Church Access Project 2022-25

End of Project Evaluation

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About the Project

The Church Access Project was a Cloudesley initiative delivered in partnership with the Islington Deanery and the Diocese of London, designed to support Church of England churches in Islington to improve the accessibility of their buildings. The Project ran from 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2025, and all Islington churches with an eligible Church of England building were invited to participate. Cloudesley committed £337,500 to the Project and its core offer consisted of three key elements:

- Cloudesley-funded Access Audits, delivered by the Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE)
- A non-competitive Access Fund, providing grants of up to £10,000 for works stemming from audit recommendations
- Opportunities for learning and information-sharing across the Deanery

The Project aimed to provide churches with a practical route to identifying and addressing barriers to access, whether physical, sensory, cognitive, or related to signage, circulation, or facilities. Through expert assessments and targeted funding, the offer ensured that churches at different starting points could make meaningful progress toward becoming more accessible and inclusive spaces for all users.

Background

Cloudesley developed the Church Access Project in recognition of the crucial role that accessibility plays in the mission, community life, and safeguarding responsibilities of local churches. Church buildings are used not only for worship but also for social action projects, community gatherings, cultural events, and weekday activities; and so, ensuring that these buildings are accessible supports inclusion, participation, and hospitality. Many churches, however, face significant challenges in understanding the full range of access barriers present in historic or complex buildings. Expert guidance and structured support therefore played a vital role in helping churches prioritise improvements and make achievable progress.

The Project also aligned with wider developments within both the Church of England and the heritage sector. National Church of England guidance increasingly encourages churches to consider accessibility as part of their commitment to inclusion, covering not only physical access but also sensory, cognitive and communication needs. At the same time, organisations such as Historic England have placed greater emphasis on inclusive access and participation within historic buildings and heritage sites. Against this backdrop, the Church Access Project provided a timely and practical mechanism for churches in Islington to assess their buildings, understand solutions, and access dedicated funding to implement improvements.

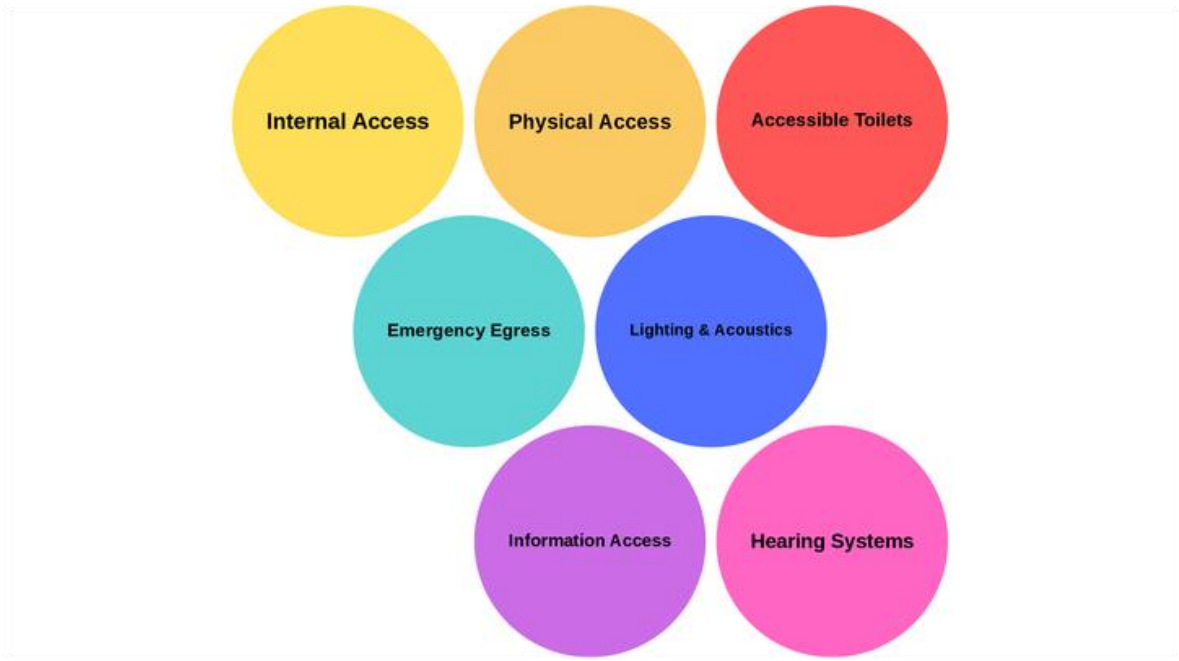
All eligible churches were also encouraged to take part in the Diocese of London's 360 Accessibility Audit; however, this was not required to take part in Cloudesley's Church Access Project.

CAE Access Audits

As a core component of the Church Access Project, Cloudesley commissioned the Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE) to deliver professional Access Audits for all participating churches. These audits were intended to provide churches with a clear and expert assessment of how accessible their buildings are for people with a wide range of disabilities, and to offer practical, prioritised recommendations for improvement.

Purpose of the Access Audits

The primary purpose of the CAE Access Audits was to help churches understand the specific barriers that exist within and around their buildings. Churches often operate in complex, historic, or architecturally sensitive contexts, and many are used intensively by both congregations and community groups. The audits therefore focused on areas such as:



Through this integrated approach, the audits enabled churches to view accessibility not as a series of isolated challenges but as a whole-building consideration impacting users' experience from arrival to departure.

CAE's Role and Methodology

CAE's role was to provide an impartial, specialist assessment using established accessibility standards and best practice. Each audit involved an on-site visit by an experienced access consultant, a detailed review of the building's layout and features, and the production of a tailored report setting out:

- Identified barriers to access
- Recommended actions (short, medium, and long-term)
- Indicative priorities
- Reasonable adjustments suitable for heritage contexts

The reports were intended to be practical and achievable, considering each church's context, resources, and building constraints. The reports aimed to give churches a roadmap they could use to plan improvements, whether funded directly through the Access Fund, through other Cloudesley programmes, or as part of longer-term building strategies.

Participation and Audit Completion
All churches in Islington with an eligible building were invited to take up the CAE audit offer as part of the Project's core provision. Twenty-two of the twenty-four eligible churches undertook a CAE Access Audit, with sixteen churches subsequently receiving Access Fund grants, reflecting both the perceived usefulness of the audits and the value placed on expert, independent assessment. The audit process also helped churches identify areas where small-scale interventions could make significant improvements, as well as highlighting where more substantial works might be needed in the future.

Themes Emerging from the Audits
Although each church faced different building conditions and constraints, a number of common themes began to emerge across the audit reports. These included:

- Stepped or uneven entrances and challenges achieving level access.
- Internal circulation barriers, especially in narrow aisles or transitional spaces.
- Insufficient signage or wayfinding, particularly for first-time visitors or those with visual impairments.
- Lighting and acoustic issues affecting people with sensory access needs.
- Limited accessible toilet provision or facilities not meeting current standards.
- Hearing loop installation, maintenance, or signage gaps.

These shared themes provide valuable insight into the most widespread access challenges across Islington's churches and help demonstrate the broader impact of the Project.

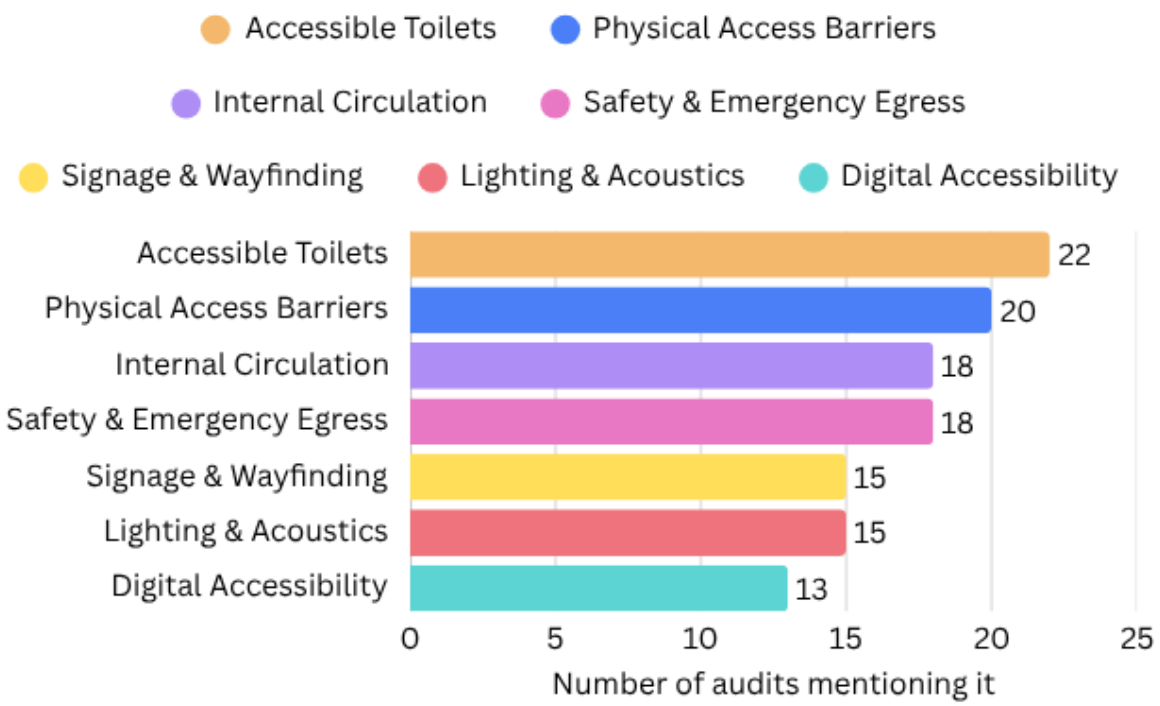
360 Accessibility Audit

Alongside the Church Access Project, Cloudesley worked in partnership with Rev John Beauchamp, Diocesan Disability Ministry Enabler for the Diocese of London, to promote the Diocese's 360 Accessibility Audit. The 360 Accessibility Audit is a self-assessment tool designed to help churches reflect on how well they enable D/deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent people to belong, participate, and flourish within church life. It considers not only physical access to buildings, but also worship, communication, leadership, welcome and inclusion across the wider life of the church.

While participation in the 360 Accessibility Audit was not a requirement of the Church Access Project, churches were encouraged to view it as a complementary next step. The CAE Access Audits provided expert assessment and practical recommendations relating to church buildings, while the 360 Accessibility Audit offered a broader framework for considering accessibility and inclusion across all aspects of church life. Together, the two approaches helped churches develop a more holistic understanding of accessibility and identify opportunities for ongoing improvement.

Audit Recommendations

The CAE Access Audits generated a detailed and practical set of recommendations for the twenty-two audited churches, tailored to the building's condition, layout, and use. Although every church had its own unique challenges, a clear set of common themes emerged across the audit reports.



These themes emerged repeatedly across the twenty-two CAE Access Audits and highlight the areas where accessibility barriers most commonly occurred within participating church buildings. They also indicate where churches were most frequently advised to prioritise improvements.

Common Physical Access Barriers

One of the most consistent findings across the audits related to physical access into and around the building. Many churches have stepped or uneven entrances, high thresholds, or slopes with gradients that exceed best practice. In several cases, temporary or makeshift solutions, such as portable ramps were in use but required updating to meet current accessibility standards. Improved level access, handrails, and re-graded approaches were frequent recommendations, reflecting the importance of ensuring that all visitors can enter the building independently and safely.

Internal Circulation and Layout Constraints

Inside the buildings, circulation routes often presented challenges. Narrow aisles, changes in level, obstructive furniture layouts, and heavy doors were common issues. In some cases, flooring provided insufficient visual contrast or created trip hazards. CAE typically recommended adjustments to internal layouts, resurfacing or repairing flooring, adding

visual contrast at key points, or installing powered door openers where feasible. These improvements were often identified as relatively low-cost, high-impact interventions.

Accessible Toilets and Welfare Facilities
The availability and quality of accessible toilet provision varied significantly across churches. Some had no accessible toilet on site; others had facilities that only partially met accessibility standards, lacking adequate turning space, grab rails, alarm systems, or appropriate fixtures. CAE frequently identified accessible toilet upgrades, reconfiguration of existing spaces, or new provision as medium- or longer-term priorities, given their strong link to inclusion and hospitality.

Signage, Wayfinding, and Information
Across many audit reports, signage and wayfinding were highlighted as areas needing attention. Recommendations included installing clear directional signage, tactile or high-contrast signs, and ensuring information is presented in multiple formats. Wayfinding improvements were often paired with suggestions to rationalise clutter, reduce visual noise, or improve navigation for first-time visitors and people with visual or cognitive impairments.

Lighting, Acoustics, and Sensory Access
Lighting levels in some churches were found to be inadequate or inconsistent, affecting the accessibility of services and events for individuals with visual impairments. Recommendations included upgrading to LED lighting with improved uniformity and colour rendering, enhancing natural light, and reducing glare. Acoustic quality and hearing assistance systems, such as hearing loops, were also common points of focus, either because loops were missing, inadequately signed, or in need of maintenance or testing.

Safety and Emergency Egress
CAE also assessed emergency egress arrangements, identifying where evacuation routes lacked clarity, lighting, or step-free alternatives. Recommendations often centred on improving signage, maintaining clear escape routes, or exploring safe refuge areas where full step-free egress was not possible due to building constraints.

Digital and Information Accessibility
Although less common, some audits referenced broader forms of accessibility, such as digital access to information, online materials in accessible formats, or ensuring that booking and communication systems accommodate a wide range of users.

Church Access Fund

The Church Access Fund formed the second major component of the Church Access Project and provided churches with the opportunity to take forward practical improvements identified through their CAE Access Audits. The Fund offered non-competitive grants of up to £10,000 to every eligible Church of England church in Islington, enabling them to address priority accessibility issues in a timely and achievable way. Cloudesley committed £284,847

to the Church Access Fund. Of this £159,744 was awarded to churches with the remaining £125,103 returned to the Main Church Grants budget for commitment during 2025/26.

Fund Design and Purpose

Cloudesley designed the Access Fund to remove some of the barriers that often prevent churches from implementing accessibility works. Many churches face limitations relating to capacity, heritage constraints, or the complexity of commissioning even small-scale building projects. By offering a simple, non-competitive process, the Fund ensured that all churches, regardless of size, resources, or readiness had an equal opportunity to progress the recommendations set out in their CAE audits. The intention was to advance works that were:

- Directly connected to improving accessibility
- Feasible within the £10,000 grant level
- Realistic for churches to deliver within the Project timeframe

By offering grants on a non-competitive basis, the Fund ensured that every eligible church had the opportunity to access funding for accessibility improvements identified through the CAE audits.

Eligibility and Application Process

All eligible Church of England churches with an audited building were invited to apply for the Fund. Churches could apply at any point during the Project period, giving them flexibility to seek funding when they had the capacity to plan and deliver works. This model was intended to support churches operating with limited volunteer or staff time, enabling them to schedule their applications around their availability.

Applications were expected to reference the CAE audit and demonstrate how the proposed works addressed identified barriers. Works commonly included small-scale physical improvements, enhancements to building facilities, or measures that directly supported improved access for disabled people.

Types of Projects Supported

Although the range of projects varied depending on each church's building and audit findings, the Access Fund typically supported works such as:

- Installation or improvement of accessible entrances or ramps
- Adjustments to internal circulation, door pressures, thresholds, or flooring
- Upgrades to signage and wayfinding
- Enhancement of lighting or visual contrast
- Installation or repair of hearing loops
- Creation or upgrading of accessible toilet facilities
- Improvements to emergency egress pathways.

These project types reflect the themes identified across the CAE audits and demonstrate the widespread need for both small-scale and more significant accessibility interventions.

Church	Project	Decision Date	Grant Amount
Kings Cross Church (KXC)	Portable hearing loop, acoustic improvements, new flooring, and training	01/03/2024	£10,000
Our Most Holy Redeemer, Clerkenwell	The installation of a new sound system to address significant barriers to the accessibility of services and other activities	21/11/2023	£10,000
St Saviour's Church	Ramp to Garden Room	04/04/2024	£10,000
St Mark's Tollington Park	Improving access to the side entrance of the church	25/05/2024	£10,000
St George's Tufnell Park	Replacement sound system	18/06/2024	£10,000
St James Clerkenwell	Temporary external ramp	07/07/2024	£10,000
St John the Evangelist Upper Holloway	Audio Visual system upgrade	21/10/2024	£10,000
Emmanuel Hornsey Road	Access works including accessible toilet improvements & hearing loop	19/11/2024	£9,744
St Silas, Pentonville	Repairs to the church entrance and handrails	25/11/2024	£10,000
St Andrew's Whitehall Park	Exterior lighting, toilet decoration, and improvements .	14/04/2025	£10,000
St Mark's Clerkenwell	Panic Hardware to two doors / inspection and repair of automated door.	25/06/2025	£10,000
Christ Church Highbury	Access Rail; Hearing Loop; Bathroom locks; and chairs	23/06/2025	£10,000
St Mary Islington	Automatic doors for the lift	07/07/2025	£10,000
St Luke's West Holloway	Toilet refurbishment, noticeboard, chairs, gate and path repair, and new matting to improve accessibility	02/07/2025	£10,000
St Mary Hornsey Rise	Works to the external paving and entrance threshold	02/07/2025	£10,000
Church on the Corner	Accessible toilet	02/07/2025	£10,000

Types of Projects Funded

The projects supported through the Church Access Fund show clear patterns in how churches prioritised accessibility improvements. Across the programme, most grants focused on addressing physical access barriers, improving sensory accessibility, and upgrading welfare facilities, reflecting the themes identified through the CAE Access Audits. Overall, the pattern of funded works shows churches prioritising practical, high-impact improvements that address the most immediate barriers identified by the CAE audits.



Case Studies

Our Most Holy Redeemer, Clerkenwell – Installation of Sound System – £10,000

Our Most Holy Redeemer used their grant to install a new sound system to address significant barriers to the accessibility of services and other activities. They were also supported by Cloudesley during the Autumn 2023 round of the Main Church Grants programme, to further support the installation of the sound system.



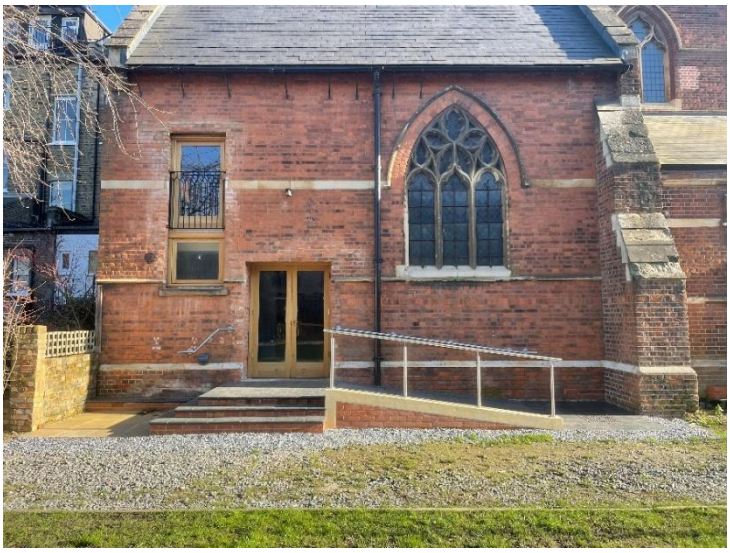
Challenges and learning: They experienced issues with members of the contractors' team being over-stretched at time of the installation, so it took time to get any issues that cropped up addressed. They also arranged for the wiring to be installed by a different contractor (who rewired the church and installed a new lighting system immediately before the sound system installation) and while this did save on time and costs, there were some small communication issues between the two contractors.

Contractors: They used Solotech, who they would recommend, but advised pressing for clarity about having a dedicated team on site for the duration of the project.

How it improved accessibility: The ability of members of the congregation and other users of the building to hear has been dramatically increased. This is the case for those with good hearing and for those who need extra support. It has also enabled the church to launch a new Sunday evening service which involves contemporary musicians whose music needs to be amplified through the sound system.

St Saviour's Church – Ramp installation – £10,000

St Saviour's used their grant to install a ramp between the garden room and main church space to allow the space to be used more frequently as more people would be able to access it.



Challenges and learning: They had a number of issues due to the ground level not being consistent across the site and the design needed to be adapted to make it work in line with building regulations. St Saviour's viewed this as a reminder to always build in contingency to budgets.

Contractors: They used JOS Property Services and would highly recommend them due to their diligence at making sure the project was done well, as well as making it possible to keep the budget down by cutting their costs.

How it improved accessibility: The site is now linked together by the new door and ramp, and creates a brilliant synergy, for the use of the church, garden, and hall. It has made access easier, and in some cases possible, from the back of the buildings for wheelchair users, and people with buggies.

St Luke's West Holloway – Toilet refurbishment, and other Accessibility Improvements – £10,000

St Luke's used the fund to complete a number of accessibility improvements including toilet refurbishment, purchasing chairs with arms, as well as gate and path repair, to improve accessibility to the church entrance.



Challenges and learning: The project was delayed by difficulties in securing contractors. An initial contractor offered a competitive quote but then became uncontactable and alternative quotes were significantly higher, requiring the scope of the project to be reconsidered. In hindsight, St Luke's felt it would have been more effective to focus the grant on a single substantial piece of work rather than several smaller improvements identified in the access audit. While they sought to maximise the value of the grant, balancing a small number of unaffordable major projects with numerous minor works

proved challenging. The delays also meant they were unable to reclaim VAT through the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme before funding ran out.

Contractors: They used Churchcare and would highly recommend them to other churches.

How it improved accessibility: The improvements have had a significant impact, with users providing positive feedback. The refurbishment of the toilets has enabled many people to use the facilities more independently and comfortably, improving accessibility across the church. The new chairs have also been well received, offering greater comfort, improved back support and armrests that make them easier to use by older people and those with physical limitations.

St George's Tufnell Park – Replacement sound system – £10,000



St George's used the fund to replace the sound system to improve the sound quality and so allow for better access to services. The project also replaced video and camera equipment to create an integrated system.

Challenges and learning: They felt well supported by the sound engineer and report that the installation went smoothly, was completed quickly and within budget.

Contractors: They used Moss Technical Ltd who they would recommend for their willingness to assist in the preparation work including faculty approval and architect's requirements, as well as for their follow-on support following completion of the installation.

How it improved accessibility: The improvements have had a significant impact, with users providing positive feedback. The new sound and video system has enhanced the experience for congregation members and building users, particularly those who are hearing impaired or neurodivergent, while also providing a much higher-quality broadcast for people accessing services remotely. The installation of TV screens has improved the visual experience during worship, and the issue of poor acoustics identified in the 2023 CAE Access Audit has been successfully addressed.

Additional Cloudesley Funding

In addition to the Church Access Project, accessibility work is often eligible through our Main Church Grants Programme, which runs twice per year and offers grants of up to £65,000. In the period that the project was running from July 2022 to June 2025, we also made a number of grants for accessibility projects through our Main Church Grants Programme, to the value of £134,011. In total, the Project resulted in £293,755 of accessibility-related investment across Islington churches.

A number of these grants are directly connected to the project, either as they are related to recommendations through the CAE Audit or the Diocese of London's 360 Accessibility Audit. The grants are as follows:

Request Name	Project Name	Decision Date	Grant Amount
St Mark's Clerkenwell	Repair to handrails alongside ramp	16/10/2022	£2,000
St Andrew's Whitehall Park	Additional costs to access ramp	04/11/2022	£9,711
St Thomas the Apostle Finsbury Park	Upgrades and additions to AV system	22/11/2022	£11,000
St Saviour's Church	Audio Visual upgrade phase 1	22/11/2022	£65,000
Christ Church Highbury	Repair of steps to entrance	21/11/2023	£15,400
Our Most Holy Redeemer, Clerkenwell	Installation of new sound system	21/11/2023	£21,000
St Thomas the Apostle Finsbury Park	Installation of new locking mechanism to main door & adjustments to specification for speaker system	21/11/2023	£6,900
All Saints, Caledonian Road	New chairs	20/05/2025	£3,000

Information Sharing

The third strand of the project involved sharing learning and information on accessibility with the Deanery. This involved the following work:

- Quarterly newsletters sharing accessibility-related resources, training and funding opportunities. When the Sustainable Church Buildings Project started in July 2023, the newsletter shared information about both accessibility and sustainability.
- Two accessibility-themed meetings of the Islington Deanery Buildings Forum, with presentations from Rev John Beauchamp, Diocesan Disability Ministry Adviser, CAE representatives, and the Rev'd Canon Dr Stephen Evans, Rector of St Marylebone, on the major accessibility project undertaken at St Marylebone Church
- A visit to St Marylebone to see the access improvements the church had undertaken
- Disability Equality Training – two sessions were delivered by Inclusion London in May and June 2023. They were attended by 23 people in total, with 91% of attendees rating the session as Excellent or Good. The sessions covered the Social Model of Disability, different types of barriers and access needs, and inclusive language and why it is important.

Learning

Engagement with the Project

- Most eligible churches engaged with the Church Access Project, with twenty-two churches undertaking a CAE Access Audit and sixteen churches subsequently using those audits to progress accessibility improvements through the Access Fund.
- Uptake of the grant offer was initially slow, likely due to the three-year timeframe and lack of deadline. This suggests that some churches could benefit from clearer deadlines or prompts to prioritise accessibility projects.
- However, overall participation was strong, and many churches ultimately took forward accessibility improvements through the Fund
- Limited staff and volunteer capacity remained a barrier for some churches, particularly when planning and delivering building projects.

Usefulness of the Offer

- Churches reported that the CAE audits helped them identify barriers, prioritise improvements and better understand how accessibility could be improved within their specific building context.
- The non-competitive nature of the Access Fund was particularly valued, allowing churches to focus on delivering projects rather than competing for funding.
- Some churches found their CAE report and the number of recommendations overwhelming. Some were not sure how to go about implementing the recommendations. Rev John Beauchamp, the Diocesan Disability Ministry Enabler at the Diocese of London, offered to support churches with this, and five churches took up this offer. Learning from this informed the design of Cloudesley's subsequent Sustainable Church Buildings Project, which had additional consultancy support available to address this issue.
- Building projects work best when initiated by the church. The impetus for this project came from Cloudesley and not the churches, and churches often had other building priorities and did not have the capacity to make full use of the Project offer.

Carrying Out the Funded Work

- Many churches found project delivery more complex than anticipated. Shared challenges included sourcing specialist contractors, obtaining technical advice, managing heritage constraints, and navigating Faculty requirements. Projects involving hearing loops, sound systems and significant building alterations were often more complicated than expected.

Accessibility and Historic Buildings

- Balancing accessibility improvements with the constraints of historic church buildings was a recurring challenge. In several cases, recommendations required modification following advice from church architects or other stakeholders. This highlighted the importance of early collaboration between accessibility consultants, architects and church leadership when developing projects.

