



# FLiP. TiPS

Agency Work



NEGOTIATING WITH RECRUITMENT AGENCIES

# Your Questions Answered

How much can I earn in the UK?

How do I land the jobs I want?

Why won't my recruitment agency always look out for me?

How do I get the most out of working with my agency?

What recruitment agency do you recommend?

Navigating the murky waters of the UK job market leaves a lot of people totally lost and confused. Many of my friends and colleagues worked for months or even years without fully understanding the ins and outs of the system, the contract conditions they had agreed to, or the entitlements they were missing out on.

And initially I was the same! But with a fair bit of digging I think I've nussed it all out and put together the [FLiP](#) website with the aim of helping everyone who comes to the UK after me go from confused, naïve and gullible to informed, confident and in control.

This guide goes even further to giving you that extra bit of help in your corner.

In my first locum job I was earning **£23** per hour. My last job, **£32** per hour.

Being armed with this information alone you could easily earn up to **£9** more per hour (or nearly **\$700AUD** more per week) as well.

This isn't a sales pitch (this info is free after all!), just an honest attempt to empower more people to understand the locum work system.

Read on to get all my best advice on working as a locum health professional in the UK.

## How much can I earn in the UK?

If you're taking on locum work within the National Health Service (NHS) – the UK's public healthcare system – you'll be paid according to their banding system:

- Band 5: Equivalent of a new graduate or clinician with a few years of experience, usually working with support from a Band 6.
- Band 6: More senior clinician with a few years of experience and extra responsibilities. Expected to be able to work unsupervised.
- Band 7: Senior clinician with specialist skills in a certain area. Likely to also have additional managerial responsibilities.
- Band 8: Team leader or manager, head of the department.

The pay you can expect in each of these paygrades can vary depending on which country you're in (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales), how popular the position is (you'll see lower rates of pay for roles that are more in demand), and how good your negotiation skills are!

As a rough guide, the locum rates you can earn as a physiotherapist are:

- Band 5: £23-25 per hour
- Band 6: £25-27 per hour
- Band 7: £29-32 per hour
- Band 8: £34+ per hour

A few things to note about these figures:

- This info is based on physiotherapy as this is the field I know (and love). While NHS pay bands are standard across professions for permanent employees, I'm not certain that the locum rates for physios are the same as other professions. The general concepts still apply though!
- These are umbrella rates. If you go PAYE the rate will be slightly lower (which I explain in detail in my article "[Umbrella Companies Explained](#)").
- NHS locum rates are capped in England which means you will generally be looking at the lower end of these wage ranges. If you want to work in London specifically, the rates could be even lower because jobs are very in demand and there's plenty of competition from lots of job seekers.
- Pay rates outside the major capitals in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland are generally uncapped to attract staff to these regions. But they are still usually guided by the National Clinical Staffing Framework which means even though they are labelled "uncapped" they aren't a free for all. Don't expect to be offered rates too much higher than what I've outlined here.
- These rates are current as of 2020 (pre-COVID!)

## Why do I have to be on my guard with my recruitment agency?

Make no mistake, in the job seekers market everyone has their own interests at heart, and a recruitment agency's main interest is money!

Your agency consultant earns their living by commission and the margin on your wages, so their number one priority is to get you into a job that makes them the highest margin possible i.e. a job where the end client is paying them a very high rate, and they are paying you a very low rate.

This is the main reason you'll find it difficult to negotiate your way up to a higher hourly pay rate – the more money you get, the less your agent ends up with in their own pocket!

So no matter what sneaky tricks or strategies they try on to take advantage of your lack of knowledge or experience (guilt trips, cold calls, ghosting etc. etc.), remember to look out for yourself first. Everyone else is after all.

## How do I know if they aren't looking after me properly?

Maybe I've been a little harsh so far, I don't want to make you overly suspicious or totally negative towards these businesses. There's really no need to be rude or nasty toward your agent (they are just doing their job after all) and usually they are actually quite pleasant and friendly to have a chat with over the phone. But honestly it can be hard to know where you stand at times, or whether you're being played.

So I guess my overall message is be polite but assertive, and keep an eye out for a few of these manipulative tricks they might try out on you:

- **Ridiculous wage offers:** anything less than £23 per hour (particularly in an uncapped region) is well under standard. If your agent makes you a silly offer like this one, they are testing you out. Simply reply with a strong email demonstrating your knowledge of the normal rate so they know not to attempt take advantage of you again. For example, you might state that you would ordinarily expect £x amount for work in this area and could the end client come back with a higher offer? Or is there perhaps something in a different region that is paying closer to what you expect? Your agent should come back with something more reasonable. If not, it's time to talk to someone else who will co-operate – make some enquiries with different agencies.
- **Ignoring your questions:** if you find your agency is not replying to your enquiries, or conveniently not answering specific questions in your emails, you're probably asking them for something they don't want to give. For example, an explanation of things you don't understand on your payslip or asking for your referral bonus. It's ok to pester them a bit and push to get a response. If they continue to be shady, or won't give you straight answers, it might be safest to take your business elsewhere.

- **Ghosting**: if your agent ceases communication with you all together, it's usually because they've got you into a job and you're bringing money in the door for them. As soon as they've got their cash you become a low priority. They'll be very hard to get into contact with as any additional work they need to do for you doesn't actually earn them anything else – so why should they bother? If you have sent emails or made phone calls that aren't being answered, or you find they're just not being particularly helpful, don't be surprised or alarmed. Get their attention with an email saying you're either thinking of leaving (therefore stopping their money coming in the door), looking for another job (therefore bringing more money in the door) or you have a colleague you'd like to refer who is looking for work (also lighting up those dollar signs in their eyes). That should get you the answers you're after. If these strategies still don't work, what in the world is this business doing? Accept that it's time to throw in the towel and work with a more professional agency.

## What things can I get my recruitment agency to pay for?

There are a few pre-employment checks and processes you'll need to complete before you land a job, and some of them require a small fee. It's a good idea to see if your agency will help you out with some of the costs.

A Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, is like a UK police check. Your agency may offer to pay or reimburse you for this, and it's ok to let them foot this particular bill. Just ensure you get a copy of the certificate with your DBS number for your own records and sign up for the DBS "Update Service" which means that any prospective employer is able to check your details online.

Vaccinations are another area they could potentially help you out. This is not something I tried myself, but it might be worth asking about if you need a booster or two.



## What processes are best to pay for myself?

To ensure you maintain the level of flexibility and control you need to best navigate the job market, there are some processes that are worthwhile paying for yourself. This way you aren't tied to just one company.

For example, your agency will offer to pay for your Mandatory First Aid and Manual Handling training, but you should pay for this yourself. If they pay, your certificate will be sent to the agency and they won't release the certificate to you. Keeping this to themselves means that if you want to get a job through a different agency you would have to go do the training again, disincentivising you from taking your business elsewhere. If you pay, you'll have the certificate in your hand and the freedom to move around recruitment agencies as you please.

As an aside, if you work in Scotland you can do online training to get this certification. In England you must do face to face training to cover the practical First Aid and Manual Handling components.

## What are the best jobs to go for?

Depends! This will be totally different for everyone based on your priorities. When it comes to picking the jobs you want, I outlined a few key points on the [FLiP](#) website under "[Picking a Recruitment Agency](#)". These are the big things to consider for sure, but here're a few other things you might want to think about:

- **If you're chasing the most money:** head rural. Think Northern Wales, Western Scotland, Northern Ireland... these are the areas struggling to get staff and willing to pay a little more to have you. Whatever rate your agent offers you up front, counter-offer with a few extra pounds and you might be surprised how high they're willing to go.
- **If you're seeking the big city life:** go north. Of course, London is the first British capital to spring to mind, but I'll be honest, you're unlikely to get paid more than £25 an hour in the big smoke. Consider somewhere like Liverpool or Manchester in England, Edinburgh or Glasgow in Scotland, Cardiff or Swansea in Wales, or Belfast in Northern Ireland. You'll get an amazing, unique, metropolitan experience AND a half decent pay packet.
- **If you're hunting for the outdoors:** go for it! I had no idea the UK had such a great outdoor lifestyle. Whether you're keen on skiing around the Cairngorms, mountain biking down Snowdonia, rock climbing through the Lake District, surfing in Cornwall or hiking up a Munro... Pick your work destination based on the season and the adventure activity you're most passionate about!

# What strategies can I use to get a fair deal?

Initially it can feel a little clunky working out how to negotiate wages, how to tell your agent what you want without revealing your whole hand or how to turn down offers you don't want. Don't worry, you'll soon get a feel for it.

To get you started though, here're my 3 top strategies for getting your next job:

## 1. Pick off the list

Your agency will send you regular emails listing the vacancies they have. These are bulk emails sent to the hundreds of clinicians on their list, but still handy for giving you an idea about what's available. If you see a role that piques your interest, simply reply to the email and make some enquiries. While this is the easiest option, the downside is that you may have less leverage when it comes to negotiating your conditions, or you might even miss out altogether, as there are likely to be quite a few people interested in the role. You won't always get your first pick in this instance.

## 2. Choose your own destination

If you know where you want to be, you can email your agency enquiring about positions in that area. Not all the roles they have available end up on their email list, so there could be a chance that a new vacancy pops up in the region you're interested in that you can nab before it's advertised more widely. Your odds may not be very high, but you never know your luck. Just be prepared to be flexible – you may have to compromise a little on the exact town or work in a field outside your specialty to get into the location you're keen on.

## 3. Lay down your terms

On the other hand if you know exactly what work you want but you're not so concerned with the specific region you end up in, list the conditions that are important to you and make a few agencies do the searching – it is their job after all. For example, if you want outpatient musculoskeletal work for no less than £25 per hour, write this in an email to a number of agencies and see what options they come back with. It's a bit of fun, who knows what fun destination you could end up in! Just be realistic with your expectations, you'll end up with no job if you're holding out for something paying £50 an hour.

As long as you give yourself enough time, using any of these 3 strategies should get you into a position you're interested in. I'd recommend starting this process about a month before you're looking to start in a job – this will give you plenty of flexibility.



## Any other inside goss on working with recruitment agencies?

- **Negotiate, negotiate, negotiate:** At first this won't come naturally. It can be difficult when you aren't entirely sure what you're worth or what the position is worth, but you will learn as you go. Never accept the advertised rate.
- **Play the field:** Don't just stick with one recruitment agency, it's absolutely fine to sign up with a few (at one stage I had 4!). You'll soon work out who takes care of you the best – stick with these guys.
- **Approved agencies:** But keep in mind that not all recruitment agencies are created equal, and the NHS prefers to work with agencies who have a good reputation for doing the right thing and sticking to Clinical Staffing Frameworks. If you are working through a dodgy agency, you are less likely to get a job in the NHS than someone who is working through a reputable one. Signing up with an approved agency (not just the agency who pays the most) also means that you will have a larger list of jobs to pick from, more security in your ability to repeatedly get jobs when you want them, and fewer headaches in the long run. Search through this (extensive) list on the [NHS Employers website](#) to find one (but remember, this doesn't automatically mean they'll all look after you. I worked with some terrible agencies who feature on this list!)
- **Wide margins:** as I explained earlier, to make money your recruitment agent will be looking to get you into a job that is paying them a high rate and paying you a low rate. With strong negotiation skills they will be willing to wriggle up a bit on your pay rate, but only up to a certain point. There comes a level where they are no longer making money, and it's not worth their while to put you in the job (in which case they'll just find someone else willing to do it for cheaper!). Understand their side of the story and you'll be less likely to stuff up your negotiation.
- **Presumptuous phone calls:** Your agency consultant may put you forward for a job before telling you about it, meaning you could get unexpected phone calls from a physio department manager wanting to interview you. This to me seems like a sneaky tactic to pressure unknowing locums into jobs that no one else will take. If you didn't ask for the role, don't feel bad for explaining the situation and turning them down over the phone.
- **Seasonal Work:** Winter = flu, bringing with it extra pressures on the health system. Flu season means plenty of work for health professionals as extra funding is released for "winter pressures". You'll easily find jobs all over the country at this time of year, possibly with even higher pay rates. Conversely, supply vs demand is less of an issue for the health system during summer months. Fewer jobs means you'll find the market harder to break in to – time to break into a European summer instead in my opinion!

- **Offence is the best defence:** You need to be on the front foot when it comes to getting what you want. Whether it's help with accommodation or information about your contract, get what you want and have everything put in place before you agree to a job – your agent will all of a sudden become very hard to get in contact with once you're bringing their money in.
- **Is it a scam?** Somewhere in your application form may be a box to tick to opt out of the Working Time Regulations Act (1998). I was a bit confused by the wording and thought by ticking it I might somehow be forced into working mega long hours 7 days per week! It's not a dodgy trick. This piece of legislation just stipulates the maximum number of hours in the work week should be 48. Taking the option to opt out just means you can work more than 48 hours per week if you want to (hello overtime!)
- **Speaking of paperwork:** Keep a Dropbox/GoogleDrive/OneDrive folder with all the certificates, checks and paperwork you need for your recruitment agency pre-employment checks. If you do decide to sign up for a few agencies you'll thank yourself later for all the time you save by keeping everything in one place.

## What agency do you recommend I sign up with?

After working with many different agencies myself and quizzing some friends and colleagues on the companies they used, the overwhelming message is: no recruitment agency is perfect.

But in my experience, there are a few that are "less bad" than others. They don't take advantage of your naivety, genuinely try to get you the jobs you're interested in, and follow the law (yes, there really are some agencies and umbrella companies who don't!).

Full disclosure though, the number one agency I recommend does have a referral bonus. However, this is not the reason I recommend them. There are many agencies out there that have much higher referral incentives, but they are usually the worst of a bad bunch and will be a nightmare to work with. I've got a bit more integrity than that. This is the agency I was happiest working with and used for every job I took towards the end of my time in the UK.

So if you'd like some help getting set up with a reputable agency, just send me an email at [info@freelifephysio.com](mailto:info@freelifephysio.com) and I'll put you in touch.