

MINUTES OF
THE WEST LONDON SYNAGOGUE OF BRITISH JEWS
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2019

Held on 18th June 2019

1. Under the Rules of the Synagogue the quorum required for an Annual General Meeting at which any votes are to be taken is 30 congregants. There were more than 30 congregants in attendance, so the meeting was quorate.
2. **Matters arising and confirmation of the minutes of the Annual General meetings held on 26th June 2018.**

The minutes of the 2018 Annual General Meeting of the West London Synagogue of British Jews were issued to congregants prior to the 2019 AGM via an E-News link to our website. As no comments were received thereon, they were approved as final.

Please refer to Appendix 1, for the approved 2018 minutes.

3. **President's Introduction**

Mark Fox was chairing his first AGM as President. He made a couple of observations. He firstly referred to the work done in enhancing security and improving the appearance of the main entrance to the Synagogue in Upper Berkeley Street and thanked Stephen Moss for his role in raising the funds necessary for this project. Mark then likened the building which we occupy as like the Forth Road Bridge. One works on improving it and when you get to the end, the first bit requires some more work. We are lucky to have this building, but it is 22 years since scaffolding was erected in the Sanctuary and urgent repairs are now needed. On the occasion of the 150th year of occupying this building (which coincides with the 180th anniversary of the Synagogue) we will need to approach the congregation for financial assistance to make the necessary improvements.

Mark added that our fee structure does not cover our running costs. Unlike some other churches, we do not have assets to sell or produce a significant income.

Mark wanted to acknowledge the amazing job our staff do and also wanted to thank the many volunteers who do things for the Synagogue. We do not take their efforts for granted. He also acknowledged the role of our talented rabbinic team who have an array of skills which complement each other and all demonstrate real dedication.

Mark finished his presentation by referring to Rabbi Neuberger's intended retirement next March. In his view it was quite astonishing what she had achieved. He noted the Friday night Community dinners with a succession of outstanding guest speakers, the transformation of our services; attendances at services had increased. Rabbi Julia leads us intellectually. It is

acknowledged that we, as a congregation, have a choice. We could go to a synagogue local to where we live but choose to come to WLS because of the leadership it provides to the Progressive Community in London. In recognition of her contribution Julia has accepted our invitation to become Rabbi Emerita and we asked her not to disappear from West London Synagogue life.

4. Chairman's Report

Patrick Mocatta started by saying that it is customary for the Chairman to summarize the achievements and challenges of the past year.

- The restored and secured front entrance to the Synagogue in many ways encapsulates much of the good and the bad affecting the West London community today. Our members have generously restored the front of the Synagogue to its original splendour and it is now again the appropriate entrance to “the vibrant hub of Progressive Jewish life in Central London”. It makes a strong statement against the current wave of racism and anti-Semitism that we are proud to have been in Upper Berkeley Street for 149 years and that we have every intention of being here for many, many more.
- In 2020, the building's 150th anniversary, the exterior and interior restoration must continue to overcome decades, and possibly in some areas more than a century, of neglect. It will be no surprise to most of you that fundraising, including through the 2019 HHD Appeal, is and will be ongoing.
- 2018 was the culmination of several years' work when all our HHD services took place here under one roof. The feedback was extremely positive, and the result of much hard teamwork led by Rabbi David, Stewart Sether and Julian Markson. It was also the year that we introduced a new prayer book for Rosh Hashanah. In recognition of their work on these two projects I am pleased that both Julian Markson for his work on the reformatting of the High Holy Days and Eleanor Angel for her work on the new RH prayer book have accepted to be Life Vice Presidents of the Synagogue.
- 2018 was also a year, when we should be proud of the Synagogue's work in many fields. In social care, where Jo Michaels and her team continue to set the standard against which many other communities benchmark themselves. WLS' commitment to support those with mental health issues as well as the elderly grows ever greater as state bureaucracy increases and its financial support diminishes. It makes our need to involve more and younger volunteers both more urgent and yet more difficult. A big thank you to all involved.
- Our Education offering continues to grow and build an ever-stronger following under the leadership of Gil Reshef and Rabbi Neil. The Religion School enrolment and attendance grew again last year, and the multi-generational involvement of parents and grandparents was evident on occasions like Purim and High Holy Days. With the backing of the Lyons Learning Project our adult education offering has been further expanded and, as it should, the Education activity is the path that attracts a good proportion of our new members to join.

- In 2018 there were a number of events that took place as a result of the Synagogue's interfaith work under the leadership of Rabbi Helen. One highlight was the invitation to WLS and Belsize Park synagogues to conduct a memorial service at Westminster Abbey on the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht; unfortunately the other 2018 interfaith highlights, which I will cite, came about also because of further tragedy such as the collaborative work done by WLS and the Al Manah mosque for children caught up in the Grenfell tower tragedy recognised in a letter to the Synagogue from the Secretary of State which was reproduced in the Review earlier this year; and the Mayor of London, Sadiq Kahn's, choice to show his sympathy and support after the Pittsburgh synagogue murders by coming to West London, his first attendance at a Synagogue service. Thank you to Rabbi Helen, Nic Schlagman and the generous support of members, because this work is not funded by membership fees.
- Our Social Action work continues to provide support for the most needy in wider society. Unfortunately, the needs of Refugees in the UK and the homeless in Westminster show no sign of decline. Rabbi Neil, Nic Schlagman and a large corps of volunteers and the financial support of the community make this possible and a source of pride for all WLS members. Thank you.
- Our building is a community centre in the middle of London and is buzzing with activity almost every day and every evening. Be it the Berkeley Lunch Club or Seymour Group activities, Kolnoa film nights, musical or literary discussion evenings and an increasing array of community dinners particularly on Friday nights and festivals. Behind the scenes Jim Fletcher and Kathryn Forro and the premises staff do a lot of work to make these community events possible. I hope with our new website about to be launched, we will be able to reach a wider cross section of the community and so to get more people to these events, because they are of the highest quality and should be building more new friendships across the community.
- The High Holy Day appeal was successful again in raising well over £100,000 for three charities and the community welcomed last year, as it will again in July 2019 traumatised Israeli soldiers under the Peace of Mind programme. This has been organised by Jim Fletcher, Martin Phillips, Monica Jankel and many volunteers. Again thank you.
- In January Rabbi Julia told us of her intention to retire next March. We are all immensely grateful for her continuing, inspiring leadership and thank her for her transformational work at WLS over what will be nine years. She has a special sense of what WLS represents because she is a child of the community and we are delighted that she has accepted to become the first Emerita Rabbi at WLS, so Julia and Anthony are not leaving. We wish her well in her new and exciting life as Chairman of UCL Hospital Trust.
- In accordance with the Synagogue rules an Appointment's Committee has been set up, which is charged with managing the Rabbinic succession. Matters are in hand and I am sure that you will understand that we are not able to comment on this matter further.

- Separately as we are about to enter WLS' 180th year I will be addressing the work being undertaken to adapt to the challenges of the changing needs of the membership under the Agenda heading Strategic Plan.
- So here I would like to finish by thanking everybody, Rabbis, professional staff, volunteers and the lay leadership for the many hours of work that makes WLS a special place, the vibrant hub of Progressive Jewish life in Central London which we aspire to be. Our Executive Director, Stewart Sether, should be singled out for special thanks for ensuring that everything happens smoothly "on the day or night". There is always much to do to serve a diverse membership with different and changing needs. As always, we are trying to adapt to social change, while we build on our tradition.

5. To receive the Community Reports for 2018 , as presented by the Chairman

The reports were issued to congregants prior to the AGM, via an E-News link to our website. As no comments were received thereon, (subject to a comment made by Valerie Bello referred to in the Any Other Business section below), they were approved as final.

Please refer to Appendix 2 for the approved 2018 Community Reports.

6. To receive and adopt the Trustees Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 December 2018

David Marks, Treasurer of the Synagogue presented these.

The Synagogue is a registered charity and has a wholly owned subsidiary, WLS Seymour Place Ltd which was established to realise the development potential of the roof space above 33 Seymour Place. There has been minimal financial activity in the subsidiary in this year although a great deal of work has been undertaken through the kind use of volunteer time. David paid tribute to the work done by the auditors, HW Fisher, their diligence and their advice on a variety of issues during this years' audit process. Jonathan Lachmann, their Audit Principal is here today to answer any questions any congregant may have. He also paid tribute to the quality of the work of the Finance Department led by Paul Warren. The audit was completed 6 weeks' earlier than the equivalent time last year.

