



Stewardship & Management Workgroup

of The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers



THE CENTRAL COUNCIL OF CHURCH
BELL RINGERS

Bell Advisers

How to get Advice on Tower Bells: Their Condition and Maintenance

Introduction

Church authorities and bell ringers may need to obtain advice on the condition of the bells in a church tower. Bells tend to be heard and not seen; they are expensive, valuable musical instruments. In some churches, there is appropriate expertise amongst the bell ringers, but elsewhere there may be little or no knowledge, whether the bells are rung frequently, occasionally or have not been rung for many years.

These notes are therefore written to help churches obtain advice on their bells, with a focus on bells in Church of England churches. The points may be applicable elsewhere but some of the details regarding ownership, permissions and legal matters may differ.

There are various people who may be interested in the condition of the bells, for example:

- Church Officials: incumbent, PCC members and church wardens
- Local Community: the church congregation, parishioners and general public
- Bell Ringers: locally and/or nationally
- Contractors: may need to know as part of their own work and safety (architects, builders, conservators, emergency services)
- Inspectors: preparing a quinquennial inspection

The information required will also vary:

- Concern about the condition of the bells and the associated installation
- Plans for restoration or the addition of bells
- Proposed alterations in the church that may affect the bells
- Local history and heritage: bells and their fittings may be decades, even centuries old
- Commemoration of people or events, locally or nationally

Quinquennial Inspections

The condition of the tower and bells of a church should normally be included in a quinquennial inspection.

However it unusual for an inspector to have a detailed knowledge of bells and the associated infrastructure.

Inspectors completing their report may therefore require a specific report on the condition of the bells and tower from an appropriate specialist.

[churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/quinquennial-inspections](https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/quinquennial-inspections)

Sources of Advice

Advice on the condition of the bells and the associated installation may be obtained from various people:

- A local ringer may provide assistance voluntarily, perhaps on a specific problem
- A member of the local ringers' society, with more expertise may be able to advise more broadly
- A member of the CCCBR Stewardship and Management Working Group (SMWG) may also be able to provide advice
- The Bell Advisor to the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC), appointed by the DAC to advise the DAC
- A professional bell hanger from the bell trade

Additional specialist expertise may also be required from structural engineers, designers or architects.

Who is asked to provide advice, will depend on the nature of the enquiry.

Points to Consider

Any activity in a church must be done with the knowledge and formal agreement of the church authorities, as owners.

Setting out what advice is needed will depend on what is already known and the overall aims. A preliminary assessment may be necessary to do this.

Prior to entering the bell chamber, there must be consideration of the integrity of ladders, floor beams, etc. If the bells have been unused for a long period, the structural integrity of the installation may have been compromised and pose serious risks.

For any checks on the tower and bells, a specific risk assessment should be completed by the person responsible for church health and safety.

Two people, possibly a small team, should be involved in any assessment, one from the church with local knowledge and one or more who can ring bells (if judged safe to do so) and have relevant knowledge. Lone working should not occur.

The people involved in the assessment should be advised of relevant church procedures, including safety and emergency procedures, security protocols, etc. Suitable clothing and protective equipment must be worn by those involved. Appropriate insurance arrangements should be in place.

Younger people, under 18, may be encouraged to observe and assist with assessments. This will encourage and support them in learning about bells and their maintenance. In all cases, appropriate parental consent must be obtained, health and safety and safeguarding procedures followed.

Responsibilities:

Potential for Confusion –

A Diocesan Bell Adviser is formally appointed by the Diocese specifically to advise the Diocesan Advisory Committee AND

A Bell Adviser may also be appointed by a local ringing society.

Confusion is most likely to occur when the ringers' society is known as 'The Xxx Diocesan Guild/Association of Ringers'.

Both advisers may then be referred to as 'The Xxx Bell Adviser'.

It should therefore be made clear who is advising whom and on what basis.

Diocesan Boundaries do not all match those of ringing societies.

The church will set out what advice is required and on what basis -

- Considerations will include:
 - For whom the work is being done
 - The scope of the assessment
 - Timescales for the assessments
 - How the advice is to be provided and to whom - normally a written report
 - Confidentiality - whether the report may be shared, and if so with whom
 - Whether any minor maintenance may be carried out during the assessment ¹
- The advice may be more formal as a contract to a commercial company or more informal with volunteers.
- Volunteers will normally offer advice to the best of their knowledge. They should declare any commercial or other interests that may affect their advice. Professional bell hangers will offer advice on a commercial basis.
- It is helpful if advisers point out informally the key findings during the assessment, then confirm these in writing.

¹ Apart from minor maintenance, work in a church, including work on bells, requires a Faculty or Archdeacon's Certificate. Until this permission has been requested formally and agreed, no work can legally be started.

Further Information

Local Ringing Societies

Affiliated to the CCCBR (Central Council of Church Bell Ringers): cccbr.org.uk/about/affiliated-societies

Some Commercial Companies

- Loughborough Bell Foundry: taylorbells.co.uk
- Whites of Appleton: whitesbellhangers.co.uk
- Nicholson bell hangers: nicholsonbellhangers.com
- Matthew Higby bell engineers: bellhangers.com
- Andrew Higson, pianos, bells, organs, clocks, consultancy: exaudite.co.uk
- Blyth & Co: churchbellspecialists.co.uk

Examples of Reference Books

- *Towers and Bells*, Alan J Frost, CCCBR, 1990
- *The Development of British Bell Fittings*, Trevor S Jennings, 1991
- *The Craft of the Bellfounder*, George Elphick, Phillimore, 1988
- *Bellframes*, Christopher J Pickford, 1993
- *Timber Bellframes*, The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 2003
- *Manual of Belfry Maintenance*, CCCBR, 2017: cccbr.org.uk/product/manual-of-belfry-maintenance

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