

Introduction & History

The COVID19 lockdown has forced many new ways of working on all of us, not least the Council of Southern Caving Clubs (CSCC) which, due to the inability to bring the necessary people together in one place held it's first two virtual meetings on 15th and 29th July 2020. These meetings were generally successful, with attendance much higher than normal¹, although this may well have had as much to do with an ongoing controversy as the meetings being online.

The CSCC represents the interests of southern cavers, being one of five Regional Councils with representatives on the British Caving Association's (BCA) council². Membership of the CSCC is available to all caving clubs that have an interest in the south of England, each may send a voting representative to meetings. In addition, the CSCC has traditionally encouraged others to attend the meetings as observers who may contribute to discussion but have no vote.

Historically the CSCC holds four meetings a year in February, May (AGM), September and November. These meetings are held at the Hunter's Lodge Inn at Priddy in the Mendip Hills. The CSCC Website provides minutes for the last eighteen years of meetings (2002 to Present <https://csccl.org.uk/wiki/doku.php?id=documents:start> which show that of the membership of approximately 40 clubs, the average voting attendance at meetings is c.8, or 20% of the membership.

Issues with the Status Quo

There are several issues with the current situation which can be summed up as follows;

1. The location of the meetings at the Hunter's favours those clubs / reps that live close to central Mendip.

The Hunters is quite rightly seen as the hub of Mendip caving. However CSCC represents much more than Mendip cavers, though of course Mendip is by far the most important part of the region as far as caving is concerned, the region also covers the Bath Stone Mines, Portland, Quantocks, Brendon Hills, The Weald and a variety of other underground sites across the south of England (though to the author's knowledge there is no definition of the boundaries of the "Southern" caving region). In addition member clubs are scattered even more widely and are not restricted to those based in the south.

It is therefore argued that the sole use of the Hunters as a meeting venue to some extent distorts the focus of CSCC to the Mendip Hills as it discourages people who have an interest outside the Mendips or who are based some distance away.

¹ Analysis of minutes from 2002 to present suggest an average voting attendance of c.8, whilst these two meetings had 15 or more voting and on 29th July over 40 attendees including observers.

² The others being the Council of Northern Caving Clubs (CNCC), Derbyshire Caving Association (DCA), Cambrian Caving Council (CCC) and Devon & Cornwall Underground Council (DCUC).

2. Four meetings a year is not frequent enough to allow CSCC members sufficient involvement in decisions which need to be taken quickly.

At present the four meetings a year are the only time that club representatives meet the officers and get a chance to vote on their actions. This can lead to significant pressure when trying to coordinate with other bodies, especially BCA, or if major expenditure is required at short notice. For instance, the recent issues with proposals for the BCA AGM were a symptom of this, as the timescales did not allow full discussion and authorization prior to the submission deadline.

3. Representation is Poor

As stated above, only a small proportion of CSCC member clubs attend meetings on a regular basis, and as such the actions of the CSCC reflect the wishes of those who attend the meetings rather than the wider southern caving community. This has led to questions from time to time as to how well CSCC is representing southern cavers. This is most definitely not the fault of those who attend the meetings, but clearly CSCC would be less open to criticism if a wider level of participation could be achieved.

4. Meetings are Held on Saturday Mornings

For the majority of cavers who do not live on the Mendips, the weekend is the prime time for caving. As such, meetings on a Saturday morning are unlikely to be attractive as this eats into valuable caving time.

5. Time Pressure

Experience suggests that holding the meeting at a pub on a Saturday morning can lead to pressure to wrap the meeting up in time for lunch. Often this rush to end the meeting is justified by the phrase, "we can discuss this in the pub afterwards". Whilst it is a good sign that CSCC representatives and officers can enjoy each other's company outside of the meetings, it does mean that CSCC actions can be influenced or even decided in the bar without record.

6. Lack of Interest

Although not strictly related to the manner in which the meetings are held, CSCC has been generally poor at communicating the good it does for southern cavers. As such the limited attendance at meetings becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

The Advantages & Disadvantages of Online Meetings

The key advantage to online meetings is that it removes the need for attendees to travel, thus saving a huge amount of time and money. In turn for the CSCC this means that there is a greater likelihood of representation of those not living close to the Hunters or members of clubs with accommodation close by. This potentially increases the breadth of the CSCC's ability to better represent outlying areas as well as Mendip. The lack of travel also means that the timing of the meetings can be more flexible, and there is less pressure to end the meeting early. Some attendees have suggested that such electronic meetings are less intimidating than attending a physical meeting.

Issues noted from the two CSCC General Meetings held online in July were as follows. With a mixture of voting representatives and non-voting observers it can be very difficult to keep track of who has the right to vote, and to count those votes when needed. In the case of CSCC with c.15 voting reps at each of these meetings, who were known to the chair, verification of the right to vote was straightforward, but this may not be the case if and when meetings become better attended. In the past the usual method of verification was a letter of authority provided by the club secretary, clearly some form of electronic delegation of vote should be used in future.

A major issue is in ensuring that attendees follow a disciplined etiquette to ensure that the meeting proceeds well. With a large number of attendees, it is vital that microphones are muted unless actually speaking, this requires a simple method for those wishing to speak to come to the chair's attention. It is preferable if attendees can use a laptop or desktop PC wherever possible.

Finally, there is an indefinable element lost without physical interaction.

Suggested Way Ahead

The following is a straw man intended to stimulate debate about the future of CSCC meetings, the core aim of which is intended to increase participation and allow CSCC to better represent its constituents.

1. Number of Meetings per Year

It is suggested that the number of meetings be increased to 6-8 per year (i.e. every 6-8 weeks). This will allow CSCC members to hold the officers to account and it is hoped reduce the length of the meetings from the current 3-4 hours to maybe <2 hours each.

In addition, it is suggested that ways be investigated to allow CSCC members to vote electronically on specific issues arising outside of meetings. If successful, this may allow the number of meetings to be reduced. This will give officers confidence in pursuing courses of actions that are reacting to urgent issues.

2. Meeting Venues

Given the apparent success of the recent online meetings it is suggested that the majority of future CSCC meetings are held online. However, it is suggested that there is still much value in face to face meetings that allow relationships to form in a way not possible online.

As such it is suggested that two meetings a year be held face to face, but in these cases there should be the ability for people to join the meetings remotely. It is suggested that the AGM should be a physical meeting, and that at least one of the two physical meetings be held somewhere other than the Hunters. Ideally these meetings should take place at different venues around Mendip and the wider south. Indeed, these latter away meetings could be combined with visits to interesting sites that may help CSCC members understand issues in particular parts of the region that they may not be familiar with.

3. Meeting Timing

At the last CSCC General Meeting there was some lighthearted discussion about the timing of CSCC meetings. As previously discussed, daytime at the weekend tends to conflict with caving for those who do not live close to Mendip, whilst weekday evenings conflict with digging activities for many who do live on Mendip.

As such it is suggested that the online meetings take place on weekday evenings, but are not held on the same day of the week in order that the same digging team is not impacted every time. With regards the physical meetings then weekends are the only real option. In this case it is suggested that the meetings are held early evening to allow people to cave beforehand.

4. Communication of Meetings

At present distribution of agenda and minutes is via the CSCC mailing list and website. Though these have been excellent at informing member clubs that are already active in CSCC they have done little to widen interest in it. It is suggested that a more active approach is taken to inform the wider community of what the CSCC is doing for them, which may encourage more people to attend meetings.

I hope the above sparks some interesting debate and above all starts a process which will lead to more participation.

Ed Waters, 21st September 2020.