# Staff at rural quangos work abroad as UK farmers face rising pressures



The complex interplay between environmental stewardship and bureaucratic flexibility has come under scrutiny as reports reveal that employees of three prominent rural-focused quangos have been working from abroad while British farmers grapple with policy shifts. Natural England, NatureScot, and the Rural Payments Agency, tasked with safeguarding and enhancing the UK's natural resources, have permitted their personnel to log in from locations as varied as Asia, North America, and Australia on numerous occasions throughout the last three years.

An investigation uncovered that staff across these organisations, which collectively employ around 6,000 people and receive substantial government funding, have worked abroad more than 300 times. Official records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act indicate that employees spent at least 1,174 days working from outside the UK, a figure likely understated due to incomplete data from NatureScot. Notably, Natural England facilitated 150 approvals for overseas work, amounting to nearly 1,000 days, including significant stints where employees worked from far-flung locales such as Egypt and Australia's eastern coast.

For instance, one employee of Natural England was allowed a remarkable 28-day working period in Ireland, while another worked remotely from France, Belgium, and Germany. Meanwhile, within the Rural Payments Agency, an individual’s 66 consecutive working days in Germany has raised eyebrows given the agency's chronic issues with processing farmers' subsidy payments on time. Critics have pointed out that while frontline workers in agriculture encounter challenging economic conditions—exacerbated by Labour's proposed inheritance tax adjustments—bureaucrats appear to enjoy considerable latitude in their work arrangements.

This situation has sparked scathing commentary from political figures. Alex Burghart, shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, mused, "One wonders how much work will get done on the beach." Meanwhile, a spokesperson from the Conservative party pointed out that those contributing to farmers' struggles should be more accountable for their own working conditions, suggesting that levels of service may not align with expectations set for those in rural administration.

In response to the criticism, representatives from Natural England defended the necessity of foreign work-related travel, claiming that attending international conferences and gatherings, such as COP16, is essential for their operational effectiveness. The Rural Payments Agency echoed this sentiment, clarifying that overseas assignments are vital for fulfilling their commitments to rural businesses across the UK.

This scrutiny around remote working arrangements is not new; previous controversies have highlighted concerns about staffing levels and operational focus within these agencies, particularly in light of the Brexit transition. In 2018, Environment Secretary Michael Gove faced backlash for reallocating staff from Natural England to manage Brexit-related tasks, a move which many feared compromised the organisation's ability to monitor and protect vital ecological sites. This highlights a persistent tension between organisational demands and the effective management of the UK's environmental resources.

As the government seeks to balance the pressing needs of agriculture with environmental conservation, the situation raises fundamental questions about accountability and the responsibilities of public service roles. Will those who oversee these vital agencies adhere more closely to the public and environmental interests they are sworn to protect, or will they continue to operate under flexible arrangements that seem disconnected from the challenges faced by those on the ground? This ongoing debate reflects broader issues about governance, resource allocation, and the future of environmental stewardship in an increasingly complex world.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14766747/Quangos-tasked-deciding-farmers-futures-allowing-staff-work-world.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england/about)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14766747/Quangos-tasked-deciding-farmers-futures-allowing-staff-work-world.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-46128368), [[7]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/michael-gove-brexit-latest-defra-staff-natural-england-wildlife-government-a8622096.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14766747/Quangos-tasked-deciding-farmers-futures-allowing-staff-work-world.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-england-privacy-notices/lone-and-remote-working-privacy-notice), [[5]](https://www.nature.scot/about-naturescot/working-and-volunteering-us/what-we-offer-you)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14766747/Quangos-tasked-deciding-farmers-futures-allowing-staff-work-world.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-46128368)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14766747/Quangos-tasked-deciding-farmers-futures-allowing-staff-work-world.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.nature.scot/about-naturescot/working-and-volunteering-us/what-we-offer-you)
* Paragraph 6 – [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-46128368), [[7]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/michael-gove-brexit-latest-defra-staff-natural-england-wildlife-government-a8622096.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14766747/Quangos-tasked-deciding-farmers-futures-allowing-staff-work-world.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/natural-england/about> - Natural England is the government's adviser for the natural environment in England, established in 2006. With approximately 3,000 staff and offices throughout England, its mission is to conserve, enhance, and manage the natural environment for present and future generations. The organisation's vision is 'Thriving Nature for people and planet', aiming to build partnerships for nature's recovery. Their priorities include managing a Nature Recovery Network, connecting people to the natural environment, contributing to climate change solutions, improving natural capital, and being a values-led organisation delivering excellent service standards.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-england-office-locations> - This publication provides a comprehensive list of Natural England's office locations across England. It includes addresses, contact details, and maps to assist in identifying the nearest office. The document is intended to help the public and stakeholders locate and contact Natural England offices for various services and inquiries.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/natural-england-privacy-notices/lone-and-remote-working-privacy-notice> - Natural England's Lone and Remote Working Privacy Notice outlines how personal data is collected and used for staff and volunteers working remotely. It details the legal basis for processing personal data, consent requirements, data sharing practices, retention periods, and rights under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The notice ensures transparency and compliance with data protection laws for individuals engaged in lone and remote working arrangements.
5. <https://www.nature.scot/about-naturescot/working-and-volunteering-us/what-we-offer-you> - NatureScot offers a range of benefits to its employees, including competitive salary scales, civil service pension schemes, generous holiday leave, flexible working arrangements, and employee discount schemes. Additional perks include volunteering days, occupational maternity and paternity pay, occupational sick pay, and salary sacrifice schemes like cycle to work. The organisation is committed to supporting staff well-being and professional development, fostering a positive and inclusive work environment.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-46128368> - In 2018, Environment Secretary Michael Gove faced criticism for redeploying 50 staff from Natural England to work on Brexit-related tasks. This move led to concerns about the impact on the agency's ability to monitor Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and protect wildlife habitats. MPs warned that the focus on Brexit preparations could jeopardise the conservation of England's natural environment, urging the government to prioritise environmental protection alongside Brexit planning.
7. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/michael-gove-brexit-latest-defra-staff-natural-england-wildlife-government-a8622096.html> - In 2018, Environment Secretary Michael Gove was accused of 'poaching' staff from Natural England to prepare for Brexit. A letter disclosed that 50 staff members were transferred to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) for EU exit-related roles. Critics argued that this staffing shift undermined Natural England's capacity to protect England's natural landscapes and wildlife, highlighting concerns over the agency's reduced funding and resources.