



Insights

Benchmarking Report

Acute Care Salary Benchmarking Report 2026





Introduction

The private acute market has entered a period of reset. For the first time in over a decade, vacancy volumes have fallen, and recruitment pressures have eased. This shift has not come from structural stability but from stagnation in the NHS locum and contract market, which has prompted thousands of clinicians to accept permanent roles. The result is much-needed continuity, but also an artificial sense of calm. While this reduction in churn has steadied operational delivery, it has slowed the flow of new talent into private acute care, creating future risk as demand inevitably returns. As NHS spend increases, providers should be both cautious and proactive about retention.

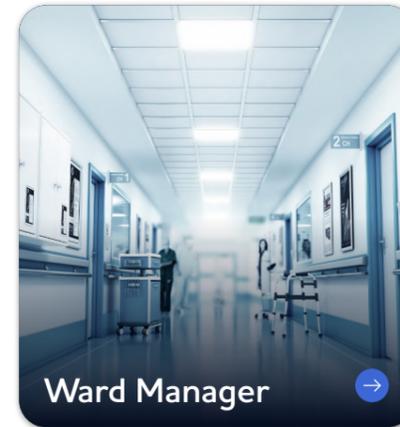
At leadership level, movement has been more pronounced. The past 18 months have seen significant executive turnover across the private sector, with boards restructured, businesses optimising utilisation, and preparation underway for a flatter economy under a Labour government. Operational resilience and data-driven efficiency are increasingly prioritised, with Directors of Clinical Services, Theatre Managers, and Hospital Directors taking on wider responsibilities that blend clinical governance with commercial accountability. Many mid-tier recruitment competitors have exited during this period, leaving fewer credible partners in the market.

This report is designed to support providers navigating this new environment. It benchmarks salaries across all major clinical and operational functions, highlights trends in management pay, and identifies where salary inflation is emerging despite broader market restraint. The aim is to provide tangible insight to help you retain and attract the right calibre of leader and talent as the market resets. Whether you are planning succession, assessing retention risk, or noting modest increases in clinical recruitment, Compass Associates remains ready to advise, benchmark, and deliver. I would be happy to connect.



Stuart Cousins FREC CertRP
Head of Compass Associates

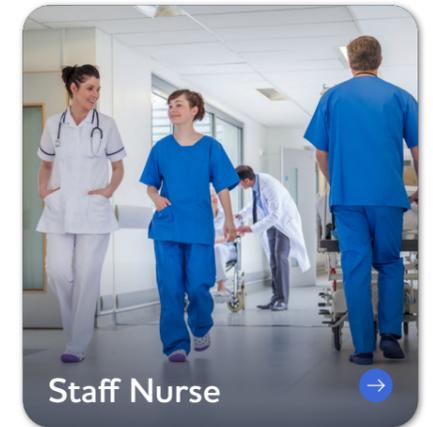
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Ward Manager



Theatre Practitioners



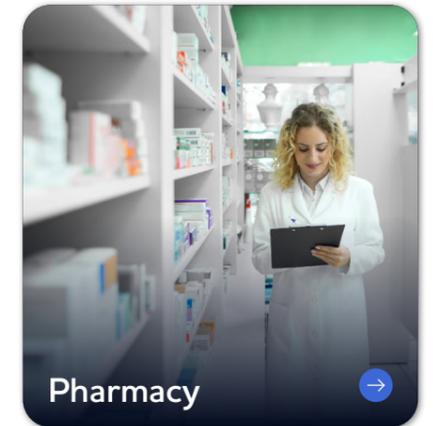
Staff Nurse



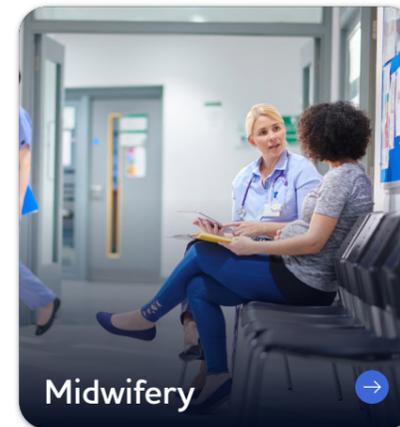
Sonographer



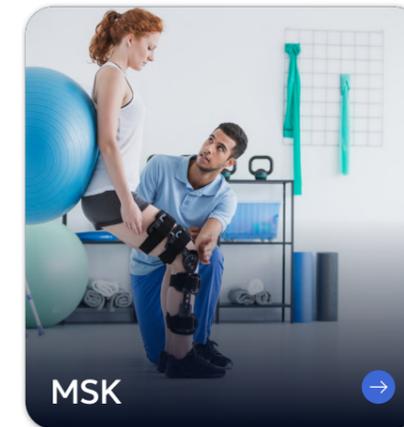
Radiography



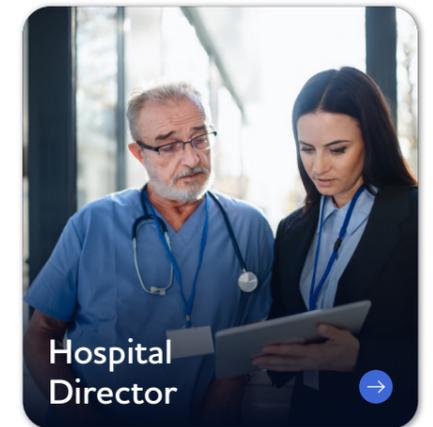
Pharmacy



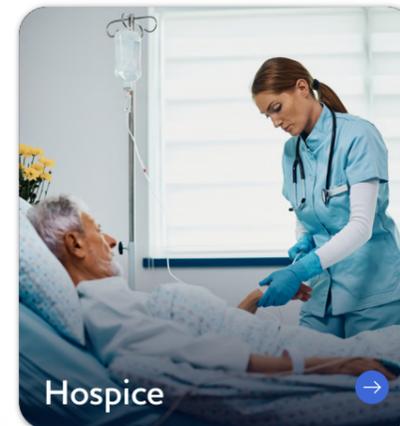
Midwifery



MSK



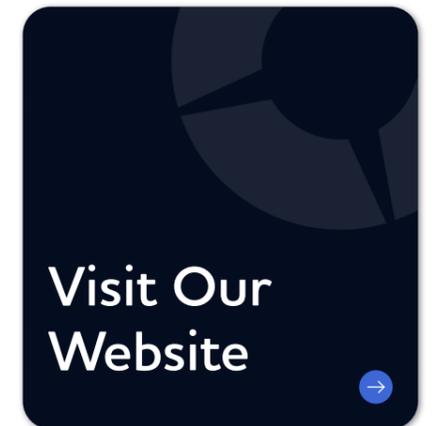
Hospital Director



Hospice



Consultants



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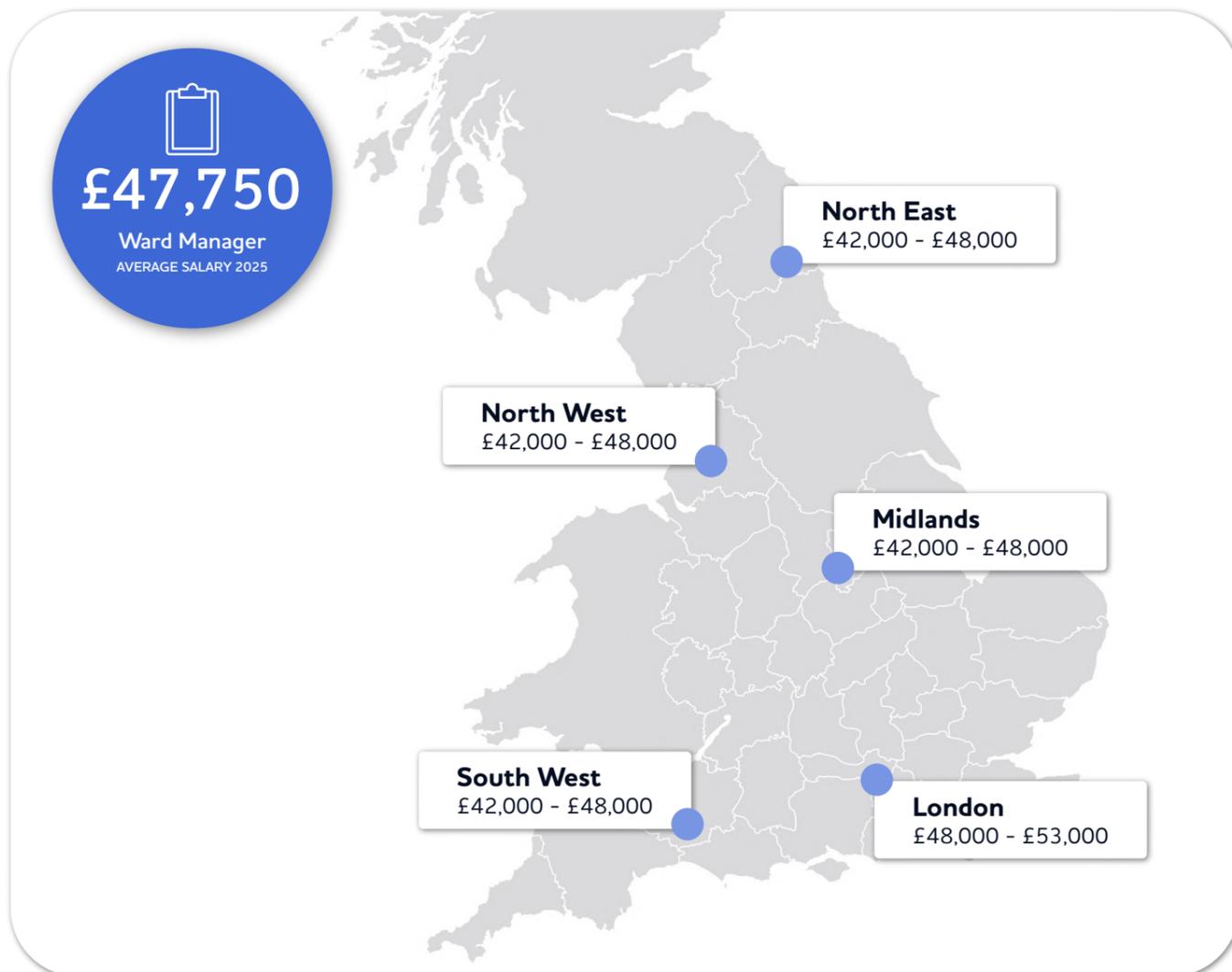


Ward Manager

Over the last three years, changes in patient profiles and the evolving private healthcare journey have led to an increase in Ward Manager responsibilities, particularly in the South and South West of England where salaries are naturally higher due to limited pools of private sector-experienced candidates.

While salary remains an important factor, providers seeking to retain staff are increasingly focusing on non-monetary elements such as brand reputation in the market, flexible working conditions, and realistic workloads. These factors are becoming essential for improving both retention and attraction, especially in geographically isolated areas where candidate attraction is problematic.

Management

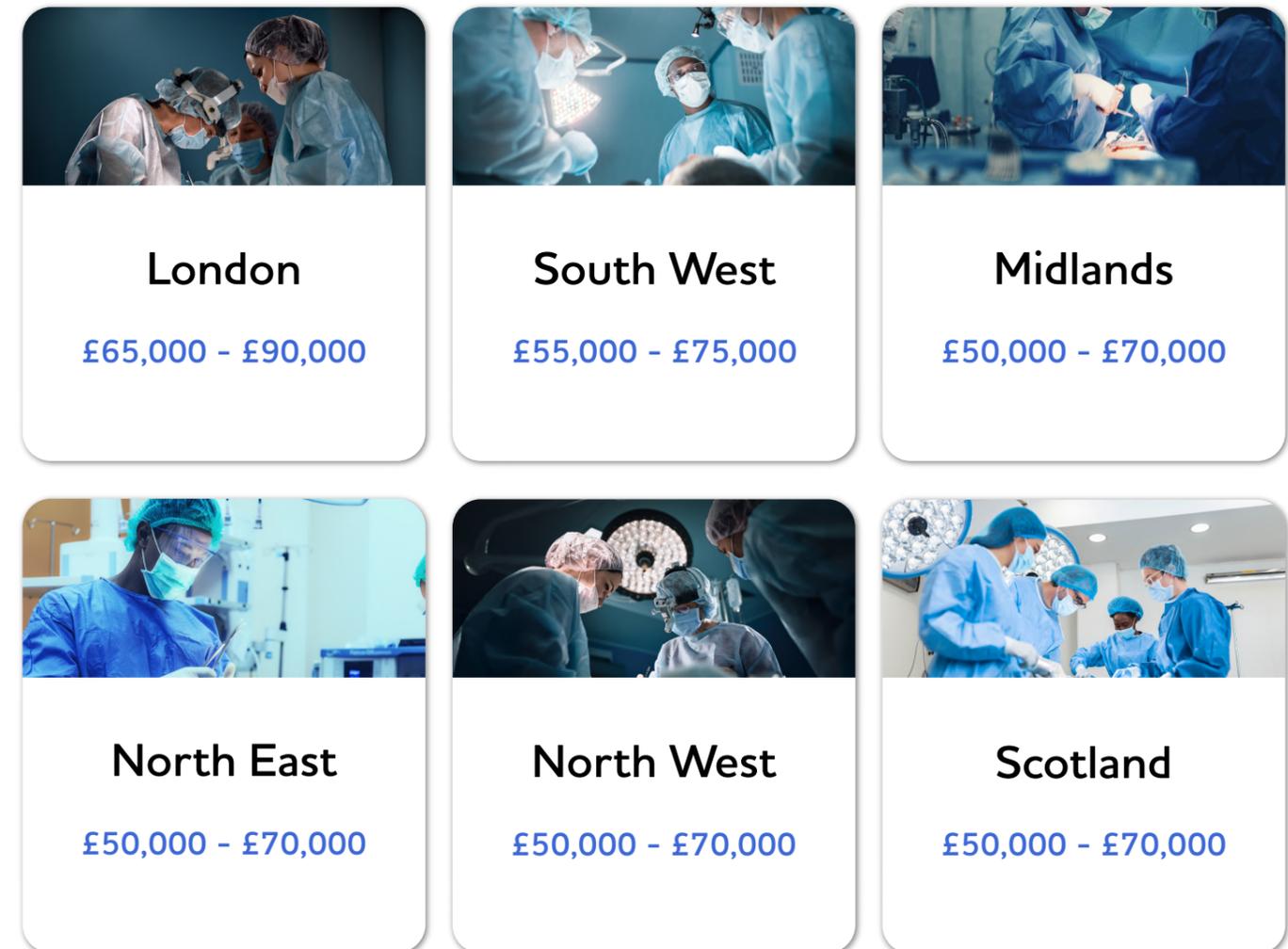


Theatre Manager

The Theatre Manager role has evolved significantly, reflecting the shifting priorities of the private hospital sector. With NHS contract activity reduced, theatre utilisation has become a key commercial metric. The most effective Theatre Managers are now as focused on throughput, governance, and efficiency as they are on clinical standards.

As opportunities to support the public sector in reducing waiting lists increase, it is essential to focus on more than just pay. The strongest candidates are drawn to employers offering autonomy, sustainable staffing levels, and the ability to shape service design. A Theatre Manager who understands operational flow, cost per case, and consultant engagement can directly influence both margin and patient experience.

In a market with limited movement, attraction will rely less on pay uplift and more on purpose, flexibility, and leadership culture.





Nursing (Secondary Care)

Nursing in both acute and secondary care has mirrored many of the pressures seen in other clinical areas over the last few years. There has been a notable 60% reduction in vacancies compared to 18 months ago, largely due to contract market fluctuations. Regional differences play a key role in attraction strategies, for example in the South, salary needs to reflect the high cost of living, while in the North, considerations like travel and accessibility become critical. Entry-level roles benefit most from robust development frameworks, while experienced nurses are influenced by service quality and leadership. The emergence of niche and community care providers is drawing candidates away from more traditional employers. Providers must streamline recruitment processes to remain competitive and focus on enhancing the candidate experience.

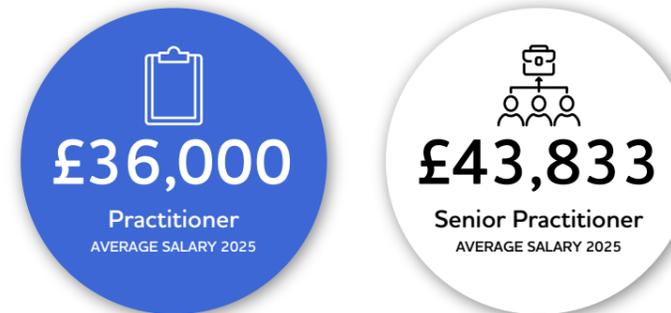
Staff Nurse (Ward, Outpatient etc) - NQ to Senior Nurse

 <p>South West £29,970 - £44,962</p>	 <p>London £29,970 - £54,000</p>	 <p>Midlands £29,970 - £47,000</p>
 <p>North East £31,892 - £50,000</p>	 <p>North West £29,970 - £44,962</p>	 <p>Scotland £31,892 - £50,000</p>

Theatres & Ophthalmology

The Theatre and Ophthalmology markets have undergone notable change. For the first time in over a decade, vacancy numbers have dropped, partly due to NHS contract stagnation. This has made ophthalmology more appealing to IDPs and scrub nurses. The community-based ophthalmology sector has grown in response to outsourced NHS contracts, but recent policy shifts and redistributed ICB contracts have led to redundancies in some private providers. Attracting and retaining talent now hinges on the working environment and manageable workloads. Candidates are sensitive to pressures and are inclined to move towards roles that offer more focused, less stressful conditions. Development opportunities and clear pathways from junior to senior levels are increasingly important in maintaining workforce stability.

Theatre Practitioners

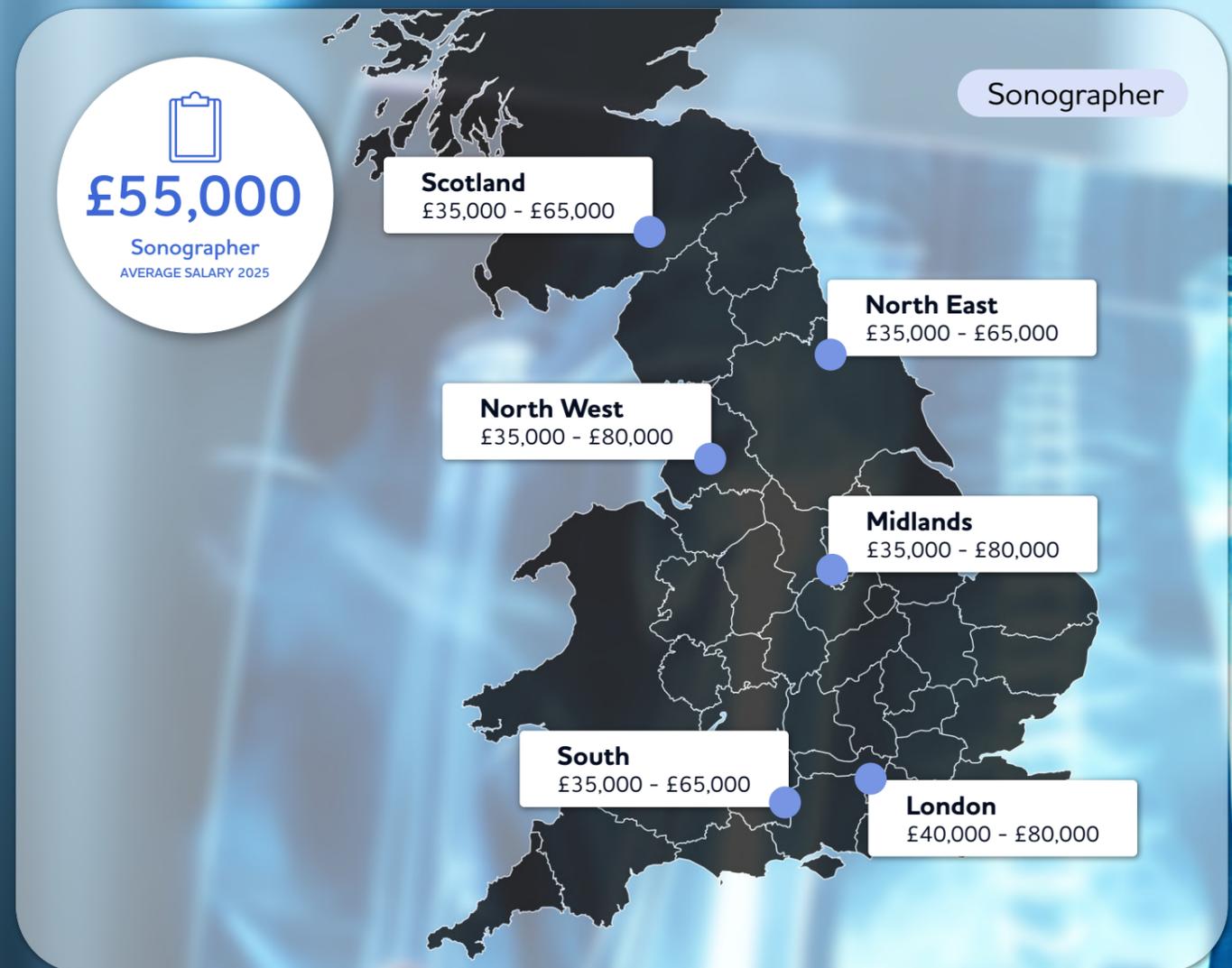
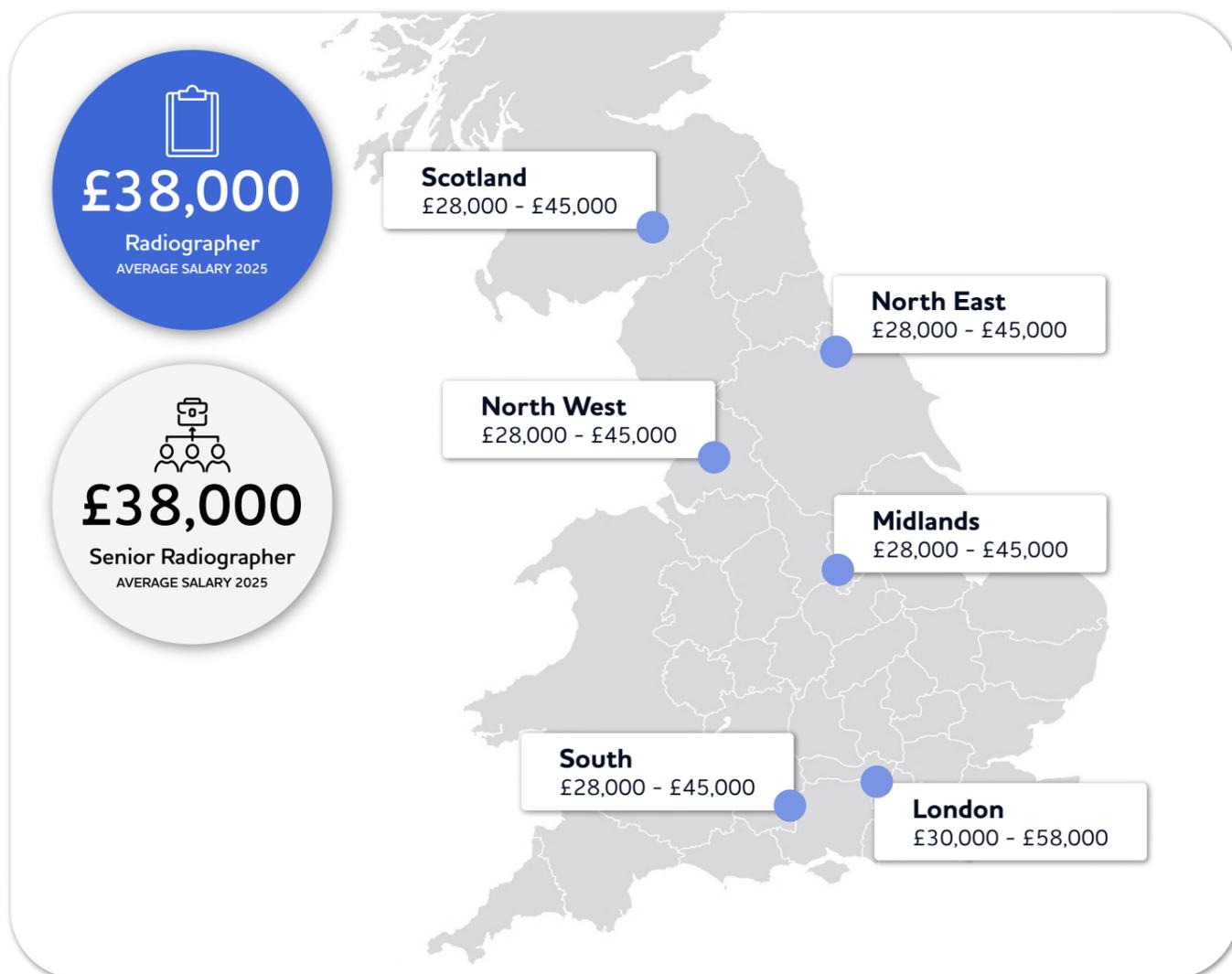


 <p>United Kingdom (Not Including London)</p> <p>Practitioner (Band 5 Equivalent) £30,000 - £37,000</p> <p>Senior Practitioner (Band 6 Equivalent) £37,000 - £45,000</p>	 <p>London</p> <p>Practitioner (Band 5 Equivalent) £35,000 - £42,000</p> <p>Senior Practitioner (Band 6 Equivalent) £42,000 - £51,000</p>	 <p>Outer London</p> <p>Practitioner (Band 5 Equivalent) £32,000 - £40,000</p> <p>Senior Practitioner (Band 6 Equivalent) £40,000 - £48,000</p>
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Diagnosics Radiography

Diagnosics remains a growing and dynamic area, propelled by NHS backlog challenges and increased private investment. Roles such as sonographers and MRI specialists are particularly difficult to fill, and salaries at entry level in this field have outpaced many other clinical disciplines as a result. The pressure on NHS services has allowed diagnostics to flourish, with private equity contributing to market consolidation. This ongoing expansion points to a future where attracting skilled candidates will become increasingly difficult. Success in this space depends on a provider's ability to offer clear career progression and competitive packages.

Radiographer & Senior Radiographer

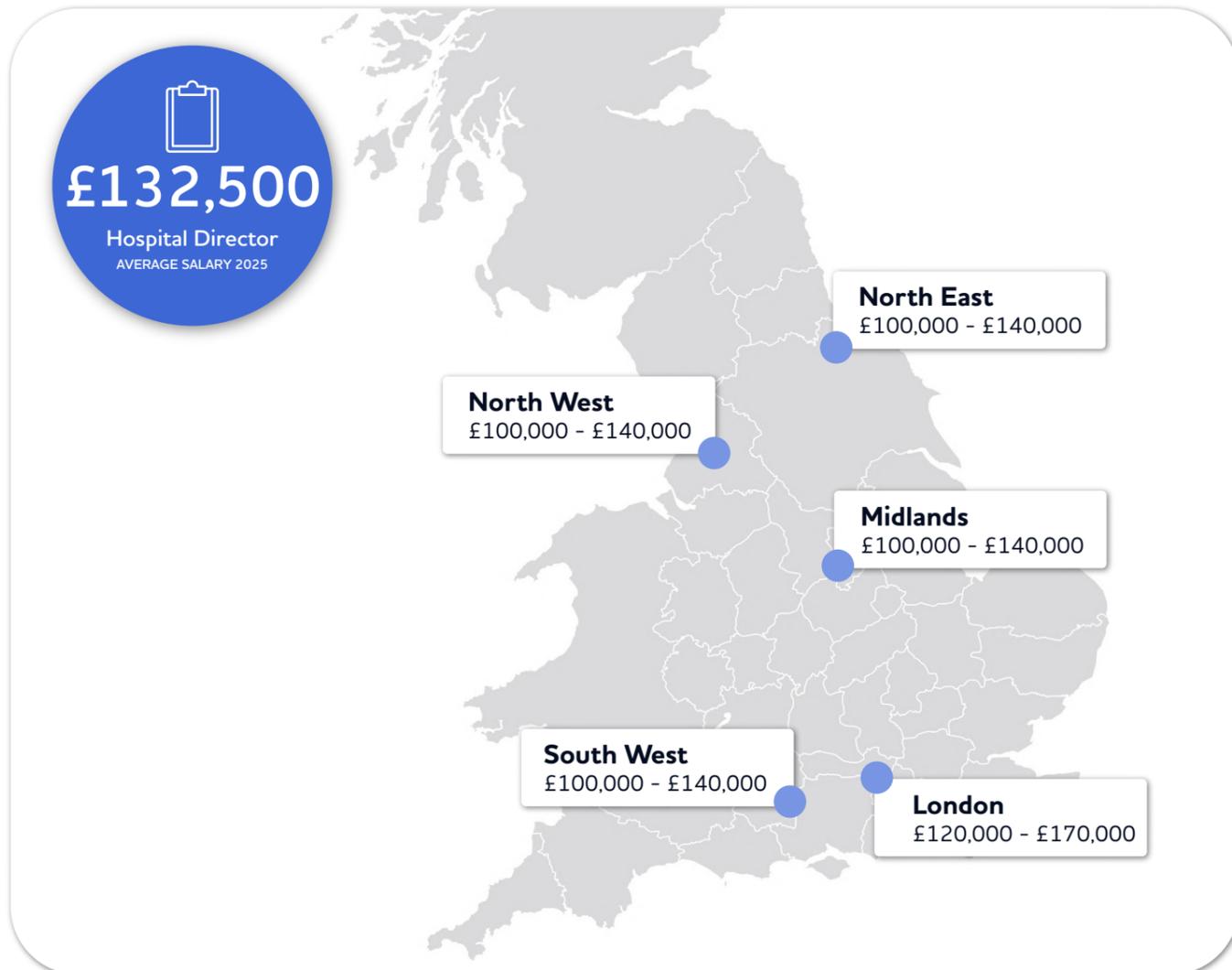




Hospital Director

Hospital director roles have become more complex over the past five years. While base salaries have slightly declined, the scope of responsibilities has widened. Many organisations are not only looking internally for directors, particularly from clinical services, but externally from commercial sectors such as retail and consumer healthcare. The recruitment process for these senior roles must be highly polished and persuasive, offering a clear vision of the business, its values, and its leadership structure. One of the key barriers to attracting talent in this area is the prevalence of timed bonuses that deter mid-year moves. Relocation incentives and strong branding can be effective tools in candidate attraction. Long-term career progression is also limited within this level, so thoughtful succession planning and candidate development paths are important for retention.

Management



Director of Clinical Services

The Director of Clinical Services has become one of the most complex leadership roles in the sector, bridging patient safety, governance, and operational delivery with board-level influence. Over the past 18 months, we have seen a wave of DCS appointments as hospitals rely on these roles to fill critical gaps. Groups are increasingly seeking leaders capable of delivering strategic change under tighter financial conditions. These individuals now play a central role in quality assurance, digital adoption, and operational turnaround.

While salaries at this level have largely plateaued, organisational stability and the quality of the executive team have become the key differentiators for attraction and retention. Many DCS candidates are motivated less by pay and more by influence - the opportunity to shape service lines, contribute to expansion plans, or progress towards Hospital Director positions. Packages and wider benefits support recruitment but securing candidates with the right breadth of skills remains the top priority for employers, while candidates seek organisations that offer more than just a salary.



London

£70,000 - £90,000



South West

£50,000 - £85,000



Midlands

£50,000 - £85,000



North East

£50,000 - £85,000



North West

£50,000 - £85,000



Scotland

£50,000 - £85,000



Pharmacy

The pharmacy market has seen a decline in acute and hospital roles, while community and online pharmacy sectors continue to expand. Candidates now place a high value on flexibility, working environment, and professional development. With independent providers and online retailers offering bespoke work conditions, larger providers need to adjust their offering to stay competitive. While salary is a factor, especially in retail pharmacy where pay has become more aggressive, work-life balance remains a core motivator. Hospitals can retain staff by promoting structured hours and better family-friendly scheduling. In this increasingly competitive landscape, process efficiency and clarity of proposition are crucial.



Pharmacist - Pharmacy Technician



London
Pharmacy Technician
£23,000 - £43,000
Pharmacist
£48,000 - £70,000



South West
Pharmacy Technician
£29,000 - £36,400
Pharmacist
£46,000 - £60,000



Midlands
Pharmacy Technician
£23,000 - £36,000
Pharmacist
£40,000 - £74,000



North East
Pharmacy Technician
£27,000 - £31,000
Pharmacist
£42,000 - £71,000



North West
Pharmacy Technician
£26,000 - £31,000
Pharmacist
£40,000 - £60,000

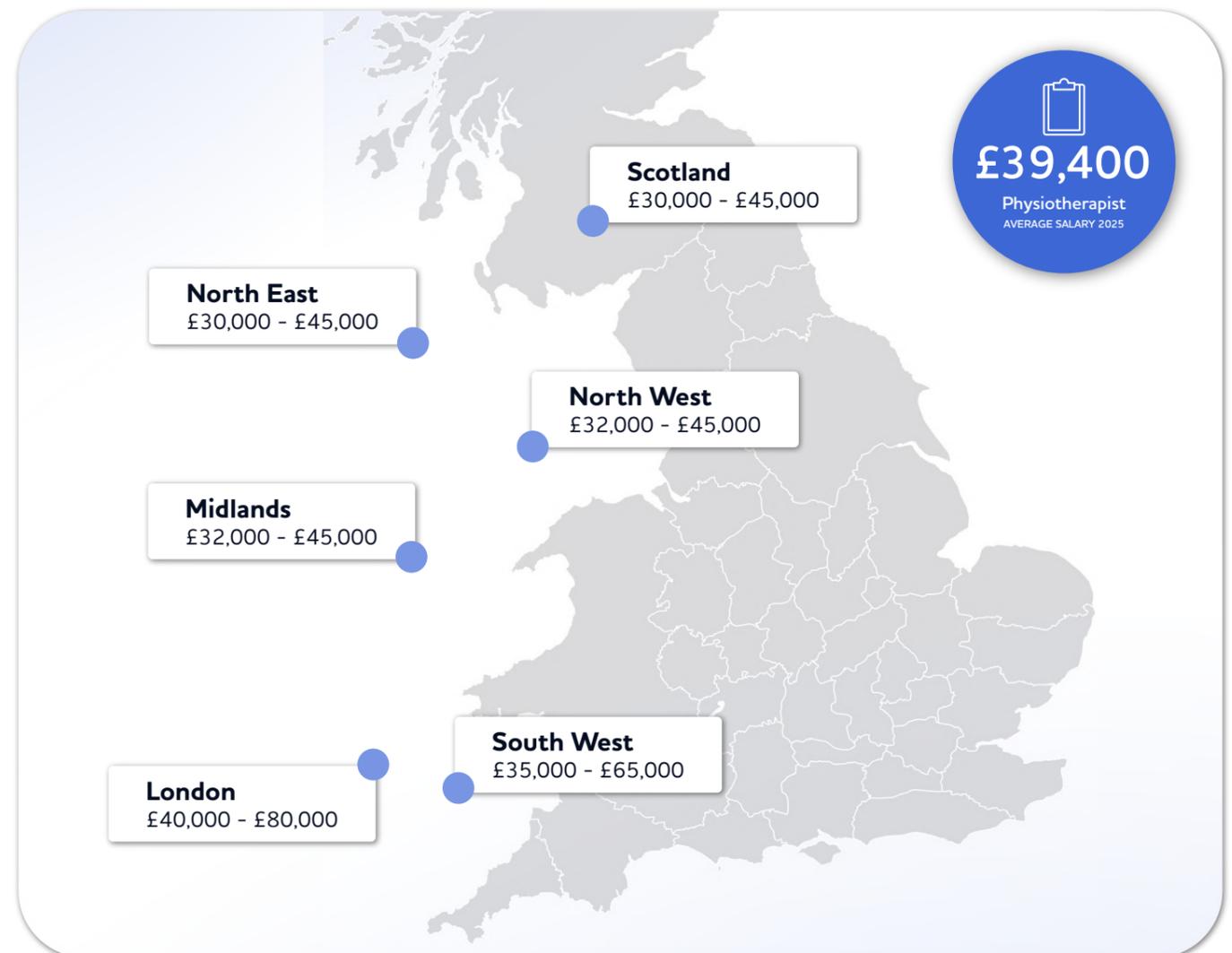


Scotland
Pharmacy Technician
£27,000 - £31,000
Pharmacist
£42,000 - £71,000

MSK Neuro Physiotherapist

Rehabilitation physiotherapy, particularly for MSK and neurological cases, is gaining traction in the UK, with several large private rehab facilities opening in recent years. While the market is still in its early stages, it is growing quickly. Attracting qualified physiotherapists is challenging due to the small candidate pool and the ease with which practitioners can become self-employed. Entry-level recruitment strategies must focus on training and development, without these the sector may struggle to scale. The appeal of wellness and self-managed practices means rehab roles must be well-supported and clearly positioned to be attractive.

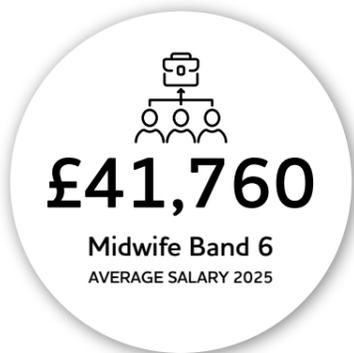
Physiotherapist - Acute Care





Midwife

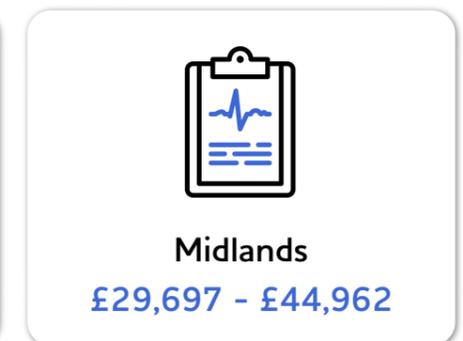
Midwifery remains a predominantly NHS-led sector with minimal presence in the private market. Salaries have stagnated due to NHS banding constraints. However, there are potential opportunities for private providers to offer midwifery services alongside fertility care as part of a complete patient journey. These offerings would appeal to candidates aligned with values of holistic and meaningful care. Despite limited growth at present, the right proposition could unlock new talent pools.



Hospice Nursing

Hospice care is an emotionally demanding field that struggles to compete with private sector pay. Candidates are often motivated by purpose rather than salary, and successful recruitment depends on benefits such as mental health support, flexible scheduling, and a strong workplace culture. While the financial rewards may be lower, providers who invest in their people and foster a values-driven environment can retain and attract candidates with a genuine commitment to palliative care. Training pathways for general nurses wishing to transition into this field should be a focus.

Staff Nurse & Senior Nurse

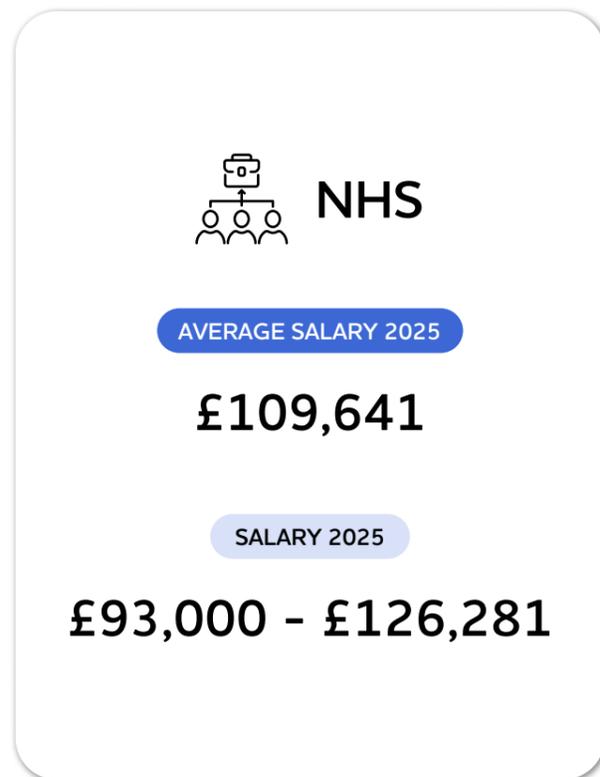




Consultants

The acute care consultant market remains under sustained pressure, driven by workforce shortages, rising demand, and ongoing NHS contract constraints. NHS consultant pay continues to lag behind workload intensity, with limited salary progression and uneven access to additional earnings through Clinical Excellence Awards, on-call supplements, and leadership responsibilities. As service pressures increase and working days regularly overrun, many consultants perceive a declining balance between responsibility, reward, and sustainability. This has not resulted in a mass exodus from the NHS, but has instead accelerated the growth of portfolio careers, with consultants seeking to mitigate risk while retaining job security and pension benefits.

The private acute care sector has consequently become more attractive, particularly for experienced consultants prioritising control over earnings, time, and clinical focus. Higher fee-per-session and procedure-based income, especially in high-demand specialties, remains a strong pull, but candidate decision-making is increasingly shaped by non-financial factors. Predictable finish times, reduced administrative burden, fewer on-call duties, and greater clinical autonomy are now central priorities. Consultants are highly selective, favouring reputable organisations with modern facilities, adequate resources, and values-led, collaborative cultures. The key challenge across both sectors is retention rather than attraction alone, with candidates gravitating towards roles that offer sustainable workloads, professional autonomy, and environments that support high-quality patient care without compromising work-life balance.



Team Breakdown

Our Healthcare experts

 <p>14 Years</p> <p>Senior Appointments</p> <p>Stuart Cousins Head of Compass Associates</p>	 <p>11 Years</p> <p>Senior Appointments</p> <p>Adam Brenton Director of Healthcare & Specialist Services</p>	 <p>5 Years</p> <p>Pharmacy Primary Care</p> <p>Jamie Cutts Associate Director</p>	 <p>8 Years</p> <p>Cosmetics</p> <p>Kane Pfeiffer Associate Director</p>
 <p>4 Years</p> <p>Surgical Hospitals Cosmetics Care at Home</p> <p>Louise Holmes Divisional Manager</p>	 <p>7 Years</p> <p>Surgical Hospitals</p> <p>Benedict Warnes Senior Principal Consultant</p>	 <p>8 Years</p> <p>Surgical Hospitals</p> <p>Rachel Smith Senior Principal Consultant</p>	 <p>11 Years</p> <p>Physiotherapy Pharmacy</p> <p>Natasha Isaac Senior Principal Consultant</p>
 <p>8 Years</p> <p>Radiology Diagnostics</p> <p>Tom Fitch Senior Principal Consultant</p>	 <p>4 Years</p> <p>Primary Care GP Care at Home</p> <p>Camila Mader Lead Consultant</p>	 <p>3 Years</p> <p>Veterinary Care</p> <p>Theo Hoten Senior Consultant</p>	 <p>2 Years</p> <p>Diagnostics</p> <p>Reza Abbasi Consultant</p>
 <p>1 Year</p> <p>Veterinary Care</p> <p>Carina Walker Consultant</p>	 <p>1 Year</p> <p>Healthcare</p> <p>Roberto Amos Consultant</p>	 <p>2 Years</p> <p>HR Finance Marketing</p> <p>Simon Codling Consultant</p>	

Conclusion

The last 18 months have been transformative for the private clinical recruitment market. A significant drop in vacancies has created a false sense of security among providers, but this lull is directly tied to reduced NHS contract spending. When NHS demand returns, competition for talent will intensify once again. Providers must proactively develop retention strategies, ensuring they are not only competitive in salary but also lead with clear development, values, and culture. For candidates, particularly those displaced from NHS roles or moving out of locum work, the private sector offers attractive alternatives with better work-life balance and structured progression opportunities. The ability of both clients and candidates to adapt to this evolving market will define future success.

For all enquiries, please contact:



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about our
commitment
to the sector

