

Payment for the use of towers

Introduction

Bell installations are generally made freely available to groups of ringers (the Branch and other), but most of the PCCs who own them do not normally make a charge, which is unusual compared with most capital installations for recreational or other use.

The custom of making donations to a tower for use of bells is well established for outings, peal and quarter peal bands and courses but so far the Branch has chosen not to make payments for regular use.

How did we get here?

I believe the historical rationale was twofold. Firstly that monthly practices rotated around the towers so the load was evenly shared. Secondly that since Branch members ring at the same towers then ‘on average’ they are practising at their own towers,. And thirdly since they didn’t pay to ring at their own tower practices they shouldn’t (through the Branch) pay to ring at Branch practices either.

There are several flaws in that argument. One is that the use of Branch towers is much more uneven than it was . Until 2010 there was only one Branch practice a month, on the third Saturday, and it nominally rotated around all Branch towers. Now there are up to five a month and the towers used are based on a combination of availability and suitability for the practice in question.

The table shows the number of practices scheduled at different towers in recent years. Adding quarter peal days and removing cancellations to get actual use would change the figures slightly but the overall picture would be the same; some towers are used far more than others.

Tower	2022	2023	2024	2025	Total	Percentage
Binfield	25	21	26	17	89	38%
Wokingham All Saints	2	15	15	11	43	19%
Hurst	15	4		2	21	9%
Finchampstead	3	4	2	5	14	6%
Twyford	2	5	4	3	14	6%
Warfield	2	2	1	4	9	4%
Wokingham St Paul			2	7	9	4%
Waltham St Lawrence	1	3	3	1	8	3%
Shottesbrooke		1	5	1	7	3%
Wargrave		1		3	4	2%
Arborfield		2		1	3	1%
Easthampstead		1	1	1	3	1%
Sonning	1	1	1		3	1%
White Waltham		1	1	1	3	1%
Sandhurst St Michael	1	1			2	1%
Sandhurst Immaculate Conception						0%
Barkham						0%
Grand Total	52	62	61	57	232	

Branch practices at towers 2022 – 2025

Binfield is the most heavily used, and based on the 2025 figure I estimate that the Branch would responsible for about 20% of the time the bells were rung (~25 hours Branch use v 100 hours local use¹) and around 25% in recent years. However since they often can’t ring on Sunday those figures are nearer 25% and 30%. For Wokingham All Saints it’s a bit over 10% (21 Branch v 150 local).

The distribution of ringers attending Branch ringing is also uneven. In 2024 only half of members (77 out of 159) attended any of the 46 events. Ten towers had members who attended 6 or more, only seven had members who attended 10 or more and just three towers provided the eight members who attended twenty or more.

Regardless of distributions does attending a Branch practice count as ‘service to the church’, which is the presumed reason that ringers don’t pay to use bells in their home towers.

The Branch pays to use halls owned by PCCs (apart from a few cases where local ringers make the booking and exploit a PCC policy of free use by parish groups (which might not stand up to scrutiny).

¹ 17 x 1½ hour Branch practices v 50 x ½ hour service ringing and 50 x 1½ hour local practice

Proposed way forward

The officers agreed that the Branch should make a contribution towards the costs of the towers that it uses for events, and we agreed a scale of £15 for a six and £20 for an eight or ten, which is broadly in line with current expectations for tower donations.

Covering the cost

Typically the General Account has an annual surplus of around £200 (£225.20 in 2024). Paying for 50 events per year split equally sixes and eights would cost £875. The £3.7k surplus built up in the General Fund can absorb the shortfall for a while but in the long term (say 2027 onwards) the Branch needs additional income. There are two ways this could be achieved:

- Charging Steeplage – Total annual attendances at Branch practices (excluding youth practices) is around 500 per annum (549 in 2024) so it would need to be around £1.50² per practice attended.
- Increased subs – Currently the Branch retains £3 per member of the £10 ODG annual subscription, with the rest going to the centre to provide core services). With just over 150 members an increase of £5 would generate the same revenue as above.

Both approaches are used elsewhere. Some societies charge steeplage, and some branches of the ODG charge an additional subscription to fund tower payments.

Steeplage places most of the cost on those who attend most events. For example at £1.50 per practice a handful of members who support most practices, including the ringing masters, would pay around £45 per year while those who don't support Branch events at all would pay nothing. Collecting steeplage would also be an administrative burden for those running practices, and could prove impractical with members choosing to be cashless.

An increased subscription spreads the load evenly across all members. An increase of £5 would bring the total (Guild + Branch) annual payment to £15 – still is extremely low compared with almost any other leisure activity.

On balance the officers recommend covering the cost of tower payments with an increase in Branch subs.

The Branch has around £3.5k in the General Fund so it can easily absorb the deficit for a few years, giving ample time to put in place the mechanism to implement collection of an increased Branch subscription in future years.

² £875 payment – £1.50 x 500 = £125, ie within the current £200 surplus.