



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

via a Zoom conference call
on Thursday 6th January 2022 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

| | | | |
|------------------|----------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Gloucestershire | Ian Sidgwick (IS) | Staffs & Shrops | Paul Cutler (PC) |
| Gloucestershire | Patrick Shields (PS) | Suffolk | Malcolm Pryor (MP) |
| Hampshire | John Fairhurst (JF) | Somerset | Tony Russ (TR) |
| Leicestershire | Dean Benton (DB) | Warwickshire | Mike Thorley (MT) |
| Lincolnshire | Rodney Mitchell (RM) | Wiltshire | Gayle Webb (GW) |
| Northamptonshire | Fred Davis (FD) | Worcestershire | Mike Willoughby (MW) |
| Oxfordshire | Rob Procter (RP) | | |

Apologies: Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Kathy Talbot (Oxfordshire), Keith Stait (Herefordshire), Richard Gwyer (Wiltshire)

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEMS 1/2: Welcome & Admin Issues

1. We approved the minutes from the 2nd December 2021 meeting. Note that all past minutes (including the latest draft) are on the EBU website.
2. **PS** reminded those present that our TOR asked us to elect a Chair and an EBU Communications Officer at this meeting. We agreed that **PS** would continue as Chair, and that the regular presence of EBU Board members at these meetings makes an EBU-CO redundant.

ITEM 3: New Experiences with Online Bridge

3. **PS** opened the discussion by noting that the presence of both BBO and RealBridge offerings, and the fact that they were different, offered a variety which positively improved his enjoyment of online bridge. This led to a discussion of the variations people experienced in the approach to Full Disclosure on RealBridge. **PS** suggested that while the starting point for RealBridge had been to mimic the live game, we had learned in the past two years that self-announcing could be a positive benefit to the game, but we had yet to standardise on best practice. Developing and instituting a single standard was seen as a potential positive move. In the meantime, tolerance was required.
4. It was suggested that the EBU practice of insisting that a System Card be available and offered at the start of each round of an EBU competition was an overkill and put some off participating. A number mentioned that it was only the carding aspects of the System Card which mattered now, as the meanings of bids were usually available through self-announcements.
5. There was still surprise expressed by some at the fact that inspecting one's own System Card or notes was allowed in online games; while doing this would seriously disrupt the flow of a live game, nobody reported experience of this disrupting an online game. It was noted that while reading is permitted, making notes to which you refer during the play of a hand is not allowed.

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

6. The general consensus is that the recovery of face-to-face bridge has been curtailed by the latest Covid news; a number of cases of falling attendance were reported, and there was concern expressed about the issue of survival for some small clubs; **DB** reported that in Leicestershire all clubs have stopped live bridge, as have clubs in Suffolk, and **MT** reported of one in Warwickshire. The compulsory use of face masks is a discouragement for some players, but there is considerable variation in the assessment of risk amongst players – which means someone is unhappy whether live bridge stops or goes ahead. **PS** made the point that club committees need to decide on what is best for their organisation, and this could easily be different from their personal preferences. **DB** noted that some clubs had found it uneconomical to open face-to-face post Covid.
7. **MW** made the point that his face-to-face outings in the Autumn of 2021 all had a social element to them, and something more than a bare Duplicate Bridge session is needed to make a club an attractive option. **PS** suggested that clubs need to re-invent themselves and develop a Unique Selling Point, as they cannot thrive by just being a provider of bulk-standard duplicate bridge.
8. To avoid a stop-start pattern occurring, **MP** reported that Suffolk CBA has switched all planned face-to-face events to be online until mid-April.

ITEM 5: The Future of Teaching

9. We noted that some clubs where teaching is established (Oxford and Cheltenham being two examples) have waiting lists for classes, but in other areas recruitment of newcomers was actually a difficulty. **MW** suggested that the Marketing material on offer from the EBU (presented at the AGM in November) could be a great help. **GW** confirmed that the leaflets etc will go into print very shortly.
10. We discussed price charges for lessons; established schools were looking for up to £10 per lesson, while some advocated that at least the first few lessons need to be free to attract newcomers (this is the pattern, **JF** told us, at Basingstoke BC). The charge also varied depending on whether or not the teacher was an unpaid volunteer. Ashby BC includes club membership in the course fee – a useful idea.
11. **FD** reported that Stamford run a Transition Course to help newcomers prepare for club duplicates, taking four lessons.
12. **MW** that one Worcestershire teacher had worked through the EBED supplied Transition Course with a class, and found that with a little tailoring it worked well.
13. **PS** asked about the visibility of newcomers who had been learning through sites such as learnbridgeonline.com – but nobody had any instances of these to report.

