

# Sustain's diversity style guide

Our guide to writing about, portraying and providing a platform for diversity and racial justice in the food and farming system.



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Our guide to writing about, portraying and providing a platform for diversity and racial justice in the food and farming system, updated April 2023

This guide sets out how Sustain writes about and portrays diversity, and promotes racial justice, including words and phrases that we use and avoid, and how we describe people with a range of personal, ethnic and cultural characteristics, and who identify in this way. It also covers the sorts of films and imagery we choose to portray diversity; how we choose, use and credit still and video images; and how we will provide platforms for people from diverse backgrounds to be seen and heard. It forms a part of our commitment to promoting diversity, equity, inclusion and anti-racism across a range of personal characteristics; and also explicitly to tackle [racial injustice in the food system](#).

We recognise that communications play a big role in influencing people's beliefs and attitudes. Our communications should portray and promote diversity as a normal and positive characteristic of food and farming. We should help people to feel embraced, welcome and included. Our overall purpose is to ensure that in Sustain's approach to communications, we support, celebrate and promote diversity in food, farming and fishing, and in local and national approaches to building the movement for change. Through our communications approach, especially conscious choices of words and imagery, we will reflect a wide range of people and experiences. We will also employ, work with, portray, promote the work of, and provide a platform for people with diverse characteristics and from diverse backgrounds, with all due respect for dignity, pride, heritage, expertise, achievements, connections and the cultivation of joy.

Deep-rooted structural injustice is embedded in the food and farming system. This means that we will sometimes need to refer to, or portray characteristics of, people from diverse backgrounds in association with difficult themes. When we do so, it must be for the clear purpose of challenging the root causes of injustice. We will treat any such description or portrayal with respect and special care, whilst avoiding labels, tokenism, stigma or stereotypes. We will make special efforts to make it easier for people who have suffered injustices to be heard and support them to do so as respected experts by experience.

In developing this guidance, we have drawn upon our own experience, that of the people we work with, and good practice set out by support and advocacy groups that work directly with diverse communities, whose good practice we use as benchmarks. Our research also includes mainstream media good practice (e.g. the [BBC](#), [Guardian](#) and [Buzzfeed](#) style guides), and civil service guidance on how people from diverse backgrounds [prefer to be described](#).

Sustain will allocate budget and staff time to enable progress on the matters outlined in this document. We commit to continuous improvement, remaining open to change, alternative ideas and opinions, challenges and constructive criticism. We will monitor and report on our progress; learn by doing; and not be afraid to try things out or get things wrong. We will acknowledge and learn from our mistakes.

# 1. Sustain's approach to diversity, equity and inclusion

All of Sustain's work is guided by values and principles of achieving a healthy, fair, humane and sustainable food system. Our alliance also has shared concerns that are highly relevant to the food system, but go beyond just food, farming and fishing. They include tackling climate change, restoring biodiversity, upholding human rights, and promoting economic prosperity and sustainable development that benefit everyone, not just a privileged few – at home and around the world.

Sustain colleagues, alliance members and many others in the food system have a profound commitment to promoting and increasing equity, diversity and inclusion (across a wide range of characteristics) within food and farming. We recognise that there are entrenched and structural causes of inequity and injustice and want to play a part in tackling these. We also want to be helpful allies to people experiencing discrimination, and people leading the way. In particular, we recognise the extent and depth of racial inequity and racial injustice in the food system and want to do what we can to help address this.

We are also committed to reaching a wide and diverse audience, who may not be familiar with diversity issues, nor yet open to challenging thinking. We will always apply the principle of accessible 'Plain English' for our communications. This will be supported by benchmarking the choices we make against good practice outlined by specialist organisations that work on the relevant issues. We will also endeavour to choose language and ways to portray diversity that challenges structural injustice, whilst also being accessible to people we need to encourage to listen and change their mindsets. Hence, our style guide provides some flexibility, as the audience and context always matter.

## i) People are people

The first important principle for our style guide is this: We are all people, and we believe that all people are equal and should be treated equally. We also recognise that current culture, power imbalances and structures mean that this is a principle not universally respected within the food and farming system.

Another principle is that the words 'person' or 'people' may be the simplest and best way to describe an individual or group, rather than trying to find more complicated adjectives.

## ii) People define themselves

Language around diversity is often politically charged. Our recommendations are based on general consensus and the benchmarking outlined below, although we are mindful that opinions vary and can change over time.

Person-specific adjectives that recognise their position or achievements may be the most respectful and informative. This is especially important in the context of describing someone's role in the food and farming system, for example: 'farmer', 'doctor', 'chef', 'community gardener', 'anti-racism educator' or 'father of three'.

When journalists ask Sustain for a quote, they usually ask us, 'How would you like to be described?' We can extend the same respect and courtesy if we are in direct contact with people we describe or portray, or with the community or advocacy groups they work with. Wherever possible, we should invite people to tell us how they would like to be described – especially in articles, books, reports, blog biographies and introductions at events. We should also use people's titles; respect people's achievements; spell people's names correctly; use any accents or other diacritical marks that are part of how someone writes their name; and make a special effort to make note of this in a way that others at Sustain will also be able to respect this in future. For example, such information should be checked through sign-off, and could be included in notes for an article or in the file name of a photo.

Where we describe people collectively by, for example, ethnicity, gender, physical capabilities or socio-economic background, then we will:

- Benchmark our language against the terms, words and acronyms chosen for use by authoritative third-sector advocacy groups, media and government agencies, recognising that Sustain should defer to the expertise of others (see chart in next section).
- Limit use of certain technical acronyms (e.g. BAME) to formal contexts, such as a response to a government consultation. (Note: This limitation on the use of the BAME acronym was noted by our diversity consultants Collaborative Future in 2023 as good practice.)
- Generally avoid other acronyms, such as BPOC or BIPOC, unless there is a good contextual reason to use them. Writing out descriptions in full avoids using labels for people and groups.
- Respect the personal choice of contributors to Sustain (for example presenters, interviewees or article authors) regarding terms they use to describe themselves and how they identify. If this includes controversial ideas or language, we will make clear that this is in the author's own voice and that there is a good contextual reason for its use. However, where controversial language is used to describe others, we may have a conversation with the contributor about if this is the best approach.
- Not allow Sustain's communication channels to be used to promote prejudice or racism, and enabling Sustain staff to have the confidence to challenge prejudice and racism when they see or hear it.

### **iii) People need allies**

According to the international [Diversity Style Guide](#), an ally is '*A person who makes the commitment and effort to recognise their privilege (based on gender, class, race, sexual identity, etc.) and work in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for justice. Allies understand that it is in their own interest to end all forms of oppression, even those from which they may benefit in concrete ways. Allies commit to reducing their own complicity or collusion in oppression of those groups and invest in strengthening their own knowledge and awareness of oppression.*'

Sustain will strive to be allies in the way we employ, work with, portray, promote the work of, and provide a platform for, people from diverse backgrounds; and by actively challenging oppressive behaviour, language and structures.

## 2. Benchmarking our language

Another important principle is that when we are describing people’s personal characteristics, Sustain will benchmark our language against the terms, words and acronyms chosen for use by authoritative third-sector advocacy groups, media and government agencies. We also use the international [Diversity Style Guide](#) as a source of advice for editorial decisions. In doing this, we recognise that Sustain should defer to the expertise of others. We will publish this document internally and externally as a style guide, and we will remain open to change over time.

Diversity theme (some are protected characteristics)	Benchmark organisation(s)	Words, acronyms and terms they use, which Sustain uses as the benchmark. Note that some other terms can be used, provided there is a good contextual reason for doing so
Action on Diversity	Standard practice by members of our network	We refer to action on diversity as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI, in this order – not EDI) but prefer to expand this in the Sustain context to either Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Racial Justice or Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism.
Equity	Emerging practice by members of our network	We prefer to use equity and inequity rather than equalities and inequalities, but context matters and this is not a hard-and-fast rule.
Age	<a href="#">First Steps Nutrition Trust</a>	Babies; infants; young children.
	<a href="#">School Food Matters</a>	Children; school children; students.
	<a href="#">UK Youth; Local Government Association</a>	Young people; care-experienced young people; young people with experience of care.
	<a href="#">Age UK</a>	Older people; people in later life. We avoid using elderly, old or vulnerable.

Disability	<p><a href="#">Disability Rights UK</a></p> <p><a href="#">Civil Service guide to disability</a></p> <p><a href="#">British Deaf Association</a></p> <p><a href="#">RNIB</a></p> <p><a href="#">Mencap</a></p>	<p>Disabled people; people with learning disabilities; people with learning difficulties.</p> <p>Deaf people (British Deaf Association uses a capital D); hearing impaired people.</p> <p>Blind people; partially sighted people; people affected by sight loss; people with visual impairment.</p> <p>Do not use 'the blind', 'the deaf', 'the disabled'.</p> <p>We avoid saying a person is 'suffering from' a condition; we prefer 'living with' a condition.</p> <p>Where possible, check with the person how they would like to be described. While some may prefer 'xx with a disability', others may prefer 'xx who is disabled'.</p>
Gender	<p><a href="#">Stonewall</a></p> <p><a href="#">GLAAD</a></p> <p><a href="#">Surveymonkey</a></p>	<p>Gender is a person's innate sense of their own gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.</p> <p>When requesting gender information, include male, female and other or, ideally, an open text box to allow people to describe their identity for themselves. Include an option to opt out of gender questions in surveys.</p> <p>Non-binary is a term for people whose gender identity does not sit comfortably with man/male, or woman/female. Should only be used if someone self-identifies as non-binary.</p> <p>We describe a person who identifies as a man as a man; a person who identifies as a woman as a woman; and a person who identifies as non-binary as non-binary.</p>
Gender reassignment	<p><a href="#">All About Trans</a></p>	<p>Transgender people; trans people; non-binary people.</p> <p>When writing about someone who identifies as trans or non-binary, we should use their preferred pronoun, if we know it: he/him; she/her; they/them.</p> <p>We describe a person who identifies as a man as a man; a person who identifies as a woman as a woman; and a person who identifies as non-binary as non-binary.</p>

Marriage / civil partnership	Citizens Advice Bureau	People who are married; people who are in a civil partnership.
Pregnancy and maternity	<u>Maternity Action</u>	<p>Pregnant woman; pregnant person/people; pregnant parent; new mother; new parent; parent; (in informal portrayal: mum; dad or another description if the person prefers). A step-parent may also identify as a parent or carer. Wherever possible, ask the person how they would like to be described.</p> <p>Remember, a transgender or non-binary person can be pregnant. Avoid the assumption that everyone pregnant will identify as female or a woman. <u>This article</u> provides some useful thinking on this subject.</p> <p>An adoptive parent is a mother, father or parent. Reference to adoption is not used unless there is a good contextual reason to do so and with permission where individuals are identified.</p>
<p>Ethnicity</p> <p>(We rarely, if ever, describe people in terms of 'race')</p>	<p><u>Civil Service guide to ethnicity</u></p> <p><u>BBC style guide</u></p> <p><u>International Diversity Style Guide</u></p> <p>Note: 'Ethnicity' is broader than race and refers to long shared cultural experiences, religious practices, traditions, ancestry, language, dialect or national origins. Ethnicity can be a more positive identity than one forged from the shared negative experiences of racism.</p>	<p>For individuals, we check how someone would like to be described.</p> <p>Black people (capital B); Brown people (capital B); people of colour (lower case); White people (capital W). We avoid acronyms POC, BPOC and BIPOC.</p> <p>The <u>BBC style guide</u> says many people in Britain of African and Caribbean heritage prefer to be called Black British or Black African.</p> <p>Avoid using 'people of colour' when the usage may include minority ethnic white people such as Gypsy and Roma Traveller communities.</p> <p>Reference to a person's religious background that also relates to their ethnicity, for example 'Jewish person' or 'person of Jewish heritage'.</p> <p>Reference to a person's cultural or geographical background, for example 'of Chinese heritage'.</p> <p>We use 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic' (BAME) only in limited technical</p>

		<p>circumstances such as a government consultation response; noting that use may be completely phased out over time. We avoid BAME as an adjective.</p> <p>We prefer 'minority ethnic' to 'ethnic minority'; and also remember that in the global south, Black people and people of colour are in the majority. Context matters. Some people refer to 'the global majority'.</p>
Immigration status	<p><a href="#">Refugee Council</a></p> <p>(Note: people with refugee or asylum seeker status, or 'no recourse to public funds' have different working and welfare entitlements – see endnotes)</p>	<p>Refugee<sup>i</sup>; it may be helpful to say where from and why, for example 'refugee children from war-torn Yemen'.</p> <p>Asylum seeker<sup>ii</sup>; person seeking asylum or humanitarian protection; person refused asylum (we don't say 'failed asylum seeker').</p> <p>No recourse to public funds (NRPf)<sup>iii</sup>.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Households with no recourse to public funds</li> <li>• Person with no recourse to public funds</li> <li>• Person affected by the NRPf condition.</li> </ul>
Religion or belief (referencing <a href="#">top 7 religions or beliefs declared in UK surveys</a> )	Christianity	Christian; Christian person; Christian community.
	No religion	Defined by the person, e.g. atheist; humanist; or (if needed) 'not religious'.
	Islam	Muslim; Muslim person; Muslim community.
	Hinduism	Hindu; Hindu person; Hindu community.
	Sikhism	Sikh; Sikh person; Sikh community.
	Judaism	Jewish; Jewish person; Jewish community.
	Buddhism	Buddhist; Buddhist person; Buddhist community.
Sex	(distinct from gender identity)	Woman; man; girl; boy; female; male; person who identifies as non-binary; intersex; asexual.
Sexual orientation	<p><a href="#">Stonewall</a></p> <p>Read this guide on <a href="#">gender identity</a></p>	<p>LGBTQ+ people; lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning, non-binary, ace (meaning asexual).</p> <p>Heterosexual; straight.</p>



Socio-economic status or background	<p><u><a href="#">Independent Food Aid Network</a></u></p> <p><u><a href="#">Child Poverty Action Group</a></u></p>	<p>Person or family living on a low income.</p> <p>Low-income community.</p> <p>People living in poverty.</p> <p>Child poverty.</p>
Household food insecurity	<p>Sustain's food poverty team use the following style guide:</p> <p><i>Language we <u>should</u> use</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People at (greater) risk of household food insecurity / food poverty</li> <li>• People who (may) need support to access a nutritious diet</li> <li>• People experiencing food inequalities</li> <li>• Individuals / groups that are marginalised.</li> </ul> <p><i>Language we should <u>only</u> use when specifically referring to government policy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medically vulnerable</li> <li>• Clinically vulnerable</li> <li>• People experiencing food vulnerability</li> <li>• People at risk of food vulnerability.</li> </ul> <p><i>Language we should <u>not</u> use:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable people, vulnerable groups or 'the vulnerable'</li> <li>• Vulnerable – in general.</li> </ul>	
Health and weight	<p>Reference organisations: <u><a href="#">Obesity Health Alliance</a></u>, <u><a href="#">BEAT</a></u>, <u><a href="#">Obesity UK</a></u></p> <p><i>Key external guidance:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u><a href="http://obesityhealthalliance.org.uk/framing-child-obesity/">http://obesityhealthalliance.org.uk/framing-child-obesity/</a></u></li> <li>• <u><a href="https://easo.org/media-portal/obesity-image-bank/">https://easo.org/media-portal/obesity-image-bank/</a></u> - recommended collections of photos for use. Free image banks of destigmatising images of people living with obesity.</li> </ul> <p><i>Principles:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use language that is free from judgement and negative connotation</li> <li>• We emphasise the food environment, rather than individual or personal behaviour</li> <li>• Do not define a person by their condition.</li> </ul> <p><i>Language we prefer to use:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every child's right to grow up healthy (we prioritise use of 'children's health' over 'child obesity')</li> <li>• Healthier and less healthy food and drink, rather than 'junk food' where possible, and not 'bad' food.</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food and drinks high in saturated fat, salt and/or sugar, always spelt out first. We use the HFSS acronym only in policy documents where this has been spelled out and explained.</li> <li>• Person living with overweight or obesity; person affected by overweight or obesity.</li> <li>• People with greater risk of diet-related diseases (for policy purposes, rather than public communications), be specific where possible.</li> </ul> <p><i>Language we should <u>not</u> use:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obese / overweight children or people</li> <li>• Fat children or people</li> <li>• People needing to lose weight or go on a diet.</li> </ul> <p><i>Imagery we prefer:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diverse images of people being active and enjoying healthy food</li> <li>• Images of both healthy and less healthy food</li> <li>• Images of real-life food and drink advertising and marketing examples, that illustrate the food environment and its influence.</li> </ul> <p><i>Imagery we avoid:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Images of people’s stomachs, or that emphasise size or weight</li> <li>• Images of people living with obesity in the process of eating or purchasing unhealthy food and drink.</li> </ul>
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### 3. Normalising diversity

When we use adjectives to describe the personal characteristics, ethnic background or any other personal attribute of a person or group of people, there should be a good reason for doing so. This would usually be either explicitly to promote someone who is growing, enjoying, creating or providing good food; to favour and celebrate talent and diversity; and/or to cultivate proactively a more representative balance of a range of people and perspectives. The same applies if we choose a photograph explicitly because it highlights someone who has a visible characteristic, for example being a Black person, a person of colour, or a person using a wheelchair (i.e. not just because they are an individual in a wider group),

Wherever possible, we will aim to use a balance of imagery and descriptions that help to portray people from diverse backgrounds in positive and empowered situations (e.g. professional, teaching and leadership positions) and not principally or only as the recipients of food, knowledge or services.

We note that a ‘good purpose’ for choosing a description or image may also be to reveal discrimination, disadvantage or hardship, but this needs to be handled much more carefully to avoid stigma and stereotypes (see below).

## 4. Using stock imagery with care

We sometimes use stock imagery: images provided by a photographic service, sometimes using models or actors, portraying typical themes and actions (e.g. schoolchildren eating a meal together), where we are not seeking to identify an individual or specific setting.

Where we use stock imagery, we will prioritise pictures that portray people from diverse backgrounds and with diverse characteristics to normalise their portrayal, especially in a central and positive light.

We may need to use stock imagery to reveal discrimination, disadvantage or hardship, but this needs to be handled much more carefully to avoid stigma and stereotypes (see below).

## 5. Avoiding stigma and stereotypes

Deep-rooted structural injustice is embedded in the food and farming system, so we will sometimes need to refer to or portray people from diverse backgrounds and/or with certain personal characteristics in association with difficult themes. When we do so, it must be for the clear purpose of challenging the root causes of injustice and we will treat any such description or portrayal with respect and special care, avoiding labels, tokenism, stigma, 'othering' or stereotypes.

Difficult themes that might involve portrayal of people from diverse backgrounds include, for example:

- The disproportionate negative impact of household food insecurity on people from diverse ethnic backgrounds; lone parent households; and older and disabled people.
- The injustice inherent in people having no recourse to public funds, an immigration condition that unfairly and disproportionately discriminates against Black people and people of colour.
- The disproportionate negative impact of climate change and biodiversity loss on Black people and people of colour (the global majority) living in the global south.
- The injustices inherent in farming and food processing that rely on cheap labour, which has a disproportionate negative impact on migrants and other people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds; and on Black people and people of colour who are farmers and food processing and supply chain workers in the global south.

Investigative journalists, including Felicity Lawrence of *The Guardian*<sup>1</sup>, and Sustain members such as the Independent Food Aid Network, Child Poverty Action Group and the Fairtrade Foundation, show us that it is helpful to provide specific examples to illustrate articles about difficult themes. This means that we make special efforts to describe and portray the impact of policies and practices on the lives of people individually. Stories and personal testimony of lived experience can help to shift hearts as well as minds, decisions and policies. This needs careful, journalistically precise and empathetic treatment.

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<sup>1</sup> Felicity Lawrence (2004), *The Guardian*: [Migrant workers tell of fear and suffering](#)

We take care that our efforts to portray injustices are not patronising, or become what some call 'poverty porn'. This is defined on Wikipedia as '*any type of media, be it written, photographed or filmed, which exploits the poor's condition in order to generate the necessary sympathy for selling newspapers, increasing charitable donations, or support for a given cause*'.

We will make special efforts to make it easier for people who have lived (or are still living) through injustices to speak and be heard, and support them to do so as respected experts by experience.

## 6. Improving accessibility

Sustain has a style guide for our print and online communications to help improve accessibility and legibility for people with visual impairment. This is included in the Sustain brand guidelines on the intranet: [www.sustainweb.org/intranet/branding/](http://www.sustainweb.org/intranet/branding/) (password).

Sustain is committed to using Plain English for our communications, avoiding the use of terminology, acronyms or technical language that may exclude people or obscure meaning. Notably, Sustain also campaigns for accessible food education, as well as clear and transparent food information and labelling. We do this with the aim of making it easier for everyone to access and understand food information in order to have the chance to make better-informed and healthier choices.

Where it will improve accessibility, and where we have adequate funding to pay for the necessary services, Sustain will use subtitles, language translation and/or provision of British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation, in broadcast materials and at events.

## 7. Learning by doing

Sustain will allocate budget and staff time to enable progress on the matters outlined in this document. We commit to continuous improvement, remaining open to change, new ideas, challenges and constructive criticism. We will publish this guidance. We will monitor and report on our progress; learn by doing; and not be afraid to try things out or get things wrong. We will acknowledge and learn from our mistakes.

## 8. What we did to draw up this guidance

As part of our programme of improving our approach to diversity, equalities and inclusion, Sustain looked at how other organisations are handling these issues, within our movement, and by authoritative third-sector advocacy groups, media and government agencies, recognising that Sustain should defer to the expertise of others on such a wide range of issues. This work was instigated by Sustain's Diversity Core Group, in consultation with key staff members leading work on specific issues and colleagues working on campaigns and communications. We have also shared this with several external advisors and with the Diversity sub-group of Sustain's Council of Trustees, who act as 'critical friends' on matters relating to diversity, equity and inclusion.

At time of writing the original draft, several Sustain staff members were participating in an Anti-Oppressive Practice programme coordinated by Sustain alliance member Feedback Global, to improve our understanding of structural racism, and our commitment to help tackle it.

**Sustain is a UK registered charity, number 1018643, website: [www.sustainweb.org](http://www.sustainweb.org)**

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> A refugee is an asylum seeker who has been granted refugee status. A person granted refugee status usually will be given five years' leave to remain in the UK, and this can be renewed. A person granted refugee status can access welfare support and tax credits. A refugee will have to fulfil the required criteria in order to receive contributory benefits.

<sup>ii</sup> An asylum seeker is a person who is seeking refugee status or humanitarian protection. An asylum seeker receives asylum support payments and a child will be eligible for free school meals. In the majority of cases, however, they are not allowed to work whilst their asylum claim is being processed.

<sup>iii</sup> 'No recourse to public funds' (NRPF) is an immigration condition imposed on people 'subject to immigration control'. This includes:

- People with limited leave to remain
- People with insecure immigration status.

NRPF prevents people from accessing benefits or mainstream housing assistance. Children in low-income households with NRPF may be able to receive limited financial support, such as free school meals.