



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 7th October at 10.30am

PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Oxfordshire	Rob Procter (RP)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Somerset	Tony Russ (TR)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)	Suffolk	Malcolm Pryor (MP)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)	Worcestershire	Mike Vetch (MV)

Apologies: Ian Sidgwick (Gloucestershire), Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Lucy Cross (Wiltshire), Mike Thorley (Warwickshire), Richard Gwyer (Wiltshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 2nd September meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website. We welcomed Rodney Mitchell representing Lincolnshire.

ITEM 3: New Experiences with Online Bridge

2. We confirmed that for the past year+ we have been stable in making serious use of three online platforms – BBO, BCL and RealBridge – but had not worked with the others. More than one county present reported that a surprising amount of random/social bridge is taking place on these platforms. Oxford BC has been successful in running live and online at the same time using the same boards, although there have been reports elsewhere of this hurting both games.
3. **MP** confirmed that in Suffolk there remained a considerable appetite for online games, with the County League running now with only one team fewer than in 2020. TR reported “massive turnout” for online games in Somerset.
4. It was noted that there are three communities – those who play only online, those who play only live, and those who like to play both – and that the last of these groups is the largest. **PS** argued that both live bridge and online bridge were equally important and needed to be supported. **RP** bemoaned the fact that Championship events were still focused on live bridge, and there were few online Championships. **MW** made the point that it was important to give younger players the choice of which form of the game to focus upon.

ITEM 4: Experience of the return to Face-to-Face Bridge

5. The return to live bridge is continuing, and to some the attendance of 25-50% of pre-Covid numbers is disappointing. One exception to this is U3A groups of which a number are reporting much higher attendances.

6. **MV** reported in Worcestershire that a session which alternated weekly between live and online was proving viable. He told us that Malvern BC had never played online but had now returned to live bridge – starting earlier in the evening than before.
7. **DB** suggested that a host system was important in fostering a return to live bridge, as some people had lost their partners over the past year or two. **MV**, in handling pre-booked events, had got involved in some partner finding for similar reasons.
8. **RP** reported on a perception of different levels of care being taken at different clubs, noting that Stoke Mandeville BC had managed 18 tables at a recent event, which meant a dense packing of players. At a number of clubs the need for improved ventilation has led to complaints about cold in the playing room; we can only expect that to get worse! The extent of use of masks varies considerably across the country.
9. **PS** asked about County activity with live bridge and while a number of counties had none to report, there was a little in Suffolk; Gloucestershire had its first live game last week with attendance about half of that in previous years. Somerset has cancelled three proposed live games for lack of interest – but the Weston Congress coming next weekend is looking good with over 30 tables on both Saturday and Sunday.
10. It was agreed that very small clubs would struggle to re-open and we should expect a number of such clubs to fold. What is important is that the players are given other opportunities to play.
11. There was a small discussion about the status of the two forms of the game – and the consensus was that both forms are vital and need to be supported, and some people will have a preference for one over the other but others will welcome a mix of both. **MW** reminded us that we have to allow people the choice and we should not expect to be able to manipulate their preferences; more important than competition between different forms of bridge is competition with other activities. It is, however, true that club players tend to focus more on the social aspects and live bridge supports this better, while more competitive players benefit a lot from the availability of serious competition and of analytical tools for the online game.

ITEM 4: The Future of Teaching

12. There has been a restart of face-to-face teaching and this has been welcomed by students. The fact of online bridge – which comes with the ability to practice whenever it suits – is now a key part of learning, even when done face-to-face.
13. The model suggested by the EBU in a recent broadcast to counties – wherein clubs recruit newcomers and run Assisted Play sessions but EBED provided online teaching – was deemed quite attractive. Recruiting has traditionally depended primarily on word-of-mouth, which is less effective in a socially distancing world.
14. **MW** reported that in Worcestershire clubs have been rewarded for their efforts to bring learners into the club environment and have seen the majority of learners transition into playing regularly in club sessions, initially online but increasingly now face to face. WCBA has been less successful, however, in attracting new learners and this is an area of concern. The latest EBED proposals are welcome in this regard.
15. **FD** lavished praise on the performance of No Fear Bridge during the pandemic, saying that many students had found the website and all its exercises ideal.

ITEM 5: The Midlands Counties Online League

16. **PS** asked for feedback from the first round, for which three matches were held on RealBridge, and one on BBO. We heard that

- Some were finding screens uncomfortable to work with; **PS** suggested this might be unfamiliarity and **MP** reported that while Suffolk were very keen on them, other counties in the Eastern League had objected to them. The Oxfordshire League mandates them, and nobody has objected. **PS** reminded everyone what while screens are the default for the MCL, the two team captains are allowed to agree not to use them.
- There is a configuration file for these matches on RealBridge which simplifies the movement. It will be distributed before the coming match (and is also [available on the website](#)).

ITEM 6: The Midlands Counties Restricted Swiss Teams

17. We noted that while appeal for this event had waned somewhat, the 16 teams which entered on 26th September was a very viable number. The only nuisance was that in terms of a winning County, only Oxfordshire produced enough teams to win! We could consider awarding the “County win” on the basis of the series of events, rather than at each event.

18. **MW** reported that the discussion session afterwards was appreciated, as was the presence of a few experienced players who chatted with the teams from their county and helped them to settle.

19. **RP** asked about the image of this event within a county – and the extent to which success was celebrated. It was agreed that the paucity of live games made this difficult, and the county website was of little use as the community concerned did not often visit that.

ITEM 7: Feedback from EBU Communications

20. One suggestion made in the recent messaging was that County Associations should take a more active interest in live NGS-restricted events, as the audience would tend to be local or regional. **MW** suggested that the journey of a bridge player would naturally start locally, and county and regional events should be considered part of the path. Allowing for the lower NGS player to progress this way makes sense and if we had enough local NGS-restricted Championships we should consider a Pachabo/Corwen equivalent at the national level.

21. The question of whether national competitions should be online or live or a mix was raised; it was agreed that there was no perfect answer but recent changing and the current position – mostly online to start but face-to-face later – was unacceptable to a number of players. There was also discontent from teams which had paid a NICKO entry fee two years ago and the competition had stalled – and now they were paying entry fees again! [LATER: the 2019-20 series has restarted]

22. **TR** suggested that the proposed change to the Licence Fee for Green Point events was too high a level, essentially £32 per table per day. **MP** reported that despite the record numbers at the recent Suffolk online Green Point event, a double Licence fee would have meant the event ran at a loss. **TR** made the point that any profits CBAs made all went to the same good causes as the EBU would address.

23. There was some dispute as to whether or not bridge players were price sensitive in searching out games to play, and **PS** reported that some experiments on this were underway. It was accepted that live EBU events were very expensive, and the suggestion was made that this is primarily down to the cost of the TDs (although VAT also plays a part). It was suggested that running online events was the best way for the EBU to earn income, and that the audience EBU events attracts would not impact the attendance at club or county events.

ITEM 8: Round-Robin from Counties

24. The following inputs were received by email

- Derbyshire: have now run f2f events for 5 weeks and are averaging 7-7½ Tables, while on BBO in the previous 5 weeks these were averaging 10-10½ Tables. The committee are meeting tomorrow afternoon to set the next calendar of events. A remaining concern is when will be the right time to start teams events. DCBA clubs are still showing no interest in starting the inter-club event.
- Worcestershire: the overall impression is that the smaller “local” clubs have generally returned reasonably successfully to playing face-to-face, while those clubs with a broader catchment area have not only maintained but also increased their table numbers by continuing to play online. Switching to online playing is not without risk because it gives up regular hall bookings. The approach of winter may well cause a further change in playing habits but overall there are good reasons for optimism.
- Leicestershire: LCBA held its AGM on Zoom and just enough attended. Membership has increased during the last year, and the County Finances have improved. Future County Competitions prize money will be reduced. Two members of the Executive have been awarded the Dimmie Fleming in recognition of their long service.
- Herefordshire: 6 of the county’s 9 clubs have resumed face to face bridge. Attendance has generally been reduced to between 40% and 70% of that experienced prior to the cessation caused by the onset of Covid although there are tentative signs this is slowly increasing. HCBA decided to hold its AGM by email as it had been a struggle to reach a quorum in previous years and it was felt this would be even more of an issue in the present circumstances. It was decided that Zoom would exclude too many of our older, less technologically able members, from participating. A limited number of responses were received from members but no adverse comments on the decision.

ITEM 9: AOB and NEXT MEETING

25. The Malvern Congress is online on 29th-31st October and WCBA asks MCWG members to put a link (<https://www.bridgewebs.com/worcestershire/MalvernCongressBrochure2021.pdf>) on their county websites. The congress will be held online on RealBridge with no screens and partner alerting in order to make the experience as close as possible to that of playing face to face in accordance with the friendly spirit of the event. Of particular importance are the two events on the Friday evening which are intended to help the players who may not have previously played much in congresses – those with NGS of nine or less and “newcomers” – gain experience of the enjoyment to be had from playing in the congress environment. There will then be a Championship Swiss Pairs on Saturday and a Championship Swiss Teams on Sunday. Green Points and Prizes to the EBU scale will be awarded for both Championship Events. WCBA is also planning to have a panel of “experts” discussing some hands on Zoom sometime after the sessions to make the congress a bit more of an occasion and more than simply a game of bridge. Watch the [WCBA website for details](#).

26. We agreed that the next meeting will be in four weeks' time, and that our pattern would be the first Thursday of the month, and therefore Thursday 4th November. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES