

# Branch payment for the use of towers

## Introduction

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

There is a well established custom of making donations to a tower when bells are used for outings, peals, quarter peals and courses, but so far the Branch has chosen not to make payments for its regular use of towers.

## 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 between them. Secondly that since Branch members ring at the same towers used by the Branch then ‘on average’ they are practising at their own towers,. And thirdly that since they didn’t pay to ring at their own tower practices then 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 now than it was in former times. 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 practices a month of various kinds, with towers chosen on a combination of availability and suitability for the practice in question.

The table shows the number of practices that were scheduled at different towers in recent years. A few of those were cancelled so removing them, or adding in quarter peal days, to get actual use would change the figures slightly but not alter the overall picture which is that 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 tower, 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 use<sup>1</sup>) 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’ (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)).

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<sup>1</sup> 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 proposed that the Branch should make a contribution towards the costs of the towers that it uses for events, and agreed a scale of £15 for a six and £20 for an eight or ten (broadly in line with current expected tower donations for other uses). This was discussed with tower representatives at the November Business Meeting and supported by those present.

## Covering the cost

Typically the General Account has an annual surplus of around £200 (£225.20 in 2024), which is significantly less than the £875 cost of paying for 50 events per year split equally sixes and eights, so with no income the Branch would run at a deficit. For a few years the shortfall can be absorbed from the £3.7k surplus built up in the General Fund, but in the long term (say 2027 onwards) the Branch will need additional income. There are two ways this could be achieved:

- Charge steepage – Total annual attendances at Branch practices (excluding youth practices) is around 500 per annum (549 in 2024) so it would need to be around £1.50<sup>2</sup> per practice attended.
- Increase subscriptions – 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. Societies like the College Youths charge steepage, and some branches of the ODG charge an additional branch subscription to fund payments to towers.

Steepage places most of the cost on those who attend the 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 steepage would also be an administrative burden on those who run practices, and might not be practical now that some members don't carry cash.

An extra subscription spreads the load evenly across all members. An increase of £5 per year, as well as the £10 Guild subscription would be an annual payment to £15 – still very low compared with most leisure activities.

On balance the officers recommend an extra Branch subscription.

As noted above the surplus in the General Fund can easily absorb a short term deficit so it seems sensible to wait until the Guild has the mechanism for collecting subscriptions online, including the ability to charge additional Branch subscriptions, which is expected to be in 2027.

This approach was discussed with tower representatives at the November Business Meeting and received broad support.

## Proposal for the AGM

Based on the above, the following motion will be put to the AGM:

- 1 That the Branch will in future make an appropriate payment to any tower used for a Branch ringing event.
- 2 That the amount payable from 2026 shall be £15 for a six bell tower and £20 for an eight or ten bell tower.
- 3 That the officers may approve a higher amount in exceptional circumstances, for example if a tower were used for a whole day.
- 4 That in the short term the increased cost of tower payments will be met from Branch reserves.
- 5 That a Branch subscription of £5 per member (in addition to the Guild subscription of £10 per member) be charged when the Guild has implemented online payment (expected to be in 2027).

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