



# Stewardship & Management Workgroup

of The Central Council of Church Bell Ringers



THE CENTRAL COUNCIL OF CHURCH  
BELL RINGERS

## Tower Safety & Risk Assessment

### Guidance Note for Bell Ringers

#### Introduction

In this document we provide guidance to ringers on how they can assist their church in the preparation and maintenance of an effective risk assessment for ringing and other activities in the church tower.

The control of hazards and risks is essential to secure and maintain a healthy and safe place to carry out bell ringing, but few churches were designed or built to comply with current legislation and many are extremely historic and vulnerable structures. Each church must be considered carefully and put in place its own relevant procedures and policies.

**Most towers with rings of bells are within the jurisdiction of the Church of England.**

**While that is the focus of this document, the principles apply to rings of bells in towers owned by other organisations, in churches of other denominations, and churches elsewhere in the world.**

**Local legislation and circumstances should always be considered.**

#### Responsibility for Safety

The overall responsibility for safety and risk assessment in a church building rests with the church authorities. The church should have an overall Health & Safety Policy and Risk Assessment in place and should have appointed a 'Responsible Person' to cover this.

Ringers have a responsibility to work with the church authorities, using their knowledge of ringing and bell installations to ensure that aspects of ringing and related activities within the tower are covered comprehensively. Ringers must behave in a safe manner while in the church and bell tower, respecting the requirements set down by the church authorities.

#### Steps to Risk Assessment

The UK Health & Safety Executive identifies five steps forming a risk assessment [1]. These are:

- Identify hazards
- Assess the risks
- Control the risks
- Record your findings
- Review the controls

The following sections describe these steps as applied to a church tower, combining steps 1 and 2.

# Identifying Hazards and Assessing Risks

This must be carried out with the cooperation of the 'Responsible Person' from the church and should involve both ringers and non-ringers (they will have different perspectives – a ringer may see something as 'normal' when it may represent risks for others). Remember that there may be other people involved who need access to the tower apart from the ringers: the clock winder perhaps, or the person who is responsible for the flag. Mobile telephone companies that use church towers for masts may need access at all times.

As a ringer, you will have one advantage: the tower is often self-contained with limited access, unlike the body of the church which may have a variety of furniture and fittings and much wider public access.

We suggest that your tower risk assessment should start at ground level including approaches to the tower entrance and go right up to the roof. Ringers may suggest that their responsibilities end at the bells but anyone who needs to go up to the roof will usually pass through the areas used most often by ringers so it makes sense to consider the whole tower.

As you proceed you must record any hazards and assess the risk that they pose to people or the fabric of the church. You will need to do this on a realistic 'worst case' basis: For example, some door catches may be slightly awkward. People may get used to them and not be concerned. But how would they cope in the case of a power cut or, worse still, in a fire?

You also need to consider unusual circumstances. For example, a tower or church Open Day where visitors may want to ascend the tower. Cases like this will require a specific risk assessment.

We list below possible hazards which you may encounter in various parts of the tower. These are illustrative, not exhaustive. It is **your** responsibility to help identify the hazards in the tower where you ring.

## Access and Egress

These are more formal words for how you get in and out of the tower and ringing chamber, possibly under emergency conditions. In most churches, you will be going through doorways and, except for ground floor rings (which we will come to later), climbing stairs or ladders. You will need to consider:

- Are external paths, steps and doorways well-lit and in good condition, to avoid slips and trips?
- Are there suitable warning or information signs?
- Are all the doors (and trapdoors, in some cases) easy to open and close in an emergency?
- Are the floors and stairs in good condition, to avoid slips and trips?
- Is any part of the access constricted or with limited height?
- Is there a robust handrail?
- Is the lighting adequate and in good condition and are there emergency lights to illuminate and indicate the exit route in case of power failure?
- Are any ladders in good condition?
- Are there any 'dead ends' or doors that do NOT lead out of the exit door?
- As you leave, are the exits clearly marked?

The overall security of the church and tower is important, to avoid theft, vandalism or possibly even terrorist action. You will need to consider:

- Are external doors well secured and resistant to forcing?
- Do the locks operate properly?

- Can they be opened and closed easily, especially in an emergency condition?
- Is the church locked with ringers inside on practice night, during quarter peals and peals? How then do they exit?
- How are keys controlled? Is the number limited and is a register of key holders maintained?
- Do church security, smoke and fire alarm systems extend throughout the tower?

Remember that there may be hazards that are more visible on the way out than on the way in, and vice versa, so work carefully while going in and then out.

## Ringling Room

This is the room where ringers spend most of their time. It may be at ground level or upstairs. Familiarity means that some hazards may be overlooked, especially by the local ringers. But what about visitors, quarter peal and peal bands who are perhaps visiting the church for the first time?

**The familiar term 'Belfry' can be used to refer both to the room from which the bells are rung and the chamber where the bells are located.**

**To avoid confusion, we will use the terms 'Ringling Room' and 'Bell Chamber' respectively.**

You will need to consider:

- Are there slip and trip hazards from trailing electrical leads, boxes, uneven floors, mats, or general clutter?
- Is there a possibility of electric shock from damaged leads or defective portable or fixed electrical equipment?
- Are portable electrical appliance PAT tests carried out at the set intervals indicated and recorded?
- Are there enough power sockets? Or is there a tangle of extension leads?
- Is the lighting satisfactory?
- Is there emergency lighting and are exits illuminated and with correct signage? Is it tested routinely and records kept?
- Are there suitable fire extinguishers? Are they regularly inspected with appropriate records?
- Is First Aid equipment accessible for ringers?  
Is there an Accident Book available and are serious accidents reported to church authorities?
- Are tower contact details clearly displayed in case of emergency?
- Are emergency exit routes clearly marked?
- How would emergency services be called, and how would they locate and access the tower and ringers?
- Are there appropriate alert notices about clock chimes and clock hammers?
- Are ringing and non-ringing visitors met and welcomed to the tower and advised on specific local risks, for example more difficult bells?

Moving bell ropes present a hazard:

- Are the ropes maintained to minimise the chance of a broken rope?
- Are all ringers instructed in the disciplines of remaining still when not ringing and not to cross the circle while ringing is in progress?
- Are learners properly supervised?

- Are the rope paths clear of items around the Ringing Room?  
Consider statues, furniture and items stored by other users, especially in ground floor rings. Remember that learners may not keep as straight a rope as more experienced ringers.
- Are bell ropes when not in use placed on a spider and hoisted clear and secured, with signage in place to indicate if the bells are 'up'?  
(Do not use notices saying that the bells are 'down' as these may be left in place by mistake and discourage ringers from checking before attempting to raise a bell.)

The most likely mechanical issues to have effect in the Ringing Room are a broken stay or rope, or a ringer losing control of the rope:

- Are the stays inspected regularly to detect incipient cracking?
- Are all ropes checked regularly for wear?
- Are learners instructed in the action to be taken in the event of a broken rope, missed sally or broken stay?
- Are there any objects in the Ringing Room which could be caught by a flailing rope?

It is general practice for bells to be left in the 'down' position when not in use. There may, however, be local circumstances which require bells to be left in the 'up' position.

An Ecclesiastical Insurance note on this [2] states: *From a health and safety perspective it is extremely hazardous for bells to be left 'up' particularly if fire fighters or others need to enter the tower or if unauthorised persons, including children, interfere with the ropes.*

If this is the case in your tower you should prepare a specific risk assessment.

Guidance on what to do if the bells are left 'up' is provided in the Ecclesiastical document.

## Bell Chamber

This room is a high-risk area, with multiple trip hazards, risks of falling and danger from moving bells.

If any major works are to be carried out in the Bell Chamber you are strongly advised to prepare a specific risk assessment.

For more regular inspections and minor works you need to consider:

- How is access to the Bell Chamber secured?
- How is access limited only to people who have authority for access?
- How are those permitted access, advised of the risks and demonstrated to be competent?
- How are they equipped with suitable protective clothing?
- What are the arrangements to eliminate, or at least control, lone working in the Bell Chamber?
- Is there adequate lighting?
- Is the floor under the bells kept clear of oily rags and accumulations of dust?
- Do any of your bells go up 'wrong' and require manual turning of the clapper?  
This is covered in the Ecclesiastical note [2] referenced in the previous section.

## Other Areas within the Tower

There may be intermediate rooms in the tower in addition to the Ringing Room and Bell Chamber. If between the two, then the ropes will pass through during ringing.

You need to consider:

- Is access to these spaces secured during ringing?

- Is anything stored in these spaces which could interfere with the ropes?
- Such a room may house the church clock.  
Are the clock winders and other persons aware of possible hazards?

## Special Considerations for Ground Floor Rings

Ground floor rings are usually found at one end or one side of the church, although some are in the body of the church, particularly where there is a central tower. This arrangement avoids many of the problems of access up a staircase, but it can introduce other hazards.

You need to consider:

- The ringers may share their accommodation with a choir vestry or the tools for churchyard maintenance. This raises risks which can only be controlled by discussion and cooperation with the other users of the area.
- Ropes must be hoisted up and secured when not in use.
- Other church users or casual visitors must not be able to enter the rope circle during ringing.
- Outward-facing warning notices must be displayed during ringing and all the ringers must understand that ringing could be stopped immediately if circumstances demand.  
During some ringing - perhaps a peal for a special occasion - it may be necessary to lock the church or position stewards in the area.

