



ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ENGLISH BRIDGE UNION

1 September 2020 - 31 August 2021

The English Bridge Union is the governing body for duplicate bridge in England, representing communities of bridge players at club, county and national level, playing face-to-face and online. It is funded by members for members and provides the infrastructure and development of the game in England. It is a not-for-profit organisation and all surplus is invested in our national game.

This report reports on the work that we do to support our clubs, counties and members.

In addition to the dedicated team of staff led by Chief Executive, Gordon Rainsford, we would like to thank all the volunteers that make up our national team - the Directors of the Board and all the members of its committees. Volunteers are a particularly valued sector of our community and without them organised bridge at all levels would be unable to function

The five-year strategic aims document entitled "Raising our Game 2018-2023" was overtaken by events and set aside, since when we have concentrated on clarifying the services offered by, and the priorities of, the EBU in a world of online bridge alongside face-to-face bridge, developing a strategy for the period up to 2025.

The statutory annual report and accounts will be able to be viewed on our website www.ebu.co.uk shortly after the EBU's Annual General Meeting on 30th November 2021.

The Board

The Board is made up of eight directors elected by the shareholders, who are the representatives of our counties, and two further ones appointed by the Board, renewable annually, as well as an appointee director who was elected at the shareholders' behest to represent their interests, by a vote among our member clubs. That position is filled by Gayle Webb. The directors receive no remuneration for the work they undertake. They have legal and financial responsibilities as set out in the Companies Act 2006.

Each director takes responsibility for one or more aspects of the EBU's business. This responsibility includes budgetary control, delivering strategic objectives and regular reporting on the work of the department and committee associated with it. For the year 2020-21 the responsibilities were as follows:

Chairman: Ian Payn

Vice-Chairman: Gillian Fawcett

Treasurer: Jerry Cope

Board director responsibilities

Board Member	Responsibilities
Jerry Cope Treasurer	Financial Strategy; Staff Development; Editorial Board Chairman
Adrian Darnell	EBED; Education
Gillian Fawcett Vice-Chair	Selection & Internationals; Sponsorship & Fundraising
Cath Fox from Feb 2021	IT; Communications
Anthony Golding	County and club constitutions; Bye laws; Articles; Legal matters; Eastern CWG
Kiat Huang until Feb 2021	Technology; Executive Working Groups
Rob Lawy	Education; Volunteering; Competitions; South Western CWG
Ron Millet	Membership project; Awards; All Party Parliamentary Group; Mini Bridge Visits; Northern CWG
Ian Payn Chair	Tournaments and competitions Board member: Selection; L&E; Tournament Panel
Kay Preddy from Jan 2021	Finance; competitions; Communications
Bev Purvis until Jan 2021	Club Liaison; Legal matters
Patrick Shields	Future Strategic Plan; County Working Groups (CWG)
Gayle Webb from Jan 2021	Clubs and counties; communications; competitions

Finance

Financially, 2020/21 has been a volatile and difficult-to-predict year. That we showed a surplus of £18.6k against a small, budgeted deficit is therefore pleasing, and is due partly to success in providing online competitions for Members and Clubs, alongside tight cost control.

However, we should not let this headline figure disguise the seriousness of our underlying finances. We relied on, amongst other one-offs, over £100k of government support in various forms, halving our investment in bridge education, a temporary reduction in our fees to the WBF/EBF and a lack of face-to-face international events. 2021/22 has started reasonably as many of these factors continue for the first half-year but will now start to unwind. EBU organised competitions, face-to-face, will, with potentially lower attendances, do well to break even. So we will need to rely on the surplus achievable from running blue ribbon online events

and Universal Membership generally to underpin our finances. This in turn will support our Clubs flourishing in a tough environment and enable our services to Members to continue to improve.

Clubs and Club Services

At the start of the year all bridge was online, with a few different platforms for clubs to choose from. There was considerable interest from clubs in the option of using RealBridge for an experience closer to that of being face-to-face. The majority continued to play on BBO as that was what their members were used to. The CLO continued to be heavily involved in all aspects of helping clubs run their sessions online.

