

National Guardian Freedom to Speak Up

Pulse survey – COVID-19

National Guardian's Office

The National Guardian's Office (NGO) is working to make speaking up business as usual. This work includes developing, promoting and supporting an expanding network of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, who work within their organisations to support workers to speak up and to effect culture change to make speaking up business as usual.

The NGO challenges and supports the health system in England on all matters related to speaking up.

Why we have carried out this survey

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is an unprecedented challenge to the health and care sector, putting enormous pressure on staff. At this critical time, Freedom to Speak Up is more important than ever. Workers and leaders of organisations will want to speak up, and they must be heard.

National Guardian's Office has carried out a short pulse survey to find out more about how speaking up is being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results of the survey show staff were continuing to speak up to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, and that speaking up arrangements had been adapted in many organisations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We appreciate leaders, like all staff, are under pressure in these unprecedented times. However, now more than ever, leaders must role model positive behaviours and ways of working. Speaking up should not only be encouraged, but those who speak up should be listened to, and their views and concerns responded to.

We want to take this opportunity to thank all staff for everything they are doing to support patients and their colleagues during this challenging time. We also want to thank those who took part in this survey.

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Methodology

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians on the National Guardian Office's directory were invited through email to take part in the survey, which was open between 3 PM on April 3rd until 5 PM on April 8th, 2020.

The survey consisted of 13 questions (see Annex 1).

Of those who received the survey, 31% (162) responded.

Seventy-eight per cent (78%) of those who took part in the survey worked for an NHS Trust or Foundation Trust. Nineteen per cent (19%) worked for other providers of healthcare services, and 3% worked for other types of organisations (such as commissioners and national bodies).

Results

Are you or is anyone in your organisation's Freedom to Speak Up network suffering from ill-health or self-isolating as a result of COVID-19?

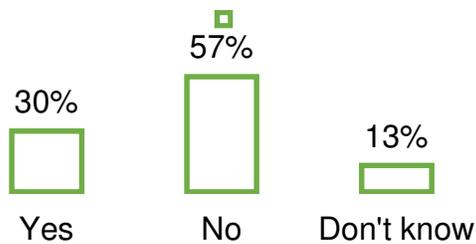


Figure 1

Have you, or has anyone in your organisation's Freedom to Speak Up network, been asked to take on other duties to support efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

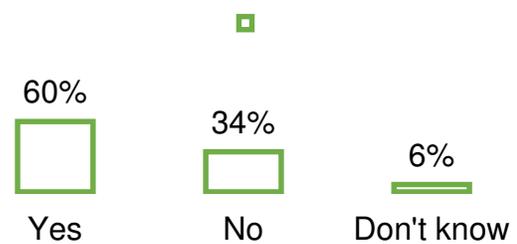


Figure 2

The COVID-19 pandemic was having an impact on Freedom to Speak Up Guardians or others in their organisation's Freedom to Speak Up networks (figures 1 and 2, above)

Thirty per cent (30%) of respondents said they or someone in their organisation's Freedom to Speak Up network had been suffering from ill-health or self-isolating as a result of COVID-19.

Sixty per cent (60%) of respondents said they or others in their organisation's Freedom to Speak Up network had been asked to take on other duties to support efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking up was continuing to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

Thirty-nine per cent (39%) of those who responded reported no change to the amount of speaking up in their organisation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Forty per cent (40%) said speaking up had 'slightly' or 'considerably' decreased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Twenty-one per cent (21%) reported speaking up had 'slightly' or 'considerably' increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Staff are currently focused on going to work and dealing with the pandemic that I think speaking up might be only when they are faced with barriers that stop them from doing their jobs, otherwise I think they will get on with things and maybe not speak up or address them in their work areas.”

What themes are being brought to Guardians?

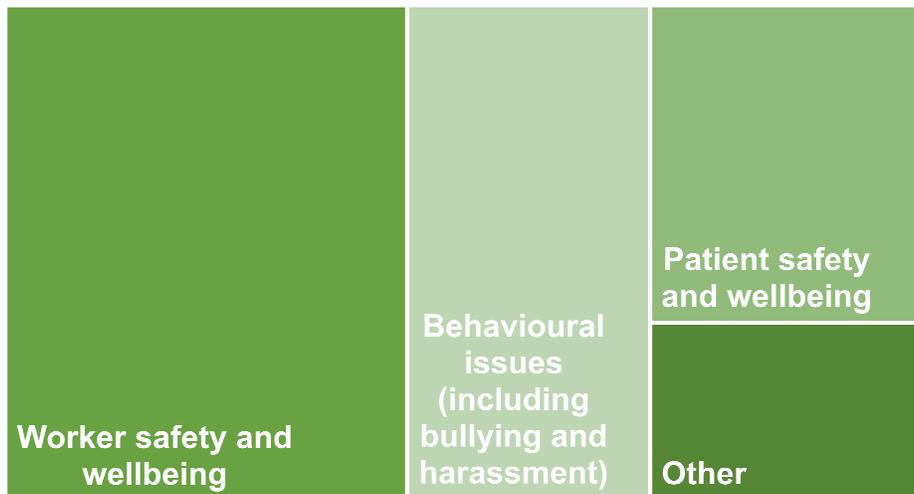


Figure 3

Worker safety and wellbeing was reported by the highest number of respondents (figure 3, above)

Seventy-six per cent (76%) of respondents said worker safety and wellbeing was a matter being spoken up about. This was followed by behavioural issues, including bullying and harassment, (46%) and issues to do with patient safety and wellbeing (34%).

“I am seeing less about bullying and harassment and more concerns about PPE and people behaviour on social distancing and people expressing concerns around mixed messaging on this for staff.”

“Usually I get most cases relating to staff interactions with each other. This has reduced, I think partly because a lot of staff are working from home so therefore are not directly interacting and partly because staff feel there are other priorities at the moment. The concerns have changed to being more about their own personal safety and wellbeing, as they are understandably anxious.”

Speaking up arrangements had been adapted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Most respondents (59%) said they, as Freedom to Speak Up Guardians or their organisations, had made changes to their speaking up arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This compares to 41% of respondents who reported no changes had been made to their speaking up arrangements as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Sixty per cent (60%) of those who responded to this question provided further information of how their speaking up arrangements had changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Around half of the examples of changes to speaking up arrangements referred to a move away from face-to-face meetings – whether that was with staff speaking up or with others in exercising their responsibilities as Freedom to Speak Up Guardians – and a move towards using other methods of communication such as audio and video calls.

“We have stopped face-to-face meeting at present and encourage phone conversation and email.”

“Virtual and telephone support for those wishing to speak up or those already raising concern.”

Around a third of respondents described the extra steps being taken to improve their organisation’s offer to staff when it comes to speaking up, including increased communications to encourage staff to speak up.

“Staff have been encouraged to raise any concerns as part of the COVID-19 daily update.”

“I have been sending a lot more... information online regarding speaking up, civility and kindness.”

“We have committed additional hours to the F2SU [Freedom to Speak Up] role and I have offered to check and respond to email contacts evenings and weekends.”

A small minority of respondents described other ways their arrangements had been adapted, including how their work tied in with wider initiatives to support staff wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some respondents described how their speaking up arrangements had been scaled back in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including examples of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians who have had to take on other duties.

“Have had to scale back and work clinically.”

Most Freedom to Speak Up Guardians reported no change in the level of support from their senior team

Sixty-two per cent (62%) of respondents said the level of support they were receiving from their senior team had not changed. Twenty-eight per cent (28%) reported the level of support they were receiving from their senior team had decreased. In comparison, 10% said the level of support they were receiving had increased.

Workers were being encouraged to speak up during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians (figure 4, see below)

Are workers being encouraged to speak up during the COVID-19 pandemic?

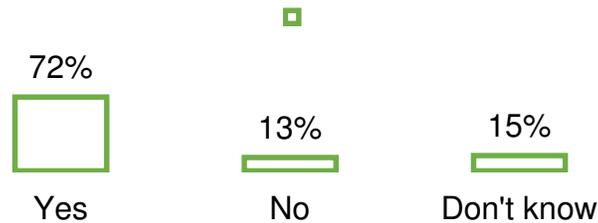


Figure 4

Seventy-two per cent (72%) of respondents said workers were being encouraged to speak up during the COVID-19 pandemic, as opposed to 13% of respondents who said workers were not being encouraged to speak up.

There were mixed views on how likely workers were to speak up during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before the pandemic started (figure 5, see below)

Thirty-one per cent (31%) of respondents thought workers are as likely to speak up during the COVID-19 pandemic as before. Thirty-one per cent (31%) of respondents thought workers were less likely to speak up than they were before the pandemic, whereas 28% thought workers were more likely.

How likely do you think workers are to speak up during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before the pandemic started?

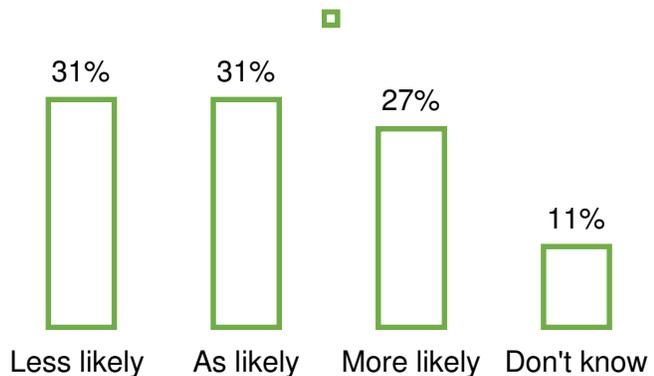


Figure 5

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We asked those taking the survey for their comments on how speaking up was being encouraged. We had 101 responses to this question. The majority of those who responded to this question gave examples of how they, or their organisations, had been encouraging speaking up during this time. This included regular communications (for example, bulletins, intranet, emails and posters) to remind staff of the importance of speaking up and the routes available through which staff could speak up.

"We are openly encouraging staff to speak up about any issues or problems staff are having."

"Regular communications encouraging staff to raise concerns about anything and everything."

A minority of those who responded to this question gave examples of speaking up not being prioritised at the time.

"I haven't seen any communication about speaking up since before the pandemic."

"It [speaking up] is not the current focus."

We invited guardians to share any other information to help us develop a picture of how COVID-19 was affecting speaking up. There were 74 replies to this question.

Around a quarter of those who responded to this question described the pressure Freedom to Speak Up Guardians or Freedom to Speak Up arrangements generally had come under in response to the pandemic.

"From speaking to other guardians, seems generally that the work is being squeezed out as FTSUGs are quite often parties with little or no protected time for their work and therefore in such difficult scenarios, this is likely to be exacerbated by re-assignment to other/frontline work."

"FTSU Guardian having to shield and potentially furloughed"

"Due to having to work in another role during pandemic not able to be proactive and also not able to meet with staff."

A minority of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardians who responded described the steps taken to improve the speaking up culture and arrangements in their organisations.

The following are a selection of other comments shared by those who answered this question.

"Please support us nationally by raising the concerns over PPE and access to testing."

"I think it would be useful to do this survey again at monthly intervals to see if the picture changes."

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"I have noted newspaper articles recently around BME healthcare staff, not only the desperately sad loss to the NHS of several frontline BME staff, but also in terms of BME staff being whitewashed out of Covid-19 celebrations by media outlets. This absolutely horrifies me and I hope that the NGO are considering and reflecting on these issues."

"The very considerable stresses placed on frontline staff are mitigated to some extent by the camaraderie and respect engendered by responding effectively to this crisis."

"My organisation is aware that being able to speak up is vital at all times, but even more so when staff are under so much additional pressure."

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What we will do next

We will continue to:

- **Provide support to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians**

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians are supporting workers in unprecedented times – listening, escalating and resolving issues. We know from our previous surveys this can take its toll on the wellbeing of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians. We have maintained our support throughout the Easter weekend, recognising that for many staff these are normal working days. We are promoting the 24-hour assistance helpline we provide for guardians through PAM Assist.

We will repeat the pulse survey on a monthly basis to understand the real-time situation for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, to provide intelligence to foster improvement for patients and those who care for them.

- **Provide information to workers on speaking up**

We will continue to provide information to workers about speaking up, including details of their Freedom to Speak Up Guardians on our Guardian Directory:

nationalguardian.org.uk/information-on-speaking-up/

- **Work with our partners**

We are working closely with partners who are receiving concerns from workers, including regulators, and representative and membership organisations. We will be sharing the results of this survey with our partner organisations, leaders of NHS and foundation trusts, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Mental Health, Suicide Prevention and Patient Safety.

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Annex 1: Survey Questions

Q1 Please indicate the type of organisation you work in:

Answer choices

- Trust or Foundation Trust
- Another provider of healthcare services
- Any other organisation (ALB, commission, etc.)

Q2 Are you rated by the CQC and, if so, what is your rating?

Answer choices

- Outstanding
- Good
- Requires Improvement
- Inadequate
- My organisation is not rated by the CQC

Q3 Are you or is anyone in your organisation's Freedom to Speak Up network, suffering from ill-health or self-isolating as a result of COVID-19?

Answer choices

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q4 Have you, or has anyone in your organisation's Freedom to Speak Up network, been asked to take on other duties to support efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answer choices

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q5 Is the amount of speaking up in your organisation increasing or decreasing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answer choices

- Decreasing considerably
- Decreasing slightly
- No change
- Increasing slightly
- Increasing considerably

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Q6 What sort of matters are being spoken up about (please tick all that apply)?

Answer choices

- Patient safety and wellbeing
- Worker safety and wellbeing
- Bullying and harassment or other behavioural issues
- Other

Q7 Is your organisation, or are you as a FTSU Guardian, making any changes to your speaking up arrangements as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answer choices

- Yes
- No

Q8 If yes, please describe.

Q9 How would you describe the levels of support you are getting as a FTSU Guardian from your senior team?

Answer choices

- The level of support I am getting has decreased
- The level of support I am getting is the same as usual
- The level of support I am getting has increased

Q10 Are workers being encouraged to speak up during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Answer choices

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q11 How likely do you think workers are to speak up during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before the pandemic started?

Answer choices

- Less likely than they were before the pandemic
- As likely as they were before the pandemic
- More likely than they were before the pandemic
- Don't know

Q12 Do you have any comments on how speaking up is being encouraged at this time?

Q13 Is there any other information that you wish to provide that will help us develop a picture of how COVID-19 is affecting speaking up?