

Briefing

July 2023

Working in the natural environment survey – Key findings

Our respondents

Prospect is proud to represent members with a wide range of professional expertise on climate and the environment. As the climate and ecological emergencies become ever more pressing, it is important that the voices of these members are amplified and that they inform policy making and resource allocation.

To this end, we surveyed a wide range of members to learn more about their experiences of working in the natural environment. The largest number of responses were from National Trust, Natural England, and the Environment Agency – all large Prospect branches. The highest response rates were from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, NatureScot and Natural Resources Wales.

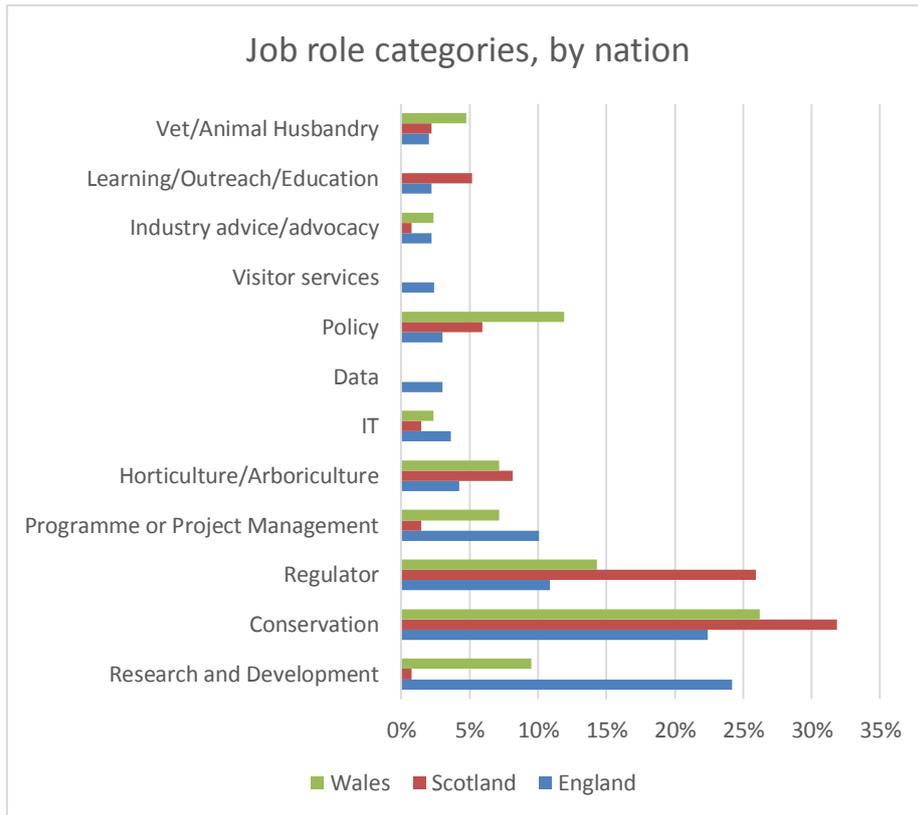
70% of respondents work in England, 20% in Scotland, 6% in Wales and 1% in Northern, Ireland.

This briefing provides an overview of key findings. Further detail is available on request.

Types of work

Most respondents stated that they work in conservation (25%). 24% have research and development roles. 9% work in programme or project management, 9% in regulation and a further 5% in horticulture/arboriculture. However, as shown in Chart 1, there are some differences by nation. Conservation roles are most numerous in Scotland, whereas England dominates in research and development roles.

