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The Rt. Hon. Emma Hardy MP
Minister of State
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
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29 July 2026

Dear Minister,

Re: Continued funding for enforcement on the River Thames in Esher and Walton

Congratulations on your re-appointment as Minister of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I am pleased that you will continue to have responsibility for this important area of work and look forward to working with you.

I also want to thank you for the support and leadership you have provided in my battle to address the serious and long-standing problems caused by overstaying, illegally moored, abandoned, wrecked and sunken boats on the River Thames in my constituency of Esher and Walton.

I have been working closely with the Environment Agency, Elmbridge Borough Council, Surrey Police and local resident groups to secure meaningful action. Your support led to the establishment of a dedicated Environment Agency taskforce, including staff members and funding, and greater coordination between the relevant agencies to deal with this issue.

That work is beginning to deliver results. Operation Riverside in September 2024 removed two of the largest long-term overstaying vessels. Elmbridge Borough Council has introduced a Public Spaces Protection Order covering several key locations under their ownership, enabling action against boats remaining at designated moorings for longer than 24 hours. This latter enforcement is underway meaning the stretch of riverbank between Thames Ditton and East Molesey is now clear. Between December 2025 and March 2026, the Environment Agency dedicated taskforce removed 53 wrecked, sunken or abandoned boats from the parts of the riverbank which it controls. Further enforcement operations have now taken place on this stretch which is very welcome. However, there is still much to do, and in order to progress on the good work already done, these enforcements need to be continuous and on-going which requires renewed resource, otherwise boats, once moved return when enforcement disappears.

Residents continue to report antisocial and intimidating behaviour, sewage and rubbish being discharged into the river, fly-tipping, intimidating dogs, noise from generators and public riverbanks being fenced off as private gardens. Legitimate visitor moorings and stretches of riverbank are being occupied for extended periods, limiting access and preventing safe recreational and sporting activity. Moving boats only for them to return is not a sustainable solution; consistent enforcement is needed along the whole stretch of the river.



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The recent Molesey Regatta demonstrated this over one week at the end of July. The Molesey Regatta has been part of Esher and Walton's local heritage since 1867, but each year the event is at risk until the eleventh hour because illegally moored boats occupy the riverbank at Hurst Park and refuse to move. This year took considerable and sustained action by my office, the Environment Agency, Surrey Police, Elmbridge Borough Council and local community volunteer groups over the course of one week to clear the area in time for the Regatta to proceed safely. **As we feared many of the boats have returned. Illegally moored boats should not hold community events like this to ransom, nor be moved on only to return with impunity.**

While I pay tribute to the hard work that meant this event could go ahead, significant sporting and community events should not have to depend on emergency enforcement activity in the final days before they take place, nor that they should return after enforcement action has taken place. Esher and Walton is a river community, with rowing clubs, regattas, leisure users, businesses and residents all relying on a river that is safe, accessible and properly managed.

The progress achieved so far shows that coordinated enforcement works when we all join up to deliver the results and agencies have the necessary resources. I therefore ask you to ensure that the Environment Agency has the sustained funding to enforce navigation, patrol the river, effect boat removals, legal action and follow-up patrols as a long-term solution. Funding must be sufficient to maintain an effective long-term presence on the river, rather than relying on occasional operations that are resource intensive and only temporary.

We have made more progress over the past year than my constituents have seen in many years, and I am grateful for your contribution to that work. As I said to you when we met, and I know you agree, it is what residents experience outside their front door which convinces them whether Government and politics works. We need now to build on this early momentum and ensure the agencies involved have the funding required to deliver lasting change and for my residents to be able to fully enjoy the river - this precious asset which belongs to us all.

I look forward to continuing to work with you to restore and protect this much-loved stretch of the Thames which is so important to my constituents.

Yours sincerely,

Monica Harding MP
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