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| Masters ICC Review |

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| **Summary** |
| The Inter County Championships (ICC) is one of the most highly regarded and important squash competitions in the game with more than 2,000 players representing their counties in 22 categories across senior, masters and junior divisions.  The Masters Championships provides competitive opportunities for players beyond club level in a team environment and the opportunity to represent their county.  In recent years, the Masters Championships has undergone significant change in an effort to make the competition more enjoyable for the players that participate whilst also making it financially and administratively viable for counties, host clubs and England Squash.  Following an extensive review process that has included county feedback, the formation of a review group, consultation with the Masters committee and analysis of participation statistics, we have developed the following changes to the competition for the 2021-22 season. |
| **Proposal** |
| Having consulted extensively with stakeholders, we have developed the following format.  Age categories to change to Men’s O35, 45, 55, 65. Women’s to stay as O40 and O50.   * Women’s O40s to change to 3 players per team rather than 5. Women’s O50s to remain 3 players per team.   Format to include divisions for each age category: Premier Division, Division 1, Division 2 (where needed).   * Championships to be hosted over 2 weekends. All teams remain involved across both weekends. * Counties to host and cover cost of stage 1 & 2 groups, England Squash to organise and cover cost of hosting Premier Division Finals.   Entry Fee: The entry fee will increase to £55 per team entered.   * Counties will cover costs of hosting group stages & stages 2 promotion/relegation play-offs. England Squash will use entry fees to cover cost of hosting finals. Any remaining budget will be used to reimburse counties left out of pocket by any late withdrawals. |

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| **Background** |

2017-18 Championships

* Stage 1 was a local round between neighbouring counties.
* Stage 2 was a regional round between counties who had progressed from stage 1.
* Stage 3 was the finals weekend.
* Age categories were split into different divisions such as Premier Division, Division 1 etc, with teams competing for promotion and relegation.
* Age categories ran across two separate weekends and included: MO35, O45, O50, O55, O60, O65, WO40 and O50.
* Scheduled dates were in November, January, and March.

2018 Review – Key findings from consultation / feedback

* England Squash made a loss of £3,220.
* Commitment to three separate weekends in the season was too much, particularly with the England Squash Masters calendar growing progressively.
* Counties hosting multiple groups led to fewer players at clubs meaning less atmosphere.
* Cost of hosting for counties became a burden. Counties were assigned hosting duty based on location to the teams within the group (central to other counties). Often some counties would have to host multiple age groups.
* Counties left out of pocket by late withdrawals.

2018-19 Championships

* Stage 1 - counties were split into four regions: North, Midlands, South East and South West and competed across one weekend.
* England Squash took over hosting responsibility by booking and paying for a cluster of courts within the four regions.
* All age categories competed on the same weekend.
* 8 teams from each age category would advance to the finals. The remaining teams were eliminated.
* The finals were hosted by England Squash in a central county.
* An entry fee of £50 per team was introduced.
* The competition dates changed from earlier in the season (November & March) to March and June.

2019-20 championships

* Scheduled for March and June of 2020. The competition was to continue in the same format as 2018-19. Following the outbreak of COVID19, the championships were cancelled.

2020-21 Review – Key findings from consultation / feedback

* England Squash made a loss of £6,274 in the 2018-19 championship.
* Team entries remained consistent with previous seasons despite fewer players competing across multiple age categories. The number of players who competed was slightly higher.
* Counties did not support the concept of age groups competing on the same weekend, preventing players from competing in more than one age category.
* Counties found that too many players were competing in other sports when the finals took place in June.
* The competition format was incredibly difficult to administer due to the imbalance in the number of teams in each region e.g., the South East was a strong region so faced more challenges.
* Hosting all age categories on one weekend in clusters meant that one withdrawal had a significant impact on the schedule for all teams in all age categories within that region. Some very late withdrawals also left teams with only one or two games in Stage 1 of the competition.
* The number of venues/courts/hours plus the additional staff expenses to host stage 1 and the finals weekend was over budget. Having reviewed the expenditure, there were very few costs that could have been reduced.

2020-21 Championships

* Scheduled for March 2021.
* The competition was to be run in a reduced one weekend format following a proposal put forward to counties by England Squash. The Championships were cancelled in January 2021 due to COVID19.

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| **Consultation to date** |

* Counties were asked to feed back on the existing format in June 2019 & April 2020.
* Counties were asked to feed back on the reduced format proposed for the 2020-21 season which was subsequently cancelled due to COVID.
* A review panel was set up by England Squash in May 2020, consisting of various county players, team managers and representatives from the Masters Committee. The review panel has fed back on key issues and has supported England Squash in developing the proposed format.
* Consultation is ongoing with England Squash Masters regarding the scheduling of competitions.
* Counties were asked to feedback on the new format proposals in April-May 2021.
* The new format proposals were shared and discussed at the England Squash Council Meeting which took place in May 2021.

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| **Next Steps** |

The format for the new season will consist of the following.

