



Press release

29th July 2021

Record numbers of healthcare workers speak up to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

Over 20,000 cases have been brought to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians throughout 2020/21

The National Guardian's Office today (29th July) publishes the latest [Annual Data Report](#), which analyses the themes and learning from the speaking up data shared by Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

There are over 700 Freedom to Speak Up Guardians supporting healthcare workers to speak up about anything which impacts on their ability to do their job. The number of cases brought to them last year represent a 26 percentage point increase on the previous year (16,199 cases). Freedom to Speak Up Guardians have handled over 50,000 cases since the National Guardian's Office first started collecting data in 2017.

Eighteen percent (18%) of cases involved an element of patient safety or quality of care – down five percentage points from 2019/20. The proportion of cases (30.1%) involving elements of bullying and harassment was also lower, (35% in 2019/20). These decreases are a continuation of a trend identified last year.

Whilst the proportion of cases which indicated detrimental treatment for speaking up has slightly decreased (3.4% in 2019/20 to 3.1% in 2020/21), over the course of the year the percentage of cases involving detriment increased from 2.7% in Q1 (April to June 2020) to 3.5% in Q4 (January to March 2021).

Similarly the decrease in the percentage of cases which are raised anonymously has slowed, with 11.7% being raised anonymously. With an increased number of cases, that means the actual numbers have increased overall. This remains a concern, as workers speaking up anonymously may be an indicator of fear and mistrust in the system.

Throughout the pandemic, workers have spoken up to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians about safety issues including staffing levels, PPE, social distancing, support for workers isolating, shielding or suffering from long Covid, and increased stress and exhaustion. In response to this feedback from Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, the National Guardian's Office has updated its guidance on recording cases and reporting data, adding a worker safety category.

Dr Henrietta Hughes OBE, National Guardian for the NHS, said, *“In this time of crisis, Freedom to Speak Up Guardians made sure that workers knew they were still listening and still there to support them. Over 84% of workers who gave feedback said that they would speak up again.*

“In the past five years, Freedom to Speak Up Guardians have handled over 50,000 cases. That is 50,000 opportunities for organisations to learn and improve. The impact of the work of guardians is outstanding and has moved the dial on the speaking up culture in the NHS and the whole healthcare sector.

“Yet, just as we see improvements, the pandemic has also highlighted how much more needs to be done. When leaders listen and act, great improvements can be made. Conversely, when leaders are defensive or victimise workers who speak up, it has a chilling effect on the whole system, putting patients and workers at risk of harm.”

For more information or interviews contact: comms@nationalguardianoffice.org.uk

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Notes for editors:

About this report

The year of the pandemic: A summary of speaking up to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

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This report summarises the cases raised with Freedom to Speak Up Guardians from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians submit non-identifiable information to the National Guardian’s Office (NGO) about the speaking up cases raised with them. The findings in this report are based on this information.

The majority (95.9% or 19,560) of cases were raised at NHS trusts. Where analysis in this report is focused on trusts only, this is made clear in the report.

Annex 1 sets out the data tables referenced in the report.

Key data:

- Between 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, **over twenty thousand (20,388) cases were raised with Freedom to Speak Up Guardians**. This is a 26-percentage point increase from the previous year (16,199)
- Quarter three (October to December 2020) had the highest number of cases reported to the NGO in a single quarter (5,334) since Freedom to Speak Up Guardians were established in 2016.
- Freedom to Speak Up Guardians continued to support workers from all professional groups to speak up. **Nurses and midwives** continued to account for the biggest portion (**29%**) of speaking up cases raised with Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.
- **Eighteen per cent (18%)** of cases raised with Freedom to Speak Up Guardians included an element of **patient safety/quality**, down five-percentage points from 2019/20. This decrease is a continuation of a trend we identified last year.
- **Thirty per cent (30.1%)** included an element of behaviours, including **bullying/harassment**, lower than 2019/20 (36%)
- **Almost twelve per cent (11.7%)** of cases raised to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians were raised **anonymously**
- **Detriment for speaking up** was indicated in **3.1%** of cases, down from 5.1% in 2017/18. However, over the course of 2020/21 the proportion of cases where detriment was indicated rose, up from 2.7% in quarter one to 3.5% in quarter four.
- Over four-fifths (84.3%) of people who gave feedback said they would speak up again.

About the National Guardian's Office

The National Guardian's Office works to make speaking up become business as usual in health.

The office leads, trains and supports a network of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians in England and provides learning and challenge on speaking up matters to the healthcare system as a whole.

Since the establishment of the NHS National Guardian's Office in 2016 following the recommendation of the Francis Freedom to Speak Up Review there is now a wide-ranging network of over 700 Freedom to Speak Up Guardians in England supporting workers in almost 500 organisations, in primary and secondary care, the independent sector and national bodies. www.nationalguardian.org.uk

About the National Guardian for the NHS



Dr Henrietta Hughes OBE FRCGP was appointed as the National Guardian in July 2016. She provides leadership and support to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians across England in national bodies, NHS and independent sector organisations to ensure that speaking up becomes business as usual. Previously a Medical Director at NHS England, Dr Hughes continues her clinical role as a GP in central London.