

Nick Timothy MP

Our Ref: 26910

nick.timothy.mp@parliament.uk

Date: 16 June 2025

Dear Nick,

Clare Mill

Thank you for your email and letter of 4 June 2025, highlighting the concerns of your constituents on the maintenance and operation of Clare Mill gates. I am grateful for the dedication and work of the mill owner and voluntary support of the Clare River Group.

As you correctly state, the Environment Agency, along with its predecessor organisation, previously maintained and operated the Clare Mill gates (and hundreds of assets like this across Essex and Suffolk) including maintenance of the upstream watercourse. In 2016, we reviewed these activities and determined that unfortunately the gates did not provide significant flood risk benefits in terms of protecting people or property and therefore were unable to secure funding for flood risk management purposes. Our remit and funding do not extend to addressing flooding on land, public footpaths, gardens, or garages. Consequently, through a planned withdrawal of maintenance, the Environment Agency gave notice that we could no longer operate and maintain the mill gates via our permissive powers.

This was not an isolated event but part of a broader process affecting multiple structures within the South Suffolk and North Essex catchments. Among these were numerous mill gates, including those at Clare, where responsibility appropriately returned to the Mill Owner, who already held the mill rights and Riparian Owner responsibilities.

Regarding the 2010 upgrade to the Ely Ouse to Essex Transfer Scheme (EOETS), this was part of the broader strategic Abberton project, developed by Essex and Suffolk Water. I want to reassure you there has been no increase in the operation of the EOETS as a result of the Abberton project. Whilst several enhancements were made as part of the project to the EOETS the overall capacity of the scheme was not increased. These enhancements included modifying the Denver licence to permit more transfers in autumn and winter, constructing a new pipeline in the headwaters to reduce direct discharges into the river, and upgrading pumps to more modern submersibles.

To give further assurance, it is helpful to note that maximum transfer rates have decreased in recent years due to a reduction in availability of water to transfer from the River Ouse at Denver. The system now operates at a maximum of 320 Ml/day, down from the original design capacity of 455 Ml/day. The current maximum operational discharge downstream of Wixoe is unlikely to exceed 250 Ml/day and is dependent upon the requirements of Hanningfield Reservoir resulting in water being transferred to the River Blackwater via Wixoe Pumping Station.

The volume of transfers each year continues to be influenced by climate and water supply demand on reservoir levels. Transfers augment river levels to support abstraction and do not need to take place when river levels are naturally high. The overall impact of transfers has remained largely unchanged since the scheme's completion in 1972. Interestingly our

Chief Executive's Office, Environment Agency

Seacole Block, 2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DF

Chief.Executive@environment-agency.gov.uk

<http://www.gov.uk/environment-agency>

flow records show a slight trend towards an increase in natural annual flow rates since then.

The local teams are keen to work with the community to better understand the implications of an eroding bank, especially at the spillway upstream of the Ashen Road Bridge, and the concerns you have highlighted relating to Flood Risk.

- Our first step will be a desktop study using existing survey data (collected during the development of the flood risk model). This will help us establish a baseline understanding of the area, supported where possible by photographic and local evidence.
- Depending on the findings from of the desktop study, we may consider commissioning targeted model runs. These would provide a more detailed assessment in understanding potential impacts of erosion at the spillway upstream of Ashen Road Bridge. In particular, it would help assess whether such erosion could increase flood risk to people and property (especially in the event of the river diverting from the New Cut to the old River Stour).
- Any insights gained (whether from the desktop study or, if feasible, the model runs) will be shared with Suffolk County Council. This information will support the development of the Section 19 report currently being prepared in response to the flooding of properties in Clare during Storm Babet.

It is important to note that the responsibility for repairing erosion ultimately lies with the riparian owner. The Environment Agency may intervene only if the flood risk to people and property is significant and if the benefit outweighs the costs. We will ensure we give this careful consideration.

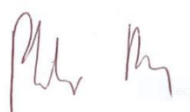
Had we retained the maintenance and operation of Mill gates across Suffolk and Essex, decommissioning and removal would likely have been explored for both ecological and economic reasons. Whilst Mill gates serve as water control structures, historically used to power mills, from an ecological and environmental perspective, they can disrupt natural river dynamics—creating backwaters, altering sediment transport, and impeding fish migration. Consequently, removing structures, rather than reinstating them, can enhance the ecological health of the watercourse, though further studies would be needed to confirm that this would be the case in this instance.

However, given the value placed on such asset by both mill owners and the local communities, who wish to keep them operational, continued community-led maintenance and operation can allow for alternate local outcomes.

I understand that this may not be the response you or your constituents were hoping for. However, we will continue to collaborate with other public bodies, local authorities, and riparian owners to deliver the best possible outcomes for the environment and local communities.

If you would like to discuss this matter further Graham Verrier, Area Director, is happy to talk with you. You can contact Graham at AreaManagerCorrespondence.EastAnglia@environment-agency.gov.uk

Yours sincerely



Philip Duffy
Chief Executive, Environment Agency