

Central Council Report 2019

The 122nd Annual General Meeting of the Central Council was held on 7th September 2019 at the UCL Goldsmiths Campus in South East London

The Guild's representatives; Jane Sibson, David Westerman, Nick Elks and Simon Dixon were all in attendance. The total number of representatives present was ??? - fewer than previously, possibly as a consequence of the change in date (previously May Bank holiday).

The choice of venue seemed to work well with excellent facilities in terms of meeting room(s) and immediately adjacent spaces for ringing related sideshows and refreshments. The first day (Saturday) started with presentations by different Workgroups to communicate what they had been working on, how matters were progressing and future plans. This was followed by the Ringing World AGM and then the main Central Council AGM was held after lunch, being wrapped up at about 4pm - it is a much slicker affair these days. The second day was effectively a mini Roadshow with plenty of talks about ringing related projects as well as a few mini-rings and dumb-bell simulators to try out and stalls representing different aspects of ringing and ringing merchandise. There was plenty of opportunity on both days for mingling and chatting with other representatives as well as with the Central Council officers.

This was the first time that general ringers as well as representatives were actively encouraged to attend the meeting(s). Apparently 25% of those who signed up to attend were interested people who were not society representatives.

The Workgroup presentations offered a glimpse into their work in terms of an overall perspective, with more detail being given in the printed papers that were given to all attendees.

My overall impression is that the new format of the Council is bedding in, with necessary ongoing business (such as ringing campaigns, safeguarding advice, publications and maintenance of archives) being attended to, as well as plans for future governance and projects.

There are many aspects to what the Central Council does, and most tend to go un-noticed under the radar, perhaps because they are deemed to be mundane and not of significant interest. This is perhaps because we might take for granted what has been put in place and continues to be maintained and developed to ensure that we can undertake 'the Exercise' as we know it and are able to do so with relative ease. I cite here examples such as method and peal definitions and records, relationships with other organisations, particularly the Church, legal frameworks, publications, records and stewardship.

I shall list now the different Workgroups and what they are working on, as well as the strategic and operational aspects of the Council and then will highlight a few activities that you might find of particular interest...

The Executive meet regularly once a month to ensure plans and projects are kept on track.

Finances - the Council have under their control total funds of £400k which consist of General Funds, Bell Restoration Fund, the Fred Dukes International Bell Fund, Publications and the Library

The Volunteer and Leadership Workgroup are concentrating on youth engagement and the retention of new ringers

The Historical and Archive Workgroup are collecting and disseminating statistics and historical items

The Stewardship and Management Workgroup are devising training courses and information about tower infrastructure, tower operation, major projects, physical objects, working with ringers and the Church, and raising money.

The Technical and Taxonomy Workgroup are working on bringing together disparate resources concerning methods, compositions and the Dove database by designing and managing information technology and databases, making them available through the internet.

The Communications and Marketing Workgroup are working on the CC website development, producing an 'Event in a box' ready-made resource for societies to use at local level events, and plans for celebrating VE75, the anniversary of VE day, and looking at how best to engage with different (non-bellringing) groups.

The Council's forward plan for 2020 is about asking and listening, and being both efficient and effective. Developing the Council's mission and building partnerships (internal and external), gathering data, working on a Direct Membership scheme, to help with redundant bells and churches and most importantly the recruitment and retention of ringers by developing workshops and introducing a new Ringing Course.

So - what has the Council been doing which might be of particular interest?

The Central Council website, which is quite possibly the first port of call for anyone who wants to know more about what goes on in the bellringing community, is still a work in progress and is continually being developed both in terms of operation (look and feel) and in content. Some debate took place on what was in and what has been left out thus far - it is still far from perfect but it is in continual development.

The Bells on Sunday resources and communication with the BBC has for the time being been taken over by Alex Fishburn but he now needs to pass this on to someone else to manage.

Safeguarding advice seems now to becoming better understood and there is plenty of advice available on the website as well as being available on request for any out of the ordinary situations.

The new framework for methods has been finalised and published (available on the website). This has been widely consulted on during its development and should now hopefully be better accepted with its more permissive ethos and content.

