

# **A New Strategy for Sport: Consultation Paper**

## **A response from The English Bridge Union**



The English Bridge Union welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussion on the future strategy for sport in England and the UK. We hope that this consultation is a catalyst for change in the way in which 'sport', and participation in activities which are recognised to be beneficial to those taking part, is considered by the government.

As the Department for Culture Media and Sport will be aware, bridge is, at the time of writing, an activity which is treated differently by certain organisations. Despite recognition as a sport by some governmental organisations in the UK – for example the Charity Commission – others, such as Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs, choose to take a different course of action. Despite receiving full governmental support in some European countries, bridge does not receive such status in the UK. Despite being recognised as a sport by the International Olympic Committee, arguably the most august sporting organisation in the world, Sport England refuses to adopt a similar position (though this may change following the recent Judicial Review in to this).

The document, A New Strategy for Sport, which accompanies the invitation to respond to the consultation, highlights the confusion which seems to exist at administrative levels, and the inconsistency in both the government's position and the stances currently taken by some bodies. These issues will be duly addressed, along with examples as to why bridge should be considered a sport, and why its categorisation as such would be of benefit to the public.

We will conclude by requesting that the following specific action be taken following this consultation:

- That bridge, and other 'Mind Sports' (five activities in total, as recognised by the Sport Accord), be given full recognition as 'sports'.

The consultation specifically says "Participation in sport means different things to different people". To a large number of people "participation in sport" means 'playing bridge'. The paper talks about take a modern, inclusive approach to 'sport' – we hope that this means being more open-minded to embracing the activities which are played by so many people, and which offer great benefits to the participants, and to the public.

### **About bridge**

We hope that the reader is familiar with the basic premise of bridge, however if an overview of the game is needed please see here - <http://www.ebu.co.uk/about-bridge>

All the factors that contribute to make great champions in other sports are important in winning at bridge: concentration, accuracy, technique, stamina, resilience, memory, the ability to cope with time pressure, staying alert, remaining calm, willingness to learn and improve - but also a sense of fun, an ability to relax and also to laugh when things go wrong.

Bridge is a partnership game; you and your partner are as one in competition, working together. In some competitions, you may be grouped with other partnerships to form a team. Supportiveness, teamwork and willingness to do your homework together are all key elements in driving success.

## Addressing an inconsistency

The inconsistency which exists in the way that bridge is treated can find parallels in the inconsistency in how A New Strategy for Sport is written. We believe this is indicative of a system which is lacking in coherence and logic, which is trying to 'play catch-up' to correct its out-of-date approach, and which wishes to pay lip service to its goals, but not take actions to achieve them.

At no point in the document is 'sport' defined. This is despite the Charity Commission and Sport England – two government funded bodies – currently using different definitions for their own activities. How flawed, therefore, is a consultation on sport when there is no clear definition of what constitutes 'sport'?!

In fact, on twenty three occasions in A New Strategy for Sport the phrase "sport and physical recreation" is used – surely an acknowledgement that not all activities are covered by 'sport', and that not all 'sports' can be covered by the term 'physical recreation'. At times there is reference made to 'sport' being something in which you can "compete" – indeed John Whittingdale talks of "the very best thing about sport participation is the thrill of competition" – and yet Mr Whittingdale himself talks about zumba, which is certainly 'non-competitive'. At other times there are references to sports which improve the health of your heart or lungs, and yet the document also references archery (and likewise Sport England recognises as 'sports' snooker and billiards) which arguably contributes little to improving heart or lung health – indeed the Charity Commission includes archery, and billiards, pool and snooker, on their list of activities which **do not** meet the criteria for 'healthy recreation', and yet they are supported by Sport England. When a different view of 'health benefits' is taken, there is a failure to recognise the activities which give the greatest contribution to arguably the body's most important organ – i.e. the contribution made to the health of the brain by participating in mind sports.

Parliament last defined 'sport' in the most recent Charities Act, when it stated sport involved "physical or mental skill or exertion", however Sport England chooses to use a much older definition – one which is now over twenty years old.

