



Department
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2 October 2024

Dear Bethia,

Thank you for your letters of 25 July and 6 September to the Secretary of State, about the proposed South East Strategic Reservoir Option scheme (SESRO) and for your kind words of congratulations. I am replying as the Minister responsible for this policy area and we apologise for not replying to your letter of 25 July sooner.

The government is committed to a twin track approach to improving water resilience. This involves action to reduce water company leaks alongside investing in new supply infrastructure, including new reservoirs and water transfers.

As you know, water companies have a statutory duty to provide a secure supply of water for customers, efficiently and economically and set out how they plan to continue to supply water to their customers through Water Resources Management Plans (WRMPs). These plans are statutory and will set out how each company will continue to meet this duty and manage water supply and demand including leaks, sustainably for at least the next 25 years. Within their plans, water companies must consider all options, including demand management and new water resources including reservoirs & transfers.

SESRO is subject to ongoing assessments to develop the design and understand the impacts of the scheme. It is being progressed through the Regulators Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development planning gated process in which many of these further investigations and assessments will be completed.

The reservoir would be Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project and would need development consent, under the Planning Act 2008, as well as relevant environmental permits. To inform a development consent decision, an Environmental Impact Assessment will be required to understand the potential impacts and how they will be mitigated. Development consent decisions are subject to public examination undertaken by a Planning Inspector. The Environment Agency ensures that any development complies with environmental requirements and appropriate mitigation and improvements are incorporated into the scheme before it could be granted development consent.

Part of the regulators' role as a statutory consultee on the WRMP process is to ensure that any regional plans and WRMPs follow Water Resources Planning Guidelines and associated methodologies to develop their plans. They also scrutinise how water companies have considered stakeholders' views in their WRMPs. We are working with water regulators to consider the draft WRMPs, which include the reservoir proposal. Thames Water are now finalising their plans and working on obtaining a Development Consent Order.

I would also like to draw your attention to the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which was introduced into Parliament on 4 September. If the bill passes, it will deliver on the manifesto commitment to put water companies under special measures by strengthening regulation to clean up our waters. These are the critical first steps in enabling a long-term and transformative reset of the entire water sector.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emma Hardy', with a stylized, flowing script.

EMMA HARDY MP