

# A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF YOUTH RINGING

David G Hull

Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today about my vision for the future of youth ringing.

You may be asking yourselves what makes me think I'm qualified to talk on the subject of young people in ringing.



Well, I was a young ringer once, back in the dark ages. I was taken up bell towers from a very early age, because both of my parents were ringers. I'm told, although I don't remember this, that when I started being able to move around, I was tied to one of the chairs with a spare bell rope. I started learning to ring at the age of 6, taught by my father. I gave up, at the age of 6, because my hands were too small to go around the sally. I started learning again around the age of 8, and it seemed to take me forever to make any progress. I was 12 before I rang my first quarter peal, and 14 before I

rang a peal. I remember struggling for months on end to get to grips with ringing Plain Bob Doubles inside.



I also remember going to Essex Association meetings. I'm pretty sure I enjoyed the tea – I've always been partial to a nice sandwich and a slice of cake – but the meetings must have been fairly tedious. I don't remember any other young ringers being at many of these events.



Nowadays, I have been involved with youth ringing in Yorkshire for the last 8 years or so. This interest has at least in part been driven by having two school-age children of my own, but also the recognition that other areas of the country were forming youth groups and clearly someone needed to do something in Yorkshire. I was lucky that Jennie Town and Jane Lynch were also having the

same thoughts, and the group we have today – the Yorkshire Tykes – exists largely due to their efforts.

This year, I have taken on the role of organiser of the Ringing World National Youth Contest, for my money one of the best things the Ringing World has done in recent years.

Why did I become a ringer? For me, the answer is easy. My parents are both ringers, they met ringing, I was exposed to ringing from a very young age and I wanted to join in and do what they did. There are lots of our young ringers today who have come to ringing through the same route – over half of the Yorkshire Tykes squad have ringing parents. There are plenty of ringing parents whose children don't ring, and well done to them, as parents, for allowing it to be a free choice. I hope there aren't too many children out there who were made to do it. My two children, Ewan and Eliza, both ring. Ewan is dead keen, does a lot of ringing, is in to method construction and has got an app on his phone which he uses to compose peals. I've tried to encourage him to use a pencil and squared paper, but what do I know. Technology marches on. Eliza is less keen, but she doesn't do it under duress, any more than she goes to school under duress. She'll either get keen later or give it up. I'm hoping for the former, but I'm not going to push it. For every child that wants to do something because a parent does it, I'm sure there is a child who doesn't want to do something because a parent does it.

I fitted the profile that I think is probably quite common in young ringers today. I was unbearably shy, a bit geeky, the child who sat in the corner who never said a word to anyone. Ringing was a team activity I could take part in as an equal, albeit mostly with people of my parents or my grandparents generations. When I started calling touches, that was probably the first time I had even spoken in public.

I went searching online to see if I could find any reasons why young people ring. I found two interesting quotations, this first one from a 14-year-old girl:

▶ “Bellringing helped me with my shyness – I've had to conduct and shout and people I don't know so it's taught me to speak up a bit. I want to try and carry it on because it's a fun thing to do and being around other people that I know is good. I'm quite shy, so it's nice.”

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around other people that I know is good. I'm quite shy, so it's nice." Two mentions of shyness there. Another teenager is quoted on the CCCBR website:



"Over the past 2-3 years I have learned a lot and it has helped me improve my social skills and confidence as well as team integration."

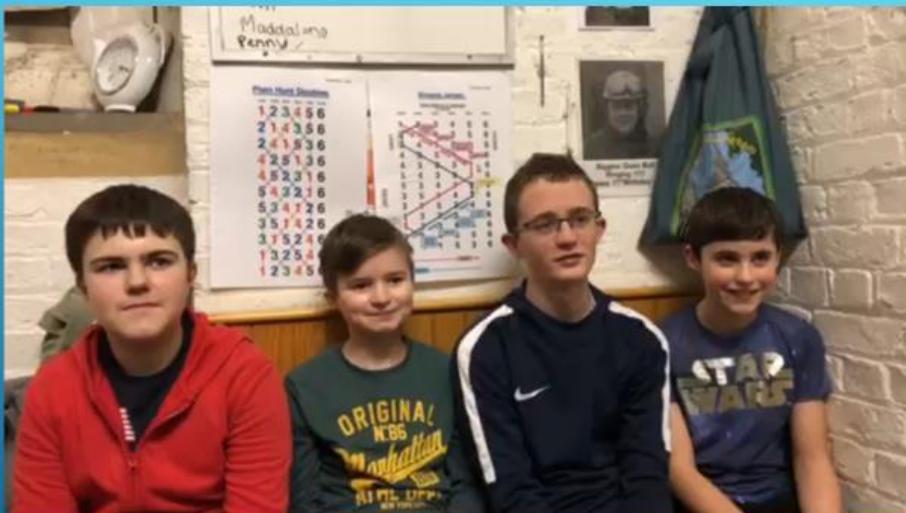
It took me years to overcome my shyness, indeed, I'm still pretty shy, but ringing has certainly helped. There are adult ringers today – some of them very well known – who are very shy, wouldn't say boo to a goose, but when they are on the end of a bellrope and conducting, they are in charge, giving out the orders and encouraging the band, but in their safe space.

I am not saying that all ringers fit this profile – far from it – but I think that there are a lot of people drawn to ringing because of some of the reasons described here, maybe a little bit of social inadequacy, introversion and shyness.



What does this have to do with the future of youth ringing? Well, I think we have to recognise who our young ringers are, what type of individuals they are, why they come into ringing, what they hope to get out of it and what we as adults can do to facilitate that, and, as importantly, what we shouldn't try too hard at to make work. Understanding the personalities of the people we are recruiting to ringing will help us to better engage with them and help them not only to become good ringers but to improve their own well-being and engagement with wider society. It is probably true that more people are drawn to ringing because they veer towards introversion than because they are massive social animals. We need to be aware of that.

I asked some other young ringers what it is about ringing that they like. Here are some of them to tell you:





Some of the other answers I received were:

- I enjoy being part of something
- I get a sense of pride in doing something well (like getting my first backstroke up on a difficult ring of bells)
- I love the challenge of ringing difficult or heavy bells which I have to work hard at – and then I'm really pleased when I get it right
- I like trying new bells to see if I can manage them
- I like what it sounds like
- It's nice to see other people in the band develop
- It gets you up in the morning
- There are no limits for how far you can go
- It's fun
- I get paid to ring for weddings
- I get to stay up late
- We go to the pub
- I get to shout at my parents

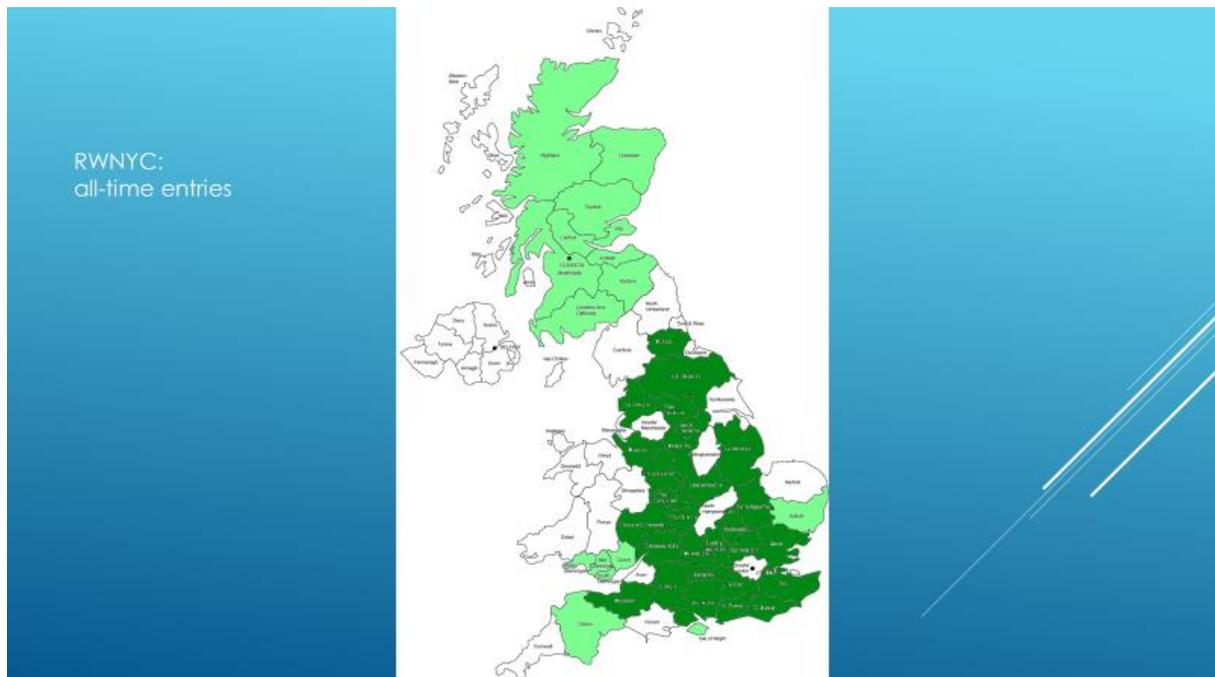
Note that no one described it as “cool” or “exciting” – they're right: ringing is neither of those things, and we shouldn't attempt to market it as such.