The government therefore seems willing to pick and choose its definition to suit its purpose, and to cite examples when applicable only to the point it is making.

Bridge is not currently recognised as a sport in the UK, but yet offers the opportunity for "the thrill of competition", "health benefits" and "social good". It is played by young and old, healthy and disabled, men and women, all races, all economic and social backgrounds. And yet it is intentionally excluded from recognition and support by government bodies despite meeting as many – if not more – of the criteria which are used at different times to define 'sport'.

We hope that the government acknowledges that when the idea of 'sport' is such a grey area – as proven by its own document – it should no longer continue to be short-sighted, and out-dated in its approach to what it considers to be worth recognising and supporting. We hope it recognises that bridge should be welcomed as a sport.

## **Theme One: Participation**

It seems a little ironic that the government wants to increase the number of people participating in 'sport', and yet has previously tried to limit the number of activities which are recognised as 'sport'. It seems obvious, therefore, that what is included as 'sport', and therefore who is 'counted' as participating, should be widened to include those participating in bridge and other mind sports.

A New Strategy for Sport talks of sport being "for everyone". It doesn't matter what your gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, income, or health, you should be able to enjoy taking part". It also states that "Different sports will appeal to different people, and this diversity should be celebrated and encouraged". Including bridge as a sport would therefore not only 'boost the statistics', but would engage those who would otherwise not find a place within the sporting community – to reach those "who do not consider traditional sport is for them". Bridge welcomes all, and does not discriminate. It can be played by the elderly who may otherwise consider themselves too old or physically unable to engage in competitive activities. It can be played by the physically disabled who may not be able, or not willing to try, to participate in other games. It can be played by men and women on a 'level playing field'. It can be played by school children without fear of failure for being physically inferior, or socially excluded. We believe this diversity should be encouraged.

In the attached article, from our members' magazine, English Bridge, teacher Sarah O'Connor talks about the benefits of teaching bridge in her school. The children she has introduced to bridge may have otherwise been 'lost', with no means of engaging with each other in a social, yet competitive, environment. They found their place in the sporting set-up, and it was at the bridge table, rather than on a pitch, or track.

Bridge is cited by many older people as their primary source of social engagement and mental stimulation. At a time when social isolation and cognitive decline – often linked – are a significant source of concern to the health and social care sectors, bridge offers an ideal way to provide an activity to these groups which can help combat these issues. When questioned in Parliament about the status of bridge as a sport, Tracey Crouch acknowledged the benefits of bridge, saying "I recognise that many of these games (Mind Sports) are enjoyed by many people and that the mental agility required in this activity can help with conditions and bring many health and wellbeing benefits". She went on to suggest approaches be made to the Health and Education Departments, as though absolving the Department for Culture, Media and Sport of responsibility. This is surely the exact opposite of her mandate. She is responsible for encouraging the participation in activities which promote health and wellbeing – in her own foreword to this consultation she says sport is something which "makes you feel better". We believe she should therefore embrace bridge, and welcome the opportunity to include it as a sport, as it will help her department to achieve one of its primary purposes – to improve the health of the nation through participation in specific activities (see also Theme Two).

## **Theme Two: Department of Health**

In this section of A New Strategy for Sport, the Department for Health looks to address issues of poor health through physical activity. We believe this to be a rather short-sighted approach in that it does not include the wide range of health benefits which can originate from other, 'non-physical' pastimes. We are unaware that the Department for Health is seeking to include Mind Sports in its approach to combating mental health problems, such

as dementia. It therefore surely makes sense to include the benefits offered by bridge under the banner of 'sport'. This would fit with the idea of "joined up working" between government departments which is referenced in the consultation document, but is not apparent when it relates to Mind Sports.

Numerous studies, including a 2014 study by Schultz et al in Madison, Wisconsin (<http://www.brainmap.wisc.edu/system/pubfiles/153/original/SchultzLarsonEtal2014.pdf?1430171907>), have cited specific links between the playing of Mind Sports, including bridge, and improved cognitive function in later life.

