

Guidance for locums and people employing locums

“I have learned so much in the last 12 or 18 months. I only wish that I had been able to do locum work before I started my own practice, because I would have learned a lot of the pitfalls that I had to find out the hard way.”
(Jonathan Kay, optometrist, speaking in November 2004 after working as a locum for 18 months after selling his practice which he had run for 35 years.)

This guidance is based upon a presentation given by Johnathan Waugh to the Council of the Association of Optometrists in November 2004, at which time Johnathan had been working with a multiple as an employed optometrist after working for nearly three years as a locum optometrist immediately after he qualified.

Johnathan Kay’s statement, above, shows the range of experience a locum optometrist can gain which can benefit their work as a locum or, in later years, running their own practice. It can also benefit the practices for which they work as locums, should the practices wish to gain from the broader experience the locum brings.

This paper aims to help practices make better use of locums and make locums’ lives a little easier. It sets out who locums are, why they choose to be locums, and how they go about it; the pros and the cons not only for the locums but for the practices that employ them; the reasonable expectations that locums might have of the places where they work, and the expectations practices might have of the locums that they are engaging. This paper seeks to help both parties to avoid the pitfalls, e.g. the locum expecting things and the practice expecting things of the locum.

Do not expect anything: ask!

These are some of the questions that locums and the people they work for should be considering and asking.

What is a locum?

First, we must understand the terminology. “Locum” is an abbreviation of “locum tenens”, which is Medieval Latin meaning “(someone) holding the place (of another)”. Therefore the true meaning of the term ‘locum’ is someone who is standing in for someone else. Over many years the term has been used among optometrists and dispensing opticians (and in some other professions) for people who are doing a job one or two days a week in a practice, when a more correct term for someone undertaking this work might be that they are a “part-time employee”. In law, whether someone is an employee or self-employed depends on the degree of control¹ they have in undertaking their work: an employee is controlled by the employer to a much greater extent than a self-employed person. Generally locums wish to be treated as self-employed, in particular for the benefits in relation to paying tax.

Who are locums?

Any optometrist may work as a locum.

Locum optometrists will have varying levels of experience and different reasons for working as locums. They may work as locums to boost their earnings, to gain experience of different

¹ The tests for control include the ability to refuse work, the ability to choose the time when they undertake the work, and the provision of equipment to undertake the work. A self-employed person is more able to refuse work and choose the days and hours they work than an employee, and is more likely to bring their own equipment to undertake the work, compared with an employee for whom equipment will normally be provided by the employer.

types of practices, or because they do not like being tied to the regime of one employer and they do not wish to run their own practices. Optometrists who have practised for many years will act and work differently from those who have recently qualified. A practice may choose a recently qualified optometrist or an optometrist of long-standing depending on its requirements.

Why choose to locum?

Locums set their own timetable for when and where they practise. Being self-employed allows practitioners to choose their own lifestyle. This can be assisted by the deferred payment of tax, compared with Pay-As-You-Earn, but it is important to remember that tax will be paid eventually, so appropriate advice should be taken on this.

Some people may choose to locum to work additional days around part-time employment, others may choose to do so to increase their income short term. Where people who are employed choose to locum in addition to their employment they should check that this is permitted under their contract of employment.

For a newly qualified optometrist practising as a locum allows you to see how different types of practice work – you can locum in multiples, in small groups, partnerships and practices run by a sole practitioner, or in hospitals. Once you find a mode of practice in which you like working or a company that you like working for you could consider working more permanently in that type of practice or that particular company. This can avoid starting a job and six months later deciding that it is not for you and having to leave.

Working as a locum will also provide invaluable experience for optometrists who may wish to set up their own practices: locums get to see how things are done in other practices – the good and perhaps less good ways of running a practice; this will help them avoid the pitfalls which they may run into when they start their own practices. If an optometrist starts a part-time practice, working as a locum on days when not in the practice will, in addition, provide an income while building up the practice.

How do locums start?

