



SRO - White Horse Reservoir Project

**J696-ARB-XXXX-XXXX-RP-EL-000123
White Horse Reservoir Pre-application
Programme Document**

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1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this document

- 1.1.1 In 2020, the National Infrastructure Strategy established a government ambition to accelerate and improve the decision-making process for major infrastructure projects, including those considered under the Planning Act 2008 (PA2008). Following an operational review of the PA2008 process beginning in 2021, the then Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) published an Action Plan setting out proposed reforms that would be implemented to ensure the PA2008 process can support the country's future infrastructure needs. Between July and September 2023, DLUHC consulted on the details of the operational reforms and Government's response to the consultation was published on 6 March 2024.
- 1.1.2 The Planning Inspectorate (PINS) has responded to the government brief by developing new pre-application services which are set out in its [2024 Pre-application Prospectus](#) (with subsequent updates made in October 2025 and March 2026). This has included the introduction of three pre-application tier options reflecting different levels of service that applicants may receive from PINS ahead of submitting a Development Consent Order (DCO) application and the introduction of fees associated with each service tier.
- 1.1.3 Thames Water notes that across all three tiers of pre-application service, all applicants are expected to engage in six primary service features, which the Planning Inspectorate considers to be fundamental general requirements for improved service, certainty and outcomes.
- 1.1.4 This Programme Document has been produced to support service feature 1. Programme Document, which requires *'the production and maintenance, by the applicant, of a pre-application programme document setting out the main steps that the applicant anticipates taking during the preparation of the application'*.
- 1.1.5 This Programme Document is not a statutory requirement and is not for consultation. However, Thames Water recognises the importance of enabling meaningful inputs from consultees through pre-application engagement. This Programme Document will be shared with statutory consultees and relevant local authorities and will be published on the Project website (<https://thames-sro.co.uk/projects/white-horse-reservoir-previously-known-as-south-east-strategic-reservoir-option-sesro/>).
- 1.1.6 Please note that this document is based on information available at the date of publication and could be subject to change. For future published versions, please check the Project website for the most up-to-date version of this document.

1.2 Background

- 1.2.1 Every water company must prepare and maintain a Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP). This plan is updated every five years and sets out how Thames Water will achieve a secure supply of water for its customers whilst protecting the environment. WRMPs are long-term plans that require forecasting of future scenarios using a range of data.
- 1.2.2 The White Horse Reservoir Project (previously known as South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO)) is part of Thames Water's wider package of actions and investment identified in the Water Resource Management Plan 2024 (WRMP24) published by Thames Water on 21 October 2024 to meet the forecast demand of an additional 1 billion litres of water every day by 2050 to accommodate climate change, a growing population and to reduce the amount of water we take from our rivers and chalk streams to protect the environment.
- 1.2.3 The strategic case for the reservoir is detailed in WRMP24. The plan sets out a range of investment measures proposed to combat the effects of climate change and population growth in London and the wider south-east region. The updated National Policy Statement for Water Resources Infrastructure (published July 2025) reaffirms the need for projects identified in approved WRMPs.
- 1.2.4 Through Water Resources South East (WRSE), Thames Water is also working with the other five water companies that supply the region's drinking water to develop a joint revised draft Regional plan that addresses the climate and environmental emergency threatening our water resources. This collaborative approach means we can look beyond our individual boundaries and work together to secure the region's future water supplies.

1.3 The Project

- 1.3.1 The White Horse Reservoir Project comprises a fully bunded raw water reservoir, located 5km south-west of Abingdon, which would draw-in water from the River Thames during winters and store it until it is needed i.e. when the weather has turned dry or demand for water increases.
- 1.3.2 Following a request made to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), a direction under Section 35 of the Planning Act 2008 was made by the Secretary of State in June 2025, confirming that the White Horse Reservoir Project would be progressed as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) under a DCO application. The updated National Policy Statement for Water Resources Infrastructure (published July 2025) also confirms that the need case of water NSIPs included in a final WRMP will have been demonstrated in line with government policy, and will not be revisited at DCO examination stage.