In its submission to the Charity Commission, when successfully applying for charitable status, Hitchin Bridge Club received testimonials from numerous bridge players, who talked of playing bridge as a cause of improved, or maintained, mental health. This was linked to self-perceived ideas of emotions such as loneliness or boredom, factors which are no less important when maintaining the mental health of the country. The testimonials to Hitchin Bridge Club also referenced the club as being some of the respondent's primary source of social interaction, and of it providing a 'support network' for those in need of a degree of 'care'.

The Charity Commission approved Hitchin Bridge Club's application, and subsequently the application by the national charity English Bridge Education and Development, in part because it believed bridge to be a sport according to Parliament's definition, but also as it recognised the greater public benefit that was afforded to society through the health benefits brought about by playing bridge.

At present, bridge receives no government funding, despite the benefits of playing bridge being cited frequently by both participants and academics, and being recognised by the Charity Commission. Given the enormous cost to the Department of Health of dealing with cognitive decline, mental health problems such as loneliness and depression, and the need for 'care in the community', the English Bridge Union believes that recognising bridge as a sport, and enabling greater exposure to the 'free' health care that playing bridge offers, would be a financially prudent decision for the Government to make.

### **Theme Three: Department for Education**

We believe that the benefits to young people of playing bridge have been overlooked for too long. We would therefore welcome any opportunity to make bridge more accessible to those in full time education.

Of course we do not wish to detract from efforts to make our children more physically active, and recognise the health benefits that this would generate. We do believe, however, that the positive benefits of 'alternative sports' can be available in addition to more traditional, 'physical' sports.

For some people, who may prefer a more 'cerebral' pastime, or are less physically gifted, PE lessons can be the most unpleasant, demoralising part of their school experience. As a result they can become disengaged from such activities and miss out on some of the 'life skills' that playing games offers – teamwork, winning with grace, losing with dignity. Playing bridge offers an opportunity for these important skills to be learnt by those who may not have the opportunity, or inclination, to discover them on a pitch or court. As teacher Sarah O'Connor

explains in her article for English Bridge magazine (see attached), her pupils have gained invaluable life skills from playing bridge.

Teachers have also found that playing bridge has aided academic performance. Stuart Haring, a teacher at Haberdashers' Aske's Boys' School wrote in an article for English Bridge magazine (see attached) that "I have received comments that the better bridge players are significantly ahead of their peers of similar mathematical ability". He also noted more generally that bridge provides "transferable skills which can be used in their academic work as well as being useful life skills for use in the workplace." Bridge can therefore be used as part of maths classes, or as an after school or lunchtime activity, and need not be only part of PE lessons.

The English Bridge Union believes that bridge should therefore be adopted by both the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and Department for Education, as a sport, and an activity which can be made more readily available to school children.

The charity English Bridge Education and Development (EBED) is working to make available to schools and teachers the resources and knowledge which they need to successfully introduce bridge in to the classroom. They are supported by a national network of bridge teachers who can assist in introducing the game to a young audience. Both the EBU and EBED acknowledge that bridge may not be suitable for every school, and that not all teachers may have the skill, or inclination, to teach bridge, but it should be as valid an option to them as more 'traditional' sports.

#### **Theme Four: The Treasury**

Bridge currently receives no financial support from the government, or any funding bodies, with the exception of the small number of bridge-related charities recognised by the Charity Commission. This must make bridge a very rare example of an activity which is undertaken by hundreds of thousands of people, and yet is entirely funded by the participants, with no support from public funds. What must make the situation even rarer is that bridge is an activity with proven health benefits to the participants, and to society, and yet there is no public investment to encourage further participation.

The issue of whether participation in bridge should be exempt from VAT, on the basis of the European Union regulation which says that sports should be VAT-free, has been referred to the European Court. The English Bridge Union would hope, however, that HMRC would choose to implement this exemption of their own accord, and that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport would exert its influence to ensure that this happened. We believe that the intention of the exemption for sports is for it to be inclusive, and to enable greater participation in activities which are known to have benefits to the health of the participant – instead HMRC is choosing to implement the policy in a way which is both intentionally exclusive and inconsistent.

