



The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

1 March 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

The State of Natural England pay report

I am writing to highlight the critical work undertaken by Prospect members at Natural England and how this vital service is being put at risk by an unfair and broken pay system.

As you will know, Natural England and its highly skilled, expert staff provide an essential public service for recovering England's much impoverished nature. Our members have a critical role to play in ensuring the Government meets its biodiversity and net zero targets, most recently helping to prepare for the COP26 and COP15 summits.

Despite this urgent remit, Natural England staff are by far the lowest paid for their service across Defra group. I have enclosed a copy of our new special pay report *The State of Natural England 2022*, which provides detail on the issues¹.

Natural England's broken pay system – the lowest of the low in Defra

This problem is rooted in Natural England's vesting, 15 years ago, which absorbed founding body pay levels and pay constraints which have persisted into the now unfit pay framework.

¹ Previous State of Natural England reports (2018-21) are available on our website:
<https://prospect.org.uk/naturalengland/>

Across the pay levels, Natural England staff have the lowest starting salaries and the longest pay scales in the group. Most of the workforce languish on pay far below the starting salaries of their Defra group comparators.

Whilst Natural England is no different to the wider public sector in having undergone ten years of pay restraint, the effects of this have been disproportionately more damaging, given these pre-existing disparities.

We believe this has also led to widespread cases of unequal pay, with men being paid more than women for doing similar jobs – in some cases, by far. For example, Natural England's Equal Pay Review 2020/21 shows there is a significant mean pay gap of 6.31% at the Manager/Principal level.

However, given the scale of the structural pay problems, Natural England has no flexibility to fix them in the annual pay awards.

While Natural England has benefited from recent welcome uplifts in its programme budget, no such enhancement has been made available for pay. Natural England is recruiting at pace to catch up with resourcing demands, but managers report increasing difficulties in recruitment and medium-term retention. Due to the lack of progression through their pay scales, new staff are dismayed they will be unable to reach the target rate for the job (midway through the scale) in a meaningful time, if at all.

Despite a relatively low turnover rate nationally, the organisation is suffering acute internal churn as staff move between roles and seek promotion as the only means of increasing their income, whilst still working for the organisation they love. This has crippled many operational teams, who are unable to retain their experienced, expert staff and then struggle to recruit suitably experienced people quickly enough, or hold on to them long enough, to allow expertise and experience to build up in the team.

Whilst masked by Natural England's national performance statistics, this situation is leading to high stress levels amongst our committed staff, demoralised by excessive workloads and poor pay. In Natural England's recent staff survey, nearly half of staff (47%) reported that they have felt unwell from work-related stress in the last 12 months, impacting on the organisation's ability to achieve its objectives. This is deeply concerning.

Fair pay for excellent, dedicated experts

Our members working in Natural England have long been calling on their employer to mend their broken pay system and deliver a framework that provides comparable pay with other Defra group bodies. The failure to provide a decent "rate for the job" has seen the years of austerity and pay restraint have a disproportionately greater detriment on staff standard of living, as well as longer term harm to their pensions.

Staff can no longer tolerate Natural England's refusal to address this issue and commenced industrial action at the start of this year.

Natural England senior leadership maintain that their inability to address these matters is due to constraints within the pay remit process. The Chancellor of the Exchequer promised public sector staff a pay rise, referring to a pay review body that doesn't exist for the staff we represent. A simple pay rise for staff in Natural England, whilst welcome, will not remedy the long-running and growing disparity with other Defra group bodies, or mend the equal pay issue.

Natural England's pay and workforce reform programme, including preparation for a pay flexibility business case, has just got underway. However, Treasury rules requiring this to be cost-neutral and self-funded will prevent the large discrepancies and pay gaps from being addressed satisfactorily. The programme also puts staff terms and conditions at risk but those self-funded savings themselves would be inadequate to provide genuine, beneficial reform.

Substantial, meaningful pay reform, underpinned by long-term funding, is urgently required to enable Natural England to attract, retain and develop people with the crucial skills and expertise needed to meet our urgent climate and natural challenges.

I hope you will raise these long-standing issues with Natural England's broken pay system with colleagues in the Treasury and Cabinet Office, so that we can work together to protect the critical services Natural England's skilled workforce provides.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the issues raised in the report.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Graham', written in a cursive style.

Deputy General Secretary