



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 18th February at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Avon	Sue O'Hara (SO)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Essex	Cath Fox (CF)	Suffolk	Malcolm Pryor (MP)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Herefordshire	Keith Stait (KS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Warwickshire	Myra Scott (MS)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Oxfordshire	Rob Procter (RP)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)

Apologies: Kiat Huang (Lincolnshire), John Fairhurst (Hampshire) and Jim Parker (Derbyshire)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We welcomed Gayle Webb, who is the latest addition to the EBU Board, on the committee of Wiltshire CBA, and is secretary of Warminster Bridge Club. We approved the minutes from the 4th February meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

ITEM 3a: A new Bridge Calendar

2. **CF** noted that the issue of the lack of a sensible bridge calendar had been highlighted by a number of people and she gave us a limited demo of a new development on this front; this allows a cleaner display than its competitors and slick facilities for filtering the contents to suit the individual reader. There is a facility for pre-defined filters which can allow a bridge club to create its "home page" from the calendar, and another facility for pulling calendar entries out of a Bridgewebs site. This calendar will be a useful way of advertising events to people, and linking the calendar into EBED's youth and training programs is being researched.
3. The capability is still under development, and we look forward to seeing later iterations.

ITEM 3b: Experiences with Online Platforms

4. The main new topic on this front is the announcement of Pianola Play. Oxford BC is trialling this next week and **KT** offered to report back once that was done.
5. Some new capabilities have been announced for RealBridge – particularly around in-built delays to avoid immediate (rather than in tempo) bids and plays. Nobody present had yet experimented with these. **MP** asked about which modes of play were in use on RealBridge; **PS** reported that the Gloucestershire County league is running with screens and self-announcing, and Suffolk uses this for top-end events, but other reports suggested that alerting partner's bids in the face-to-face style dominated.

6. It was suggested that BBO is being seen as increasingly awkward for County Teams matches, and **PS** reported that misgivings about BBO's handling of Swiss Teams has also been documented.

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

7. We discussed the timescale for planning face-to-face events. **KT** reported that they were planning the Oxford Congress as online, but making some preparations in case face-to-face becomes a possibility. **MP** reported the Suffolk congress in September was expecting to be online. It is not clear how the turnout will be at congresses, as many of the relevant players have become heavy users of online facilities. The need was identified for a congress to have some attractive attribute (a Unique Selling Point).
8. **RP** asked about the feedback from recent County surveys about attitudes, suggesting that these were suggesting that competitive players were keener on online bridge, while social players were the group keener on returning to face-to-face. He asked whether we were considering running online cross-county games (possibly at multiple levels) in the future, and suggested that if we were doing this, it could take away a lot of the appetite that these players have for congresses. Should we be thinking this through now as we plan congresses and other events? Others agreed that a new structure of tournaments needs to be thought through. The question was asked – if we do inter-county games online, will there ever be an appetite for a face-to-face meeting of the players? **PS** highlighted the BCL approach from pre-lockdown of organising an annual physical get together for its online players, which was very successful.
9. There is a clear possibility of the supply of bridge events exceeding the demand, which argues for coordination amongst providers to avoid wastage and frustration. We need to develop a vision for how the tournament world might look post lockdown, and perhaps a process to develop this vision.
10. One issue to be addressed is the relevance of County BAs as bridge event organisers; **PS** noted the size of the gap between club and national events and the need for CBAs to fill the gap. He reported that looking at average NGS in games he could see – club duplicate was running at about 50-51% average NGS, and County games were running at 57-58% (and National was higher) which indicates quite a gap which club players have to jump in moving from club to tournament. People reported different experiences of the mix of player standard in the online events we are running – some with learners joining in more happily with experienced players and others (eg Suffolk) finding a higher standard county competition, when well-presented proves attractive to many.
11. **FD** highlighted the shorter length of online games, and the fact that this was appealing to a number of players, and we agreed that short games were here to stay. **PS** reported on the Cheltenham BC survey which found a small number looking for 24 boards rather than 18, but not enough to change the pattern. He also noted that the plans for the Master Pairs were 48 boards online in a single day, and that this was a heavy load for those players, discouraging some from entering. In Wiltshire **GW** reported that they have kept themselves to 20 board sessions (partly as more is too tiring, but also because more is more expensive on RealBridge).
12. **CF** reported that the appetite for face-to-face is still there, but rather than playing face-to-face three times a week, many might return to a once-a-week face-to-face game, while continuing to play online. **GW** reported on her contact with a bridge club in Canberra (Australia) which had closed and had gone back to full operation, but is running a lot of online games as well. Visits to the club are used to socialise, and the emphasis on daytime bridge has increased.