Once a return to face-to-face started to look possible two club restart seminars were held, these were well attended and well received. Clubs started to think about whether their membership wished to continue to play online, return to face-to-face or a mixture of the two. Hybrid games as a compromise option was one of the topics covered in the restart seminars.

The EBU held the Eastbourne congress face-to-face which was encouraging for clubs to see that it was possible to play bridge face-to-face and without overly restrictive precautions.

Some clubs restarted in July (and a few even earlier) but it has been a very gradual process as clubs explore what format of session makes sense for them. Heading now into winter it will be harder to attract players back to face-to-face sessions particularly in the evenings.

At the time of writing (9 November) 546 out of 625 affiliated clubs have submitted a session since 1 April 2020. Of those 546 clubs 200 were inactive throughout Covid but have submitted a session since the relaxation of restrictions in July.

The EBU is currently offering a trial affiliation offer so clubs that have not been affiliated since 2010 can affiliate but pay nothing until September 2022. This is a great offer and will hopefully work well to show the benefits of EBU affiliation to clubs which have previously been unaffiliated. It is early days, but a handful of unaffiliated clubs have already signed up.

To help players who have taken up the game during Covid and so have never played in a club setting EBED has designed a transition course for use by EBU clubs. The materials are being made freely available to affiliated clubs so the clubs can run courses in the way that most suits them. Again, this is a recent initiative but we have received a number of requests for the materials.

Membership Retention

These notes deal with the issue of retaining existing members as part of member recruitment and development.

It is obvious that as we come to terms with Covid, the EBU, Counties and Clubs will be facing a range of challenges. Reopening face-to-face, incorporating online play with traditional forms of Bridge and reviving recruitment & teaching are some of the obvious areas to tackle.

In the years before Covid struck we would acquire an average of 4,000 new members every year. Until 2019 that was just enough to keep pace with the annual losses through aging and retirement. There are now additional pressures: for at least a year very little recruitment has taken place. In addition, there is a growing tendency among newcomers to accentuate the social content of their Bridge activity and increasingly to regard it as just one of many alternative pastime activities.

The internet has been found to be a double-edged sword. It has made play and teaching more accessible. It has also meant that where, when and how to play have developed a whole range of new options. As has been remarked “clubs no longer have walls” or for some players they do not exist at all.

Much of this is a strategic threat but not everything. For example, in the last year we lost 5 clubs that used to meet face-to-face but we also gained 28 clubs that meet virtually. This will be a developing situation. Can we help more clubs from failing? Will we retain those virtual clubs in the coming years?

During the pandemic our membership held up quite well. It actually increased by 260 to 55545. As we all know the picture is not as simple as that. For nearly two years Tim Anderson, our Membership Development Officer has analysed the levels of Bridge played derived from the monthly UM figures. In recent months the number of active players has been remarkably stable. The figures for that part of this year are as follows:

March	20,702	May	20,003	July	19,586	Sept	24,943
April	20,239	June	18,930	August	21,834	Oct	26,162

This stability is to be welcomed. Yet despite the growth in the last 2 months the low level of numbers compared with total membership underlines the huge difficulty we face. This stark picture can be seen in the data attached to the end of the draft accounts to be submitted to the AGM. In 2019-20, our core regular and active players numbered 34,371. For the year just gone they have collapsed to less than half at 16,245.

Looked at from the position of UMO, (those who have never played for at least a year) we see a mirror of the situation for active players. Dormant players jumped from 9,159 in 2019 - 20 to 29,888 last year - an increase of 20,729: that was more than three times the previous year's figure.

At county and club levels there are significant variations with some doing quite well and a few threatened with disappearance. It also seems that some members are playing more frequently than when only club and congress play was available.

We all understand that these are the effects of the Pandemic. The figures will be distorted by some omissions, by movements between different categories and not least by EBU members playing outside their club on BBO, BCL etc. That makes the challenge we face complex as well as severe.

Apart from recruitment and membership growth as normally understood there is a new task which is the “reclaiming” of the 20,000+ who have not played on an EBU virtual club site for a year or more. The problem of dormant members is not new: it was recognised as a stubborn and growing problem as far back as 2015. Now it is a matter that is far more fundamental than just clubs reopening face-to-face and welcoming old members back.

