

# Sustain's guide to writing about, portraying and providing a platform for diversity

This guide sets out how Sustain writes about and portrays diversity, including words and phrases that we use and avoid, and how we describe people with a range of personal, ethnic and cultural characteristics. It also covers the sorts of films and imagery we choose to portray diversity; 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, equalities and inclusion across a range of personal characteristics and considerations; 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 diversity as a normal and positive characteristic of the food and farming system. We should help people 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, 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 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, so 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 and 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, good practice set out by support and advocacy groups that work directly with diverse communities (whose good practice we use as benchmarks), and also 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, and open to ideas, 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, equalities 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, such as 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 staff, colleagues, alliance members and many others in the food system have a profound commitment to promoting equality, meaning that we want to promote diversity and inclusion across a wide range of characteristics. We recognise that there are entrenched and structural causes of inequality and injustice and want to play a part in tackling these, and to be helpful allies to those leading the way. In particular, we recognise the extent and depth of racial inequality 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, plus a principle of common and expert parlance, which is that we will benchmark the choices we make against the specialist organisations who work on the various issues. We will also endeavour to choose language and ways to portray diversity that challenges structural injustice, whilst also being accessible to the people who need to listen and change mindsets. Hence, our style guide provides some flexibility, as the audience and context of use always matters.

## i) People are people

The first important principle is this: We are all people, and all people are equal. 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, so some of these recommendations are the language that most, but not all, people agree on.

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, such as for example: "farmer", "doctor", "chef", "community gardener", "anti-racism educator" or "father of three".

When they call Sustain for a quote, journalists 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 the 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 marks, cedillas or accents 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).
- Usually use certain technical acronyms (e.g. BAME) only in the context of formal documents such as a response to a government consultation; generally avoid acronyms such as BPOC or BIPOC, unless there is a good contextual reason to do so.
- Respect the personal choice of contributors to Sustain – for example presenters, interviewees or article authors – to choose their own terms, which could include controversial ideas or language (within the bounds of civility), provided it is clear that this is in their own voice and that there is a good contextual reason to do so.
- Not allow Sustain’s communication channels to be used to promote prejudice or racism, with Sustain staff confident to challenge prejudice and racism when they see/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.

## **2. Benchmarking our language**

When 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 so, 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
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</a>	Young people; young care leavers.
	<a href="#">Age UK</a>	Older people; people in later life. We avoid using 'elderly', 'old' or 'vulnerable'.
Disability	<a href="#">Disability Rights UK</a> <a href="#">Civil Service guide to disability</a> <a href="#">British Deaf Association</a> <a href="#">RNIB</a> <a href="#">Mencap</a>	Disabled people; people with learning disabilities; people with learning difficulties. Deaf people (British Deaf Association uses a capital D); hearing impaired people/ Blind people; partially sighted people; people affected by sight loss; people with visual impairment. Do not use 'the blind', 'the deaf', 'the disabled'. We avoid saying a person is 'suffering from' a condition; we prefer 'living with' a condition.
Gender	<a href="#">Stonewall</a> <a href="#">GLAAD</a> <a href="#">SurveyMonkey</a>	Gender is a person's innate sense of their own gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth.  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.  Non-binary is a term for people whose gender identity does not sit comfortably with 'man' or 'woman'. Should only be used if someone self-identifies as non-binary.
Gender reassignment	<a href="#">All About Trans</a>	Transgender people; trans people; non-binary people.  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.  We describe a person who has transitioned to a man as a man; a person who has transitioned to

		a woman as a woman; and a person who identifies as non-binary as non-binary.
Marriage / civil partnership	<a href="#">Citizens Advice Bureaux</a>	People who are married; people who are in a civil partnership.
Pregnancy and maternity	<a href="#">Maternity Action</a>	Pregnant woman; new mother; new parent; parent; (in informal portrayal: mum; dad).  An adoptive parent is a mother or father. Reference to adoption is not used unless there is a good contextual reason to do so and with permission where individuals are identified.
Ethnicity  (we rarely if ever describe people in terms of “race”)	<a href="#">Civil Service guide to ethnicity</a>  <a href="#">BBC style guide</a>  <a href="#">International Diversity Style Guide</a>  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 seen as a more positive identity than one forged from the shared negative experiences of racism.	For individuals, we check how someone would like to be described.  Black people (capital B for Black); Brown people (capital B for Brown); people of colour (lower case); White people (capital W for White). We avoid using acronyms BPOC and BIPOC.  The <a href="#">BBC style guide</a> says many people in Britain of African and Caribbean heritage prefer to be called Black British or Black African.  Avoid using “people of colour” when the usage may include minority ethnic white people such as Gypsy and Roma Traveller communities.  Reference to a person’s religious background that also relates to their ethnicity, for example “Jewish person” or “person of Jewish heritage”.  Reference to a person’s cultural or geographical background, for example “of Chinese heritage”.  We use “Black, Asian and minority ethnic” (BAME) only in limited technical circumstances such as a government consultation response; noting that use may be completely phased out over time. We avoid BAME as an adjective.  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.
Immigration status	<a href="#">Refugee Council</a>  (Note: people with refugee or asylum seeker status, or ‘no recourse to public funds’ have different	Refugee <sup>i</sup> ; it may be helpful to say where from and why, for example “refugee children from war-torn Yemen”.

	working and welfare entitlements – see endnotes)	Asylum seeker <sup>ii</sup> ; person seeking asylum or humanitarian protection; person refused asylum (we don't say 'failed asylum seeker').  No recourse to public funds (NRPf) <sup>iii</sup> . <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 impacted 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	Jew; 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.
Sexual orientation	<a href="#">Stonewall</a> Read this guide on <a href="#">gender identity</a>	LGBTQ+ people; lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning, non-binary, ace.  Heterosexual; straight.
Socio-economic status or background	<a href="#">Independent Food Aid Network</a> <a href="#">Child Poverty Action Group</a>	Person or family living on a low income.  Low-income community.  People living in poverty.  Child poverty.
Household food insecurity	Sustain's food poverty team use the following style guide:  <i>Language we <u>should</u> use</i> <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> <i>Language we should <u>only</u> use when specifically referring to government policy</i> <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> <i>Language we should <u>not</u> use:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable people, vulnerable groups or 'the vulnerable'</li> <li>• Vulnerable – in general.</li> </ul>	

<p>Health and weight</p>	<p>Reference organisations: <a href="#">Obesity Health Alliance</a>, <a href="#">BEAT</a>, <a href="#">Obesity UK</a></p> <p><i>Key external guidance:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://obesityhealthalliance.org.uk/framing-child-obesity/">http://obesityhealthalliance.org.uk/framing-child-obesity/</a></li> <li>• <a href="https://easo.org/media-portal/obesity-image-bank/">https://easo.org/media-portal/obesity-image-bank/</a> - 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> <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 spelt 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 comms), 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 characteristic or ethnic origin or any other personal attribute of a person or group of people; or if we choose a photograph explicitly because it highlights someone who has a visible characteristic, such as – for example – being a Black person, a person of colour, or a person using a wheelchair (i.e. not just because they are one member of a wider group), there should be a good purpose for

this. 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.

Wherever possible, we will aim to use a balance of imagery and descriptions that help to portray people from diverse backgrounds in professional, teaching and leadership positions, and not 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 or 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 to normalise the portrayal of people from diverse backgrounds, 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 or 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 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 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 impact of household food insecurity on people from diverse ethnic backgrounds; lone parent households; and older and disabled people.
- The injustice inherent in the immigration condition ‘no recourse to public funds’, which unfairly discriminates against Black people and people of colour.
- The disproportionate impact of climate change and biodiversity loss on Black people and people of colour living in the global south.
- The injustices inherent in farming and food processing that rely on cheap labour, which has a disproportionate impact on migrants from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and Black people and people of colour who are farmers and food workers of the global south.



Investigative journalists such as 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 a personal and human angle on difficult themes. This means that we make special efforts to describe and portray the impact of policies and practices on the lives of real people. 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.

Equally, we do not want our efforts to portray injustices to be patronising, nor become what some call 'poverty porn', 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 experience of 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, information and labelling to ensure that everyone can access and understand food information and make well informed and healthy 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 sign language 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, and open to 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

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

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 Team, in consultation with key staff leading on 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, equalities and inclusion.

At time of writing, several Sustain staff are also 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. Most of the time a person granted refugee status 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 - for contributory benefits a refugee will have to fulfil the required criteria in order to receive them.

<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, however they are not allowed to work in the majority of cases whilst their asylum claim is processing. Someone who is refused asylum should be referred to as a refused asylum seeker, not a "failed asylum seeker".

<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. In a Sustain context we have used the following language:

- Households with no recourse to public funds
- Person with no recourse to public funds
- Person impacted by the NRPF condition.