Understanding the White Horse Reservoir Planning Process

A guide for local people

The proposed Thames Water White Horse Reservoir (formerly known as SESRO) is being considered through a special planning process used for major national infrastructure projects. This guide explains what happens next, who makes the decision and how local people can have their say.

Who decides?

The reservoir is a **Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP)**. This means the final decision will be made by the government, not by Vale of White Horse District Council. The council is an important consultee in the process and will represent local concerns, submit technical evidence and scrutinise the application, but it is not the decision-maker.

How long does the process take?

Once an application has been submitted, the process is highly structured and typically takes around **12 to 24 months** before a final decision is reached. It follows several formal stages.

Stage 1: Acceptance

This is the first stage after the application is submitted.

The Planning Inspectorate checks whether all the required documents and information have been provided and whether the application meets the standards needed to proceed. **This stage usually lasts about 28 days.** Members of the public are not involved at this point.

At the end of this stage, the application will either:

- Be accepted for examination.
- Not be accepted.
- Be withdrawn by the applicant.

If accepted, a panel of planning inspectors, known as the **Examining Authority**, is appointed to run the next stages of the process.

Stage 2: Pre-examination

This is when local people first get the opportunity to become formally involved. The stage typically lasts between **three and five months.**

The application documents and draft Development Consent Order (DCO) will be published, allowing people to review the full details of the proposal.

Residents, community groups and organisations can register as **Interested Parties**. This gives them the right to participate throughout the examination.

People who register can submit a **Relevant Representation**. This is an initial statement explaining:

- Whether they support or object to the proposal
- What impacts they believe it may have
- Why those impacts matter to them or their community

The Examining Authority will also hold a **Preliminary Meeting** to explain how the examination will be run and set the timetable for the next stage. This meeting focuses on process rather than debating the merits of the project itself.

Stage 3: Examination

This is the main stage of the process and is where evidence is tested in detail. It consists of multiple deadlines, hearings and opportunities for comments.

What happens during the examination?

Local evidence is submitted

The host authorities (in this case, Vale of White Horse District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and Oxfordshire County Council) prepare a **Local Impact Report (LIR)**. This is an evidence-based assessment of how the project could affect local communities, the environment and the wider area. It helps ensure that local knowledge is considered during decision-making.

Interested Parties can provide more detailed comments

People who registered earlier can submit written representations expanding on the points they raised in their Relevant Representation.

Public hearings take place

The Examining Authority may hold different types of hearings, including:

- **Open Floor Hearings** where members of the public can speak about the project.

- **Issue Specific Hearings** focusing on particular topics such as transport, flooding or environmental impacts.
- **Compulsory Acquisition Hearings** if land acquisition issues need to be discussed.

Questions are asked

The Examining Authority can ask questions of Thames Water, councils, expert organisations and sometimes individuals who have raised specific concerns. Responses are published and can be commented on by others involved in the process.

At the end of the examination, Interested Parties can submit a closing statement summarising whether they believe their concerns have been addressed.

Stage 4: Recommendation

Once the examination ends, the Examining Authority reviews all the evidence and prepares a report with its recommendation to government. This stage typically lasts **three months.** No further representations can normally be submitted after the examination has closed.

The recommendation is then sent to the Secretary of State responsible for making the final decision.

Stage 5: Decision

The Secretary of State reviews the recommendation, all the evidence and the examination findings before deciding whether to grant development consent for the project. This stage is intended to take around three months, although extensions are common.

The Secretary of State may also ask additional questions before making a final decision.

If permission is granted

If the project is approved, Thames Water would still need to comply with a range of legal requirements before construction could proceed. There may also be further consultation if significant changes are proposed after approval.

How can local people make their voices heard?

The most important opportunity to get involved comes after an application is accepted for examination.

Residents can:

- Register as an Interested Party.
- Submit a Relevant Representation.
- Attend and speak at public hearings.
- Submit written comments during the examination.
- Comment on information and responses submitted by others.

The council strongly encourages residents, community groups, town councils and parish councils to take part if they wish their views to be considered by the Examining Authority.

Best Practice Advice

If you register as an interested party and submit a representation, here is some best practice advice to consider:

• Keep written submissions **succinct** - the examiners have thousands of pages to read through.

• Use **Examination Library** reference numbers to refer to documents.

• References should be in square brackets in bold, e.g: [APP-040], and refer to specific paragraph numbers.

• Make sure your own submissions are paginated and use paragraph numbers.

• Try to use policy to support your points, NSIPs are determined against the relevant National Policy Statement, not the Local Plan.

• Do not try to argue against the merits of the National Policy Statement - the examiners are allowed to disregard submissions which do so.

Find out more

The council's Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) Hub contains information about the White Horse Reservoir and other major infrastructure projects affecting the district, along with updates on the planning process and opportunities to get involved.

This table below illustrates the main stages of the NSIP decision-making process.

Stage	What it means	Typical timescale
1.Pre-application **Developer prepares its plans**	Thames Water develops its proposal, carries out surveys and consults local communities, councils and other organisations before submitting an application.	Can take several years for a project of this size.
2. Acceptance: **Application check**	The Planning Inspectorate checks whether the application contains all the information needed to start the formal process and proceed to examination.	Up to **28 days**.
3. Pre-examination **Public registration and preparation**	The application documents are published. Local people can register to take part, submit their initial views and learn more about the examination process.	Usually around **3 to 5 months**.
4. Examination: **Evidence and public hearings**	Independent inspectors examine the proposal in detail. They review evidence, ask questions and hold public hearings where people can share their views. This is the main stage of the process.	Up to **6 months**.
5. Recommendation: **Inspectors make a recommendation**	After reviewing all the evidence, the inspectors prepare a report for the Secretary of State recommending whether the project should be approved or refused.	Up to **3 months**.
6. Decision: **Government makes the final decision**	The Secretary of State considers the inspectors' recommendation and decides whether the project can go ahead. **Vale of White Horse District Council does not make the final decision.**	Up to **3 months**
Legal challenge period	Anyone wishing to challenge the decision through the courts must normally do so within **six weeks** of the decision being issued.	Within **6 weeks**