



REPORT OF THE BOARD TO COUNCIL: OCTOBER 2021

Approved by the Board September 2021

INTRODUCTION

This report has, as in previous years, 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”. The report focuses on what has been achieved during 2020/2021. The Board has reviewed the Strategy and Business Plan document, also included in the papers to Council, and has made a few changes, mainly to reflect the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the increased focus on online chess. The Board is happy that that document sets out the Board’s proposed direction of travel over the coming years and the objectives that the Board has set itself for 2021/2022 and beyond.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

We’re delighted that over the board chess is finally starting to re-emerge after the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the ECF has suffered serious financial and operational damage over the course of last year, the support of our wonderful members and supporters, together with HM Government’s furlough scheme, has enabled us to see out the worst of the pandemic financially, and the unstinting efforts of the volunteers on whom we depend and to whom we are so grateful have not only helped to put a comprehensive online offering in place for our members but also supported the full return to over the board chess for which we all hope so fervently.

Despite our present troubles much has been achieved. Until the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic it was very much ‘business as usual’ for the ECF, and it was also good to see non-ECF over the board events such as the Hastings Congress, the UK Chess Challenge, the London Chess Classic the 4NCL continue to flourish – as they will again. If there has been a silver lining to the Covid-19 cloud, it has been the opportunity that the cessation of over the board chess has given many of our hard-working volunteers to turn their attention to developmental initiatives that will serve us well in the future, in particular in the online chess and grading/rating arenas. Highlights include the following:

- Our work to develop our online chess presence over the last year has been highly successful. Over the last 18 months we have taken the ECF online clubs from a few hundred members at the start of the pandemic to around 7,000 club members, making England one of the largest federations globally for organised online chess. We also have around 7,000 players with an online rating, which is higher by some way than the number of players with a recent over the board rating. ECF Online is hugely appreciated by our membership, and also by new players who have become interested in chess following the Queen’s Gambit series in particular, and who have been joining in significant numbers to take part in ECF online events during the pandemic. The new ECF online players have a different demographic from over the board players, with a much higher percentage of juniors, female players and young players in general. We have taken the opportunity provided by having a large online club to run regular weekly rated tournaments and take part in numerous international leagues on chess.com and lichess, which is again much appreciated by our membership. Highlights for the year include the two British Online Championships in December 2020 and August 2021, the Checkmate COVID marathon in June

2021, and the very successful Improvers Festival specifically targeted at new to chess online players. Much effort has also gone into developing an ECF broadcast facility for online and over the board events led by WIM Natasha Regan and GM Matthew Sadler, who have been providing an outstanding commentary service with a number of IM and GM colleagues which has received extremely positive feedback from our members.

- Clubs and leagues are now restarting over the board chess, with various congresses and events being scheduled. We carried out a survey of over 700 clubs in England, receiving responses from almost 100 which have helped us to better understand the challenges and opportunities that clubs are seeing, together with initiatives in progress where they are looking for support on a national basis. This has provided us with a clear picture of the issues facing our clubs, and we are developing a number of initiatives to provide support for clubs and grassroots chess. We are currently in the course of organising the British Chess Championships for 2021, which will take place in October with separate Open, Women's, Junior and Senior Championships at two venues (Hull and Milton Keynes). Despite the pandemic and the timing of the event outside of the holiday period, we are seeing a good response from players, and look forward to restarting the championships with the supporting Major Open and rating limited events to be staged in the spring as part of a wider chess festival. We also organised a small series of friendly matches for the counties during August and September.
- Despite the problems caused by Covid, junior chess has flourished online. England won three out of four sections of the Glorney Cup, and juniors were entered into the limited range of international online tournaments that were available. The Academy has continued as an online only venture, with plans to adopt a hybrid online/face-to-face approach in due course. A register of coaches has been established, and has proved extremely successful. Work has also begun on a national syllabus to better structure the delivery of coaching for new and inexperienced coaches, and we hope that this will be fully operational in the near future.
- Much hard work has gone into developing our benefits package for members. In particular: our GoMembership proposition offers a range of discounts from over 270 online and high street retailers; Chess & Bridge and Chess Direct continue to offer significant discounts to our members on a range of chess products; our monthly "Chess Moves" magazine has improved in quality by leaps and bounds over the year; and our annual yearbook now provides a complete compendium of news and articles concerning English chess. We will continue to develop our member benefits package so that it makes joining the ECF an attractive proposition regardless of whether rated games are played or not.
- Our new four digit rating system went live in October 2019 and is now well established, with the initial stage of integration with the online rating system in progress whereby online ratings are displayed alongside players' over the board rating. We have moved from an unsupported three digit Clark grading system with two lists per year to a well-managed elo rating system with monthly and daily live ratings recalculated every night and available to all our players. We now have a world-leading rating system for over the board and online ratings which is operated and run by a dedicated rating team.
- Our social media manager, publicity officer and webmaster have continued to work on building our public profile and on developing awareness of chess across England. ECF accounts have around 5,000 followers on Facebook and 10,000 on Twitter. We are also active on chess.com, with the opportunity to reach between two and three million English registered players on the chess.com platform. We have revamped and relaunched the ECF newsletter so that it is now a

free monthly magazine packed with a wide range of chess articles from regular GM, IM and other contributors and comprehensive round-ups of English chess news. We have also taken some initial steps to advertise the ECF on Facebook, with encouraging results so far. We are now fielding regular press enquiries to the ECF and considerable interest from various media outlets.

- The National Chess Library has finally been relocated to De Montfort University Leicester – a great achievement given the logistical difficulties presented by the pandemic. The library is a fantastic resource for anyone interested in the history of chess or looking to pick up some tips for their own game. The books and journals will be catalogued in due course, but for now the collection can be browsed on the open shelves.
- We have continued to keep our costs and operations under close review. Gary Willson leaves us with our very best wishes after many years of dedicated service to the ECF, and we welcome back Christine Adams and Paul Buswell, who will be providing part-time support on an as needed basis. Andrew Walker also deserves a special mention for holding the fort so valiantly during this most difficult of years. We have taken the opportunity to outsource as many of our day-to-day accounting processes as we can to our third party bookkeepers, and all the evidence is that the transfer has gone and is going very well. In the event we have not needed to call on the Permanent Investment Fund for emergency support, as we feared might be the case in last year's report – but our financial position remains fragile such that the restoration of the ECF's finances to a reserves level of £100k or so may have to be put on hold for the time being.
- Mention should be made of the annual ECF awards, which recognise the achievements of many of our volunteers during the year. This year awards were made to The UK Braille Chess Association (Contribution to Accessible Chess), Lawrence Cooper (Contribution to Women's Chess), Uxbridge Junior Chess Club (Contribution to Junior Chess), Camberley Chess Club (Club of the Year), Oliver Brennan (Online Contribution of the Year), Cheney Rapidplay (Congress of the Year), and Joe Conlon and Andy Howie (President's Award for Services to Chess). Our thanks go to them, and to all our other volunteers who work so hard in the cause of our great game.