

12 March 2024

Emma Hardy MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
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2 Marsham Street
London
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GMB Union
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Dear Minister,

I am writing on behalf of GMB members who maintain and operate locks and weirs on the River Thames. Our members have voted to register a dispute with the Environment Agency (EA) and are preparing a ballot for industrial action. This step arises from serious concerns about insufficient staffing, deteriorating infrastructure, and the increasing risk of flooding.

Currently, there are only 52 permanent staff on the river, plus 10 temporary posts expiring on 31 December 2025—positions that have been difficult to fill. Seven experienced keepers are also due to retire next year. According to a 2008 EA assessment, over 100 staff were needed during peak season. With climate change causing more frequent and severe flooding, adequate staffing is now more urgent. Nonetheless, staffing levels continue to drop without proper consultation or risk assessment.

Our members often manage multiple weirs during severe weather and have repeatedly been denied the required 24-hour or 48-hour rest periods, posing a safety risk to both the public and staff.

Budget-driven decisions are putting people and property at risk. We have already alerted MPs along the Thames, and there is growing political concern about preventable flooding. A major incident caused by understaffed and poorly maintained lock and weir systems would be devastating.

We urge you, as the Minister responsible for the Environment Agency, to treat this matter as a priority. We request:

- A thorough review of River Thames staffing to ensure both navigation and flood resilience are safely maintained.
- Adequate and stable funding for recruitment, retention, and training of lock and weir staff.
- Immediate provision of promised equipment (e.g., Apple notebooks) to enable timely reporting and maintenance.
- Transparent engagement with the GMB and its members to develop sustainable solutions that safeguard the public and respect fair working conditions.

GMB's priority is public safety on the River Thames and the welfare of our members. We believe that with proper resources and constructive dialogue, these objectives can be achieved.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Brandstatter', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Kevin Brandstatter
GMB National Officer