

REPORT OF THE PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: SCRUTINY OF WATER RESOURCES AND THE SOUTHEAST REGIONAL PLAN

Cllr Kieron Mallon
Chair of the Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee
February 2023

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Agree to respond to the recommendations contained in the body of this report, and
 - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee hereby requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and its recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. At its meeting on 25 January 2023, the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the Council's consultation response to the draft Water Resources South East regional plan, a presentation from Thames Water on their proposals to ensure a resilient and sustainable water supply, and a presentation from Group Against Reservoir Development (GARD) on their views regarding the South East Regional Plan consultation response.
4. The Committee received the input of Cabinet Member for Climate Change Delivery and Environment Councillor Sudbury, the Corporate Director for Environment and Place Bill Cotton, Rachel Wileman, Director of Planning, Environment and Climate Change, Phil Stride and Lesley Tait from Thames Water, and Derek Stork from GARD. The Committee would like to thank everyone, especially external contributors, for sharing their time and expertise with the Committee.

SUMMARY

5. The Committee considered a report on the County Council's proposed responses to the current South East water resources regional and company draft plan consultations. Draft responses were being prepared for those with a

deadline of 20th February 2023. The draft Thames Water WRMP24 had a delayed publication date, of 13th December 2022 and has a deadline of 21st March 2023, and therefore, a draft response has not yet been prepared.

6. The Director of Planning, Environment and Climate Change presented the report and referred, in particular, to the Council's opposition to the proposed strategic reservoir described in the Thames Water plan. She said that a representative of GARD had been invited to the meeting to explain their organisation's views on the proposed development.
7. Phil Stride from Thames Water gave a presentation on the consultation on the two plans. He said that Thames Water were keen to hear the Council's views on these plans. He made the following points:
 - The need for resource planning to address the potential shortfall in water resources in future decades
 - Work with the Environment Agency and other stakeholders on scenarios for abstraction reduction
 - The development of a best value plan
 - Managing leakages and water demand effectively
 - Development of new sources of water
 - Proposals for the South East Strategic Reservoir
 - Opportunities from the plan for Society, the Economy and the Environment
 - Proposals for consultation and engagement
8. Derek Stork, Group Against Reservoir Development gave a presentation covering the following points:
 - Aims of the GARD campaign/response to the plan
 - Analysis of water demand predictions
 - Performance of Thames Water against government targets on water efficiency and leakage
 - Drought resilience
 - Supply-side solution de-emphasising new reservoirs
 - New infrastructure to 2040
9. During discussion, members made the following comments on the draft response to the plan set out in the report:
 - Too much emphasis on engineering solutions to the problems
 - Targets on water leakage and performance were not sufficient
 - Insufficient proposals on educating the public on reducing water usage
 - Concern that an Oxfordshire-built reservoir will benefit other areas
 - There was no local support for the reservoir plans
 - Concern about the choice of language in the Council's proposed response set out in the report
 - A holistic approach was needed to water resourcing before detailed matters raised in the proposed response are considered

RECOMMENDATIONS

10. Water resources regional plans across England have reached a draft stage, and draft individual water company plans have also been produced. These draft plans set out the water company priorities for securing future water supply and will provide the framework for progressing the selected water resource options through consenting processes.
11. These matters are of particular interest to Oxfordshire because water companies are proposing a reservoir located near Abingdon known as the South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO), as well as other options for securing future water supply.
12. Key proposals that impact Oxfordshire include:
- SESRO – The plans propose that this reservoir holds up to 100 million cubic metres of water, providing for up to 185 million litres per day (Ml/d) of water. The plans envisage SESRO providing water from 2040.
 - Severn Thames Transfer (STT) - The plans propose that up to 500 Ml/d be transferred from the River Severn to the River Thames via a new pipeline. The plans envisage STT providing water from 2050.
 - Thames to Southern Transfer – The plans propose that up to 120 Ml/d be transferred from the River Thames via a pipeline from Culham south. The water would be available from SESRO and/or STT.
 - Thames to Affinity Transfer – The plans propose that up to 100 Ml/d be transferred between the Thames Water and Affinity Water companies, partly via the River Thames and then by a new pipeline from a point in Hertfordshire. The water would be available from SESRO and/or STT.
13. The Committee considered the County Council's detailed draft responses to:
- Water Resources South East (WRSE) regional plan consultation
 - Water Resources West (WRW) Plan consultation
 - Water Resources East (WRE) Plan consultation
 - Affinity Water's draft Water Resource Management Plan consultation
14. The Committee wholeheartedly agreed with the detailed draft responses challenging the draft plans, including the assumptions used, for example the future population figures and how these are used to calculate future water needs. The Committee also agreed with the many concerns listed about the SESRO, for example its size, effectiveness, length of time to construct, cost, and environmental effects. The Committee agreed that the SESRO should be removed from the plans and more attention to reducing leakage and other matters which will help reduce demand.
15. The Committee noted that the Council's responses argue for a 'resilience first' approach, given climate change, and advocate for policies indicating a preference for low carbon and least environmentally damaging water supply solutions. Notwithstanding this, the Committee agreed it would be helpful to include a statement setting out the Council's holistic vision in this policy area.

Recommendation 1: That the Council includes, as part of its consultation response, a statement setting out Oxfordshire County Council's vision in terms of a holistic approach to water management, highlighting our

preference for solutions that are based in nature and that recognise the reality of an increasingly water scarce environment and the need to adapt to this reality.

16. The Committee shared the draft responses' frustration with some of the methodology and assumptions used but agreed that it is important that appropriate language is used when drafting responses to government consultations, avoiding divisive words such as 'nonsense'. Moreover, the Committee agreed that appropriate and professional language should be used in all Council business as a matter of course.

Recommendation 2: That the Council ensures appropriate language is used in future responses to consultations and all Council documents, avoiding unclear and divisive words such as 'nonsense'.

17. The Committee considered evidence provided by Thames Water and GARD which highlighted the current high levels of water leakage in Thames Water areas (176 litres per property per day) and how these are significantly higher than the industry average for the South East region (140 litres per property per day), based on 2017/18 figures.

18. Thames Water's ambition to reduce leakage to 66 litres per property per day by 2050 was welcomed by the Committee, but it was noted that this would still be worse than the average target for the region of 52 litres, which would still be a significant difference and if effectively addressed could significantly contribute to water resilience in the region.

19. The Committee discussed if more could be done to address water leakage and recommended that possible ways to expedite repairs are explored between the Council and Thames Water in order to improve levels of leakage and water resilience in Oxfordshire and beyond.

Recommendation 3: That the Council works with Thames Water to explore if more can be done to expedite water leakage repairs.

NEXT STEPS

20. The Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee will review the published Cabinet response to this report and its recommendations at the meeting of the Committee after Cabinet's response in accordance with part 6.2, 13(f), of the Constitution of the Council.

21. The Committee does not anticipate looking at water resources and the South East regional plan again within the current civic year.

Contact Officer: Marco Dias, Interim Scrutiny Officer
marco.dias@oxfordshire.gov.uk