This year's Ringing World National Youth Contest in Liverpool has attracted a fantastic entry of 24 teams. The squad lists I've received include the names of 278 young ringers, ranging from as young as six years old up to the upper limit of 18.

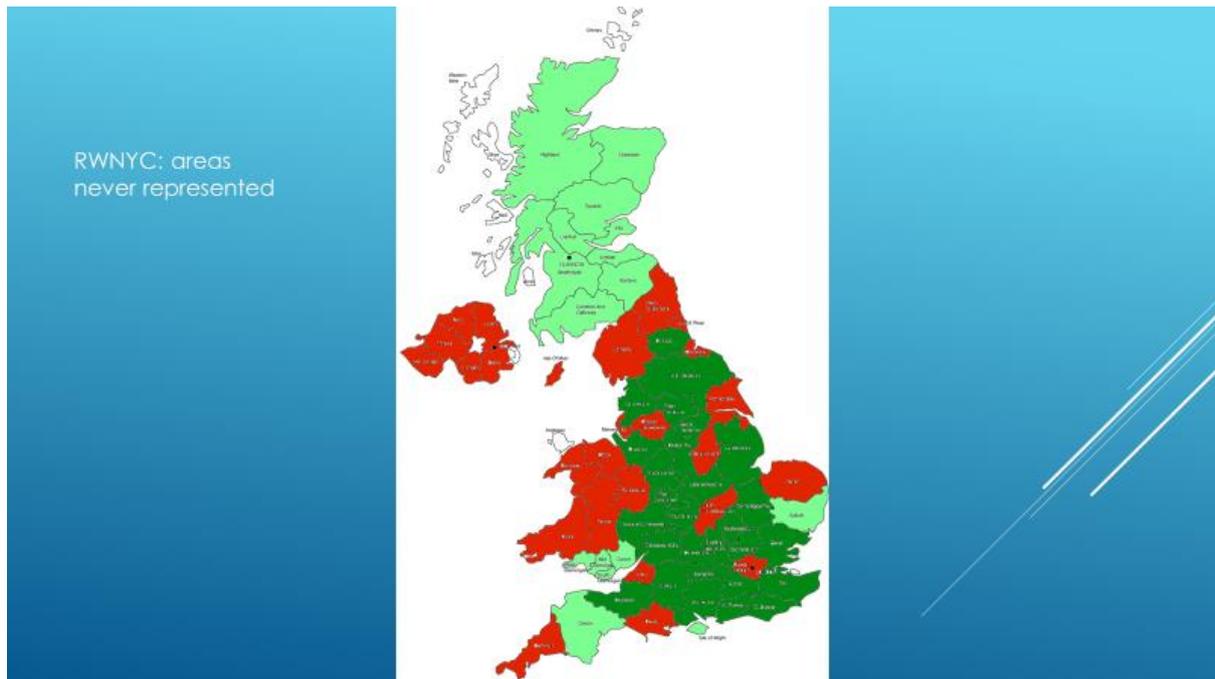


We have a good geographic spread too, with entries for the first time from a team from Lancashire and one from Durham and Newcastle.

Teams from other parts of the UK have entered in the past, but, for whatever reason, didn't enter this year.

