

MINUTES OF THE MIDDLE LEVEL COMMISSIONERS' NAVIGATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 9TH September 2025 at 9:30 AM at Middle Level Offices

Present

J Brown	Middle Level Commissioners
R Sexton	EAWA
J Revell	Inland Waterways Association
P Syred	Fox's Marina
A Wildman	Residential Boat Owners Association
N Arnold	Environment Agency
C Middleton	Environment Agency
D Laws	Fenland District Council
S Corney	Huntingdonshire District Council
P Mather	Well Creek Trust
S Whittome	Middle Level Commissioners

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

1. Welcome including Confirmation of Minutes and Matters Arising

The minutes of the Navigation Advisory Committee held on the 4th February 2025 were confirmed as correct and approved.

Matters Arising

John Revell mentioned the boats which are moored outside the Ship Inn and the Acre in March, but these were chosen to be discussed during AOB

2. Noting publication of 2024/25 Financial Summary

Paul Burrows announced to the Committee that a summary of last year's navigation accounts had been published in early July, and these are available to access and read on the MLC website. A summary of income and expenditure had also been published which highlights the ringfenced funds which have been allocated for the improvement of facilities.

Within the past year, Andrew Wool has been appointed as the new MLC Head of Finance and is getting to grips with the previous accounts system and has highlighted scope for improvement and rationalisation of the Finance department. Paul also discussed as Andrew further beds into the role; this will unlock further efficiencies.

3. 2025 Registration Summary

Paul Burrows summarised that MLC had received over 300 boat registrations last year and 290 boats had already been registered this year with applications still being received. Registration of 200 out of the 290 vessels had been relatively straightforward, however the remaining boats were needing to be chased for registration. In comparison to last year, there have been 42 new registrations to the Middle Level, and it would be good to understand where these had come from. However, there was still a set of unregistered boats where chasing letters had to be sent to the boat owners, with some of these being

highlighted for debt management and as defaulting on their direct debits. The number of boats registered is holding and it is positive to see a good number of new registrations.

Roger Sexton wondered how the finances compared from this year to last and whether there had been any improvement with Paul stating that it is slightly better, and that he would be happy if these levels were to continue. Ideally for next year, he would like to get 250 boats being registered without having to chase for registration.

Jonathan Brown wondered how this compared to other authorities, with Alan Wildman commenting that the Broads had been quite successful, and Jonathan considered if there was anything we could learn from how the Broads operate. Alan discussed how the Broads Authority have a low tolerance for not registering boats.

Paula Syred mentioned how the CRT have similar issues but have larger numbers of boaters. Nathan Arnold discussed how the EA are similar to MLC, and have good percentage registration by the 1st April, with some registering later. A small percentage of boaters are being tracked down for not registering, with a few people defaulting on their direct debits. The figures are similar to last year with lots of visitors to the waterways and this is probably due to paddle sports being popular. Usually there are 500 to 600 Anglian Pass users, however this year there were only around 150 and this has likely been impacted by the Cam Conservators issues around their locks.

Alan Wildman asked if having 40 new applications but a decrease in registrations indicates an increase in unregistered vessels on the Middle Level. Paul replied that MLC do not have the capacity to analyse the numbers but it looks this way, and that some boaters will have left the system without advising us.

Project Boats

Currently the MLC have a registration available to purchase for boats that are in the process of being refurbished and Paul explained in detail how this is carried out and the basis of the registration. Based on feedback received and the demand, this scheme is not very successful as 10 have been issued and of those only 1 has fully complied with providing proof of incremental improvement of their boat. Additionally, the scheme is not working as it is subjective and is very administratively time consuming, and Paul does not think that it can continue in its current format.

In order to update and improve the Project Boat registration, Paul outlined a new proposal for the NAC to consider with a full registration being required until the boat is improved and then 50% off of the first-year registration fee post refurbishment. Kevin discussed that this would work more successfully for MLC as it puts the onus on boaters to provide evidence of their refurbishments before they can receive a discount.

Roger Sexton asked whether we would insist upon the Boat Safety Scheme certificate before issuing discounted rates, and Jonathan Brown asked if there were any incentives for boaters to get their boat ready quicker. Kevin Russell said that it was down to his discretion about whether they received the discount but that the maximum time of 2 years would remain for them to have improved their boats to a higher level. Paul also added that the 50% discount would be for the person registering the boat and not the vessel itself.