We need work on retaining as many of our existing members as possible and there is serious work to be done to minimise these huge losses, so that the current levels of active membership are temporary and do not become permanent through dormant members not returning.

The EBU intends to be active in encouraging and advising counties in this work to re-energise clubs and their membership.

Executive Working Groups

The Technology Executive Working Group comprises Gordon Rainsford, Cath Fox and Kiat Huang, incorporating business and IT leadership. It has resulted in significant well managed strides in the use of Technology during and since Lockdown. It has introduced prioritisation, order and method, allowing sensible responses to demands for EBU IT resource. It can quickly organise and build solutions to requirements such as new on-line competitions including the Lockdown League. Significant cost savings have been achieved through negotiation with suppliers. Working with staff, including via face-to-face workshops held in Aylesbury this summer, a roadmap of improvements is being developed and delivered.

We would still be interested in forming a Marketing and a Commercial EWG if suitable volunteers were to be found – up to three people with appropriate experience to form each group.

Media coverage

Media coverage of duplicate bridge has increased slightly in the past year. Most coverage in the national press has continued to be through the regular bridge columns, with the occasional additional article.

There have been additional bridge articles in the national papers (both in print and online), in addition to the usual bridge columns. These have focused on the increase in bridge play online, for example in the Daily Telegraph, the Times and the Sunday Express. Janet de Botton wrote an article for the Spectator in June about the return of face-to-face bridge for the Premier League. There has also been increased regional news coverage, with articles and radio interviews on BBC radio 4, BBC radio York and BBC Radio Sheffield.

The high number of cheating cases made the news, with an article the Times. There was also media coverage about the European Bridge League's qualifying tournament for the 2021 World National Team Championship, in August, including the boycott of the Italian team. This story was covered as far afield as the New York Times website, the New Yorker.

Local news sites across the country covered some of the bridge clubs re-opening or open days. For example, Billericay BC, Stamford BC and Bury Athenaeum BC. The Summer Meeting returning to Eastbourne made the local news.

Overall online media coverage has remained similar to previous years. However, the type of coverage has shifted due to the increase in online play and the slow return of face-to-face bridge.

International Performances

With BBO considered unsuitable for trials and international representative events, the first such events since the start of the pandemic took place on RealBridge in December 2020. Our pairs trials for the Camrose and Teltscher Trophy proved popular, and our juniors performed respectably in the Channel Trophy, with the U16s (playing the inaugural event in that category) the pick of the bunch, pushing the winners, France, all the way. England were victorious in the Camrose, Lady Milne, Junior Camrose and Peggy Bayer.

With travelling all but impossible, 2021's major championships were cancelled, just as 2020's had been, but in August an unprecedented event was held – a European Qualifier for the 2022 World Bridge Team Championships, played on RealBridge, but with each country's players meeting at a central venue where they could be monitored by impartial observers. The arrangements worked well, and it wouldn't surprise me to see similar events take place in future. The event wasn't short of drama – it appeared in the national press as a result of a “controversial” selection by the Italians and the subsequent failure of all thirty of their opponents to turn up to play against them! Our Women's team recovered from a slow start to qualify for the Venice Cup and our Open team qualified for the Bermuda Bowl after gaining a huge net swing on the last board. Our Seniors narrowly missed out after they finished with an unlucky slam swing out, although they may still get an invite to the D'Orsi Bowl should not all teams be able to take their places.

One major responsibility for this year was to plan for the next “cycle” – the 2022 Europeans and 2023 World Championships. We decided to return to holding face-to-face trials (it is our policy that trials should replicate the conditions of the event itself where possible), but, based partly on the popularity of the pairs trials earlier in the year, we decided to use that approach in all categories.

As with the adult categories, the major junior championships were cancelled, so our U16 squad leader, Giorgio Provenza, organised the “Europa Trophy”, a de facto online Europeans. The England team finished third, having won the round-robin. Also worthy of note is the U26 team's semi-final appearance in Sweden's premier event, the Chairman's Cup.

Regulation

The Laws and Ethics Committee (L&E) is made up of seven elected individual members of the EBU and two appointed Board members. For most of the year the chairman has been Heather Dhondy. It is responsible for the regulation of the game in England.

