ECF Finance Council meeting.

Firstly, a small apology. Owing to a combination of things I managed to arrive about 20 minutes late for the meeting. Fortunately, this being an ECF meeting, I didn’t miss anything significant.

I counted roughly 40 attendants at the meeting, which filled most of the room.

When I arrived the meeting was discussing the minutes from the AGM last October, and the former ECF CEO Phil Ehr was commenting. I suspect it may have been related to a post by Phil on the ECF’s official forum just prior to the present meeting. It made for quite an interesting read, but unfortunately the ECF’s official forum is now closed for business, so if you haven’t already read it you’ll just have to take my word for it.

The next item was matters arising. The only point I noted down here was regarding the National Chess Library. Essentially no real progress has been made, and as one of the members of the committee responsible for it has now retired the committee is now in need of reform.

It’s a difficult situation, the National Chess Library.

At the moment the National Chess Library (that is all the magazines, books etc the ECF gets left by individuals in wills, or gets donated to the ECF etc) is in a storage lock up. It’s very difficult for anyone to get the opportunity to read any of the collection, as firstly it would require someone who is responsible for the collection to accompany you, and secondly I imagine all of the items are piled up and it would take a lot of moving and searching to find specific items. So the ideal solution would be to donate the collection to a library. Unfortunately a lot of libraries are facing budget cuts at the moment, and don’t really have the space to accommodate such a collection. The bigger libraries who may be interested wouldn’t want a lot of duplicate copies of items, which I believe the National Chess Library has quite a few of. From the ECF side of things I believe it’s very difficult to split up a donation and sell the items that they have duplicates of. So a bit of an impasse. There may be a very small glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel, which I’ll get to later. In the mean time, if anyone has any ideas for how to resolve things sooner, I’m sure the ECF would be delighted to hear from you.

Somewhere around here someone mentioned about One Member, One Vote, which, if you have the misfortune to regularly read one or both of the Forums, is quite a hot topic amongst the forum users. Unfortunately the council member was informed the only time it would be possible to discuss it would be under Any Other Business. Which, as I can personally attest from previous experience, leaves no realistic chance of it being discussed.

The next item was the approval of the ECF’s accounts, and some good news. The ECF is doing rather well, financially speaking. The ECF made a surplus of £55k, and a £44k increase in assets. This is mainly due to the ECF not having an office manager for a substantial period of time (they do now, but all the same a huge amount of
thanks are due to the ECF Company Secretary, John Philpott, who covered the role voluntarily in the interim). The ECF was aiming to reach £100k in reserves over 3 years, and they virtually made it in 1. A little over £99k was the figure announced at the meeting. A comment was made about management accounts, financial planning etc, and the ECF is planning to have a board meeting on this in the next few months. The accounts were approved with no votes against.

Around about here it was announced that item 9, on Pay to Play fees in FIDE- Rated events, was being shunted down the order until after item 11. The idea being that the ECF could discuss membership fees, game fees, the budget proposals etc as almost a block item, then vote on them, before moving onto other items that weren’t directly related.

Anyway, item 6 was next up, which was the report of Finance Director and Budget for 16/17.

The charitable portion of the ECF, which has been discussed in one form or another at quite a few meetings now, is up and running, and the trustees will be meeting in May. There are ongoing discussions regarding moving some of the money from the Permanent Invested Fund into the charity, and some proposals will be put to the meeting in October.

For anyone interested, there’s quite a bit of information relating to the charity here: http://www.englishchess.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/C20.15-charity-paper.pdf

There was a suggestion from a council member to pay for the budget proposals out of the ECF’s reserves rather then raising membership/ game fees.

The Finance Director assured council that if they chose option ‘A’ for the budget (i.e. raise membership/ game fees to pay for the extra items of ECF expenditure) it would only be taken as indicative for future years, and the ECF wouldn’t be locked into the plan to raise fees for the next 3 years.

One council member suggested that council could pick and choose items of expenditure. Another suggested an alternative of a £12k write- down of the PIF to fund the proposals for this year.

A council member was critical of the ECF’s lack of strategic planning. The Finance Director agreed and stated that he had been trying to improve this area for 2 years. One of the Non- Exec Directors then spoke and acknowledged that there was work to be done, but pointed out that between trying to fill several vacancies left after the AGM, and a variety of other areas the ECF had been working on, there just hadn’t been the time to focus on strategic planning.

The Finance Director explained the reason why a number of critical budget papers were only posted online a short time before the meeting was owing to a slight delay at board level and then several board members having holidays booked (volunteers taking holidays, whatever next....).
After this there was a presentation by a number of members of the board (the Finance Director, and the Directors and Publicity Officer who were hoping to secure approval for extra expenditure with Option A on the budget). There has been some criticism that this presentation was unnecessary, and one of the reasons why the meeting didn’t cover all of the items on the agenda, but personally I found it useful to hear some more details from each of the ECF Directors/ Officers on their proposals and also allow the opportunity to ask questions. Also, for what it’s worth, all of the people who were involved with the presentation spoke very well, and deserve credit for that.

The Finance Director spoke first and discussed the 2 options available to council. Option A was to approve the ECF’s proposed budget, with increased expenditure in certain areas. This would either be funded by membership/ game fee rises, or taking money from the PIF. Option B was to keep fees at the present rate and this would involve some reductions in funding and activity in certain areas of the ECF. I think its fair to say the ECF were definitely hoping for Option A.

The Finance Director stated that they were no longer including sponsorship/ donation figures on the budget, as this would mean assuming they are going to be forthcoming. Instead the ECF is budgeting on not having any sponsorship/ donation, and then if they do receive anything from either of these they will be treated as additional income. The PIF currently has £321k, whilst the John Robinson Youth Trust currently has £597k. Both of those figures are approximates.

Assuming I’ve copied it down correctly, Option A funded by membership increases would’ve seen something like this:

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The next Director to speak was the International Director. He felt the budget is conservative. He wanted to aim for commercial sponsorship before going for a cap-in- hand approach to fundraising. So far he has raised £5k in sponsorship for the international team, and £15k for the British (there was actually some criticism from a member of council about the amount of sponsorship raised so far, which is stunning, to say the least. Suffice to say, the International Director deserves a lot of praise for his work in fundraising so far.)

The ID wants to spend some money on training events for the ECF international players prior to events. He wants to aim for a second England player to be consistently over 2700 (I pressed him on whether he has a similar sort of target for a female player. He was loathe to put a specific figure on it at a lower level then the male target, but was confident he would be able to get another female player to 2300
(FM) standard.) He then did a comparison in terms of strength and number of strong players with France, which doesn’t really paint us in a good light at the moment.

The ID wants to focus on supporting players who have the potential to play full time, and also aims to support more international tournaments. He wants to ensure representation and offer training for senior teams (we have a potentially very strong senior team, with a very decent chance for some success if it can all come together well). The ID also added that any additional sponsorship raised would be used to expand his policies.

The next Director to present was the Junior Director, whose request for additional expenditure was focussed on the ECF’s new academy.

I’ll get on to the academy in just a minute, but the Junior Director also spoke about some of her other work in the role. She was aiming to maintain the current activities, and spoke of the large number of international junior events the ECF is now involved in or has the potential to be involved in. She is aiming to focus on secondary schools’ chess, and has started a new programme where schools that have chess clubs are encouraged to try and encourage other schools in the local area to take up chess. She is about to interview a new manager of girl’s chess. She also introduced Christelle Hafstad, who is the Finance Manager of the Junior Directorate.

Back to the academy. It appears to be a big success in terms of numbers. It was oversubscribed this year, and so projections for numbers have been upped. The extra expenditure is partly because of this, partly because of a few other reasons. The student to coach ratio being reduced, the introduction of the ‘Elite’ group at an earlier stage then expected (this is the group where the ECF hopes that the juniors can go on to achieve titles at some point in the future), and also a timescale reduction owing to potential ECF governance changes. The Junior Director also stated that if the expenditure wasn’t approved by council and no sponsorship/grants were forthcoming then the academy may have to curtail activities or raise fees.

The next person to speak was the Home Chess Director. The Director was very clear that the proposal was for approving the expenditure on the LMS system only, and that a proposal regarding moving to a monthly grading list would be forthcoming at a future meeting. The planned software was developed by Malcolm Peacock, and, amongst others, used by Somerset.

For anyone outside Somerset, or indeed within Somerset, who hasn’t seen the software before, this link shows it as Somerset uses it:

http://sc.popmalc.org.uk/somerset

The final person to speak was the Publicity Officer. His request came in four separate parts. The first part he addressed was probably the most controversial “It is envisaged that £4,000 will be spent on an initiative to engage the public by bringing a chess master to local pubs”. Which, to be perfectly honest, really doesn’t inspire much confidence. Fortunately, the presentation elaborated on this somewhat, and presented the idea in a much more favourable light. The idea is essentially to have titled players make public appearances to play chess, maybe play a simul etc at 10 separate sessions
across the country. Alongside pubs (for which I’m still sceptical of the impact), the publicity officer also mentioned potentially shopping malls and other public spaces. I think it may be the case that a brewery or a pub chain has expressed some interest in this idea, which is where pubs have come into this. If a pub chain or brewery wants to potentially offer some sponsorship towards this idea, then that would be excellent, but for the ECF’s funded events I would hope they aim more towards something like either of these ideas:

http://www.bathstudent.com/photos/gallery/555/

This is when Bath University held a number of outdoor chess events on Sundays in the summer of 2010.

Or this is a good example of an event the ECF could look to hold in a shopping centre.


Anyways, the second part was regarding National Chess Day. I believe this was an idea originally organised by David Levens last year, which didn’t entirely succeed as the ECF wasn’t prepared to support it and local organisations felt likewise. This year the ECF will be supporting it, with the Publicity Officer hoping to be given money to help local organisations organise events.

http://www.englishchess.org.uk/national-chess-day-saturday-10-september/

has more information on the subject. I would also be remiss if I didn’t mention that aside from hopefully raising the profile of chess in England, the chief objective of this day is to help raise funds for the charity MIND.

The next part was to ensure the ECF has funds to enable it to have a presence at prominent English chess events such as Hastings, the London Chess Classic etc.

The final part concerned the ECF’s YouTube channel:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRazaRwwrCej7HDCNr2SSLw/videos
The last video the ECF put on YouTube was 8 months ago (a number of videos from last year’s British Championship) and I don’t think any of the videos have more then about 3,500 views. So clearly this is an area where there’s scope for improvement. The Publicity Officer hopes to commission a video professional to do some work on the YouTube channel, and hopefully upload a few decent-quality videos.

There was a question about the ECF’s Forum. In October the board seemed fully focussed on revitalising it, and now the board intend to close it (indeed I believe it was fully closed as of this week). The International Director acknowledged that it represented a u-turn, but also pointed out that since the board previously acknowledged their support a number of board members, including the International Director (and, it should be noted, the CEO), have come on board, and opinions have changed. For whatever my opinion is worth, I think the ECF was probably right to close it. It had from some time back reached a similar level of discussion to that which caused the ECF to break ties with the EC Forum, and really wasn’t doing the
ECF any favours with how it presented the organisation to anyone unfortunate enough to stumble across it.

There was now a great deal of discussion about which order to vote on the items related to this: vote the membership/game fee first, and then the budget items, or vice versa. In the end the former won out. The voting was all decided on hand votes, as follows:

Proposal to keep membership fees at the same rate: Passed with 5 against.
Proposal to keep minimum membership fees for organisations at £60: Passed, none against.
Proposal to keep game fee at the same rate as present: Passed with 2 against.

I think the comment that most stuck with me was made by one council delegate who said something along the lines of “the ECF is doing well financially, has a huge amount of money and has reached its target level of reserves way ahead of schedule. It’s very hard to justify to members why the ECF is asking them to pay more”.

So Option A funded by membership fee rises was off the table, and it was now down to either funding Option A through an alternative method, or voting for Option B.

It was interesting that there was no real interest from the meeting in voting separately for the separate requests for expenditure. I thought before the meeting that a couple of the items would be voted through fairly easily (the junior chess items and most of the publicity items), but that the rest of the items (international, the LMS system, and the “chess masters to local pubs” part of the publicity expenditure) would encounter quite a bit of resistance. As it turns out council seemed to accept that it was either fund everything or fund nothing without much interest in the items separately.

A proposal finally came forward which was to support the activity through taking £12k from the ECF’s reserves to finance it this year. This was passed with 3 against.

I don’t think its by any means unreasonable to fund it this way (although I note the ECF CEO has wrote on the EC Forum that he would’ve preferred the money to be taken from the PIF), but it does need to be recognised that the ECF’s original intention with the membership increases was to help fund these activities over a 3 year period. Things may well change between now and next year when the budget comes up again, but if the ECF is to retain a decent safety buffer in its reserves in case of an unexpected financial occurrence it can’t be reasonably expected to take a further £12k a year out of the reserves for each of the following 2 years. Anyway, for this year it seems a sensible enough compromise to allow the ECF to make its requested expenditures without putting more financial burden on its members or putting the ECF in any real financial problems.

The next item was the delayed item 9, regarding England- registered players who aren’t gold or platinum members, but who wish to enter FIDE- rated events. The proposal was to charge them a game fee equal to the difference between Silver and Gold membership, and for anyone who is a Silver member to treat it as an upgrade of the membership to Gold. John Philpott spoke on behalf of Adam Raoof, who was against the proposal, but council voted in favour with 2 votes against.
Just before I carry on with the meeting report, a slight aside to talk about my voting. If you sent me any specific instructions or comments (as I believe did Cornwall, Barnstaple, Somerset, Frome Congress, Bristol, Gloacs/ North Gloacs, Bournemouth, Dorset, and possibly some others that I’ve forgotten) I did my best to carry out the instructions etc. With the specific voting a lot of it was done on hand vote, and here in spite of the number of votes I have I can only raise one hand to vote in favour, and one hand to vote against. If any votes were reasonably close and didn’t go the way I felt a majority of South-West organisations would have wanted, I have enough votes to force a card vote, so that each individual vote can be counted. At this meeting I don’t think any votes fell into that category, so I raised my hand in favour if one organisation asked me to, and against if another organisation asked me to, and didn’t put a huge deal of thought into how many specific votes were intended for me to be cast either way. As such I haven’t noted in this report which way specific organisations asked me to vote, or how I would have voted if it came down to me using each organisation’s specific votes. When the AGM comes around a lot of voting will be done for candidates using card votes, and then I’ll note how I use each specific vote.

After this I believe there was a break followed by the BCF meeting. I tend to use the BCF meeting as an excuse to pop out for a breath of fresh air, so I’m afraid I can’t really tell you what happened at that meeting. Just take my word that nothing overly exciting ever happens there, and we’ll move on.

I also had the chance to speak with Amanda Ross during the break. She organises the Casual Chess events in London:

http://casualchess.org/

Amanda was at the meeting to speak about an item coming up on the agenda (item 12). The reason I mention the conversation is because Casual Chess is a great enterprise, well worth your support if you’re ever in London for a day or more, and I’m just taking the opportunity to give a bit of a plug to it:

“London’s real life, friendly chess cafe! From Monday to Friday you’ll find us in The BFI Lobby Lounge, 21 Stephen St, Off Tottenham Court Rd, W1T 1LN (nearest tube Tottenham Court Rd), 5.30pm – 10pm. On Saturday nights, or when the BFI is occasionally closed, we’ll be in either the basement bar or the upstairs licenced cafe of Waterstones book shop, 19-20 Tottenham Court Rd, W1T 1BJ.”

After the break a minute’s silence was held for Cyril Johnson.