Paula Syred believes that 1 year should be enough to work on a boat to improve it to an acceptable level, but 2 years gives the individual the benefit of the doubt.

Steve Corney mentioned how he had just purchased a boat and had stripped it back to bare metal, and he thinks he is probably a year away from putting it back into the water. Personally, he has plans to utilise the Middle Level waterways for the next year but then travel further and explore more so he agrees that the Project Boat registration is a good gesture, but in reality it may not benefit individuals who do not plan to stay in the Middle Level system for the 2nd year.

Jonathan asked if 1 year would be sufficient to fix and improve a boat, and Alan believes that you would amend your plans to fit within the year in order to benefit from the scheme. Paul understands this concern, but he wants to create something that incentivises boaters but does not want to burden the administration team with anything complicated. Paul would like people to consider these proposals and reconsider at next NAC meeting, but it is important to note that the gesture is significant and is much easier than chasing people for registration.

CRT Gold Licences

Paul discussed how this has been a long-standing snagging issue as there are boaters with Gold licences who are not registered on the ML system. Nathan Arnold explained how CRT Gold licences between EA and CRT are treated with discretion by MLC as before 2018 the legislation allowed the EA to register ML boaters. There has been lots of discussion surrounding Gold registration in ML as people are sometimes still seen as EA waterways customers. Nathan explained further how the CRT Gold website allows users to select which rivers they want to be registered to and last year there were 11 boats registered to the Middle Level. It does not generate a large amount of money, but it is important to ensure that waterways are accessible to the people that register. Currently, the EA and CRT are negotiating new agreements. The navigation team says they are almost there in completing the local agreement and that the fees to be transferred to Middle Level for 2024 are around £7,500. A similar exercise will be carried out for the 2025 season.

Paul referred back to the CRT licences, and advised the NAC that in theory those 11 boats with CRT Gold licences could be paying 100% of the ML registration but they would also need to purchase other licences. The current arrangement with the CRT and EA gives ML 80% of what they would get, but it relies on the CRT Gold licence holders adding the Middle Level as their home mooring. Both Kevin and Nathan agreed that they were working on promoting this to boaters.

Jonathan Brown wanted to know if 11 boats was a consistent number and Paul responded that he is unsure as there was not good data quality available, but the number is around 10-20. Nathan said that if there was not an agreement in place that all funding would be lost and Alan wondered when this would become untenable for the EA. Nathan answered that at present, the EA receive the normal fee and the rest goes into a pot for EA and CRT which is shared using a complicated calculation. EA/CRT get the top slice of money and the only cost to the EA is administration which will be getting smaller as the system develops.

4. Review of 2025 Season

Vegetation Management

Paul discussed how it had been a very dry year and water level management had been very challenging with lots of activity for the Operations Team, and this highlighted how fortunate we are in the Middle level to be able to hold a water level compared to other areas of navigation which have struggled. At Stanground/Kings Dyke there was more weed clearance needed than normal to help aid water transfer. Paul also mentioned that he is receiving the standard range of feedback from boaters, and our challenges are in the usual places. Kevin Russell agreed that nothing is standing out more than usual although he is seeing isolated places where there are higher levels of weed growth.

Alan inquired about boating movements with Kevin responding that they have decreased in comparison but in areas where there were more boats, there had been less weed growth. John mentioned that most of the system looked good with only a few weak points, and Paula agreed that water management had been carried out fantastically in comparison to 1976 dry summer where vegetation growth was so bad that you could walk across the riverbed in town.

Paul discussed how early in the boating season there had been new approach to weed removal, by creating conservation bays on the banks (areas of bank that were cut short) to place vegetation removed from the channels which helps birds and reptiles in the area. However, some cut areas have been mistaken for angling swims but despite this, the approach will become a common feature as it also helps to promote diversity of habitats.

Well Creek – Loss of water

Kevin attended the Well Creek Trust AGM and discussed the instances of loss of water over recent months. There had been issues with Aqueduct pump from the Middle Level Main Drain to Well Creek, and a few incidents with slackers at the lock.

Kevin discussed an incident where all 4 slackers were left open at Marmont Priory Lock which subsequently started to drain Well Creek, and it was suspected that it was an intentional issue but was dealt with quickly. The WCT members now have lock handles and more people watching the Well Creek from the Trust, so that any similar incident could be dealt with much quicker in the future. Paul Mather added that there are now named winch holders in the village who can be called to sort out Marmont Priory lock if required. Dee Laws asked whether cameras had been considered, as these can now be run from large batteries as Kevin mentioned there was no power supply at the lock. Jonathan asked whether this was a consistent problem and Kevin said this had been the first issue for several years. Paul suggested that the best approach would be seeing if the community could help and Kevin agreed that this would prevent putting onus onto the WCT but would be helpful to have more eyes on the locks and more local knowledge available.