The English Bridge Union would also welcome a change in policy which would allow local bridge clubs to apply for funding from the National Lottery, and from local government, to help support their activities, and to develop their facilities. At present, bridge clubs find it very difficult to secure any form of funding, including from the private sector.

## **Theme Six: Elite & Professional Sport**

The consultation talks with pride of the success of England and the UK at an international level, and rightly supports the activities of the NGBs which produce the winners of medals and championships. Indeed, specific reference is made to success being “measured as much by the medals, trophies and championships we win as by the number of people that play”. The English Bridge Union therefore believes it seems contradictory that the sporting system in the UK will not recognise the contribution made to the sporting landscape by the elite bridge players in England.

Since 2008 England has won nine medals at World and European team events, and yet these teams are supported solely by the members of the English Bridge Union, and from the participants own pockets – some pay their own travel costs, others take unpaid holiday from their jobs to participate. As bridge is recognised as a sport by the International Olympic Committee, should elite bridge players not be considered for the same support as other athletes competing in IOC-recognised events?

We would welcome greater recognition of the performance of elite bridge players on the international stage.

## **Theme Eight: Fairness and Equality**

Caroline Dinéage writes, “Sport...can bring people of all ages, backgrounds and cultures together... Ensuring that the culture of sport is inclusive and diverse...is a goal worth fighting for”. We are pleased that she acknowledges that government has yet to establish a sporting environment in which this is true, as the exclusion of bridge from ‘sport’ is clear evidence that the decision makers are not taking an inclusive and diverse approach to their consideration of what should be supported. There is no greater example than bridge of an activity which can bring together all people. In almost all bridge competitions young people compete with, and against, old people. Men play with, and against, women. Different races and cultures mix, both as teammates and as opponents.

Whilst the government’s goal to increase physical activity is justified, there must also be a recognition that for some people this cannot, or will not, happen. For the elderly or disabled bridge clubs provide an ideal opportunity to be socially engaged, competitive (should they wish), and exert themselves – if only mentally; things which are all traits of ‘sport’. People who choose to participate in bridge should not be discriminated against by being kept out of the ‘sporting’ community just because bridge does not fit a preconceived and antiquated notion of what ‘sport’ should be. Ms Dinéage writes that “sport needs to do more to open itself up to the entire population”, and yet it is wilfully closing itself off to such groups by excluding bridge and other mind sports from being recognised as ‘sports’.

We believe the government should do more to encourage participation in an activity which is inclusive to all, and the first step would be heed their own words, and be “inclusive” in deciding what is ‘sport’ – they should recognise bridge and other mind sports. Only by doing so can we reach a “culture of fairness and equality”.

## **Theme Ten: International Influence and Major Sporting Events**

The English Bridge Union is one of the most important members of the European Bridge League and World Bridge Federation. Its competitions are widely recognised as some of the

world's best, and as well as providing for the large UK market they attract competitors from Europe and further afield. In November 2015 England is hosting the European Champions' Cup event, in which Europe's leading players will compete.

Bridge events therefore contribute to the nation's finances – by generating spending by 'tourists' in the UK – and also to the reputation of the UK as a leader in the deliverance of high quality sporting events. The English Bridge Union would welcome recognition and support from government bodies for its work in this area.

## **Summary**

Bridge is an activity which offers significant benefits, be they mental – for example the contribution that playing it may make to delaying the onset of dementia, and the improved academic performance amongst children who play; or social – for example helping older people to remain socially active and mentally stimulated, and helping children learn important skills, such as teamwork. These benefits are recognised by all areas of government, and yet very few – an exception being the Charity Commission – are willing to take any action to help those supporting and promoting bridge in England.

At present, governmental bodies are choosing to use as their defence the fact that bridge does not satisfy their definition of what constitutes a 'sport'. This is despite the fact that the last time Parliament passed legislation relating to sport it specifically included mind sports, stating in the most recent Charities Act that sport should involve "physical or mental skill or exertion". In addition the International Olympic Committee, possibly the most significant single sporting organisation in the world, and the organiser of the events around which so much of UK Sport's activities revolve, recognise bridge as a sport. The government's position is also at odds with the majority of members of the European Union.

