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Lockdowns and Vaccines

Since the last edition there have been two counterpointing stories on the virus.

The rate of cases rose dramatically in most of the country and the government called a second lockdown initially limited to a month. Schools and Universities remain open. The majority of other non vital activities are closed.

As ever, no one has a crystal ball, but there must be a real possibility that this lockdown will be extended, at least by some weeks, to bring case numbers down to the level at which the NHS is not at risk of being overwhelmed.

On the brighter side, there's a major scientific breakthrough. A new type of vaccine has been shown to be largely effective in a substantial trial. Other trials of different kinds of vaccine are looking promising. There are many further challenges to be met. It is likely to be many months before regulators can assure safety, manufacture grows to meet global demand, distribution is arranged, the administration of the vaccine makes the majority of the population safe.

We need to consider strategies for various segments of bridge during further lockdown and periods of varying tiers of restrictions and most of all for the time when people are able to socialise freely once again.

Platforms and Cheating

There are now four major online bridge playing platforms. The features, costs, approach, culture and ease of access for individual players and for clubs and other organisers vary tremendously and the next year will see the offerings evolve and attract its market share. Access is no longer controlled by National Bridge Organisations and their initial advantage as competition organisers is quickly disappearing.

Play on the online platforms varies from purely social to competitions organised on a national level by NBO's. However, no national or international competitions of standing have been played yet. This will be partly because everyone is building experience of this environment.

However, online bridge has always had a reputation of attracting cheating. The technology creates tempting opportunities to access unauthorised information. Over recent months all platforms and most NBOs have issued statements condemning cheating. The EBU has recently announced that it is currently dealing with over twenty cases of alleged cheating. It has set up a special group and contemplates new regulations to address the problem.

Segmentation

The world of bridge is huge and highly varied. Any conversation about it frequently needs to focus on a particular element to be useful.

Estimates vary widely, but perhaps 200,000 people used to play some form of bridge regularly.

Here's a suggestion on a way to segment playing of the game in order to discuss it more effectively. There are many overlaps and inconsistencies of course and many players will find themselves in more than one group.

Elite Bridge

Elite bridge in England is organised by the EBU. The total individual membership of the EBU is around 55,000, although more like 36,000 have taken part in affiliated events recently.

At the elite level, there are competitions between nations at World and European level. National competitions are competed amongst the quirkily constituted EBU counties, the major clubs, and teams and pairs organised individually.

Perhaps around a thousand players take part. The management of the EBU of the counties and of some of the larger clubs are generally drawn from the same population.

Affiliated Club Bridge

There are around 1,000 duplicate bridge clubs in England. Around half of them are affiliated to the EBU. The biggest of these have buildings,

employ managers and are large businesses.

EBU affiliated clubs are in turn each affiliated to one of the forty EBU "counties".

The majority of clubs are smaller and typically meet on a weekly basis in community facilities, are run by volunteers and use a members club constitution. There are some substantial duplicate clubs who choose not to be EBU affiliated.

The majority of the EBU's active membership belong to one or more clubs, possibly a mixture of affiliated and unaffiliated. There are probably around 35,000 members of affiliated clubs.

Social

Players of social bridge are often highly competent but seek environments more aimed at enjoyment than competition. Huge amounts of bridge is played in private homes, on cruises during holidays and in non affiliated clubs. There are many groups who play bridge together, but it may be rubber or chicago.

Novice

Bridge teachers are everywhere. They range from fully professional to occasional volunteer. There are some large teaching businesses, teachers attached to clubs, teachers attached to groups in other sports clubs, and self starting individuals.

An Informal Survey

Since April I have produced a newsletter twice a month (second and third weekends) just for my club members.

I also produce a monthly newsletter aimed at any bridge player, mostly in the Midlands, once a month on the first weekend.

"Bridge in the Heart of England" goes to 332 subscribers.

I included a Yes/No survey in the November edition. The question was "Are you playing online?" The open rate was 63% (209). Forty one responded:

YES 80%

NO 20%

This is a higher proportion than other sources suggest. It may well be that self selection was biased towards those playing online. From my own knowledge of the respondents I estimate that 30% are playing only in online social games.

EBU Membership Blog

Tim Anderson has written a thoughtful piece in which he estimates the proportion playing online at more like 50%.

[Tim Anderson's article](#)

Follow the money

Part of the attraction, and the tension, in bridge is caused by very

different attitudes to money. The pandemic has wrenched the finances of every organisation and may well permanently change the profile of income, and therefore costs, all round.

Elite

Around ten years ago the EBU had suffered a major drop in subscription income from individuals. It changed its major charging model to a levy on each person playing in a competitive game in all affiliated clubs. This meant that its "disposable" income was now collected and remitted in accordance with the records of play at the clubs. Although the EBU has two other major sources of revenue, tournaments and its shop, neither produces significant contribution. The cost of participating in international events, on a four-year cycle is substantial. The competition activities of elite players at international, national and county level is supported largely from the levy on affiliated club players. This situation has been debated for ten years.

Elite competitions generally consist of large numbers of players participating in hotels or conference facilities. The pandemic has made this impossible. The EBU strategy is to keep cancelling these competitions three months before their planned date. The counties have generally cancelled their competitions until further notice.

The closure of affiliated clubs was a body blow to EBU finances. EBU counties were generally less affected as most of them do not have substantial commitments like buildings or employees. The EBU has responded with redundancies, and using the furlough scheme and other cost control.

The EBU launched itself as a major competition organiser on BBO. Income from these events is shared between the EBU and BBO. It has grown to a substantial level reducing EBU losses. The EBU also acted as a gatekeeper for clubs wishing to stage competitions on BBO. The EBU provides either hired TDs, or training for TDs. The revenue from these games is mostly shared between BBO and the club with the EBU getting fees for directors or training and the levy on each player.

Affiliated Club

The biggest affiliated clubs, with premises and staff, have suffered a similar blow. Many have set up clubs games on BBO, but struggle to make any contribution to their other standing costs.

The EBU has been at best discouraging and at worst bullying over the resumption of face to face bridge. It is seen as believing the future will be online. However sources inside the EBU acknowledge that without the resumption of face to face bridge their income and their costs will have to be radically restructured.

There is considerable dissatisfaction over the perceived priorities of the EBU between its own financial position and its support of affiliated clubs. Clubs have called several times over the last few months for the EBU to take the lead on agreement of guidelines for Covid secure bridge. They have not made any move in that direction.

Social

Holiday and cruise companies have suffered loss of most of their business. Their best hope of resuming activity while tiered restrictions are in place is agreement of guidelines for Covid secure bridge.

Some social bridge has taken place in homes. Most community facilities have been reluctant to open and so few organised groups have been able to play. The community facilities have usually taken the financial hit, so the groups may not be out of pocket. The loss of the social contact, and all the benefits shown to associated with bridge are probably the biggest loss. The future of many village and church halls must be doubtful.

Novice

Bridge beginners are overwhelmingly recruited by club teachers, by professional and volunteer independent teachers. Some are paid, a few operate large professional companies. Others volunteer to support a club. Many more volunteer or charge modest amounts.

It is probable that the majority use their own materials. Many have already adapted to teaching online and are enjoying it. In the new world, teachers are setting up practice sessions online, and may well go on to create online competitions for their students.

In an attempt to avoid VAT the EBU spun its teacher association and other development activity to the charity EBED. EBED has its own constitution and governance.

Prior to the pandemic EBED spent five years and several changes of staff and management setting itself up. Its sources of income were sale of publications and associated materials, donations from the EBU and other grants. Donations from the EBU and grant income have been much reduced. EBED has never conducted media campaigns to

promote bridge or to attract teachers.

