

The Revised Central Council Rules

Questions on the Final Edition (2 of 2)

By Clyde Whittaker, Coordinator, Rules Work

As we approach the Central Council's Lancaster meeting this second article deals with four sensible questions about the Council's revised rules which are to be presented at Lancaster. These questions were addressed during last year's consultation, but perhaps deserve dusting down. Will the revised rules lead to a simpler and more user-friendly Central Council? Are they safe? Are they democratic? and finally, Will the Council after Lancaster be fundamentally the same?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'no' then whatever the challenges ahead, the status quo will probably be the better option.

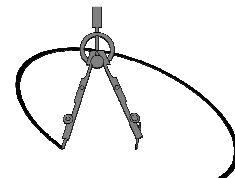
Before we turn to them, it's worth remembering that the status quo is not always the safest place. The Council's current rules, which reached their "modern" form around 1903 are those of a distinguished club, but for this reason they create barriers which have obscured rather than promoted many good things which the Council does for ringing. They are also some way from what the Charity Commission now requires.

"The important thing", wrote the Ringing World editor as far back as 1916 expressing sentiments recently echoed by the current editor, "is to find the way to remedy the existing state of things, so that the Council may be regalvanised."

The fact that "regalvanisation" was slow to occur was not a problem when the Council was less active, but at more energetic times its rules have frustrated its business and created an unjustified reputation for inertia.

Since 1903 the expectations of ringers, the media, the Church and the Charity Commission have all grown immeasurably. To meet the many new demands on it the Council's organisation has become more complex to the point where the Victorian model simply cannot take the strain. The Council's procedures and organisation have become its master and not its servant.

That is why the proposals agreed at the Council's Edinburgh meeting recommended that the Council's governance was improved and its decision-making made more straightforward. Something simpler and more user-friendly was felt to be required. A body structured not as a club, but as an organisation which speaks up for ringers, promotes ringing and supports, as far as a central body can, the efforts of towers and associations throughout the year. This is not reform for its own sake. It is *"reform that you may preserve"* in the wise words of Macaulay.



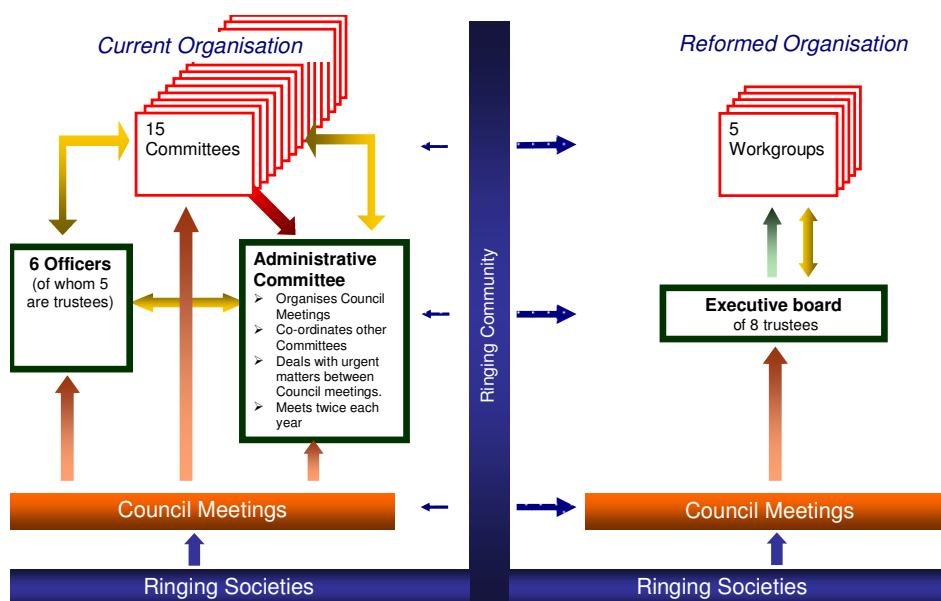
A simpler and more user-friendly Council

At the core of the revised rules is the simpler decision-making engine set out in the Edinburgh proposals. The schematic below, which compares the current and reformed organisations, shows this clearly.

The current organisation involves a complex structure and its challenges were dealt with more fully in the first of these two articles on 27th April.

The revised organisation, shown alongside, resolves these problems through a structure which is simpler and more in line with charity law. The task of the trustees is to oversee the Council's work on behalf of its members. They are supported by a smaller number of Workgroups, who are accountable to the trustees and the trustees in turn are accountable to the members.

