

# The state of Natural England 2022

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A special pay report by  
Prospect trade union



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## Protect England's nature – protect Natural England



# Natural England staff – champions for the natural environment

The “State of Natural England” has been covered in several reports over the past few years<sup>1</sup>. These touched lightly on the plight of the staff, the principal aim there being to strengthen the organisation in terms of resources to tackle the various climate and conservation emergencies. But it is now time to focus on those staff.

Natural England and its staff provide a vital public service for recovering England's much impoverished nature. Our country is shamefully one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, with the UK ranking at 189 out of 218 countries assessed for loss in biodiversity<sup>2</sup>.

Much of our wildlife has been lost over the last few decades because of policy-supported agricultural intensification including widespread devastating use of herbicides and pesticides; urbanisation and deforestation; pollution and waste; and effects of the climate crisis and from non-native invasive species.

Natural England is a Non-

Departmental Public Body (NDPB) created under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006, and is formally accountable to the Secretary of State for Defra (Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), who is accountable to Parliament for our activities and performance.

The breadth of Natural England's remit was always wide and crucial, but even more so now with an urgent government agenda to halt biodiversity decline, and its net zero target to combat the climate crisis<sup>3</sup>.

But the value of nature, for individual people and communities across the country, really came into its

<sup>1</sup> Standing up for Natural England | Prospect

<sup>2</sup> Hayhow DB et al (2019) State of Nature report. State of nature partnership [bit.ly/state-of-nature-2019](https://bit.ly/state-of-nature-2019)

<sup>3</sup> UK Government policy paper A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment (Jan 2018) [bit.ly/25-year-env-plan](https://bit.ly/25-year-env-plan)

UK Government policy paper Nature for people, climate and wildlife (May 2021) [bit.ly/nature-people-climate-wildlife](https://bit.ly/nature-people-climate-wildlife)

UK Government policy paper Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener (Oct 2021) [bit.ly/net-zero-strategy](https://bit.ly/net-zero-strategy)

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## Caerthillian Cove, West Lizard SSSI, Cornwall



© Natural England/Neil Pike

own over the last two years, revealed by the covid pandemic and the multiple lockdowns and restrictions we endured. The ability to access and enjoy nature was so important for people, to help them cope and recover. Natural England's work is fundamental to helping people in England do this. Think of your favourite place in England... It is likely it is a place protected and conserved by Natural England.

Examples of Natural England's work include:

- its regulatory role of ensuring that development is sustainable on land and at sea;
- implementing policy, guidance and new measures for nature recovery set in the Environment Act 2021 and the government's 25 Year Environment Plan, including biodiversity net gain and Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRSs);
- improving people's access to nature through upkeep of our best sites for wildlife on our National Nature Reserves (NNRs);
- setting greenspace standards and initiatives for Local Plans; designating and helping enhance our protected landscapes including Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and National Parks;
- crucial ecological input into the design of the new Environmental Land Management Scheme for environmental benefits;
- direct conservation efforts to save endangered species through Back from the Brink<sup>4</sup> ;
- partnership and initiatives to provide nature-based solutions to combat the climate crisis including peatland restorations and tree planting projects, the England Peat Action Plan and the England Trees Action Plan<sup>5</sup>.

Natural England can only achieve this because of its staff; a simple statement but they are highly skilled and the repository of expertise, enthusiasm and commitment to the natural world, working to leave it in a better state than we found it.

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The breadth of Natural England's remit was always wide, but even more so now with an urgent government agenda to halt biodiversity decline, and its net zero target to combat the climate crisis

4 <https://naturebftb.co.uk>

5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tree-planting-rates-to-treble-by-end-of-this-parliament>

73% of staff surveyed disagree that their pay adequately reflects their performance

NE staff survey, August 2021

## Natural England's pay problems

“ I would have applied for the recent botanical specialist role but for the very poor pay. My current salary as a botanical specialist consultant is nearly double the amount offered by NE.”

### External ecological consultant

Despite the incredible importance of Natural England's work and the magnitude of the task at hand, there is a huge threat to it succeeding: the historical and perpetuating problems of its broken pay system; and the impacts of this on the staff and the organisation.

Since being created in 2006, Natural England has dragged along the bottom of pay in Defra. Together with lack of pay progression, this has become a serious risk for Natural England in retaining its staff but also its ability to attract the best people in the future, tainting its reputation.

Whilst Natural England's woes of slashed core funding during the years of austerity have been somewhat repaired with recent additional uplifts from Defra, this has not touched the amount of pay available for staff which is bound by government rules.

Poor pay remains a huge and worsening risk to Natural England and the work it does, with concerning impacts on the staff themselves.

This report sets out the detail behind these fundamental, structural problems in Natural England's pay. These cannot be fixed through annual pay awards. Comprehensive reform, supported with true additional funding, is urgently required to haul the organisation up to parity with its counterparts and value its staff fairly for their skills and responsibilities.

### The problems

- **Staff starting salaries are by far the lowest in Defra**, and beyond in the private and charity sectors, to the tune of thousands of pounds.
- **NE has by far the longest pay scales**, but with no hope of individuals progressing through these through a decade of government-imposed pay restraint.
- **NE jobs are worth around 20% less** than they should be had they risen in line with cost of living over the last decade.
- **Two-thirds of Natural England's workforce currently languish below their mid-points** in their scales, not even near the target rate for their job, including staff with over 15 years of experience.
- **Equal pay has become a problem** with widespread cases of men being paid more than women for doing similar jobs, but are not being resolved.



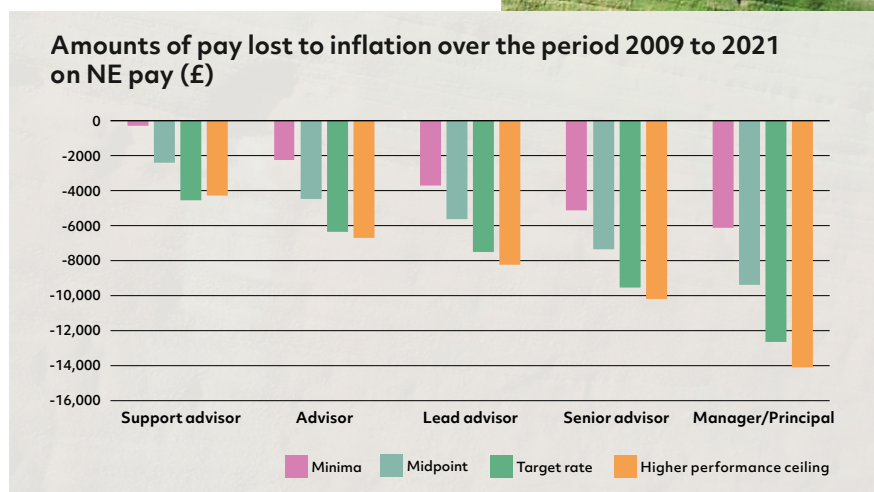
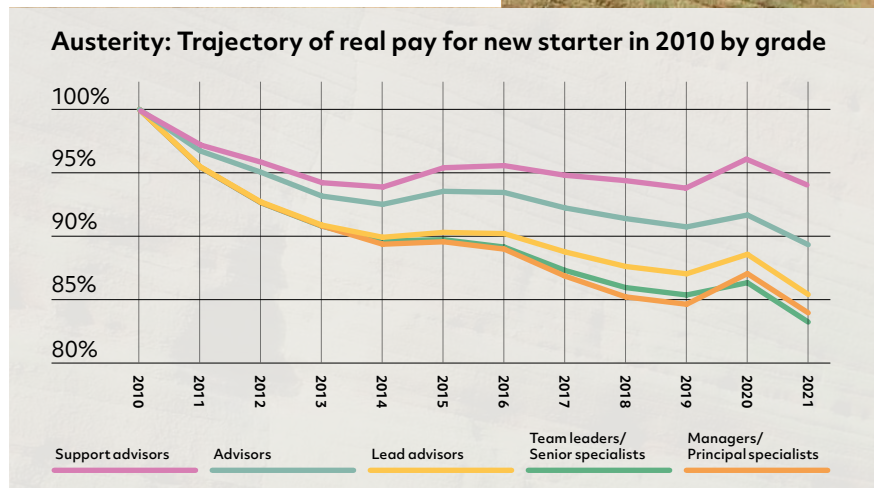
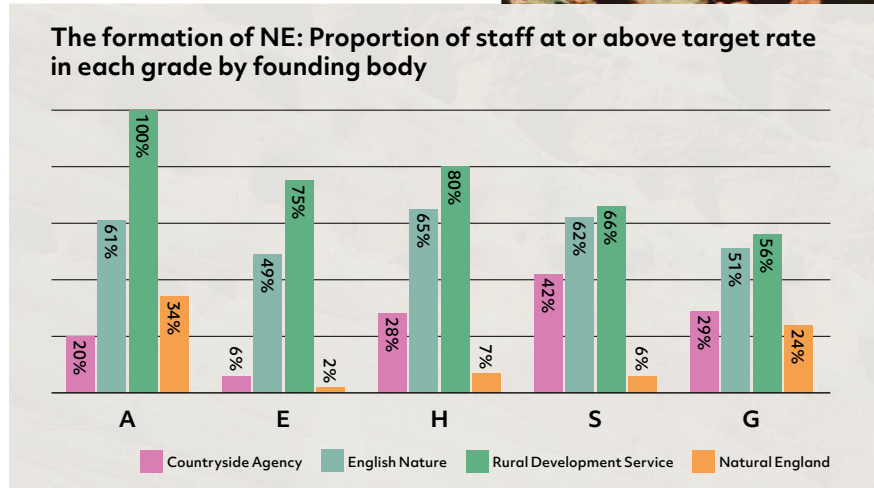
# The history

Whilst the woes of public sector pay are well aired and rehearsed, the situation in Natural England sits a little differently. Although the formation of the organisation in 2006 did see a benchmarking exercise to arrive at a pay framework, the aspiration of pay harmonisation between the founding bodies of English Nature, The Countryside Agency and Rural Development Service was thwarted by major interventions: the 2008 banking crisis, decade of austerity (2010 – 2020), and departmental marginalisation that saw Natural England take the largest cuts in grant/ funding the Defra group between 2010/11 and 2018/19 (SoNE 2020-21, p9). The early mantra of reaching the target rate within six years was, for many, drowned out by the clamour of austerity.

The early (c.2008) legacy pay body data shows the disparity that has probably not been resolved, although tracking where the staff members by legacy currently are is not easy and so an up to date picture is not possible. But the disparities were clear and the position for the ex-Countryside Agency staff members was poor.

In 2010, the Coalition Government announced a two-year pay freeze from 2011/12. From 2013/14 to 2017/18 public sector pay awards were capped at an average of 1% of the pay bill. However, as Natural England is not covered by a Pay Review Board, it had no champion to suggest elevation in 2017 when the policy was revised. Between 2018/19 to 2020/21 parts of the public sector that are covered by the PRBs received pay rises above 2%.

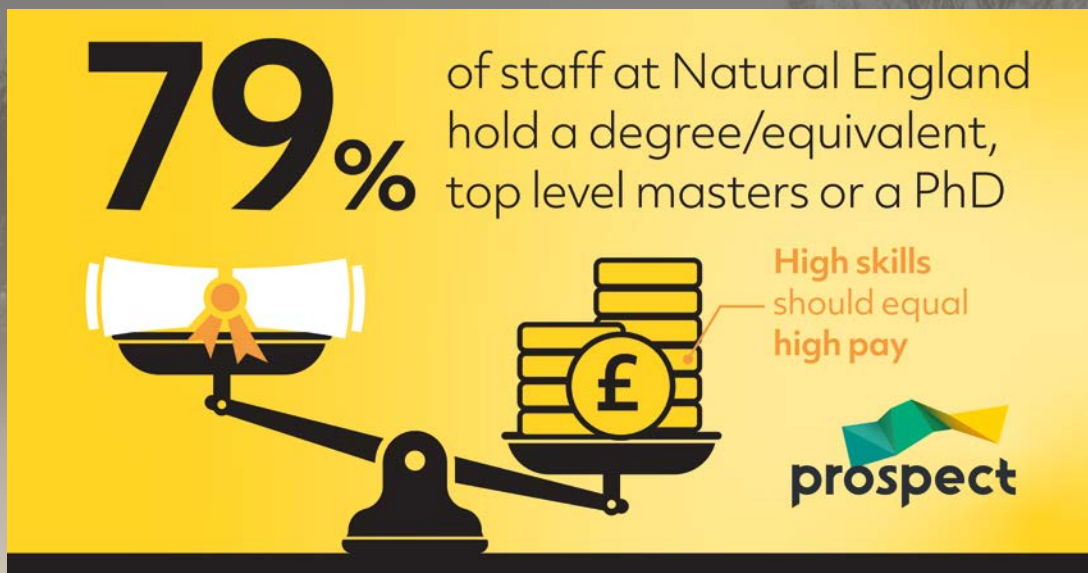
From the available pay scales between 2009 and 2021 and with knowledge of the CPI rates, one can indicate the magnitude of pay losses to staff by grade over that period.



“

We are embarking now on a change of direction that has been long overdue in the UK economy. We are not going back to the same old broken model with low wages, low growth, low skills and low productivity.”

**Prime Minister Boris Johnson**  
**Conservative Party conference, October 2021**



Source: Natural England's Workforce Strategy 2021-26

