



NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THE MIDLANDS COUNTIES WORKING GROUP

at West Midlands Bridge Club
on Wednesday 16th October 2019 at 10.30am

PRESENT:

EBU Clubs Officer	Jonathan Lillycrop (JL)	Oxfordshire	Kathy Talbot (KT)
Gloucestershire	Patrick Shields (PS)	Warwickshire	Mike Thorley (MT)
Leicestershire	Dean Benton (DB)	Worcestershire	Mike Willoughby (MW)
in addition, remotely by video conference			
Lincolnshire	Kiat Huang (KH)	Somerset	Tony Russ (TR)
Northamptonshire	Fred Davis (FD)		

CHAIR: Patrick Shields

ITEM 1 : Welcome & Apologies

1. We had apologies from Clare Batten (Nottinghamshire), Jim Parker (Derbyshire), Rob Procter (Oxfordshire) and Dave Thomas (Worcestershire), and welcomed two new faces by video – Fred Davis from Northamptonshire and Tony Russ from Somerset. We still lack any contact from Staffs & Shrops (but their off-line input is of course welcome). We had belated apologies from Dave Pollard who was taken in by the wrong day on the distributed agenda (sorry!).

ITEM 2 : Minutes of Last Meeting (20 Jun 19)

2. The minutes were approved, and no matters arising, missing from below, were raised.

ITEM 3 : News from the EBU/Aylesbury

3. JL had feedback for us from Jerry Cope (EBU Treasurer): Jerry noted that membership levels (we think this is UMS player sessions recorded) is up 1.5% year-on-year, and this together with the other efficiencies raised at the Chairs meeting in May leads him to drop the proposed UMS increase (due to be ratified at the AGM) from 2p to 1p for the coming year. He also reported that the [Chairs' meeting](#) held at YCBC had proven less expensive than the shareholders' meeting it replaced. Finally, he noted that a quantified SLA (service level agreement) is being put in place with EBED.

4. JL reported that on Tournaments & Regulations, the Eastbourne venue in August was generally liked, and the weekend numbers were reasonable but mid-week was lower than some hoped. The Sunday discussion on Tournaments went well and has spawned the now very active [EBU forum on tournaments](#). The change in the mean NGS grade attending this congress had been noted as changing from 57.38 in 2005 to 60.24 in 2019, with the proportion below NGS of 55 dropping from over 30% to less than 10%. Various reasons for this were postulated but the primary one is the changing shape of the “ability pyramid” which is now much flatter (larger at the base) than it used to be, because of the changing demographic of this country’s bridge players (many starting to play the game later in life).
5. TR reported a serious drop in the attendance at the West of England Congress, some of which he attributed to the clash of dates with the Premier League this year. The next Midlands Counties League also conflicts with a Premier League weekend. We noted that over the years/decades we have introduced more events into the calendar and rarely taken any away, despite the dwindling congress clientele. We pondered whether consolidation would be a Good Thing, but the fact is that each event is attractive to some people and almost all prove to be viable in their own right (albeit stretching the availability of the volunteer resource).
6. There were issues this year with the Selection Committee and the Tournament Committee fixing their dates (almost) independently, and this generated discussion about the process for the organisation of calendars. We noted that dates dependent on non-bridge club venues are always booked far ahead, and by different authorities. There was a consensus that calendar setting needed a better and a transparent process. JL was asked to research whether EBU-central was willing to provide this (and if not, the Counties would have a go). KH pointed out that merging the supplied calendars into your Google Calendar allowed very flexible filtering to let you see different types of bridge event.

ACTION 191016.1 : JL to research the process for calendar setting.

