

MINUTES OF MIDDLE LEVEL NAVIGATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 25th MAY 2021

Present

D C Thomas	-	Middle Level Commissioners
L McShane	-	“ “ “
K Russell	-	“ “ “
N Arnold	-	Environment Agency
C Middleton	-	“ “
C Howes	-	Inland Waterways Association
C Ovenden	-	Middle Level Watermen’s Club
R Sexton	-	East Anglian Waterways Association
P Syred	-	Fox Narrowboats Ltd
A Wildman	-	Residential Boat Owners Association
Cllr D Laws	-	Fenland District Council

1. Apologies for absence

J L Brown, M Heading and S Whittome (Middle Level Commissioners) and P Hughes (Fenland District Council).

2. Declarations of Interests

There were no further declarations of interest other than already declared on Members’ Interests forms.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the Navigation Advisory Committee held on the 23rd March 2021 were approved.

4. COVID-19 – Key Dates

David Thomas confirmed that the waterways were now open for navigation although there were still a few constraints in place but mostly relating to hire boats. Signs about COVID-19 safety were still in place on the waterways. The Middle Level offices were now open without appointment.

5. Membership

David Thomas confirmed that at the April Board meeting of the Middle Level Commissioners Stephen Corney was approved as a member of the Navigation Advisory Committee and he had been invited to attend. Kye Jerrome who had been seconded to another post with the Environment Agency and he still retained this new position so would not be available to attend the Navigation Advisory Committee for the next six months. Whilst Chris Middleton had been appointed to represent Kye Jerrome at the meetings this was only a temporary appointment ending in April 2021 and as there would not be another Middle Level Commissioners meeting

in which to confirm a further temporary appointment, he could not continue as an official committee member.

RESOLVED That Chris Middleton should continue to attend the meetings as a representative of the Environment Agency but he would be there in the capacity as an observer with no voting rights.

6. Tourism Update including March Town and Ramsey Market Town District Council Bids

Councillor Laws confirmed that the March Town Bid had been successful and that the Government funding for the project was secure. A new Mayor of the Combined Authorities had been appointed following the local Government elections and the Conservatives had lost control of Cambridgeshire County Council. Councillor Laws stated that there were a number of grants from other sources that still needed to be confirmed. She stated that March Town Council are very supportive of the project and advised that she would give a further update at the next meeting of the Committee.

Ramsey Town Council

David Thomas confirmed that he had held a meeting with Steve Corney who was a representative of Huntingdonshire District Council and also a member of Ramsey Town Council and was very supportive of the provision of moorings in Ramsey.

There was currently a development at High Lode and the developers had been reminded about the requirements for piling to take place before development was commenced. It was hoped that Steve Corney could attend the next meeting and update the Committee on the provision of moorings at this location.

Pump out station in March

Colin Ovenden expressed that there was currently nowhere in the town centre where boaters could purchase tokens for the pump out. Councillor Laws confirmed that once the Council's property in the town centre was open again they would recommence selling tokens and David Thomas offered to sell tokens from the Middle Level offices. It was stressed that the swimming pool, library and also the card shop on the corner bridge would be suitable locations to sell tokens to boat owners. Councillor Laws stated that she could not provide an answer at the current time to the issue of the collapsed mooring which had been closed off but confirmed that if there was a source of funding the moorings would be replaced. She advised that she is not the portfolio holder for assets and this was under the remit of Ian Benney.

7. Residential Moorings Strategy

David Thomas reported that further work was needed to develop the residential moorings strategy. This work would be carried out and once the first draft was complete it would then be submitted to Alan Wildman who was the representative for residential boaters and represents the Residential Boat Owners Association on the Committee. David Thomas also reported that he had given a presentation to the Developers Forum at Fenland District Council about the potential for water front development and residential moorings. He confirmed that there had been no further contact with the consultants working for Fenland District Council on the local plan. Councillor Laws confirmed that she was actively trying to promote residential moorings. However, during the recent call for sites the Council currently had 512 land sites for assessment and it was taking some time to work through these sites. Councillor Laws confirmed that

residential areas on the waterways were being looked at by the policy officers and it was hoped to have a draft local plan at the September meeting of the Council.