The next item was item 12, and it’s a potentially very exciting one. The full details can be found here:


By way of a summary:

- The British Go Association received a legacy of £300k from an individual to use to set up a place in London where Go can be played daily.
• The BGA decided that the money should be used to set up a more general Mind Sport’s Centre, and an ECF official put them in contact with Amanda Ross to work on moving the plan forward.
• It was concluded that the best option was to attempt to buy premises in London (at an estimated cost of £2-4 million).
• It is anticipated that the potential premises would be self-funding through a combination of sub-letting part of the building, and charging for membership, refreshments etc.

Obviously this is a huge amount of money, and a huge ask to fundraise it. Nevertheless, it was strongly suggested at the meeting that another amount, larger then the original received legacy, will be forthcoming shortly, meaning the fundraising effort is well on the way. These premises could also be used to store the National Chess Library, and organise frequent chess events. At the meeting council backed part-supporting a detailed feasibility study at a cost of £3k, with 3 votes against.

The next item, 13, concerned a number of changes to bye-laws and articles of the ECF, in line with the recommendations made by the Pierce report at the AGM. Around about this point we had passed the intended 4hrs for the meeting, and were well in to the fifth. When discussion flared up on the first part of this item, it was obvious that some of the items at the bottom of the agenda weren’t going to get discussed; it was just a question of how many.

The first part concerned re-introducing the post of Non-Executive Chairman to the board. The discussion seemed relatively brief at first, until the International Director voiced concerns that the Non-Exec Chairman role would mean the ECF had reached its maximum number of Directors, and unless or until a motion is put forward at a separate meeting the Directorship that the International Director wished to see introduced wouldn’t be. The International Director wished to see a Director of Women’s Chess be introduced, and has a candidate lined up for the potential vacancy. I’m wholeheartedly in favour of such a director. There simply aren’t enough females from secondary school level up to adult playing chess, and it’s something that needs to be addressed. The simple opinion that “that’s just the way it is” just isn’t acceptable to me, and although I personally don’t have ideas on how to address the situation, I absolutely believe that any person who does have a decent idea on how to do so should be strongly supported. English chess has an issue attracting half the English population to play chess, and it shouldn’t shy away from that.

Anyways, rant over. There seemed to be quite a bit of support from council for such a directorship, and the discussion went on for some time about how best to achieve it. Some felt it was best to vote in favour of the Non-Exec Chairman and there was a way to deal with it from there, some felt the best way to vote to ensure a Director of Women’s Chess was to vote against the motion. I have to admit I was somewhat confused by it all at the end. The hand vote went 24 in favour, 6 against. As the requirement for these motions is a 75% majority, and it was pretty close to that, it went to a card vote. I really hate when it happens like this, as it means I have to consider how each organisation would like me to vote, and then check how many votes each organisation has. I’m afraid that in the rush (I had to chase after the vote-counters who had gone outside to begin counting) I didn’t note which way my
specific votes went, but the overall vote went 212 in favour, 31 against, so the Non-Excc Chairman post was introduced.

Part ‘B’ of the motion was to introduce the post of Chairman of Council. I missed most of the discussion for this, owing to working out the vote for the previous part, but it passed with a clear majority.

Part ‘C’, amending a bye law to reflect Part ‘B’, was voted through with none against.

Part ‘D’, introducing three years terms for Directors and the Chairmen of Standing Committees passed with 25 in favour, 5 against. One funny moment here. Given it was reasonably close to the 75% minimum requirement, there was some discussion about going to a card vote. One council member said “Ben, how did you cast your votes?” and when it was clear that all 32 were being cast in favour, we moved on to the next item.

Part ‘E’ was an amendment so that the FIDE Delegate is appointed by the board rather than than Council. The FIDE Delegate said that as he was working to represent ECF members he appreciated council voting for him and approving his work. One of the counter-arguments was that this was the only officer post that was elected, rather than appointed. Ultimately the FIDE Delegate’s opinion carried enough weight to affect the vote. It went 16 in favour, 11 against, well short of the 75% needed to pass the resolution, and so the resolution failed.