One of the best way of getting work is through recommendation – the locum is recommended to a practice and a practice is recommended to the locum. The perfect match, perhaps. Otherwise:

- 1) Apply directly to practices. Ask people you know if they know anyone who might take on a locum.
- 2) Apply through agencies. They advertise in the optical journals. Some may be better or more efficient than others. If you do not know how good an agency will be at finding you a job or to work for, ask people their experiences of different agencies. Again, it is better if you can go on recommendation. It may be that an optometrist receives a lower rate of pay by going through an agency because the practice is paying the agency commission, but this must be weighed against the greater opportunities for work agencies may provide.
- 3) Put your name on a locum list. The Association of Optometrists has a locum list and some companies may have lists of locums who they can call upon.

Pros and cons for the locum

Pros

- Flexibility of being self-employed, e.g. managing your own work schedules
- Broader experience can be gained very quickly through working in practices ranging from independents to multiples and old-fashioned to ultra modern
- Using a broad range of equipment – some companies, e.g. new multiples, have equipment that you are unlikely to see more generally in practices because of the cost
- Financial advantages including possibility of greater earnings and deferred payment of tax
- More contacts in the profession among people who are looking for locums or know of locum vacancies, should lead to more locum work
- Travel opportunities (although staying in hotels can be dull)

Cons

To avoid the cons discuss the points with the practice before you start work.

A locum may give a patient a very poor impression of their capabilities if they are becoming acquainted with procedures, equipment, record cards, etc, at the same time that they are examining the patient. Locums can avoid this by asking about and familiarising themselves with things before they see their first patient in a practice.

- Lack of job security. There is no secure income: especially around Christmas when it can be difficult finding locum work in many places. Take advantage of the summer time when people are on holiday to make your money.
- Unfamiliar procedures.
- Unfamiliar examination room and equipment – you need to know how to use the equipment and what results you are to expect.
- Record cards vary widely as to content, format and space. Familiarise yourself with what numbers go where and how to record things properly in a way that people will understand at a later date.
- Staff may not be aware of the role and expectations of the locum. The practice owner or manager should explain to them what they can and cannot expect of the locum, and the locum should be told how to work with the staff what they will require of the locum.
- Competitors' activities. Locums should not disclose confidential information about other practices you have worked for. It may acceptable to disclose how things are done well at other practices, so that the practice may learn from this. Do not be negative about other practices you have worked for or talk about how their business is doing: you would not want your current practice think that one day you may be saying similar things about them. Likewise, it is not appropriate to identify patients at other practices or talk negatively about the personalities and professionalism of colleagues you have worked.
- Travel costs and time. Agree with the practice before you take up the job whether you will be paid the cost of travel and accommodation. This will avoid earning less than your expectations if you then find yourself paying your travelling costs and other expenses.
- Payment. Locums may have to chase up payments when they are not longer at the practice. (This compares with an employed optometrist receiving a regular salary.) Payment is usually by cheque, BACS or cash. This is to be agreed between the two

parties but the locum should be aware which method of payment is appropriate to the way they are handling their finances.

- Tax. Put money aside to pay the income tax when it is due.
- Cancellations. Agree terms in the event of cancellation: the liability of the practice if it cancels and the liability of the locum if they cancel. Different payments may be agreed according to the length of notice of cancellation. While this should secure payment for the locum in the event that the practice cancels the booking, it may put the practice off of booking the locum if they feel that they can book someone who will not ask for payment in the event of them cancelling at short notice.
- Lunch. Try to agree with the practice that a certain time for lunch will be allowed without patients being booked in, otherwise you may not get anything to eat, if appointments have been booked during your lunch and the practice is very busy.
- Walk-ins. You may agree to do 20-minute tests but with patients walking in off the street the practice may wish to limit your tests to 10 or 15 minutes. Try not to be pressured into the shorter testing times if you are uncomfortable with them.

