

REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE &
DEPUTY DIRECTOR (PLANNING AND COMMUNITY STRATEGY)
TO THE EXECUTIVE
1 SEPTEMBER 2006

Proposal by Thames Water Utilities Ltd. for a Reservoir.

1.0 Introduction and Report Summary

- 1.1 Thames Water Utilities (TW) has announced its intention to begin public consultation on 14th September 2006. It is understood that an exhibition will be open to the public at the Guildhall in Abingdon, followed by venues in Steventon, East Hanney and Wantage and that the consultation period will last 8 weeks. It is further understood that this first consultation will set out the needs case for a reservoir and the case for it being located in the Vale of White Horse area. It is possible that an indication only of its location will be provided at this stage with no more than a concept design.
- 1.2 TW has indicated that it foresees a second public consultation on design and after use proposals taking place early in 2007, again with an 8 week consultation period.
- 1.3 The purpose of this report is to draw some of the immediate issues for this Council to the attention of the Executive inviting it to set a framework for this Council's response and to consider future working arrangements with potential partner organisations involved in assessing the reservoir proposal.
- 1.4 The contact officer for this report is Mike Gilbert (01235 540681)

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1
- a) that the Head of Communications and Leader of the Council be designated as the official contact points at the Council;
 - b) that all members of the Council be invited to a private briefing on the proposal prior to the submission of the Council's response to the first consultation;
 - c) that an extension of time by four weeks be sought from Thames Water to enable this Council to consult widely on views before submitting its response;
 - d) that the Council should consult its residents for views in a variety of ways, including
 - a special Vale Voice exercise
 - a special edition of Vale Views
 - an invitation to each Town and Parish Council to express a view
 - a whole area structured survey undertaken by an accredited organisation such as IPSOS MORI;
 - e) that the County Council and South Oxfordshire District Council be invited to join the proposed consultation exercise, both to avoid duplication and to share the costs;
 - f) that the Environment Agency be approached to see whether agreement can be reached to share consultants on those aspects which directly affect both bodies;
 - g) that the County Council and South Oxfordshire District Council be approached to explore the scope for joint working in order to avoid duplication and additional costs;

- h) to request the Officers to bring a further report to the next meeting of the Executive, in the light of the public consultation by TW, on the resource implications (in both time and finance) and proposals on how the Council could best approach its obligations to respond to this potential major development.

3.0 Relationship with the Council's Vision, Strategies and Policies

This report relates to the Council's Vision in that it supports all objectives. The report does not conflict with any Council Strategies.

4.0 Issues

- 4.1 There are a number of issues which are already apparent on which the Executive needs to take a view.
- 4.2 TW is now confident that it intends to seek deemed planning permission through the use of a Compulsory Works Order. This is a specific procedure which enables TW to apply directly to the Secretary of State concurrently for permission and any Compulsory Purchase Orders. Under this procedure, this Council would be a statutory consultee during the CWO process and a principal party at the subsequent Public Inquiry. As such the Council's submission to the Inquiry would be an Executive function, although it would of course be open to the Executive to consult full Council if it so wished. Despite this intention it remains open to TW at any stage to submit a planning application to this Council and the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer have written to every member of the Council urging caution in making public comments since this remains an, albeit remote, possibility.
- 4.3 The Council will inevitably receive a series of comments and questions throughout the whole process. Until the exhibitions begin on 14th September, any approaches can only be referred to TW. However, from that date there will be an increasing expectation on the Council and it will be important that PR issues are managed through an agreed protocol. It is suggested that Nikki Malin, Head of Communications, should be the contact officer for communications, with Jerry Patterson as the official Council spokesperson. The Head of Communications will necessarily need to refer on technical queries to the appropriate officer within the Council, or direct them to TW.
- 4.4 TW has a tight timescale leading up to a probable Inquiry sometime in 2008. It has therefore set a consultation deadline of 8 weeks. This deadline is not realistic to enable the Council to consult meaningfully with various organisations and stakeholders and it is therefore suggested that an extension of time should be sought. It is not also realistic to believe that the Council will be able to give a full response in the timescale allowed and it is therefore likely that a holding or interim response will be made.
- 4.5 The impact of any reservoir will extend beyond the boundary of the Vale. It is likely that SODC and OCC will also wish to consult before responding. In order to avoid duplication and the incurring of additional costs, the County Council and South Oxfordshire District Council could be invited to join the consultation exercise. It is imperative that objective consultation takes place to avoid pressure groups (whether in favour of or against a reservoir) from dominating any consultation. Such consultation could comprise the use of Vale Voice, Vale Views, a structured survey by an accredited organisation such as IPSOS MORI and writing directly to all Town and Parish Councils. Public meetings are not recommended since they are likely disproportionately to attract pressure groups and can become dominated by one or more of such groups and therefore focussed on limited issues rather than providing a comprehensive overview.
- 4.6 The Environment Agency has already engaged consultants to research TW's business and needs plan. Bearing in mind the short consultation timescale, the likely limited availability of experts in needs analysis and the costs involved in duplicating research, the Environment Agency could be approached to see whether an agreement could be reached to share and

rely on its expert consultants on the needs case. The Environment Agency has produced a briefing note which is duplicated at Appendix A on its position as at July 2006. It can be seen from the briefing note that there are a number of issues relating to the reservoir proposal that fall outside the Agency's remit to consider, in particular, air quality and noise pollution during construction, the visual impacts of the reservoir, and traffic during and after construction. This authority, together with the County Council and South Oxfordshire District Council, will need to address these issues throughout the CWO process.

- 4.7 This common, or overlapping, interest suggests a powerful case for seeking to establish joint working and it is suggested that approaches are made to the other two Councils to establish their willingness and the scope for such work.
- 4.8 This proposal is one of the most significant potential developments ever to be faced by the Council. It will require considerable resource, both in senior officer time and finance. The Executive will wish to bear in mind that there are a number of other major initiatives such as the Great Western Park (Didcot) development and the anticipated planning application for Grove which also need to be handled often by potentially the same staff. It is clearly not yet possible to quantify the impact or put forward proposals for mitigating it. The Executive may wish to request a further report from officers on this aspect to its next meeting. Such a report will need to consider the possible engagement of consultants to assist in assessing the issues such as noise, pollution and visual impact where these fall to this Authority to lead on. There may also be a need to seek advice on the potential costs and benefits of alternative after use proposals.

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Background Papers: None