

CHANGE RINGING FOR THE FUTURE

THE REGIONAL CONVERSATIONS HAVE BEGUN!

A Summary of the
Regional Breakout Groups
at the Central Council AGM

ELVA AINSWORTH
DUNCAN WALKER

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SUMMARY

We're pleased to let you know the regional conversations have begun!

At the AGM of the Central Council of Church Bellringers (CC) on 29 May, there was something a little bit different on the Agenda. Members were given the opportunity to participate more than usual, by taking part in group discussions with others from their regions. These discussions were wide ranging, covering the challenges they face and identifying opportunities for further cooperation with each other and the CC.

The flipcharts have all been written up, the post-it notes have all been collated and this summarises the key points, ideas and recommendations.

During the session, one member wrote on a post-it note "*We are limping*" and this seems to be a reasonable summary! The good news is that some Guilds/Associations are in good shape, having done new things to modernise, so others who are struggling more have ideas they can learn from.

The most common challenges were recruitment and retention, particularly youngsters. The most common opportunities identified were a need for leadership training, plus working together more on recruiting and retaining. Overall, there are significant areas of concern and a need for urgent action.

This report is for those who are interested in what opportunities there may be for doing things differently, particularly working together more effectively with others in your region and with the CC. If that would be of interest to you, please read further, think further about opportunities in your area and feedback your ideas through your CC member representative.



INTRODUCTION

A series of seven proposals was put before CC Members in advance of the meeting, in a paper titled “*Change Ringing for the Future – Update May 2015*”. This was intended to be a thought provoking summary of earlier regional seminars, additional data collected recently and proposals for moving forward. One of the key aspects of this was for Guilds/Associations to consider working more closely together in regions, to help each other and link with the CC more effectively. CC Members were asked to gather brief feedback from key Guild/Association officers, as preparation for these initial discussions at the AGM.

The regions we used for England initially were those used by the Heritage Lottery Fund, a possible funder.

Members from outside the UK joined with those from Scotland, Wales and Ireland to form an ‘International’ region (some of whom nicknamed themselves the Extra-Terrestrials!). They were able to find a good deal in common in the challenges of distance they face, together with technology ideas and other innovative solutions.

The seven proposals are listed below and the paper can be seen in full on the CC website: <http://cccbr.org.uk/future-of-ringing/>

1	‘Going regional’, to encourage sharing ideas and working together
2	New format for the CC AGM meeting, with more of a working conference feel
3	New website to attract prospective learners, linking to up to date information
4	Full survey of ringers, to understand needs and priorities
5	Leadership training course, aimed at Tower and Guild officers
6	New learner pack for recent recruits
7	Partnership with ART, particularly on teaching and recruitment

These ideas form a package to start upgrading and modernising the way we function, improving the first impression for new people and the experience of learning to ring. Encouraging existing organisations to share ideas and work together on a regional basis is seen as a key opportunity and critical to practical implementation of initiatives such as the others proposed, so we decided to start as soon as possible at the CC AGM.

We were encouraged to see that discussions started well in advance of the meeting. In both email and social media, ideas were exchanging rapidly between CC members and



others active in those spheres. It is also fair to say there was a range of views beforehand, with some regular CC critics hard to convince.

However, the experience of sharing ideas and best practice was overwhelmingly useful and constructive. The notion of working across boundaries to co-ordinate recruitment, training and PR activity was well received. The straightforward practicality of communicating and connecting with over 200 CC members is clearly easier via smaller groupings. The challenges we are facing mean bridging the gap between ringers and tower captains on the one hand, with the support available from national ringing organisations on the other hand, has never been so important.

APPROACH

A total of 75 minutes was made available in the AGM agenda for this, including a short introduction and time to disperse to breakout rooms. So, we needed to be well organised, to make the most of a relatively short time for the groups to get to know each other, start working together and discussing possible ways forward.

A facilitator, scribe and supporter were invited in advance to lead each group; they had a preparation briefing session the day before. A tightly defined agenda was put together, linking back to the pre-work each CC member was asked to do in advance, which started by working through the following questions:

What's working well in your area?
What's not working well in your area?
What cross-boundary initiatives are happening near you?
What are the cross-boundary opportunities in your region?

The first task was for each person to put their ideas on post-it notes and onto flipcharts for each of the above. That technique allowed ideas to be shared quickly and allowed informal discussions to generate further ideas. From these, trends emerged visually by grouping similar ideas.

The final part was to look forward to what actions could make a difference across the region and how it may be possible to work together. Some of those were more definite than others. Some felt the need to involve their Guild/Association Officers more, before deciding how to move forward. Others have started already!



This was not your usual CC meeting. However, most entered into the spirit of it and once the thoughts and responses were flowing the positive energy was clear.

The 1000+ post-it notes have now been written up for each region and categorised under common headings. A summary of the common themes across regions has also been produced. However, it should be remembered that some of the challenges and ideas were identified in only one or two regions (so don't feature in the cross region summary), but were nevertheless important where they do occur. There is no 'one size fits all'.

RESULTS

One quote from a CC member at the end of the meeting was particularly encouraging, "Thank you for the best meeting for a century!" In general, although there was some scepticism to start with, there was a widespread view of the usefulness of the exercise. There is no plan to reorganise formally around these groupings, but there was a positivity towards continuing to work together.

A summary of the data from the regional breakout sessions is presented below. More detail is available on the CC website at the following link, including an aggregated summary and each regional write-up: <http://cccbr.org.uk/future-of-ringing/>

Overview

On the one hand, this can make depressing reading – the challenges include towers falling silent, not enough leaders, Guild/Association meetings following old style formats which are badly attended, gaps in key leadership positions, ITTS not being as successful locally as hoped, and communications needing improvement. In addition, these are the views of those giving up their bank holiday weekend for the CC AGM, who could be seen as the supremely motivated!

On the other side, things are working well in some areas, so there are ideas to help improve things by working together, if we can find a way to harness people's energy:

- Teaching learners the new way – with sessions specifically for them
- Local towers working together, within and across boundaries
- Modernising the format of Guild/Association events
- Providing teaching and courses for all levels, co-ordinating across boundaries
- Special practices targeted at different levels of ringers, especially on 10/12



- Regional striking contests to raise aspirations, especially youngsters
- Targeted quarter peals and peals

The biggest problem areas are clearly seen as **recruitment** and **retention**, particularly youngsters. These are the obvious areas to target ideas for cross-boundary sharing, training and co-ordinating.

The same can be said of the need for more **leadership**. Training is planned which will help, but this is not an easy or short term fix. However, available good leaders need opportunities to contribute to the maximum and may need to consider work across their existing boundaries, to help others.

The issue of the current Guild/Association/CC **structure** is evident too. There were ideas to reconsider boundaries on a local level. There were also ideas to look at the national picture and consider a membership organisation, similar to CAMRA and many professional bodies.

Some striking contests are clearly working well, particularly when they are focused on youngsters or other targeted groups eg National Youth Contest, National 12-bell, London 12-bell and regionally based 10-bell contests. They help to generate a sense of community and raise aspirations.

How do the regions differ?

The core issues facing each region were broadly the same, even in the international group. Interestingly, the size of the challenges and the openness of the CC members to thinking 'regionally' was initially more evident the further you travel from the south of England. This could indicate a difference in timing connected with density of ringers. If so, the south may want to get ready...

Some regions have more new initiatives going on than others. The Winchester and Portsmouth Guild had the most listed and were the result of an in depth review and strategic planning process over the last two years.



RECOMMENDATIONS

We ask all Guilds/Associations to take an active part in the upcoming survey, looking for opportunities in the Regions to coordinate, share results and identify opportunities to work together.

We ask the regional groups who met at the CC AGM to keep the conversation going. If there is a good consensus for working together on some key priorities, perhaps a regional meeting with key Guild/Association officers would be a good way to get things moving. For any others who would like to give input, please do so via your CC representatives.

We will contact the regional groups again in September, with a view to pulling together a report on progress and recommendations for the CC Admin Committee meeting in October.

As soon as the survey has been completed we will review a full analysis across all the regions to evaluate the potential of the regional proposition and consider more radical approaches should they be needed.

TO CONCLUDE

A view expressed on one of the popular ringing email lists recently was: *“The view seems to be that bellringing is a local, self-funding, community leisure activity aligned to individual churches with good, bad and indifferent standards to suit the bells and the available voluntary resources in the parish”*. There often is resistance to accept help from outside, however well meaning. Guilds and Associations can find this when reaching out to some parts of their area; so, it is no surprise that the Central Council may also find this happens when they are reaching out to Guilds and Associations to suggest change is considered. However, we were on the whole encouraged by how open people were to working together in their regions and the results of the first discussions.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved – the CC Officers and Admin Committee for allowing the time on the agenda, all those who helped to lead the groups, all the CC Members who contributed on the day, plus others who gave them feedback in advance for their pre-work.

The regional conversations have begun!

