

Feedback from consultation

1 Introduction

The consultation arose from concern in the Admin Committee that the affiliation fee had risen steeply in recent years and that it may rise further in the future. Since the current formula for calculating the affiliation fee for societies of different size shares the burden very unevenly (15:1 in terms of cost per member) it was felt that a change to make the fee proportional to membership should again be explored.

In 2007 a proposal to do this was narrowly defeated amidst much controversy, so before considering a new proposal it was considered important (a) to provide a much more thorough analysis than that offered in 2007 and (b) to consult with member societies on the principle of redistribution before deciding when and if to develop a substantive proposal. In particular it was thought necessary to obtain the views of the larger societies whose contribution would increase if affiliation fees were directly related to membership.

It was also considered wise not to limit the consultation solely to finance, since finance is a means to an end (enabling the Council to do its work) and money is only one resource. The Council's work is even more dependent on the availability of suitably motivated volunteer effort, mainly provided by society representatives. The questions were deliberately open ended in order to encourage comment about other aspects of the Council's structure, its organisation and the scope of its work.

Preparing the consultation document took longer than intended, leaving only six weeks for responses before the March meeting.¹ Several societies commented on the difficulty of consulting their members or even their committees in this time, and some others may have decided there was too little time to respond.

2 Summary of response and issues raised

Response

Responses were received from 18 societies, a quarter of those affiliated to the Council. Of those that replied 8 were 'larger societies' (with more than ~750 members who currently pay less than the average per member). The table below lists the larger societies in size order, and shows which responded. Six of the ten societies with over 1000 members responded.

Society	Reply	Members (2011)*	Current fee per member
Oxford DG	Y	2586	7p
Bath & Wells DA	Y	1889	8p
Yorkshire Association		1860	8p
Winchester & Portsmouth DG	Y	1441	10p
Salisbury DG	Y	1416	11p
Kent CA	Y	1403	11p
Gloucester & Bristol DA	Y	1386	11p
Sussex CA	Y	1326	11p
Essex A		1212	12p
Lancashire A		1062	14p
Truro DG	Y	988	12p
Peterborough DG		888	14p
Chester DG		864	14p
Suffolk G		837	14p
Hereford DG		800	15p
Norwich DA		779	15p

* Membership figures are those declared by the society to determine the number of Council representatives. In some cases they are less than the society's total mailing list.

In addition to the society responses, comments were received from 6 individual ringers.

The central question was:

B2 – Is the proposal to link society affiliation fees to their membership a practical way to achieve this?

The table below lists the answers given, together with an indication of the main comments or concerns raised by each society. The table lists societies in order of size and shows those with more than 750 members in bold type.

Respondent	B2	Criticisms/Concerns
Oxford DG	Yes	
Bath & Wells	Provisional	Need better accountability, and demonstration of value. Is everything the Council does really necessary? Are there any cost savings?
Winchester & Portsmouth	Yes	Should focus on future of ringing
Salisbury	Yes	Council should collect funds from all societies for the Ringing Foundation
Kent	Yes	
Gloucester & Bristol	No	Size of council, relationship with Ringing Foundation
Sussex	Yes	
Truro	Yes	Fear of continued rises going forwards and the possibility of paid employees. Organization concern. Lack of financial discipline.
Lincoln	Yes	
Worcestershire	Yes	
Devonshire	Yes	More focus on needs of ringers in 30s & 40s
Surrey	No	Council is too big and should reorganize and live within its means
Cumberlands	–	Consider reducing costs and/or services
Derby DA	Yes	
Middlesex & London	Yes	More national advertising and better access to resources
Durham & Newcastle	Yes	Council needs to be restructured. Should focus on how to move ringing forward
Four Shires	Yes	Need more transparency on what they get for their money
St Martins	Yes	Over-reliance on affiliation fees

* Lack of time to consult fully, and unconvinced about getting value from the last 25% increase.

Most responses support sharing the cost on a per member basis.

Of the six larger societies that responded four were supportive, one was conditional and one was against.

Responses from individual ringers were half broadly supportive and half critical, though the criticisms were mainly about other aspects of the Council or the nature of the consultation and did not express a direct view on the idea of a different distribution.

¹ One response was received after the meeting, and is included in this version of the document.

3 Conclusions

- 1 The responses suggest that there is significant support for more even cost sharing between societies of different sizes, though some suggested a transition period to ease the impact on larger societies.
- 2 There are many concerns about the structure, organisation and function of the Council.
- 3 There is a significant minority of opposition to changing the basis of the affiliation fee, but given the number of concerns expressed about other aspects of the Council it is not possible to determine whether this opposition is based on a belief that the current distribution of costs is inherently better or simply that reform in other areas is more urgent.
- 4 The majority support of a fairer charging mechanism from those who responded is sufficient justification to continue to develop a proposal to reform the affiliation fees. But the fact that only

20% of societies responded, and that significant issues were raised, mean that further work should be done to overcome the legitimate objections and concerns expressed before going on to develop a substantive proposal.

- 5 The nature of the feedback and the concerns that were raised makes it clear that the Council is some way short of satisfying all of its constituent societies that it is trying to do the right things and is correctly structured and organised to do so.
- 6 There is therefore a strong case for Council to consider other reforms as well as the affiliation fee.
- 7 The fact that so many issues were raised in connection with a topic that is tiny in absolute terms (pence per member per year) suggests poor communication between the Council and its constituent societies, and hence the need to ensure far more effective dialogue. (The recent regional workshops may have helped but there is clearly far more to do.)

4 Recommendation

- 1 That we note the generally favourable response as support for continuing to explore the idea of reforming the way the Council is funded.
- 2 That further work be undertaken to address the specific money related issues raised, either to dismiss them or to modify the proposal in the light of them.
- 3 That work be undertaken to review the way the Council works and what it does, which should include addressing the criticisms and questions raised, either to dismiss them or to form the basis of proposed reforms.
- 4 That the Council must continue to work to maintain a more effective dialogue with its constituent societies.
- 5 That the Committee set out a plan and timescale based on the above.
- 6 That the Committee report to Council in the terms below.

The above will require more resources than the small working group that developed the consultation document. It would seem wise to set up a number of groups to take each aspect forward.

Draft statement for Admin Committee report:

The Committee was concerned that the steep increase in affiliation fee bears more heavily on some societies than others and decided to re-visit the possibility of linking it directly to society membership. A comprehensive analysis was undertaken and a consultation document was sent to affiliated societies ahead of deciding a course of action. 20% of societies responded in the very short time available. The consultation showed strong support for a change to affiliation fees, but it also revealed many concerns and criticisms of what the Council does and how it operates. On that basis the Committee recommends a review of Council function and organisation, as well as further work to develop a widely supported basis for future affiliation fees.

5 Detailed points raised

Very few responses were confined to answering the questions (and a few didn't answer them). Most replies contained a lot of comment (critical or otherwise) about many other aspects of the Council and how it is run. This is valuable feedback and justifies the decision to include questions about the value of what the Council does as well as about how to fund it.

This section gathers many of the significant issues raised (some by more than one respondent). For ease of understanding they are grouped together under the following themes:

- Level of affiliation fee & how it is shared
- Purpose & management of Council expenditure
- Validity of assumptions
- Relationships & perceptions
- Council structure and function
- Criticisms of the consultation

Each has an added commentary. Some of these are merely answers to questions or explanations. Some question the validity or basis of the comment. Others acknowledge the importance of the comment and suggest possible responses or actions to address it.

Level of affiliation fee & how it is shared

- 1 16p per member may not seem much but having achieved that, the Council will then keep asking for more.**
The need for some future rise in income is anticipated, and the purpose of changing to a fairer distribution is so that any rise (small or large) would be more equitably spread. There is no immediate intention to raise the overall income from affiliation fees. A revenue neutral comparison seemed the best way to look at the effects of redistribution separate from other factors such as an overall increase.
- 2 The affiliation fee has gone up far more than inflation - what added value has this produced?**
Council expenditure (apart from fluctuation caused by exceptional items like Roadshows) has been broadly similar for the last decade. The reason for the increased affiliation fees is a fall in the investment income that used to cover most of the expenditure. Ringers previously paid very little of the Council's costs but now have to pay a much larger fraction.
- 3 Societies will only pay the affiliation fee if it is at a reasonable level.**
What is considered 'reasonable' is a combination affordability and value bought. 16p per year can hardly be considered unaffordable so the question is all about perceived value. The Council clearly needs to ensure that societies understand the value of the Council's work.
- 4 Is the ground being prepared for the Council to take on paid employees?**
As long as there are sufficient volunteers with the requisite skills who are willing to give the required time to run all of the Council's affairs then there will be no need to employ paid support staff. However it would be imprudent not to have the ability to do so should the need arise. The Council is unusual among similar bodies in not using paid staff to support its volunteers.
- 5 The impact of the change on large societies could be reduced by spreading the transition over a few years.**
If a change in the basis of affiliation fees is proposed the timescale for implementation must be chosen to allow societies whose fee would increase substantially to plan and budget.

- 6 The Council should go straight to a higher rate, say 20p, rather than make a revenue-neutral change.**
Such an increase can easily be made at the same time. The consultation didn't include it since it was felt important to make a decision on how the costs should be shared across the ringing community separate from other factors.

