

REPORT OF THE BOARD TO COUNCIL: OCTOBER 2023

Approved by the Board September 2023

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 2022/2023. The Board has reviewed and updated the Strategy and Business Plan document, and is happy that it sets out the Board's proposed direction of travel over the coming years and the objectives that the Board has set itself for 2023/2024 and beyond.

The report is a rather 'lighter touch' report than those of previous years. Most if not all of the detail supporting the report's high-level overview is contained in the ECF's monthly *ChessMoves* publication, and there seems little point in repeating that content here.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

The highlight of the year has undoubtedly been the Government's announcement of a combined package of measures worth almost £1 million to support chess. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport's ('DCMS') grant of £500,000 over two years will go to inspiring the next generation of chess players, bringing chess to a wider audience, whilst supporting the development of elite players and our best juniors. Plans will see investment in the ECF that will ensure players receive world-leading training and development opportunities and help make England a chess heavyweight again. Separately, there will be grants (£200,000) from the Department for Education for schools in disadvantaged areas to get more primary school children playing chess, and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will fund the installation of 100 new chess tables in public spaces (£250,000). At the moment we have little information about how the funding will be allocated while discussions continue with DCMS, but we expect more detail to emerge once those discussions are complete. As part of the discussions, we will need to consider how much of the funding can be applied to the ECF's existing funding for international chess, and to what extent we can potentially extend support for grassroots chess and other activities.

As well as its engagement with HM Government over the last few years, the Board has continued to pursue sponsorship opportunities to replace sponsors such as Tradewise and Chessable. It would be premature to announce anything at this stage, but we are quietly hopeful of being in a position to announce some positive developments in this regard in the not too distant future. As with HM Government funding, however, we are determined that sponsorship should not be used to fund our ongoing core expenditure run rate – the loss of DCMS funding many years back and the resulting disruption that that caused remains a painful reminder of the resulting dangers.

The ECF's finances and operations continue to be in a healthy state. Membership numbers as at the end of August 2023 stood at record levels, with 18,491 members in total (14,134 paying members) compared with 14,146 members in total (11,411 paying members) as at the end of August last year. This 'installed base' of paying members gives us the confidence to plan securely for the future, and we believe that rolling membership, alongside our membership benefits package, has been and will continue to be instrumental in helping us to continue to grow our membership numbers.

While on the subject of membership, Council members will have seen that the Board has submitted a membership options paper for Council's consideration following the request made by Council

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members at April's annual general meeting. For the avoidance of doubt, the Board would like to make clear that although its preferred option is to adopt a single membership fee model for the longer term (on the basis that the cost of providing most ECF membership benefits is broadly the same per member regardless of the amount of chess that a member plays, and that therefore those membership benefits should be available equally to all members regardless of the amount of chess played), it is for Council and not the Board to decide on its preferred funding model for the ECF. The Board's opinion is just one among many.

Over the board chess has recovered well from the depredations of the Covid pandemic, and the ECF has played its part in organising a number of events. The Board is happy that the suite of events organised annually by the ECF on its own account or on behalf of the British Isles federations overall is now pretty much in place and complete, comprising as it does the British Championships, the British Rapidplay, the English Championships, the English Women's Championships, the English Senior Championships, the UK Open Blitz, the Cambridge International, the Grand Prix and the National Club Championships. A few highlights: the UK Open Blitz had a very successful inaugural outing, the new Cambridge International event sold out a month beforehand in February, the English Championships were re-established as national championship tournaments in May, the National Club Championships will return in October after a lengthy over the board absence, and we had record entries at this year's British Championships in Leicester during July.

Online chess also goes from strength to strength. We have record online membership numbers, with over 10,000 players in the three ECF clubs on Chess.com and Lichess, and a total of eight ECF online rated club tournaments across Chess.com and Lichess. ECF/ England teams also participate in the Live Chess World and European leagues on Chess.com and the online Bundesliga and Liga Ibera on Lichess. We also held another very successful online marathon in support of the Red Cross humanitarian appeal for Ukraine. Our growing online community is based on ECF club membership, which has been key to attracting new ECF members.

On the international stage we have many successes to report:

- On the junior front England won three out of four sections at the Glorney Cup. Samar Dayal won gold in the Commonwealth Under 8 Championship, Bodhana Sivanandan won silver in the World Under 8 Girls, Zoe Veselow won silver in the European Under 8 Girls, and Bodhana Sivanandan won gold at the World Under 8 Girls Rapid and World Under 8 Girls Blitz. The following juniors achieved titles: Aaravamudhan Balaji (FM); Kenneth Hobson (CM); Nina Pert (WCM); and Bodhana Sivanandan (WCM).
- Our golden run at European and world seniors level continues. Congratulations to John Nunn on winning the European Seniors 65+ title to add to his current World 65+ title; John secured the title with 7/9 on tiebreak, ahead of four others including Terry Chapman who also had an excellent tournament. Congratulations are also due to Keith Arkell who came joint first with six others in the European Seniors 50+ section with 6½/9 but lost out on tiebreak to a regular winner of this title, GM Zurab Sturua. English team success at senior level continued as the England 50+ team stormed to victory at the end of last year at the European Senior Team Championships in Dresden, with Mark Hebden, Keith Arkell and John Emms scooping individual gold board medals and Glenn Flear securing the individual silver board medal. And at July's European Senior Team Championships English teams did even better, with gold medals for the 50+ and 50+ Women's teams, silver for the 65+ team, and a plethora of individual board medals too numerous to mention here but which can be found at [Roll of Honour – recent ECF medallists \(teams\) – English Chess Federation](#).