7. We also discussed handicapping of events and JL noted that a handicap event is being run under Funbridge and the possibility of an EBU event was in active consideration. Some expressed disappointment that handicapping is not currently reflected in Master Points issued, and even in Stratified Events the share for lower strata is very poor (it drops for each stratum and further because of the lower number present in that stratum). With NGS playing a stronger role in measuring performance, there might be an opportunity by being more generous here to encourage more participation by weaker players. This topic will come up for discussion at the next issue of EBU News.
8. JL also reported how successful the national teams had been at the recent World Championships in China (the only nation with two sets of medals, and only one of three nations with teams in the knock out stages of all four competitions). It was noted that very little had come of this in the national press. The view was expressed that the EBU ought to take responsibility for such publicity, and that the recent split of responsibilities with EBED had diluted the effort on this considerably. Even making club players aware of the success has not been achieved; we wondered how many club websites link into national bridge news. The issue of raising the visibility of the game of Bridge to the nation was identified as difficult, and finding the right leadership in Bridge to give the game a high profile was agreed to be far from easy.

9. JL reported that he was now responsible for developments on EBUScore and welcomes inputs; and that the EBU's Volunteer Code was in draft and would soon be made public. He also reported that a trial offer was to be announced soon – whereby Unaffiliated Clubs (never before affiliated) would be allowed a 4-month trial of Affiliation, without having to pay UMS charges. This was particularly geared to U3A clubs and the question of U3A clubs generated a lot of discussion, from which it emerged that:

- KH had engaged with local U3A last year and suggested to Jeremy Dhondy that the EBU could partner with U3A (who have a very similar demographic) effectively from the top down. This is still Work-in-Progress, and U3A club details are being gathered and those clubs will be a focus for the offer for new club affiliation.
- Some Bridge Clubs (eg Penrith) have a U3A section, and Worcestershire sends its County Newsletter to all U3A branches in the county. FD reported his support for Peterborough U3A, of whom plenty play (mostly rubber) bridge. U3A Bridge can be seen as a first step before becoming involved with a Duplicate Bridge Club.
- The WBU engaged with U3A in Wales a few years back and had organised some cross-publicity using the excellent U3A infrastructure; there were plans to run a (restricted standard) event jointly, but it never came to fruition.

ITEM 3b: the EBU Strategic Aims & Plans

10. We noted that there is nothing to report on overall progress against the plan, and it was felt that some obvious gaps in the Strategic Aims (eg no reference at all to Unaffiliated Clubs, Publicity, Marketing) dampens the power of the Strategic Aims to generate synergy and to motivate people to contribute. If the key purpose behind the Aims is to grow the game of Bridge in this country, then the club members of constituent clubs are the key marketing resource – word of mouth being so much more effective than any advertising route tested so far, but as a body of potential volunteers the crowds are not tapped. FD reported that the variations away from standard duplicate at Stamford BC (café bridge, barbecues) were very effective in encouraging a shared membership mentality and getting people involved.

ITEM 3c: Membership Targets

11. We had discussed at the last meeting the fact that the EBU Strategic Plan's "Year 1 targets" lack any quantitative targets for the membership campaign and concluded that while setting targets to let the EBU survive financially was possible, setting targets for the game to thrive was more difficult – and for both, setting realistic targets was something we did not know how to do. We resolved to think within our Counties about if/how we could set local targets and whether that could help nationally. Various counties had had discussions internally and reported in, and we have learned that

- Growth through more members and growth through more sessions come from different forms of promotion and need to be distinguished.
- There are two distinct metrics which are key – the number of players and how much these players play. [LATER NOTE: we had failed to notice that first of these for EBU clubs is made visible in the rear of the EBU AGM minutes (for at least the last five years)]. An approximation to the second of these is provided by the number of EBU player sessions, deducible from County receipts and from data which Tim Anderson has provided as feedback to counties about their clubs.