Purpose & management of Council expenditure

- 1 The Council's capital could be used to provide a buffer when times are hard.**
It has been doing so, and could permit the Council to run at a deficit for many years (with the current pattern of income and expenditure). It is valid to suggest that the Council review the purpose of its capital reserve and consider whether to maintain it (and why), whether to invest it in some major activities to benefit ringing or whether to use it to subsidise annual losses.
- 2 Investigate charging for Council services (eg T&B inspections).**
This could be done if felt appropriate. The reason for not doing so initially was stated in the paper.
- 3 There have been many 'one-off' expenditures in the past 25 years, what were they?**
To answer that question would require a much more detailed analysis. The term 'one off' was used in the analysis to separate non-recurring from annual recurring costs, in order to see the trends in the latter. It would be much harder to discern reliable trends in non-recurring items.
- 4 Council should plan for a future where its income doesn't require the continued existence of territorial ringing societies.**
There are arguments for other ways to constitute and fund a central body for ringing. This consultation did not consider them on the assumption that the Council would remain a federation of ringing societies for the foreseeable future.
- 5 For one charity to pay money to another charity is questionable and may not be legal.**
Since this has been the situation for many years for those societies that are registered as charities. It seems odd to question it now. Changing the formula for calculating the fee doesn't alter anything.
- 6 Has the Council considered reducing its need of income?**
Council's income enables its work to be done. To reduce the need for income it would first have to consider what activities could be curtailed to reduce expenditure. Expenditure is considered half yearly by the Admin Committee.
- 7 Future subscription increase needs to be for a purpose and justified to the wider Exercise.**
It is agreed that the purpose of expenditure should be justified. New activities are considered at length by Council (sometime too long perhaps). Representative members need to report back.
- 8 We would expect assurance that affiliation fees are spent effectively, not on unnecessary activities, and that capital was wisely invested..**
The Council's obligations prevent it knowingly spending money on anything that it considered 'unnecessary'. Likewise, capital is invested in a way that achieves an appropriate blend of income and security. Financial activities are reported half yearly to the Admin committee and annually to the whole Council. The annual accounts are examined by the Independent Examiners and a full report of all the committees' activities is printed in the CC supplement.

- 9 **If the affiliation fee is not linked to the annual meeting it could be used to finance any project no matter how well or how badly thought through.**
The obligation of the Council to spend its money wisely applies regardless of whether the money comes from capital interest of affiliation fees.
- 10 **The relationship (financial and governance) between the Council and the Ringing Foundation and the Association of Ringing Teachers is not adequately transparent and should be clarified.**
Any such concerns need addressing to ensure clarity.
- 11 **The Council should collect funds for the Ringing Foundation rather than it rely on donations from some societies and not others.**
That could be explored.

Validity of assumptions

- 1 **The national economic situation of the past five years is unlikely to continue indefinitely, so why change?**
The graphs show investment income steadily declining over the last 20 years. The sudden dip in 2008 merely added to that decline.
- 2 **Payment for various services is not essential for the future of ringing.**
The argument seems to be that because ringing has survived thus far on the current basis there is no need to change. That is not necessarily true. Volunteers willing to take office are increasingly hard to find, probably because ringers have greater pressures on their time from career, family and other activities than hitherto. The norm in other successful hobby, sport and musical activities is for the large amounts of voluntary effort to be supplemented by small amounts of paid services and support.

Relationships & perceptions

- 1 **For the Council to employ anyone would be a fundamental break with the voluntary nature of ringing.**
Ringers are volunteers (apart from weddings and a few special towers). That status is not affected by whether for example some of the administrative work of the Council is done by a volunteer or someone who is paid. The voluntary nature of church choirs is not compromised by the fact that many choir masters / organists are paid or that the Royal School of Church Music employs several full time staff.
- 2 **Linking the fee to individual members will change the relationship with the local ringer.**
If individual ringers feel they have a stake (albeit a very small one) in their national body then surely that is positive. If in return they expect it to do useful things (and complain if it doesn't) then that too is surely beneficial.
In practice, how many societies will choose to emphasise to their members that 16p (or whatever) of each subscription is paid to the Council. If they currently give their members an itemised breakdown of what their subscription pays for then it will already contain a (smaller or larger depending on size) amount for the Council.
- 3 **A significant increase may cause some members to question affiliation to the Council.**
Change always draws attention and can cause people to question things. But most people look beyond the percentages to the actual cost. How many people consider 16p per year to be 'a lot'?
- 4 **The Council meeting is perceived as a big happy session for the elite, many of whom serve no useful purpose.**
That perception is a problem that the Council should seek to

dispel. For many Council members, the Council meeting and preparation for it are by no means a 'jolly' and for all those who serve on committees the rest of the year when all the work is done certainly aren't. However, the accusation could be true for those members who go to the Council weekend, don't contribute to debates, don't sit on committees and don't lobby officers and chairmen on behalf of their members' interests. (See later comments.)

