



MINUTES OF THE MIDDLE LEVEL COMMISSIONERS' NAVIGATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 31st July 2024 at 9.30 AM at Middle Level Offices.

Present

J Brown	Middle Level Commissioners
R Sexton	EAWA
P Syred	Fox's Marina
A Wildman	Residential Boat Owners Association
N Arnold	Environment Agency
M Daines	Middle Level Watermen's Club
D Laws	Fenland District Council
P Hughes	Fenland District Council

Also in attendance: Paul Burrows, Kevin Russell and Ruth Martin

Alex Miscandlon also attended as an observer.

Alan Wildman, Vice Chairman, took the Chair for the meeting.

Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Chris Howes (Inland Waterways Association), Chris Middleton (EA Fisheries) and Stephen Whittome (MLC)

1. Chairs Welcome including Confirmation of Minutes and Matters Arising

The minutes of the Navigation Advisory Committee held on the 14th May 2024 were confirmed as correct and approved.

Matters Arising

Mike Daines gave a brief account of his latest Monks Lode trip, advising it was very pleasant. He added that it would be possible to clear the stretch as previously discussed once permission had been given. He also thought it would make a good location for a rural mooring.

The minutes were then taken as read.

Declarations of Interests

As recorded in Member Interest Forms.

2. 2023/24 Financial Summary

The Committee were advised that the Financial Summary for the year 2023/24 had been published on the MLC website and had also been circulated to the committee. Paul Burrows outlined the details of the Summary. He advised that the proposed uses for the ring-fenced fund for facilities will be outlined

later. He added that he wants to better understand the staff costs associated with provision of our Navigation service without creating a burdensome approach.
The Committee agreed they were happy with the content of the Summary.

3. 2024 Licensing Latest

MLC Licences

Kevin Russell reported the current licencing levels:

279 Licences (increased from 246 at last report), including
21 Marina Only Licences
18 Project Boat Licences
4 defaulted on their payment plan after the licence issued
25 non-renewals from 2023/24

Last year there were 297 Licences issued.

CRT have confirmed that there are only 12 CRT Gold Licence holders recording their home mooring as being in Middle Level waters.

EA and MLC Agreement for CRT Gold Holders based on ML

Paul Burrows updated the Committee on the agreement being worked on to transfer a proportion of the licence fee collected by CRT for these vessels to MLC, with 80% of the licence fee being transferred to MLC. An agreement between MLC and the EA is currently being worked on, and the EA and CRT are currently drafting a new Gold Licence agreement. This will be referenced to in the EA/MLC agreement to ensure transparency when transferring public money. Paul advised that MLC and the NAC need to recognise CRT Gold holders on the system, that MLC may not receive the full amount of the standard MLC licence in return, but to agree that this is the right thing to do.

Paul added that until now MLC Licencing has mirrored the EA's licence fees, but we need to consider if this is the approach we take in future.

Nathan Arnold added that the Gold Licence is still an agreement between the EA and CRT but as this recognises the MLC area and its boaters, they recognise there is money to be transferred. Paul added that this process is entirely reliant on CRT boaters completing their online records correctly. Nathan confirmed that there is a Middle Level category on the online form, but also a River Nene category, and so this may cause some confusion. Paul added that if they select the wrong category when their home is on the Middle Level, they will be considered as unlicensed.

Paul added that between the EA, CRT and MLC, we need to address the boaters whose home moorings are on the Middle Level but who are still purchasing an EA licence with an Anglian Pass. These vessels are also unlicensed but have not been approached as yet. This is currently being addressed by the EA and we hope that the EA licensing team are dealing with this as they should not be being issued EA licences. Nathan added that if he is provided with a list of unlicensed boats the EA's team can confirm if they are vessels that fall in this category.

2025 Licensing – early thoughts

The Committee were invited to give their thoughts on the licencing strategy for 2025. The EA are currently consulting on a 9% increase and have received the expected customer reactions. We need to

consider if we want to move forward with improvements with a strong proportion paid for by those benefitting from it, but with a proportional reasonable increase. Do we wish to disconnect from the EA figure? Roger Sexton felt that a lower increase might encourage those registered with the EA to register with MLC instead. He then asked about drainage rate increases but was advised by Jonathon Brown that these are likely to be relatively high but the MLC Board have a commitment to give best value for all ratepayers.