Roger Sexton raised a concern that the former lock keepers cottage had been vandalised and wanted to know if the building was or could be listed. It was pointed out that the cottage is not owned by MLC, and Kevin added that the property had not been vandalised and that he understands that it is going to be put up for sale.

Paul Mather talked about this being his first time at the NAC and being the first representative for the Well Creek. He added that the Trust have become aware of more boaters complaining this year, and asked if Well Creek was considered a pinch/problem point for MLC?

Kevin responded that the Creek had been a focus for vegetation management. Paul Burrows explained that mechanical weed management had taken place in Well Creek and Bevill's Pond to improve navigation with the majority of reaches of the Creek dredged in the last 10 years. There were still different sections remaining to be cleared and a bathymetric survey had been carried out, but the remaining works would be expensive and it was important to be sure that they would make a demonstrable difference. Paul mentioned that Nicola Oldfield (MLC Chief Engineer) is developing an asset investment plan which features the Well Creek but as it is a navigation channel no government Grant in Aid funding is available. The Middle Level also has extensive works needed across the system, and so we will need to prioritise what receives the money first and if there are any other funding sources available.

Roger Sexton mentioned that he was a founder member of the WCT so he understands the issues around maintaining water levels and the importance of the Aqueduct Pump, and how this had always been a problem. If too much material is removed there is a risk that the clay puddle will be fractured and then all water will be lost. The current situation with lots of sunlight and high nutrients in the water has created the weed problem.

5. Future Works Update

MLC Boater Facilities

Kevin discussed how the new water point at Salters Lode is being connected this week and should be active by Friday. Paul mentioned how it has been hard work as the MLC have limited land holdings there. John asked if there was any progress on the installation of Elsan or rubbish disposal at Salters Lode, and Paul responded that as MLC do not own any land there (the EA allowed us to install the water pipe over their land), he considered it would be better to find somewhere in the villages better suited to siting the disposal facilities. He has asked WCT to identify potential businesses that may be able to help, and we need to consider financial viability of having rubbish locations nearby. Currently we are waiting for feedback from the WCT about this issue and we have also approached The Crown Lodge at Upwell but have not received any feedback. Ideally we would like for the local community to help out.

Paul updated the Committee on the installation of the new access track at Stanground which allows access to the paddock. An approach is currently being developed to enable for the installation of a water point as the starting point for facilities provision, but due to land registration issues this is holding up what the MLC want to achieve and therefore the water point development on hold.

Paul added to the previous discussion that if boaters do need to dispose of rubbish, that they can get in contact with the MLC lock keepers for assistance, but Kevin explained that where the rubbish disposal is located needs to be carefully considered. Paula agrees that Paul should continue to pursue communication with the Crown Lodge to see how they can assist with rubbish disposal. Nathan added that rubbish disposal is very tricky as

waste needs to be separated to enable recycling, and that bins need to be accessible for lorries for emptying too, but that this makes them accessible to others as well. The EA have reduced areas of waste disposal, and they are planning a way forward by working with local businesses.

Paul mentioned that he has contacted Peterborough Environment City Trust and Living Sport to discuss developing facilities for Paddle sports, building on existing portage, and if this can bring in any further funding.

Nathan discussed how the EA are working with Peterborough City Council to remove and dispose of 5 or 6 boats located on The Embankment at Peterborough. This should occur within the next few days. They are also looking at other ways they can develop boaters facilities in the area.

Paul advised the Committee that the water point at Whittlesey Manor Leisure Centre has been installed, and although there had been some teething problems, it is now working well.

Ashline Lock Refurbishment

Paul advised the Committee that the repairs to Ashline Lock are now the next priority now that Marmont Priory has been resolved. The general feedback at Marmont Priory is that the rectification works have been successful.

