

The Federation of St Martin's and Seabrook

Church of England School's



Guinea Pig Handling and Welfare Policy

Policy Title	Guinea Pig Handling and Welfare Policy
Policy Category	Health, Safety & Animal Welfare
Applies To	All staff, volunteers, pupils, and parents/carers
Date Adopted	June 2026
Date for Review	June 2029
Policy Owner	Executive Headteacher / Designated Animal Welfare Lead
Approved By	Full Governing Body

Christian Ethos Statement

Living and Learning Together

Inspired by St Martin we endeavour to make a difference through compassionate actions so every member of our community and our natural world flourishes. We value, love and nurture every individual's unique gifts and talents by investing and empowering them through rich learning opportunities to reach their full potential following Jesus' example.

1. Purpose and Scope

This policy sets out the school's approach to keeping guinea pigs on the school premises and the safe, supervised handling of those animals by pupils. It applies to all staff, teaching assistants, lunchtime supervisors, volunteers, and any pupils who interact with the guinea pigs, whether during curriculum time, enrichment activities, or before/after-school sessions.

Guinea pigs can make a valuable contribution to pupils' personal development — fostering empathy, responsibility, and a sense of stewardship for living things. This policy ensures that those benefits are realised safely, hygienically, and in a manner consistent with the school's Christian values.

2. Roles and Responsibilities

2.1 Executive Headteacher

- Has overall responsibility for the implementation of this policy.
- Ensures a named Animal Welfare Lead is designated and trained.
- Reviews this policy annually or following any incident.
- Ensures sufficient resource is allocated for the guinea pigs' care and welfare.

2.2 Animal Welfare Lead

The Animal Welfare Lead (AWL) is the member of staff with day-to-day responsibility for the guinea pigs. Their duties include:

- Overseeing daily care routines (feeding, watering, bedding, health checks).
- Maintaining the guinea pig care log (Appendix A).
- Liaising with the school's veterinary practice for routine and emergency care.
- Conducting and documenting risk assessments for all handling activities.
- Briefing staff and volunteers on safe handling procedures.
- Reporting welfare concerns to the Executive Headteacher.

2.3 All Staff and Volunteers

- Must read and follow this policy before participating in any guinea pig handling activity.
- Must supervise pupils at all times when guinea pigs are being handled.
- Must not leave guinea pigs unattended outside their enclosure.
- Must report any injury to a pupil, volunteer, or the animal to the AWL immediately.

2.4 Pupils

- Must follow all staff instructions during handling sessions.
- Must wash hands thoroughly before and after handling.
- Must handle guinea pigs gently and calmly, in line with the guidance in Section 5.
- Must report any scratches, bites, or concerns to a member of staff immediately.

3. Animal Welfare and Housing

3.1 Housing Standards

The school will maintain housing standards consistent with current RSPCA and British Veterinary Association (BVA) guidance for guinea pigs. As a minimum:

- Guinea pigs must be housed in pairs or small groups, as they are social animals and will suffer if kept alone.
- The enclosure must provide a minimum of 2m² of floor space per pair, plus a separate run area where possible.

- The enclosure must be kept indoors or in a sheltered, weatherproof environment, away from direct draughts and sunlight.
- Bedding (dust-free hay or paper-based substrate) must be spot-cleaned daily and fully replaced at least weekly.
- Fresh water must be available at all times via a clean bottle or bowl.
- A hay-based diet must be supplemented with fresh vegetables rich in Vitamin C daily (e.g. leafy greens, peppers).
- A quiet hide or shelter must always be available within the enclosure.
- The enclosure must be secured against predators and escape at all times.

3.2 Veterinary Care

- The school must be registered with a named local veterinary practice.
- All guinea pigs must receive an annual health check.
- Any animal showing signs of ill health (lethargy, loss of appetite, unusual discharge, laboured breathing, dental problems) must be assessed by a vet within 24 hours.
- Emergency veterinary contact details must be displayed visibly in the care area.
- The school will not attempt to breed guinea pigs. All animals of breeding age must be sexed by a vet.

3.3 Holiday and Weekend Care

- The AWL will arrange a named member of staff or approved volunteer to provide care during weekends, school holidays, and INSET days.
- Pupils must not take guinea pigs home unless a formal, signed loan agreement is in place (see Appendix B) and the AWL is satisfied with the suitability of the home environment.
- Any holiday loan arrangement must include a veterinary emergency plan.

4. Risk Assessment

A written risk assessment (Appendix C) must be completed and approved by the Headteacher before any pupil handling activity takes place, and reviewed at least annually thereafter. The risk assessment will address:

- Zoonotic disease transmission (see Section 6).
- Allergic reactions in pupils or staff.
- Risk of dropping or injury to the animal.
- Risk of scratches or bites to pupils.
- Supervision ratios.
- Suitability of the handling environment.

The risk assessment must be made available to all staff involved in handling sessions and shared with parents/carers prior to their child's first session.

5. Safe Handling Procedures

5.1 Before Handling

- Handling sessions must take place only when a minimum of one trained adult is present for every six pupils (1:6 ratio), with a minimum of one adults present at all times.
- The handling area must be clean, enclosed (e.g. a mat on a low table), and free of hazards such as trailing wires, open windows, or access to other animals.
- Pupils must wash hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds before the session begins.
- The AWL or supervising adult must carry out a brief visual health check of each guinea pig before it is brought out. Any animal appearing unwell must not be handled.
- Pupils with known allergies to animals, hay, or animal bedding must not participate unless medical clearance has been provided (see Section 6.2).

5.2 During Handling

- Guinea pigs must always be supported with two hands — one beneath the body and one gently steadying the back.
- Pupils must remain seated on a chair or on the floor when holding a guinea pig.
- Guinea pigs must never be held above waist height when seated, to minimise injury risk if dropped.
- Pupils must be calm and use quiet voices. Sudden movements, shouting, or running near the animals is not permitted.
- Handling must be limited to a maximum of 10–15 minutes per guinea pig per session to avoid stress to the animal.
- No pupil should handle a guinea pig against the animal's clear signs of distress (teeth chattering, loud vocalisation, attempting to flee, freezing).
- Guinea pigs must not be passed directly from one pupil to another; they must be placed on the mat between transfers.
- Food treats may only be given under direct adult supervision and only with approved food items.

5.3 After Handling

- All pupils and staff must wash hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds after handling or contact with the enclosure.
- The guinea pig must be returned calmly to its enclosure and observed briefly to confirm it has settled.
- The handling area must be cleaned and disinfected after each session.
- Any injuries (to a pupil or the animal) must be recorded in the incident log and reported to the AWL.

6. Health, Hygiene, and Medical Considerations

6.1 Zoonotic Disease

Guinea pigs can carry bacteria including Salmonella, Campylobacter, and Bordetella. The risk of transmission is low when hygiene protocols are followed. The school will:

- Ensure strict handwashing compliance before and after all contact.
- Prohibit touching the face, mouth, or eyes during handling sessions.
- Prohibit eating or drinking in the care/handling area.
- Ensure the enclosure and equipment are disinfected with animal-safe products regularly.
- Seek veterinary advice and inform parents/carers in the event of any suspected zoonotic illness.

6.2 Allergies and Medical Conditions

- Parents and carers must disclose any known allergies (to animals, hay, dust, or animal saliva) or immune-compromising conditions on the school health consent form.
- Pupils with disclosed conditions will not participate in handling sessions without written medical clearance.
- Pupils who are pregnant, or who have a disclosed immunosuppressed condition, must not participate.
- EpiPens and prescribed medication must be accessible in the handling area for pupils with severe allergy profiles.
- Any suspected allergic reaction during or after a session must be managed in line with the school's allergy/medical emergency policy and parents/carers must be informed immediately.

6.3 Bites and Scratches

Guinea pigs rarely bite, but scratches from claws can occur. In the event of a bite or scratch:

- The wound must be washed under running water for at least 10 minutes.
- The incident must be recorded in the school accident book.
- Parents/carers must be informed on the same day.
- Medical advice must be sought if the wound breaks the skin or shows signs of infection.

7. Communication with Parents and Carers

- Parents and carers will be informed in writing (letter or school communication platform) before their child first participates in guinea pig handling activities.
- The risk assessment summary will be available on request.
- Annual updates will be provided at the start of each academic year.
- Any significant incident involving the guinea pigs (illness, injury to a pupil, or death of an animal) will be communicated to all relevant parents/carers promptly.
- Parents/carers may opt their child out of handling sessions at any time by written request to the Headteacher. This will be respected without question.

8. Inclusion and Equal Opportunities

The school is committed to making guinea pig handling activities as inclusive as possible. Reasonable adjustments will be made for pupils with disabilities, sensory needs, or SEND. Where direct handling is not appropriate, pupils will be offered meaningful alternative roles (e.g. preparing food, observing, keeping the care log) so that they can participate in the learning and responsibility-building benefits of the programme.

9. End of Life and Rehoming

- The school will seek veterinary advice to ensure a good quality of life is maintained for all animals throughout their lives.
- Where a guinea pig requires euthanasia, this must be carried out by a vet. The welfare of the animal will always be the primary consideration.
- The death of a guinea pig will be handled sensitively. Pupils will be told in an age-appropriate way consistent with the school's pastoral and Christian values around loss and remembrance.
- Guinea pigs that can no longer be cared for by the school will be rehomed through a reputable route (e.g. RSPCA, specialist rescue). They will not be sold commercially or given to pupils as pets without prior parental agreement and a suitability assessment by the AWL.

10. Policy Review

This policy will be reviewed annually by the Executive Headteacher and Animal Welfare Lead, or earlier following any significant incident, change in legislation or guidance, or change in the school's circumstances. Any amendments will be approved by the Full Governing Body.

Signed (Executive Headteacher)

Date: _____

Signed (Chair of Governors)

Date: _____

Appendix A — Daily Guinea Pig Care Log

Complete this log every school day. Archive completed sheets termly.

Date	Staff Initials	Fed & Watered	Bedding Checked	Health Check OK?	Notes / Concerns

Appendix B — Holiday Home Loan Agreement

This agreement must be signed before any guinea pig is taken home by a member of staff or approved volunteer during school holidays.

Name of Borrower	From: _____ To: _____
Date(s) of Loan	
Animal(s) Borrowed	
Emergency Vet Contact	
School Contact (AWL)	

I confirm that I have read and understand the school's Guinea Pig Handling and Welfare Policy. I will provide appropriate care, housing, and veterinary access for the animal(s) during the loan period and will contact the AWL immediately in the event of illness, injury, or emergency.

Borrower Signature	AWL Signature
_____	_____
Date: _____	Date: _____

Appendix C — Risk Assessment Template

Complete before the first handling session each academic year and review following any incident.

Hazard	Likelihood (1–5)	Severity (1–5)	Control Measures	Residual Risk
Zoonotic infection	2	3	Strict handwashing before and after; no face-touching; no eating in area; regular vet checks.	Low
Allergic reaction	2	4	Parental disclosure; medical clearance required; EpiPen available; staff trained in anaphylaxis response.	Low
Animal dropped	3	3	Pupils seated at all times; two-hand hold technique; no transfers pupil-to-pupil; height limit enforced.	Low
Bite or scratch	3	2	Calm handling technique taught; stressed animals not handled; wounds washed and recorded immediately.	Low
Animal stress / welfare harm	2	3	15-min session limit; health check before each session; quiet handling environment; animal can signal distress.	Low
Escape from handling area	2	2	Enclosed mat area; doors and windows closed; minimum two adults present.	Low

Assessed by	
Role	
Date of Assessment	
Date of Next Review	