

Policy statement: Sustain's approach to supporting mental health in the workplace

Physical and mental wellbeing are precious and deserve conscious cultivation. We can all take steps to protect and improve our own wellbeing, as well as help others to do so. Sustain strives to support staff, volunteers and people we work with to have a positive experience that can promote both physical and mental health. Ours is a collective and cultural approach.

Unfortunately, many people at some point in their life will suffer from mental health issues – either in a temporary bout, or extending over a longer period. This can be painful, isolating, frightening and difficult to talk about or to seek help for. As an organisation, Sustain is committed to adopting policies and practices that help colleagues to minimise the negative impacts, cultivate well-being, and which support people along the road to better health.

Actively cultivating wellbeing

Sustain cultivates open discussion of physical and mental health issues. We follow the principle from the mental health charity Mind that, *"If colleagues feel they can talk openly about mental health, problems are less likely to build up."* We therefore aim to normalise open and honest conversation about personal experiences, and to ensure that facing up to mental health challenges is considered a strength, not a weakness. Equally, if people prefer to keep their own experiences private, or not to discuss them in an open forum, we respect this.

There are plenty of opportunities for Sustain staff and volunteers (collectively described as 'colleagues') to get involved with activities that can be beneficial to health and well-being. Whilst overall responsibility resides with Sustain's management and core operational team, all colleagues are collectively encouraged both to participate and themselves to encourage participation. Opportunities vary from time to time, but indicatively our approach includes:

- Cultivating mental health awareness and the skills to spot mental health issues early.
- Adopting an approach that naturally tends towards addressing rather than ignoring problems when they arise.
- Cultivating respectful and sociable relationships between colleagues. We want to be a workplace characterised by praise and appreciation, celebrating progress, where people can feel ownership; proud of what they do and the contribution they make.
- Appreciating strong emotions, and channelling these towards collective action.
- Promoting healthy eating and appreciation of good food culture and skills.
- Promoting community gardening that combines healthy food growing with being outdoors in nature and sociable physical activity.
- Listening to people's personal needs and treating their requirements and preferences with respect; going out of our way to ensure that people facing physical or mental challenges are listened to and that we respond positively.
- Creating space for people to take lunch breaks and have time for conversation if they wish.

- Prioritising premises and venues conducive to active travel such as walking or cycling.
- Choosing the Ethical Property Company as a landlord partly because of varied activities run by others in the shared premises, such as meditation, yoga and workout sessions.

Helping those who need support

If a Sustain colleague has a mental health crisis or longer term issue, it's important that we take it seriously and treat people with care and compassion. It's also important to be clear that people experiencing mental health issues have rights. As an employer, Sustain has a 'duty of care' to colleagues. This means that we must do all that we reasonably can to support health, safety and wellbeing, and to protect people from physical and mental harm.

Mental health issues can happen suddenly, because of a specific event in someone's life. Sustain recognises that this can happen to anyone at any time and is a challenging but inevitable part of being human. We will always respond with compassion. Sustain also has a range of policies in place that can provide support. An example is our Compassionate Leave policy, setting out our approach to people taking time off after bereavement. We set out such matters in written policies so that colleagues know what they're entitled to, don't have to feel the onus is on them to ask, and to help ensure that colleagues are treated fairly.

Mental health issues can also build up gradually over time – for example stress, depression or anxiety – or be ongoing medical conditions. Sustain has a range of working practices that can provide support. Most importantly, we endeavour to create a culture that prevents problems building up; and which treats such issues with compassion. Through induction, line management and working practices we endeavour to ensure that people know that they can seek help if they need it, and that they will be met by a friendly, discreet, positive, non-judgemental and supportive response, focused on addressing the needs of the individual.

We also recognise that mental health issues can build up if someone is worrying about what they can or should do in a difficult situation. The most important thing Sustain can do is be clear that if colleagues are open about a difficult situation, then we can take collective responsibility for fixing it, and to do so in a way that minimises conflict. We are also committed to a 'no blame' culture (except in cases of actual malpractice – although openness and early action may well minimise the impact on individuals and the organisation in such circumstances) so that issues can be identified early and dealt with effectively.

Sustain's written policies on Health and Safety, Diversity, Bullying and Harassment, Whistleblowing, Safeguarding and dealing with complaints also offer tools, processes and accountability to deal with circumstances that may be especially upsetting.

Further, we recognise that Sustain colleagues are not qualified to fix serious or recurring mental health issues. We have limitations, and it is a strength to recognise this and to seek appropriate support, sometimes externally, and indeed the mental health of managers may also benefit from being able to seek additional support with management issues. Whilst respecting the confidentiality of colleagues, we will seek professional advice or other help when we need to.

Very helpful guidance films, documents and training materials are available free of charge from the mental health charity Mind (www.mind.org.uk/work) and the [advisory service ACAS](#).

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