Replacing the Central Council Decisions
An update on the new framework for describing ringing
by John Harrison (on behalf of the task group)

Two years ago I wrote a series of eight articles, *Decisions, Decisions,* about the importance of the Central Council's Decisions on methods and peals, where they fell short of the needs of modern ringing, and how they might be improved. The Council Action Review Group (CRAG) also identified this as an area needing reform, and the Council meeting in May 2017 approved the CRAG recommendation that:

The Decisions of the Central Council should be replaced with a simple and permissive descriptive framework for ringing with only the minimal detail required to maintain the historical record.

The Executive should appoint a neutral and respected ringer who is demonstrably independent of those responsible for the current Decisions to complete this work. The leader may assemble a group of ringers to assist with this task and should consult widely on their proposals before presenting them to the Council in May 2018.

The publication and maintenance of this framework should be the responsibility of the Executive.

In late summer, the newly formed Inaugural Executive asked Tim Barnes (who led the independent group, of subscribers to the *ringing-theory* mailing list, that worked on the problem in 2015) to lead this work. He formed a small group to draft the initial language, and a slightly larger group to review sections at regular intervals. The core group was Tim Barnes, Mark Davies, John Harrison and Graham John. The review group was formed of Philip Earis, Andrew Johnson, Don Morrison, Philip Saddleton, Peter Scott, Leigh Simpson, Richard Smith, Derek Williams and Robin Woolley. Not everyone was able to contribute equally, and over 90% of the activity involved Tim Barnes, Graham John, Don Morrison, John Harrison & Philip Saddleton. Other current and former members of the Methods Committee were invited to participate but either declined or did not respond.

The group recognised that 'simple' statements, which might be obvious to an expert, often need explanation and/or examples to help non-experts. That can make the document very cluttered, so an early decision was made to present the material on a website with supplementary text or diagrams behind individual statements, which can be either displayed or hidden. In October this was made available at: **cccbr.github.io/method_ ringing_framework** for anyone interested in following progress, but comments were not sought at that stage because the content was regularly changing.

The group drew on two significant sources. The 2015 work by the *ringing-theory* sub-group on a descriptive, permissive approach provided a useful starting point, and the existing Decisions were also used as a point of reference, since they reflect the historical record with which the framework needs to maintain continuity.

The original plan was to make the complete draft framework available by the end of the year, with three months for the ringing community to comment, followed by revision and finalisation in time for the mid-April deadline for papers to the next Council meeting.

The first release to the review group was in early October. It had the whole of the proposed structure, with the design principles and first major section (definitions) complete and the remaining sections having either placeholders or preliminary text. Subsequent releases were intended to complete the remaining sections in turn, as well as updating the earlier sections in the light of comments.

In the event, the review raised major issues that required significant rework and slowed progress. The sixth release, in mid-December, still had outstanding issues and some sections incomplete, making the end of year target for general release unachievable.

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Not being able to meet our target wasn't for lack of trying, with hundreds of hours of work, and well over 1,000 messages (around 120,000 words) exchanged. So why was it so difficult? The remit says the framework must be 'simple', 'permissive' and able to 'maintain the historical record', but there are inherent conflicts between these. The easiest way to be 'simple' is to exclude inconvenient complications and rule out anything that doesn't fit, whereas permissiveness requires the opposite. Defining things in a way that the definitions won't 'break' if ringers innovate and do things differently is much harder. Simplicity would also be easier with a blank sheet of paper, but that would ignore the need for continuity with the historic record. So the task is very much one of seeking a balance that as far as possible meets all these conflicting goals.

The review group deliberately represents a spread of views – because the framework must be acceptable across the ringing community, not just to a small, factional interest group. But diversity of views can lead to extensive debate over many points of detail because everyone wants to get it 'right'. They are, after all, documenting a pastime about which they are passionate. With hindsight the split between a core group and a review group also slowed down progress, because things the core group had already debated were opened again with the review group.

Another source of difficulty is that ringing is inherently complex. It has a lot of interdependent concepts, and the framework needs to cover them with precise wording that avoids ambiguity – which is also harder when taking a permissive standpoint.

Despite the delay, a lot of progress has been made, and we still hope to have the draft ready for widespread review no later than the beginning of March, to allow comments to be received and incorporated for the 15th April submission deadline.

However, the timeline is now very tight, so we are preparing for different possibilities. If the complete framework is not ready for approval in May then by default the existing Decisions, or any required parts of them, will roll over as Standards under the new rulebook, pending their replacement by the framework in due course. That need not mean a year's delay since if appropriate the Executive would be able to implement new standards when they are complete (subject to Council members' power to 'call in' any unsuitable decisions).

The next article, during February, will explain about the framework itself, what changes and what stays the same, leading in to the consultation.

My *Ringing World* articles about the Decisions are at: **jaharrison.me.uk/New/ Articles/Decisions/**