

A Place to Belong: Access Appraisal

Access audit based on guidance from the Church of England resource '[A Place to Belong: A Guide to Access, Inclusion and Welcome in our Churches.](#)'

Church: St Luke's, West Holloway

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1	<p>Introduction</p> <p><i>Reason for this appraisal, for example building refurbishment or extension; new mission action plan, or funding application for building development.</i></p> <p>The Inclusion Committee has set out to assess the barriers that prevent people from accessing and participating at St Luke's West Holloway—barriers to <i>getting in</i> and barriers to <i>joining in</i>.[*] We are particularly thinking here about disabled people (including chronically ill people, those with mental distress, those with learning disabilities, and neurodivergent people). We carried out a mini access audit to look at some of the barriers that disabled people may face in the church. We did not have the resources to do a full audit, which is undertaken by professional auditors. This mini access audit looks mainly at the physical barriers in the church building/environment, with some discussion of cultural barriers.</p> <p>[*]"Getting in" and "joining in" are phrases used by Fiona MacMillan and the Disability Advisory Group at St Martin-in-the-Fields Church, London.</p>
2	<p>Purpose of this appraisal</p> <p>The St Luke's Inclusion Statement reads: <i>We seek to be an inclusive congregation, welcoming of both human experience and human diversity. This means we are working towards becoming a place where everyone can find justice, especially those who have been excluded by churches in the past. We seek to be a place of real welcome for all people of all ages, black people and those of ethnic minority backgrounds, LGBTQI+ people, and disabled people, including those who are physically impaired or neurodivergent, people with learning disabilities, those experiencing mental distress, and those who struggle with belief. Just as Jesus welcomed everyone, going out to meet them where they were, we want to do the same. We believe that the good news of Jesus is a radical welcome, a great and generous invitation to share in the banquet of God's creation. And also, a challenge, to this and all generations.</i></p>

	<p>Many of those who are excluded by churches – however unwittingly – are disabled people. According to the social model of disability, it is barriers that <i>disable</i> people: barriers in buildings, environments, cultures, and attitudes. An example of a physical barrier is a flight of steps up to an altar; an example of a cultural barrier is a lack of large print service sheets; an example of an attitudinal barrier is a negative response to someone who makes noise during a service. Church communities can work to dismantle barriers, so that all are truly made welcome, including disabled people. Through the Inclusion Committee, St Luke’s West Holloway is committed to reducing the disabling barriers in our church.</p> <p>Below, we have listed the main physical/environmental barriers in the church. Where possible, we share pictures showing the access features or barriers. Similar photos could be shared on an ‘access’ area of the church website, to help disabled people trying to decide whether they can come to the church.</p>
3	<p>Tell us about this church /parish in general <i>How representative is the church of its local community? What kind of understanding do the people in this church have of disability, mental health and autism/neurodiversity?</i></p> <p>As shown in the Inclusion Survey in 2021, St Luke’s is not as representative of its community as some churches. Among other groups that are under-represented in the church, we have fewer disabled people than we might expect, given their high numbers in the area.</p> <p>Disability access at the church is generally good, compared with many other churches. The church seems to have a reasonably good understanding of disability and access. Disability is talked about in relation to inclusion, and it was a significant part of the Inclusion Survey in 2021. However, there is always room to move from ‘inclusion’ to <i>justice</i> – not just ‘us’ welcoming ‘them’ into ‘our’ churches, but understanding that disabled people want to be active members and leaders in churches, and working to make this possible. This shift towards disability justice is part of the journey St Luke’s is taking towards a more diverse, welcoming community.</p> <p>Learning disability: Islington has a higher than average number of children and people with learning disabilities. Work needs to be done to ensure more understanding to meet those needs, so that participation and belonging can take place within St Luke’s.</p> <p>Mental health and distress: Now more than ever, there is a need for Christ’s message, and for communities like St Luke’s to reach out and involve those who are caught in the wave of emotional and mental distress resulting from the pandemic. Finding collective ways of sense making in church services, especially for young people, can support healing and recovery.</p> <p>Neurodiversity: Many church communities have quite poor understanding of neurodiversity (including autism, ADHD and Tourette’s Syndrome). It is not a topic under much discussion at St Luke’s, although it is mentioned in the Inclusion Statement. See section 22 below.</p>
4	<p>Current issues / concerns / projects <i>What are the current concerns of this church? Is there a mission action plan?</i></p>

	<p>The PCC has adopted a MAP (mission action plan) to give St Luke’s a framework and a number of priorities to help shape our common life for the next few years. This is available at saintlukeschurch.org.uk/pcc.</p> <p>The agreed priorities are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaching out to those feeling lonely and isolated. • Running activities that promote good health and wellbeing. • Extending our work with families and young people. • Implement a Creation Care Plan. <p>Several of the recommendations in this report fit with the MAP priorities, including ‘reaching out to those feeling isolated’ and ‘extending work with families and young people.’</p>
5	<p>Legal responsibilities under the Equality Act</p> <p>Under the Equality Act 2010, churches need to make “reasonable” efforts to remove barriers that prevent disabled people from entering the church and participating in church life. Access should be “independent” if possible. We also need to “anticipate” the needs of those who are not yet in our community. Access is not just the law of the land – it’s the message of the Gospel.</p> <p>Most access adjustments are minor and low cost – they simply involve remembering and expecting disabled people in our community, e.g. serving communion from the level floor of the church rather than from a raised altar, or making simple changes to signage in the building. More major adjustments may be more challenging or expensive, and may need approval from the Diocese. However, funding may be available from the Diocese. In this report, we have <i>not</i> recommended any major changes to the building (which is already fairly accessible). Instead, we have suggested ways around the access barriers at St Luke’s, which can be easily overcome by small changes to the ways we do things, as a community.</p>
6	<p>Definition of disability</p> <p>The Equality Act defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.” About 20% of people are covered by this legal definition of disability, including many older people, and many whose impairments are invisible. Not all these people would identify as disabled, but improving access still helps them to ‘get in and join in’ with churches.</p> <p>For the purposes of this access audit we use <i>identity-first</i> language (“disabled person”) as this is the term most widely accepted by the UK disability rights movement. We also use the terms “people with learning disabilities,” “people who experience mental distress” and “neurodivergent people,” as these are terms often preferred by these groups of people. When thinking about disability, it is also important to think about families of disabled people, especially children – whole families can be excluded through disability injustice.</p> <p>The most important principle of access is listening to disabled people. The Inclusion Committee have been unable to evaluate some barriers in detail, without hearing more from</p>

	<p>those with lived experience (e.g. from people with visual impairments). One way to address this is to seek disabled people’s feedback, making it clear that, as a church, we want to listen and work towards change. The Inclusion Survey has already collected some data about some barriers (discussed below).</p>
7	<p>Finding the church</p> <p>It is not easy for everyone to find a church. Information in advance is vital, e.g. for people with learning disabilities. Directions from the nearest stations and bus stops, with pictures, can help. Wheelchair users (and others with mobility impairments) appreciate knowing in advance if there is step-free access. Sharing information about other facilities – from hearing aid loops to lighting – helps other disabled people. Pictures and information on the St Luke’s website of the approach to the church, the entrance and the interior of the church, would help more people to decide whether the church will be accessible to them.</p> <p>St Luke’s is relatively easy to find. It is visible from the road, has a social media and website presence, and is listed on the Church of England’s ‘A Church Near You’ directory. The details of clergy are shared on the website. Contact details of a named disability access representative would be useful for people who have questions about access.</p> <p><u>Recommendations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Directions to the church from stations/bus stops, with pictures, on the website. - Information about access facilities on the website, with pictures where useful (including telling people that we have a step-free sanctuary, accessible toilets, and other access information in the sections below). - A named contact on the website would help disabled people who have questions about access to the building/environment.
8	<p>Car parking</p> <p>There is no accessible car parking at the church itself. The church is within 200 metres of a small number of ‘blue badge’ accessible parking spaces on the street. However, the streets around the church have some large trees blocking the pavement, which might make it difficult for wheelchair users/mobility-impaired people to get from these parking spaces to the church. But for the most part, there is good street access around the church. There are dropped kerbs (for wheelchair access) opposite the church, and some are textured (which helps blind/visually impaired people).</p>



Figure 1: Tree blocking the pavement opposite the church for wheelchair users/walking frame users



Figure 2: Dropped kerbs provide easier access from the pavement opposite the church

	<p>The outside notice board displays some of the upcoming church events. Most of the information is in small print, which would be difficult for visually impaired people to read. Clear information about weekly services would help people who need information in advance. Even if this information is also on the website, it can be useful for passers-by.</p> <p>Signage is not clear. Ideally, there should be signs to the main church doors from the entry gate, in clear, contrasting print (e.g. black print on white signs), clearly pointing out which entrance is usually in use. Temporary signage can be put up when the side entrance is in use. Signage is especially important if the main church door is ever closed. It may be obvious to some congregants which door is the main door, but it may not be so clear to people with learning disabilities, neurodivergent people, people with anxiety, or those with dementia.</p> <p><u>Recommendations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clearer signage to the main church doors from the entry gate and on/near the main church doors, showing which entrance is usually in use. - Information on the noticeboard about upcoming services (in <u>clear print</u> e.g. black print on pale colour paper, at least 14pt sans serif font).
10	<p>Approach to the church</p> <p>The main gate is wide enough to be easily accessible for those using wheelchairs or walking frames, with no steps to get in the way. The path is level, making it accessible to most people with mobility difficulties.</p> <p>Some of the paving stones are uneven. This could pose a safety problem to people with visual impairments or mobility difficulties, especially in the dark, particularly on the path down to the side entrance. There is a motion-sensitive light on the ramp to the side door, but we were not able to find out if there is other lighting on the side path. If not, it would be better not to use the side entrance during the evening, and to bring people in through the church (via the accessible indoor route to the church hall).</p> <p><u>Recommendations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoid use of the side entrance to the church for evening events. Or provide an additional entrance by also opening main doors.



Figure 3: Main gate is wide enough for most people using wheelchairs/walking frames



Figure 4: Some paving stones are uneven on path leading to the church entrance

11 Entrance

The main church door is level access, with no steps, and the side door is ramped. This gives good access to many disabled people. However, there are several changes of surfaces where people with mobility impairments or visually impaired people could trip. The entrance and changes of surfaces could be **marked with a yellow and black strip** to make them more obvious.

The main entrance needs to be **signed**, if possible, e.g. MAIN CHURCH DOOR. The sign could be placed on the wall near the door.

If doors are in use, e.g. for a service or event, they should be **left open**. It is a struggle to open the main doors from a wheelchair or if using crutches. Many wheelchairs and walkers would not be able to fit through the single open door, so we should make sure that the **double doors are open at all times** (both the inside and outside sets of doors) when a service or event is about to start/in progress.

Information about basic access to the building can be shared on the website, including pictures, so that disabled people can judge for themselves how easily they can access the church, before they make the journey there.

Recommendations

- **Main doors** (both sides) to be **left open** at times of services/events, and side door to be left open if it is in use for an event.
- **A contact can be named on the noticeboard** for a disabled person to ring, if they find a door closed and need help opening it.
- **Yellow strip** on the ground to mark uneven or unsafe changes of surface at entrances/doors.
- Main church entrance to be **signed** (in black text on white background).
- **Information about level access** (with photos where useful) can be shared on website.



Figure 5: Main church door leads to several uneven changes of level, which could be marked with yellow strips. Both doors need to be opened for a wheelchair to pass through.

12 **Lighting and lip reading**

The lighting in the church is bright and consistent, and it may be adequate for people with visual impairments. Asking for their feedback would be useful here.

The welcome team can enable D/deaf and visually impaired people to **sit where they can see or lip-read** best, which they will know themselves. This may mean reserving chairs, if someone requests this. They may prefer not to sit in the darker side aisle or behind pillars.

If we are ever considering a **service with low lighting** (such as a candlelit service), we should think about access for those who are visually impaired and D/deaf people who lip read. For example, information about the service and service sheets can be shared in advance or

online. We can ask how we can best include D/deaf people in these services, e.g. by turning on lights again as soon as social interaction begins after the service.

- Enable people to **sit where they can see/hear** (being ready to **reserve seats** if requested).
- Make clear when services will have **low lighting** (e.g. candlelit services) and remember access for those who need good lighting to see/hear/move around, e.g. by turning off lights only when everyone is seated and turning them back on at the end of the service.
- **Encourage feedback** about lighting and sound in the church.

13 **Moving around inside the church**

Is there access for all to all places?

Inside the **main sanctuary**, movable chairs make access much easier for people with mobility impairments/wheelchair users. A wide aisle is placed between rows, making it generally easy to move around. The side aisle is harder to access and see from.

There is flat access in the church as far as the **altar**, where there are two **stone steps** up to a raised level. The steps have no rail, making them unsafe for many people with limited mobility. There is a portable ramp available for wheelchair users, but it has a gradient of 1:4, which is unsafe for wheelchair users and those pushing them (the recommended gradient is 1:12 – much less steep). One solution would be to buy a ramp of at least 3 metres in length, but that would be more difficult to carry around. Portable ramps also do not give independent access, as wheelchair users need to ask for them to be brought out.

As a simple solution, the community may decide **only to use the main area of the sanctuary** in services, where there is level access. This would be inclusive of those with mobility impairments, blind/visually impaired people, and others who have difficulty with steps. Service leaders and servers who are disabled will also appreciate this (disabled people need to see that we are welcome to lead too). If the steps are used, they should be marked out with a **yellow and black strip** so that visually impaired people can distinguish them.

It is important that there is access to all for **Holy Communion**, which is symbolic of inclusion in the Body of Christ. While some disabled people are happy for communion to be brought to them at their seats (welcomers can ask if they would like this), other disabled people will want to go up to receive with the rest of the of the congregation. Avoiding using the raised altar offers this choice. Servers sometimes offer communion to the whole congregation at their seats, e.g. if seated in the round – this is wonderful for those who cannot easily stand.

There is good wheelchair/mobility access to the rest of the church building. However, there are **heavy doors** in parts of the building (especially the door out from the sanctuary towards the hall and toilets). It would help if these doors could be left open after services and events.

There is only one **accessible route** through the building, without steps. This route could be better signed e.g. STEP-FREE ACCESS TO HALL AND ACCESSIBLE TOILET.

When social events are held outside the church, we need to ensure that **venues** are as accessible as possible. This can be especially difficult if congregants' homes are used for small group meetings, as not all houses are accessible to people with mobility difficulties. One

solution is to hold some groups in the church. For example, if welcome evenings are often held in the vicarage, could some be held in the church instead?

Recommendations

- **Do not use the portable ramp**, unless specifically requested, and then with a warning that it is at user's/carer's own risk.
- Consider **only using the level access area of the sanctuary** for all services, including **communion**. Consider continuing the inclusive practice of sometimes offering communion to the whole congregation at their seats e.g. if in the round.
- If the steps to the altar are regularly used, place a **yellow and black strip** on the edge of each step.
- **Leave heavy doors open after services**, so wheelchair users can easily get to the hall and accessible toilet.
- **Create signage for accessible route** from the sanctuary to the hall/accessible toilet.
- Consider **venues used for social events** and whether they are accessible.



Figure 6: Steps to raised altar

14 Seating

Seating is adequately comfortable for most people. One chair with arms is left out for a known person with a need for it. There were some concerns in the Inclusion Survey about **uncomfortable seating**, from some people with chronic illnesses and older people. The church has recently bought some more comfortable seats, currently being stored in the chapel. An easy solution is to have a few of these **comfortable chairs scattered through the congregation** for a service, and to encourage regular congregants to ask for a seat to be 'reserved' if they have a need for more comfortable seating. (We will not always know who needs these seats. Chronic pain is invisible, and not everyone is comfortable talking about it.) **Chairs with arms** would also be useful for people with chronic pain/mobility issues.



Figure 7: Congregational seating (a similar picture could be shared to help disabled visitors decide whether the sanctuary will be accessible to them)

Recently the church has been **taking out a chair** to make space for wheelchair users, which we encourage continuing to do. Making space can be a way of telling disabled people ‘we’re expecting you.’

Clergy and leaders can think about how they are going to **ask people to stand** for hymns or liturgy. Inclusive language about sitting/standing can make a huge difference to chronically ill people, and others who have difficulty standing, who may worry that we are seen as disrespectful when we do not stand for hymns or prayers. Consider a form of words such as “Stand if you are able and comfortable to do so,” which invites people to *worship as we are*.

People who have difficulty standing may appreciate a few **seats left out during coffee time**, near the coffee serving area, so they can sit while talking to others.

Recommendations

- Scatter a few **comfortable seats** and **seats with arms** through the congregational seating. Encourage people to leave these seats for people who need them. Encourage those who need these chairs to ask for them to be ‘reserved’ (if they would like to).
- Leave an **empty space for wheelchair users**. This does not always have to be at the back, but make sure this wheelchair space is easily accessible, at the end of a row.
- Set out a few **chairs near the serving area** for coffee time.
- Consider always using **inclusive language about standing** for hymns etc.

15	<p>Hearing loops and access for D/deaf people <i>[The capital letter ('Deaf people') is used for members of the Deaf community who use British Sign Language. A small d ('deaf people') is used for people with a hearing impairment who do not use BSL.]</i></p> <p>At the time of this access audit, there was no opportunity to test the hearing aid loop. The loop should be regularly tested. If it fails, it may go unnoticed until a D/deaf person finds they cannot use the loop. Ideally, a named person who can operate the loop should be available at services/events. The church can make clear who that person is (e.g. on the service sheet), if a D/deaf person needs to communicate that the loop is not working.</p> <p>Everyone who is speaking to the congregation must use the microphone. Otherwise, people who use hearing aid loops will not be able to hear anything that is said. In the sanctuary, sound bounces off the high ceiling, creating an echo that can make it hard to hear or understand, especially for people with hearing impairments or auditory processing difficulties. The microphone helps overcome this problem.</p> <p>1 in 7 people has a hearing impairment, including many older people. Church communities can develop deaf awareness, e.g. through simple training that reminds people to look directly at someone who lip-reads and to speak clearly. If any church members know British Sign Language (BSL), they may be willing to volunteer for the welcome team and to teach other members a few BSL signs, to help welcome people from the Deaf community.</p> <p><u>Recommendations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All speakers to use microphones. - Test the hearing aid loop regularly. - Have a named person (listed in service sheet) who can operate the hearing aid loop and who can be approached if it is not working. - Consider some simple deaf awareness training e.g. for the welcome team, and ask if anyone who knows BSL would like to get involved.
16	<p>Printed and screen-based materials <i>For guidelines on how to ensure all printed and screen-based materials are accessible, see 'The View from the Pew' by Rev Bill Braviner and David Lucas.</i></p> <p>We should consider whether our printed materials are accessible: a) to people with visual impairments, b) to people with specific learning difficulties like dyslexia, c) to people with learning disabilities. Clear print guidelines require a minimum font of 12 point in a clear sans serif font (e.g. Arial), using black ink on white or pale paper. Our current service sheet has very small print.</p> <p>The service sheet is available online, which is very helpful. However, when this access audit took place, the church was not making large print service sheets available to those who need them. Many of the older people who need large print will not have their own mobile devices to read the service sheet on (nor a printer). Church administrators could print out 5-10 large print copies and make sure that they are left out at a clear collection point, and welcomers can offer them to people with visual impairments who are known to them.</p> <p>The service sheet could include more of the liturgy and readings. At present, it often 'skips' parts of the liturgy and returns to it only for the congregational responses. This makes everything easier to fit on an A4 sheet. However, for people with hearing impairments or</p>

	<p>auditory processing difficulties, this limited information means we cannot follow some parts of the liturgy and readings.</p> <p>The principles of clear print also apply to church websites.</p> <p>When screens are used in worship, the ideal is to use subtitles, and not to show videos with no speech at all (which can exclude blind people). Creating subtitles can be a challenge for churches if it is for a whole streamed service, but it is usually possible on short videos. Subtitles can open up understanding for D/deaf people and those with auditory processing difficulties, including them more fully in church life.</p> <p>We recommend service guides that explain mystifying parts of the service, which could be available online and in print. See section 21 (on learning disabilities) for more details.</p> <p><u>Recommendations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Service sheets and other printed materials could be in clear print (which may mean using slightly larger print). - More of the liturgy and readings could be shared on service sheets. - Alternatively, wi-fi in the church would allow people to bring up the service sheets/readings on mobile devices and increase print size (for those with devices). - Subtitles can be used when screens/videos are used in worship. - Church website to use clear print. The website could be assessed to ensure it meets accessibility standards.
17	<p>Toilets</p> <p>Churches should have at least one accessible toilet, which we do (accessed through the hall). This toilet is signed with a wheelchair sign, but there could be clearer signage to this toilet from the sanctuary, via the accessible route. The toilet has enough space for a turning circle for most wheelchairs or walking frames. It has a changing table.</p> <p>Accessible toilets always have a transfer space beside them – in our accessible toilet, this space is to the left of the toilet. Please keep this space free from bins or clutter.</p> <p>The toilet to the right of the sanctuary is not fully accessible – the hallway outside is cluttered and there is not enough turning space inside for a wheelchair, although it does have a useful shower. This toilet may be helpful for families, e.g. with children with learning disabilities, as long they do not have care needs that require a larger facility.</p> <p><u>Recommendations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve signage to accessible toilets. - Keep accessible toilet free of clutter, especially in the transfer space to the left of the toilet – leave bins at the other side of the room. - If possible, move clutter away from the room that leads through to the smaller toilet with shower. Do not direct wheelchair users to this toilet – send them to the fully accessible toilet accessed through the hall. - Let people know that we have a toilet with a shower, even though it is not an accessible toilet (information could be shared on the website).
18	Kitchen

The **kitchen hatch** has a lowered area, which is excellent for wheelchair access (as well as for children). People serving coffee can be reminded to come to the lowered counter to serve wheelchair users.

The kitchen itself can only be accessed by wheelchair users if the double doors are opened – the single door is too narrow. Many mobility-impaired people would be able to help with serving coffee by sitting down at the counter (a stool could be provided), although there are no lowered kitchen counters, so a wheelchair user could not easily serve coffee.

There is a small step out from the kitchen towards the garden that should be marked with **yellow and black tape**, as it may be easily missed by visually impaired people and cause them to stumble or fall.

Recommendations

- Tea and coffee servers to be reminded to **move to the lowered area** to serve wheelchair users (most are already doing this)
- **Yellow strip** needed on the step out from the kitchen towards the garden



Figure 8: Step from the kitchen out towards the garden is hard to see and needs a yellow strip

19 **Garden**

The **step down to the garden** from the side door (through the sanctuary) is not safe or accessible. Use of this exit should be avoided. See photo below.

Because there is also a small step from the kitchen to the garden, there is **no wheelchair access to the walled garden from inside the church**. However, there is access through the front garden.

The entrance to the walled garden from outside is narrow, but still manageable for many wheelchair/walker users. The garden team are working on widening the path to allow easier access to the walled garden. If using the garden, e.g. for an outdoor service at Easter, be aware that many wheelchair users will not be able to get up onto the raised area of grass. Chairs can be set out so that some people are sitting on the paved area with spaces for wheelchair users alongside them.

Not all mobility impaired people/visually impaired people will easily be able to move around the front lawn for outdoor events outside the church. If a refreshments table is set up outside during the summer, this can be set out on the paved area, which everyone can easily access.

Recommendations

- **Avoid using the side door** to the walled garden with the large, uneven step. It should also be marked with **yellow and black tape**, if it is ever used.
- Wheelchair users can be shown the **accessible route to the walled garden** through the front garden and gate.
- If holding a service in the walled garden, be aware that **wheelchair access to the grass is not possible**.
- If serving refreshments on the front lawn, considering setting up the table on the **paved area**.



Figure 9: Small step down from the sanctuary to the garden is uneven and hard to see - could cause someone to trip. Avoid using and mark with yellow tape

20 Church hall and other related buildings

Where the church or PCC owns or has responsibility for a hall or meeting rooms etc, the same considerations relating to access apply as for the church building.

The church hall is generally wheelchair/mobility accessible. The hall kitchen does not have a lowered counter, but there is room to move around easily.

However, the set of doors from the sanctuary out towards the hall is very heavy. There are several other doors that must be opened to reach the hall or toilet via the accessible route, although other doors are lighter. **Heavy doors should be left open** during/after services and events. It is a positive that doors are wooden, not glass – opaque doors are safer and easier for visually impaired people to use.

The outside steps up to the church hall are not wheelchair/mobility accessible. It would be best not to use this entrance, and only to access the church hall from inside. A **yellow strip** marking the steps would improve safety, if they are used.

Recommendations

- During/after services, **leave open the main set of doors** that lead from the sanctuary to the hall/toilet (accessible route)

- Unsafe/unclear changes of room/floor surfaces could be marked with a **yellow and black strip** (unless these have obviously different surfaces e.g. different colour carpets).
- **Avoid using the outside steps to the hall.**



Figure 10: Outside steps to the hall are a barrier - offer access through the church

21 **Welcome for people with learning disabilities**

Church services are often not fully accessible to people with learning disabilities. The language used in church can be difficult to understand, services can be long and wordy, and service sheets can be complicated. Some simple awareness of the needs of people with learning disabilities can help leaders to make the service more accessible.

For people with learning disabilities who come to church, **named people** in the congregation can offer to act as host, if they so wish. The **welcome team** may wish to appoint an (experienced) person to be aware of people with learning disabilities and make sure they can follow what is going on in the service.

Sunflower lanyards are recognised by many people with learning disabilities (and others) who wear them to show that they are invisibly disabled. Churches can keep some at the front for people to borrow, and train the welcome team in what they mean.

Service guides, clearly showing what happens at each stage of the service, can help people who may become confused by unfamiliar aspects of a church service. For example, a guide can explain how and when to go up for communion, as it may not be clear to everyone that we are not told to go up by ushers in rows. Service guides can be written in Easy Read or Plain English. St Luke's Inclusion Committee has members experienced with writing similar guides, who can help.

St Luke's has members with lived experience of learning disabilities, who propose to offer **training** to the welcoming team and a way of inclusion to the larger congregation.

Much of the advice in section 22 below (on welcoming neurodivergent people) will also be relevant for people with learning disabilities.

Recommendations

- The **welcome team** could nominate an (experienced) person to be aware of those with learning disabilities and act as hosts, if they need this support. A **named contact for disabled people** in the church could also offer support if needed.
- **Service guides** can explain what happens in the service.
- **Sunflower lanyards** available at the welcome desk for people with learning disabilities to take, to show they have a hidden disability.
- **Training in inclusion of people with learning disabilities**, particularly for the welcome team and leaders, with the help of St Luke's members with lived experience

22 **Welcome for autistic/neurodivergent people**

For more information, see the [Oxford Diocese Guide to Welcoming Autistic People in Churches](#).

Neurodivergent people include autistic people, people with ADHD, Tourette's Syndrome and others. Our abilities vary widely, but we always face barriers, in a *neurotypical* world that is not designed for us. Churches can be mystifying, painful places for neurodivergent people, with bright lights, echoing noise, unclear rituals, and frequent social interaction.

The church can help by sharing **information in advance** on the website: directions to the church, information about the service, and details of access facilities that help neurodivergent people (e.g. the quiet room). **Pictures** of key leaders in the church can help (many autistic people are 'face-blind').

Because loud noises are distressing for many autistic people, the church can warn the congregation before **microphone testing** or other loud/unexpected noises. Many autistic people have **auditory processing difficulties**, which makes it harder to understand speech. To help, always **use microphones** to speak and **subtitles** on videos.

Many autistic people need very clear instructions. A clear **service guide** can explain what is happening at each stage of the service. The **Peace** may be a stressful moment – touch/eye contact may be difficult. A service guide can let people know that it is fine to use alternative methods of offering the Peace (such as BSL signs) or that they can opt out of shaking hands.

The church community could consider how to make **social times** easier for neurodivergent people, who often have difficulties with social interaction. For example, at coffee time, could a member of the welcome team say hello to someone standing alone? (Autistic people may have difficulty recognising faces – re-introducing yourself may be helpful.) A structured activity over coffee, e.g. a craft session, can help those who find small talk difficult.

Neurodivergent people may need breaks in a long service. St Luke’s has a **quiet room**, which can help, but if it also used by parents with children, it may no longer be quiet! The welcome team can direct people to other quiet spaces e.g. the church hall or the garden.

Some neurodivergent people **stim** (e.g. by rocking or moving). The church community can be encouraged to be welcoming of people’s difference, including those who stim, and people with Tourette’s Syndrome who may tic (e.g. make noise) during services.

Some neurodivergent people may prefer to sit at the back, or in a **favourite seat** that feels safe. The welcome team can reserve that seat, if requested. The welcome team can keep some **sunflower lanyards** at the front of the church, to be borrowed by neurodivergent people to signal that they have an invisible disability.

Church leaders and the welcome team can raise their awareness by reading the [Oxford Diocese Guide to Welcoming Autistic People in Churches](#). **Neurodiversity training** can increase acceptance of neurodivergent people, in a church community – the Inclusion Committee has members with lived experience who may be able to offer this training.

Recommendations

- Share access **information in advance** on the website.
- Give **warnings** before loud noises.
- Use **microphones** when speaking from the front and **subtitles** on videos.
- Let the congregation know we have a **quiet room**, and direct people to additional quiet spaces if needed.
- **Reserve seats** for people, if they say they would like this.
- The **welcome team** can reach out to people during coffee (if this is wanted).
- **A service guide** can explain confusing aspects of the service and give clear instructions.
- Leave **sunflower lanyards** at the front of church.
- Consider offering **structured activities** during coffee time.
- **Neurodiversity training** from Inclusion Committee members with lived experience.

23 **Welcome for people experiencing mental distress**

For more information, see [The Mental Health Access Pack](#)

People who experience mental distress report mixed experiences of churches. Some have found churches to be places of acceptance, but many have sadly had difficult experiences of church and bad theology – feeling judged by others, or told there must be unconfessed sin or a lack of faith causing their experiences.

Because mental distress comes with significant stigma, it is important to **discuss mental health openly** in a church, especially from the front, e.g. in sermons, or through personal stories and testimonies. This can help to decrease the stigma, ignorance and fear around

mental distress in a community, challenging the idea that mental health problems are shameful or sinful.

St Luke's has a good record of discussing mental health fairly openly, but **mental health training** (delivered by people with lived experience, from a non-medical-model perspective) can help create an even more accepting environment, where members will feel more able to share their stories. Training can include reflections on **challenging harmful theology**.

As with other conditions, it is easy for churches to fall into the trap of thinking that people with mental health problems are only in churches to be 'cared for', and not to be active members and leaders of churches. In reality, many people in our congregations have experience of mental and emotional distress. The church can welcome the active participation of people with mental health problems, finding ways to adapt what we do to each person's needs. The contribution of people with mental distress benefits a church. Those who have the greatest difficulties to overcome can develop the greatest abilities to cope with challenge. The very '*disability*' and '*disorder*' that society deems so problematic can lead to sophisticated resilience and flexibility. Such people can acquire skills, insights, and humour – indeed, wisdom about faith and humanity that others struggle with. Such insights and experience can benefit other members of the congregation going through hard times.

However, people experiencing distress may at times seek the support of the **pastoral care team**. This means that **training and supervision** is particularly important for this team. Supervision is a process of professional learning and development that enables individuals to reflect on and develop their knowledge, skills, and competence, through support with another professional. Peer mentoring sessions for the pastoral team, with occasional support from a trained supervisor, can help the pastoral care team support distressed members of the congregation, whilst protecting their own mental health and avoiding burn out.

Mental health problems can fluctuate. When people are unwell, they may find it difficult to attend church. Others may prefer to attend only smaller services, for example if they experience anxiety. The pastoral care team and others can **stay in touch** with those who have asked for help, welcoming them as valued members of the church even when they cannot attend (without pressuring them to attend, which may make people feel ashamed).

Talk to people about what they need, and take access requests seriously. For example, if someone finds it difficult to sit in darkness because of anxiety, simply turning up the lights in an evening service could all make the difference to whether that person can attend or not.

Recommendations

- **Training in mental health and distress**, led by people with lived experience, especially for the welcome team, pastoral care team and leaders.
- **Supervision**, developing a plan for ongoing professional support for the pastoral team.
- Encourage **open discussion** of mental health, especially from the front of church, and via planned events (e.g. a sermon series or discussion group series on mental health).
- **Stay in touch** with those who cannot always attend church regularly.
- **Take access requests seriously** e.g. for small changes to environments.

24	<p>Welcome for people with chronic illnesses</p> <p>We have already suggested ways to include people with chronic illnesses, from improving seating to using inclusive language. But people with chronic illnesses may have difficulty getting to church at all. Church communities expect to see people regularly – those who are often too unwell to go to church can be easily forgotten. St Luke’s could help by reaching out to people who can only attend infrequently (without pressuring them to attend, which can lead to shame), e.g. through the pastoral care team.</p> <p>Some chronically ill people may prefer to come to evening services, because these are quieter, or because it is easier for them to find energy for services with a later start time. It is very helpful that these smaller services exist, but only attending these services can be isolating, if most social connection happens at the morning service. Members of the welcome team can be present at evening/smaller services to reach out and keep people in touch with the community and events.</p> <p>Streamed services have opened the church gates for people with chronic illnesses – there have recently been many stories of people who cannot leave their beds, who can finally attend church. But attending only online can still be isolating, if there is no way to connect with the church community. Churches can find ways to include remote members of churches, e.g. encouraging the pastoral care team to reach out to people, or offering to send sermon recordings to those who do not have online access. A named contact for disabled people (shared on the website) can encourage remote members of church to email and make themselves known. This can begin a relationship.</p> <p><u>Recommendations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Find ways to remember those who cannot attend church regularly e.g. ask the pastoral care team to reach out sensitively to these people. - Continue to stream services and share recordings of sermons e.g. on the website. - For those who prefer to come to evening services, members of the welcome team can introduce themselves and keep people in touch with the church community. - Have a named contact for disabled people, to act as a contact for those who attend only online, and share contact details on the website.
25	<p>Welcome for children with additional needs</p> <p>Family carers with children who have additional needs should be encouraged to talk with church leaders as to the best way to ensure their needs are met whenever they are in the church. Having a named contact for disabled people and carers can help with this (with details shared on the website and service sheet).</p> <p>Leaders of children’s work can be trained in some basics of disability access and inclusion, with a focus on the needs of children. This can form part of wider learning disability training.</p> <p>St Luke’s has a quiet room where service audio is streamed, which can be helpful if families need to take a break with their children, but not everyone knows about this facility. Service leaders can announce at the start of every service that there is a quiet room with service audio, and where to find it.</p> <p>Many children with learning disabilities use Makaton sign language. If we have any church members who know Makaton, the children’s section can be signed (if there are children who</p>

would find this useful). Leaders can teach the congregation together how to sign the Lord's Prayer or a song in Makaton. Congregants who know Makaton can wear badges to show this.

Recommendations

- Leaders of children's work to be given some **basic training** in disability inclusion
- Have a **named contact** for disabled people and their families/carers to talk to about their access/inclusion needs.
- Remember to **announce that there is a quiet** room (with service audio) at the start of every service, so that families can take their children out for a break if needed.
- Encourage a little **Makaton sign language** use in the service, if children with additional needs who use Makaton begin to attend St Luke's.

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And finally

Have you asked your congregation / community about any particular access needs they have identified? Do you or they know someone who would come if something was different?

Disabled people's voices have not historically been heard in churches. It is vital to seek the views of disabled people and our families – we are 'experts by experience' on what needs to change if we are to be included in churches. Speaking out can be difficult, when disabled people are often used to receiving negative responses when we ask for access. But there are ways that, as a community, we can help people to tell us about the barriers in our church.

Ideas for seeking feedback include:

- **A Disability Advisory Group** made up of disabled congregants (consciously including people with chronic illnesses, mental distress, neurodivergent people, and those with learning disabilities), together with family members/carers and others with an interest in disability access and justice. This group could meet to discuss issues in the church and share their feedback with leaders. This model comes from the Disability Advisory Group at St Martin-in-the-Fields Church.
- **An anonymous feedback box**, or a way of sharing feedback online anonymously, which can encourage people who are nervous to speak out about a problem or barrier. The danger is that disabled people's needs may be easily forgotten amongst other concerns shared this way.
- **A named 'disability access representative'** for the church, who can be flagged as the person for disabled people to talk to about access or inclusion concerns – ideally a disabled person themselves. This representative can advocate for disabled congregants, encouraging the church to prioritise access and disability justice.
- **Simple training** for church leaders and committees in disability equality, mental health, neurodiversity and learning disability, led by people with lived experience. This is one aspect of creating a **disability-positive culture**, where church communities commit to taking access seriously, dismantling barriers and challenging ableism.

By listening to disabled people's voices, churches can be transformed into Kingdom communities of justice, where all are truly included.

What we did not look at

There are some areas that this access audit has not looked at, because we do not have the right expertise in the Inclusion Committee, e.g. access for people with dementia (see the

Dementia Trust's [Guide to Supporting People with Dementia in the Local Church](#).) There is also much more we could say about *cultural barriers*, which cannot fit in this short report.

Examples of cultural barriers include:

- Liturgy and hymns that suggest that disabled or chronically ill people must be cured before they can be saved, or which associate deafness/blindness with spiritual ignorance;
- Some kinds of preaching about Gospel healing stories, that use disabled people as a spiritual lesson for non-disabled people;
- A limiting attitude, in many churches, that disabled people are in the pews to be cared for, but not to be active members or leaders;
- Some healing services, which can be traumatic for disabled/chronically ill people if they have had negative experiences of 'healing' prayer in the past. We can consider how we can avoid marginalising disabled people through teaching about healing (for example, by making clear that God's healing is about more than cure, that everyone needs healing, and that we are all "fearfully and wonderfully made," just as we are).

These are areas that can be explored in further conversations or training, if the church community wants to address disability justice on a deeper level.