ITEM 8: The Midlands Counties Online League

14. We confirmed that neither Gloucestershire nor Leicestershire had any interest in playing the outstanding match from the 2019-2020 season, and Warwickshire and Nottinghamshire confirmed later that they were of the same opinion. It was agreed that the leagues would be finalised and that the events would be marked as “not completed” on the relevant trophies.

ITEM 9: The Midlands Counties Restricted Swiss Teams

15. We were all reminded to push forward the advertising for the next event, on Saturday 29th January, noting that last year we had 45 teams played in it. **PS** reported that although the Gloucestershire Treasurer had been providing the necessary service for the past two years, he leaves post in a few months' time and a replacement is needed. Attendees were requested to go and twist arms.

ITEM 10: Feedback from EBU AGM

16. We discussed the ability of County Associations to work jointly with the EBU on distribution of marketing materials to help clubs find newcomers to the game; GW reported that the posters, leaflets and postcards would be available soon, and she can supply a soft-copy version on request.

17. We discussed the level of concern with the third-to-half of our membership which has been (to EBU eyes) dormant since the first lockdown. **IS** noted that one of his local bridge clubs had lost a third of its membership in the recent annual subs cycle. **MP** made the point that online the market place allows players many options and club loyalty can no longer be expected at the levels of the past. We also noted that the competitive players are well catered for online, and the consequence is that the return to face-to-face bridge has (with a few top EBU events being an exception) been much more from the less competitive and more sociable players. **MP** reported the feeling that much of the current success of Suffolk Bridge Clubs is because they actively surveyed their members to uncover what was wanted.

18. We discussed the EBU offer of free EBU membership to members of non-Affiliated Clubs for a limited period. **TR** reported talking to different counties about their progress on this; many had put action on hold, but there were 11 clubs across the nation which had accepted the offer. The extent of the existing relationship between a CBA and its non-Affiliated Clubs affects progress on this topic; **IS** reported the plan in Gloucestershire to extend the buddy scheme they had just initiated for Affiliated Clubs to include the non-Affiliated. A number of counties noted that it had worked well when they had treated all clubs equally, independently of the Affiliation status. **RP** reported that independently of this offer Oxfordshire CBA had two new Affiliated clubs, both driven by the members of those clubs who were, independently, EBU members.

19. We considered the extent to which, particularly online, County Associations and the EBU games are competing for the attention of the same players. A number present favoured letting the market place decide where each party should put its emphasis, but others felt an element of structure to the division of effort would be more appropriate.

ITEM 11: Round-Robin from Counties

20. A lot of the inputs at the meeting and by email were incorporated in the record above at relevant points; not covered yet were the following

- a. **JF** reported that the self-practice lessons built by Basingstoke BC are continuing to get good feedback, and will be developed further. He reported that in an effort to encourage the better players to play more at the club, BBC is running a joint online session with Cheltenham BC (who expressed the same concern) once a week for the next few months.

- b. **IS** reported that the Cheltenham Congress in May 2022 will be entirely online.
- c. **FD** reported of a club whose level of activity had fallen to a level that the bank decided they needed to introduce charges; the result was a change of bank!
- d. **Jim Parker** reported offline that in Derbyshire F2F continues, regularly with 8-10 tables for County night. The DCBA runs no on-line sessions although it helps two local clubs run a BBO session every Tuesday where numbers are poor (2-4 tables). Teaching is run privately in Derbyshire although some clubs run their own tuition. The DCBA has a Training officer on the committee that liaises with the teachers. Those County players that stopped playing bridge during lockdown have returned to DCBA F2F sessions.

ITEM 12: AOB and NEXT MEETING

21. We agreed that the next meeting will be in accordance with our pattern of first Thursday of the month, and therefore Thursday 3rd February 2022. The link for the Zoom conference will be distributed the day before.

END OF MINUTES