



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Hangouts conference call
on Thursday 7th May 2020 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Oxfordshire	Rob Procter (RP)
Herefordshire	Keith Stait (KS)	Suffolk	Malcolm Pryor (MP)
Lincolnshire	Kiat Huang (KH)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Dave Thomas (DT)
Nottinghamshire	Pravin Tailor (PT)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEM 1: Welcome & Previous Meeting's Minutes

1. The Google Hangouts technology worked well this week for everyone who got in but two tried and failed (Jim Parker and Ian Payn), and two had initial problems. It seems that an up to date browser (Chrome and Microsoft Edge have worked) is part of the requirement. All who haven't used Hangouts are strongly encouraged to ensure a successful test before the meeting.
2. The minutes of the previous meetings were approved for publication.

ITEM 2: EBU Central Activities

3. PS reported that the EBU Board was actively addressing the crisis, including two meetings this week. He highlighted that:
 - a. Financially the EBU, whose income is dominated by UMS, was only receiving a small fraction of its normal income and despite cutbacks and staff furloughs was eating into its cash reserves. The position needs to change before the year is over, and the Counties as shareholders need to be concerned.
 - b. With the EBU online games and ~60 Virtual Clubs now in operation there was some income, but there is a need for more VCs and we as CBAs need to be encouraging their adoption. Sponsorship of training of BBO TDs by EBU and/or by CBAs in support of that also needs to be considered.
 - c. The preparation of online teaching material is getting attention, reflecting both the unique opportunity of lockdown and the anticipated need for replacement club players in years to come. Plans are underway to allow teachers to easily share digital material.
 - d. A plan is being made to hold the May County Chairs Meeting online and one week later. Details will emerge soon. Concern about the viability of such a large meeting were raised.

ITEM 3: Round Robin on News/Plans/Problems

4. We started with **FD**'s busy week in **Northamptonshire** where there are now three clubs active online, and he was contacted in the past week by U3A bridge players asking for help. **FD** has five small learning groups now active, and is planning soon to stream them by ability and is looking for a new start date for more to join. Attempts to get other teachers active so far have fallen on deaf ears – they seem daunted by going online. EBED had no tutorial this week; any open discussion forum they might organise would be welcome.
5. For **Worcestershire MW** reported that unlike with others, most Worcestershire activity was on Bridge Club Live, the technology with which the county's driving force was more familiar, and County competitions are now going to happen on BCL. This leaves the county independent of the EBU, with no prospect of UMS payments and will bring more into question the Value Proposition of the EBU. **DT** commented that another option for the Midlands Counties League (discussed last week) was realigning the season to run February to November.
6. We continued with **KS** from **Herefordshire** who had now received 3 more replies to his request to clubs and has identified just under 90 online players in the county. He is now canvassing the County team now to check their status. He is working on teaching some newcomers in support of KH's initiative to get some useful advertising video footage – see the Google Docs [description here](#).
7. We moved on to **PT** from **Nottinghamshire**, who could tell us that the County committee had been considering how the MCL might proceed, and felt sure it would not be face to face; each team at a home venue with supervision might allay fears of cheating while allowing online play and social distancing. PT commented that the CBA lacked any BBO-trained TDs although two clubs had TDs with BBO permissions. He was encouraged to have NCBA sponsor BBO-TD training. He also asked about the meeting frequency we have adopted and was assured it was by popular demand (although, **PS** commented, if we get communications via Facebook working well, we might cut back).
8. Then **MT** from **Warwickshire** told us that Darren Evetts was continuing his sessions but at times getting onto BBO was a struggle and some had been rescheduled (evenings are now at 21.00 hrs, with noticeably smaller table numbers than before (eg 26 down to 7), just like Richmond). **MT** had spoken to Sam Punch about the Sociology of Bridge initiative; when quizzed **PS** expressed his scepticism about work in this field.
9. Next came **RP** from **Oxfordshire** telling us that 5 clubs in the county were now operating online and County Night was starting tonight – but throughout all these it was the top players (higher NGS) who were the most numerous. He recommended that the EBU mirror the Oxford BC approach of running a Gentle Duplicate (Cheltenham does this too). Four events for learners had originally been planned for this time of year, and it had now been decided to hold these online (starting 31 May) but RP's attempt to set this up as a club on BBO at which participants did not have to concern themselves with BBO \$ had been receiving conflicting advice which he had not yet resolved. He was advised that a number of clubs are running events without BBO \$ but are collecting revenue from the players offline, so it should be possible. He next raised the point that for people wanting to learn from scratch it was very confusing because EBED had not supplied a clear roadmap; others chipped in that there was no single way to play the game and that different people had different learning styles, so it is not a "one size fits all" world. Having a menu of options was suggested by a number of people. He finished by reporting how one sceptic of online bridge had been totally brought round when he was able to provide them with a video of bridge players playing on line, but socialising through video conferencing with refreshments in their hands at the same time.

10. Now **MP** reported from **Suffolk** where he felt they had been successful in attracting all standard of players to play online. Virtual Clubs continue to roll out (7 altogether including the three biggest and some examples of clubs merging for online games) and the county game had 21 tables last Sunday. The SCBA is expecting no face to face bridge this calendar year and is now planning to manage their county competitions online. Investigation is underway into how the main Suffolk Green Point event might transition to an online equivalent. The County AGM has to take place by June and they are planning now to run this online using Zoom (but might need the professional version of Zoom). He expressed concern about the current UMS rates when applied to online bridge, and PS commented that the EBU Board was conscious that this needed to be revisited.
11. From **Lincolnshire**, **KH** reported that many things reported last week were continuing, but there had been almost no take-up of Virtual Clubs in the county, and a number of clubs had totally shut down. He also reported that (as a private venture) he was engaged with other bridge playing software developers on the idea of an Open Source bridge engine that could be taken up by NBOs like the EBU as a non-profit making alternative to BBO and other commercial suppliers.
12. For **Gloucestershire** **PS** reported that Cheltenham BC was in the process of expanding its schedule of Virtual Club open sessions from 2 to 4, and was also running a Gentle Bridge session and was planning a Learner's Duplicate. He also reported that the county was organising a (NGS) 9-HIGH Swiss Pairs event, which would allow players from the smallest clubs get engaged in competitive online bridge.
13. Offline having failed to connect, Jim Parker reported that Derbyshire had run a very successful County night online and that DCBA has a thriving public Facebook group. They are also actively organising a friendly county game against Lincolnshire.

ITEM 4: GETTING EVERYONE ON BOARD

14. A few times the point arose that not all bridge players were currently engaged equally in the available online bridge. **FD** expressed concern that those not comfortable with the technology were being left behind. **KH** suggested we can categorise bridge players in the following boxes, and the support we need to give in different boxes needs to be different

Experienced in the game Comfortable with the technology	Inexperienced in the game Comfortable with the technology
Experienced in the game Uncomfortable with the technology	Inexperienced in the game Uncomfortable with the technology

Another factor to remember is that we as organisers are all experienced players which means our reactions to online bridge might not match that of the majority of our playing community.

ITEM 5: FACEBOOK

15. In the last few minutes we confirmed that the limited use of Facebook we already had up and running was proving useful, and that for any message we wish to impart we need to use all cost effective communications channels and Facebook does seem to be one of those – and is one that can reach communities we might otherwise miss.

ITEM 6: FUTURE PLANS

16. We confirmed we will meet again next week, same time, same place – feedback welcome but we intend to continue with Google Hangouts. The link will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES