

The White Horse Reservoir: what it is and how to have your say

You may have heard it called the Abingdon Reservoir or SESRO. Thames Water has now renamed it the White Horse Reservoir. It's a proposed reservoir on farmland south-west of Abingdon, between Steventon, East Hanney and Drayton. It would be one of the largest in England, needing around 38 km² of land. Thames Water plans to start operating it in 2040.

What happens next?

Thames Water ran a public consultation last winter. It now plans to apply for planning permission (a "Development Consent Order") in November 2026. The application will be examined by the Planning Inspectorate, and the final decision will be made by the Government. This is the most important stage for residents to have their say.

The case for

Thames Water says the reservoir is needed to protect water supplies in the South East during droughts, as the population grows and the climate changes. It would be filled from the Thames in winter and release water when rivers run low. The Government has listed it as a priority project. Thames Water also says the site would offer public spaces and new wildlife habitat.

The case against

Local councils and campaigners have raised serious concerns:

- **Cost:** the estimate has risen from £2.2bn to as much as £7.5bn, paid for through water bills.
- **Need:** critics argue fixing leaks (around a quarter of Thames Water's supply is lost) and recycling water would be cheaper and less damaging.
- **Safety and flooding:** Oxfordshire County Council voted unanimously against the scheme, partly because no full emergency plan is required before approval.
- **Disruption:** years of construction, with more lorry traffic than first forecast.

Find out more

- **Thames Water Project Site:** <https://thames-sro.co.uk/projects/white-horse-reservoir-previously-known-as-south-east-strategic-reservoir-option-sesro/>
- **Vale of White Horse District Council:** <https://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/vale-of-white-horse-district-council/planning-and-development/thames-water-south-east-strategic-reservoir-option-sesro/>
- **Planning Inspectorate** (application documents will appear here once submitted): <https://national-infrastructure-consenting.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/WA010005>
- **Group Against Reservoir Development** (campaign group opposing the scheme): <https://groupagainstreservoirdevelopment.org/>

How to have your say

1. **Register with the Planning Inspectorate.** Once the application is accepted, there will be a registration window of at least 30 days. By sending a short comment (a "relevant representation"), you become an "Interested Party." That means you can send further evidence and speak at hearings. If you miss the window, you lose these rights, so watch for the dates.
2. **Contact your MP and councillors.** You can find them by postcode at writetothem.com.
3. **Tell the Parish Council.** Your views help shape the council's own response.

Whatever your view, please take part. This is a once-in-a-generation decision for our area.
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