
SUPPORTING THE WELLBEING OF FREEDOM TO SPEAK UP GUARDIANS

Further analysis of the
Freedom to Speak Up Guardian
Survey 2021

June 2022



**National
Guardian**

Freedom to Speak Up

National Guardian's Office

The National Guardian's Office (NGO) leads, trains and supports Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, who support workers to speak up and work within their organisation to help identify and reduce barriers to speaking up.

The National Guardian's Office supports and challenges the healthcare system in England on speaking up.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank Freedom to Speak Up Guardians for participating in the survey, particularly given the additional pressures on the healthcare system.

We also want to thank Picker Institute Europe for their expertise and support in running the survey.

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Foreword



The role of a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian is challenging, and never more so than during the past two years of the pandemic response.

From the uncertainty and fear of the first wave to two years later and the ‘new normal’, with services still under sustained pressure dealing with the care backlog and a workforce recovering from the impact of the pandemic, Freedom to Speak Up Guardians have continued to listen and support their colleagues.

Their role means they often support people in distress, and the confidential nature of these discussions means that guardians can carry a great deal of emotional weight. Yet Freedom to Speak Up Guardians tell us that although this affects their emotional wellbeing, the role can be the most fulfilling when they can affect change positively.

My role as National Guardian is to support these special people who want to do so much for their colleagues and the organisations they support. They are at the heart of everything we do at the National Guardian’s Office.

Which is why, as part of our annual survey of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, as well as asking about the role and implementation of the role, we have also asked guardians about their health and wellbeing.

This report is our second publication looking at the results of the 2021 Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Survey. It looks in more detail at the responses from guardians about their wellbeing and the support that is available to them, whether that’s from their leaders, their guardian peers, or from the National Guardian’s Office.

A key message from the survey highlights again the importance of adequate ring-fenced time for carrying out the role. We know from the proportion of guardians who have responded that those who do not have ring-fenced time feel that the role reduces their emotional and psychological wellbeing. They are also more likely to say that they spend all their time in the guardian role on supporting colleagues – the reactive elements of the role (20% compared with 5% of those with ring-fenced time).

This compares with the greater proportion of respondents with ring-fenced time (34.6%) said they split their time equally between supporting colleagues and supporting their organisation - the proactive element of their role compared to 21.7% of respondents with no ring-fenced time.

This highlights the importance of sufficient ring-fenced time on Freedom to Speak Up Guardians' health and wellbeing and their ability to carry out their role effectively.

Lack of ring-fenced time has an impact, not just on the day to day fulfilment of the role, but also on Freedom to Speak Up Guardians' ability to access support to carry out their role. Respondents with ring-fenced time were more likely to attend guardian network meetings and they are more likely to attend events organised by the National Guardian Office, and to open the fortnightly communications bulletin. Network meetings are valuable opportunities to share good practice and psychological and emotional support with their guardian peers.

The National Guardian's Office has repeatedly called for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians to have sufficient ring-fenced time to carry out their role. I ask all leaders to discuss the findings of this report with their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian and assess with them the amount of ring-fenced time needed to carry out the role and meet the needs of workers in their organisation. This means not only the proactive and reactive elements, but also that their guardian has sufficient time to access wellbeing resources, including their guardian networks.

It is critical that guardians have the emotional and psychological support they need from their leaders and their organisations so that, in turn, they can support workers who speak up to them.

We included questions around guardians' perceptions of the impact of their personal characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, seniority etc). Results indicate that this is a complex area which, among other things, should be viewed through an intersectional framework rather than through single characteristics. We found that there was awareness among Freedom to Speak Up Guardians of the potential impact of characteristics on individuals speaking up to them.

The National Guardian's Office will continue to work in partnership with others to understand further the impact of personal characteristics on speaking up and effective interventions to help overcome barriers.

Feedback is a gift, and at the National Guardian's Office we have used this survey to examine the offer we have to support Freedom to Speak Up Guardians and to inform our future work programme.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians provide a unique and valuable service to their organisations. As such they should be valued. Yet we have heard that some guardians face indifference from leadership, or in extreme cases that guardians have been victimised for effective performance of the very job expected of them.

I would encourage all leaders to use this survey as a prompt to have a conversation with their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian. Take the time to understand the challenges of the role and listen with gratitude and compassion to what they are telling you.



Dr Jayne Chidgey-Clark

**National Guardian for the NHS
June 2022**

Introduction

This is the second report regarding the results of our most recent Freedom to Speak Up Guardians survey. We undertake this survey annually to gain insight into the implementation of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role and how this could be improved. Feedback from respondents helps us assess developments since the launch of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role and identify and prioritise improvements that we may need to make to support the Freedom to Speak Up network.

We invited 745 Freedom to Speak Up Guardians 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 44.7%.

All survey questions were voluntary, so the number of responses to each question varies. Therefore, results are shown as a percentage of each question's total number of answers.

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

In March 2022, we published our [first report](#) looking at the 2021 Freedom to Speak Up Guardian survey results.

In this second report, we take an in-depth look at Freedom to Speak Up Guardians' perceptions in the following areas:

- The impact of their role as Freedom to Speak Up Guardians on their wellbeing
- The effectiveness of Freedom to Speak Up Guardian networks
- The effectiveness of the National Guardian's Office's support and outputs for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians
- The impact of their personal characteristics (such as their seniority, age and ethnic background) on their ability to effectively carry out their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role

This was the fifth survey of its kind. Please see [here](#) for reports from our previous surveys.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians provide an additional route to support workers to speak up, ensuring people are thanked, issues raised are responded to, and feedback given on the actions taken. They also work proactively to help identify and reduce barriers to speaking up, working in partnership with senior leaders to create a climate where speaking up, listening up and following up becomes business as usual.

The Freedom to Speak Up Guardian [job description](#) sets out the expectations of this important and far-reaching role.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians are expected to be appointed by their organisation following a fair and open recruitment process. They need enough time and resources to carry out the role's reactive and proactive elements. This means sufficient ring-fenced time, a physical setting where people know they can be reached, a budget, a case recording system that satisfies National Guardian's Office guidance and, importantly, a direct channel to and support from leaders in their organisations.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians cannot be effective in isolation and must maintain strong partnerships with senior leaders and decision-makers in their organisations. This ensures that they can function in accordance with role expectations, such as retaining their impartiality in investigations, not taking on a representative role, and being able to support anyone who needs it, even if on opposing sides of a dispute.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians meet regularly in national and regional networks. Led by Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Network Chairs - and under the banner of the National Guardian's Office - these confidential forums provide an opportunity for peer networking and support, as well as learning and development opportunities.

A diverse, national network

There are currently over 800 Freedom to Speak Up Guardians supporting workers in hundreds of healthcare organisations across England, including NHS Trusts, independent providers, hospices, primary medical services and non-provider organisations such as Care Quality Commission, NHS England and NHS Improvement and other regulators.

Guardians come from diverse backgrounds; for example, representing different professions, roles, levels of seniority and time allocated to the role. Individual organisations determine how the role(s) will be implemented to meet the expectations of the universal [job description](#) within the unique context of their organisation.

Making a difference

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians share non-identifiable information with the National Guardian's Office about the speaking up cases raised with them. This information provides invaluable insight into the implementation of Freedom to Speak Up.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians have handled over 65,000 cases in the past five years. That is 65,000 opportunities for organisations to learn and improve.

Workers speak up to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians about a range of topics, from patient safety and quality of care to worker safety and wellbeing and many other matters.