Since the first lockdown it has launched the English Bridge School, costing £60 per student per year. EBS is based on Google Classroom, available free, and the BFA materials. EBED appears to be relying on the members of the Teacher's Association, that it inherited from the EBU, to bring students to the EBS. It has also raised its teachers' subscription, due next April, from £25 to £45.

Club Futures

The last Zoom conference opened up some difficult questions about the future of clubs, particularly face to face bridge in clubs.

The new lockdown has suspended all face to face bridge. The tiered regulations did not stop activities in shared community facilities for up to 30 people provided the premises and activity were Covid secure. Risk assessments must be drawn up to demonstrate the approach. Failure to comply became a legal matter. Bridge is not formally recognised as a sport, so it is unclear whether/how the DCMS process to agree guidelines for reopening can be used. Bridge clubs do not generally fit into any of the types of industry, religious or public service settings addressed by the regulations. It is not clear how bridge holidays in hotels are regulated, even when hospitality venues are able to open. There was a suggestion that a risk assessment approach is submitted to a local authority environmental health officer.

If the future of bridge is largely online, then clubs with premises may have to sell them. How or whether players will group into clubs online is an open question. There are still around 50% of player before the pandemic are not playing online. Will they simply disappear? Or will the pleasure of other people's company bring them, and even new players to face to face clubs when it's possible?

Will the sort of person who has given their time to teach bridge, supervise practice, score events, direct competitions and manage clubs take their efforts online? especially if it's for good?

EBU Futures

The EBU issued a call for views on possible changes to the Universal Membership (P2P) charge that is its major source of disposable income.

Members overwhelmingly wished to leave things as they are right now.

The EBU AGM will take place online this month. We hope that recordings of the proceedings will be made available promptly, as in the case of the chairmans' meeting earlier this year.

Many clubs are asking what they can expect from the EBU.

New Normal Zoom Conferences

The meetings are informal gatherings. They are intended to bring together a wide range of perspectives. They should allow constructive debate. The proceedings are not secret and will be recorded and published widely.

The first Zoom conference took place on 16th September. The second on 21st October. The next will be at 2pm on 18th November. Click below for an invitation.

Please Send me the Zoom link for the next New Normal Bridge Zoom Conference

16th September Zoom Conference and Face to Face Bridge

On Wednesday 16th September the Zoom meeting attended by twenty-four individuals . Some people were formally appointed to represent organisations, many others attended as individuals. Several EBU affiliated clubs, at least one unaffiliated club, at least one other NBO, several bridge holiday providers, other bridge product service providers, bridge teachers and individuals to be represented.

The planned main topic was face to face, or club house, bridge. The meeting discussed the current government guidelines, approaches to playing the game in a COVID secure environment and the role of the English Bridge Union.

The meeting agreed that guidelines for the safe playing of the game

need to be urgently agreed with government. Although there may be a new national lock down soon, such guidelines could be used as soon it is lifted.

EBU Affiliated Clubs agreed that the EBU, as National Bridge Organisation, was best placed to undertake getting this agreement.

After the meeting letters to the EBU were sent. The EBU has made no progress.

Wednesday 21st October at 2pm

The second New Normal Zoom Conference took place at 2pm on Wednesday 21st October. There were 29 attendees. There was discussion around:

- * establishing agreed guidelines for face to face bridge
- * the future of clubs and the role of the EBU
- * support and networking for teachers.

New Normal Newsletter

This is issued once a month generally on the third weekend. It is written and distributed on an entirely non profit basis, takes no advertising or commission.

Previous New Normal newsletters and a subscription form are

available on the Bridge for Pleasure web site.

There is also information on playing Covid-secure bridge.

A freely available bridge teaching scheme with lesson plans, notes, deals, homework quizzes and answers is there for all.

[Bridge for Pleasure - Information Web Site](#)

[Click to suggest a topic \(contributions welcome\)](#)

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