

# Muswell Hill Synagogue Strategy 2013

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The aim of this strategy document is to set the agenda for the next phase of the community's development. We are planning over a five year timescale, but need to recognise that many elements of any strategy will have to remain fluid and open to debate. The proposals here arise from an extended strategy meeting of the Board of Management on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> January 2013; from previous discussions of the Executive and of the Board of Management; from the work carried out by the Strategy Committee in 2012; and from the community survey carried out in 2007 for the community profile of 2008 (which clearly might now be out of date).

## Membership

1. The financial base for the community is set by the size of its membership, and specifically by the number of full fee-paying members. Membership is fairly stable at just over 600 individuals and approximately 330 paying members (very loosely understood as 'families'). However, only about half of these are paying the full membership fee, and our fees are much lower than those of neighbouring communities (e.g. Hampstead Garden Suburb's fees are approximately double those of Muswell Hill). The membership is slightly below the level quoted in the community profile of 2008. We seem roughly to be replacing 'losses' (deceased members and those leaving the community) but not growing. One very noticeable change since 2000 is that there is now a much younger profile, with approximately half our members under the age of 50 whereas previously two-thirds were over the age of 60. This has had noticeable effects, most obviously in the relatively large number of children in the community, which has also meant an extraordinary growth in the size of the cheder (over 110 children in 2012-13) and a full nursery (Yeladenu). It also suggests that there is a youngish group of families who have links with the shul through various informal activities, but are not necessarily highly visible in religious services.
2. Despite the relative youthfulness of the community, there remains a sizeable number of older members who have similar interests and needs to others in some respects and distinctive needs in others.
3. It is a moot point whether the community is at the 'right' size or needs to grow. Larger communities can offer more diverse friendship groups and find it easier to maintain core activities (particularly religious services) but risk being alienating and impersonal. Smaller communities are likely to be 'warmer' and more accessible to people, but may have too restricted resources to be able to maintain a full communal life and to meet the needs of its various constituent groups. Our impression is that Muswell Hill may be at its optimal size currently, but this means we have to recruit new members to replace those who leave.
4. **Proposals:**
  - a. **To sustain a reasonable financial base for the community and to maintain numbers at a level that allow positive growth without changing the nature of the community unduly, we should aim for a net growth of ten new full fee-paying members per year over the next five years.**
  - b. **To plan adequately for this we need to analyse currently available membership data and collect information from new members to identify trends in membership numbers and reasons why people are attracted to Muswell Hill.**

- c. We should actively promote the community both internally (through better communication with current members) and externally by developing the web site, following up attendees on the yomim neraim, making more active connections with cheder and Yeladenu parents, and other tactics being developed by the New Members sub-committee.
- d. One focus of publicity is to emphasise the *inclusivity* of the community in our communications and publicity, as this is seen as a major strength of Muswell Hill Synagogue.

## Finances

- 5. The community's finances are reasonably stable, but whilst there is a sizeable reserve at present, there are many potential claims on it. Most of the activities of the community aim to do no more than break even and may require subsidies (for example, the cheder is more-or-less self-funding but the synagogue nevertheless underwrites its expenses and at times contributes money to it).<sup>1</sup> Even without spending on big projects, we are expecting a loss in 2012 of approximately £25,000 and a larger one in 2013; this means that by the end of 2013 reserves will stand at around £100,000.
- 6. The financially (and perhaps strategically) most important investment this year has been in the Youth Directors. Adding together their small salaries, the cost of housing and of their expenses on activities, the Youth Director scheme is costing over £30,000. Tribe is contributing about a quarter of this, and the Kol Nidre appeal probably around another quarter.
- 7. Significant new initiatives will require fundraising, and it is not apparent that there is a lot of spare resource in the community for this.
- 8. **Proposal: The Board has agreed to begin a programme of targeted fund-raising linked to specific projects. The first stage is to identify a fund raising 'champion' within the community to form a working group to run this programme.**

## The Synagogue Building

- 9. The needs and possible future development of the building have been major concerns in the past few months, with discussions located in the House/Building Committee (which also has responsibility for maintaining the Rabbi's house) and the Strategy Group/Committee. Both these groups have reported to the Board in recent meetings.
- 10. It is clear that a lot of work is needed on the building, some of it urgent. The Buildings Committee has employed a Quantity Surveyor to help prioritise and cost this work, and is establishing relationships with a preferred provider of services.
- 11. The best estimate of costs is that a schedule of repairs would come to over £200,000, with a considerable amount of this needing to be spent over the next two years to put right urgent problems that if left unaddressed will lead to significant further deterioration. Without additional fundraising, this will use up all of our reserves.
- 12. The Strategy Group undertook some research into the uses and problems of the building in the summer of 2012 and reported on it to the Board in the autumn. Those areas that relate directly to the building are:
  - improve tidiness and appearance of main internal and external spaces

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<sup>1</sup> Yeladenu is a separate company and receives no direct financial support from the synagogue.

- invest in the building; design better multi-functional rooms
  - maximise use of dead spaces in the shul
  - commercially exploit the building
  - improve the accessibility of the building
  - improve accommodation for people working in the building
  - ensure security.
13. Subsequent to this research, a set of proposals was presented to the Board for a radically redesigned building that would regenerate the existing site in such a way as to fulfil the aspirations in the Strategy Group's report. This or a similar scheme could have huge advantages in developing a building that could serve the community well for a long period. On the other hand, it would be very costly and would require not just an extensive fund-raising campaign but also significant borrowing, well in excess of the 'repair-only' figure given in paragraph 11.
14. In the context of our finite and restricted resources, the Board was faced with making an important choice between investing heavily in the synagogue building or focusing on necessary repairs and devoting funds more strongly towards people and activities. This decision might be influenced by two rational, but opposed perspectives. The first one sees a good, attractive and fit-for-purpose building as the centre of the community, with religious services and a large range of activities taking place within it, and with commercial use that not only provides income but also makes the synagogue more visible to the wider Jewish and non-Jewish communities. One plausible but untestable claim is that a vibrant building of this kind would catalyse growth by making Muswell Hill a more obvious place for potential new members to come to; and it would also sustain community life by being attractive and user friendly. The second perspective is that communities are not defined by buildings, but by people, and are best understood as networks that may be loose or tight, and that grow or contract in different time periods as the needs of community members change. Tying up large amounts of financial resource in a building is an inflexible way of facilitating community life and can easily result in efforts going into maintaining spaces that are poorly used and that do not support the kinds of activities people are actually interested in. There is some evidence for this in the range of informal activities happening in Muswell Hill, mostly in people's homes (but it could be argued that this is because the building is unwelcoming).
15. These issues were debated at the strategy meeting of the Board, with the following proposals arising.
16. **Proposals:**
- a. **We develop a five-year plan of building work.**
  - b. **We move forward immediately to implement the first two years of this plan, focusing on repairing the building in ways that would be compatible with, but not dependent upon, a more radical restructuring of the building should funds become available.**
  - c. **In parallel with this, there should be further exploration of the possibility of a large-scale development of the building, based on determining the feasibility of a separate funding stream that might include both fund raising and the exploitation of some appropriate commercial possibilities of the site.**

## Religious Life

17. Shabbat services are lively and have been enormously enhanced by the Rabbi's 'Shabbat on the Hill' series which has combined imaginative advance programming with opportunistic use of visitors. It is clear that this series has drawn people into the shul. Feedback on the friendliness and welcoming nature of our services is still good. The findings from the 2007 survey may be out of date, but intuitively they still seem right: 'Over 80% of those who expressed an opinion answered with "good" or "very good" when asked to rate the "atmosphere" at *Shabbat* morning services and 70% did so for both the quality of sermons and ease of following the service. Decorum, explanations, and quality of singing were much less well regarded – ranging from 39% to 27%. Men were much more satisfied generally than women; in particular, women tended to profess a lower ability to follow the service.'
18. On the whole, the minyan is sustained for Friday night, Shabbat minchah and weekday services, but this continues to require significant work and there is certainly no indication that expanding the morning minyan to every day of the week would be successful. In 2007, '35% of all respondents said that they attended the *Shabbat* morning service on most weeks; another 26% said they did so at least once a month.' It is hard to know how to compare this with the current situation; our guess is that it is similar, although there has possibly been a reduction in the number of women who are attending Shabbat morning services.
19. The development of a Muswell Hill and Highgate eruv is being actively pursued. This might have a significant effect in making it possible for religiously observant young families to stay in the community, especially in a context in which many other communities are developing eruvim and so might be more attractive prospects for such people. Design plans are fairly well advanced, but the latest information is that the set-up costs are very considerable and maintenance costs are also high. Accepting the argument that an eruv would be good for the community, there is still the issue to be faced of how high a priority it should be.
20. **Proposals:**
  - a. **There is strong support for the continuation of the Shabbat on the Hill initiative, both as a way to enhance the Shabbat morning religious services and as an element in our adult education programme.**
  - b. **We continue to pursue the prospect of building an eruv, with further discussions with Highgate that include looking at the funding possibilities, especially in terms of how much of the planning side (which amounts to about half the total set-up cost) can be covered by volunteer members of the two communities.**
  - c. **Improving the experience of religious services for women is a priority for the community (see below).**

## Women in the Community

21. As in the United Synagogue as a whole, the community's approach to providing a fulfilling role for women is a major issue for Muswell Hill Synagogue. One of the priorities in the 2008 community profile was given as 'Support and encourage more active engagement by women in the community, especially in educational events but also as far as possible through interventions in the service.' Some progress has been made: for instance, plans for a downstairs mechitzah are progressing; the Rosh Chodesh group has high visibility in the community. The Rabbi has been supportive of innovations around women's participation, for example around Purim, Simchat Torah and bat mitzvah ceremonies. The new ruling by the US

that women can become Chairs of synagogue Boards is a significant step forward that hopefully will impact at Muswell Hill in the near future. However, against this there seems to be a declining number of women (especially young women) attending synagogue services and it is arguable that given the gap between experiences of equality and status outside the synagogue and of discrimination within it, some radical thinking might have to be done to change this situation.

**22. Proposals:**

- a. We proceed with building a removable downstairs mechitzah that will significantly increase the availability of downstairs seating for women.**
- b. A working party is to be set up to review women's activities in the community, with a brief to report on action to be taken to support and further develop current initiatives.**

## **Education, Children and Youth and Communal Activities**

23. As noted above, the cheder has grown enormously in the past ten years. One issue has been the relatively loose relationship between the cheder, represented by its Governors, and the synagogue. Recently, we have clarified how the cheder is accountable to the Board through its Governors. This has made it easier to negotiate, for example over necessary changes to the Rabbi's role in the cheder and also the approval of budgetary issues raised by the employment of new staff members.
24. Although Yeladenu is a separate company, the Rabbi is its Principal and there are very strong links with the synagogue. In terms of the 'offering' to the community it remains important to have a thriving nursery provision.
25. Children's services are active but as ever rely on the continuing efforts of a relatively small number of people. It is arguable that the services and other children's activities are not fully meeting the needs of children and parents in the community.
26. The adult education programme is heavily reliant on the Rabbi and needs more input from others in the community. Apart from the highly successful Shabbat on the Hill series, which has the advantage of 'captive' audiences in shul but which also draws people in specifically to hear high quality speakers, and the Rabbi's weekly Talmud shiur, other initiatives have not proved sustainable.<sup>2</sup>
27. The Youth Director scheme has been highly successful this year. To a considerable extent this is due to the quality of the Youth Directors themselves. Our shared view is that the current Youth Directors have shown what the scheme is capable of and that their excellent work has made the best possible case for its continuing. However, it is very expensive and there might be grounds for considering an alternative model (e.g. an Assistant Rabbi or Community Development Worker). This should be combined with consideration of the best way to support the Rabbi in his communal work.
28. There are many informal activities in the community that are not necessarily centred on the synagogue premises. These include the Rabbi's Talmud shiur, the Rosh Chodesh Group, the Friendship Club, the Women's and Men's Book Groups, the Oneg Shabbat series, the Desert Island Discs series, the Whisky Club and others. These activities are self-generated and self-sustaining, usually small-scale, and make little or no drain on formal community resources,

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<sup>2</sup> B'Yachad had good speakers but very poor attendances; occasional other talks sometimes attract interest, but are not regular enough to be firmly part of the community's agenda.

but there is an argument that they are core to the building and sustaining of community life and might be recognised as such. Many of the events organised by the Board's Events and Communication Group (e.g. Harmony on the Hill) can be included in this category.

**29. Proposals:**

- a. **A formal evaluation of the Youth Director scheme is due, but the Board is strongly minded to continue with it using the current management structure. We will examine the possibility of extending the role of the Youth Directors to include younger children, formalising their current involvement in children's services.**
- b. **We shall also investigate the possibility of more professional support for the children's services.**
- c. **Because of this, it is unlikely that we can raise sufficient funds to also employ a Community Director.**
- d. **However, we propose to actively pursue with the US and LSJS and any other appropriate organisations the possibility of finding a part time rabbinic intern who could take on some specific development tasks within the community.**
- e. **Adult education needs to be targeted appropriately and may be best focused around Shabbat, including Friday evening learning sessions (as in the Oneg series) and Shabbat afternoon learning in the summer months.**

## **Welfare**

30. Welfare provision was identified as a major priority for this Board and considerable progress has been made. This has included the recruitment of a large and active volunteer group and also clarification of the Rabbi's welfare role. What is important now is a strategy to ensure that structures are in place to maintain the momentum that has been generated in the last few months. Welfare is probably the best recent example of how 'champions' in a particular area can have a galvanising effect.

**31. Proposal: The current leadership of the Welfare team seem very well placed to develop this strategy for continuity. We shall continue to monitor it closely as a high priority area for the community.**

## **Strategy Development**

32. There are some issues concerning the role of subgroups within the Board that need to be resolved, perhaps most significantly that of the relationship between the Strategy Committee and other elements. Specifically, should 'strategy' be the concern of the whole Board (and if so, how can this be achieved in the context of highly pressured meetings), or is it right to have it contained in a separate body made up mainly of people outside the Board, who report to it? The view emerging from the discussion was predominantly that strategy is the responsibility of the whole Board and that this should be the focus of Board meetings, with subgroups reporting on their views and background work.

**33. Proposal: The Board should be seen as responsible for the community development strategy and should govern the activities of the subcommittees and subgroups that form to implement this strategy.**