

22. John Wesley's New Room

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Mission

To be a globally significant Methodist heritage centre where people come in and go out renewed.

Vision

To use our historic collection and other resources to bring to life the story and legacy of the Wesleys, offering space for curiosity, reflection, and enjoyment to all.

A Snapshot of our Year

As the oldest Methodist building in the world, John Wesley's New Room (JWNR) occupies a unique position which continues to attract visitors locally, nationally, and internationally. It remains the most visited Methodist heritage site in the UK.

In 2024/25 our mission to reach out to visitors from the community in Bristol and nationally and internationally, resulted in over 40,000 visits - the highest number since records began, with the special place that is the New Room touching the lives of individuals with Methodist, as well as other churched and unchurched backgrounds.

The global significance of the New Room's heritage continues to be recognised with visitor numbers from Methodist communities across the globe returning to pre-pandemic levels, with particularly significant numbers from the USA and South Korea.

Successes in 2024-25 also included welcoming a range of temporary exhibitions, the ongoing provision of a range of educational activities and a continuing seasonal programme of community and other events to engage new audiences.

JWNR Trustees have taken necessary steps to reduce the operational financial deficit highlighted in our last report to the Conference. Increasing the levels of income generation continues to be our vital aim to enable us to move forward as a thriving centre of Methodist heritage.

The Trustees are grateful to the Methodist Church for their one-off grant funding which has allowed the JWNR to look forward with more confidence and confirm that we remain a going concern for the near future. However, the Trustees remain vigilant to the fact that the level of expenditure already committed and potentially required to maintain the property will utilise current reserves over the next five years.

Our Trustees recognise their responsibility to the Methodist Church for operations of the JWNR but believe that this responsibility now needs to be shared more proactively by the wider Methodist Church to enable this globally unique piece of Methodist heritage to thrive.

Mission and Outreach

Our dedicated executive staff and volunteers continued to deliver the previously agreed Activity Plan for the Methodist Church until 2025. This included educational outreach, community engagement, museum, library, archive research and learning opportunities, and volunteering skill development in hospitality and retail.

The breadth of such activities can be seen at <https://www.newroombristol.org.uk>

During 2024/5 we continued to provide a regular space for worship at our Friday Communion services organised by our chaplains. In addition, we held special events, such as carol services, and a special service for Wesley Day. Having registered as a place where same-sex couples can be celebrated, we are available to hold weddings and the blessing of same-sex couples and to host the annual Christians at Pride service supported by the LGBTQI+ community in Bristol and partner churches from across the ecumenical spectrum.

John Wesley's New Room remains a space open to all and often engages in providing pastoral care for those seeking comfort or spiritual direction. In addition, we increasingly provide a place where sister churches can inspire their own congregations for worship and evangelism.

Staffing

Over the past year the JWNR's Directors led the organisation through a period of significant consolidation following the staff reductions highlighted in previous reports to the Conference.

Following this consolidation, further changes are in train. This has enabled a further focusing of staff responsibilities for the future, and JWNR has been blessed in its ability to recruit very experienced individuals to lead activities forward in the areas of Collections and Education & Community.

Our dedicated staff and volunteers were led throughout most of the year by Louise Wratten – JWNR's now sole Executive Director.

Heritage Site and Property Development

Within the last year we have undertaken a significant amount of property-related maintenance.

We have addressed significant legacy problems with our visitor centre build. This unexpected maintenance has required rather more attention than would normally be expected for a new build, such as temperature, humidity and ventilation control within our collections space. Indications are that further maintenance work could be required in the short term.

The JWNR unitary Operations Committee continues to meet monthly to address the financial implications of sustaining publicly accessible operations within our grade listed historic buildings, which inevitably require regular and unpredictable repairs, such as recent water damage to Charles Wesley's House. These costs are potentially significant when they arise.

The quinquennial inspection carried out at the end of 2023 also revealed a number of less urgent works requiring attention which are gradually being worked through.

Challenges

JWNR's Directors have led the organisation through a period of significant change seeking to address the balance between prioritising commercial activity whilst remaining true to our vision to offer a welcoming space of community.

The challenge moving forward continues to be ensuring that the achievements following the end of financial support from a National Lottery Heritage Fund Grant in August 2021 can be sustained.

Our vision and mission are fundamental in providing a focus and motivation when navigating through the pressures of such uncertainty.

However, the Trustees are aware of significant future challenges JWNR faces, including:

- Operating within a listed heritage site inevitably requires regular and unpredictable repairs alongside the costs of maintaining Charles Wesley's house and its neighbouring investment property. These costs are potentially significant when they arise.
- Less expected has been maintenance costs for the new visitor centre which has required rather more attention than would normally be expected for a new build, with indications that such costs could continue in the short term.
- The nature of the Broadmead area of Bristol surrounding the New Room is also in the process of changing dramatically, with a demographic shift from retail to residential presenting potential financial challenges to the Trustees, as well as opportunities if we can respond appropriately.

Financial Resilience

JWNR has taken necessary steps to reduce its financial deficits. However, we need to improve our financial resilience.

The Trustees and our dedicated executive staff and volunteers have taken significant steps to control costs whilst striving hard to attract more visitors. It is recognised that as the oldest Methodist building in the world, JWNR occupies a unique position that will continue to attract visitors locally, nationally, and internationally. However, existing funding streams need to generate more income, and new income streams need to be identified and secured alongside the control of overall salary costs, including re-organisation of staff roles to

maximise the impact of their areas of activity. Support from Friends of the New Room, donations, and legacies have also been promoted to support JWNR.

It is recognised that we will need to be more pro-active in developing such income streams both commercially and through grants and donations.

We have highlighted the challenge of maintaining all aspects of our premises whilst the assets are owned by the Methodist Church through the Conference, and the impact this has on management of our reserves. As a result of representations on this issue, the connexional Methodist Church awarded the New Room an immediate grant of £20K followed by a further grant of £271K.

The Trustees are grateful to the Methodist Church for this one-off grant funding which has allowed the JWNR to look forward with more confidence.

However, our long-term sustainability continues to be somewhat precarious and close monitoring of all aspects of our operation will be needed to ensure we remain responsive.

The Trustees recognise that this is a big responsibility and believe that it will have to be shared with the wider Methodist Church if it is to be successful.

Governance Changes

At its meeting on 26 February 2025 the Board of Trustees of JWNR agreed to recommend changes to the constitution of the Board of Trustees.

Excluding trustees nominated by three external bodies, the new Board constitution proposes the appointment of up to seven 'independent' Trustees compared to 20 under current arrangements.

This change would bring the Trustee Board into line with contemporary charitable/corporate good governance.

The proposed changes to the Standing Order are shown at resolution 22/2 below.

The requirement for the Conference to agree the amended constitution of the JWNR Trustee Board and annually appoint named trustees, creates a short-term governance issue in terms of the phasing of appointment of trustees under any new constitution.

To avoid any interregnum, the Conference is therefore requested to appoint formally, in the first instance, the existing JWNR trustees set out in the Appointments paper elsewhere in the Agenda, recognising that there will be changes if the Conference is minded to agree the new JWNR Trustee Board constitution.

This interim position can be regularised following any change to a new Trustee Board constitution, and new named trustees brought to the Conference for formal appointment in 2026.

An implication of following such good governance and operating with a smaller trustee board is the potential to lose informal stakeholder engagement which takes place around a larger board.

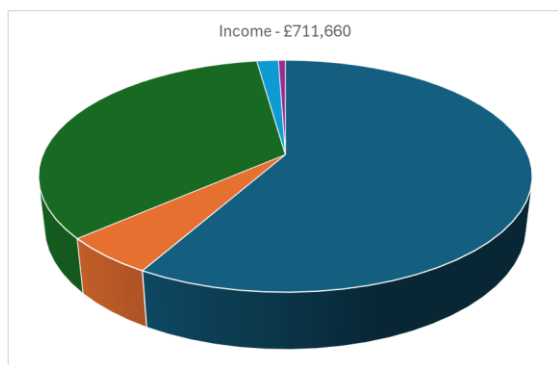
Should the Conference be minded to agree the recommended changes to membership of the JWNR Trustee Board, we will then establish a larger Advisory Council of friends and stakeholders to offer views on proposed developments, and act as champions for JWNR.

This Advisory Council would be solely advisory and have no decision-making responsibility.

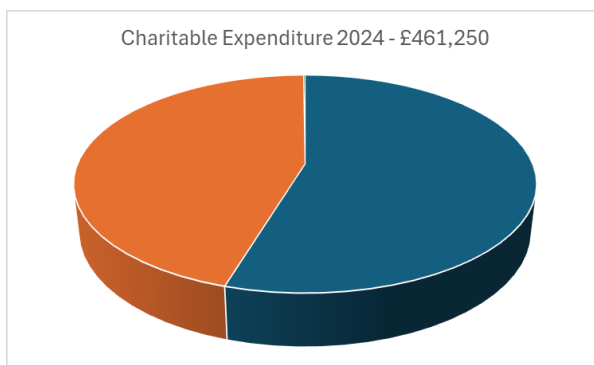
As well as wider stakeholder engagement, such an Advisory Council will also allow the JWNR to continue to draw on the knowledge and experience of trustees stepping down from the Board at the end of their formal appointment and also build a pipeline of future trustees.

Financial Activities for Year ended 31 August 2024

The Statement of Financial Activity for the year to 31 August 2024 submitted to the Charity Commission is summarised below.



Income, Legacies & Grants
Raising Funds
Charitable Activities
Interest & Investment Income
Other



Raising Funds
Charitable Activities

	2024 (£)	2023 (£)
Income	711,660	381,878
Charitable Expenditure	461,250	550,932
Gains on Investments	20,136	2,789
Net Income (Expenditure)	270,546	(166,265)

Total Funds Brought Forward	£ 357,047
Net Movement in Funds	£ 270,546
Total Funds Carried Forward	£ 627,593

The above suggests a major turnround in the financial performance of JWNR, however underlying activities are masked by a large exceptional item.

For accounting purposes, the significant grant from the Methodist Church of £291K falls wholly into the year's income which overstates **underlying** financial performance by the whole of the stated surplus.

A more realistic assessment of underlying performance is that the JWNR continues to move towards a break-even position operationally, with this trajectory aided by modest improvements in income from 'trading' such as commercial events and venue hire, alongside tight expenditure control.

The operational position for 2024 is therefore similar to the **underlying** performance in 2023, where the financial outturn was masked by a one-off exceptional item; in that case capital expenditure for development of our investment property at 5 Charles Street to significantly improve its rental potential. This one-off investment resulted almost wholly in the stated deficit.

The latter illustrates an ongoing issue for JWNR's financial position. As all property is owned by the Methodist Church, the significant capital expenditure on these heritage assets must be written off within the year it is incurred, rather than over the useful life of the asset. This inevitably results in significant fluctuations in year-end position and a challenge for management of the JWNR's General Reserves.

***RESOLUTIONS

22/1. The Conference received the Report.

22/2. The Conference amended SO 280 as follows:

280 The New Room, Bristol

...

(2) The trustees shall be:

(i) **a nominee of** the Secretary of the Conference;

- (ii) ***a nominee who is a member of the Synod*** ~~the Chair of the Bristol District,~~ ***appointed by the District Policy Committee;***
- (iii) ***a nominee who is a member within the Superintendent of*** ~~the Bristol and South Gloucestershire Circuit,~~ ***appointed by the Circuit Meeting;***
- ~~(iv) the warden of the New Room;~~
- (v) not more than ~~twenty~~ **seven** other persons.