Pros and cons for the practice

Pros

- Greater flexibility for setting the days and hours for an optometrist to be at the practice.
- Flexible staffing cover, e.g. for holidays, etc.
- Experience. The locum will bring a range of experience to the practice some of which may be innovative and valuable for the practice.
- Consistency. If you find a locum you are happy with you can use them over a long period to cover absences from the practice and provide consistent testing.
- Recommendations from practitioners or locums whose opinions you value should make it easier for you to find a locum who will fit in with the practice.
- References from a practice where a locum has worked previously should make it easier to find the right locum.
- The locum's personality is very important to the patients and to the running of the practice: the locum's willingness and ability to adapt to the practice; professionalism and approach to the job; youthful enthusiasm and relative inexperience or nerves, but with a fresh knowledge of the latest techniques, may be judged against experience and mature reflection. Remember, patients may be coming to the practice to see a particular optometrist who they are used to seeing, so ideally the locum should complement the service given by the practitioner they are standing in for.
- Improving your services based on what other practices do. Do not work on the basis that the locum is only with you to examine patients' eyes. Try to build on your locum's experience. If you have the opportunity, ask the locum how you may improve the service you give to patients based on his or her experiences in other practices.
- New ideas. Apart from differences between practices there may be differences in the way things are done in different areas. If your locum has worked in different places, e.g. England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, they may be able to bring new ideas from these areas to your practice.

Schedule some time to talk to your locums about new ideas and how you might improve your services.

Cons

If you choose the right locum you can bring great benefits to the practice, if you choose the wrong one you may encounter problems.

Slide 7: Pros and cons for the practice

- If the practice does not choose the right locum, the locum may damage the business by not having the appropriate experience, having a higher percentage of patients return for recall examinations, or by upsetting patients and staff.
- Locums may be more expensive taking account of agency fees, travel and accommodation costs. Even where a practice does not employ a locum through an agency the latter two costs may be incurred over and above the pay for the job.
- Agencies provide locums to fill positions but they may not provide references for the locum.
- Lack of consistency between different locums in the service they provide and their record-keeping.
- Record-keeping. It is important that the practice should be aware at an early stage of the quality of the records each locum keeps in order to maintain high standards and consistency.
- NHS payments. There may be problems in getting paid where locums are not registered with the NHS authority in the area at the start of their locum work. The practice may be left with vouchers that have to be signed by the locum who may not be returning to the practice for a while if at all. There may also be problems in receiving payments if they are made to the locum and not to the practice. Make arrangements to avoid these problems.
- Payment of tax. If the Inland Revenue asserts that a locum is really a part-time employee they can seek payment by the employer of the income tax due on the gross payment to the employee. Both employee and employer can appeal against the Inland Revenue's assertion.

Optimising the benefits of working with locums

Meeting and managing expectations

The expectations and requirements of the practice and the locum must be clearly stated the locum starts work in the practice. This requires communication in advance between practice and locum. It is preferable that these are set out in writing, so that the parties will know where they stand.

There should be a written contract setting out the terms on which the locum's services are retained (the Association of Optometrists has a specimen contract for its members).

Ideally there should also be a practice information pack, a two- or three-page document sent to the locum before they join the practice, would assist the locum in settling into the practice and may address the locum's expectations. A specimen guide to drawing up an information pack is provided herewith. It gives directions to the practice and outlines the equipment in the consulting room, the names of the staff and local facilities that a locum might want to use at lunchtime

Training and acclimatisation are very important. There is an ethical responsibility on the provider and the locum should insist that is part of the process. A locum cannot properly

discharge their duty of care to the first few patients while getting acclimatised to strange equipment, looking around for instruction books and so on.

If possible, arrangements should be made for the locum to become acquainted with the practice, the staff and the equipment before seeing their first patient. Staff should be made aware of the locum's role and needs, and vice versa. This will avoid demands which cannot be met by both parties.

Locum's expectations

The locum should state their expectations which may include:

- Time to familiarise themselves with the practice and equipment and time to set up where necessary. Ideally the locum would have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the practice prior to their first day working in the practice.
- Test time. How much time does the practice allow for the eye examination? Be careful not to be pressured into doing more eye examinations than you want to do. Be prepared to walk away from the job if you are being asked to do more eye examinations than you are comfortable with. The practice can always get another locum, but you may lose your qualification if you miss something during an eye examination because you are working too hurriedly.
- Lunch break. What time is your lunch break? If it is important to you to have that break say that you will not see patients during your lunch break. It may be a time for you to eat and have a rest or to see a bit of the area in which you are working. You may find that you are not offered a set time for lunch, but if you want a set time, ask for it. You may want to use your first lunch break to familiarise yourself further with the practice and the equipment. But remember, you should try to familiarise yourself with these things before you see your first patient.
- Cleanliness and tidiness of practice and consulting room
- Staff being made aware of the days and times the locum will be working in the practice.
- Friendly staff who are willing to talk to the locum, so the locum is not left to read a book in the consulting room until the next patient comes in.
- Assistance from competent staff including knowledge of the equipment
- Equipment which works and is easy to use with instructions to hand if required. (The locum should not have to change the bulb to use a projector and should not have to adjust the focimeter or take it apart to clean it to check a patient's glasses.) It is off-putting for the practitioner and the patient where the optometrist is not confident about using the equipment. It appears to the patient that the optometrist does not really know what he or she is doing and this may lead the patient to believe that the eye examination has not been carried out properly.
- Modern equipment. Younger locums may be used to having the more modern equipment; older practitioners may not wish to use the most modern equipment, although higher standards through more modern equipment can be aspired to by all.
- Prior warning of difficulties relating to equipment or patients (e.g. an interesting paediatric case or a contact lenses patient) who the locum will see.
- Ways of working and special practices and potential difficulties which should be brought to the locum's attention.

- Breathing space. This may be important for the locum to do their job properly without feeling rushed or harassed. This may be especially important if the locum has recently qualified or is new to the practice.

Layout of consulting room

Room layout can vary greatly. The locum should have an opportunity to get acquainted with the layout of the room before seeing the first patient. In particular the locum should become acquainted with where things are and how to get around things to get to other things.

Instruments

Instruments vary considerably between practices. The locum should have time to get acquainted with the practice's record card before seeing the first patient. It would also help if the locum could be informed of the equipment (function and model) in the practice at the earliest opportunity. A checklist is provided herewith.

Record cards

These vary vastly between practices. The locum should have time to get acquainted with the practice's record card before seeing the first patient.

Referral procedures

The practice should inform the locum of what the locum is to do when referring patients (where are the forms, or are referrals made by letter?), and when the locum should do this.

Practice's expectations

- Competence and experience. Practices will look for people who are competent. They may prefer to have people with experience, who know what they are doing, but people who have qualified recently should be quick to learn, particularly where the foundations have been laid during the pre-reg year. It may take a recently-qualified locum a bit longer to get used to a new practice than someone with more experience. On the other hand, a recently qualified person may adapt more easily.
- Good record-keeping is important to look after the interests of the patient, practice and the optometrist. The practice should take some time to outline their system of keeping records and what they are looking for.
- Personality. Practices are looking for people who are reliable and honest, and diligent and careful in looking after the patients' health. Personality and friendliness are important too in making a good working environment. These things will impact on the patients' perception and thereby sales.
- Specialisation. If a practice specialises in a field of optometry they should talk to the locum first to make sure that the locum is confident about the specialist field of work. These may include more routine areas of work such as children and contact lenses which some locums may not be happy to do. Locums are not doing themselves or the practice any favours where they are working in an environment in which they are not happy. In doing this they are likely to fail.
- Value for money. What are practices looking for in locums to give them good value for money? This may be the number of eye examinations, average test time, or conversion rate. If any of these are important to the practice they should be stated so that the locum

will be aware of what is expected. Other than specific items, the practice may be looking for a more general contribution to the work of the practice.

- How to leave the consulting room The locum should be advised on how the consulting room is to be left for when the regular optometrist returns to the practice.

Ways to improve working with locums

Locums

- Make sure that you know what kind of practice you are going into.
- Tell the practice what you want.
- Always be tidy, professional, friendly and honest.
- Undertake your eye examinations properly and be consistent. Some practices who have employed locums who have done a lot of eye examinations in a day, have found one or two weeks later that they had 20% or 30% of recalls from these examinations which had been rushed. Other patients who may have had problems may have chosen not to return to the practice but to go elsewhere to sort them out.
- Communicate with colleagues at all levels in the practice.
- Seek feedback from the practice where you are working. This may help you appreciate your strengths and improve on your weaknesses.
- Ask the practice where you are working if they will give you a reference for future jobs.

The practice

- Check that the locum is duly registered with the General Optical Council.
- Ask for a CV to find out about the locum's background, even where the locum has been taken on through recommendation or an agency
- Ask the locum why they have chosen to locum. Whilst most may have good reasons for doing so, some may be doing so because of problems in the past.
- Assist the locum with registration with the NHS before the locum joins the practice so that they can sign their own forms. This will avoid the situation where there are several hundred pounds-worth of forms waiting to be signed, awaiting the locum's return to do so.
- Can you invite the locum in a day or two before their first day, to make sure they are happy with where they are working and the tests they will do, and so they know the environment they are coming into. You may wish to have a trial day where they come and do a morning or afternoon session and can talk to the staff before they do a full day. This may be especially important for somebody who is going to be there over a number of weeks or months.
- Provide a practice information pack with details about the practice, where it is located, how to get there. Assistance with drawing up an information pack will be found at the end of this guidance.
- Have a written contract setting out duties and cancellation rights both for when the practice cancels and when the locum cancels. (See AOP locum contract.)
- Be clear about appointment and testing times.
- Ensure the cleanliness and tidiness of the practice.

- Train your staff to answer patients' questions about why there is suddenly somebody new in the practice, and perhaps why they are young or taking longer or are taking only a few minutes with the patient when they expected different. This will help the locum in meeting the expectations of patients' and staff.
- Train practice staff on the range of equipment a locum might have to use, in case there is a problem so there is always somebody there to show them how things work.
- If you have specialist clinics or unusual test times, make sure the staff know not to book these for the locum (unless agreed with them).
- If you have agreed terms with the locum, try not to break them or allow your staff to.
- If you allow newly qualified optometrists extra time to examine patients (and you may pay them commensurately less), they may do a better job than more experienced locums who are rushing. This may help you develop a good rapport with a good optometrist who will become faster as they gain more experience.
- If you like the examination room, the practice or staff to be treated in a certain way tell the locum what this is.
- Pay fairly. Do not ask for too much and do not offer money that seems a lot less than you will be making out of the locum.
- Nurture the relationships you have with the locum and you will probably get a lot more from them.
- Thank the locum at the end of the day and mention if they have done a good job.

Specimen practice information pack

The Practice

Name and address: _____

Name of person to report to: _____

Directions to the practice: _____

Car. Road directions and landmarks (e.g. nearby shops) to get to the practice. Nearest parking facilities to practice. _____

Train (and directions from the station): _____

Bus (and directions from the bus stop): _____

On foot: Street directions and landmarks (e.g. nearby shops) to get to the practice

Bicycle: Directions and parking or storage facilities.

Staff (names and title/position in practice and days on which they work):

Local facilities (distance and directions to shops and types of shops and other facilities)

Places of special interest (e.g. museums, distance and directions)

Working environment

The examination room will be clean and tidy and all equipment and instruments will be checked by practice staff to ensure that they are working before the locum arrives.

Lunch hour: _____

Practice procedures

Specify any practice procedures which should be brought to the locum's attention:

Record cards

A set of the patient records used in the practice is provided herewith for your information.

Referrals procedures

Specify the procedures for locums to refer patients:

Equipment

Test chart: _____

Test chart projector: _____

Instruments (make and model)

The practice has the following makes of

Focimeter: _____

Visual field screener: _____

Autorefractor: (Lens case/eye deck/Topcon): _____

Trial case:

- 1) complete set of trial lenses
- 2) incomplete set of trial lenses

Comments on the above: _____

Equipment instead of trial case: _____

Autorefractor _____

General comments on any of the above equipment.

Equipment the locum might wish to bring to the practice:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Locum's expectations of the practice

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Where these are agreed, e.g. testing times, lunch break, assistance from staff, all members of staff in the practice should be made aware of them, so that they are not making demands which the optometrist may not expect.