

The Revised Central Council Rules

Questions on the Final Edition (1 of 2)

By Clyde Whittaker, Coordinator, Rules Work

Listeners to Radio 4's "I'm Sorry I Haven't A Clue" will know the lines by heart. *"I notice that we've received almost two letters this week it comes from a Mrs. Trellis of North Wales"* is the cue for another short, but incoherent letter from the fictional Mrs. Trellis (who even has her own website) along the lines of *"Dear Mr Titchmarsh, I contacted you months ago about earwax removal. I still haven't heard anything. Yours sincerely, Mrs. Trellis."*

If truth be told, Christopher O'Mahony's request for RW readers and Council Members to email questions about the final edition of the revised Central Council rules (published on 23rd February and reissued with minor modifications on 22nd March) generated almost two emails to constitution@cccbr.org.uk, and we are grateful for it! As Robert Lewis remarked last December "We are never likely to see scrawled across a belfry wall *"The Central Council Rules, OK?" (with or without the comma)*".

There have however, been some useful contributions to the Ringing World and I would like in particular to thank Chris Mew who kindly sent me an advance copy of his article and spent some time talking through the details before publication. A number of concerns raised by these contributions are now resolved or have been covered in the Frequently Asked Questions paper (available at www.cccbr.org.uk/reform/rules), but there are one or two which may benefit from further thought.

Is the Journey Really Necessary ?

Many contributions have been supportive of the principles of reform, but change is never easy. It needs good communication, strong working relationships and the ability to adjust the plan from time to time in the interests of the greater good, so it's worth reminding ourselves what the greater good is. In the words of the famous 1940 wartime poster "Is your journey really necessary?"

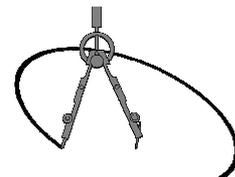
As Robert Lewis wrote in the RW back in 2016, *"What would Sir Arthur Heywood make of the 21st century CCCBR? He would probably be pleased that it is still in existence, but he might well be surprised that it has evolved so little from his own day and failed to adapt fast enough to the very changed world in which ringers now operate."*

The demands on the Council are as never before. They require it to develop new capabilities and ensure that it is more relevant to ringers in general. Overall, the tasks ahead require a level of agility which the timbers of its existing constitution (largely unchanged since 1903) cannot support.

The first six reform proposals made by CRAG and agreed at the Council's Edinburgh meeting therefore recommended



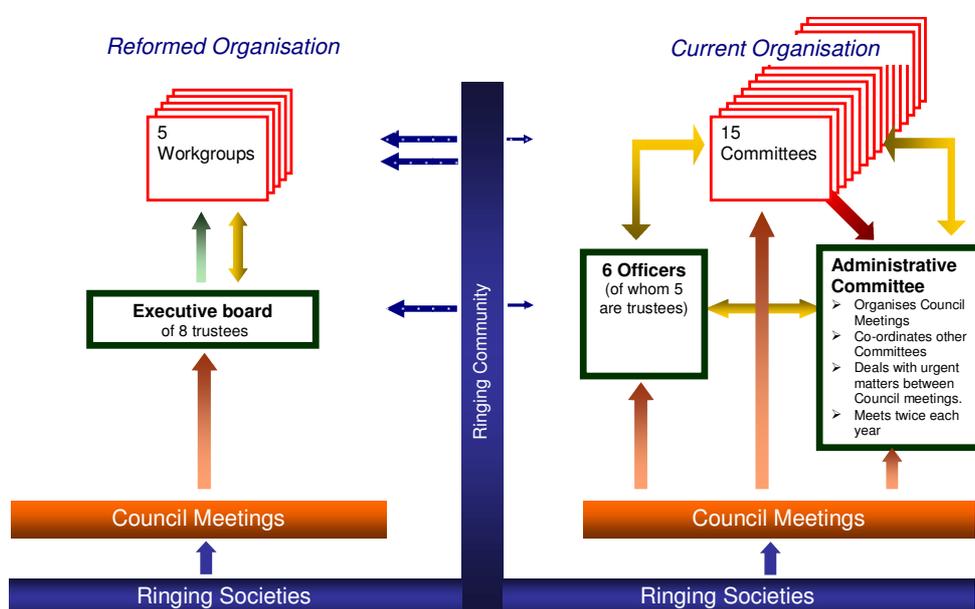
A question for today's Central Council. The famous wartime poster first published in 1940 (crown copyright).



giving the Council's rules the equivalent of a 50,000 mile service to simplify decision-making, encourage greater open-ness and bring ways of working more into alignment with working practices in the 21st century.

At the same time the Council is a charity and not a business. It relies on the dedication and experience of its many volunteers. Whilst it cannot ignore compliance, as elsewhere in ringing, it also needs to maintain its enduring values as a democratic and volunteer body.

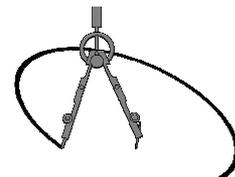
That is why the Edinburgh proposals recommended that the Council moved on from the nineteenth century model of elected committees and stewards, to a simple organisation in which accountability is more transparent, as shown in the schematic below.



From distinguished society to central ringing organisation - the reformed and existing Council structures side-by-side.

Let us take an example of how this will work in practice. Currently, the Council's officers, as trustees have a legal duty to oversee the affairs of its committees and ensure it remains solvent. But its rules also give some of these functions to its Administrative Committee, who are not trustees, but whose terms of reference require them to "co-ordinate the activities of other committees, and deal with urgent matters between meetings of the Council". Accountability is further blurred as the Administrative Committee meets only twice each year and is not empowered to see the minutes of officer meetings. Of its 33 members 15 chair Council committees and six are existing officers, creating circular accountability. To matters worse, the existing rules allow the Council's officers, as trustees to take a wide range of decisions without reference to either the Administrative Committee or Council members.

To address this, a key CRAG proposal agreed at Edinburgh was that the Council should "transfer management of its affairs ... to an Executive of eight people (including President, Deputy President, Secretary and Treasurer and four other elected members)." The effect is an organisation which is simpler and more in line with charity law. The task of the trustees is to oversee the work of the Council on behalf of its members. The new



Workgroups are accountable to the trustees and the trustees in turn are accountable to the members.

The revised rules have been designed to achieve a balance; making the Council's organisation more straightforward and flexible on the things that matter, whilst at the same time maintaining the Council's ethos as a volunteer organisation. It involves trusting people more to make the right decisions while removing the barriers which have hindered accountability and transparency.

Will more straightforward governance solve the challenges which the Council faces? Will it lead to a major change of direction? No, but better governance is the foundation stone which will enable the Council to survive and prosper in the future.

Democracy vs Accountability ?

In the current Council almost anyone who does anything is a Council member who has been elected for a fixed term of 3 years; a system which was appropriate in the days when the Council was in effect a very distinguished club. By contrast, a key conclusion embodied in the Edinburgh proposals was that in a modern charity the members elect the trustees, and the trustees then maintain the organisation. There are a number of good reasons for this.

First, there is a practical dimension. Life (if you have given up part of your house to store the Council's library) does not fit into neat triennial boundaries. If the Library Steward moves to a smaller house six months into a new term, it is they and the trustees who will put in the time and effort to ensure that the Library is found a new home. Waiting for the next annual meeting may not be an option.

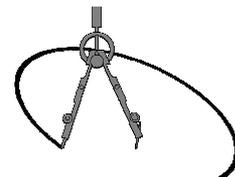
Second, fixed structures often get in the way of progress and fail to promote collaboration. The Council's organisation needs to be the servant of its purposes, changing itself flexibly to meet new challenges, and not the other way round.

Third, we must not confuse accountability with democracy. Imagine for a moment what would happen if we insisted that the editor of the Ringing World was elected by its members. Few would entertain the suggestion because we all know that the best people to seek out the most qualified candidate to take the editor's chair are the members of the Ringing World's board. It is the board who are 'on point'. It is they who have the best all-round view of the Ringing World's affairs. This does not mean that the editor of the Ringing World is not accountable. He or she is solely accountable to the board and they are solely accountable to the members. Making the editor beholden to the both the board and the members at the same time sets the one against the other and is a formula which most organisations and individuals would find invidious.

As well as adopting a simpler governance model, the revised rules also extend the opportunity to play a full part in the Council's work to everyone and not merely Council members. This cultural shift will not happen overnight. It will require a change in the way in which the Central Council is perceived throughout the Exercise, but it can only strengthen the Council in future years.

The Detailed Organisation

In parallel with the work to revise its rules, the Edinburgh proposals suggested that the Council collapse its organisation of 15 permanent committees into a smaller number of



workgroups. This work has been actively pursued by the current President and officers, but is only indirectly connected with the new rules and neither is dependent on the other.

The new rules deal with fundamental matters of governance and are designed to accept whatever detailed structure of workgroups is agreed. They do this by allowing workgroups to be implemented through Standing Orders (or byelaws).

Fewer committees is something on which almost everyone seems agreed. It makes the Council's machinery less complex and encourages collaboration. Chris Mew was working on this project in his time as President. In the RW in 2016, Robert Lewis suggested six groups, one of which brought together the Library, Peal Records and Biographies. In 2017 CRAG recommended no more than 9. The current President and his officers have settled on an organisation of five.

This sort of consolidation is not an easy task. It requires a willingness to listen and the flexibility to seek outcomes which are in the best interests of the Council and ringing. Few would envy the President in having to steer it through.

Can the rules help with this reorganisation? To a degree. First, their job is to enable the Council to maintain the internal organisation which it chooses. It is a strength of the new rules that they do not lock the Council into rigid structures. They are not there to dictate matters of detail which sensible trustees, stewards and committees should be able to work out for themselves. Instead their role is to deal with the fundamentals of governance.

Second, they can promote accountability. The revised rules achieve this by ensuring that each new Workgroup is associated with a named trustee who has its interests at heart.

Third, the revised rules give explicit recognition to the Council's important assets such as the Library and a number of other areas of decision-making by giving them "statutory" protection for the first time, meaning that important decisions, which previously could have been made in isolation by the Council's officers, can in future only ever be made at a Council meeting.

This protection is one of a number of important checks built into the revised rules to ensure that flexibility is not at the expense of safety and that ultimate control of the Council continues to rest squarely with its members. This balance in turn will allow the Council to move confidently in the direction which it chooses. It's a journey which is timely, although I'm not sure whether Mrs. Trellis would agree !

A slightly amended version of this article appeared in the Ringing World on 27th April 2018