We therefore call upon government to change their position, and recognise bridge, and other mind sports recognised by the IOC, as sports. If the new accreditation is limited only to the 'mind sports' which are currently recognised by Sport Accord then it will not 'open the floodgates' or lead to calls for 'parlour games' to be recognised. What it will do, is aid in the government's own agenda of increasing participation in meaningful, competitive activities which improve the health and wellbeing of the participant, and thus of society as a whole.

The English Bridge Union is not seeking this recognition for financial gain. It would simply like bridge to be recognised in a way which will enable the EBU to promote bridge more widely and make it available to a greater number of people.



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## School Bridge Rewards

**Sarah O'Connor is a teacher at St Paul's Girls' School, London; she was a successful junior player and is now the U15s squad leader (see page 38). She is also a member of the EBU team for the 2015 Lady Milne Trophy.**

WHEN first considering this article I asked my pupils what they like about bridge. Every one of them said that they loved the logical aspect of the game and, as a teacher, I can immediately see how useful it is for students to learn to think analytically and to articulate this analysis when discussing hands. The girls enjoy the fact that bridge becomes more and more complex as they learn more but that they can see the progress that they are making; they always feel that there is a new challenge but that the challenge can be met.

Playing bridge encourages students to think logically and gives them confidence that they can sit down and solve a difficult problem. They learn to focus on one task for an extended period of time and to remember cards that have been played, a skill that seems like magic when they first start to learn the rules of the game. Developing a skill that initially seemed so impressive further builds confidence and shows students that they are capable

of more than they previously thought. Further, the complex nature of the game teaches them that it is not always possible to be completely right and that there can often be more than one potential solution to a problem. I have seen my pupils' confidence grow and watched them become far more willing to have a go at challenging tasks or to venture an educated guess in class when they don't know an answer.

The other thing that pupils commonly mentioned is the social aspect of the game. Bridge is a hobby that young people can share with parents or grandparents but also a competitive game that they can beat their siblings at! My students have learnt to socialise with people in different year groups and from other schools and, when they start to play in clubs, they will learn to talk to adults, developing social skills and enjoying spending time with people they would not otherwise talk to. The bridge club also provides a welcoming environment for

students who find it harder to settle in socially.

Through playing bridge students don't 'just' learn a fun and sociable pastime. They also develop invaluable skills that benefit them away from the table, and make friends that they would never otherwise have met. I could not possibly overstate how much I have gained in terms of life skills, unique experiences and happy memories from learning bridge at school and it brings me a deep sense of satisfaction to see my own students starting to experience the very same benefits. □



*2015 EBED Schools Cup winners: Haberdashers' Aske's Boys School 'A': l-r, Jack Ronayne, Dylan Dissanayake, Jonathan Clark, Kripa Panchagnula. In the final they beat, by 23 IMPs, Queen Elizabeth Grammar School – Horncastle: Aaron Hutton, David Dichmont, Anna Hutton, James Burman.*

## HABS' Secrets of Success

**Haberdashers' Aske's Boys' School (HABS) in Elstree, north-west London, has one of the most successful school bridge clubs in England. Stuart Haring, a maths teacher and former pupil of the school who runs the club, talks to Simon Barb about bridge at HABS.**

**Stuart, you are a very strong bridge player. Is that a requisite for having a successful school club?**

Not at all. Of course, it is helpful if the teacher does understand the game but we're not trying to turn out champions. The boys gain so much simply from participating in an activity which teaches them the value of cooperation and gives them a real sense of achievement. We're all about building the child's self-esteem and competitive spirit.

**How many pupils at the school play bridge, and how do you recruit new players?**

There are over forty-five members at present, mostly aged from 14 to 18. The club is advertised and promoted, but I also ask the children directly to come along and try it. We play next to the canteen at lunchtime, so we are highly visible. This removes a lot of the mystery surrounding the game – anyone can wander in and watch. I (along with colleagues and former colleagues before me) encourage the boys to play and, like any activity in schools, enthusiasm and success allows the club to strengthen.