- Distinguishing between new members who have just learned the game, those returning, those whose club has just affiliated, those giving up, those who have died, etc is impossible. So we cannot tell how well different avenues for growth are working. The reasons for losses are unknown and a serious proportion (over 15%) of members have not played in the past year.
- DB reported Leicestershire's allocation of a budget to promote bridge in the county and that LCBA has run a number of "Learn Bridge in a Weekend" sessions with reasonable levels of success, and at two centres in the county. He pointed out that there are bridge players who are not for duplicate, and that was being catered for in Leicester. KH said we could all benefit from inspirational stories of successful teaching and growth, and we agreed that EBU News and the Club Management Focus newsletter were the places to advertise these.
- MW pointed out that the number of people going through lessons was a "Lead Indicator" for the number of additional members and additional member-sessions in years to come, but that this fell down when teaching outside clubs did not lead to club members. We cannot deny teachers a living, so the best answer to this was for clubs to engage with teachers and for clubs and counties to offer higher quality teaching than is available outside.
- DB pointed out that the fact that registered teachers can obtain free initial EBU membership for their learners had only just become visible to people in his area.
- TR reported on four Fast-Track courses run in Somerset, each based on a club with the learning weekend leading into lessons at the club. Three of the four had provided a successful follow-through. On the other hand, Somerset's clubs' foray into the EBU Membership Campaign had failed – it has only been the County-led initiative which had worked.
- FD noted that the key was motivating the teachers and integrating teaching into the club. Stamford BC, with its own premises, has pulled learners in from satellite clubs to do the teaching for clubs which lack the ability to do that themselves.

12. We agreed that more thinking and more research was needed. Our next step forward is to consider what metrics we need to have available in order to guide and measure our progress. We agreed that each County would consider this question and we would aim – by email, before the next meeting – to agree on what mattered most and then we would approach EBU-central to find out what they could do to provide these. KH suggested that if there was an API available to the EBU database(s) then some counties would be able to make much greater use of the raw data than they can today (but some others didn't know what an API was!).

ACTION 191016.2 : All counties to identify key metrics and email them to PS by the end of November.

ITEM 3d: plans for the November EBU AGM

13. We agreed that it was right for MCWG counties to confer once the papers for the AGM were published, but that we did not need a meeting to do this. The meeting penciled in for the 13th November was cancelled, and we agreed on a timetable of:

- Papers get published.
- Within 7 days, counties send reactions to PS.
- Within 3 days of that, PS will distribute the collated reactions and identify any conflicts or further coordination we need.

ITEM 4 : Youth Bridge and EBED

14. The proposal on Youth Bridge from EBED seems to have got lost en route to some email boxes (it will be re-distributed with these minutes, and it is stored in the MCWG OneDrive folder under EBED), so there was no overall reaction, except

- a clear preference in Gloucestershire by the teachers concerned to proceed independently of EBED.
- KH reported that a keen County Youth Officer in Lincolnshire had been in touch with Donna Wright about getting involved but contact has been lost.
- MW reported that Worcestershire was not yet ready to get involved (WCBA is putting its current effort into adult teaching) but hoped to come back to it later.

15. On the distributed Value Proposition for EBED, most readers were quite impressed. MW reported his recent attendance at the Teacher Training course, and was very positive about the value he obtained from it. JL noted that there is an EBED vacancy has just arisen, as Claire Wheeler (training manager) is leaving.

ITEM 5 : MCWG Key Threads

16. We discussed briefly the Classroom to Clubroom transition question, noting that

- Assisted Sessions are seen as vital as a transition path, and where this approach is in use (which is most places) it has been successful. It is still the case that people need encouragement to move on.
- Mixed ability sessions can generate discomfort; speed of play issues can be difficult to resolve, but restrictions on NGS rating or on system can help. MW commented that they didn't have a clear answer for the Worcestershire "Simple Systems" division of their league, and a number of suggestions were made of Convention Cards written against a basic level. It was noted that a number of clubs (most notably YCBC) had a standard "Club Card" and made sure copies of it were available for any casual partnerships to use. See <https://www.ebu.co.uk/laws-and-ethics/system-cards> for a number of examples.

