# Structural & Strategic – Initial thoughts

*In 2010 I was invited to a meeting to 'develop a strategy for a healthy future of ringing'. Afterwards I agreed to consider structural and strategic issues. This document was the result. A lot still seems relevant. (TtU=Thinking th Unthinkable)*

How do the two parts of our brief relate? Structural issues probably need addressing at a strategic level, but not all strategic issues are structural. So I began by thinking about the structural issues, and came up with:

a) What structural weaknesses are helping to cause 'the problem'?

b) What structural barriers could prevent required action?

c) What structural changes would be needed to facilitate the required actions?

d) How can current organisations be engaged to help bring about change?

That seemed logical until I tried to think through each. When I got to (c) I came unstuck. I had thought of its as our goal, with (d) as a mere rider – 'how to get started before we change the structure'. But changing structures is a non-trivial process, and probably not something we could rely on as part of an action plan in the short, or even medium term. Maybe we should define some ideal long term structures that would enhance sustainability, and then try to define an incremental 'road map' of how to get there via more pragmatic initial changes. But what we mustn't do is undermine the case for realistic medium term actions by linking them to what are perceived as unrealistic long term aspirations.

It is also logical to plug any other strategic issues into the list prior to considering how to engage organisations as part of an action plan. There may be several such issues, but two come to mind. One is the need to coordinate actions on both the supply side and the demand side of the equation, and the other is the need for objectivity untainted by hype. So my revised list became:

a) What structural weaknesses are helping to cause 'the problem'?

b) What structural barriers could prevent required action?

c) What reconciliation is needed between supply and demand side?

d) How can we ensure objectivity rather than hype?

e) How can current organisations be engaged to help bring about change?

And before trying to unpack any of them, it is worth recapping on what I think was a more or less consensus definition of 'the problem', which is in two parts:

- We are concerned to ensure a sustainable supply of competent*, motivated ringers in the future.

- We are concerned that 'business as usual' might not achieve that.

\* By competent, I mean able to perform at a standard that would be considered competent by a conventional musician listening to the result, ie considerably more than being safe on the end of a bell rope.

There was a strong feeling that 'young ringers' (under 20) form an essential component of a sustainable supply, partly because they are more likely to acquire higher levels of competence, partly because they are more likely to achieve adequate teaching competence and partly because they have longer to contribute. I don't disagree with this (though note 'likely') but I think it is about means rather than ends.

The other marked feeling related to ringers in their 20s and 30s, who 30 years ago appeared to be the most effective tower captains. I don't think we have the evidence either way whether that is still true, but there are certainly plenty of very effective towers being run by people past that age. So at the strategic level, I think we need to stand back from that one, and maybe put the main emphasis on the need to understand and foster what makes tower captains / bands effective in terms of both sustainability and competence generation.

## 1   Structural weaknesses

I interpret this to mean factors that tend to reduce, or at least not to stimulate and encourage, a sustainable supply of competent, motivated ringers, and have thus led us to the current state where the present is far from ideal and we are not confident about the future.

a) The Exercise is fragmented – By fragmented, I don't just mean that there are multiple bodies, I mean that the links between them are weak and ineffective (as discussed in TtU 4 & 5). A fragmented Exercise finds it harder to recognise or understand trends, and harder to mount any co-ordinated actions to counter adverse trends.

b) The CC is weak – It is the only ringing body with an Exercise-wide remit, but it is weakened by vague accountability and an inadequate funding mechanism. As a result it tends to be cautious, and its actions tend to be slow and under-resourced.

c) Ringers lack cohesion – Many (the majority of?) ringers feel no sense of identity with the Exercise at large, or any

commitment towards it, nor do they share any significant corporate values. A divided, and largely uncommitted, Exercise tends to isolate the minority of activists and those who value achievement, rather than being inspired by them. The gulf between the uninspired mass and the inspired minority is so great that excellence is seen as 'elitism' rather than aspirational. If ringers were on the Titanic, most would not bother to rearrange the deckchairs.

d) There is a widespread 'non-performer' subculture in ringing – In many towers, the majority of ringers not only have a low standard of performance, but do not see themselves as 'performers'. As a result, the dominant ethos in most towers is to accept, and not criticise, poor performance. Learning to ring in this environment reduces the chance that otherwise well taught, potentially competent ringers will actually become competent performers.

e) Public perception – Widespread public ignorance and mis-perceptions about ringing create a climate where few would see it as a desirable activity, and those that do take it up risk being seen as nerdy or odd. This greatly reduces the pool of potential recruits, and can provides a non-supportive environment for those that do, thus increasing the risk of their giving up.

## 2   Structural barriers

I interpret this to mean factors that would tend to inhibit the introduction of changes that might be needed to help improve the supply of competent, motivated ringers.

a) The fragmented organisation (as above) – Any action to achieve major change would require coordination across all parts of the Exercise, but it is not structured for such co-ordination. The CC has no executive control over its member societies, and they likewise have no such control over the towers they represent (or even their own branches). At each level, the islands tend to guard their independence and distrust the level above, especially if it is seen as 'interfering'.

b) Hang ups – Despite the ability of individuals and small groups to innovate, ringers at large seem opposed to any change in the way things are done. Examples include vehement opposition to: the Instructors Guild (requiring competent teachers would cause the death of ringing), charging the CC precept per ringer rather than per CC rep (G&B would become unviable if required to pay the CC 10p per head rather than 7p per head) and general horror at the idea of paying for anything that is currently free. Since major change will require many things to be done differently, it is likely that much effort would be dissipated in trying to overcome widespread opposition.

c) Inadequate teaching* infrastructure – The number of teachers with the required skills, and the way they are organised (mainly working in isolation, with limited time at arbitrary locations) is not able to deliver significantly more competent ringers. Injecting a major influx of recruits into the existing structure would mean that many of them did not receive training that enabled them to become competent ringers. Many recruits would be in places where training of adequate quality was not available. Even in places where training of adequate quality is available, many could not cope with a major increase in throughput.

d) Poor development* infrastructure – The way that much ringing is currently organised (short weekly general practices) could provides stimulating development opportunities for a small minority of trainee ringers. A major influx of new ringers, even if trained competently in the early stages, would thus be unlikely to develop full competence, and many would be likely to become disillusioned and give up.

e) Dilution – Drip feeding new ringers into bands that produce and tolerate poor standards of performance is unlikely to motivate them to become competent ringers.

* I separate 'teaching' and 'development' because although in an ideal environment they would be part of an integrated process, in practice there are often major differences. Teaching is predominantly delivered by an individual teacher in one to one sessions (typically bell handling and possibly ringing with a simulator). It is readily controlled by the teacher, who can both apply good practice and adapt to suit the needs of individual students, and it can fairly easily be delivered intensively (hours per week). Development is predominantly delivered in a group setting (collective ringing, from Rounds through to methods). It is less readily controlled by any one person, because it is subject to group expectations and needs. It is much more difficult to deliver intensively, because of the need to share limited practice time between multiple people with multiple objectives.

## 3   Reconciling supply-side and demand-side

The traditional (naive) view is that the community should supply recruits to meet the Exercise's demand. That is true in the trivial sense that new ringers must come from the mass of non-ringers, but offers no insights because it neglects the Exercise's wasteful use (and loss) of recruits, and fails to address why any non ringer should become a recruit. The 'marketing' perspective that Andy introduced does address that question, and is thus helpful. From that perspective the Exercise is trying to 'sell' places in its ranks to non ringers. Thus we have a supply of places and a need to stimulate the demand for them. If we want to increase recruitment then we need to take action on both sides: to make the places attractive, and to increase the demand for them.

a) Supply-side issues – A tower with bells and no ringers has places, but they are not very attractive. A tower with bells and an active band that supplies good training, achieves a good standard of performance, has an active social

life and values its members is much more attractive. On that basis, there are plenty of places, but many of them are not very attractive in the above sense, nor are they likely to be filled by competent, motivated ringers.

b) Demand-side – The demand for places in the Exercise is driven partly by awareness (knowing that there are opportunities to become a a ringer) but mainly by perceptions of the costs and benefits of doing so. The perceived costs include the effort that would be needed to become competent, the time that would be committed to ringing, and any loss of social status associated with being a ringer. The perceived benefits include the pleasure and fulfilment that would be derived from ringing, the satisfaction of rendering service to others through ringing, and any gain in social status associated with being a ringer.

