

The ECF Membership Scheme and Cheshire & North Wales

Introduction

When the new membership scheme was introduced a specific arrangement was made for players in the region covered by Cheshire & North Wales Chess Association (C&NWCA). The Membership FAQs and the Guidelines for Leagues etc. say:

"There is a specific exception for members of the Welsh Chess Union in Cheshire and North Wales, who will be treated as Bronze ECF members for the purposes of calculating Game Fee liability. This is in accordance with an existing agreement."

It is understood from correspondence with the then Chief Executive that this includes the right for such WCU members to upgrade to higher levels of ECF membership, e.g. for the purpose of playing in congresses, if they so wished.

In March this year, the acting Director of Membership and Marketing wrote to the Chester and District Chess League as follows:

"I write to inform you that although the bye laws of the English Chess Federation do not permit the CEO to grant such an exemption, the ECF will honour this undertaking for season 2012-13. Nevertheless, this exemption will not be extended as it appears to be discriminatory."

From 1st September 2013 WCU members playing in Chester & District Chess League will need to pay for Bronze ECF membership or their games will be charged at the prevailing game fee rate."

I wish to make the following points in defence of the existing arrangement:

1. It need not be implemented in a discriminatory way or be seen as discriminatory in the pejorative sense. C&NWCA is in a unique position.
2. The proposed change would be contrary to the spirit of an agreement made between the BCF and WCU.
3. The proposed change would potentially have a disproportionate and damaging effect on the WCU and on the CDCL.
4. The proposed change would be inconsistent with the provisions made for non-English players in the 4NCL and other FIDE-rated events.

In addition, there is an alternative solution that would honour the existing agreement with the WCU while removing the 'free Bronze membership' arrangement for WCU members in C&NW.

Discriminatory or not?

In a literal sense the current arrangement is discriminatory in that it distinguishes members of the WCU in North Wales from others and treats them in a different manner. However, this only matters

if it establishes a precedent for members of other unions or areas, for instance members of the Chess Scotland, such that the ECF would either be acting unfairly towards them or, in granting them the same recognition, should experience an unpalatable loss of income. I believe neither is the case, for the following reasons:

C&NWCA is unique in being a constituent body of the ECF while spanning the border with another country. By an agreement between the ECF and C&NWCA made when the ECF was established, Welsh players in the area can continue to participate in chess as if they are English; for example, they are eligible to play in C&NWCA teams in ECF-organised competitions.

The Chester and District Chess League (CDCL) and the Wirral League are believed to be unique in having Welsh clubs participating, while being registered with the ECF. All the Welsh clubs in the CDCL and Wirral League are in the C&NW (some of the English clubs in the Wirral League are in Merseyside). In fact, the CDCL is predominately a Welsh league, in that six of its nine clubs and around 60% of its players are in Wales. It is understood that there are no Scottish clubs in the leagues in Cumbria and Northumberland.

It follows that the notion that the arrangement for C&NWCA sets a dangerous precedent is, to say the least, questionable. However, even if one imagines that it does, how much financial loss might the ECF expect to suffer by extending the exemption to members of other national associations? Of course, I do not know, but respectfully suggest that it would be negligible.

The ECF could choose to continue as now on the basis that no genuine precedent has been set, or to provide the same arrangement for members of other national associations. My personal view is that we should do the latter, and the gains in goodwill would outweigh any financial loss.

Agreement with the WCU

In 1971, when the WCU became independent of the BCF, an agreement was made whereby players should be free to join whichever of the two organisations they wished. The proposed change is, at the very least, contrary to the spirit of that agreement. It would require players in the CDCL, for instance, (assuming the CDCL continues to register with the ECF) to join the ECF or pay Game Fees – and this for services that they do not require, since the WCU maintains its own ratings system for its members. Thus a match in CDCL at a Welsh location between two Welsh clubs and players who are all members of the WCU would require the players to pay ECF dues, which seems bizarre.

Effects of the Proposed Change

Some statistics from the CDCL (snapshot on 28/02/2013):

1. There are nine clubs in the league, six of which are Welsh.
2. 130 players had played in the league.
3. 10 were not members of either the ECF or WCU.
4. 82 were members of the ECF only.

5. 32 were members of the WCU only (30 of which are drawn from 4 clubs).
6. 6 were members of both the ECF and the WCU.
7. 98 members of the ECF list one of the CDCL clubs as their primary club (obviously some had not played in the league by 28/02/2013).

The effects of the proposed change are hard to predict in with any confidence; the best I can do is present some scenarios.

If the 32 WCU-only members were to join the ECF instead, this would represent a loss of membership to the WCU of over 5%. There are more than 9000 members of the ECF – a gain of 30 would represent 0.3% of ECF membership. Clearly if this happened the impact on the WCU would be considerably greater than on the ECF.

At minimum, the loss of any WCU members who decline to play in the CDCL as result of proposed change can only accelerate the steady decline that that the CDCL, in common with many other leagues, has experienced in recent years.

The four clubs providing most of the WCU members had 46 players among the 130 playing in the CDCL. If those clubs were to withdraw, the CDCL would have lost 45% of its clubs and 35% of its players. One of these four clubs plays also in the Wirral League (which has two Welsh clubs among its nine members).

If all six Welsh clubs were to withdraw, perhaps to play in their own league, the CDCL would have only three remaining clubs – obviously not viable.

If the CDCL were to collapse as a result, or if the CDCL were to avoid the problem by ceasing to register with the ECF, there is the potential for the ECF to lose a significant number of members – no doubt well short of 98, but it is anybody's guess how many.

This may seem an extreme scenario, but it would be a viable solution for the CDCL to consider itself to be a Welsh league with a minority of English clubs participating. Players could have their games graded in the WCU system by joining the WCU, but the WCU does not currently require players in local leagues to be members.

Consistency with the 4NCL and other FIDE-rated Events

The requirement for ECF membership (or alternatively, the payment of Pay to Play fees) in FIDE-rated events, including the 4NCL, does not apply to members of other national federations. The current arrangement for WCU players in the C&NWCA area is consistent with this approach, for which the provision for FIDE-related events is a clear precedent.

Alternative Solution

Council may wish to consider an alternative to the current 'free Bronze membership' arrangement.

Since WCU players do not require grading in the ECF system and ECF players do not require grading in the WCU system, a solution is for the WCU members in C&NW to be graded by the WCU (they are anyway) but not by the ECF (unless they are also ECF members), and ECF members to be graded by the ECF. The CDCL and Wirral league could continue to be registered with the ECF but no Game Fee would be charged in the case of WCU members. Those not members of either organisation could be charged Game Fees and have their games graded by the ECF, as now.

This solution would mean that members of the WCU would not be required to have membership of the ECF as well and pay for a service they do not require in order to play league chess. At the same time, the ECF would be able to honour its agreement with the WCU while dispensing with the 'free Bronze membership' arrangement and avoid any issues of discrimination it perceives that this arrangement generates.

Summary

1. The current arrangement for WCU members in the C&NWCA area does not set a dangerous precedent for other non-English players.
2. The proposed change would violate at least the spirit of the agreement between the WCU and the BCF; it would be a hostile act with the potential to damage the WCU far more than it would benefit the ECF. Do we really want to act in this way towards our neighbours?
3. It has the potential to do considerable damage to the CDCL (and to a lesser extent, the Wirral League).
4. In an extreme but far from impossible scenario, the ECF would lose rather than gain members.
5. There is an alternative solution in which the ECF no longer offers free Bronze membership to WCU members, WCU members are not graded by the ECF, and the ECF continues to honour its agreement with the WCU.

If it does not wish to take up this alternative, **Council is requested to make no change in the existing provision for WCU members in the C&NWCA area.**

Patrick Ridley
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ECF Delegate for the Chester and District Chess League

31st March 2013