13. There are options for hybrid games which can bring the online and face-to-face audiences together – there are developments on Pianola Play and LoveBridge which offer possibilities here.

ITEM 3d: The Future of Teaching

14. There was little to report on this front, but **DB** did tell us of the experience of one club which had, by using personal contacts by members, generated a much bigger cohort of learners than they expected.

ITEM 3e: The Midlands Counties Online League

15. It had been noticed that the June date for this event coincides with the date of the Pachabo, and this might create a clash for a number of people. We agreed to move the June MCOL match back one week, to be on Sunday 20th June.

16. It was noted that the EBU has specified in the conditions for the Pachabo that the county champions from the 2019-20 season have preferred right of entry. Some counties had a champion for that season, while others were some distance from that.

ITEM 3f: The Midlands 8-High Swiss Teams

17. MW raised various questions about the next event on 30th March, and we agreed that

- We should be flexible in allowing non EBU members to play, the only restriction being that the standard of the team should not become too high.
- We would not encourage highly disparate NGS grades to pair up in this event, preferring to cater for the likes of student-teachers games elsewhere.
- We would raise the average NGS allowed in the this event to be NGS-9.

18. We confirmed that Sarah Amos will run the event on our behalf, and we would look to running an NGS-6-high event as the next in the series. Another possibility is running an event like this in two sections (**GW** reported that this has been done successfully in Wiltshire for Swiss Pairs). **PS** pointed out that when we restrict an entry, eg to 9-high, the turn-out is all very biased toward the top of the range, which further drives the requirement for 6-high in the future. **MS** urged that we do run a 9-high alongside any future 6-high offerings.

ITEM 3g: Seniors events

19. **PS** asked about the Seniors events – suggesting that these ruled out on a small proportion of the potential audience, and that it was odd to see these at the national level but not at county or club level. A few counties indicated that they did run such events, although one (club) instance of a Seniors Pairs was cancelled when they found out that 98% of the membership was eligible.

ITEM 4: Round-Robin from Counties

20. We received responses of “no change” from most counties, the exceptions being:

- Herefordshire : **KS** reported that the Midland Counties Bowl had been settled for Sunday 27th June and the relevant counties have all been contacted.

- Suffolk : **MP** reported that the SCBA had put some funds aside specifically to help any clubs in financial trouble on restart. **PC** reported that Staffs & Shrops had offered all clubs such help but there had been no take up yet.
- Wiltshire : **GW** reported that the county was busy – much busier than pre-lockdown.
- Oxfordshire : **KT** reported that the County BA was now beginning the thinking about planning the next year. Oxford BC have declined to run the Masters Pairs but are combining with Wallingford to support it.
- Leicestershire : **DB** reported how his club, to encourage participation by the beginners, have cut the number of boards and increased the time per board in one particular session. Others reported that relaxed sessions tended to be 8 minutes per board, and for Suffolk all events are 8 minutes per board.

21. And there was one offline update from Lincolnshire : Kiat reported that

- County players are enjoying the participation in the MCOL, which is being very well run in my view.
- There is more interest in online coaching of existing players, rather than teaching new players.
- Running events on RealBridge rather than BBO is increasing for teams across the county.
- About half the county members are still not playing online, though there is a trickle of converts.

ITEM 5: AOB and NEXT MEETING

22. **MW** raised a concern that we still lack a national effort in promoting the game, building on the value of recent newspaper articles. The topic also arose in the latest Nicky Bainbridge meeting, and the need for promotion of the game in the restart timetable is now recognised. As well as national publicity we need to look to how the membership can help and how local publicity can be generated. **PS** reported that Cheltenham BC was planning, as soon as it converts to be a CIO (any month now), to put effort into raising community awareness of the club.

23. We agreed the next meeting will be in two weeks' time, on Thursday 4th March. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES