

BURY AREA CHESS LEAGUE

Online Competitions for 2020/21

It is very unlikely that we will be able to play over-the-board before January, and it is quite possible that clubs will not reopen before the early spring. One outcome has been a surge in playing chess online. The purpose of this paper is to consider whether the League should run online competitions, and if so in what format.

Before briefly reviewing current online opportunities we acknowledge that online chess is not for everybody. It is a different game. Playing in two dimensions takes some getting used to. More significantly players can cheat, and whilst computer algorithms can detect this they are not always reliable, and accusations and denials can lead to a loss of trust. However there are benefits in playing online in convenience, not having to travel to matches and being able to play opponents at a time to suit you both.

There are numerous opportunities to play through the two main platforms, chess.com and lichess. However random pairings can often lead to unsatisfactory games and most players prefer to play through domestically organised tournaments and competitions. There has been a 4NCL League and another is planned, an online Counties Championship is due to complete later this month, and various tournaments have been organised by 4NCL and the ECF. There also appear to be quite a lot of random events organised, teams representing regions and even internationals.

Locally both the Bury and Linton clubs meet online, are running club tournaments and have played the occasional match. This has encouraged members to play and it also maintains contact between the players and the club. Roughly half the membership of both clubs play online. The downside of playing in a relatively small group, though, is that players are likely to play each other regularly and there can also be mismatches in strength of the players.

The BACL Executive asked us to develop plans for local online chess, ideally providing a combination of team and individual competition, and rapidplay and classic time controls. In fact there is already a Norfolk online club, Icenis, that run such tournaments, and they have invited clubs in Suffolk and Cambs to join in. They too see the benefits of having a wider pool of players.

Briefly they run a League in two divisions, designed to be a friendly League with no arbiter checking for cheating, no entry fee and no prizes, just a means of enabling players to have some (semi)-competitive chess. Teams are of between 4 and 6 players, agreed between captains, and it is run as a rapidplay (15+10) with two games between players. Matches are weekly with the home team choosing the match night. More entries could enable a third division to be created. The next League starts in late September, so there is time for clubs to canvass interest among their members. More details can be found online: <https://www.chess.com/clubs/forum/view/iceni-live-league-1>

The individual tournament is a 6 round Swiss played weekly on Tuesdays, though this can be varied by agreement. Half point byes can also be taken except in the final round. The classic rapidplay time limit (45+15) is used. The next tournament starts in early September but it appears that once one event finishes another starts.

This appears to provide the combination of opportunities that the League Executive was seeking. There are no local established alternatives to IcenI, whose organisation and format is tried and tested. Arguably BACL could run something similar, but we feel the pool of players and clubs would be too small and the organisation of the events would be down to us. It has also been suggested that the EACU might organise something along these lines, but it is not likely to be agreed by the Counties and even if it were it would be a complex and time-consuming process to set up.

In addition to the above, Steve Lovell is offering to run an online near equivalent to the Jamboree if sufficient interest can be raised. It would make sense to run this on the same platform as the IcenI events if those are adopted, namely chess.com. Teams would need to submit names and chess.com usernames of players in advance to allow collation of team results. Alternatively, a Jamboree could wait until the return of over the board chess and might be used to close the season rather than to open it.

So, with the possible exception of an online Jamboree, our recommendation is that the BACL does not establish its own online competitions but encourages clubs to join IcenI. If smaller clubs cannot raise their own team both Linton and Bury would be happy to accept players who wish to take part as online members, or they may elect to band together to form a virtual club of their own.

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