

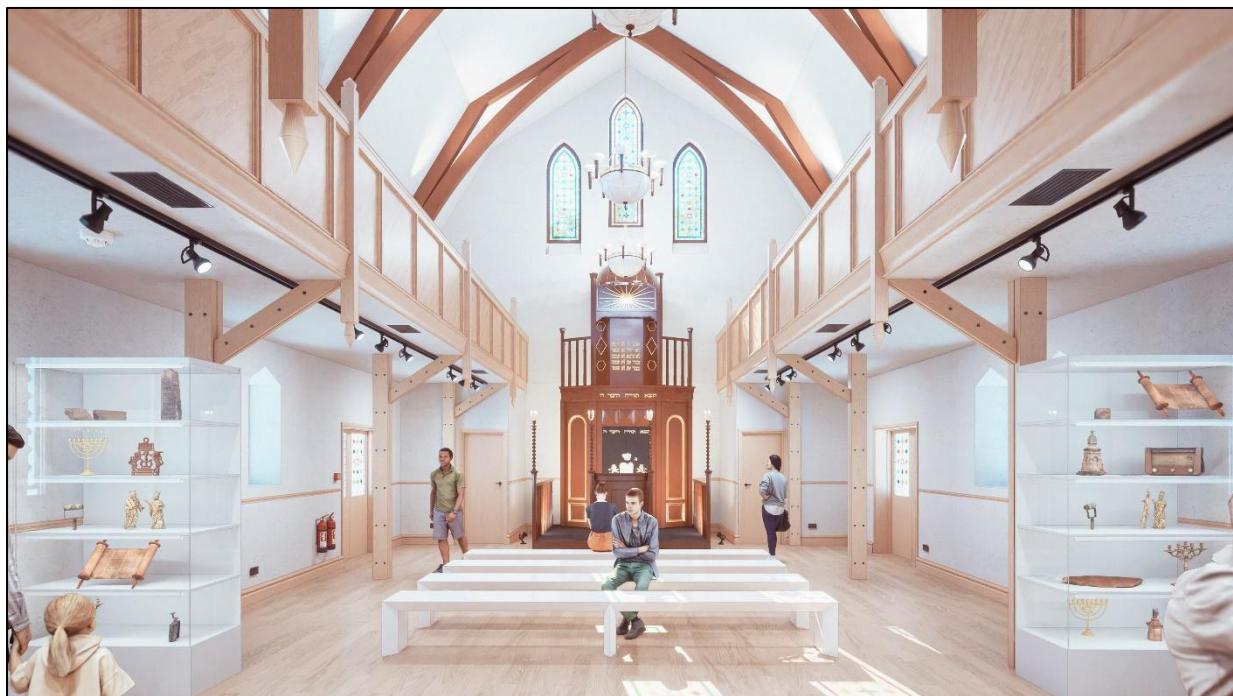


WELSH JEWISH
CULTURAL CENTRE
CANOLFAN DDIWYLLIANNOL
IDDEWIG CYMRY

Welsh Jewish Cultural Centre

Project Consultation and Engagement

May 2025



PROJECT CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the consultation work and the levels of engagement undertaken for the Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue Project, a major development project that will restore the derelict and empty building and establish a new Welsh Jewish Cultural Centre. These consultations have presented the Project – and the design proposals for the building – to the local community in Merthyr Tydfil, and to wider communities across Wales, with the aim of testing proposals and obtaining feedback to inform the ongoing development of the Project.

THE PROJECT

The Welsh Jewish Cultural Centre (WJCC) will be a heritage, cultural and community centre that will serve a broad and diverse range of people who have an interest in local and national Jewish Welsh heritage, art and culture in all its forms, from the local Merthyr Tydfil area but also from across Wales, the UK and the world.

The WJCC will be based in the historic Grade II former Synagogue on Brynteg Terrace, which will be profiled as a visitor and community centre, with administrative facilities situated in the adjacent Primrose Hill House, also a Grade II building.

The Synagogue and Primrose Hill House have been acquired by the Foundation for Jewish Heritage to be safeguarded as heritage and community assets – with the Synagogue building among the foremost heritage assets in Merthyr Tydfil, and recognised as the most important Jewish cultural site in Wales, and one of the most at-risk Jewish sites in the UK.

The WJCC will celebrate Welsh Jewish culture that links the past with the present, unites people and builds connections through Jewish heritage, culture and traditions. The Centre will offer an exciting range of inspiring initiatives, programmes and partnerships will bolster and support the development and growth of the WJCC. Together with the creation of an innovative programming and activity schedule, the WJCC has the opportunity to become a leading cultural and heritage destination that reaches out to a range of audiences, both physically and digitally.

The key aims of the Project are to:

- Restore and bring to life the historic interior and exterior fabric of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue
- Develop the adjacent Primrose Hill House for use by the WJCC as a learning and office space as well as to provide commercial space to bolster the organisation's income generation
- Create public access to the Synagogue as well as provide visitor facilities to provide for an all-round visitor experience
- Develop the landscape to the side and back of the building to provide for a better all-round experience and to extend the interpretation offer
- Create interpretation internally in the Synagogue that will tell the story of the Jewish community of Merthyr Tydfil and Wales, the impact of the Jewish community on the local area and Wales, the story of migration to the area as well as explain the key artefacts and objects that were housed in the Synagogue when functioning
- Create learning resources that will inspire schoolchildren and visiting families so that they can understand the importance of the Jewish community of Merthyr Tydfil to the area and to Wales and to learn more about Jewish customs, culture and traditions
- Involve the local community in the life of the WJCC as volunteers and active users of the space
- Create partnership programmes with strategic partners locally and nationally to help sustain the national remit of the project
- Secure the financial sustainability of the project with realistic financial planning, a fundraising campaign and income generation
- Create a governance model that will support the WJCC moving forward.

OVERVIEW OF CONSULTATIONS

Consultations have taken place online through meetings, open days and workshops, and in person through focus groups, conversations and pop up events at local venues. Consultation with the local and wider community and potential audiences, as well as a range of pilot activities, have helped us to develop and refine our project proposals, and specifically to test the following:

- Capital proposals and design development for the buildings
- Landscaping proposals for external areas to the north of the Synagogue
- The groups that represent target audiences and visitors, with the establishment of contacts to enable ongoing consultation
- The interpretation and exhibition design proposals, including key stories/narratives
- The types of activities that will be undertaken by the WJCC

The groups that have been consulted include:

- Immediate neighbours to the Synagogue
- The local community in Merthyr Tydfil
- The wider community in south Wales and across Wales
- Local community organisations and charities in Merthyr Tydfil
- Local heritage organisations and groups in Merthyr Tydfil
- Educational institutions and schools
- Potential partner organisations
- Key stakeholder groups across Wales and the UK including potential activity partners
- Other faith organisations
- The Jewish community in south Wales and across Wales
- Potential audience and visitor groups in Merthyr Tydfil and across Wales
- Local community leaders in Merthyr Tydfil including Councillors

Consultations have been scheduled and overseen by:

- Neil Richardson, Project Director
- Ashley Collins, Community Engagement Officer
- Headland Design, Project Activity Planners
- Cultural Associates Oxford, Project Business Planners
- Creative Core, Project Interpretation Planners

CONSULTATION ACTIVITY

The levels of consultation and engagement have included:

Project Website and Social Media

The Project Website (<https://www.jewishheritage.wales>) and the website of the Foundation for Jewish Heritage (<https://www.foundationforjewishheritage.com>) have shown plans for the redevelopment of the Synagogue and the types of activity envisaged for the site. There have been regular blogs about progress with project development, visits to the site by interested parties, our work with partner organisations and ways to get involved. The website has a contact page, with dedicated emails for general enquiries, community outreach, marketing and communications, and for fundraising, volunteering and support.

The Project and the Foundation both use social media to promote work and activities, including community and engagement events, on an ongoing basis.

Project Open Day: Merthyr Tydfil

A key engagement event was the Project Open Day on Sunday 18 February 2024, held at the Synagogue and at Theatr Soar, with the following activities at each site:

- **Synagogue**

The Synagogue was opened to the public for the first time since it closed in 2004, so that the local community and the wider public could see the building in its present condition, and compare this directly with the proposed plans. Entry was controlled with sign-ins and safety briefings. On-site activities included:

- Project team members and volunteers on hand to manage visitors and to answer questions.
- Displays of project proposals including design scheme plans, visualisations of the interior of the Synagogue once reopened, and early ideas for exhibition and the visitor experience.
- Feedback forms for visitors to provide comments on proposals.
- Memory forms for the local community and others to contribute the recollections of the building; as a Synagogue, a gym, or as a prominent heritage building in the town landscape.

- **Theatr Soar**

The main consultation activity took place in Theatr Soar. From sign-in sheets we know that most who visited the Synagogue also visited Theatr Soar. Activities and representation included:

- Displays of project proposals, with the Project Architect on hand to answer questions about the design scheme and to obtain direct feedback on proposals from visitors.
- Presentation and testing of activity ideas, with the Project Activity Planning team on hand with questionnaires and feedback forms to engage directly with visitors and to establish a better understanding of potential audiences and their interests and expectations.
- Business Planning team also on hand to answer questions about the sustainability of the WJCC and to test business plan assumptions including visitor interest (numbers) and price points for entry and activities.
- Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments Wales represented to talk about digital access to information and stories – and with equipment to scan and log any documents or images relating to the Synagogue brought in by members of the local community.
- Two presentations by a local historian on the history and importance of the Synagogue.
- A children's table with activities

Team members on hand to engage with visitors included the Project Manager, the Community Engagement Officer and a Community Support Officer (on secondment from the Holocaust Education Trust), as well as key officials from the Foundation for Jewish Heritage, and the Project Steering Committee. Refreshments were available, and the Open Day ended with a performance by a Wales-based Klezmer band, which gave visitors an entertaining insight into traditional Jewish music.

The Open Day attracted approximately 500 visitors, primarily from the Merthyr Tydfil area, as well as from across south Wales, and further afield including Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester and even London. Feedback on proposals was entirely positive.

Community Consultation Days

Two full-day community consultations were held in August 2024: at Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Merthyr Tydfil, and at Insole Court, Cardiff. The purpose of the consultations was:

- To present project design proposals as a follow up to the Open Day, and to obtain community feedback.
- To test ideas for exhibition themes and narratives with potential visitors and audiences, and the ways in which stories could best be presented – in order to inform the exhibition design.
- To promote the project and generate awareness, interest and support.

Near Neighbour Consultation

A consultation event specifically for near neighbours was held at the Synagogue in July 2024. The aim was to present project proposals, including design development for the buildings (the Synagogue and Primrose Hill) and for the landscape, and obtain feedback. The Project Director was on hand to talk through the

proposals, and there was representation from design team, with the Landscape Architect also on hand. Key points discussed included:

- Rights of way and site access.
- Project delivery plans.
- Property boundaries including boundaries – with options for landscaping to delineate and improve the overall grounds, including fencing/hedges.
- Reiteration of activity plans to identify any concerns or impact.

Throughout 2024, the Project Community Engagement Officer has been in regular contact with near neighbours to ensure they are fully aware of project proposals. The overall support for the project by neighbours is overwhelming. The derelict Synagogue has attracted considerable amounts of anti-social behaviour including alcohol and drug abuse – and so neighbours see the redevelopment of the Synagogue as an important initiative in improving the social and community landscape in the immediate area.

Online Survey

An online survey was conducted from July through to October 2024 to obtain feedback and comments from people in the local and wider community who could not attend in-person events. The focus was on proposals for storytelling and exhibition design, although this related strongly to the design proposals for the Synagogue building. The online survey generated 95 responses.

Education Forums

Education and learning will be a major activity for the WJCC, and we have actively engaged with schools and learning institutions to test the interest in both visits to the Synagogue by school and other educational groups, as well as outreach educational activities across Wales. This engagement has been led by a member of the Project Steering Committee who is the lead RVE (Religion, Values and Ethics) adviser to schools in Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Swansea, supported by an Education Officer on secondment from the Holocaust Educational Trust. Engagement has included:

- Online educational workshops with teachers from across south Wales
- Consultation Jewish learning groups including the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Weiner Holocaust Library.

Rhondda Cynon Taf has made a place available for a representative of WJCC on its Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE).

Networking Events

Scheduling of specific networking events to bring together key stakeholders across Wales, and attendance at other networking events to represent the project, including:

- Networking day held at Insole Court, Cardiff, in September 2024 to present the project to key stakeholder groups with the aim of testing the project including capital design proposals, understanding visitors and audiences, and developing partnerships. 25 attendees from organisations across Wales.
- Representation at BAME forums through Welsh Government in Swansea and Cardiff.
- Attendance at 2-day workshop hosted by Bangor University on the 'Lived Experience of Jews in Wales and Ireland'.
- Attendance at the Places of Workshop Forum in Swansea.
- Attendance at community engagement and networking events organisation by the Cyfarthfa Foundation and Cyfarthfa Museum.
- Attendance at Holocaust Memorial Services.

At all networking events (and when appropriate), information about the project – including capital design proposals – was made available for review and comment.

Individual Stakeholder Consultations

There has been extensive consultation about the project, the plans and the proposals with individuals and groups through our activity planning work. Conversations with the following organisations have been held regarding working partnership:

- Josef Herman Foundation
- Weiner Holocaust Library
- The College, Merthyr Tydfil
- Troedyrhiw Youth Group
- Jewish Heritage Association South Wales
- Theatr Soar
- Holocaust Education Trust
- People's Collections Wales
- Llandudno Museum
- Manchester Jewish Museum
- Cyfarthfa Castle & Park
- AC St Fagan's Museum
- Rhondda Heritage Park and Cynon Valley Museum
- Gladstone's Library
- Hope Church, Merthyr
- Compass Community Hub
- Merthyr Historical Society
- Merthyr Library

Consultations with potential audiences have presented the proposals, including the capital design scheme, and have included a series of key questions which have helped to inform our research, including:

- What is interesting (or special) about Merthyr's Synagogue?
- Demographic info – postcode, age, disability, ethnicity, Jewish, religion/ ancestry
- Historic places / museums that you visit
- Would they visit Welsh Jewish Heritage centre in Merthyr
- Take part in outreach activities – around Merthyr / across Wales
- Which stories are of interest (select from list)
- Types of events/ activities of interest (see list)
- What is the key story for you about Welsh Jewish history?

Key conversations have been held with the following:

- Welsh Religious Buildings Trust
- The College Merthyr Tydfil
- Youth Service Partnership Forum
- Treharris Boys and Girls Club
- Rhondda Heritage Park
- Gladstone's Library
- Manchester Jewish Museum
- Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery
- Hope Church 'Out for an Hour' Community Group
- Amgueddfa Cymru – St Fagans
- Learning Through Outdoors Group
- Compass Community Hub
- Merthyr Historical Society
- Manchester Jewish Museum Volunteers
- Theatr Soar, Merthyr Tydfil
- Tywlynrodyn Youth Club
- Youth Club Troedyrhiw