

Church Buildings Council

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Dear Jacqui,

East Coker, St Michael & All Angels (Diocese of Bath & Wells) Proposed reordering and external landscaping

Thank you for seeking the Church Buildings Council's advice over the proposed reordering and external landscaping at East Coker, St Michael and All Angels. This has been considered under the Council's delegated advice policy following a site visit by Liz Kitch and Keri Dearmer on 25th April 2024. Its advice is set out below.

St Michael and All Angels is a Grade II* listed church. It has late 12th-century origins with 15th and 19th century work. It is built of Ham stone with fishscale and plain tile roofs to the nave, north aisle and north transept with stone slates and lead on other roof slopes. The south aisle was added in the 15th-century by the family who owned the manor house next door.

The congregation of St Michael and All Angels averages around 30 people on a Sunday morning service. Services are held in the church three times a month and often on the fifth Sunday. The church is located on the edge of the village at the top of a hill which is a fairly steep climb. The ashes of T.S. Eliot are interred here and they attract a large number of visitors from all over the world. The church wishes to make more of this, encouraging greater visitor numbers and engagement as well as partnering with other organisations to be a location for events.

The PCC proposes to remove the western portion of the pews, relay the floor and provide new chairs. It is proposed to introduce a platform lift, draught lobby and storage around the west entrance, a servery at the west end, an accessible WC, and a re-arrangement and re-provision of interpretation around T.S. Eliot and Valerie Eliot's interred ashes. It is further proposed to remove the existing heating and to replace it with various forms of electric heating. A scheme of relandscaping is proposed externally.

The Council was grateful for the clear statements, photographs, options considered and additional reports. In due course the statements should be updated to justify the option which is settled on by the PCC and the wider community. The Council was grateful for the PCC's open attitude towards discussing options.

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External Works:

The Council was pleased to note that the PCC is prioritising accessibility. Ordinarily, the Council would ask that the principle entrance is equally accessible for all. Given the steep approach to the church, and the spacing of the internal steps, it is not possible to make the north entrance accessible. It is feasible to make the west entrance accessible, which is used less often but is also the ceremonial entrance. The Council accepts that this is the only practical option and asks the PCC to encourage the use of the west entrance in order that both entries are considered equal. This could include suitable signage or path materials to create easy wayfinding.

The Council has no in principle objection to the removal of the hedge and wall within the carpark, but the significance of the wall should be fully understood. If it is acceptable to remove the wall, the Council asks that some demarcation of its location is employed to mark the historic boundary with the manor house. The PCC might consider providing [Electrical Car Charging](#) as part of its aim to reach net zero.

The church is on a hill and the steep access makes it difficult for even the able bodied to access, meaning driving and parking is often the preferred option. The Council has no objection to the more southerly plot of church land being used as parking but the retention of greenery in this area is desirable and reinforced grass would be a good option. The PCC should investigate whether this area was ever used for burial (bearing in mind that medieval burials are unlikely to be marked). It would be desirable to establish who is responsible for the land where the plague pit is marked, and ideally to make this more presentable.

The water run-off from the car park could have a detrimental effect on the alms houses further down the hill and a means to reduce this impact should be installed. The Council also asks that the church footpath remains visually distinctive both in this section and the more northerly section of the carparking area.

Internal Works:

The Council has no objection to the removal of the western portion of the pews. It asks that they are either reused or passed on to members of the community, in order to reduce the carbon impact of the project. The PCC may find the Council's guidance on [Embodied Carbon](#) useful when considering this. The Council suggested during the site visit that although the single pew to the west of the war memorial is on the same line as the rear of the eastern set of pews, it would look somewhat stranded if left on its own. It may be preferable to place a pew frontal in this location, to give the war memorial a suitable demarcation, but to also create some flexibility for Remembrance Day.

The proposed new flooring material for where the pews are removed should be specified. Both stone and timber have been suggested, either of which the Council considers to be acceptable. The proposed chairs to replace the pews should be specified and should be in line with the Council's guidance on [Seating](#).

The Council is supportive of enhancing the area around the interment of T.S. Eliot's ashes and making more of his connection with the church while still respecting the sanctity of the church. These proposals should also respect the effigy of Lady Elizabeth Courtenay. There are many



options for interpretation. When looking at options, the PCC should consider offering interpretation in ways which are accessible to the largest number of people. For example, providing an audio description of written text for those with visual impairment. The Bats in Churches team developed an e-learning course on [Creating and Writing Interpretation](#) (relevant to all types of interpretation). The PCC should also carefully consider how to approach Eliot's antisemitism.

While the Council is supportive of creating a space where people feel at ease and are welcome to spend some time reading poetry or simply appreciating the space, it should be noted that the Council does not consider domestic furniture to be appropriate in a church and the seating provision should therefore be carefully considered.

The Council has no in principle objection to the relocation of the font. It is not yet clear where this will be located but its new location should be as close to the principle entrance as possible and it should be located in spacious and well ordered surroundings. Any relocation should be undertaken by a suitably qualified conservator.

It has been established that the west entrance is the only viable option for providing an accessible entrance. It is also clear that the level change is too steep to make a ramp a practical option and that a lift is therefore, the only viable solution. The architects have produced options to make the lift less visually intrusive. The Council has no objection to this or the provision of a draught lobby and storage at the west end. As the PCC is aware, lifts require regular maintenance and money should be set aside in the annual budget to cover this. The Council also has no objection to the proposed glazed doors at the north door, subject to their design.

The location of the servery at the west end is logical and acceptable. The location of the WC occasioned greater discussion. The Council strongly prefers for WCs to be located within the church where possible in order for them to be easily accessible (not requiring the use of a lift) and comfortable to access in adverse weather. If space permits, the Council will always ask that a WC is fully accessible. There are a number of different possible locations for a WC at East Coker, all with their own advantages and drawbacks, but it should be possible to provide a fully accessible WC.

It is the Council's preference for WCs to be located at the west end in order that congregants can access them more discreetly during a service. It is unlikely that there would be sufficient space to provide a privacy lobby to a fully accessible WC at the west end. It would be possible to create a fully accessible WC, with a lobby in the existing vestry and to retain the existing smaller WC, if access was created through the east wall of the north aisle. The PCC expects to use the WC more frequently during events, taking place at the west end, than during services, which take place three to four times a month. If this is the preferred option of the PCC, the reasons for this choice should be set out clearly in the statement of needs. In drawing this option up, it would be desirable to include a small modesty screen to allow more discreet access during services. The age and significance of the east wall of the north aisle should also be established. The tower was built in 1790 (replacing a central one), but this wall may be older.

The PCC has already installed under-pew heaters to the eastern set of pews. Halo heaters, wall mounted panel heaters and over-door heaters are all being considered to provide heat at the west end of the church. The Council considers that a number of options which can be

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operated separately for different functions is likely to be a good idea. While it does not object to halo heaters in general, their visual impact should be considered if they are proposed. Halo heaters can incorporate lighting and the PCC might consider the lighting provision of the church in tandem.

I hope that this advice is helpful and the Council looks forward to seeing the proposals again as they develop.

Yours sincerely,

Keri Dearmer

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