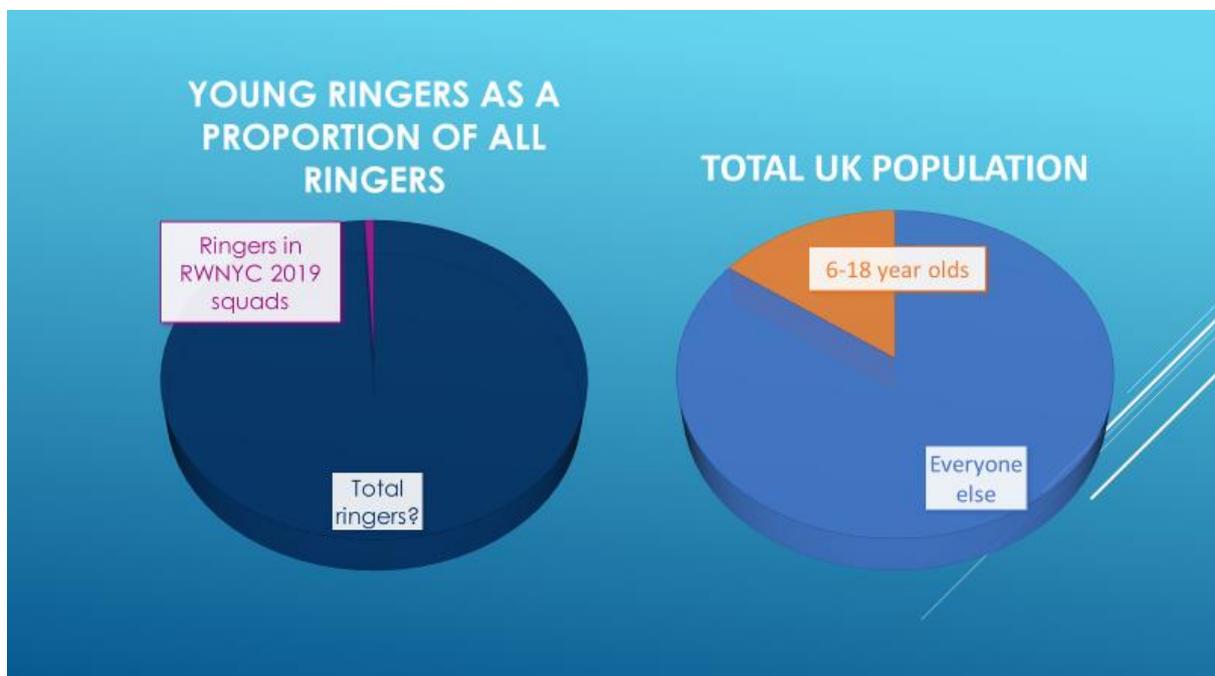


Scotland, South Wales, Devon, the Isle of Wight and Suffolk have come and gone.



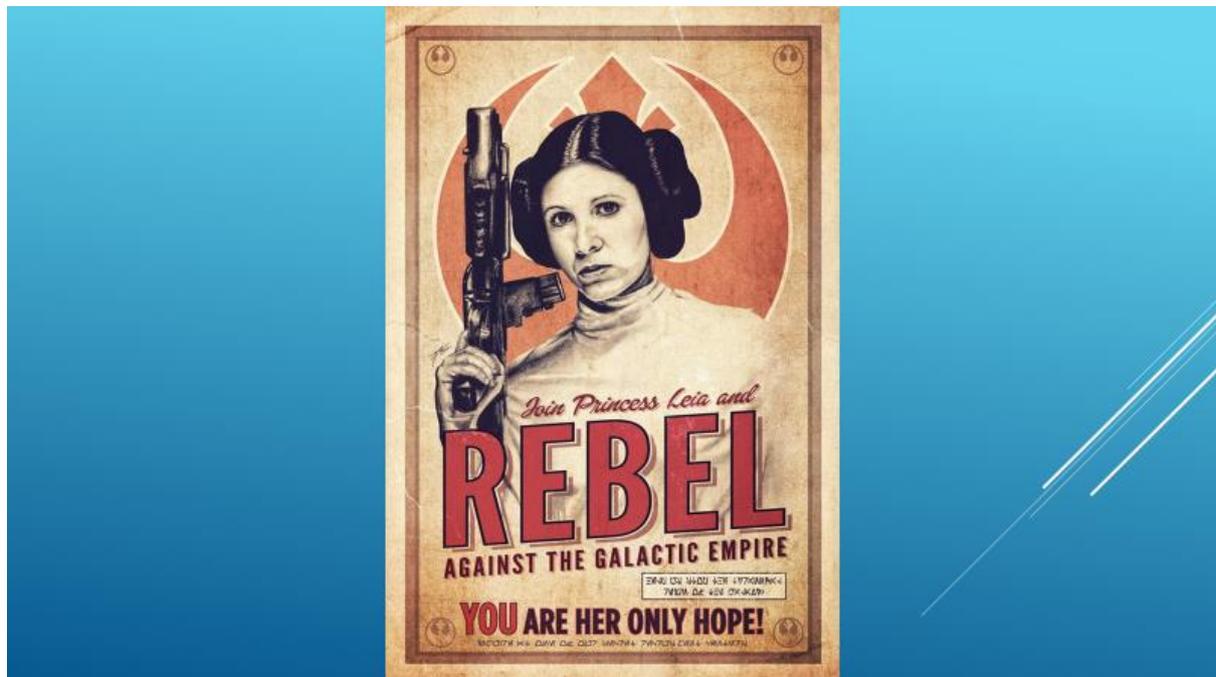
And some areas have never entered the contest. OK, so this is a bit crude and based entirely on county boundaries, but it does give some indication of the areas where we may need to try harder to get youth ringing off the ground.