1.3.3 The proposed Project infrastructure includes:

- A fully bunded 'live' (usable) water storage of 150 Mm³ plus a suitable allowance for 'dead' (not suitable for use) water storage at the base of a central borrow pit trench reservoir in Oxfordshire, 5km south-west of Abingdon.
- A pumping station at the toe of the embankment (on the north-east side of the reservoir) including both inflow pumps and outflow energy-recovery turbines.
- A conveyance tunnel to transfer flows via the pumping station to and from the intake / outfall structure on the River Thames, near Culham. This would also act as a drawdown in the case of an emergency.
- Local watercourse diversions to both the east and the west of the reservoir and construction of compensatory floodplain.
- A new access road into the site (from A415, Marcham Road) and the diversion of the existing East Hanney to Steventon Road.
- Provision to enable other interfacing schemes (e.g. Thames to Southern Transfer).
- A temporary rail siding to facilitate delivery of materials by freight train during construction, minimising the impact on local roads.
- Public access, parking and recreation facilities, public education facilities, landscaping and creation of aquatic / grassland habitats.

Figure 1 Indicative Master Plan of the White Horse Reservoir (Source: Statutory Consultation, 2025)



(Please note this illustration is indicative and may be subject to change)

- 1.3.4 When complete, the reservoir would supply water for 15 million people across the South East, including local customers. The infrastructure required to move water from White Horse Reservoir to other supply areas will not be included within the White Horse Reservoir DCO application and will be delivered as separate projects by the respective water companies with responsibility for the supply of water in these areas.
- 1.3.5 The separate projects will be required to obtain their own planning and other consents, and currently include:
- Customers in the Thames Valley – Water would be supplied via a new pipeline to support customers in the ‘Swindon and Oxfordshire’ area and also potentially the ‘Slough, Wycombe and Aylesbury’ customer area. This proposed pipeline would be subject to separate public consultation and planning approval.
 - Customers in London – Water from the reservoir would be released into the River Thames to flow downstream to London for abstraction for Thames Water and Affinity Water customers. Where any additional infrastructure is required to support water abstractions or distribute water supply, these projects would be subject to separate consultation and planning approval(s).
 - Customers in Hampshire – Water from the reservoir would be treated and transferred via a new pipeline to customers in Hampshire which will be separately consented by Southern Water. A new water treatment works, located close to the new reservoir, would be needed as part of that project. As a result of the proximity of that proposed new water treatment works, this is proposed to be incorporated as part of the DCO application for the White Horse Reservoir.

2 Pre-application Programme

2.1 Current Pre-application Programme (as of June 2026)

- 2.1.1 The Project programme is shaped by a number of factors, most critical of which is the requirement from RAPID for the proposed reservoir to be operational by 2040 to provide a resilient water supply for the South East of England. The programme below focuses on the activities that enable consultees to engage with the development of the proposed Project as well as covering the pre-application requirements.
- 2.1.2 The DCO application for the Project is expected to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate in Autumn 2026.
- 2.1.3 The pre-application programme will be updated as necessary during the pre-application period to publicise completion of significant stages and demonstrate progress in preparation of our application for development consent. Please note that the programme is subject to change and will be reviewed on a regular basis. Updates to key milestones in the pre-application programme will be communicated to key stakeholders and published on the Project website: <https://thames-sro.co.uk/projects/white-horse-reservoir-previously-known-as-south-east-strategic-reservoir-option-sesro/>.

2.2 Completed Pre-application Activities to date (as of June 2026)

Non-statutory Public Consultation

- 2.2.1 The non-statutory public consultation took place between June and August 2024. The material used at the consultation is available here: <https://thames-sro.co.uk/projects/white-horse-reservoir-previously-known-as-south-east-strategic-reservoir-option-sesro/>. The feedback collated at non-statutory consultation has been used to inform and influence the Project's design optioneering work. A full Statement of Response (available here: [Statement of Response](#)) has also been published, which sets out the issues raised and Thames Water's response to the feedback received.

Environmental Impact Assessment Scoping

- 2.2.2 The EIA Scoping Request was submitted in August 2024 (available here: [WA010005-000010-WA010005 - Scoping Report.pdf](#)), with the Scoping Opinion from PINS received in September 2024 (available here: [WA010005-000017-SESRO Scoping Opinion 2017 EIA Regs FINAL.pdf](#)).

Public Information Events

- 2.2.3 A series of public information events introducing the Project to local communities was held in November 2023, alongside online published information and newsletters.

- 2.2.4 A Spring Project Update was launched in March 2025, which provided a summary of the masterplan design options which were being considered at the time.
- 2.2.5 A Summer Project Update was launched in June 2025, which presented the preferred design options for the project, with in-person events held in Oxfordshire in July 2025. A Feedback Report prepared by Ipsos (available here: [Ipsos report](#)), alongside a Statement of Response to feedback collated at the 2024 Non-statutory Consultation were also published.

