

Changing the perception of the Council

The Council has a problem. Despite having done many useful things during its 125 years it is increasingly criticised, disparaged or ignored by ringers at large – both ‘high end’ achievers and the so called ‘grass roots’ ringers. That undermines not just the Council’s reputation but also its effectiveness because it deters ringers with talent and drive coming forward to contribute to the Council’s work.

The Council must change if it is to satisfy the needs and aspirations of modern ringers. Most urgently it must change the way it is perceived, to prevent its reputation sliding to the point where reform becomes impossible.

A critical event

When the Council declared that it was not interested in exploring the possibility of registering ringing with Sport England it unleashed a flood of protest, not just against the inaction but against the reason given – that the Council’s purpose was to encourage ringing for Christian worship, and that anything suggesting otherwise might upset its relationship with the church.

As a side effect, the storm attracted a lot of mostly positive media coverage for ringing, but that external effect does not compensate for the fact that ringers saw the Council as out of touch and complacent. Its reputation sank to a new low.

A timely stimulus

Shock events can trigger change. The need for change has been apparent for a while but so far it has been painfully slow. Recent events highlight the need and suggest that the Council needs to ‘kick start’ some more substantial reform.

The mechanics of reform cannot be rushed but by making an immediate and binding declaration of its intent to change, the Council could regain much of the respect that it has lost. The declaration needs to be bold and convincing – one that will create headlines and that ringers will notice – of both the purpose and the process by which it will change.

This paper explains the thinking behind two motions to achieve this, which will be put to the 2016 Council meeting.

Why does the Council exist?

It might seem obvious that the Council should exist to serve ringers, but that’s not what its rules say. The Council’s Object (legal objective) says that it is ‘To promote and foster the ringing of bells for Christian prayer, worship and celebration’. That reflects the motives of its Victorians founders but it does not reflect the needs of modern ringers, nor does it reflect what the Council actually does.

Ringing for services is an important feature of modern ringing, but for most ringers it is only a part of what they do – a lot of ringing is secular, and the Council’s work mainly concerns the secular aspects.

We should remember that service ringing was only introduced when the church took over ringing in the late 19th century. Prior to that ringing had for centuries been just a sport and public entertainment.

We must also note that the accelerating rate of church closures will reduce the amount of service ringing, and also reduce opportunities to ring on church bells.

Charitable purposes

The Council’s religious Object might be seen as a necessary hook on which to hang its charitable status, but other ringing organisations have achieved charitable status without mentioning religion, notably the Association of Ringing Teachers and the Ringing Foundation. In fact if the Council were to be scrutinised against its religious Object it is possible that it might not retain its charitable status.

Charity Commission guidance lists thirteen types of charitable activity of which four are potentially relevant to ringing, namely the advancement of:

- Education
- Religion
- Arts, culture, heritage or science
- Amateur sport

Education means: ‘to promote, sustain and increase individual and collective knowledge and understanding of specific areas of study, skills and expertise’. For example ‘development of individual capabilities, competences, skills and understanding’ by ‘organisations that educate the public in a particular subject’. It must however be ‘for the public benefit’ and the benefit must be ‘intentional not incidental’.

Teaching members of the public to ring or raising public awareness of ringing both seem relevant, subject to being of appropriate scale, openness, benefit and efficacy.

Religion may be advanced by: providing places of worship; raising awareness and understanding of religious beliefs and practices; missionary and outreach work; religious devotional acts. Only the last could be related to (some) ringing.

Art covers ‘promotion at a national/professional and local/amateur level’ of ‘performance such as music’. The key requirement being to establish ‘merit’.

Heritage includes ‘parts of a country’s local or national history and traditions, passed down through successive generations’ advanced by ‘preserving or maintaining a particular tradition’ ‘to provide a benefit to the public’.

Culture is ‘a broad term associated with art or heritage’. For example organisations that ‘promote or encourage high standards of performance’ or ‘preserve historical traditions’.

Sport ‘promotes health by involving physical or mental skill or exertion’. The guidance mentions ‘organisations concerned with the promotion of a particular amateur sport or game’.

It is clear from this brief analysis that ringing has many facets that would enable the Council’s work to be classified as charitable, without the need to invoke a religious purpose. This could put the Council’s charitable status on a more secure footing, and would be in keeping with the need to

promote the non-religious aspects of ringing to attract recruits (particularly young ones) for whom a religious emphasis is a deterrent.

What the council (really) does

Despite the misleading top level ‘Object’ being only tenuously related to what the Council does, the clauses that follow it ‘... in furtherance thereof ...’ give a much better description of the Council’s work, and relate more closely to the needs of ringers. In some of these areas the Council has done a lot but in others it does very little, so there is scope for improvement. Generally it is stronger on things relating to hardware than ‘liveware’, notably training, where the lead to improve standards is now elsewhere.

Relationship with the church

The Council’s relationship with the church is currently the most important it has outside of ringing. But it should be a relationship of cooperation and synergy, not one of dependence or exclusivity. Ringing is about far more than the church and the church is about far more than ringing.

Most ringers are members of church bands, with a commitment to their local church(s). Some of them are Christians for whom ringing itself is an act of worship while some are non-Christians happy to ring for the Church in return for the pleasure of ringing. Many lie between these two extremes.

The Council should support ringers in church bands by maintaining a good relationship with the central bodies of the relevant churches. The Council already has a working relationship with the Church of England, which has helped to resolve various issues that affect ringers, and similar relationships could potentially be extended to other churches. The relationship could also be improved – for example to avoid decisions that affect ringing being made without consultation.

Relationships with secular bell owners

Churches currently own most of the bells used for ringing, but as increasing numbers of churches close many of these bells will either go out of use or pass into secular control. In addition the number of secular rings is likely to increase. The Council should therefore seek relationships with owners of bells in secular buildings to ensure that ringing is properly supported, and it should seek to create a climate where other secular providers will make bells suitable for ringing available in the future.

As well as the provision of bells, vibrant bands normally require a commitment to regular performance, to act as a focus. For a brass band this may be a programme of playing for parades, fetes, markets, etc, and for choirs or orchestras it is public concerts. For most ringers, even those with no religious affiliation, ringing for church services provides this core performance focus, but in a future world with less service ringing something more will be needed.

Some secular towers already have a commitment to public

ringing, but these are relatively few. The Council could help to stimulate a demand for public ringing, which as well as supplementing the opportunities for ringers to perform could also help to raise the public awareness of ringing.

Relationship with ringers

The Council’s most important relationship ought to be with the ringers it serves, but that relationship is weak. Rank and file ringers are often unaware of the Council or see it as distant and uncaring, while ‘high end’ ringers can see it as irrelevant, misguided or obstructive. These attitudes feed on themselves and obscure much of the good work that the Council does.

But there is no smoke without fire. The Council’s poor reputation is not just bad PR. The Council does have weaknesses, and protesting that ringers should ignore them and be content to focus on its good points doesn’t help. It makes the Council seem uncaring.

The Council’s structure doesn’t help either. It is a federation of ringing societies, many of which are themselves perceived as remote from their members, so ringers don’t feel they have any direct stake in the Council.

Other relationships

The Council does not seem at ease with other providers of services to ringers. Its default stance seems to be defensive rather than collaborative. It ought to play an integrating and supportive role, to help maximise the benefits to ringers.

The need for change

The Council has toyed with reform, and a few things have changed, but many proposed reforms get sidelined.

Three ways that the Council could improve things are:

- 1 Make a declaration to dispel misconceptions. To be effective that must be prominent and widely reported. It can be done now.
- 2 Institute a comprehensive review of the Council’s objectives, structure and function. That can’t be done instantly, but to ensure that it does get done, and that ringers believe it will be done, it must have a clear scope and timescale to deliver results.
- 3 Explore the possibility of more direct ways for ringers to engage with the Council (or some related global body in which they could have a direct stake), which has already been identified¹.

Our first motion covers (1) and the second covers (2) & (3).

If you wish to see the Council widely respected by ringers, and working effectively to serve them, we encourage you to support these motions, which we see as necessary first steps to achieving that objective.

*John Harrison
Ruth Marshall*

¹ *Change Ringing for the Future* conference in 2011 and Admin Committee in 2014, but not followed up.