Key Findings

The projects supported through the Access Fund demonstrate several common accessibility priorities across Islington churches:

- Physical access improvements remain a widespread need
- Sensory accessibility, particularly hearing support, is often underprovided
- Accessible toilet provision continues to be inconsistent
- Relatively modest investments can deliver significant improvements for building users

Overall Reflection

The Church Access Project demonstrated that churches could make meaningful progress on accessibility when provided with expert advice and accessible funding. The CAE audits have given churches a clearer understanding of their accessibility needs and created a foundation for future improvements across the Deanery.

Future Plans

The Church Access Project has highlighted both the progress made across the Deanery and the scale of work that still lies ahead to ensure that all churches are fully accessible to all users. Building on the learning and outcomes of the Project, several areas of future focus are emerging for Cloudesley and participating churches. The Project also demonstrated the value of expert accessibility advice. Future support may include sharing learning from the Project, encouraging churches to embed accessibility within wider building projects, and signposting churches to additional sources of funding and technical guidance.

Supporting Churches to Address Remaining Audit Recommendations

While many churches were able to take forward priority works through the Access Fund, the CAE audits identified a broader set of recommendations that could not always be completed within the £10,000 grant level. Several churches now have clearer long-term accessibility pathways but will require additional funding, planning, or technical support to deliver more complex works, such as major entrance reconfigurations, comprehensive toilet upgrades, or significant circulation improvements.

Cloudesley may explore opportunities for churches to apply for further support through its wider grant programmes, mirroring the approach encouraged in the Project planning. The project also led to the development of a quarterly newsletter to share learning and good practice on accessibility across the Deanery. While originally established as part of the Church Access Project, the newsletter has proved valuable as a wider communication and learning tool and so has continued beyond the life of the Project with a broader focus.

Embedding Accessibility Within Future Building Projects

A widespread finding was that churches often incorporate accessibility improvements most effectively when these align with broader or necessary building projects. As churches plan quinquennial works, repairs, or capital improvements, there is an opportunity to embed accessibility considerations from the outset. This integrated approach may prove especially important for heritage-sensitive works where full accessibility cannot be achieved through minor interventions alone. Cloudesley's future guidance and grant processes will continue to encourage this integration. As part of Cloudesley's Church Grants Review undertaken in 2025, it has been agreed that Cloudesley will raise accessibility opportunities with churches during the assessment stage of the grant application process. For instance, a church looking to purchase chairs would be encouraged to consider purchasing some chairs with arms.

Conclusion

The Church Access Project has played a significant role in helping churches across the Islington Deanery identify and address barriers to accessibility within their buildings. Through the combination of professional CAE Access Audits, a flexible and non-competitive Access Fund, and opportunities for learning across the Deanery, churches were able to make meaningful progress in improving the way their buildings welcome and serve all users. The Project demonstrated that even modest, well-targeted investments, such as ramps, hearing loops, improved thresholds, and accessible toilets, can have a substantial impact on inclusion, safety, and the overall experience of congregations and community groups.

The learning gathered through the Project underscores the ongoing need for accessible expertise, clear guidance, and continued support as churches work through the full set of audit recommendations. While many were able to complete priority works, the CAE audits have provided each church with a longer-term roadmap, and it is clear that sustained attention will be needed to address more complex challenges, particularly in historic or heavily constrained buildings.

Most importantly, the Project has helped embed accessibility as a shared priority across the Islington Deanery. Churches now have a stronger understanding of their buildings' needs and a clearer sense of how to approach future improvements. Cloudesley remains committed to supporting churches in this work, both through future grant opportunities and through continued learning, collaboration, and planning.

As a result of the Church Access Project, churches across Islington are better equipped to provide safe, inclusive, and welcoming environments for all who use them. The foundations laid through this initiative will continue to influence building projects, accessibility planning, and community engagement for years to come.