278 young ringers at this year's RWNYC is great – indeed, from an organiser's point of view, I'm quite glad it isn't more as we'll be struggling to give everyone a good go on the end of various bellropes as it is. But what does this figure actually represent?



I don't for one minute believe that 278 is the total number of young ringers in the 24 areas that are being represented this year. But, for the sake of argument, let's assume it is. The total number of ringers is reckoned to be about 35,000, and 278 is less than 1% of that. In my own area of Yorkshire, the local association has 1,700 members. We have 16 youngsters on the Yorkshire Tykes squad list – again, less than 1%. Very roughly 15% of the population of the UK is aged between 6 and 18, and on

that basis we might reasonably expect that 5,000 of the 35,000 would be youngsters. Even the most generous estimates are nowhere close to that figure. We are doing lots of good things with youth ringing, but we need to do so much more.



So, how can we recruit more young ringers? There are no easy answers to this, but we perhaps need to look at what some of the barriers are. 21<sup>st</sup> century children have a lot of commitments to juggle, and as a hobby we need to be an attractive option that people will want to devote time to. I think many are put off by the perceived link with religion. The fact that bells are in churches leads to an automatic conclusion that all bellringers are overtly religious, at a time when religion in the UK is certainly unfashionable. I think a lot of people also think we are a bit peculiar, and are keen to lump us into the same category as other traditional English pursuits like Morris Dancing. Interestingly, I heard a piece on the Today programme last year when some young morris dancers were talking about how difficult it is to attract new youthful recruits – we are not alone. The Morris Dancer being interviewed was himself the son of a Morris Dancer and didn't find it an odd pastime at all – sound familiar? Other more recent media coverage has been positive – excellent pieces on Newsround, Blue Peter, Channel 5 News and in The Times have shown ringing, and young ringers in particular, in a very good light.



An idea which the erstwhile Ringing Foundation had, and which was tried in part by Jason Hughes at a school in Surrey, was to introduce ringing within a school by using elements of ringing in lessons and having a mini-ring in the school hall on which the children learnt to ring. Jason tells me that this was successful and repeatable, but that it was difficult to get his teacher colleagues to grasp some of the concepts. But the important thing was to introduce some of the theoretical concepts of ringing to a teenage audience to try to break down some of the barriers that exist, remove some of the stereotypes and hopefully pique the interest of some in learning to ring.

Building on this idea, I feel there are elements of ringing which could relate to a considerable number of subjects in the national curriculum. Music is probably a fairly obvious one, as is maths – at all levels, from generation of permutations up to group theory. Computer Science could look at the way computers are being used in teaching and judging bellringing; Physics could look at pendulum dynamics, the way bells are hung and the way modern bells are harmonically tuned; Chemistry could look at the composition of bell metal; History could consider how change-ringing developed and Geography could look at where change-ringing bells exist and how this relates to the Commonwealth. And if we wanted to include Religious Education, notwithstanding what I've already said about trying to sell this as a secular hobby, you could discuss the importance of bells in calling people to worship. For Biology, there are the physiological aspects of the actual exercise of ringing, although someone also suggested that adolescent relationship-making was as biologically fundamental as anything.

This is all very conceptual, but I feel some ringing educationalists could work this up into a package of material that could be promoted to local education authorities as maybe a week-long project that schools could undertake, or as part of a programme of weekly extra-curricular activities, something we are hoping to trial with a York school in the near future.



