

Introduction

This report has been prepared in accordance with the recommendation of the Independent Constitutional and Governance Review Commission that “instead of individual Directors reporting to Council, there should be a single report of the Board, approved by it beforehand”. For ease of cross-referencing, however, the detailed content of the report is structured on similar lines to the recently published Strategy and Business Plan document in order that progress against the objectives contained within that document can be more easily tracked and monitored in the future. The Strategy and Business Plan document, which sets out the Board’s proposed direction of travel over the coming years, has been posted on the ECF website, but is included again for completeness with the papers for the Council meeting.

In summary, the Board’s overall impression is that good progress has been made in a number of areas (subject, as always, to the time constraints facing volunteers with often limited amounts of time available to devote to chess-related matters). Most importantly, the Board has for the most part operated in a collegiate way; any contentious issues, of which there have been remarkably few, have been addressed in private rather than public, and while there have been healthy exchanges of views and differences of opinion between individual Directors, once agreement has been reached at Board meetings Directors have in general maintained “the party line” in public. This can only be helpful in restoring the ECF’s somewhat battered reputation, and if success can be measured by the amount of public criticism made in the direction of the ECF then the Board considers that 2016 has not been unsuccessful in that regard.

One area for which the Board as a whole, rather than any individual Director, has ownership is that of communication. The Board has made great efforts to improve performance in this regard. A Publicity Officer has been appointed, a new email database has been set up so that the Board can communicate directly with league and congress organisers, the ECF forum has been closed down, a new monthly e-newsletter has been implemented to replace Chess Moves, much more use is being made of social media such as Twitter and Facebook, and an Ask the Directors facility has been implemented so that members (and indeed anyone else) can interact directly with Directors. Much work remains to be done in this area (including a long overdue upgrading of the ECF website) but, as the saying has it, “every journey begins with a single step”.

We pay tribute to John Philpott, a magnificent servant of English chess who has decided to take a well-earned break from chess to devote himself to other interests (yes, it is sometimes hard to believe that there is a real world outside chess, but so it seems). John has performed many different roles for the ECF ranging from his current portfolio of Company Secretary, Financial Controller and Voting Register Officer to previous roles of Chair of Governance, Minutes Secretary and many others. At an appropriate time the Board will wish to mark the ECF’s appreciation for John’s work in a suitable way.

Finance

As a consequence of John Philpott's decision to step down from his roles we are actively recruiting for accounting and company secretarial resource in anticipation of his retirement, and any help or suggestions in this regard on the part of Council members would be very gratefully received. Council should note that this Board considers these functions to be core to the sound running of the ECF, and that as such its preference is to seek resource from the open market rather than to rely on volunteers – this comes of course at a cost, but the Board believes that this is a cost well worth bearing if it reduces the risk to these core functions should volunteers depart at short notice.

Since the start of the year much effort has been put into reviewing future funding options for the ECF, and the Board will be recommending to Council that it is time to look to the capital rather than simply the income of our trust funds to support development projects, with membership income used to maintain the ECF's ongoing operations. The Board has come to this view for a number of reasons: (a) For as long as chess remains unrecognised as a sport by the government (and the Board considers the chance of this happening any time soon as somewhere between vanishingly remote and non-existent), English chess must look to its own resources to fund both ongoing commitments and future development work; (b) The ECF should not rely on sponsorship, which is by its nature uncertain and ephemeral, to fund development projects which may in some cases be of many years' duration; (c) Maintaining the large levels of capital in the trusts that the ECF does makes it increasingly difficult to convince sponsors to provide funding when the ECF is perceived to be unwilling to make use of its own available resources; (d) Legacies are a renewable resource – there is no reason why the ECF should not receive future bequests to replace and/or supplement past bequests if it is seen to be behaving in a financially responsible way; (e) The Board does not believe that it would have been the wish of past bequeathers to see income drip-fed out of trusts while deserving causes which the Board and Council believe are vital to the future of English chess are starved of funds.

Hand in hand with the above, the Board has also been developing its financial plan for the coming five years; we refer you to the Finance Director's paper which seeks Council's support. Also, in line with accepted best practice the Board wishes to develop a set of key performance indicators in order to be able to monitor its performance against its plans; this is a development for 2017.

Some other items deserve bringing to Council's attention. Firstly, much good work has been done to maintain and to develop the ECF's sponsorship opportunities, and we thank in particular Tradewise for supporting Hastings and the Grand Prix, Jupiter Asset Management for supporting the England Open team, and the anonymous donors who have supported the British Championships, the British Knockout Championships and the London Chess Classic; their generous support of English chess has been invaluable. Secondly, work is in hand to review game fee billing; this is both an onerous and a manual process as regards which, if the effort involved were charged to the ECF rather than being carried out by volunteers, the cost would doubtless exceed the income generated. We hope to bring forward proposals to next April's Council meeting that will address these and other issues. Finally, putting in place

robust management reporting remains an important objective, and we expect to turn our attention to this in the latter part of 2016 and in 2017.

As part of its concerns for the English chess community the Board agreed a donation towards supporting one of our senior and long standing members during a period of personal difficulty. This is an unusual occurrence, but one which I am sure everyone will endorse.

The Board would like to direct Council's attention to the report of the Chairman of the Finance Committee, Tim Herring, for the Finance Committee's perspective on the ECF's financial affairs.

Governance

The Governance Committee has had an exceptionally busy year on the heels of the Independent Constitutional and Governance Review Commission report, which has understandably been the focus of most governance-related activity. A separate subcommittee, involving selected members of the Board, has been set up under the chairmanship of Julie Denning to review and implement the Commission's findings. It is the view of Robert Stern, Chairman of the Governance Committee, that the recommendations of the Pearce Report will have been substantially implemented by the time of the Council meeting. Robert's report on behalf of the Governance Committee gives further detail.

As well as work on the Independent Constitutional and Governance Review Commission report, the Governance Committee (again, supported by selected members of the Board) has also made progress in developing proposals for Council to consider in relation to voting reform, with the intention of inviting Council to consider at next year's Finance Council meeting a number of options for change (and of course to consider retaining the status quo). On the basis of Council's preference as expressed at that meeting, the Governance Committee will (if Council's preference is not to maintain the status quo) undertake more substantive work to bring before Council a detailed proposal for change.

Junior

Following Council's approval for an ECF Chess Academy good progress has been made. As the Academy prospectus says, "It is one year since we launched the ECF Chess Academy, and our first cohort of students on the "International programme" are progressing well and enjoying their challenging but worthwhile studies." The Academy top tier "elite programmes" have also been launched. Again in the words of the Academy prospectus, "In 2017 we aim to take a further 30 students on to the "International Programme" and launch a further ten "Elite Junior Player Programmes" to continue on from the thirteen programmes launched in 2016. The purpose of the tiers of the Academy, and the programmes within those tiers, is to provide a developmental pathway that a junior can follow, from learning to play chess to potentially becoming a titled player. Eventually we aim to introduce programmes in the national tier for young players to develop the skills needed to become the coaches, arbiters and chess organisers of the future. Above all, we want to encourage a lifelong love and enjoyment of chess, and to see chess thriving in England

throughout the 21st century." England lags well behind many other countries in strength and depth of junior chess (the starting line-ups for August's European Youth Chess Championship are a sobering reminder of just how much work needs to be done to catch up), and if the ECF Chess Academy can go some way towards closing this gap the effort and investment will have been worthwhile.

Elsewhere, the usual full programme of ECF-led junior activity took place. Some highlights: in the Glorney Gilbert International England took first place in the Gilbert Cup, second place in the Robinson and Stokes Cups and third place in the Glorney Cup; the ECF National Schools Chess Championship, now in its sixtieth year, continues to flourish; the English Youth Grand Prix completed another successful year; England were represented in the Open section of the European Youth Team Championships by a team of four players who acquitted themselves creditably against strong opposition; we sent a delegation of 16 players and four coaches to the European Schools Chess Championships and a delegation of 28 players and seven coaches to the European Youth Chess Championships; and the "Chess Leadership Schools" scheme, which superseded the long inactive and defunct "Centres of Excellence" scheme, was launched and is proving successful.

As regards individual junior successes, Akshaya Kalaiyalahan was awarded her FM title by FIDE, Brian Tarhon, Joseph McPhillips, Matthew Wadsworth, William Claridge-Hansen and Adam Taylor achieved FIDE Master titles. Shreyas Royal achieved a well-deserved silver medal in the U7 section of the 2016 European Schools Chess Championships, for which he is eligible for a FIDE Candidate Masters title. Savin Dias won a silver medal in the U10 section of the Commonwealth Chess Championships and Anum Sheikh was elected ECF player of the year for 2015/2016. Arjun Kolani won the first Neil Carr Scholarship Prize at the British Chess Championships, which entitles him to one year of free tuition on the ECF Chess Academy "International Programme".

Finally, as with other areas of English chess, identifying sponsorship funding remains a key priority and will be a continuing focus of attention in the future. As things stand no fewer than five ECF-led schools competitions are dependent on previous years' surpluses and current year entry fees to cover costs.

Women

We are delighted that Sarah Longson has taken on the role of Director Designate of Women's Chess. Women's chess in England has for many years not received the attention it deserves (not least in addressing the problem of the massive attrition rate from junior to adult chess), and has not previously been represented at Board level. The Board will therefore be bringing forward a special resolution for approval at the Council meeting to increase the number of Directorships to allow this important post to be created.

The relative shortness of this section of the report is to some extent at least indicative of the lack of focus on women's chess in the past. We congratulate Jovanka Houska (who also represented England at the European Women's Individual Championships) on winning the British Women's title with a score of 7/11 and with a round to spare. The first separate English Women's Championship took place; congratulations go to Kanwal Bhatia, who won

with 4½/6. Tellingly, only six women entered. Equally tellingly, there is no report on proceedings on the ECF website.

That, by and large, is it. We need to do better!

Home

We have had a steady year on the Home front. Again, some highlights are worth commenting on. The organisation of the British Championships at Bournemouth received much favourable comment, and in particular live games commentary went extremely smoothly, with lessons learnt from the problems of last year and actions put in place as appropriate. Through the support of an anonymous donor we were able to announce a strong Championship field, with Mickey Adams making a very welcome reappearance and winning convincingly with 10/11. Next year we move to a one-week/nine-round format, which the Board believes will encourage those not willing to sacrifice two weeks of their summer holiday on playing chess to enter, quite apart from being a significantly cheaper option. The National Club Championship in its new format continues to expand slowly, although even in the most recent event only 24 teams entered overall and only one team entered the Open section. Clearly more work needs to be done on re-engineering the event if it is to have a long-term future, and in particular the Open section is clearly struggling. This is something we will be giving attention to in 2017. The County Championships continue to attract strong support, and we also thank Tradewise for their sponsorship of the Grand Prix which has enabled us to provide additional prizes to support players on the Grand Prix tournament circuit. Congratulations go in particular to Mark Hebden, winner of the 180+ category, Marco Ho, winner of the Most Improved Player category, and Jacob Yoon, winner of the Junior category.

Although it has largely been “steady as she goes” on the Home front, two initiatives are worth singling out. Firstly, a key challenge for English chess is to not only attract but also retain junior chess talent to replace and replenish our steadily ageing chess demographic. We cannot ignore the rapid rise in the popularity of internet chess, and to that end we hope to develop official ECF internet events that will, we hope, provide a bridgehead to the world of over-the-board chess as an ancillary benefit. Secondly, the ECF arbiter regulations have been thoroughly overhauled after a period of extensive consultation, and we hope to run a number of ECF arbiter courses in the future in consequence.

To end with, special mention should be made of two fine servants of English chess. Richard Haddrell’s long tenure as Grading Administrator has come to an end, and Stewart Reuben will shortly be standing down as Chairman of the Awards Committee; both leave their posts with our very best wishes for the future. Carl Portman, Manager of Chess in Prisons, has gone above and beyond in the time and effort he has expended in visits to numerous prisons around England. These visits have been uniformly well received; in Carl’s own words, “It is not enough to complain about the dark; we should light a few candles. I am so proud that light is being shed in prisons all over England – and indeed the UK. I even received correspondence from an inmate in a US jail. That is how far-reaching this initiative has become. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and this requires a tremendous amount of work – but

as one inmate said, 'Since your chess page has been about I am flooded with other prisoners asking me about chess'. So the work continues."

Membership

There is little to say under the Membership section of this report, which is hopefully as it should be for what is one of the ECF's key operational processes.

Membership numbers across all categories remain broadly stable compared with previous years; the Board has no particular comment to make on this well-debated issue as to whether the structure of the membership scheme itself or changing English chess demographics (or both) are responsible for the fact that numbers are not increasing. One area which can certainly be addressed is the issue of pay to play fees for occasional players, which the Board accepts is at best an irksome administrative task both for chess organisers and for the ECF, and may at worst be discouraging casual players and other infrequent players from engaging in competitive chess. As noted in the Finance section above, we hope to bring forward proposals on this at next April's Council meeting.

One other project of note is the implementation of the new League Management System (LMS), which is on schedule and being monitored closely to ensure delivery to the agreed deadlines. The development, which will be free of charge to all English leagues, is intended to streamline results collection (although leagues wishing to report results in the traditional manner will be at liberty to do so). Leagues using the LMS will only need captains, club secretaries or league secretaries to report results via the website, enabling the ECF to grade the results on a much more timely basis. This will allow the ECF, for example, to move to monthly grading lists in due course if so desired.

A sincere apology is due to Council regarding the unacceptable delay in publishing the 2016 yearbook. Numerous balls were dropped along the way, and the problems that occurred are being addressed. We intend to publish the 2017 issue early in the New Year, and for future years we are looking at the additional information which would need to be available on the ECF website to enable a proposal to be brought forward to Council for the yearbook to be discontinued.

International

The 1970s chess explosion continues to pay dividends with our 50+ teams and 65+ teams doing well on the international scene. The 50+ and 65+ teams secured the bronze medal and fourth place respectively at the World Senior Teams Championship in July (together with a stack of individual performance medals for both teams). Had only a couple of games gone the right way, the gold medal for the 50+ team would have been a very realistic prospect. On the other hand, none of our 50+ grandmasters attended the European Senior Individual Championships, nor did England have a 50+ team in the European Senior Team Championship in April; as one well-known English grandmaster has rightly observed, in the absence of sponsorship it is very difficult for many players to fund themselves.

In this context, the Board are delighted that through the good offices of our International Director we secured sponsorship from Jupiter Asset Management to help provide better conditions, facilities and training in particular for the England international teams at the recent Olympiad. As a result, both teams were close to their maximum strength, and the women's team in particular included one of our most promising juniors in an event in which she scored 7½/10 and from which she is sure to derive huge benefit in the future. The men's team acquitted itself very well, finishing ninth on tie-break, defeating two giants of world chess in China and Azerbaijan, and achieving its best result in many years. Jupiter Asset Management sponsorship will, we hope, also enable us to support training for our elite players throughout the year.

As noted above, however, it remains a sad fact that the benefits of the Fischer boom have now largely disappeared, and that the gap between England and the rest of the world, already wide, continues to widen. If success at international level is a desirable ambition (and the levels of funding and effort involved in achieving Team GB's success at the Rio Olympic Games suggests that most of Britain believes that it is), then, in the absence of government money, sponsorship and legacy funding become ever more important. However, just as important as adequate funding to help our players compete on equal terms at international level and to foster an environment which encourages professional chess is a properly structured hierarchy that gives juniors excellent training and rigorous playing competition to enable them, should they so wish, to progress to a level where they are able to compete with the "best in class" from other countries. The ECF Chess Academy is one of the ways in which we are trying to make this happen; it goes without saying that the Academy will only bear fruit if the participants are committed to working as hard as their counterparts in other countries.

Finally, let us celebrate success in another field of chess. The Great Britain team, under the auspices of the British Chess Problem Society and sponsored by global investment managers Winton, were perhaps slightly unfortunate to finish just outside the medals in the World Solving Championships in Belgrade in August, and our very own John Nunn retained his individual Senior (60+) Champion title. The importance of sponsorship is once again demonstrated; in John's words, "Without (Winton's) support it wouldn't have been possible to field our top solvers in Belgrade".

Conclusion

The Board hopes that this report gives Council a good overview not only of what has been achieved in the recent past but also of what still needs to be done in terms of the future challenges facing English chess. All the Directors currently in post, with the exception of Julian Clissold who is standing for the post of Chairman of the Board, have indicated their willingness to stand again; they are of the view (a view that they hope Council will endorse) that in the Strategy and Business Plan document they have a clear direction of travel for the coming years, and the Board is united in its commitment to deliver it.