It produces two annual publications, the White Book (primarily information and guidance for Tournament Directors) and the Blue Book (primarily information for players). Both publications are available free from the website. In addition, the Sky-Blue Book has provided regulations for online bridge to cover the interim period before they can be assimilated into the existing main regulations.

There is also a series of videos relating to The Laws of Duplicate Bridge (2017) and a group of forums for various English Bridge Union interests.

The L&E hears cases of both a technical and disciplinary nature. Appeals from tournaments are reviewed by the L&E so that they can offer advice and ensure the consistency of decisions. An annual booklet of the major decisions is published and is available electronically from the EBU website. Appeals are reviewed and comments published in the minutes of the L&E meetings.

The committee has been very taken up with the large number of cheating allegations brought to the it for investigation. The Online Ethics Investigation Group has undertaken extensive analysis of these allegations to prepare evidence for the L&E's prosecution panel.

A pro bono adviser, Joy Mayall, is available to anyone who is subject to disciplinary action by the L&E.

The committee provides advice on model disciplinary procedures for clubs and counties and has also produced a set of model regulations for League Competitions. In addition, the committee has produced a set of guidelines for disciplinary committees.

A panel of referees is appointed by the L&E who hear appeals at tournaments and act as telephone referees in knock out events.

Tournaments and Competitions

We had expected to be further along the path back to holding face-to-face congresses by now, but having run the Summer Meeting at Eastbourne to a small, though very appreciative audience, and seen the slow return of players to bricks-and-mortar clubs, the decision was taken to wait until the new year before trying to run any further such events, although all our trials for international events are running live. In the meantime, we are continuing to hold most of our events on RealBridge, which ensures they continue without the financial risk of trying to run them live too early. We hope the Easter Congress will provide us with an opportunity to run a large event to signal the return to something like our previous schedule of events.

We have a sub-group of board members who have been meeting regularly to consider all matters relating to the return to live bridge and its balance with online bridge, recognising that it is clearly here to stay. The group has been trying to develop a strategy that will allow both to co-exist without either having an unreasonable advantage over the other, and to consider which events are best suited to being run online.

We continue to run seven daily 12-board games on BBO, two of which are limited to less-experienced players. We expect to continue running these for as long as there is demand for them. As well as our regular daily Funbridge robot games programme and our daily 12-board robot game on BBO, we now also have a daily 12-board robot game on Funbridge, with a monthly ladder combining the results of the two 12-board robot games. We hope in this way to be providing a varied offering to suit the many different groups of players who comprise our membership.

Our new arrangements with *First for Bridge* (Arena travel) to take over from *Bridge Overseas* in running our overseas holidays and finding playing accommodation for us in England for our congresses and other competitions, were held back a great deal by the pandemic. However, they have made arrangements for us for some events that have taken place, such as the Crockfords finals, and in addition to our regular overseas congresses next year, the spring one in Malta and the autumn in Turkey, they will also be arranging a new river cruise for us in early summer, travelling through the Netherlands and Belgium .

Tournament Directors Development Group

The Tournament Directors Development Group (TDDG) is a subcommittee of the Board which deals with the development and management of the EBU's active tournament directors. It was chaired by Heather Dhondy for most of the year. There have been no new additions to the panel, but the explosion of online bridge has kept those of our TDs who have been involved in it very busy indeed, learning new skills as they have gone along.

Parliamentary Activity

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Bridge (APPG) continues to be chaired by Bob Blackman MP, with Baroness Henig acting as the primary point of contact for the EBU and the coordinator of the majority of the group's events. For the last 18 months, due to Covid-19, the group has not held any meetings.

The annual Lords v Commons match was organised by the EBU as usual, taking place on 28th October after a gap last year. After a very close first half, the Lords stormed ahead after the team break and beat the Commons convincingly to retain the trophy.

The County Working Groups (CWG)

Only one of the two County Working Groups mentioned last year continues to meet. There are about 16 counties who get involved in the Midlands CWG and (another 8 in the dormant Northern CWG), which means that a significant number of County Associations are missing out on the chance to confer with their peers. Meetings happen across the internet (using Zoom) and occur monthly for the MCWG and normally quarterly for the NCWG. Any County Association which would like to engage just has to ask. The minutes of meetings of both are found on the EBU website.

