

Sickness Absence Policy

St Peter's, Colchester

Adopted by the PCC: [tbc]

Review date: [annually]

Policy owner: The Parochial Church Council

1. Purpose

St Peter's seeks to be a church where people are treated with dignity, fairness, honesty and care. This includes the way we support employees during sickness absence and manage the practical effect of absence on the church's work.

This policy explains how employees should report sickness absence, how sickness absence will be recorded and managed, how St Peter's will support return to work, and how longer-term or repeated absence may be addressed.

St Peter's recognises that sickness absence may involve physical illness, mental ill-health, disability, stress, injury, recovery from treatment, bereavement, caring pressures or other personal circumstances. We will seek to handle sickness absence sensitively, fairly and responsibly.

At the same time, St Peter's must also consider the needs of the church, the requirements of each role, the effect on other staff and volunteers, safeguarding and confidentiality responsibilities, and the effective delivery of St Peter's ministry, worship, administration and operations.

This policy does not form part of any employee's contract of employment and may be amended by the PCC from time to time.

2. Scope

This policy applies to employees of St Peter's.

It does not apply to the Vicar in respect of his office as an office-holder under Church of England terms of service. Where the Vicar also has a separate employment relationship with the PCC, or where the Vicar has a conflict of interest in relation to an employee's sickness absence, the Chair of the Human Resources and Remuneration Governance Group, or another person appointed by the PCC, may act in place of the Vicar.

Volunteers, office-holders, clergy, licensed ministers, elected PCC members and others who are not employees are not covered by this employee sickness absence policy. However, sickness, incapacity or wellbeing concerns affecting voluntary service or ministry roles should still be

handled pastorally, safely and in accordance with the relevant St Peter's policy or Church of England process.

3. Relationship with other policies and processes

This policy should be read alongside, where applicable:

- Welcome, Dignity and Fair Treatment Policy;
- Flexible Working Policy;
- Grievance Policy and Procedure;
- Disciplinary Policy and Procedure;
- Equal Opportunities Policy;
- Data Protection Policy;
- Data Retention and Records Management Policy;
- Health and Safety Policy;
- Lone Worker Policy;
- Safeguarding Policy;
- Staff Handbook;
- any relevant contract of employment or employment statement.

Sickness absence should not automatically be treated as misconduct. Where absence, health or disability affects an employee's ability to carry out their role, this will normally be considered as a sickness absence, wellbeing, reasonable-adjustment or capability matter.

However, the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure may apply where there is evidence of misconduct, dishonesty, unauthorised absence, failure to follow sickness reporting procedures without good reason, or behaviour inconsistent with sickness absence.

Where sickness absence raises safeguarding, health and safety, data protection, disability, grievance, capability, pastoral or employment-law issues, St Peter's will decide the most appropriate process, taking advice where needed.

4. Principles

In managing sickness absence, St Peter's will seek to:

- treat employees with dignity, fairness and respect;
- respond sensitively to illness, injury, disability and mental ill-health;
- maintain appropriate contact during absence;
- respect confidentiality and handle medical information carefully;
- record sickness absence accurately;
- support employees to return to work where reasonably possible;
- consider reasonable adjustments where disability or long-term health conditions are involved;
- consider flexible working, phased return or temporary adjustments where appropriate;
- take account of the needs of the church and the employee's role;

- avoid unreasonable pressure to return before the employee is fit;
- act fairly and proportionately where absence becomes prolonged, repeated or difficult to sustain;
- take HR, occupational health, medical, legal or other advice where appropriate.

Employees are expected to report sickness absence promptly, keep in reasonable contact, provide required information or fit notes, co-operate with return-to-work and absence-management processes, and be honest about their health and availability for work.

5. Reporting sickness absence

If an employee is unable to work because of illness or injury, they should contact their line manager as soon as reasonably possible.

Where possible, the employee should make contact before the time they are due to start work.

The employee should normally explain:

- that they are unfit for work;
- the general reason for absence;
- when they first became unwell;
- how long they expect to be absent, if known;
- whether any urgent work, meetings, safeguarding matters, pastoral issues, deadlines, keys, passwords, bookings or other practical matters need to be covered;
- how and when they expect to be contacted during the absence.

The employee does not need to disclose more medical detail than is reasonably necessary. However, enough information should be provided to allow St Peter's to understand the likely duration of absence, arrange cover, consider support, and meet employment, safeguarding, health and safety or operational responsibilities.

If the employee is too unwell to make contact personally, someone else may contact St Peter's on their behalf. The employee should then make direct contact as soon as reasonably practicable.

Text messages, email or messaging apps may be appropriate in some circumstances, but the employee should follow any reporting arrangements agreed with their line manager.

6. Keeping in contact during sickness absence

During sickness absence, the employee and line manager should maintain reasonable contact.

The purpose of contact is to:

- show care and concern;
- understand the likely length of absence;
- identify any support needed;
- arrange work cover;
- consider whether medical advice, fit notes or occupational health input may be needed;

- plan for return to work where appropriate.

Contact should be proportionate and should not place unreasonable pressure on the employee.

Where absence is brief, minimal contact may be needed. Where absence is prolonged, uncertain, work-related, repeated, or connected with mental health, disability or workplace concerns, more structured contact may be appropriate.

7. Recording sickness absence

St Peter's will record sickness absence for employment, payroll, management, pastoral, health and safety and statutory sick pay purposes.

Absence records may include:

- dates of absence;
- working days or hours missed;
- general reason for absence;
- self-certification information;
- fit notes or medical certificates;
- return-to-work notes;
- adjustments or support agreed;
- SSP or sick pay information;
- relevant correspondence.

Absence records will be handled in accordance with St Peter's Data Protection Policy, Data Retention and Records Management Policy, and Data Privacy Notice.

Medical information will be treated as confidential and shared only where necessary for proper management, HR, payroll, safeguarding, legal, health and safety or governance purposes.

8. Self-certification and fit notes

For sickness absence of seven calendar days or fewer, including non-working days, weekends and bank holidays, an employee does not normally need to provide a fit note from a doctor or other healthcare professional.

For sickness absence of more than seven calendar days in a row, the employee must provide a fit note or other acceptable medical evidence.

A fit note may state that the employee is "not fit for work" or "may be fit for work" if certain changes are made.

If a fit note says that the employee may be fit for work, St Peter's will discuss with the employee whether any recommended changes can reasonably be made. These may include, for example, amended duties, altered hours, workplace adaptations, working from home, a phased return, or other temporary support.

If St Peter's cannot reasonably make the changes suggested, the employee will normally be treated as not fit for work for the period covered by the fit note.

Current GOV.UK guidance confirms that employers can only ask for a fit note where an employee has been off work for more than seven days in a row, including non-working days. Acas also encourages employers to discuss possible changes where a fit note says the employee "may be fit for work."

9. Statutory Sick Pay and contractual sick pay

Employees may be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay, depending on statutory eligibility requirements.

Any entitlement to contractual sick pay will depend on the employee's contract of employment, employment statement, Staff Handbook, or other written terms.

Statutory Sick Pay rules and rates may change. St Peter's will apply the statutory rules and rates in force at the relevant time.

Employees should provide the information reasonably needed to administer sick pay and Statutory Sick Pay.

Where St Peter's considers that an employee is not entitled to Statutory Sick Pay, the employee will be informed and provided with the appropriate information or form where required.

10. Sickness during annual leave

If an employee becomes sick during annual leave, they should notify their line manager as soon as reasonably possible.

The employee may ask for the affected annual leave to be treated as sickness absence instead. St Peter's may require the employee to provide appropriate evidence of sickness.

Where annual leave is changed to sickness absence, the employee may be entitled to take the annual leave at another time, subject to statutory rules, contract terms and operational needs.

Employees on sickness absence may still request annual leave. Any request should be discussed with the line manager.

11. Return-to-work contact

After a period of sickness absence, the line manager will normally make contact with the employee on return to work.

This may be a brief conversation or, where appropriate, a more structured return-to-work meeting.

The purpose is to:

- welcome the employee back;
- check whether they are fit to return;

- confirm the reason and dates of absence;
- identify any continuing health concerns;
- consider whether adjustments or support are needed;
- discuss any fit note recommendations;
- update the employee on any important work matters;
- confirm any next steps.

Where the absence was brief and straightforward, the return-to-work contact may be informal.

Where the absence was longer, repeated, work-related, connected with mental health, disability or stress, or involved a fit note, a more formal return-to-work meeting will normally be appropriate.

Acas advises that when an employee returns to work after sickness absence, they should have a return-to-work meeting with their employer, and that disability-related reasonable adjustments should be discussed where relevant.

12. Phased return to work

A phased return may be appropriate where an employee is returning after longer-term sickness absence, surgery, injury, mental ill-health, stress, disability-related absence or other significant health issues.

A phased return may involve:

- temporarily reduced hours;
- temporarily reduced duties;
- gradually increasing hours or responsibilities;
- temporary home working;
- additional supervision or support;
- adjusted start or finish times;
- avoiding particular duties for a limited period;
- review meetings.

Any phased return should normally be agreed in writing, including:

- the start date;
- the expected length of the phased return;
- the temporary working pattern or duties;
- how pay will be handled;
- review dates;
- what happens at the end of the phased return.

A phased return may need to be reviewed or extended depending on medical advice, the employee's health, and the needs of the role.

13. Occupational health and medical advice

St Peter's may ask an employee to consent to medical advice or occupational health input where this is reasonably needed.

This may be appropriate where:

- absence is long-term;
- absence is repeated or patterned;
- the employee may need adjustments;
- there are concerns about fitness for work;
- there are concerns about work-related stress;
- the employee's condition may amount to a disability;
- there are health and safety concerns;
- St Peter's needs advice about return to work, phased return, duties, hours, workplace adjustments or capability.

Medical or occupational health advice may consider:

- whether the employee is fit for work;
- when the employee may be able to return;
- whether a phased return may help;
- whether adjustments may be needed;
- whether the condition may be long-term;
- whether the condition may be affected by work;
- whether there are duties the employee should avoid;
- whether further review is needed.

St Peter's will explain why medical or occupational health advice is being sought and how the information will be used.

The employee's consent will normally be needed before St Peter's obtains medical information from a doctor or occupational health provider.

If an employee does not consent to medical advice being obtained, St Peter's may need to make decisions based on the information available.

14. Disability and reasonable adjustments

Some sickness absence may relate to a disability or long-term health condition.

St Peter's is committed to making reasonable efforts to remove unnecessary barriers for employees who are disabled or who have health conditions affecting their work. This reflects both our legal responsibilities and our Christian commitment to treat people with dignity, patience and care.

Where an employee is disabled, St Peter's will consider reasonable adjustments. These may include:

- adjusting working hours;
- altering duties;
- providing equipment;
- changing workplace arrangements;
- allowing time off for treatment or appointments;
- recording disability-related absence separately where appropriate;
- adjusting absence triggers or review points;
- allowing home working or hybrid working;
- providing additional supervision or support;
- changing communication methods;
- considering redeployment where appropriate.

The reasonableness of any adjustment will depend on the circumstances, including the employee's role, the needs of the church, cost, practicability, safeguarding, confidentiality, health and safety, effect on others, and available resources.

Acas guidance notes that disability-related absence may need to be handled differently, and that employers may need to make reasonable adjustments, including considering medical advice such as occupational health.

15. Repeated short-term absence

Repeated short-term sickness absence can create difficulties for the employee, colleagues, volunteers and the church's work.

Where there are repeated short-term absences, St Peter's may arrange an absence review meeting.

The purpose of the meeting may be to:

- understand the reasons for absence;
- identify whether there is an underlying health condition or disability;
- consider whether absence is work-related;
- consider support or reasonable adjustments;
- consider whether medical advice is needed;
- discuss expectations about attendance;
- agree next steps;
- set a review period.

St Peter's will not assume misconduct simply because an employee has repeated absences. However, where there is evidence that absences are not genuine, or that the employee has failed to follow reporting procedures without good reason, the matter may be considered under the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure.

16. Long-term sickness absence

Long-term sickness absence will be handled sensitively and carefully.

Where an employee is absent for a prolonged period, or where there is no clear return date, St Peter's may arrange one or more absence review meetings.

The purpose may be to discuss:

- the employee's health and wellbeing;
- medical advice or fit notes;
- the likely length of absence;
- whether the employee may be able to return;
- whether a phased return may be possible;
- whether reasonable adjustments may be needed;
- whether flexible working may help;
- whether the employee can continue in their current role;
- whether alternative duties or redeployment may be possible;
- the effect of the absence on the church's work;
- any sick pay or SSP position;
- next steps and review dates.

St Peter's may seek occupational health, medical, HR or legal advice where appropriate.

The employee may be accompanied at a formal absence review meeting by a work colleague or trade union representative.

17. Ill-health capability

Where sickness absence or ill-health affects an employee's ability to carry out their role, St Peter's may need to consider capability.

Capability concerns relating to ill-health should be handled fairly, sensitively and with appropriate evidence.

Before making any decision about continued employment, St Peter's will normally consider:

- the nature of the employee's role;
- the employee's health and medical evidence;
- the likely length of absence or limitation;
- whether the employee may be able to return to work;
- whether a phased return is possible;
- whether reasonable adjustments may help;
- whether flexible working may help;
- whether there are alternative duties or redeployment options;
- the effect of absence on the church's work;
- the effect on other staff and volunteers;
- whether further medical, occupational health, HR or legal advice is needed.

Dismissal on grounds of ill-health capability will only be considered after a fair process and as a last resort.

GOV.UK and Acas both emphasise that dismissal because of long-term illness should be a last resort, and that employers should consider reasonable adjustments where disability may be involved.

18. Dismissal on grounds of ill-health

In some cases, it may become impossible for an employee to continue in their role because of long-term ill-health, repeated absence, or inability to carry out essential duties.

Before any dismissal is considered, St Peter's will seek to follow a fair process, including:

- consulting with the employee;
- reviewing medical evidence where appropriate;
- considering reasonable adjustments;
- considering phased return;
- considering flexible working;
- considering alternative duties or redeployment where practicable;
- considering the effect on the church's work;
- giving the employee an opportunity to respond;
- considering any representations made by the employee;
- taking HR, legal, occupational health or other advice where appropriate.

If dismissal is the outcome, St Peter's will confirm in writing:

- the reason for dismissal;
- the date employment will end;
- notice or payment in lieu of notice where applicable;
- final payments, including holiday pay;
- arrangements for return of church property and access to church systems;
- the right of appeal.

An employee has the right to appeal against dismissal on grounds of ill-health capability.

19. Stress, mental health and work-related concerns

St Peter's recognises that stress and mental ill-health may affect employees' ability to work.

Employees are encouraged to speak to their line manager, the Vicar, or the Chair of the Human Resources and Remuneration Governance Group if they are experiencing work-related stress, anxiety, depression, burnout or other mental health concerns.

Where an employee believes work is contributing to their ill-health, St Peter's will seek to listen carefully and consider appropriate steps. These may include:

- reviewing workload;
- clarifying priorities;
- adjusting duties or hours;
- improving supervision;

- addressing conflict or communication problems;
- considering flexible working;
- considering reasonable adjustments;
- seeking medical or occupational health advice;
- considering whether a grievance, safeguarding process or other policy is engaged.

20. Medical appointments

Employees should try, where reasonably possible, to arrange routine medical, dental or other appointments outside working hours or at times that minimise disruption.

St Peter's recognises that this will not always be possible, especially for hospital appointments, urgent treatment, disability-related appointments, pregnancy-related appointments, mental health support or specialist care.

Employees should give as much notice as reasonably possible of appointments during working time.

Time off for appointments may be paid or unpaid depending on statutory rights, contract terms, the nature of the appointment, disability or pregnancy considerations, and the circumstances.

21. Unauthorised absence

If an employee is absent from work and does not report sickness absence or otherwise explain the absence, St Peter's will try to contact the employee.

Unauthorised absence may be treated as misconduct under the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure.

However, St Peter's will consider whether there may be a reasonable explanation, such as serious illness, accident, emergency, mental health crisis, bereavement, caring crisis or communication difficulty.

22. Sickness absence and church systems, duties and confidentiality

During sickness absence, St Peter's may need to make practical arrangements for cover.

The employee may be asked, where reasonable and appropriate, to provide information needed to protect the church's work, such as:

- urgent deadlines;
- meetings or appointments;
- safeguarding or pastoral matters needing handover;
- bookings or events;
- access to relevant files or systems;
- keys, equipment or documents;
- password or account recovery arrangements through proper channels.

An employee on sickness absence should not normally be expected to work. Any contact should be proportionate and limited to what is reasonable.

Employees must continue to respect confidentiality, safeguarding, data protection and IT security requirements during sickness absence.

23. Confidentiality and wellbeing

Sickness absence and health information will be handled sensitively.

Information about an employee's health should not be shared more widely than necessary.

Where colleagues, volunteers or church members need to know that an employee is absent or that cover arrangements are in place, St Peter's will normally avoid unnecessary medical detail.

St Peter's will seek to speak about absent employees with care and respect.

24. Records and data protection

St Peter's will keep appropriate records of sickness absence, self-certification, fit notes, return-to-work meetings, absence review meetings, adjustments, occupational health advice, correspondence, sick pay and related decisions.

Records will be handled in accordance with St Peter's Data Protection Policy, Data Retention and Records Management Policy, and Data Privacy Notice.

Medical information will be kept securely and shared only where necessary for proper management, HR, payroll, legal, safeguarding, governance, health and safety or pastoral purposes.

25. Concerns or complaints

An employee who has concerns about the handling of sickness absence should first raise them with their line manager where appropriate.

If the concern cannot be resolved informally, the employee may raise the matter under St Peter's Grievance Policy and Procedure.

An employee should not be treated unfairly because they have been absent through genuine sickness, requested reasonable adjustments, raised health concerns, or exercised statutory employment rights.

26. Further information

Employees may seek further information from their line manager, the Vicar, or the Chair of the Human Resources and Remuneration Governance Group.

External guidance is available from Acas and GOV.UK.

27. Review

This policy will be reviewed annually, or sooner if required by changes in employment law, statutory guidance, Acas guidance, St Peter's staffing arrangements, PCC policy, or parish practice.