

# LONDON ASSEMBLY

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**Leonie Cooper AM**  
**Chair of the Environment Committee**

Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP  
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

(Sent by email)

16 February 2024

Dear Mr Barclay,

I am writing on behalf of the London Assembly Environment Committee, which has recently run an investigation into issues and opportunities regarding water and rivers in London. The investigation was held over two Committee meetings in July and September 2023 and covered a range of topics, including water security, pollution and flood risk in London. As part of the investigation, the Committee also visited the Thames Barrier by boat in September with the Environment Agency and Port of London Authority, as well as the Mogden Sewage Treatment Works in October with Thames Water. The Committee will be producing a full report including conclusions and recommendations across these areas, but in advance of the full report, I wanted to raise a number of issues with you directly.

## **Thames Water's Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP24)**

As you will be aware, Thames Water published its revised WRMP24 in August 2023 following its public consultation, which ran from 13 December 2022 until 21 March 2023.<sup>1</sup> During the Committee's meeting on 7 July 2023, we were told the Plan has not yet been signed off. In response to a question on the status of the WRMP24, Cathryn Ross, the then Acting Joint Chief Executive of Thames Water, told the Committee "My understanding is that we are due to get a decision from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural

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<sup>1</sup> Thames Water, [Revised Water Resources Management Plan 2024](#), August 2023

Affairs (Defra) because it is the Secretary of State who ultimately decides on the WRMPs by the end of this calendar year [2023].”<sup>2</sup>

The Committee understands that the revised WRMP24 is still due for approval. The Committee further understands that whilst the regional scale of collaboration offered by the WRMP has been widely welcomed by the sector, delays in publishing of this guidance are holding up the progression of major infrastructure projects, including planning processes over the Abingdon Reservoir. Cathryn Ross outlined the lengthy process for approving the Reservoir after approval from Defra:

“We have then got to include it in our price review submission to Ofwat to enable us to get the funding for it. Ofwat may be yet to be convinced about the need for the reservoir. If Ofwat is convinced about the need for the reservoir, we have then got to submit planning applications and go through planning. Only then can we start to construct the reservoir, the construction of the reservoir would probably take at least ten years, possibly 15, and that is putting aside the potential for challenges through the planning process.”<sup>3</sup>

Given the WRMP24’s effects on preparations for water security, the Committee would like to request that Defra provides an update as soon as possible on when it intends to publish its decision.

### **Development of the Abingdon Reservoir (South East Strategic Reservoir Option)**

In April 2023, Defra published its National Policy Statement (NPS) for Water Resources Infrastructure in England.<sup>4</sup> The Committee warmly welcomes the aims of the NPS in streamlining the planning process for projects, to enable new supply infrastructure, and the positive impact it will have on increasing water resilience, given the many challenges across this area nationally.

The Committee acknowledges that this NPS by its nature “sets out the need and government’s policies for, development of nationally significant infrastructure projects for water resources in England,”<sup>5</sup> but does not provide input into specific projects.

However, the Committee was concerned by Cathryn Ross’ statement in our July 2023 meeting that:

“The unfortunate thing about that National Planning Policy Statement on Water Resources [Infrastructure] is that it is not spatially specific. It does not include the need for the reservoir near Abingdon, which means that we are very exposed to planning challenges as that goes through, which will result in delay and will increase the costs of the project.”<sup>6</sup>

Given the original timeline for completion of the Abingdon Reservoir was 2037, which has now slipped to 2040,<sup>7</sup> and the potential for its costs to escalate due to planning challenges,

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<sup>2</sup> [London Assembly Environment Committee Meeting](#), 11 July 2023, p.8

<sup>3</sup> [London Assembly Environment Committee Meeting](#), 11 July 2023, p.11

<sup>4</sup> The Government, [National Policy Statement for Water Resources Infrastructure](#), April 2023

<sup>5</sup> The Government, [National Policy Statement for Water Resources Infrastructure](#), April 2023

<sup>6</sup> [London Assembly Environment Committee Meeting](#), 11 July 2023, p.11

<sup>7</sup> Thames Water, [South East Strategic Reservoir Option \(SESRO\) Brochure - Autumn 2023](#)

the Committee recommends that the NPS is supplemented to include a spatially specific letter to advance the development for the Abingdon reservoir.

Further, the Committee would suggest that future guidance on water infrastructure is more spatially specific. This will help to reduce delays for the development of necessary infrastructure and will ensure meaningful consultation can commence early on in the process, helping to reduce confusion and feelings of discontent from local residents as has been the case over the Abingdon Reservoir. An example of this is highlighted in the responses to the consultation for the Thames Estuary 2100 Plan, as respondents stated (amongst other contributions) that they should be involved in discussions early and should not have solutions proscribed for them.<sup>8</sup>

We need to consider water infrastructure in the same way as we consider energy or transport infrastructure – all are essential and need to be prioritised.

I would be grateful if you would consider these points, and let the Committee know your response. We would expect to publish your response, once received.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Leonie Cooper". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name and title.

**Leonie Cooper AM**  
**Chair of the Environment Committee**

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<sup>8</sup> Environment Agency, [Summary of responses and Environment Agency response](#)