The key topics covered in the MCWG have been the experiences of online bridge, and of the transition back to face-to-face bridge. Over this year we have arranged visits to the group from Giorgio Provenza of EBED, Shireen Mohandes of RealBridge, and David Guild from the Yorkshire teaching initiative - to all of whom we are grateful for informative sessions. The MCWG also oversees the Midlands Counties League and has been organising restricted NGS Swiss Teams events bi-monthly through 2021.

The NCWG has not met during 2021 but intends to start up again in Spring 2022.

EBU Headquarters at Aylesbury

We now have a full-time staff equivalent of around twelve, a reduction of 20% over the last two years. They serve over 55000 members through the provision of tournaments, regulation, international support, club and membership support services including the Bridge Warehouse providing bridge books and supplies, and communications including Club Management Focus to affiliated clubs, and Events Focus to 'tournament players'.

We also support the charity English Bridge Education and Development, with whom we share offices and some administrative systems. EBED has a Chief Executive, Giorgio Provenza, as well as four part-time staff.

- **IT and Data matters**

This year saw the launch of our updated website, which was necessary because the Drupal 7 software on which it was based went out of support at the end of last year.

The EBU Tech Group, comprising Cath Fox, Kiat Huang, Tim Anderson, Harry Watson, Charlie Bucknell, Jonathan Lillycrop, have regular weekly virtual meetings and have been very active in rationalising our IT provision and checking our agreements for value for money. We expect Tim Anderson to be extending his time working for us to four days a week, with his extra hours devoted to IT.

- **Staff**

A number of our staff were on furlough after the scheme started in March 2020, but this is coming to an end and most are now back working their usual hours, though a number of them are working from home more than before. All staff have shown a willingness to be flexible and expand their roles in the light of the varying circumstances caused by the Covid pandemic.

Annual General Meeting and Shareholdings

The EBU is a company limited by shares. Our shareholders do not get any financial remuneration, their shareholdings and voting rights are based on the number of members their county has. This report will be presented to the shareholders for discussion at the Annual General Meeting on 30th November 2021.

For full details of our constitution and structure please see the EBU's Articles and Bye Laws available on the EBU's website, www.ebu.co.uk



Ian Payn
Chairman

For and on behalf of the Board of the English Bridge Union

Staff members and national volunteers 1 September 2020 – 31 August 2021

Details of the directors, committee members and staff can be found at <http://www.ebu.co.uk/biographies/ebu>. We are also grateful for the assistance of:

Honorary Counsel

David Ewart QC

Pro Bono Advisor

Joy Mayall

Disciplinary Panel (a committee drawn from this group hears and decides on cases that are prosecuted by the Prosecution Panel named below)

Sally Bugden, Brian Callaghan, Frances Connell, Jerry Cope, Jim Grant, John Hayton, Andy Hughes, Norman Inniss, Christopher Jago, Adrian la Chapelle, Liliias Lamont, Alan Mould, Kath Nelson, Paul Roberts, Paddy Seligman, Geoff Smith, Jeff Smith, John Williams, John Wilmott.

Prosecution Panel (members drawn from this group conduct prosecutions on behalf of the EBU)

David Bakhshi, Simon Cocheme, John Dean, Heather Dhondy, Jeremy Dhondy, Richard Fedrick, Tony Forrester, Mike Graham, Stephen Green, Mike Huggins, Simon Husband, Jane Jensen, Richard Johnson, Fiona Littlewood, Jim Mason, Shirley Pritchard, Neil Rosen, Tom Slater, Andrew Southwell, Nick Woolven.

Appendix A

EBU Pie Charts of income and expenditure 2020-21

	INCOME £k's	EXPENDITURE £k's
Membership, Nat Org, Admin	440.4	-539.6
English Bridge Magazine	28.1	-136.6
EBED *	24.4	-21.6
Comps, Licensing, MPs, Sims	394.6	-218.4
Internationals	10.9	-31.1
Bridge Warehouse	33.0	-49.4
Government Support	111.6	0
Laws & Ethics	0.0	-27.7
	1,043.0	-1,024.4

* English Bridge Education and Development Charity