Chart 1



Pay

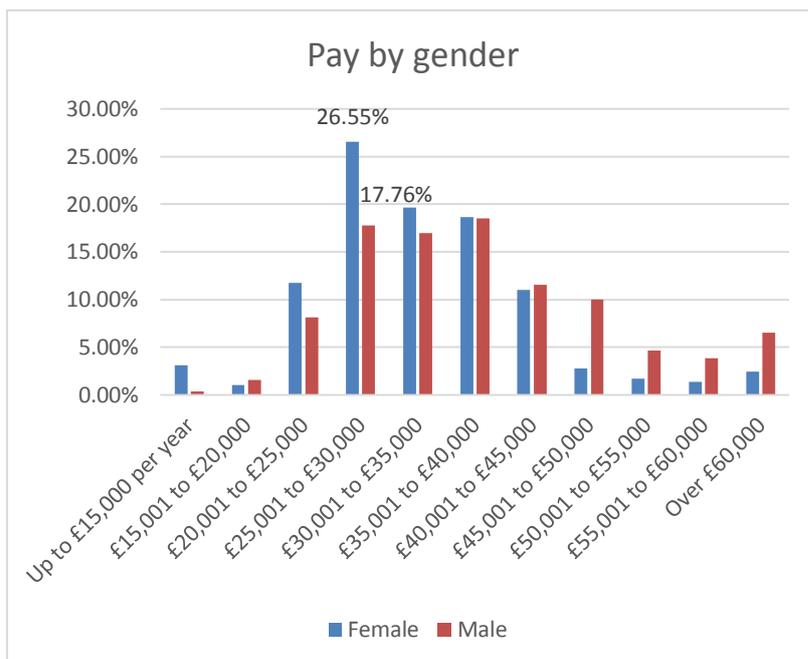
'I work in a role which is crucial to the organisation yet receive one of the lowest salaries. I have to do regular overtime every month to survive and as a result have a poor work/life balance. It effects my mental and physical health,'

'I sacrifice a lot in terms of potential earnings to do the job I do because I find it interesting and I feel like that it makes a difference to the environment; however, this sacrifice is only widening each year as pay increases fail to keep up with inflation and automatic pay progressions are put on hold. I like my job and want to keep doing it but I do also have a family to support.'

'I really like the people I work with and the value of the work I do, but I could be paid 4 times as much for my skills in a different industry - one that is bad or indifferent to the environment. We can't solve environmental problems or net zero unless we have people to do the work.'

38% of respondents earn £30,000 or less and 35% earn between £30,000 and £40,000. 28% earn more than £40,000. 81% work full time, 15% part time and 3% are on fixed term contracts. The impact of low pay disproportionately affects women – see chart 2.

Chart 2



Qualifications

Most respondents are highly qualified. **20% have a PhD or equivalent, 21% have a Masters degree or equivalent professional qualification, 39% have a degree**; 9% have no formal qualification and the remaining 12% have qualifications equivalent to Levels 1, 2 or 3.

34% are members of a professional organisation, and 74% of these respondents have financial support for the cost of their professional membership from their employer.

Length of service

62% of respondents have been in their current role for 5 years or less, 25% have been in their role more than 10 years. 54% have worked in this area of employment for more than 10 years, and 30% for 5 years or less.

Overall, responses from different demographic groups are remarkably similar.