## Controlling Risks

You will now have a long list of potential hazards and risks. You may be worried about this, or you may have already started to see ways in which the hazards can be addressed in order to bring the risk to an acceptable level. Towers vary so we cannot tell you how to deal with every hazard or risk but we will give you some ideas about what may need to be managed by the church authorities or ringers. Remember the 'ALARP' principle as applied to risks: 'as low as reasonably practicable'.

The basic need is to establish and maintain a culture of safety and good housekeeping that is respected by all members from the Tower Captain to new recruits and communicated to visitors, both ringers and non-ringers. Remember that 'culture' has been defined as the way that people behave even if they think nobody is watching them.

In many cases hazards can be eliminated by simple actions. For example:

- A defective electric fire can be repaired or replaced by a new one.
- The Ringing Room is kept clean and tidy, and free of unnecessary items.

Modifications, some of them expensive, may be required:

- Locks may need to be changed, or new padlocks purchased.
- Handrails may need to be fitted on stairs.
- Work by professional contractors may be needed on the electrical installation.

Procedural controls may be possible. These are where we ask people, both ringers and visitors, to behave in a safe and responsible way. Such controls can be enforced by instruction and warning notices but, most of all, you need careful explanation to ensure that all members of the band, plus visitors and any new recruits, understand why these actions are necessary. Examples are:

- Respecting the need to remain seated and legs uncrossed with feet on the floor while not ringing.
- Respecting restrictions on who is allowed in the Bell Chamber.

- Establishing and maintaining requirements on teaching learners, identifying who can provide teaching and the precautions to be taken, especially with minors.

Hazards arising from the bell installation, most notably a broken stay or rope, are controlled by a comprehensive programme of maintenance. For more serious problems, or if none of your ringers have maintenance experience, you should contact your local ringing Guild or Association, or a professional bell hanger.

Where a bell is prone to going up 'wrong' it may be possible to remove the hazard by a hardware solution. Possibilities are:

- Modifications to the clapper geometry.
- Fitting a wooden-shafted clapper.
- Using a clapper turning mechanism operated remotely from the bell.

All of these solutions will require assistance from professional bell hangers or other experts. If none of these solutions is possible a specific procedure should be prepared. This should include two persons being present in the Bell Chamber.

Opening a tower to parishioners and other members of the public is an excellent way of informing people about ringing (and a good day out). But it can pose challenges: The suitability of the access route, the condition of staircases, steps and handrails and the adequacy of any lighting, to name only a few. This is a case where a specific risk assessment should be carried out and guidance is provided by Ecclesiastical [3].

## Recording Findings

When the activities above are complete the results should be recorded. There are many formats available on-line. One relevant to small churches is provided by Ecclesiastical Insurance [4], with a worked fictional example [5]. A suitable template is available on the Stewardship & Management Resources page of the Central Council website [6].

You are at liberty to use your own format, tailored to fit your needs. But you should cover the following points:

- Identification of the hazard.
- The consequential risk.
- What is already being done to control the risk.
- What further action is needed, if any.
- Who is responsible for carrying out any further action.
- An agreed date for completion of any further action.
- Date of completion of any further action.

The document should also record who carried out the assessment and any further actions, and the acceptance by the church authorities.

The church authorities will be producing a risk assessment for the rest of the building and the assessment for the tower will normally form part of that and may follow their format.

This assessment must be communicated to the rest of the band. Where possible, they should be involved in the completion of any actions arising.

The document should be readily available and key points made known to new recruits and visitors. The risk assessment will be useful only if all members take ownership of the findings.

## Reviewing Controls

Finally, the assessment must be a 'living document'.

It should be reviewed regularly (probably annually) and certainly after any changes to the building or the personnel. The review dates should be publicised and adhered to.

The review should involve all members, who may point out problems, accidents or near misses which might require modification to the document.

## Useful Information

You may wonder why we did not offer this information right at the start. Well, we think that starting off by ploughing through this information would be enough to put you off the whole idea. But there is useful information here and the time to use this information is when you have understood the challenges in your own tower. The sources below may highlight things you have missed and may help you with identifying suitable controls. You should also consider the list of general safety principles given in the appendix to this document.

The **UK Health and Safety Executive** and **Ecclesiastical Insurance Group** (both already referenced in this document) provide extensive risk management information, that from Ecclesiastical being more relevant to churches and ringers.

The **Central Council of Church Bell Ringers** have published guidance documents [6] covering church tower access, lighting in and around towers, fire safety and risk assessment, and lightning protection. Additional documents are in preparation. Guidance on maintenance is provided in the publication *Manual of Belfry Maintenance* (currently under revision), available from the on-line CCCBR shop [7].

The **Association of Ringing Teachers** [8] provide advice and assistance on teaching ringing.

## References

NOTE: Please inform the SM Workgroup Secretary (SMSec@cccbr.org.uk) of any broken web links.

1. *Managing risks and risk assessment at work*, Health and Safety Executive: [hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/steps-needed-to-manage-risk.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/steps-needed-to-manage-risk.htm) [accessed 25/10/2020]
2. *Conditions of use applying to change-ringing bells*, Ecclesiastical, November 2019: [ecclesiastical.com/documents/bell-ringing.pdf](https://www.ecclesiastical.com/documents/bell-ringing.pdf) [accessed 25/10/2020]
3. *Tower Tours*, Ecclesiastical, 26 March 2020: [ecclesiastical.com/risk-management/tower-tours](https://www.ecclesiastical.com/risk-management/tower-tours) [accessed 25/10/2020]
4. *Risk Assessment (Small Church)*, Ecclesiastical, 2017: [ecclesiastical.com/documents/risk-assessment-template-small-churches.pdf](https://www.ecclesiastical.com/documents/risk-assessment-template-small-churches.pdf) [accessed 27/10/2020]
5. *Risk Assessment (Worked Example)*, Ecclesiastical, 2017: [ecclesiastical.com/documents/example-risk-assessment.pdf](https://www.ecclesiastical.com/documents/example-risk-assessment.pdf) [accessed 27/10/2020]
6. *Stewardship & Management Resources*, Central Council of Church Bell Ringers: [cccbr.org.uk/resources/stewardship-and-management](https://cccbr.org.uk/resources/stewardship-and-management) [accessed 26/10/2020]
7. CCCBR on-line Shop: [cccbr.org.uk/shop](https://cccbr.org.uk/shop) [accessed 26/10/2020]
8. *ART: excellence in ringing teaching*, Association of Ringing Teachers: [ringingteachers.org](https://ringingteachers.org) [accessed 27/10/2020]

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# Appendix

## General Principles for Safety in the Bell Tower

- A clean and tidy environment must be maintained within the tower.
  - This is more likely to be achieved by encouraging a 'tidy culture', rather than by irregular massive clean ups.
  - Adequate space is provided for hanging external clothing.
  - Large items such as luggage, backpacks and pushchairs are not brought into the Ringing Room.
- Tower contact details (postcode, what3words reference) are clearly displayed in case of emergency.  
The Ambulance and Fire Service may be required to extract an injured person from the tower.
- The name of each person entering the tower and during ringing is recorded, with date, time of arrival and departure.  
This acts as a record for safeguarding purposes and as an aid for emergency services in the event of a need to evacuate the area.
- All the electrical equipment and fittings are safe and tested.
- Extension leads are not 'daisy chained'.
- Lighting is adequate and reliable and includes emergency lighting inside the tower and along emergency exit routes.
- Heaters and other electrical equipment are in date for PAT tests, safe and switched off when not in use (equipment switch and wall socket both off, plug out).
- Fire extinguishers suitable for the hazards present are visible and checked at the set intervals (they are easily overlooked if behind closed doors or upstairs).
- Rope warmers are appropriately designed, tested and use low powered heating elements, not filament bulbs.
- All doors and trapdoors work smoothly and locks are secure.
- A route is available for emergency evacuations, including when the church is otherwise closed.
- All keys are limited to those that need them and a register of keyholders is maintained.
- All ringers and visitors are briefed and understand the principles of belfry discipline.
- Only those with specific authorisation can access the tower and bells.  
Any other visitors are escorted.
- Bell ropes are not accessible to people without permission.
- Learners are taught and accompanied only by experienced ringers.  
Minors are escorted by a parent or guardian.
- The Tower Captain is usually elected by the ringers with the appointment approved by the Church Authorities.

**This list is intended to help you and the church authorities to spot hazards and identify controls.**

**Please do not think that you can complete a risk assessment just from this list.**

**Your assessment should be based on the tower where you ring and an assessment of risks and mitigations.**

- The Tower Captain and other officers are aware of their responsibilities.
- Bells are left down when not being rung unless there is a justifiable reason for some or all to be left up.  
If left up, this is clearly indicated in ways that make the risks understandable to non-ringers.
- The Ringing Room and Bell Chamber are not accessible to unauthorised people.
- Anyone entering the Ringing Room can tell immediately if anyone is working in the Bell Chamber.
- Work in the Bell Chamber is controlled:
  - At least one of those present is qualified and authorised.
  - There is no lone working, although a trained and authorised person can work alone when someone else is in the tower and the two are in communication.  
An example would be adjusting the length of bell ropes.
  - Bells are down while work is being carried out in the Bell Chamber unless it is essential to carry out checks on a moving bell (for example, to check for binding after replacing a stay). In that case a specific risk assessment is carried out.
- Bells and fittings are regularly inspected and maintained by competent personnel, with records kept.
- A comprehensive procedure is in place for when the tower is open to non-ringing visitors.