry regulators including the Environment Agency, as the primary regulator for water resources, will scrutinise this work.

Turning now to the specific points that you have raised on the reservoir.

The reservoir is one of the strategic resource options (SROs) that is being examined under a new regulatory process to develop water resources options. This process is overseen by the Regulators' Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development (RAPID) – a team made up of experts from the Environment Agency, Ofwat and the Drinking Water Inspectorate, with guidance from Natural England. To date we have completed, and reported on, the initial feasibility assessments for the South East Strategic Reservoir Option, called the "Gate One assessments", and we are now progressing more detailed assessments running up to Gate Two (October 2022). The assessments include engineering, environmental, and planning assessments and are consistent across all the SROs.

In respect of the environment, we will undertake detailed assessment of the potential environmental impacts in line with regulatory and legal requirements. The reservoir does offer significant opportunity to enhance the landscape and the environment by providing new aquatic and terrestrial habitats that encourage biodiversity as well as helping to support the flow of ecologically vulnerable chalk streams. It also has the potential for developing carbon capturing wetlands. Thames Water has a long and successful track record of doing this at the London Wetland Centre where we have worked for over 30 years with the Wildfowl & Wetland Trust to create one of the UK's most important wildlife sites and most popular visitor attractions. Carbon is an important factor being considered in the development of the South East Regional Plan. We will work to reduce and mitigate embodied carbon on all the options proposed, as much as possible.

In respect of the disruption to the local community, the reservoir is a major infrastructure project with a construction period of around eight years and as such we fully recognise the concerns of the local community. There would be careful planning and provision of suitable mitigation, guided by local feedback and industry best practice to reduce the impact as far as possible. As part of the Development Consent Order (DCO) process the detailed proposals would be subject to formal consultation, public examination hearings and appraisal by the Planning Inspectorate, if the scheme is taken forward.

Whilst noting the concerns raised, the reservoir could provide significant regional and local economic and social benefits including the creation of over 1,000 new jobs directly through construction, as well as opportunities for the supply chain, apprenticeships and work with schools and colleges to champion careers in engineering and construction; as well as providing leisure and recreational opportunities; potential to mitigate local flooding issues; and contribute to wider improvements such as supporting the development of a new railway station and improvements to the local highway network.

I understand that a meeting was held for Oxfordshire County Council and Vale of White Horse District Council Councillors and Officers on Thursday 13 January to provide an early briefing on the Emerging Regional Plan for the South East and to respond to points raised recently by the local community and Councillors on the reservoir. I hope this session was helpful and informative.

As a final point, I do want to reiterate that no decisions have been made on the solutions which will be taken forwards and, given the importance of this issue to the Council, we are committed to continue to work in an open and collaborative manner as we continue to develop long-term plans for a resilient water supply.

I trust this offers reassurance to you. Should you require any further assistance about this matter or would like to take us up on our offer of a meeting, I have asked a member of our CEO Office to be available for you. Linzey Bell can be contacted via 0800 009 4995 and will be happy to help you.

With very best wishes,



Sarah Bentley  
**Chief Executive Officer**