

St Swithun's Church, Bathford,

Statement of Need

This statement of need is being prepared to support a proposed repurposing of facilities already in place at the west end of the church to improve accessibility and in particular the toilet arrangements.

Section 1 - General Information

St Swithun's is part of a United Benefice with St John's Batheaston and St Catherine's. The village of Bathford has approximately 2,000 residents and there are 109 people on the Church Electoral Roll of which just a few live outside the Parish. We are very much a Village Church rather than a gathered Community. Since the United Benefice was formed a few people travel between St Swithun's and St John's for Sunday services to follow the Holy Communion service alternating between these two churches.

The clergy of the benefice are the Vicar Rev'd Laurretta Wilson, aided by the Assistant Curate Rev'd Jane Hoe. We also have a Lay Reader Dennis Pearson at St Swithun's and we have recently been joined by a retired priest, though she is as yet not applying for Permission to Officiate.

St Swithun's also benefits from a strong PCC, an active and able Fabric Committee and a Pastoral Group. We also have some excellent volunteers who support social and outreach efforts such as our monthly Film Club, Quiz nights, a thriving Toddler Group, monthly Children's Church, and post-service pastoral gatherings with refreshments. Regular meetings are also held in the church including PCC, Standing Committee, Charity Action Group and Pastoral group .

St Swithun's is a Village church with a breadth of tradition within it. The community seeks different things at church services with a variety of styles of services, where audio-visual presentation and provision of refreshments has become a pre-requisite. To encourage everyone to flourish in their faith we have a breadth of services through the month: two services are Communion services (one more traditionally liturgical), one service is a Contemporary service with little liturgy, and the fourth is a Welcome church - a café style service with discussion. The average attendance in these services is between 40 and 50 people.

We also have an Evening Prayer once a month in the afternoon with approximately 15 people, a Children's afternoon service with currently up to 12 children although we pray this will grow), and two teenager services (started as a result of participation in the Bishop's Launchpad initiative) which offer the young people a chance to reconnect- both with friends from Bathford Primary School, and with the Christian faith that they experienced there.

We do have a strong link with the local Primary school and offer weekly school assemblies. We also host the whole school in termly services in Church, and offer some RE lessons. The school also shares our church values – abbreviated as to Grow, Care, Serve and Share.

Major festivals draw larger congregations from the village with services on Easter Day, Harvest Festival, Carol services, Christmas Eve and particularly for Remembrance Sunday. In 2024 there were 3 Baptisms, 1 Wedding, 3 Funerals within the church and 3 burials of ashes. Other funeral services at the Crematorium were also carried out. The attendance at these services ranges from about 20 – 150+

Music is important at St Swithun's, not only the variety of provision for the Sunday services but also for festivals - a choir sing at Christmas, inclusive of anyone in the village who would like to join. This is gathered and directed by Sandra Dixon who is our main leader of music, assisted by another member of the congregation Katherine Lush. A series of charity fund raising concerts also takes place in the church. These have also proved popular with many people who are not regular members of the congregation. Attendance is often up to 100 people. The central position of the church within the village, its good acoustics and modern audio-visual facilities and new electric piano/keyboard make it ideal for events such as these which are greatly enjoyed.

The Church is always open during daylight hours (thanks to villagers, not all of whom are congregation members) and it is very well used by the community as a place of prayer and a quiet space. It is a well-maintained building.

Because the church is so well-used, we are very conscious that it is not accessible for everyone. It does not comply with equal access legislation, and it impedes our desire to make the church a welcoming space for all. The changes we are proposing would help us to provide a space that is more accessible and welcoming for everyone including wheelchair users - children, people who come for Occasional Offices and our regular worshippers. The work has practical benefits, the ramp and improved toilet facilities accessible office, and also missional improvements attractions in being able to use the church more flexibly and offer improved catering provision.

Financially the Church is stable at present but is continually striving to maintain the ability to meet its running costs, including a 2025 Parish Share Contribution of £67,648. St Swithun's does have (restricted and PCC designated) funds for this building project, largely as a result of a substantial legacy, which will go a long way to financing the Accessible Toilet, re-shaping the current office space to enhance the kitchen facilities, and relocating the office space. It is intended to seek whatever grant assistance is available for this work when the detailed plans have been drawn up and the full potential cost is known and also to embark on fundraising initiatives.

Section 2- What we need

After consultation with our architect and a detailed discussion with the Diocesan Advisory Committee we are proposing a series of changes to the church that centre around improved accessibility. The PCC have endorsed this as it aligns with our church's strategic values and our Missional perspective. It will also aid our provision of an inclusive worship space and compliance with current legislation. The architect drafted a number of plans (we have worked with him to modify these slightly so that we can keep the existing toilet) and have arrived at our preferred plan (attached). This focusses on repurposing the facilities, principally at the west end of the church and also improves access at the main north door entrance.

Section 3 – The Proposal

Ramped access

The porch currently houses a temporary ramp which is manageable for wheelchair users, often with assistance but is not easy for people to manage who have problems walking. The proposal is to construct a permanent ramped access to allow independent access for everyone with appropriate handrail provision. We propose that the existing stone slabs to the porch are lifted and re-laid to deliver a permanent and easy to manage accessible entrance. This would maintain the stonework in the porch and would improve the current aesthetics. The Diocesan buildings advisor says that this has been delivered across the diocese to great effect and with minimal impact visually.

West End Facilities:

The facilities at the west end of the south aisle include a very cramped and not easily accessible toilet, an administrative office and a galley type kitchenette. The proposal is that these should be repurposed so that the office and galley area is to be replaced by:

- An additional toilet that would allow level access and sufficient space to accommodate wheelchair users and those with other mobility difficulties. Baby changing facilities would also be housed in this area.
- Use of the remaining space to accommodate an improved kitchen and servery area to allow a cooker, and some space for simple cooking to provide hot food, which would be an attraction for our Welcome church services and our outreach events.
- Cooking is proving to be a popular feature of our children's services and so improving the facilities is also a missional imperative. One of the leaders has said that we are not just improving their cooking skills but allowing informal conversations to develop which are just as 'influential' as any formal teaching. Ideally we would also like to create room for a fridge and dishwasher.
- Refurbishment of the current toilet. This would effectively give us two toilets which would improve facilities especially for larger services and concerts.

We have considered a number of different configurations to accommodate these facilities. The proposed plan has been chosen because it allows us to keep the existing toilet as an extra facility and to improve on the kitchen provision. The DAC appeared greatly in favour of this version of the plans because it kept the existing footprint of the building and did not have any adverse aesthetic effect on the building. The Diocesan Buildings Advisor says that any alterations to the drainage and venting should be straightforward as the extant drainage is near the west vestry/tower door.

Because of the location of the water supply within the church to accommodate the new toilet and changes to the kitchen we will need to re-locate the office. The above work can proceed without the office re-location as, in the short term, our Administrator has agreed to work from home or from the upstairs meeting room in the church.

The priorities for a new office location are

- A secure office space with accessibility for visitors. In line with the focus on accessibility this needs to be on ground level- both for visitors and to be inclusive for any future Benefice Administrator.
- A good, healthy working environment for the Benefice Administrator who is always in the office two days a week, and at busy times more often.

We did consider moving the office to the upstairs room in the church as this is a light and pleasant working space. However, concerns have been expressed over safety and security of this option. It would necessitate a security camera being installed, it would not be easily accessible by many visitors and certain equipment especially the large photocopier would need to be housed downstairs, away from the Administrator requiring a lot of movement up and down stairs.

Another option we did consider was to build an extension at the back (west) door of the church which would have provided space for a new toilet and more open entrance vestibule along with allowing us to retain our current office space. However, this option would change the external appearance of the church viewed from one side with resulting planning impacts on our grade 2 listed building. Members of the visiting DAC team were not in favour of this approach because it changed the footprint of the church and carried considerable aesthetic challenges; since it was also likely to carry the highest implementation cost of the options we considered, we did not pursue it.

Repurposing the base of the tower to relocate the office

The church architect has suggested a re-ordering of the existing choir vestry at the base of the Tower to accommodate the office and continue to provide storage space. (see plan)

At present the choir vestry and the area immediately in front at the west end of the nave is a rather dark space. However, the ambience of this space would improve if the organ pipes and console were removed (see below for details of the organ and pipes). Any perceived disadvantage of removing the organ seems greatly outweighed by the advantages of exposing the stained glass window. Exposing the currently hidden beautiful stained glass window thereby allows both its own beauty to be appreciated and also allows natural light into the west end of the church, and this new office space.

The office space would be sited on the ground level, along with minimal storage for essential items. This area would be carefully designed with minimal furniture and fittings to maintain accessibility. The current items housed in this area can mostly be removed and the remainder housed carefully in the upstairs space. The minimal aesthetic in the office space will be important as this area will be visible from the nave- there would be a wooden framed glass screen to match the work already done at the east-side window.

An improved staircase, rather than the 'loft ladder' would allow better use of the first-floor space.

Removing the organ

An expert survey carried out in 2018 by Harrison and Harrison, organ builders of Durham, determined that the electronic switching gear and control system was unreliable and out of date. The conclusion was that the instrument had 'no future' and putting in place a replacement second hand instrument was the only "realistic approach" - estimated in 2018 as at least £60,000 with the risk of a much higher cost if the transfer into the current site was not "fairly straightforward". The organ pipes themselves are not a cohesive whole, the instrument was re-composed from a number of different sources in the 1970s. It is not the original site of the organ or pipes that were in the southeast corner of the church beside the choir but were removed following a fire in 1969. (see statement of significance). The organ has not worked for nearly 10 years. We now use a high quality electronic piano which has, amongst other features, an effective organ mode.

The benefit in removing the organ and pipes would be revealing the stained-glass window – the stained-glass windows are a beautiful feature of this church building and exposing this one would aid both our worship and the overall aesthetic of the building. The removal would also allow better use of the space.

Accessibility

Following the repurposing of the choir vestry in the base of the tower to be the core office facility on the ground floor this will allow equal access to the main office facilities directly from the nave. The proposal would include the creation of direct access to the office from outside with a door discreetly positioned in the South West corner and not visible from Church Street. This would improve the safety and security of the Benefice Administrator.

Storage

There are some larger items currently housed in the choir vestry that will need to remain in the downstairs space and this is accommodated for in the plans. e.g. table tennis table that is used for the teenager group. However, much better use can be made of the upstairs space for storage if some of the monuments are re-located.

Monuments

There are several monuments in the upstairs space that are currently off the wall, and some loosely fixed to the wall and at risk of being damaged. These need to be carefully assessed and properly re-housed. They are not in their original locations; they have been moved before and so a proper re-housing would be an improvement. There is an existing catalogue and the Diocesan Buildings advisor has offered to assist with which organisation can advise on their assessment and re-siting.

Section 4 - Why the changes are needed and why they are needed now

- Most importantly the church needs to be able to offer equal access for all and our current facilities do not allow this. At the moment people who have any kind of mobility limitation find it impossible to use the existing toilet.
- Although toilet facilities are not obviously a missional concern, to tell anyone that they cannot go to the toilet becomes an issue of inclusion/exclusion and is as such far from the good news we proclaim.
- We are also aware that having only able bodied toilet facilities might put us in breach of employment law since it effectively prevents us from employing someone with physical disabilities as our part time administrator.
- Improved baby changing facilities again would make families feel welcome and comfortable that such provision is available
- Offering children a chance to cook as part of their afternoon service is proving an attractive feature of the time together and so an improved area and a fixed cooker and other appliances is a missional imperative.
- Offering hot food would mean that we could develop our provision for café style services and increase our hospitality at concerts, school events (e.g our annual Easter experience for year 1) and allow us to move some of our larger social events (such as Harvest suppers and quizzes) into the church. We see increasing hospitality in the church as an important part of our missional activities to invite more villagers to feel comfortable with being inside a church.
- Improved hand washing facilities would also be of great benefit.
- Re-locating the office to a space that is on ground level and to a space which is currently not used does mean some internal development, but this would be an improvement in removing the vestigial organ and exposing the beautiful stained-glass window that is currently hidden by the organ pipes.

All these reasons are urgent and immediate, and we have been advised that the compelling reasons, the obvious space that is already easily available (once the office is removed) and the funds that are ready to use, mean this can be an application for swift attention and approval.

Section 5- Justification

We believe that these proposals will benefit all users of our Church and will not have any detrimental effect on the significance of the building. The changes that we propose will not affect the footprint of the church. The interior changes are not to the detriment of the church but will enhance its use and aesthetic and therefore the worship and mission of the church. The benefits include an environment which caters for the wellbeing of the whole community by providing more inclusive facilities which people expect to find in public buildings. Our mission to the local community will be enhanced through offering greater hospitality which can then lead to new friendships and connections and faith journeys. We believe that these changes will help us to develop our worship, mission and ministry to the community that we serve.

Rev'd Laurretta Wilson
John Keelty- Church Warden
Michael Gilbert- Treasurer

On behalf of St Swithun's Bathford PCC 26 March 2025