GARD's case against the proposed Abingdon reservoir

GARD is a local community group formed to campaign against Thames Water's proposals to build a reservoir on land to the south-west of Abingdon.

Thames Water's proposed reservoir

- Plans for a ***100 million cubic metre reservoir were rejected at a Public Inquiry in 2010***, the Inspector found that it was not fit for purpose, was not compliant with the regulators' requirements, and had failed to properly investigate alternative water resources.
- In addition, the Inspector noted that "*development of a highly environmentally damaging reservoir ahead of low impact alternatives will make the plan illegal for Defra to support within UK and EU law*".
- Revised plans in 2018, by Thames Water and Affinity Water are ***for a larger 150 million cubic metres***, covering more than 4 square miles.
- Built ***above ground with bunded walls up to 30m in height, the reservoir will seal over 1 square mile of flood-plain.***

Why object to the reservoir?

GARD has examined the plan and taken advice from leading experts in the UK water industry. We consider that*:*

- the failings highlighted by the Public Inquiry are still present
- Thames Water claim reduced reservoir costs but increases in all alternative options. This makes no sense*.*

GARD's findings and our alternatives

- Essential cost data is withheld due to 'commercial confidentiality' so can't be checked. Thames Water cost estimates for major projects varied by up to 30% in only 6 months, giving them no credibility.
- Thames Water's own demand cannot justify the reservoir, so it has recruited Affinity Water as a customer to justify the development.
- We support Affinity's need to reduce abstraction from vulnerable chalk-streams and replace this with alternative supplies. GARD has shown how simple changes to Thames Water and Affinity plans could allow Affinity chalk-stream abstractions to be reduced or halted by 2030, rather than having to wait until at least 2038 for the reservoir.
- Up to 80% of the water provided to Affinity (by Thames Water or suppliers outside the region), and the resulting increased chalk-stream flows, would return to the Thames, for use by Thames Water. The net Affinity need is thus only 20% of that stated in their plan.
- The Thames is already over abstracted with most of any excess stored by the reservoirs around London. ***In a prolonged drought, no water would be available to fill the Abingdon reservoir and it would soon empty, meaning it is not resilient to future extreme droughts.***
- With the uncertainty about the future level of demand, smaller incremental schemes make more sense e.g. transfer from the River Severn, topped-up, if necessary, by water already offered by United Utilities or Severn Trent Water. The National Infrastructure Commission prioritises such schemes above reservoirs.
- If Thames Water and Affinity simply achieved Ofwat targets for leakage reduction and reduced personal consumption, small schemes could ensure water supplies until the end of the century.
- The reservoir site is good agricultural land, with wildlife of importance.
- The huge reservoir capital project would allow Thames Water to pay less tax and increase customer bills. Alternative schemes would not. Policy and decision makers ***must*** ensure the environment is protected, customers' interests are safeguarded and decisions are taken in the national rather than commercial interest.

Flooding and reservoir safety

- The proposed reservoir site is the flood plain for the surrounding villages and Abingdon ***much is classified as Flood Zone 3, which should not be developed (Environment Agency guidance).***
- Recent events at Whaley Bridge, only 1% the size of Abingdon reservoir, reinforce concerns over reservoir safety. Abingdon's bunded embankments would be 30m high: ***any breach could cause widespread flooding and destruction in Abingdon and local villages, with significant effects in the lower Thames Valley.***