

## **Overview**

This is an interim report from the ABF Online Bridge Committee presented to the 2023 ABF AGM.

The Committee's objectives are to:

- Investigate questions relating to implementation of online bridge in Australia.
- Recommend changes to allow the ABF to continue to foster both online and F2F (F2F) bridge environments.

As part of the process the Committee set up 5 separate groups to assist with its investigation and invited other bridge players/administrators to assist. The groups are:

- **Tournaments:** with Richard Ward/John McIlrath/Jenny Thompson
- **Etiquette:** Jim Naughtin/Bill Jacobs/Jenny Thompson
- **Assisting Clubs:** John McIlrath/Jennie Codognotto/Mark Guthrie
- **Teaching:** Liz Sylvester/Bill Jacobs/Rakesh Kumar/Philip Young
- **Look at the future of bridge:** Liz Sylvester/Philip Young /Jim Naughtin

These working groups will continue to be involved and having such an experienced and varied group of participants has been crucial to working through all the issues at this very important time for the future of bridge.

Kate Terry who is chairing the New Zealand Bridge Online Bridge Strategy working group has also been contributing to our work. NZ is in the phase of trialing a mixture of online and F2F tournaments. The trial runs until November 2023. The trial is in place to assess the appetite for online events and how these complement (or conflict) with in-person events scheduled for the same weekends.

Our committee commissioned two separate surveys to gather feedback from both players and clubs/associations. We received responses from 2,490 players and 155 clubs, providing a multitude of opinions and perspectives.

The surveyed players fell into three categories:

- play only F2F bridge (27% of respondents)
- play only online bridge (12% of respondents)
- play both F2F and online bridge (61% of respondents)

Similarly, there are F2F clubs, online clubs and clubs that offer both F2F and online games.

It is therefore indisputable that the ABF should facilitate the growth and health of both forms of the game. Online bridge is here to stay. Growth is fundamentally achieved by players being brought into the game via both online lessons and F2F lessons.

The two forms have their own separate advantages. So, both forms should be encouraged and promoted, and the market can then decide how the game might evolve into the future.

The Committee will continue its work on its final recommendation to the ABF in October, however, below we have set out the topics we have been looking into.

### ***Current State of Play***

The first online platform used in Australia for games that awarded ABF masterpoints was **Stepbridge** (<https://www.stepbridge.com.au/>), a private club based in South Australia, which began operations in 2005.

Stepbridge currently has just over 2,000 members with 7 sessions of bridge offered per week. Stepbridge also offers Virtual Club services through which clubs can run their own online games.

**Bridge Base Online (BBO)** (<https://www.bridgebase.com/>) has been the world's most popular online platform for over 20 years. In May 2020, as the Covid pandemic hit, the ABF entered into a relationship with BBO whereby clubs could run masterpointed games on BBO's platform.

BBO was a life-saver for many during lockdown. Now that conditions have eased, many have returned to F2F, and some have moved to RealBridge (see below), however BBO is still currently used by 13 clubs (some of whom also offer F2F bridge).

**RealBridge** (<https://realbridge.online/>) is a British platform developed at the start of the pandemic. It is a powerful product that has quickly gained popularity. RealBridge has business relationships with 59 Australian entities, which is a mix of clubs, state and national bodies, directors and teachers.

### ***Recommended Platforms into the Future***

StepBridge, BBO and RealBridge all have significant ongoing patronage and levels of familiarity, and the three platforms should continue to be authorized by the ABF for the issuing of masterpoints.

New platforms may be added in the future, but would have to be vetted by the ABF to ensure they meet minimum levels of quality and security.

### ***Masterpoints***

Masterpoints can be an emotive issue, but four important points must be made clear:

- Every masterpoint earned represents income to the ABF. Indeed, the ABF derives much of its revenue from the issuing of masterpoints, and this revenue needs to be protected.
- Masterpoints provide a fundamental 'feel good' factor for almost all players. The pleasure of reaching each new level of 'masterhood' is a greater or lesser motivating force for everyone.
- One thing that masterpoints do not represent are a reflection of skill or rating. Therefore, being overly discriminating in the matter of masterpoints is not a particularly useful exercise.
- The masterpoint system is a complex beast taking decades to evolve and now we are at a point where club MP secretaries know how the system works, what they have to do and how to interpret the parameters in place. The intention is to migrate the Masterpoint Centre into

myABF over the next year or so, a complex programming and coding operation, which precludes any suggestion of modifying the Scheme during this transition period.

All this leads to our conclusion that tinkering with the masterpoint system is unwise: there is no real upside, and the potential downsides (loss of revenue, decrease in customer satisfaction, increased infrastructure costs) are significant. We highlight this point because there are some vocal opponents of online bridge who argue for a reduced masterpoint allocation for online games.

The committee's recommendation is that any ABF-approved on-line platform would be authorized to issue green and red masterpoints in the usual way: these are the staples of club bridge.

However only platforms that provide full video and audio functionality may be used to award gold masterpoints.

### ***Handling the issue of Online Cheating***

While this has been a matter of much discussion, we believe this should not deter the ABF from promoting online bridge. Extra effort needs to be put into deterring and detecting cheating. We will be covering this in more detail in our final report.

### ***Tournaments***

Online bridge is a real option for running bridge and bridge competitions at all levels. As many players cannot travel, have health issues or live remotely having online bridge tournaments makes bridge much more accessible.

A suggestion that has been raised is that a newly created position, ABF Online Manager, could be appointed to assist with educating all levels of stakeholders how to operate bridge online. This role would have overall responsibility for the investigation and resolution of allegations of cheating.

### ***Assisting Clubs***

There are currently 332 affiliated clubs registered with the ABF, 292 of these fall in the range of having between 1 and 199 members. Within this group there will be clubs that choose to participate in games open to any ABF club and clubs which choose to run their own games. The expertise of their directing staff will vary and those who choose to use an online platform without much experience will need to be trained and be aware of the current laws for online bridge, which will differ to F2F. The clubs will also need to be directed to the ABF Education page to use where appropriate.

### ***Teaching online***

The ABF's Education page should be continually updated to provide a consolidated and curated list of links of useful teaching resources and online lessons. It should also provide supporting materials to assist beginners who have been introduced to the game online to join a F2F club.

### ***Player Support***

The ABF will need to develop a set of guidelines, codes of conduct and regulations to support the playing of online bridge. There are players who find the use of new technology difficult.

### ***Managing Calendars***

It is our belief that the provision of online opportunities for tournaments hosted by clubs, State & Territory Associations and the ABF cannot occur without facilitation, planning and mediation where necessary. If this does fall under ABF's area of responsibility it could be part of the responsibilities of the Online Manager.

### ***Next Steps***

The Committee and working groups, as it has done up to this stage, will take on board feedback from all stakeholders, and develop final recommendations for the ABF Board in October.

We ask that any feedback be sent to [jenny.thompson@duckcube.com](mailto:jenny.thompson@duckcube.com).

Jenny Thompson

Mark Guthrie

Bill Jacobs

April 2023.