- 5 **There should be more focus on people in their 30s & 40s. Ringing is run by retired people and all the focus is on young ringers. Ringing as an all age activity but those in the middle get ignored.**
This comment should be heeded, especially since evidence points to ringers in this age group making good leaders.

Council structure and function

- 1 **The Council is too large to be fully effective.**
This presumably relates to its role as a decision making body.
- 2 **Council is bigger than it needs to be to fill committee posts (198 Representatives v 107 on committees).**
This is true. Some allowance is needed for people who need to take a break from committee work for legitimate reasons, but whose presence is still valued. Even so, in a much smaller Council there could be committee places for most members. But would the skills and expertise of the smaller number elected by their societies match the needs of the committees?
- 3 **A much smaller Council could do its work with the assistance of non-members.**
External members could be chosen for their capabilities (like Additional Members), and the Council could be even smaller.
- 4 **Why are people without the requisite skills, time or inclination are the on the Council?**
That's a good question. It is possible to have an impact as a 'back bencher' without being in a committee (either in debates or behind the scenes) but many members do not do this.
- 5 **Council should ensure that people with appropriate skills and expertise are on committees.**
Under the current constitution, Council doesn't control who societies elect to it. It can encourage some people to stand for certain committees but the majority of nominations are mainly influenced by individual wishes to join particular committees, which may or may not correlate with how suitable they would be. Even within the choice available, the voting might not deliver the optimum result (in terms of committee performance) because members have relatively little information about candidates' skills and track record, and what there is is presented hastily during the elections. The result may be more influenced by who is well known. Several improvements are possible but they would require major changes to procedures, and they would only work if members gave due consideration to assessing all the information when making voting decisions.
- 6 **Why are the Additional Members not Representative Members?**
Additional members are the only ones who can be 'head hunted' because they have specific skills or experience that the Council needs. They have to be voted in by the whole Council (whereas representative members may not have been elected by anyone if the society post was uncontested).
- 7 **The cost of the annual meeting could be reduced for a smaller Council.**
Yes (though the annual meeting only accounts for around 10% of Council costs). The need for a smaller venue would provide more choice and reduce costs. Administrative costs should reduce too.

- 8 **The long weekend is costly and unnecessary.**
Dispensing with events other than meetings might not save the Council a lot of money. Outings, visits, etc are not usually subsidised. The main cost of meeting room hire, etc would remain. If Council members are willing to give up their time to travel to the meeting it doesn't seem unreasonable to provide additional events for them (at minimal cost to the Council).
- 9 **Time is wasted in meetings. More use could be made of technology.**
This presumably refers to elections using paper ballot.
- 10 **Many of the services provided by the Council are provided (at no cost) locally [... and by implication the Council should not provide them].**
Many services are provided at local and (inter)national level. The Council seeks to provide services that complement rather than competing with locally provided services. For example, the Education Committee has produced training publications that can be used locally and developed new types of course that can be run locally. The PR Committee has created publicity material that is used locally.
- 11 **Rather than just asking for funds the Council should ask itself: What is it for and to what functions should it limit itself?**
Council should certainly keep its activity under review and discontinue any that have outlived their purpose. Over the years it has wound up many committees whose purpose has been fulfilled or no longer applies. A review of the Council's role and services could be useful, especially if it helped to restore confidence that it is serving a useful purpose.
- 12 **The Council is involved in too much. It should restrict itself to offering advice rather than laying down rules.**
As noted above, a review of Council's activities could be useful. Very little of the Council's expenditure is associated with the technical part of its work, ie 'rules'.
-

- 13 **If the Council can't fund its current work it shouldn't be considering doing more, it should consider doing less.**
Should the Council not determine what needs doing and then find the resources to do it, rather than the other way round?
-

Criticisms of the consultation

- 1 **Committee Expenses are lumped together with no breakdown between committees or indication of how the money is used.**
The figures in the analysis showed the broad breakdown of the main classes of income and expenditure, in order to show how they have changed over the years. More detailed breakdown is publicly available in the accounts for successive years. The larger committees tend to have higher expenses. (Mostly the ones that grass roots ringers would consider the more 'useful'). The committees dealing with peals, methods, etc tend to have low expenses.
- 2 **Too little time was allowed for consultation on such a fundamental topic.**
It was intended to give more time for consultation but the work took longer than planned. (The volunteers doing the work have other calls on their time.) The alternative to consulting this year would have been to delay until next year (to the delight of critics who accuse the Council of doing everything at a snail's pace). The Council is in the early stages of considering a change. Rather than present a cut and dried plan for a vote, it chose to consult early before making any firm proposals, to gather representative views on the issues. It has succeeded in this, even though many societies did not submit a response. The views received will be very helpful in formulating a way ahead.
-