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Women's chess saw a year of solid progress in the main, although disappointingly female membership numbers still remain at less than 10% of overall membership numbers. Highlights include: A gold medal for the 50+ Women's team at July's European Senior Team Championships (see above); Harriet Hunt winning the second English Women's Online Blitz Championship; Lan Yao getting her final WGM norm at the British Championships; Sheila Jackson sharing the title in the 65+ British Championship; the setting up of the Djuna Tree Chess Fund, which awards scholarships to low-income female chess players; and the continuing success of The Lichess England Women's team, led by WGM Jovanka Houska and Caroline Robson - this is a well-subscribed club for women and girls on Lichess with a regular schedule of club and international events which currently has around 350 members. On a very serious downside, public allegations were made recently by a female chess player regarding entirely unacceptable behaviour from several people within the game. The ECF takes all such allegations seriously, and encourages anyone who has been harassed, threatened or suffered abuse at a chess tournament to contact the ECF in complete confidence so that action may be taken where possible, and if requested, for the matters to be taken to the relevant authorities where appropriate.

Rolling membership is now in place (not without some technical glitches along the way). In the Board's view it has been a great success overall by getting rid of the previous unfair arrangements whereby new members would in many cases receive only part of a year's benefits in return for a full annual subscription. It cannot be denied that although it is a much fairer system than the previous one its workings are not always as easy to understand as the previous system, and the Board has worked hard to publish clarifications as and when these have been needed.

We have continued to work on improving our benefits package, with our monthly magazine *ChessMoves*, the ECF yearbook, JustGo Rewards, and Chess & Bridge discounts worthy of particular mention. *ChessMoves* is now well established as our main vehicle for communicating with members, supported by our social media presence, our website and periodic all-member emails.

As regards the day-to-day services that the ECF provides, the Board and Officers of the ECF, ably assisted by our Office staff, continue to work hard to maintain and develop the ECF's support services. The following (non-exhaustive) list gives an idea of the extent of these services:

- Maintaining and developing rating services;
- Maintaining and developing the league management system;
- Dealing with new and renewing members;
- Organising ECF tournaments and congresses;
- Producing the ECF's monthly magazine *ChessMoves* and annual yearbook;
- Keeping the ECF website up to date;
- Ensuring that facilities such as the events calendar, the registered coaches scheme, the junior clubs development pathway, the clubs home page, the club finder facility etc are regularly reviewed and updated;
- Maintaining and developing our complaints/safeguarding/safe space policies;
- Working closely with the Chess Trust and the John Robinson Youth Chess Trust;
- Working closely with Chess in Schools and the Community on prison outreach work;
- Supporting international team trips;
- Running three ECF online clubs;
- Providing training and refresher course for arbiters.

The annual ECF awards recognise the achievements of many of our volunteers during the year. This year awards were made to Bob Jones, Rupert Jones, Alex McFarlane, Peter Purland and Kevin Staveley (President's Award for Services to Chess), Chris Lewis (Contribution to Junior Chess),

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Caroline Robson (Contribution to Women's Chess), Leeds Junior Chess Club (Club of the Year), Ringwood Chess Club (Small Club of the Year), University of Warwick (Congress of the Year), and Greenwich Peninsula Chess Club (Contribution to Chess in the Community). Our thanks go to them and as always to all our other volunteers who work so hard in the cause of our great game. We would also like to pay tribute to volunteer Carl Portman's outreach work with prisons; Carl has visited several prisons this year including HMP Littlehey, Hewell, Gartree and Dartmoor, and reminds us that the latter even made him a special chess cake for his visit, as seen in *ChessMoves*. Carl even managed to get permission for the BBC and the Justice Department to film at HMP Hewell, and the ECF were mentioned on BBC Breakfast, Radio 5 Live and many other stations, with people across the world seeing the BBC's video. Carl tells us that he continues to receive many letters from prisoners, telling him how chess is changing lives, and imploring him on behalf of the ECF to continue this work.

Finally, a quick word on the accompanying Strategy Statement. This has been reviewed and updated, but no fundamental changes have been made. The Board has come to the view that a number of the objectives contained in the document are either not achievable or not measurable in any realistic way, and that in any event it does not guide the behaviour of the Board and other ECF officials in any particularly meaningful way. We will accordingly regroup next year and reflect on whether a shorter and altogether more focussed and measurable strategy document can be developed.