The Ringing Remembers campaign has come to an end - it was ably co-ordinated by Vicki Chapman who is now the Central Council's Public Relations Officer. Whilst the campaign had a certain amount of criticism (I cite the poster, as well as its long term legacy, or perceived lack thereof) it has been a successful project led by the Central Council with over 3000 new recruits.

The Roll of Honour remembrance ringing project is now almost complete. This has been led by Alan Regin, in his role as Steward of the Central Council's Rolls of Honour.

There is a new President of the Central Council. The previous President, Christopher O'Mahony, has very ably overseen the transition of the Council to its new format over the past three years with his own brand of tact and diplomacy - which was a good set of attributes for this transitional period. What is needed now is a firebrand to ensure that everything comes to fruition, that the forward plan is rapidly put in place and that the future of ringing comes to the fore and is adequately addressed. Simon Linford was

elected at this AGM as the new President of the Central Council - he has the requisite qualities of drive and vision, someone who will not take 'no' or 'perhaps maybe' as an answer and he commands respect at many levels. His track record is impressive and I for one am both delighted and encouraged that he has taken the helm.

At our own Guild AGM this year questions were raised about the significance and relevance of the Central Council and the role of our Representatives. I shall try now to address that - though will state first that as the Council is still evolving there is no clear answer at the moment.

A bit of history - previously the Council consisted of affiliated societies, each having a number of representatives based on the number of members of that society. These representatives were able to vote on procedural matters arising and were also expected to perform roles within the Committees which did various tasks within the Council.

With the current format of Workgroups and their task-based sub-groups being led by a Workgroup leader who then appoints people to fulfill various tasks, those people are now sourced from whoever might be good at the particular task, with suitable relevant skills, and they do not necessarily have to be society representatives. The idea here is that 'suitable' volunteers with requisite skills help perform tasks rather than well intentioned, though perhaps not well-suited, volunteers. The role therefore, in this respect, of society representatives is changing.

Society representatives still have a crucial role to play in scrutinising the activities of the Central Council and to vote on important matters arising, including appointing the Executives who run the Council. Representatives are also able to represent their society members in raising any issues with the Council which are of concern or are considered important.

This then raises the question 'do we still need the same number of Representatives?'. The answer to that is not currently clear and depends a lot on how far the Central Council reforms go in subsequent years, and is particularly reliant on whether or not the mooted 'Direct Membership' scheme becomes a reality. That particular aspect of the reconstituted CC currently seems a long way off, though is potentially next on the agenda in the reform process. In the meantime, by legacy, we still have a number of representatives based on the size of our society.

I shall try to summarise...

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

A. I think that position has not changed with the reconstituted Council - we all benefit from the top-level organisation that assures continuity of thought on important matters that ensure we are all able to enjoy 'The Exercise' in a consistent and well-managed fashion.

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

A. The Representatives are able to scrutinise the work of the Council, to ensure that the Guild and its members benefit from, and are not disadvantaged by, actions of the Council. They are also able to report back to the Guild on what is occurring at Council level and on any related matters. The AGM is also a good opportunity to mix with and meet others from other societies to share thoughts and exchange views.

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

A. The role of the representatives is to scrutinise the Councils work and to potentially influence its work by lobbying the Executive and the Workgroup Leaders. The Council seeks to always be open to this scrutiny so that it can best represent the affiliated societies and their members. There is a certain element of debate during the AGM but the best way reps are able to influence the Council is by getting to know, and to converse with, other reps and the Council leaders, which usually happens during the AGM weekend but outside of the meeting itself. The meeting itself has become a lot slicker and focussed of late, which makes for more time for the truly influential informal discussions that take place outside of the meeting. This of course depends on how pro-active your reps are during the occasion - as well as at other times during the year.

In my opinion, what the Central Council does is generally good and we do benefit from their work. We therefore ought to continue to support the Council and to work with it as best we can. The Council has changed to try and be more relevant to the needs of the ringing community by being open and transparent but also flexible and more permissive in its actions and decisions. It is also trying to engage better with the wider ringing community by inviting all comers to get involved. It is of course run by volunteers and more are always needed. Do you have any special skills which might be of benefit to the Central Council Workgroups and are therefore able to help better serve the wider ringing community?