Part ‘F’ was intended to change a bye-law assuming Part ‘E’ was passed. As Part ‘E’ failed, Part ‘F’ became irrelevant, and we moved on to the next part.

Part ‘G’ was to allow an individual Director to be removed or suspended from office by a unanimous decision of the other members of the board. It passed with 1 against.

Part ‘H’ was to adopt all proposed changes to the Articles of Association not covered by previous revolutions, and Part ‘I’ was an ordinary resolution to amend a bye law (No. 4, since you wondered). Both passed with none against.

Item 14 was next, and was council noting amendments the board intends to make regarding the Directors and Officers Responsibilities Regulations. It was duly noted.

The next Item was a couple of County Championship rule changes. When this item was introduced I think there was a little over 5 minutes left in the meeting, so not really any time to discuss the 2 proposals properly.

The first proposal was to FIDE-rate the final stage of the Open and Minor Sections of the County Championship. Cornwall and Somerset had both told me that they didn’t want this, but it felt unfair to teams who play in the Open to vote against FIDE-rating both sections, when realistically neither county will be playing in the Open in the imminent future. So I proposed an amendment removing the Minor Section from the proposal, which passed 12 in favour, 11 against. I think if it weren’t for the shortage of time this may well have gone to a card vote, but given there wasn’t really time to fill out the card votes and collect them, much less count them, the amendment passed. The vote then came for FIDE-rating the Open section, which was much more
decisive, 18 for, 3 against. So from next season the national stage of the Open, but not the Minor, will be FIDE-rated.

The second proposal was to allow the default dates for the quarter-finals and or semi-finals to be split over 2 weekends. Essentially, the argument in favour of this is that if you’re the captain of a county that enters a lot of teams at the national stages it’s a huge burden to get a lot of players out on the same day, and having the opportunity to have players play for teams in 2 different sections will ease the strain. The argument against is that doing this gives teams an unfair advantage, and they will still have to face this problem anyway if they get to the final, where there isn’t the opportunity to split the dates.

This is probably a proposal where it would have benefited from having the opportunity to properly discuss the issue before voting, but alas, time was against us and the proposal went almost straight away to a vote. The vote came 16 for, 5 against, and the proposal passed.

And with that time was up and the meeting ended. Items 16, 17, and 18 were dropped without discussion, and I guess will resurface at the bottom of the agenda at the AGM in October.

Item 16 was titled “Transparent Council votes and proxy preference” and was proposed by a number of voteholders, including the Past Chief Exec., the Chess Arbiter’s Association, one of the Gold Members’ Reps, and 3 other congresses/organisations. It was the following proposals:

1. All card votes at council shall be published along the minutes, commencing from the AGM in Oct.
2. Published information shall identify the individual who cast the vote, his or her organisation, and any proxy votes.
3. In the event any council member desires his/her vote to remain unpublished, that this option be exercised in advance of the meeting and disclosed in the voting register and minutes.
4. Council designates the Chairman as its preferred recipient of undirected proxies.

Item 17 was a long item, proposed by the Past Chief Exec., the Northern Counties Chess Union, and the West of England Chess Union (worth noting that I’m not WECU’s ECF Rep). It featured item 1, parts a-d (with part D having 2 parts), and item 2, parts a-f. I won’t copy it all out in full, but a lot of it involves PQASSO:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PQASSO

“PQASSO or Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations is a performance evaluation system and quality mark for charitable organisations in the UK.”

is the paper that accompanied this proposal.

Item 18, Any Other Business was the final item to lose out in the time scramble. So no discussion on One Member One Vote or any other items, such as the date of the next meeting.

For additional information about the meeting:

http://www.englishchess.org.uk/about/ecf-council-and-board/

Contains all of the papers relevant to the meeting.

http://www.englishchess.org.uk/2016-finance-council-meeting-2/#more-36594
http://www.sccu.ndo.co.uk/bcf.htm

Contains the ECF and the SCCU’s reports on the meeting respectively.