

Decisions on methods & peals – the case for review

Council agreed the need to review the principles and fundamental requirements underlying the Decisions on methods and peals. The Methods Committee was invited to contribute, but clearly there is a need for input from the wider ringing community as well.

Before starting we need to be clear on the problem. The perennial arguments about the technical definition of methods and peals are the symptom not the cause. They bring the Council into disrepute, not just with the high-end ringers who trip over the Decisions but with the mass of ordinary ringers.

The review must look deeper than technical detail – to the underlying principles – and it must look more broadly at the purpose of the Council's Decisions before getting sucked into arguments about nuts and bolts.

What are the Decisions for? Council's Rules require affiliated societies to abide by them but they don't define their status or purpose. The rules require the Methods Committee to advise on their interpretation but don't say why or how they should be created.

The Decisions represent a set of norms and standards, and as their custodian the Council has a duty to ensure that they broadly reflect the needs and expectations of the ringing community that it serves.

The Decisions fall into two groups. Decisions A, B, C & H cover things to be encouraged or discouraged¹ and Decisions D, E, F & G (85% of the words) cover methods, calls, extensions, compositions and peals. Although much of their content is devoted to the mathematical aspects of method structure, truth, etc this group also covers non-mathematical things like the nature of the instrument used for performances, the conduct of performances and administrative criteria for the recognition of records.

The review should not start with detailed technicalities – it should start with the core principles. When they have been agreed then it is sensible to move on to consider the detail needed to embody the principles. The first phase needs the widest consultation in order to capture a reasonable consensus from across the ringing community. The second phase also needs consultation across the community but since the matter being discussed will be more technical the number of ringers, both in the Council and outside, that will be able to contribute usefully will be far fewer.

The first stage of the consultation should not be led by a specialist technical group. The officers should appoint a small group with an appropriate breadth of experience to lead it. The second phase of consultation, and the associated implementation of the technical detail, should be led by the Methods Committee, drawing on appropriate external expertise (for example members of the RingingTheory² list).

Some principles that ought to guide the review and subsequent re-formulation are:

- Balanced consensus – Absolute agreement on everything is unlikely. The aim should be to understand the range of views on each topic and to achieve a balance that will receive widespread support or at least respect.
- Change where required – Where there is a good reason for change it should be made, despite the status quo.
- Continuity where practical – It would be wrong to ignore what we have inherited and throw the baby out with the bath water. Therefore although change should be made where it is needed, continuity should be provided wherever it can be without conflicting with the agreed principles.
- Simplicity – The aim should be to simplify the Decisions where possible, using fewer words. General cases should be preferred, with special cases only used where essential.
- Future-proofing – The aim should be to provide a framework within which future innovation is possible without undue obstacles. Arbitrary constraints should be avoided and there should be a clear separation between the mechanisms used to describe what has already been done and the requirements for what it may be acceptable to do in the future.

¹ Decisions (A) and (B) are directed towards ringing associations and their corresponding dioceses. They encourage the existence of specialist advisors, bell restoration funds, half muffled ringing, the development of ringers' abilities and the encouragement of good striking, and they deprecate things like breaking up good bells or using electronic substitutes. Decision (C) covers the custody of the Rolls of Honour and decision (H) encourages the formation of alliances and the development of change ringing in new regions.

² Some debate has already begun on Ringing Theory but without the benefit of a prior consensus on core principles from the wider ringing community. Thus detail tends to be debated as a surrogate for (implicit) principles.