



2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons

We've been giving a lot of thought to the future of the 4NCL during the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic, and I'm emailing the team captains and managers with an update.

1. With great reluctance we've decided to abandon the 2019/2020 season for the following reasons:
 - Three weekends would be needed to complete the season. Even if restrictions are indeed ended on 21 June, after taking account of the fact that the summer months are not conducive to organising an event such as the 4NCL and that a large part of October will be taken up with the British Chess Championship finals we believe that insufficient time will remain during the remainder of 2021 to organise those weekends satisfactorily.
 - Even if that could somehow be achieved, organising five 2021/2022 weekends in the five months from January to May 2022 after organising three weekends before the end of 2021 may place an unreasonable financial expectation on players in terms of travelling and accommodation costs and in any event places an unreasonable organisational burden on the 4NCL team.
 - We're not yet confident that sufficient teams will emerge unscathed from the pandemic, and that sufficient players will be willing to play during 2021, to enable the season to resume in an orderly manner.
 - We're not yet confident that players will be willing to stay overnight at venues in sufficient numbers to justify the large bedroom allocations that venues will expect to be filled in return for offering us free venue space on the scale we need.
2. We intend to use our planned July (and, we hope, September) congress to 'road test' post-Covid 19 conditions (and potentially requirements) – assuming, that is, that HM Government's restriction-easing roadmap to 21 June remains on track.
3. We have reviewed the 4NCL's structure and have decided that the pandemic has given us a unique opportunity to restructure the league without the need for laborious transitional arrangements. The main reasons for doing this are as follows:
 - Many Division 1 and 2 captains have expressed concerns for some time now about overflow hotels at Division 1 and 2 resulting from the number of rooms being required often exceeding the number of rooms available at the playing venue. Having 24 teams instead of 32 will hopefully remove (or at least, significantly reduce) the need for overflow hotels in those divisions.
 - As far as we know all major national leagues have abandoned the 16 team/two pools format in favour of APA arrangements, and many Division 1 and 2 captains have for some time now been expressing a preference for reverting to a 12 team APA structure.
 - The playing space requirement for Division 3 South and Division 4 South is severely restricting the availability of suitable hotels. Moving to a Division 3 and 4 Central and South arrangement will give more opportunity to grow in each region, and open up more hotels as viable venues in terms of playing area requirements.



2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons

- A smaller number of teams at each venue enables greater separation between playing boards should the need arise, for example to reduce Covid-19 risks.
 - Reducing the APA divisions to 12 teams reduces the risk of mismatches during the season.
 - Occasions have arisen in the past of teams finishing significantly higher or lower than their performance throughout the season would merit depending on the chance of whom they beat and to whom they lost in the original pool.
 - Players and commentators in other countries find it hard to understand our present system, potentially reducing any international attention we receive.
4. The restructuring involves the following main steps:
- The 4NCL will continue to run over 11 rounds and five weekends.
 - All divisions in the 2021/2022 season will be run on a Swiss format. This should give us greater flexibility, for example by being able to adjust numbers downwards in the event of teams not renewing their entries, thereby obviating the need to make potentially difficult decisions as to which teams should be offered places made vacant by withdrawals. Moreover, should the 2021/2022 season need to be curtailed, for example because of future Covid-19 restrictions, we will be able (within reason) to use teams' finishing positions in the curtailed season as the starting point to form the new 2022/2023 divisional structure.
 - For the 2021/2022 season Divisions 1 and 2 teams as at the end of the abandoned 2019/2020 season will play in one combined Swiss format division of 32 teams. At the end of the 2021/2022 season: (a) The top 12 teams in the Swiss will form Division 1 and teams finishing in 13th-24th place in the Swiss will form Division 2 of the 2022/2023 season; (b) eight teams will be relegated, and may decide in which of the three regional APA leagues they wish to play in for the 2022/2023 season (see below).
 - We have decided on a combined Swiss format for Divisions 1 and 2 for 2021/2022 as it gives a clear-cut answer as to which teams will be relegated to Division 3 and which teams will comprise the new APA Divisions 1 and 2. It also gives us much easier decisions to make on promotion and relegation issues should the season need to be curtailed at short notice because of, for example, a Covid-19 resurgence. We considered two options: (a) retaining the present group system for both divisions; and (b) playing Division 1 on the present group system with Division 2 played as a Swiss. We rejected both options as being unnecessarily complicated for what we're trying to achieve and (in the case of the first option) giving teams in the Division 2 relegation group nothing to play for from rounds 7 to 11. For the 2021/2022 season only, rule 1.3 will apply (but rule 1.2 will not apply).
 - Divisions 1 and 2 will reduce to 12 teams each for the 2022/2023 season, and will be played as APAs at a central venue. Teams will continue to consist of eight players. Rules 1.2 and 1.3 will continue to apply for the 2022/2023 season onwards.



2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons

- There will be three separate Division 3s for the 2021/2022 season which will operate on a regional basis: North, Central and South. Division 3 South and Division 4 South will combine into a new Division 3 South. All the regional Division 3s will be run on a Swiss format. Teams will consist of six players. Rule 1.4 will continue to apply.
- For the 2021/2022 season existing Division 3 and 4 teams may elect as usual to play in whichever region they wish, but in the event that teams do not elect to play in equal numbers in the Central and South regions in particular we may need to apply a 'first come first served' basis to entries if there are playing venue space constraints. We will need to wait to see which teams decide to enter for the 2021/2022 season before the effect of this, if any, becomes clear, but we will of course do whatever we can to ensure that teams play in the regions they select.
- Three new regional Division 3s will be formed for the 2022/2023 season. They will also comprise 12 teams, and will also be played as APAs. They will comprise the eight teams relegated from Division 1/2 (see above) together with the requisite number of teams finishing at the top of the 2021/2022 regional Swiss Divisions 3 to make the numbers up to 12 in each regional Division 3. All other teams will go into a Swiss format Division 4 in each region (but see below).
- For the 2022/2023 season onwards, if team numbers in any of the regions do not support an APA Division 3 and a Swiss format Division 4, one single Swiss format Division 3 will be held in the region concerned.
- For the 2022/2023 season onwards promotion/relegation will be on a three-up/three-down basis across all divisions apart from Divisions 2 and 3, where we are currently considering two options (there may be others): (a) three teams will be relegated from Division 2 and one Division 3 team will be promoted from each region each season; (b) three teams will be relegated from Division 2 and there will be a play-off weekend between the top two/three Division 3 teams from each region to determine the three promotion places. The 4NCL team have no strong views on this either way, so **we would welcome captains' and managers' input on this**. In any event, we will retain a rule similar to the existing rule 13.3 to handle any geographical imbalances arising from Division 2 relegations.
- For the APA divisions (but not the Swiss format divisions), we have been thinking about whether combined squads as defined in rule 2.1 should be allowed only one team in the same division for the 2021/2022 season and beyond. Combined squads directly affected by this would of course be free to split into two separate squads in order to avoid one of their teams being automatically relegated on resumption. The intention of this would be to introduce somewhat greater competitiveness into individual divisions by making it impossible for combined squad teams to use players from another team in the same combined squad in the same division in the event of a player shortfall. The 4NCL team has mixed views on this, so again, **we would welcome captains' and managers' input**.



2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons

5. Dave Thomas has decided to stand down as Chief Arbiter after many years of service; I'm sure you will all join me in thanking him for his huge contribution to the 4NCL over the years. Dave will continue to manage the 4NCL's IT and has agreed to stay on as a non-executive director. In his place Alex McFarlane has kindly agreed to take on the role of Chief Arbiter for the 4NCL, with Shohreh Bayat taking on the new role of Deputy Chief Arbiter.

The below image summarises the intended 'roadmap' from 2019-2020 to 2022-2023.

	2019-20		2021-22			2022-23		
Division 1	32 teams at venue	16 teams	32 teams at venue	1st - 12th -> Division 1	24 teams at venue	12 teams		
				13th - 24th -> Division 2		3r		
Division 2	256 players	16 teams	256 players	32 teams	192 players	3p	12 teams	
			25th - 32nd -> Division 3	3r				
Division 3	North	South	North	Central	South	1p North	1p Central	1p South
	16 teams	16 teams	x teams	x teams	x teams	12 teams	12 teams	12 teams
			?r	?r	?r	3r*	3r*	3r*
* See Section 4 Bullet Point 9								
Division 4		34 teams				3p	3p	3p
						x teams	x teams	x teams