



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 5th August at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Derbyshire	Jim Parker (JP)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Essex	Cath Fox (CF)	Warwickshire	Myra Scott (MS)
Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Wiltshire	Gayle Webb (GW)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Wiltshire	Lucy Cross (LC)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)		

Apologies: Fred Davis (Northamptonshire), Mark Goddard (Nottinghamshire), Rob Procter & Kathy Taylor (Oxfordshire), Malcolm Pryor (Suffolk), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), Mike Thorley (Warwickshire), Mike Vetch (Worcestershire)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 8th July meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website. Lucy Cross, who has recently become Chair of the Wiltshire CBA, was welcomed as a new face. We noted that the Lincolnshire representative (although not present) was now Glynn Elwick.

ITEM 3: Experiences of Online Bridge

2. In response to a question, there was little real-life experience with hybrid events reported except (**CF** told us) that Upminster is now on week three of trying Hybrid Sessions. **PS** suggested we need to be thoughtful about when we run such events, highlighting as possible reasons for going to the extra effort being:
 - It helps to build and/or maintain a sense of one community across the players in the two contexts. The sense of community is important as it is from this that we get the volunteers vital to organise the games.
 - Running events for one group or the other will lack a critical mass to give people meaningful results. Here scoring across a larger field gives a more respected result.
 - It is important from a competitive perspective to have results across the field; this might be true if there is a single trophy to be assigned and we want to give both groups of players the chance to win.
 - For a competition spread over time, conditions might favour online during some months and face-to-face during others. The hybrid approach might give the flexibility needed to cope with that.

3. Looking at the other side, we identified potential problems with hybrids
 - The presence of online providing too attractive an option, cutting the face-to-face numbers below a viable turnout (to cover the cost of the venue).
 - The danger of the field splitting into two different standards of play.
4. **JF** noted that there were clubs combining together to give their online sessions a critical mass, while they return to face-to-face.

ITEM 4: Returning to Face-to-Face Bridge

5. In general reports of the return to face-to-face were of lower than expected numbers, but not always - as **JF** reported, it was a wonderful experience as at Basingstoke BC for some people to meet for the first time in months, and for BBC the turnout was twice the number attending the online game it replaced. Low numbers are attributed in part to a cautious clientele, partly to the fact of a lull in summer, and partly to players getting out of the habit.
6. **PC** asked about policy on vaccination; it was identified that as well as for protection, this was in support of player confidence. A number of clubs were asking people not to attend if not vaccinated, but checking this and protecting such information is a minefield. The EBU has not expressed any requirement for the Eastbourne Summer Meeting.
7. **JP** reported the plans of Derbyshire CBA – to start with three social evenings at which there would be some duplicate bridge but the emphasis was on building player confidence through rubber bridge or teams games, back in the club. DCBA plans to start its programme in September and to cease running online games when it does so. Planning the DCBA calendar has been difficult, one issue being a reluctance of players to commit to series of teams games, particularly team-of-8 leagues. The calendar will therefore start with an emphasis on Pairs, but there will be some team-of-4 games, for which playing online will remain an option.
8. **PS** announced that Gloucestershire was working with only a 4-month planning horizon, as much might change before the end of the year and affect plans for 2022.
9. It was noted that clubs have to identify the appropriate balance for their community between face-to-face and online games. There is an expectation that the best balance might also vary with the seasons. There is also an expectation that for face-to-face the emphasis will be afternoon games, and for evening games the emphasis will be online.

ITEM 5: The Future of Teaching

10. **PS** reported that initial results from the recent EBU survey of teaching capacity in clubs showed that
 - Roughly one third of clubs had nobody to whom to direct beginners who wished to learn.
 - Roughly one half of clubs did not run any Assisted Play or Novices sessions.
 - The most frequently requested areas for help in generating more bridge players were – in order – running promotions (59), running online courses (49) and training more teachers (19).

The group who initiated the survey meet this afternoon to consider the next steps.

11. A number of those present reported that very little teaching had happened in the past 16 months, and some counties were waiting until face-to-face games were re-established before tackling this issues. Others reported that online teaching had been happening at a rate commensurate with previous face-to-face learning.
12. **CF** noted that the opportunities presented by online learning are a positive asset, and that many have found the transition from classroom to clubroom to be easier online than it ever was face-to-face. It was noted that where learners start online, there was a danger of them not transitioning to become club players. **MW** reported on active club participation being successful in avoiding that; the key is building a sense of community.
13. **IS** reported on one discussion at the BAMSA conference where incredulity was expressed at the idea (which is fairly common in this country) of taking two years of learning before being fit to play at a bridge club. A much faster entry path is needed of which the EBED Fast Track is one option. (LATER: [this free course](#) starting on 10th August is advertised as just 4 lessons and 4 practice sessions to cover all the basics and has great reviews).
14. **LC** reported that in Wiltshire only improvers have received lessons during the pandemic, but the plan is to start some beginners face-to-face shortly, and then move their lessons to be online.

ITEM 6: The Midlands Counties Online League

15. The proposal for how this runs in 2021-2022 had been circulated, and all counties present were comfortable with the proposal. The only discomfort, which the relevant counties were willing to live with, was the consequences of lack of experience with RealBridge. Nottinghamshire and Oxfordshire have also confirmed their satisfaction. The announcement, with the latest dates (second Sunday except for November and January), will go out with these minutes.
16. **MW** asked if it was worthwhile generating our MCL standard movement as a configuration file for RealBridge, that all matches could use. **PS** agreed to make an attempt at that and to get any such attempt reviewed by the authorities at RealBridge.

ITEM 7: The Midlands Counties Restricted Swiss Teams

17. **MW** asked whether we were “eating the EBU’s lunch” in organising these games when they could be run nationally, but we agreed that the sense of representing your county and of a bounded number of counties participating made it much easier for many inexperienced players to sign up, than would be the case with a faceless national event. We then confirmed our earlier proposal to run these events in September, November, January and March and that the sequence would be (in NGS terms) 9-high, 6-high, 9-high, and 6-high. Previous arrangements for advertising via counties would stand, and **MW** will act as liaison with Sarah Amos to arrange management of these games.
18. We agreed we would timetable these games for the afternoon of the fourth Saturday of the relevant months.
19. **MW** agreed to investigate with Sarah Amos alternative ways of collecting entry fees, as use of her website facilities might save counties effort.

ITEM 8: Round-Robin from Counties

20. The following inputs were received by email (in advance) of the meeting

- Herefordshire from Keith Stait: in Herefordshire 2 of the 9 affiliated clubs have re-opened for Face to Face bridge. Initial numbers are 40% - 70% of pre-pandemic levels. A further four clubs plan to consider re-opening at their next committee meetings.
- Suffolk from Malcolm Pryor:
 - i. A meeting was held in July for the twenty Suffolk Affiliated Clubs to review the findings of the survey of Suffolk members, to review the proposed mix of F2F and on line for both county and club sessions, to review the timing of the return to F2F at club level and related issues, and to review other issues including teaching and bridge for new players. The meeting was extremely constructive with a strong spirit of working together on shared issues
 - ii. Two clubs have shared the risk assessment forms they have developed. Two clubs have subsequently returned to F2F, with others actively reviewing options with their members. The two that are playing F2F are getting less than 50% of their usual number of tables, as many of their members remain cautious. Two of the larger clubs intend to operate hybrid arrangements, with simultaneous F2F and on line sessions being run using the same hands, with merged results.
 - iii. At county level for next season Pachabo and Garden Cities qualifying events will be played on line, the Corwen qualifying events F2F. The flagship County Congress (aka Felixstowe) will be run online in October, but in future years will be run F2F. Of the other competitions in the calendar some will be F2F, some will be online and two may be hybrid. The first F2F event is planned for November 2021.
 - iv. One club has decided to fold. Attendance pre-Covid was already low and there is now insufficient interest in restarting.
 - v. The member survey was primarily directed towards understanding member preferences on the future mix of F2F and on line for county competitions, however some additional statistics of interest were gathered from those who responded (c. 30% of members): 79% play on line, of these 92% expect to continue to play on line as well as F2F; 41% expect to play more on line than F2F; 33% expect seasonal variance in their mix of F2F and on line bridge.
 - vi. Several clubs are extremely active in running sessions for relatively inexperienced players, including hosting / mentoring, and post-game de-briefs.
- Warwickshire from Mike Thorley: several of the County's clubs have returned to face-to-face (F2F) sessions: however several, notably those playing in multi-user venues, seem to be targeting a restart in September. The Warwickshire Pairs League Online (WPLO) is moving from BBO to RealBridge because the latter enables the event to be run using conventional Swiss Pairs arrangements.

- Warwickshire uses a County Constitution based on the EBU model. Although the Conduct Committee and/or Disciplinary Committee is rarely called into action, situations can arise where the operation of such a Committee is hampered by anomalous circumstances: for example, the resident Chair may be unavailable due to their absence or necessary recusal due to a conflict of interest or other involvement. WCBA has drafted a framework for their Conduct Committee Process to assist with the smooth running of the Committee's operation, which includes a flowchart designed to clarify in detail procedures to be followed. This will be reviewed shortly by a legal expert prior to Executive Committee approval. Once this is complete would any other Counties be interested in sharing this documentation?
- Worcestershire from Mike Vetch: Worcester BC have started again with alternating Tuesday afternoons and Wednesday evenings (50% of the usual number of sessions); limited table numbers are allowed, various control measures including some which are optional are implemented; by next Wednesday there will have been 45+ members at one or more sessions (from a theoretical 150 on the books but that includes some who live abroad, or North of the Wall, so working/regular membership is approx. 100); many others holding back, so WBC is continuing to run its online offering. Also starting with face-to-face are Malvern and Ridgeway plus one or two non-affiliates.

21. From those present at the meeting extra information emerged as follows -

- Staffs & Shrops: The Edgar Foster Cup is being hosted (online) by SCBA on 19th September. Relevant counties have been invited.
- Essex: CF reported that the First Class Bridge Academy in Billericay is hosting a [holiday club](#) for 8-18 year olds, once a week in August, and has 19 participants following the taster session last Saturday. Advertising was done through county and club website, emails to club members, and postings on lots of Facebook groups; word-of-mouth was the most successful path.
- Derbyshire: JF reported that a face-to-face AGM for the County Association is planned for November.

ITEM 9: AOB and NEXT MEETING

22. Mike Thorley had asked offline about the perception of a drop in the number of cases of online cheating which were being reported. It was suggested that the earlier peak had arisen because of a large backlog from the start of lockdown. There was no change in EBU policy to report.

23. **MW** asked about the introduction proposed by the EBU recently of a restriction on the Green Point allocations allowed to County Associations. **PS** agreed that the introduction was a little abrupt, and reported that the EBU Board were considering allowing waivers (ie two online Green Point days) for cases where it was clearly impossible for one of the days to be face-to-face.

24. We agreed that the next meeting will be in four weeks' time, on Thursday 2nd September. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES