

How a Development Officer can help English Chess

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1. Why the ECF needs a Development Officer

England is currently a mid-ranking chess country whose level of organization is fairly stable, but suffers from long-term demographic weaknesses caused by generations of teenagers and young adults leaving the game after primary school and junior chess. Clubs and local organisations are too inward-looking and resistant to change, when with a more pro-active, outward-looking approach we could be on the verge of a chess boom – particularly if opportunities arising from the 2018 London World Championship Match are seized.

Yet with clubs and local organisations focusing more on juniors, and better coordination among various junior chess organizations, we can also take a big step toward restoring England's previously strong position internationally over the next few years.

To establish a strong chess culture nationally, we need to reach out beyond the formal structures of chess organizations and encourage a wider layer of hobby and social chess players to become more active, particularly through public chess in cafes, pubs and libraries.

To rejuvenate the English chess scene, we need to expand into new, innovative formats, such as online team matches and rated games, fun summer leagues, and local and national café and pub competitions. We need to revive the tournament & congress scene after decades of slow decline, due to factors as varied as an ageing ECF membership, longer/unsocial working hours and competition for leisure time, local authority spending cuts, and rising venue and transport costs.

England in the 1970s was a pioneer of weekend Swisses – but now we need to reboot to meet the challenges of the 2020s and beyond. We have some great advantages: the dominance of English language in the online chess media, London as a major centre for world chess and the UK's leadership in chess publishing.

Yet, just like England football teams, we cannot rest on past laurels – for chess to 'come home' we need to tackle the weaknesses in our grassroots game. We need chess to be on public view, accessible and fun – 'Chess For All'. Not tucked away, hidden in traditional chess clubs, but also in a variety of public locations: schools, universities, cafes, pubs, libraries, workplaces, city squares & shopping centres. Some of our existing clubs can play a leading role in this chess revival, but only if they move with the times and embrace new, modern & diversified forms of the game.

This is where a passionate, committed and effective Development Officer comes in.

The Development Officer (DO) should be a key resource for the ECF in promoting this chess revival.

The DO should:

Encourage local organisations to reach out into their communities and recruit new members from the large numbers of people who currently play social, hobby or online chess, or who would like to learn the game – particularly through ‘Chess For All’ public events.

Train local chess organisers to bring these new and casual players into organized chess, particularly women, teenagers and young adults, who will build the ECF’s membership and ensure growth in the future.

Prepare an Annual Development Plan for the ECF and encourage local chess organisations to create their own Development Plans.

Assist local organisers in fundraising and attracting commercial sponsors, and draw up proposals together with national and local organisers to win financial support for chess from key stakeholders such as local authorities and businesses.

The DO should report to the CEO, Director of Home Chess, Director of Junior Chess and International Director.

2. Reviving grassroots chess

Many of our chess clubs fail to welcome (or even discourage) new members, particularly women, juniors and young adults. They focus too much on experts rather than beginners, have no training programmes or help for members to improve, and even struggle to play league matches.

But according to a recent article by the Bristol Chess Times, turning this situation around isn’t ‘Mission Impossible’: It’s already happening at a number of successful chess clubs around the country. These good clubs do 5 key things: They a) Support all levels of chess activity; b) Create a welcoming atmosphere for new and existing members; c) Run tutorials, lectures and club nights; d) Enter multiple leagues and cups; and e) Support juniors.

(‘5 Traits of Successful Chess Clubs’ (Bristol Chess Times) <https://bristolchesstimes.com/2017/11/23/five-traits-of-successful-chess-clubs/>)

A key task for the DO would be to promote these examples widely in the chess community, particularly through online and social media, and to encourage clubs to see that making these changes, even simple ones, can lead to big improvements and rapid results.

The DO should highlight best practice models, offer advice and training to current and potential club organisers, and support clubs and local organisations in making these positive changes.

Many ideas for revitalizing chess clubs are relatively simple, and range from making newcomers feel welcome to organizing fun events such as World Championship fan zones with commentary.

(See **Appendix 1: IDEAS FOR REVITALISING CHESS CLUBS**).

The DO would work with local chess organizations to ensure their Development Plans prioritize outward-looking initiatives to popularize the game.

One effect of this would be that clubs, counties, congresses and other organisations would be strongly encouraged to share all their events on the ECF Calendar, and to coordinate them with each other. (Currently, many local events are missing from the Calendar, resulting in fewer entries and unfortunate date clashes.)

3. Training Local Chess Organisers

The Development Officer should be responsible for the commissioning of a new, expanded Chess Organiser's Handbook as part of a Chess Club Starter Pack for running vibrant, active and welcoming chess clubs.

The Starter Pack should include teaching materials aimed at juniors and adults, drawing upon and including junior training programmes such as those offered by CSC and the Dutch 'Steps' method, as well as a package of equipment including: Demo board, chess boards, sets and DGT clocks, a basic 'Club Version' of Chessbase or similar program aimed for use by a group of players, Swiss Manager or similar computer pairings program.

As a vital step towards creating a much-needed layer of new local organisers, the DO should run and facilitate the organisation of Chess Organiser Training Days, from which attendees could gain a Chess Organiser qualification from the ECF. The training of new organisers is essential to avoid the collapse of clubs and local organisations when a key person retires or moves to a different area.

(See **Appendix 2: IDEAS FOR TRAINING ORGANISERS**)

4. Bringing Juniors into Clubs

The DO should encourage clubs to actively recruit juniors and involve them fully in competitions, leagues and training, emphasizing that this means reaching out to where children and young people are – not simply waiting for them to come to you.

Clubs should offer to help set up a chess club in schools in their local area, offering teaching, materials, advice and other support, as well as offering opportunities within their club for school students. Resources are available from organizations such as Chess in Schools and Communities, and clubs could offer to give a simul or chess display in a school as a taster for children to play.

The DO should encourage clubs to create an atmosphere that is friendly towards children, teenagers and young adults – with various forms of internal and inter-club competitions and activities that newcomers can take part in.

The DO should encourage early evening Junior and Schools Leagues, including online matches to avoid lengthy travelling times.

Promoting Girls' Chess: The DO should encourage clubs and local organisations to actively promote girls' chess, rewarding achievement through a combination of girls' prizes in mixed events and the holding of more girls' tournaments and championships. Such positive discrimination should be used to increase the proportion of girls in all types of chess events.

There should be more training for women and girls by local organisations, including having women players lead coaching sessions, and by using the examples of positive role models such as Judit Polgar, Hou Yifan & Jovanka Houska in training. Junior clubs should be welcoming toward girl players, with female team members given plenty of encouragement.

Clubs should promote an atmosphere where all female players feel safe, comfortable and welcome, without being in any way patronized.

Fostering Cooperation: The DO should act as a coordinator and resource for the various junior organisations to try and improve cooperation and coordination. The DO could also ensure all events are

promoted. Ideally, these organisations would even consider pooling their resources on occasion to fund and organize large tournaments at good-quality, family-friendly venues, training events and team jamborees.

On a national level, the DO should work out a proposed agenda for a possible future meeting of major national junior organisations to discuss the opportunities for collaboration.

The DO should also foster links with local junior centres of excellence, to create a national coaching network that feeds into the ECF Academy.

Libraries: The DO should encourage clubs and other local organisations to start and support children's chess clubs in libraries, working together with such organisations as Chess in Schools and Communities (CSC). The CSC model has been very successful and should be replicated where possible as it can feed positively into club development.

Safeguarding: Clubs should be encouraged to have all members involved in teaching chess and coaching children to complete DBS checks, and to encourage any potential chess teachers to undergo basic tutor training, for example with such bodies as CSC. The DO can coordinate this and assist clubs with the admin process.

5. Embracing New Formats

There are many more types of chess competitions currently being played around the world than a generation ago, and English chess should reflect this and seek to be ahead of the curve.

Changing work patterns and lifestyles, the rise of online chess, and competition from various leisure pursuits such as computer- and console-based games, mean that chess has to adapt and offer different forms of chess in addition to the traditional ones.

The DO should encourage local organisations to embrace new ideas and formats for chess events, including online matches between clubs and counties.

(See **Appendix 3: NEW FORMATS**)

6. Chess for All: Organising Community Chess Events

The DO should coordinate a high-profile 'Chess for All' campaign, aimed at promoting public social chess events and increasing the numbers of people from all backgrounds playing chess.

Chess club members, including juniors, chess teachers and expert players, would take part and encourage newcomers and hobby players to take part in these public events, with the aim of increasing all forms of chess - both social and competitive. This would result in raising chess's profile in the community, and help in creating a chess culture, as well as drawing thousands of new players into competitive chess in various forms.

Also, at a national level, the 'Chess for All' campaign should involve various events around the British Chess Championships, so that the annual event becomes a chess festival aimed at developing chess in that city or region. Events to include various public activities, in the months leading up to, during and after the British, to use the championships as a springboard to boost chess in that area.

(See **Appendix 4: 'CHESS FOR ALL' PUBLIC EVENTS**)

7. Bridging the Demographic Gap

As shown dramatically by the Demographic Survey of ECF members presented to the Board by Malcolm Pein and prepared by Daniel Young, there is a massive gap in the ages of active chess players in England today – it is no exaggeration to say that there is a lost generation.

Look at your local clubs, leagues and congresses – and you will see that there is a keen shortage of players aged 18-50. (In many areas, it is even more pronounced: There are few players between the ages of 11 and 65).

There is also a far smaller proportion of women and girl players in English chess clubs, organisations and tournaments than in many countries in Europe and worldwide.

(Nationally, a 4NCL Women's League in addition to existing places for women in the 4NCL could be one way to encourage greater participation by women and girls.)

The DO should urgently encourage all chess clubs and local organisations to actively recruit teenagers and young adults, and women and girls of all ages.

The Under 35s are the key demographic, and to attract them it's important to try using cool, hipper venues than most chess events are currently held in: hipster hangouts, cool cafes, student-friendly pubs, city centre parks & squares should be used wherever possible, rather than relying on often dingy workingmen's clubs and draughty village halls.

To encourage more young adults to keep playing chess and to take up the game, the DO should encourage local organisations to support university students, their clubs and societies, and promote more events organized by the British Universities Chess Association, including rapidplay and blitz team events.

8. Raising Chess's Public Profile

The DO should forge links with local, regional and national media, and seed a syndicated chess column with puzzles and basic chess material. The DO should seek agreements with local & regional newspaper chains to publish weekly chess columns, and provide local volunteer correspondents with beginner-friendly material for the columns, to which they would add local commentary, news and results.

The DO should also work together with the Director of Home Chess and the Manager of the British Championships to coordinate media coverage for the British to ensure that the Championships get the best possible media coverage, locally and nationally – with daily reports in local newspapers, on local TV, radio and websites.

The Development Officer should also assist the Manager of the British Championships to get live broadcast coverage of beginner-friendly commentary of the events.

The DO should also act as a PR person for local congresses and help organisers by creating templates for press releases, and prepare economic impact and PR value statements for local authorities looking to host chess events.

9. Local & National Fundraising

The DO should work with local chess organisations to engage companies and local authorities, to secure good venues and free or affordable cost, and to secure sponsorship in various forms: to support junior teams & clubs, to purchase equipment, and to finance chess tutors in schools & libraries.

The Development Officer should work to establish relationships between the ECF and commercial chess entities to mutual advantage, and to help local and national congresses secure various sponsorship deals.

Appendix 1: IDEAS FOR REVITALISING CHESS CLUBS

Their key motto should be: 'Let's make it easy for new people to join our chess club.'

There are many examples of good practice around the country, including the Liverpool, Battersea, 3Cs and Forest Hall Chess Clubs to name a few, where they have seen a big growth in membership thanks to:

- a) Promoting the club online & locally – let people know you exist and where they can play;
- b) Encouraging hobby players to come out of their homes and play face-to-face in clubs or at social and community events;
- c) Creating and regularly updating their club websites, Facebook and Twitter pages with news at least once a week, & with all results;
- d) Advertising the club with leaflets distributed in the local community through a variety of outlets, such as pubs, cafes, shops, fast-food restaurants, libraries, health centres, schools/colleges, community & youth centres, as well as places where people spend a lot of time socializing or waiting/queueing such as bus/train stations. (County and other local associations should also produce leaflets inviting the public to play chess at local clubs, giving contact details, venues and playing times for each. Such leaflets have been produced and distributed by Northumberland Chess Association in Newcastle and Gateshead, and have led to an increase in enquiries about clubs.)
- e) Finding someone in the club or through friends who knows how to set up a website and can help with social media.
- f) Distributing free chess sets to as many different places in the local area as possible, especially libraries, cafes, community centres and schools. Cafes are perfect, as they attract people across the generations and from every gender, ethnic & social background. People can be encouraged to play chess over a coffee or during a lunch break. Money can be raised to buy chess sets to be used in the community from your local council, Chess in Schools, the ECF, and Lottery funds.
- g) Chess clubs must be welcoming. Each club needs at least a couple of people who ensure that new 'walk-in' players are welcomed, found a game and invited to join the club. The welcome should be extended to everyone, regardless of background, age, gender or ethnicity, and to players of all standards, from beginner to expert – whether they want to play competitive or purely social chess.
- h) Club competitions and teams must cater for new players of all standards, and especially for juniors.
- i) Clubs must follow up after a new potential member's first visit with a standard welcome email, inviting them to fill in a registration form, play in internal club, ladder or other competitions and/or leagues.
- j) Juniors should be invited in, given games and help to improve, welcomed onto league teams, and wherever possible given experience in a junior league wherever one exists.
- k) Use the Teamer.net app for organising club teams, members, fixtures and events. This app, designed for managing sports teams, is ideal for chess clubs. It enables a club to gather all new members' details, announce fixtures and see who is available for each game, and organise other events/meetings/internal competitions. It also helps clubs to plan who is going to a particular congress – helping people to share a ride and transport costs.
- l) Teamer can also create your own club website as part of its free package, enabling clubs to get an online presence even if no member has Wordpress skills.
- m) Know & share your club history. Famous club alumni from the past and a list of league honours/titles/internal tournament winners should be published online, and displayed at your club venue prominently on a noticeboard, so that winners feel their achievements matter and will be recorded in the club archives. A club Hall of Fame can be created, with photos of the club's past champions and winning teams.

The key, according to Leon Watson of Battersea Chess Club, is actually quite simple: Making club evenings & matches fun and ensuring your club is a sociable, friendly, welcoming place are more important than the level of competitive play, but this atmosphere will help your club to become stronger and win more competitions.

Advertise your club: Another great way to advertise your club and boost team spirit is to produce and wear matching team T-shirts and/or baseball caps, emblazoned with your club logo and some cool and/or funny design.

And there's always music, too: Before the start of club matches, you could play a theme tune for each team to build the atmosphere. From classics such as 'Eye of the Tiger' from Rocky to 'Ride of the Valkyries,' or local anthems such as 'You'll Never Walk Alone,' or 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles,' there's something for everyone.

And the Chess Oscar goes to... The Development Officer should revamp and promote the ECF Chess Oscars, with awards for Club, Congress, School, Junior Club and County of the Year.

Clubs and ECF constituent units should nominate candidates for these awards, from which a panel of respected experts commissioned by the ECF should produce a shortlist and then ECF members can vote for the best in each category. This system will reward excellence and hard work, and ensure fairness and transparency, while giving ECF members an important say in the final winners.

The winners could be invited to a gala evening, for example during the British Championships or the London Classic, where the Chess Oscars would be presented – a perfect way to honour rank-and-file chess players.

Appendix 2: IDEAS FOR TRAINING ORGANISERS

The Chess Organiser's Handbook to include user-friendly information, such as:

Various practical advice and instruction on how to hold various internal club competitions;

- Advice on how to run teams in local and national leagues and competitions;
- FIDE Laws of Chess and ECF rules governing the playing, grading and organising of competitions;
- Advice on running congresses and various external and public competitions, including simultaneous displays, rapidplay and blitz events;
- Guidelines for running a junior club within your chess club, including how to make your venue child- and family-friendly, how to encourage parents, older teenage children and other adult club members to get involved in the running of the junior club, and how to run league teams to encourage the participation of children of all ages (earlier starting times, shorter time limits and organising events at times suitable to school students).
- Recommendations on how to interact with the general public in their area, local authorities, potential sponsors, media organizations and other stakeholders, such as the management of potential chess venues;
- A basic guide to fundraising, approaching sponsors, and maintaining and using healthy club finances for the purpose of developing chess in their local town, city and region;
- A simple guide to setting up and maintaining a club website, with advice and links to good examples and basic templates for websites capable of being used and developed by club members;
- Ideas and suggestions for how to make chess clubs welcoming to new and existing members, using model examples and success stories from around the UK and internationally.

Appendix 3: NEW FORMATS

The format of weekend congresses should be looked at, for example, to see if innovations such as switching to rapidplay, including a FIDE-rated blitz, or making the event more family-friendly by cutting it to 2 days, would attract more players.

One simple step that many congresses are already taking is the introduction of a beginners' section, and they can also consider starting special junior and seniors' events where they do not already exist.

Many different models can be tried – and some will work better than others – but the important thing is for even successful weekend events to be aware of the need for updating and reviewing their format, particularly if numbers drop or a lack of juniors is observed, for example.

Summer Leagues: A lighter, more fun type of chess league (for example, in the summertime) can make league chess more accessible to players and teams who wouldn't otherwise give up a weekday evening to play chess.

The Development Officer could encourage local associations to start summer leagues involving players not currently part of club structures, where all matches are held simultaneously at a central venue, as a complement to existing leagues. Follow the example of the Summer Chess League in London, founded by Battersea and Hammersmith Chess Clubs, where community and workplace-based teams are being encouraged to take part.

London Summer Chess League <http://www.summerchessleague.org.uk/>

There, the league makes teams 4 boards a side, to make raising a team easy and travelling in a single car possible (eg: for 4 players and a driver).

Battersea's convenient regular venue, close to Clapham Junction station, combined with weekday-friendly time controls of 60 minutes plus 30 seconds, made the London Summer League a big hit in its first year, 2017.

Now it has 3 divisions of 6 teams each, and awards 3 points for a win and 1 for a draw to spice up matches. Teams meet up for a curtain-raising social evening in June, then play 5 Tuesdays over the summer to complete the league. As all players gather at the same venue, it adds to the friendly social atmosphere.

Prestigious Regional Events: To promote international events around the regions of England, the Development Officer should help to coordinate a network of 5-day, 9 round FIDE-rated open tournaments & international congresses, and GM/IM/WGM/WIM all-play-all norm events. These events should have the effect of boosting chess locally, particularly encouraging local experts and top juniors to compete for international titles. The UK is way behind most continental countries which is due to an extent to the more favourable environment in local government in Europe. For example, at the recent Lille Open, the congress received subsidies from local government, regional government and cultural bodies. While it would be harder in the UK, there are funds to be tapped into if we just ask and the DO would prepare a template for applications and also seek out local sponsors.

Going Online - Not Your Granddad's Radio Matches: We all remember those references in chess history to the famous USSR v USA Radio Match, Edinburgh v London by Telegraph in the 19th century, or when your granddad played an interminable match by telephone that took 7 hours. Well, the good news today is that, thanks to the internet, you can play a club match against another team in Stavanger, St Louis or Sydney – all on a playing website where play is in real time.

If your club has DGT boards, you can even transmit league games on your website live.

The Northern Counties Chess Union AGM has just passed a rule change that allows clubs to play their matches in the NCCU Club Championship online, and the first trial match is set to take place this summer. (An independent referee at each club venue will ensure that fair play is observed, thus saving both clubs a lot of time and money in travelling and booking a neutral venue).

It's a way of using 21st century technology that doesn't leave us all isolated at home, but rather brings clubmates together in their home venue, while enjoying the excitement of a long-distance match.

It's no exaggeration to say that Internet Chess could even save the County Championships.

Chess Variants: The DO should encourage the organization of local fun chess events, including blitz, handicap, and other events, which use Chess960 (Fischer Random) or other variants, with the aim of popularising less formal kinds of chess.

Organise a Chess Festival alongside the British Championships

The DO should work with the Director of Home Chess and the Manager of the British Championships to organize and facilitate:

Public simuls in city squares/libraries/shopping centres;

'Walk-in Chess' events at the British Championships venue, where beginners and newcomers to competitive chess can drop in, play a game, receive tuition and watch commentary aimed at the general public, not expert players.

A chess-themed exhibition at a city museum and/or central library;

A special run of 'Chess, The Musical' at a local theatre;

A chess-themed film festival, featuring such films as 'The Queen of Katwe' and 'Searching for Bobby Fischer';

'Chess in the Park' Fun Day in summer. Including Live Chess game, kids' tournament, simuls, open-air performance of the musical 'Chess', chess feature film shown at free open-air screening;

Special evening fun chess events, such as pairs blitz, Fischer Random (Chess960), Exchange chess, a quiz night, talent show put on by chess players;

Sports events such as football, cricket & golf matches between chess players and local teams.

World Championship themed-events

Jon Fisher, of the Bristol Chess Times, recommended clubs to use the Carlsen v Caruana World Championship match to attract new members ('How Can British Clubs Benefit From the 2018 World Championship Match?' (Bristol Chess Times) <https://bristolchesstimes.com/2018/03/29/how-can-british-chess-clubs-benefit-from-the-2018-world-championship/>):

Book a room/space in a local pub/cafe and turn it into a World Championship Fan Zone, just like football. Get chess members and friends together to watch online commentary at Chess24 – simply plug your laptop into a large flatscreen TV. Or, if you prefer, you could organize your own commentary by a local expert or chess teacher.

Organise some fun blitz games alongside the commentary, and invite onlookers in the pub to join in.

And in a further innovation, you could invite club members to pick a side and dress up for the occasion, either with a Viking helmet (for Magnus Carlsen) or cowboy hat (for Fabiano Caruana). And if noise is no problem, why not take along a vuvuzela and cheer for your player!

Similarly, you can spice up your usual club venue by advertising a Free Open Night and putting the World Championship match on a TV screen there. Put an announcement in the local paper, flyers in local shop windows, and publicize it as an event on Facebook & Twitter. Invite newcomers and make it a fun evening for beginners and everyone else.

Appendix 4: 'CHESS FOR ALL' PUBLIC EVENTS

The DO should work to support the start of pub & café leagues and competitions. An excellent example of this type of competition is in Bristol, where a Pub Blitz Chess League has started, featuring teams of 3 players (average strength not more than 175), who each play a 6-game blitz match against the 3 players of the other team, once with White and once with Black.

'Introducing the Bristol Pub Blitz Chess League' (Bristol Chess Times)

<https://bristolchesstimes.com/2017/11/26/introducing-the-bristol-pub-blitz-chess-league/>

National competitions for pub and café teams should be organized, with regional heats leading to the national final. The whole competition would be in a lighter vein, recreating the atmosphere of 'coffee house' chess prevalent in New York or Amsterdam, or 19th century London, Paris or Vienna. Sponsors for national competitions should be sought: For example – The Costa Coffee House Chess League, or The Weatherspoons Blitz Chess Challenge.

Fun Themed Children's Events: The DO should encourage local junior organisations to create a fun theme for their regular junior tournaments: Harry Potter or Star Wars, for example, would be ideal for kids to dress up and come as a wizard, favourite Star Wars character and with broomsticks, wands and light sabres. (This was tried very successfully for the launch of a chess club at Stockton Library on Teesside by Sean Marsh and other local enthusiasts.)

Other public chess events to include:

- Chess clubs, displays and simuls in libraries;
- Events for the disabled, including such events as a public match between non-sighted and sighted experts;
- Live chess games, with human participants, in public venues such as city squares and shopping centres;
- Exhibition Games with giant chess sets;
- Blindfold simultaneous displays by a master;
- Public games of chess between a local master/expert and the public, via local media (newspapers, TV, radio, websites), in a similar style to those undertaken by Kasparov v the World or Carlsen v readers of a Norwegian newspaper, etc.
- Public talks on chess, aimed at the general public/beginner, at local libraries.