However, the condition of Ashline Lock is a concern, and will require a programme of repairs that will last many years, including a plan to replace both sets of gates. The project will be extremely challenging and water bypass around the lock also needs to be considered. It is intended to dewater the lock first to carry out an inspection and to scope the works needed. It is recognised that this could be important infrastructure for the development of the Fens Reservoir. The MLC are keen to carry out affordable improvements which would improve conditions for boaters, and they are in the process for signing up to an appropriate framework agreement with the EA to provide a project delivery route. However, there are currently no indicative time scales available or clear costs but at the April Middle Level Commissioners Board meeting, the project was discussed, and the Board agreed to take on a loan to fund the works. Additionally, it is important to note that what the Cam Conservators are currently facing highlights that investment is not cheap.

Roger Sexton questioned the ability to salvage any remaining parts of the gates to reuse but Paul confirmed that the MLC want to carry out a full replacement to ensure that the refurbishments last at least 70 years. John asked about optimistic timescales for the project and Paul explained that it will be carried out over the next few years, but no time scales could be confirmed presently.

Ramsey Basin

Steve Corney circulated details surrounding Ramsey Town Council's proposals, and explained that he had met with Huntingdonshire District Council and that Ramsey Town Council had received £35-40,000 from them to spend to help improve the Ramsey Basin. He advised that a design had been developed enabling wheelchair access towards the water's edge and moorings, but that the first design had been shared and subsequently

altered. The land shown on the photographs circulated at the top of the existing mooring is owned by the Abbey Group although Ramsey Town Council have been maintaining this land, and so they are now trying to formalise this arrangement. In addition to improved wheelchair access, they would like to install a new footpath to the moorings and a new water point. The proposals to improve the turning radius at the moorings would mean consideration would need to be given to removing the shoulder from the batter but this would require discussion. The Town Council also now have a small grounds team and are considering their options regarding waste. They are currently planning not to provide bins, but for waste to be disposed by contacting the grounds team who would then make arrangements with the boater to collect the waste. Furthermore, they are looking at sourcing any match funding to help them develop these ideas.

Paul Mather explained how the WCT use a QR code on their water point asking for small donations of £2 and £5 and they believe this will be successful as boaters understand that the facilities they use need to be paid for and are happy to donate.

Stephen and Steve discussed the provision or improvement of a turning circle to help boaters, and how the removal of old moorings would also help to create more space for boaters to move around. Steve explained that HDC would be in charge of this, but that he would be leading on this project with RTC.

Dee was concerned that the use of QR codes may be impractical as not everyone is technologically savvy and wondered if there were any other provisions to raise funding. Stephen was concerned that there could be large amounts of spending on moorings which may not be used but Steve explained he had spoken to a boater who wanted to go to Holme Fen but due to large amounts of weed growth, he had given up and returned to the moorings which shows that there is not an issue with the turning circle.

Bevills Leam Pumping Station Refurbishment

Paul Burrows discussed the recent works at Bevills Leam Pumping Station where one pump and motor has been lifted out of the pumping station for overhaul. This has required water levels to be lowered and Lodes End Lock has subsequently been closed. This will happen again when the refurbished pump goes back in, but at present Paul could not advise when this will be happening. The refurbishment is a rolling operation as all 6 pumps will need to be refurbished.

6. Any Other Business

Fens Reservoir

Paul updated the Committee on the current position, advising that there had been lots of recent engagement with Anglian Water and that this is beginning to ramp up. Since the last NAC meeting, it has been confirmed that the project has been regarded as a National Strategic Infrastructure Project, and so the Planning Inspectorate will be make the ultimate planning decision as opposed to local authorities. Ofwat have recently provided AW with tight timescales and they have not accepted additional requests for further time to work on the project which is frustrating for MLC. Paul explained that he has written to Ofwat and another people involved in the project and has expressed issues regarding MLC's capacity to deal with all their requests quickly, both now and in the future.

Paul also mentioned that the use of MLC waterways during the construction phase is also an important topic to discuss. He feels that everyone needs to manage their expectations of the viability of using ML waterways for transferring plant and materials during the construction phase. However, using the waterways for construction could also impact the use of waterways for navigation as they could become part of a construction site which would mean they could not be used by the public. Anglian Water are also still working on finalising the sources of water for the reservoir.

John asked whether there could be a potential revenue stream from using boats during construction and Paul added that conversations are still ongoing regarding the provision of registrations for boats involved in the planning and construction phases of the project. John Revell asked that Amelia stay in contact with Ian Bliss of the EA and Steven Heywood of the IWA.

AOB Other

John asked about the boats outside the Ship Inn and Acre and Kevin explained that the Ship Inn boats were being moved hopefully this week but as the narrowboats are registered, there is nothing that MLC can do and that the moorings are owned by FDC.

