

Worcester Cathedral Guild of Bellringers (WCGoB): review

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1. Terms of Reference

1:1 The Dean outlined the following scope for this review:

At a time when all Cathedrals are increasingly under public scrutiny for their governance and accountability, it is important that the Chapter keeps all aspects of the life and work of the Cathedral under review, including all the associated bodies that carry the name of Worcester Cathedral. The Chapter has therefore agreed to carry out a review of the organisation of the Cathedral Guild of Bellringers, one of our largest associated bodies. This will include its policies and procedures, including safety and safeguarding, and the channels of communication between the Guild and the Chapter. The Chapter has asked Mr Tim Keyes, Tower Captain of Ledbury Church, and former Headmaster of King's School Worcester, to act as the reviewer.

1:2 Whilst this is the first formal review of bellringing at the cathedral in recent times, the Chapter intends that such reviews should now happen at regular intervals as part of a wider process of regular review of all voluntary activity in the cathedral.

2. Introduction

2:1 A bellringing operation in a cathedral is the **building's most public voice** and form of communication. Many of the thousands of people who regularly hear the bells will seldom have been inside the building and will never have been to a service. The bells continually remind the people of Worcester that they have at their centre an historic and vibrant place of Christian worship that serves and enriches the community.

2:2 The **bells are one of the cathedral's most expensive and valuable assets**. If they are not regularly and skilfully maintained, repairs can be very costly. More importantly, the cathedral must not take any risks over safety. Ringing is a potentially dangerous activity but all the potential dangers can be mitigated through regular maintenance, careful risk assessments, thorough policies and procedures, expert teaching of learners, regular training of the ringers themselves and good communication. A recent report (May 2019) for the attention of Chapter entitled *Tower Safety and Safeguarding* draws attention to some factors that make rigorous attention to safety and safeguarding particularly important in Worcester Cathedral: the bells are unusually large and difficult to ring; there are many visitors for whom the tower and the bells are unfamiliar; many youngsters ring in the tower in the Training Centre or on the bells themselves, and some of these youngsters (by agreement) are not accompanied by a parent or guardian; evacuation in the case of a fire would not be straightforward and therefore there should always be people present who know how to implement the necessary procedure, and there should be a list kept of all those who ascend the tower. This report flags up the need for more ringers to have First Aid training and for better

information to be passed to the Ringing Master about bellringers who may wish to ring in the cathedral but who are known, through diocesan or other channels, to be a safeguarding concern.

2:3 Bellringing is an **absorbing and rewarding hobby**. It is a privilege to be allowed to ring cathedral bells but it also takes a great deal of practice and dedication to progress to the level of competence needed to master the bells of Worcester Cathedral which are among the most difficult bells to ring of any cathedral in the country. Poor ringing is not good to listen to! To produce and maintain a band which is committed to regular attendance, which rings well and which steadily brings on learners to the point where they can play a full part in ringing for services takes strong and skilful leadership and management.

2:4 **Many who volunteer to run or support activities in cathedrals, including bellringers, are not Christians** and may play no part in the other activities of the cathedral in which their own activity takes place. Some ringers are visitors. Ringers, like other volunteers, should be welcomed for the part they play in serving the cathedral community but it needs to be remembered that many probably see themselves as practising a skill and indulging a hobby rather than as being volunteers at the cathedral, although they are happy (not least because senior ringers stress the importance of this) to make a regular commitment to ring the bells as the needs of the cathedral may dictate. Their interests and intentions may not, however, be closely aligned with those of the people who lead the cathedral and its operations. This may lead, from time to time, to disagreement or complaint. The ringers, for their part, should be aware (and there is no reason to think that this is not the case) that they serve the requirements and mission of the cathedral, that ringing as a member of the Cathedral Guild or as a visitor is a privilege and not a right and that The Chapter has the final say on when the bells are rung. It is a mark of the current good communication, mutual respect between Chapter and ringers, and the effectiveness of current arrangements, that members of Chapter have hitherto delegated much responsibility without regular oversight to the Ringing Master. They are, however, well disposed towards any suggestions of more frequent communication and a process of regular review.

2:5 **Good communication between the bellringers and the Chapter** is of paramount importance when there are so many events for which the bells are needed. The Chapter has strategic oversight of the use of the bells. They should therefore take the lead in ensuring that arrangements in the Chapter Office for requesting the ringing of the bells for services and other events are efficient. Adequate notice should be given to the ringers, many of whom are busy professionals who need to plan well ahead. The ringers, for their part, should ensure that Chapter is abreast of all developments, issues and plans, is represented at WCGoB committee meetings and is provided in good time with any documentation needed to inform their decisions in relation to the bells and bellringing.

2:6 It is almost inevitable in an organisation involving so many members, visitors and family connections (eg parents and guardians of young ringers) that **issues will arise from time to time** with the potential to lead to a formal complaint if not addressed early at an informal stage. The Worcester Cathedral website has a complaints policy which covers all areas of the operation. It is incumbent upon each separate activity to alert Chapter immediately if there has been any expression of concern or incident that might develop at a later stage into a complaint. The logging of concerns at an early stage (which might in the first instance be an email or letter, for example) would be good practice. If there is any incident that the Ringing Master feels from experience might lead to a complaint, this should also be logged and the Warden of Ringers should be alerted. All this is good practice. It is also a way of making sure that the time of both the Ringing Master and the

Chapter is not taken up with the management of complaints that might have been resolved at an earlier stage.

2:7 **Policies and procedures** are laid out clearly on the website (worcesterbells.org.uk) under the sections labelled Downloads and H&S. These seem to cover all key areas (child protection, safeguarding, risk assessments etc) although it is three or four years since some have been reviewed. The Safeguarding and Complaints Policies on the Worcester Cathedral website (worcestercathedral.co.uk) are appropriately prominent on the front page but the Complaints Policy is more of a summary document than a detailed outline of the processes that need to be followed.

2:8 **Those who run voluntary organisations within the cathedral** give an enormous amount of time and energy to ensuring the success of the activities which they oversee. It is important that there should be an opportunity to celebrate and support this, to discuss targets and also to allow the airing of any concerns and issues, through a process of regular review.

2:9 There are currently no occasions when **all those who lead voluntary activities get together** to share ideas and good practice and to encourage one another and be encouraged by members of Chapter. There is no necessity for this to happen but an annual meeting, for instance, might have a number of benefits.

Strengths

3:1 There is a high **level of expertise** in the band which enables a ring of bells that is difficult to handle to be rung very effectively, and for 12 bells to be rung for almost all events (services and other cathedral occasions). There are, altogether, 16 “ringing” bells and a bourdon bell – approximately 10 tons of metal and a value of, perhaps, £1 million. The ringers appreciate the fact that the Dean and Chapter trust them to use and look after such a valuable resource. The ringers, for their part, are a group of highly capable professionals in a variety of fields who are glad to bring their experience and expertise to this field of volunteer activity.

3:2 WCGoB has a nationally acclaimed **teaching structure** based around the purpose-built teaching centre, a body of well-trained and willing volunteer instructors and the use of a second tower (Old St Martin’s) to bring on learners. All ringers are committed to the development of learners, and prioritise their needs. One individual has the role of coordinating the teachers and pupils and is the first contact for those who express an interest via the website.

3:3 There is a very effective **committee** who bring high levels of expertise from their own careers and experience to this operation. They are in regular and effective contact by email and meet formally 2 – 3 times each year.

3:4 The **finances of WCGoB are very carefully managed** by the treasurer to ensure that all income and expenditure are logged in appropriate detail and that regular accounts are produced.

3:5 Mark Regan is a **Ringing Master** who is widely acknowledged to be an excellent leader and encourager. He is prepared to delegate authority (eg the oversight of the training of learners and the managing of practices) to develop other members of the committee and the band. His membership of the wider cathedral community and congregation, and engagement with the Chapter and with members of the administrative team, are very helpful in ensuring good communications. His PR skills and determination to promote all that is good about ringing mean that the image of the activity in and around Worcester is very positive. He is a gifted teacher and lecturer who has

willingly supported the training of ringers around the country. One Worcester ringer says of Mark: *“He is so mindful of the challenge of creating a sustainable ringing community worthy of ringing the Cathedral’s bells that he is actively mentoring various other ringers including younger ones to learn the art of the Ringing Master. He is utterly diligent about the Guild’s ringing role and responsibilities and is passionate about the public service we play”*. It is worth mentioning that Mark was brave enough to support the Chapter at York Minster (and so incur the wrath of many in the ringing community nationally) through the process of helping getting ringing going again after the turbulent events of Autumn 2016. His was a decision based on a practical and forward-looking analysis of what was in the best interests of bellringing at York Minster.

