

The state of Natural England 2018-19



A view from
Prospect trade union



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Stand up for your environment, stand up for Natural England

Summary

In 2018, Natural England, the public organisation for safeguarding England's natural environment, is in crisis. Its staff are in the eighth year of a 1% pay cap.

The organisation itself is in its fourth year of successive budget cuts with no sign of let-up for the years ahead.

The organisation's diminishing ability to fulfil its public service remit because of the cuts was laid bare earlier this year by a House of Lords Select Committee¹.

Prospect trade union is the major union representing staff in Natural England. Its recent surveys of members revealed just how damaging the impacts of the pay cap have been, personally and to the organisation.

Yet in spite of the cuts, the pay cap and the recent exodus of many NE staff to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on EU exit secondments, the staff still strive to protect and conserve our fragile natural environment for present and future generations.

They are high-calibre professionals – experts in their field – and will be pivotal

in enabling government to achieve its 25-year environment plan. But they can only go on so long. They, and Natural England's work, have been undervalued and underfunded by government for too long.

This report is in response to our members' experiences, concerns and uncertainty over their livelihoods and what this could mean for the environment. It shines a light on Natural England's crucial work for the natural environment and the impact of cuts on this work.

Prospect is a politically independent union but felt compelled to highlight the plight of Natural England and its people.

We also describe the impact of the long-standing suppression of pay and squeeze on resources on the staff and their well-being.

And we explain why we so desperately need a turnaround to revive the once flourishing Natural England for the good of the natural environment and the public of England.

¹ House of Lords Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 Report of Session 2017–19 (March 2018) The countryside at a crossroads: Is the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 still fit for purpose? <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/nerc-act-committee/news-parliament-2017/nerc-act-report-published/>

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What is Natural England and why does it matter?

Natural England is a non-departmental public body in England sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

It was established on 1 October 2006 through the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act. This amalgamated the Countryside Agency, English Nature and the Rural Development Service – themselves long-standing bodies with some being able to trace their heritage back to 1949 with the then Nature Conservancy.

Natural England is responsible for protecting and improving England's natural environment, including its landscape, flora and fauna, freshwater and marine environments, geology and soils. And for people's enjoyment of it all.

To achieve this, Natural England has a myriad of statutory duties and other essential work including partnership-based projects. It:

- advises government on environmental legislation and policy
- is a statutory consultee on environmental matters for planning, development and marine licensing
- helps farmers and landowners enhance the natural environment on their land
- issues and enforces wildlife licenses for protected species
- designates our most precious environmental sites
- commissions and undertakes environmental scientific research, evidence gathering and drives local partnership projects
- has a responsibility to help people enjoy, understand and access the natural environment.

But there is so much more to Natural England than what gets recognised.

It is a repository of skills, expertise, enthusiasm and commitment to the natural world. These are the sorts of time-tested qualities that used to be valued in the civil and public service that need to be maintained and cherished.

The sheer scope and scale of the work



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delivered by Natural England's staff is not well understood or appreciated, yet it has a real and lasting influence on the ground. A few examples are outlined below.

- **Protected sites** – designation of our best ecological and geological sites, both terrestrial and marine (Sites of Special Scientific Interest and National Nature Reserves – the crème de la crème of the best natural features in England); European sites and Marine Conservation Zones. European sites form a network of the best sites across Europe and in England they always overlap SSSIs. Natural England advises on the management of SSSIs, assesses their condition, consents activities and undertakes enforcement.

There are 4,127 SSSIs in England, covering more than one million hectares of special habitat, wildlife and geology (approximately 8% of England's total land area).

One of Natural England's most recent designations is Langdon Ridge SSSI near Basildon, Essex, now protected for its important meadows and extensive woodland, invertebrates and the beautiful, but nationally scarce,

Natural England is a repository of skills, expertise, enthusiasm and commitment to the natural world

Source: Prospect membership survey, May 2018



© Getty Images/Hillview1

Deptford pink. The site also acts as an incredibly important landscape-scale area of connection between other priority areas for conservation.

- **Countryside stewardship** – helping farmers and landowners design plans to enhance biodiversity on their land and secure funding for this from the European Union. This helps to achieve a balanced agricultural economy which is sustainable and benefits wildlife. Most SSSIs are managed through stewardship. Many of England's well known and much loved estates are in stewardship, such as Chatsworth House and most estates of the National Trust and Crown Estate. Approximately 23% of English land is currently under stewardship (three million hectares).

Natural England also uses stewardship to target specific conservation efforts such as saving the turtle dove, a charming bird which used to be a familiar sight in the English countryside but is now close to extinction – one of the causes of its decline being lack of seed and grain as food during the breeding season.

Natural England is working with landowners in the 'turtle dove friendly zone' near Maldon in Essex to raise awareness and encourage specific habitat management for this species.

- **Planning development and policy** – statutory consultee on impacts of development and planning policy on protected sites and landscapes. A significant part of Natural England's work in this area is promoting integration of green infrastructure and biodiversity net gain as part of development schemes. It is also pioneering landscape-scale solutions across local authority boundaries to address the impacts of development and population growth on vulnerable internationally important sites. These include: the Dorset Heathlands, Thames Basin Heaths and coastal sites such as the Solent, Exe Estuary,

North Kent Marshes and the Humber Estuary. For the latter, Natural England has been the key driving force in bringing about the South Humber Gateway initiative which is creating 275 hectares of new wet grassland habitat.

- **Protected landscape** – designates Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks; provides expert advice on landscape impacts from development when consulted.
- **Marine environment** – designation of marine protected areas, setting their conservation objectives and providing conservation advice. Statutory consultee on licensing and consent for marine activities, including fisheries. Provides advice to government on marine policy with a recent focus on exiting the EU.
- **Catchment sensitive farming** – working jointly with the Environment Agency and Defra to reduce diffuse water pollution from agriculture, by giving free training and advice on cleaner water and healthier soils to farmers in England.
- **Wildlife licensing and enforcement** – assesses and issues licences for activities which may disturb or kill European protected species including bats, great crested newt, dormice, smooth snake, sand lizard and Natterjack toad; and national protected species including common reptiles, badgers, water vole and Schedule 1 birds such as the barn owl. Enforces licence breaches.
- **England Coast Path** – establishing and designating a new National Trail along the entire length of England's coast, due to be completed in 2020. This includes detailed assessment of possible impacts on residents and protected environmental sites and incorporating avoidance measures. A recently opened length of the path in the North East provides 44 miles of accessible coastline for walkers between South Bents and Amble.
- **Advice to government and**



© Tim Page, Natural England

Natural England engages across government departments and agencies, industry sectors and the voluntary sector

scientific research – specialist advice to government, stakeholders and the public on environmental evidence and policy. Natural England furthers scientific research by commissioning and undertaking studies on wide-ranging aspects of the natural environment and conservation². Natural England was also heavily involved in the design of the government's 25-year environment plan.

- **Collaborations in conservation** – key driver of numerous partnerships and project work, for instance *Back from the Brink*³ in cooperation with the RSPB and other partners to save 20 species from extinction. This included the reintroduction of the Chequered Skipper and securing the future for over 200 more through various sub-projects such as *Shifting Sands* in the Brecks.

While Natural England is often seen as just doing business with Defra, it is a non-departmental public body. Its remit, and the customers and partners with which it works, are wide-ranging and cross-cutting at many levels.

Natural England engages across government departments and agencies, industry sectors and the voluntary sector. It encompasses all types of our environment – from urban to peri-urban and open countryside through to the coast and sea.

This is the beauty of Natural England – it provides overarching custodianship, expertise and forethought for all aspects of the natural environment and provides the links and authority to make a difference in the real world.

This forms the crux of Natural England's Conservation 21 strategy, its place in delivering the 25-year environment plan and is the reason why Natural England is more than the sum of its parts.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-englands-publications-maps-and-data>

³ <https://naturebftb.co.uk/>

Natural England's funding

Natural England receives its core funding, known as Grant in Aid (GiA), from Defra. Although recent initiatives to introduce charging for services NE offers have enabled external funding to be brought in, this is small compared to its core GiA.

Grant in aid has fallen by approximately 50% since 2007, with further cuts projected for 2019-20. Negotiations on funding for the next five years will begin in 2019, but there is no indication the trend will be reversed.

Similarly, staffing has also dramatically declined since Natural England came into being. In particular, the organisation suffered a significant hit in 2018 when approximately 460 permanent staff working on securing stewardship schemes (approximately a quarter of the workforce) were transferred to Natural England's sister organisation the Rural Payments Agency, which administers the agri-environment stewardship funds from the European Commission.

This has fundamentally transformed the way Natural England delivers stewardship, losing overall ownership in signing off agreements, losing the power to authorise payments, make new agreements or make changes to existing ones.

Natural England will however continue to provide ecological advice to farmers when working up agreements and make recommendations to the RPA.

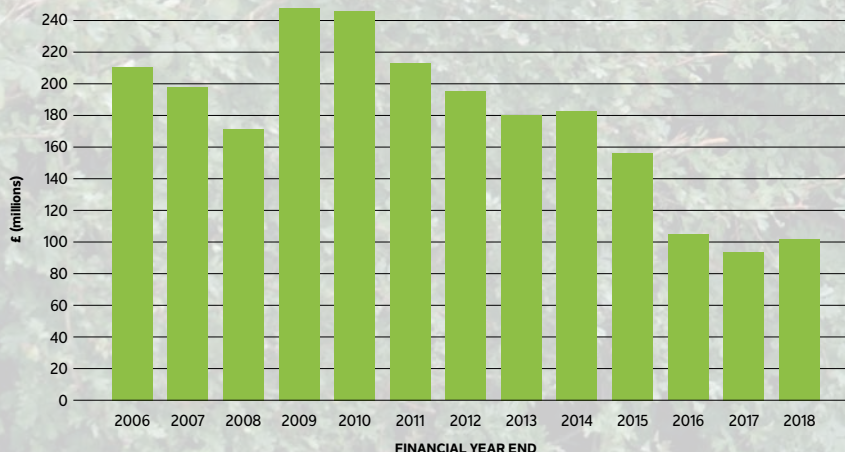
Severe cuts in core funding have also resulted in many remaining staff being redirected into work which is externally funded ie the small proportion of work that does not rely on GiA. This includes ringfenced and time-limited projects such as the England coastal path, catchment sensitive farming and designation of Marine Conservation Zones; or roles that depend on commercial income such as through pre-application planning advice.

This means changes in organisational priorities and difficult decisions about what core work should be stopped, such as condition assessments on protected sites, are driven by funding.

Ultimately, the impacts of the cuts are causing a drift towards significantly altering Natural England's original remit and purpose.

Previous voluntary redundancy schemes since 2010 have also removed long-standing expertise at many levels. Those who remain are operating under intense strain as workloads have not meaningfully diminished.

Defra core grant-in-aid to Natural England



Natural England numbers of staff



Source: Figure for 2019 not publicly available but calculated by Prospect based on the number of staff who transferred to the RPA in October 2018. Natural England annual reports 2006-7 to 2017-18 – www.gov.uk/government/collections/natural-england-annual-reports-and-accounts

2018-19 budget cut and urgent fiscal shortfall

The 2018-19 budget cut was worse than planned and came well into the start of the new financial year. This meant Natural England had more staff than it could afford, particularly in core work areas like farmland conservation and protected sites – perhaps what Natural England is best known for.

The senior leadership has scrambled to move staff from core work to externally-funded roles, including those which receive commercial income. The reaction has been panicked and fraught, with workforce decisions rushed through without the normal checks and controls.

To give itself breathing space for two years, Natural England has also sought widespread secondment of staff to EU exit roles in Defra. However, it had to block many willing applicants for fear of a further detrimental impact on the business. Natural England must of course

also find its secondees a job on their return.

Individuals, including specialists with many years' experience in their field of expertise, have been forced to move to completely different jobs with no say in the matter and with no alternatives.

Well-being and equality checks have been far from the centre of the process. The senior leadership has struggled to maintain a sense of control over the fiscal shortfall and lost the hearts and minds of the staff.

Throughout the fallout of this most recent cut, there has been a deafening silence from the leadership on challenging Defra on the cuts. It appears to appease the department as far as possible, referring to the need to reduce 'overspend' rather than outwardly acknowledge the cuts for what they are.

There has been a deafening silence from the leadership on challenging Defra on the cuts



Impacts of the budget cuts on Natural England's performance

The impacts of cuts to Natural England's funding are manifesting themselves across its business. They are ultimately affecting, or will affect, the environment. Some of these are set out below.

- **Protected sites** – one of Natural England's statutory duties is to deal with SSSIs that have been neglected. However, officers responsible for SSSIs are being told this year that this work is not a priority and they have been reassigned to other roles which do not rely on core funding.

This has affected SSSI condition assessments, a key part of SSSI work. These surveys should be undertaken every six years but staff have been told they cannot do these visits unless they are linked to routine stewardship aftercare visits.

Overall this has meant less monitoring is taking place, affecting the quality of information available to advise landowners and public authorities on impacts of development on sites.

According to a senior manager's post (our emphasis added):

*"This [protected sites work] is what many of us joined the organisation to work on and, as for me, it has been the central focus of much of our conservation work for years. There are currently no government targets for this work. I repeat that, government doesn't have extant targets for this work in the current parliament period... Our budget is set by Defra and comes largely in ring-fenced packets, tied to other targets – like the England Coast Path or marine designations. As such **cuts this year have fallen on work that is not protected, the largest area being SSSI work. That's the stark reality.**"*

- **National Nature Reserves (NNRs)** – NNRs are also under intense strain as a result of budget cuts and ever reducing dedicated staff. The existing workers on NNRs are struggling to cover for sickness or annual leave of their

colleagues and specialist skills for the various types of habitat management are spread thinly.

There is continual tension between the need to fulfil the core statutory duty of maintaining these special sites at high quality, or to mothball them as the staff simply cannot cope, as in the East of England.

Another consequence is the volunteer base, an essential resource in achieving habitat management on the ground. Many NNR staff are now cautious about appointing new volunteers because the resources to manage them are so stretched and it is becoming increasingly difficult to fund volunteer training, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and travel expenses. Some NNRs are having to refuse all but the most local volunteers because NE cannot afford to cover their travel.

NNRs are at risk of, or currently suffering from deteriorating condition, and for some sites even vandalism. NNRs are the natural living equivalent of the heritage and special artefacts we have in our museums.

If our heritage was being vandalised or not cared for in the British Museum, this would be a national scandal. Yet the same is happening to the best examples of our natural heritage today. It is time our NNRs received the special care and attention they deserve so that they can be preserved for future generations.

- **Planning and marine advice** – since the budget cuts started, there has been a gradual loss of core skills and a reduction in staff numbers due to non-backfilled secondments and staff departures. Remaining staff are struggling to provide statutory advice on casework, with those on more senior and junior grades having to fill the gap. This has also meant that staff have been blocked from applying for outward secondments as they are deemed too critical for Natural



England's business. This has had an impact on morale and individuals' career aspirations.

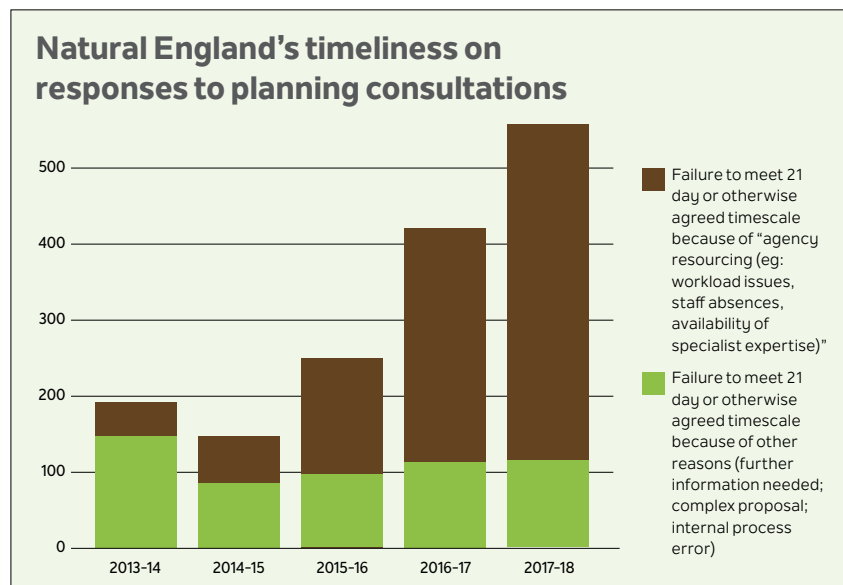
As a consequence, Natural England has struggled to respond on time to planning consultations. In 2017, four out of five of its late responses were due to workload issues, staff absences or availability of specialist expertise. This is set to get worse.

Relationships with key partners such as local authorities, the Marine Management Organisation and Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities are also becoming stretched with the tighter resourcing.

There is also a significant shift to a dependence on income generated from pre-application advice from developers to make up the fall in core funding.

The House of Lords report said: "*[Natural England's] focus must continue to be on improving the process rather than generating revenue as a first priority.*"

- **Wildlife licensing** – Natural England is struggling to deal with substantial outstanding and incoming license applications on protected species within the 30-day timeframe. Decisions are having to be made to prioritise work on European protected species (such as great crested newt, bats, dormice). This is effectively exposing nationally protected species (including common reptiles, water vole, badgers) to the risk of people undertaking activities which may disturb or kill protected species without the necessary legal checks and mitigation in place.
- **Countryside stewardship** – for staff providing ecological advice to farmers on stewardship agreements, there is the annually recurring problem of an intense peak in workload during the summer. This is because Natural England's target for new stewardship agreements, agreed with Defra, must



Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-englands-response-times-to-planning-consultations-in-england>

be secured in time for an internal deadline of 31 August at which point all agreements must be passed to the Rural Payments Agency for processing. This is driven by the single nominal start date for all new agreements on 1 January each year (set by the European Commission).

This means staff struggle to get all applications ready with a peak in work over summer, rather than staggered as in previous schemes. If the start date is missed, the farmer may not receive payment for that year. This puts intense pressure on staff, who are often emotionally invested in each of their agreements and with a relationship with each customer. They habitually work over their contracted hours, late nights and weekends. Individuals often have excessive targets because of fewer staff because of the funding cuts.

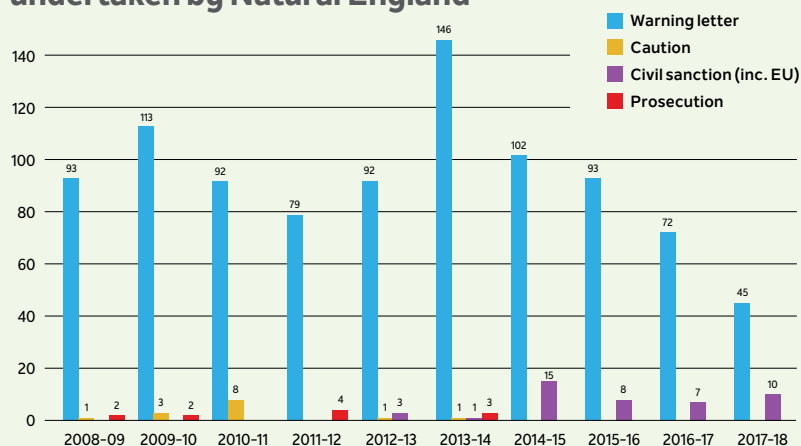
The increase in time taken for an agreement to be worked up, and the sheer volume of information and evidence required, has led many farmers to decide not to go into the scheme. This may well have consequences for protected sites if they are managed through stewardship. Schemes are 'scored' for eligibility for the Higher Tier of agreement. Small SSSIs can fail to hit the target because they are 'out-competed' by larger applications with, for example, lots of historic environment features which score highly.

Cuts this year have fallen on work that is not protected, the largest area being SSSI work. That's the stark reality.



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Decline in enforcement casework undertaken by Natural England



Source: Official NE data available here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/enforcement-laws-advice-on-protecting-the-natural-environment-in-england>

The volume of work also has other knock-on effects. Other important work areas such as enforcement get delayed or dropped. Aftercare or condition assessments, which would otherwise be best done during summer, have been virtually dropped from the workload.

But importantly, this may mean that potential breaches of existing agreements go undetected, exposing Natural England to the risk of severe financial penalties by the European Commission.

Natural England staff also have the inherent pressure of being 'in the middle' between the farmer and the RPA, the agency which delivers the money and carries out inspections. If Natural England provides wrong advice in setting up an agreement, due to lack of experience of a very complex system, this may leave the agreement holder open to the risk of financial penalties. This is a cause for concern as staff are put under increasing pressure to finalise agreements to hit an inflexible deadline.

- **SSSI enforcement activity** – the graph above shows the decline in enforcement casework – especially since 2015-16. This is due to a reduction in staff working on enforcement. In 2015-16, Natural England had an enforcement team of 14 senior casework managers and specialists and 11 experienced and trained regulation and enforcement lead advisors who shared the casework with colleagues across the country. That team has

declined to two, full-time dedicated lead advisors and only some of the time of four of the former leads.

There are no longer any dedicated senior enforcement advisors with an overview of the high-risk casework, this role having been amalgamated as part of a general role. There are substantial gaps nationally without experienced and trained enforcement and regulation lead advisors.

It has not been possible to report in the same way for wildlife licensing enforcement as no effective case tracking mechanism has been in place since 2015-16. This points to the de-prioritisation of this work by senior managers. There is uncertainty around the number of technical and minor offences Natural England becomes aware of – and how or whether these offences are dealt with.

Species enforcement leads are reporting a lack of time and impetus to investigate and take action on breaches of species licences. The lack of action on breaches of licences has led to significant delays in renewing licences, which then affects Natural England's customer service standards.

As for SSSI enforcement, resource for wildlife licensing enforcement has reduced over the past few years, including no backfill for a dedicated national senior specialist.

Without effective resourcing, protected species and SSSI enforcement work will continue to decline in frequency and value.

Natural England's independence and ability to fulfil its purpose

Ever reducing funding, and the knock-on effect on the work Natural England can actually undertake, culminated in the House of Lords Select Committee calling the organisation's autonomy and efficiency into question in 2018.

In the summary of its report, *The countryside at a crossroads: Is the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 still fit for purpose?*, the Committee described the damning effects of austerity and budget cuts on the organisation's ability to carry out its public service:

“Since 2006 many of [the NERC Act's] provisions have been hollowed out. Natural England has been subjected to severe budget cuts, leading to concerns regarding its ongoing ability to perform core regulatory functions.

“The Commission for Rural Communities has been abolished, and was replaced by a unit within Defra – the Rural Communities Policy Unit – which has itself subsequently been abolished. Rural society, the rural economy and our natural environment have not been well served by these changes.

“The Act gave Natural England a broad remit, including the promotion of nature conservation, protection of biodiversity, conservation of the landscape and promotion of public access to the countryside.

“To deliver against this remit requires adequate resources and – within the recognised procedures applied to non-departmental public bodies – a good degree of independence from Government. Natural England currently enjoys neither of these essential prerequisites.

“The Government must address this situation urgently. We recommend that Natural England should be funded to a level commensurate with the delivery

of its full range of statutory duties and responsibilities.

“We share the concerns of witnesses who have told us that Natural England no longer has a distinctive voice, and urge the Government to take action in recognition of these concerns.

“We also make specific recommendations that seek to improve Natural England's performance of its planning obligations, particularly with regard to conserving the landscape.”

This report was debated in July 2018.

The government's response⁴ failed to acknowledge the problems created by the severe cuts in core funding. It did however reinforce the value and influence of NE's work in many areas, supported with many examples.

It is difficult to see how Natural England will be able to fulfil its important public service remit if its core funding continues to diminish.



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It's difficult to see how Natural England will be able to fulfil its important public service remit if its core funding continues to diminish

⁴ <https://www.parliament.uk/nerc-act-committee>

The consequences of austerity and the pay cap

As well as budget cuts, Natural England's pay system has suffered years of neglect because of the government's public sector pay policy which limited paybill growth to 1% and removed progression through the pay scales.

The cap has been in place in Natural England for eight years. Prospect was so concerned about the effects of the pay cap that it conducted a detailed survey of its membership to investigate the human impact and the impact on the organisation.

The effects have manifested in a number of harmful ways, including:

- financial hardship
- significant loss of take-home pay and pension accrual in real terms
- loss of skilled staff
- exacerbating the gender pay gap
- recruitment and retention difficulties
- increased workloads and grade creep
- low morale and well-being
- stalled pay progression
- disparity between NE pay grades and the rest of the Defra group
- lagging behind the private sector.

Some members report that either they or their partner have had to take on a second job to support their families. Things are now becoming so severe that leaving seems the only option for some.

"I feel I am insufficiently compensated for the technical, highly-skilled and level of work I do. I do not feel technical skills are reflected in the pay structure which is balanced to managers. I am actively seeking work elsewhere."

The graph below shows how the NE pay scale minima and maxima compare to

Around 44% are actively looking for new jobs outside of Natural England

Source: Prospect membership survey, May 2018

the wider Defra family. Natural England minima lag at the bottom for each grade – from support advisors through to specialists to managers.

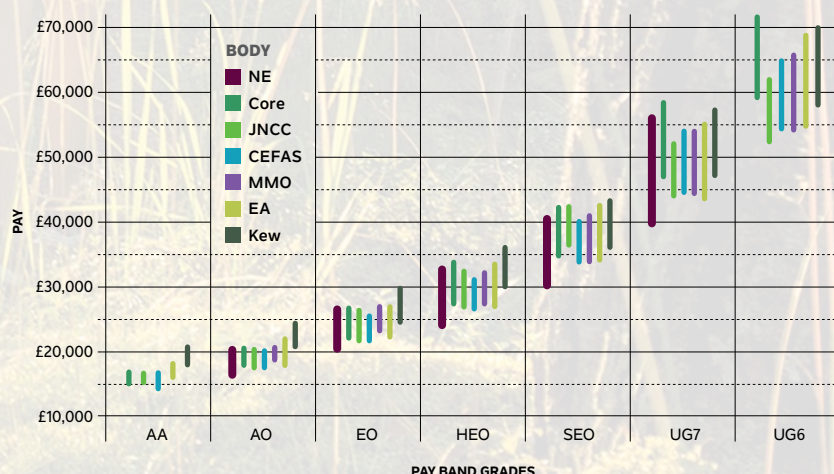
Approximately 90% of Natural England's workforce occupy the lower grades from Support Advisor (AA) to Senior (SEO). People at the top of their pay scales have had their pay eroded by inflation and their pensions damaged. People lower down the pay scales have little hope of ever getting to the fair rate for the job, let alone the maximum. This has an impact on Natural England's business.

"I don't have as much loyalty to the job anymore and am stricter on doing my prescribed hours...morale is at an all-time low."

The pay cap is causing real hardship. Over two thirds of respondents replied to the question on how much disposable income there was in their families.

"The pay freeze/austerity has come at the same time as our children have become teenagers. The combined

Comparative pay bands: NE versus other Defra bodies and core Defra



Legend: JNCC: Joint Nature Conservation Committee; CEFAS: Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science; MMO: Marine Management Organisation; EA: Environment Agency.
Data based on 2017 Defra pay awards



© Tim Page, Natural England

effect has been to significantly reduce our disposable income with the result that we have been spending most of our savings, and are often overdrawn at the end of the month."

"I live in constant dread of paying the bills."

"I can't afford luxuries such as eating out and with the increase in fuel, living costs and food costs I have to buy very basic food items and make them stretch. I can't afford to do basic things like go to the cinema, join a gym or buy new clothes and shoes."

"With pay not keeping up with the cost of living I have eaten considerably into my savings which I intended to use in my retirement meaning I will be required to look at claiming income support after retiring, not what I expected having been faithful to the organisation for 36 years."

"Yes, our standard of living is basic. We buy clothes from charity shops and jumble sales. We do not take holidays abroad and this year will probably not take a holiday at all. We shop at discount stores for food and are careful with every penny."

The staff reductions, undiminished workloads, erosion of the skills base, difficulties in recruitment and depressed morale are all gaining traction to an extent

that feels unparalleled within at least the past 25 years.

"We had six to seven managers doing what two managers are now currently covering. I suffered from work-related stress last year due to this and had to take five weeks off under doctor's advice. I can now feel pressure building again due to workload."

"There were once five staff covering my area and now there are two and a half."

"We had two posts vacant last year which took four rounds of recruitment and a year to fill."

"When I was promoted I shared various work areas with another colleague. He left and was not replaced. His workload was added to mine, which (combined with other factors) led to months of sick leave due to a stress-related illness."

Natural England provides a crucial public service and relies on highly-skilled staff. Yet its people have lost out on thousands to tens of thousands of pounds over the past eight years, with many incurring financial hardship as a result.

It has also seriously hindered Natural England's ability to recruit and retain high-quality, skilled staff, with knock-on effects on the incumbent workforce.

This suppression of pay and ever-reducing organisational budget, have to end.

69% of respondents reported lowered morale, demotivation and a feeling of being significantly under-valued

Source: Prospect membership survey, May 2018

Staff well-being and discrimination issues

The pay survey built on an earlier survey of Natural England's staff carried out by Prospect and PCS unions in

2017. That survey focused on discrimination and members' well-being. It confirmed that members were experiencing high levels of stress, mainly because of high workloads.

It also revealed high levels of hidden disability, such as mental health conditions, which are under-reported in Natural England and are having a serious effect on well-being and morale.

Some respondents from across grades gave detailed accounts of poor behaviour and a strong feeling of being unsupported or not appreciated when it came to raising bullying as an issue in some parts of the business.

“senior managers do not seem to care, or do not consider, or are indifferent to the needs of staff”

“feeling lonely and isolated with lack of face to face support”

“a bullying culture and inappropriate behaviour that remains unchallenged”.

The survey also suggested that Natural England's disability declaration rate is low at 6%, something which Natural England acknowledges. A large number of staff with hidden disabilities have probably not declared and are therefore not receiving the adjustments they need to work to the best of their abilities.

They may also be more prone to bullying behaviour from colleagues, as has been revealed in several personal cases that the unions have handled.

Twenty-five per cent of all absence days taken in Natural England are due to mental and behavioural disorders and stress, according to Natural England's own absence data.

As a result of the well-being survey, and building on the experience of union reps who help members through personal cases (many of which involve hidden disabilities), Prospect is working jointly with PCS union and Natural England management to improve awareness of hidden disabilities.

This has been successful and led to the launch of a 'workplace passport', devised by the trade unions and supported by HR and senior management, to help all staff receive the support they need at work. This is a significant positive step.

However, more action is needed to tackle the persistence of discrimination – particularly involving hidden disabilities. Progress is under threat because management is distracted by trying to tackle the shortfall in money and keeping the business running.

The unions fear more cases of discrimination and bullying as a result of continual cuts. Staff and managers are bearing the brunt of the pressure and disabled colleagues are the most vulnerable.

There is no sign that the intense workload pressure on the wider workforce will diminish.

83% of respondents are stressed due to high workloads

Source: NE trade union side membership survey, April 2017

42% of respondents have impairments or long-term health conditions; 91% of these are hidden disabilities

Source: NE trade union side membership survey, April 2017

The future

The environment still matters to people. Five million belong to the National Trust, one million to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; 800,000 to the Wildlife Trusts. Natural England engages with all of these organisations.

Despite pouring rain, 10,000 people marched through central London in September 2018 on the 'People's Walk for Wildlife'. And in 2017, 14.1 million people watched Blue Planet II and pushed the plastics debate to the fore.

Natural England is needed more than ever. More than ever, it needs to be strong.

We need:

- Natural England's wide and important remit for people and nature to be properly recognised and funded
- its autonomy as a non-departmental public body to be meaningfully restored
- the damage caused by the pay cap to be reversed and pay progression, based on skills and competency, to be restored

- to achieve pay parity with the rest of Defra, particularly for pay scale minima and maxima
- to no longer be covered by the civil service pay guidance and be subject to an independent pay review body.

This is the only way to:

- restore and enhance the wider countryside and the marine environment
- help species to recover
- achieve favourable condition of protected sites
- meaningfully fulfil Natural England's remit
- ensure that the government's 25-year environment plan has a chance of success
- improve access to, and enjoyment of, our wonderful natural environment.

Natural England is needed more than ever. More than ever, it needs to be strong

If you care for your environment, stand up for Natural England...



The state of Natural England 2018-19



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