Dee Laws asked for more details about who at FDC the boats had been reported to and she said that she would follow up on the requests for more information and action to move forward. Paul explained there are plans to remove the unregistered vessels from outside The Ship using our Boat Removal Protocol, but that regularly overstaying boats on moorings that are managed by other organisations are not our responsibility. However, Paul encourage that continued reporting of these online using the FDC website.

John asked for navigation notes on the MLC website to be updated to go past Conington Fen bridge and Paul explained that the notes had been updated the previous year and this further tweaks can be made for 2026.

John Revell asked about the Monks Lode work party which had been discussed at the previous meeting. Paul explained that ecological survey season has just started and the survey is in a long list to be undertaken. He added that there is also not a clear understanding on who the landowner is in the location of the works, and that we need to understand who is leading the works from a Health and Safety perspective, but also that a clear plan of works needs to be in place.

John also asked for a review of rural moorings in the area to see if improvements are needed and Kevin explained that that several moorings had posts moved to allow them to become more usable. A further three additional moorings had been also discussed where boaters had suggested would be helpful, and the landowners permission has been sought to allow them to be constructed but this will take place during a winter and aligned to other works in the area. John asked that further information about these three moorings and was advised that this would be discussed at the next NAC meeting. Paul added that works on these moorings would be carried out in conjunction with other IDB works to keep the costs down.

John Revell asked about the desilting on the Middle Level Main Drain, particularly asking about the size and draft of the vessels used. Paul explained that floating pontoons had been used, and that the works cost several million pounds. These major capital works

were to return the Main Drain back to its design capacity and extend its design life, and that the construction approach would likely differ for other watercourses across the system. To carry out embankment and channel capital works on the remainder of the Middle Level system, excluding Well Creek, would cost in excess of £100 million.

John also asked about March Town Bridge and whether works were completed despite scaffolding still being up. Kevin explained that as far as he knew, the works were finished and John suggested writing to Cambridgeshire County Council to ask about the progress with removing the scaffolding.

Roger asked about the removal of moorings within West End Park which are owned by Fenland District Council. Dee explained that due to nothing being budgeted for the works there are currently no works planned. However some money could potentially be recouped from the March Regeneration Project. Roger asked if the piles were removed, could this become an MLC Rural Mooring? Paul explained that there have been discussions with Phil Hughes about mothballing this mooring but this needs pricing before it can go ahead. Paul also advised that he attended the GOBA AGM, where they talked about having a GOBA presence on the Middle Level. Paul has suggested that this mooring could be considered.

Paul Mather explained that he was asked by the WCT committee to raise concern of the deteriorating navigation condition of Well Creek with issues surrounding weed and reed growth where areas are too narrow for 2 wide beam boats to pass. He has been talking to other navigation authorities about how they can manage their weed and improve their conditions for the future.

Paul Burrows wanted to highlight there needs to be a differentiation between in channel vegetation and reeds at the side of the water, as side cutting cannot take place until October so may impact people's views on what is being done regarding vegetation. Paul Mather asked whether it would be beneficial to have visible schedule available for MLC weed boats to help people understand when works are taking place and Kevin explained that it does not work like that as the amount of growth and the locations varies from year to year.

Dee advised the Committee of a consultation currently being held on the Manor Leisure Centre in Whittlesey and how she believes it would be of value for MLC to contribute to discussions in the future. She shared concerns about vandalism and the need to improve security when redeveloping the Manor, and she highlighted the opportunity to put forward proposals from other people regarding the improvements and works being undertaken. A public consultation has also taken place where ideas have been put forward for comment from the general public and Dee said she would share the link to this discussion with Paul Burrows.

Nathan Arnold wanted to make the Committee members aware that the EA are relaunching the River Views newsletter as an E-newsletter and he will distribute the link when it is available. He hopes that it will help to promote waterways and the local region, and behind the scenes work that is being carried out. Additionally, the EA website was being updated to improve the navigation notices system to make it easier to use for boaters. Nathan also wanted to share that the Jennings Arms in Denver will reopen soon as the EA has improved the building and the lease agreement has been signed by new

tenants. He hopes that it makes Denver a destination again, and improvements can be done to install new moorings and attract more people to the area.

7. Date of Next Meeting

Tuesday 13th January at 9:30am at Middle Level Offices

With nothing further to discuss, Alan Wildman thanked everyone for their attendance and the meeting closed at 11.30am.