**Age categories to change to Men’s O35, O45, O55, O65. Women’s to stay as O40 and O50.**

* Counties will be allowed to enter multiple teams per age category.
* The trend for divisions separated by 5 year age gaps showed that teams were predominantly using players within the correct age bracket but would supplement with one or two players from the next age category to fill out teams.
* Analysis of team selection suggested bigger counties can fill teams with players outside the intended age brackets when needed, smaller counties either play with fewer players or withdraw.
* [Appendix Figure 1](#_Figure_1), shows that more than half of the men’s players in the O35s are over the age of 40.
* [Appendix Figure 2](#_Figure_2), shows that 29 players who competed in the Senior ICC, also competed in the Master’s ICC. The Senior ICC was made up of 10% (14 players) aged over 40+. If all of those 14 players also competed in the Master’s ICC, then we can assume the minimum number of players who competed in both Seniors and Masters aged between 35-40 is 15 players. We therefore estimate that between a quarter to a third of players competing in Masters O35 also compete in the Senior ICC competition.
* Tiered league system will level out the ability spread after the first year. Teams will fall into divisions of similar abilities.

**Women’s O40s to change to 3 players per team rather than 5. Women’s O50s to remain 3 players per team.**

* [Appendix Figure 1](#_Figure_1), shows that 17% of the players that competed in the women’s O40 division were over the age of 50.
* [Appendix Figure 3](#_Figure_3), shows that entry numbers have slightly increased in the women’s O40 since the format change however entries in the women’s O50 have reduced.
* Analysis of team selection suggested counties relied on O50’s players to fill out O40’s teams. When the format change came into play, players were forced to choose between the two, leading to a reduction in O50’s teams.

**Divisional format for each age category: Premier Division, Division 1, Division 2 (where needed). Championships to be hosted over 2 weekends. All teams remain involved across both weekends.**

* County feedback suggested strong opposition to the existing elimination format. Counties were travelling greater distances to play fewer games and were subsequently frustrated if they were eliminated in the first round.
* County feedback suggested strong support for a return to tiered competition to increase competitiveness.

**Counties to host and cover cost of stage 1 & 2 groups, England Squash to organise and cover the cost of hosting the Premier Division Finals**

* County feedback suggested strong support for a return to county hosting but with greater support from England Squash regarding withdrawals and organisation.
* England Squash will charge a non-refundable entry fee to help fund the event and act as a deterrent to teams withdrawing.
* England Squash will create a rotational pattern for hosting counties to reduce the burden of hosting multiple groups.

**Entry Fee: to increase to** £55 per team (£33 for teams of 3) for the 2021-22 season

The competitionhas operated at a loss of £3000 or more for each of the past five active seasons. An entry fee is required to make the competition financial sustainable.

* Counties will cover costs of hosting stage 1 groups and stages 2 promotion/relegation play-offs. England Squash will use entry fees to cover cost of hosting finals. Any remaining budget will be used to reimburse counties left out of pocket by any late withdrawals.

### Appendix

#### Figure 1

Number of players registered in the Master ICC 2018-19 Championships. The table shows the average age of players in each in age group and a breakdown of what percentage each age category is made up from. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. All figures have considered the age of players when the competition was held in 2019.

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|  | MO35 | MO45 | MO50 | MO55 | MO60 | MO65 | WO40 | WO50 |
| N Players | 155 | 80 | 71 | 68 | 51 | 33 | 72 | 36 |
| Average age | 40.52 | 48.07 | 52.86 | 56.37 | 64.74 | 69.34 | 44.24 | 53.92 |
| 35-39 | 49% |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 40-44 | 21% |  |  |  |  |  | 44% |  |
| 45-49 | 17% | 45% |  |  |  |  | 39% |  |
| 50-54 | 10% | 34% | 62% |  |  |  | 8% | 52% |
| 55-59 | 3% | 21% | 30% | 77% |  |  | 9% | 43% |
| 60-64 | 0% | 0% | 8% | 19% | 47% |  | 0% | 5% |
| 65+ | 0% | 0% | 0% | 4% | 53% | 100% | 0% | 0% |

#### Figure 2

Number of players registered in the Senior ICC 2018-19 Championships. The table shows the average age of players in each age group and a breakdown of what percentage each age category is made up from. Percentages are rounded to the whole number. The number of players who also competed in the Masters ICC is listed. All figures have considered the age of players when the competition was held in 2019.

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|  | Men's | Women's |
| N Players | 137 | 120 |
| Average age | 29.37 | 36.67 |
| 16-29 | 50% | 15% |
| 30-39 | 40% | 63% |
| 40+ | 10% | 22% |
| Played Masters ICC | 29 | 12 |

#### Figure 3

Number of teams entered per age category in the previous two active seasons of 2017-18 and 2018-19.

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|  | Men's O35 | Men's O45 | Men's O50 | Men's O55 | Men's O60 | Men's O65 | Women's O40 | Women's O50 |
| 2017-18 Championships | 29 | 27 | 20 | 20 | 23 | 16 | 12 | 16 |
| 2018-19 Championships | 24 | 19 | 17 | 18 | 17 | 14 | 13 | 12 |