

58. Proposal for a new District in North West England

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Background

- 1 The Bolton and Rochdale, Cumbria, Lancashire and Liverpool Districts brought a report to the January 2023 meeting of the Council, requesting that the Council initiate a consultation process with the Circuit Meetings and Synods of the four Districts concerned under the terms of SO 401. The Districts set out, in their report to the Council, the rationale for a proposal to merge into one District with effect from 1 September 2024.
- 2 The Districts in the region have a history of co-working and covenant, which has strengthened and enriched each partner. The membership in this area is dramatically smaller than when the present Districts were first conceived, and is likely to become smaller still should current trends continue. The governance burden of current structures is disproportionate to the region's size. It is challenging to fill the offices, lay appointments, and meetings.
- 3 The Districts noted that 2024 is a critical point for the Districts in the region, given the anticipated change of leadership. The new District model proposes a different way of being District. It is a collaborative matrix model where the proposed District Hubs interact with the proposed Mission Areas to provide sound governance and resourcing whilst releasing energy and personnel to support Circuits to focus on mission in their localities. The new District, to be known as the North West England District, will have a single Synod and a single DPC.
- 4 The proposal will include three District Hubs each with distinctive sub functions: Mission and Leadership, Administration and Compliance, and Ministry and Vocations. The District Chair and two District Secretaries will lead the hubs. They will provide district leadership, governance and resource collaboratively.
- 5 The larger District will still require a local expression. The Mission Areas are smaller geographical groupings of Circuits within the District, initially taking into account existing identities but moving towards different ways of gathering where appropriate. It is anticipated that there will be no more than four Mission Areas. Each will have a Mission Area lead whose primary role is to foster relationships and promote mission. They will deputize for the District Chair and hold a representative role, connecting with the wider community, ecumenical partners

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and leaders of other faiths. The Mission Area Lead role is presbyteral and will probably be part-time sitting alongside another presbyteral role. The Mission Areas will not hold governance responsibilities and so will not add a governance layer. The Mission Areas leads and district Hub leads will work collaboratively to ensure that Mission is at the heart of both loci of leadership.

- 6 The Council directed that a consultation process take place with the Circuit meetings and Synods of the participating Districts which has been undertaken.

Consultation Process

- 7 The Council appointed a scrutiny group to ensure that the proposals have been carefully set out by the regional review group and have been widely discussed both locally and at the Methodist Council.
- 8 The scrutiny group felt it was evident that there has been widespread consultation and discussions with the Districts and Circuits. Alongside this, excellent resources were produced to support this process which helped to outline the case and also to emphasise the support of the current District Chairs and leaders of synods. Much in-depth liaison, reflection and debate has been undertaken with the clear imperative of enhancing mission and the discussions held were robust, with considerable engagement with the proposals.
- 9 The report from the scrutiny group indicated that there was a substantial majority in support of the proposals and the Council is confident that there has been, and will continue to be, careful pastoral and prayerful liaison, outreach and discussion with the Circuits that were not in favour. The process was felt to be fair and equitable and that a firm proposal has been put forward and examined democratically, and the outcome is clear.
- 10 The Council received a further report from the Manchester and Stockport District. The Synod had voted, at its September 2022 meeting, not to participate in the process towards a new single District. However, when the Synod met in the spring of 2023, it considered the proposals further and resolved to ask the Council for permission to consult its Circuits on the proposal that the Manchester and Stockport District become part of the new District from September 2024. The Council has therefore directed that the Manchester and Stockport District be consulted on whether to become part of the North West England District from September 2024, and that the consultation be in a form similar to that previously undertaken in the Bolton and Rochdale, Cumbria, Lancashire and Liverpool Districts. The four Districts (Cumbria, Lancashire, Bolton and Rochdale, Liverpool) will be consulted on whether the North West England District may also include

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the Manchester and Stockport District and the Council will receive a further report by January 2024. The Conference is therefore asked to note that the resolutions presented here relate to the four Districts where the full consultation has been conducted, and that the Council will make a further report to the 2024 Conference.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

- 58/1. The Conference receives the Report.**
- 58/2. The Conference adopts the recommendation of the Council that the Bolton and Rochdale, Cumbria, Lancashire, and Liverpool Districts amalgamate to form the North West England District with effect from 1 September 2024.**