

Parish DisABILITY Policy: Church is for Everyone

Church is for everyone

1. In terms of the Equality Act 2010, parishes are service providers for worshippers, pilgrims, tourists and visitors, in places of religious and cultural heritage, as practising worshipping Christian communities and as providers of wider community projects.
2. These are legal obligations but in the Church they are also expressions of God's love and our desire is to ensure everyone can contribute to the life of our parish, benefice or Mission Community and take part in our activities and projects. Our policy is not just about access to buildings, it's about providing the opportunity for everyone to participate in the life of the Church and both receiving and exercising God-given ministry together. So this is about ensuring the ability to participate rather than a focus on disability.
3. The Equality Act 2010 says a disability is a "physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities."
4. We are required to make all reasonable adjustments but we recognise this is about learning to be creative in our use of our existing facilities, and about the quality of our relationships, to enable people to participate fully in our church life. A good welcome can determine whether or not someone stays to visit or worship with us. Therefore we agree the following:

Our responsibilities as service providers

5. It is important develop a culture of listening and consultation so that we can learn from people with disabilities. We will find ways to understand their experience and include their contributions. This also includes children with disabilities and parents/carers. All disabilities are different so we will speak with someone with a disability to find out what assistance is required.
6. Full participation in all aspects of worship is central to the experience of the Gospel. So we wish to find ways to make sure everyone can participate in all our services and activities. To this end we will choose fully accessible venues for church services, activities, socials and courses whenever possible and provide communications in ways everyone can access.
7. Gathering together for Holy Communion is the heart of Christian worship. So we will consider those with disabilities and consult them about how they prefer to be included.
8. We will access Diocesan and other suitable training to help us provide disability awareness training for all groups within the life of the church. This will help us learn more about welcoming and including people with disabilities, children and young people with disabilities, and carers in all our activities.
9. Singing in the choir, serving, chalice assistants, reading lessons, leading intercessions, are all part of worship. We wish to make sure there are opportunities for everyone to take part, that activities are accessible and that any selection processes accommodate the needs of people with disabilities.
10. We recognize that the Church exists beyond the church building and services and that we have a responsibility to provide Holy Communion and pastoral visits to those who cannot come to us, so that they can be included in our community.
11. For all statutory meetings, for example Parochial Church Council (PCC) meetings, committee meetings, and the Annual Church Meeting which all local residents and Church Electoral Roll members should be able to attend, we will be sensitive to the needs of members and will provide suitable communications and choose accessible locations when necessary so that all can participate.

12. All worship resources, and papers for statutory meetings will follow “Clear and Large Print Guidance’ and will be made available in large print or in alternative formats for all those who need them.
13. Assistance dogs will be permitted to all activities when requested.
14. We recognise that at times those with a disability may be more vulnerable to abuse and so we will refer to our safeguarding policy, training and guidance when necessary.
15. We will do a regular access and facility audits of our church buildings including halls and will implement findings and recommendations as soon as possible. We will use the document “Guidance for completing an Access Audit” available from the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) and the Exeter Diocese website. This audit will also be reviewed during the Quinquennial Inspection process and whenever making plans for alterations to our buildings.
16. We will publish our facilities for people with disabilities on external notice boards, church websites and on the national website “A church near you” so that people know what facilities are available and that they will be made welcome.

Our responsibilities as employers

17. In terms of the Equality Act 2010, voluntary work attracts the same rights as others in a paid capacity. Our legal obligations therefore apply to everyone working in parishes, paid or voluntary.
18. We will make reasonable adjustments to avoid people with disabilities being put at a disadvantage. This may include adjusting working hours and practices and providing special equipment to help someone fulfil their role.
19. Assistance dogs will be permitted for interviews, management and training sessions.
20. Repairs to existing vicarages and the choice or building of new vicarages are the responsibility of Exeter Diocese and will take into account accessibility.
21. Management processes such as interviews, reviews and training will be held in accessible locations whenever necessary.

Implementation

22. We will review our activities on a regular basis to make sure that our policy is working in practice; that people with disabilities have the opportunities to participate fully, and we will look at ways to see that individuals with changing needs can continue in their activities and ministries among us wherever possible.
23. More detailed strategy and guidance is available from Exeter Diocese to support this policy.

This policy, approved by Exeter Diocesan Synod on 17th March 2018,
was adopted for St Matthew’s by its PCC on 25th January 2021