

BRIEFING PAPER ON PROPOSED RULE CHANGES REGARDING REMOVAL & SUSPENSION FROM MEMBERSHIP OR OFFICE

Background

The Association takes its responsibilities for the safeguarding of young people and vulnerable adults seriously and some years ago the Association General Committee adopted a formal safeguarding policy and statement which is reviewed regularly.

Within that policy are several commitments made by the Association which have been followed but are not specifically covered by the existing rules. For example, there is no mechanism to ensure that those elected to office are properly fit to hold such office including being free from safeguarding concerns. Similarly, should serious concerns be raised about the behaviour of an existing officer then there are no mechanisms or procedures within our rules to deal with these concerns.

The policy states “It is at the discretion of the KCACR to exclude any member (or non-member) from joining in any KCACR organised activity. The person in charge of the activity has the right to ask any member (or non-member) to leave a practice or event if there are concerns about the said person’s conduct.” There is no mechanism, however, either to consider whether a member’s conduct has given sufficient cause for concern that their membership should be terminated or to do so in the event it has.

While the need for such procedures and sanctions is rare, when they are needed then the circumstances for both individuals and the Association are serious. The Association must protect our members’ safety – including young or vulnerable members, protect the reputation of the Association and remain credible with the Church and other bodies.

There may on occasion be serious matters other than safeguarding that call an officer’s or member’s conduct or capability into question. These might for example include convictions for violent crimes, financial misconduct or bringing the Association into disrepute in other ways. We expect it would be unusual for this to be needed and the proposals are not intended to replace the Volunteer Complaint and Grievance procedure.

As a membership body we have control only over who we elect as members and those whom we elect to be our officers. We are not employers, nor do we have control over who may and may not ring at any of the towers *in union* with the Association (apart from at Association events). It is the priests in charge of each parish with a ringing tower that have this power, albeit sometimes exercised at the request of Diocesan authorities.

It follows that the only potential sanctions or controls available to the Association when dealing with serious concerns are:

- to set eligibility criteria for new or continuing membership (that go beyond the ability to ring safely);
- to have a process that allows removal from membership, either temporarily by suspension (for example during investigation of concerns) or permanently;
- to have a process to rule that a member’s prior behaviour or conduct renders them unsuitable for office;
- to have a process that allows removal from office, either by temporary suspension or for an indefinite period (while retaining membership).

Current concerns:

Two recent cases have brought these issues into sharp focus. In one of these a member and former officer has been imprisoned and required to sign the Sex Offenders' Register, having pleaded guilty to several serious sexual offences.

In another case, investigation of a ringing-related safeguarding concern by Diocesan authorities has revealed that an Association member had behaved in a way that contravened both Church and Association safeguarding policies, despite having undergone safeguarding training. Furthermore, they claimed that since the safeguarding concerns had arisen away from church premises following non-KCA, non-service ringing, they were no business of either the Church or the Association. Unsurprisingly, one recommendation from the formal report into those concerns by the Diocesan Safeguarding Team is therefore:

"It is recommended that KCACR review their safeguarding policies, guidance and procedures, in particular with regards to how these relate to all members and officers of the association when engaged in ringing of any kind, including KCACR organised ringing events but also other ringing sessions such as quarter peals and peals."

The only practical way to achieve this would be to require members, as a condition of membership, to undertake to follow both the safeguarding policies of any church or other place where they may ring as well as KCACR Safeguarding Policies and safeguarding guidance at all times – even when ringing is not under the auspices of the Association or specifically for an organised church activity. It is envisaged this would be by an annual declaration by members when they renew their membership.

Why have this process dealt with by the Committee?

The issues are not about an individual's capabilities as a ringer. Our normal processes that allow a new member to be elected, or a lapsed member to be re-elected, are not adequate to deal with the issues concerned. Our rules state that the government of the Association is vested in the General Committee and the wording of the proposed rules is designed to reflect this. The three Principal officers have to deal with issues such as these in the first instance, hence the confirmation of the role of these officers in initial steps.

Can't this wait until the 2023 AGM?

The criminal case is a particularly serious one and the Association needs to act decisively in this. To allow continued membership, or to allow re-joining by a former member without any mechanism for reconsideration, risks bringing the Association into serious disrepute.

Adding a 12 month delay before considering the necessary rule changes would imply that the Association is incapable of dealing with urgent matters in a timely fashion. This itself would give an extremely poor impression to Church and other authorities. In these circumstances the General Committee has adopted the rules as working procedures immediately and agreed that they should be proposed as rule changes without the requirement for notice to have been given by September 1st of the year before the AGM.

Members are asked to support these proposals for rule changes at the forthcoming 2022 AGM.

Phillip Barnes
Chairman, February 2022