

Hi Nick

This has had limited time for debate with the Exec members so some of this is really my opinion. I am also coming at this from almost an outsider's standpoint as you know. These are good questions and thank you for asking them because it is important that we are clear on these points and that the answers are communicated widely once we have had chance for a full discussion. My fellow Exec members have all had much more time to develop a clear picture of what the Council is and should be doing – I have only had a couple of weeks. And I am sorry you did not get an answer to your questions earlier.

1. What are the benefits to the Guild of being affiliated to the Central Council in its new format?

Any activity that has mass participation and common purposes needs to have an overall governing body that is responsible for things like keeping and developing rules, dealing with external bodies, record keeping, etc. For ringing that governing body is the Council, which has specific functions like managing method names, and looking after Dove's Guide because someone needs to.

There are things that can be done centrally that have direct or indirect benefit to ringers in all areas of the country and worldwide. These are specific projects such as Ringing Remembers or developing the Safeguarding policies, and ongoing activities such as the maintenance of Dove's Guide and the method libraries. Imagine just for a moment how much more difficult it would have been to get ringing safeguarding policies agreed if individual associations had needed to agree policies with their own Diocese, rather than the Council dealing with the Church of England and agreeing a universally acceptable code? Some would probably have failed with potentially dire consequences. Imagine also what a wasted opportunity it would have been had the Council's PRO not grasped Ringing Remembers and coordinated the recruitment of over 3000 new ringers, at least some of whom are potential Peterborough DG members.

It is also worth having a network of people who can be called upon for advice, and a central body can manage that and share that expertise widely, plugging gaps in local knowledge, which given the current demographic trends of bellringing ages and numbers is crucial.

Although the Central Council doesn't have high costs because of the volunteer ethos, it does have some administrative expenses. I understand that historically the affiliation fees of member societies were to cover the cost of organising the annual meeting, although it is viewed a bit more broadly now. The Council is really run on a shoestring - the income from affiliation fees from member societies is about £8000 in total, or about 25p per ringer per year. This was one of the criticisms uncovered by CRAG – the Council does not have enough income to be effective. ART has higher income than that, and the Birmingham School of Bell Ringing soon will have.

A question is whether a central body ought to try and do a lot more, and try and raise a lot of money to do it. Organisations like the RSCM have six figure income from members – sports governing bodies like the FA will have multi-million pound budgets. What would a central

ringing body be able to do in terms of raising awareness of ringing and increasing recruitment and training if it had a budget of, say, £200,000 a year and full time staff?

So although ringers may justifiably ask why associations are affiliated to the Central Council, as we did question at the St Martin's Guild a year or so ago, my answer is that affiliation is a commitment to a common purpose and set of standards and that an affiliation fee is a contribution to the cost of running the central organisation on behalf of the ringers we represent. It recognises that generally all the broad and quite extensive range of things the central council does via its various volunteers are of benefit to all ringers, and that it is better for these things to be done by one body than devolved.

2. What are the benefits for the Guild of attendance of the Guild Representatives at the Central Council meeting ?

3. With the new format Executive and Workgroups, what is the role of the representatives at the meeting?

These are very good questions and are linked so I will answer them together. The CRAG review said that the purpose of the representatives is to hold the Executive and its Workgroups to account, i.e. make sure the people who have been elected to these working positions are doing good and useful things. The annual meeting is the time when progress is reported and the Executive and other team members can be quizzed. Having to present results once a year is a good way of making sure things happen!

The Guild only therefore benefits if its representatives find out what is going on, report back to the members of the Guild they represent, and take the opportunity to raise questions either from themselves or on behalf of their members.

What needs to be reviewed now is whether any Guild really needs more than one representative, given that Workgroups can be staffed by volunteers or pressed men/women who do not need to be Council reps. Given the importance of the development of ringing to the Central Council's activities - it should be a key part of the strategy - there is an argument for there just being one representative of each Society or Guild and that person being the Ringing Master or A.N other person close to the day to day ringing operation or the culture of the Association. And finally in terms of number of reps and their need to attend, I expect some associations have spent more on getting their representatives to the Council AGM than they pay in affiliation fees! That doesn't make a lot of sense.

That then also calls into question the logic of the affiliation fee being 'per rep'. The fee somehow ought to be linked directly to the numbers of members an association has, but that doesn't take account of the fact that some ringers are members of multiple affiliated groups. If it were just £1 per ringer, the affiliation fees of large territorial societies would increase hugely, but then they have the most income so why not? It probably ought to be tiered but this is something that needs to be looked into. If every ringer paid £5 a year to a central body that promoted ringing for everyone's mutual benefit would that be too much to ask? It would certainly be a step change. I expect 10% of ringers would pay 10 times that amount if they

were convinced of the benefit, especially if it also gave them their Ringing World every week. This information was highlighted in the consultation work by CRAG. Some might do it simply because they believed it was the right thing to do. I am a Life Member of CAMRA and member of the National Trust not because I get value for money, but because I think they are doing things that need doing and I want to support them.

I think that the central ringing body, whatever it is called, now needs to do more to consider strategies for arresting the decline in recruitment and training of ringers, strategies that are likely to involve boots on the ground in all areas of the country. Pulling together is likely to be more effective than territorial associations doing their own thing, good ideas will be shared, and cross border initiatives developed to recognise ringers' mobility and willingness to travel to learn. There is also the chance that any association that is not effective in providing opportunities for ringers to develop will be bypassed, and new groupings will be developed perhaps around cities or centres of excellence to provide greater opportunity where there is a critical mass of help. Some of the best ideas are already coming from outside traditional structures.

4. What benefit does the Central Council derive from the affiliation of our Guild?

The Council needs to represent all ringers, and the way ringing is currently organised is that ringers are largely represented by territorial associations of which they are members, plus a number of 'special interest groups'. While the Council would no doubt continue to operate if the odd association was not affiliated, the Exercise would start to fall apart if more and more associations disaffiliated. Different rules and standards would start to emerge, a body only representing part of the ringing community would probably cease to be motivated to do anything, especially if there was a feeling that a major recruitment drive (like Ringing Remembers) benefitted unaffiliated societies as much as affiliated ones. This would probably just hasten the creation of a direct membership ringing body that could replace the Council and many territorial associations would decline quicker than they are already.

There is therefore benefit overall to ringing that all associations representing ringers are affiliated to the Central Council, abide by its rules and support its activities, rather than it being possible to identify the specific benefit derived from the affiliation of specific Guilds in isolation.

As I said at the start, this answer has not had the benefit of time for discussion with my fellow Exec members. We have not even had a meeting since I was President. It therefore has a large element of being the way I see it, though be assured I have consulted with all of them over the last couple of days and they have all read this. I hope it is enough for you to face your Guild with confidence and justify continued affiliation to the Central Council.

Simon Linford

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