



MINUTES OF THE MIDDLE LEVEL COMMISSIONERS' NAVIGATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 13th January 2026 at 9.30 AM at Middle Level Offices.

Present

H Whittome	Middle Level Commissioners
J Brown	Middle Level Commissioners
J Revell	Inland Waterways Association
P Syred	Fox's Marina
A Wildman	Residential Boat Owners Association
N Arnold	Environment Agency
C Middleton	Environment Agency
S Corney	Huntingdonshire District Council
M Daines	Middle Level Watermen's Club
P Mather	Well Creek Trust

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

Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Roger Sexton (EAWA), Dee Laws (Fenland District Council), and Stephen Whittome (MLC).

1. Welcome

Alan Wildman opened the meeting, and Paul Burrows introduced the Committee to Hugh Whittome who has recently taken over as the Chair of the Middle Level Commissioners.

Paula Syred and Paul Mather asked that the email circulation list be checked as they had not been receiving all email correspondence.

No matters arising were raised.

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed, and no amendments were made.

2. Registration Fees for 2026/27

Annual Registrations

Paul Burrows advised the Committee that MLC need to advise on the determination of fees for the next season. A decision was made in 2025 not to mirror the EA fee increases and therefore present Middle Level as a slightly more affordable option. Paul advised the Committee of three potential fee increase options including a budgetary forecast for further discussion. He added that he was keen to ask the NAC's advice on where to set the increase so that MLC can start to publicise the increase. His opinion is that an inflationary increase should be made but that he would be happy if the NAC thought it should be slightly less, and if this would be more welcome to boaters.

Nathan Arnold advised that the EA are proposing to increase their fees by 3.8%, which has been based on inflation and CPI. Jonathon Brown asked which figure would be best for budgetary reasons, and Hugh Whittome added that he thought an inflationary increase would be sensible to keep in step with increases. Alan Wildman agreed and said he would be happy with 3.8%, and proposed the fees increase by this figure. This was unanimously agreed.

Project Boats

Paul reminded the Committee that it was recorded in the minutes of the last meeting that changes were needed to the Project Board registration due to it being abused and being administratively burdensome. He would like to propose the alternative model he outlined at the September meeting is taken forward. This would mean that eligible boats would be required to hold a full registration until the improvements are completed, and then a 50% reduction in registration fee for the first-year post refurbishment. This would affect only a small number of boats, but the message to boat owners is the right type of incentive. Alan Wildman thought that this proposal would encourage the owners to stay within the Middle Level. Kevin Russell added that in the past people have used the Project Boat process as a loophole to get a cheap registration, but that this would change that. There are currently 2 Project Boat registration holders that he feels are legitimate Project Boats. Paul advised that he would like to start the new process from April 2026.

A vote was held and the NAC unanimously agreed to the changes in Project Boat registration.

Paula Syred asked for an update on enforcement and Kevin Russell and Ruth Martin reported that it has not been too successful. The details of six boats were passed to external enforcement officers on a 'no win – no fee' basis, but they were only successful in securing payments from two boat owners. To pursue others further would be cost prohibitive at this stage. Kevin added that there is not a clear route to take and it is not that easy. Nathan Arnold said that the EA have been proactive with messages and removing boats, with about 20 being removed on EA waters. Paul Burrows reported that MLC have removed 4 or 5 boats in the last year, and that MLC have new Compliance and Enforcement Officers. They are currently focussing elsewhere, but it is anticipated that they will have capacity next summer to assist Kevin with a navigation enforcement presence. They will also be looking at unconsented mooring structures, which often accompany unregistered boats. Kevin added that they have been out with him and familiarised themselves with the area and the issues.

John Revell said that those who are paying to legitimately register their boats object to unregistered boats and consider that they are not being pursued. Jonathon Brown asked if we could affix a big red sticker on an unregistered boat, and Kevin advised that we are already doing this. Hugh Whittome asked where these boats are located, and Kevin could advise that they are throughout the system. Paul added that there are things we can do at a low cost, including asking people to report boats that have been abandoned.

Some particular boats were discussed, and Paul reported on a recurring issue with moorings in March that are owned by FDC who, when contacted, advise residents that MLC own the moorings. This is particularly frustrating as the signage on the moorings clearly indicate they are FDC Short Stay moorings, but FDC appear to be distancing themselves from the moorings and the associated issues. FDC should be represented on this Committee and Paul has had conversations with Phil Hughes of FDC on the same issues. Hugh Whittome asked if the record of attendance by FDC representatives could be picked up, and Paul agreed to write to their Chief Executive, reflecting on the issues we need them to address.

