

Hitchin Bridge Club during lockdown.

The club's AGM for the year ending 2019 was on 16th March and immediately afterwards the country went into a national lockdown.

It was apparent that this was an end to face to face bridge for quite a while and action needed to be taken to keep members connected and mentally fit.

By the end of April, the club had launched a virtual bridge club, and this has grown from one weekly session initially to seven each week with other occasional monthly sessions and more planned. Last week saw the club host 97 tables of bridge (that is 388 individuals playing the game).

The sessions cover all levels of ability from the very relaxed to the highly competitive.

The club also recognised that other smaller local clubs did not have the critical mass to move online and as a result created an open session for all bridge players. Members from Royston, Letchworth and Stevenage bridge clubs are now able to enjoy an online game. This initiative also brought in players from wider afield and 20 new members joined the club taking our membership to 280.

This particular session is earmarked as a charity event with all profits usually going to the Letchworth Garden House Hospice. It is anticipated that by Christmas over £4000 will have been raised for the hospice. For Children in Need week the profit went to CIN, 120 bridge players took part in that one session and £717 was sent to the charity.

In addition, one trustee is running a zoom morning game for small groups of players who want to continue learning and improving. She is also regularly phoning members particularly those living alone for a friendly chat and to check on their wellbeing.

By temporarily moving online the club has helped members to remain mentally active and to keep in touch with friends and partners. **BUT** they all miss the social aspect of physically getting together to compete with friends around a bridge table. The benefits of social interaction in preventing loneliness and isolation have become even more apparent during this pandemic and should not be underestimated.

The creation and success of our virtual club in the very unusual circumstances in which we are now living shows the club is able and willing to adapt and respond quickly and effectively to the needs of its members and the wider bridge and general community.