

Volunteering days for Sustain staff: Making time for climate, nature and social justice

In 2019, Sustain joined others in declaring a climate and nature emergency. This is in recognition that how and what we farm and fish, eat and dispose of are some of the biggest contributors to dangerous climate change and precipitous loss of nature. Meanwhile, at a time of great affluence in western economies, millions of our fellow citizens experience hunger, everyday food insecurity or avoidable diet-related diseases, both in the UK and globally.

Sustain was founded on the belief that a fair, healthy, humane and ecological approach to food production and consumption can – and should – mean that everyone is able to eat well, in perpetuity. Sustain staff are deeply engaged with the issues, personally invested in the solutions, and there is a growing mood of urgency, disquiet and change. Many of us are also involved in activities outside Sustain that connect us directly with practical work on climate, nature and social justice – whether this be support for social enterprises, community groups, helping to manage other charities, or campaigning. Some are developing new campaign and policy activities for Sustain. Over recent times, some staff have also felt personally moved to participate in non-violent direct action on the climate and nature emergency – either as protestors, supporters or speakers. Many of our supporters, alliance members and funders are expressing similar concerns and diverse responses.

Sustain recognises the need to respond to shifts in priorities and mood. As both a non-governmental campaign organisation and a responsible employer with a charitable remit, we want to play a part in helping staff navigate these matters together, on both a personal and professional basis.

As part of wider developments, we want to adopt a system of ‘volunteering days’ for staff to take a day out of the office, to participate in some form of climate, nature or social justice activity. The purpose is to support Sustain staff taking part in climate, nature and social justice activities that develop knowledge, skills, sense of agency, diversity of experience and thoughtful connections. Staff are free to choose the activity, but some suggestions of what might be covered (evolving over time) include:

- Volunteering to help with an event or activity with a Sustain alliance member.
- Participating in a conservation project, tree planting or plastics clearance.
- Participating in a gleaning day, picking crops that would otherwise go to waste.
- Attending an educational event about agro-ecology, pollinators or soil science.
- Spending a day at a food bank to help out and witness the impact of food poverty.
- Visiting a place where climate change is already affecting nature or communities.
- Attending a conference on a climate, nature, sustainable farming or food sovereignty theme.
- Taking extra time for longer-distance travel via foot, bike, public transport; not by car or air.
- Participating in a march, or a (non-violent) protest or parliamentary lobbying activity.

To be practical and fair, we will introduce this scheme gradually. We propose that at first, the opportunity of 1 Volunteer Day (not *pro rata*) should be available for a pilot year to those working 2 or more days per week, who have successfully completed their probation period and whose contract is at least one year long. We are open to this evolving over time. This would be treated as an entitlement for paid staff (not at this time for freelance staff). We will work to ensure that the scheme is managed fairly, reviewed after one year, reporting to Sustain Council – we invite staff to help us develop this. We will also encourage participating staff to share experiences and reflections, in a spirit of mutual learning.

Note: Sessions run by Sustain to discuss climate and nature emergency are not included in this process; they are a normal part of Sustain development activities and staff time, and treated as such.

Approach approved by Sustain Council for a one-year pilot and review, January 2020