



**National
Guardian**

Freedom to Speak Up

Press release

31 March 2022

Warning signs that more needs to be done to support improvements in speaking up culture in the NHS – local and national leaders need to do more to listen, act and support.

[A report published by the National Guardian's Office today](#) (31st March) shows the experience of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians amid the continued pressure of the pandemic on the healthcare sector.

While the majority of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians who responded to the survey by the National Guardian's Office were positive about the speaking up culture in their organisation, there are warning signs that more action is needed.

The proportion of guardians who reported a positive culture of speaking up in their organisation has dropped by five percentage points on last year, to 62.8%.

This drop correlates with the findings of the 2021 NHS Staff Survey, published 30th March, where the proportion of staff who say they feel safe to speak up about anything which concerns them in their organisation has also fallen by more than three percentage points to 62%.

The proportion of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians who say that speaking up culture in the healthcare sector has improved has also dropped - from 80% in 2020 to 72% in 2021.

The network of over 800 Freedom to Speak Up Guardians in over 500 organisations throughout the healthcare sector provide an additional route for workers to speak up to about anything which gets in the way of them doing their job.

The National Guardian's Office surveys Freedom to Speak Up Guardians annually in order to understand how speaking up is supported within healthcare organisations. Their views give valuable insights into both how the Guardian role is implemented and what further support and learning is needed to make speaking up business as usual. The responses also reveal details about their perceptions of the barriers to speaking up and how detriment for speaking up is handled in their organisations.

There has been a drop in the proportion of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians who responded to the survey saying that their senior leaders support workers to speak up. This has fallen by 9 percentage points on last year, to 71%.

Although the majority believed that their senior leaders understand the role of Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, 1-in-10 of respondents say that senior leaders do not.

Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark, National Guardian for the NHS, said:

“This gives me cause for concern. Senior leaders should discuss the findings of this survey with their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian, and their workers, and look at their plans to continue to improve the speak up culture in their organisations.

As the sector works to recover from the pandemic, leadership in healthcare has never been more pressured. A strong speak up culture is essential in delivering high quality and safe services and supporting the wellbeing of workers.

Guardians can be a significant source of support for leaders in this, as they share themes of what workers are speaking up about - whether those are patient safety concerns, ideas for improvement, or issues affecting their work or wellbeing.

But to help create the right climate for change, leaders must listen and act on those concerns. Collaborative and compassionate leadership is essential to retain the loyal and committed workers who have given so much over the past two years.”

To support leaders in their understanding of the benefits and drivers of fostering a healthy speaking up corporate culture, the National Guardian’s Office is launching a new module as part of its [Freedom to Speak Up e-learning package](#), in association with Health Education England.

The first module – Speak Up – is for all workers and has been completed by over 46,000 people. The second module, Listen Up, for managers, focuses on listening and understanding the barriers to speaking up. A third and final module, Follow Up, for senior leaders will be launched next month.

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

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Notes for editors:

About the Survey

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Survey 2021: Senior leaders' essential role in Freedom to Speak Up

Published : 31st March 2022

Available from: nationalguardian.org.uk/

This annual survey aims to gain insight into the implementation of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role and how this could be improved. The responses from the survey help the National Guardian's Office assess developments and to identify and prioritise changes that we may need to make to support the Freedom to Speak Up network.

This is the fifth survey of its kind. You can read reports from previous annual surveys [here](#).

The survey was conducted online by Picker, an independent external research charity, on behalf of the National Guardian's Office. Picker analysed the survey findings and shared anonymised results with the NGO in a format in which no individual, or their responses, can be identified.

737 Freedom to Speak Up Guardians were invited to participate in the survey, which was open from 13 September to 31 October 2021. In total, there were 333 responses - a response rate of 45.2%.

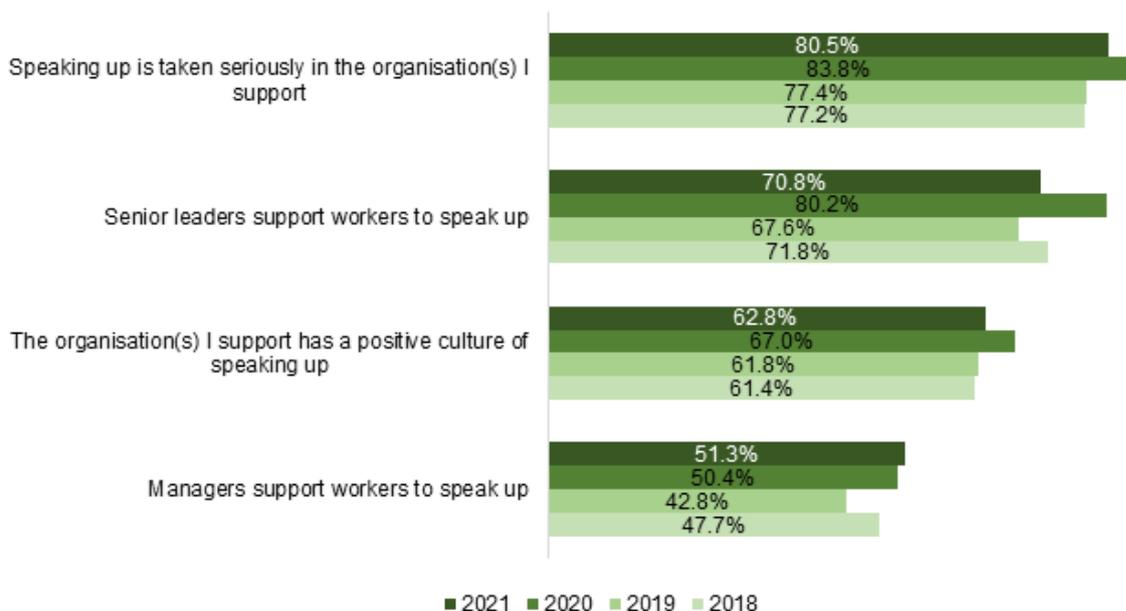
Please see [here](#) for the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Survey 2021 Question List.

Key findings:

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians were asked a variety of questions about the speaking up culture in their organisation.

- 72.8% of respondents say that speaking up culture has improved in the healthcare sector in the last 12 months.
- 74.3% of respondents say that speaking up culture in the organisation they support has improved in the last 12 months.
- The proportion of respondents saying their organisations has a positive culture of speaking up dropped by five percentage points to 62.8%.
- The proportion of respondents saying that senior leaders support workers to speak up fell by 9 percentage points to 71%.
- 1-in-10 respondents say that senior leaders do not understand the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.

- 13.4% of respondents did not agree that senior leaders were effective role models for speaking up.
- Most respondents spend most of their time on working reactively. A third have a 50:50 split between working reactively and proactively. Over 10% only work reactively.
- 72% of respondents agree that detriment is being taken seriously but nearly one in ten (9.5%) believe that the response to detriment is ineffective.
- Most respondents (72.1%) to the survey were confident that they were meeting the needs of workers in the organisation(s) they support as Freedom to Speak Up Guardian.
- Two-thirds (67.0%) of respondents that spent an equal amount of their time on the proactive and reactive aspects of the role thought that the allocation felt right to them.
- Less than half of respondents (48.7%) said that they had sufficient time to carry out their Freedom to Speak Up responsibilities. Almost a third of respondents (32.6%) said it was insufficient
- Two-thirds (65.6) of respondents had ring-fenced time to carry out their role, a 4.7 percentage point decrease compared to the previous year (70.3%, 2020).
- A greater proportion of respondents with ring-fenced time said that they had sufficient time to carry out their Freedom to Speak Up responsibilities. Twenty-seven per cent (27.2%) of respondents with ring-fenced time strongly agree that they had sufficient time compared to 5.5% of respondents with no ring-fenced time.



About the National Guardian's Office

The National Guardian's Office works to make speaking up become business as usual to effect cultural change in the NHS.

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.

The role of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians and the National Guardian were established in 2016 following the events at Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust and recommendations from Sir Robert Francis' Freedom to Speak Up Inquiry.

There are now over 800 Freedom to Speak Up guardians in NHS primary and secondary care and independent sector organisations, national bodies and elsewhere that ensure workers can speak up about any issues impacting on their ability to do their job.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians support workers to speak up when they feel that they are unable to do so by other ways. They ensure that people who speak up are thanked, that the issues they raise are responded to, and make sure that the person speaking up receives feedback on the actions taken. Guardians also work proactively to support their organisation to tackle barriers to speaking up.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians are appointed by the organisation that they support and abide by the guidance issued by the National Guardian's Office. They follow the ['universal job description'](#) issued by the NGO.

www.nationalguardian.org.uk

About the National Guardian for the NHS



Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark was appointed as National Guardian in December 2021.

She is a registered nurse with more than 30 years' experience in the NHS, higher education, voluntary and private sectors. Prior to her role as National Guardian, she was a non-executive director at NHS Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group where she was also Freedom to Speak Up Guardian.

She is the Independent Chair for the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Adults Board. She also worked with the NHS England New Care Models Programme for three years as a Clinical Associate and has been working as a consultant and coach with and in the NHS since March 2015. Her specialist clinical area is end of life care in which she was awarded her PhD.