



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 29th April at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Essex	Cath Fox (CF)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Derbyshire	Jim Parker (JP)	Suffolk	Malcolm Pryor (MP)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Wiltshire	Richard Gwyer (RG)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)		

Apologies: Sue O'Hara (Avon), Rob Proctor (Oxfordshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 15th April meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

ITEM 3a: Experiences of Online Bridge

2. **PS** explained the model for online games which Oliver Cowan described in a seminar earlier today ([seminar recording here](#)). The key features of the service he offers are:
 - Arrangements for playing the same deals online and in the club premises. Online can be BBO and RealBridge (often both simultaneously).
 - Clubs combine their online presences, thereby ensuring a critical mass for that. Combinations of clubs will be decided on the basis of compatible timing (a necessity) and location (stronger sense of community, meeting people you might know).
 - Each section (online or face-to-face) gets processed independently for Master Points and for NGS rankings.
 - Scores across all sections are visible, and can provide a learning vehicle through which novice players can see how better players handled the same hands.
 - There is a fixed charge per online table for providing this service.

It was agreed that this would be attractive to small clubs.

3. **PS** asked whether anyone had been thinking about whether clubs should – in the future – run online games at the same time as face-to-face games, or at different times. The former means that both are competing for the attention of the same members, while the latter has the danger of creating two distinct communities.

4. [Offline] Sue O'Hara reported that Bristol BC is in the process of moving all its online sessions from BBO to RealBridge.

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

5. **MP** raised the issue of club insurance policies on which the EBU had recently written to clubs. Two points emerged from the discussion which followed:
 - The position on liability of club (and county) officials has become unclear; the insurance broker is working on restoring the earlier position, and we should expect to hear more in the next week. [LATER: the insurance broker has secured cover with another insurer for clubs and it is anticipated that counties will be similarly covered, subject to clarification of some minor details].
 - For some counties [this communication](#) to clubs was not visible. It was suggested that all club communications should be visible for CBAs, to enable them to sensibly respond to questions. [LATER: this should happen; a back-up is available to this through a link on the [EBU website minutes page](#) to an archive of email broadcasts]
6. The uncertainty over players' choices when face-to-face bridge becomes possible again was discussed. A number of clubs have been initiating surveys to identify better players' intentions, and this was confirming the uncertainty raised. It was suggested that sharing survey questions would be useful. **PS** agreed to put together a list of known surveys that we can all consult. [LATER: [first cut here](#), contributions welcome]. **CF** suggested it might be important to warn people being surveyed that the results might be shared with others, and **PS** warned about the unreliability of people's assessment of their own intentions, and of the danger of 'survey fatigue' if we do ask the same questions repeatedly.

ITEM 3c: The Future of Teaching

7. **FD** confirmed that teaching was continuing in Northamptonshire, with sizeable interest coming from the U3A communities (who had seen better bridge played online?) for improvers lessons. He commented that currently it was very difficult to interest players in teaching online, a situation which it is hoped would improve once face-to-face teaching becomes possible. Teaching in Derbyshire continues but with only 4 students per group.
8. **DB** commented on how attractive RealBridge now is for teaching, noting in particular the ability of the Director at a table to talk to (and he heard by) just one of the players at the table. **GW** commented how well RealBridge worked for Supervised Play, and offered the chance to see this to anyone who wanted to turn up at the Warminster BC Monday morning session.

ITEM 3d: The Midlands Counties Online League

9. It was agreed that **PS**, **JP** and Richard Jephcott (from Worcestershire) would form a task team to generate a proposal for how the MCL/MCOL should proceed during the next season, and offer this for ratification to the committees of the counties involved. A number of those present voiced the suggestion that it might well stay online for the next year.

10. **PS** asked about the appetite for the traditional play-offs between the winners or inter-county leagues. The Northern League is a summer event which did not run in 2020 but is planned for July-October 2021 (online, RealBridge). The Metropolitan Cup (the qualifier for the South-East) took place on 29th November 2020. [LATER: it was confirmed that the South-Western League had also completed]. We agreed that with two seasons incomplete the MCL was not ready to consider play-offs. We noted that we had all become much more comfortable with online inter-county games since we last discussed the completion of the 2019-2020 season; we agreed that the target date for the one outstanding match would be July and we would decide in early June whether it should take place online or face-to-face.

ITEM 4: Round-Robin from Counties

11. We did a quick round-robin; a few counties had no changes to report but we did learn that:

- From Avon: [offline report] Bristol BC is planning to open the club for some face to face sessions from 21st June but will continue some online sessions.
- From Derbyshire: **JP** noted that Derbyshire's qualified club for the Garden Cities declined to enter, the main reason being that there is a MCOL round on following day.
- From Essex: Mid-Essex Bridge Club intends to open F2F on 21st June. Chelmsford Bridge Club has changed annual subscription to £2 per year whilst on-line and is considering going back next Spring but reviewing every quarter.
- From Hampshire: **JF** reported that a recently added session had proved a flop, suggesting perhaps that people are getting busier. Running sessions in the morning is now under consideration. A brainstorming is being planned on the topic of education, looking particularly at what happens to newcomers after a course of lessons completes.
- From Leicestershire: **DB** reported that there are three clubs teaching, and a student's competition is being planned. The greatest concern is clubs which have been totally dormant for the past year.
- In Northamptonshire: there was a suggestion of the Kettering club running drop-in sessions as a means to introduce new people to the club.
- In Oxfordshire: the county held a meeting for club representatives. No one had clear plans for returning. They thought the most useful thing that the county could do at present is create a forum for sharing experiences. Significantly, there were no volunteers to help with anything.
- From Staffs & Shrops: **PC** reported record numbers at the recent (Telford) congress and postulated that the lower price was encouraging participation. When asked about whether such events might be restricted to locals, the answer in this case was no.
- From Warwickshire: **MT** noted that some clubs' projections of returning to face-to-face bridge were very different, and he asked how clubs were handling annual subscriptions in the current climate. **PS** reported that Cheltenham offered deferred payment to those not playing online. **KT** pointed out the need for clubs to be transparent with their members in explaining their approach during the pandemic.
- From Wiltshire: **RG** expressed an interest in the county joining the Midlands Counties League.

- From Worcestershire: **MW** commented on something of a drift to RealBridge and noted that for many who had taken it up at the start of the pandemic, the renewal of BCL subscriptions were coming and might test their commitment to that platform.

ITEM 5: AOB and NEXT MEETING

12. We agreed the next meeting will be in three weeks' time, on Thursday 20th May. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES