

St Michael & All Angels
East Coker

Project Beacon Statement of Needs

St Michael and All Angels Church,
East Coker

Prepared by East Coker PCC – October 2025

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The Current Situation

The Parish and Village

In 2021 the population of East Coker civil parish was 1721. In 2025 there are 54 on the church's electoral roll. The largest population demographic for the parish in 2021 was 50 – 59.



The village has a thriving primary school of about 200 pupils. Though not a C of E school, East Coker Community Primary School has growing links with the church. The church hosts the school's annual Christmas Service and a leavers' tea party each year. A school governor is on the Project Beacon committee, and we intend to explore more outreach opportunities with the school presented by Project Beacon.

A significant housing development proposal (Keyford) which will consist of up to 800 new dwellings is currently under holding direction from the Secretary of State, with final approval pending central government review. Though on the outskirts of neighbouring Yeovil, Keyford is within the East Coker Civil Parish.

Services and Church Attendance

St Michael and All Angels Church is a rural parish church situated in the South Somerset village of East Coker. It is part of the Coker Ridge Benefice which is made up of seven parishes. As well as worshipping together, the churches of the benefice support one another, sharing resources and expertise for mutual benefit.

There are normally 3 regular services held in St Michael's each month; on the 2nd Sunday - Morning Prayer; on the 3rd Sunday - Evensong; and on the 4th Sunday - Holy Communion, which is a sung Eucharist. A united Benefice service is held on 5th Sundays and St Michael's takes its turn hosting this as it does with weekly Wednesday morning Benefice prayers.

The average attendance at the Sunday morning services is 30. Attendance at Evening Prayer has declined so we will be reimagining it in 2026 after a winter break.

Despite the high median age in the village, we have a couple of young families who regularly attend meaning that the age of the congregation at most services ranges between 5 and 90. But as it stands, the young worshipers are in the minority, and the present congregation is on the older side. The church has a children's corner and there is work going on to recruit a Benefice Children and Families' Worker (funding has been secured).

As well as the regular Sunday pattern, services take place on high days and holidays. Special services were held to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee and to give thanks for her life following her death, both attracting congregations in excess of 80. A service to celebrate the Coronation of King Charles III was similarly well supported. Last year over 100 attended the Christmas carol service, on Christmas Day about 50 attended a family Communion and a recent Choral Evensong to celebrate our patrol festival filled the church. St Michael's regularly hosts weddings, baptisms and funerals.



A brief encounter at the Pets Service



Remembrance Sunday

Community activities also take place in the church. It is a venue for the biennial Od Arts Festival, which normally entails hosting contemporary art installations and concerts over the festival weekend. We put on a church fête each year, with large crowds attracted by teas, tower tours, plant and produce sales, raffles and the opportunity to ‘splat the vicar!’. The church also hosts occasional concerts, most recently the Parnham Voices, a local a Capella group as part of their charity fund raising choral safari. In November 2025 we will host ‘Faith and Stories’ a talk by a crime writer and C of E priest.

The church building

The church is open during daylight hours every day of the year.

The building is in generally good repair. The latest Quinquennial Inspection took place in September 2025 and the report from this will be used to focus repair work and help develop our regular maintenance programme.

In terms of capital funding, St Michael is in a relatively healthy position. A number of endowments over past years give us a good reserve in our fabric fund which will form an excellent start to our future fundraising efforts.

An overview of the church layout is covered in the Statement of Significance, but the following observations are relevant specifically to the Statement of Needs.

Accessibility

The church is not accessible by wheelchair. There is a significant step from the church path into the porch, another step into the main body of the church and then a 3rd step to the nave floor level. After that the floor is level throughout up to the altar steps.



The north entrance

The church path itself is currently laid to a temporary hoggin surface, a measure taken by way of an emergency temporary faculty on H&S grounds.

Linked to accessibility is the limited availability of proximate parking. Only about 6 cars are able to park directly outside the church. We have a tenancy agreement on a nearby glebe field which we open for parking for major events, but the walk to the church is steep and is a struggle for many, particularly the elderly and infirm.



Space

Most of the church interior is filled with fixed pews mounted on platforms. This leaves very little space for social gatherings and fellowship activities, it constrains our options in terms of displaying and interpreting heritage artefacts and makes hosting large groups or conducting group activities problematic.

W.C.

The church has a W.C. at the foot of the tower. However, it is accessed via a narrow door and passageway off the chancel and is small. It is not suitable for wheelchair users and can't be used as a baby changing area.

Refreshment making

The refreshment making facilities in the church are rudimentary. A cabinet in the south transept contains kettles, crockery and cutlery and a trestle table is put out to act as a serving counter when required. The only interior water source is the tap in the W.C. basin, and this is where kettles are filled. The basin is too small to



wash up in, and any waste liquids (undrunk tea etc) needs to be poured out in the churchyard.

Heating and energy efficiency

Like many buildings of its age and type, the church is poorly heated and poorly insulated making it cold and uninviting in the winter months. A heavy curtain is hung in the entrance doorway to try and cut down on drafts, but this has the effect of making the entrance somewhat forbidding.

Lighting¹

Poor lighting in the church is a challenge for those with bad eyesight. It also adds to a slightly gloomy and unwelcoming air and makes appreciation of some of the finer points of architecture, engravings and stained glass difficult to appreciate. The lighting also has a distinct yellow rendering, making internal photography (e.g. at weddings) quite unsatisfactory.

The needs

We need to make the building accessible for everyone, so that anyone, regardless of mobility issues, can visit to worship, attend community events, or access the heritage, history, and tranquillity of our church.

We need to create space in the church to offer more varied forms of worship, facilitate fellowship after services, host community events, and enhance our outreach activities related to our heritage.

We need to be able to provide refreshments for fellowship after weekly services and for high day and holiday festivals, and to support community activities such as sales, concerts, talks and exhibitions.

As well as growing the worshipping community (part of our mission), we need to increase footfall to the church to help us raise funds and makes us more sustainable financially.

We need to better preserve, present and interpret the heritage bound up in the church, so that new audiences brought to the church are helped to understand its significance to the social and cultural history of our community.

We need to make the church more welcoming to visitors.

We need to improve the energy efficiency of the building.

¹ Lighting is mentioned here for completeness. Overhaul and modernisation of the church lighting will be the subject of a separate faculty application.

Evidence for the needs

In 2023 we conducted a village wide survey to gauge people's attitude towards the church. We received 134 responses out of a parish of approximately 1700. The full results can be made available on request. Some headlines from the survey:

- Most respondents had a positive attitude towards the church. Only 10% (14/134) said they never go to church. 41% said they only went for weddings and funerals and almost half said they went regularly – even if for some it was infrequently. 53% (71/134) described themselves as either religious or spiritual with only 17% identifying as atheist.
- When asked to state reasons they did not go to church only 42 responses said it was because they were not religious. 122 stated other reasons, such as being too busy, excessive formality, coldness of the building and poor parking. This suggests that measures to address patterns and styles of worship, and an improvement in access and heating would attract better attendance.
- There is a good awareness of T S Eliot and his connection with the village, and a majority (66%) in favour of making more information about the poet available.
- The church's green agenda received very strong support in the survey.

The Benefice used to run a very successful messy church in the East Coker village hall. When the hall became unavailable and the activity moved to a neighbouring parish, attendance from the village dropped to nearly zero. Messy church at St Michael's is an example of something that recent history suggests would be welcomed in the village.

Village school pupils study local history including a module on William Dampier. That module is being revised and the governor overseeing this has expressed a keen interest in our developing plans, seeing the church as a potential resource for the school

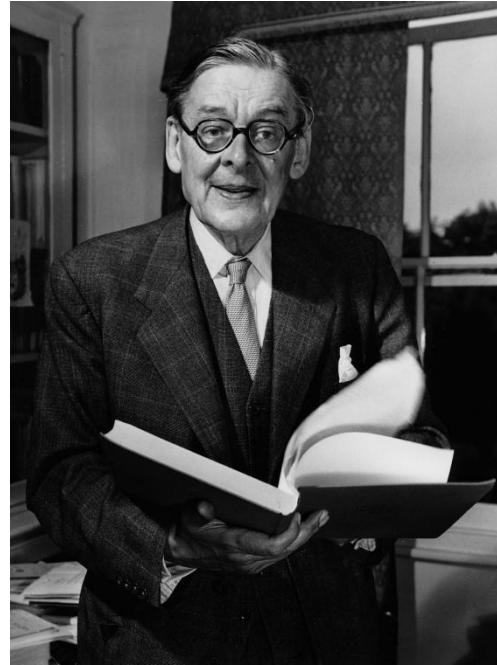


There are several heritage objects and aspects that are neglected and in poor repair. At the time of writing, a conservation report has been commissioned into 3 pieces² in particular.

² C13 Purbeck marble female effigy, C14 unknown male civilian effigy, acrostic ledger stone.

The pre-conquest origins of the church are poorly understood. Local history groups are actively researching this period of the building's story, and this project will help mobilise interest and resources to increase this understanding.

The Eliot corner attracts visitors from around the world. Analysis of entries made in the church visitors' book shows that 20% of visitors are from overseas. Research carried out for Visit Somerset by the Southwest Research Company in 2022 reports that overseas visitors make up less than 10% of tourist visitors to Somerset overall, showing the particular significance of the Eliot Memorial. Of overseas visitors, 33% are from the USA (Eliot's country of birth) and 26% all of entries either mention T S Eliot or quote his poetry in the comments section of the page. Yet there is little information that contextualises Eliot's connection to East Coker and little that leads them to learn more of the building and its wider heritage.



A nearby Grade 1 listed priory (Naish Priory) has recently been acquired by the T. S. Eliot foundation and is to be used as a writers' retreat and study centre. This will further enhance the importance of East Coker as a destination for academics and Eliot devotees and is bound to see still greater interest in the church's memorial corner.

An energy and decarbonisation survey was carried out in 2023, the report from which has informed the proposals in this document³. The report observes that 84% of the church's energy consumption is accounted for by heating, and this is provided by an oil-fired system resulting in high carbon emissions.

The congregation and the PCC have been consulted extensively over reordering plans and are overwhelmingly in favour. We have also engaged the Parish Council and directly with the community and are getting wider village involvement and buy in.

The Proposals

The proposals detailed below are a result of extensive and close collaboration with the Church Architect and iterative informal consultation with the Bath and Wells DAC, statutory consultees, and local authority planners. As part of developing these proposals we have worked closely with heritage interpretation specialists, local historians, conservators, a DAC appointed archaeologist, M&E consultants, lighting designers and a structural engineer. Extensive surveys have been commissioned

³ Inspired Efficiency Energy Efficiency and Net Zero Carbon Advice dated 29 Sep 23.

included topographical surveys, drainage surveys and a bat roosting survey. There follows a narrative description of the proposed changes. A large quantity of supporting documents, plans, drawings and survey reports are also available if required.

Remodel the north entrance for accessibility

We propose the construction of a dais outside the north porch door which will be reached by either via ramp (from the west) or steps from the path. This will create level access to the porch. The floor level of the porch will have been raised so that it is level with the small landing immediately inside the main body of the church. From here an internal ramp will be built leading west, to the main nave floor level. This series of ramps and raise levels will create wheelchair accessibility from the carpark into the nave, from where all of the church can be accessed without steps.

Repave path

We intend to repave the path stone, replacing the temporary hoggin surface.

Improve car parking

Without acquiring neighbouring land there is little we can do to make a significant impact on parking. We do, however, propose to remove the hedge and wall that runs through the church carpark. This will realise some more parking and will make manoeuvring easier, particularly for vehicles such as hearses.

Install a glazed door in north doorway

A glazed door in the north doorway will allow us to remove the curtain to make the main entrance of the church more inviting and welcoming. It will also be more effective in insulating the space and so contribute to the warmth and energy efficiency of the building. Space and design constraints mean that we cannot fully actuate this door, but it is designed to be operable by most wheelchair users, so works towards our accessibility aims.

Remove pews and pew platforms and refloor west end

To create a flexible and adaptable space in the church we plan to remove the pews and pew platforms from the west end of the church (from a line level with the North entrance backwards). The area currently covered by pew platforms will be re-floored in stone tiles. Where possible pews will be repurposed elsewhere in the church.

Reposition font

We will reposition the font to the central aisle, roughly in line with the north entrance, a position that both better symbolises the place and importance of baptism in the Christian journey and allows a more inclusive approach to baptismal services.

Remodel west steps

The additional space created by the re-ordering of the west end allows us to improve the steep and difficult steps from the west door, making them easier to negotiate (particularly for brides in high heels and pall bearers) and more fitting for an important entrance to the church.

Increase storage

The re-ordering of the west end also allows us to increase the capacity of storage either side of the west door with new cupboards. This storage will be necessary, not least to store trolley mounted stackable chairs and folding tables – furniture that will be needed for new uses of the church space.

Install servery

We intend to install a servery in the southwest corner of the church.

Replace heating system

We will remove the existing hot water radiator heating system and decommission the oil-fired boiler. This will be replaced by a range of complementary electric heating solutions.

- Areas of the west end where there are currently pew platforms that are being refloored will be fitted with under-floor heating.
- Two far-infrared chandelier style heaters will be suspended, one from each of the western most arcade arches.
- The deployment of under-pew heaters (already fitted in the east central nave) will be extended to remaining side aisle pews.
- Two convention heaters will be fitted forward of the front pews, either side of the central aisle, in place of existing radiators. These will be used to heat the crossing/pulpit/lectern area when required.
- Plinth heaters will be built into cabinetry in the transepts.

Establish an accessible W.C.

We propose the creation of a fully accessible W.C. The chosen location for this is at the base of the tower, taking up about half of the existing vestry. The new facility would be accessed via a new doorway created from the north transept, through its east wall.

Develop the heritage offering

Central to Project Beacon is a reimagining and revitalisation of our heritage offering. Our developing heritage interpretation plan will weave together objects and stories into a compelling story that charts the fortunes of East Coker and St Michael's church

through the ages. This will be done through conservation and restoration, repositioning and re-presentation, interpretation, and a programme of related activities.

Conservation and restoration.

Our priority for conservation is the 13th century Purbeck marble effigy, followed by the acrostic ledger stone below the chancel arch and the unknown 14th century male effigy. Conservation reports have been commissioned in relation to these objects.

Repositioning and re-presentation⁴

Subject to specialist advice we plan to reposition the Purbeck marble effigy in the south transept, horizontally presented on a new plinth, orientated east west. She will be mounted above the crucifix incised floor slab and beneath the window containing remnants of the oldest (16th century) glass in the church. We also intend to move the 14th century male ham stone effigy to the south transept, making this corner of the church a focus for our interpretation of the medieval/pre-reformation period.

Interpretation

We will develop interpretation of the church's Anglo-Saxon legacy, probably centred on the west end of the nave where evidence can most readily be seen.

New interpretation of the medieval period will be part of the move of the artefacts mentioned above. We will also interpret 17th century items (the remnants of glass, the plague pit, the acrostic ledger, the coat of arms) to paint a picture of a turbulent and portentous century, one which saw the emigration to the New World of Andrew Eliot and the start of the extraordinary voyages of William Dampier.

New Dampier interpretation will become an important feature, and we will examine how the new space created can be used to add further context and border appeal to the T. S. Eliot connection.

Information will be offered about the families commemorated on the east wall of the north transept, making the connection between the manufacture of Coker canvas and Dampier's sea-going achievements.

Activities

Accessibility to the church, the space created by capital works and new facilities will allow us to develop a programme of heritage related activities such as workshops and outreach events.

⁴ Until we have received expert advise the artefacts mentioned will remain in their current positions. Any future moves will be subject to separate faculty applications.

Options appraisal

Accessibility

We looked at 2 options for developing an accessible entrance. The discounted option was to use the west door. This would have entailed some exterior landscaping, the construction of a dais and draft porch inside the door off which would be a power lift. Wheelchair users would access the nave floor level using the lift and others could use modified west-door steps.

The advantages with this option were that it would have had no visual impact on the exterior of the church and would have required relatively little groundwork. However, it would require the installation of a costly and complex mechanism for the lift – one that would introduce an ongoing maintenance burden. The option also altered the internal look and feel of the church and was felt to be visually intrusive. Finally, and importantly to us, we felt this option would have created a separate entrance for wheelchairs. In almost all instances the north entrance is used. It is the natural approach from the village and has always been used by villagers. To expect wheelchair users to use a different entrance from others felt divisive and discriminatory.

Parking

We wanted to be more ambitious and create significant additional parking. A narrow strip of land to the north of the cemetery, which is owned by the church, was considered as an additional parking area. The area is small, and the presence of mature trees made access complicated. We approached the neighbouring landowner to discuss acquiring an additional strip of land from the adjoining field, enough to make the option more viable. He said he wasn't willing to give up the land at this time. Given the very limited benefit we would accrue balanced against the expense of the required work, we decided to put that plan on hold for now. We may revisit it should the neighbouring landowner have a change of heart.

Servery

Three options were considered for the servery (see appendix A). The southwest option was considered the most discreet and practical. An option just to the west of the north door would have necessitated the relocation of the children's corner and would have been impractical so close to the main entrance. An option in the north transept would have meant the loss of valuable storage space. Furthermore, it would have impinged on the planned doorway to the new accessible W.C.

W.C.

A range of options were considered for the accessible W.C. (see appendix B).

A separate shed/structure outside the west door was considered. This was discounted both because it would need new foul drainage and other utilities and, with the west door having been dismissed as an accessible entrance option, the facility would have poor accessibility.

We considered adapting the existing W.C. at the base of the tower. This would have required creating a wheelchair suitable outdoor path down the north wall, converting the east tower entrance (which has 3 steps from the ground level) into an accessible entrance and then changing the interior wall and door configuration to give enough manoeuvre space. Initial investigation suggested this was not achievable.

The option of converting the north porch into an accessible W.C was considered. This would have denied us the customary entrance and would have required modifying the west door as the new entrance. The complications of this are explained above under 'accessibility'.

Options were considered in the main body of the church: in the west end of the south aisle, in the south transept, in the north transept, and at the west end of the nave. These options were variously too small, obscured windows or other fabric or required significant work to provide drainage and utilities. In all cases they used space that could be, and is now planned to be, used for other purposes.

Two vestry options were considered. An option to use a southerly portion of the vestry was dismissed as the entrance door, which would have been alongside the pulpit, would have made accessing to the W.C. somewhat exposed.

The ability of congregants to discreetly use the accessible W.C. in its proposed location during a service was raised during consultation. Firstly, it should be noted that the planned doorway is some distance from the pulpit and would be out of sight from most parts of the nave. A moveable/stand-alone modesty screen will be considered if required. Moreover, the WC is most likely to be used during events, when the west end of the church is more likely to be used.

Why now?

Church attendance is low and unless we appeal to new church users it will not improve. New worshippers are unlikely to be attracted by only the limited and traditional styles of service we offer now. Unless we think of imaginative new ways to carry out our mission, we will become increasing irrelevant to, and out of touch with, the community.

Our running costs already exceed our income, and we rely more and more on reserves and in time it will become difficult to afford carry out routine and preventative maintenance on the church building. Unless we act now to increase our income we will, over time, become financially unsustainable. A smaller congregation means lower income from charitable giving and so measures to increase worshipping attendance is

part of the answer. Visitors are also an important source of income. We are particularly fortunate to have the T S Eliot memorial to attract visitors but have a great deal of heritage that is little known and under visited. Making all our heritage, including the T. S. Eliot memorial, appealing and accessible, and optimising the visitor experience is important to making us financially resilient. The wider community is also a relatively untapped source of funding. By making the community feel more engaged, and by creating a community space that can be used by all, we will increase our revenue through both donations and fees.



Climate change is upon us, and we must act without delay to reduce our carbon footprint and help the Church of England achieve its 2030 Net Zero target.

The Inspired Efficiency Energy Efficiency and Net Zero Carbon Advice report notes that our oil-fired boiler was installed in 1997 and so has reached the end of its serviceable life. Failure to electrify the heating in the church now would necessitate the installation of another energy inefficient system, likely based on fossil fuels, so perpetuating the environmental damage currently being done.

Under the Equality Act 2010, all organisations are required to promote equality for people with protected characteristics in every aspect of their work, and churches are required to make reasonable adjustments. But as well as the legal requirement, we strongly believe that it is our Christian duty to make our church and the activities that go on therewithin accessible to all. The state of the church path, the unsuitability of the carpark and the lack of disabled access and facilities are acting as a barrier to many of our parishioners and would-be visitors.

How these proposals help the worship and mission of St Michael's

Notes on Worship & Mission from the Incumbent

'On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me."

This verse from John 7, of Jesus' great salvific invitation, is close to my heart as I support this proposal for the Beacon project. The person and work of Jesus Christ enabled the presence of God to no longer be limited to the Temple in Jerusalem and limited to the most select of individuals to encounter. All are welcome to Jesus' embrace, the water of life can flow in any place, language or culture. Churches are not meant to succeed the temple as a place to limit the Holy Spirit, but to be a home for all to be able to know God as Father in a relationship that they carry out the door.

The lack of wheelchair access for worshippers is an obvious and frustrating element of the building that undermines the intended message of Christ's invitation. It is a delight that we are at a moment when we have a plan and a reasonable expectation of addressing this deficiency. Having an accessible main entranceway is a powerful statement of unity, that we all are welcomed through the same door. Having an accessible loo for everyone will also be a factor for those who may struggle to commit to an event at Church without it. While our accessibility will not be complete following this project, as a wheelchair using priest would struggle with vestry access and sanctuary use, this project is a massive step in our holistic Christian worship.

I believe the project enhances the flow of engagement specifically both visitors to the building, and those coming to services. Having our notable heritage elements highlighted better, including how they represent a flowing story through history, will help those who come for TS Eliot to also be drawn to the beauty of what will be our quiet prayer/side chapel area in the south transept. Those who come to note the Dampier memorial will be better able to sit quietly and reflect in that area. As for those coming to services, the pew removals and servery at the west end of the nave are not only an easier space to move around as a crowd after the service but obviously allow us easier and safer delivery of refreshments, an important element of Christian welcome.

I particularly like the repositioning of the font centrally in the nave, which only works with the pew removals, as I like how all coming up into the nave from the north door, will be more prominently reminded of baptism. The vestry will be much smaller as a result of this project but will prompt a healthy refreshment to the space. The lack of natural light to the vestry shouldn't be too much of a problem as it is rare for anyone to spend more than ten minutes inside.

This project doesn't directly impact the most prominent area of worship, there are no plans to change anything about the sanctuary, chancel or the east end of the nave. The re-creation of a lady chapel area, in what would have been its historic place of the south

transept, will be an ideal place for quiet prayer, and creative prayer engagements. This is currently unfeasible because of its use as an area for serving refreshments occasionally. The project would emphasise the notable passion picture underneath the Helyar window, and its position at the furthest point from the north door makes it ideal for undisturbed prayer. We have discussed the potential for use of the accessible toilet during services becoming a distraction due to movement somewhat close to the chancel, and potential noise/smell. There are suggestions about using free standing partition screens (doubling as information displays), but I am not that sure it will indeed be a problem, so any use of screens will be looked into after the completion of this project and involve new faculty application if advised. I am confident door quality, self-closing hinges and quiet flushing device would minimise any potential smell/noise distraction from the toilet.

The Beacon project enhances St Michael & All Angels Church's welcome and reflects the invitation of the Lord Jesus Christ. I think it will help visitors to flow into the sanctity of the space and offer an encounter they can carry with them. I believe it will enhance the fellowship of the church family and the ability of newcomers to build relationship with us. I am confident the village community will grow in understanding of the church as more than a space for services but a shared home for all. For these reasons I commend the project to you as one that glorifies God and enhances the church's mission and worship.

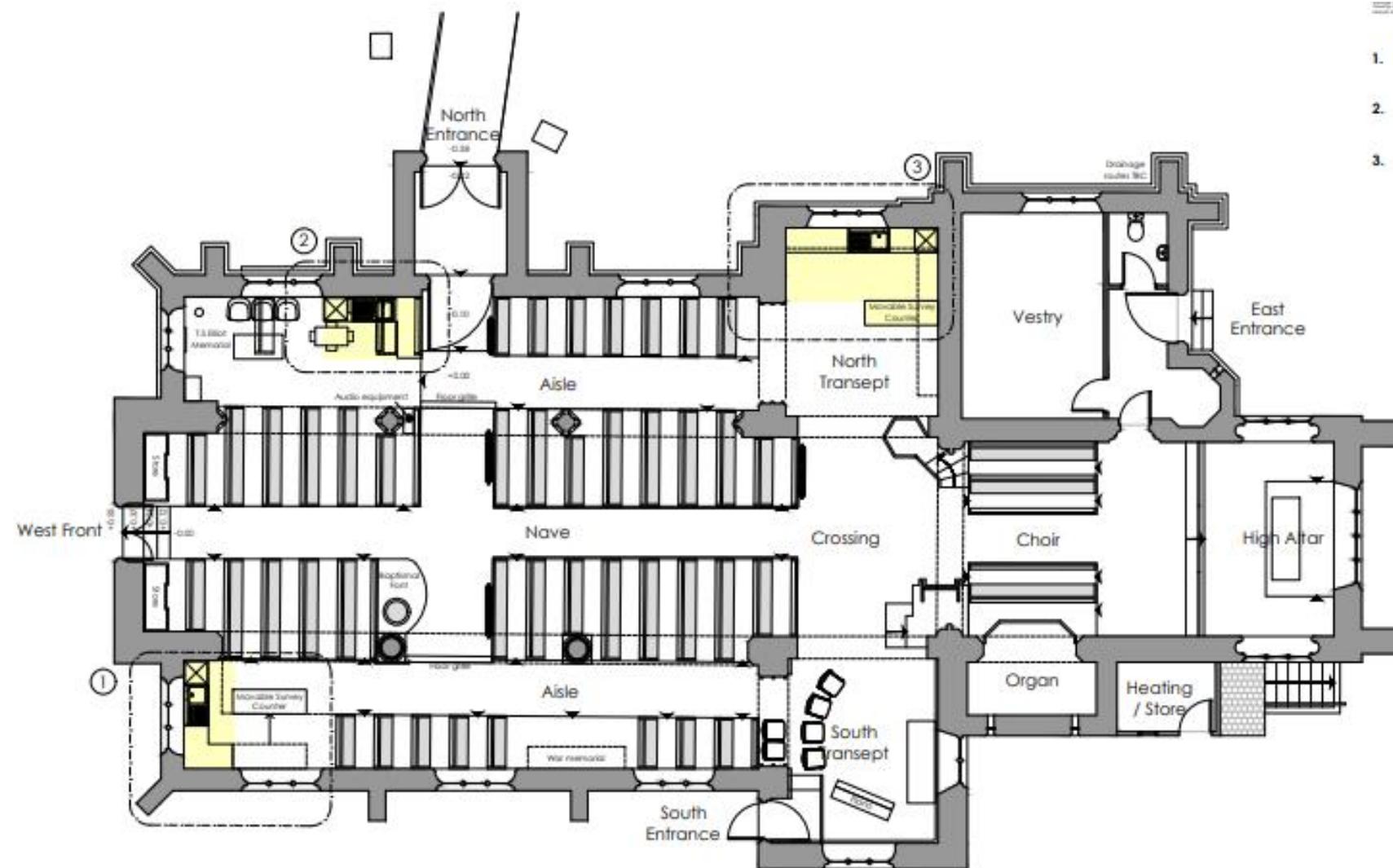
Reverend Philip Macaulay, 30th September 2025



How Project Beacon contributes to environmental sustainability

The replacement of a 'dirty' and inefficient heating system is included in these plans. Moving to a more efficient electric system will allow us to decommission our oil-fired boiler and source electricity from more sustainable suppliers. In the longer-term micro-generation (e.g. PV) could be considered to further reduce our carbon footprint. Electrification of the church achieved by Project Beacon opens up this future possibility.





1. Nave West End

- Size to small to be accessible
- Functions well with reordering at west end/access improvements
- Pew removal needed
- Balanced with lift on south side
- Better location for use/noise/services and community uses
- Drainage distance larger
- No natural light

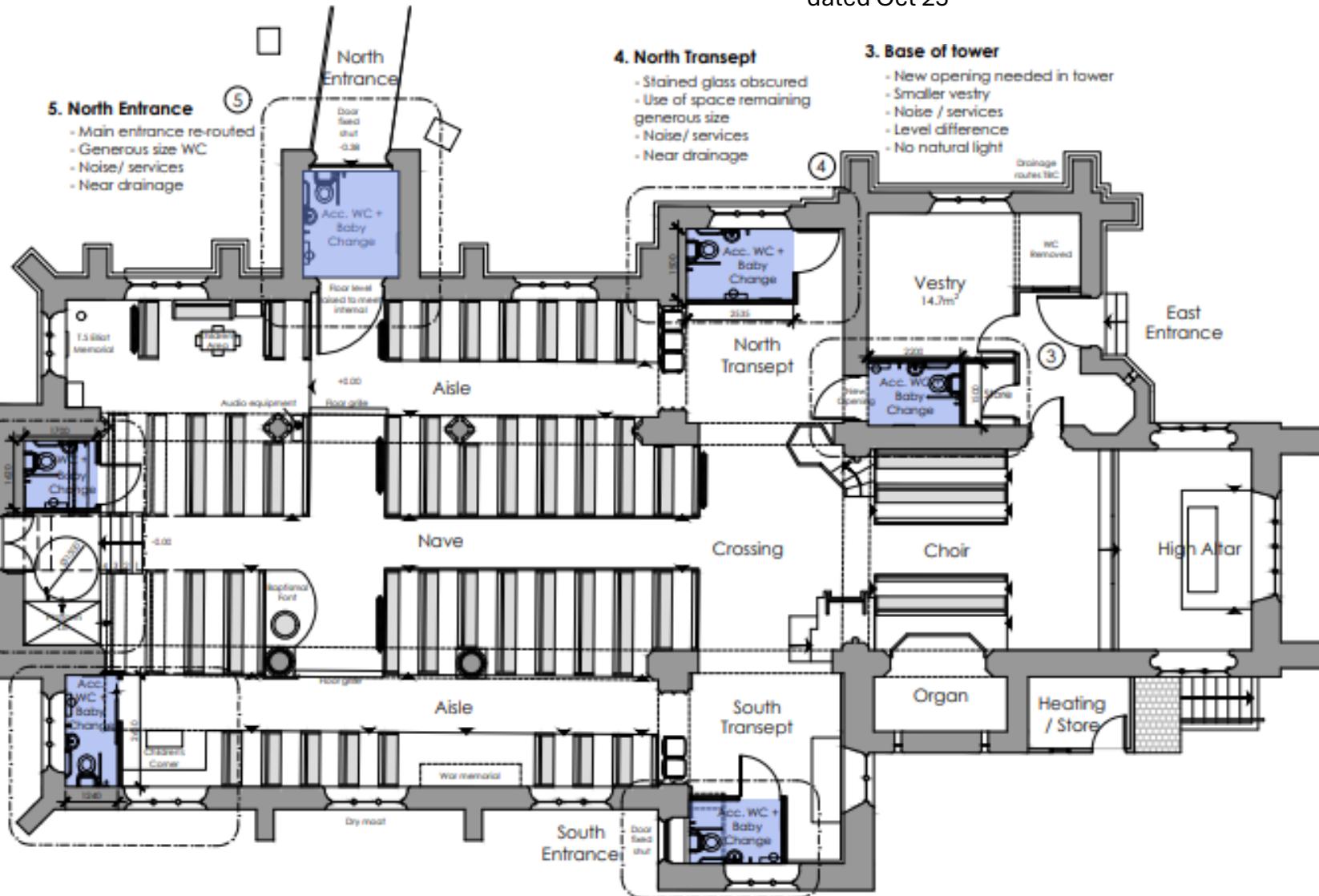
West Entrance

①

2. South Aisle West End

- Size restricted
- Window obscured
- Better for use/noise services + community uses
- Drainage distance larger

②



5. North Entrance

- Main entrance re-routed
- Generous size WC
- Noise/ services
- Near drainage

⑤

4. North Transept

- Stained glass obscured
- Use of space remaining generous size
- Noise/ services
- Level difference
- Near drainage

④

3. Base of tower

- New opening needed in tower
- Smaller vestry
- Noise / services
- Level difference
- No natural light

③

6. South Entrance

- Loss of exit/entrance
- Stained glass obscured
- Use of space remaining generous size
- Noise/ services
- Drainage distance larger

⑥

