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Diocese: Oxford **Archdeaconry:** Berkshire
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Statement of Needs

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Improving Access at St John the Evangelist Church, Newbury

General Information

St John's holds a very significant place in the Christian and wider community in Newbury, with a rich and notable historical and aesthetic heritage. Indeed, these are integral to its prayerful ambience and make St John's a very sacred space which impacts on everyone who enters. This includes those who enter regularly to worship; those who attend occasionally for baptisms, weddings, funerals or festive celebrations such as Christmas; and those who come to participate in community events or concerts. St John's thus plays an important role in both the spiritual and worldly life of people of all ages and abilities, whether locals or visitors, and has a great deal to offer.

What is needed?

Despite the significance of St John's and the activities it accommodates, it is felt that the current entrance arrangements into the church are not as welcoming or accessible as they need to be. Improvements to the entrance and narthex of the church would be invaluable in helping and heartening the experience of regular worshipers, as well as encouraging and inspiring the entry of newcomers. It has been determined that this aim of improving community access can be achieved by the delivering the following two objectives:

1. A single access point for all, by provision of a disabled access via the main entrance.
2. Improved visibility and presentation of the entrance and narthex.

The proposal

In order to deliver these two objectives, four elements have been identified for construction, alteration or improvement:

1. External glass entrance porch – A new fully glazed entrance porch incorporating bi-parting automatic glass doors at the main entrance to the church.
2. Ramp – A gentle incline from the entrance porch into the southern side-aisle, giving access to the nave and main church.
3. Lighting – Provision of improved lighting in the narthex and entrance area.
4. Adjustments to the doors – The existing inner and outer doors are to be retained with the inner doors permanently pinned back.

Why?

The rationale for each of these four proposals are as follows:

1. External glass entrance porch – The two sets of double wooden doors into the narthex that make up the main entrance at the west end of the church are dark and heavy, with the inner ones being hazardous to open and close. This makes for a difficult and unsafe entry, as well as a bleak, dark and gloomy atmosphere in the entrance porch. This is not the image St John's wants to present to the world, as part of the mission of St John's (as, indeed, for the whole Church) is to welcome anyone and everyone simply, openly and warmly. In order to help accomplish this mission, it is proposed to install a new fully glazed glass entrance porch incorporating bi-parting automatic glass doors at the main entrance to the church. This will make the act of entry easier for all, and allow for visibility into the church before entering; indeed, any passers-by would be able to view inside the church, and so may be enticed to come in. Furthermore, this will increase the light levels in the porch and narthex, and so help to lift the murky atmosphere which people may find unwelcoming.

2. Ramp - The accessibility of the church is restricted not only by heavy doors and poor lighting, as discussed elsewhere in this document, but also by the presence of three steps between the narthex and nave. At present, those with walking aids, wheelchairs or pushchairs are directed around the sides of the church and forced to enter either via the Parish rooms or by the vestry door at the East end. The former route necessitates negotiation of an exposed pathway and opening of another two doors. This gives a very negative message, especially to those unfamiliar to the church, such as visitors and newcomers. A common entrance for all is important theologically in terms of welcome and equality, as well as legally. The proposed installation of a ramp from the main porch, through the current electrical cupboard, up into main body of the church will provide a universal, easy entry for everyone from the main entrance, regardless of their physical capabilities.

3. Lighting – The poor lighting in the entrance may have been part of the original architect's intention, effecting a sense of moving from darkness into light as one enters the relatively dark lobby to ascend the steps to the right and enter the nave. However, this darkness is problematic if the gloominess, invisibility and inaccessibility of the church deters people from entering the church in the first place. So, whilst the intended theological contrasts and symbolism may have worked in the past, they are unlikely to be effective now, and their significance lost on contemporary visitors who can find this darkness uninviting, even intimidating. Furthermore, this darkness poses a serious safety hazard, especially when combined with the steps. Better lighting in the entrance porch will make it safer and more inviting, and will also better display the architectural and artistic beauties within the narthex, such as the font and original doors.

4. Adjustments to the current doors – As outlined above, the current two sets of double wooden doors into the narthex are dark and heavy, with the inner ones being hazardous to open and close. However, the doors are significant to the history and legacy of St John's: whilst the inner doors are not dedicated, the outer ones are. As such, it is desired that they remain visible. Therefore it is proposed that the inner doors are permanently pinned back and the outer doors usually held open but kept fully operational for occasional use. In combination with the glass entrance porch, this will increase the light levels in the porch and narthex and allow for visibility into the church before entry.

The first objective, of a single access point for all by provision of a disabled access via the main entrance, will be realised by the bi-parting automatic glass doors incorporated into the external glass porch and the ramp from the porch through the current electrical cupboard. The second objective, of improved visibility and presentation of the entrance and narthex, will be realised by the light streaming through the external glass entrance porch, the provision of improved lighting in the narthex and entrance area, and the holding back of the current wooden doors. Thus the overall aim of improving community access will be achieved.

Justification

Pastorally, practically and missionally, we desire to create a more inviting aspect and a safer entrance to St John's, and improve the inclusivity of all members of the church and community in special services and events. The proposed changes to the doors and lighting will create a more inviting and well-lit area, illuminating what is within, which is consistent with theology of welcome and light. And the introduction of a ramp to allow access to the church from the main entrance will mean all comers are treated equally, can enter safely, and feel accepted and welcome, regardless of their mobility.

St John's is unquestionably part of the local community, open to all, and as such must be accessible to all. Currently, however, the church suffers from a poor, unsafe and unwelcoming entrance yielding restrictive and discriminatory access. This is due to the heavy doors, dark entrance, steps and cramped entrance area. We wish to improve the accessibility, openness, visibility and welcoming of St John's for both its congregation and its community, thus ensuring all feel welcomed and valued, whilst also fulfilling our legal and safety obligations. Practical, historical, pastoral, liturgical and theological perspectives are all important as we strive to achieve this goal, which we intend to accomplish through the installation of a ramp, improved lighting, repositioning of the current doors and a new external glass entrance porch. The principles driving our intentions to make these changes are the desire to serve God and our fellow human beings in a way that respects and honours the past, connects to the mission of the present and gives everyone access to a brighter future.

The Improving Community Access Project (i-CAP) Project Management Group
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