

## REPORT OF THE BOARD TO COUNCIL: OCTOBER 2024

### Approved by the Board September 2024

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’.

The Board has reviewed, updated and streamlined 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 2024/2025 and beyond. The Board intends to review the Strategy and Business Plan document again in the light of potential future Board changes, including the intention of the CEO to stand down in October 2025.

This report differs from previous reports in taking a wider look at some of the things that the ECF has achieved over the last decade or so rather than focussing on a specific year, reflecting the copious information given by the ECF’s website and monthly magazine *ChessMoves* about what has been accomplished during 2024/2025.

### Funding

- Most recently, our regular lobby of and dialogue with HM Government was rewarded with funding of almost £1 million to support chess at all levels, ranging from supporting the development of our elite and professional players to grants for schools in disadvantaged areas to get more primary school children playing chess.
- Alongside the HM Government funding above, we have succeeded in setting up a grassroots fund of around £140,000, to be spent on supporting local and regional initiatives across a range of initiatives. This link gives more information about what’s involved: <https://www.englishchess.org.uk/ecf-grassroots-support/>

- The Permanent Invested Fund (PIF) has been donated to the Chess Trust from the BCF, with the only administrative piece of work left to complete being that of winding up The Chess Centre Limited. The Chess Trust has agreed to hold £100,000 of PIF assets as a 'rainy day' reserve should the ECF fall on hard times; this arrangement provides an extra level of financial security to the ECF in addition to its £50,000 reserves target.
- We have been true to our long-term objective of funding our ongoing core expenditure through membership income, whereas third party funding (excluding that from the Chess Trust and the John Robinson Youth Chess Trust), sponsorship etc is only used to support non-recurring activity given our experience of the risks of relying on third party funding which is subsequently withdrawn.

### **Growth, Membership and Benefits**

- The number of paying members has increased from 9,714 as at the end of August 2014 to 14,236 as at the end of August 2024, a very creditable outcome in the Board's view.
- We established a wide-ranging set of benefits, with our monthly magazine *ChessMoves* (now a 60 page + online magazine as opposed to its previous incarnation as a fairly short newsletter), the ECF yearbook (transformed from a fairly dry directory to an annual 200+ page news digest), JustGo Rewards, and Chess & Bridge discounts worthy of particular mention. *ChessMoves* is well established as our main vehicle for communicating with members, supported by our social media presence, our website and periodic all-member emails.
- Rolling membership has been successfully in place for some time now, removing 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.
- Silver and Gold membership has been combined into a single Gold class. This has simplified our overall membership structure and removed the anomaly

of congress players being required to pay a significant membership fee premium simply to play in FIDE-rated events as opposed to ECF-rated events.

- Our four digit rating system went live in 2019. This has moved us from an unsupported three digit Clark grading system with two lists per year to a well-managed and comprehensive elo rating system providing official monthly and unofficial 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 covering standardplay, rapidplay and blitz chess, operated and run by a dedicated rating team.
- We implemented a new membership system (formerly Azolve, now JustGo) in 2018 to improve the service and options available to members. The system undoubtedly still has its weakness and shortcomings which we continue to work hard with JustGo to address, but it is undoubtedly a great improvement on its predecessor.

### **Support for Leagues, Congresses and Clubs**

- Our League Management System was implemented in 2017, with continuing improvements since then. The system now supports hundreds of leagues, congresses and clubs.
- Our events calendar has been redeveloped to improve accessibility, improve visibility for events, and make it easier for players to find events by category. A new calendar is currently being implemented to improve its 'look and feel' still further.
- Other club-related services include: a clubs page offering advice on a whole range of club-related matters; a club finder facility allowing players to locate and contact clubs near them (the information on the page is regularly cleansed and updated – do please check the information for your own club to make sure it's up to date); discounts on chess equipment courtesy of our friends at Chess & Bridge; club insurance.
- The ECF's arbiter scheme is now well-established, comprising a registration scheme with four levels of accreditation, a regular series of arbiter training

courses and tests, and a list of over 350 ECF-registered arbiters at different levels available to support chess across the country.

## **Events**

- 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 complete, comprising as it does the British Championships, the British Rapidplay Championship (in partnership with the 4NCL), 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.
- We have re-established and grown the British Chess Championships since Covid, with a comprehensive range of separate events catering for all tastes and ages and also including a wide-ranging and very well-received series of social events.
- The ECF now offers a comprehensive online chess package. 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.

## **Junior Chess**

- We have worked closely with both the Chess Trust and the John Robinson Youth Chess Trust to provide support to our most promising junior chess players. In particular, we supported the Chess Trust in setting up the new Accelerator Programme for our elite junior players.
- We have set up a Development Pathway programme for junior clubs, the objective of which is to create a structured and formal progression plan for junior chess players which incorporates existing coaches, junior clubs, associations and programmes. The programme's hoped for outcomes are to: develop junior talent to reach their chess potential; achieve competitive success in the junior ranks of international competition; develop the next generation of professional players in the senior ranks; help develop greater

clarity for parents and players regarding their development options and opportunities; provide a fair market place for individuals and organisations to compete and offer their services. It's fair to say that the programme hasn't been marketed as well as it might be, and this will be on our 'to do' list for the coming year.

