

MINUTES OF MIDDLE LEVEL NAVIGATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 8th DECEMBER 2021 at 09.30 AM

Present

D C Thomas	-	Middle Level Commissioners
L McShane	-	“ “
K Russell	-	“ “
J Brown	-	“ “
C Howes	-	Inland Waterways Association
Cllr S Corney	-	Huntingdonshire District Council
C Middleton	-	Environment Agency Fisheries Team
R Sexton	-	East Anglian Waterways Association
P Syred	-	Fox Narrowboats Ltd
A Wildman	-	Residential Boat Owners Association
S Whittome	-	Middle Level Commissioners

1. Apologies for absence

Colin Ovenden (who is standing down as a member of the NAC), Nathan Arnold (Environment Agency) Cllr D Laws (Fenland District Council) and Phil 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 17th August 2021 were approved with the exception of an amendment requested by Councillor Steve Corney who asked that the records be changed to show that he is a member of Huntingdonshire District Council and not Fenland District Council.

4. Membership

The Chief Executive confirmed that as agreed at the MLC Board Meeting on 4th November, Chris Middleton would be appointed as a member of the NAC representing Environment Agency Fisheries until further notice as Kye Jerrom's secondment has been extended. The Board had also approved Colin Ovenden's new position on the Committee as Youth Representative and that a decision on any replacement representative from the Middle Level Watermen's Club should be delegated to the Executive Committee.

Since the date of the Board Meeting on 4th November 2021 the Chief Executive stated that he had received a notice of resignation from Colin Ovenden who has advised that due to a change in circumstances he wishes to step down from the Committee.

The Committee wished it to be recorded that they thanked Colin for his contribution to the Navigation Advisory Committee.

RESOLVED

It was proposed that the Chief Executive write to the Middle Level Watermen's Club to ask them to offer a representative to be appointed to the NAC.

5. Tourism Update including March Town and Ramsey Schemes

March Town Scheme

The Chief Executive advised that he had received no further update on the March proposals.

Ramsey Basin

The Chief Executive stated that in association with Accent Housing Limited and Ramsey Town Council the Middle Level Commissioners were pleased to announce that an agreement had been concluded to deliver 120m of new moorings on the High Lode at the northern edge of the town centre of Ramsey which would be owned and managed by the Middle Level Commissioners.

BJ Plant Hire had been appointed as contractors and it was anticipated that work would commence in Spring 2022.

Once completed Ramsey Town Council would take ownership of the land above the moorings to provide amenity space and would be responsible for the supply of water for use by boaters as well as waste and recycling facility provision.

Councillor Steve Corney advised that the Town Council were discussing potential opportunities for implementing tourism/navigation improvements on the opposite bank to the moorings. Another supermarket was to be developed in Ramsey – a Lidl store and the Town Council were looking at the potential for any contributions from new development etc including the Levelling Off Fund by which local MPs can sponsor schemes in their constituencies.

Roger Sexton raised the importance of the enlargement of the winding hole being incorporated into any future plans. The challenge to this will be the absence of information on the ownership of the Drove Road which may be affected.

Chris Howes raised concerns about how different Local Authorities in the area dealt with refuse collection and recycling. At the waste disposal facilities in Willow Walk, Ely (which is a jointly owned by East Cambridgeshire District Council and the Environment Agency) refuse is collected every day which prevents overflow of bins which attracts rats.

Councillor Steve Corney stated that the Town Council were aware of problems with refuse and would look at different approaches before implementation on site. The Town Council had also asked Huntingdonshire District Council if the Council's CCTV could be used to monitor the site.

6. Facilities Provision

There were no further update reports from Fenland District Council about the future of the Pump Out Facilities in March, although they currently seemed to be open and working.

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

The Chief Executive advised that currently 190 boats had licenced which with the split from the Anglian Pass would produce an income of £115,000 (from which 25% needs to be ring fenced for improvements on the link route).

Although there was still some uncertainty about the current numbers of boats on the system it was possible that there were currently in the region of 400 boats on the system.

The Assistant Clerk/Solicitor advised on the Enforcement work which had been undertaken to date which had involved attaching letters to unregistered boats and stickers advising of Enforcement proceeding. In future years enforcement would become easier because there would be a database of boat owners.

A number of boats in Bill Fen Marina remain unlicenced, although the Marina Manager was providing useful information to the Navigation Officer about new boats entering the Marina and boats being sold and moved from the Marina.

The Assistant Clerk/Solicitor advised that it was important that the Commissioners were seen to enforce against unlicensed boat owners and court action should be commenced before the end of the current licencing year.

Charging

The Chief Executive advised that following the Environment Agency's consultation, which sought views on a three year charging plan from 2022-2024 and other changes on the way boats were registered, the EA had changed the levels of increase in fees to 4% in 2022, 4% in 2023 and 2% in 2024. There were also some changes in relation to classifications, but not the suggested move to length x width area calculations. The view of the Committee was that the fees should continue to mirror the fees set by the EA Anglian area as with the introduction of the Anglian Pass it was important that there was parity over all three organisations.

RESOLVED

That the Middle Level fees for 2022-2023 should be increased by 4%.

Anglian Pass

The Committee considered the proposed increases in charges for the 2022/23 year for the Anglian Pass.

The Assistant Clerk/Solicitor advised on the term for the Anglian Pass Agreement. It was noted that the Agreement commenced on 1st April 2021 and that termination of the Agreement could only by any one of the parties giving 12 months' notice.