Jonathon Brown reminded the Committee that Direct Debit defaulters were discussed at the last meeting, and asked if we still have people cancelling their Direct Debits after the first payment, and after they have received their registration certificate. Paul advised that we are treating their boats as registered after one warning, and that once they have defaulted on a payment they will not be offered a Direct Debit option in future and will need to pay the registration fee in full before receiving the registration document.

3. IWA Fens Reservoir Transport Option

John Revell gave the Committee an overview of the report on transport options which had been submitted by IWA nationally in response to the Fens Reservoir Project Phase 3 Consultation. He said that the consultation documents produced by Anglian Water / Cambridge Water referred to the option of transporting construction material by rail to March railway sidings and then by lorry to the site. The consultation documents estimated a peak of 900 lorry movements per day for 3 months. IWA's previous suggestions for transporting material to site by water transport had been rejected probably because of restrictions at Briggate Bend and through Upwell and Outwell. IWA's report proposed two new options which appeared viable using the Twenty Foot and Sixteen Foot rivers which offer 12 miles of existing, deep navigable waterways. The first option would require restoration of the Bramley line up to Chain Bridge on the Twenty Foot. The track appeared to be in reasonable condition and Bramley Line Railway Trust had expressed support. The second option would involve transporting material across farmland to the Twenty Foot rather than using the Bramley line. IWA's report had provided costings and suggested that these options would be cheaper and offered many other benefits.

The ideas have been put forward and there has been some interest in the proposals. John hoped that the Middle Level would be supportive of the principle of the proposals.

Paul Burrows advised the Committee that there is a session planned the following week to discuss further the consultation response. The ideas have merit but would require improvements to the Middle Level System. Jonathon Brown asked how many tonnes of aggregate could be carried by a barge and how many trips they could do each day. It was advised that it was approximately 80 tonnes, or the equivalent of 3 lorries, and they could do 8 trips each day.

Paul said that the assessment is welcome, and he would be happy to play it through, especially if a viable option could result in new moorings, and/or perhaps some dredging funded by the scheme.

John Revell said that the Sixteen Foot Drain is a big navigable channel so there is room for a barge to turn. Mike Daines added that environmentally it is an obvious choice. John Revell added that there is a question of adding extra functionality to the Middle Level. It is a good system of irrigation, drainage and navigation. Water to the reservoir will come through Stanground but we have the difficulties of Briggate Bend and Ashline Lock but that they do not plan to change the Middle Level system. How can they introduce more water without improvements or potential damage to Middle Level? Who will pay?

Paul advised that Anglian Water will need a legal and financial arrangement with MLC. John Revell asked if there was any problem seen with maintaining navigation levels. Paul replied that there could be additional water in the winter but that there would be no more water brought in during the summer. The base principle is that no more water in winter for the reservoir than in the summer for irrigation.

John Revell thought that there had been no provision at the reservoir site for moorings, but Paul advised that there is a place for a potential marina. How much of this AW will do remains a question.

Hugh Whittome asked if the boating community have made representation to the relevant committees? Horse users have been banging the drum and pushing for what they want. Planners need something solid to go at, ideas are not enough, but a clear costed plan is required. John added that there is nothing about moorings, but Hugh replied that representation needs to be made to push this forward. If it is not driven forward nothing will happen, it needs to get to the right ears. Paul suggested that John might want to discuss this further when they meet next week to talk about transport options. For MLC, if the reservoir provides the skeleton of a marina, decide if MLC takes it on and it becomes base for our navigation. We would need to assess any opportunity carefully.

We have the pot of facilities ringfenced money we could use to design something that we could put to the reservoir team. He asked the Committee to consider a maximum figure of £10k for this. Paula Syred

added that facilities of the standard required would not be put in place without some investment. Hugh Whittome thought that the reservoir developers would like to see added value and community involvement, but that we need to be the driving force. Paula suggested that a worked-up plan could also attract other funding.

The Committee discussed and agreed in principle to the proposal to contribute £10,000 towards developing a scheme from the facilities ring-fenced fund to include moorings at the reservoir. It was agreed that this proposal would be discussed further at the meeting with the IWA being held next week.

Steve Carney suggested that the proposal should be taken a step further and to look to go forward with an option, where it is going and where it would end. Paul Mather asked where the marina would be located, and Paul Burrows advised that the plans currently show it located on the Forty Foot Drain. MLC have other questions regarding the proposed wetlands that are located in a similar area and thought that this may not be the most suitable place for a marina or wetlands and that these proposals need to be developed.

Paul Mather suggested to John Revell that if he had calculated the reduction in road journeys that it may be advisable to calculate the reduction in CO₂ emissions.

