

Nick Timothy
Member of Parliament for West Suffolk



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON, SW1A 0AA

Philip Duffy
Chief Executive
Environment Agency

4 June 2025

Dear Philip

I am writing to raise an issue that has been brought to my attention by my constituents. The trustees of Clare Castle Country Park — a charitably-run local amenity that includes the Scheduled Monument of Clare's Norman Castle — recently showed me the sluice gates on the New Cut, a mill stream diversion dating from the 14th Century on the River Stour. This issue was also brought to my attention by the owners of the private land on which the sluice gates are located. These residents also maintain the gates.

To provide further background, the Environment Agency (EA) was responsible for active management and maintenance of sluice gates and weir along the River Stour until 2016, including the one in Clare. Previously, the EA had dredged the river, cut back overhangs and operated the sluice gates. Any debris which comes into the river upstream can become a problem if it gets caught at the sluice gates.

As the EA will know, the New Cut's sluice gates require careful maintenance and management so the water flow can be safely regulated. The speed of water through the gates is also strongly influenced by the amount of pumping that the EA undertakes as part of the Ely Ouse To Essex Transfer Scheme, which included a significant volume upgrade in the 2010s to support the increased capacity of Abberton Reservoir.

The owner has been concerned that the abutments to the sluice gates have been seriously weakened by several serious floods on the Stour in recent years, and has sought to minimise risk by keeping the sluice gates almost permanently fully open. The trustees say, as a result of the open gates, there is now much less water in both the New Cut and the Chilton Stream, especially in the long dry winter and spring period, and this has created greater erosion through dry clay banks cracking and also being undercut. They have concerns that they have shared with Historic England that the section of banks that form part of the Scheduled Monument will be seriously damaged by the continued erosion.

The trustees have highlighted further concerns that the bank of the New Cut is eroding most seriously next to a spillway upstream of the Ashen Road Bridge where over 1m of bank has been taken since the summer of 2024. They consider that if this continues at a similar rate, then within 3 to 4 years, the water will simply flow into the old course of the River Stour. This would create a significant flood risk to buildings around it including the Grade 1 listed Scheduled Monument of Clare Priory, while at the same time leaving the New Cut dry excepting in periods of heavy, sustained rainfall.

In the interests of protecting environmental safety, I ask the EA to take over the maintenance of the sluice gates. Right now, the operation of the gates is undertaken by the owner of the Mill House, with some support in keeping the gates free of debris from the Clare River Group, an informal body of residents which formed in 2016. In flood situations, the gates are raised as soon as possible to prevent unnecessary floods to gardens. Inevitably, flooding can drive debris down to the sluice gate which then needs to be cleared to maintain the flow of water. The lack of dredging downstream can make the situation worse.

Should the EA restore its responsibility for maintenance, it would be open to the Agency to allow some operational arrangements, overseen at the moment with a great deal of care by residents on a voluntary basis, to continue.

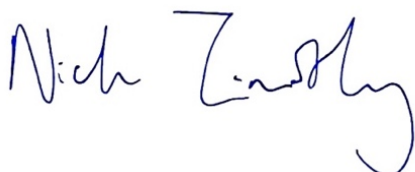
However, there is a strong case for the EA taking over the maintenance of the sluice gates. Clare Castle Country Park is a cherished historical and natural asset whose careful curation is strongly in the public interest. So is the protection of the town of Clare from the risk of flooding. Maintenance of the gates is at the heart of the EA's mission to 'create better places for people and wildlife, and support sustainable development'.

The EA owns a number of structures on the River Stour. It has the expertise, knowledge and experience of how infrastructure such as this should be looked after in the best interests of safety, local ecology and wider environmental considerations. It also has a budget which reflects the amount needed to maintain river structures such as these.

The alternative would be for the gates and their support struts to be allowed to deteriorate and disintegrate. I fear that, in addition to the erosion and flooding risks highlighted above, this would threaten serious damage to the public footpath and footbridge that runs over the sluice gates and which members of the public visiting the park use regularly. This risks public safety. It would also require a large sum of public money to fix.

I am grateful for your urgent attention to this matter and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Nick Timothy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Nick Timothy
Member of Parliament for West Suffolk