Feedback is an essential part of the speaking up process. Freedom to Speak Up Guardians ask those they support whether, given their experience, they would speak up again. Workers answered 'Yes' (84.3%) in most cases where feedback was provided.

Please see [here](#) for more information about the speaking up cases raised with Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

A challenging, rewarding and sometimes isolating role

Being a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian is a rewarding, challenging, and sometimes isolating role. Freedom to Speak Up Guardians must have the support, time and resources from their organisation and understand and take advantage of the other available support offers depending on what is right for them. This includes the support from buddies, guardian networks and the National Guardian's Office. The National Guardian's Office provides access to a workplace assistance programme - which provides a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week helpline where Guardians can seek a range of support on various topics, including wellbeing.

Guardians are often approached by people in distress, wanting to speak up about the most serious of matters. However, respecting confidentiality means they can be holding a large amount of sensitive information, some of which they are not able to pass on. This can affect the health and wellbeing of Guardians. So, it is essential that leaders recognise the need to engage regularly with their Guardians to understand what tailored support can be offered.

A lack of leadership support can severely undermine Guardians' ability to do their job. For example, not having a direct line of communication with the most senior leaders suggests little value is placed on the role. This can diminish the role in the eyes of workers, managers and sometimes Guardians themselves. In extreme cases, we have heard of Guardians being victimised for the effective performance of the expected job.

Our annual survey helps us understand more about the disparity of support that exists and informs our discussions about what more is needed.

Key findings

Guardian health and wellbeing

- Almost half (49.2%) of respondents of respondents said the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role reduce their emotional and psychological wellbeing.
- A third of respondents (33.7%) said the role had no impact on their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Seventeen per cent (17.7%) said the role improved their emotional and psychological wellbeing.
- A greater proportionate of respondents without ring-fenced time said that the role reduced their emotional and psychological wellbeing compared to their peers with some ring-fenced.

Support and resources from the National Guardian's Office

- Most respondents found most elements of support and output to be helpful, particularly the following: the fortnightly bulletins for guardians (93.1%), the National Guardian's Office website (89.6%) and the guidance documents (89.8%).
- A greater proportion of respondents with ring-fenced time said they found the support and outputs helpful.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Networks

- 87.0% of respondents had attended at least one network meeting, with over half (50.9%) saying they had attended three or more.
- Respondents with ring-fenced reported better attendance at regional network meetings. Less than one in ten (9.1%) of those with ring-fenced time had not attended any meetings compared to 21.1% of those with no ring-fenced time to carry out their role.
- Of those who attended at least one network meeting, 88.2% agreed or strongly agreed that the meeting(s) were helpful. Only 2.9% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- Nearly three-quarters (74.1%) of respondents supporting NHS trusts said that network meetings were very or somewhat effective in providing an opportunity to engage with the National Guardian Office. In comparison, 83.9% of respondents supporting other organisation types thought that network meetings were very or somewhat effective compared in this regard.

Personal Characteristics

- Majorities of respondents identified their seniority and profession as influential characteristics in terms of whether workers spoke up to them. In comparison, majorities or near majorities of respondents thought that their protected characteristics - like age, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation - did not influence whether workers spoke up to them.
- Compared to the 2020 survey results, a greater proportion of respondents said that the various personal characteristics identified- including seniority, ethnicity and gender - influenced whether workers spoke up to them.

- Majorities of respondents thought that protected characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity did not influence their ability to carry out their role as Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.
- Seniority was the only characteristic identified by a majority of respondents (57%, 2021) as influencing their ability to carry out their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.
- Compared to those in a majority group, a greater proportion of respondents from minority or subordinate groups within a characteristic - such as women, lesbians, gays and bisexuals and those from a minority ethnic background - were more likely to think that their characteristics were not only consequently, but positively so.
- Compared to those in a majority group, a greater proportion of respondents from minority groups within a characteristic - such as women, lesbians, gays and bisexuals and those from a minority ethnic background - were more likely to think that their characteristics were not only of consequence, but positively so.

Actions

Supporting the health and wellbeing of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians' health and wellbeing needs should be identified, assessed and met so that they can effectively and sustainably provide a vital, additional route for workers to speak up and work in partnership to bring about culture change.

- The **National Guardian's Office** will continue to seek feedback from Freedom to Speak Up Guardians to understand the effectiveness of the actions we have taken, as mentioned throughout this report, in response to their feedback.
- **Freedom to Speak Up Guardians** should understand and take advantage of the available support offers depending on what is right for them.
- **Leaders** should actively reach out and arrange regular conversations with their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian(s) about providing appropriate health and wellbeing support and seeking assurance that the support is effective.
- The findings in this survey and other research show the importance of sufficient ring-fenced time on Freedom to Speak Up Guardians' health and wellbeing and ability to carry out their role effectively. The National Guardian's Office has repeatedly called for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians to have sufficient ring-fenced time to carry out their role. The National Guardian's Office urges **leaders** to discuss the findings of this report with their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian and assess with them the amount of ring-fenced time needed to carry out the role and meet the needs of workers in their organisation.
- The National Guardian's Office has worked with colleagues in NHS England and Improvement on developing guidance on freedom to speak up for senior leaders in the NHS and organisations delivering NHS services. Scheduled for publication in Q1 2022/23, this resource includes guidance on how to support Freedom to Speak Up Guardians effectively. **Leaders** should effectively utilise this guidance.
- The **National Guardian's Office** will continue to work with NHS England and Improvement and the Care Quality Commission on methods to monitor compliance with the guidance about Freedom to Speak Up and the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.
- The National Guardian's Office has issued [guidance](#) on speaking up training for workers in healthcare. In addition, in partnership with Health Education England, it has launched a Freedom to Speak Up e-learning package. **Leaders** are strongly encouraged to undertake training to support their understanding of the benefits and drivers of fostering a healthy speaking-up culture, including improving their knowledge of and support for the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.

Supporting the effectiveness of Freedom to Speak Up Guardian networks

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian networks provide, among other things, opportunities for peer support and networking, and the sharing of learning, ideas and challenges and successes in a confidential environment. Network meetings are also forums for

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians to be informed about and have input into the National Guardian's Office's plans.

- **Freedom to Speak Up Guardians** are expected to join and participate in Freedom to Speak Up Guardian network meetings to benefit from the learning and development opportunities on offer and to give and receive peer support, which helps support their wellbeing.
- **Leaders** should encourage and facilitate the effective participation of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians in network meetings, including through the provision of sufficient ring-fenced time.
- The **National Guardian's Office** will continue to work with network chairs to support:
 - the refreshed expectations of the chair role
 - the effectiveness of network meetings, including agreeing on measures of success
 - including providing training and support to facilitate the above.

Enhancing the National Guardian's Office support for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

The National Guardian's Office leads, trains and supports Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

- The **National Guardian's Office** is committed to exploring effective levers to ensure Freedom to Speak Up Guardians are supported locally in accordance with expectations.
- The **National Guardian's Office** will produce guidance for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians to support effective and confidential case management processes, including when Freedom to Speak Up Guardians step down.
- The **National Guardian's Office** will continue to monitor feedback following the launch of the new style of foundation training and aims to work collaboratively on developing annual refresher training to support the needs of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians in diverse settings.

Appreciating how what we bring to the workplace impacts speaking up

Personal characteristics (like ethnicity, seniority and profession) may impact how we speak up and whether colleagues speak up to us. The National Guardian's Office is committed to continuing to promote much-needed discussion and reflection about the role of characteristics in speaking up.

- The **National Guardian's Office** will conduct research to build on our work and shed light on the impact of characteristics from workers' perspectives. We look forward to sharing further information about this research in the year's second half.
- The **National Guardian's Office** is working with the Workforce Race Equality Standard (WRES) team in NHSE to deliver training for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians on supporting inclusive speak-up cultures. The **National Guardian's Office** is committed to exploring how the learning from this can translate into future learning and development for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

- **Freedom to Speak Up Guardians** are expected to continue to reflect on the impact of their characteristics on speaking up in the organisations they support.
- We all need to reflect on what we bring as individuals to the workplace for speaking up to become business as usual. Therefore, we strongly encourage **leaders** to consider this as part of the Freedom to Speaking Up training.
- **Leaders** should work with their Freedom to Speak Up Guardian(s) to identify potential groups that face barriers to speaking up and work towards addressing those barriers in their speak-up culture improvement plans.

Health and wellbeing

Impact on emotional and psychological wellbeing

We asked respondents about the impact of their role on their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Forty-six per cent (45.5%) of respondents said the role ‘*somewhat reduced*’ their emotional and psychological wellbeing. In comparison, 14.8% said it somewhat improved it. A third (33.7%) said it had no impact on their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

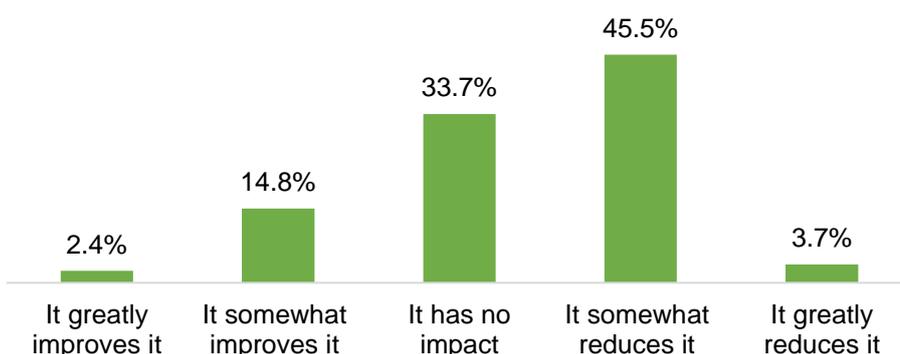


Figure 1: How do you feel your role as Freedom to Speak Up Guardian impacts on your emotional and psychological wellbeing?

We found variations in responses to this question, including the rating of the organisation supported by respondents. As can be seen in figure 2, a greater proportion of respondents supporting organisations rated *requires improvement* by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) said that their role reduced their emotional and psychological wellbeing.¹

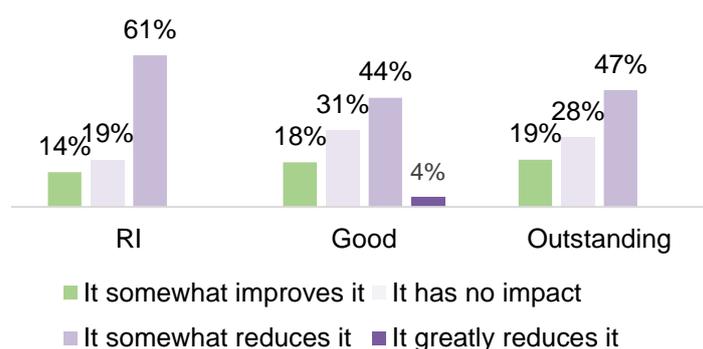


Figure 2: How do you feel your role as Freedom to Speak Up Guardian impacts on your emotional and psychological wellbeing? (CQC rating, where applicable)

¹ The Care Quality Commission (CQC) regulates and inspects many of the organisations with Freedom to Speak Up Guardians. The CQC gives one of four [ratings](#) to services they regulate: outstanding, good, requires improvement, and inadequate.

Similarly, compared to those with some ring-fenced time, respondents without ring-fenced time were more likely to report that their role as a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian was reducing their emotional and psychological wellbeing (figure 3).

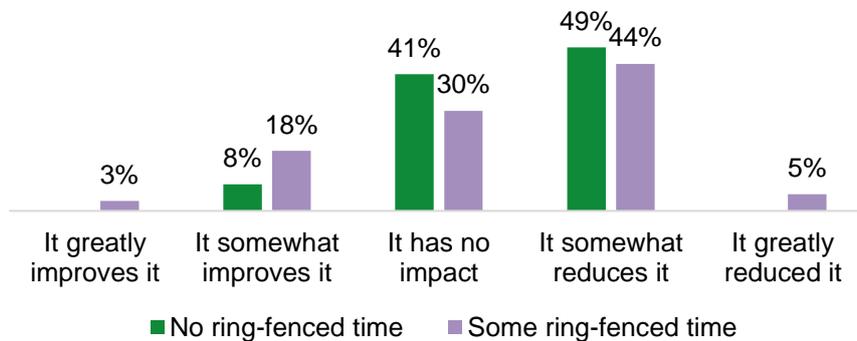


Figure 3: How do you feel your role as Freedom to Speak Up Guardian impacts on your emotional and psychological wellbeing? (ring-fenced time)

Support from employers

We asked respondents about the availability of health and wellbeing support from their employer.

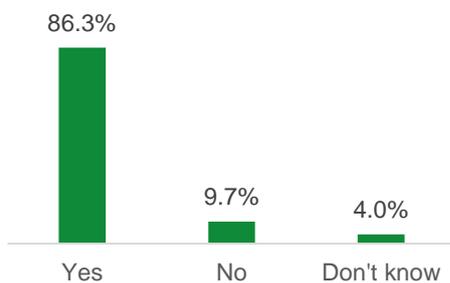


Figure 4: Does your employer offer you health and wellbeing support (such as access to occupational health or other emotional and psychological support services)?

Eighty-six per cent (86.3%) of respondents said their employer offered health and wellbeing support. Ten per cent (9.7%) said such support was not offered (figure 4).

Respondents who had been offered health and wellbeing support were then asked whether they had accessed this support and, if so, how helpful or unhelpful they found it.

Most respondents (74.1%) said that they had not accessed the support. Most of those who had accessed it – 90.8% - said they found the support helpful.

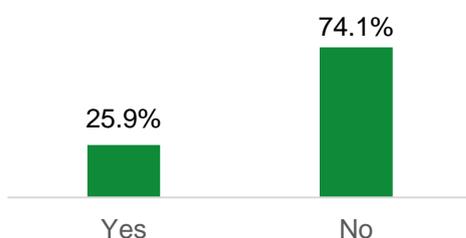


Figure 5: Have you accessed this support?

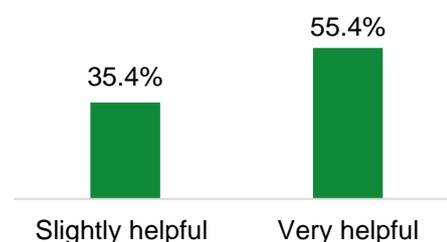


Figure 6: How helpful or unhelpful did you find it?

Respondents were invited to share further comments to explain their answers. Below, we have grouped their feedback thematically.

The impact of the role itself

Respondents described how the role was simultaneously rewarding and challenging. Respondents referred to their satisfaction from supporting workers and making a difference in their organisations. However, many also described the invariable impact on their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

“Supporting others to speak up, supporting leaders and managers to learn how to encourage speaking up directly to them within their teams and seeing the gradual culture change really warms the soul!”

“Like most roles in the NHS, the role of Freedom to Speak Up Guardian is simultaneously very satisfying and sometimes stressful...”

"the offers for wellbeing are useful, sometimes though you cannot help but feel weighed down emotionally by the concerns raised and feel worried for others' wellbeing. This is, at times, hard to handle and can lead to increased stress and anxiety, no matter how good the support is, it doesn't take away those feelings. Good job I am a resilient individual and, on the whole, can cope."

“Some days what people tell me really hits home, and then others lift you. It's a balance.”

"... the role both negatively and positively impacts on my health and wellbeing. Sometimes negatively due to the burden of risks and emotional/psychological charge I am left carrying and the frustration of trying to get anything done but it also positively impacts: nothing compares to doing a fulfilling role and seeing changes big or small and the impact on staff."

"On occasions, a speaking up concern can cause you to worry. On another day, when a staff member tells you how grateful they are for your support and how "I could not have achieved this without you," you feel very positive."

...

Some respondents spoke about the frustrations resulting from misunderstandings of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.

"I have been questioned as to why I am involved...: "This has got nothing to do with Speaking Up". On each occasion, having explained why it does have something to do with Speaking Up, I have been able to get them to understand. But the process of defending my position cannot be done without some stress! I have [been] given protocols as to exactly how I will operate, which I have resisted as this compromises my independence... but this has also been stressful. Occasionally, I have been concerned enough... to... lose sleep over those cases."

"... although managers say they support Freedom to Speak Up I still hear comments like "the staff member will get what they want by speaking to Freedom to Speak Up". This does not discourage me but makes me more determined that staff have a voice."

...

Similarly, respondents mentioned the challenges when colleagues don't take speaking up matters seriously.

"[It is] also worrying when concerns raised are not seen as a priority by some senior leaders, or not taken seriously."

...

Many respondents mentioned how the role could feel lonely and isolating.

"Being a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian can be lonely and isolating. This is due to the confidentiality you have to abide by. Standing by the ethics of confidentiality and not sharing any concerns raised."

"It can be a stressful, emotional and isolating role."

The availability, use and effectiveness of support

A common theme among the responses received was that support was available, though this was not the case across the board.

"My employer regularly sends emails promoting wellbeing, yoga, and reflexology sessions. In addition, there are helplines for mental health support and a weekly newsletter to encourage people to share their experiences at work."

"It is difficult to deal with sometimes when you have distressing Freedom to Speak Up conversations at the end of the day or on a Friday afternoon when there are limited avenues to download or seek advice."

...

While some respondents had accessed support, others noted that they had not needed it.

"I can 'self-manage'."

"I can access support and have not yet felt the need to do so"

...

Many respondents distinguished between general support offers and ones that were more direct and tailored (such as supervision, buddying and networks). Respondents reported that the latter was more practical, though not always available.

"I have a psychologist for Supervision which is really important to work out how and why I have responded to speaking up in a certain way, what I could have improved on or done differently."

A safe, confidential space for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians is essential."

"Recognition of own support mechanism is more useful than a generic referral to Occupational Health. Self-support is accessed through the regional buddy and Clinical Supervision monthly session within own organisation provided by Safeguarding team."

"The support is not necessarily what I would find helpful... Supervision, where I could talk through concerns and challenges, would be far more useful, [but]... is not available."

"Peer support from other Guardians in the network and from a buddy is often more effective as they understand the challenges well."

"... all Freedom to Speak Up Guardians should have regular access to Clinical Supervision... Supervision or professional counselling provides a safe space to discuss the emotional pressures and helps build resilience."

...

Some respondents spoke about the challenges of accessing support through their employer.

"I am concerned about the potential conflict of interest in accessing emotional wellbeing support from inside my organisation."

"It is very difficult to access support internally when you feel so protective about colleagues' anonymity. Always thinking carefully about what the next word out of your mouth is going to be can be draining, so I don't access internal support."

"In our organisation, occupational health can only be accessed with a referral from your line manager... Therefore, I cannot access this service to discuss matters confidently. In the first instance, I would need to share my reasons with... [my line manager] to enable a referral."

...

Respondents suggested potential ways to address these challenges.

"Identifying supervision resources externally is hard and requires additional financial resources. One idea is for [the organisation] ... to cooperate and offer support to a neighbouring guardian."

Support from senior leaders and others

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians do not work in isolation. Their ability to carry out their role effectively depends on the willingness of others to work together.

Another theme in the respondent's feedback was the importance of support from leaders in organisations. Many respondents mentioned the positive impact of this support on their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

"I feel my emotional wellbeing and mental health has not been impacted by the role, and I think this is because ... [the organisation/s I support is] very supportive of me and keen to do whatever I need to help me achieve in the role."

"I receive regular 1:1 meetings with two executive directors.. and 1:1 meetings with the non-executive director. These are sufficient and supportive."

"I'm being praised for my work so far. I have gained positive feedback and reassurance I'm doing well from those I engage with and help, plus senior management. It's a positive and supportive space right now."

...

However, many respondents reported that they did not have this support.

"I feel the wellbeing of... guardians was overlooked by our senior management throughout the pandemic as we were not considered 'frontline workers', and the emotional impact upon us was underestimated and poorly understood, despite our speaking up numbers being very high and the emotional intensity overwhelming."

Ring-fenced time: amount of work

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians should have ring-fenced time to effectively carry out their essential role. Under two-thirds (65.6%) of those responding to our latest survey said they had ring-fenced time to carry out their role, down from 70.3% in 2020. Please see our preceding [report](#) for further information.

Some respondents spoke about the demands on the role and its impact on their wellbeing. Similarly, some respondents reported not having the time to utilise support.

"... Being continuously on call is cumulatively the most stressful part of the role – this particularly applies if only one person is doing it for a whole Trust."

"There is not enough time to access wellbeing support. This should be offered as ring-fenced time."

"It's just a lot of work to do in a short space of time and whilst they say there's no expectation to work outside your hours the reality is that it will be hard not to"

"Don't have the time to get through the work and seek support for the impacts of undertaking the work on me."

Response from the National Guardian's Office

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians' health and wellbeing needs should be identified, assessed and met so that they can effectively and sustainably provide a vital,

additional route for workers to speak up and work in partnership to bring about culture change.

- The National Guardian's Office has called for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians to have sufficient ring-fenced time to carry out their role.
- In association with Health Education England, we have launched the third and final module of our [Freedom to Speak Up eLearning package](#). This module is designed for leaders at all levels to help them foster a speaking up culture in their organisations, including improving understanding of and support for the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.
- We have worked with NHS England and Improvement on the development of *Freedom to Speak Up for the NHS and organisations delivering NHS services*, which offers guidance to leaders on, among other things, effective support for the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.

Support and resources from the National Guardian's Office

The National Guardian's Office provides a range of [support and resources](#) for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, including:

- Regular webinars on topical issues to share learning and provoke discussion.
- Guidance documents to help understanding of the practical elements of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian role.

We asked respondents how helpful they found this range of support and resources.

The following three items attracted the most positive ratings:

- 93.1% of respondents said that the fortnightly bulletins for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians was very or slightly helpful
- 89.8% of respondents said that the guidance documents from the National Guardian's Office were very or slightly helpful
- 89.6% of respondents said the National Guardian's Office website was very or slightly helpful

Please see the figure 7 below for a further breakdown.

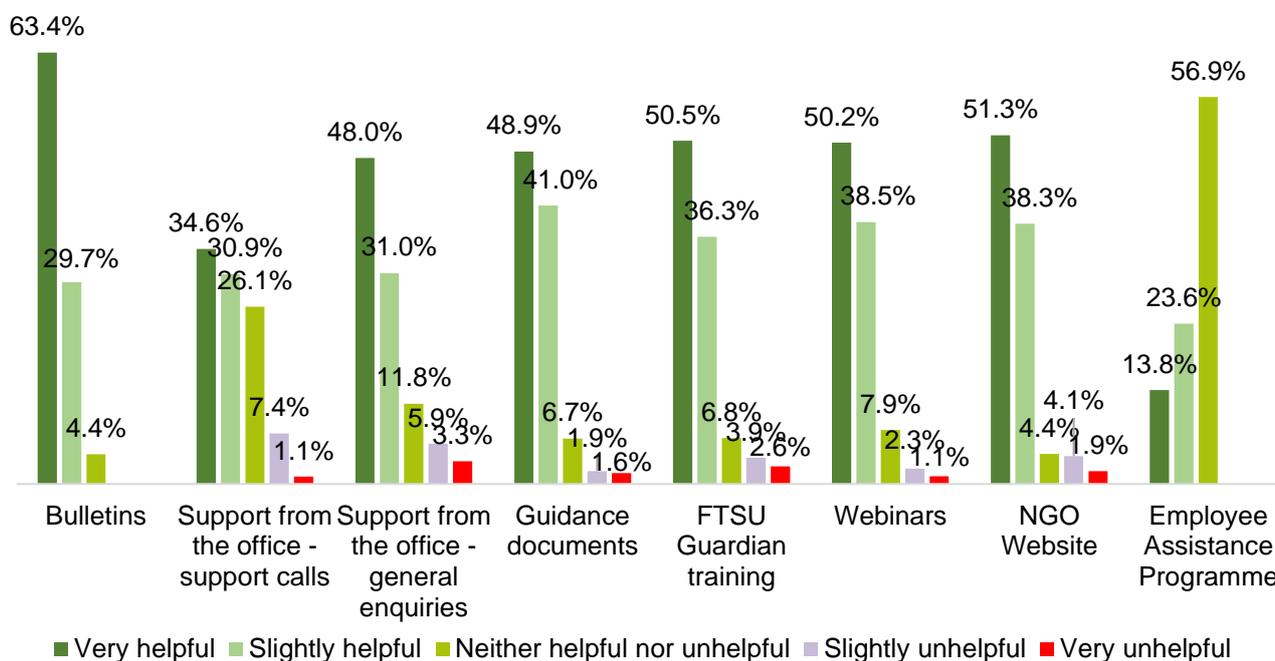


Figure 7: How helpful or unhelpful do you find the following from the NGO

- The item that attracted the least positive ratings was the workplace assistance programme arranged and offered by the National Guardian's Office to Freedom to Speak Up Guardian.

- Most respondents (56.9%) said they found the employee support programme neither helpful nor helpful.
- The qualitative comments from the survey indicated that many respondents had not heard of the service and were unaware of how it could help and support them in their role as Freedom to Speak Up Guardian

Ring-fenced time

Responses varied depending on whether respondents had ring-fenced time.

Compared to respondents without ring-fenced time, a greater proportion of respondents with ring-fenced time said they found the support and resources very or somewhat helpful.

The variation in responses was smaller regarding items such as the bulletins and the website. However, the divergence was starker for items like webinars, general enquiries and support calls, where a greater proportion of respondents answered 'not applicable'.

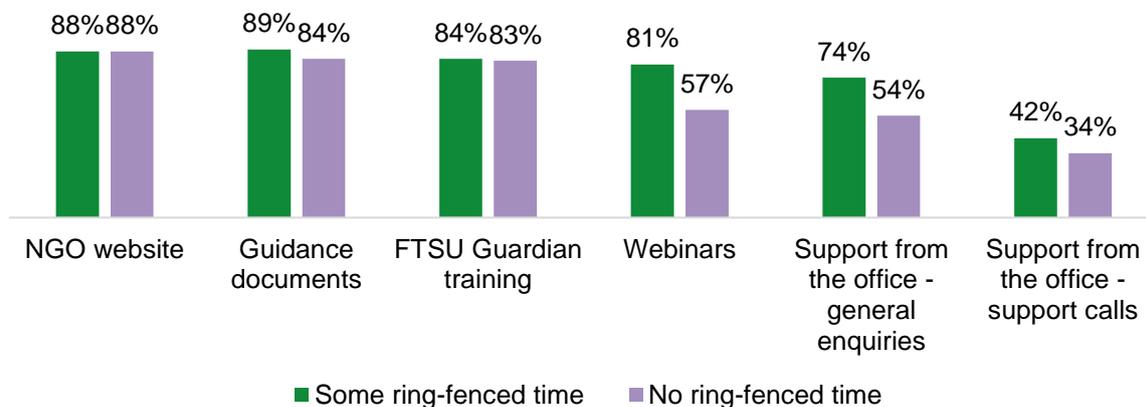


Figure 8: How helpful or unhelpful do you find the following from the NGO: percentage of respondents who answered, 'very helpful' or 'slightly helpful'.

The results may reflect that utilisation of support and resources, such as webinars and support calls, often require more time than receiving and reading bulletins and accessing resources on the National Guardian's Office website, which respondents without ring-fenced time may be less likely to have spare. This was also indicated in some of the comments shared by respondents:

"It is incredibly difficult to read all the literature and guidance documents as I do not have protected time for my role."

"I've had little time to engage with you or your website regularly due to my workload, and only employed in this new role part-time."

Respondents were invited to share further comments to explain their answers. Below, we have grouped their feedback thematically.

Training for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

Respondents provided feedback on the training they received from the National Guardian's Office. Some respondents said the training was helpful, though many said it could be improved.

"I feel the training... was helpful."

"I am unsure whether it equipped me for the role. I think more real-life examples of speaking up and how to support would be helpful. I think refresher training via the NGO would also be helpful."

"I would like to receive more training from the NGO and more continuous development by looking at case studies."

"it was a good start... [with] a good presenter. However, it was nowhere near as detailed as I thought it would be... [T]here were two case studies.... [but] these were not relevant."

...

The National Guardian's Office adapted its training in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of this was reflected in the feedback from some of the respondents.

"I feel that the original Guardians training was extremely helpful. However, I am unsure that the short virtual introductory sessions would provide the relevant information for guardian update training."

"Due to Pandemic did not receive the full induction – only had a short half-day induction – would welcome more when... possible."

...

Respondents also shared suggestions regarding training for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

"I would like very advanced training on how to deal with queries. Also, we need to be offered Mental Health First Aid and other wellbeing training as Guardians."

...

National Guardian's Office communication and engagement with Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

Respondents stated that the fortnightly bulletins and Lunch & Learn webinars for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians were informative and a good way to stay connected. However, some noted that the topics covered in the webinars were more useful than others.

“The bulletins and webinars are really good at ensuring we are in touch and up to date with what is happening.”

...

Respondents commented on the value of measures to reach all Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

“The recorded webinars are helpful as sometimes it is hard to attend live.”

...

Respondents welcomed the NGO’s revamped website, launched in 2021. However, many respondents noted areas for improvement, including navigation and maintenance of the website.

“I use the website regularly, but I don’t always find it easy to find what I’m looking for.”

...

Respondents also mentioned the responsiveness of the NGO and its general engagement with Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

“I am pleased at the responsiveness of the NGO to feedback from Guardians – new items have been added to the website, and the data collection protocols have been much improved as a result.”

...

However, respondents noted areas for improvement in this regard.

“Freedom to Speak Up Guardians are often the last to know or find out.”

“I don’t think the engagement and consultation are there.”

...

Several respondents mentioned that they were not aware of their ability to access the workplace assistance programme arranged by the National Guardian’s Office.

The effectiveness of National Guardian’s Office support for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians

Respondents commented on the responsiveness/effectiveness of the support and resources from the Office.

“The office has been helpful with queries around submitting data...[..]... I have always received great communication.”

...

However, many said that this was an area for improvement. Broadly, this feedback fell into four areas:

- NGO responsiveness

- Practicality of support from the NGO
- Availability of guidance, including on stepping down
- Universality of the NGO's focus

"The office response time can sometimes be slow, which is frustrating if it is a quick question/query."

"When a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian contacts the NGO, they are usually asking for urgent support – to get a response that says you may respond within three weeks is not helpful."

"Some guidance/advice could do with being pinned down more carefully; it can be a little too ambiguous."

"I asked a question... I ... did not get a response."

"There isn't guidance for how Freedom to Speak Up data is handled when a Guardian leaves their organisation."

"I think everything still assumes an NHS environment. As a Hospice, that is not always applicable."

...

Improvement suggestions

Respondents shared suggestions for improvement.

"It is difficult to find the section for confidential guardian information. It would be far better to have a sign-in section - that may be linked to the portal - that allows access to all the information."

...

Response from the National Guardian's Office

We have acted in response to feedback from Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, including the following:

- We developed a password-protected area of our website for Freedom to Speak Up Guardians only to access wellbeing and development resources. The resources pages include a newly designed Freedom to Speak Up Guardian logo and associated communications resources.
- We updated our auto acknowledgement to emails, and since March 2022, we have started monitoring and improving our response times for enquiries.
- We have promoted the workplace assistance programme offered to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Networks

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians are expected, as part of the role, to join and participate in regional and national network meetings with other Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

These meetings seek to provide the following:

- Peer support and networking
- Sharing of learning, ideas, challenges, and successes in a confidential environment
- Being informed about and inputting into NGO plans
- Contributing to and furthering the Freedom to Speak Up agenda

We asked respondents how often they had attended networks meetings:

- 87.0% of respondents had attended at least one meeting
- 50.9% of respondents saying they had attended three or more meetings

Over a fifth of respondents (21.1%) with no ring-fenced time to carry out their role reported that they had not attended any meetings. In comparison, 9.1% of those with ring-fenced time had not attended any meetings. Similarly, a smaller proportion of respondents with no ring-fenced time said they had attended three or more meetings (39.4%) compared to respondents with ring-fenced time (57.2%).

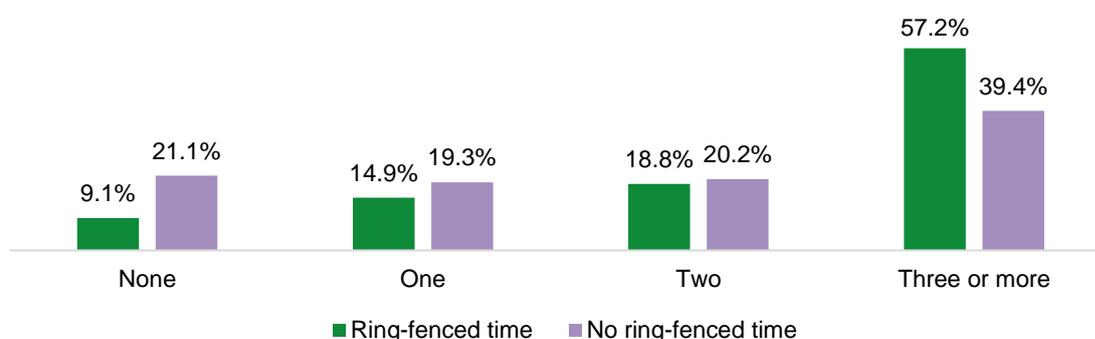


Figure 9: How many network meetings have you attended in the last 12 months?

Of those who attended at least one network meeting, 88.2% agreed or strongly agreed that the meeting(s) were helpful. Only 2.9% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Respondents also shared their views about how well network meetings met their aims and objectives.

In four out of five areas identified, over half of respondents said the network meetings were very effective. Thirty-six per cent (36.2%) of respondents said the

meetings were effective (very or slightly) in providing an opportunity to engage with the National Guardian’s Office.

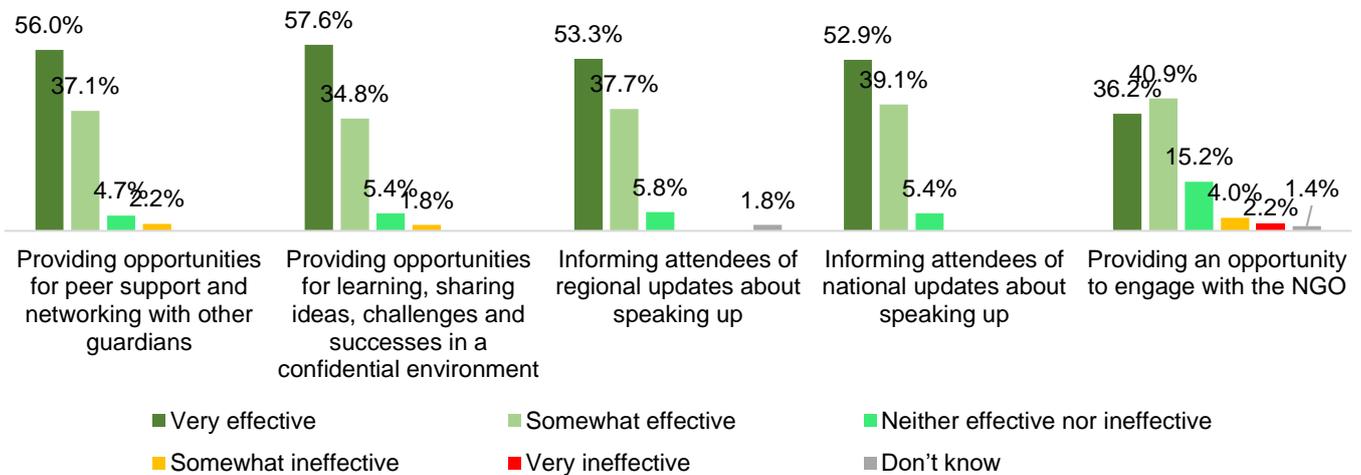


Figure 10: How effective was the network meeting(s) for...

Organisation type

A larger proportion of respondents supporting NHS trusts found network meetings very or somewhat effective in most of the areas identified compared to respondents supporting other organisation types (figure 11, below). The only area where this was reversed was when it came to the effectiveness of network meetings in providing an opportunity to engage with the National Guardian’s Office. In this regard, 83.9% of respondents supporting other organisation types agreed the network meetings were very or somewhat effective compared to 74.1% of those who supported NHS trusts.

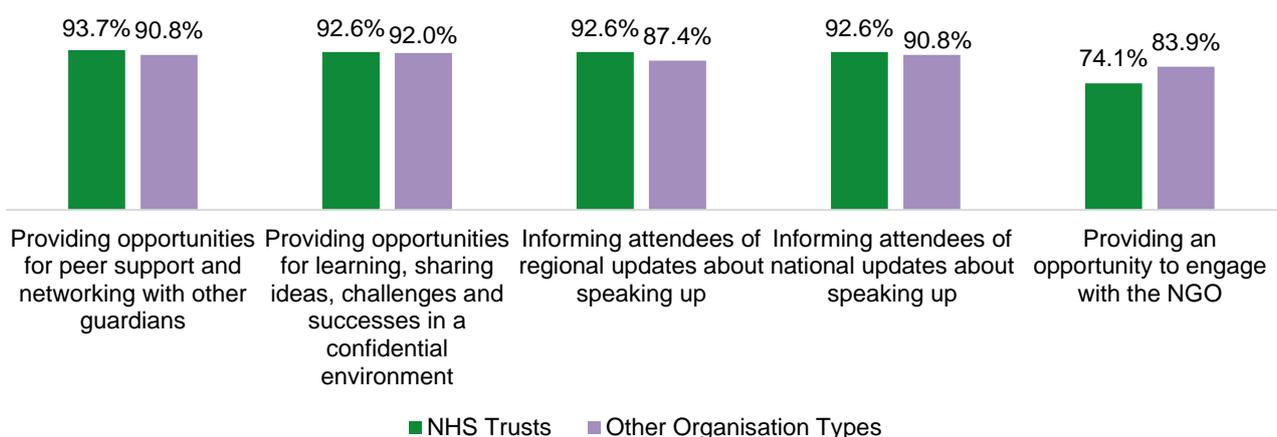


Figure 11: Somewhat/very effective responses by organisation type

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide further comments about network meetings.

The impact of Freedom to Speak Up Guardian networks

Feedback highlighted the importance of these meetings to Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, including in the following areas:

- engagement and networking
- information sharing, learning
- peer support
- case handling

"The meeting has provided the opportunity for networking, sharing ideas and supporting each other."

"I don't know what I'd do as a Guardian without the networks. It's a crucial forum for support and guidance."

"It is really helpful when other Guardians (particularly experienced ones) prioritise these meetings -it provides valuable learning opportunities for new guardians in post."

...

Many respondents mentioned how the role can be isolating and lonely and how the networks are invaluable for support. Respondents also referred to the importance of network meetings as a safe, confidential space.

"These meetings are essential lifelines for Freedom to Speak Up guardians whose roles are often quite isolated... ."

"Being a Guardian can sometimes feel quite an isolating role - being part of the network makes it feel like you're part of a team with similar experiences who can support each other."

...

Many respondents praised their peers in their networks.

"I find the community spirit and openness helpful, the sincerity of each individual."

"Our Chair... is fantastic."

"We have established a very strong, effective, supportive and collaborative group. There is always someone ready and willing to offer help and guidance."

...

Respondents also commented on the network opportunities to engage with the *National Guardian's Office, including how this could be improved.*

"... it was very helpful to have someone from the office attend."

"The most useful elements are the discussion of issues ... presentations from the NGO and other organisations for information or as case studies and the ability to ask questions."

“Due to the recent changes within the NGO, there has been limited input from them.”

“Information provided by regional NGO colleagues tends to be what has already been received via the Bulletin. It might be helpful to understand any cases they have supported or talk through some case studies.”

...

Planning and running of network meetings

Respondents commented on the planning and running of network meetings.

“Meetings are really ... well run”

...

Many also shared feedback on how this could be improved.

“I also feel more structure would be helpful - often minor points can be discussed, at length, without any resulting decisions or actions.”

“In terms of sharing of learning, more time could be given for engagement, e.g. active participation after a presentation, so probably having fewer items on the agenda to allow meaningful discussions would be helpful.”

“...earlier announcements of dates... .”

“It's a little nerve-wracking to attend at first - I would find it super helpful if there was a guardian mentor appointed for me rather than leaving it to newly appointed Guardians to approach people.”

“It would be helpful if they are recorded so that they can be accessed afterwards.”

...

Some respondents said that they had not always been invited to attend or were aware of the dates when network meetings were taking place.

“I have not been invited to these meetings but would much like to attend.”

“NGO could provide regional chairs with updated contacts list for Freedom to Speak Up guardians in the area ensuring that all guardians are linked into the correct region.”

Several comments highlighted the pandemic's impact on their engagement with their networks, particularly the move towards virtual meetings. Many welcomed the move towards virtual meetings, remarking how it has made it easier for peers to engage. At the same time, several respondents mentioned that they missed in-person meetings.

“Easier to attend them online as would struggle to attend if needed to travel although maybe one face-to-face a year would be good once permitted to improve networking.”

“Due to Covid, we had to move to virtual meetings. This has helped with the engagement and regularity of the meetings and, therefore, the peer support. It

would, however, still be great to see each other face to face once or twice a year, as conversations flow far better when you are in a room together."

"Doing online meetings means that peer support is dramatically affected."

"I think whilst things are online, it's difficult to network well as it can sometimes feel like there are friendship cliques but nothing I can't cope with. In-person, I would approach people to chat but can't do this in the same way and not sure we can do more than share small talk. So many members don't make any effort to engage, so it's difficult to hear other voices or views and to be a newbie I'm conscious that people don't know me yet, and it may seem strange for them to answer my questions or trust me."

...

Some commented that they didn't always have time to engage with their networks.

"It would be great to have dedicated time to attend these network meetings as I have found them incredibly informative and supportive. However, I don't feel the Guardian role is fully recognised by Trust leaders as there is much more to it than just casework."

"I have a very busy schedule in my full-time job, and as there has been such a staff shortage, it is very difficult to get time allocated for the Freedom to speak up role."

...

Some respondents noted that the meetings focused on particular organisation types.

"I am a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian not [in] a Trust. I find much of the info is understandably biased towards acute trusts."

"I find the specific hospice network meetings most beneficial as the issues and challenges are similar. I did not find the regional network meetings helpful as the organisations were much bigger, and there were staff members/teams responsible for this."

...

Some respondents said that networks and meetings are not always inclusive.

"The... network is starting to become ... 'cliquey' and ... non-inclusive."

"I attend the meetings for my learning but often do not find them a pleasant experience. The more 'established' Guardians dominate the discussions, and I feel they can be quite patronising to the newer Guardians... In addition, I feel my views and comments are not valued by the network - often comments aren't even acknowledged."

"I feel most vocal attendees and dominant personalities monopolise the network."

...

There were varying views on the frequency of meetings.

“The frequency of the meetings increased during the height of the pandemic- I miss them now!”

“Can only attend a proportion as the meetings are too frequent.”

...

Reflections on the broader infrastructure of networks

The comments also provided areas for improvement that the National Guardian’s Office can take forward to ensure the network meetings are fully effective in supporting Freedom to Speak Up Guardians.

“We have had a regional group for .. years, and many of us rely on it for a safe space to confidently share difficult conversations. However, as the membership has expanded, this feels less like the appropriate place for this conversation and more business-driven.”

“Regional forums... are well executed. However... much of this is based on the goodwill of the regional chair, how the appointment is conducted into this role and what resources are allocated to the role.”

“I do not believe the appointment of the Chair and Vice-Chair ... followed an open and transparent process.”

“I wonder how effective full-region meetings will be in terms of mutual support as the number of Guardians grows - but an advocacy of buddying relationships may help this.”

“I see the variety of offers going on regionally for the Freedom to Speak Up guardian networks, and sometimes I feel a little sad that there isn't more consistency... I recognise that we have to coordinate these speakers and that regional needs might differ, but it would be good to have that offer, and those details shared for all regions.”

“Admin support for the meetings is required as it is very time-consuming producing accurate minutes.”

...

Response from the National Guardian’s Office

The National Guardian’s Office has an ongoing programme of work with network chairs to support the effectiveness of Freedom to Speak Up Guardian networks, including the refreshed expectations of the network chair role, the including agreeing on measures of success to facilitate effective network meetings, including providing training and support to facilitate the above.

Personal characteristics

As human beings, we possess a range of characteristics, visible or hidden, biological or social.

Our unique combination of these means that we all bring something special to the workplace. However, these characteristics may also impact on how we speak up, and how and whether colleagues speak up to us. For example, people will respond to our seniority (or their perception of our seniority). They may have a response to our accent or make a judgement based on our personal and professional relationships. We also possess what are described in law as 'protected characteristics', like age, ethnicity, sexual orientation or religious/political beliefs, and our colleagues will also have a response to these.

Personal characteristics: the make-up of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian network

Freedom to Speak Up Guardians come from all walks of life.² Figure 12 (below) shows the demographic breakdown of respondents to our two most recent annual surveys (2021, 2020).

Characteristic	2020		2021	
Gender	Male 24%, 66	Female 72%, 194	Male 19%, 56	Female 80%, 232
Ethnicity	White 89%, 240	Minority ethnic 9%, 25	White 85%, 246	Minority ethnic 15%, 44
Age	51+ years old 51%, 138	50 or below 48%, 128	51+ years old 57%, 165	50 or below 43%, 126
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual / straight 89%, 233	Gay, lesbian or bisexual 6%, 17	Heterosexual / straight 87%, 251	Gay, lesbian or bisexual 6%, 17

Figure 12: Breakdown of respondents to the 2020 and 2021 Freedom to Speak Up Guardian survey: percentage and actual figure

As can be seen in the table above, there has been an increase in the percentage of Freedom to Speak Up Guardians from minority ethnic backgrounds responding to the survey from 2020 to 2021. Similarly, there has been an increase in the percentage of female respondents and the age profile of responders in 2021 compared with 2020.

² We asked respondents to share information – including demographic – to inform us of the make-up of the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian network. These results can be found in the first report we published into the results of the [2021 Freedom to Speak Up Guardian Survey](#).

Personal characteristics: whether and how it has an effect

We asked Freedom to Speak Up Guardians to share their reflections on whether and how their personal characteristics:

- Affected their ability to carry out their role
- Influenced whether workers spoke up to them

<i>To what extent do you think 'X' influence(s) whether workers speak up to you?</i>						
Characteristic	Doesn't make a difference		Don't know		Does make a difference	
	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
Seniority	35%	32%	16%	14%	49%	54%
Profession	38%	32%	15%	15%	47%	52%
Age	53%	51%	17%	16%	29%	32%
Ethnicity	53%	48%	24%	24%	24%	27%
Gender	61%	55%	22%	23%	16%	22%
Sexual orientation	70%	69%	25%	24%	6%	6%

Figure 13

In the case of both seniority and profession, most respondents said that their seniority and profession influenced whether workers speak up to them. In comparison, in the case of protected characteristics like age, ethnic background, gender, and sexual orientation, a majority or near majority of respondents did not think these characteristics influenced whether workers spoke up to them.

Compared to the 2020 survey results, a greater proportion of respondents said that the various characteristics - including seniority, ethnicity and gender - influenced whether workers spoke up to them. These results may reflect that there has been greater coverage about the impact of characteristics, especially during the pandemic.

There were similar responses with respect to whether certain characteristics influence a Guardian's ability to carry out their role (figure 14, below).

To what extent do you think 'X' influence(s) your ability to carry out your role as a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian

Characteristic	Doesn't make a difference		Don't know		Does make a difference	
	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
Seniority	42%	32%	6%	11%	53%	57%
Profession	44%	40%	7%	10%	49%	49%
Age	62%	58%	7%	8%	31%	34%
Ethnicity	72%	64%	12%	15%	15%	20%
Gender	77%	68%	11%	17%	13%	15%
Sexual orientation	86%	77%	11%	18%	3%	5%

Figure 14

In comparison to the previous question, smaller proportions of respondents answered 'don't know' when asked about their views on the extent to which these characteristics influence(s) their ability to carry out their role as a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian. This greater certainty may be attributable to the fact that, unlike the previous question which invites respondents' perceptions of what other people may think or act, this question is more directly about respondents' own experiences and reflections.

When it came to characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity, most respondents thought that they did not influence their ability to carry out their role as Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, though the size of these majorities fell compared year-on-year.

Seniority was the only characteristic that most respondents (57%, 2021) identified as influencing their ability to carry out their roles.

We examined the results further to see how respondents with different characteristics answered these questions.

The tables below set out a breakdown of the results for some of the characteristics.

As can be seen in figure 15, most white respondents thought that their ethnicity did not:

- influence whether workers spoke up to them
- affect their ability to carry out their role

To what extent do you think your ethnicity...		Discourages / negative impact		No influence		Encourages / positive impact	
		2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
...influence(s) whether workers speak up to you?	White	16%	17%	55%	53%	4%	3%
	Minority ethnic	12%	10%	28%	23%	48%	57%
... affects your ability to carry out your role as a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian	White	8%	12%	77%	70%	4%	2%
	Minority ethnic	8%	11%	28%	36%	48%	43%

Figure 15.

This was not the case for minority ethnic respondents. A majority (57%) of them said that their ethnicity encouraged workers to speak up to them and 43% of them said it positively affected their ability to carry out their role.

A similar picture emerged when looking at the results by gender and sexual orientation (please see figures 16 and 17).

To what extent do you think your gender...		Discourages / negative impact		No influence		Encourages / positive impact	
		2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
...influence(s) whether workers speak up to you?	Male	11%	9%	63%	59%	5%	6%
	Female	2%	4%	60%	54%	14%	20%
... affects your ability to carry out your role as a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian	Male	2%	2%	82%	73%	6%	9%
	Female	3%	3%	75%	67%	11%	12%

Figure 16.

In comparison to male respondents, a greater proportion of female respondents said that their gender not only made a difference but that it encouraged workers to speak up to them as well as positively affected their ability to carry out their role (please see figure 16. above).

To what extent do you think your sexual orientation...		Discourages / negative impact		No influence		Encourages / positive impact	
		2020	2021	2020	2021	2020	2021
...influence(s) whether workers speak up to you?	Heterosexual or straight	2%	3%	72%	72%	1%	0%
	Gay, lesbian or bisexual	0%	0%	47%	24%	18%	47%
... affects your ability to carry out your role as a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian	Heterosexual or straight	1%	2%	87%	79%	0%	1%
	Gay, lesbian or bisexual	0%	6%	71%	47%	24%	30%

Figure 17

In all three cases, respondents in a minority or vulnerable group - minority ethnic, gay, lesbian or bisexual, and female - reported similar perceptions of the impact of their characteristics compared to their relevant counterparts.

Response from the National Guardian's Office

The National Guardian's Office is committed to continuing to promote much-needed discussion and reflection about the role of characteristics in speaking up.

- We commissioned research to understand workers' experiences of accessing Freedom to Speak Up Guardians and whether the ethnicity of a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian affected their decision to speak up, and the support they received. The findings of this research, carried out by Roger Kline OBE and Ghiyas Somra, was [published](#) in 2021.
- When training Freedom to Speak Up Guardians, the National Guardian's Office emphasises how various characteristics may influence the speaking up dynamic.
- The National Guardian Office will continue to work in partnership with others to understand further the impact of personal characteristics on speaking up and effective interventions to help overcome barriers.
- If we are to make speaking up business as usual, we all need to reflect on what we bring as individuals to the workplace and how we approach the speaking up dynamic when we speak up or respond to someone speaking up to us. To this end, we encourage everyone to consider this as part of the [Freedom to Speaking Up training](#) for all workers, including those in leadership, that we developed with Health Education England.