

The 'Pay-to-Play' proposals from the English Bridge Union (EBU) have now been in the public domain for fully six months. Much discussion has taken place, not least in BRIDGE, and decision time is fast drawing near. Mr Bridge has asked me to do some 'blue sky thinking'. My guess is that the EBU Board will go ahead with the changes, yet that a good number of bridge clubs throughout England will be unhappy. Some of these clubs may decide not to continue affiliation. What might the future hold for such unaffiliated clubs?

The Proposals

Let me start by summing up the present state of the proposals:

- Individual members will no longer pay a subscription to the EBU.
- In its place, all affiliated clubs will pay a levy, on every session of duplicate bridge, known as 'Pay-to-Play'.
- Club subscription to the EBU will continue. The proposed club affiliation fee is now £30 p.a. per club, irrespective of size. (The EBU has dropped the idea of different fees for clubs of different sizes.)
- Affiliated clubs will be required to report electronically to the EBU so that the latter can calculate and invoice the Pay-to-Play fee.
- The Pay-to-Play fee will be in the order of 40p per player in all club duplicates. The EBU has spent the last two months gathering data from clubs to find out just how many playing sessions take place, so that they can decide on the right figure for the Pay-to-Play levy.
- Only Pay-to-Play duplicates will be eligible for Masterpoints. Affiliated clubs may choose not to issue Masterpoints but will still pay the Pay-to-Play fee, at a rate of roughly 10p per player less than for Masterpoint duplicates.
- Masterpoints will all be electronic and paper Masterpoints will be no more.
- All players in Pay-to-Play games will become 'members' of the EBU and will receive copies of English Bridge and other benefits. There will be no registration fee. The EBU has scrapped its original idea of a one-off administration fee of £5.

EBU Pay-to-Play. What

Long-Standing Mr Bridge writer N

- The EBU expects county associations to follow suit, dropping the annual fees their members pay and setting their own Pay-to-Play fee. The EBU will collect this fee with the National Pay-to-Play fee and pay it to the counties.

The Timetable

Over the last couple of months, the EBU has asked counties to canvass clubs to see whether they broadly support the proposals or not. The counties have also gathered details on how many playing sessions the clubs organise, how many people attend, and hence the number of Pay-to-Play payments that will be due. The EBU will use this data to set the first Pay-to-Play fee.

The draft final proposals from the EBU's 'Membership Development Action Group' are due in January this year (2008), and a meeting of the MDAG in February will finalise those proposals. From there they will go to the EBU Board for approval in March. The approved final proposals will then go to the 'shareholders' of the EBU (county delegates) in May and an extraordinary general meeting of the county delegates will take place on 4th June 2008. This meeting will either accept or scrap the plan. If accepted, it will take effect from April 2010.

What's the Point

By proposing these changes, the EBU hopes to bring into membership the many club bridge players who do not currently join the EBU. They will make administrative savings by having electronic-only Masterpoints and smoother revenue collection throughout the year. The circulation of English Bridge will go up with the hope of increased advertising revenue. Finally, the EBU hopes that higher membership figures will make the organisation 'more compelling in approaches to government, the media, and potential sponsors'.

What is not so Good

The scheme brings with it extreme central control, invading the autonomy of clubs. There is an element of compulsion about the scheme. One county, Leicestershire, on its website, describes this as 'undemocratic and unsavoury'. The list of benefits that the EBU says that it will offer to clubs (see BRIDGE 85) is overstated.

The realistic chance that bridge will have much impact on government is zero. Any move to have 'mind sports' recognised by the Sports Council and hence the National Lottery, died four years ago. At that time, the International Olympic Committee dismissed the applications of bridge and chess to be in the Olympic programme and asked them not to re-apply. The 1937 Education Act, which bars the recognition of non-physical activity as sport, remains unaltered. Bridge is a specialised activity and any hope of its appearance in the National Curriculum, as suggested in BRIDGE 86 by Sally Bugden, Vice-Chairman of the EBU, must surely be a complete pipedream. Personally, I would rather see a greater focus for schools on basic literacy!

The EBU, if it goes ahead with the Pay-to-Play scheme, will be taking a huge risk. The current membership model, while in decline, is by no means broken: membership fees, including county dues, currently generate some £375,000 of income for the EBU. Masterpoints produce another £235,000 out of a total EBU income of £1.6m. (Competition fees raise the bulk of the rest – some £619,000 in the year to March 2007). The Pay-to-Play fee will have to replace all the revenue from membership fees and Masterpoints from the outset.

The EBU claims they do not intend to raise more money with the new structure but, if it works, there will be a large number of new members to service with magazines and so on. Indeed, with 'free' membership it is likely that there will be many new members whether they come in through Pay-to-Play or not. Counties will also

Where Do You Stand?

ED PAUL is finding it hard to decide

need extra resources to service new members, many of whom have yet to show any desire to play outside their clubs. The scheme does not hold out any prospect of enhanced democracy – the EBU does not intend to give individual members a vote over its affairs.

Best Case Scenario

The best case for the EBU is that bridge players in England come to accept the proposals and that criticism of the strategy will turn out to have been natural resistance to change. There will be a bit of residual muttering but we will all pay up and swallow our doubts. The EBU intends to ask each club to sign a contract, which amongst other things will specify the regulations for Pay-to-Play. The calls for more democracy will have no more effect than calls for a referendum on Europe do on our national politicians.

With its higher membership base, we may suppose that the EBU can gain commercial sponsors for an enlarged competition programme and can make some impact on bridge in education. Any clubs who opt out will quickly realise the error of their ways and rejoin the new EBU.

Clubs Assert Themselves

A different scenario comes when clubs realise it is they who deliver bridge to their members and not the EBU. Nothing much will change for the clubs that adopt Pay-to-Play, except that they will have to account to the EBU at between three and four times the current rate for Masterpoints. Signing the EBU contract will also put the clubs in a Master-Servant relationship with the EBU. This will be with the EBU as master, when I believe it should be the other way round. Its proponents present Pay-to-Play as a levy on individuals – but the players do not analyse their table money – they just grumble when it goes up.

In practice, Pay-to-Play is a tax on clubs and organisers. Some clubs might decide it is unfair, not only to collect the money but account for it as well. Maybe

the members would prefer tea, coffee and biscuits, and an independent club rather than pay the Pay-to-Play charge.

A decision by a club to affiliate or not affiliate could cause schism. A club that votes to leave will no longer issue Masterpoints, thereby upsetting those members who are keen collectors. On the other hand, a vote to stay in will mean higher table money for all, and inclusion willy-nilly in the Masterpoint scheme of everyone in the club. Up to now, a majority of players in most clubs have not bothered with nor sought to collect them.

The one-size-fits-all nature of the proposals does not fit easily into the bridge landscape. Clubs exist for all sorts of reasons. Some are purely social, some for learning, only a minority are flat-out competitive. The EBU seems to take no account of Chicago or rubber bridge, both still important in many bridge clubs. They also overlook that many people play bridge in their homes rather than at clubs. Marketing people classify the likes of bridge as ‘Long Tail’ activities; only a small part of bridge is visibly organised; the rest is just a long tail of social and occasional bridge. The EBU needs to find ways of encouraging the long tail, not cutting it off because it produces little income.

Life Outside the EBU

Let us imagine then the scheme goes ahead and some (many?) clubs choose to withdraw from the EBU. What are their prospects? Clubs do not need the EBU for publicity. Any prospective player these days is likely to start with an internet web search. You have moved to Little Dunting? Just put ‘Little Dunting Bridge Club’ into Google (or ask the local librarian to do so) and you will soon be up and playing. The services that clubs need are all available from commercial suppliers. Dealing software, scoring software, tables, boards, cards, other equipment, stationery, website software, and so on are all easily obtained from non-EBU sources.

If a number of clubs in a county

withdraw, it would be natural for them to form some kind of information exchange, and maybe even form local leagues for inter-club play. Indeed county organisations may have to decide whether to recognise unaffiliated clubs in some way simply to maintain an overview of bridge in their area. Which will be the first county to break ranks and go down this route?

Unaffiliated clubs will not have access to EBU Masterpoints. A well-organised club with a good social ambience may find that Masterpoints are not necessary. Maybe even a non-EBU scheme will emerge. The Pay-to-Play fee of 40p per session per player is quite a chunk of cash. Paid to an alternative Loyalty Card type of supplier this amount of money might easily generate a new kind of ‘Masterpoint’. Not only would you get your promotions, but also ‘Masterpoints’ would be worth something. Imagine being able to claim money off bridge books and software, discounts on bridge holidays, and even special offers from outside commercial partners. The EBU could do these things of course, but centralised organisations are not good at creating initiatives like this. If the opportunity is there, an entrepreneur with an eye to the main chance is likely to move in first.

Where Do I Stand?

So where do I stand on all this? I organise and instruct bridge for a living and one of my clubs is currently in membership of the EBU. I am self-employed and although I write for Mr Bridge and host weekends, I do this on a fee basis and it is just part of the mix that keeps me going. I like to think that all that I do is good for bridge and helps sustain the game in my area.

I have been a member of the EBU since the days of Dimmie Fleming, Harry Scully and Harold Franklin (remember the old EBU Quarterly?). I feel very loyal to bridge and passionate about the success of a strong national organisation. I know and respect many of the EBU staff and officers. However, I feel ill at ease with the Pay-to-Play proposals. I want to defend my club’s independence and the right of choice for my players. As I wrote before, it is hard for instinctive centralisers to understand these doubts.

I have not yet decided what to do. I suspect that I will be guided by ‘market forces’, whatever produces the best outcome for my clubs. Am I wrong? ■