Demand-side actions ('selling ringing') are essential for the early steps of Using Andy's AIUPPR[1] model. Awareness and Interest depend almost entirely on promulgating information, and a positive image of ringing. When a 'buyer' moves to Understanding, and certainly Purchasing, then reality takes over from image. Here there is a danger of a mismatch with the 'product' (the experience at tower X), if it doesn't live up to the image. The most attractive image will be based on the best towers, and on the richness of the wider Exercise, whereas the actual 'purchase' will relate to a specific tower. So we need supply-side action to improve the 'product' offering more widely across the board. When it comes to Repeat purchase (which for ringing means continuing to 'use', rather than 'discarding' the 'product') then supply-side factors will dominate.

Stoking up demand while the product is of very variable quality might generate recruits, but many of them will be dissatisfied and won't stick. And even if they do stick, they might not become sufficiently competent to move us out of the current state of low overall performance.

The simplistic answer is to get the product right before trying to sell it. The might be true for washing machines, but it is by no means the whole truth for places in the Exercise. We certainly need to improve the capability and number of teachers, but teaching is only part of the 'product'. The other parts are development and cohesion. To generate bands within which to develop ringers (whether organic or synthesised in ringing centres) requires (more) competent ringers, ie other people who have 'bought the product', which also requires demand-side action.

I am conscious that at the strategic level, we should not just be thinking about how to recruit one or more ringers, we should be thinking about how to transform ringing into a mainstream activity. To use a product selling analogy, we want to move from an era where we have to go round knocking on doors trying to persuade people to buy this unusual product that will sit in the kitchen and wash dishes for you, to an era where everyone knows what a dishwasher is, most people think it worth having, and when they want one they go to the shops to compare products on offer.

Maybe we could develop the model used for the take-up of innovative products, which stratifies users in terms of the phase at which they enter the market: Innovators, Early adopters, Early majority, Late majority and Laggards. Drawing on the definitions in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion_of_Innovations#Adopter_categories, and trying to interpret the jargon in a ringing context:

**Innovators** – are willing to take risks, are young with high social class, are aware of the 'cost' of activities, and like to interact with other innovators.

**Early adopters** – tend to lead opinion, are youngish with high social status, are aware of the 'cost' of activities, are well educated and socially forward. They choose their activities more carefully than innovators, and see them as important to their relationships.

**Early Majority** – have above average social status and contact with early adopters. They seldom lead opinion

**Late Majority** – are sceptical about new activities, but take them up when they see others doing so. They have below average social status and are not very aware of the 'cost' of activities.

**Laggards** – are averse to change and tend to be older.

Despite my selectivity, some of those attributes are suspect when applied to ringing. For example, I have interpreted 'financial lucidity' as awareness of the 'cost' of activities. Also the implication that older people are later adopters doesn't seem to apply to people currently 'buying' (low quality) places in ringing, but it might apply more strongly when we try to sell high quality places.

