

NORTHERN IRELAND BRIDGE UNION

Report of the Honorary Secretary 2023-2024

The post-COVID trends in how Bridge is played have continued throughout the 2023-24 season with regular online play taking place at the expense of NIBU face-to-face competition. It also reflects the rise over many years in home-based entertainment and recreational activity.

Recent rises in the cost of living have not helped with the various expenses involved in playing 'live' being heavily undercut by the small charge for playing online. The advantages of enjoying social contact do not seem to be enough in themselves to draw players away from their computers. However the Tournament Committee is looking at imaginative ways of tempting players out, perhaps by slimming down the calendar of events but raising the profile and status of those that remain.

There are currently 32 clubs affiliated to the NIBU, an increase of 1 on the previous season. We welcome Mourne as a new club and also Causeway and Strabane who have re-affiliated after a short absence. Meanwhile we regret the loss of Dromore (Co. Tyrone) and Merville.

The total membership is estimated to be c. 1462, the majority of whom are of Intermediate status. A new phenomenon is the apparent reluctance of Intermediate players to be re-graded as senior for whatever reason. This is regrettable as NIBU representation at International level is dependent on a stable supply and ready availability of our best players. Northern Ireland finished last in all the Home International events this season.

The NIBU Council had 3 formal meetings in September, December and March. It also met immediately after the 2023 AGM in order to resolve matters of Council membership as is now customary.

The new online League format has been a major success with entries being taken on an all-Ireland basis for the first time. Both the Senior and Intermediate Leagues attracted 12 entries each with the Senior being played on Real Bridge and the Intermediate on BBO. It is hoped to attract even more entries in the 2024-25 season .

Closer links are being fostered with Bridge players who are members of U3A. For one year only, free NIBU membership has been offered to any U3A player wishing to join an affiliated club.

In recognition of the declining number of 'active' members i.e. those helping to serve or administer the Union's business, preliminary discussions have been taking place with the CBAI with a view to possible amalgamation. It is widely felt that at a time when all Bridge Unions are experiencing similar problems, there are economies of scale to be gained from being part of a larger organisation with greater resources. It must be stressed however that no 'takeover' is being countenanced but rather a partnership of equals. Such a relationship already manifests itself in the form of the Irish Bridge Union and it may be a consequence of these discussions that we simply develop and enhance the work of that organisation. The NIBU membership will be kept fully informed of developments while any final proposal will be put to a vote.

Michael McFaul