- We're delighted at the recent successes on the world stage of our latest crop of highly talented juniors. We applaud the wonderful efforts of our various junior organisations around the country in helping to bring this about, and would like to think that the ECF's activity in the junior space has contributed. A more coordinated approach across the English junior stage would reinforce the progress our juniors are making; relationships between the various important junior organisations are probably better now than they've ever been, but chess organisations generally often guard their independence fiercely, and it may be that junior activity now is as coordinated as it's ever going to be.

### **Women's Chess**

- Recognising that women's chess in England had for many years not received the attention it deserved (not least in addressing the problem of the massive attrition rate from junior to adult chess), and had not previously been represented at Board level, the ECF appointed its first Director of Women's Chess in 2016. While progress in increasing female representation at all levels of chess has been frustratingly slow (for example, overall female representation within our membership base remains stubbornly just below the 10% mark), we're optimistic that sound foundations have been and are being put in place to improve the prospects for future growth.

### **International Chess**

- England continues to maintain its place as a top ten ranked team on the international stage. To state the obvious, however, our top players are not going to go on for ever, so it's encouraging to see that the efforts made over the last decade or so by the ECF and other organisations to address the earlier relative neglect of elite junior chess may finally be bearing fruit as a new wave of junior talent seems to be emerging.

- At the other end of the scale, the 'English chess explosion' in the 1970s and 1980s is now bearing fruit in a whole string of gold, silver and bronze medals at 50+ and 65+ level in European and world individual and team events as the golden generation from that era turns its attention to senior chess events. Long may it continue!
- The DCMS-funded focus on supporting and developing our elite and professional players that we mentioned at the start of this report will, we hope, be transformational in the future fortunes of our international male and female teams.

### **Education, Titles and Certification**

- We have introduced a Registered Coaches Scheme which has two main objectives: to provide an opportunity for all coaches to advertise themselves; to provide reliable information to those seeking coaching. The scheme has over 130 registered coaches; there are four levels based on both experience and qualifications ranging from coaches with basic skills and experience through to coaches who have worked for 10 + years at international and are published chess coaching authors.
- The Certificate of Excellence scheme has been redesigned and relaunched with the introduction of online tests. The scheme, designed by chess professionals, is a progressive three-level chess course for everyone starting chess or interested in improving their expertise in chess.
- The National Titles/Master Points scheme has been reintroduced. All title holders receive an ECF certificate in recognition of their achievement, and are registered with their highest national title on the ECF National Titles/Master points website page until/unless they achieve a higher level International/FIDE title.
- The International Rating Officer function has been reorganised and developed to provide more efficient management of FIDE registrations, FIDE-rating of events and FIDE title awards.

### **And All the Other Stuff...**

- We have worked hard to improve our social media and PR presence. We have a Social Media Manager and a Publicity Officer, and have a large and growing

presence on Facebook, the platform formerly known as Twitter. We're also active on chess.com, with the opportunity to reach between two and three million English registered players on the chess.com platform.

- Our outreach work includes: working closely with Chess in Schools and Communities on bringing all the benefits that chess can offer to prison inmates; support for chess centres and grassroots chess; making chess more accessible through working with groups such as the English Deaf Chess Association and the Braille Chess Association.
- We completed the implementation of the Pearce Commission recommendations ('Independent Constitutional and Governance Review Commission Report to the Council, Board and Governance Committee of the English Chess Federation').
- We established the Chess Trust on a firm footing with the proceeds of Richard Haddrell's estate such that it is an appropriate vehicle for other bequests and donations should they be received. The principle that there should be no restriction on the use of capital should the trustees deem that to be appropriate was also established. The ECF Board has two ECF ex officio trustee positions (Chief Executive and Finance Director) on the Trustee Board of the Chess Trust.
- We have started a project to review our IT infrastructure, which has been creaking for some time. In particular, we want to address our various IT system inefficiencies and vulnerabilities and our key person dependencies. This is likely to be a fairly expensive exercise, and so will probably be spread over a number of years.
- The National Chess Library has been relocated to De Montfort University Leicester under a renewable twenty-year lease agreement, finally providing a secure future for the ECF's large collection of books, magazines and ephemera after many decades of uncertainty. 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.
- We have strengthened our internal processes and controls, including regular reviews of, for example, our GDPR and safeguarding policies, our by-laws and our regulations, and our registered coaches scheme.

- The ECF's accounting processes have been professionalised, with a proper accounting package (Xero) implemented and routine accounting and bookkeeping services outsourced to a professional provider. services