

Your employment document map: what actually governs your work

Understand how the advert, offer, contract, terms, job description, rota and job plan fit together—and what to do when they conflict.

- ✓ 18 min reading
- ✓ Full teaching, practical next steps and reflection
- ✓ Six practice questions with answers and explanations
- ✓ Complete source list and jurisdiction notes

Prepared for SAS, locally employed and other UK doctors

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Using this module

Independent education

This is general professional information, not individual clinical, legal, employment, immigration, regulatory, tax or pensions advice. Current official instructions and the circumstances of the individual case remain controlling. Practice scores do not establish professional competence or accreditation.

The short answer

No single document tells the whole employment story. The contract creates the employment relationship; incorporated national or local terms add rules; the job description defines the post; and the job plan or work schedule describes how time and duties are organised. Keep the signed versions together and resolve contradictions in writing before relying on assumptions.

Three next actions

- Collect the advert, offer, signed contract, incorporated terms, job description, rota and latest job plan or work schedule.
- Mark the employer, grade, hours, salary point, work location, notice, pension and governing terms in each document.
- List contradictions and ask HR or the medical staffing team to confirm the agreed position in writing.

Learning objectives

- Explain the purpose of each employment document.
- Identify contractual and operational inconsistencies.
- Create a controlled personal employment record without retaining confidential patient information.

Seven documents with different jobs

An advert describes a vacancy but usually does not contain the whole bargain. An offer records the proposed appointment. The written contract identifies the parties, role, pay, hours and incorporated terms. National terms may govern matters such as pay progression, leave and job planning. A job description describes duties, accountability and person requirements. A rota allocates attendance or on-call commitments; a job plan or work schedule allocates contractual time and activities.

Documents can be contractual without being called 'the contract', particularly when the contract incorporates national terms, employer policies or a job plan. Ask which version applies and whether later correspondence formally varied it. A policy may guide procedure but cannot safely be assumed to override an express contractual entitlement.

- Keep dated copies of every signed or accepted version.
- Record which national or local terms are incorporated.
- Separate a description of current practice from an agreed contractual variation.

Written particulars and missing terms

Employees are entitled to written particulars of core employment information. Medical contracts are commonly more detailed and may incorporate national schedules. Missing wording does not mean there is no legal relationship, but ambiguity creates avoidable risk about hours, notice, place of work, deductions or contractual status.

Ask for missing documents early. Frame the request as record correction: identify the term, the conflicting wording and the confirmation needed. Preserve the response with the contract pack. For significant disagreement, obtain individual BMA, union or employment advice before signing a variation or resigning.

- Do not rely only on a recruitment portal once access may expire.
- Ask whether policies are contractual or non-contractual.
- Keep a clean issue log rather than a chain of emotional emails.

Title, grade and contractual status

Trust doctor, clinical fellow and similar titles do not by themselves identify a national contract or seniority. A locally employed doctor may work under bespoke local terms, terms mirroring a resident-doctor contract, or another arrangement. Specialty Doctor and Specialist are defined SAS grades under national arrangements; legacy Associate Specialist posts have separate historical terms.

Test status using the actual contract, employing body, grade code, pay scale, duties and incorporated terms. Clinical autonomy comes from competence, governance and agreed scope—not from a locally attractive title. If the duties have grown beyond the documented role, seek job-description and job-plan review rather than treating title as evidence.

- Use the contract, not the badge or rota nickname.
- Distinguish grade from Specialist Register status.
- Check whether a local contract genuinely mirrors national terms and where it differs.

Variations and custom in practice

A contractual change normally needs clarity and agreement; medical work also changes operationally in response to service need. Repeated practice can become important evidence, but a doctor should not assume silence has permanently changed every term. Ask whether the change is temporary, its start and

end date, payment, supporting time, supervision and review mechanism.

Where urgent patient care requires immediate action, deal with safety first and record the operational issue afterwards. For planned recurring change, use the job-planning or contractual variation route prospectively. State reservations promptly if asked to work under disputed terms, while taking individual advice about lawful instructions and patient-safety duties.

- Name temporary arrangements as temporary.
- Confirm pay and time before recurring additional work.
- Never let an unresolved contract issue become a patient-safety confrontation.

Build a secure contract record

Keep an employment folder containing signed documents, pay circulars relied upon, job plans, formal review outcomes, pay progression decisions, leave records and pension statements. Use dates and version names. Store it on a trusted personal system where lawful, but do not remove patient records, incident files or employer-confidential documents without authority.

A factual chronology should record what happened, when, the document involved, the question raised and the response. It should not speculate about motives. This makes routine correction easier and supports advice if a disagreement escalates.

- Use version-controlled filenames.
- Save the source URL and access date for pay circulars.
- Exclude patient-identifiable and unauthorised organisational material.