# The current pay landscape in Natural England

“ I applied for my current role as it was advertised at a salary band, I presumed I would be hired on the bottom of the band and would be given clear objectives to allow me to progress through the pay band as I achieved certain targets and settled into the job role etc. It has become clear that the salary advertised is not correct and there is no salary progression for me in this role. This has directly affected my future decisions around staying within NE. I feel I was hired under a false salary promise.”

## Prospect member comment

The staff have a high and long-standing commitment to the natural environment. This is something that is reflected in the relatively low national turnover and this despite the widely recognised poor pay. The internet is full of critical reviews of Natural England jobs being interesting but poorly paid. Applicants flock to get one, some leave shortly after, others put up with it. This low turnover is seen as a “problem” rather than an asset, despite the government bemoaning the high churn levels in many departments as staff leave to chase better wages. Natural England staff bring high levels of expertise along with passion to the jobs they do. They stay in NE because they care, and in staying develop unequalled expertise.

It is perverse to collectively penalise Natural England staff for staying in post rather than leaving. The value of Natural England contributions to the development of policy and legislation on topics as diverse as Net Gain, the Environment Act, the Nature Recovery network, the wider 30by30 biodiversity target, the Marine Conservation Zone network and the additional 400,000 hectares of new protected landscapes by 2030 is recognised but inadequately rewarded.

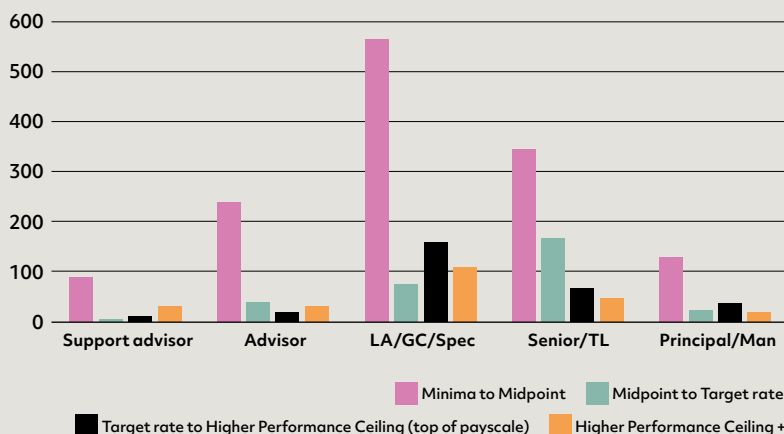
The nationally low turnover however masks the very real high levels of internal churn and turnover in NE’s frontline delivery teams, as staff have no option but to seek promotion for any hope of increasing their income. This has left some teams



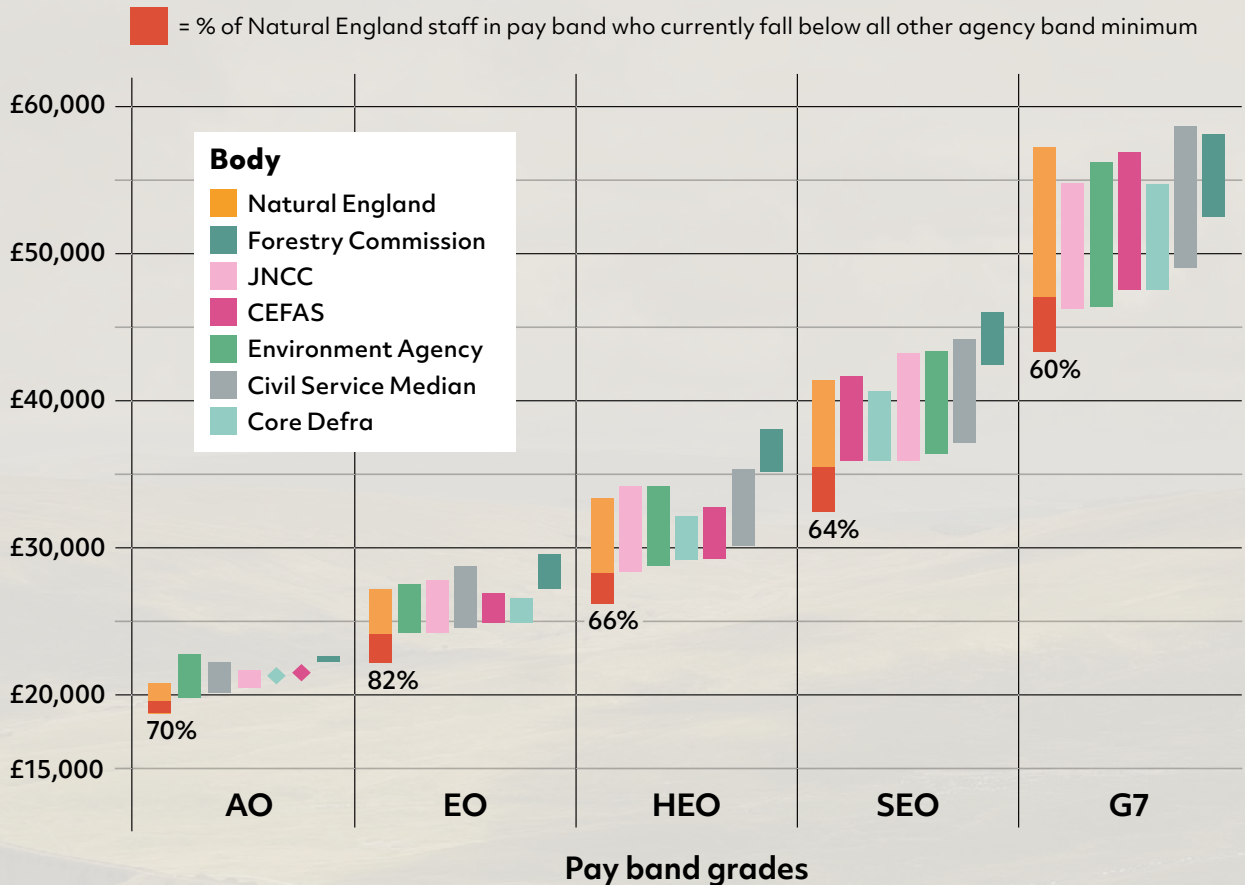
“I interviewed a candidate for a Lead Advisor role this summer who was with a Wildlife Trust. They didn’t take up the offer as it would have meant a substantial pay cut from their current salary for doing very similar work.”

## Prospect member comment

Position of staff in the pay range in Natural England



## Pay rates at Natural England compared to other Defra agencies



This figure updates and extends the graphic shown in other State of Natural England reports and includes the Environment Agency, although the read across is open to more interpretation as they do not adopt the same grading framework.

“ I took a pay cut to join NE and believe not only in the work that I do but what the organisation does as a whole. I don't want to leave but after having learnt what colleagues in Defra earn, doing the same job as me, it is likely I won't stay for very long. I am not actively looking for a new job but am definitely keeping my eye out for anything which fits with what I want to do and has a higher rate of pay. I am a single parent with two children, one of whom is disabled, I own my home and every penny counts! I get a small amount of Universal Credit as an unpaid carer but it doesn't make much of a dent, especially after the recent, well-publicised cut.”

**Prospect member comment**



### Target rate comparisons as of 2021

	G7 (£)	SEO (£)	HEO (£)	EO (£)	AO (£)
NE	51,235	38,689	30,427	25,776	20,227
JNCC	50,973	40,138	31,779	25,819	21,065
Difference	262	-1,449	-1,352	-43	-838

### Illustrative 'target rate' aspirations for NE staff set against estimated Defra target rate equivalents

Grade	Average EFRA* target rate (£)	Median EFRA* target rate (£)	NE target rate (£)	Average differences (£)	Median differences (£)
Band AO	21,569	21,446	20,227	-1,342	-1,219
Band EO	26,719	26,285	25,776	-943	-509
Band HEO	32,743	31,966	30,427	-2,316	-1,539
Band SEO	40,826	40,455	38,689	-2,137	-1,766
Band G7	53,226	52,711	51,235	-1,991	-1,476

\*CEFAS, Core Defra, JNCC, Environment Agency, Civil Service Median, Forestry Commission

on their knees as they try to secure a stable and experienced operation on the ground, this is especially so for planning and wildlife licensing teams across the country. One Area Team has seen in the last three years turnover rates in excess of 20% and churn rates approaching 100%. This has brought some teams to breaking point, on ability to deliver but also their health and wellbeing, leading directly to concerning levels of stress incidents and absences.

Unpublished pay data arranged by length of service shows a full spread of years for Natural England staff from just one year of service up to, exceptionally, 45. However, there is a marked clustering in the time period of 15-25 years (possibly more finely defined as around 20 years' service), and in the centre of the 10-15 year band. The rest of the time periods have less density of staff numbers.

The early "promise" of reaching the target rate within six years of starting should not lead to the sort of pay distribution one sees. Closer

examination of the pay landscape shows a strong clustering of staff in the lowest areas of the pay band, a band that itself is one of the poorest in the Defra family. Natural England staff find themselves the lowest of the low.

Notwithstanding the recent increases in new recruits increasing the numbers in the min-to-mid-point band, one might expect higher black bars – the target rate – to be met by the existing and experienced staff complement (see graph on page 7). This inability to reach even the modest (by Defra group levels) target rates even after years of excellent service burns deeply into the staff morale and sense of value.

When this lower end clustering is set against the pay landscape of the Defra group pay scales, the issue becomes stark.

"Target rate" as a concept seems not that common but is found in the JNCC pay framework.

If one takes a working proportion of 60% of a pay band as roughly equivalent to a target rate (TR)

Examination of the pay landscape shows a strong clustering of staff in the lowest areas of the pay band, itself one of the poorest in the Defra family

“A full-time Senior Advisor at the very top of their pay scale would be classified as a low-income household based on the criteria used to assign student bursaries and scholarships.”

**Prospect member comment**

**North York Moors National Park**

(a reasonable fit for the NE situation), then the average and median target rate values might be the sort of uplifts required to reach some notional parity, at least within the EFRA group.

The Environment Agency is not alone in sitting apart on pay scale terms and the same is true of the National Trust, which in many of its types of work reflects Natural England’s agenda. Whilst not comparable as they again operate on a completely different grading system, insider knowledge has suggested that the typical work carried out by a Grade 5 NT staff member (at £43,153 “target rate”) is comparable to that carried out by a senior advisor/ specialist (at a target rate of £30,427).

Recently advertised National Trust mid-senior advisor (which insider sources equate to be at the Natural England Lead to Senior pay range) with a starting point of £40,564 is £1,875 above the target rate for NE senior specialists/advisors and team leaders which they ought to be achieving after some six years. Note that the leave and other allowances are different, a point that should be borne in mind throughout these

comparisons. That said, a shopping voucher doesn’t pay the rent. The revision of the overall pay framework does not address the substantial issues with appropriateness of grading, especially for the National Nature Reserve (NNR) staff. Their levels of day to day responsibility are now significant, dealing with staff, livestock, H&S issues, the public, site management, funding, volunteers, and yet they sit under-valued in pay. This is particularly galling when comparable roles are being paid substantially more in 2021 in other bodies: £31,135 for a reserve manager in Sussex Wildlife Trust for example – compare this to a NE NNR reserve manager starting salary of £22,418 or senior reserve manager at £26,224. Benchmarking of NNR staff can only be done with reference to the wider environmental sector, as no real comparators exist within the Defra group.

The Environment Act places Natural England in a central role for some of its core functions, drawing on the collective skill base, expertise and educational levels found within the organisation. Yet the rewards are frugal.



## The social justice of the case

“ For the past few years, I have had to supplement my income in various ways to keep up with household bills, rising energy costs, food etc as well as supporting children through further education and university. This has included working weekends driving lorries, helping out in a friend's motor business. I have recently accepted a senior advisor role in Natural England in order to help improve my main income, only to find very disappointingly that in real terms my additional net income amounts to an additional £151.39 per month... it looks like driving an HGV full time is looking far more prosperous than the current NE salary.”

### Prospect member comment

“ I took a pay cut of £3000 to join Natural England in 2009, arriving with three years' experience of the job I joined to do. I was told I had to start at the bottom of the pay band and due to poor pay progression, which I was ensured of when I accepted the job, I only got back to my pre-Natural England wage after nine years of service.”

### Prospect member comment

“ My personal circumstances have changed a lot since I first started with Natural England. I now live with my partner and stepson and we are expecting a baby in 2022. This of course has brought with it additional outgoings and despite my promotion, the progression of pay in real terms has certainly not kept up with how my life has progressed. My partner works as a nurse in the NHS, and she has likewise up until this year experience a pay freeze and limited pay progression and our combined salaries are struggling to meet the ever-rising costs of living.”

### Prospect member comment

“ I've had to move in with my parents since September 2020 as I don't earn enough to be able to rent/buy a house on my own. It's demoralising... I'm being paid exactly the same as new starters in my team, where my workload is much greater as I am more knowledgeable and have four years' experience on the project. I feel undervalued and like I'm just a number, when I should be paid for my skill set.”

### Prospect member comment

The overall pay framework, lack of current and widely benchmarked sectoral target rate, and the entrapment of far too many staff below even the current inadequate target rate after six years of good service, are unacceptable.

In-work privation to conserve and enhance our shared environment under the looming power of climate change and biodiversity declines is unacceptable.

Being able to easily source stories of hardship from staff working, albeit for arm's length, for government is unacceptable.

A new benchmarking of the whole pay system, a re-evaluation of the appropriateness of some grading, and funds to execute the equal pay and

legacy pay discrepancies, the jump to target rate for those with more than six years' experience who sit below it, and to fund the new pay system are core to the demand.

Natural England may be beginning this analysis in its workforce reform programme; but being bound by Treasury rules, for any reform to be 'cost-neutral' and 'self-funded', means it may well be set up to fail. The staff's dedication is not an excuse for sustained privation.

Natural England staff deserve better than having to work on the cheap, to deploy their complex skill sets to advise government on the cheap, or to service the Environment Act 2021 on the cheap.

**This must now change.**



Being able to easily source stories of hardship from staff working for government is unacceptable

“

At nearly 40, with 14 years of working in the environment sector, I am currently on the same salary I was in my mid-20s, working for a charity with just five years' experience.

If I am unsuccessful in securing a better-paid role within Natural England, I will not hesitate to go elsewhere – I have no choice.”

**Prospect member comment**

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