**How does bridge compete with other activities?**

There isn't a stigma about playing bridge. The boys applaud academic success amongst their peers, so they are not worried about appearing 'geeky' by going to a bridge club. And I coach the Under-14 rugby and cricket teams, so they can see that cerebral and physical pastimes can mix.

**How do you allow for the range of abilities that must exist in the club?**

One session a week is specifically aimed at beginners through mini-bridge. At other times, when there is an inter-house competition, or the Schools Cup, for example, priority is given to those playing in those competitions. We also have a longer after-school session where more teaching takes place. But mainly boys of different abilities play in

the same game and better players talk through their decisions with weaker ones to help them learn. It is not all 'teacher-led', and the resources are available to use every lunchtime, even without staff present, so they get lots of playing time. The boys just enjoy playing the game at whatever level they choose, and the social aspect that there is to bridge.

**You mentioned the Schools Cup. HABS has been particularly successful in recent years.**

Yes, the school has won the last six Schools Cups. We have also won the local Middlesex C league. Some of the team are involved in the England Junior Squad.

**What benefits have staff at the school noted?**

There have been numerous advantages. Alongside the social aspect that the boys have enjoyed, they have developed strategic and logical thinking, to plan ahead, choose which information to give, and also interpret the information they receive. These are transferable skills which can be used in their academic work as well as being useful life skills in the workplace. Specifically, I have received comments that the better bridge players are significantly ahead of their peers of similar mathematical ability when dealing with permutations, combinations, probability and conditional probability. The better players are also involved in teaching and setting problems for the newer players, which develops their leadership skills.

**How do you hope the club develops?**

We are hoping to have participants from the adjacent Haberdashers' Aske's School for Girls. With help from Andrew McIntosh, we have run events in a local bridge club involving other schools and groups in the area, including a 'kids' duplicate session to expose more to that form of the game. That is an area I would like to improve on to get more school children playing 'club bridge'. □



## Hitchin Bridge Club



### Members Comments on the Benefits of Playing Bridge

As you are aware I have a severe hearing problem. Whilst I am well supported at home there is no doubt that I had become socially isolated as a result. I decided to learn and play bridge purely because of my interest in card/mind games and because I believed that my hearing loss would not be too detrimental to my enjoyment of the activity. To my surprise and pleasure I have found that the social interaction involved has also been of great benefit to me. I have made some good friends at Hitchin bridge club with similar interests outside of bridge with whom I now socialise. My wife and I now play bridge socially with people that we were fortunate to meet on the bridge course. To anybody with a severe hearing loss a much improved social life is of great benefit.

I also believe that the activity of bridge in itself is of great benefit to me. A three hour session of duplicate bridge has forced me to concentrate and think hard over a long period of time. I found this difficult at first but I am sure that my concentration has improved as a result. As dementia runs in my family I can only draw the conclusion that this "mind workout" will be of benefit to my future health.

Finally, for me, the bridge club is not just about the activity of bridge. The club actually becomes a small community in itself which brings people together in a positive way.

C (this member is a very keen and talented cyclist and swimmer)

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A weekly gathering can be very important to those people who, for whatever reason, don't get the chance to spend quality time with other people.

For myself, I enjoy and value the mental stimulus of bridge, but have also met a great many people in different bridge venues throughout the West Midlands and now in and around Hitchin. Playing bridge is an easy way into a community which may otherwise seem very alien when moving to another part of the country. Thank you for your help in this.

Can I tell you about an old bridge partner of mine who lives in Sutton Coldfield. He is in his eighties and has a wife who contracted MS in her forties and has only recently had to go into a local home. He visits her everyday but is lonely at home. So... he has opened his house on Saturday afternoons to new bridge players (mainly old ladies) who need a bit more confidence before tackling the duplicate sessions at the local clubs. He provides bridge, tea and cakes and by all accounts a very convivial atmosphere. This generous gesture has changed their lives in the same way that bridge clubs can do throughout the country.

Then there's Margaret, who is 98 and still dresses up in all her finery to play in two clubs. Though not as adept as she used to be, she still maintains an impressive score. She has seen out two partners with dementia (who themselves were around 90) and now plays with her daughter-in-law.

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After a series of mid-life crises, including my parents' deaths, my husband's suffering from a life-threatening form of lymphoma, a major career crisis and my only child's leaving home, I was suffering from moderate depression.

I needed a new, absorbing interest to stimulate and entertain me, so I took bridge lessons at Hitchin Bridge Club from October 2010 to June 2011. I loved the challenge of learning something new, and have become a very enthusiastic - if not very talented - bridge player. As well as attending club sessions once or twice a week, I play social bridge almost every week with a couple whom I met in my bridge classes. They have become close friends of my husband and me: we have been on holiday together, and I have played at bridge clubs in France and England. I have made other good friends at Hitchin Bridge Club, and I thrive in the Club's friendly and informal atmosphere.

I can't imagine any other activity that would have enhanced my social, intellectual and psychological well-being as much as the experience of learning and playing bridge at Hitchin Bridge Club - it's a lot better for me, and cheaper for the State, than decades on Seroxat!

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Four years ago, I retired after an intensive forty year career in local government estates management. Whilst I am lucky enough to have friends and family around me, I suddenly found that life appeared to have stopped. The intensity and long hours of my work had precluded much in the way of hobbies, and I was aware that my mind was stagnating. It was at that point that it was suggested to me that I should learn how to play bridge. Hitchin Bridge Club gave me that opportunity, and whilst I am painfully aware of my limitations in the game, I find it highly stimulating and great fun, opening new doors and friendships to me.

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I was diagnosed with cancer in 2007 which meant reducing from full time to part time work before I was ready to. Taking up playing bridge after a gap of 15 years has given me the emotional support needed to cope with the cancer and move from full time work through part time to fully retired. As I now run bridge sessions and support bridge training sessions it has allowed me to use the skills I gained through working and gives me an active and stimulating retirement.

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Through learning and playing bridge I have kept my brains active in my old age and made many new friends. Learning to play bridge is an exciting and time consuming experience. I try so hard to remember the many conventions of bridge that I have little time to think about minor ailments.

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My husband died over 4 years ago of a brain tumour. While he was very ill I retired at the age of 60 to be with him and shortly afterwards he died leaving me feeling lonely and depressed. I decided to make some new friends and interests. One of the best things I did was to join the Hitchin Bridge Club where I learnt to play bridge and now attend the club once or twice a week. I have made lots of new friends and we play together in each other's houses and attend various charitable bridge afternoons in addition to club evenings to raise money for good causes. Bridge has been wonderful for me and I would love to see more interest and help in such mind sports from our local councils.

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I've greatly enjoyed the company and mental stimulation of playing bridge again while working away from home. It also keeps me out of the pub, which is perhaps more of a reflection on me, but one thing worth emphasising is that it is a relatively cheap occupation. In terms of the game itself, the combination of high skill levels, coupled with some luck encourages tolerance and a sense of humour in a way that (say) chess doesn't. Having played both games to a reasonable standard (I was a county first team chess player when younger), I know which is more relaxing. In terms of the benefits for the elderly, my grandmother died at 83 having taught me to play cards, first whist and then bridge, and remained mentally sharp until her final illness.

I (bridge and chess player of national standard in his 20's)

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Since retiring from business I managed to allay the loss of day to day contact with work colleagues by taking on the responsibility of Captain of my local golf club which provided me with the opportunity to use my management experience to keep the club abreast, and indeed ahead of, the current needs towards the social and physical benefits of playing golf. With advancing years my mobility started to suffer with the onset of arthritis in the knees and I started to look at other ways to maintain social interaction with people of a similar ilk and decided to take up duplicate bridge after many years playing the 'rubber bridge' version of the game. Since joining the Hitchin Bridge Club, both my wife and I have found that, the social and mental stimulus of playing this most enthralling game has given us an extra impetus to enjoy the latter years of our life. We have both found many new friends amongst the membership of the club and look forward to many years to come. Whilst there is a progressive attitude within government to tackle obesity by encouraging people to engage in some form of exercise to keep the pounds off and lead a healthier lifestyle, it should not be forgotten that mental as well as physical exercise are both equally important - particularly with the seeming increase in mental dementia. Lest we should forget, the much hackneyed phrase 'Use it or lose it' applies both to mental as well as physical activity.