4. CRT Gold Holders on ML - Payment from EA

Nathan Arnold updated the Committee on the latest position. The EA have an agreement with MLC to have a Middle Level option on the Gold Licence. The EA and the Canal and River Trust (CRT) are still in the process of updating the Gold Agreement. The EA have also been revising the agreement between MLC and the EA Anglian Division, but this agreement needs to reference the EA/CRT agreement which has not been finalised. We have a temporary agreement in place and MLC should have received a Purchase Order form the EA for the invoicing of fees for the period 1st January to 31st December 2024 for 11 boats, a figure in the region of £7.5k, which equates approximately to the income from the fees less the EA's administrative costs. We are now waiting for the 2025 figures along with the final EA/CRT agreement.

5. Future Works Update

MLC Boater Facilities

Paul Burrows updated the Committee. The water point at Salters Lode is now in place and working. All other items are as the September update. We are still working through the land ownership issues at Stanground, and the issues raised by the Fens Res project.

We have received feedback from the Well Creek that Elsan facilities are required, and Kevin Russell advised that MLC have put out feelers and are waiting for responses. However he advised that Elsan cannot be discharged into mains sewers and also causes an logistical headache and makes it very expensive to maintain. It is nice to have but from a business point to view they do not want the responsibility or cost. Fenland District Council provide facilities in March, as do Fox's Marina, and there are facilities as Bill Fen Marina, but these are for their residents only.

Hugh Whittome asked if it would be possible to have the facilities available in tank form with a contract in place for emptying the tank. Kevin thought that this would be possible. Nathan Arnold advised that the EA have found that the only way they can provide facilities is to charge for it. The EA do still have free pump out facilities but they cannot financially maintain this service so a new system will be put in place. Hugh thought that a free-standing tank system covering costs seemed the obvious way forward and suggested that Kevin makes contact with Matthew Latta, an MLC Board Member, who may be able to provide further advice in this area.

Mike Daines asked for an update on the land ownership issue at Stanground Lock. Paul Burrows advised that we are currently waiting for EA Estates to get back to us. We need to tackle this issue before the reservoir comes online. There is an action for Ruth Martin to take this forward.

Ashline Lock

Paul updated the Committee. There are two sets of gates that require replacement, but we need to ensure that this project is well planned before we commence. The project is more complicated than that at Marmont Priory. There is an ongoing plan to dewater and inspect this winter, but MLC do not have the required resources to progress this at present, so this is being planned for next winter. The cost is currently unaffordable for the Commissioners. There are also lots of water quality issues in this area, and FDC and AW are currently water quality testing, and the EA are assessing the results. There is an increased risk of either set of gates failing in the interim and this would result in a navigation closure. Alan Wildman asked if this meant that there was a risk to the public, but Paul advised that it was not considered so, but a proper inspection would require dewatering the lock.

Winter Jobs

Paul advised the Committee that we came out of last winter not completing all of the jobs that were intended to be done but hope that this year all of the required housekeeping will be completed. Mike Daines asked if this included tree trimming and identified some particular areas where this was an issue. Paul explained that as the land on which the trees are located does not belong to MLC, they are not our responsibility. Hugh Whittome asked if there was anything in the Middle Level Acts that would help, and Paul advised that if a tree were to fall and block navigation, we could remove the tree and seek to recover the costs from the landowner. In Well Creek we had a situation where a tree that was blocking the Creek was removed by the landowner. Paul added that we do not have the resources to carry out a proper survey of all trees or report these to landowners, and so we are reliant on people to spot them and flag them with either MLC or the landowner. However, we hope to be in a better position when the winter ends.

Kevin Russell advised the NAC that it had been announced the previous day that the planned closure at Briggate for bridge works has been suspended. Paul Burrows added that we are currently waiting for a formal confirmation of this and then the closure will be retracted. However, it is likely that the closure will be required next winter. Both Norfolk County Council and Cambridgeshire County Council have been told that requests for navigation closures will only be accepted if the closure is during the winter months. John Revell advised that CRT end all of their winter works by 13th March.

Paul Burrows advised that it will be necessary to suspend navigation west of Lodes End Lock when works continue at the Bevill's Leam Pumping Station, similar to the suspension last September. This will likely be a short-term closure and will be before the irrigation season commences. There are six pumps at Bevill's Leam Pumping Station, and they are being refurbished in 'bite sized chunks'. It is necessary to lower the water levels in order to lift out the pumps, but this cannot be during the irrigation season and has to be at a time where it is possible to reinstate water levels once works are complete. So far one pump has been refurbished, with pumps two and three requiring 3 temporary closures. Timing is currently uncertain due to weather conditions and contractor availability.