That, in essence is the change which the Lancaster meeting will be asked to approve. The revised rules empower the Council's President and fellow trustees, making decision-making more straightforward. Of course they build-in protections to maintain the rights of Council members and they bring the Council's rules into compliance with the requirements of the Charity Commission. But at their heart is a simpler and more user-friendly organisation in which accountability is easier to understand and the barriers which have hindered decision-making are removed.

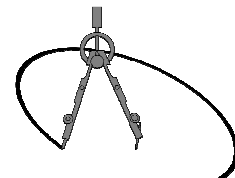


Simple and more accountable - a reminder of the reformed Council structure.

Sound and Robust

My article of 22nd September mentioned that the Council's current rules would be revised using an iterative process in which no point of view would be ignored, with the aim of creating a rulebook which is acceptable to all.

Far from being the creation of a handful of energetic individuals the revised rules are the work of 30 thoughtful contributors, mostly senior Council Members and former officers.



They took six months to write and incorporate hundreds of recommendations, which reflect many years of Council experience.

They have been cross-checked against Charity Commission guidance and received approval from the Charity Commission in March.

Those responsible have not blindly imposed the Edinburgh proposals, but have done their utmost to produce a set of rules which embodies good judgement and sound knowledge of the Council's processes.

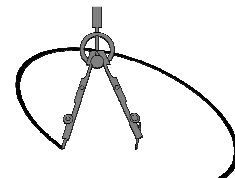
A great deal of thought has gone into almost every eventuality. When one reads the bare text of the new rules, this level of care is not always apparent, but it's there all the same.

Democracy or Benevolent Dictatorship?

As agreed at Edinburgh the revised rules give the President and trustees greater empowerment. At first sight this may seem less democratic than the current situation, but with this new empowerment come robust controls which bring the Council more closely under the supervision of its member societies (who are in effect its "shareholders"). Council members are given eight important rights:

1. Control over the Council's trustees and its rules. Council Meetings will in future elect eight trustees with elections phased so that either 2 or 3 trustees are elected at each Council Meeting. At every Council meeting, Council Members will have the opportunity to influence the composition of the Executive board.
2. The trustees' annual report, plan and budget must be debated at annual meetings.
3. Decisions at formal trustee meetings during the year must be communicated within 14 days.
4. A range of strategic decisions which could previously have been made by the Council's Officers will in future be reserved for Council members and can only be taken at a Council meeting.
5. Proposed Standing Orders (or byelaws), Decisions and Policies may be 'called in' by Council Members if it is felt that consideration by a Council Meeting is required (subjecting them to the same process of approval as at present).
6. Motions may be submitted for consideration at Council meetings, exactly as at present, and new rules ensure they will receive due consideration.
7. Council members may still request a special Council meeting and have an important new power 'in extremis' to remove a trustee where all persuasion has failed.
8. Whilst all members will contribute to the Council's business, voting rights will be restricted to society representatives and the six existing life members, ensuring the Council is more closely aligned with the priorities of its member societies, who pay its subscriptions, and through them individual ringers.

The net result will be a more democratic and transparent Council which is more closely supervised by its constituent guilds and associations.



The Council after Lancaster – evolving or revolutionised?

The Council after Lancaster will be more fleet of foot, but still the Council we know. The President and trustees will continue to be elected. Ultimate control will still rest with the same or a very similar number of society representatives. Work will continue to be done by committed volunteers who love ringing (currently arranged as 16 committees, but in future arranged into 5 workgroups).

There is no move to a centrally led or corporate model because the Council is a charity and not a business. The revised rules strengthen rather than weaken society representation and the Council will remain a democratic body founded on the dedication and experience of its supporters.

Finally, we should bear in mind that the revised rules are a means and not an end. Their role is just to make the Council's governance simpler, more accountable and compliant.

To build on these foundations and ensure a flourishing future both for the Council and for ringing will require the leadership of the Council's elected trustees and the approval of its members.

It is their settled vision - whether it is a deeper and direct engagement with grassroots ringers, as proposed by Phil Barnes, the lighter and smaller body envisaged by Jane Wilkinson in last week's Ringing World, or an alternative to these - which will guide the Council on its future journey.

Whatever the chosen strategies in the years ahead, simpler governance will make it easier for the Council to implement them and thereby to preserve and enhance its reputation.

A slightly amended version of this article appeared in the Ringing World on 18th May 2018