**ECF Response to the Consultation on British Championship Qualifying System**

The English Chess Federation launched a consultation on the British Championship Qualifying system, to be implemented from the 2018 British Championships onwards. It went live on 15th January and closed on 12th March.

In addition, a British Isles Co-Ordination Committee (BICC) meeting was held on 12th January to discuss these matters and allow the members to consult with their own Federations. A supplementary meeting was held on 10th April to formally sign off the qualifying regulations – although not formally sign a new BICC Agreement – including the format of the British Championships Qualifying Grand Prix.

41 responses were received to the ECF consultation, and the below sets out their responses, rather than those by the BICC. Where general comments were submitted and they related to a specific consultation question, my responses to them are subsumed into the comments I am making about the relevant question consulted on. Due to the variety of different comments provided, it is not possible to reply to each respondent individually. A response is only provided in this document where the point raised came up repeatedly.

Where a percentage on a 1-5 scale is mentioned, then the score was derived by subtracting 1 from each score to get a number on a 0-4 scale, finding the mean of the responses and multiplying it by 25, to get a number on the 0-100 scale.

**Responses to Questions**

1. Do you support the Aims of the change of regulations? [Yes/No]

**65.9%** of respondents agreed that the regulations should aim to remove the “weak tail” from the bottom of the British Championships. Those who disagreed mostly felt that the British Championships should either be an All Play All, or a big Open, with the British Champion being the leading British player. An All Play All is not financially viable at this stage.

The Board did not think that this was the right approach for several reasons:

* The British Championship has a history of being an event that people can qualify for, and congress organisers expressed an interest in retaining this.
* The prospect of an overseas player winning the tournament, but not the title, was felt to be detrimental to the interests of British players, which the Championship has historically sought to protect.
* If the British Champion isn’t coming from the highest scoregroup, then there is a greater likelihood for playoffs being required for the Championship due to the nature of a Swiss system tournament.

These points notwithstanding, it was acknowledged that running the Championships as a big Open tournament was a perfectly viable way to organise a national championship, and indeed one that could prove popular. **Therefore, the ECF Board Meeting on 14th March tasked the 4NCL with investigating the viability of organising an English Open Championship, either in 2017 or 2018.** This would be held in addition to the British Championships, and the Board feels that this will satisfy those who would like a big Open tournament to play in, while awarding a title of national significance.

2. How satisfied are you with the proposals regarding Section 1: Who is eligible to play in the Championships? [1 – very dissatisfied, 2 – dissatisfied, 3 – no opinion, 4 – satisfied, 5 – very satisfied]

This scored an approval of **71.2%**. Four responses scored this as less than 3, and three of those responses scored 1. However, all three of those responses gave 1 to every consultation question, and their subsequent comments addressed other concerns, and nothing to do with the issue of who should be eligible.

3. How satisfied are you with the proposals regarding Section 2: Qualification from the British Championships? [1 – very dissatisfied, 2 – dissatisfied, 3 – no opinion, 4 – satisfied, 5 – very satisfied]

This scored an approval of **71.2%** too. Three responses scored this as less than 3, and they scored it 1 – they were the same people as those above. No subsequent comments from them addressed this point. One comment suggested specifying the finishing position within the Championship (and Major Open, in fact) rather than score, which would help to control the number of players who qualify. This seems a wholly reasonable approach, and is something that will be included in the final regulations.

4. How satisfied are you with the proposals regarding Section 3: Pre-Qualification by Grading, Rating, or Performance Rating? [1 – very dissatisfied, 2 – dissatisfied, 3 – no opinion, 4 – satisfied, 5 – very satisfied]

This scored an approval of **51.9%.** There were various categories of objection, where expressed:

* The three 1s from the above scored this 1 as well, and none of their subsequent comments related to this point.
* Various responses from people who could potentially come in just below the qualification bar (FMs rated 2300 in the consultation paper) expressed the view that the bar should be lower. It was felt that no matter where the bar was, people would express a similar view. In addition, it should be noted that in the 2007 Agreement, before the regulations were weakened, the bar was 2350 but no FM requirement was attached. There were other responses suggesting that the bar was about right.
* Some people asked why there was no equivalent ECF grade qualifying level – the answer is because as a British Championships, we need a constant reference point. If we use ECF grades, we also need to use the other national Federations’ domestic grades, and for the benefit we will gain from doing so, we do not feel that the volunteer work to find suitable conversions between all of them will yield significant benefit – the vast majority of players of that standard will already all have FIDE ratings.
* Some people suggested there should be a minimum rating of a player who can enter the Championship. The practical problem with this is that the rating may reach the limit at one point, and then drop below it by the time they play in the Championship. This notwithstanding, the Board do not agree with the principle of an absolute rating floor requirement.

5. How satisfied are you with the proposals regarding Section 4: Qualification from Events? [1 – very dissatisfied, 2 – dissatisfied, 3 – no opinion, 4 – satisfied, 5 – very satisfied]

This scored an approval of **50%.** There were two categories of concerns received:

* That the proposals would mean congresses are not qualifiers in their own right, but they would instead be part of a Grand Prix.
* That the proposals did not go far enough, and would continue to allow players who are too weak to qualify. This view was expressed in particular by those who thought the event should be restricted to being an All Play All, but was also expressed by others.

Therefore, those who gave low scores did so for two opposite reasons, and so it is difficult to draw concrete answers from the final score.

Various specific comments were made:

* Why is the British Championship Grand Prix being restricted to FIDE-rated events? The Grand Prix will include results from all 5, 6, 7 and 8 round Open tournaments in the BICC areas, and is based on FIDE-ratings when awarding points. As above, therefore there needs to be a standard reference point when including these within the Grand Prix, and it is impractical to gather numerous conversions. In addition, it is the current practice that all FIDE-rated Opens are British Championship qualifiers. They would remain so, and the strength of the field is taken into account. Previously, people have complained that some qualifiers are weaker than others.
* Some argued that the Grand Prix model would favour players who play more frequently. The intention is that this will not be the case; the current version of the proposed Grand Prix scoring system had five qualifiers who played in only three FIDE-rated congresses, when we did a simulation of the 2015/16 results. The system is designed to be participation neutral; i.e. the number of tournaments is not important relative to your performance in the tournaments you do play. It is theoretically possible to qualify from fewer than three tournaments; in the 2015/16 simulation, there were four such players in the top 20 of the standings. One-third of Grand Prix points scorers who had not pre-qualified already play in 3 or more FIDE-rated congresses per year, whereas nearly one-seventh of Grand Prix points scorers who had not pre-qualified play in more than 3. Therefore, we are confident that three is the correct number.
* Some congress organisers were concerned that they would lose entries from the fact that their event will not be a qualifier. We won’t know whether or not this is the case until the changes are made, and we do not feel it is wise to speculate on that impact until there is evidence available.

There was a fundamental misunderstanding from some people who thought that the drive to restrict qualification was done at the behest of the stronger players, who didn’t want to play the weaker players. This consultation was not driven by comments from the Championship contenders at all.

8. How satisfied are you with the proposals regarding Section 5: Nominated Players? [1 – very dissatisfied, 2 – dissatisfied, 3 – no opinion, 4 – satisfied, 5 – very satisfied]

This scored an approval of **64.1%.** There were no comments that were apparently about this point in particular, so it is difficult to understand what could be done to make this approval higher. The assumption is that people still had the previous section in mind when answering this.

The BICC members realise their events will lose qualifying places as a result of the proposals in this section, but nevertheless the BICC meeting of 10th April did not object to the changes.

9. Do you have any general comments to make about the issue of British Championship Qualifying? [text]

There was no approval for this section due to the open nature of the comments. I will use this section of the response to respond to individual comments.

One response suggested the qualification by rating should be lower for improving juniors, given how much their rating should improve during the 12 months before the Championship. The BICC Agreement currently allows a weaker qualification for improving juniors, but on balance, we still feel that 2300 is the right level; noting that juniors who improve to that extent are likely to qualify via other means in any case.

On the other hand, one person complained about the proposed lower rating limits for female players. We believe this is essential to ensure a number of players are participating in the Championship for the British Women’s Championship. The option to play in the Major Open will still be open to qualifiers who would rather play in that. The lower qualification limit is legal for women, as it would be for juniors if we did it for them.

There were comments that these changes would make congresses less appealing. We don’t agree that would be the case. Under the current system, most of the congress winners have qualified already via other means, and often the qualifiers are somewhere near the middle of the Open section of the tournament. There was approximately a 1 in 7 takeup rate of qualifiers who then played in the 2016 British Championship. Anecdotally, many people don’t realise they’ve qualified – they usually finish quite low down the Open section of a tournament, but all the people above them have already qualified. The proposed Grand Prix solution aims to address that problem.

Some people questioned whether or not there were enough FIDE-rated tournaments for the Grand Prix to work. Ireland, Scotland and Wales all have at least three FIDE-rated tournaments in them, and the BICC meeting therefore deemed three to be a reasonable number. In England, the ECF is satisfied that each of the Unions has enough FIDE-rated tournaments, often well in excess of three.

Others questioned how busy people could qualify for the Championship with a Grand Prix in place. There is an opportunity to qualify for the Championship in a one-off event for those who do not want to play three weekends – the Major Open. The schedule of this event is identical to the Championship, so if the aim is to qualify to play in the Championship, the expectation is that players can make the necessary arrangements to play in the Major Open.

There was a suggestion that 7-round events should not be Grand Prix events, but should be qualifiers in their own right like FIDE title norm events. The respondent had previously made this representation on behalf of an organisation that organises a 7-round event, and that organiser disagreed with the respondent. For other 7-round events, they are typically played on Bank Holiday weekends with 2 rounds per day, and so they are more like a Grand Prix event than a title norm event, and so they should be part of the Grand Prix.

Others made various comments not immediately linked to the matter on which consultation was made:

* There were complaints about the prize money. Since that person responded, the prize fund for the Championship proper has increased by £20,000 due to the sponsorship of Capital Investments Waterloo Ltd., which we hope satisfies those respondents!
* Others made comments about other aspects of the festival, which were welcome and noted.
* One person commented “Dominic Lawson is just the best person for President of the ECF.” I will undertake to pass on those regards.

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Alex Holowczak

13th April, 2017