Paul added that he did not feel comfortable mirroring the EA increase in the future, although it had been helpful to do when setting up licensing on the Middle Level. He added that in his view it is time for MLC to settle on our own levels, with perhaps a simplified pricing structure. All agreed that the 9% increase proposed by the EA would not be acceptable to Middle Level boaters, but that an inflationary increase may be better tolerated. Paula Syred added that it would be useful for boaters to understand more about land drainage rate and the levels these are currently at. Roger Sexton thought we should educate people in what we are providing – a non-fluctuating watercourse that is open year round. This is not always possible on the main river. He added that the Middle Level has no violent water movements, and the issues getting out of the system are out of the control of MLC. Paul added that focus has been on our weaknesses, and we have to maximise our strengths. We cannot make the licence fee too low and add financial burden onto our drainage rate payers.

Action: Paul Burrows and Ruth Martin to draft licensing options for discussion at the next meeting.

4. Proposed Boater Survey

Paul Burrows introduced the survey that he has drafted and would like to publish. Generally, boater feedback on social media is criticism rather than positive praise or ideas for improvements. It is hoped that the survey will draw out qualitative intelligence. Paul ran through the draft survey and added that he is not making this an anonymous survey. Jonathon Brown agreed with this approach, and that this would give legitimacy to comments. Paula Syred added that this would give the local boater more voice. Alan Wildman asked if a question could be added to understand more about how respondents use the system – is it daily, monthly, just for holidays etc. It was agreed that this would be useful information, and a question was added to the survey.

Roger Sexton asked if the survey would be online and Paul advised it was intended to be online only, the rationale being that those that post online could access an online survey. It was agreed that it would be useful to promote the survey by putting up posters at the locks, and Paula agreed to put one up at Fox's. Jonathon Brown thanked Paula and proposed we ask all of our local marina owners to display a poster.

Action: marina owners be asked to display Boater Survey posters

5. Regulation and Enforcement Latest

Kevin Russell reported that he has served several notices on boats that are not licenced. Paul reported that we have been taking stock on our current debt collection approach and have carried out research and due diligence on potential Debt Collection suppliers. We have spoken to several companies that can get involved before court action is required. There are a number of key benefits, including retaining control over which cases are passed to them, there is no additional cost to us as they work on a no win no fee basis, and that the costs of collecting the debt is paid for by the debtor. Kevin confirmed that there were some repeat offenders, and that 3 or 4 boats appeared to be abandoned.

Paul reminded the Committee that the Boat Removal Protocol has been updated recently and that there was no feedback received during the consultation period. He added that removal is not free, and we are unlikely to recover any removal costs so we need to consider any removals carefully. It is hoped that the proposed Debt Management support will have a further reaching positive effect.

Kevin Russell updated the Committee on the support received from the EA staff at either end of the system, Stanground and Salters Lode, and that the EA and MLC were working together to ensure vessels were appropriately licenced. A strong presence has resulted in some good outcomes.

Phil Hughes explained how FDC spent a large amount on legal fees last year in moving on a boat that was overstaying at moorings for extended amounts of time. Dee Laws added that it was good that licence payers see proactive works but asked how this was being promoted – how are MLC getting the message out and what is the procedure being followed? She added that these activities are not promoted enough, and promotion of these activities gives a clear message to those who are doing things correctly.

Paul advised that once a debt management company has been appointed something will be published. Paul also asked Phil Hughes if it would be possible to carry out a joint venture in the 6 weeks before the annual St George's Festival in March town centre, to take stock of the vessels moored in town, and to create some positive momentum before the Festival and to use the Festival as a means of promotion. Phil agreed that something could be arranged.

6. Facilities Latest

MLC

MLC are currently enacting the link route facilities plan, with a water point and visitors space being installed at the office. Kevin Russell advised that this is being used regularly and working well. Facilities at Stanground Lock have been affected by the wet weather, but the access track is now in place. The next phase will include the installation of a new water point and Anglian Water have been consulted regarding the new connection. An easement will also be needed across the Peterborough City Council land at the Green Wheel and this is the current hold-up. Once these issues are resolved a mobile unit for relief lock keepers will be installed, and then a plan will be developed for rubbish and Elsan disposal. Kevin reported that funding from Paddle UK had been secured for canoe portage, and this was being stored at the MLC depot prior to installation. Paul added that Paddle UK have members that use the system, and they are currently developing trails for publication. Paul has provided safe access information for inclusion in the publicity they develop.

Paul reported that MLC receive lots of feedback from users of the rural moorings. Generally, the moorings are supported but we need to take stock of the assets. Most were installed quickly and at low cost, but some are difficult to get to, some are more useable than others, and some are challenging to maintain. It is intended that these will be reviewed after the summer with a couple of boaters involved, asking what we can improve and are there any changes we need to make. We can then plan works into future years. Jonathon Brown said that he drives past the Cock Bank mooring on a regular basis and it is invariably used as a fishing platform. He asked if this causes complaints. Kevin Russell advised that no complaints had been received from boaters. Paul advised that the fishing rights agreements are to be reviewed imminently, and asked Ruth Martin to include information on the do's and don'ts of using rural moorings in these.

Paul advised that work continues in trying to get a water point positioned at Salters Lode. The land here is owned by the EA, and MLC are waiting for them to confirm their approval of the point. Nathan Arnold reported that in principle the EA have no objections, but that the request needs to be handled formally by their Estates Department. Paul added that any further facilities at Salters Lode would be difficult to install due to lack of MLC owned space, but we will take stock after the water point is installed. Provision is already in place for relief lockkeepers.

Fenland District Council

Phil Hughes reported that FDC have been working with MLC to install a water point at the Manor Leisure Centre in Whittlesey, but that there have been some concerns raised about potential vandalism of any facility.

Phil also reported on the water leak outside The Ship in March, and that both FDC and MLC have contacted Anglian Water, who in turn have advised that the water is not treated and so is therefore not due to their equipment. They have advised that this is a Highways issue and so they have been contacted.

Phil updated on the collapsed mooring in West End Park, March. To repair to the standard of the original mooring would cost in the region of £100k, and this was not affordable. FDC are now considering a rural style mooring with canoe portage, but FDC need guidance on what can be achieved with the funding they have available as they have no expertise in this area. The construction of the original mooring was discussed, along with the potential for MLC funding being available for canoe portage from their ring-fenced fund. Paula Syred advised that the mooring had been a popular one and that river users could provide some useful comment on suitability of mooring. Phil agreed that he would be happy to hear users thoughts. Nathan Arnold advised that the EA floating moorings cost £200-300k and so this would not be suitable for use here. He added that the EA have had similar issues on the Ely Ouse, where moorings were installed 10-15 years ago and were fit for purpose at the time but are now unusable. New moorings are more costly, but last longer. They now install less moorings but of a better quality. He said that the EA have standard designs that they would be happy to share.

Paul advised the Committee that many Facebook users have been talking about the Peterborough Embankment, and that Peterborough City Council have Tom Hennessy who is working on promoting Peterborough and improving the riverside environment. He has made contact with MLC as a result and there have been some useful conversations, especially regarding Stanground. Nathan Arnold added that the EA have also had some useful contact and they are now working closely with Peterborough City Council although they are in the early days of engagement. There are some big schemes proposed but lots of existing issues to deal with, and Tom is keen to make changes quickly. A new bridge further down the river is being planned which it is hoped will drive positive river development.

Dee Laws suggested investigating the Wind Turbine Community funding streams, particularly as they are very open to this type of project. Phil Hughes agreed to work with Paul Burrows on identifying funding sources. Nathan Arnold advised that the EA struggle with grant funding due to being a government agency.

Ramsey Town Council / HDC

Paul Burrows advised that he has written a letter of support to Ramsey Town Council regarding their plan to invest in the Town Basin. It is hoped this will include a water point, canoe portage and an access ramp. They were looking for S106 funding to do this but Paul has heard nothing further from Steve Corney.

Paul has also held a training session recently with the HDC Senior Leadership team, teaching them about Internal Drainage Boards, but it was pointed out that they have no portfolio holder for waterways. It was highlighted to them that this is something that they need to engage with. Mike Daines added that this is a shame as there was a good facility at Ramsey.

7. AOB

Paul Burrows advised that he has been trying to add weed management updates on social media channels, and Paula Syred added that these have been useful as they can prewarn boaters where the cutting boats may be. Kevin Russell added that they have helped to reduce the number of complaints

and phone calls received about weed. Mike Daines said that it had helped him the previous week, and that the weed situation was good at Ramsey St. Mary.

Paula Syred asked about the high water levels the previous weekend and the issues at White Fen Farm Bridge. There was no message sent over the text service to advise of the water levels and this would have been useful. Mike Daines added that he had been under the bridge the previous weekend and that with care it can be passed under with no issues. Roger Sexton asked why the water levels were so high, and Paul explained that at this time of year MLC are trying to manage for irrigation. Paul apologised for the lack of information, and that lessons had been learned. He added that there have been higher levels over the last few days due to an incident at St German's which has prevented pumping, and that MLC will try to find out who owns White Fen Farm bridge. There are some concerns that the bridge is sinking and it would be useful to know its maintenance regime. Ruth Martin has been tasked with establishing what we know about the bridge, and to contact the owner with our concerns. Dee Laws advised that the Cambridgeshire County Council bridge officer, Adam Cobb, should have ownership information. Paul advised that he has been in touch with Adam regarding the March Town Bridge works, and that he is still waiting for the 3 yearly maintenance programme from him. He added that March Town Bridge may need to be closed to navigation due to scheduled Highways works, although Paul will discourage closure until after September.

Nathan Arnold advised that there is a new publication of the Nene mooring and boating facilities on the EA website, and printed copies are now available. Nathan will arrange for boxes to be sent to Paula Syred, Fenland District Council, and MLC.

Phil Hughes was asked about the FDC Whittlesey Moorings that need repair, and Phil advised that work has been scheduled for later this year. Phil was also advised that the winding hole at Manor needs vegetation removing.

Roger Sexton asked about the Fens Reservoir consultation. He added that he had attended the consultation events, and had been to the Manea, Wimblington and Doddington meetings. He is concerned that they are selling it as a major amenity, but he is very concerned that these proposals may not develop further. He has sent questions in, to which he has just received a response. He agrees that it is needed, but he is concerned about what the project is taking away from the area, and what it may not give back in return. He is concerned that there are lots of 'maybes' such as the marina, and that vehicular access has not properly been considered.

Dee Laws responded that CCC Highways are involved, and that public consultation is meant to bring all thoughts to the table. Fenland District Council are determined to get the best outcome for the area. Dee understands that the vision is to have something like Rutland Water. Paul Burrows added that the concern for the NAC is how we get the best for navigation from something that is not being developed for navigation. We should see this as an opportunity to create a stimulus for this part of the world. Positive comments will bring investment, and we need to develop the wider benefit.

Dee Laws added that Rutland and Grafham Waters had the same issues, and that many amenities came after the development. She is sure that the same will happen with the Fens Reservoir. She added that Cam Cycle have a strong voice and are being consulted.

Roger Sexton added that boaters have said to him that they are concerned about pumping. Paul Burrows said that this is something that needs to be tied down with Anglian Water, and that the reservoir will require MLC to change its operations, but the reservoir does provide a real opportunity. This will be a winter fill reservoir, which will help reduce the amount of pumping required for us during the months of most pressure.

Roger Sexton asked about the Horseway to Welches Dam stretch which is currently dry, and stated that the reservoir scheme is not doing anything about this. Paul Burrows disagreed, adding that Anglian Water strongly want to promote moving water from the Delph through Welches Dam and Horseway.

Roger added that AW were casting doubt on this plan during the consultation meetings. Paul concluded that no one can really say yet what will happen, and that if water is needed from the Delph, something must be done in this area which will be a positive outcome for us. MLC will be sending in a consultation response soon after this meeting.

8. Dates of Next Meetings

Tuesday 1st October 2024 at 9.30am at Middle Level Offices

Tuesday 14th January 2025 at 9.30am at Middle Level Offices

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Chairman

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Date