

UK contracts, grades and four-nation differences

Identify the correct SAS or local contractual framework in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland without assuming uniformity.

- ✓ 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

Medical employment is not governed by one universal NHS contract. England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland publish or negotiate their own arrangements, implementation dates and pay circulars. Start with the employer and nation, then the grade and contract version, and finally any local terms. Never apply a pay table or job-planning rule from another nation by analogy.

Three next actions

- Write down nation, employing body, grade, contract version and whole-time-equivalent hours.
- Download the current national terms and latest national pay circular from the official publisher.
- For a local contract, create a clause-by-clause comparison with the national terms it is said to mirror.

Learning objectives

- Recognise the main SAS grades and legacy arrangements.
- Find the controlling national source for each UK nation.
- Assess local-contract claims accurately.

Specialty Doctor, Specialist and legacy grades

The reformed SAS arrangements introduced a new Specialty Doctor contract and a Specialist grade in participating nations. Specialist grade is an employment grade requiring a senior defined scope and capability; it is not the GMC Specialist Register. Associate Specialist is generally a closed legacy grade, so historic contract wording and individual status matter.

Doctors may remain on older contracts or have transferred under national processes. Never infer the contract solely from appointment date or payroll label. Identify the actual terms accepted, any protection or transition arrangements and whether the employer completed the relevant choice or transfer process.

- Name both grade and contract version.
- Keep transfer letters and pay-protection calculations.
- Do not confuse Specialist grade with specialist registration.

England

NHS Employers publishes the England SAS 2021 terms, model contracts, schedules and implementation resources. Pay is updated through medical and dental pay circulars. The 2021 terms include structured pay progression and job-planning provisions; older terms may still apply to doctors who did not transfer.

England also has distinct national terms for resident doctors and consultants. A locally employed doctor is not automatically covered merely because a local salary is benchmarked to one of those scales. Read the incorporation clause and local schedules.

- Use NHS Employers' current circular, not a cached salary table.
- Check the pay scale and progression gateway separately.
- Ask whether the role is national or local terms.

Wales

NHS Wales has its own medical and dental circulars and Welsh SAS terms. Job-planned units are commonly called sessions; a standard session is ordinarily four hours under the relevant SAS terms, but premium-time and working-pattern rules must be checked in the current document.

From August 2026 Wales began phased resident-doctor contract changes affecting in-scope locally employed doctors. That does not convert every LED into an SAS doctor or automatically rewrite every job description. The contractual wrapper, clinical scope, supervision and job design must be considered separately.

- Use Welsh circulars and Welsh terms.
- Do not replace 'session' with an English rule without checking.
- For LEDs, confirm whether the 2026 reform applies to the individual contract.

Scotland

NHS Scotland's SAS contractual history and pay implementation are distinct. Scottish Government pay announcements and NHS circulars should be used for current awards; the 12 August 2026 announcement confirmed a 3.5% 2026/27 increase for Specialty, Specialist and Associate Specialist doctors, backdated to 1 April 2026.

A headline award is not a complete pay table. Check the implementation circular, effective date, grade and point, and then reconcile the payslip. Scottish pension administration is through the Scottish Public Pensions Agency, not NHSBSA.

- Separate announcement from implementation circular.
- Check back pay after the stated payroll month.
- Use SPPA for Scottish NHS pension records.

Northern Ireland

The Department of Health Northern Ireland publishes the SAS 2021 contract documentation, including terms, model contracts, pay-progression guidance and transfer material. Pay implementation can occur on a different timetable from Great Britain, so a UK review-body recommendation is not itself a Northern Ireland payslip instruction.

Use the current Department circular or employer confirmation for the relevant year. If an award is delayed, distinguish the eventual effective date, implementation date and date arrears are paid.

- Use Department of Health NI documentation.
- Do not assume GB implementation dates.
- Check arrears and pension consequences when awards are backdated.

Locally employed doctors

A local contract may adopt selected national provisions, mirror a pay scale, or create bespoke rules. Similarity is not incorporation. Compare salary, hours, out-of-hours treatment, leave, study/professional development, pay progression, sick pay, family leave, notice, redundancy, expenses and pension access.

The safest comparison is a table that quotes the local clause, identifies the national comparator, records the difference and asks whether it is intentional. Do not assume every difference is unlawful, but do not let a familiar job title conceal material disadvantages or ambiguity.

- Compare clause by clause.
- Prioritise pay, hours, leave, progression and termination.
- Obtain advice before accepting a material variation.

Common mistake

Avoid this

Using the latest salary number from another UK nation because the grade name looks the same. Pay, implementation and contract wording are nation-specific.

Pause and reflect

Can you name the official publisher of your current terms, pay circular and pension information?

Takeaways

- Begin with nation, employer, grade and contract version.
- A pay-review recommendation requires national implementation.
- Local contracts need clause-level comparison, not title-level assumptions.

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 on the Specialist Register and works as a Specialty Doctor. What follows?

- A. Their employer must pay consultant salary
- B. They are automatically a Specialist grade doctor
- C. Their contract is invalid
- D. Their regulatory status does not automatically change their employment grade

2. An English trust says a fellow is 'paid like a Specialty Doctor'. What must be checked?

- A. Nothing—the phrase proves national status
- B. Only the badge title
- C. Whether the contract incorporates Specialty Doctor terms or only uses a similar salary
- D. The consultant contract

3. A Welsh SAS job plan uses ten sessions. What should the doctor do?

- A. Convert sessions using ordinary daytime hours without checking premium-time provisions
- B. Convert them using an English consultant rule
- C. Assume each session is an hour
- D. Interpret them under the Welsh terms and agreed job plan

4. What does a 3.5% national announcement prove?

- A. Pension contributions stay unchanged
- B. The award and broad effective date, not the doctor's complete payslip calculation
- C. The English pay scale applies
- D. Every allowance rises identically

5. A DDRB report recommends an uplift. Is that automatically the NI pay scale?

- A. Only for LEDs
- B. Only if a colleague receives it
- C. No; national implementation must be confirmed
- D. Yes, on publication day

6. What is the key question for a local contract?

- A. Does the title sound senior?
- B. Is the font official?
- C. Did a colleague sign it?
- D. Which national provisions are expressly incorporated and which are different?

Answers and explanations

1. D — Their regulatory status does not automatically change their employment grade

Their regulatory status does not automatically change their employment grade This applies the principle in “Specialty Doctor, Specialist and legacy grades”.

Re-read “Specialty Doctor, Specialist and legacy grades”, then identify the controlling document and the fact you would verify before acting.

2. C — Whether the contract incorporates Specialty Doctor terms or only uses a similar salary

Whether the contract incorporates Specialty Doctor terms or only uses a similar salary This applies the principle in “England”.

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

3. D — Interpret them under the Welsh terms and agreed job plan

Interpret them under the Welsh terms and agreed job plan This applies the principle in “Wales”.

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

4. B — The award and broad effective date, not the doctor’s complete payslip calculation

The award and broad effective date, not the doctor’s complete payslip calculation This applies the principle in “Scotland”.

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

5. C — No; national implementation must be confirmed

No; national implementation must be confirmed This applies the principle in “Northern Ireland”.

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

6. D — Which national provisions are expressly incorporated and which are different?

Which national provisions are expressly incorporated and which are different? This applies the principle in “Locally employed doctors”.

Re-read “Locally employed doctors”, 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>

NHS Wales: 2026/27 medical and dental pay circular

Wales · <https://www.nhs.wales/files/pc-resources/md-w-0126-pay-award-02-04-26-version-2/>

Scottish Government: NHS pay awards, 12 August 2026

Scotland · <https://www.gov.scot/news/nhs-pay-awards/>

Department of Health NI: SAS 2021 contract documentation

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

Edition and verification

Editorial edition: 9 September 2026. The page source-review date is 2026-09-08. A publication date, editorial edit and substantive source check have different meanings. See sasdoctors.com/corrections for material corrections and the scope of review.

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