RESOLVED

To continue to be a party to the Anglian Pass for a further year and to agree the increases proposed by the EA.

8. Proposed suggestion for a Transit Licence for passing through the system

The Chief Executive had received a request from a boater who had asked the Commissioners if they would consider introducing a Transit Pass which would allow a boat to pass through the system or for taking a boat for repair.

The current arrangement in these circumstances was for a boater to purchase a weekly licence (or in the case of special circumstances such as going directly to a marina for repair, a Day Pass)

RESOLVED

That the request be refused as it would be difficult to administer and enforce and the existing arrangements in place were seen as adequate to cover this situation.

9. Consideration of offering discounts for licencing small craft through local member organisations

Chris Howes explained the background to the Well Creek Trust and the Chief Executive discussed the request he had received from the Well Creek Trust about allowing small unpowered vessels e.g. paddleboarding, kayaks, rowing boats and canoes, to use the waters from Marmont Priory Lock to Salters Lode at no cost or a reduced charge.

RESOLVED

To defer the decision whilst getting information on the number of small vessels likely to be involved and for further discussions with Well Creek Trust and other organisations to be undertaken. The intention is then that matter will be further explored at the next meeting of the committee when the additional information can be used to make an informed decision.

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

Fisheries

Chris Middleton advised that he had very little to report, apart from the fact that night patrols are being carried out by the EA Fisheries Team to look for illegal activity.

Recreation

The Assistant Clerk/Solicitor advised about the Board's decision to agree in principle to allowing open air swimmers to use the old bathing shelters on the Twenty Foot River beside Chain Bridge Road. This was subject to the swimmers indemnifying the Commissioners and taking adequate safety measures including the use of highly visible floats to make other waterway users aware of their presence.

Chris Howes requested that the swimming organisation be made aware of the limitations of boats being able to stop at short notice due to the weight of the vessel and that swimmers should be advised to make themselves aware of the likelihood of approaching boats.

Residential Moorings

The Chief Executive advised that he had received no further information from Fenland District Council about site allocations in preparation of the Local Plan. He understood that some of the allocations being put forward included residential moorings.

11. Engagement with Waterways Users

The Chief Executive referred to recent discussions at the Waterway Users Group. He noted that he continues to use the MLC website and Twitter as a way of communicating waterway issues. The information for boaters on the website had been recently been reviewed and updated to ensure it was current.

Roger Sexton asked if the time was right to once again commence discussions on the use of volunteers with Cambridge Acre and proposed that an item about this be included on the Agenda for the next meeting.

12. Recommendations to the Board

There were no specific recommendations to the Board arising from the meeting.

It was noted that the resignation of Colin Ovenden left a vacancy for a Youth Representative for the waterways.

13. Feedback

The Chief Executive stated that he had received a copy of a 'Best Practice Guide for Boat Dweller Accommodation Needs Assessments under Section 124 of the Housing and Planning Act 2016' as supplied by the Chair of the NBTA. He confirmed that he had acknowledged receipt of this and had thanked the Chair for forwarding it. Other committee members advised that they had also received copies.

There was no other feedback from users requiring resolution by the committee on navigation matters other than that referred to in these minutes.

14. Any Other Business

(i) The George Pub

The Chief Executive reported that the Commissioners had agreed in principle to licence a section of the Forty Foot Bank to The George Public House to use for tables and seating and hopefully make it a destination on the Forty Foot River.

Members of the Committee were keen to see permanent moorings at this location and discussed how they could be funded, as this location was not on the link route.

RESOLVED

That the Commissioners' Engineers provide a design and costings for moorings at this location with steps from any new moorings up the bank.

(ii) Fisheries

Chris Middleton advised the Committee that the EA Fisheries have been carrying out a Fisheries Survey using nets in the water – usually one months' notice would be provided when this work was to be carried out.

It was agreed that notice would be given when EA work boats were on MLC waterways.

(iii) Abloy Key

Chris Howes requested that the Commissioners gave consideration to the use of an Abloy Key to access all facilities as is used elsewhere on the waterway system. The Chief Executive agreed to discuss this matter with Nathan Arnold of the EA and said he would give consideration to standardisation.

(iv) Fact Finding Cruise for Committee

Chris Howes suggested the Committee look at two locations for further view mornings:

- Upwell and Outwell
- Ramsey Moorings and White Fen Bridge

(v) Insurance Claim

The Chief Executive reported on a claim being made against the Commissioners' insurance following a boat's hood being ripped when it passed under a vandalised footbridge at Marmont Priory. The matter is still with the Commissioners' insurers, but the bridge has since been repaired.

(vi) The Chief Executive reported that, at the Board meeting on 4th November, it was resolved to carry out further dredging at Well Creek – from the Globe Pub to Salters Lode.

At the last Waterways Users Group, the representatives from the Middle Level Watermens Club had asked if the river through March could be dredged. Whilst this has got to be an objective of the Board due to the costs involved it may be some time before this will be possible. However some dredging may be possible as part of the Town Centre redevelopment and this will be explored further.

(vii) Bank Raising Works

The Chief Executive advised the Committee about a Grant Aided scheme which had been approved for Bank Raising Works throughout the Middle Level system. This would involve soft defences and piling. The project was likely to take five years and would start next year with dredging and the importing of materials for the project.

15. Date of Next Meeting

Monday 6th April 2022 at 09.30 at the Middle Level Offices

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Chairman