

Leave, SPA, flexible working, expenses and development time

Understand different forms of leave and supporting time, make workable requests and distinguish entitlement from local approval process.

- ✓ 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

Author: Dr N Aziz

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

Annual leave, study or professional leave, SPA, family leave, sickness absence, flexible working and expenses serve different purposes and follow different rules. A headline entitlement does not answer notice, approval, carry-over, funding or job-plan treatment. Use the actual contract and policy, submit clear requests early and ask for written reasons if refused.

Three next actions

- Create a one-page index of the leave, study, flexible-working and expenses policies that apply to you.
- Reconcile SPA and development commitments with the signed job plan.
- Plan requests with dates, service impact and feasible alternatives.

Learning objectives

- Distinguish major leave and professional-time categories.
- Prepare a flexible-working or development request.
- Challenge repeated loss of SPA or expenses fairly.

Different leave, different rules

Annual leave supports rest. Study or professional leave supports approved development. Family, carers, sickness, bereavement and special leave have distinct contractual and statutory frameworks. Public-holiday treatment can depend on work pattern and contract.

Check entitlement, service qualification, notice, approval, pay, carry-over and evidence separately. Do not use annual leave to conceal sickness or a workplace injury; correct classification protects both health and records.

- Name the leave category.
- Check national and local terms.
- Keep approvals and balances.

Study and professional leave

A request should link the activity to the role, appraisal or agreed development plan, state cost and cover needs and comply with notice rules. Approval of leave and approval of funding may be separate decisions.

Where access is repeatedly refused, request written reasons and examine whether the job plan, service cover or policy is being applied consistently. SAS tutors, education teams and unions may help distinguish an individual request from a structural access problem.

- Link the request to objectives.
- Separate time approval from funding.
- Track patterns of refusal.

Supporting professional activity

SPA supports the professional infrastructure of safe practice: appraisal, CPD, governance, audit, teaching preparation and job planning. The precise allocation is contractual and job-specific. Avoid treating any single benchmark as a universal legal minimum across all grades and nations.

Specify outputs and time. If SPA is repeatedly displaced by service work, record the instances and consequences, seek operational protection and review the job plan. Protected does not mean disconnected from service need; it means the agreed professional work is real and deliverable.

- Define SPA activities and outcomes.
- Protect time operationally.
- Review repeated displacement.

Flexible working

Eligible employees have statutory rights to request flexible working, while contractual and local policies may add detail. A good request states the proposed pattern, start date, practical effects and possible solutions. Examples include reduced hours, compressed patterns, annualisation, remote elements or predictable days.

The employer should consider the request under the applicable process. Disability, caring, pregnancy, religion or sex-discrimination issues may create additional equality considerations; obtain advice rather than relying only on the generic flexible-working route.

- Use the statutory and local process.

- Offer practical options.
- Identify equality or adjustment issues separately.

Expenses and relocation

Travel, subsistence, relocation, professional fees and study costs are governed by contract and policy. Approval may be required before spending, and tax treatment can differ from reimbursement entitlement. Keep receipts and claim within deadlines.

For cross-site work, distinguish job-planned travel time from reimbursement. For home-to-base travel, do not assume business-mileage treatment. Ask payroll or expenses teams for written application of policy to unusual patterns.

- Obtain prior approval.
- Keep receipts and deadlines.
- Separate time, reimbursement and tax.

Fair access and record keeping

Compare decisions using relevant facts rather than rumours about colleagues. If a pattern suggests discrimination or inconsistent policy, record applications, reasons, comparators where lawfully known and the impact. Seek union or equality advice.

Do not collect other doctors' confidential contracts or personal data. Ask for anonymised policy-level information through appropriate channels where needed.

- Keep your own decision record.
- Use lawful comparators.
- Escalate patterns proportionately.

Common mistake

Avoid this

Quoting one familiar allowance or SPA benchmark as though it applies identically to every contract, nation and working pattern.

Pause and reflect

Which agreed professional activity is most often displaced, and what objective or safety function is then lost?

Takeaways

- Identify the correct leave or time category first.
- Make development and flexible-working requests specific and workable.
- Repeated loss of agreed time should be evidenced and reviewed.

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 doctor is unwell during booked annual leave. What should they do?

- A. Work remotely while ill
- B. Follow the sickness-reporting and evidence process and ask how leave is reclassified
- C. Alter the rota personally
- D. Say nothing

2. A course is relevant but funding is unavailable. What follows?

- A. Treat the funding refusal as a final decision about every form of attendance
- B. The appraisal is invalid
- C. Treat personal annual leave as the default without considering study-leave or development arrangements
- D. Leave and funding should be considered as separate decisions under policy

3. SPA is cancelled weekly for extra clinics. What is the best response?

- A. Stop all governance work silently
- B. Record the pattern and seek operational and job-plan review
- C. Assume SPA is optional
- D. Call every activity SPA

4. What strengthens a flexible-working request?

- A. Only saying 'I need flexibility'
- B. A threat to resign immediately
- C. A clear pattern, start date, operational analysis and alternatives
- D. No proposed arrangement

5. A doctor is asked to attend another site weekly. What should be clarified?

- A. Only parking availability
- B. Only the tax code
- C. Base, job-planned travel time, mileage policy and approval
- D. Nothing if the sites share a logo

6. What is safe evidence of repeated refusal?

- A. Your dated requests, decisions, reasons and policy criteria
- B. Copies of colleagues' private files
- C. Anonymous gossip
- D. Patient records

Answers and explanations

1. B — Follow the sickness-reporting and evidence process and ask how leave is reclassified

Follow the sickness-reporting and evidence process and ask how leave is reclassified This applies the principle in “Different leave, different rules”.

Re-read “Different leave, different rules”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

2. D — Leave and funding should be considered as separate decisions under policy

Leave and funding should be considered as separate decisions under policy This applies the principle in “Study and professional leave”.

Re-read “Study and professional leave”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

3. B — Record the pattern and seek operational and job-plan review

Record the pattern and seek operational and job-plan review This applies the principle in “Supporting professional activity”.

Re-read “Supporting professional activity”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

4. C — A clear pattern, start date, operational analysis and alternatives

A clear pattern, start date, operational analysis and alternatives This applies the principle in “Flexible working”.

Re-read “Flexible working”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

5. C — Base, job-planned travel time, mileage policy and approval

Base, job-planned travel time, mileage policy and approval This applies the principle in “Expenses and relocation”.

Re-read “Expenses and relocation”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

6. A — Your dated requests, decisions, reasons and policy criteria

Your dated requests, decisions, reasons and policy criteria This applies the principle in “Fair access and record keeping”.

Re-read “Fair access and record keeping”, 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>

Acas: flexible working

Great Britain · <https://www.acas.org.uk/flexible-working>

Legislation.gov.uk: Working Time Regulations 1998

Great Britain · <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukSI/1998/1833/contents>

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