

EGM - CONSTITUTION CHANGES

Ron Kelley

The constitution was adopted at the specially convened EGM in Liverpool on 6th March 2010. The version adopted was the same as that circulated to members in January with a minor modification – the few remaining references to “Hon.” Secretary and Treasurer were removed to avoid confusion with “Honorary Members”.

These changes put NWEMF onto an even keel with regard to legislation and should be a good basis for the future.

Report by the Chairman to the Annual General Meeting

This is an abridged version of the 8 page report which I presented at the AGM. It was my first and also my last full report to you as Chairman. It had been my intention to be in post for 3 years but for a number of reasons, this has not proven to be possible.

General Administration

The year started with difficulty with David Allen being taken very seriously ill immediately after the AGM in 2009. There was no handover from David to me and this inevitably delayed a number of things in particular workshop planning. David recovered well and matters were put on to a more normal footing.

My role was to be one of sorting out administration and organisation. I made it very clear that I would have no involvement in organising workshops as I did not have the time to do that.

A brief word about financial reserves. The new Charities Act requires that I report to you the Committee's position on financial reserves. The Committee's view is that NWEMF should maintain a minimum balance of £5,000. It is felt that this is sufficient to cover any likely liabilities, such as commitments to Summer School.

Constitution

When looking at the constitution a number of related matters came to light during discussions with the Charity Commission:

- no formal policy on expenses;
- a lack of understanding of who the trustees of the charity were;
- no process to validate and verify the trustees;
- no governance policy document
- no mechanism to estimate and budget the costs of workshops
- no setting of a budget nor a review process

The 2006 Charities Act requires that the Committee has appropriate financial controls in place, which at its most basic means setting a budget forecast and monitoring actual expenditure and income against it and planning accordingly.

These comments are not criticisms of any individual, nor is there any inference that people are not performing their jobs. What has happened is that the law has changed and it now makes greater demands on what is expected of the Committee and NWEMF has not kept itself up-to-date with those changes.

Summer School

The issue that makes me most uncomfortable is the Summer School (SS). When asked, everyone says how good an idea it is. Whilst it is undoubtedly "a good idea", people need to stop and think about the implications of that:

- SS consumes about 90% of all NWEMF turnover
- A 6% error in calculating income from SS would wipe out an entire year's NWEMF subscription income
- About one third of all Committee face-to-face time is devoted to SS (my personal view is that it is more like half)
- Over 2008 and 2009 the SS made substantial losses, which have been borne by NWEMF

The SS is large and complex and requires its own team to run and administer it. A sub-committee has met several times to look at the SS. This is a lengthy process and the review is still underway. It has to be said that there is a polarisation of views into those who feel that the SS should be an independent body and thus remove the financial risk and administrative burden away from NWEMF and those that feel that it should remain an integral part of NWEMF.

In addition to these issues the SS does not provide much direct benefit to the members of NWEMF. The overwhelming majority of the attendees of SS are not NWEMF members. The challenge to me is: should NWEMF expend so much of its time and resources on an event which per se is not of benefit to its own members? I come back to the basic point of: who benefits? I would rather see the Committee devoting its time to the development of NWEMF and running and promoting activities for the membership.

The main challenge for me is that the Trustees carry personal financial liability for NWEMF. This is a distinct disincentive to people joining the Committee.

The only solution available until now is to have NWEMF become an incorporated society, limited by guarantee. However, this is a complex solution and really aimed at much larger organisations than NWEMF.

The 2006 Charities Act has introduced a new concept called a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, or CIO. These will become available in April

2010. We believe that provided that it is an administrative process with the Charity Commission to convert to a CIO from an unincorporated society. The advantage of becoming a CIO is that the personal liability of the trustees is removed. This seems to be an attractive option, which the next Committee should pursue.

Child Protection

It has been the practice of NWEMF to encourage U16 youngsters to attend SS. This has been handled through paying for the services of a full-time 'child minder' whose sole responsibility is the care of the youngsters and who is designated as the 'responsible adult'. There is also a dedicated tutor for the children. The engagement of extra resources and the vetting process adds significant costs to the running of SS, which are borne by all of the course delegates through the fees charged.

The Government has made changes in this area and there is an 'enhanced' vetting scheme being introduced. The impact on small organisations is likely to be significant. For example, all 'officials' of an organisation, regardless of whether or not they come into contact with children, have to be vetted.

As it stands, it is unclear what is in fact required as the government has not made it clear. On that basis, NWEMF has taken the decision to have no direct involvement with children (i.e. be the responsible organiser of an event involving children) until further notice, which includes SS.

I would particularly like to thank Clive Tolley who has spent a great deal of time investigating this subject on behalf of the Committee. A suggestion made by Clive is that NWEMF should support outreach activities organised by other groups, rather than being the organiser, which eliminates the child protection burden from NWEMF.

Workshops

It has been a concern of mine, reflected in my post-bag, that NWEMF offers relatively few instrumental workshops, certainly in comparison to vocal/choral workshops. The feedback that I have received from you is that members want to see a bigger range of choral workshops organised featuring a wider range of tutors.

Taking the issue of tutors first, I have spent a great deal of time contacting numerous people to run workshops. I have spoken to and received outline agreement for the following: David Hatcher – instruments and voices; Jonathan Morgan – recorder and other wind/brass; John Pritchard – Gregorian Chant; Philip Duffy – Gregorian Chant; Philip Rushforth (MD Chester Cathedral) choral; Tim Noon (MD Metropolitan Cathedral, Liverpool) choral; David Allinson – choral (booked); and Ibi Aziz - viols (booked)

I have also received agreement from BMEMF to run a joint workshop. It will be up to the next committee to actually schedule these events in.

The feedback that I received from experienced committee members was that instrumental workshops are in general poorly supported and difficult to put together. There are several reasons for this as far as I can tell.

- A typical day workshop costs about £500
- Workshop numbers are going to be low for an instrumental event (compared with a choral event), which inflates the per capita cost
- Instrumental only days are less likely to cover costs and therefore require support from central (NWEMF) funds
- NWEMF has limited financial capacity to support events
- NWEMF does not undertake budget forecasting/planning for workshops and has no clear idea of its likely expenditure levels

There is a clear pattern here: an historic tendency to just ‘run’ events means that there is no clear picture of what can and cannot be done. Proper financial planning would set a budget to be used for workshops. There is also a failure to plan adequately far ahead. In my opinion, there should be a rolling workshop schedule running 12 – 15 months ahead, all detailed on the web site with application forms published as early as possible. This would be helped by having an events co-ordinator on the Committee who could make sure that this is all pulled together.

We have tried to schedule more instrumental events this last year. The first was at Sykes’ Barn and organised by Elizabeth. This was poorly supported by NWEMF members, although the event was successful. Next there was the recorder workshop in December organised by me. This was successful but again poorly supported by NWEMF members. If

the event had not been so well supported externally, it would have had to have been cancelled.

Next, I decided to try to organise a viol workshop with a “name” to run it. After a lot of hard work we finally settled on a weekend event with Ibi Aziz tutoring. This a stand-alone event – it would only proceed if there was sufficient support to make it viable in its own right. I would like to thank Clive Tolley for taking over the organising of this from me. We are now scheduled to have 20 people attending a weekend in North Wales. It is so successful, that we have had to bring in some extra tutor support. Thanks to robust planning by Clive, this has not blown the budget because this was factored in as contingency in the planning stages. NWEMF is providing zero financial support to this event. I think that this is a good model for other types of workshop.

NWEMF should be doing more of this type of event, which benefits a much larger group of members. The Fort Belan viol weekend demonstrates that it is possible. I don't deny that it is hard work.

An area that ties in with the next subject of development is that we seem to run a very eclectic selection of workshops – very specialist music aimed at a very narrow audience of enthusiasts. These have their place and are valuable, but where are the ‘popular’ events to attract a larger and perhaps different, less eclectic audience? When did we last run a day based around the Oxford Book of Tudor Anthems, or Italian Madrigals, or a day on the Chandos Anthems, or perhaps Baroque choruses (with Baroque strings and wind?). I leave that for my successors to address.

Development

A major is the lack of time devoted to the development of NWEMF. By this I include promoting the organisation, recruiting new members, getting involved in other activities such as outreach programmes etc.

I hope that you have seen the redesigned web site that David Allen has put together – it is a great improvement and it helps to ‘sell’ NWEMF and its activities.

If NWEMF wishes to be more ambitious then it needs to be recruiting more members. BMEMF, which covers Shropshire, Herefordshire, and

Worcestershire, regularly get 60 – 70 people at their workshops. This means they are regularly making a £200 - £300 profit on a workshop. NWEMF rarely exceeds 30 attendees at a workshop and rarely makes a profit on any workshop. The membership base of NWEMF ought to be much larger and is an area that should be targeted for development.

Newsletter

Elizabeth, as ever, continues to perform wonders in preparing and distributing the Newsletter 5 times a year. The production of a paper-based newsletter in its present form cannot continue. Why? The newsletter consumes fully 50% of all NWEMF's subscription income. When after that you then deduct the other overheads and running costs of NWEMF, you are left with almost nothing for the development of NWEMF. This is unrealistic. There are only two solutions: a move away from paper newsletters submitted via e-mail, or a significant increase in subscriptions.

I have tried through the Newsletter to ask members to review and renew their e-mail details with us. I have failed. Despite requests in three newsletters, I have received only 20 updates from members. In both of the choirs of which I am a member, we issue an e-mail newsletter, which includes articles, photographs, even music extracts, and these are almost 100% sent by e-mail.

I do not understand the reluctance to provide e-mail addresses – it's not as though we are going to sell them to people - it's to enable us to distribute the newsletter and to keep you informed about what is going on in NWEMF such as news about workshops and concerts etc.

The Future

I have been quite blunt in some of my statements so far and it's been for a reason. NWEMF is fundamentally a good organisation, it does good work and it has good people in it. However, as an organisation, it has become complacent and stagnant and has been happy to go with the 'status quo ante'. In 2010 this is neither acceptable nor good enough: the 'good governance' onus placed on trustees by new legislation requires more than this.

In the last year we have:

- Brought the constitution up-to-date
- Implemented an expenses policy
- Introduced a governance document
- Introduced a workshop venues database
- Introduced a workshop costs calculator

This now puts NWEMF in a strong position with regard to governance and compliance with the requirements of the Charity Commission.

For NWEMF to continue to thrive it has to change and move forwards. There is work underway to achieve that and plenty of work still to do. The new committee structure should help, especially the simplification of the membership secretary's role into a single person and the creation of an events co-ordinator.

The future is not just the responsibility of the Committee, it also requires the support of you, the membership. At the end of the day, NWEMF belongs to the membership, not the Committee. In my year in office, I have done what I can to move matters forward. I have not achieved everything that I would have liked to achieve and there have been a number of issues that have proven difficult to overcome. The future is now in the hands of others.