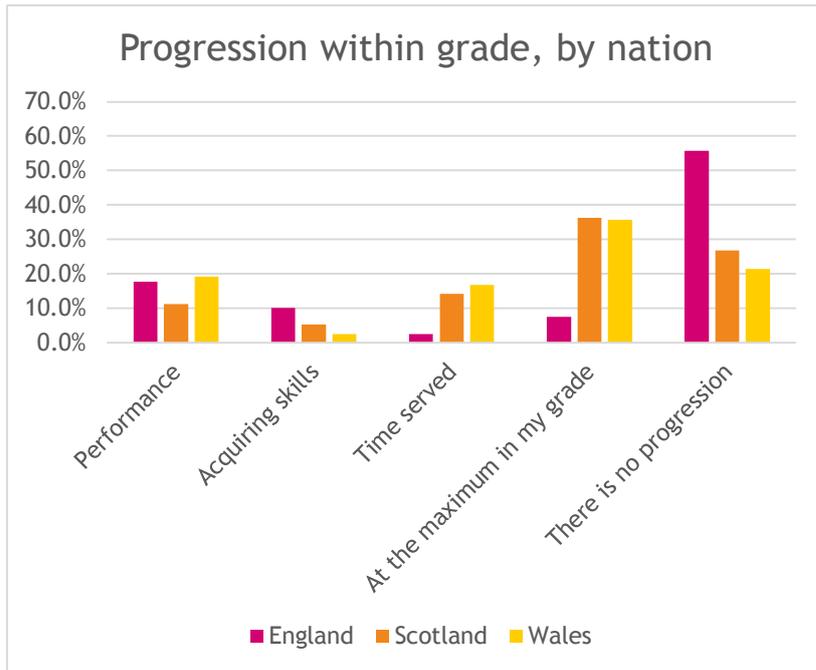
Progression

'Major problem is lack of reward for expertise gained over time, it is demoralising when programme managers are valued more highly than international experts.'

Almost half of respondents (48%) say there is no progression in their role. 17% of respondents say that progression is based on performance. For 9% it is based on acquiring skills and for 6% it is based on time-served. 15% of respondents have reached the maximum in their pay grade.

Chart 3 shows that there is a significant difference between the nations: 54% of respondents in England say there is no progression compared to 23% of those in Scotland and 19% of those in Wales. Just 7% of respondents in England have reached their pay maximum compared to 37% in Scotland and 36% in Wales.

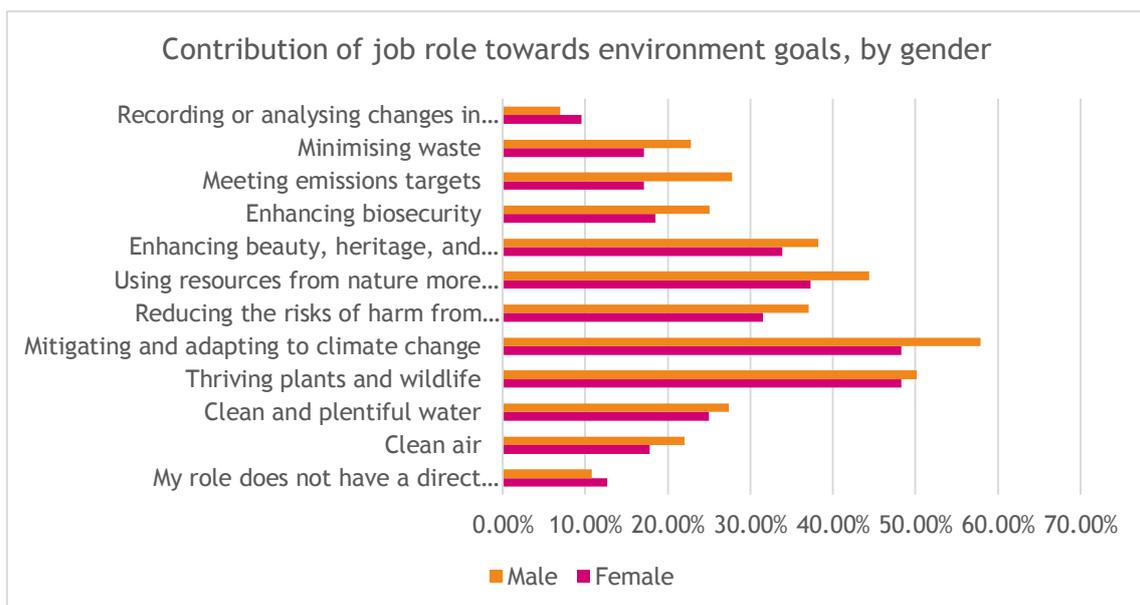
Chart 3



Contribution to the UK’s environmental goals

88% of respondents have a key responsibility that is associated with one or more environmental goal, as shown in chart 4. Of these respondents 53% are responsible for mitigating and adapting to climate change. 49% have responsibility to ensure thriving plants and wildlife. 40% are focused on using resources from nature more sustainably and efficiently. 36% are responsible for enhancing beauty, heritage, and engagement with the natural environment and 34% on reducing the risks of harm from environmental hazards.

Chart 4



In Wales and Scotland higher proportions of respondents have responsibilities for mitigating and adapting to climate change; thriving plants and wildlife; and using resources from nature more sustainably and efficiently.

The biggest barriers to preserving the natural environment and achieving Net Zero?

'The need for systemic change. Blocking by vested interests. Inadequate and short-term governance. The need for a major shift in attitudes, lifestyles, and behaviours from the public and private sector.'

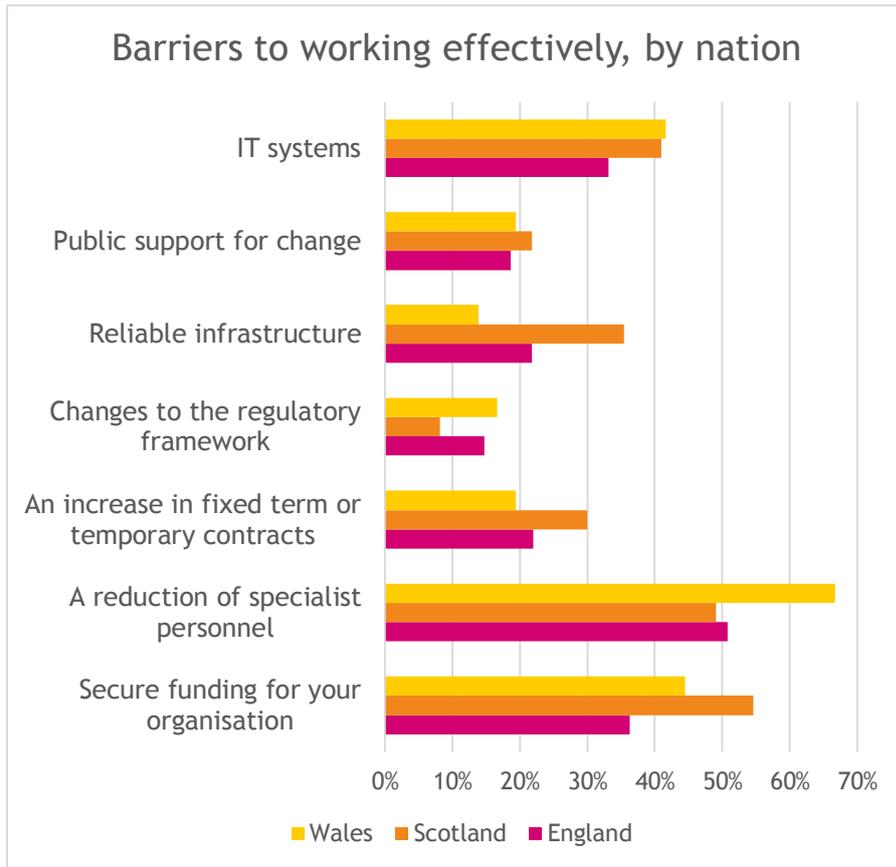
'Lack of sufficient resources: There are too few staff on the ground carrying out the practical task of delivering on the 30x30 target. Low pay is indicative of a lack of understanding of the specialist skills needed to effect change on the scale needed for nature recovery. Delivery is consistently undervalued in relation to policymaking.'

'The high turnover of officers in my type of job, due to economic migration, means that most officers are new to the role or fairly inexperienced. Plus, the more experienced officers mentored new officers, sharing knowledge and experience. It's understandable that people move onto better paid jobs because of the current cost of living crisis, but it does leave a serious shortfall in experienced and well supported officers able to meet targets.'

'Cost does not include full environmental impact such that investment in sustainable solutions is delayed.'

37% of respondents state government policy is the biggest barrier to preserving the natural environment and achieving net zero. 27% blame the economy due, variously, to the commitment to consumerism, a globally competitive economy, greed or oil dependency, 16% of respondents cite behaviours or lack of willingness to change. 9% believe that a lack of resources in their organisation is the biggest barrier. 5% cite land use and agricultural practice. 4% identify the cost of alternatives and a further 4% say lack of enforcement. Respondents from Scotland were most likely to cite lack of secure funding, whereas most respondents from Wales commented on the reduction in specialist personnel.

Chart 5

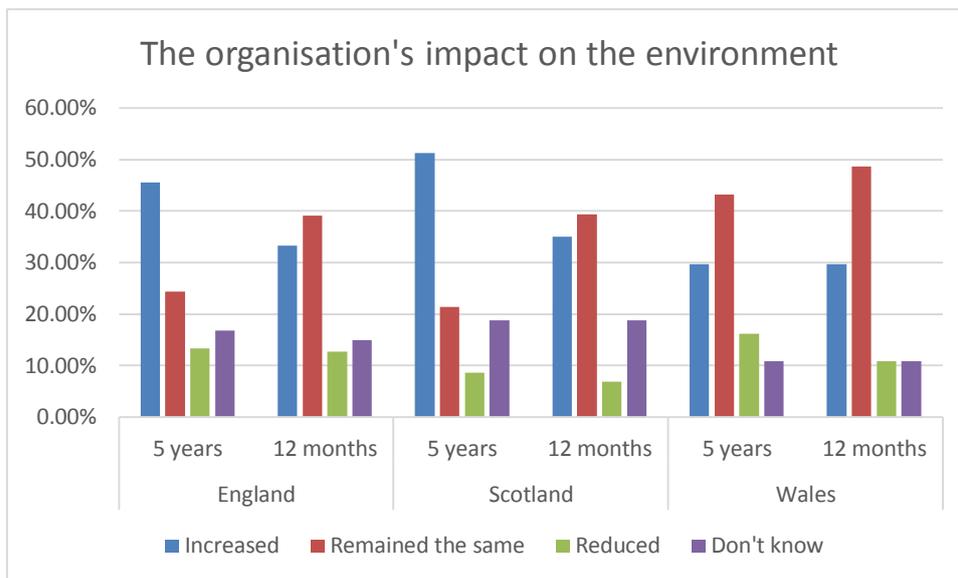


The organisation’s impact on the environment

‘Overall, it seems to me that xx is a great place to work, with a supportive and inclusive culture and many benefits (except the poor pay). Unfortunately, it’s abundantly clear that underfunding and understaffing limit the extent of the impact that we can have on actually making concrete progress on conservation and restoration of nature. The great work that’s been done so far with such limited resources is a testament to the dedication and passion of long-term xx employees who contribute so much to creating a positive workplace culture’.

Less than half the respondents (46%) say that their organisation has increased work on the environment in the last 5 years with 24% saying it has remained the same. However, it appears that environmental work has come under increasing pressure in the last 12 months, with just 34% reporting an increase in activity over this period and 39% stating that it has remained the same – see chart 6.

Chart 6



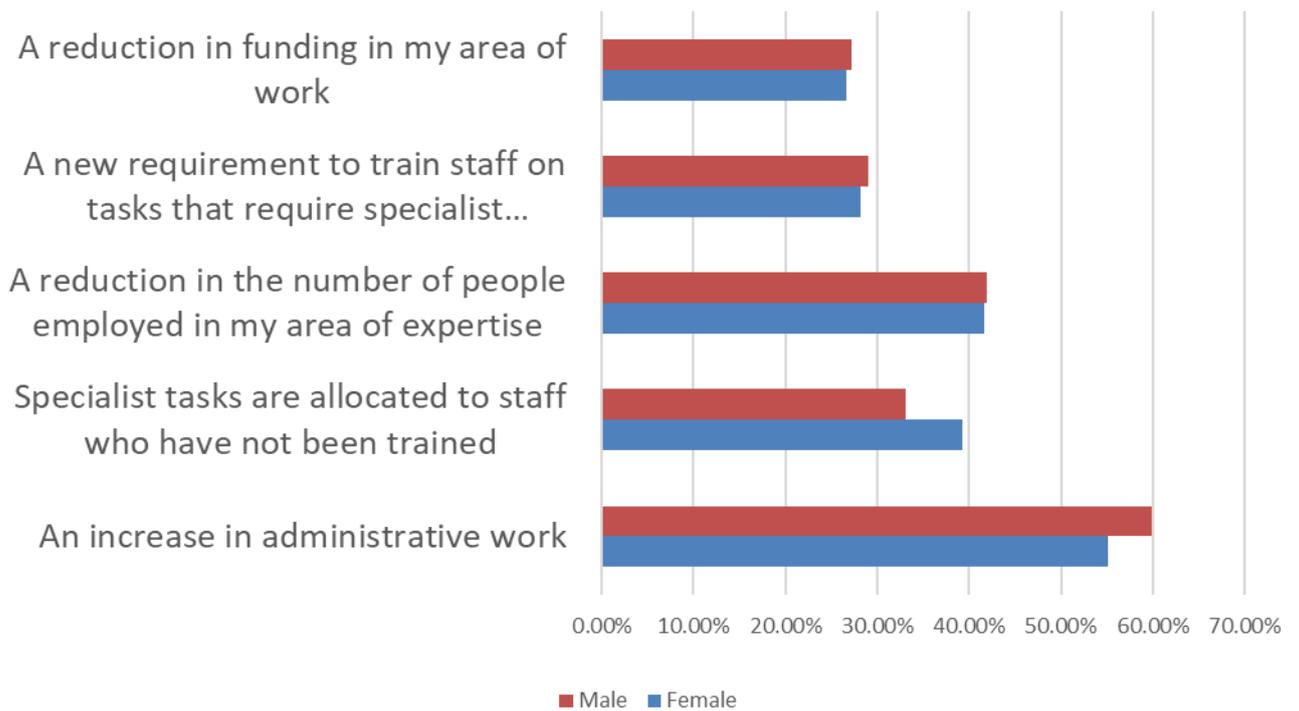
Changes to job roles

The most common change that has affected job roles in the last 12 months is an increase in administration (57%), followed by a reduction in the number of expert staff (42%) and specialist tasks being allocated to staff who have not been trained (36%), 29% report a requirement to train new staff in specialist skills and 27% a reduction in funding. Other problems highlighted include an increase in staff turnover, increased workload and difficulty accessing funding for core activities. Administrative work appears to have increased most sharply Wales (74%), compared with 55% in England and Scotland (60%). A reduction in funding is more likely to be mentioned by Scottish respondents (39%), compared to England (25%) and Wales (27%).

As shown in chart 7, barriers that have prevented respondents from doing their work effectively include a reduction in specialist personnel (52%), an absence of secure funding (41%), IT systems (35%), an increase in fixed term contracts (24%) or reliable infrastructure (24%). Other barriers mentioned include difficulty recruiting or high staff turnover; high workloads or lack of resources; the turnover of government ministers or lack of leadership by senior management; excessive regulation and a loss of expertise. 55% of respondents in Scotland raised barriers to secure funding as a concern compared with 36% in England and 44% in Wales. A reduction of specialist personnel was mentioned by 67% of respondents in Wales, 51% in England and 49% in Scotland.

There has been a significant increase in workload for 35% of respondents with just 25% of respondents reporting no increase in workload.

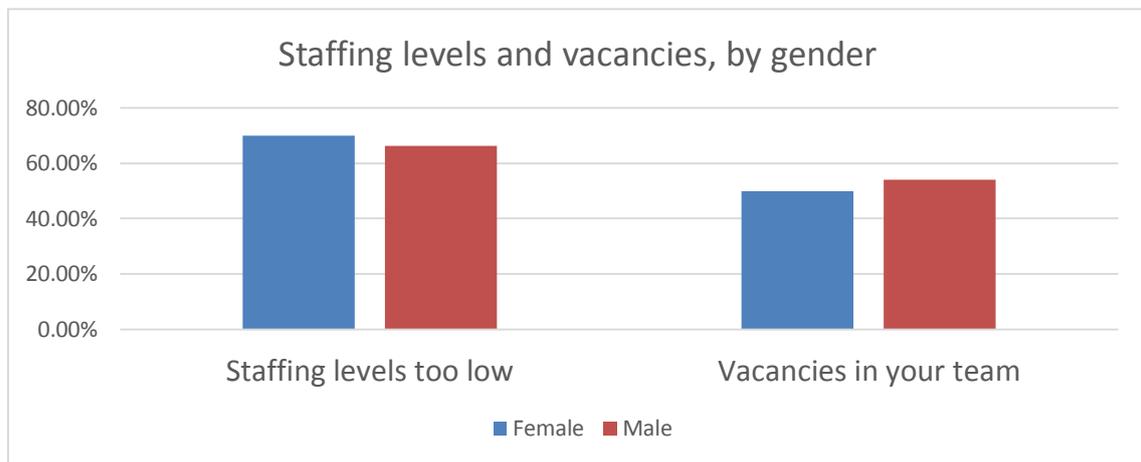
Chart 7



Staffing levels

As shown in chart 8, 69% of respondents say staffing levels are too low and a majority of respondents (52%) report that there are vacancies in their team.

Chart 8



Working hours

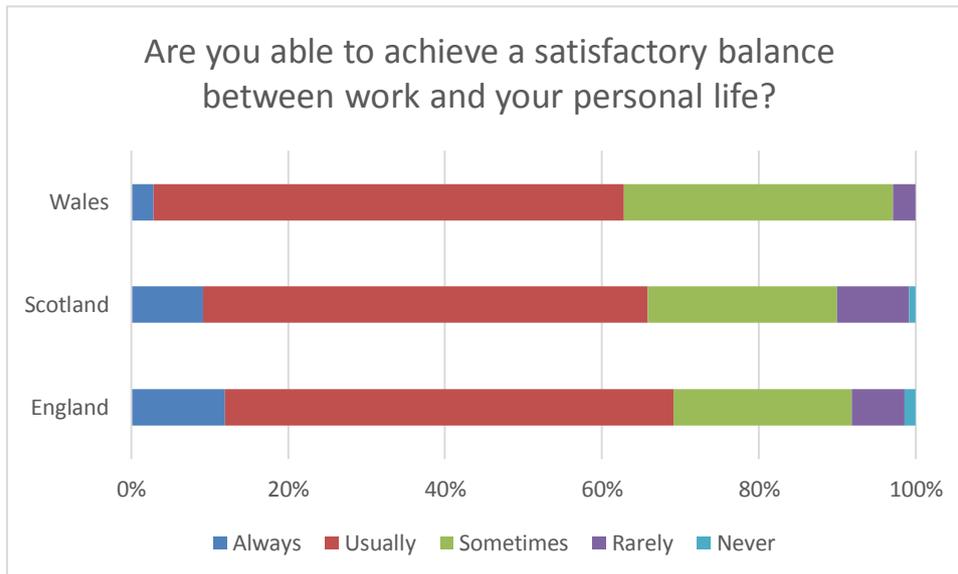
More than one in five respondents (23%) regularly work more than their conditioned hours every week and 25% work more than their conditioned hours a few times a month. Of those working additional hours every week, 39% work up to 2 hours and 31% work 3 to 5 hours.

Respondents (60%) are most likely to be compensated for additional hours worked through time off in lieu, 26% of respondents report that additional hours are usually unpaid. A higher proportion of respondents in Scotland (31%) are not paid for additional hours when

compared to England (25%) and Wales (24%). An overwhelming majority of respondents (77%) say that they work additional hours to complete tasks.

Nonetheless a majority of respondents are able to achieve a satisfactory balance between work and personal life usually (57%) or always (11%) – see chart 9.

Chart 9



Work morale

‘Poor senior management, poor pay, too few staff, inequality with rotas, undervalued, love my place of work.’

‘The only thing that keeps me here is my sincere passion for the environment and doing the right thing - this passion is being exploited by the government. We are being underpaid, undervalued, understaffed, overworked, our work sold out from under us into private companies’ pockets rather than funding the staff and training we need. We are being eroded and demoralised over time by the lack of ambition in the government to actually to support us. And the lack of ambition from the government in actually making any real steps to tackle climate change and environmental degradation.’

Chart 10 shows that 41% of respondents report excellent or good work morale and a further 34% say it is okay. 18% say it is poor and 6% say that it is extremely poor. As shown in chart 10, morale is highest in Scotland and lowest in London and the South East. In Wales where just 32% of respondents report a good or excellent morale and 40% report poor or extremely poor morale. 40% of respondents in England report good or excellent morale and 27% report poor or extremely poor morale.

Chart 10

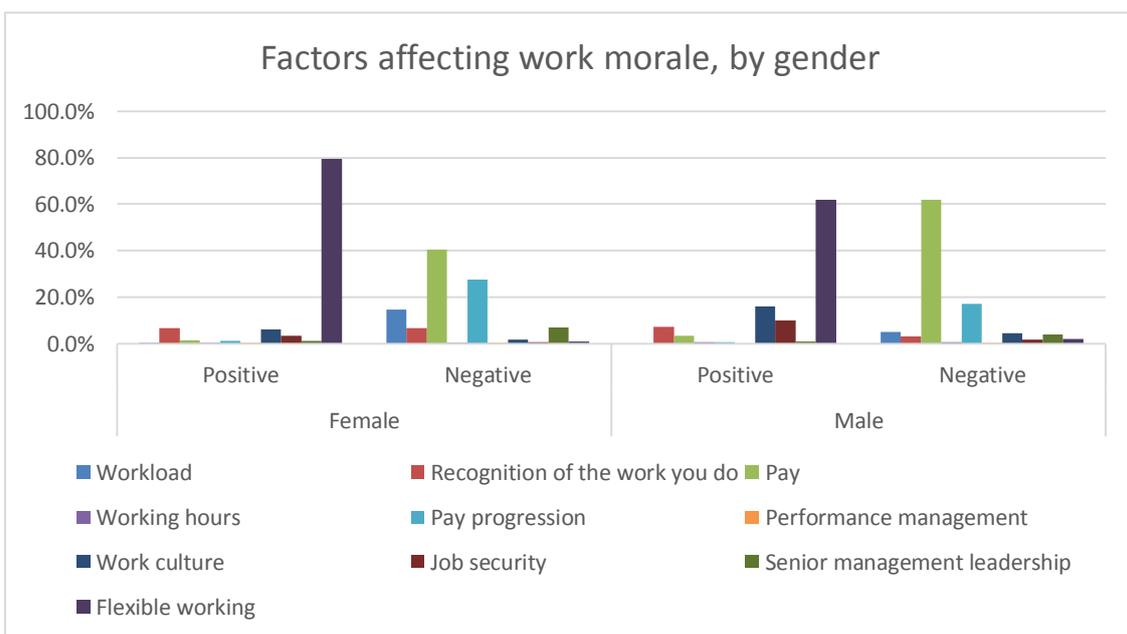


Chart 11 shows that the single factor that is most likely to positively affect morale at work is flexible working (72%), followed by work culture (10%) and recognition of work (7%). Factors that negatively affect morale are pay (41%), workload (28%) and pay progression (17%).

Flexible working has a higher positive impact for female than male respondents (80% of female respondents compared to 62% of male respondents). Factors that have a higher positive impact on male respondents include work culture, job security and recognition for work.

Although a higher proportion of male respondents feel their morale is negatively impacted by pay (62% of male respondents and 40% of female respondents), female respondents are more likely to say that pay progression negatively impacts their morale (27% of female respondents compared to 17% of male respondents). Female respondents are also more likely to say that workload (15% compared to 5%) and senior management leadership (7% compared to 4%) have a negative impact on morale.

Chart 11



There are more significant differences between nations on the factors negatively impacting morale than those that affect it positively. Pay and pay progression have the most significant impact on morale in England (58% and 24% respectively). This compares to Scotland (35% and 20.5%) and Wales (20% and 3%). Workload also contributes to a negative work morale in Wales (36%) and Scotland (20%) compared to just 6% in England. The other factor contributing to poor morale in Wales is senior management leadership (26%, compared to 7% in Scotland and 4% in England).

Final comment

More than 100 respondents provided additional comments about their work. The most frequent comment was that respondents did not feel valued, followed by those reporting that they felt overworked, that there were too few staff, or that there are few chances to progress.

There is frustration with bureaucracy which, in the view of some respondents, leads to a misdirection of resources on the wrong priorities rather than on supporting the core environmental mission.