Career Co-Pilot

Before You Apply

What to Do Between Finding an NHS Job and Pressing Submit

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Why This Guide Exists

Most advice about NHS jobs is about the interview. By then the hard part is behind you, because the majority of applications never reach an interview at all. They are filtered at shortlisting, against a document many applicants barely read.

This guide covers the part nobody teaches: what to do in the days between seeing a job you want and submitting a form. It is short on purpose. Every point in it is something we have watched cost people a role they were qualified for.

> **ONE THING BEFORE YOU START**
>
> If you take only one thing from this guide, take section 5. The single most under-used advantage in NHS recruitment is the contact printed at the bottom of almost every advert, and the reason it is under-used is that most people do not realise they are expected to use it.

SECTION 1

Apply Earlier Than You Think

The closing date is not a promise. It is the latest a vacancy could close, not the date it will.

NHS employers can and regularly do close an advert early, usually once a set number of applications has arrived. Many trusts state this openly, sometimes naming a threshold of fifty or sixty applications, and advise applying as early as possible. For competitive posts in competitive regions this can happen inside the first week.

So the closing date is the last moment you could apply, not the moment you should be aiming for. If you have seen a role you want and the advert has been live for a few days, treat it as closing this week.

There are two related things worth knowing. Shortlisting usually happens after the vacancy closes rather than as applications arrive, so applying early buys you a place in the pile rather than a head start in the queue. And late applications are almost never accepted, whatever the reason.

> **IN PRACTICE**
>
> Give yourself a working week between finding a role and submitting. That is long enough to read the pack, speak to the manager and write something considered, and short enough that the advert is unlikely to close underneath you.

SECTION 2

Download the Pack, Not Just the Advert

What you see on screen is a summary. The documents that decide the outcome are attached to it.

Almost every NHS advert carries attachments, usually a job description and a person specification, sometimes combined into one PDF and often alongside a candidate information pack about the organisation. Download all of them and save them somewhere you will find them again, named for the role.

There is a practical reason beyond preparation. If you are invited to interview several weeks later, the advert may have come down, and with it the documents you most want to reread. People lose them routinely.

What to Notice on the First Read

- **Is the post new or a replacement.** A new post usually means a service that is expanding or changing, and that shapes everything you would be walking into.
- **Permanent, fixed-term or secondment.** A fixed-term post often attracts a smaller field, which can work in your favour.
- **Does the title match the band.** Job titles in the NHS drift. Read the duties, not the label.
- **Who the post reports to, and what sits beneath it.** This tells you more about the real seniority of the role than the band does.
- **Whether the advert is open to external applicants.** Some posts are ring-fenced to internal or at-risk staff first.

None of this takes long. Fifteen minutes with the pack will tell you whether this is a role worth several hours of your evening, which is the more important decision.

SECTION 3

The Person Specification Is the Scoresheet

The job description tells you what you would do. The person specification is what you are marked against. Most applicants read the first closely and skim the second, which is exactly backwards.

At shortlisting, a recruiting manager and usually a second shortlister work down the person specification looking for evidence that you meet each criterion. If they cannot find it in your application, it does not count, no matter how true it is of you.

Essential and Desirable Are Not Two Grades of the Same Thing

Essential criteria are pass or fail. Miss one and you are usually out, even if you are outstanding on everything else. Desirable criteria only come into play to separate the people who have already cleared every essential.

That sounds discouraging and it is meant to be clarifying. It turns applying for everything into applying for the right things, and it tells you exactly where to spend your effort: on proving the essentials, not on impressing with the desirables.

The Wording Is Looser Than It Looks

Person specifications are written by people, often reused between posts, and phrases such as or equivalent experience appear more often than applicants notice. A criterion asking for experience in a particular system or setting may well be satisfied by something adjacent. Where you genuinely cannot tell, that is a question for the hiring manager rather than a reason to walk away.

> **THE HONEST TEST**
>
> Go through the essential criteria one at a time and ask, could I point to a specific thing I have done that proves this. If the answer is no for two or three of them, this is probably not your role yet. If it is no for one, ask.

SECTION 4

Build Your Evidence Before You Write

Do the matching as a separate exercise. Trying to do it while writing produces prose that sounds confident and proves nothing.

Take the person specification and list every criterion down one column. Beside each, write one specific thing you have done that demonstrates it. Not a description of your strengths, an instance: what the situation was, what you did, and what changed as a result.

A Claim Is Not Evidence

Experience of stakeholder management, met with the sentence I have strong stakeholder management skills, scores nothing at all. Met with a named programme, your part in it, the people you had to bring with you and what happened in the end, it scores. This is the single most common difference between applications that get shortlisted and applications that do not.

Use real examples, including ones from outside paid employment where they are genuinely relevant. Voluntary work, professional body roles, project work carried out alongside a substantive post and study all count, provided you can describe them as concretely as you would describe your job.

Mark the Gaps Rather Than Hiding Them

Some criteria you will not be able to evidence. Mark them. A single gap is worth a conversation with the recruiting manager, because they will know whether something adjacent satisfies it. Several gaps is useful information of a different kind: it tells you what to go and get before this role comes round again, which it will.

> **IF YOU ARE A CAREER CO-PILOT MEMBER**
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> The Evidence Bank is where these examples can live, but only once you have put them there, by uploading your CV and appraisals, talking them through, or adding them by hand. It holds nothing until you do. Once it does, the next application is editing rather than starting from nothing. If you are not a member, a document on your own machine does the same job. The discipline matters more than the tool.

SECTION 5

Talk to the Hiring Manager

This is the part of the process that most applicants skip and most recruiting managers expect.

Nearly every NHS advert names a person to contact with questions about the job, usually with an email address and often a direct number. That contact is published for exactly this purpose. Using it is normal, expected and common. Managers are more often surprised by how few people make contact than irritated by those who do.

This is worth saying plainly because it is a cultural convention rather than a written rule, and conventions are invisible if you did not grow up inside them. Applicants new to the NHS, and applicants applying from outside the UK, very often read that contact line as a formality or as something reserved for people who already have a connection. It is neither.

What a Fifteen Minute Conversation Actually Gets You

- Why the post is vacant, which tells you whether you are joining a growing service, replacing someone who moved up, or walking into a role people leave.
- What the first six months would actually involve, which is rarely what the job description implies.
- The pressure the team is under right now, which is the thing your supporting statement should speak to.
- Whether there is flexibility on band, hours or a secondment arrangement.
- Whether an essential criterion you are unsure about can be met a different way.

And one thing that is harder to name: you stop being a document. At shortlisting, a manager reading your application having already spoken to you is reading it differently from one who has not.

WORTH ASKING

- Why is the post vacant.
- What would success look like at six months.
- What is the biggest pressure on the team at the moment.
- How does the role sit in the wider structure.
- Is there any flexibility on hours or working pattern.
- Do you expect a large field.

NOT WORTH ASKING

- Anything clearly answered in the pack. It reads as not having looked.
- Salary, before you have shown any interest in the work.
- What are you looking for in a candidate. It puts the work on them.
- Whether there is an internal candidate. You will not get a useful answer.
- Anything that sounds like negotiating a job you have not been offered.

Read About the Service Before You Make Contact

Spend half an hour on the organisation before you write or call. The trust or employer first, then the department, then the team the post sits in. Annual reports, board papers, strategy documents, CQC reports and the organisation's own news pages are all public, and most of them are more readable than people expect.

Then look for the work. If the team or the department is running a project or a programme, read about that too: a system going in, a service moving site, a new pathway, a pilot, a recovery plan. That is usually the reason the post exists, and it is almost never spelled out in the advert.

This changes the conversation. A generic enquiry gets a generic answer. One specific, accurate reference to something the service is actually doing turns it into a conversation between two people who know what the job is about, and it is the difference the manager remembers at shortlisting. The same reading goes straight into your supporting statement afterwards, so none of it is wasted.

How to Make Contact

Email is usually easier than phoning and gives the manager a chance to reply when they have time. Keep it short: who you are, that you are interested in the post, one or two specific questions, and an offer of a brief call if that is easier for them. Three short paragraphs is plenty.

If you do call, ask whether it is a good moment before launching into questions. Clinical and operational managers are often mid-shift.

If the Contact Is a Recruitment Inbox Rather Than a Person

A minority of adverts give only a general recruitment address. Writing to it with questions about the work rarely gets you anywhere useful, because the people reading it are not the people doing the job. Ask instead to be put in touch with the recruiting manager, and say briefly why: that you are preparing an application and have a question about the role itself. That request is routine and usually granted.

If Nobody Replies

Send one polite follow-up after a few days, then apply anyway. Silence is almost always a busy inbox rather than a judgement, and an unanswered email is not a reason to skip a role you want.

REMEMBER IT RUNS BOTH WAYS

This is not an interview and it is not scored. But it is an impression, and some managers make a note. Read the pack first, have your questions written down, and be someone they would be glad to see on the shortlist.

SECTION 6

If You Need Sponsorship

Three checks, in this order. Most people do them in the wrong order and reach the wrong conclusion.

- **What does the advert say.** Many adverts state plainly whether the post is open to applicants requiring sponsorship. Where it does, that is the employer speaking about this specific vacancy, and it is the strongest evidence you will get.
- **Does the employer hold a sponsor licence.** The Home Office publishes a register of licensed sponsors. An employer on it is able to sponsor, which is not the same as saying they will for this post.
- **Ask the employer.** Sponsorship is decided vacancy by vacancy, not as a blanket organisational policy, so the only authoritative answer comes from them.

The point people get wrong is the middle one. An advert that says nothing about sponsorship is not an advert saying no. A great many employers hold a licence and simply do not mention visas in every posting. Silence is silence.

When you do ask, ask well. Not as your opening line on a first call, and not instead of talking about the work. A short, direct question near the end of the conversation, or a separate line in your email, is the right shape.

> **WHAT WE SHOW, AND WHAT WE DO NOT**
>
> On Career Co-Pilot, a role carries a sponsorship note when the advert itself states a position, and a licence marker when the employer appears on the Home Office register. Where an advert says nothing, we show nothing rather than guess on the employer's behalf. For your own circumstances, an immigration adviser regulated by the IAA is the right source. We are not one.

SECTION 7

Writing the Application

By this point the thinking is done. What follows is mostly about not losing the work you have already put in.

Write It Somewhere Else First

Write your supporting statement in a word processor and paste it into the form. Online application sessions time out, and people lose an hour of writing to a session expiry more often than any other single mishap in this process. It also means you keep a copy, which you will want for the next application and for interview preparation.

Structure It Against the Person Specification

Work through the criteria in the same order they appear in the person specification. Some applicants use the criteria themselves as subheadings. It is not elegant writing, but shortlisters are looking for specific things in a specific order, and making that easy is entirely to your advantage.

Lead each point with the evidence rather than the claim. A sentence that begins with what you did is stronger than one that begins with what you are good at.

Employment History and Gaps

Give your full employment history and explain any gaps. This is not a shortlisting matter, which is why it catches people out: gaps surface later, at pre-employment checks, and an unexplained one holds up a job offer you have already won. A short factual explanation is all that is needed.

References

NHS employers work to national employment check standards, which for appointments from outside the NHS require references covering three consecutive years of employment or training immediately before your application, normally at least two, from managers or supervisors rather than friends, colleagues or family.

Gather the names, job titles and current email addresses before you start the form rather than at eleven o'clock on the evening you submit. Then tell your referees. A referee who is expecting the request replies in days. One who is not can take weeks, and references are the most common reason an offer stalls.

AND DO NOT SUBMIT ON THE CLOSING DAY

If the form fails, the attachment will not upload or the session drops, there is no recovery and late applications are not accepted. Aim to submit with days in hand, not hours.

SECTION 8

Two Things Most Applicants Miss

Both are on the form. Both are regularly skipped by people they would have helped.

The Disability Confident Interview Guarantee

Most NHS employers are registered with the government's Disability Confident scheme. Under it, an applicant who declares a disability and who evidences every essential criterion on the person specification is guaranteed an interview. Desirable criteria do not affect it.

Two things make this easy to miss. You have to opt in actively, and answering the equality monitoring question about disability does not do it: those are separate questions on the form and they do different things. And the guarantee depends on your application clearly evidencing the essentials, so it rewards exactly the work in sections 3 and 4 rather than replacing it.

A disability here has the Equality Act meaning: a physical or mental impairment with a substantial and long-term effect on your day to day activities. That is broader than many people assume, and it includes a great many long-term conditions that people do not think of as disabilities. You are not usually asked to give details or provide evidence of the condition itself.

Reasonable Adjustments Apply to the Process, Not Just the Job

You can ask for adjustments to the recruitment process itself: the format of an interview, extra time, questions in advance, a different room, an online rather than in-person session. Say so when you apply rather than waiting to be asked.

Some employers run comparable interview guarantees for armed forces veterans and for care leavers. Where they do, it is stated on the advert or in the candidate pack.

SECTION 9

Submit, Then Wait

The waiting is longer than you expect and the silence means nothing.

Shortlisting normally happens after the vacancy closes rather than as applications arrive, often within a few days of the closing date but sometimes considerably later depending on the panel's availability. Hearing nothing for several weeks is ordinary and is not a signal about your application.

Do not chase before the closing date has passed and a reasonable interval has gone by after it. When you do, a short polite enquiry to the recruitment team is the right route.

Keep a Record

Log the role, the employer, the closing date, who you spoke to and when you applied. Three reasons. You will not remember which version of your statement went where. You will want the job description again if you are shortlisted. And over a few months the pattern in what gets you interviews is genuinely informative, but only if you wrote it down.

If You Are Not Shortlisted, Ask Why

Many NHS employers will give feedback to unsuccessful applicants, including at the shortlisting stage, and almost nobody asks for it. A short email to the recruiting manager is usually enough. The answer is frequently one specific essential criterion you did not evidence clearly, which is a fixable problem and worth knowing before the next application rather than after the fifth.

SECTION 10

The Checklist

Everything in this guide, on one page. If you are short of time, this is the guide.

- ☐ Job description and person specification downloaded and saved, named for the role.
- ☐ Read the person specification before the job description.
- ☐ Every essential criterion matched to one specific thing I have done.
- ☐ Gaps identified, and a decision made about whether to apply anyway.
- ☐ Read up on the trust, the department, and any project or programme the team is running.
- ☐ Hiring manager contacted, or one follow-up sent.
- ☐ Questions for the manager written down before making contact.
- ☐ Sponsorship position checked with the employer, if it applies to me.
- ☐ Supporting statement written in a word processor, not in the form.
- ☐ Statement structured in the same order as the person specification.
- ☐ Full employment history given and any gaps explained.
- ☐ Referees covering three years identified, contacted and warned.
- ☐ Disability Confident scheme opted into, if it applies to me.
- ☐ Reasonable adjustments requested, if I need them.
- ☐ Submitted with days to spare, not hours.
- ☐ Logged in my tracker.

About Career Co-Pilot

Career Co-Pilot is a career intelligence platform for healthcare professionals. We read NHS job adverts at scale and turn them into something you can act on: live roles by band and domain, what employers are actually asking for, which organisations hold sponsor licences, trust level intelligence, and tools for building an application from your own real experience.

We were built by a doctor working in the NHS, for people making the moves the system does not help you make: into digital and data, from clinical into management, from overseas into an NHS career, or simply from one band to the next.

You are welcome to share this guide with anyone it would help.

careercopilot.academy

Sources

Every factual claim in this guide about how NHS recruitment works traces to a public source. Nothing here is our opinion presented as a rule.

Public Sources

- NHS Employers, Employment history and reference checks standard, on the three year reference requirement and who may act as a referee.
- GOV.UK, Disability Confident employer scheme, on the interview guarantee and the requirement to opt in.
- Equality Act 2010, for the definition of disability used in section 8.
- Home Office, Register of licensed sponsors, referred to in section 6.
- NHS trust recruitment and applicant guidance pages, for early closing of adverts, shortlisting timescales and the treatment of late applications.

What This Guide Does Not Cover

Interview preparation, which is a different exercise and a different document. Anything specific to one employer, since local practice varies. And individual immigration advice, which must come from an adviser regulated by the Immigration Advice Authority.

Career Co-Pilot, Before You Apply. First edition, September 2026. Recruitment practice changes. Where this guide and an employer's own instructions differ, follow the employer.