Alan Wildman stated that he had been invited to speak at the All Party Parliamentary Waterways group and discussions had taken place with the Waterways Minister and Housing Minister about the difficulties in getting planning permission for residential moorings. Chris Howes made reference to Mercia Marina in Nottingham where a planning application for a further 100 boats had been applied for to the Local Planning Authority. Mercia Marina was a waterway village with shops, cafes and other boating facilities. If the planning application for the further berths was approved it would mean that the marina could accommodate 200 moorings. Paul Syred stated that her marina was currently full as was Bill Fen Marina and the Environment Agency moorings at Northampton. Chris Howes discussed whether the moorings were residential for 12 months of the year as in some cases the planning permission required boat owners to leave the marina for one month which prevented the moorings being permanent residential moorings. The provision of small residential moorings was difficult in that 20+ boats were needed to make a marina viable commercially.

David Thomas confirmed he had recently visited Napton junction where there were numerous marinas in a very small area which all appeared to be full. The local economy in this area is vibrant on the back of the boating community demonstrating that boats can have a very positive impact on an area. It is hoped that there would be opportunities to develop some residential moorings at Chatteris, Whittlesey, Upwell and Outwell. It was suggested that future works should include the exploration of suitable sites on the waterways, their ownership and the viability of developing them as residential moorings. Chris Howes stated that the Inland Waterways Association minimum standards were pump out facilities, water and electricity being available at a reasonable cruising distance as many boats now have solar panels to top up their leisure batteries. Some boaters do not need a lot of facilities they want quiet countryside moorings which they can access legally.

8. Facilities Provision

David Thomas confirmed that the income from boating registration in the 2020/21 financial year was approximately £40,000 and of this 25% had been ring fenced for improvement of facilities on the link route. He stated that if the projected income of £100,000 for the current year was achievable then this would allow for a further (approximately) £25,000 to be spent on the improvement of facilities. David Thomas stated that in addition to the ring fenced money held in accounts, four rural moorings had now been provided and the refurbishment of Salters Lode moorings and Marmont Priory Lock had been completed. Further dredging was needed at Well Creek, March and Benwick and he stated that over the winter period 2020/2021 there had been a number of bank slips with an estimated cost of £100,000 to repair which whilst not being funded from the navigation budget, would impact upon the Middle Level Commissioners' ability to invest in navigation this year. David Thomas stated that if works progressed through the Fenland District Council market bid this could give the Middle Level Commissioners an opportunity to do some dredging. However, he stated that the cost of works to dredge the centre of March would be in excess of £200,000. He confirmed that this expenditure would be for navigation and not for drainage. It was currently estimated that £14 million needed to be spent on bank raising for controlling flood risk and these works would include some dredging but it was necessary to look at the model as a whole and the benefits to the system.

9. Update on Registration/Charging/Reciprocal arrangements/Anglian Pass

David Thomas stated that Defra had signed off the Byelaws on the 28th April and these would be in force from the 28th May 2021.

Anglian Pass

Nathan Arnold confirmed that as of today's date the 25th May approximately 600 passes had now been sold with an income of £19,000. The national contact centre for the Environment Agency had some initial problems in issuing the passes but these had now been resolved. Posters advertising the Anglian Pass had been put up at key locations on the waterways and they were available at the Middle Level Offices. Councillor Laws asked if some posters could be sent to her for including on the tourism section of the Fenland District Council website. Alan Wildman and Colin Ovenden offered to take some of the posters for circulation. It was agreed that the posters be sent to the Middle Level Commissioners who would circulate to all members of the Committee. Nathan Arnold also referred to a pack which had been prepared for waterway users entitled "Welcome to the Anglian Waterways" with help from Heritage Lottery funding. Three thousand of these packs had been prepared and the pack contained information on the rivers and watercourses across the Anglian waterways region together with general information of use to boaters using the waterways. Alan Wildman referred to a voluntary code of good practice which the Residential Boat Owners Association had produced for residential boaters and agreed to forward a copy to Nathan Arnold. It was confirmed that the MLC navigation notes were available at Salters Lode and Stanground and were offered to boaters who entered the Middle Level waterways. Nathan Arnold was asked that the good wishes of the Committee to Sue Kent on her retirement be recorded.