3:6 There is a strong focus on the importance of **regular maintenance** of the frame, bells and fittings. Two members of the band give a very large number of hours of their time every year to ensuring that the whole installation is safe and as easy to use as possible, and that all work in the tower is properly recorded on a database. There is an annual maintenance report. The current Steeplekeeper has written papers on specific aspects of maintenance (pulleys, clappers, ropes etc) and ensures that there are sufficient spares (eg stays and bolts) to ensure continuity of ringing if there is any equipment failure. The expert volunteer hours of work dedicated to maintenance per year represent a considerable saving to the cathedral, but if this work does at some point need to be contracted out, it will be on the basis of a very well maintained operation with excellent records.

3:7 There is effective and regular communication between the Ringing Master (and other officers) and the **Chapter Office** over forthcoming events, other diary matters, PR, applications for use of the bells, entries in the newsletter / on the website etc. Ringing-related events generally have a high profile in the city.

3:8 There are impressively detailed and practical **policies and procedures**, for the most part regularly reviewed and backed up by regular training of the band (especially in Safeguarding and Safety). All new ringers are briefed in detail about safe practice. It is vital that a tower with so many ringers of different ages in its own band, and which welcomes so many visitors, should give these areas such a high priority. Hilary Higton, Safeguarding Officer, has given very helpful guidance to the WCGB committee. Work is being done on risk-assessments for ringers with any relevant disability. There is appropriate liaison with Chapter over fire drills, and an awareness of the need for evacuation practice. There are separate codes / locks for all doors used during practices and service ringing. It is a mark of good practice that it has been made possible for ringers to undertake online certificated Safeguarding training if they cannot attend on-site sessions.

3:9 There are impressive supportive **literature and display banners** for recruitment, teaching and the edification of visitors.

3:10 There is an excellent **website** (worcesterbells.org.uk) which gives a most positive picture of all that goes on in Worcester that is initiated or supported by the bellringers. The website is also a mine of useful and interesting information including appropriate policies and advice to visiting bands.

3:11 The Worcester Guild of Bellringers is recognised nationally as a **centre of good practice** and is, for instance, consulted by Chapters and those who oversee ringing in other cathedrals and ringing guilds for advice about how things might best be done. The Worcester ringers also have strong links with Australia and the USA.

3:12 There is a clear **sense of direction** and an awareness of areas in need of improvement (eg how to move learners on from the early to the more advanced stages of ringing by means of manageable steps).

3:13 There is a large **band** who attend practices regularly and who recognise the importance of ringing for Sunday services and on other occasions when ringing is requested by the Dean and Chapter. The drop-out rate is very small. Everyone embraces an ethos that is positive, progressive and focused on enjoying the experience of ringing. Experienced band members recognise the importance of their role in encouraging learners and in modelling best practice. They get learners to observe closely and to ask questions. There is a positive sense of discipline so that learners are encouraged, through staged levels of challenge, to take responsibility for their own progress. It is a common theme from feedback from WCGoB that they value the strong sense of community in the band, the ethos of mutual support and encouragement and the wider opportunities to meet socially. *"It's like having a second family"* said one. Another comments: *"There are numerous personal stories of how young and older people alike have been supported to learn ringing and in turn found new sources of personal strength from the greater confidence and self-esteem that has come from feeling safe and welcomed to learn and do well in ringing"*. A number of members of the band are actively engaged in voluntary work in and around the city. This is characteristic of a pervading ethos of a collective determination to make a positive impact in the community.

3:14 Excellent **management of practices** enables a large band representing many levels of ability and development to have a good experience on a Monday evening.

3:15: **Security of the tower** is made a priority. Access to the tower is controlled by restricted access to door codes. The arrangements have been approved and considered exemplary by the Ecclesiastical Insurance Group, the cathedral's insurers.

3:16 There is a **welcoming environment** for both learners and visitors.

3:17 Good **liaison with the parents** of young ringers ensures that parents are well informed about what their children are doing, and about plans for future events. They are also briefed on safety and safeguarding policies and procedures.

3:18 There has often been good **liaison when required with members of Chapter**. Val Floy is seen as the key person with whom to raise issues.

3:19 The band has a strong sense of **common purpose**, are united in enthusiasm for what they do, and make the whole experience of ringing a very positive one for everyone.

3:20 There is a strong commitment to **local outreach** whether it be supporting the ringers in other local towers, planning a ring of bells at a local secondary school or using local media to celebrate bellringing as an activity. The bellringers have an excellent relationship with the local community, its organisations and businesses.

4. Areas for development

4:1 The sheer **number of those who want to ring** at the cathedral presents challenges: how to offer sufficient practice time to ringers at different levels of development and how to move them on (both adult and youngsters) from one level to the next.

4:2 The Chapter should take overall responsibility for **all aspects of safety** in the tower including the testing of fire procedures and procedures for managing accidents that might arise during ringing.

4:3 Safeguarding is a particularly important area for an activity which involves the teaching of many young people, takes place well away from other cathedral activity in an environment where there are many visitors. **Communication about safeguarding** may not always have recognised these factors. In particular, the bellringers need to know, through Chapter and Diocesan links, of anyone who may be a potential safeguarding risk to ringers.

4:4 Members of Chapter, for many good reasons, do not visit the tower or watch ringing in action very often. There is, however, a danger that what is out of sight can also be out of mind. There is scope for **more regular involvement by Chapter members in tower activities** and for more frequent communication between Warden (the member of Chapter with particular responsibility for bellringing) and Ringing Master. As a key element of the outreach of the cathedral, bellringing should feature in any overall strategic plan for outreach in such areas as relationships with key institutions (the University, schools and colleges), the local Council, the business community, institutions promoting the Arts, volunteer activity groups, international visitors and, of course, the many churches of the diocese. The Teaching Centre has already proved itself as a place that welcomes a wide range of visitors including young people and their parents, ringers from churches in the area and groups of people who want to understand more about this ancient and rather mysterious skill.

4:5 **Procedures for dealing with expressions of concern or complaints** have been tested in recent times through two cases in particular, one of which became a formal complaint. These experiences would suggest that ways should be explored of resolving such matters at an earlier stage if at all possible. In the case of the above-mentioned complaint, the Chapter took longer than might have been expected to look into the initial expression of concern. More effective action and communication at this point might have made it less likely that the matter would develop into a formal complaint. This protracted process was also difficult for the Ringing Master. A review of the policy might encompass the need for support for the person against whom a concern has been directed until (and, if necessary, after) the matter has been resolved. The Complaints Policy on the Worcester Cathedral website needs reviewing to ensure that it outlines in sufficient detail the different stages of the process including, perhaps, clearer time-scales, how records will be kept, guidance on the way a complainant should lay out a letter, and what happens if the complaint is not resolved at the end of stage 2 (ie should there be provision for an independent panel hearing?). There will be model policies available from various sources. A brief search conducted by this reviewer revealed that there seems to be no obvious standard model used by cathedrals. Legal advice might be worth considering to ensure best practice. These matters are often distressing and time-consuming for all parties involved. This is a good time to ensure that any future investigations will be covered by a policy and processes which are designed to minimise such distress and complexity.

4:6 The accident that took place on 11th Feb 2017 when an experienced visiting bellringer was flipped over by a rope that caught him under his foot was an indication firstly of the potential risk of injury from bellringing but also of the importance of (a) **tested procedures for the involvement of the emergency services** and (b) **effective PR protocols** that are ready to be activated in the immediate aftermath of such an incident. There are Chapter protocols in place which have been reviewed in the light of this incident. The report of the incident by Mark Regan, the Ringing Master, in the Feb 2017 edition of *The Ringing World*, gives much reassurance that the cathedral already had in place effective procedures for responding quickly and effectively to a potentially serious accident over 100 steps (most of them on a spiral staircase) up the tower, but also shows how helpful it was to have, in Mark, a communicator who was used to dealing with local and national media. The sensational and wholly inaccurate reporting of the incident by some newspapers could, if less skilfully handled, have caused more serious reputational damage to the cathedral as well as to bellringing as an activity nationally. At the same time, it is important that the decision about who should be the spokesperson for the cathedral in the event of an incident which might attract media attention should rest with the Chapter. Circumstances may dictate whether this should be a representative of the ringers or a member of Chapter. All those who might be called upon to take on this role should be appropriately trained. It is important that if the Ringing Master or another member of the Guild speaks on behalf of the cathedral that they are careful to clear their intended statement with Chapter so that there is no danger of making a statement on a potentially controversial issue that may not be in line with Chapter policy.

4:7 Some **policies** are due for a review. It is very easy to let this slip if there is not a review process in place.

4:8 Most of the **funding of developments in the tower** (including regular maintenance) has been met by fundraising activity or even donation by the ringers themselves. This is not unusual in towers around the country but nor should it be taken for granted. There should be a proper assessment of the cost both of regular maintenance (with appropriate contingency for accidents and damage) and of agreed developments to the installation and other facilities in the tower. For their part, the ringers should give Chapter the best possible advance warning of likely expenditure and should share their budget and accounts with Chapter so that its members can hold their discussions on the basis of the best possible information.

4:9 Given the remoteness of the activity in the tower from the rest of the cathedral but also the value of being able to use the best of information technology, it is desirable to have **wifi or a network connection** restored to the tower.

4:10 Given the number of steps to the ringing room, the need for younger members of the band to be escorted if they want to visit a toilet, the fact that the ground floor of the cathedral is almost entirely alarmed during practices, and the large number of people (40+) present in the tower on many occasions, the lack of **toilet facilities** needs consideration.

5 Recommendations

5:1 There should be a **regular review of the overall bellringing operation** at the cathedral at least every three years. The main aim of such reviews is to ensure that policies and procedures are up-to-date, understood and effective; to ensure that there is excellent communication between Chapter and the Officers of the Guild, and amongst the ringers themselves and their families; to encourage the Tower Captain and ringers and give them an opportunity to report formally to

Chapter on all that is going well; to ensure that there is a strategic plan for bellringing, approved by the Chapter, and that recommendations from the previous review have been addressed.

5:2 There should be a rolling cycle of **review of policies** (e.g Child Protection, Safeguarding, Safety, Arrangements for Visiting Ringers) to ensure that they are up to date and compliant with latest regulations. This is always a challenge for any voluntary organisation and should therefore be a regular (perhaps annual) item for discussion with Chapter.

5:3 Procedures relating in particular to possible **discrimination, disagreement or complaints** (which inevitably arise in a large organisation where safety and safeguarding are paramount) must be as easy to implement as possible for the sake of all concerned. Chapter might usefully review the effectiveness of the current Complaints Policy and its processes and consider adding to the policy a more clearly defined first stage at which expressions of concern (which experience suggests might lead to complaints) may be received, and how they will be handled. It goes without saying that all expressions of concern and complaints should be carefully logged and taken seriously, and that all parties should be treated with respect.

5:4 Ways should be found to make it **easier for members of Chapter both to visit the tower** from time to time, get to know members of the committee **and meet the ringers and their families socially** (an annual get-together hosted by Chapter perhaps). Ideally, ringers should see themselves as cathedral volunteers as well as simply bellringers but they would need to be made to feel more clearly part of the bigger picture.

5:5 The member of Chapter who is **Warden to the Ringers** should have regular formal minuted meetings with the Ringing Master, in addition to informal contact, to ensure that all the good things that are going on as well as any issues are noted and, when appropriate, passed on to Chapter. The Warden should also attend committee meetings of the WCGoB (just as he does, with another hat on, with the Chamber Choir, for instance). Where committee business is conducted by email between meetings, the Warden should be copied in to any discussions or attachments that might lead to subsequent discussion in Chapter. All this will help ensure an effective “paper trail” to support discussion and decision-making.

