**Muswell Hill Synagogue Chairman’s Report 2016/5776**

This year the Board has been quite active in developing the synagogue’s Strategy, and I am concentrating this report on providing an update on where we are with this and our current priorities. The original Strategy, on which I have reported in previous years, was initiated in 2013 and was envisioned as running over a five year timescale, but was also written with recognition that many elements of any Strategy paper will have to remain fluid and open to debate. The elements of the Strategy described here arise from an extended meeting of the Board of Management on Sunday 11th October 2015. The sub-headings used in the 2013 Strategy are retained; we discussed briefly whether new areas should be included, and these are listed at the end of this document.

Each section of this document contains the most recent report on the 2013 (from the Chair’s report to the 2015 AGM, with some minor updates) and then the conclusion of the October discussion.

## Membership

1. We have continued to grow at a steady pace. We now have a total of 658 members, representing 400 ‘households’, our largest membership for very many years. We have met the growth targets. There have been 50 joiners (including one previous ‘defaulter’) since the last AGM, and 30 leavers. Interestingly, 24% of our members are single, divorced or widowed and 23% of our members are over 70, data that has to be taken into account when we think about what the community offers its members. Almost half our members are under the age of 50 and nearly two-thirds are under the age of 60.
2. About half of our new members are genuinely new, with the rest having ‘returned’ after a break or transferred from other shuls. Leavers have been deceased or moved away, though a few joined the Masorti.
3. The website and email newsletter (Ethos) have continued to function very well and both have been renewed lately, with Ethos being simplified and linked in better to the website. They are generally kept up to date and are a reliable source of information for the community. The shul magazine is excellent and represents the community very well to the outside world. We have not been very successful at following up occasional attendees (e.g. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur), but the integration of cheder and Yeladenu parents seems to have improved and it is still the case that a very high proportion of those are members of the synagogue. The New Members initiatives of the Board have stuttered a bit, but there is a gradual make-over occurring – although more help with this would be very welcome.
4. Inclusivity features well in our representation of the community, for example in the magazine, ethos and our many public-facing events. A special success in the past year or so has been inter-faith and related trans-communal work, led by the Rabbi and reflected in another very successful Civic Service.
5. **Plans:** 
   1. **To improve our work on membership, we still need to explore the reasons for new members joining the shul, in order to build on these successes. This involves much better follow up of these new members, with the Administrator routinely providing information to the relevant Board members about them, as well as following up their membership with an invitational letter. There should also be routine passing on of information to the relevant Board members about people who contact the shul office for information about services on the Yomim Neraim and any other special occasions.**
   2. **The quality of ‘public relations’ over our many events and special activities remains relatively weak. We need a Board member to take proper responsibility for this, ensuring for example that wherever possible we get good press coverage.**
   3. **Our combination of Ethos, the shul magazine, the website and additional emails works well as a way of informing the community of events, and the revision of Ethos has enhanced readability and currency.**
   4. **The foyer area is an underused resource. It needs rethinking as a space to provide information and to act as a welcoming area for visitors and members alike.**

## Finances

1. We have now identified two individuals who are working actively on developing a fund raising campaign, and expect to make considerable progress with this in the next year. We have had extremely useful gifts and pledges to cover the cost of the eruv and we have also worked productively with the United Synagogue to identify funds for other new areas of work. We have received grants from the Centre for Rabbinic Excellence supporting special shabbatot, allowing us to cover costs. As far as possible, we raise funds to pay for specific projects and use membership fees to pay our running costs.
2. **Plans: As well as raising money for improvements to the synagogue building and the development of the Community Events Director post, we are seeking to raise sponsorship and funds for attractive smaller projects in order to enable us to redirect funding to needed but less attractive projects. This requires the drawing up of a ‘wish list’ of smaller projects that have a good chance of being funded by donations.**

## The Synagogue Building

1. We continue to actively manage the building work, balancing as far as possible essential repairs with desirable developments.
2. Many repairs have been done or are under way, including finally repairing the front canopy, upgrading the security gates, dealing with severe problems in the back wall of the car park. The main cloakroom has been configured and some metal coat racks have been moved to the children’s play area in the car park, where large wooden cupboards have been built. We are planning to install new walls at the back of the shul to replace the dysfunctional ‘partitions’, which are no longer useable and are increasingly precarious.
3. As with last year, most of the focus this year has been on repairs, although these are being made compatible with possible future developments.
4. **Plans:**
   1. **Whilst repairs have been carried out and the building is in a much better state than it was, there is a continuing need for an ongoing programme of repairs and upgrading.**
   2. **There is also room now to identify larger projects that could be run alongside the repair schedule and we currently have an architect costing proposals for these, including upgrade of the kitchen and of the Bet Hamedresh and of the side entrance to the hall.**
   3. **The general principle should be to split our buildings budget (set by the Financial Representative) between repairs and one significant project a year. The larger project could then become a target for fundraising.**

## Religious Life

1. Shabbat on the Hill has continued slightly less frequently than before, largely because of the number of bar- and batmitzvahs that the shul is currently accommodating. Text on the Hill has not really developed further this year, but there have been two ‘scholars in residence’ shabbatot which have been received positively. Shabbat and yomim neraim services have been busy and vibrant; chagim less consistently attended but still enjoyable and lively. We are struggling to maintain minyanim, especially on Friday night and the evenings of chaggim. Purim services were again excellent.
2. We have proceeded with the eruv and are finally near to getting planning permission. Funding is in place for this part of the process and we are hopeful of meeting the costs of the actual building of the eruv without having to engage in large scale fund-raising.
3. **Plans:** 
   1. **To address the concerns about decorum during shul services, especially when we have a large number of visitors, we have developed an information and ‘behaviour expectations’ sheet.**
   2. **There have been a small number of ‘alternative services’ held during the year, and we are assessing how much we can do this way without damaging the community atmosphere of the shul.**
   3. **More active recruitment of men for shabbat evening and afternoon services is needed.**

## Women in the Community

1. We have implemented an ‘occasional’ (monthly) use of flexible screens to create a large downstairs area for women. This has been used, but except on simchas has not been very busy. On the other hand, there has been little disruption to the ordinary functioning of the shul and the ‘displaced’ men have coped. The enlarged weekly area for women with free-standing chairs has been popular and is a significant improvement on the previous arrangement.
2. Women’s activities have continued to be strong this year, particularly in relation to the Rosh Chodesh group (which after some uneven times is now flourishing again), Purim and women’s services. We have had several women’s shabbat morning services, one of which hosted the bat mitzvah of the Rabbi’s elder daughter. This was an enormously successful occasion and is likely to lead to other bat mitzvah celebrations being held in the women’s service. There have also been innovations especially during succot that have been aimed at enhancing women’s involvement in the shul service.
3. **Plans:** 
   1. **Communication of women’s events needs improving and some strategic thinking needs to take place about timing, especially connected with the use of the downstairs seating area (now timetabled for weeks when there is a shabbat on the hill speaker or other relevant event). The downstairs seating area is currently being re-evaluated in January.**
   2. **We have agreed to reinstate the ‘ashet chayil’ arrangements that have fallen into disuse in the last few years, planning the next one for next simchat torah. This will involve careful thought about the structure of the day.**
   3. **To address concerns about losing young girls from the community, we should introduce some targeted events for teenage girls, including shabbat lunch.**
   4. **A women’s shiur on the shabbat nearest Rosh Chodesh should be introduced, at least on an occasional basis.**

## Education, Children and Youth and Communal Activities

1. This year, partly for financial reasons and also because of recruitment issues, we have had only ‘live-out’ Youth Directors (one male, one female). They have run weekday clubs very successfully and also occasional youth services. This has been very worthwhile, but it is clear that the live-in arrangement was particularly good and its loss has been felt. We have agreed to continue with the scheme next year orin conjunction with the Community Events Director scheme.
2. The Cheder is again slightly reduced in numbers. The figures are: 2012/13 - 107 pupils, 2013/14 - 92 pupils, 2014/2015 – 88 pupils, 2015/16 approximately 65. It is likely that this decrease in attendance is largely due to the opening locally of Eden Primary School, and to greater numbers of children attending Jewish secondary schools such as JFS and JCOSS. The reduction is also partly due to our decision to combine the year 7 and 8 groups with those of other local shuls in the ‘Zone’ Youth centre, which did not work well. The Cheder nevertheless remains strong and is well managed again by its Board of Governors, the co-chairs of which work closely with the Headteacher and with the Synagogue Chair and FR.
3. We are seeking a paid person to support and develop children’s services, especially for younger children.
4. We are currently in the process of appointing a part time Community Events Director and have negotiated significant financial support from the United Synagogue on our funding application, as part of their new Communities of Potential scheme.
5. The Friday onegs and Shabbat on the Hill sessions have been very successful again. In addition, the Rabbi’s shiurim are proceeding well and the winter seudah shelishit series continued , though with less intensity than previously. There have been many weekday events of very high quality.
6. **Proposals:**
   1. **I-clubs continue to be successful largely because of the quality of the local young people who run them. We are working on ‘succession planning’ for this, as the Tribe training scheme seems markedly inferior to that offered by other organisations. We need to explore training of madrichim as a way of maintaining this important resource.**
   2. **We hope to have a Community Events Director in post soon and will carefully evaluate the success of this position over its initial two-year funding period.**
   3. **Children should be better integrated into the services, possibly with a ‘children’s involvement’ in the main service on an occasional but not infrequent basis.**

## Welfare

1. Welfare work has developed well this year, with very active leadership and good involvement from the Rabbi and a team of volunteers. The workload has increased accordingly. We have employed a part time (up to 4 hours weekly) coordinator to manage the organisational side of the work (including liaison with the Rabbi, managing the volunteer rota and the schedule of needs) and this has very markedly enhanced our organisational effectiveness.
2. **Plan: Management of the welfare area, which continues to a high priority for the community, is now by the Vice Chair of the Board.**

**Stephen Frosh**

**May 2016**