Statutory Consultation

- 2.2.6 The statutory consultation took place between October 2025 and January 2026. The material used is available here: [SESRO Statutory Consultation 2025 - Document Library](#).
- 2.2.7 The Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC) was published prior to the launch of statutory consultation in October 2025, which set out our approaches to consulting and working with local communities.
- 2.2.8 The Preliminary Environmental Information (PEI) Report was also published as part of the statutory consultation, providing an assessment of the likely significant effects during construction or operation of the Project.
- 2.2.9 Consultation feedback from both statutory consultees and the public are being collated, analysed, and reviewed. The feedback obtained will be considered as part of the design development and finalisation process ahead of DCO submission.

2.3 Ongoing and Upcoming pre-application activities (June – November 2026)

- 2.3.1 The following key pre-application activities are anticipated to commence / continue between June to November 2026:
- Pre-application engagement with key stakeholders (commenced 2021 – ongoing), including engagement for Statements of Common Ground
 - Pre-application engagement with PINS (commenced 2025 – ongoing)
 - Site Surveys (ongoing)
 - Preparation of the Environmental Statement (ES) (ongoing)
 - Preparation of DCO documents (ongoing; selection of draft documents shared with PINS in June 2026)
- 2.3.2 Consideration is also being given to the requirement for further supplementary consultation and/or engagement as a result of recent updates to the Project and in light of the new guidance for the Planning and Infrastructure Act (2026) issued by government.

2.4 PINS Pre-application Service

- 2.4.1 It has been confirmed that the Project will follow the 'Standard' pre-application service tier as set out in the PINS Pre-application Service Prospectus (2024). As such, a maximum of six project meeting per annum could be arranged with PINS.
- 2.4.2 An Inception/Project Scoping meeting under the terms of service was held with PINS on 2 April 2025. Potential timings of the meetings at key milestones of the Project are provided below for reference:

Table 1 Proposed Pre-application Meetings with PINS

Key Milestone for Project Meeting	Proposed Timing
Project Scoping	Held on 2 April 2025
Pre-Section 42 Consultation	Held on 13 August 2025 and 13 October 2025
Post-Section 42 Consultation (including Site Visit)	Held on 26 March 2026
Draft DCO documents feedback	Held on 8 July 2026
Pre-submission Meeting	Q3 2026

- 2.4.3 Minutes of the meetings and the Section 51 advice log are available on the Planning Inspectorate White Horse Reservoir Project pages, under the Section 51 advice section: <https://national-infrastructure-consenting.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/WA010005/s51advice>

3 Engagement with Statutory Consultees, Local Authorities and Affected Persons

- 3.1.1 The White Horse Reservoir project is currently in its pre-application stage. We have sought to carry out consistent and effective engagement to date, which has comprised a mix of regular meetings, technical engagement on specialist issues and correspondence to handle queries from statutory consultees and local authorities.
- 3.1.2 Thames Water has, and will continue to support statutory consultees' activities through suitable service level agreements, including provisions established through changes to the PA2008 (cost recovery) and through the use of Planning Performance Agreements (where appropriate).
- 3.1.3 Issue-specific 'Technical Liaison Groups' were set up early in scheme development for Thames Water to engage with technical stakeholders throughout the pre-application process. To date, engagement with statutory consultees and local authorities has comprised the following:
- Regular programmed meetings with the Environment Agency and Natural England, and other statutory consultees
 - Regular programmed meetings with the host Local Planning Authorities (LPAs)
 - Investigation into affected statutory undertakers and commencing discussions with these parties
 - Presentation to Local Resilience Forum to detail our position on emergency planning and how we want to work together
 - Briefings to elected officials at appropriate milestones of the Project
 - Early-stage engagement with local businesses in the Thames Valley
 - Legacy workshops to initiate partnership working with interested stakeholders
- 3.1.4 In June 2024, a 12-week non-statutory consultation was commenced which included seven Community Information Events. Technical Experts were available at the events to discuss the interim masterplan (a spatial layout of the proposed reservoir and surroundings) and key optioneering studies undertaken to inform the current design.
- 3.1.5 A 12-week statutory consultation was undertaken from October 2025 to January 2026. Seven in-person consultation events were held across key locations, alongside additional landowner drop-in sessions. Two online webinars, including Q&A sessions, were held in November 2025. All statutory consultation documents were deposited and made available to the public in Abingdon and Wantage libraries, in addition to eleven information points.

- 3.1.6 Key statutory consultees, including the relevant LPAs, were briefed before and during both non-statutory and statutory consultations.
- 3.1.7 The Project will affect persons with an interest in land under section 44 of the PA2008 due to surface and below ground construction works. We have an ongoing programme of engagement for all relevant affected persons.

