# Taxpayer-funded environmental agencies permit extensive overseas remote work amid farming sector strife



In recent revelations, taxpayer-funded staff at key environmental agencies in the UK have been found to undertake extensive remote work from various international locations, raising eyebrows especially among farmers grappling with the implications of proposed inheritance tax increases. An investigation has unveiled that employees from Natural England, NatureScot, and the Rural Payments Agency have logged significant time working from countries including Australia, the US, and Japan, even as the agricultural community confronts uncertain futures.

Data obtained via a Freedom of Information request indicated that these three quangos, which collectively employ around 6,000 people and receive substantial government funding, permitted their staff to work abroad over 300 times in the past three years. The total days logged working internationally is approximately 1,174, suggesting a misuse or at least a questionable application of resources, particularly at a time when farmers depend on timely and effective support from such bodies. In a notable example, one Natural England employee was recorded as working from Egypt for 15 days, while others spent more than two weeks in locations such as Slovenia, France, and Germany.

The implications are stark, especially considering the context of a challenging policy environment for farmers. Amid ongoing discussions surrounding Labour's proposed inheritance tax reforms, many agricultural stakeholders are frustrated by the logistical support they receive—or often do not receive—from government agencies. Critics have voiced concern that while these quangos allow for what they describe as "flexible working", such arrangements risk isolating the agencies from the realities faced by the farming community. Alex Burghart, the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, expressed scepticism regarding productivity, questioning, “One wonders how much work will get done on the beach.”

This issue reflects a broader trend wherein public sector organisations are increasingly permitting remote work arrangements, even abroad. For instance, in January 2024, the Scottish Government announced that civil servants were allowed to work from abroad for up to a month annually, provided certain conditions were met. This policy ostensibly balances flexibility with operational needs; however, it raises important questions about accountability and ensuring that public servants remain in touch with the communities they serve.

The Natural England spokesman attempted to justify these working arrangements by arguing that, as the government's adviser on natural environmental matters, international collaboration and attendance at conferences such as COP16 necessitate overseas work. The Rural Payments Agency similarly defended their practices, claiming such travel serves official government business aimed at supporting rural enterprises.

Yet, sceptics suggest that the benefits of these arrangements must be scrutinised further against the backdrop of operational failures seen within these organisations—specifically, delays in subsidy payments to farmers, a point that only amplifies scrutiny on their prioritisation of resources and time. As calls for transparency grow, the need for effective governance and support for the agricultural sector remains a pressing issue, with many questioning whether these quangos are adequately addressing the needs of those dependent on their services or are instead drifting further from their core responsibilities.

As debates around public sector flexibility and accountability continue, stakeholders from various sectors will likely keep a watchful eye on how these organisations adapt to maintain both their operational integrity and their commitments to the communities they are meant to serve.

## 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)
* 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), [[2]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/01/29/scottish-civil-servants-allowed-to-work-abroad-for-a-month/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/01/29/scottish-civil-servants-allowed-to-work-abroad-for-a-month/), [[6]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/01/29/scottish-civil-servants-allowed-to-work-abroad-for-a-month/)

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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.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/01/29/scottish-civil-servants-allowed-to-work-abroad-for-a-month/> - In January 2024, the Scottish Government informed civil servants that they could work from abroad for up to a month annually. This policy allows staff to work remotely from foreign countries for a maximum of four weeks each year, provided there is a genuine requirement. The guidance, obtained through a Freedom of Information request, specifies that such arrangements are subject to approval and must meet specific criteria. The policy aims to balance flexible working with operational needs.
3. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/01/29/scottish-civil-servants-allowed-to-work-abroad-for-a-month/> - In January 2024, the Scottish Government informed civil servants that they could work from abroad for up to a month annually. This policy allows staff to work remotely from foreign countries for a maximum of four weeks each year, provided there is a genuine requirement. The guidance, obtained through a Freedom of Information request, specifies that such arrangements are subject to approval and must meet specific criteria. The policy aims to balance flexible working with operational needs.
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