Now we've demystified ringing and generated lots of new recruits, we need to teach them. The ART website already includes a postcode-based search allowing people to find their local ART-accredited teacher and tower – if there is one – but we could take this further by also putting them in touch with their local youth bellringing group. This isn't rocket science, but we do need a coordinated approach to this communication, and an infrastructure to support focussed and quick teaching of learners.

I'm not going to dwell on the actual teaching for long – I imagine that most people in the room are bought into the ART's Learning the Ropes scheme. I think this provides exactly the sort of structured framework and system of monitoring, assessing and rewarding progress which people learning anything in the 21<sup>st</sup> century expect. One thing I will mention though is the question of payment.



Ringling is considered by many to be a cheap hobby, indeed, many people are proud of the fact that

we can teach people to ring for nothing. However, we need to be aware of a couple of things here. Firstly, it is possible that some parents may be suspicious of their child getting something for nothing. My daughter learns the piano and the flute, and I pay £13 for every half hour of tuition she gets. I am paying for the teacher's time and expertise. If we are accredited teachers of bellringing, should we not also be able to charge for our services? Secondly, as a body of teachers, we are a finite resource. We need to find a way of ensuring that our time teaching new ringers is well spent, that those who we are teaching are going to stick with ringing and not give up. If we charge money for lessons then it may make people think twice before committing, and those who, after a few lessons, are obviously not going to make it are more likely drop out rather than continue paying. I realise that this is a controversial view that has been aired in the Ringing World recently, and will not find favour with those who want ringing to be free for all, but if we can genuinely generate significant numbers of new young recruits then we need a way of managing that.



So, we've taught an army of new young ringers, and now we need to ensure that we have the networks in place to support them. Our youth team leaders are already doing a great job in much of the country, and they need all the support we can give them. Some groups receive excellent funding and support from their local territorial Guild or Association, who recognise that these people are the future of ringing and future leaders of ringing. However, this support is not universal. In Yorkshire, it has been a struggle to get even £250 a year to support our activities. There is an assumption that parents will meet all of the necessary costs, including transport. These can be significant and, for non-ringing parents, of questionable benefit. Some areas of the country where there is currently no youth ringing activity cite this as the major problem of getting young ringers together – the distances that need to be travelled and the costs incurred.

In some counties, youth ringing happens in spite of, rather than because of, the local Association – although that local ringing organisation is usually the only place that youth leaders can turn to for financial support. Could the Central Council provide a pot of money dedicated to youth ringing that individual groups could bid to? How many Associations and Guilds automatically apportion part of their annual subscription to a Bell Restoration Fund? Almost all. How many divert a percentage to supporting ringing education and young ringers? Very few, if any. This truly seems to be putting the cart before the horse. We have hundreds of bells around the country for which we do not have

ringers – shouldn't we be devoting more of our resources to closing that gap before we consider putting in new rings of bells? Yorkshire is a case in point – roughly 2,200 bells, 1,700 ringers. Having said all that, there IS some very good practice out there in some parts of the country, and we need to gather this and share it as widely as possible.



Our youth groups are a vital part of the system that will keep young people engaged with ringing through their teenage years and beyond. We need to recognise that there are lots of external pressures on young people, not least GCSEs and A levels, and work around those as best we can. Our youth team leaders have spotted the importance of bringing young people together, and are doing a great job of doing so, but we need more people to take on those leadership roles. As with the majority of ringing, the best things happen because enthusiastic individuals make them happen. I would like to see more youth groups springing up around centres of ringing, rather than focussing on traditional county or diocesan boundaries. This of course relies on a critical mass of young ringers, as well as adult organisers, but it does have the potential to remove distance and travel costs as barriers to existence. We should involve the youngsters themselves in the organisation. They will know better than anyone what activities they want organised and what is likely to appeal to others. Yes, we still need a responsible adult to help facilitate events, but we want to train our youngsters to be the future leaders of ringing as much as we need them to excel on the end of a rope.

I'm not going to dwell on what activities individual groups should organise, but I would recommend getting a regular date in people's diaries which will help ensure that your young ringers are available as often as possible. If practical to do so, put one of the young ringers in charge of running the ringing – it's an important skill – and try to avoid what I might call "lowest common denominator" ringing all the time. You want to encourage your newest recruits as much as you can, but those who have been around for a while and are capable of ringing at a more advanced level will get bored if you don't include some touches for them. For most teams this will probably require adult help - not every touch needs to be youngsters only, although every touch should be for the benefit of the young ringers. And consider whether some lightweight social activity could follow. We've certainly found in Yorkshire that some food in the church hall afterwards has worked well, and we've gone

from the young people sitting with their parents to them sitting with each other and even talking to one another.

