



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 15th April at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Essex	Cath Fox (CF)	Somerset	Tony Russ (TR)
Derbyshire	Jim Parker (JP)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Lincolnshire	Kiat Huang (KH)	Wiltshire	Richard Gwyer (RG)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)		

Apologies: Rob Proctor (Oxfordshire), Malcolm Pryor (Suffolk), Keith Stait (Herefordshire)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 1st April meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

ITEM 3a: Experiences of Online Bridge

2. The first item mentioned was BBO's Video offering on which there was little news. **KH** suggested that those with a keen appetite for audio/video had already migrated to RealBridge. **PS** noted that many club players are expressing a preference for BBO; some of this is attributable to the busyness of the RB screen, some to greater familiarity with BBO. The availability of alternatives for communication in social games (eg WhatsApp) might also dampen the interest in BBO video.
3. In the other direction, **KT** reported that Oxford BC was experiencing a significant move away from BBO to RealBridge, and that on both platforms they were moving increasingly to playing directors. Many commented favourably on the positive attitude of RB's owners to continued development. **PS** reported that Cheltenham BC's latest run with the Andrew Robson lesson on RB saw the TD almost overwhelmed with the large number who turned up. **JF** confirmed that in Basingstoke these lessons had received a very positive reception.
4. Issues were reported about problems obtaining scores from BBO after an event had concluded. **PS** had seen this on a regular basis, and it is attributed to a blockage imposed by BBO on VEBU-run tournament results whenever a Simultaneous Pairs is happening, and there was possibly an issue with clock changes that amplified the problem. Scores have always been available the next day.
5. Comments were also made on the relatively poor support online Simultaneous Pairs events had been receiving recently; one factor postulated was the extra hassle which collecting a larger fee entailed (unless you were willing to let BBO cream off a chunk of the extra).

ITEM 3b: Returning to Face-to-Face Bridge

6. **PS** started by pointing out the recent additions on the EBU website, listing issues which need to be addressed in any re-opening. It was noted that Nicky Bainbridge's meeting was coming next week, and **KT** reported that Oxfordshire CBA was meeting with its clubs next week also to discuss re-opening.
7. **FD** made the suggestion that some small clubs were looking at playing bridge at a pub or a garden centre table (outside) as a first step; for those who have not been able to play online, playing bridge in any form is much more important than playing an organised duplicate session. He reported on discussions with U3A bridge groups, where they gather to deal and play, which avoids the need for movements and allows easier social distancing. Their groups may well restart more quickly than Duplicate Bridge clubs.
8. In response to a question from **TR**:
 - **KH** reported that Lincolnshire was looking to a restart with its physical AGM on 1st August, and LCBA had booked venues for events later in the year.
 - **JP** reported that Derbyshire CBA was intending to restart in September, following local clubs restarting in August.
 - **RG** reported that Wiltshire was hoping to resume in September.
 - **PS** reported an expectation that most Gloucestershire CBA games would remain online, perhaps with one in four being face-to-face, and on a timetable following the re-opening of Cheltenham BC.
 - **MT** reported that a survey of Warwickshire players with respect to three particular competitions had shown an online preference on all three.
9. There was a discussion of whether the EBU daily games would be competing with clubs as they return to face-to-face games; it was argued that if these games suited some players then it was right to continue them rather than to restrict choice. **PS** reported that the Competitions Strategy work at the EBU was confident that online bridge was here to stay, although the balance between that and face-to-face was not yet clear. **KH** suggested that market forces will determine the balance eventually.
10. **MW** suggested that personal liability of committee members of a club re-opening remained an outstanding issue.

ITEM 3c: The Future of Teaching

11. **FD** reported that in Northamptonshire teaching is continuing to be successful, and **PS** had heard from David Guild that the Yorkshire CBA venture on which we were briefed a month ago was continuing well, with 300+ students still engaged.
12. **JF** reported that he was working with a weekend teaching forum, in which the teachers were talking about pooling of online resources. He suggested that this group was making little use of the EBS material, preferring their own.

ITEM 3d: The Midlands Counties Online League

13. The first question asked was about who shall decide on the future of the MCOL and the suspended Midlands Counties League. It was quickly agreed that it was necessary for all the relevant County Associate Committees to agree on the way forward, and that the best way to reach something on which they could agree was to assign to a small group (of 4-5 people) from across the counties the task of preparing a detailed proposal. **MW** was encouraged to check on Paul Hammond's level of interest (as he has run the MCL for a number of years). All relevant counties are requested to research whether they are able to contribute to this group, and to report back at the next meeting.
14. It was agreed that making firms plans would be very difficult before the experience of the summer months. **MW** reported a survey had indicated a strong preference in Worcestershire for continuing to run cross-county games online.

ITEM 3e: The Midlands 9-High Swiss Teams

15. We had agreed to research the grade levels of those who had participated in the 8-high and 9-high events run over recent months, and the feedback from those who were able to suggested that at least a third of those participating would be eligible for an NGS-6-high event. A number of counties suggested that they could provide sufficient numbers of an NGS-6-high event, and we agreed to use that as the restriction for the next event on 19th June. **MT** mention that Myra Scott had collated some feedback from Warwickshire; offline we found that the key points were
- A mix of 9-high and more restricted events was appealing, and a forward timetable would help local event planners.
 - With varying patterns of play, some players' NGS rankings might not be a fair reflection of their current standard.
 - Keeping some regional element to these events is preferred, and will make it easier for counties to develop local face-to-face events in due course.
16. **MW** and Sue O'Hara had indicated a willingness to continue as the organising leads, and following a suggestion of sharing the experience, **GW** agreed to join them for the next run.
17. **PS** noted that there was nearly £500 profit made in the first two events and there was general support for the suggestion that, when appropriate, any surplus becomes a donation to EBED. We confirmed that the charge per team would remain unchanged next session.

ITEM 3f: Is the EBU calendar over-crowded, and might it get worse with online events?

18. **PS** started the discussion by pointing out that even before the pandemic, face-to-face events were struggling to keep numbers up and this will only get worse in the near future. Would a thinner calendar make the remaining face-to-face events more attractive? **MW** suggested that it was a balance between supply, demand and price – all of which are related. **FD** suggested that visibility of others' calendars was the key to a success. **KH** pointed out the success of recent collaborations as online bridge grew, and others wondered if/when competition between organisers might kick in.

19. There was some discussion about the pricing of online and face-to-face events. **GW** reported that the recent Wiltshire GP weekend had run with a charge about half of the charge of previous years. had nearly the same numbers and realised nearly the same profit. **PS** made the point that because online bridge is so cheap, there is a danger of cost-driven face-to-face events being very unpopular. Setting the correct relative pricing of online and face-to-face games is important, and is being thought through at the EBU at this time. It was suggested that high-priced face-to-face events will not be supported.

ITEM 4: Round-Robin from Counties

20. We did a quick round-robin. A number of counties had no changes to reports but we did learn that:

- In Northamptonshire: the biggest concern at the coming AGM is finding the right people for the next committee.
- From Warwickshire: MT asked about the Inter-County League Playoffs which have happened in July of previous years. It was noted that Ian Mitchell who had led the organising of these in the past has stepped back, and the Warwickshire CBA are going to take responsibility for this in the future. With only the Midlands active this year, these were expected to resume in 2022.
- From Worcestershire: MW reported that a number of recent surveys had shown a strong preference for online bridge. Clubs running online are playing significantly more bridge that they did before. There is uncertainty about whether the October congress will run online or face-to-face.
- From Suffolk (offline report): the county is very actively surveying players' attitudes, and it is worth looking at [what has been done in Stansfield BC](#).

ITEM 5: AOB and NEXT MEETING

21. A question was raised about "Master Point raiders" playing in remote clubs' online heats of Simultaneous Pairs. It was agreed that this was an issue for the clubs involved, who had the option to accept or not accept visitors to their events. There was a need/duty for organisers to ensure that the less experienced players they support are not intimidated by visitors.

22. We agreed the next meeting will be in two weeks' time, on Thursday 29th April. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES