



# NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call  
on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022 at 10.30am

## PRESENT:

Gloucestershire	Ian Sidgwick (IS)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Oxfordshire	Rob Procter (RP)
Hampshire	John Fairhurst (JF)	Staffs & Shrops	Paul Cutler (PC)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Suffolk	Richard Evans (RE)
Lincolnshire	Rodney Mitchell (RM)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)

**Apologies:** Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), Gayle Webb & Lucy Cross & Richard Gwyer (Wiltshire), Tony Russ (Somerset).

**CHAIR: Patrick Shields**

## ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 7<sup>th</sup> April 2022 meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.

## ITEM 3: New Experiences with Online Bridge

2. There are a number of cases where the online numbers are drifting downwards – which might be a time-of-year effect, or attributable to the existence of more face-to-face opportunities, but if it results in people just getting out of the habit of playing regularly, it could be a danger sign. The National Pairs was a recent event where numbers were significantly lower than previous years, even though it was online (again); getting out of the habit of playing in certain events might be the issue.
3. Oxfordshire is running some hybrid sessions with online and live sections, but nobody else was conscious of examples of this. Stamford BC has introduced a new Sunday evening online session and found a good number want to play.
4. We discussed what the concept of club membership means with online bridge. Some clubs' games insist on membership, some are open to all comers, and some are in between (eg Stamford allows visitors 3 games before paying a membership fee). Where should a club or County Association focus? Is it good or bad to have online members from a different country?
5. The question was asked whether free competition between clubs for online games will result in too many losers – and if so, would some coordination be better? The choice has to lie with the clubs themselves, but do CBAs have some responsibility to help? One form of coordination might be around the standard of the game; a large club can provide sessions focused on different grades, while a small club cannot do that themselves, but might be able to work with other clubs to provide a variety of grades of session.

6. We discussed the idea of distinct online and face-to-face championships, uncovering strong opinions on either side of that question. **RP** made the point that a commercial supplier would support all modes of bridge (with championships and prizes to encourage play) as long as there was an audience for them, and all the evidence suggests there are plenty of people in the online, face-to-face, and both-types camps.
7. **JF** raised a question about the issue of potential eye-strain from online bridge. It was noted that in a business environment, we would expect guidelines for screen use, mandating regular breaks. This might be something we need to consider for bridge events. A number expressed their view that two days in front of a screen was notably less appealing than two days face-to-face. On the other hand, it is easier to break away from the game for a minute or two when online (either during pauses or as dummy). **PS** reported that the GCBA online games were all shorter than their face-to-face predecessors.

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

8. The reports of returns to live bridge were mixed -
  - a. There are examples of a splendid return to face-to-face followed by a dribble down to non-viable numbers, but also **RM** and **KT** reported others where the face-to-face numbers continue to creep upwards. For some clubs the combination of live and online bridge has resulted in a higher attendance than was obtained in pre-pandemic days.
  - b. **RE** reported that a club event that used to attract 25-30 tables for Swiss Teams had recently to be cancelled (as a face-to-face event) because of too few entries. There is a suggestion other events might suffer the same fate, because the online alternatives are so attractive (avoiding travel, taking fewer hours).
  - c. **DB** reported on a club, struggling on restart, but which was adamant that they did not want help. Other instances of club intransigence to working with other clubs was reported.
  - d. **JF** reported of an instance where face-to-face games were poorly attended until it was announced that you had to book, and if there were insufficient numbers it would switch to online. Numbers improved immediately [but are not quite enough for running hybrid sessions].
9. Special events have been seen to do much better than routine events. **JF** reported on great attendance at pub sessions doing bridge with lunch, but players were quite happy to think of this as bridge outside the club rather than as a club activity. It was suggested that clubs and counties need to focus more on the enjoyment element rather than the competitive element, and if they want regular attendance they need to think of special events as feeders for repeat events. It was noted however that making every event special is a lot of effort.
10. The availability of a break during a game greatly improves the atmosphere for the less competitive players. But **FD** reported one case where a risk assessment on handling a break dictated that self-service was not safe, and with no staff available to serve, the break has been discontinued (help yourself as you play now being the norm). The timing of the game also affects the viability of a break.

11. We noted the fall in entries for the National Knock-Outs, and that there is a spiral effect here as a smaller entry means more distance between opposing teams, which further discourages entry. The entry fees are also rather steep, and **PS** reported that discussion had started on how to improve that (eg by not financing the finals from the entry fees). In general County Associations do not find representative events self-sustaining, and it is other events in the county which finance, for example, Pachabo and Corwen entry fees.
12. **IS** gave a brief summary of the EBU Club Restart seminar which took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> April. It provided some useful, but not ground-breaking, information. The consensus was that restart had already happened and the big issue for clubs is now boosting numbers. It was noted that the marketing materials created by the EBU are now available; **IS** reported the use of the materials in Chipping Campden, with club details overprinted on the poster.

### **ITEM 5: The Future of Teaching**

13. **RE** reported on a new initiative in Suffolk; in cooperation with the County Library Service, lessons for beginners are being offered in library premises, free of charge. After encouragement from the centre, individual libraries have been enthusiastic in taking up the opportunity. A course running for 8 weeks is planned, and follow-on courses will be available but are unlikely to be free.
14. **DB** reported that Ben Norton (English Open team at the recent World Championships) is doing some sessions on card play at the Leicestershire County BC. He also noted that there were three teaching centres in the county which were active.
15. There is a Teacher Training course on offer at West Midlands Bridge Club being run by EBED on 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> July.