David talked about the annual results for the 2018 calendar year. The accounts have been posted on our website for inspection. The results for the year were satisfactory. We generated a surplus of £110,000 on general (or unrestricted funds) and a surplus of £83,000 on restricted funds. The surplus (or deficit) on restricted funds is due mainly to the timing of receipts and expenditure so is not a meaningful number. Our intention is not to spend more on non-core activities than we have raised to fund them. The surplus or deficit on unrestricted funds is the critical number because this represents the funds raised through various means to pay for the main activities of the Synagogue such as staff costs, building maintenance, education etc.

Whilst it is pleasing to have generated a surplus, David's view was that this was insufficient and we probably need to aim for an annual surplus of closer to £200,000. This is because we need to fund debt repayments out of our surplus and it would also be prudent to create some free reserves which would allow us to more confidently deal with variations during the year of our cash flow.

For information, at May 31, 2019, the most recent date for which numbers are available, our outstanding external debts were £928,674 made up of:

£158,587 to Halcyon School (for building refurbishment);

£97,175 to some of our members who lent us money to enable us to repay the Bank overdraft that had grown inexorably during our period of financial difficulty a few years ago;

£250,000 to a company owned by two of our members; the loan having been used to fund the professional fees incurred by WLS Seymour Place Ltd in obtaining planning permission for the development of the airspace

£48,333 for deferred contributions to the Movement for Reform Judaism (we agreed with them to defer an element of our annual levy to reflect the cash flow difficulties we were facing)

£374,579 to the Bank to repay the financing taken out to replace the boilers a few years ago.

Other than the boiler loan, which was advanced for a 20 year term, all the other debts must to be repaid by the end of 2023 so we have to fund some £600,000 in debt repayments over the next four and a half years. Fortunately, with the exception of the Bank loan all other debts are interest free.

It is difficult to achieve the objective of a £200,000 annual surplus. Either one must increase income, perhaps through encouraging philanthropy or diversifying the sources of revenue. Andrew Stone will tell us about the current state of plans to generate more income from the airspace above 33 Seymour Place.

If one looks at the comparative position in the US, Synagogue congregations appear to be more inclined to philanthropy; particularly to cover the costs of running their Shuls. We have some incredibly generous supporters who tend to direct their giving to specific projects; examples being social action to fund the asylum seeker drop in centre and winter night shelter and security such as upgrading our Upper Berkeley Street entrance. But we need to encourage our members to support the general activities of the Synagogue if it is to flourish into the future.

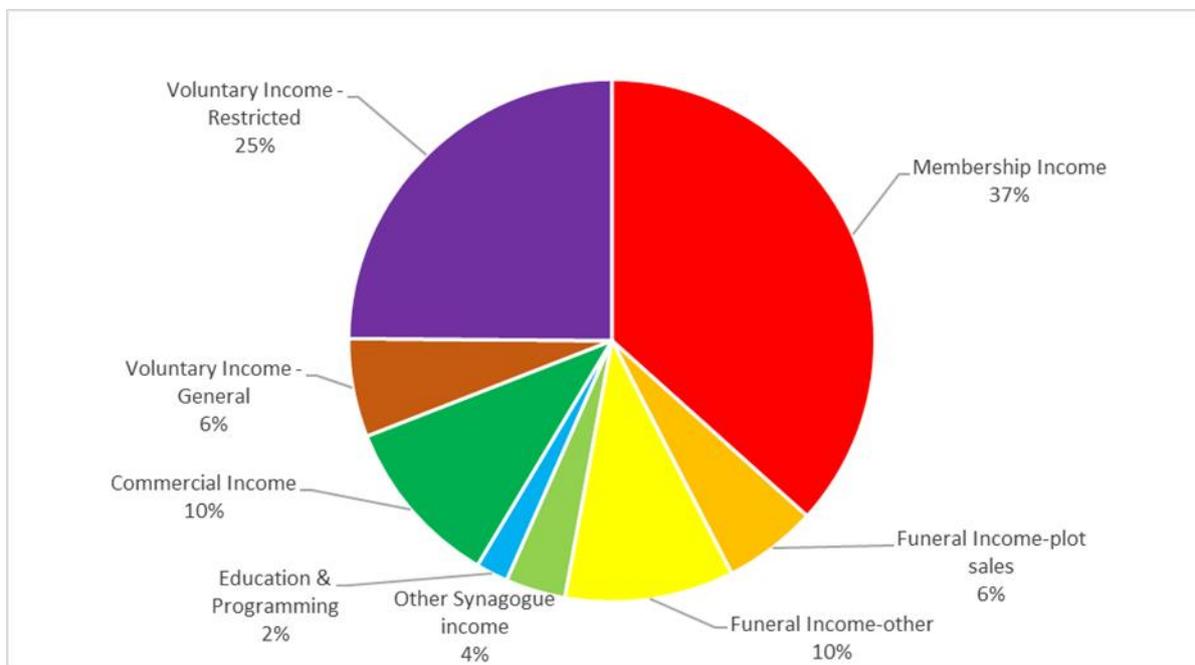
We have historically funded our provision of social care to needy and aged members of our community through restricted fund appeals but this is getting tougher and we will be asking more of our members if they are prepared to assist as looking after our own must be a prime responsibility of the Synagogue.

We have also worked on the creation of an endowment fund which will be a separate charity with independent trustees but will have the purpose of generating funds to support the synagogue into its future; hopefully by attracting legacies. This will be launched to the community as part of our 180th anniversary celebrations next year.

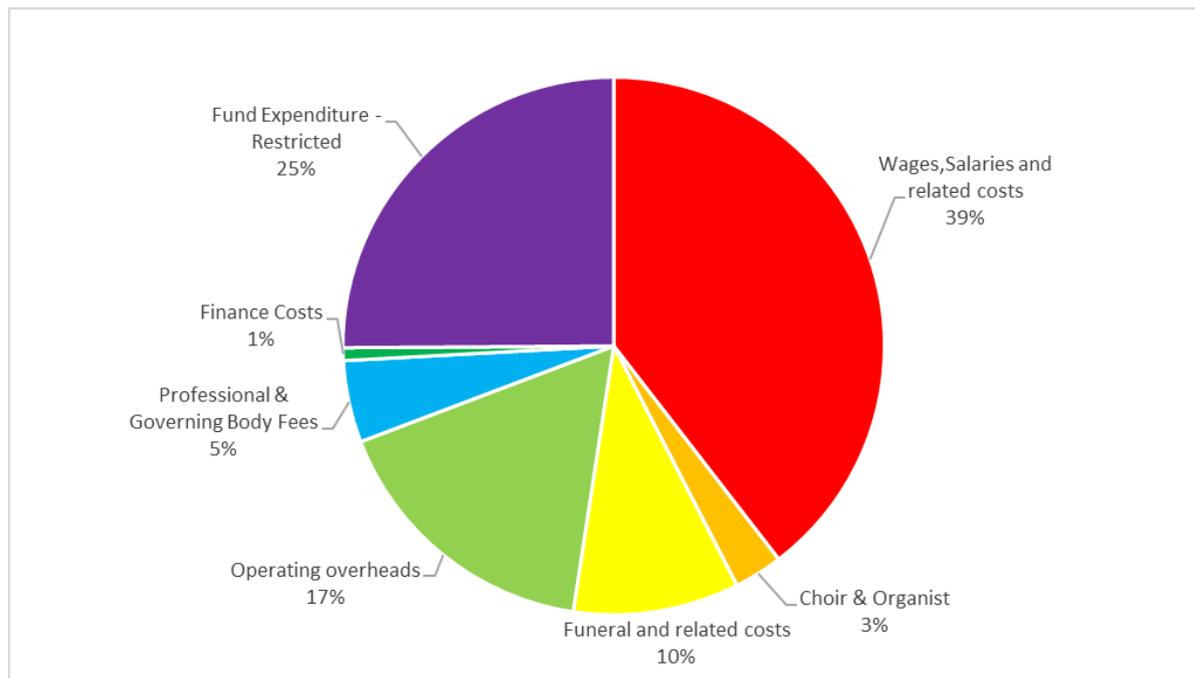
We have continued to maintain a tight rein over expenses. We could look at cutting costs further, but this would have a negative impact on the quality of the services provided by the Synagogue, so we are reluctant to do anything drastic.

David showed a slide in pie chart form the sources of income and the breakdown expenditure for 2018.

INCOME



EXPENDITURE



The first noticeable factor is that wages and salaries are barely covered by membership fees so all other costs must be funded from other sources. Commercial income, funeral related income and general donations being the most important.

Income from grave plot sales was materially lower in 2018 compared to 2017 but by its nature is unpredictable. Restricted income was considerably higher as we successfully raised funds for our security project at the Upper Berkeley Street entrance.

The financial outlook for 2019 might be more challenging if we are unable to generate more income from the sale of grave plots but thereafter as some of our debts are discharged, the position may become slightly easier.

A question was raised by Michael Lewis about what we have termed our internal debt between the restricted and general funds. Money raised for restricted activities had been spent in the past on the general running of the Synagogue. This was inappropriate and those funds need to be restored to the restricted fund bank account for spending on projects envisaged by the donor. Since this was identified as a major issue, over half of this internal debt had been repaid to the restricted bank account and we continue to reduce the amount owing. Because of the external debts that must be repaid this may take a few more years and David targeted 2025 as the time by which the matter should be fully resolved.

Dr Joana Rustin asked whether we needed to chase outstanding membership subscriptions. David confirmed that regrettably, we do have to do this and a part time credit controller has

greatly improved our position. We will also try and encourage more of our membership to pay their Synagogue fees by direct debit which should also assist with this issue.

Michael Lewis whether we had replenished the funds “borrowed” from our restricted fund reserves to fund general operations. David commented that this was a difficult issue to resolve but we had succeeded in bringing the deficit down by over one half and we continue to make progress. The key thing was to have a plan to eliminate this “internal borrowing and it was hoped that by 2025 we will have done so.

David asked the congregants present to approve the trustees report and accounts and this was done so unanimously. Please refer to Appendix 3 for the adopted 2019 Trustees Report and Accounts,

7. Update on WLS Strategic and Operational Review

Patrick Mocatta updated the meeting on the current progress made.

Over the past 18 months the teams of Rabbis, professional staff, members and volunteers involved in each area of Synagogue activities has reviewed its work and submitted a vision to the Board of how it should be developed in the medium term. A Subcommittee of the Board is now working on analysis of certain obvious steps, which will not involve large investment. Changes will anticipate and take into consideration the views of members, which were canvassed extensively during the Listening Project, which finished in 2017 and have been updated particularly with input from younger members over the past 12 months. The objective remains that WLS should be “the vibrant hub of Reform and Progressive Jewish life in Central London” for many years to come.

The brunt of the distillation of the work has been done by Rabbi David and Stewart Sether, so some of the findings will also be integrated into normal operating improvements and passed through the annual budgeting process.

Examples of the strategic work which continues to be undertaken are:

Under the leadership of Julian Markson some of the religious services, music, minor festivals and life cycle events are being reviewed. For example, in common with many other synagogues WLS members who attend weekly services favour Friday evening over Shabbat morning services. Just as we have introduced Shira services on Friday evenings and brought the HHD services under one roof, we must now look at what the right format should be for Shabbat morning services when there is no special event like a Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Under the current leadership of Jane Mecz, the House of Community is trying to address the challenges faced by the Social Care team. The need for the provision of Social Care to our members increases as government austerity cuts public services both for the old and for those with mental health issues. One of the key areas, which Jane’s team will address with Jo Michaels and our professional and volunteer team is how both to train more qualified

volunteers and in so doing how to reduce the average age of the pool of volunteers. All of this has to be done at a time when we are working to replace the funding from a substantial donor to the Synagogue's Social Care work.

Other areas which are being reviewed are membership fee structure under a team led by Andrew Stone. Membership fees and fundraising are closely linked, so David Gasperow, who oversees fundraising from the board is part of this review team.

We are also aware that we need to improve Communication with the membership. We believe that we probably only reach 35-40% of the membership today and aim to double our reach. The first steps should be achieved through an upgraded website which will go live in the autumn and an ambition to build on and around this new foundation.

I have not singled out Education (where Maggie Thurer has responsibility at the board), which is obviously a core activity, Social Action nor Interfaith work, because the changes in those areas will happen both naturally at the operating level, while the strategic issues will be handled later, because there is only the capacity to address so much at one time. Both Social Action and Interfaith are overseen by Henrietta Hughes at the Board.

8. Update on Airspace Project

Andrew Stone was invited to explain the current state of this project. Andrew started by saying that we only have one shot at doing this so it was vital that we get it right and therefore we must do it slowly and thoughtfully. We originally considered selling the rights to develop residential flats to a developer. This was subject to some criticism as we effectively would lose the asset once this has taken place. We have a cash lump sum but no real further interest in the building extension. We also considered doing a joint venture with an office developer, but the returns were not sufficiently attractive to warrant that alternative. The current state of the London property market caused us to reconsider. We now have resurrected discussions with Halcyon International School (Halcyon). We have been in discussion with the School for a considerable period and had become frustrated by the slow progress but more recently, they had reengaged, and we were now making progress.

We are now getting close to reaching agreement with Halcyon. Andrew said it was not appropriate to go into details whilst negotiations were ongoing but when agreement is reached the proposal will be presented to the Board and then to an EGM of our members as is required by our Constitution. The deal with Halcyon is likely to involve us granting an option to Halcyon. They will pay us a modest fee for this option. If and when they exercise the option, they would enter into an agreement for a lease and when the building is completed a full lease. They will build the extension at their cost and we will reimburse them over an extended period out of the rent they would be paying us. This is unlikely to provide any significant return for the Synagogue for 15 years but thereafter would provide a very valuable additional source of revenues for us. Andrew emphasised that this proposal is not risk free and would explain that for consideration when the final details had been negotiated. He said that he could take questions on the general structure but not the details. No questions were put to him.

9. To ratify the appointment of the incoming Junior Wardens

William Campus Ortega and Monica Jankel had been nominated as the new junior wardens and a resolution to that effect was put forward. The proposer was Elisabeth Shrager and the seconder, Jonathan Lass. This resolution was carried unanimously.

10. To confirm the appointment of HW Fisher as our Auditors

A resolution was then tabled to reappoint our auditors, HW Fisher for the forthcoming year. David Marks proposed, and Joan Arnold seconded this resolution. It was carried unanimously.

11. Any other Business

Hermey Jankel wanted to congratulate the editor of the Synagogue Review, Gaby Wood Smith and a vote of thanks was tabled.

Dr Joanna Rustin expressed a view that she would like to see more in the Review aimed at the younger generation and this was duly noted and this comment would be passed to the editor.

Elisabeth Shrager commented on the poor attendance at the AGM and expressed disappointment that not all trustees were present. There were 10 of the 17 trustees present. The President noted that poor attendance might be reflective of general satisfaction with the way in which the Synagogue is being run at present. A higher attendance would be expected if congregants had concerns or complaints.

Valerie Bello noted that there was nothing in the Community Reports about the Budapest Twinning activities.

Valerie also commented that sometimes emails from new members go unanswered and recommended that we should have a membership committee which welcomes new members and assists with their integration them into Synagogue life. Patrick Mocatta agreed to look at this.

A question was raised as to why there are no new elections for trustees this year. The response was that this was due to chance in that no trustees were due to resign this year. Election of new trustees would be expected in the next two years.

A congregant complimented the Synagogue on the Wall of Memory and asked how the funds raised had been deployed. David Marks confirmed that they are received on general fund account and contributed to the running costs of the Synagogue.

Joan Arnold asked about the existing lease to Halcyon School and in particular whether they incur a service charge, are responsible for repairs caused by wear and tear and whether they are liable for dilapidations in the event the lease terminates. Andrew Stone responded by

saying that this was an ordinary commercial lease but as they are “our friends” there may be practical limits to the degree we could secure full payments from them.

12. Closing Blessing

Rabbi Julia Neuberger gave the closing blessing.

The meeting ended at 8:20pm, with refreshments then being served.