5:6 Chapter should consider conducting an **annual review of all those who lead the voluntary organisations** in the cathedral. This would normally be light-touch and its purpose would be primarily to encourage those who give their time to offer leadership of this sort, to recognise all that has been achieved by them and their teams of volunteers, to discuss and agree targets for the year ahead and to offer an opportunity to the individuals concerned to raise any issues or concerns that they might have relating to their role. Recent controversies in the bellringing community nationally as well as locally have shown that the position of Ringing Master at a cathedral can feel quite exposed. Recognition by Chapter of the need for support, pastoral and practical, of its volunteer leaders, especially when they are under pressure, will continue to be important. Regular review will assist with identifying these needs.

5:7 The Chapter should clarify, perhaps as part of the ongoing review of all aspects of its operation, how the **monitoring and support of volunteer activities** (Bellringing, The Friends, The Flower Guilds, the Voluntary Choir, the Chamber Choir etc) and of those who lead these activities, should relate to, or in any way differ from, that of paid departments of the operation (Choir, Vergers, Administration, Education, Fundraising, Stonemasons etc).

5:8 All **new members of Chapter** (ordained and lay) should, as part of their wider induction, visit ringing practices in the training centre and the ringing room, and be introduced to members of the committee.

5:9 **Crisis management procedures and policies in the event of an accident or serious injury** should be tested, simulated if possible and reviewed at regular intervals to make sure, for instance, that arrangements for communication with the emergency services and the ability to remove the trapdoors are understood by a sufficient number of people to ensure that the response to any serious incident is calm, quick and effective. Appropriate training should be given to all those who might be called on to liaise with the press and other media. This should include members of Chapter and the Chapter Office and other administrative staff as well as representatives of the bellringers. Mark Regan is qualified from his own professional experience to offer such training to any staff or voluntary helpers in the cathedral, and is happy to do so.

5:10 **The budget** both for essential maintenance and to support the teaching of learners should be realistic and regularly reviewed.

5:11 The Chapter should be aware of and plan for the possible **future need and associated cost of regular maintenance** in the event of there being no expert volunteers in the band at any point.

5:12 Consideration should be given by both the WCGoB Committee and Chapter to the most efficient way of informing the operational team in the **Chapter Office** about planned events and applications for the use of the bells to minimise the likelihood of clashes. Publishing the calendar of events on the website would be helpful for local residents.

5:13 Consideration should be given by Chapter to **succession planning** for the role of Ringing Master in particular. At whatever time Mark Regan might cease to be Ringing Master, the process for appointing his successor needs to be clear.

5:14 A schedule, backed up by efficient records, of **regular fire drills** and of **regular safeguarding training** should be drawn up.

5:15 Consideration should be given to inviting more members of the Guild to put themselves forward for **First Aid training**. Chapter should take responsibility for initiating and enabling such training.

5:16 **The way in which ringing practices are structured** should be reviewed by the WCGoB Committee so that occasional practices give an opportunity for the best ringers to push the limits so that other practices can be devoted to those of less experience.

5:17 The restoration of **wifi or a network connection** to the tower would be highly desirable.

5:18 Consideration might be given as to how a **toilet might be installed** at the level where ringing takes place. In safeguarding terms, it is not desirable for youngsters to have to be conducted to the ground floor to go to the toilet. For adults, especially those of more advanced years and less than perfect health, it is a potential deterrent to have to go down and up so many steps for this purpose.

The decision for such an installation rests, of course, with Chapter and would need the involvement of the Cathedral Architect at an early stage.

6. Sources of evidence

- Two meetings and other phone conversations with present and former members of Chapter.
- Meetings with the Ringing Master (one on his own and one with two committee members).
- Formal interviews with all members of the committee (face to face or by phone).
- Phone conversations with other ringers and those with an interest in bellringing for other reasons.
- Phone calls or email feedback from ringers in other guilds nationally.
- Informal conversations (face to face) with parents of young learners and learners themselves.
- Informal conversations during a practice with members of the band.
- Detailed consideration of the website and especially the policies and procedures outlined there.
- Promotional and informative literature.
- Evidence relating to recent complaints (formal and informal).

Tim Keyes

November 2019