

Ref: CS/JS/EA

Rt Hon Lord Smith of Finsbury
Chairman of the Environment Agency
Millbank Tower
25th Floor
21/24 Millbank
London
SW1P 4XL

10th January 2012

Dear Lord Smith

It is my understanding that you recently held a meeting with members of the TUGN group along with Lady Suzanne Warner and Professor Ruth Hall, to discuss proposals in regard to the Waterways Board decision to rent Lock Houses when they become available and to freeze the positions of the Resident Lock & Weir Keepers.

This decision, as I am sure you are aware, has caused a great deal of concern to river users and home owners river wide. This is the second time in three years that the housing has been brought to the table. The last time was in 2008, which concluded with Howard Davidson giving assurances to David Cameron, Teresa May and river user groups that the safest and most sensible way to run the River Thames was to have a resident lock and weir keeper at each of the 45 sites.

Resident lock and weir keepers have a long and documented history of responding quickly to out of hours incidents and have been the first port of call to those in difficulty for more than 200 years. The role of Resident Keeper is woven into the fabric of the River Thames and during this time many people owe their lives to their heroic actions. Resident lock and weir keepers are at the hub of the local community and are central to increasing the contribution and involvement of the public.

The E38 Branch of the GMB, which represents the vast majority of both resident and relief lock keepers, were given assurances in June 2011, that should a decision to rent out the properties be taken, there would be time for discussion before the plan was implemented. This verbal agreement was not honoured. Staff and unions were informed on the decision on a Friday and the houses made available for rent on Monday.

Our members challenge the validity of many of the claims made by the Waterways Board. Rental achieved to date is evidence that forecast income has been over inflated, as has the forecast savings in employment costs. Recent changes to working practices mean that Residents now offer the Agency as much, if not greater, flexibility than Reliefs

Neither staff nor their unions were involved in the process which led to the decision to freeze Resident posts and although our members have unanimously raised concerns over the safety to both staff and the public, the Waterways Board have refused to delay the implementation of its plans to allow proper consultation to take place.

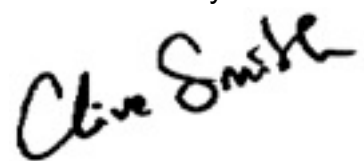
The GMB has, on several occasions, written to the Waterways Manager asking for the detailed figures involved in the plan but to date have only received ambiguous and vague information. Our members have yet to see detailed risk assessments associated with the decision.

The GMB understands that the Waterways Board has claimed that it has sufficient staff on stand-by to respond to the threat of rising water, out of hours, at all 45 weirs simultaneously. Our members wish you to know that this statement is untrue. There is not one single employee on stand-by who has the training or experience to set weirs correctly or make the calculations necessary to manage water levels on the Thames. We believe the Waterways Board should be put to a strict test of evidence over this claim.

Whilst it is recognized that the Agency is under financial pressure, our members believe that the current plans will put safety and property at risk. Furthermore, our members believe that if the plans were properly scrutinized they would be found to be fundamentally flawed.

We fully support the TUGN request to have the decision reversed and would then welcome the chance to work with management in their quest for a sustainable waterways.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Clive Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**CLIVE SMITH
GMB ORGANISER**