4 Main Issues raised through engagement

4.1.1 This Section provides an overview of main issues raised through public consultation to date. A Potential Main Issues for Examination (PMIE) Document will be prepared by the Applicant as part of the DCO application submission.

4.2 Non-statutory Public Consultation (2024)

4.2.1 A non-statutory public consultation took place between June and August 2024, focussing on the emerging design options and an interim masterplan for the proposed new reservoir. Stakeholders and local communities were engaged with in order to understand priorities and gather information and feedback which will help shape our proposals.

4.2.2 All consultation responses and feedback collated have been reviewed by Thames Water, incorporating design changes where opportune and appropriate. A summary of the issues raised, and the outcome of this review following the non-statutory consultation have been reported in the Statement of Response published in June 2025 (available here: [Statement of Response](#)).

4.3 Statutory Public Consultation (2025)

4.3.1 Statutory Consultation for the project took place between October 2025 and January 2026, presenting updated Project proposals based on ongoing design development, feedback provided during non-statutory consultation and from ongoing stakeholder engagement.

4.3.2 Thames Water is maintaining a live Issues Tracker to record and track progress regarding issues raised and identified by relevant stakeholders. The Issues Tracker will be made available to PINS as well as any affected statutory bodies and local authorities, in accordance with PINS guidance on the Issues Tracker as the primary service feature 2 within the PINS Pre-application Prospectus.

4.3.3 Statutory consultation respondents raised a variety of issues and topics in their feedback, some of which were also raised during the 2024 non-statutory consultation. Examples of themes include (but are not limited to):

- Comments on the need of the scheme;
- Comments on the construction cost of the scheme and the long-term value for money;
- Concerns with reservoir flood risk and the proposed mitigation measures;
- Comments on the approach to undertaking assessments of environmental impacts;
- Local traffic and transport impacts; and
- Opportunity for future leisure and recreational amenity provision.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1.1 This Programme Document has outlined the White Horse Reservoir Project's intended approach to undertaking the main steps through pre-application stage. The Project will proceed with the 'Standard' level of pre-application service with PINS.
- 5.1.2 This Programme Document will be maintained and updated by Thames Water to reflect any substantial changes and/or updates to the pre-application programme, and any future updates to this document will be publicised online on the Project website: <https://thames-sro.co.uk/projects/white-horse-reservoir-previously-known-as-south-east-strategic-reservoir-option-sesro/>.
- 5.1.3 For further information regarding the White Horse Reservoir Project, please contact Thames Water via whitehorsereservoir@thameswater.co.uk.

References

Documents and legislation referenced in this Pre-application Programme Document are shown in the tables below.

Documents

Title	Document date
South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) EIA Scoping Report	August 2024
South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) EIA Scoping Opinion from the Planning Inspectorate	October 2024
Thames Water Water Resource Management Plan 2024	October 2024
South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) Non-statutory Public Consultation 2024: Our Statement of Response	June 2025
South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) Statutory Consultation 2025: Statement of Community Consultation	October 2025
Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects: 2024 Pre-application Prospectus	May 2024, last updated March 2026

Legislation

Title	Document date
The Planning Act 2008	2008, as amended
The Infrastructure Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017	2017, as amended
The Planning and Infrastructure Act	2025, as amended

Glossary

Terms and acronyms	Definition
DCO	The means of obtaining permission to construct and maintain developments categorised as Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects.
EIA	A process by which information about environmental effects of a proposed development is collected, assessed and used to inform decision making.
PEI Report	Preliminary Environment Information Report containing initial environmental data and assessments provided early in the Development Consent Order process to inform decision making.
PINS	The Planning Inspectorate is an executive agency of the UK government that deals with planning appeals, national infrastructure planning applications, and examinations of local plans in England. They act on behalf of the Secretary of State, making decisions and recommendations on a range of planning-related matters, including everything from small household extensions to large infrastructure projects.
WRMP	Water Resource Management Plan. Regulatory requirement sets out how water companies intend to achieve a secure supply of water for their customers and protect and enhance the environment.
WRSE	An alliance of the six water companies that supply drinking water across South East England.

Acronyms

Terms and acronyms	Definition
DCO	Development Consent Order
Defra	Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs
DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
ES	Environmental Statement
LPA	Local Planning Authority
NSIP	Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project
PEI Report	Preliminary Environment Information Report
PINS	The Planning Inspectorate
RAPID	Regulators' Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development
SESRO	South East Strategic Reservoir Option
SoCC	Statement of Community Consultation
SRO	Strategic Resource Option
WRMP	Water Resource Management Plan
WRSE	Water Resources South East

