In our main evidence (paragraph 53), we commented on the Scottish Government’s official vacancy figures. The official Scottish definition of a consultant vacancy is “A vacancy is a post which has been cleared for advert after being through the redeployment process (internal or external advert) and remains a vacancy until an individual starts in the post.”

The BMA believes these official figures used by the Scottish Government fail to capture the true picture of consultant vacancies across the country and its impact on doctors within the service. Vacancies not filled through the recruitment process can be removed temporarily from the overall establishment figure, and posts not yet cleared for advert are also excluded. Moreover the figures do not include the heavy reliance on locum doctors that boards are using to cover vacant consultant posts.

The BMA Scottish Consultants Committee (SCC) raised its concerns with the Scottish Government on a number of occasions, but progress has been frustratingly slow. Over the summer SCC finally put in a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all NHS boards in Scotland. Rather than replicating the ISD exercise, SCC asked for a breakdown on consultant posts which gave the total number of consultant posts in a board, how many were filled by a permanent post-holder and how many were otherwise vacant or covered by a locum.

The information we received from the FOI responses gave an overall consultant vacancy rate for Scotland of 11.32 per cent; the rate includes 5.39 per cent which are occupied by locum doctors. The true figure is likely to be even higher since NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde, the largest employer, did not provide any figures for the agency locums it employed to cover vacant consultant posts. NHS Grampian also did not provide complete figures. Even without complete information, and allowing for differences in timing, it is clear that the consultant vacancy rate in Scotland appears significantly higher than the official quarterly ISD figures.

- NHS Lanarkshire shows an official vacancy rate of less than 5 per cent
- The BMA FOI vacancy rate showed nearly 13 per cent, and includes a locum rate of nearly 5 per cent
- The Chief Executive of NHS Lanarkshire confirmed to the Public Audit Committee that 10 per cent of consultant posts were vacant in October 2014, with use of locums above that rate

Audit Scotland highlights this increasing use of locum doctors by boards to maintain services, and the Scottish Government acknowledges the additional cost to this cover. The recent Audit Scotland report on NHS Scotland reflects the impact of vacancies on staff workloads, which is not sustainable.

The Scottish Academy of Medical Royal Colleges also reports on Consultant appointment panels. The latest report shows that in the last year 28 per cent of panels were cancelled, of
which 42 per cent were due to a lack of applicants. The Academy suggests that this seems to be linked to shortage specialties.¹

³ The Scottish Academy of Medical Royal Colleges notes that they do not guarantee that the information in the report is complete or that the use of guidance in the report will lead to any particular outcome or result.