

Could Hybrid events save English chess?

We need to face a stark reality: Unless the ECF reinvents itself and finds new ways to organise chess, the organisation faces potential financial collapse in the next 12-18 months. I am therefore proposing 6 steps to save English chess (and the ECF) during that period.

With the prospect of a continuing Coronavirus crisis worldwide, with particular public health challenges facing England and the rest of the UK, we know that it will be extremely difficult to go back to 'normal' large-scale, over-the-board (OTB) chess gatherings such as the British Championships, weekend congresses and the 4NCL in the short and possibly medium term.

As the ECF derives most of its income from membership fees from people playing ECF graded games, under its current financial model the ECF must organise graded games to survive.

Since the start of this year, there have been a number of ECF Online Events that require players to be ECF Supporters and provide players with ECF Online Ratings. But Supporters' fees (£5 annually currently, rising to £10 if ECF Board proposals are accepted) can realistically only provide a fraction of the income that the ECF needs to survive.

1 Organise Hybrid Chess Events

My first, and most important, proposal is that for the 2020-21 season, we put our primary focus on organising and facilitating a new form of chess: **Hybrid Chess Events** (HCE).

Hybrid Chess Events are ones where smaller numbers of players gather at a local venue (such as a chess club, pub, community centre, library or school/college/university) and play ECF Graded Games online using a laptop under the supervision of an **Independent Invigilator**. In one sense, Hybrid Chess Events are simply the modern-day equivalent of the old-style telephone match, but ones where we combine modern technology offered by online playing chess servers with exam-style invigilation.

For more information about the pioneering development and theory behind Hybrid Chess Events, see this excellent article by GM Jordi Magem Badals, Technical Director of the Catalan Chess Federation:

<https://www.chesstech.org/2020/the-new-reality-comes-with-new/>

To generate sufficient ECF membership fees income for 2020-21, the ECF should organise and promote 3 levels of Hybrid Chess, each equating to a category of ECF membership:

1. Bronze: Local team and individual competitions (such as local or regional leagues and local individual competitions).
2. Silver: Rating-limited tournaments (the equivalent of Major & Minor tournaments in weekend congresses).
3. Gold: Open tournaments, national leagues and national individual competitions (e.g. 4NCL, National Club, Counties Championship, national championships).

(The ECF should also work with organisations such as FIDE and the European Chess Union to investigate how the more advanced levels of Hybrid Chess Events can be FIDE-rated in future. For now, the priority should be restarting ECF graded events.)

The ECF should publish rules for Hybrid Chess Events that reinforce the FIDE Laws of Chess, but specifically highlight:

- a) No use of chess engines during play;
- b) No use of other computer functions during play, apart from viewing other team members' or players' games in the same competition;
- c) No other electronic devices should be on in the playing area;
- d) No communication with other persons about chess games during play.

Penalties for violations of these rules should include a) bans and b) game defaults, depending on the seriousness of the violation. Any penalties should be decided by the Chief Arbiter in consultation with the Independent Invigilator.

To ensure Fair Play is under the full control of the event's Chief Arbiter, games should be unrated by the playing server, but checked by Professor Ken Regan's software in cooperation with the ECF. Any player deemed to have used computer or other outside assistance during play after an investigation may be banned from the event. Before any ban is enacted, however, the player should be offered the opportunity to appeal to an ECF Hybrid Fair Play Appeals Committee.

The **Independent Invigilator** at each venue should be appointed by the ECF to ensure Fair Play at each local playing venue, monitoring players and their computer screens, and advising players on ECF social distancing guidelines during play. The Independent Invigilator should be in constant contact with the Chief Arbiter in real time during play – e.g. by email, instant messaging or video conference – to resolve any problems, including internet disconnection.

The Independent Invigilator should be independent of the players/teams at the venue (i.e. not be from that club in the case of a club or league match, or not be from that county in the case of a county match).

Independent Invigilators should be local volunteers from that city or region, and would be eligible to claim reasonable travelling expenses from the organiser of the event, whether that is the ECF, a local league or a national or regional tournament. The cost of Independent Invigilators is a price worth paying, when viewed against the savings on travel and accommodation for all players, and the safety benefits of organising smaller chess gatherings in local venues.

2 Publish standard ECF safety guidelines for OTB and Hybrid Chess

The ECF should urgently conduct tests and pilot projects in OTB and Hybrid Chess, observing FIDE's Medical Security Policy and Protocol for Upcoming Over-The-Board Events (<https://www.fide.com/news/626>), so that by September 2020 at the latest the ECF can publish standard guidelines on how to play OTB and Hybrid chess safely, with recommended variations and options for different types of venues, and for various sizes and types of standard-play and rapid events. Blitz is not suitable for purely OTB events, due to the problems in maintaining social distancing.

Once standard guidelines are produced, the ECF should organise online training seminars on restarting OTB and Hybrid chess to ensure the widest possible dissemination of safe practices, social distancing and anti-Covid-19 hygiene among chess players, organisers, arbiters and independent invigilators.

3 Organise ECF YouTube/Twitch Streams & Webinars

Social media video streams such as YouTube and Twitch can be used to provide a vital link for ECF Members and Supporters, and would be an excellent way to provide value for ECF Membership and Supporters Fees.

Full access to a regular ECF news, commentary and chat show on YouTube & Twitch, featuring top English players' commentary on ordinary ECF members' games and interviews with interesting players, could be provided as part of ECF Membership Fee packages.

ECF Members & Supporters would be able to participate in moderated chat, ask questions of presenters and take part in online polls, etc.

Twitch subscriptions could be used to generate income, and the presenters/commentators would be able to promote themselves and their projects through the channel.

It would also be possible to organise online webinars for ECF Members & Supporters via Zoom or other video conferencing services.

These services would increase communication between the ECF and its members and supporters. They would also reach potential new ECF members and help with combatting potential social isolation caused by the Coronavirus crisis.

4 Organise Hybrid National Championships

During the 2020-21 season, the ECF should organise a hybrid British Championships, with events in various categories, using up to dozens of regional hubs around the UK.

This event, with ECF Arbiters and Independent Invigilators present at each hub to ensure Fair Play, could be potentially more attractive to sponsors and players currently than either a purely OTB or Online Championships.

5 Take full control of Fair Play procedures in ECF Online Events

To enable ECF Members and Supporters to have the best possible confidence in ECF Online events, where participants play from home, the ECF should take control of Fair Play procedures by ensuring that all ECF Online rated games are played as unrated on the playing server, but checked by Professor Ken Regan's

software. In cases where a player is deemed to have used computer or other outside assistance, the player should have the right to appeal to an ECF Online Fair Play Appeals Committee before any ban is enacted.

6 Establish 'Chess For All' charity to nurture amateur & social chess

The ECF should establish a dedicated charity to financially support grassroots amateur chess for all, providing startup grants for new community chess projects and chess clubs, and helping to provide safe, affordable and welcoming local chess venues for all – regardless of age, income, gender or ethnicity.

The fund should also help with the revival of local chess clubs affected by Coronavirus and combating social isolation among the chess community, supporting the organisation of regular social chess meetups in safe and accessible locations.