17. We discussed briefly the Clubroom to Tournament transition question, noting that we had covered a lot of this in the discussion reported in paragraphs 4 to 8 above. Points which arose were

- Bringing club players forward to county standard is thought to be outside the EBED remit, and so any responsibility lies with the Counties themselves. The “Master Class” sessions held by some counties address this.
- The path from beginner -> assisted play -> gentle duplicate -> regular club duplicate -> local congresses -> EBU congresses -> national competitions is a long path and not always recognised as such. KH suggested that improving the visibility of the path might help people understand it, and encourage people to move along it.
- Cross-club competitions – of the sort a County might organise – were identified as a useful tool.

18. We then moved to the topic of Unaffiliated Clubs. Following the discussion last time, Rob Proctor had asked that we consider further his argument that financial considerations were stopping clubs from affiliating and that

- Until [EBU] prices are matched to individual services there will always be difficulty in selling the whole package to those who only want a small part of that package.

19. His argument had been run past Jerry Cope (EBU Treasurer) who made the point that a lot of the EBU is a fixed cost operation (eg running Aylesbury) and would not flex with volume, so a menu approach could be devastating if a sizeable proportion did not take the full offer. Since the EBU finances look to be on an even keel currently, the risks involved in a change like this are not worth taking.

20. KH described the current situation as “paying a uniform tax on duplicate bridge games” and suggested that the computer systems processing UMS returns should be capable of implementing individual per user charging, giving users rebates on services not wanted. MW pointed out that this tax currently runs at about a mere 10-12p per hour of entertainment.

21. On the general question of Unaffiliated Clubs, PS pointed out that bringing these clubs into the fold was a one-off step and that the issue of membership numbers and the demographics of bridge players would not go away once this step was done. A number felt that the key to tackling Unaffiliated Clubs is persuading them that this is the best way to support the game they love, and that we need to appeal to their altruism more than to their purses.

22. [Some of this reflects discussion after the formal meeting ended, as some had to go] The key issue is defining the right business model for the EBU. Currently the EBU has no strategic partnerships and the EBU’s only revenue streams are bridge games, where other sports have found a greater diversity on both fronts. Even chess – recently through Twitch and Youtube streaming – has massively improved its visibility (as a spectator sport) and consequently its marketability. The EBU membership has a lot of expertise but without the right vision, leadership and motivation this expertise is going to waste. We recognised that those present here (as in so much of bridge management) have been playing the game in its current form for so long, we have difficulty seeing beyond our current horizons.

ITEM 6 : Schedule and Plan for 2020

23. We agreed that our timetable should take cognisance of the EBU Chairs' meeting and EBU AGM, but in practice we have not linked our activities to EBU Board meeting and we would not try to do that. After various people exposed their regular commitments, we concluded that (subject to change as necessary as we get close to any date) our plan should be

- Meet on the second Thursday of the month
- Meet in January, April, July and October.

24. The audio and video connection seemed to work reasonably. Those at the meeting had no problem taking input from the remote attendees, but some of the remote attendees missed some of the conversation, suggesting that investment in an omni-directional desk microphone would be a good idea. Lincolnshire have just purchased a Jabra Speak 510 UC. This might be an investment that EBU-central could consider making.

ITEM 7 : AOB

25. Midlands Improvers Pairs: there was broad consensus that we should proceed with this event, but that it would work much better if we could integrate it into normal club sessions, in the way which other Simultaneous Pairs work. We look to Jim Parker for a proposal.

26. Myra Scott asked that we note the following Club Teacher Training courses, coming next year

- At Wallingford BC, Oxfordshire on 26-27 May
- At West Midlands BC, Solihull on 11-12 July
- At Leicester BC – being planned for March (local contact is Simon Stokes)
- In Nottingham area – being planned for August/September.

27. The meeting finished at 1305 but a few continued the discussion until about 1330.

END OF MINUTES