

## Complaints procedure and policy

### Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming

*Charity number (no. 1018643); company limited by guarantee (no. 02673194).*

Sustain views complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve for the future, as well as a chance to put things right for the person or organisation that has made the complaint.

Our policy is to:

- Provide a fair complaints procedure that is clear and easy to use for anyone wishing to make a complaint
- Publicise the existence of our complaints procedure so that people know how to contact us to make a complaint
- Make sure everyone at Sustain knows what to do if a complaint is received
- Make sure all complaints are investigated fairly and in a timely way
- Make sure that complaints are, wherever possible, resolved and that good relationships are maintained or repaired
- Gather information that helps us to improve what we do

A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about any aspect of Sustain's work, or the work of our projects, project partners, staff members or volunteers.

Complaints may come from anyone affected by the work of Sustain, whether that be a beneficiary, supporter, volunteer, project partner, funder, Sustain member, or otherwise – anyone who has a legitimate interest in Sustain and its work. This policy does not usually cover complaints by staff regarding issues at work, who should refer to Sustain's disciplinary and grievance policies.

A complaint can be received verbally, by phone, by email or in writing and will usually be received by a Sustain project officer and – where necessary – a senior staff member.

If the complaint relates to safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults, then it must be dealt with immediately by a senior and nominated representative of Sustain (usually chief executive Kath Dalmeny or programme director Sarah Williams) under the terms of Sustain's separate safeguarding policy.

All complaint information will be handled sensitively, telling only those who need to know and following any relevant data protection requirements.

Overall responsibility for this policy and its implementation lies with Sustain's Council of Trustees (the Sustain Council), who empower and expect the senior management team and project coordinators to implement the policy and report back to the Sustain Council on any emerging issues.

Sustain's complaints policy and procedure is kept under regular review.

#### **Policy and procedure approved by the Sustain Council, May 2018**

Availability: Reference in induction materials; publish on Sustain intranet; publish on Sustain website.

Guidance is available from: Good Governance (supported by the Charity Commission): Code of Good Governance for Smaller Organisations, useful resources: [www.governancecode.org](http://www.governancecode.org)

# Complaints procedure of Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming



Written complaints may be sent to Kath Dalmeny, Chief Executive of Sustain, Development House, 56-64 Leonard Street, London EC2A 4LT, or by email: [kath@sustainweb.org](mailto:kath@sustainweb.org).

Verbal complaints may be made by phone to Kath Dalmeny, 020 7065 0902, or in person to any of Sustain's staff or trustees at the address above or at any of our events or activities.

## Guidance to Sustain staff or volunteers who receive a complaint

Complaints may arrive through channels publicised for that purpose or through any other contact details or opportunities the complainant may have. Complaints received by telephone or in person need to be recorded, and written complaints need to be kept.

If the complaint relates to safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults, then it must be dealt with immediately by a senior and nominated representative of Sustain (usually chief executive Kath Dalmeny or programme director Sarah Williams) under the terms of Sustain's separate safeguarding policy.

If the complaint causes any conflict of interest with a member of Sustain's Council of Trustees, Sustain member of staff or Sustain volunteer, then the matter should be dealt with by someone who does not have such a conflict of interest.

The person who receives a phone or in person complaint should:

- Be polite and helpful and not seek to make a judgement of what has happened unless it is appropriate to do so in order to rectify a simple problem; provide information; or address an issue of clear factual accuracy;
- Identify the nature of the complaint, and refer it to someone more senior if they feel the issue is serious enough to warrant such treatment;
- If the discussion becomes heated, consider referring the matter to a senior member of staff;
- Otherwise: Write down the facts of the complaint;
- Take the complainant's name, email address and telephone number;
- Note down the relationship of the complainant to Sustain (e.g. volunteer, attendee at an event or training session, Sustain member, project partner, supporter, newsletter recipient);
- Tell the complainant that Sustain has a complaints procedure;
- Tell the complainant what will happen next and how long it is likely to take;
- Where appropriate, ask the complainant to send a written account by post or by email so that the complaint is recorded in the complainant's own words.

## Sustain's approach to resolving complaints – stage 1

In many cases (with the absolute exception of safeguarding of a child or vulnerable adult, or in the case of an accusation of criminal behaviour, violence, sexual misconduct, discrimination, financial impropriety or other issue that may have serious implications for the individuals and Sustain), a complaint is best resolved by the person responsible for the issue being complained about. If the complaint has been received by that person, they may resolve it swiftly and should do so if possible and appropriate.

Whether or not the complaint has been resolved, information should be passed to the Sustain management team (Kath Dalmeny, Ben Reynolds, Sarah Williams, or in their absence Quoc-anh Tran) as soon as possible, and usually no later than within one week. Actions should include:

- On receiving the complaint, if it has not already been resolved, the senior manager will delegate an appropriate person to investigate it and to take appropriate action.
- If the complaint relates to a specific person, that person should be informed and given a fair opportunity to respond.

- Complaints should be acknowledged by the person handling the complaint as soon as possible, and no later than within a week. The acknowledgement should say who is dealing with the complaint and when the complainant can expect a reply. A copy of this complaints procedure should be attached.
- Ideally complainants should receive a definitive reply as soon as possible, and no later than within a month, unless in exceptional circumstances. If this is not possible because for example, an investigation has not been fully completed, regular progress reports should be sent with an indication of when a full reply will be given.
- Whether the complaint is justified or not, the reply to the complainant should describe the action taken to investigate the complaint, the conclusions from the investigation, and any action taken as a result of the complaint.

#### Sustain's approach to resolving complaints – stage 2

If the complaint reveals an issue relating to safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults, then it must always be dealt with immediately by a senior representative of Sustain (usually Kath Dalmeny or Sarah Williams) under the terms of Sustain's separate safeguarding policy. Otherwise:

- If the complainant feels that the problem has not been satisfactorily resolved at Stage 1, they can request that the complaint is reviewed at the level of the Sustain Council of Trustees. At this stage, the complaint will be passed to Sustain's Chief Executive Kath Dalmeny, who will raise the issue with Council members (also known as Sustain's Board).
- The request for Trustee-level review should be acknowledged within a week of receipt. The reply should say who will deal with the case and when the complainant can expect a reply.
- Council members may investigate the facts of the case themselves or delegate a suitably senior person to do so. This may involve reviewing the paperwork of the case and speaking with the person who dealt with the complaint at Stage 1.
- If the complaint relates to a specific person, for example a Sustain staff member or volunteer, that person should be informed and given a further opportunity to respond.
- The person who dealt with the original complaint (Stage 1) should be kept informed throughout.
- Ideally complainants should receive a definitive reply within a month. If this is not possible because for example, an investigation has not been fully completed, regular progress reports should be sent with an indication of when a full reply will be given.
- Whether the complaint is upheld or not, the reply to the complainant should describe the action taken to investigate, the conclusions from the investigation, and any action taken as a result.
- The decision taken at this stage is final, unless the Board decides it is appropriate to seek external assistance with resolution, such as legal advice or independent arbitration.

#### Additional notes relating to Sustain's charitable status

- The complainant can complain to the Charity Commission at any stage.
- Information about the kind of complaints the Commission can involve itself in can be found on their website at: [www.charitycommission.gov.uk/publications/cc47.aspx](http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/publications/cc47.aspx)

#### Variation of the Complaints Procedure

The Board may choose to vary the procedure if they are able to agree and provide a good reason for doing so. This may be necessary to avoid a conflict of interest, for example, a complaint about the Chair should not also have the Chair as the person leading a Stage 2 review.

#### Monitoring and learning from complaints

Complaints are reviewed regularly to identify any trends that may indicate a need to take further action.

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