

Report from the Birmingham District and the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District on a proposed amalgamation of the two Districts

MC/23/71

Date of meeting	19-20 October 2023
Contact name and details	The Revd Rachel E Parkinson, Chair of the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District chair@wsmethodist.org.uk The Revd Novette S Headley, Chair of the Birmingham District office@birminghammethodist.org.uk
Action required	For approval and decision
Resolutions	71/1. The Council receives the report. 71/2. The Council notes the proposed amalgamation of the Birmingham District and the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District to form a single District from 1 September 2025, and, in accordance with Standing Order 401, directs that a formal consultation with the Circuit meetings and Synods of the participating Districts take place by the end of the spring Representative Synods, to enable the Council to consider submitting a proposal to the Conference of 2024.

Summary of content

Subject of aims	The Birmingham District and the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District propose amalgamation to form a single District commencing on 1 September 2025. This report asks for the approval of the Methodist Council and the initiation of the processes laid down in Standing Order 401 concerning consultation in the two districts and proposals to the Conference of 2024.
Main points	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction 2. The Rationale for the Proposals 3. Vision 4. Proposed Structure 5. Staffing 6. Finance and Further Work
Background context and relevant documents (with function)	The background context is supported by a map showing the current outlines of the two districts. A set of Frequently Asked Questions has been produced for use within the districts, and can be made available to members of the Council on request.
Consultations	As outlined in Paragraph 1.2

Summary of impact

Standing Orders	SO 401
Financial	As outlined in Paragraph 6
External, including ecumenical	The promotion of ecumenical partnerships and relationships with local and regional authorities and other institutions in wider society is an important motivation behind this proposal
Risk	Risks are identified in paragraph 2 Further financial modelling to include financial risk and mitigation is being undertaken

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Council is asked to consider the amalgamation of the Birmingham District and the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District to form a single Methodist District under Standing Order 401, and to direct that a consultation takes place with the Circuit Meetings and Synods of the participating Districts to enable a proposal to be brought to the Conference of 2024. If approved, the two existing Districts will cease to be on 31 August 2025 and amalgamate to form a new District in the West Midlands from 1 September 2025.
- 1.2 These proposals have arisen from the increasing joint working of the two districts; recognition of the changing circumstances of their worship and mission, not least as they emerge from the pandemic; and shared concerns to ensure that they are best able to praise and serve God in the future. In April 2023 the two Synods voted separately for conversations to begin. An *ad hoc* task group initiated consultations that included open meetings as well as discussions in other fora such as joint meetings of the Superintendents in the two districts. Outline proposals were formed and refined in the process, and then presented to a joint meeting of the two Synods in September 2023, following which the Synods held separate discussions and both voted to bring this request to the Methodist Council (with 70% voting in favour in Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury and 70% in Birmingham). They have also formally appointed a new task group to do more detailed work on how the proposals would be implemented, and to respond to issues and concerns raised in the Synod debates.

2. Rationale

- 2.1 The Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District and the Birmingham District have a productive history of some collaborative working and sharing of resources across boundaries in ways which have promoted mission and sustained ministry. There is synergy between them in that together they serve churches in important rural areas around an urban mass of the Black Country, Birmingham and Coventry. More collaboration and sharing of resources, however, is needed to increase efficiency and enable local churches and circuits to flourish more in their mission and worship.
- 2.2 Membership of both Districts is significantly smaller than when the present Districts were first conceived, and it is likely to become smaller still. The governance burden of current structures on local churches, circuits and the districts themselves is increasing and is already disproportionate to the size of both Districts. It is a growing challenge to fill the necessary offices, lay appointments, and meetings and to provide the necessary HR support to employees in both districts.
- 2.3 A combined West Midlands District will enable us to pool our resources of people, time and finances, and make them more available across a wider area. It will increase our capacity to respond not only to any numerical decline but also to new projects and growth in the years to come. It will avoid the duplication of processes, increase people's access to specialist skills and enable more team working as opposed to lone working.
- 2.4 A combined district will also help us to provide greater governance support to Circuits and encourage Circuits to work cross-borders with one another to fill the office-holder gaps that exist in many circuits; and provide better options for communication that will help to reduce geographical distance between its

constituent parts, using and developing further the improved information technology that has been utilised in the last three years. We are committed to reducing travel by using technology (eg Zoom or hybrid meetings) wherever possible.

3. Vision

- 3.1 We long and pray to be a growing, good-news-sharing, justice-seeking, inclusive church without walls.
- 3.2 Our vision is of a new way of being a district which fulfils certain mandatory duties and governance functions, but otherwise is a streamlined and lightweight support service for circuits and their constituent churches. As such it will enable circuits and local churches to flourish; connect people who can help and support one another, but who otherwise might not know of each other; evolve with the changing picture of Methodism in a rapidly changing world; initiate new work; and, where necessary and appropriate, challenge the status quo in the wider church and society.
- 3.3 These streamlined services will be targeted on the following priorities:
- co-ordinating and promoting intergenerational and youth work;
 - encouraging and resourcing New Places for New People;
 - ensuring that the specific needs of rural areas are not forgotten;
 - providing support when crises occur in mission and ministry (e.g. conflict resolution and reconciliation, and the management of Human Resources);
 - supporting the management of transitions, whether in situations of growth or decline;
 - providing support for circuit and local church governance structures;
 - fulfilling the core, mandatory work of the District (stationing; complaints and discipline; worship training and support; vocations; probationers; facilitating synods);
 - delivering other more generic areas of work which would support the priorities and life of the district as a whole (administration; communications; finance; property; HR support; lay worker support; office holder support; safeguarding; training and gathered events).
- 3.4 We recognise that (in accordance with Standing Order 400A) the primary purpose of a district is to advance the mission of the Methodist Church in a region by
- providing opportunities for circuits to work together and support each other;
 - offering them resources of finance, personnel and expertise which may not be available locally; and
 - enabling them to engage with the wider society in the region and address its concerns.
- 3.5 In practice this means that in accordance with Standing Orders the district will
- act as the link between the circuits, on the one hand, and the Conference on the other;
 - serve both circuits and the Conference in the support, deployment and oversight of the various ministries of the Church and their programmes of training, and in the evaluation of applications for approval of or consent to their proposals and provision of grants from connexional funds;
 - work ecumenically wherever possible.
- 3.6 The District therefore has some particular governance functions but is otherwise a support service to enable the circuits (and their constituent local churches) in its area to fulfil their own primary purposes. Although the circuit is the primary unit in which local churches express and experience their interdependence and interconnectedness in the body of Christ (“connexionalism”) the Methodist Church is still too big, even with the current numerical decline, for all of them to participate directly and effectively in the wider connexion, the Conference and the institutions that serve it. So just as local churches are gathered together and constitute circuits, in the same way circuits still have to be gathered together and constitute intermediate bodies between the circuits and the wider connexion. Those bodies are what are known as ‘districts’. At a time of numerical decline and financial hardship, the number of them (and of circuits) and, in particular, the costs of them will have to decrease. At the same time their effectiveness in promoting worship and mission will have to be increased. That will require clearly distinguishing the roles of circuits and districts and then rigorously ensuring that they do only what they are supposed to do.
- 3.7 In essence, we recognise that districts are not primarily meant to be a way in which burdensome responsibilities cascade onto circuits and their constituent local churches. Instead their main purpose is to provide minimalistic structures enabling there to be a cascade of resources to Circuits and churches

to support them in their worship and mission, together with a framework of oversight and accountability for their use.

4. Proposed Structure

4.1 The changes that are underway concerning oversight and trusteeship to be exercised in and through bodies that relate to the whole connexion might provide a useful precedent for what happens in the new combined district. Mirroring those principles, there will be a **Synod** as the overall governing body, under the Conference, of the district. The Synod will be responsible for the overall policies in the district's life and mission (however much those policies are formed in the light of advice from subsidiary bodies). To do that, all the circuits and other constituent bodies in the district will have to be represented in it. The Synod will also have to re-learn how to be a conferring body which seeks to discern and decide as a corporate body, as well as being a place of inspiration, training and learning.

4.2 There will also be a **District Council** which will be responsible for the overall strategic management and administration of the provision of resources and support for the district's own life and work, together with that of its constituent circuits and other entities. The District Council's membership will have to be large enough to be representative, but not too large to be effective. There will be three strands to its work (again mirroring what is happening in wider connexional institutions):

- **Mission and Leadership:** collaborative and shared oversight of mission in both traditional and new places, schools and education, cultural 'fellowship' groups etc; resourcing of activities dealing with external relationships (World Church, ecumenical, inter-faith and community-based), public issues etc; encouragement of public theology and spiritual leadership; support for stationing and provision of a focus for the ministry of the District through the Chair's role as pastor to the pastors and the shared discipline embodied in the presbyteral session of synod.
- **Discipleship and Vocation:** support and administration of processes dealing with such as Learning and Development (linking with the Learning Network), reconciliation and positive working together, Children and Youth, Methodist Women in Britain, Local Preachers and Worship leaders, Probationers and Under-5s, and Reflective Supervision.
- **Administration and Compliance:** dealing with district-wide work and supporting circuits in their work with regard to such matters as EDI, Finance, Grants, Lay Employment, Property, Reconciliation & Complaints support, and Safeguarding.

4.3 There will also be a **Senior Leadership Team** consisting of appropriate district staff and officers, who shall prepare business for the District Council and the Synod; ensure that their decisions are effected; and fulfil the functions of a District Policy Committee that are required in Standing Orders.

5. Staffing

5.1 Again mirroring connexional principles the **core staff** shall consist of

- a single **District Chair** (a presbyter) acting as a representative focal point for the District and wider Connexion so far as the circuits, ecumenical partners and the wider community are concerned, and fulfilling the role of a Chair in Standing Orders;
- a **District Secretary** (lay or ordained, employed or stationed) mirroring the connexional role of the Connexional Secretary, co-ordinating and where appropriate managing the district staff;
- and a **Synod Secretary (assisted by a Presbyteral Synod Secretary)** relating to the Synod and District Council.

5.2 In order that the Chair may concentrate on exercising not just a representative role but also a pastoral role in support of lay and ordained colleagues we are considering how to make creative use of **Deputy Chairs** to act as the link people to particular circuits, areas or entities within the district. For example, if there are 2, one might relate to the urban areas and one to the rural and semi-rural areas. If there are 3, a third might relate to external agencies.

6. Finance and further work

6.1 Initial finance and governance modelling has commenced. Further work will be done on this in time for the formal consultations with the circuits and the synods.

6.2 Circuit Assessments should not increase because of the amalgamation of the two districts, and the district component of the assessment may even be decreased or held in check because of the streamlining of procedures and removal of duplication. However, we recognise that regardless of these changes, overall Circuit assessment is likely to increase due to inflation and planned increases in stipends and pension contributions.

7. Resolutions

The Synods of the Birmingham District and the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District therefore respectfully request that the Methodist Council adopt the following resolutions:

***RESOLUTIONS

71/1 The Council receives the report.

71/2 The Council notes the proposed amalgamation of the Birmingham District and the Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District to form a single District from 1 September 2025, and, in accordance with Standing Order 401, directs that a formal consultation with the Circuit meetings and Synods of the participating Districts take place by the end of the spring Representative Synods, to enable the Council to consider submitting a proposal to the Conference of 2024.

Appendix: Map