The 30-minute first check

Start with identity: correct employer, grade, start date and continuous-service date where relevant. Then check hours, whole-time equivalent, salary and pay point, main and additional locations, probation if applicable, notice, pension status and the incorporated terms. Compare the job description, rota and job plan for time and responsibility.

Do not sign merely because payroll needs a form. Raise material queries before acceptance where possible. If work has already begun, request correction without delay and keep evidence of the date first raised. A contract review is most useful when it asks precise questions rather than declaring the entire document wrong.

- Check identity and dates first.
- Reconcile hours, salary, duties and locations.
- Turn every concern into a precise written question.

Common mistake

Avoid this

Treating the job title or latest rota as proof of the contractual grade. The controlling answer comes from the signed terms, incorporated documents and any valid later variation.

Pause and reflect

Could you locate, within five minutes, the signed document that supports each element of your current pay and working pattern?

Takeaways

- Employment documents have different functions and must be read together.
- Titles do not determine national-contract status or autonomy.
- Precise, dated written questions resolve more than broad objections.

Knowledge check

Choose one best answer. These practice questions support reflection; they do not assess a real case or confer accreditation. Answer positions match the browser edition.

1. A rota contains extra recurring duties that do not appear in the signed job plan. What is the best first step?

- A. Assume the rota automatically rewrites the contract
- B. Archive the signed plan and use the latest rota as the sole working agreement
- C. Compare the documents and ask for a documented job-plan review
- D. Refuse every duty immediately without checking risk

2. A doctor has an offer letter but no incorporated national terms. What should they do?

- A. Wait until a dispute develops
- B. Assume the newest national contract applies
- C. Ask the employer to identify and provide the governing terms
- D. Use a colleague's contract as their own

3. A post is advertised as 'senior clinical fellow'. What proves the contract?

- A. The rota name
- B. The written terms, grade, pay basis and incorporated conditions
- C. The word senior
- D. The doctor's years of experience alone

4. A department asks a doctor to add a weekly clinic indefinitely. What is the sound response?

- A. Accept verbally and keep no record
- B. Clarify scope, time, payment and review through the job-plan process
- C. Agree informally without documenting duration, workload or review arrangements
- D. Treat it only as an appraisal issue

5. What belongs in a personal employment record?

- A. Signed terms, job plans, pay decisions and factual correspondence
- B. A rewritten contract created by the doctor
- C. Unverified rumours
- D. Patient lists copied for context

6. Which query is most effective?

- A. 'Everything is unfair.'
- B. 'My colleague says this contract is illegal.'
- C. 'Clause 4 states 10 sessions but the job plan totals 11; please confirm the agreed total and payment.'
- D. 'Please review my rota when the next annual planning round opens.'

Answers and explanations

1. C — Compare the documents and ask for a documented job-plan review

Compare the documents and ask for a documented job-plan review This applies the principle in “Seven documents with different jobs”.

Re-read “Seven documents with different jobs”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

2. C — Ask the employer to identify and provide the governing terms

Ask the employer to identify and provide the governing terms This applies the principle in “Written particulars and missing terms”.

Re-read “Written particulars and missing terms”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

3. B — The written terms, grade, pay basis and incorporated conditions

The written terms, grade, pay basis and incorporated conditions This applies the principle in “Title, grade and contractual status”.

Re-read “Title, grade and contractual status”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

4. B — Clarify scope, time, payment and review through the job-plan process

Clarify scope, time, payment and review through the job-plan process This applies the principle in “Variations and custom in practice”.

Re-read “Variations and custom in practice”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

5. A — Signed terms, job plans, pay decisions and factual correspondence

Signed terms, job plans, pay decisions and factual correspondence This applies the principle in “Build a secure contract record”.

Re-read “Build a secure contract record”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

6. C — ‘Clause 4 states 10 sessions but the job plan totals 11; please confirm the agreed total and payment.’

‘Clause 4 states 10 sessions but the job plan totals 11; please confirm the agreed total and payment.’ This applies the principle in “The 30-minute first check”.

Re-read “The 30-minute first check”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

Official and professional sources

Confirm the current source version and applicable nation, contract, scheme or specialty. A source list is not a statement that every rule applies to every reader.

NHS Employers: SAS 2021 terms, model contracts and resources

England · <https://www.nhsemployers.org/articles/terms-and-conditions-and-resources-sas-contract-2021>

NHS Wales Employers: SAS doctors resources

Wales · <https://thenhsalliance.org/resources/specialty-specialist-and-associate-specialist-sas-doctors-wales>

Department of Health NI: SAS 2021 contract documentation

Northern Ireland · <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/sas-2021-contract-documentation-and-guidance>

BMA: SAS contracts

UK · <https://www.bma.org.uk/pay-and-contracts/contracts/sas-doctor-contract>

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