

Where are we headed?

As you will have noted, there is a lot to read from Headquarters in the current Journal (October 2021). What follows are some personal reflections intended to aid debate and they are certainly not offered in any sense to wreck the Club.

There is a lot to take in. With so many action lists, the AH pages this time do not make for easy reading - but neither do they present a very coherent overview of our Club and essentially what it is for. Indeed, there is no clear expression of the Club's overall purpose. They read very much like an over-optimistic headquarters report and a wish list that is based in many areas on untested assumptions. And in many areas important detail is missing.

Of course, as we all know, it is essential to plan ('Fail to plan and you are planning to fail'). On the other hand, what appears to be being offered up here on pages 37 to 50 is not just far too long (justified no doubt as 'keeping the members informed') but leaves out many important considerations. Despite what is said about the Club needing to be more of a Club and less of a business (but run in a business-like way obviously), what is offered here reads more like a student's final year MBA project than a practical plan for running the headquarters of a motorcycle club. And yet what is surprising, particularly given the corporate instincts and thinking that so obviously underpins it, is that there is no executive summary which condenses 'the Plan' into a simple and straightforward narrative.

On the apparently positive side, from a position where the subs income did not support the central running of the club (a situation that has been around for at least twenty years, has involved significant losses and been exacerbated by an unwillingness to put subs up properly), we now seem to have a break even or better situation financially. But it must be remembered the current situation has only been created by a unilateral action to get rid of almost all HQ staff, virtually removing the pay bill, while other costs of AH have remained. This has only really been allowable against the background of forced contraction of Club activity under COVID restrictions. Next year remains very much an unknown quantity, including whether we will have Banbury and/or 1000 bikes or a successor event(s). All the rest that is hailed in the magazine is actually Section activity.

The 'Plan' suggests that in future the Club at HQ level is to be run by volunteers, and if they do not come forward, then that will be taken as an indication that members do not want certain activities to continue. This is not only a huge risk but is also based on a questionable assumption. Those who have been around in the Club for more than just a few years know full well how hard it is to get a coordinated team of volunteers to run a large national event, and even harder to keep them doing it year on year.

At present the Chairman himself is acting in the role of GM. There is scope here for potential conflict of interests. And what happens when he moves on is unclear.

So, this 'Plan', despite its length and apparent detail, does nothing to remove the uncertainty of the immediate future and has no description of how it will achieve success. There is no real definition of success other than by selling more aspects of the Club, not something that is sustainable.

What is missing is a clear recognition that, at its heart, the Club is essentially a federation of Sections, not just a headquarters, a membership list and a set of central services.

The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis presented is very much a headquarters (and possibly a newcomer's) view and not 'a worm's eye view' from ground level in the Club expressed by experienced members who are deeply immersed in V&C motorcycling.

Missing from the 'Strengths' section is any real recognition of the huge camaraderie and fellowship that exists between members, not just as it says on page 40 'at events' but year in year out at Section level and

in local communities. And there is no mention of the deep marquee and technical knowledge that exists within the Club - nor the huge reservoir of understanding of our motorcycling history. Perhaps not all the current directors appreciate these things fully enough but quite clearly our people and our shared community of interest are the VMCC's greatest strengths.

Many of the suggested 'Weaknesses' are quite obviously subjective impressions that are unsupported by evidence. Indeed, some of the things mentioned as 'Weaknesses', such as a 'culture of mistrust', are not really apparent at Section level at all.

There is no mention of the massive effort (when you look at it in aggregate) that is put in week in and week out by Section officials. No real appreciation of the huge amount of work put in by volunteers who organise VMCC runs and events. And there is no mention, for example, of the work of the Regulatory Advisory Group which involves eight volunteers.

(In that context there is no mention of the need for the VMCC to maintain our links, working with and through outside bodies, even though past surveys indicate clearly that representation of members' medium and long term interests through bodies like MAG, FBHVC and LARA remain high on their list of reasons for joining/remaining.)

There are many unanswered practical questions.

The "Riding Forward Plan" is not actually a product of Headquarters but the aggregate of plans developed carefully by Sections. But what is to be done to minimise the extent to which premier events put on by Sections may overlap or clash? What approach can be taken to encouraging Sections to combine together to run events jointly?

How is Section experience to be harnessed to create a better Section handbook with sensible and proportionate advice on safety etc.? How are suitable insurances to be put in place?

What of our marquee specialists?

With all the emphasis that the VMCC should be more like a club (or even a family perhaps) and less like a business - why the heavy over-use throughout of 'corporate speak' - 'leadership team' and so on? (Do Sections really feel that they need to be led?).

There is an overwhelming focus on revenue generation (rather than living within subscription income). And critically, there is no commitment to absolute financial transparency. (There can be no trust without it.)

The library is seen effectively as a revenue generator, not a heritage asset to be conserved as part of our duty to hand on V&C motorcycling to future generations.

And as to Club values and culture, of course we should always treat with each other fairly and politely - but 'values' are not handed on only via families that go back a long way in the Club.

The whole Plan reads not like a prospectus for democratic debate and adjustment but a centrally devised 'take it or leave it' offering. Indeed, the approach to democracy that comes across throughout is one of plebiscitary approval (acceptance or rejection?) of plans generated at headquarters, not one based on visiting Sections and listening to members' views and suggestions. It is fearful that in future, in organising General Meetings, our directors, learning from fashions in corporate communications, will be tempted to turn them into stage managed PR exercises with little if any opportunity for members to debate motions that will then bind those elected to office within the Club.

We will have to wait and see how members react. I have a feeling that despite most members' quite legitimate wish for AH operations and finances to be put into sustainable order, many older and more experienced members are deeply sceptical and some may even be tempted to cancel their subscriptions.

Understandable as this may be, it is something that needs to be resisted, for, whatever happens in the future, we need to form an open and welcoming 'Real VMCC' network within the Club, which will include all who share our vision of what the Club is - and needs to continue to be. In fact, the 'Real VMCC' already exists in what is essentially our federation of Sections, a strange but lively community of shared interests and values and a hearty fellowship that is independent of AH. As time goes on, this network will probably coalesce further around those who want to go on organising things 'their way' and continue to use the old logo and so on. Neither should we accept the false accusation that those of us who feel this way are all backwards looking reactionaries, wreckers who are against change that will help things work better. (Change is inevitable and necessary but exactly what that change could or should be is something that needs to be debated, not handed down from on high.)

In short, we who share this view, need to remain a core of linked souls who are the guardians of the best of the Club.

I plan to attend the planned General Meeting on 21st November but I am not sure I am going to pay £20 to do so since I believe I have the right to be admitted and take part simply if I show my membership card.