Visitors Passes

David Thomas confirmed that weekly and monthly passes would be available from the Middle Level Commissioners for visitors from the Environment Agency watercourses in addition to the Anglian Pass. However, for the time being, one day passes were not being issued with the exception of boats going in for repair at boatyards or coming into the system to be lifted out. The exception for these instances was approved by the Committee. David Thomas confirmed that the Canal and River Trust Gold Licence would be recognised as agreed until the end of December 2021 and that further discussions would take place with the Canal and River Trust in September on the future of reciprocal arrangements. Nathan Arnold confirmed that 4% of Anglian Pass applications had stated that they had a Gold Licence.

10. Non Boater Waterway User Interests – fishing/recreation/tourism

Chris Middleton confirmed that new platforms for fishing had been installed for March Angling Club. Chris Middleton requested that any reports of theft of fishing should be reported to the Police or to the Environment Agency. He reported that fishing had greatly increased during the COVID-19 restrictions and there had been an increase in applications for fishing licences for rods. Chris Howes requested if it would be possible for the dates and times of fishing matches to be communicated to the Inland Waterways Association and in that way boatowners could avoid travelling on the waterways when fishing tournaments were taking place.

11. Byelaws

The Committee recognised that now that the Byelaws had been approved and were in force there would be more active enforcement on the waterways and expressed concern about the safety of officers carrying out these duties and the need to invest in safety equipment and protective clothing. The Chairman referred to the report of a Canal & River Trust officer who

had been stabbed in the course of his duties. Nathan Arnold advised that the Environment Agency enforcement team wore stab vests and that the Environment Agency would be willing to advise on equipment and safety clothing to be worn by Enforcement Officers. The Committee requested that thanks be conveyed to Stephen Barclay MP for his assistance and intervention in the approval of the Navigation Byelaws and also thanks to Lorna McShane to be recorded for all her hard work on the production of the Byelaws.

12. Recommendations to the Board

That the Board be recommended to approve Chris Middleton to remain as the Fisheries representation on the Navigation Advisory Committee. This appointment to remain in place until further advice is received from the Environment Agency.

13. Any Other Business

Councillor Laws stated that as her main responsibility was the Planning Portfolio which included flood risk and flood risk management, some of the matters discussed at the Committee fell within the remit of the Assets Portfolio holder owner and this was Councillor Ian Benney. She agreed to report back relevant matters to him from the Committee. Roger Sexton requested whether either Fenland District Council or the Middle Level Commissioners could prune the trees along the river to improve visibility of the river. Roger Sexton asked a further question on whether the Middle Level Commissioners could build and operate a marina themselves. David Thomas advised the Committee that this would need substantial financial provision to be in place and a business plan with funding arrangements before this arrangement could be contemplated. Councillor Laws stated that as Fenland District Council had budget constraints would it be possible to get help from Middle Level Commissioners and the Inland Waterways using their volunteers for any scheme to cut back trees and open up the visibility of the river. She stated that she would ask Phil Hughes to contact David Thomas and the Inland Waterways Association to progress this matter. David Thomas confirmed that lockkeepers from Salters Lode and Denver were finalists in the British Marine inland boating lockkeeper of the year award 2020. Details of the presentation had been put on the Middle Level Commissioners' website under navigation.

Appointment of Chairman

David Thomas requested the Committee to consider the term of office for the Chairman of the Committee and it was agreed that the Chairman should hold office for 3 years. That future appointments for Chairman should be made at the April meeting of the Committee. A suggestion was put forward that for the September meeting of the Committee that they should hire a day boat from Fox's boatyard and go for a waterway site visit.

Date of Next Meeting

It was agreed going forward that the meetings of the Committee should be quarterly. However if business dictated an emergency meeting of the Committee this could be scheduled as necessary. The plan was to hold a meeting in early April and then October together with 2 further meetings during the course of the year and this to be kept under review.

The date of the next meeting is Tuesday 17th August 2021 at 9.30 am. The meeting would be held at the Middle Level Offices with the opportunity to join the meeting remotely if necessary.

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Chairman