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I get lots of people who start bridge classes to keep their minds active in retirement or to get out and about and socialise following the loss of a spouse etc. Bridge is clearly of great benefit for these people and should be recognised as a vital pastime for the older generation.

P (bridge teacher unconnected with the Hitchin Club)

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I am a widower aged 75. When I lost my wife fifteen years ago, I was quite lost because I had depended on her for our social life and I retired soon afterwards. But a friend told me to cheer up and join a bridge club (I had never heard of bridge clubs until then).

She was absolutely right – joining my local bridge club gave me immediate access to a rich social life based on a variety of new friends, some of whom have since become holiday companions (a major issue when you lose your spouse), and all of own are very supportive often well away from the Club.

For example, my poor eyesight prevents me from driving, but I am always offered a lift to bridge and even more important, to hospital by club members. One group of members regularly visits a lonely member with terminal cancer to cheer her up and provide a little social bridge.

Bridge, for me, has been a real godsend in overcoming the loneliness of widowhood- I just wish more people knew about it. Sadly, we don't get any recognition from the local council.

D (president of another Herts bridge club)

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When we downsized, having retired, we arrived not knowing anyone in the area and decided that it would be fun to be able to have a hobby that we could enjoy together. We saw an advert for the bridge club and we enrolled in the bridge classes never having played before. Since then and through the club we have made many friends and have seen the club go from strength to strength. Apart from the social aspect of the club we feel that our brains are given a much needed work out something we feel is vital to keeping old age at bay.

T & S

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I first came to the club and started lessons three years after my first husband died. I had looked after John at home for over 16 years since his first stroke and I had been rather tied to the house and so I was rather at a loss when he died – in other words my reason for living had been removed. I was encouraged to come to the club by a friend and this was just what I needed. It took me out of the house for a few hours and apart from saying 'good evening' I did not need to enter into deep conversation with anyone if I didn't wish to. I had people around me and I could focus on the bridge. I have made many friends since I joined and I would recommend bridge to anyone who was lonely or depressed.

R(this lady subsequently remarried another widowed bridge player)

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I am 67 years old and have been a very able and active sportsman all my life. While I am still a regular golfer my age means that I am now unable to participate in those sporting activities that were so much a part of my earlier life.

Recently I started playing bridge at the Hitchin Bridge Club and I now pretty well get the same enjoyment from bridge that I used to get when I was playing soccer, hockey, cricket, tennis, squash, badminton etc in my younger days. Just as I used to nervously look forward to playing those sports of my youth I now have that same feeling before my bridge night. I have a team member to play with and opposition to play against. I am able to plan with my partner a means to beat or defend against the opposition and then try to put those plans into action. I need to be flexible to vary my approach should something change during each game and I need to be quick in response to such demands. Of course those earlier sports required the thought process and the physical application, now it is the mind game and a different type of application.

Bridge and the other sports I mentioned have many similarities. Bridge is like golf, because it too enables me to play with and against players of vastly differing ages, abilities, from all walks of life and of both sexes. All bridge players are using the game as the medium for keeping their minds active while at the same time enjoying themselves in the company of others.

I would be the first to admit that I am not the best bridge player but I do my best and I still try to win. I always was a competitive being! Like my earlier sporting engagements though, it is not a win at all costs attitude, but it is just great to be involved in a pastime that gives me an opportunity to pit myself against others and at the end of the game it is still good to shake the hands of my opponents. I love it!

Merv. [\(a very talented sportsman and sports coach\)](#)