# 4  Objectivity

Our concern for the future of ringing is based on some clear evidence and trends, but neither the evidence nor the trends are fully understood, and in we cannot categorically state what will happen in the absence of any intervention. Whilst we understandably wish to stir people into action, we must be cautious not to over-state the case, or to misrepresent it, and to ensure that others whose efforts we seek to entrain do not do so either. Otherwise we risk undermining the credibility of the case for change. Some aspects that need care are:

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[1]  Aware, Interested, Understands, Positive, Purchases, Repeats purchase.

a) The demise of ringing – There is no basis for predicting that ringing will die out if we do nothing. Even among the various possible scenarios, that is probably not the most likely. I would consider all but the last scenario I describe in TtU-10 as undesirable, but even the 'implosion' (which I read out during the meeting) does not involve the complete extinction of ringing.

b) Quantity v quality – I suspect that most of us are more concerned about quality than quantity. If we had to choose (magic wand in hand) between 30,000 ringers in 2000 towers regularly achieving 90% good striking, and 50,000 ringers in 5000 towers achieving 20% good striking, I suspect we would opt for the former, which represents a healthier, and more sustainable, state of 'ringing'. But I think we are in a minority. The majority of ringers, in as far as they care at all, would probably prefer to have it the other way round.

c) Competence – This is related to the point above. I use the term 'competent, motivated ringer' a lot in this paper, by which I imply someone who is capable of, and motivated to achieve, a good standard of performance. For many ringers, 'competent' means able to ring a bell, and motivated means willing to turn up and do so, however badly. The quality-oriented interpretation of 'competent' needs to be put over, but the message needs to be made acceptable to the majority who need influencing. The high level objectives will need more clarity of expression than we achieved on Sunday if we are to avoid either diluting the core message or being dismissed as impractically elitist.

d) Disruptive events – Should we be aiming for a strategy that includes a degree of resilience to potential disruptive events, for example the ones discussed in TtU-10? Or should we base it on the plausible but not necessarily realistic assumption that the world stays much as it is?

# 5 Engaging current organisations

Starting from where we are, any strategy must be viable within the current structure, even if it includes some medium to long-term structural changes.

The key point is scale. While it is possible to produce small islands of change by exploiting local exceptions to the overall picture (eg Worcester) a major shift in the way things are done needs to be national (or international) in scope. To coordinate such an initiative means engaging bodies with a global remit.

a) The Central Council – The CC is the logical 'owner' of the problem, and it has already shown some ownership by setting up the Ringing Trends Committee, by setting up the Ringing Foundation, and by placing the action that led to our meeting. If the Council were not hampered by the structural weaknesses mentioned above, it would no doubt have done more already.

b) The Ringing Foundation – The Foundation's remit is built around this problem. Although it is still finding its feet, and has not yet built up a track record and extensive expertise, it has more freedom to innovate than the Council, and it is not shackled by the Council's organisational constraints. In particular, it is set up in a way that enables it to seek and deploy money on a scale, and with a speed, that the Council would be unlikely to do.

c) Ringing media – The RW is no longer the only communication medium in ringing, but it is the one with the widest readership, and as well as being a communication channel, it is organised in a way that enables it to formulate, and implement, policies. Other media, including Campanophile and the many E-lists make it easier to communicate with ringers (rather than just societies) than it has ever been.

d) The non-territorial societies – The SRCY and ASCY, despite their day to day London bias, represent ringers without boundaries across the Exercise. They probably have stronger links with many of their members than the territorial societies do, and they represent parallel networks connecting some of the more active and influential people across the Exercise. They might be engaged to help support an (inter)national initiative. (I am not a member of either, so I don't know how realistic this is.) Some of the premier university societies have similar reach, and might also be engaged.

Ideally, we would want all of the above to cooperate. The CC is the logical leader, providing it can show the necessary leadership. The Ringing Foundation is a natural partner, in particular where funding is involved or where greater risks need taking. The RW and the major non-territorials could play supporting roles, possibly running some initiatives themselves, and certainly by encouraging their members to stimulate initiatives within their own areas.

I haven't mentioned the territorials above, because I was focusing on organisations with full reach. The territorials have a part to play, but individually they can only act locally, and their only collectively agent is the CC, which is covered. Some of the territorials may drag their heels, while others rise to the challenge (possibly beating the CC to the draw, based on past form) but they are an integral part of the current ringing structure.

I have deliberately kept this discussion general, ie about who and how to engage, rather than trying to pre-empt the outcomes of the other two threads (recruitment and retention) by talking about the content of the engagement.