## the social network

How should we use social media to support what we do? Well, I think the first thing to understand is that young people use social media in a completely different way to those of us who are longer in the tooth. A 16-year-old said to me last week that “no one under the age of 18 uses Facebook any more – it’s for old people”. I don’t think that’s quite true, but it is worth bearing in mind. The apps of today are Instagram and Snapchat, but something new will undoubtedly come along in six months time.

## anti the social network

There is some evidence that young people are turning their backs on social media altogether, whilst at the same time some online platforms have recently come in for some scathing criticism in the press. We need young people to advise us on how best to use social media, and indeed I’m looking

for a young person to manage the national youth contest's online presence for me. We also have a duty, as parents and responsible adults, to ensure that our young charges are using any online system both responsibly and safely.



The Ringing World National Youth Contest provides an excellent focus for many teams, and it is certainly true that the RWNYC was a catalyst for a number of teams starting up. I see it very much as a festival of youth ringing, including a contest, giving young ringers the opportunity to ring at places, and attempt new things, that they otherwise may not be able to do. Its success is great, but we are operating at capacity and yet there are still areas of the country unrepresented. I would really like to try to facilitate more regional activity to supplement the annual get-together. This already happens successfully in the south-east of England, but there is no reason, except for finding an enthusiastic person or group to organise them, why this couldn't happen across the country. There could be regional contests, joint outings, mini-festivals – anything really that is going to get young ringers ringing together.

## WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

- ▶ Build on current success
- ▶ Engage professional marketers
- ▶ Sell ringing realistically
- ▶ Steer away from religious connections
- ▶ Introduce concepts to schools
- ▶ Provide good information based on location
- ▶ Use LTR and BSoB models
- ▶ Consider charging like music lessons
- ▶ Ensure effective network of youth ringing groups
- ▶ Organise ringing events
- ▶ Encourage the creation of new centre-based groups
- ▶ Involve young people as organisers
- ▶ Share best practice regarding organisation and financial support
- ▶ CCCBR to also provide funding?
- ▶ Facilitate regional gatherings
- ▶ Keep RWNYC structure under review
- ▶ Work on retaining and transitioning young ringers

What can we conclude from all of this? Firstly, we are very much on the right path. The advent of the Ringing World National Youth Contest has galvanised people in at least 30 areas of the country to form youth ringing groups, and the continued success of the contest is testament to the fact that things are on the up.

But we still need to recruit more young people to ringing. We need to engage professional marketers to look at our product and rebrand it for teenagers in 2019. We need to sell that product realistically, avoiding words like “exciting” and focussing on what ringing actually is – an enjoyable team activity which blends physical and mental skill. We need to try to steer away from connections with religion, however difficult that may seem. And we should look at ways to introduce more young people to the concepts of ringing through engagement with schools.

We make sure that if people want to learn to ring, they can easily find out where to go to do so. Then we provide good quality, fast and accredited training using the Learning The Ropes model, and encourage other ringing centres to follow the lead of the Birmingham School of Bellringing. We think about whether we might charge people to learn.

We put support networks in place so that young people can ring with people their own age as soon as they are able to. We need to not worry too much about the social aspects of ringing, and focus on events when young people can ring together. We encourage more people to consider organising youth ringing groups, based on centres rather than traditional boundaries, and involve our young people in the organisation. We encourage territorial ringing organisations to share best practice, particularly with regard to funding of youth groups, and consider how the Central Council might financially support young ringers.

We help facilitate regional gatherings and contests, and make sure that the Ringing World National Youth Contest remains fit for purpose. We try our best to retain our young ringers interest through those difficult teenage years so that they carry on ringing at University and beyond.

Simple, isn't it?

THANK YOU –  
ANY QUESTIONS?

The slide features a blue gradient background that transitions from a lighter shade at the top to a darker shade at the bottom. The text "THANK YOU – ANY QUESTIONS?" is centered in white, uppercase letters. On the right side, there are several thin, white, parallel diagonal lines that create a sense of movement or a modern design element.