

Pay progression, gateways, protection and contract transition

Understand when progression is conditional, how to prepare for a gateway and what to check during transfer or pay protection.

- ✓ 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

Under reformed SAS contracts, movement through specified pay points is linked to contractual progression requirements rather than assumed to be automatic every year. The employer should operate a fair, documented process. The doctor should know the next eligible date, criteria, evidence, decision and appeal route. Older and local contracts may work differently.

Three next actions

- Confirm the contract, current pay point and next progression date in writing.
- Obtain the applicable gateway criteria and review evidence at least three months beforehand.
- Keep any transfer, protection and backdating calculation with the contract record.

Learning objectives

- Distinguish annual uplift from pay progression.
- Prepare for a progression gateway.
- Audit transition and protection arrangements.

Annual award versus progression

A national pay award changes published scale values when implemented. Pay progression moves an individual to another point under contractual rules. They can occur in the same year but answer different questions. A doctor may receive an uplift without crossing a gateway, or progress to a new point before a later national uplift.

Ask payroll and HR to identify both events separately. When checking arrears, apply the correct scale to the correct point and period.

- Track award and progression separately.
- Record each effective date.
- Use the applicable scale for each period.

Progression criteria

Reformed SAS progression commonly considers participation in appraisal and job planning, required statutory and mandatory training, no live capability process, and conduct or disciplinary conditions as defined in the terms and guidance. Exact wording, safeguards and exceptions must be checked in the applicable national documents.

Criteria should be applied objectively and proportionately. Approved leave, disability, organisational failure to provide training or another protected circumstance may require adjustment. Seek advice early if a criterion cannot be met for reasons outside the doctor's control.

- Use the exact contractual wording.
- Record employer-provided access to requirements.
- Consider equality and leave-related adjustments.

Prepare for the gateway

Check the expected date, decision-maker, evidence window and local timetable. Bring current appraisal and job plan status, training record and evidence that any agreed development actions were addressed. Correct factual record errors before the decision meeting.

Ask for confirmation of the decision and new salary point. If progression is deferred, the written outcome should identify the unmet criterion, evidence, support, review date and backdating rule under the terms.

- Start preparation early.
- Correct records before review.
- Require a reasoned written decision.

Challenge and appeal

Use the progression review or appeal mechanism specified in the contract and guidance. Focus on whether the criterion was correctly interpreted, facts were accurate, procedure fair and equality considerations addressed. Observe deadlines.

Where an underlying disciplinary, capability or health process affects progression, obtain advice on both routes. The pay appeal may not determine the merits of the parallel process.

- Identify the precise decision challenged.
- Keep parallel processes distinct.

- Seek representation early.

Transfer to reformed terms

Contract reform exercises may include choice, eligibility, pay protection, assimilation and backdating rules. Keep the written expression of interest, employer offer, accepted terms, starting point and worked calculation. Compare more than salary: hours, progression, safeguards, leave and job planning may also change.

Do not assume a transfer is automatically better or worse for every doctor. Obtain personalised BMA or union advice where the financial or contractual effect is material.

- Keep the full choice record.
- Audit salary and non-pay terms.
- Get advice before accepting irreversible change.

Pay protection and acting-up arrangements

Pay protection preserves defined earnings in specified circumstances and usually has boundaries, review rules and duration. Acting-up or temporary higher duties should state role, authority, supervision, payment, start and end dates and what happens if recruitment is delayed.

Temporary arrangements should not continue indefinitely without review. If higher-level duties become substantive, address job description, appointment process, governance and contract—not only an allowance.

- Read the protection formula and end conditions.
- Document temporary higher duties.
- Review substantive role design.

Common mistake

Avoid this

Assuming a clean appraisal automatically guarantees progression or, conversely, that one unresolved issue permits indefinite withholding. Apply the specific contractual criteria and process.

Pause and reflect

What is your next progression date, and could you show today that every criterion has been fairly addressed?

Takeaways

- Pay awards and individual progression are different.
- Gateway decisions require evidence, fairness and written outcomes.
- Transfer and protection decisions need a whole-contract comparison.

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. What is pay progression?

- A. Movement to a contractual pay point after applicable requirements, distinct from an annual scale uplift
- B. Every national pay announcement
- C. Any overtime payment
- D. A change in tax code

2. Mandatory training was unavailable despite documented requests. What should happen?

- A. Create a false certificate
- B. Wait for the next progression cycle without seeking a decision on the documented access problem
- C. Assume progression must fail
- D. Record the employer barrier and seek a fair, adjusted progression review

3. What should a deferral decision explain?

- A. Only the word 'unsatisfactory'
- B. Personal rumours
- C. The unmet criterion, evidence, support, review and pay consequence
- D. No route to reconsideration

4. A doctor disputes a deferred gateway. What is the strongest ground?

- A. A specific factual or procedural error linked to the contractual criterion
- B. Refusing to read the decision
- C. A colleague's different specialty
- D. General seniority alone

5. What should be compared during contract transfer?

- A. Only the contract title
- B. Only the top salary point
- C. Only a colleague's outcome
- D. Pay, hours, progression, safeguards, leave and job-planning terms

6. A doctor covers a higher role for six months. What should be written?

- A. Duties, authority, support, payment, dates and review
- B. A permanent title without process
- C. Only an informal thank-you
- D. Nothing until the arrangement ends

Answers and explanations

1. A — Movement to a contractual pay point after applicable requirements, distinct from an annual scale uplift

Movement to a contractual pay point after applicable requirements, distinct from an annual scale uplift
This applies the principle in “Annual award versus progression”.

Re-read “Annual award versus progression”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

2. D — Record the employer barrier and seek a fair, adjusted progression review

Record the employer barrier and seek a fair, adjusted progression review This applies the principle in “Progression criteria”.

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

3. C — The unmet criterion, evidence, support, review and pay consequence

The unmet criterion, evidence, support, review and pay consequence This applies the principle in “Prepare for the gateway”.

Re-read “Prepare for the gateway”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

4. A — A specific factual or procedural error linked to the contractual criterion

A specific factual or procedural error linked to the contractual criterion This applies the principle in “Challenge and appeal”.

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

5. D — Pay, hours, progression, safeguards, leave and job-planning terms

Pay, hours, progression, safeguards, leave and job-planning terms This applies the principle in “Transfer to reformed terms”.

Re-read “Transfer to reformed terms”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

6. A — Duties, authority, support, payment, dates and review

Duties, authority, support, payment, dates and review This applies the principle in “Pay protection and acting-up arrangements”.

Re-read “Pay protection and acting-up arrangements”, 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>

Department of Health NI: [SAS 2021 contract documentation](#)

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

NHS Wales Employers: [SAS doctors resources](#)

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

BMA: [SAS contracts](#)

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

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