

## In the Spotlight: Dr Helen Stagg, SUSTAIN awardee

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**Dr Helen Stagg is the head of the Population Health and Infectious Diseases (PHID) research group at Usher Institute, University of Edinburgh.**

**Dr Helen Stagg took part in the third round of SUSTAIN in 2019-2020. SUSTAIN is a programme that enables female researchers to thrive in their independent research careers. It provides an innovative programme of training and support to develop participants' leadership and career potential.**

### **Tell us about your research, and what you are hoping to achieve.**

My group's research in infectious disease epidemiology focusses on areas where the 'facts' that have underpinned our clinical and public health practice and research for decades rest on an insufficient evidence base of assumption and conjecture. In collaboration with colleagues in statistics, mathematical modelling, anthropology, pharmacology, genetics, wet laboratory, and healthcare we apply a wide-ranging toolbox of quantitative methods to fill such knowledge gaps. Our four key areas of current research are treatment adherence in chronic conditions, treatment optimisation in tuberculosis, antimicrobial resistance, and herpesviruses. My group works extensively with and for policymakers and industry in order to maximise the impact of our research.

### **What do you think is the biggest challenge that you face doing your job – and has that changed since SUSTAIN?**

Job precarity is an extensive issue in academia at the moment and this is taking a huge toll on early- and mid-career staff members, leading to poor mental health across the sector (not helped by the pandemic) and a haemorrhaging of talent. I am grateful to have had the leadership training that SUSTAIN provided whilst guiding my group through all the challenges that life and work poses for us.

### **What did you gain from participating in SUSTAIN?**

So many things! A big positive from SUSTAIN was gaining a network of peers that I can reach out to for advice and support on all sorts of issues whenever required, even now (several years after I completed the programme). The training in negotiating and pitching was particularly beneficial.

**What made you decide to get a mentor?**

I had a mentor prior to participating in SUSTAIN and found that an exceedingly helpful experience; in fact, it's one of my top tips for all academics: get a mentor (and spend the time finding the right one for you).

**Can you describe your mentoring relationship in a few words?**

Supportive, different perspective, wise, grounded.

**Do you feel that the mentoring relationship has specifically helped you prepare for a leadership role?**

Yes, community is a big thing for me in academia and getting advice from someone who has 'been there, done that' an important part of that community. It is always a relief when you feel really stuck on something then talk to someone more experienced than you and realise these sorts of issues are normal.

**What are your tips for being a good mentee?**

Be organised; think through exactly what you want to get out of each meeting and send your questions through to your mentor in advance so they can ponder them before you chat.

**Tell us about your experience of SUSTAIN.**

I joined SUSTAIN relatively early on during my MRC Career Development Award when I had recently moved university and thus was working on building my research group in a new environment. This, as it turned out, was perfect timing; SUSTAIN gave me the opportunity to step back and evaluate who I wanted to be as a leader in my new institution and the ethos that I wanted my group to embody. From the programme itself, as well as from my peers, I gained a huge amount of knowledge on how to lead and had the protected thinking time to figure out what I wanted from my career and how to get it. SUSTAIN can feel like a big commitment of time to take out of your calendar (so I was grateful to do it early), but it was worth every single minute.

**How do you think SUSTAIN will affect your future career / development?**

SUSTAIN has already been of massive help to my career by providing me with an incredible set of training and amazing support network; if you are reading this and wondering if you should apply for the programme, I can only say 'go for it!'

**Is there anything else you'd like to say about SUSTAIN?**

Judging by the experience of myself and my peers, SUSTAIN has been of substantial benefit to many women over the preceding years. I would love to see the programme grow and develop to support gender minorities as a whole, as well as to work more broadly on intersectionality; my experience as a white British able-bodied cisgender woman who sounds very middle class (!) is one of extensive privilege versus that of many colleagues. One of our best tools to promote equity is to make allies of us all.