6. AOB

Paul Mather of Well Creek Trust advised the committee that a company called Boat Breakers East Anglia have contacted him, and he passed their details on to Kevin Russell and Nathan Arnold. He thought they appeared to offer a good service.

He also invited the NAC to the Well Creek Trust AGM which is to be held on Friday 6th February. This year they have produced a film about travelling along the Well Creek, which is about 1 hour long. Paula Syred offered to publicise the meeting. Paul Burrows advised that MLC have also produced a short video which he hopes everyone has seen, and it is available on the website.

The Well Creek Trust committee have also asked that it be reiterated at the NAC meeting their concern over the width of reed in the Creek. Paul Burrows responded that side cutting has now taken place, so he would encourage them to look again, perhaps taking 'before' and 'after' pictures.

Stephen Corney updated the NAC on the position with mooring at Ramsey, and that Ramsey Town Council have been progressing with tidying the moorings. They have sourced £40k of funding which is allowing them to install an accessible pathway down to the moorings. The Great Whyte side of the abutment wall is to be tidied, and a new paved area is being laid. Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) want to install a 'Coffee Pod' but they are struggling with a water connection from Cambridge Water, but they have asked a contractor to put the pipework in ready to provide a waterpoint.

Stephen also advised that there would be an HDC meeting the following day to discuss cancelling the upcoming Local Government Elections so he is not sure if he will be attending future meetings. Paul Burrows said that representatives will still be needed around Internal Drainage Board tables, and Stephen confirmed his intention to still stand for election, and that Peterborough City Council had unanimously agreed the previous evening to cancel their elections.

Nathan Arnold reported that The Jenyns Arms at Denver Sluice, which is owned by the EA, is not yet open but it is expected very soon. He also provided an update on lock closures, with 11 locks currently closed of which 8 were on the Nene and 3 on the Great Ouse. He recommended that river users look out for any extended closures.

Nathan also reported that an online magazine 'Riverviews' launched last month and that there will be future opportunities to promote events or write articles etc in future issues. They may be looking to sell advertising space in the future, and anyone can access the publication.

Chris Middleton reported that on 28th February the Angling Trust will be holding their Winter Finals. The location has not yet been named. The closed season is from 15th March to 15 June inclusive, and Chris asked if anyone sees any anglers during this period to report it to the EA, either by phone or online. Hugh Whittome asked if there were any open angling areas, and Chris advised that there is no free fishing. Paul recommended that people join Angling Clubs which will allow them access fishing areas associated with that club.

John Revell reminded the committee that at the last meeting they talked about installing 3 new rural moorings, and asked where they were located. Kevin Russell advised that they have not yet been installed, and that he has been asking boaters for feedback in order to establish the most suitable sites. Kevin asked John if he would work with him to establish locations and to also help with any feedback, and John agreed.

John also asked about Monks Lode, noting that the Navigation Notes have not been changed as previously agreed, with the removal of the reference to Conington Fen Bridge being requested. The map also needs updating to show the extension to navigation here. Paul Burrows advised that the Navigation Notes are currently being updated in readiness for the new season, and Kevin added that the work to the turning bay were proving difficult to progress due to the ecological impact of such works.

Mike Daines asked for any update to the fishing platforms permit, and Chris Middleton advised that they are still waiting for permission. Paul confirmed that this is being dealt with but cannot confirm when this will be completed.

Paul advised that he attended the Great Ouse Boating Association (GOBA) AGM last year and that they appointed an MLC Point of Contact, Nigel Morris. He and a colleague are coming to explore the Middle Level the following day. Paul has been encouraging them to work with Fenland District Council on the collapsed mooring in West End Park, in the hope that this may become a future GOBA mooring. Paul is contacted regularly by GOBA requesting articles for their magazine.

John Revell asked about the impact of extreme weather on the Middle Level system. Paul said that the dry been a massive challenge, but that so far this winter has been relatively straightforward. We have pumped less than is usual at this point, and there have been no major dramas. He hopes that this continues. Hugh Whittome added that the recent rainfall event would normally have been an issue, but because of the deficit we had, the land absorbed more than usual. Paul added that the event did show the stress that the Catchwater Drains are under, and that it became more of a Highland Water event.

7. Date of Next Meetings

The next meeting will be held on September 15th 2026.

The Committee asked that Paul Burrows provide an update in mid-April, via correspondence. Alan Wildman asked if two formal meetings per year would be adequate, and Hugh Whittome added that if that were so then could we schedule them, so they are in diaries. Paul advised that at least one would need to be around January in order to discuss the seasons registration fees.

The meeting was then closed at 11.15am

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Chair

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Date