

Thinking the unthinkable – 8

Attitudes to money

Our expensive equipment is provided free. Most other services associated with ringing are either free or grossly subsidised (eg books whose price only covers the cost of printing and distribution, but not their creation, intellectual property or management of the process). Ringers tend to start with an assumption that most things will be free, whereas in most other activities, people expect to pay their way. On the flip side of the coin, many ringers are very generous with their time and talents, so to some extent the two balance out. But the residual effect on the mindset of ringers is something that non-ringers can find difficult to understand. Consider a couple of examples.

A few years ago there was a heated debate at a society AGM about a subscription increase from £4 to £4-50 per annum (ie an extra penny a week) because it was 'above the rate of inflation'. How can a non-ringer, living in the real world, be expected to understand anyone quibbling over such a tiny amount, when the annual subscription to say a choral society might be ten or twenty times what a ringer pays?

At the 2007 Central Council meeting a society representative made an impassioned plea that the society would not be viable if it had to pay 10p per annum per member to the Council, rather than its current fee based on having 5 representatives, which for its 1000+ members was equivalent to about 7p per member. How can a non-ringer take seriously any organisation that quibbles about a difference of 3p per member per year, when many amateur organisations pay annual precepts of several pounds per member to their national bodies?

Looking over the fence

What happens with other performance based activities, for example a typical choral society. The annual subscription might be £80 or £100 per member, though some charge much more. Of this, the society would pay between £1-50 and £2-50 per member (depending on size) to Making Music, the national body for voluntary music groups. Where does the money go? The choir will pay to hire its rehearsal room, and typically pay its conductor £50 - £60 per rehearsal. Some of the money will underwrite the cost of concerts, which are often not covered by ticket sales. That includes possibly £500 to the conductor, £3000 for an orchestra and up to £2000 to hire a large venue. An orchestral society would not need to hire an orchestra, but its members would have to buy their own instruments, which could cost a substantial amount, depending on the instrument.

At the national level, Making Music (MM) has some similarities with the Central Council. It lobbies government, it organises workshops and training, it provides information, it provides insurance and it pays collective performing rights fees. Also like the Council, MM relies on a network of many unpaid volunteers (though they receive full out of pocket expenses) but unlike the Council, it also employs paid staff to perform its core functions and to support the volunteers.

The numbers are somewhat different. MM represents some 200,000 people, whereas the CC represents under 50,000 ringers, so pro-rata,

MM's 10 paid staff would equate to 2 or 3 for the CC. The structure is different too. MM has 12 regions, which between them represent 2,800 groups. CC has no regions, but is in effect a federation of around 50 territorial societies and a few others, representing say 5000 bands.

If we looked at other performing arts and sports, each would produce a slightly different picture, but the pattern would be similar. Participants would mostly buy or hire the equipment that they use, and they would pay significantly more than peanuts for membership of their local organisation. The national body would most likely employ some paid staff, and would be supported by a significant precept from affiliated local groups. Paid instructors are also likely to be common, alongside volunteers.

Financing the Central Council

How does the Council spend the 10p per ringer that it receives every year? Does it cover the Council's work and services? You might be surprised to discover that it isn't really intended to pay for any of them. The official line is that the affiliation fee is only expected to pay the cost of organising the weekend of the annual meeting, which it just about does. That is the excuse for levying it per representative rather than per ringing member of the societies.

So who pays for running the Council the other 362 days of the year? The answer is no one. Over its century plus existence, the Council has managed to accumulate some surplus funds, the interest on which is its main source of revenue, one that has reduced drastically in recent years. Other than that, if it can't be done for free, then it can't be done. The Council runs on a shoestring, and it is amazing that it achieves what it does, thanks to the dedication and vast amounts of unpaid time donated by Council members and supporters.

Payment to ringers

Another topic guaranteed to spark heated debate among ringers, is the question of payment to ringers. The very idea seems to create shock, without asking what the payment would be for. Payment for time, effort and expertise (especially training) raise the strongest feelings, but even payment for directly incurred costs doesn't escape. There are mechanisms to reimburse expenses, but there is also a strong culture that prevents many ringers from ever claiming, especially for things like travel costs. You can get a flavour of this culture by reading the CC Guidance on committee expenses

"Notwithstanding the great commitment that we, as church bell ringers, demonstrate by keeping our church bells ringing regularly Sunday by Sunday, bell ringing is a hobby. In exchange for our contribution to the life of the Church we are able to enjoy ringing at other times, for instance practices, meetings, quarter peals and peals, usually for no more than a small donation to tower funds. Many ringers also contribute to the organisation of ringing, by accepting office at tower, district (or branch), and society (or association or guild) level. We do this, usually with no more than possible reimbursement for secretarial expenses such as postage or phone calls, for our love of the Exercise. Indeed, as in other voluntary organisations, most societies would quickly become insolvent if their officials sought to recover in full the expenses they incur in the

performance of their duties. The same is true of Council committees. If all members of committees routinely claimed the expenses of attending committee meetings, then either the dues collected from affiliated societies would have to rise substantially or the activities of the Council would have to be curtailed. However the Council would not want its committees to be deprived of the expertise of a member who could not afford to attend committee meetings. Accordingly the Hon. Treasurer will meet claims for travelling expenses to committee meetings from those members, subject to the following criteria . . ."

Boiling that down to its essentials, it says that because ringers (at large) get everything free, then any ringers who serves the Council should not only give their time free, but should also pay their own costs of doing so. It stops just short of refusing to pay, but it comes close to it by hinting that claims are for hardship cases.

Notice the implied presumption against asking affiliated societies to pay 'substantially' more. A non ringer might question the use of the word 'substantial' even if the current 10p per ringer per year were to be doubled. Also questionable is the suggestion that officials of national bodies of other voluntary organisations can't claim their expenses.

The Ringing Foundation

The idea came from a working group that I chaired. The group was exploring ways that money might be used to help secure the future of ringing by allowing things to happen that wouldn't otherwise do so. The Foundation would raise money to invest in the human side of ringing, notably training and public awareness (see: www.ringingfoundation.com/) It was just one of our ideas, but we saw it as a potential facilitator of the others. It needed legally 'setting up' and would take some years to develop, so we focused our limited time on it.

During its short history, the Foundation has had its critics. Some say it is not needed, while others accuse it of not doing enough. We anticipated this 'chicken and egg' problem (but we didn't solve it). To raise funds, the Foundation needs to show examples of how the funds could be used. Such ideas are thin on the ground in an Exercise where everything except bell restoration has traditionally been conceived around not costing much. We hoped that the Foundation would act as a magnet for new ideas of better ways of doing things, unconstrained by the need to be cheap.

The Foundation was one piece in the jigsaw. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Changing the mindset?

Were we wrong to believe that the Exercise was capable of changing? Is it really impossible to use money to benefit the health of ringing? Are we really so content with doing everything for free that we can't find any better ways (or ways of doing more things, more quickly) given the prospect of financial support?

After ringing for a wedding, I once alluded to the trivial nature of the Guild subscription by saying that my wedding money would pay it for two years. A fellow Guild officer replied 'but there is nothing else to spend it on'. We are back to the chicken and the egg. What must we do to change our mindset and aim higher?

John Harrison

For publication in [The RingingWorld](#)