### **ITEM 6: The Midlands Counties Online League**

16. No potential changes to the 2021-2022 plans for the league were identified, and **PS** was tasked with preparing a proposal along the same lines for the next season. Some interest was expressed in a nationwide (online) league but only for the season after (2023-2024).
17. We discussed the way in which inter-county friendly matches had flourished in the early days of the pandemic, and engaged a wider population in representative matches, to the benefit of the game. It was agreed that such matches should be face-to-face, and that, while people are sometimes more available in winter, travel is easier in summer and this creates a dilemma as to when in the year such events should happen. It was agreed that we should continue to investigate the options, and that we would all hunt for someone willing to work up a proposal on this topic, and put 3-4 such people together as a Working Group.

### **ITEM 7: The Midlands Counties Restricted Events**

18. NTR – on hold until September.

### **ITEM 8: EBU Bye-Law Changes**

19. **PS** summarised the key changes, which were driven primarily by issues around online cheating, as (a) enabling an unpublished reprimand rather than published sanctions for a certain class of players who admitted the charge against them, and (b) not publicizing the conviction of those who admitted the charge.

20. There was concern expressed about the subjective nature of the decision as to which people would be eligible in case (a) and a worry that (b) could lead to an increased amount of cheating.

### **ITEM 9: Youth Bridge Funding**

21. **PS** noted the fact that Junior Funding from the EBU had been cut fairly drastically in the current financial year, because the revenue was not there to support this, and that the junior squads were now engaged in fund raising activities to compensate. **JF** reported that Hampshire CBA had been approached about fund raising, probably because of junior squad membership from that county. It was confirmed that EBU and EBED have tried, but been mostly unsuccessful, in obtaining sponsorship for this; it was suggested that professional help might be worth paying for.

22. **RP** reminded us of the success a few years back with events raising money for the Juniors venture in China. Clarity around the target for funding is important and worked in the China case, but the current position is less clear. **PS** volunteered to organize for Joan Bennett who leads for Youth Bridge to come and explain the position to this group. [LATER: Joan accepted and will attend our next meeting]

### **ITEM 10: Round-Robin from Counties**

23. A quick run round the table identified the following items which had not arisen in the earlier discussion

- a. **DB** told us that the Leicestershire County Association had sent out a questionnaire to all clubs about the future direction, and about County Competitions in the future. He noted that Leicestershire had only one positive reply to the offer of “free” first year Affiliation to new clubs (**PC** reported the same from Staffs & Shropshire but others had none to report).
- b. **FD** asked about the possibility of recharging the progression of Directors (through Club and County Director to Congress) as finding a suitable TD was sometimes difficult. **KT** reported on success in spotting future TDs in learners’ classes.
- c. **PC** reported that the Shropshire Congress last month, run online, had numbers about 65% of those of 2021; questions were being raised about what to do in 2023.
- d. **MW** reported that Worcestershire was seeing plenty of online play, and that the WCBA had pruned back its county competitions; while clubs are thriving, the county level of play is being squeezed. The October Worcester Congress will be a live event.
- e. **IS** reported that at the Cheltenham Congress, run by Sarah Amos’ team, the numbers were down somewhat. He also reported a gathering for representatives of a half dozen clubs in one corner of the county, at which enthusiasm for promoting the game was quite evident, and following which the group are (a) listing all bridge games in the area on one website to make it easier for people to find a game, and (b) experimenting with Duplimated boards and investigating the sharing of such machines with others.
- f. **MT** reported that details of information on the Regional Finals of the Garden Cities had been very difficult to obtain from the EBU. The closing date for entries was April 22, with a statement on the website that details of arrangements would be sent out to clubs soon after this date. The WCBA Competitions’ Secretary had had to spend considerable time and effort contacting the EBU to resolve this problem. He asked that **PS** made the EBU Communications team aware of this to prevent a recurrence [done].

24. Offline reports were:

- a. Keith Stait from Herefordshire: Herefordshire & Gloucestershire are enthusiastically returning to live bridge for their Green Point event in July this year. Another HCBA club re-opened in mid-April to assess the level of support, and a class of 16 have started bridge lessons.
- b. Jim Parker from Derbyshire: in Derbyshire at County level and Derby city centre, F2F sessions are going well. The DCBA is holding its AGM F2F tonight. Teaching prospects have improved with two new teachers offering to undertake running classes; one is currently lying 2nd in the county NGS list, and he has been offered attendance at the Solihull teacher course as he hasn't done that yet. As online sessions have ended, players that wish to play online have been seen to move to other clubs and join in their sessions (and some play regularly in weekly events in Scotland and Ireland). Some of the players that only play F2F are worried that online bridge events will seriously affect bridge attendances.
- c. Lucy Cross from Wiltshire: the return to F2F has been patchy in Wiltshire and numbers F2F are still down. This may improve with the weather/Covid figures but a couple of clubs are struggling. WCBA will shortly be discussing County events for the coming season Sept 2022 - April 2023, and some things like the Wiltshire League are likely to stay online.

**ITEM 12: AOB and NEXT MEETING**

25. We agreed that the next meeting will be in accordance with our pattern of first Thursday of the month, and therefore Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2022. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES