



MINUTES OF THE MIDDLE LEVEL COMMISSIONERS' NAVIGATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE FEES MEETING HELD ON 18th December 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
C Middleton	Environment Agency
M Daines	Middle Level Watermen's Club

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

Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from John Revell (IWA) and Dee Laws (FDC)

Due to having issues accessing the meeting online, a phone call was received from Alan Wildman where he advised that he was happy for the meeting to go ahead without him and requested that Mike Daines chair the meeting in his capacity as Vice Chair. Mr Wildman added that he would be supportive of a 3.2% fee increase when the meeting reached the appropriate point.

1. Welcome

Mike Daines opened the meeting, and Paul Burrows advised that as this was an extraordinary meeting, there would only be two items on the agenda for discussion – that is setting the Registration Fees for 2025/26, and to discuss the Marmont Priory lock gates.

However, before the meeting progressed further, Paul reflected on the passing of Chris Howes, and how fitting it was to see so many people from the boating and navigation world at Chris' funeral. He added that this is a huge loss, but his support had been instrumental in making the many changes to navigation that we see today in the Middle Level and further afield.

2. Proposed Licence Fees for 2025/26

Paul Burrows drew the Committee's attention to the licence fee proposals already circulated. He advised that the timing of the fees decision has been brought forward this year following the EA's recent announcement that they would be increasing their fees by 9%. He presented the Committee with a range of fee options for the Middle Level, proposing that the Middle Level increase their fees by 3.2% in line with CPI, with some additional rounding of the figures to whole numbers. John Revell had already advised of his agreement to the proposal, as had Alan Wildman.

Paul added that the figure would help us to differentiate from the EA but still show a reasonably substantial financial value, with an opportunity to draw further boaters to the Middle Level. Although our drainage rate payers have seen much bigger increases in their rates, the income difference between an increase to the Navigation Licence of 3.2% and 9% is not significant enough with the number of boats

already on the system to have a significant impact. If we increase fees by too large a margin, we risk jeopardising the positive pathway we are currently on and losing income.

Jonathan Brown asked what the uplift would be for each boat, and Paul explained that there are various classes with each changing by a different amount, but on the class with the most boats the increase would be £39, which compares to an EA increase of £108 on the same class.

Mike Daines added that a smaller increase would be welcomed by his club members, and that they appreciate the burden on the drainage rate payers, and Paula Syred added that the difference would go a long way towards paying for an Anglian Pass.

Jonathan Brown asked how many extra boats the system could accommodate, and Paula Syred advised that the marinas on the Middle Level have capacity for an additional 50-75 boats.

Roger Sexton said that the EAWA are fully supportive, but the Middle Level needs to continue to offer a good service. He added that there were still concerns about the Salters Lode situation. Paul Burrows responded that Salters Lode is not in the control of the Middle Level Commissioners, and that they have no legal or financial responsibility over it. He added that we have to market what we do have, and that there will always be a constraint on what we can maximise on.

Paul then read out to the Committee a briefing he had drafted based on announcing a 3.2% increase. He advised that he would like to publish the briefing on the MLC Website within the next few days, adding that we are not immune from the pressures that other Navigation authorities faced, and this was reflected at the recent AINA meeting.

At this point Alan Wildman rejoined the meeting on MS Teams.

Roger Sexton then proposed that the 3.2% increase be agreed, and this was seconded by Mike Daines. It was agreed unanimously.

Some discussion followed regarding the rationale behind the EA 9% rise, and how EA Licence holders with home moorings on the Middle Level may respond. Paul Burrows advised that we know that some EA with Anglian Pass holders are looking to change to an ML Licence with Anglian Pass, and Roger Sexton added that people based on the Nene that have been experiencing changing water levels on the Nene may look to move into the Middle Level. Paul added that by agreeing our Licence Fee now it gives our marina owners an opportunity to add this to their marketing. Most of the time the Middle Level has navigable water levels. We may not have all of the facilities that boaters want, but this is something we can continue to work to improve. AINA members have reported they are struggling to keep their navigations open, and so we want to keep our navigation going as there are future opportunities for us. Kevin Russell added that boaters are telling him that the Middle Level looks to be a safe place to spend the winter.

Mike Daines asked Paul Burrows to recap what improvements have been planned for next year. Paul advised we are still waiting for Peterborough City Council to approve the easement for the water supply to the proposed waterpoint at Stanground. Kevin Russell added that the canoe portage has been purchased and is ready to be installed at Stanground. Paul updated the Committee on the review of the rural moorings, and that Derek Pace and Karen Smalley had assisted with developing a suite of adaptations to the moorings. Kevin Russell reported that these works would be taken as plant and equipment are available and when there are other works being undertaken in the area, and that it was intended that the rural mooring at Skylark should commence the next day.

3. Marmont Priory

Paul Burrows updated the Committee on the current position with the problems with the lock gates at Marmont Priory Lock. The gates are sticky and not improving, and we now have a quote from the

contractor to remove the gates so that they can be assessed and hopefully the problem can be diagnosed and resolved. The works need to commence in January, with the intention that work will be completed before ahead of Easter. This is an unbudgeted expense, but the work is essential.

Jonathan Brown asked how many passages a month there are through the lock. Both Kevin Russell and Paula Syred agreed that this would be difficult to say but estimated that during the summer this could be 6-10 boats per day. Paul added that the budget for the works to improve moorings would need to be reallocated to help fund the works to the lock gates. Roger Sexton asked if the MLC engineer knows what the problem with the gates is, and Paul responded that although the engineers had their suspicions, they could not be sure until the gates had been lifted out. Jonathan Brown asked how much the works will cost, and Paul advised that the quotation received is £89k, but Kevin Russell added that this includes for dewatering, lifting the gates out and inspecting. Not included are any further works that are identified to rectify whatever the problem is. Kevin added that MLC will ensure that they have staff on site when the gates are lifted out.

Paul Burrows advised that a 12-week emergency navigation closure is likely to be needed in January to facilitate the works, although it is hoped that the works will take less than 12 weeks. He added that the lessons learned from this project would be applied to future lock gate replacement projects. Kevin Russell added that the steel gates would be expected to last 70 years or more, where the wooden gates that were removed had only lasted for 20 years, so the additional upfront work will be worth the effort.

Roger Sexton asked if an update regarding March Town Bridge could be given. Paul Burrows reported that Cambridgeshire County Council have advised that works will start on 13th January 2025, necessitating a navigation closure, although it is hoped that weekend navigation will be maintained wherever possible. The works should be complete by 31st March 2025 and there is a penalty clause in the consent agreement should this date be missed. Fenland District Council have also advised that they are planning to repair two of their moorings during March 2025.

9. Dates of Next Meetings

The next meeting will be held as scheduled:

14th January meeting has now been moved to Tuesday 4th February 2025 at 9.30am at Middle Level Offices.

Tuesday 6th March 2025 at 9.30am at Middle Level Offices